

Dargan

Builder of Ireland's Railways

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The Don of Donegal, 2004, Lulu

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Battle of the Somme, Children's Poolbeg, Dublin,
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Ricky Banks – Music Star, Richmond
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London, 1998

Famine, Children's Poolbeg, Dublin, 1997

Titanic, Children's Poolbeg, Dublin, 1996

Robin Hood of the Cave Hill, Children's Poolbeg,
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Dedication

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Chapter One

Dargan's Early Years

In Dublin outside the National Gallery there is a statue of a man. At the bottom there is one word: **Dargan**.

Who was Dargan?

William Dargan was the man who built Ireland's railways. He was born on 28th February 1799 near Carlow. His father had a big farm and had plenty of money.

At school William worked hard. He was good at maths.

When William left school he went to work in England for Thomas Telford, the famous engineer. William was just 21 years old. He helped Telford to plan and build the new road from London to Holyhead. People could travel more easily between England and Ireland.

"Well done, William," said Mr Telford when the job was finished. "It was a hard part of the road to build but you've done it."

William Dargan travelled around England. Everywhere he went he saw new railways being built.

Then William Dargan returned to Ireland.

"I have a dream," he said to himself. "Ireland has lots of people who work hard. This could be a rich country if people could travel to the towns and cities more easily."

His next job was near Dublin. He got the chance to design and build the road from the city centre to Howth. Lots of people came to watch as the new road was being built.

"This is one of the best roads in Ireland," said one of the men who came to see the new road. "Dargan is a very clever young man."

After that Dargan got lots of other jobs in Ireland.

He built the North Circular Road in Dublin.

In 1831 William Dargan got the job of building the railway line from Dublin to the port at Kingstown. The town was getting bigger and bigger and the port was getting busier. The railway was six miles long.

The weather was bad and the rain made the job dirty. Dargan paid good wages and the men worked hard.

The new railway was ready just before Christmas 1834. The first train left Westland Row Station in Dublin on 17th December. Lots of people came to watch. The engine had four wheels and a tall chimney for the smoke. It pulled carriages full of passengers.

"It must be cold for those passengers," said one man who was standing in the crowd.

"Yes, I'm sure it's cold," another replied as they watched the train move slowly out of the station. "But think how fast the train is! Those passengers will all be in Kingstown in no time."

On the first day more than 5,000 people travelled on the train from Dublin to Kingstown. They all thought it was wonderful.

The railway age in Ireland had begun.

Chapter Two

Dargan in the North

Dargan got the chance to plan and build lots more roads in Ireland. Many of them were in the north. He also built new waterways and canals. In the 1830s and 1840s Dargan built most of the great railway lines in Ireland.

Dargan built the Ulster Canal to join Lough Neagh to Lough Erne far in the west. It was another great success.

"This new canal is wonderful," said one farmer to another. "We'll be able to send our fruit and vegetables to the big markets in Belfast."

In Banbridge he built the bridge over the River Bann. He also built the Cut in the main street.

In Newry he made the canal wider so that bigger ships could come in to the port.

In Belfast he helped to make the River Lagan deeper so that ships from England and other countries could use the harbour. He also helped to make Belfast's water supply better by building the Waterworks on the Antrim Road.

Between Ballykelly and the River Foyle he drained the mud on the coast so that farmers could make fields.

But Dargan wanted the chance to build more than just roads.

"I have a dream," he said to his wife Jane one morning as they were having breakfast. "In many parts of the country people have to walk when they need to travel. The coaches are too expensive for many people."

"So what can you do?" asked his wife.

"I want to build new railways all over Ireland," Dargan replied. "Railways are faster and can carry heavy loads. We'll make trains cheaper, so that people will have to pay only a penny a mile. If there are good railways people will be able to live outside the towns where the air is fresh and clean. They can go to work by train."

"Do you think people will want trains, William?" asked Mrs Dargan.

"Yes, Jane, I'm sure they will," replied her husband. "Trains will be faster, cheaper and more comfortable than the roads or canals."

Belfast was growing quickly in these years. The people in the new towns needed a lot of fresh food. Dargan's Ulster Railway was opened on 12th August 1839. It went from Belfast through Lisburn to Lurgan. In 1842 the line was opened as far as Portadown. In 1848 it reached Armagh. It was the first line in Ireland to carry goods to market and passengers. People who lived in Fermanagh, Tyrone and Armagh were able to send their goods to the market in Belfast. At this time Belfast was getting bigger and bigger. Lots of people were moving into the town to find work in the new factories there.

The railway was very expensive to build. The railway companies had to pay for the land on which the track lay. The engines and passenger carriages were expensive. The companies built large stations near the centres of the towns and cities. They built big hotels near the seaside for tourists who came from the towns and cities for a holiday.

Dargan built the railway line from Belfast to Carrickfergus and Ballymena.

In 1848 the line along the coast from Belfast to Bangor was opened. It passed near the sea through lots of pretty little villages - Sydenham, Holywood, Helen's Bay and Crawfordsburn - and then on round to Bangor.

Chapter Three

Dargan's Railways Cover the Country

"I've done a lot of work in the north," said Dargan to Jane one evening as they were having coffee after dinner. "But I have another dream. I want to cover the whole of Ireland with railways."

At the same time Dargan was busy in other parts of Ireland.

The line from Dublin to Drogheda was 25 miles long.

The Great Southern and Western Line was 115 miles long. It went from Dublin to Cork.

The Midland Great Western Line went from Dublin to Galway. It was 110 miles long.

In 1853 a new bridge over the River Boyne joined the different parts of the railways in the east of Ireland. For the first time it was possible to travel by train from Belfast to Dublin. The journey was fast and comfortable. The coaches took more than twelve hours, even with the fastest horses; the train took about half that time.

By 1853 Dargan had built more than 600 miles of railway in Ireland. He had plans to build another 200 miles.

The railway lines which Dargan built opened up the country. It was easier for people to travel for work or to enjoy themselves. Railways were faster and more comfortable than walking or taking a coach.

Farmers were able to send their animals, grain, vegetables, milk and eggs to the markets in the big towns.

City people had a chance to get away from the noise in the crowded streets where they lived and worked. They could go into the countryside or take a train to the seaside for a day out.

William Dargan was a very successful businessman. He worked hard. Hundreds of people worked for his companies. Some worked in the offices, planning the new railways. Others worked in the fresh air, digging the ground and laying the tracks for the railways. Dargan paid his workers well and he made sure they got their money on time at the end of every week. He was popular with the workers.

During the famine years in Ireland in the 1840s Dargan and the railway companies gave jobs to thousands of people all over Ireland. They paid more than four million pounds to the people who worked on the railways. The men who dug the new railway lines had to work hard. Every day was long and tiring. The rain and cold weather often made the work difficult. But the money the men earned helped their families during the years of terrible hunger in Ireland.

After the famine was over the country was more open for industry.

Chapter Four

Dargan and the Irish Industrial Exhibition

Dargan was a quiet, shy man. He did not like crowds. He was very independent. He did all his work himself. He did not have a secretary or an assistant to help him with his work. Dargan was a rich man but he did not like talking about money.

He lived with his wife at Mount Anville in Dundrum near Dublin. They also had a town house at 2 Fitzwilliam Square East.

In the 1850s William Dargan became interested in helping the linen industry in Ireland. He helped farmers grow flax in their fields. He also built some linen mills. But this business was not as successful as the railways. William Dargan lost a lot of money.

"I have lost money in the linen industry, Jane," he often said to his wife. "But I have another dream."

"What's your idea this time, William?" asked his wife.

"Jane, I want to put on a great exhibition of Irish industry and art here in Dublin," replied her husband. "It will be just like Prince Albert's great Exhibition in London two years ago. We must all be proud of Irish industry. We must show it to the world. I want everyone in the country to know how much we can make and do here."

In 1853 William Dargan helped to plan the Irish Industrial Exhibition in Dublin. He gave £30,000 to help pay for it. Later he gave another £70,000, all out of his own pocket. Lots of Irish companies put on a show with the things that they made in their factories.

The exhibition opened on 12th May 1853. The main hall was one hundred metres long and over thirty metres high. Lots of people came to Dublin to see it. Many came by train on the railways that Dargan had built.

"Look at that fountain!" said one man in amazement. "Look how high the water rises!"

"Listen to the organ," said another man as music filled the huge hall. "I've never heard anything so sweet and so loud."

Many other visitors came from foreign countries. They too were amazed by everything they saw and heard.

Later in the summer of 1853 Queen Victoria came to see the Exhibition. She visited Dargan and his wife at their home at Mount Anville on 29th August 1853.

"Mr Dargan, this Exhibition which you have arranged is marvellous," said the Queen after she had finished her cup of tea. "I want to make you a baron. I want you to become *Sir* William Dargan."

"Your Majesty, you are most kind," said Dargan. "But I have no wish to be a baron. Men have always called me Dargan - and Dargan I will always be."

The Queen said nothing for a moment. The ladies and gentlemen with her looked very surprised.

"Mr Dargan, you're a strange man," said Queen Victoria. "But it will be as you wish."

The Irish Industrial Exhibition was a great success.

Chapter Five

Dargan and the National Gallery

William Dargan had a lot of pictures in his home. Irish artists had painted many of them.

Dargan lent many of his pictures to the city of Dublin for the Irish industrial Exhibition. He also borrowed lots of pictures from the big country houses in many parts of Ireland.

"You must lend me your pictures for the Exhibition," said Dargan to his rich friends. "We want everyone who visits the Exhibition to see that Ireland has some of the best factories and some of the best paintings in the whole world."

After the Exhibition was over Dargan had a new idea.

"I have another dream, Jane," he said to his wife one morning while they were having breakfast together at Mount Anville.

"What's your new idea?" asked his wife, looking across the table.

"Jane, we have collected all the pictures and put them on show for the Exhibition," replied her husband. "It's a pity they all have to go back. Very few people will see them again if they are kept in houses all over Ireland. What we need in Dublin is a building where we can let people see them now and in the future. We need a National Gallery for Ireland, just like the National Gallery in London or the Louvre in Paris."

Soon Dargan was hard at work on his new project. He built a great new home for the pictures in Merrion Square. He paid for the whole building with his own money.

The National Gallery of Ireland, another of Dargan's dreams, was opened in 1864. But William Dargan was too shy to go to the opening ceremony.

Chapter Six

The Death of Dargan

One day in 1866 William Dargan fell from his horse while he was out riding. He hurt himself badly.

After his accident he was not able to work as hard as before. His business began to go badly. He had no secretary or assistant to help him. Soon Dargan had lost a lot of money. He had to sell his big house at Anville. Jane and William went to live in their town house at 2 Fitzwilliam Square East.

As the weeks went past William's health got worse and worse. His business got into more and more trouble.

"I think we're bankrupt," said William to Jane one day. He was lying in bed. "We have nothing in the bank. We owe money to a lot of people."

Jane held her husband's hand but said nothing.

In the last months of his life Dargan worried more and more about his business and got more and more sick. But he should not have worried so much because he still had a lot of money in the bank.

William Dargan died on 7th February 1867, a few weeks before his sixty-eighth birthday.

Thousands of people came to Dargan's funeral.

He was still quite a rich man. He was not bankrupt. He still had a lot of money in the bank. William Dargan was one of the greatest businessmen in Ireland in the Nineteenth Century.

His railways helped to open up many parts of Ireland. He made Irish people proud of the new industries which had started to grow in different parts of the country.

He planned the Irish Industrial Exhibition and he started the National Gallery in Dublin.

He was buried in Glasnevin Cemetery in Dublin.

On his grave there is just one word: **Dargan.**

