OLD LIMERICK BRIDGES.

BY JAMES GRENE BARRY, M.R.S.A.I., VICE-PRESIDENT.

With Note by P. J. LYNCH, M.R.I.A.I.

It would be superfluous here to follow the development of bridge buildings from the earliest successful attempt to bridge a deep or rapid flowing stream or river. A fallen “giant of the forest” was, no doubt, the first means of bridging a river, then two or more trees meeting and joined together over the water to which a swinging platform of twisted and interlaced branches were attached, thus we have the first form of the “Cantilever” bridge. The most ancient form of bridge which we know of in Ireland was the Cliath, made of hurdles or wicker work.

Cliabh, a basket, and Cliath, a hurdle, are common names, even now, in many districts. Cliath is found in townland names, and gave Dublin its primitive name of Athcliath, the hurdle ford, and is still used by Gaelic-speaking people to denote the City of Dublin.

These hurdle bridges were either suspended across the water from bank to bank, or fixed on piles driven into the bed of the river, and at a later period, on stone piers. These rude stone piers were made by encasing stones in wicker work, and the hurdles were attached to timber stretchers, generally of bog oak, from pier to pier. Another kind of bridge, frequently to be found in mountain districts, was the “clapper” bridge. The piers were usually formed of large and heavy stones and the transverse stone slabs were generally from nine to twelve feet in length. These were our first stone bridges, and are still occasionally to be found across mountain streams. The next development was the wooden, or plank bridge, of which we find mention in our ancient record.

Now the question suggests itself, how was the Shannon bridged between “the island city” and Thomond in pre-Norman times? There can be little doubt that it was bridged. The Cantilever hurdle bridge was out of the question, and the hurdle bridge on piles was not possible owing to the rocky river bed.
The ford here, the only one across the Shannon between Limerick and the sea, some seventy miles to the west, was dangerous and impassable during high tides and when the river was in flood; therefore, it follows that, as a matter of necessity, the inhabitants of the island city must have bridged the river here at a very early date. It is probable that a plank of timber structure was thrown across the Shannon long before Norse raiders sailed up the estuary of the Shannon for the first time. It would be possible to give stability to this rude structure by inserting the trestles which supported it into stone piers under water, encased in wicker work.

THOMOND BRIDGE.

After the Normans incorporated Limerick in 1197, we learn that King John, then Earl Moreton, caused a bridge and an *Egregium Castellum* to be erected there. The date of the construction of the bridge is usually assigned to the year 1270. Some engineering critics of the early part of the last century held the opinion that the bridge then constructed was merely a wooden one, and that the stone bridge taken down in 1840 was a structure of a later date, probably of the 15th or even 16th century.

If the castle erected by John was only *bretesche*, i.e., a wooden tower, such as the Normans frequently erected both in England and Ireland in the 11th and 12th centuries; this theory might hold good, but the adjective *egregium* would not apply to such a temporary structure, and both tradition and the Annals are in agreement that King John Castle was built of stone. The old foundations are still to be seen on which the present towers have been built. If the castle was built of stone, why not the bridge? and as our Annals do not mention the erection of a stone bridge across the Shannon afterwards, we may fairly assume that tradition and the Annals are accurate, and the old Thomond Bridge was the stone bridge constructed in the early years of the thirteenth century. This bridge, then, was a fine example of the good and permanent work done by early Anglo-Norman bridge builders. Old Thomond Bridge was a structure of 14 arches, with a perfectly level roadway, though a narrow one, as it was not needed for wheel traffic, then unknown.
Plan and Elevation of Thomond Bridge.


Reproduction of Drawings made by Mr. James Pain, Architect, in 1814.
The arches were turned on wicker work, the system adopted by both Norman and native castle builders. The grouting was poured hot over the wicker work arch, and the work completed up to the road level, like our present method of concreting. The piers were built solid, and were made with angular abutments to present the least resistance to the great flow of water at high tides and when the river was in flood. These abutments came flush with the parapets on both sides. This bridge was a little over 150 yards in length. There was a fortified gate-house at the city end, and a castellated gateway and drawbridge at the seventh arch from the city end. This was Thomondgate. The Thomond end of the bridge had protecting outworks on the rising ground some ten yards from the bridge. The map in Parata Hibernia (vol. 1., p. 194) shows King John Castle and the city portion of the bridge to Thomondgate in 1600 A.D.

Ferrar's History of Limerick (2nd ed., 1787) gives a good engraving of the bridge after 1761, when the castellated gates were removed. The engraving of this bridge in Lenihan's History (p. 50) is clearly idealistic and inaccurate. All goods coming over this bridge into the city were subject to tolls. The money thus collected went to keep the bridge in repair. All Freemen of the city were free of this bridge and also free of the Bristol gate tolls and customs, showing the close connection then existing between these cities.

The present bridge was erected in 1840 at the cost of £10,000, on the same site as the old bridge. Many mementoes of the slaughter of some six hundred of the garrison of Limerick on the old bridge were then found. This fatal occurrence took place on the 22nd September, 1691, when the English, having taken the outworks protecting the bridge, drove the defenders on to the bridge, when a French major, who was in command at Thomond Gate, raised the drawbridge, and the Irish were driven into the Shannon and drowned, or slaughtered on the bridge. This terrible slaughter of their comrades, under the eyes of the garrison, who were powerless to render assistance or succour them, tended mainly to a parley for the surrender of the city next day, and the Treaty of Limerick.

A considerable amount of James II. brass money was found in the bed of the river, near the centre arch, the site of the drawbridge.
BAALS BRIDGE.

The water-colour picture in my possession, now for the first time reproduced for this Journal, shows the old bridge of four arches circa 1810, with a row of five brick houses on the W. side. The corner house at Clare Street end, where the carriage is waiting and a fusilier is on "Sentry go," was the Stamp Office. The old Assembly Room, built in 1770, can be recognised from its high roof and two stacks of chimneys, just beyond the bridge. The women "beetling" clothes at the slip was a familiar sight fifty years ago. The five houses on the W. side of the bridge were taken down in 1830. The occupants then were: next Mary Street, Woods (hatter), then F. Ward (silversmith), P. McArdle (trimmer, etc.), J. Purdon (cap maker); and at the Irish town end: M. R. Cleary (apothecary). The houses were of brick, three storeys high, only one room in breadth, and overhung the river at the rear.

A charter was granted in 1340 for the building of a bridge in Limerick. As Baals Bridge was the only one in Limerick connecting the two towns, no doubt, this is the date of its construction. The first mention of Baals Bridge in our Annals is A.D. 1361, when John of Galway (de Burgh) defeated the O'Briens and took the bridge and presumably the English town. Irish speaking people call it Droichead Maol, i.e., the bald or bare bridge, meaning one without battlements or parapets. In Parsa Hibernia (vol. ii, p. 652) Baals Bridge is represented with three detached houses on it, and a castellated gateway at each end; that at the English-town side having a drawbridge, making a fifth archway.

Lenihan, in his History of Limerick, assumes that the rows of houses on this bridge were erected before the Williamite sieges; but the evidence is all the other way. The maps of the sieges of 1690 and 1691 do not show rows of houses on the bridge. Viscount Shannon (not the Earl of Shannon, as stated by Lenihan) got a grant from the Crown of this bridge, and after the surrender of the city let both sides of it for building. It is doubtful if there was a single brick house built in Limerick before 1691. The Dutch, who settled in the city after that date, established brick works in the cordless lands on both banks of the Shannon, and practically rebuilt Limerick. The old stone houses and castles, both in the English and Irish towns, were faced with brick, and two rows of brick houses were erected on the bridge, leaving just enough
room for a horseman to pass. Some of the alleys off High Street will now give some idea of the roadway before the houses on the E. side were purchased by the Irish Parliament and taken down in A.D. 1761. That the ford here, which made the only connection between the "island city" and the south side of the Shannon, was bridged at an early date is certain, most probably by a hurdle bridge, to be succeeded by a wooden one at a later date. The Boher Mhor, or great highway, started here. It branched to Mungret, and outside Mungret gate became Boherbuoy (yellow road, from the gorse bushes along it), and led westward to Adare. At Donoughmore the Boher Mhor went East by Caherconlish to C ashel, and South by Kilmallock to Cork. There was another road in connection with Baals Bridge, called Boher Glas (the green road), starting from West Watergate by St. Michael's Church, outside the walls, through South Priorsland by Courtbrack and Corraghballly to Ballinacurra. The "base town," as the Irish town was called by the English of Limerick, grew gradually along this main outlet, and had developed into a town in the 14th century, when it was walled in and fortified. The present bridge of one arch has the following inscription on the East parapet:—"This bridge was erected in virtue of an Act of the XI George IV. The Right Hon. Thomas Spring-Rice, M.P. for the City of Limerick. Commenced taking down the old bridge Nov., 1830. The new bridge finished Nov., 1831."

I. and G. R. PAIN, Architects.

NOTE.

By P. J. LYNCH, M.R.I.A.I.

As I happen to possess a plan and elevation of old Thomond bridge, with notes on its condition, prepared by James Pain, Architect, in 1814, and his sketch design for the present bridge, for which he was architect in 1838, I would like to add some notes to Mr. Barry's interesting paper. Though the plan is very carefully prepared, there is nothing on it to indicate the original position of the drawbridge, which must have been closed in 1761 when Ferrar states the castle and guard-house on the bridge were removed, as "the Government found that
Limerick could no longer be considered as a fortress," an unfortunate decision, in one sense, as it allowed vandalism a free hand in the removal of the city walls, gates, and castles, which deprived Limerick of much of that picturesque beauty of which other ancient cities are so justly proud.

Dinely, who visited Limerick in the reign of Charles II., gives a sketch of the bridge (1) and shews the drawbridge in the place of the eighth arch from the guard house, or fifth from John's Castle. In Pain's plan the position of the guard house is occupied by the "Toll house," which is about 60 ft. from the North end of the bridge.

Dinely states that Thomond bridge is "said to have been built by King John." If it had been a work of Elizabeth's reign (2) the fact would have been known in the time of Charles II.; its history could not have been lost in 60 years.

As Mr. Barry states, Ferrar gives a good engraving, but does not take in the toll house. Lenihan's view is idealistic. The best of any is Petrie's in the Dublin Penny Journal for 1832 (p. 149). There is another article on the bridge and castle by Petrie in the Irish Penny Journal for 1841 (p. 305), but, judged from Pain's drawings, none of the illustrations are strictly accurate. The arches were different, eight were flat pointed and six were semi-circular, an evidence of renewals at different periods. They were also of different spans, the widest, next Castle Street, being 25 feet, and narrow arches of 12 ft. and 10 ft. wide at the North end.

The roadway between the parapets in 1816 was only 10 ft. 6 ins. wide at Castle Street end, but gradually widened until it was 17 ft. between the parapets at the Toll house (3). Some of the angular abutments to the piers were carried up to the road level, and the parapet continued around them, forming recesses for pedestrians to avail of when vehicles were passing. Some of these were triangular on plan same as the abutments, others were formed semi-circular; there were twelve of these in all.

The bridge was maintained out of the tolls, from which Freemen were exempted, but in 1673 the bridge was in such a bad state of repair

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(2) See Lenihan's History, p. 50.
(3) The Castle Street end was increased in width in 1822.
that the Freemen were deprived of their privilege to aid in providing a sufficient sum for its repair. From Pain's notes of the condition of the old bridge in 1816, "arches cracked," "piers undermined," &c., it is surprising how it was preserved in a condition of safety until its removal in 1838.

The house opposite the Treaty Stone is marked "Mr. Myles' house" on Pain's plan, and at the Castle Street end is "the Fish house," and next to it the "Mot house." These were removed in 1822.

Since writing the above notes it has been decided to prepare Pain's drawings of 1814 for reproduction in the Journal. His sketch design for a new bridge may have been drawn on the sheet at a later date.

The present bridge has the following inscription:

THIS BRIDGE WAS BUILT A.D. 1840
AT THE EXPENSE OF THE CORPORATION
OF THE BOROUGH OF LIMERICK
THIS TABLET WAS PLACED HERE BY ORDER
OF THE TOWN COUNCIL A.D. 1843
THE RIGHT WORSHIPFUL MARTIN HONAN, MAYOR

JOHN F. RALEIGH, ESQ., TOWN CLERK
FRANCIS J. O'NEILL, ESQ., TREASURER

JAMES AND G. R. PAIN,
ARCHITECTS.