



The **WORLD** in our street

Interview with **John Kenyon – Manager of St Werburgh’s Parish Centre**

There has been a building on this site since at least the end of the 1600s and also, what was referred to on old maps of the area, as a ‘bowling alley’. It is quite amazing to think that some form of the game of bowls has been played on this site more or less ever since. Indeed next year sees the 330th anniversary of the first green being laid here in 1687. Originally a private house, by 1805 a pub operated from the site. Due to its close proximity to the old Chester Cattle Market, business would have been generally good. By 1912 the site had been acquired by a private developer and the Bowling Green Hotel opened its doors for the first time in 1914. What we see today is not how the building and surroundings were back then. Then there was a large parking area, stables and a warehouse, as well as the bowling green and garden. So big was the area that it was used by army re mount divisions who would send horses, donkeys and mules from here, to the Western Front during World War One. There are pictures of this at St Michael’s Heritage Centre in Bridge Street.

After WW1 life in the Hotel returned to some kind of normality. Farmers would still attend Market, many staying here overnight and using the stables to keep their livestock in overnight too. Tradition has it that many cattle were sold over a handshake and a pint or two of beer at the Hotel. Back in the day older locals would recall how quite often they would be given sixpence or so by local farmers to help ‘drive’ the cattle back to the outlying farms on the outskirts of the City. Should they have been at school instead of ‘cattle prodding’? They never did say! One of the features was the two donkeys that were used to pull the mower that cut the bowling green. Obviously they were stabled here and many local children would pop in to watch them carry out





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this task and then feed them. The donkeys wore specially made slippers to protect the green from damage by their hooves!



By the late 1960's early 1970's, plans for and the building of the inner ring road had led to the relocation of the Cattle Market to Bumpers Lane. Trade in the area suffered greatly and the Hotel was no exception to this. By 1973 the Hotel had been shut down and the Bowling Green left for nature to take its course. But following a land swap, the site was acquired by the Catholic Parish of St Werburgh's and in 1975 the building opened once again.



Of course, in those days the Club and indeed the Street, was a lot different than what we see today. Local firms such as The Hydraulic Engineering and the Leadworks provided a lot of work for locals and shops were kept very busy at lunchtimes. Although the glory days of the old cattle market had gone, the Street still had a variety of shops to attract local people. However, over the years the butchers and green grocers have disappeared along with a number of other businesses, but the Street still keeps going. In fact it has probably got the lowest proportion of empty shops of anywhere in the City. Because as one shop goes, there is always somebody willing to give a new business idea a try. Of course, what we have now is an amazing ethnically diverse community.



For my part in this diverse community, although born in Chester, my parents came from Limerick City on the west coast of Ireland. A beautiful City with a Cathedral, City walls, a proud and long





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history, an old port and surrounded by magnificent countryside. So Chester was very much a home from home for them. I went to school at St Werburgh's which then occupied the site where Tesco now stands. So my journey to school took me through Brook Street every morning. Of course in those days the cattle market was still in full flow and there was always a special atmosphere on market days. For City kids it was quite exciting to see the pigs and cattle as we waited for our bus back home.

Upon leaving school, I did work behind the bar at the Club during breaks from College and in fact the family moved from Kingsway to Newtown back in 1977. So the Street was then very much on our doorstep. I often remarked that Brook Street to the people of Newtown is what O'Connell Street was to the people of Dublin. It lay at the heart of everything. Of course, living around here meant that the City Centre was just a short walk away which was great for going out at night and was also handy for work.

For a time I was employed at St Martin's House opposite the old Infirmary and worked there for Halton Health Authority. It was there that I met my wife Debbie. Eventually Halton H.A. relocated to Runcorn which meant for us both a daily commute up the M56. Not such a difficult task as in those days but still a tough enough ordeal. So we decided we would have to move to Runcorn and needed to save for a deposit on a house. This required extra money so I popped into the Club to see if there was any work available. As it happened, the last steward had left and so had most of the staff. I ended up working six nights a week as well as my day job. Eventually, they asked me if I would take the Manager's job on. Well, as we both loved the place and the people in it, I agreed and took over in May 1986.





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There have been many changes both at the Club and in the Street over the past 30 years, but what doesn't change is the resilience of the Street because whenever it is written off it always seems to bounce back. The cattle market went. It survived. The local employers left and still it moved on. So here we have an exciting diverse community about to embrace the Street's role as the main link between the railway station and the new bus station. Certainly for Brook Street, time never stands still!

