



IRISH TEMPERANCE LEAGUE

ITL EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

How We Got Here

Imagine yourself in the deprived and unsanitary living conditions of the early nineteenth century such as prevailed in a rapidly growing city like Belfast - a breeding ground for every conceivable social ill including the use and abuse of alcohol with attendant family neglect, abuse of spouses and unemployment, hence a scene of wretchedness so vividly portrayed in Hogarth's famous painting *Gin Lane*.

Pioneers

Into this scene stepped some men of pioneering spirit, motivated by their evangelical faith and determined to do something about it. Their initiatives took many forms, and a number of organisations came into being, few of which have been more enduring than the Irish Temperance League (ITL).

The ITL

The ITL was established in Belfast in 1858 having, in a sense, grown out of the Belfast Total Abstinence Association (BTAA) which had been established in 1837. According to one historian it was 'embedded in the merchant class of the town – businessmen rather than professionals, with the help, of course, of the clergy', most of them also deeply involved in dealing with living and working conditions, sanitation, prison reform, etc, men like Dr Barnardo, J P Corry, Edward Harland and Forster Green, to name a few of the better-known.

All-Ireland and non-party political

Although centred on Belfast the League, as the name suggests, has always been an all-Ireland organisation. From the beginning it declared itself to be 'non-party political, but functioning on the principle of Christian charity and love.' A main objective was 'the suppression of drunkenness by moral suasion, legislative prohibition and all other lawful means.'

Non-sexist

At the outset the League, reflecting the times, was a bastion of maleness, but the ladies soon showed that they lacked neither vision nor stamina. In 1874, alongside the League, the Belfast Women's Temperance Association (BTWA) was formed and in 1877 the Belfast

Prison Gate Mission for Women (PGM). (It is noteworthy that the modern Probation Service acknowledges that its roots lay in the PGM).

In five years (1863) the ITL had established its own journal, the *Irish Temperance League Journal*, renamed *Everybody's Monthly* in 1906. (Copies of the journal from 1863 to 1940 are preserved in the Public Record Office.) The League's influence in the country is reflected in a historian's comment that 'in 1870 it had established itself as a body to unite by affiliation the different associations in the country'

Lobbying

Space forbids to tell of the League's lobbying of Government and other agencies regarding liquor licensing laws, the granting of liquor licenses and of its co-operation with other bodies, for example the Irish Temperance Association (ITA) in an unsuccessful attempt at prohibition. However, it succeeded in ending spirit grocers in 1923. That it was a force to be reckoned with is revealed by the fact that it provided experts to advise the Royal Commission on Liquor Licensing Laws in 1898. An example of the kind of thing it did was when it shared with a church the cost of compensating a publican for surrendering his licence.

Coffee stands, etc

Against a backdrop of 634 public houses in Belfast in 1861 these pioneers were painfully aware of the lack of an alternative non-alcoholic choice of refreshment for Belfast's growing working class. Thus, in December 1874 the League opened its first purpose-built stand to serve coffee on Donegall Quay. (In 1919, reflecting the number of servicemen passing through the harbour during the Great War, it is on record that this stand had served 105,874 soldiers and sailors.) That the coffee stands were a success from the beginning is shown by the fact that by 1908 there were 24 such establishments in the city - some kiosks, others bespoke cafes. The coffee stand has been described by a historian as 'aimed at the passing and mobile trade of a working-class too busy to linger and with enough money to spend on refreshments.'

The League's other establishments included the Lombard Cafe, opened 1877 and aimed at the middle-class and leisured female market, and the Kensington Hotel, acquired by the League in 1943.

All this activity proved to be a commercial success, the profits used to fund the other activities of the League, which included promotion of its total abstinence policy in relation to alcohol and other drugs, music and arts festivals, instruction in hygiene, cookery, etc.

And so, for most of a century, with adjustments from time to time to meet changing conditions, this was the pattern of ITL activity, but private enterprise eventually took over the catering industry, and 'the troubles' were the 'last straw', resulting in the sale of all the

property in the early 1970s. This produced a substantial investment fund, so the question became one of how best to use it in pursuit of the objectives which had not changed.

Grants scheme

Following an experiment or two it was decided to launch a grants scheme whereby the income from the investment would be used to help voluntary, community and self-help groups that are working to counter the culture of alcohol and other drugs. After twelve years the scheme continues to function very satisfactorily – for details see elsewhere on this site.

Conclusion

A historian has concluded that ‘a strength of the ITL has been its ability to change and be flexible. In the Victorian period, where it recognised a societal need in relation to alcohol, it tried to meet that need; thus, when there were few alternatives to the public house, it provided such through its cafés. Where there was a need to provide support and refuge for those impacted negatively by alcohol it sought to meet that need through, for instance, the Prison Gate Missions. When the state began to meet those needs, then the ITL ceased to be the agency involved. The ITL has consistently sought to keep the topic of temperance and the dangers of alcohol before the public, in particular the danger of alcohol for the young. This is where its roots lay ... and where perhaps it continues to do the best work now.’