Historical Aspects of Business and Commercial Enterprise in Newry and Mourne
Flaxworkers at Carnmeen Mill in 1890s. This mill was owned by James McGeorge, a Newry Town Commissioner, in the mid 19th century.

*Courtesy of Cathy Brooks*
Chairperson’s Foreword

I am delighted to write the foreword to this booklet which accompanies “Historical aspects of business and commercial enterprise in Newry and Mourne”, a temporary exhibition at Newry and Mourne Museum.

Starting in the medieval and early modern periods, and including a range of objects, documents and photographs from the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries, this exhibition explores the history of the growth of businesses and commercial enterprise in the Newry and Mourne area. Major themes include the emergence of Newry as a ‘merchant town’ in the 18th and early 19th centuries, the development of industry in Newry and the diversity and success of the many small businesses throughout the area. The local impact of the changing national and international social, economic and political climate of the 20th and early 21st centuries is also considered.

The exhibition has a strong reminiscence element and many local people will have shopped or worked in the businesses that have been highlighted in the exhibition.

On behalf of the Museum, I would like to thank all those who responded to the Museum’s appeal for artefacts, documents and information. Their generosity is much appreciated.

Councillor Gillian Fitzpatrick
Chair of Newry, Mourne and Down District Council
Introduction

Newry’s origins as a centre for trade can probably be traced back to the Cistercian abbey.

Although the Cistercian monastic order did not allow its monasteries to develop markets, this rule gradually changed and markets were established at Cistercian monasteries in the 13th century. A market may have been established at Newry sometime after Hugh de Lacy’s confirmation charter to the abbey in 1237.

The first documentary evidence of a market is from An Inquisition into the property of the College at Newry, dated August 1549 which mentions “... a watermill and the customs of the market of the town of Newry ...”

In 1552 the former estates of the abbey were granted to Nicholas Bagenal and he developed an urban settlement which had a valuable rental income by 1575. The population of the town probably comprised craftspeople, traders and merchants. References to a market and fair are also made in the charter from James I to Arthur Bagenal of 1613 confirming Borough status to Newry.

In the 1690s Michael Hill purchased the townland of Carneyhough from the Crilly family. This allowed for the development of the area known as The Low Ground (now Hill Street and the surrounding area) and the building of Newry Canal, completed in 1742. These were important factors in the growth of Newry as an important commercial centre. Trading links were established with Europe and through the Needham family with Jamaica and the sugar trade.

A wealthy merchant class emerged in the 18th century and this stimulated further commercial activity. Merchants, who lived in large and imposing houses along North Street and Boat Street, wanted to fill their homes with expensive furnishings and objects. This encouraged specialised craftsmen to settle in the town to meet this demand. Furniture makers and clock makers, such as John Gelston, set up businesses in Newry and an important publishing and printing industry emerged in the town to satisfy the appetite for education and culture.

Other industries included tanning, iron working, glass making, distilleries, mills and ship building. Many of industries were near the canal and port for export, and ease of transport. Warehouses were built along the canal on Merchants Quay and Sugar Island.

Bessbrook, outside Newry was established as a model village by the Richardson family who developed a linen mill in the 1840s. Their linen products were exported all over the world through the port of Newry. The port was also important for the import of coal and this led to the emergence of companies including Joseph Fisher and Sons Ltd.

The rural economy was also developing and the landlords developed a network of market towns including Crossmaglen, Newtownhamilton, Hilltown, Rathfriland and Kilkeel. The advent of the railways led to Warrenpoint and Rostrevor becoming important tourist destinations and this encouraged the building of hotels and other leisure facilities.
Political and economic changes in the 20th century impacted on commercial activity. Long established industries along with the canal and port declined as the century progressed and in the post war period new manufacturing and service industries were established in the Newry and Mourne area. In the last decades of the 20th century many family-run businesses and small shops closed. These were replaced by multi-national stores, located in purpose-built centres such as the Buttercrane and the Quays in Newry.
Markets in Newry
Joanne Glymond

Although the market at Newry has a medieval origin, the right to hold a market every Thursday was confirmed to Arthur Bagenal in 1613 by James I. He was also granted two fairs in the year, each lasting three days, as well as a weekly market to be held at Greencastle.

Like all landlords, Arthur Bagenal had the right to collect tolls or customs from commodities sold in the markets. One example is six gallons out of every hogshead of wine sold.

With its proximity to good transport links by sea, road, canal and rail, Newry market managed to draw in business from counties Louth, Down, Armagh and even farther with its hiring fair and trade in butter.

The hiring fair was held in various locations including North Street, Mill Street and Hill Street. Males and females were segregated to different sides of the market while prospective employers bartered prices with them or their parents.

"Loosing Day", a day when workers left their previous job, happened on the first Thursday in May and November. A week of respite followed after which workers made their way back to the market for the following Thursday where they were re-hired or moved on to a new job.

Lord Kilmorey built the Butter Crane Quay market in 1808 to accommodate Newry’s large butter trade business. In the 1830s thousands of casks of butter were exported to England.

By the end of the 19th century, the market expanded to deal with the increase in population and business. It was now held every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday in King Street, Mary Street, Needham Street and Market Street. Fairs were now being held on a monthly basis.

Each market sold a variety of local produce. The Newry markets dealt with grain, livestock, plants, hides, hay, meat, potatoes, eggs, fruit and vegetables. Aside from the markets,

Newry also boasted a great deal of manufacturing businesses such as tanneries, coach-building, iron foundries, flour mills, and linen weaving factories to name but a few. This ensured that a regular supply of items could be sustainably sold and the market place catered to more than just the farmer’s need.

The market rights were transferred to the Town Commissioners in 1881. The market for some items, such as pork, flax and fowl, were taken off the streets and moved to a more suitable location within the town. Another change that was heralded at this time was the protocol of setting aside one day in the months of January, April, June, August and November for the sale of cattle and horses only.
Connor’s Chemist, Newry
Joanne Cummins

At one time the second largest chemist in Ireland, S. Connor was established in 1826 at the corner of Hill Street and Mill Street. The company was founded by Dr. Patrick Connor, physician, surgeon and druggist. The Medical Hall, a larger premises, was later established at 77-79 Hill Street (the current site of Newry Library), extending back to Water Street. It was said to have been one of the largest shops of its kind outside Belfast or Dublin.

On his retirement in 1862, Patrick Connor’s nephew, Dr Samuel Connor from Stoneyford, Co. Antrim, took over the business. Dr Samuel Connor lived on site and abstained from medical practice in order to give all his time to compounding physicians’ and surgeons’ prescriptions. He also was director of several local companies such as Newry Navigation Company, Newry Mineral Water Company, Newry Salt Works and the Dundalk and Newry Steampacket Company.

Samuel died suddenly from a heart attack at the age of 57 in 1894. His funeral was described at the time as being one of the biggest ever seen in Newry. His obituary states that his two sons, John Edgar and William Horatius were already engaged in the apothecary business in Newry.

J. Edgar Connor extended the company’s interests beyond pharmacy to Newry Steam Laundry, Magheralin Lime Works and wholesale pharmacy and veterinary supplies to pharmacies and farmers from the district.

An advertisement in The Open Window in 1901-1902 for S. Connor and Sons lists a wide variety of stock for sale in the shop: surgical instruments, photographic equipment, spectacles, a variety of toiletries and household cleaners as well as oils, paints, animal feedstuffs and fertilizers.

The company remained in the Connor family until it was bought in 1967 by Freddy Whitcroft who had been apprenticed to the company in 1953 and subsequently employed as a pharmacist. He began extensive renovations to modernise and expand the size of the shop in Hill Street. He also started discounting heavily and introduced self service, which was then rare in pharmacy. Just a year after the renovations were completed, the shop was destroyed by fire in September 1969. The company moved to premises in John Mitchel Place and were trading again within a fortnight.

S. Connor and Sons was the parent company of Connor’s Chemist, Ireland’s largest pharmacy group, employing around 650 people across 34 stores until it was bought by Boots in the mid 1990s.

Calendar from S. Connor, 1891
Newry and Mourne Museum Collection

Medicine cabinet supplied to Ellen Constance, Countess of Kilmorey, by Connor’s Chemist in the 1890s
Newry and Mourne Museum Collection
The Victoria Bakery in Newry
Ken Abraham and Shane McGivern

The Victoria Bakery, also known as the McCann’s Bakery, was established in Newry in 1837 by the McCann family from county Louth. Thomas McCann ran the Bakery at Nos. 20 and 21 Castle Street in Newry up until his death in 1876. Meanwhile his nephews, Arthur and James, established an extensive grocers’ business in the Milestone Building in Hill Street in the 1870s.

In 1892 their business partnership ended and Arthur took sole control of the Bakery and moved the bakery to a new site (across the road from the old one) in Castle Street in 1894. These premises had been formerly occupied by Joseph Doyle’s seed merchant and flower business. This move was to be an important milestone in the modernisation of the Bakery and its continued success. New state of the art bread making machinery was installed and the early decades of the 20th century were a prosperous time for the Bakery business.

The 1930s was a challenging period for the Bakery. During these years, Newry, like many towns in Britain and Ireland, faced a period of economic decline and there was also competition from bakeries in Belfast. The outbreak of the Second World War introduced rationing which affected the business when flour and other bread-making material were in short supply.

In 1948, Miles, the second son of Matthew McCann, who had run the Bakery since 1924, took over the family business. The 1950s saw many family-run bakeries in Northern Ireland either closing or being taken over by larger firms. McCann’s managed to survive and, in the 1960s, redeveloped and extended its premises. New machinery was also installed. The demolition of Castle Street and the construction of a dual-carriage way in front to the McCanns building meant that a new dispatch and loading bay had to be built at the rear of the premises.

In 1984, Christopher McCann became the managing director and the fifth generation of the family to take charge of the Victoria Bakery. The business continued to flourish and expand into the European market. Like so many other small bakeries, however, McCann’s came under intense pressure from competition with larger firms. McCann’s eventually ceased operating in Newry in the mid 1990s after being taken over by Irwin’s Bakery in Portadown.

Inspection of the Bakery building at the time of its closure led to the rediscovery of Bagenal’s Castle, built by Sir Nicholas Bagenal in the mid-17th century, which had survived enveloped by the Bakery premises. The former Newry and Mourne District Council purchased the site and restored the Castle with adjoining warehouse as a new home for Newry and Mourne Museum.
Local Businesses in Warrenpoint and Rostrevor

Noreen Cunningham and Shane McGivern

Located on Carlingford Lough, Warrenpoint and Rostrevor emerged as important seaside resorts in the 19th century, attracting visitors from far and wide.

Warrenpoint, the larger of the two, began to develop as a town after 1767 with the building of a tidal dock. By 1820, Warrenpoint had grown quite rapidly as a seaside resort with the majority of businesses being public houses, lodging houses and grocers. People were employed as tidewaiters (harbour customs officials), ship builders, carpenters, captains, chandlers, mariners and boatmen.

The 1840s saw further commercial development of Warrenpoint. In 1845, a Patent Slip was constructed for the building and repair of vessels and in 1849 the railway between Newry and Warrenpoint was opened. A horse drawn tramway linked the Great Northern rail-head at Warrenpoint with Rostrevor between 1877 and 1915. By the late 19th century there were seven hotels in Warrenpoint and three hotels in Rostrevor, the Mourne (Great Northern), Woodside and Rostrevor.

Although Warrenpoint was primarily a seaside attraction, there was also local industry, with McClelland’s coach builders, Hunter’s ship building yard, Greer’s Corn Mill and a busy port which mainly dealt with exporting cattle and importing coal. The pier at Rostrevor was used to export timber and potatoes and import coal. In the vicinity of the village there were linen industries, with a bleach works at Kilbroney, a beetling mill at Newtown and a dyeing and finishing establishment at Forestbrook.

By 1920 there were twenty boarding and lodging house owners in Rostrevor and twenty seven in Warrenpoint. The latter also had eleven boatmen, who rowed tourists and day trippers back and forth to Omeath on the other side of Carlingford Lough. There were also a range of businesses geared toward the local population, as well as the seasonal trade, including grocery shops and pharmacies.

In the first half of the 20th century, Warrenpoint and Rostrevor continued to be popular destinations for tourists and day trippers. The closure of the Newry to Warrenpoint line in January 1965, coupled with the increased popularity and accessibility of foreign holidays, saw a decline in Warrenpoint as a holiday resort. Its role, however, as a port became more influential with the closure of the Newry Ship Canal in 1974 when all international shipping trade was transferred from Newry to Warrenpoint port which has continued to expand.

Warrenpoint and Rostrevor today remain popular summer resorts for day trips and have retained much of their original character.
Memories of Sands’ Mill, Newry
Alex Lyons

About 1904, when my father Henry Lyons was 18, he started working for Mr Robert Sands on a temporary basis while he waited for exam results. His first pay was three shillings and sixpence per week. He died in 1979, 75 years later, still working at Sands’ Mill.

My father started as a clerk, and over time became a shareholder, Director, Managing Director and Chairman. In Mr Sands’ time he had a motor lorry and a car, and also a generator to produce the electricity for the lights in the mill and offices. A rare sight in those days!

Robert Sands died in 1915 and his widow ran the business for a few years before selling it to four senior staff members, Messrs Breakey, Corkey, Craig and Lyons, who had been managing the mill for her. They formed the business into a limited company known as Robert Sands Ltd., Clanrye Mills, Newry. In the 1940s Mr Breakey died and his shares were bought by the three other shareholders.

I remember, as a boy, going to the mill on a Saturday morning and riding on the four wheeled horse drawn carts while deliveries were made in the town. I also remember the two large steam boilers, and watching the stoker as he kept the fires burning. There were two steam engines, one large and one smaller and the large flywheels and all the shiny brass bits. One engine ran the ‘big’ mill and the other ran the ‘wee’ mill. A large drive shaft went through the wall into the mill and different size pulleys ran different machines throughout the mill. The main machines were Greenhill grinders and mixers.

It was always assumed that I would ‘go into the mill’ when I finished school. I went to work in James Neill’s flour mill in Belfast to learn about milling, machinery and management and attended a flour milling technology course at Belfast Technical School. I chose a flour mill as the other animal feed mills did not want someone with connections at Sands’ Mill learning their secrets.

When I started in Sands’ Mill, in 1953, the mill had changed from steam to electricity. The horses had disappeared and the motor lorry had taken over. In the 1950s we only sold our meal to merchants but later on we sold to farmers as well. All meal was packed in hundred weight bags, the bags were jute or hessian except for Chick Mash which was packed in cotton bags. These bags were filled from a spout, direct from the mixer, then weighed and ‘sewn’ with a packing needle and jute cord. This was all done by hand. Later, half-ton bags and bulk delivery were introduced. During my time we installed semi-automatic machinery, and by the time I retired we were 90 percent automated.

During the Troubles our business carried on much as usual. In 1972 an incendiary device completely destroyed the offices and a large store. We bought a house in an adjoining street to use as temporary offices. About 1974 we started selling farm machinery and were appointed main distributors for Kuhn Farm Machinery and also some other makes. In 1977 a new company was formed called Robert Sands Machinery Ltd.

On the 5th February 1985 a large fire destroyed one half of the big red brick building. The other half was only slightly damaged because the fire doors between both halves were closed. We had to remove the two top floors of the damaged part before re-building started.

In the early 1980s business became very difficult for independent mills, and as Fane Valley Co-operative were one of our main customers, and they wanted a mill, we decided to sell to them in 1981/2. I retired from the business in 1997.

Alex Lyons pictured right c. 1982 when he was Managing Director of Robert Sands Ltd, with James Baines, Production Manager Newry and Mourne Museum Collection

Workers at Robert Sands Ltd., Clanrye Mills, Newry, in 1908. Henry Lyons is pictured standing in front row, extreme left Newry and Mourne Museum Collection

Sands’ Mill (centre) with Baker’s Store on left where meal was packed. In the foreground is the Canal Turning Basin for barges and lighters Newry and Mourne Museum Collection
Newry’s First Carnival Shopping Week 2nd – 7th July 1928

Noreen Cunningham

The Collection at Newry and Mourne Museum contains a number of items from Newry’s first ever Shopping Week, which took place in July 1928. Together, these items which include a Newry Telegraph supplement, a scrapbook owned by Newry solicitor, William Johnson, and a series of photographs of a parade, demonstrate the amount of organisation that went into this event and its subsequent success.

The Newry Telegraph supplement outlines the fifteen men who were ‘prominent personalities’ in the organisation of what was called the ‘Great Programme of Attractions’. P. J. O’Hare, solicitor, and Mr. John Thompson were Joint Honorary Secretaries, and the Chairman of the General Committee was Charles O’Hare, a pharmacist.

There were also ten committees, or subcommittees, each headed by a person of note, for example Terence Ruddy, a Councillor with Newry Urban Council, was Chairman of the Transport Committee. There were a range of other organising committees relating to publicity, entertainments, decorations, motor parade and industrial parade.

Writing in the Newry Telegraph, Charles O’Hare outlined that the aims and objects of Shopping Week or Civic Week were to:

- Make more widely known the merits of Newry-manufactured articles of goods of every description
- Advertise, by attractive displays in the shops, our unsurpassed shopping facilities and the outstanding advantages of Newry as a shopping centre
- Support in every way goods manufactured in Ireland in order to afford our people employment in Newry if possible, but at any rate that Newry products should come first

He went on to ask every household to give the town ‘…as gay and festive an appearance as possible …’

Photographs taken of shopping week show the main shopping streets attractively decorated with bunting, flags and banners featuring messages such as ‘Encourage Home Industry’. Photographs of the industrial parade show floats from local businesses such as McCarr’s Bakery, Robert Sands Ltd and Newry Mineral Water Company.

The industrial parade was just one of the many events organised during Newry Shopping Week. Others events included a motor parade, ‘go as-you-please’ race, as well as a civic meeting and concert, which William Johnson, although not a member of the committee, was instrumental in organising. A letter in the scrapbook dated 11th July 1928, from the secretaries of the General Committee of Newry Carnival Shopping Week, thanks him for his kind assistance. They write that, ‘the success of the Broadcasting and the prior Concert was largely attributable to the excellent services rendered by you, which were greatly appreciated by the large audience’.

A return letter from William Johnson, says that everyone was delighted with the success of the event and hopes that ‘it will join and knit the Merchants and Traders of Newry to make common cause for the advancement of the trade of the Town’. He concludes by asking for a more representative Chamber of Commerce, which could bring together the representatives of employers and employees, to reduce the level of unemployment in the town which stood at 1,200.

The Shopping Week of 1928 was a first for Newry, but was revived in the 1960s.
J.T. Gorman of Mayobridge
By Dympna Tumilty, based on an interview with Seamus Gorman in December 2015

James and May Elizabeth Gorman owned a shop in Broadway, Belfast, but in 1921 they decided to buy a shop which had a bar, farm, funeral and undertaking business and post office in Mayobridge, outside Newry. They settled into the local community and the business was eventually taken over by Seamus, one of their children.

The post office contained the telephone exchange and was also responsible for delivering the post to the countryside around Mayobridge. The post was delivered to Mayobridge Post Office before 7am each morning, and the bags opened and sorted. The mail was usually delivered on foot, but there was also a post office bicycle, which had a large basket at the front, which was useful for delivering parcels. The postal delivery staff were Charlie Fegan, Tommy Gribben and Mrs Coulter. At a later stage, the post was delivered by van.

Old age pensions were collected from the post office and often a basketful of groceries bought at the shop. This would have included meat and butter from animals reared on Gorman’s farm. The farm had a dairy for churning butter, and pigs were killed and the bacon cured on the premises.

From the 1930s to the 1960s the shop also had a mobile van that delivered groceries to isolated homes and farms. This was an important service, as there were very few cars in the area until the 1960s. The van had a counter with a glass top and there was standing room for the shoppers who came in through the doors at the rear. A variety of goods were sold ranging from foodstuffs and soap to bandages. Eggs were also collected from farmers’ wives, and these were sent off to Kilkizel and Lurgan. The money they received was usually spent on groceries or paid off some of their account. Orders were also taken for heavier items such as coal and animal feed, which would be delivered the next day.

The public bar was popular for people to come in for a drink and to relax. Guinness was bottled in the bar, and although this was labour intensive, the family were proud of never selling Guinness younger than fourteen days. If it became apparent that extra might be needed, it would be sourced from Catherine Boden in Newry or Henry Smith in Warrenpoint.

In the early days of the business, only a few funerals were carried out each year, and the hearse was usually horse-drawn. A neighbour’s horse was used with Gorman’s horse to pull the hearse. As most people were ‘waked’ in their own homes there was no need for a funeral parlour. Whiskey, stout and other beverages for these occasions were purchased in the bar, while tea, ham and cheese for sandwiches were bought in the shop. Funeral and undertaking is now the focus for the Gorman family business, particularly since the closure of the grocery shop, and the relocation of the post office.

Although many things have changed over the years, the Gorman family is still very much at the heart of the Mayobridge community.

The Gorman family and staff pictured outside their business premises c.1936
Courtesy of Seamus Gorman
Two entrepreneurial families in Kilkeel: the Sloanes and McGonigles

Ken Abraham

Robert James Sloane was originally from the townland of Ballykeel West, near Rathfriland, county Down. He learned the drapery trade as an employee of Foster & Co in Newry and, in 1887, opened his own shop on Newry Street in Kilkeel selling fabric and dressmaking and tailoring supplies. In 1895 he moved to larger premises on the opposite side of Newry Street and began to sell all types of ladies’ and gentlemen’s clothing including shoe and fashion accessories. The shop was widely known for specialising in high quality goods.

In the days before ready-made suits and dresses, tailoring, dressmaking and millinery were an essential part of R.J. Sloane’s business. He employed a local workforce and this gave many young women and men in the Kilkeel area an apprenticeship in the fashion trade. Another aspect of the business was the manufacture of sashes and collarettes for local Orange Lodges.

R.J. Sloane’s first wife had died not long after they were married. In 1905, he married Hessie Neill from Cookstown who had come to work as a supervisor in his dressmaking workrooms. They had two daughters, Jeannie and Hessie. In 1938, Hessie married William McGonigle whose father owned a butcher’s shop on Greencastle Street in Kilkeel.

The McGonigles were from Donegal and Edward McGonigle, William’s father, had come to Kilkeel, after a period in America, and opened his butcher’s shop at the Halloween Fair at the end of October 1911. Around 1927, he purchased McCann’s hardware shop next door to his premises and enlarged the building on Greencastle Street by adding another storey. He also opened a bakery in the former hardware shop.

William McGonigle, who had also worked in the Mourne Cinema on Rooney’s Road in Kilkeel, opened the Vogue Cinema in 1940, in partnership with Jim McCullough. They continued to run the cinema until they sold it to Newry and Mourne District Council in the 1980s.

R.J. Sloane died in 1952 and Jeannie Sloane continued to run the shop until ill-health prevented her from doing so in the early 1980s, when the shop closed. Rae McGonigle, William and Hessie’s son, says for him as a child, going into the shop was like “going back in history”.

She died in 1982. At the time of closure the shop still contained the original fittings and had merchandise from the early decades of the 20th century. Rae McGonigle, William and Hessie’s son, says for him as a child, going into the shop was like “going back in history”.

Rae McGonigle ran the butcher’s shop after his grandfather, Edward McGonigle, died in 1962 and expanded the business to include a hot food carry-out called ‘Pick and Fry’. Both the shop and the carry-out closed in 1989. The bakery, which had been taken over by Sunray Bakery from Newry, closed in the mid 1990s.
Reckitt and Colman factory, Canal Quay, Newry in the 1950s. Locally known as ‘the jam factory’, it produced potato powder, baby food and jellies until it closed in 1974 at the height of the Troubles. The site was bought by Newry and Mourne Co-operative Ltd, and is now known as WIN Business Park.

Newry and Mourne Museum Collection

Boat builder at work in Mackintosh’s boatyard, Kilkeel, in the 1940s.

Courtesy of Rae McGonigle

Cowan’s Shop, Cowan Street, Newry c. 1890s

Newry and Mourne Museum Collection
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Compiled by Noreen Cunningham
and Dr Ken Abraham

Every effort has been made to correctly attribute photographs used in this booklet and accompanying exhibition.
Ephemera from local businesses, early to mid 20th century

Newry and Mourne Museum Collection
John Grubb Richardson (1813 – 1890) set up Bessbrook Mill, which exported linen world-wide. Richardson also established Bessbrook, the first “model village” in the British Isles, based on Quaker ideals and designed to encourage social cohesion and a sense of community

*Newry and Mourne Museum Collection*