The ravages of time, the troubles and the planners' bulldozers have reduced large areas of Belfast to rubble. Buried in the debris of re-development are many old traditions which could be lost forever in the rush to clean up our capital city. New houses are mushrooming alongside the old but the people who have moved out are gradually drifting back again to salvage what is left of the past. Those who remain wait patiently to be re-housed, stubbornly keeping old traditions alive. The first article in an occasional series.

The Markets

Trotting Kings Harry, Brendan and Joe Murdock talk shop with Barney Ross (second right) the oldest in the game.

Exercising the trotters in Stanfield Street. L-r., AW Pick and Jim Murdock jnr. and Rosehall Massey with Joe Murdock jnr

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A CLOUD of thick black smoke hung over Verner Street in the Markets area of Belfast, and the pungent odour of burning plastic was everywhere.

It was not another firebomb attack on a city store — there was nothing sinister at all about it — it was merely a signal that Barney Ross was in residence and open for business.

Barney Ross, ex-prize fighter, horse trainer extraordinary and rag and bone man, had spent the morning burning the insulation off a roll of electric cable to get at the copper, for there is money to be made in recycling a city's waste.

Four generations of Rosses have lived and worked in the Lower Markets — once a proud mixed community, self-contained and self-sufficient — now the planners' bulldozers and the troubles are tearing at its heart.

Hundreds have moved out and the ones who are left wait patiently for the key to a bright new flat or house being built alongside the old.

It is mainly the old who stubbornly sit it out and put up with the rising damp and deplorable housing conditions that exist here. There are young couples with children here too, but the pull of the area is strongest on the old.

For the old a move across the street is an ordeal — to move out of the area entirely is unthinkable.

At 65 Barney is reluctant to move. Apart from the upheaval in leaving his wee parlour house, he needs to find alternative premises for his business — and that poses a problem.

Behind his two-up-two-down terraced house in Verner Street is a sprawling backyard full of junk — the hallmark of his trade. "Not everyone would welcome a rag and bone man moving in next door," he said with a smile, "and there are the horses to think of too."

Years ago most of the thriving business community that lived here kept horses. Butchers, bakers and deliverymen stabled their workhorses in the Markets and in addition to them they kept and raced trotting ponies. Nowadays there is only Barney Ross and the Murdock brothers, who live round the corner, to keep this tradition alive.

At their stables in Market Street the five Murdock brothers, Brendan, Jim, Harry, Joe and Ambrose have the largest number of trotters in Ireland, and some of the best.

The sport is not as popular in Northern Ireland as it once was. There is only one racecourse — at Ballyskeagh Lambeg, near Lisburn. The first race of the season is on Easter Monday, then twice a week all summer long.

Last year in Dublin, where the sport is more popular, the Murdocks won seven races out of seven with their gelding Big Deal. Prize money averages £100 a race but bookies odds are low, says Barney. "Four to one is the best you will get and that is not enough to pull the crowds."

It costs about £5,000 for a good trotter. The Murdocks have over 11 fine horses, all the stuff of champions. Big Deal won the Horse of Year and Carpiant trophies last year. Another of their horses, Thunders Express, was overall winner — north and south — of the Bookmakers Challenge Cup. Big Deal and Thunders Express raced against each other in the Horse of the Year trophy. Harry Murdock came first on Big Deal and Joe's son, Jim junior came third on Thunders Express.

The Murdocks have two other horses from which they expect great things this year, Scottish champion AW Pick, top winner in 1975, and bought recently by the brothers, and a two-year-old, Rosehall Massey, whose sire was the fourth fastest horse in the world.

Another Markets tradition which almost disappeared recently in the rubble of re-development, was boxing. The St. George's Amateur Boxing Club, founded 1929, and named after St. George's fruit and vegetable market, has been pulled down — the "cradle of champions" had rocked the amateur boxing world for almost 50 years.

It moved out of East Street to new premises in May Street after making an indelible mark on the local boxing scene. It produced the cream of Irish fighting men, and at one time it held every title at every weight. In later years it and the Immaculata Club on the Falls Road dominated amateur boxing.

The St. George's club was established in premises owned by Barney Ross who was junior lightweight champion before the weight was officially recognised. His face unmarked after 200 bouts, he won 17 by K.O. and dozens of others by outboxing his opponents. His cauliflower ear is the result of an accident at work, not in the ring.

Barney still has the looks and bearing of a fighter, although the last time he wore the gloves was in 1940. He is a well-known and respected figure in the Markets.

He brought me to see some of his oldest friends whom you can meet in Part Two TOMORROW.

THE COUNTDOWN TO DEMOLITION

THE redevelopment process in Belfast was begun in the late 1950s and the first areas defined and approved in 1960. When the first proposal was finally approved in 1966 it affected 28,000 houses.

By 1968 proposals for an urban motorway in the city were well advanced. Because of this a revised redevelopment areas programme was adopted and published in 1969. This called for a three-stage time scale up to 1982, by which date all the areas should have been submitted for vesting.

In 1971 the Redevelopment Areas Programme Stage Two (1870-75) was adopted by the County Borough Council. This programme passed to the Housing Executive at the beginning of 1972.

The troubles have resulted in considerable areas being destroyed or damaged and this coupled with the time lapse since the original redevelopment surveys of the Fifties has caused a further deterioration in housing.

Acting on advice from the Public Health Inspectorate and the planning staff of the Belfast County Borough Council, the Housing Executive approved extensions to the redevelopment boundaries.

Designated redevelopment areas are the responsibility of either the Housing Executive using its powers under the Housing Acts, or the Department of Housing, Local Government and Planning, with powers under the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order, 1972.

Over 750 houses in the Cromac Street, Markets area (Area 1B) were acquired in 1975. One side of Cromac Street has already been demolished and the first 30 new houses being built in the Lower Markets area will be occupied at the end of this month (March).

INGERSOLL WATCHES