

# When Cork Drove Fords

The Ford manufacturing plant  
and the people of Cork  
**1917–1984**



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# Henry Ford

## The Cork Connection



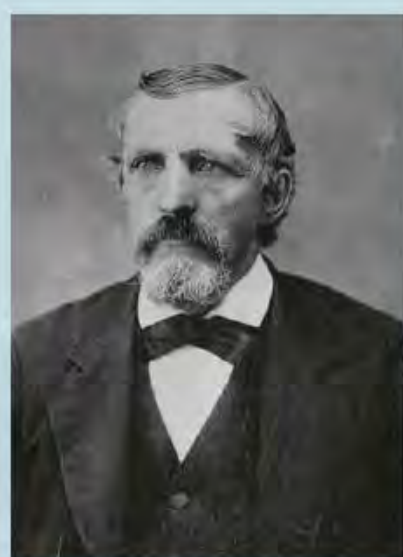
Henry Ford 1930

**Henry Ford**, colossus of American industry and founder of the Ford Motor Company, was born in 1863 in Greenfield Township Michigan, the son of Cork immigrants.

Remembered for his pioneering engineering skill, his embracing of the assembly line method of mass production, and his vision of global consumerism leading to world peace, Henry Ford never forgot his Irish heritage or his connections to Cork.



Henry Ford married Clara Jane Bryant in 1888

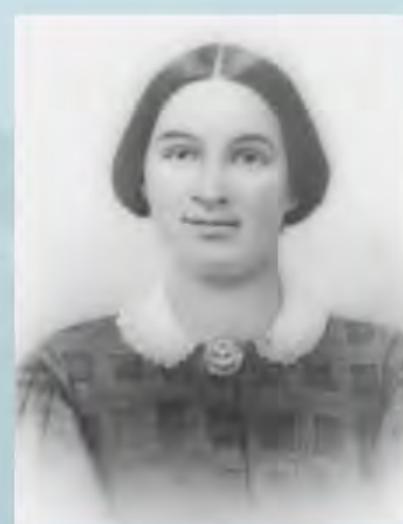


William Ford

Henry's father **William Ford** (1826–1905) was born in Ballinascarthy, near Clonakilty. He emigrated with his parents, uncle and grandmother to a new life in the Americas in 1847 – at the height of the Famine. This was a journey William's mother Thomasine Ford did not survive.



Fair Lane



Mary Litogot

Henry's mother **Mary Litogot** (1839–1876) was born in Michigan, the youngest child of Belgian immigrants, whose parents died at a young age. She was adopted by neighbours Patrick Ahern of Fair Lane in Cork city and Margaret Ahern (née Stevenson).



## Cork and Detroit

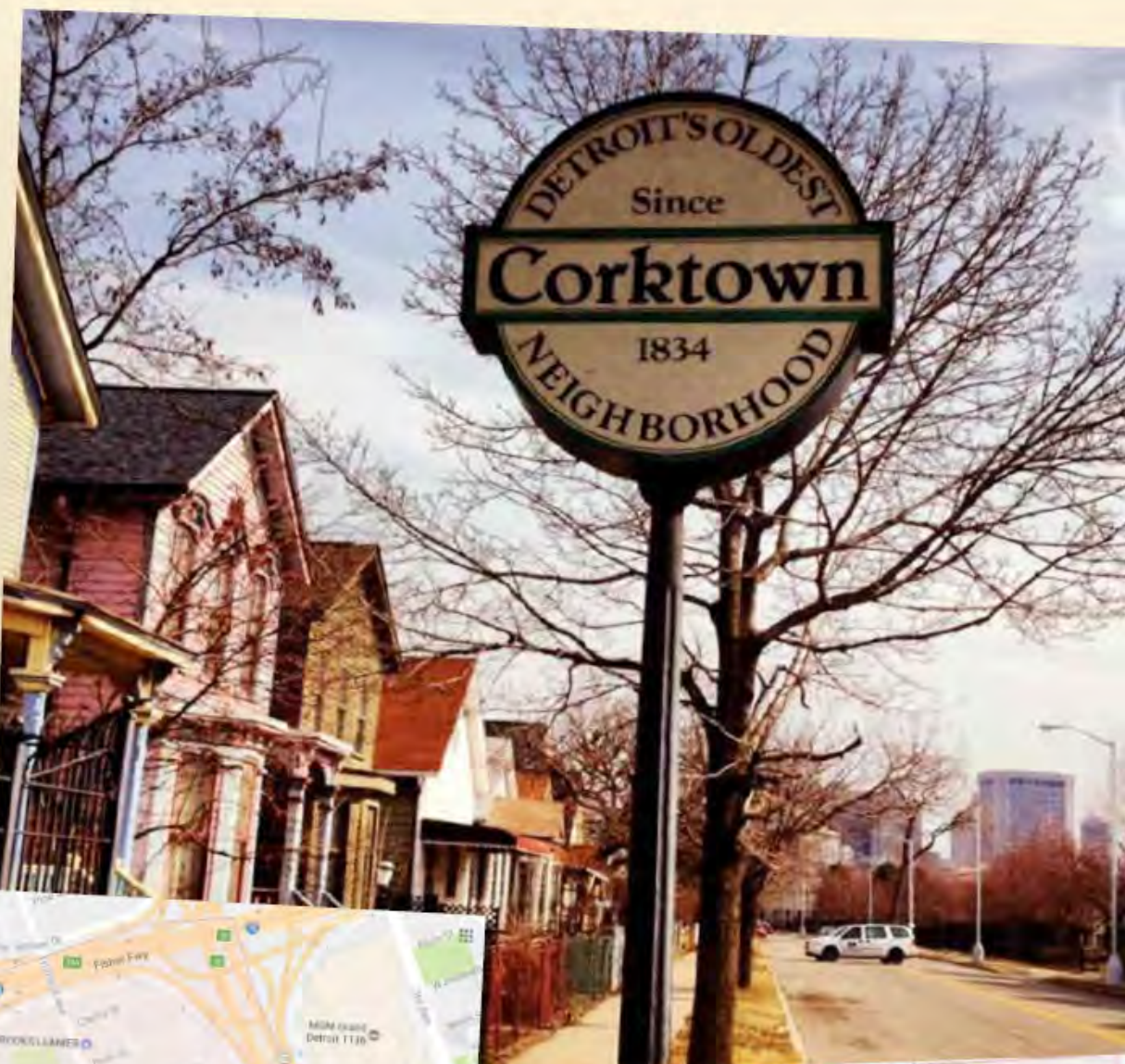


The name of Henry Ford's Dearborn mansion was inspired by his maternal roots: Fair Lane

On both sides of his family the strong Irish and Cork connection was ever present during Henry's formative years, and indeed for the rest of his life.

Just like the Fords' own journey, significant numbers of Cork immigrants during the Great Famine entered America by making landfall in Canada and travelling on to Detroit, settling on the western side of the city. This neighbourhood came to be known as Corktown. By the early 1850s half of the 8th ward (which included Corktown) was of Irish descent.

The Corktown Historic District survives to this day and is a largely residential area, which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and is designated as a City of Detroit Historic District. The neighbourhood contains many newer homes and retains some original Irish businesses. South Greenfield Township (now Dearborn) where Henry was born was just a short 10 miles from Corktown.



Corktown is close to Detroit city centre



Dearborn, formerly Greenfield Township, near Detroit



# Cork Park Race Course

On Monday morning November 20th 1916 the people of Cork were shocked and amazed to read the incredible news that Henry Ford had made a proposal to Cork Corporation to purchase and construct a manufacturing plant on the site of Cork Park Race Course. Cork Corporation called a special meeting on 22nd November to discuss the proposal.



Phoenix Maps 1900 [Cork City Libraries]

The “Cork Park” once occupied the land that today is the site of Páirc Uí Chaoimh, the Showgrounds, the Ford Motor Company car park and the many oil companies and other businesses bordered by the Monahan Road and Centre Park Road. In total it covered in excess of 70 acres of land.



Cork Park Racecourse  
[The Lawrence Photograph Collection, National Library of Ireland]

Before the construction of the Navigation Wall (The Marina) in 1763 at a cost of £4,000, the ‘Park’ was a slob or marsh land overrun regularly by the tides and floods. The early races in the Park were often held in seas of mud and slush and many the horse and spectator took a tumble in the slimy drains that bounded the track. Almost 30,000 thronged the Park for the first races in 1869.

## CORK PARK RACES

The races held in the park at Cork, on the 17th and 18th inst., were in some degree spoilt by the wet and sloppy condition of the ground; but many thousands of people came to see them on the first day, the weather being then fine. The Grand National Steeplechase, for £200, added to a sweepstakes of £5 each, was the most interesting event. It was contended for by eleven horses, the foremost of which in the race were Mr. Smith's Ranger, Mr. Mansergh's Sea Queen, Mr. Hume's Knockany, Captain M'Craight's Ballindonagh, and Mr. J. D. Whye's Kitten. They made beautiful running, the Sea Queen and Knockany getting the lead; but the Kitten and Ballindonagh took the leap just before going into the run home in quick succession. This Sea Queen and Knockany did not do; and, though they passed the winning-post at the stand as first and second horses, they were afterwards objected to for having failed to do the jump. The stewards met, heard the objection and the grounds for it, and decided that the Kitten had won the race, and that Ballindonagh, who immediately came after her, was second.

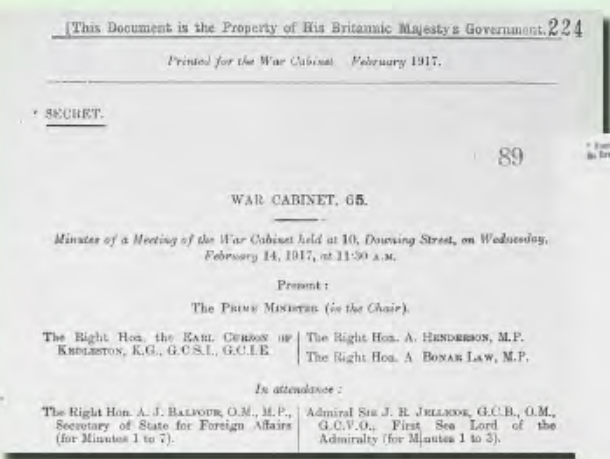
Image and text from *Illustrated London News*, vol. LIV, 1869, p553





# Plant Construction

In 1917 food shortages and the cost of bread dominated the Cork press. Food security was of major concern for Lord Devonport, Hudson Ewbanke Kearley, Minister of Food Control and the rest of the British War Cabinet during 1916 and 1917. Attempts to introduce a munitions factory near the city were proving very slow. 'Lady postmen' were introduced by the Post Office in December 1916 due to the shortage of labour, earning 5d an hour.



## War Cabinet Minutes 14 Feb 1917

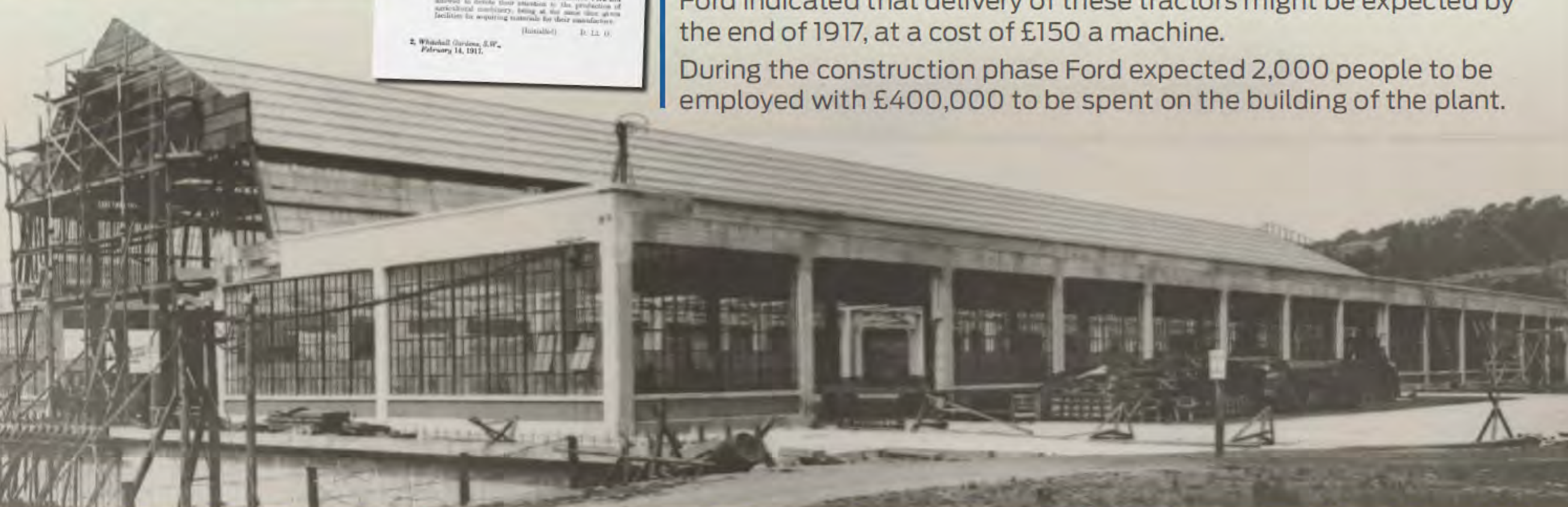
### Why Cork?

On 14 February the British War Cabinet was made aware of an offer by "Henry Ford to erect, with Irish Labour, a factory near Cork for the production of agricultural tractors.."

Tractor manufacturers in Great Britain were at the time "fully employed in the manufacture of munitions" for the war effort. The British War Cabinet was concerned that there would not be sufficient tractors or labour in the spring of 1918 to secure enough food for civilians at home and the armed forces abroad.

Henry Ford's proposal would help address these issues. In his offer Ford indicated that delivery of these tractors might be expected by the end of 1917, at a cost of £150 a machine.

During the construction phase Ford expected 2,000 people to be employed with £400,000 to be spent on the building of the plant.





## First Fordson

The first Fordson tractor came off the production line on 3 July 1919.

At the time Cork Corporation workers earned 22 shillings to 30 shillings a week, and a 3 shilling war bonus. These were well paid and much sought after jobs. Henry Ford committed to a pay rate of one shilling minimum per hour for workers in the plant. The average manufacturing working week of 50 hours + paid 50 shillings. Skilled Ford employees' weekly wage could be significantly higher than that, as seen in the table on right.



**Lord Mayor William F. O'Connor on the first Fordson tractor produced in Cork Plant, 3 July 1919**

Trade	Minimum rate	Maximum rate
Toolmaker and tool fitter.	2s. 10d.	3s. 5d.
Blacksmith.	2s. 6d.	3s. 5d.
Draughtsman.	2s. 5d.	3s. 5d.
Tool turner and tool grinder.	2s. 10d.	3s. 2d.
Ambulance attendant.	2s. 7d.	3s. 0d.
Millwright.	2s. 4d.	3s. 0d.
Joiner, pattern maker, body builder, plumber and engineer fitter.	2s. 3d.	3s. 0d.
Sheet metal worker.	2s. 2d.	3s. 0d.
Sawyer, wood machinist.	2s. 1d.	3s. 0d.

**Starting Ireland on the Road to Industry: Henry Ford in Cork [unpublished PhD thesis] by Thomas Grimes, 2008**

Inside the Ford plant, 1919



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## Fordsons FC

In 1921 former Ireland soccer international Harry Buckle moved to Cork and began working for the Ford Motor Company. He soon afterwards founded Ford F.C. which later became known as Fordsons F.C.



Fordsons 1923



Fordsons 1928

Fordsons soon won their first Munster Senior Cup and in 1923–24 won their first Munster Senior League title. As a result, Fordsons qualified to represent the Munster Football Association in the FAI Cup. Playing as Fordsons FC the club would win the Munster Senior Cup four times.



Fordsons FAI Cup winners 1926 with FAI Cup

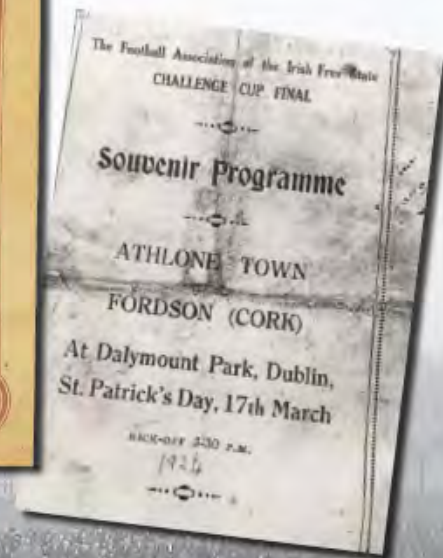
On 23 February 1924 Bill O'Hagan became the first Fordsons player to win representative honours when he played for an FAI XI in a 3-0 defeat to Celtic. Another player of note was Frank Brady, granduncle of legendary Republic of Ireland international Liam Brady, who earned two caps representing Ireland.

After making the FAI Cup final but losing out to Athlone Town in 1923-24, Fordsons went on two seasons later, in 1925-26, to defeat Shamrock Rovers 3-2 and to lift the Cup.

At the end of the 1929–30 season Fordsons were informed by the Ford management that they could continue only as a factory team and only compete in local leagues. As a result, the club parted company with Ford and changed their name to Cork Football Club.



Programme, 1926



Programme 1924



Fordsons v Drumcondra

Images reproduced with kind permission of Plunkett Carter.



# The 'Dagenham yanks'

In the confusing and turbulent times that were the 1920s in Cork, the Ford plant remained a stabilising influence and a firm part of the economic foundations of the city. For employees the need to hold down a steady job with one of the best employers in the city, and the management's policy of steering clear of politics and politicians, helped to keep the plant open against the odds.

As the 1930s began the plant continued to boom. The Cork plant was the sole Ford facility producing tractors globally. Materials and parts flowed into the Marina to supply the plant and finished tractors lined the waterfront to be shipped around the world.

Global events soon overtook the plant and Cork. The effects of the 1929 Wall Street Crisis eventually began to filter through. The global drop in demand and the resulting trade tariffs introduced with protectionism in leading economies hit the plant hard. By June 1930 almost 6,000 employees were let go, a devastating blow for the city's economy and confidence.

The opening of the Dagenham plant in 1931 and the relocation of tractor production to England in 1932 changed the role of the Cork plant, from manufacture to assembly. As the heavy machinery was relocated to the new Ford plant, so too many of the highly skilled work force travelled to England and became known as 'Dagenham Yanks'.



Transmission Gear Line 1929



Clutch Housing Assembly Line 1929



Cylinder Head Assembly Line 1929



Ford Plant Cork 1921





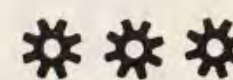
## The end of an era...

A decade after Ireland's accession to the EEC the Ford plant and its central role in the social and economic fabric of the city was coming to an end. In the January/February edition of the *Ford News*, the Cork plant's newsletter, the following article appeared on the front page.

The images below were taken by Bill Daly, a Ford employee, during the last days of the plant



THE recent announcement regarding the cessation of assembly at the Cork plant later this year will in no measure detract from Ford of Ireland's intention of maintaining its position in the passenger car, commercial vehicle, tractor, and industrial product markets in Ireland. Ford will continue to sell, service and finance vehicles and tractors through its Ford Dealer network and to stock and distribute vehicle and tractor parts, activities which will continue to employ a sizeable workforce in Cork.



### Can you name anyone?

The photo second from bottom on left includes the late musician and singer Christy Twomey at its centre.

We'd love to know more about all the men included in the photos. If you can identify anyone let us know at [libraries@corkcity.ie](mailto:libraries@corkcity.ie), or at the desk





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