

Last days of the Markets



A THIN green line drawn on a map four years ago has sealed the fate of one of Belfast's most historic areas and signalled the death rattle of unique community life.

The map is in the board room of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and the erratic thin green line crawls like a dog's hind leg across the page. It delineates the borders of what we know as the Markets. In Executive parlance it is Cromac Street Redevelopment Area 18, Vesting Order Map.

The total area enclosed is 40.4 acres. North to May Street, East Bridge Street and the new Central Line and river Lagan to the East. West across Cromac Street to Joy Street with Ormeau Avenue and the gas works marking the southern boundary. It is

The streets echo with famous names. Charlie Chaplin stayed here. John Dunlop invented the pneumatic tyre here. But now the unique community in what was once a prestigious area of 18th century Belfast is set virtually to disappear.

ALAN WHITSITT reports.

the most centrally placed of all the Executive's redevelopment areas and historically one of the most important in this part of 18th century Belfast.

It was once a high class residential area. The fine Georgian houses in Alfred Street and Joy Street and in Sussex Place and Hamilton Street were the homes of the gentry and respectable merchants, until the flight of the middle classes to Malone and above the Ormeau

bridge began in the 1840's. The Duke of Abercorn's town house (pulled down in 1962) was at No. 3 Hamilton Street, and the street bears the family name. May Street and Joy Street are named after well-known Belfast families.

Sussex Place, Adelaide Street and Clarence Place were all named after members of the Royal

family before the reign of Queen Victoria. But no one knows who Grace, Catherine or Henrietta were.

The houses the merchants vacated became the bed-land of the 1840's. Students at the new Queen's College lodged there until the Ormeau Road and University Street areas developed. In the 1850's and 60's John Dunlop, a veterinary surgeon with premises in Gloucester Street and May Street,

invented the pneumatic tyre here and developed it by riding a pushbike around the streets.

As the students moved closer to the university their places were taken by business lodgers and in particular musicians and actors. Before and immediately after the Great War most of the world's celebrated artists stayed here, including Charlie Chaplin. That is how it was until the closure of the Empire in 1961. Belfast's last variety and repertory theatre. Other events were laid on in the area to entertain visitors and residents, including wrestling, boxing and trotting. The trotting ponies still exercise in the lower markets but sadly their numbers have been greatly reduced.

Once there were 30 shops and 26 pubs in the area. When the planners' bulldozers have finished their work, not one pub will be put back. There will be two shops, one has been rebuilt and the other will be placed east of Cromac Street. Shops at the bottom of Cromac Street have been excluded from vesting.

All the houses in the Upper Markets will be demolished with the exception of 30 Georgian terraced houses. There will be approximately 540 houses put back. 169 have already been built and occupied in the Lower markets. At the date of vesting, April 1973, there were 561 occupied houses and 678 houses and

businesses with accommodation. In 1972 over 2,000 people lived in the markets. The 624 families that made up this number were in a slightly lower age group than was average for the rest of the city.

The plan for the whole area should accommodate just over 2,100 people. The dwellings are a mixture of two or three storey houses, two person flats and old persons dwellings. There will be approximately 226 four person houses; 109 six-person houses; 84 two person flats and 70 old person dwellings.

There are many children living in the area, most of the younger ones attend the Convent of the Sacred Primary School at the corner of Sussex Place and Joy Street. The school has escaped the redevelopment area and the Catholic Church to which it is attached, St. Malachy's, will still form the cornerstone of the new look re-habituated and redeveloped Markets.

It is planned to include play areas, gardens and pedestrian ways, with an underpass to connect the two parts of the markets together. At the moment the only trees are to be found in the grounds of St. Malachy's, and waste ground and every available street is a gigantic car park. Residents awaiting re-housing are in Executive terms "decanted" into wooden huts and presumably poured back into the area when their new homes are ready.

Rents for the fine Georgian houses average around £250 a fortnight. When re-habituated this will soar, for central heating, kitchen extensions and bathrooms cost money. To do up one of these houses will cost around £10,000. Total cost of the scheme in the region of £8.5 million. The estimated cost of propositions to design and build the markets of the future is around £400,000.



Customers enjoy a drink in the Grand Bar, Joy Street. It is not included in the Executive's Vesting Order map, the line runs past outside the door.