

Short History of Ringsend & Irishtown

Irishtown lies a short distance outside the medieval city walls of Dublin. Dublin was originally a Viking city and after 1171, when an Anglo-Norman army took it, Dublin became the centre of English rule in Ireland. The native Gaelic Irish were therefore viewed as an alien force in the city. Suspicion of them was deepened by continual raids on Dublin and its environs by the O'Byrne and O'Toole clans from the nearby Wicklow Mountains. By the 15th century, Gaelic migration to the city had made the English authorities fearful that English language and culture would become a minority there. As a result, the Irish inhabitants of Dublin were expelled from the city proper circa 1454, in line with the Statutes of Kilkenny. They settled in Irishtown, outside the city walls, giving the area its name.

There is a romance in sea-borne commerce which compensates for the sombre aspects of the districts which are its inlets and outlets. There are few maritime towns or villages in Ireland with a more storied past than Old Ringsend. Some little difference of opinion exists as to the derivation of the name of this ancient part of Dublin. Rev. E. Mangin in his book, *Parlour Window* says that "Ringsend" is an absurd corruption of "Wring Sand", the proper name of the suburb.

The *Topographical Dictionary of Ireland* (1846) describes Ringsend as a town in the parish of St. Mary, Donnybrook, originally called Rinn-Ann, "the point of the tide" from its situation at the confluence of the Dodder and the Liffey. It suggests that the modern name is a singular corruption of the former, or may have perhaps arisen from the large blocks of stone into which rings of iron were inserted for mooring vessels. D. A. Chart, in his *Story of Dublin*, humorously infers that it is a typical Irish bull as a ring has neither beginning nor end. An alternative suggestion is that Ringsend may really derive from Rinn Abainn, the point of the river."

Ringsend first came into notice in the 17th century as a landing place for passengers bound for Dublin. From the time of the Anglo-Norman Invasion until the 16th century, Dalkey was the

port for merchandise and passengers, but with the increasing traffic of the Elizabethan period, Dublin merchants found it more convenient to discharge their ships near their place of business. With the merchandise came the passengers and from the 17th to the 19th century Ringsend was the chief place of embarkation and disembarkation, until the completion of the harbours at Howth and Dun Laoghaire caused a diversion. A Fort was constructed in 1582 to secure dues. So frequent were the violations of the Revenue Laws, it became necessary in 1620 to station a Revenue Surveyor at Ringsend and a house was built there to accommodate him. Thomas Cave was its first occupant. Ringsend was a busy village at this period, as may be gathered from the fact that in 1637, ten barques were carried away from their anchorage during a severe storm and were never heard of again. Still, the population in 1660 is given as fifty nine English and twenty one persons of Irish descent.

During the Cromwellian period, says Ball, Ringsend was almost surrounded by water which ran over the low ground between Irishtown and Beggar's bush, then much infested with robbers. This brought into use the much famous Ringsend Cars – a seat suspended on a leather strap between two shafts. In 1665 - 5,000 spectators witnessed races between these vehicles for prizes presented by the Lord Deputy.

Ringsend played no mean part in the great historical event of the 17th century. Oliver Cromwell landed there in 1649 and in 1655 came Henry Cromwell and his retinue, rowed in boats from Dun Laoghaire to assume the governorship. The notorious gang of robbers - The Brennans escaped from there in 1683. In 1690, Sir Cloudesley Shovel drove the ships of James II ashore after a naval engagement. De Ginkel, favourite General of William III embarked there, after his campaign in Ireland, in 1691.

The port of Dublin was at this period, in a very unsatisfactory condition. At high tide the water extended as far as Fenian (formerly Denzille) Street, Pearse (formerly Gt. Brunswick) Street, Townsend Street, and, at one time, Merrion Square. Desultory efforts were made to effect improvements but it was not until 1707 that corporate powers were given to form a Ballast Office. Then the construction of the South Wall was begun and by 1755

it had been carried as far as the site of the Fort. Before 1796 the extension to the lighthouse was completed.

Poolbeg incidentally first shed its radiance over the waters of Dublin Bay in 1767. At the beginning of the 18th century Ringsend was described as “a clean, healthy and beautiful village, with houses on the walls of which vines were trained”. The shore was famous for its shrimps and cockles, and an oyster bed. Good cheer could be had in abundance at the sign of “The Good Woman”. It is not difficult to picture the sporting Dubliner of the period seeking relaxation in the horse racing on the strand, or the bucks of Trinity College settling “an affair of honour” there in the early morning, before adjourning to the neighbouring hostelry.

In 1791 the Government gave what was for those days the large grant of £112,752 for the construction of a basin and docks at Ringsend, on the south side of the river, which occupied a space of thirty five acres.

From the middle of the 18th century, owing to difficulty attending the passage up and down the river, it was customary for passengers arriving in Dublin by the packets to land at a place on the breakwater, known as the South Wall, which extended from Ringsend into Dublin Bay.

This was known as the Pidgeon House and derived its name from the caretaker, Pidgeon, who built up a prosperous refreshment business in catering for the numerous boating parties, who visited there.

Constance Maxwell, in her book *Dublin under the Georges*, describes Ringsend as possessing a very good tavern, known as “The Sign of The Highlander” where the landlord provided excellent cooking and billiards. At this time, Ireland was exporting to the West Indies glass, soap, candles, linens and manufactured articles. In exchange she took sugar, rum, cotton and coffee. To the United States Ireland exported glass, coals, hay, lime, bricks and manufactured iron goods, receiving in return tobacco, flax, corn, cotton, resin, and turpentine. It is reasonable to assume that Ringsend received its share of this maritime commerce.

But, by 1848, just on a century ago, Ringsend had lost its importance as a maritime centre. In Thom's Almanac of 1848, it is described as having 150 houses, with a population of 1,755. It consisted of several streets of very indifferent and irregularly built houses, chiefly poor and mainly dilapidated. Amongst the few streets occur the names "Quality Row" and "Whiskey Row", indications of the class distinctions and the commercial activities of the period. "Thom's" goes on to say that Ringsend had formerly extensively glass and salt works, the former of which had been just revived. In addition there was ship and boat building to a small extent, an iron foundry producing iron boats, steam engines and boilers, and a Sal-Ammonia factory. There was an omnibus service to and from College Green at a fare of two pence. A good proportion of the population was also engaged in the fishing industry.