

***Rus in Urbe* – Stillorgan and Environs as an Evolving Dublin Suburb, c. 1860 to 1960**

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Although today the Stillorgan area is very clearly part of Dublin's suburbs this relationship really only began to emerge in the second half of the nineteenth century. Indeed, the modern-day concept of a suburb which we tend to take for granted only evolved from about this time onwards. The discussion that follows examines some of the significant phases in Stillorgan's evolution as a suburb, from tentative beginnings linked to new transport links, through a phase of institutional growth, to state-of-the-art developments on either side of 'the Emergency' and ending with its possible status as the ultimate Irish suburb of the 1960s.

The word 'suburb' began to be used in medieval times, when the areas beyond the town walls were inhabited by the poorest or unwanted classes, or were used for noxious activities such as tanning. It was much later that suburbs came to be seen more positively, as a residential retreat from the city. From the nineteenth century, we see a growing desire to 'escape' from the city, first by the upper classes and later filtering down through the newly emerging bourgeoisie. In Britain, where this process arguably happened earlier than elsewhere, the move to the suburbs was encouraged by the increasingly unpleasant nature of the industrial city, with its smoke-filled atmosphere, high death rates and burgeoning slums. In Dublin, too, a move away from the centre began, although even in the 1850s the city was still relatively compact.

At this stage, the area around Kilmacud and Stillorgan was still very rural and had changed little from the description in 1837 in *Lewis's Topographical Dictionary of Ireland*:

This parish comprises only 648 statute acres, of which about three-fourths are meadow and pasture, chiefly demesne lands, and the remainder principally garden grounds. There are numerous handsome seats and pleasing villas beautifully situated and commanding some fine sea views and mountain scenery, with extensive prospects over Dublin bay.

One of the restrictions on moving out of the city, for those whose occupation or income was linked to urban life, was the need for reliable transport to travel between home and workplace. The well-to-do would have had their own stables and coaches, but others might have relied on the mail coach, which would have made for a trying experience in poor weather conditions. The arrival of a new mode of transport – the railway – opened up new opportunities by making the Stillorgan area more accessible to those in a position to pay the fares.

The first flurry of what might be considered suburban activity in Stillorgan was associated with the opening of the Dublin and South-Eastern Railway's inland line from Harcourt Street to Bray in 1856. This line competed with the established Kingstown line, which had the distinction of being the world's first suburban railway line. The entrepreneurial Messrs Bentley & Son, the estate and land agents who developed Brighton Square in Rathmines, soon began trying to open up the lands around Stillorgan's new station for house building. The intention appears to have been to provide homes for a better class of commuter. We know, for example, that Bentley negotiated special concessionary fares for residents of these villas (both first and second class tickets), and a further station was to be provided on the

estate itself. An omnibus service to Kingstown was arranged and a free site was offered for a Church of Ireland church to act as a focal point for the development (Daly, 1984, pp. 200-1).

A typical advertisement appeared in *The Irish Times* on 20 January 1860 offering building sites, in lots of one to ten acres each for detached houses, with 900-year leases on ‘very moderate terms’ of from £5 to £10 per acre. The sites were ‘very elevated, and command magnificent sea and mountain views ... within two miles of Kingstown, and within a few minutes’ walk of the Stillorgan station’. The advertisement noted that a further station was due to open the following September, while ‘omnibuses will ply between same and Kingstown for bathing, shopping, etc., as soon as the first twelve houses shall be fit for occupation’. Prospective purchasers were also assured that superior bricks, stone, lime and sand were available on the lands and would be given to the tenants on very moderate terms.

By 1862 the builder John Doyle was offering villas with an acre of pleasure grounds on Bentley’s land, just three minutes from Stillorgan station, for £450. The location is described as ‘most healthful, cheerful and well-sheltered’. The generous size of the plots is indicated by another advertisement of the same date which offered a ‘small furnished house’ to let, with grass for a cow. The house had three bedrooms, two sitting rooms, but also dressing and servants’ rooms, as well as stabling. The relatively large plots would be ripe for subdivision at a later stage in the area’s development.

On 5 April 1862, *The Irish Times* wrote favourably about Mr. Bentley ‘the enterprising proprietor’ who had, ‘by the application of capital, energy, and skill ... brought the lands into the highest state of cultivation, and upwards of one-fifth of the estate has been divided into villa plots, upon which numerous costly and ornamental buildings have been erected’. Despite the efforts of Mark Bentley's efforts, who had reputedly spent between £40,000 and £50,000 on roads and site development by 1865, not to mention the fact that later legal action showed that the DSE railway was being favoured above the Kingstown line with cheaper fares, the project was a flop, and Bentley eventually abandoned the enterprise by the late 1860s. The 505-acre Foxrock estate was eventually sold to the Royal Exchange Assurance Company, which was still trying to develop the land in the early 1900s.

By the 1880s, the Stillorgan area could, like much of Dublin’s hinterland, be described as a transitional zone. It was not yet fully integrated into the urban area as a dormitory, and remained predominantly rural. Advertisements seeking employment in the area typically offered skills in gardening or domestic service. At the same time, the locality had become favoured for seasonal lettings, due to its perceived healthy location and relative proximity to the sea.

Gradually the high and healthy location and the availability of large tracts of land suitable for building caused institutions linked to the city to locate there. Stillorgan was seen as having the correct balance between distance from and proximity to the city. It had also become home to a major reservoir for the city. The availability of the ‘Vartry water’ supply was of great significance to the development of Dublin’s suburbs, and another way in which Stillorgan was linked to the city.

That the residents of the locality were of the better sort can be seen from the advertisements of this era which offered houses to let in this ‘highly respectable’ neighbourhood, whilst others from well-known grocery halls offered home delivery in the area. Most people at that time, even the upper crust, rented their homes rather than owning them outright, a situation that did not change until well into the twentieth century. Houses were seen as a good investment, and it was common for them to be sold in groups for investment purposes. A typical example is the terrace of four houses offered by James H. North in *The Irish Times* of

25 July 1883. These were ‘four handsome houses, built in the villa style (in the best possible manner); charmingly situated in the nicest part of Stillorgan ... all let to most eligible tenants’. The houses, being sold at £1,750 for the entire, were described as a ‘safe and profitable investment’.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century we see some of the large residences in the area, as in other outlying locations around Dublin, being given over to institutional use. Examples included the St John of God Hospital, Sheil’s Institute, Linden Convalescent Home and the Carmelite Sisters’ Monastery of St Joseph, which occupied the former Kilmacud Manor. High and healthy surroundings, such as those offered in Stillorgan, were considered important for convalescence. Meanwhile, in the 1910 listing in *Thom’s Directory* for the Convalescent Home, Stillorgan, it was noted that the pay wards would cater ‘for the shop assistant or commercial class’. This was a class-ridden society, and everyone knew their place.

By the turn of the twentieth century Dublin had truly begun to suburbanise with a series of independently governed ‘townships’ circling the city and stretching along the coast to the south. The middle-classes had moved in their droves to suburban locations that were removed politically and socially from an increasingly impoverished urban core. Within that central area, between the canals, there was an on-going slum crisis, but at the other end of the social spectrum the middle-classes went about their business and lived their lives, apparently immune to the squalor of tenement Dublin.

The new suburbs were generally developed by the landowners and builders. The latter often built houses both on a speculative basis for sale and/or rental, and for specific customers. It was also common to make building plots available to other builders, as has been seen with the example of Doyle building on Bentley’s land. Examples of this speculative building process can be identified throughout Dublin’s suburbs, as at the Herbert Park estate in Ballsbridge developed by the partnership of George and Tom Crampton (later to form the limited company, G & T Crampton Ltd) or in the Iona Road area of Glasnevin, developed by Alexander Strain. The more substantial homes built at the time were often advertised ‘to let or sell’. Advertisements promoted the healthy location, proximity to transport networks, water supply and existence of hot and cold running water, which were still novelties. Because they were typically built ‘on spec’, without a definite purchaser in mind, the houses geared to the middle-class suburban dweller tended to be conservative in their design and layout, symbolising the substance and respectability (whether aspirational or real) of their inhabitants.

While Stillorgan and Kilmacud, being well outside the city, were slower to suburbanise than areas such as Rathmines and Pembroke, the late nineteenth century had seen steady, on-going development. Between 1891 and 1911, there was an increase of just over 300 houses in the Stillorgan electoral division. There were now 1,591 houses in its 11,000 acres. Similarly, the population had grown by almost a quarter in the same period, to 7,255. As well as providing a snapshot of development in the area, the individual census returns for 1911 offer an insight into the different types of people who lived in the area. A brief examination of a selection of examples helps to illustrate the social diversity of the Stillorgan area a century ago.

The Pim family living at Knocksinna, an eighteen-roomed house with a rateable valuation of £105, were clearly at the top of the social hierarchy. On census night, the head of the household, 48-year-old H. Leopold Pim, described as a merchant (from the eponymous department store) and member of the Religious Society of Friends, his wife, two children, and a visitor were in occupation, served by an impressive array of indoor staff. In addition to the usual female staff, which numbered a housemaid, cook, nurserymaid and governess

(French), the household boasted one key signifier of high social standing by employing a butler. At Stradbroke, Stillorgan, another (unrelated) Pim family, this time headed by Richard Pim, a 67-year-old stockbroker, included his wife of 20 years, a daughter from a previous marriage and two other children, as well as four indoor servants, a cook, laundress, housemaid and parlourmaid. At the nine-roomed Athgarvan, Stillorgan Park, which was valued at £30, Charles B. McElwee (43) organiser of drawing instruction, National Education, Ireland, his wife and three children, all of whom were Church of Ireland adherents, were joined by two teenaged servants, a ‘nurse’ and a ‘general’, both of whom were Roman Catholic.

While the three examples presented above suggest different elements within the middle classes, there was another side to life in Stillorgan. The village itself had its share of labourers cottages and residents of limited means, with very different occupations from those outlined above. The Plunkett family at 1 Jolly’s Cottages represent this different aspect of Stillorgan. Here the head of household was a dairy proprietor who could read but not write. Meanwhile, there were eight people living in the two-roomed cottage listed in the census as 3 Jolly’s Cottages, including John Doyle (50), a gardener who could not read, his wife, Mary, five children and a boarder, 22-year-old Francis O’Toole, who was also a gardener. The census returns also reveal that Mary Doyle had given birth to ten children, of whom only five were still living, an all-too-common example of the high mortality rates of a century ago.

House construction throughout Ireland was impeded by the Great War of 1914-18, which brought with it associated shortages of building materials and labour, and increasing building costs. Due to the political instability into the 1920s, there was a prolonged delay in the resumption of house construction, so that shortages existed for all types of housing. The new Free State government therefore introduced measures to promote construction for private as well as public housing. New standards were introduced, following British precedent, including lower housing densities of 12 houses to the acre (*c.*30 per hectare) in suburban locations.

Private speculative builders tried to distinguish their wares from the high-quality housing now being provided by local authorities, including Dublin Corporation. Their advertisements emphasised the use of solid materials such as brick and a continuance of pre-war standards. By the 1930s suburban houses had become more compact with fewer rooms; maid’s rooms, pantries and the like were gradually dispensed with. The semi-detached design was favoured, usually with two reception rooms, sometimes with sliding doors between, a kitchen and scullery on the ground floor, with three or occasionally four bedrooms, a bathroom and separate w.c. on the first floor. Although some semi-detached houses were built by local authorities, terraces were extremely rare in private speculative housing of this era. Bay windows were also often used by private builders to distinguish their houses from those built by local authorities.

By the 1930s, house advertisements had become increasingly sophisticated, with some builders producing brochures for their wares. Probably the most sustained campaign was conducted by ‘Irish Homes’ to market their Mount Merrion development. The site at Mount Merrion was acquired by Irish Homes in 1933, from which time a vigorous advertising campaign was undertaken. The builders, Messrs John Kenny, were already developing Seafield Park along the Stillorgan Road, but the Mount Merrion development was to be very different in terms of scale and ambition. Both detached and semi-detached houses were constructed in a spacious layout, existing trees were preserved, adding to the ambiance of the area, and the density was very low. A range of houses was offered in various styles, initially designed by architect Rupert Jones, giving a sense of diversity and charm to the estate.

While there appears to have been a boom in building and many attractive houses for sale, not everyone in the locality enjoyed such comfortable lodgings, and the local authority attempted to provide some cottages for those in need. At a hearing concerning the proposed compulsory acquisition of land near The Grange, Stillorgan in 1935, witnesses suggested that ‘the erection of the cottages would depreciate the value of the mansion on the land to the extent of £1,000’ and furthermore ‘that the place would become untenable if these labourers’ cottages were built’ (*The Irish Times*, 20 February 1935). Understandably, property owners were fearful of the impacts of constructing the proposed sixteen cottages on this site. However, the evidence of need presented by the medical dispensary officer was compelling. He described a case where a labourer, his wife and six children, as well as a lodger, were living in a stable which consisted of a kitchen and a loft divided in two. His estimate was that one hundred houses were required for labourers in the district, given the extent of the ‘insanitary, unlighted, unventilated and overcrowded’ dwellings.

The 1946 census gives a sense of the journey yet to be travelled in terms of housing quality in almost-mid-century Ireland. There were just over 17,000 private dwellings in County Dublin outside the city area on census night, over half of which were rented. Information was also gathered on the average monthly rent of these homes. For South Dublin rural district this was just over 52 shillings. In neighbouring Rathdown No. 1 district, the census makes a distinction between the 68 rented dwellings in ‘Mount Merrion Town’, averaging 178 shillings per month, and the remainder of Rathdown rural district, where 2,461 rented dwellings commanded an average rental of 59.5 shillings. The census also dealt in detail with the ‘nature of occupancy and social amenities of private dwellings’. The amenities are rather different from what we might expect today. A series of tables considered water supply (which varied from public piped water supply to well or stream water), fixed bath and sanitary facilities. According to the explanatory notes, these sanitary facilities could be classed according to the following types: flush lavatory, chemical closet, privy or dry closet and the fourth and final category: ‘no special facilities’. For Dublin South, just under half of dwellings had a flush lavatory, while only 40% of homes had an indoor toilet. In Rathdown No. 1, 53% of homes had an indoor toilet. Again, the results for ‘Mount Merrion Town’ were separated out, with 97% of the private dwellings in the area having an indoor toilet.

Much of this census information reflects the legacy of older housing throughout the city and county. Given the shortage of housing for all classes in the immediate post-war period, a new housing drive was required, and this encouraged a new series of legislative measures to stimulate development. References to Government Grants can be seen in many advertisements in the late 1940s and 1950s.

A newspaper advertisement for the Redesdale Garden Estate in January 1950 proclaimed that ‘we offered to build the largest houses eligible for government grant at £1,525 plus £275 grant, with the cavity wall construction essential for dryness and warmth’. These were now built and the next section was in preparation. The houses could be bought with a deposit of £150. Amenities being offered at Redesdale included an interesting layout of houses ‘set around open squares and greens’, as well as tennis courts and children’s’ playground. These amenities were very much ahead of the times. Cavity wall construction was still a novelty well into the 1960s.

Despite its lengthy gestation, in many ways the Stillorgan area can lay claim to being Dublin’s first modern suburb. Building gathered pace in the 1960s with new styles of houses, some offering the American style open plan. At Lakelands Close the three-bedroom semi-detached houses had large picture windows and boasted warm-air central heating, which was seen as a significant innovation. While some schemes from the 1930s, including Mount

Merrion, had offered shopping parades as part of the development, Stillorgan was to become the location of Ireland's first modern purpose-built shopping centre in 1966. Indeed, with the combination of shopping centre, bowling alley and dual carriageway, by the 1970s Stillorgan was at the forefront of developments and seemed to represent the ultimate in modern suburban living. Over the course of a century, Stillorgan and its hinterland experienced successive phases of development until ultimately becoming a fully integrated and highly regarded Dublin suburb.