

The English Market

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In pre-conquest times, Cork had markets at Fair Hill and Greenmount, and later outside the North Gate and South Gate. After the siege of Cork in 1690, the medieval Key (Quay) on which the Queens Old Castle complex now stands, was filled in to become a meat market or shambles. During the late 17th century, Dunscombe's Marsh was developed and various canals filled in. The English Market was constructed on the western end of this reclaimed land, and was opened on 1st August 1788 by Cork Corporation.

Almost a century later the market's interior was enlarged and its entrances onto Princes Street and Grand Parade improved. This work was carried out by Sir John Benson, who also designed and built twenty nine bridges after the flood of 1853, including Patricks Bridge. He is also credited with the construction of the Berwick Fountain on Grand Parade. The market was hailed as one of the show pieces of the city and is described in Tuckey's Cork Remembrances as, 'certainly as handsome a structure as exists in the three Kingdoms having the same object'. Benson well understood the city's liability to flooding, and incorporated a raised floor in the market. He also designed skylights, made from wired glass set into the roof, which were certainly innovative at that time.

The market's original design consisted of several detached sections for the sale of meat, fish, poultry, game, tripe, fresh butter, vegetables and fruit and was 'abundantly supplied daily with every kind of provisions'. (Lewis, 1839) Not much has changed in the market's structure, but there has been a significant change in the produce sold, which now include ethnic foods, toys, clothes and health foods.

This paper presents a discussion which focuses on the ways in which those who use the English Market perceive its history, its functions past and present and its future prospects. During 1988, three groups of people were questioned about the market. These were the traders, the customers and the market's administrators, the Cork Corporation. Each group had very differing opinions and thoughts, which highlight the complexity of any account of the market. The traders and the administrators do not appear to agree on any level. The individuality of the customers gave vent to some interesting perceptions and attitudes.

At the time of the survey, there were 50 stalls operating in the market. Butchers occupied the largest number of stalls, with fruit and vegetable vendors next followed by fish mongers. The majority of these stalls are family businesses, and have been so for at least two generations. One meat stall had its origins in the market c. 150 years ago. There is pride in this continuity, and most traders hope it will continue. It is possible to meet three generations of the same family at a stall. Many of the older stall holders have recollections of the market in times past. They evoke a certain character, which some people will still find in the market today.

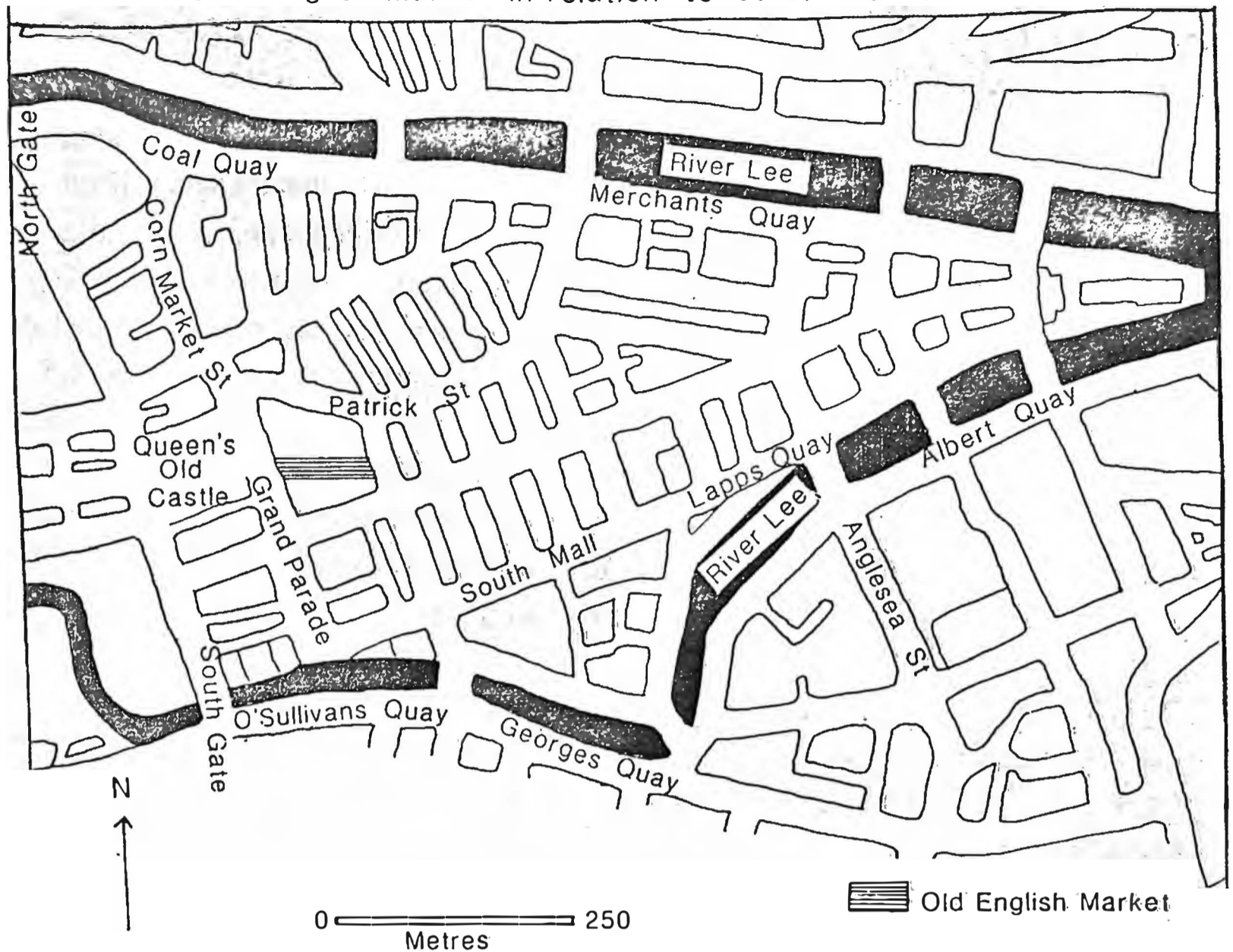
One butcher remembered his father's stall being 'small and dimly lit'. His father bought one live animal each week and had it slaughtered. It would immediately go on sale, a practice unheard of today in the meat trade. When the butcher's son suggested that the meat be pre-cut and displayed with prices, his ideas were rejected, the reasons being that the other traders would know what prices he charged, how much meat he sold in one week, and therefore know his business. At the end of the week, any meat left on the carcass was given, free of charge, to the charity convents.

Another butcher recalled memories of the market in the 1950s. His father occupied a stall then. He remembered the rotten smells of decay that were always present because of the poor hygiene practices. There was no refrigeration at the time and the standards of cleanliness and hygiene were not as stringent as today. He had the impression that many stall holders were renting stalls merely for occupational, not monetary reasons. The stalls were let on a weekly basis and the overheads were not high. It was a regular occurrence for some stall holders to close their businesses at any hour during the day and spend the rest of it in the public bar. It was not unusual for a stall holder not to turn up for work on a weekday. The customers never objected. They would purchase from another trader. He also recalled the amount of haggling that went on between the trader and the customer. The latter rarely accepted the asking price, and if he or she did, a discount was given as a 'special price'.

Today each stall holder has a regular clientele. Traders consider customer's attitudes to have changed in recent years. The customer is now keenly aware of value for money and price is a priority. Leaner meat is more in demand and issues such as irradiation and hormone treatment of livestock are likely to affect a small number of shoppers attitudes. The sale of lamb reduced dramatically after the Chernobyl incident.

There is no price agreement made between traders. They compete favorably with

Old English Market in relation to other market sites



each other and those stalls with higher financial overheads justifiably charge a little more than those with less. There is a level of rivalry among the fishmongers. One man referred to one of his opponents as 'Jaws'. Some of the fishmongers donate left over fish to the Simon Community. Poached salmon and trout are often offered to the stall holders, but it is usually refused. This was not the case in the past. The risk of prosecution is the main deterrent nowadays, apart from the regular availability of fresh water fish from fish farms.

Of the more unusual stalls in the market, the ethnic food stall is probably the most interesting. It is situated at the Princes Street end of the market. It is owned by a Moroccan, who has lived in Cork for quite a number of years. He runs a wholesale business in Cork, and considers his stall to be an important contact point in the city. The majority of his customers come from the Middle East and East and include such nationalities as, Kuwaitis, Ghanaians, Indians and Moroccans. They buy their staple foods from him, which include basmati rice, chick peas and pistachio nuts. His stall adds a touch of the exotic to the market. One could hear Arabic being spoken one minute, French the next. His business is an interesting indicator of the type of ethnic minorities that exist in Cork city.

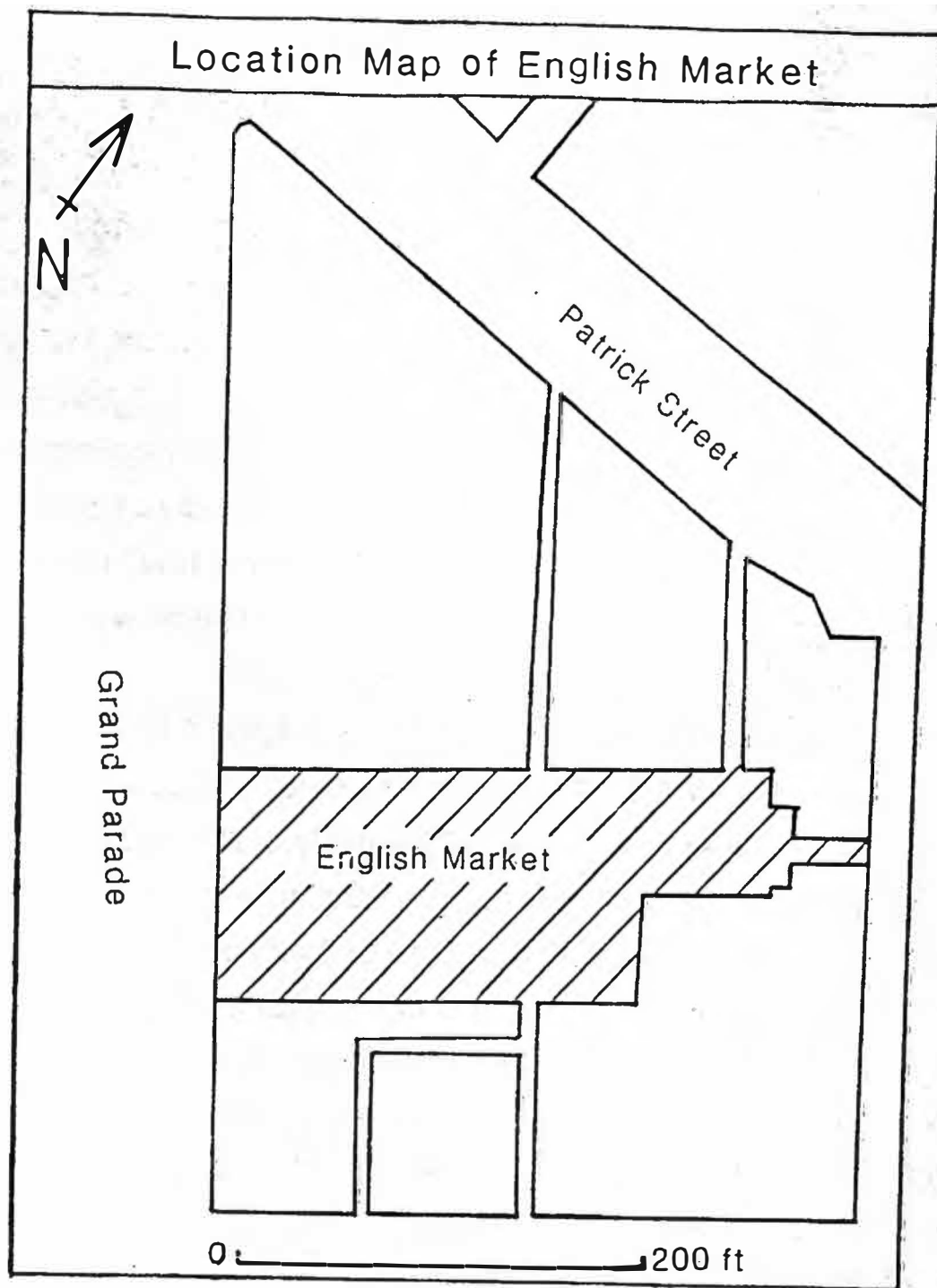
The stall holders are represented by a Trader's Committee, each voices collective

opinions to the Cork Corporation. Ascertain apathy exists amongst some of the traders, which creates problem for those who seek solidarity. It appears that there is constant tension between the traders and the Corporation, with very little agreement found on important issues. These issues include the cost of service charges, which are considered to be extravagantly high and not necessary. The traders would not object to such high charges if the market was improved and maintained properly. They consider the market to be unhygienic and unattractive. Another grievance against the Corporation is the lack of parking facilities in the vicinity of the market's entrances. The main entrance is on the Grand Parade, and since an island was created over a parking area on that street, access to the market is very limited. Also, bus stops have been moved away from the area, making it difficult for shoppers to carry bulky goods such as fruit and vegetables.

The traders have sorely felt the effects of the recession of the 1980s. They reckon their hay-day was in the 60s and 70s, when there was plenty of employment and large families to feed. Unemployment and emigration have reduced cash-flow in the market, and where once a woman may have bought meat for a family of eight, she now buys for two. The advent of shopping centres also affected their business with fewer people coming into the city centre for groceries. Every trader interviewed claimed to have a lower turnover than in the 70s, a fact which compounds their negativity towards the high service charges and rates. In general there is a feeling of uncertainty about the future of the market as a viable retailing outlet in the city.

Regular customers make up a large proportion of the clientele frequenting the market. The range of produce available has increased dramatically, with a wide range of exotic and 'out of season' produce available throughout the year. There has been a change in people's tastes, with more demand for the 'unusual'.

The majority of customers tend to specialise in their shopping at the market. They shop for fish or meat or tripe, but rarely for all the produce that is available there. They shop at supermarkets or local shops for general groceries. Some customers hold particular attitudes towards certain stalls. One woman considers the meat stalls unhygienic and finds the amount of blood splattered around the stalls very off-putting. She shops in the market for fish only. This opinion was contrasted by a young man who will not buy meat in the supermarkets because of the fact that it is wrapped in cellophane and therefore it is difficult to judge the quality. He had worked in a meat packing factory and claimed awareness of malpractices in meat packaging. For him, the market is a good place to shop and it is possible to choose the cut of meat required.



For the majority of customers, personal service is very important, and all consider it to be a characteristic of the market. Each has a favorite stall, especially for fish. For many, shopping in the market is a family tradition and the market is seen as an important traditional and cultural centre in Cork city. Many customers form the inner city and older suburbs of Cork such as Ballyphehane, Blackpool and Blackrock. Most of the people living in these areas are Cork born and would follow traditional shopping patterns, either walking or using public transport to reach the market. The majority of customers are women and within that group, most are aged between thirty and fifty years. A high proportion of unemployed and pensioners shop at the market. Small quantities of food are generally bought there, which suggests that the market suits the person living alone or with a small family.

A certain loyalty exists among the market's clientele. This is manifested in the continuity of family shopping traditions. Many young people shop there because their Mothers did, and traditions like that are hard to break. Personal service and value for money will always be equated with the market.

In many institutions, there is conflict between administrators and administered. The market is no exception. The Corporation do not consider the market and economically viable section of real estate in the city. The market has a prime location which is of major economic value. Attempts to modernise it in the early 1970s were suppressed by public outcry. This was mainly due to the fact that the traders would lose almost twelve months of business while renovations were in progress, with no offer of compensation for this. The plans included the building of a multistory carpark overhead the market, which would have altered not only the design of the market, but the skyline as well.

The Corporation is critical of how the market is operated. It criticises the traders for not making a bigger effort in promoting the market as an attractive place in which to shop. The traders do not advertise, individually or collectively, and make no attempt to raise public awareness of the advantages of shopping in the market. The Corporation claims that some of the traders are merely operating their stalls for occupational purposes, and that profit margins are not high. It has problems with collecting service charges and claims that it has no funds to make any improvements to the market at present. Hence the vicious circle. It calls on the traders to modernise their own stalls. No official surveys have been carried out on the viability of the market in its traditional mode. The Corporation has no immediate plans for the market, and is acutely aware of public opinion concerning this historic place.

The customers however, without whom the market would not operate, have very definite opinions on its design. Some would like to see it developed into a European style, with a greater variety of goods on offer. A suggestion for a cafe was made, where people could sit and sip tea while watching others pass by. This would certainly add a continental flavor to the place. Public toilets were also called for, as well as a general 'cleaning up' of the place, especially the overhead areas. It is easy to imagine how it could be transformed into a bustling place, full of colour and aromas. With a little imagination and respect for tradition, it seems the market could be transformed into a popular, lively and exciting place in which to shop, or just wander through.

The uniqueness of the English Market lies in its history and its lay-out. Each trader is competing with each other in a very open arena, which somewhat mimics the past market centre. The English Market is not a market centre in the traditional mode, but it is a market place, a place of exchange. Its complexity lies in its fragments, creating a distinct whole which is embodied by the building and which is unique to Cork.

Not to wander through the market would, however be to miss something of the flavor of Cork. Dating almost from the time of the coffee houses, it has seen generations of Cork people come in to buy meat, fish, vegetables, eggs, fruit and flowers, tripe and drisheen, crubeens and offal, black puddings and geese for Christmas..

(Petit,1982)

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