

Hibernian Hotel

The origin of the Royal Hibernian Hotel, Dawson Street, goes back to 1751, which makes it the oldest known hotel in Ireland. The hotel began its life as two Georgian houses that were run by a Mr. Kenny Bourne in the early 1800s. Bourne ran a coaching business with a partner called Hartley, which they sold out to Bianconi in the 1840s. The hotel was the city terminus for the Bianconi long cars. It was extremely popular with wealthy country people and British Army officers in the years following the Act of Union and it continued to thrive up to the end of the century.

The hotel's fortunes appear to have been in decline at the beginning of the twentieth century. The Royal Hibernian was purchased by Colonel Walter Tighe in 1905. The new owner brought in Paul Besson, from the Hotel Cecil, in London, as hotel manager. Under Besson's direction the hotel was completely refurbished and a Winter Garden and Ballroom were added. It is noted in the Hotel and Restaurant News section of *Food & Cookery* (Oct. 1905:434) that the hotel was partially reconstructed and completely renovated, including a thorough overhaul of the kitchen.

Paul Besson was born in London. His father was Swiss and his mother was from Dijon in France. Papers supplied by his grand-daughter suggest that about 1891, Besson's father may have worked with Auguste Escoffier, Louis Echenard and Caesar Ritz in the Savoy Hotel, London. The Memorandum and Articles of Association of the Royal Hibernian Hotel Limited, shows that the company became a private limited company on the 4th October 1909 with five equal shareholders; Walter Stewart Tighe, his wife Adelaide Margaret Tighe, Paul George Besson, his wife Joan McLean Besson, and Richard Edward Maunsell, a land agent with an address at 9 Ely-place, Dublin.

The 1911 census lists Paul George Besson (30) from London as hotel manager; his Scottish wife Joan McLean Besson (33) as hotel housekeeper; Edward Weiss (26) from Alsace Lorraine as second (assistant) hotel manager; Kathleen Jane Walsh (28) from Tipperary as confectioner and Sarah Brennan (23) from Queen's County as kitchen maid. There is 29 staff in total listed as resident in the hotel ranging from the manager and his wife to cashiers, assistant housekeeper, linen keepers, stillroom maids, house maids, laundry maids and general servants. More senior staff such as the chefs and waiters must have lived outside the hotel. Besson and his wife worked hard and built up a successful business. The adjoining Evans Chemist was purchased, demolished and replaced by the Hibernian Restaurant. The Royal Hibernian was described in a London Journal in 1914 as '*The most fashionable first class hotel in Dublin*' and its '*ballroom was the venue for a succession of elaborate balls and banquets*'. The management boasted an '*orchestra daily, free garage and electric elevator*.'

In 1918 Besson bought the Salthill Hotel in Monkstown. Besson was active in the Hotel and Tourist Association of Ireland and was involved in the organisation of the Irish Food and Cookery Exhibitions 1909-1912 in the Rotunda. It is not unreasonable to suggest that *haute cuisine* would have been served in the Royal Hibernian during this period, considering it was a 'first class' hotel, and also Besson's previous connection with the Savoy and Cecil hotels.

The Buttery, a first class cocktail bar, was opened in 1935, modelled on and named after its prototype in the Berkley, London. This was run by George Buller and Jack Lee who had been in the service of the Hibernian since 1924. The Hibernian held the catering contract for the Masonic Lodge on Molesworth Street from 1910 to 1935, and by 1939, Paul Besson had acquired controlling interest of the Royal Hibernian. Besson sold the Salthill Hotel in 1945 and purchased the Russell Hotel on St. Stephen's Green two years later.

A list of general managers of the Royal Hibernian from 1935-1982 was printed in 'The Last Farewell' menu (11/2/1982). Chefs who apprenticed in the Hibernian during this time include Frank Farren, Willie Ryan (Shannon), and Matt Byrne. Farren only spent the winter season of 1943 in the Hibernian and found the attitude of management to staff 'vile', compared to his experience the previous summer in Rossapenna with chef Kordina, a German who had reputedly worked with Escoffier in the Savoy Hotel, London. Willie Ryan received his initial chef's training at the Vocational Training School, Parnell Square, before serving his apprenticeship in the Royal Hibernian; where he went on to hold the positions of *chef de partie*, banqueting chef, *sous chef* before being promoted to *chef de cuisine*. Matt Byrne went to the *Café Royal* in London on leaving the Royal Hibernian Hotel and then returned to Dublin as *sous chef* in the Russell Hotel in 1948.

George Ennis began as trainee manager in the Royal Hibernian in the early 1940s. He recalls that Willie Ryan was head chef, that there was an English *sous chef*, and that Joe O' Neill was the grill chef. 'Paul Besson was owner / manager and Douglas Vance was a manager, who later went to the Metropolis Hotel in Cork. There was just one dining room, and snacks in the Buttery'. Ennis worked at every section as trainee managers did in those days, and then moved to Jury's Dame Street, as assistant manager.

In 1963 ten of the 175 one Michelin stars awarded in the British Isles were in Ireland, of which half were in Dublin: The Gresham Hotel, Red Bank Restaurant, Royal Hibernian Hotel, Shelbourne Hotel, and Addington House. Ten years later in 1973, only one of the eighteen two stars (The Russell), and eight of the 123 one stars awarded in the British Isles were in Ireland, of which only three were in Dublin: The Royal Hibernian's Lafayette Restaurant, and two new style restaurants – Snaffles and The Soup Bowl. There was roughly thirty percent less stars awarded in 1973 than in 1963. Paul Besson died in 1950 and his son Kenneth took control of Royal Hibernian Hotel.

Kenneth Besson was unhappy with the standard at the hotel. He convinced union delegates of the need to improve standards in Ireland by inviting them to join him on a fact finding tour to Europe. The result was an agreement to allow foreign chefs and waiters to work in Dublin, but this was conditional on Irish apprentices being indentured and trained in the relevant disciplines. In February 1951 *The Irish Hotelier* reported that Lucien Adrian, the Hibernian's Head Chef won first prize for a ham dish and silver medal for cold game at the International Gastronomic Festival in Torquay. *The Irish Hotelier* (October 1954) listed Hector Fabron as manager of the Royal Hibernian, with 'chef Garnier in charge of the kitchens and the popular Michael as Restaurant Manager'. Jane Walsh, enumerated in the 1911 census now a septuagenarian, was also listed as 'presiding over the pastry kitchen'.

Dave Edwards began his chefs training in Cathal Brugha Street in 1955, taking first prize in his final year. In 1957 he began his apprenticeship in the Royal Hibernian Hotel under Deschamps and recalls two other Frenchmen, Belmont and Belan, who were *sous chef* and sauce chef respectively, and a German chef Heinz Marquardt. In 1959 Edwards was appointed pastry chef. Edwards points out that the manager at the time was Mr. Gladwell who later became the head of the Blackpool Hotel School. Hector Fabron succeeded him as manager. Edwards remembers that a Mrs Casey was the baker in the Royal Hibernian and used to make the breads for the Russell and the Bailey as well. Mary Murphy was the larder chef. Murphy is one of the few women who held a *chef de partie* position in *haute cuisine* kitchens during this time. Roger Noblet worked in the Russell at the time, but he is present in some of the photographs that Edwards has from his Hibernian days, which illustrates cooperation between the kitchens of the Besson hotels. Noblet replaced Deschamps as head chef and remained nearly until the hotel closed, when he was succeeded by Nicky Cluskey.

The Besson hotels ran training courses for young apprentices with prizes for the best students. They were also encouraged to enter catering competitions. Mervyn Stewart was indentured in the Hibernian in 1958, aged fourteen, and remained until 1962. He recalls that Noblet was the only foreign born chef in the Royal Hibernian during this time, naming Kevin Barry as his *sous chef*, Hobbs as *entremetier*, Murphy as larder chef and also recalls Cluskey. Conditions in the Hibernian kitchens he suggests were reminiscent of Orwell's description of the *Hotel Lottie* in *Down and Out in Paris and London*. Despite starting out shovelling coal for the ranges and enduring some cruel initiations, Stewart concludes: 'it was really an amazing experience and you would have never traded it for anything else because you learnt the old fashioned way when, you know, butchery was butchery in a kitchen and sauces were mounted and glazed. A lot of duchesse potato and all that sort of original old style French cuisine was there'.

Sean Hogan began his apprenticeship as a commis waiter in the Royal Hibernian Hotel in 1970 and remembers that apart from Cluskey replacing Barry as *sous chef* and Carroll becoming pastry chef, the brigade remained much as described by Mervyn Stewart. Hogan recalls that John McGann and Johnny Bacon were the two restaurant managers in the Lafayette and also names Eddie Murray and John Rigby as waiters there.

The Lafayette Restaurant was separated into three rooms: The Dawson Room, Maxim's, and The Waterford Room – all individually decorated. The restaurant had two managers, eight station head waiters, twelve waiters, a sommelier, and twelve commis waiters. The restaurant could seat eighty six people between the three rooms. Hogan attended St. Mary's College, Cathal Brugha Street, two days a week for training while he was serving his apprenticeship, where his teachers included Kevin O'Rourke and John Byrne. The curriculum included kitchen and larder work, Gueridon work, home economics, accountancy and menu French. Rigby organised for the commis waiters in the Royal Hibernian to be allowed spend time in the hotel kitchen to learn how it was run. Hogan remembers the gastronomic events that took place in the Royal Hibernian Hotel when visiting French chefs came to Dublin, cooking for up to three hundred people per event.

Sean Kelly opened *La Rôtisserie* in 1970 and Hogan notes that he also looked after the Bianconi Grill which offered food at a more reasonable price with less formality than offered in the Lafayette Restaurant, which was consistently awarded a one star rating from *Egon Ronay* from 1963-1974 . An advertisement describes *La Rôtisserie* as 'Dublin's newest restaurant where you can enjoy traditional spit-roasting in a gracious relaxed atmosphere'.

After decades of under-development and stagnation, Ireland finished the twentieth century richer than could have been imagined. Restaurants serving *haute cuisine* declined by the early 1970s, standards of food stagnated up until the mid-eighties, but from the late 1980s to the end of the twentieth century, there was a resurgence of a new style of *haute cuisine* in Dublin restaurants, influenced by the *nouvelle cuisine* and 'fusion' cuisine that was popular contemporaneously in London restaurants. By 1999, tourism was a £2 billion industry, but as *The Irish Times* described the 'new' Ireland as 'overpriced, under-serviced, and distinctly unfriendly' (23/1/1999).

By 1974, *haute cuisine* in its traditional form was disappearing from Dublin. The successful days of Jammet's and the Russell Hotel were over and The Royal Hibernian Hotel closed its doors in 1982.