

Hucksters and Petty Retailers in Thomastown, 1880-1945

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The town of Thomastown was founded in about 1200AD as a Norman military centre and as a trading depot with its commercial rights safeguarded by charter. As far as we know, fairs and markets were regularly held in the town through the centuries. These dealt not only with agricultural produce from the area but also with imported and manufactured consumer goods. It was not until the second half of the eighteenth century, however, that retail shops (as we know them today) began to appear - as they did elsewhere in eastern Ireland and in England. These shops gradually displaced the fairs (and, perhaps, itinerant pedlars) as the suppliers of small quantities of commodities to final consumers. By 1824, there were about 36 retailers in the town; there were 37 in 1884, 39 in 1911 and 41 in 1945.

In the town and in the surrounding countryside, there were also - in the nineteenth century (and probably earlier) and until the middle of this century - a few other retailers who were not usually regarded by local people as shopkeepers. They operated on a very small scale and, although some of them were said to "keep a shop" or to "have a small shop," they were not "real shopkeepers." Their enterprises were tiny in scope, yielding very small profits, and they were often short-lived and usually irregular in operation and in the commodities they stocked.

Petty Retailers in the Rural Areas

Some of these petty retailers - particularly in the countryside - were commonly described as "hucksters" by local, elderly people looking back from the 1980s. It was a term rarely used by younger people for they had never known such individuals. Huckster shops were defined by one elderly woman as "shops which sold anything and everything but not much of anything." This fairly well epitomised the rural huckster shops, away from the town, which irregularly carried a variety of groceries - bread, tea, sugar, salt, flour, matches, candles, tobacco. The small stocks were obtained from shops in the town so that, to make even a small profit, prices

had to be a little higher. However, these commodities were available for purchase, usually in tiny quantities, at almost any hour by nearby residents who did not often go the few miles into the town and who could take advantage of the ready convenience and small quantities.

The meaning of the word "huckster" has probably varied over time and in different parts of Ireland. For instance, Kennedy (1979:202), using Irish census data for 1881-1911, grouped hucksters together with costermongers and street sellers, distinguishing them from "general shopkeepers" and so-called "dealers." Such distinction does not apply well to hucksters in the Thomastown area in the later nineteenth century and the first half of this century. (We have no information as to how the word was used in earlier times.) Rather, the huckster shop of Thomastown seems to have been somewhat similar to the so-called "general shop" referred to by historians of retailing in England. There, such shops were located either in the backstreets of cities and catered to the urban poor (Alexander 1970:110, 234) or they were in villages and catered to small rural populations (Davis 1966:266). Yet those village shops could be more elaborate in their stocks than were the Thomastown hucksters, at least if a classic description was at all typical. Writing between 1824 and 1832, Mitford depicted her local village shop as "multifarious as a bazaar: a repository for bread, shoes, tea, cheese, tape, ribands and bacon." That kind of shop, whether or not called a huckster's, existed in Ireland, too, but they were located in small villages where they had little or no competition and where they attempted to offer as wide a range of foods as possible. We know of no shop in Thomastown, of any sort, including huckster, which carried so varied a stock. The regular (so-called "real") shops in the town were more specialised whilst the hucksters carried only groceries.

During the later nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, two or three rural huckster shops existed at any one time in the parish. Both owners and locations varied as individual hucksters died and their shops with them or as they found the tiny profits intolerable or they ran out of cash with which to replenish stock or they aged and lost vigour. At times, extensive rural areas to the south and to the east of the town had no such shop, whereas western townlands seem always to have had one or more (Oldtown, Jerpointabbey, Ballylowra), perhaps because of

the large labour force employed on the nearby Ballylinch demesne.

Apart from hucksters, a few other rural people also engaged in petty retailing to final consumers from time to time. For example, at the turn of the century, a farmer sold small quantities of milk to individuals as well as larger amounts to the workhouse and to a town grocer. Farmers' wives have sold eggs to individuals as well as to grocers. Some labourers and their wives, with cottages built on an acre of land, were able to sell eggs, poultry and vegetables. None of these sellers were described as hucksters nor as shopkeepers; neither did they "keep a shop." There were also a few men, in the nineteenth century, described in the newspapers as "dealers." They were not retailers: rather, they bought and sold livestock, probably acting in part as agents of larger dealers in Waterford and New Ross.

Petty Retailers in the Town

The town had tiny huckster shops but, as well, there were other petty retailers - not usually described as hucksters by elderly informants - who specialised in only one or two commodities: for example, bread, milk, tea, tobacco or sweets. These shops offered the possibility, as well as the convenience, of small purchases by neighbours who preferred not to walk the short distance into the town centre or who wished to obtain some necessity at almost any hour. Elderly people in the town recalled to us that, earlier this century, these petty retailers could offer small, short-term credit to neighbours who ran out of cash before pay day and who, as low wage and/or irregular labourers, could not obtain weekly credit from the main retailers. Thus, it was possible, even common, for a person to obtain a few penniesworth of essentials - bread, tea, tobacco - and to pay a few days later. "It was," said an elderly woman in 1981, "better to owe money to a neighbour than to be in debt to a shopkeeper. But, sure, you couldn't get credit with a shopkeeper. They wouldn't give it to poor people." Note that by implication in this statement, the petty retailers were not seen as "shopkeepers."

At least seven petty retailers (including three hucksters) were operating in the town in 1901 and four in 1911. In 1926, there were four and in 1941 there were three. The individuals themselves, in their household returns for the censuses of 1901 and 1911, did not claim the occupational description of "shopkeeper" or "huckster"

but entered "widow," "pensioner," "labourer," etc. on their forms. Although, of course, there was no exact line of demarcation, local people had little difficulty in distinguishing the petty retailers from the "shopkeepers." Both shopkeepers and others in Thomastown, in the 1980s, were agreed that the petty retailers were "not really shopkeepers," implying that they should not be put into the same category as "real" or "proper" shopkeepers. In addition to the small scale of their activities, most petty retailers did not have shop-like premises - that is, particular rooms devoted to stocks of commodities, a counter, a shop window, the proprietor's name carved or painted over the door. Typically, the petty retailer operated from the living room or kitchen in her/his house.

Some examples of these petty retailers can illustrate the scale on which they operated. About 1911, a middle-aged widow lived with her bachelor son, a casual, often unemployed labourer. She purchased bread from a baker in the town, and sometimes had tea and sugar, to sell to her neighbours on Mill Street, where lived many of the mill workers, fishermen and casual labourers. From her small stock, kept on a table in her living room, her customers could buy part of a loaf or a little tea. About the same time, an elderly woman sold small quantities of tobacco, cigarettes in ones and twos and sweets from a limited and variable stock kept on a kitchen shelf. In the 1920s, an elderly spinster held small supplies of pens, pencils and paper and a widowed refugee from Belfast sold sweets. One or two women prepared and sold food: blood puddings was the specialism of one woman on Mill Street and another woman baked "cakes" for sale on market days.

Among the town's hucksters was the widow of a saddler who used her husband's shop during World War I and after. A bootmaker's widow did the same but in so desultory a manner that, as one elderly man put it, "you weren't sure that she was open or if she had anything to sell." A bootmaker with his wife, ran a huckster-type shop (including occasionally selling small quantities of coal) whilst they took in lodgers. In the later 1920s, a tailor attempted to buttress his fading artisanal business by running a huckster shop, although he ceased after a few years of virtual failure.

These examples come from the first part of the twentieth century. Information for the nineteenth century is poor because commercial directories, governmental reports and newspapers were not interested in such tiny-scale operations. We are, therefore, dependent

on casual reference - when, for example, a court witness was described as a huckster - and on a few accounts from older informants who recalled what their parents had told them. Doubtless there were petty retailers in those and earlier times who met the same needs as those of the early twentieth century. Similarly, there is little information concerning costermongers, street sellers, hawkers and itinerant pedlars: but we know of no Thomastown person in those occupations, at least since 1840. According to our informants in the 1980s, hawkers of earlier times were not Thomastown people. They were stereotyped as coming from other towns in the region (Callan, Graiguenamanagh, New Ross), with an open implication that, unlike Thomastown, poverty and desperation were so great in those places that people there were forced to resort to hawking, an inferior and disreputable occupation. Several older people made particular mention of hawkers from Graiguenamanagh who sold herrings (presumably brought up the Barrow river by boat from the ocean).

Who were the Petty Retailers and Hucksters?

As the examples suggest, petty retailers (including the hucksters) were mainly women and mainly widowed and elderly, but there were also a few elderly men. All these individuals lived in poverty and were endeavouring to earn a pittance to alleviate their privation by the exiguous profits they could gain. A few younger persons - a man and his wife, say - combined petty retailing or working as a seamstress, for instance, whilst the husband worked as a handyman, a carter or a casual labourer.

In most cases, petty retailers originated in labourer families and only in a few cases was there an artisanal background. Moreover, in the town, most of them were located in streets where labouring people lived. That is to say, these tiny-scale retailers were members of, and lived amongst, a low income, working class who were their customers - people who often experienced poverty and distress. As a result, they were accepted and tolerated; indeed, they were approved, unlike the man of labourer origin who attempted to become a "real shopkeeper," selling to the general public and moving beyond his status-class. Such an individual might be subject to begrudging resentment whereas, in contrast, no-one suggested that the petty retailers suffered that envy and disability. On the contrary, we heard that there was some desire to purchase

from a petty retailer as a form of disguised charity for an impoverished neighbour and "one of us."

It is evident that these petty retailers gained only tiny and unreliable incomes and not uncommonly a small loss meant disaster. Sales were of very small quantities, turnover was slow and the profit margins were minute. Credit was not always paid quickly, although this does not appear to have been a major problem except in the very worst of economic times. Operation was generally irregular because the owner was scrambling to earn other income or was elderly and lacked stamina or was temporarily unable to replenish stock. "You could never be sure that she would have bread to sell you," explained one old man, in 1981, of his widowed neighbour of half a century earlier.

As a result, the majority of petty retailers did not last long. Of 29 known individuals who were petty retailers in Thomastown town and parish between 1900 and 1950, 12 continued more or less regularly for more than ten years. Many of the others lasted only two or three years. Some seem to have operated erratically, suspending operations when there was no money to obtain stock or when a husband or son obtained more than transitory employment, and restarting again when unemployment returned. Only in two known cases was the tiny business passed on to an heir: in each case it was associated with artisanal work (blacksmith, bootmaker) and did not survive the heir's lifetime.

Petty retailers (including hucksters) virtually disappeared from both urban and rural areas after the middle of the twentieth century. Their roots had lain in a degree of poverty which no longer existed in Thomastown. The state's welfare provisions were sufficient to make such petty enterprise unnecessary whilst increasing prosperity obviated the need for petty purchases and neighbourly charity. New convenience shops catered for customers who wished to make casual purchases outside normal shop hours or away from the town centre. Rural residents came to town more easily and frequently, whilst bread, milk and other basic commodities were regularly delivered by retailers' vans. Thus, both the need (especially the desperate need of the near indigent) and the opportunity to gain tiny profits disappeared and so did Thomastown's hucksters and petty retailers.

Notes

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Kennedy, Liam, 1979. "Traders in the Irish Rural Economy, 1800-1914;" *Economic History Review*, 32:201-10.

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