



FAMILIAR SIGHT: Just another St Patrick's Day in Belfast's Holylands area

Holylands has become one unholy mess

Alex
KANE

ABOUT 10 years ago I walked around the Holylands area with a university friend who had lived there between 1977-81. He'd been away from Northern Ireland for most of the next 30 years, but returned for a month-long visit to catch-up with old friends and observe the post-1998 changes.

"What has happened here?" he asked, "Why have the university and city council allowed it to become this bad, this run down?" It was a good point. When he and I had rubbed shoulders in the area in the late 1970s (I graduated two years earlier) long-term residents and young university staff outnumbered the students. The area was clean and tidy and any parties were always kept under control, didn't spill onto the road and usually involved the hosts informing nearby families, particularly if they had young children.

One of my neighbours was a friend of my aunt and I kept in touch with her for years after I graduated. I remember chatting to her at my aunt's in the early 1990s and asking her if she still struck up friendships with students and left in sandwiches and cakes on Sunday (which she used to do with us: "who wants to cook after a long bus journey"). Her reply was stark: she no longer lived there because the student/resident balance had changed so much that she

didn't feel welcome.

The 'Holylands problem' is not a new problem. It's one we've heard about regularly since the early 1990s and each year it seems to get worse. What should be a genuinely bohemian area for students and small businesses is, instead, a bit of a wasteland which nobody wants to take any particular responsibility for. Not the two universities; not the council; not the police; not the landlords; and certainly not the students themselves. And when no-one wants to take responsibility we can hardly be surprised when a place becomes unloved and unwelcoming.

Meanwhile, the remaining residents do their best to hold on to their homes and a normal family life. Sadly, most of the support they receive seems to consist of mere words and vague promises. Listening to the radio on Wednesday I heard a local MLA call for a coming together of the usual suspects (universities, council, police, students, landlords, residents, MLAs and local councillors); it's a call I have heard every year since I began working in the assembly in 1999. It's a call I have heard every year since I left

the assembly in 2010. Yet nothing ever seems to happen, other than an ever-increasing number of students (most of whom, it's worth remembering, are courteous, civil and hard-working) descending on the area for about nine months of the year.

But I can't say I'm surprised to hear that hundreds of them are partying away in the midst of a pandemic; openly flouting the rules on social distancing and taking enormous risks with their own health. And the health of others. They may sound very brave with a few pints in them, but I'm pretty sure they'll be wetting themselves when the Covid symptoms start. I'm also pretty sure they'll be on the first bus home to mum and dad, taking the symptoms back to them, their siblings and others in the family. They'll also discover that all their drinking buddies will want nothing to do with them; and certainly won't want them hacking away and struggling to breathe in the same student accommodation.

Given the amount of money students are paying to live in Holylands accommodation (and I've often wondered if there is an equivalent to the area in any other university town/city) I'm surprised there hasn't been a campaign from them demanding better conditions and more facilities. Maybe, just maybe, if the conditions and environment were massively improved, there wouldn't be the tendency to treat the place with such open contempt? Just a thought.

And here's another thought. Maybe the universities and landlords should be forced to take more hands-on responsibility for

the thousands of students they are earning a tidy profit from every year? Overcrowding in what was always a smallish area is a major problem and yet no-one seems to address it. Most post-university rented-accommodation contracts are fairly tough in terms of what is and isn't permissible and carry significant penalties if breached. Maybe students – living away from home and parental supervision for the first time – need an early lesson in personal responsibility?

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ON THIS DAY

SEPTEMBER 18 1920

Bigotry on the Bann

THE infamous 'pogrom' now in progress has recently been accompanied by the stipulation that its victim should sign away manhood, nationality and religion before being allowed to earn their daily bread. This began in the works situated in Banbridge.

In July, all the Catholics employed in the various weaving and bleaching establishments on the River Bann, adjacent to Banbridge, were cleared out. The now familiar declaration is a Banbridge patent. The Catholic workers refuse to sign and even long weeks have passed and they still loiter aimlessly about the streets, outcasts of society, men and women whom the children of the 'elect' pass with a shudder. They are outcasts in every sense of the term with scarcely a nod of recognition from former friends of the workshop.

Today the entire Bann valley has been cleared. Over 500 Catholics on the lower reaches of the river from Laurencetown to Gifford have been added to the list of evicted victims. A fortnight has elapsed since the Catholic employees of five further works were driven forth by a mob of thousands strong, with flute bands at its head.

A representative of *The Irish News* last week made an extended tour of the affected district. Cycling along from Banbridge I first struck the little village of Seapark. The dinner horn sounded and a stream of workers marched up the avenue for their midday meal. Do they ever give a thought as workers of the world to their former comrades, perhaps without a dinner and they the cause? Further along I passed the bleach works at Milltown (Lenaderg). The 'Micks' had been cleared also in July last. Next came weaving works known as Hazelbank, owned by Mr Norman Dickson from which 80 girls were chased.

In Gifford the big local spinning mill of Messrs Dunbar, McMaster and Co. Ltd. whirled on but without 250 Catholics. It was here the pogrom of the lower reaches of the river commenced. Workers to Gifford Mill on Monday morning, September 6, on reaching the gates, found their progress barred by pickets who informed them that the mill was closed down for the day. A total of about 800 are employed here and of this number about 250 are Catholic employees.

About a thousand Catholics employed in the valley of the Bann have now no work.

The impact of the sectarian work expulsions affected not only Belfast but Banbridge, Lisburn and Dromore. The Banbridge 'lock-out' began with the IRA murder of Colonel GB Smyth in Cork. The Gifford expulsions followed rumoured IRA involvement in the murder of a local Protestant during a highway robbery.

EDITED BY ÉAMON PHOENIX
e.phoenix@irishnews.com