

Bartholomew Sullivan and the Paper Mills of Dripsey

Compiled by Richard Murphy from articles by Tim Sheehan

Alongside the River Dripsey as it flows towards its meeting with the River Lee and the Inniscarra Reservoir, lies the jewel of Dripsey known as Griffins Garden Centre and Restaurant. The commercial heart of the modern Dripsey, it is situated in a location which was, during the 19th Century, its equivalent of the times, The Dripsey Paper Mill. At its peak, the Mill was said to have employed as many as four hundred people and a village, known as Blackpool, grew around it to house those workers and their families.

Country life in rural Ireland in the early 19th Century was very different from the present day. Two hundred years ago, a system of complementary handicrafts and trades such as shoemaking, tailoring, knitting, spinning, carding, combing, weaving and metalwork existed in almost every hamlet. But in the industrial sphere, the process of papermaking was viewed as the top industry catering for employment.

Dripsey had such an industry at that time and owed its success to the determination of one man, Bat Sullivan.

To trace its existence it is necessary firstly to place the spotlight on North Main Street, Cork, specifically on Hoare's Lane, which is now Adelaide Street. In fact, the area contiguous of the North Gate Bridge was the centre of various trades in the early 1760s. It was here a young man named Bartholomew Sullivan grew up and was apprenticed to a papermaker.

Bartholomew Sullivan was employed by Sir James Jeffreys to manage a paper-mill in Blarney. Some years afterwards Sullivan, who resided at Dromisole with his wife and family, moved to a three-storey residence, Beechmount House, near Healy's Bridge, where he operated a large paper-mill and iron works.

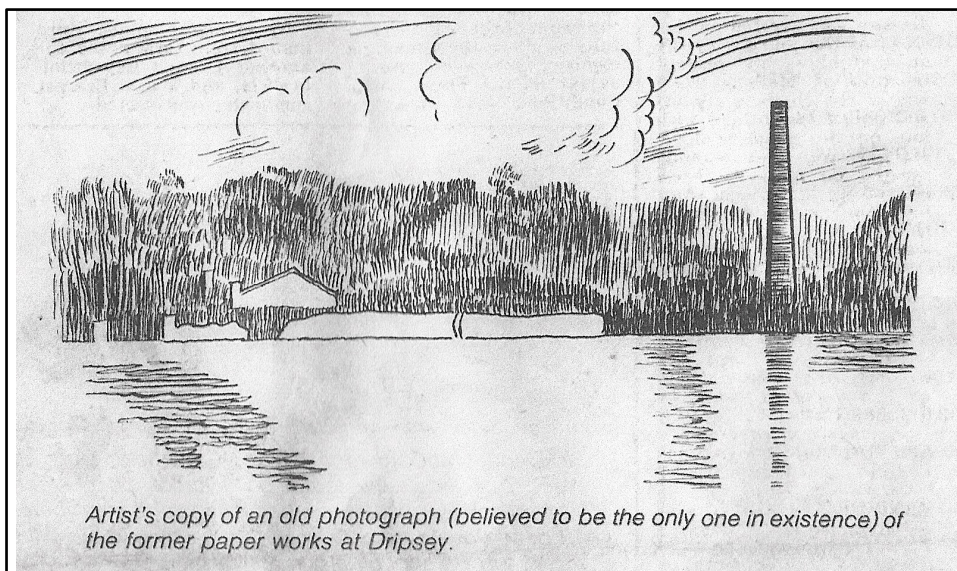
Here he was assisted by his son Jimmy, who was educated at the Reddington Academy, near Cobh, the first Catholic Boarding School in Ireland

subsequent to the Reformation. Incidentally, Daniel O'Connell and his brother Maurice also attended this school which closed down around 1810 or so.

Sir Richard Payne, then the Lord Chief Justice, had purchased Blarney Castle, with mills and land of 1,400 acres, for the sum of £3,000. A year later, the entire property was sold on to General Sir James Jeffreys who, having seen waterpower used successfully in England to drive machinery, felt that the topography and streams in and around Blarney provided excellent opportunities for industrial development in the district. Thus, he planned the layout of Blarney village, built a new mansion beside the old McCarthy Blarney Castle, and set up 13 mills within a compact area.

At this school, Jimmy Bat Sullivan, as he was called, was regarded as dreamy and eccentric. These traits remained in him up to his accidental death in London in 1829; but it appears they also sparked his genius.

Young Sullivan, having branched from his father's business at Healy's Bridge, set up his own paper-mill at Dripsey around the turn of the 1800s, in an abandoned linen mill. Huguenots failed to establish themselves owing to the fact that this religious sect was not favoured by the Church of England. The Huguenots, originally German, were driven out of their home country by the Lutherans and settled in France from which they were expelled a hundred years later. Numbers of them who came to Cork, settled in



Artist's copy of an old photograph (believed to be the only one in existence) of the former paper works at Dripsey.

successfully in the trade and business life of the city; but being French, and owing to the warring animosities of the English and French, themselves and their religious beliefs failed to make common ground with the Church of England landlords, particularly the Magnays of London, absentee landlords in Dripsey, from whom Sullivan leased the disused mill.

In Dripsey, Sullivan installed the most modern machinery of the day. It was the invention of a Frenchman named Didot, and perfected by an English firm, Fourdininers of London. Prior to Didot's invention, paper in Ireland was made in sheets only three feet long. The advantage of the Frenchman's invention was that it made paper in continuous sheets. Dripsey, having been the first mill in the south to make such paper, became famous as a result. Sullivan's mind conceived unlimited possibilities for this new paper. He leased a large tract of land in Dripsey (known to this day as the Acres) from the local Cross' Cromwellian landlords and held a monster ploughing match for a two-fold purpose. Firstly, to have this tract of land ploughed in one day and secondly, to provide an occasion for a grand party to which he invited the gentry and hoteliers of the county and city, ostensibly to view his manufactured sheet paper in use as covering for large tables, instead of the more expensive linen. From this sales gimmick, he won orders in England, to where he exported the paper.

Sullivan made contact with a French expert who made another breakthrough in Dripsey, namely producing lined paper. France, up to the time of the Revolution, was the most advanced country in paper-making in western Europe, which explains the ingenuity of this Frenchman during his stay in Dripsey. The sap of the red willow, a tree that grew in

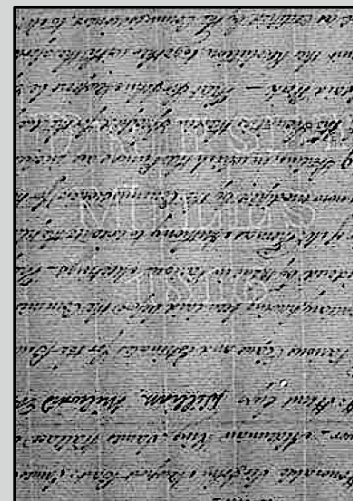
abundance on both banks of the Dripsey River, formed the main colour constituent of the formula he used for lining paper. Having secured a contract from the Bank of England for banknotes, he devised a colouring process for those banknotes, approved by the Treasury.

However, Sullivan's ingenuity in manufacturing produced a negative reaction from the workers who apparently started a fire at the mill in protest at the instalment of modern machinery which threatened their jobs.

Engineers from the Newcomen Works, England, came to Dripsey to repair the damage at a cost of almost £300. That happened at a time when J B Sullivan was living at Dripsey beside the paper-mill where, it is understood that his brilliant son, William Kirby Sullivan, the future and second President of Queen's College, was born. William Kirby Sullivan is credited as having been the first scientist in Ireland to extract sugar from beet.

In its heyday, Dripsey Paper Mills was reputed to employ 400. However, my research could find only 100 documented. Admittedly, my research dealt with a period later than Sullivan's management. During Sullivan's time a village, mainly of mud-wall cabins and stone built

Irish Watermarks identified There are well-documented records of the long established Irish families in the paper making trade within the few reference texts that have been written specifically about Irish watermarks. The Sullivan family is known to have been producing paper in both Dublin and Cork. Bartholomew Sullivan established the Dripsey Mills in Cork in the late 18th Century; these mills eventually grew to cover nearly six acres and were a huge employer in the local area. Excellent examples of watermarks from Dripsey mills were found within the collection. There are watermarks from 1810, 1814 and 1816, the font of the watermark remains the same; it varies only in size, with the 1810 watermark being the smallest. From 1787 the Dublin branch of the family seems to have been under the stewardship of Jeremiah Sullivan and watermarks of JS, J Sullivan and JS under the post horn watermark were located. The earliest date recorded was 1808, with a watermark JS.



Source:

Irish Watermarks Identified in the CSO-RP Manuscripts Zoë Reid & Eileen Walsh

houses, was built to house the workers. The village, which was unofficially named Blackpool, was situated west of the paper-mills on land owned by a John Ryan who lived where the present John Joe Roche farms. The system at that time was that all dwellings or outhouses on the land were rated against the tenant who held the farm. Between the paper-mill and Blackpool there was a hedge school in a stone-built house owned by the Bowen-Colthursts. Dripsey Paper Mills complex comprised about six acres. The mill building contained stone-built passages, store rooms, and water conduits fed from a large pond, a backup from a dam on the River Dripsey. The raw material used in the manufacture of paper was rags; linen rags and clippings preferred. The paper made there was certainly strong and durable. The panel above, which shows Watermarks of J Sullivan and Dripsey Mills, suggests that Bat

Sullivan was in some way related to J Sullivan of Dublin, but there is some doubt. This famed paper-mill changed hands a number of times after the accidental death in London of Jimmy Bat Sullivan, who fell into the Thames one night while over there on business. An inquest confirmed that the place where he slipped was considered dangerous. Papers found on him, which were due for publication, dealt with paper manufacturing in Dripsey. The flooding of the Lee Valley in 1957, following the completion of Inniscarra hydro-electric station, submerged the ruins of the once-famous Dripsey Paper Mills. One hundred years before that Dripsey Pond had disappeared with the closure of the mills. Subsequently, "Blackpool Village", with its hedge school, crumbled and disappeared. The area then known as Blackpool is now occupied mainly by Griffins Garden Centre.

Margaret Griffin remembers

"I'm thinking about Molly the lovely lady who lived in the cottage across the road from the Garden Centre. Molly Lynch was her name. She always spoke about the girls from a UK agricultural college working in the field where the Garden Centre is now, of them wearing black full length dresses and white aprons. I'm not sure if it was to do with the cheese factory or the gardens of the big house. Seemingly it was a beautiful estate garden. Did you know that's why Abina and William sold that first 5 acres to me? I went to them one Saturday afternoon, on my bike as I will never forget how nervous I was. I asked them if they would sell that field. They didn't give me an answer straight away, but Abina was such a beautiful lady and she loved flowers and her garden. She thought it great that a garden would appear in that field again, history repeating itself so to speak."



A parade is held in Dripsey each year to commemorate the fallen in the Dripsey Ambush and to lay wreaths at the monument. This photograph shows the extent of the parade as they march across the Dripsey Bridge. We don't know the year but would estimate the 1950s period.