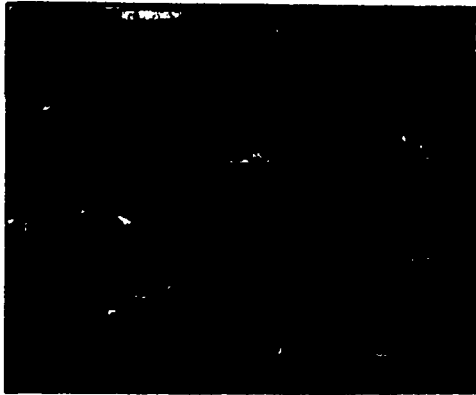


a few hours. The gate would then be closed and locked once more, not to be opened until the following Friday. Though no business was done, the ancient mart was not entirely deserted. For many years a solitary web of brown cloth was visible for a short time each Friday, deposited in the gateway by the late John McNicholl, of Maghera, who made his weekly journey for the purpose, and who, after remaining for a period varying from a few minutes to an hour or so, removed the web until the next Friday, when the same performance was enacted. By this means, it is said, he thought he preserved or established some proprietary claim to the



Interior of Old Brown Linen Hall.

old place. He died a few weeks ago, and his son, James McNicholl, proposed to continue his father's practice, but on arriving at the old Brown Linen Hall on the 22nd inst., he found the gate locked. Murphy & Orr, the well-known linen and damask manufacturers, 18 Donegall street, whose premises adjoin the market and who are the custodians of the key, and claim to be now the legal possessors of the ancient market place, questioned his right to enter the ground and refused to open the gate. Then followed the scene described in our last issue. Mr. McNicholl sold one or two pieces of his web, and in the evening closed the premises, and had a new lock put on the outside of the gates, while Murphy & Orr had it locked as usual on the inside.

On Thursday night, 15th inst., Bernard McNicholl, Maghera, with his two brothers, James and John Joseph, and about a dozen young men in their employment, visited the place to effect an entrance in order to be in possession of it on Friday, which, according to former custom, is the weekly market. Admission by means of a key being impossible, they removed the lock to find that the gate was barricaded on the inside. Procuring a ladder, Mr. McNicholl and his friends scaled the wall, got into the grounds and removed the debris obstructing the passage, among which was found the ancient web which had been allowed to remain on the premises to keep up the appearance of a market. Mr. J. S. Mahon, solicitor, attended with the Messrs. McNicholl to give advice if necessary, but no one present raised any question as to the legality of the matter. A number of police on special duty and a large crowd of people watched the proceedings with interest. Having cleared the gateway, Messrs. McNicholl and their assistants remained on guard all night. On Friday the market was visited by a large number of people, some of whom bought small quantities of the web, probably as souvenirs. At 2.30 the brothers and their friends quietly departed, locking the gate on the outside when they left.

The first Linen Hall was established by the Earl of

Donegall in Ann street about the year 1746, but the place was sold by auction on July 13, 1756. Its place was taken about 1754 by a Linen Hall in Donegall street, then called New street, upon or near the site of St. Anne's church, now being converted into a cathedral. When the parish church of Belfast was to be erected in 1774, the place on which the Linen Hall stood was, according to Benn, the local historian, deemed the most suitable site. It was accordingly chosen for the church, and the present Brown Linen Hall was given in its stead. By the order of George Black, Sovereign of Belfast, published in 1775, the sale of brown linen cloth was to be confined to the "Linen Hall Yard," and "the market for yarn to Broad street, otherwise Waring street, from the corner of Skipper's lane to the corner of Bridge street." The nature of the trade carried on in the Brown Linen Hall up till the middle of the last century has been thus described by the local historians: "The linen bleachers or their agents travelled about in groups, like a small troop of cavalry, from market to market on horseback for society and security, spending almost the entire week in this way." When they reached the market places they were elevated "on stools or tables or small built permanent standings"—remains of some are still to be seen in Donegall street—receiving the webs for examination, and purchase from the weavers who stood beneath them, and who came from the surrounding districts. The quantity of linen bought in this manner in Belfast was not as large as in Ballymena and other rural centres. In 1784 the sales in the Belfast Brown Linen Hall were estimated to amount to £1,000 per week, whereas sales in many other places far exceeded that sum. The old loom and spinning-wheel have long since disappeared from the farmers' houses, except in specific districts, such as near Lurgan, where special classes are manufactured that the power-looms are unable to touch. In 1855, David Alderdice, who had the key of the Belfast Brown Linen Hall in his possession, refused to open the gate. The members of the trade called a meeting, and authorized Robert Roddy to get a new lock and key, and he was duly installed as custodian. Mr.



Mr. McNicholl and His Web of Cloth.

Roddy's successors in business are Murphy & Orr, and they continued in the guardianship of the market place, and, we believe, have paid for many years the rates and taxes for which it is assessed. It is stated that by the terms of the charter, which appears to have been lost, the hall is to be opened at 11 o'clock every Friday for the transaction of business—the sale of brown linen. The present Mr. McNicholl's grandfather is said to have sold brown cloth or sacking (not linen) at the entrance of the old Brown Linen Hall, and was permitted to stand in the shelter of the gateway during wet weather. His son, the late John McNicholl, although no sales took place, continued the custom of placing a web of