

## HIDDEN GEMS AND FORGOTTEN PEOPLE



### **THOMAS GALLAGHER (1840-1928) – “The Tobacco King”**

Thomas Gallagher was born at Templemoyle, near Londonderry on 27 April 1840, and processed tobacco in the City until 1863, when he transferred his business to Belfast. By 1902, when he started to make cigarettes, he already had 1,600 people working for him. The cigarettes were so successful that he set up a large London factory to cope with the increased demand. He also opened factories in Ballymena and Dublin. Gallagher also owned a tobacco plantation in the Richmond, Virginia.

Gallagher was an autocratic man, and as Chairman of the Belfast Steamship Company he became involved in the 1907 dock strike. Jim Larkin, the well-known labour leader, came to Belfast to organise the National Union of Dock Labourers; he also tried to create a union in Gallagher's, but this was vigorously opposed. Larkin called Gallagher "an obscene scoundrel"; there were sympathy strikes, and even street riots in Belfast. Despite this Gallagher was the first employer to reduce the working hours from 57 to 47 and the first to introduce annual paid holidays.

After Gallagher's death in May 1928 the firm continued to prosper - in the 1950's it employed 3,000 people. However, the end came with the recession of the 1980's. The factory was partly demolished in 1990 to make way for the York gate complex.

**Victor Price**