

HIDDEN GEMS AND FORGOTTEN PEOPLE



BARNEY HUGHES (1808-1878)

Master Baker and Philanthropist

Bernard (Barney) Hughes was born in Armagh in 1808. He started work as a baker's boy in 1820, moving to Belfast in 1826. He worked in a small bakery in Church Lane and later in the Public Bakery in Church Street, becoming manager 1833. In 1840 he opened his own bakery business in Donegall Street, followed by a second one in Donegall Place in 1846 and a third in Divis Street in 1850.

Hughes was recognised as Belfast's leading master baker and by 1870 owned the largest baking and milling enterprise in Ireland. By then he was not only Belfast's first elected Catholic representative but his roles as municipal politician, industrial reformer and Catholic lay spokesman had won the admiration of all sections of the increasingly divided city. His political and personal courage was characterised by a deep hatred of sectarianism. His heroic attempts to defuse the bitter sectarian riots in Belfast in 1857 and 1864 brought him into conflict with both the Catholic Church and the Tory hierarchy, gaining him the respect of Orange and Green alike.

But it is for his bread that he is best remembered. His innovative production and marketing ideas provided the city's working population with cheaper bread at a time when they needed it most, particularly during the years of the Great Famine. He also introduced Barney's 'bap', which is famed in the Belfast children's song 'half a bap with sugar on the top'.

Hughes is remembered not only for his business vision and liberalism but also his philanthropy - for example, donating the ground on which St Peter's Cathedral was built and money to build St Mary's Hall, Bank Street (now demolished). Hughes was also among the leading citizens who contributed money to erect the statue of Dr Henry Cooke, colloquially known as the 'Black Man', which still stands today in front of the Royal Belfast Academical Institution.

Barney Hughes died on 23rd September 1878, and is buried in Friar's Bush graveyard.

Patrick Devlin