Baal's Bridge; an enigma

UP to the time that Bartlett's famous drawing of old Baal's Bridge was exhibited and put on public view, the portrait of Robert Emmett, which was to be shown in the stilted-grooms in most houses in Limerick, was relegated, to varying degrees, in favour of the realistic details of the everyday scene of women in the picturesque backdrop of old Baal's Bridge.

When then two other portraits jockeyed for favour but only with transitory success; these were photographs of President Peadar and Pope John Paul Paul, Bartlett's old Baal's Bridge remains in evergreen favour.

squeezed out of the Island by the Anglo Norman settlers, otherwise it would hardly be feasible to think of such a precarious position over a fast flowing river, with so much available space in the fristhown.

One would expect such houses to be in use as tenements, housing families in desperate need of accomodation. Such was the case. From the earliest records, we learn that well-do-do persons were passing down the years.

Among these members of the residents on the bridge were the servants of the governors of the Tinarana above Killeavey. The last survivors on the bridge were two elderly ladies, who, so proud and discriminating were they in their youth that they could find no male companions grand enough to suit them.

Father time could not wait

SIR HENRY HARSTONGE
A feature of special interest in our picture is the tall house on the right at the end of Mary Street.

This was the home of Sir Henry Harstone, M.P. for County Limerick, from 1790 to 1796. He is remembered today in the form that he built between Baal's bridge and the site of the present O'Dwyer bridge at his own expense - Sir Harry's Mall.

He is remembered too as the husband of Lady Pery, sister of Viscount Pery and founder of St. John's Hospital.

After her death in 1793, a physician at St. John's described her as "an angel of mercy" in whose life, one whose continuous stream of benevolence". Her only memorial is Harstone Street.

FR. CASEY
Another interesting feature of Harstone, standing parish stands in the Square in Abbeyfeale. The house was taken down in 1908 and replaced by the present redbrick structure.

OTHER PREMISES
On the other side of the bridge at the corner of Wilson's Quay (now Lock Quay) and Broad Street, stood the Shambles Castle. This was demolished about 1750 and replaced by a stone house which was a famous tavern. While in possession of the Quillinan family it was a renowned watering hole. It was burnt to the ground in 1962 and replaced by the present house, now owned by Mr. John Costello, who has improved the comforts of the place and at the same time maintaining much of the old-world charm which distinguished it from all other pubs in the fristhown.

Bolingbroke all day
By John O'Day
Who sells good Try.

WILLIAM BARTLETT
The artist who left us the splendid picture of the old bridge was born in Kentish Town in 1809. From early childhood he showed a remarkable flair for drawing. As he grew older his genius was noted with reverence by his teachers and he was awarded to Mr. John Britton, whose architectural publications are well known. One of his first great works was the "Picture Antiquities of English Cities". Although I can find no reference to an early tour of the United States, he tectural status only that he must have been there before 1829; how else could he have visited the Limerick which boasted no buildings of any importance or archi-

Died on board ship on his last journey to the Holy Land.
KEVIN HANNAN, 1994

A weekly series by KEVIN HANNAN

"Why Limerick"

Though we have no recollection of the first attempt to bridge the Abbey river, we can safely say that the first bridge was there long before Thomond bridge was created at the beginning of the thirteenth century. Lennin expressed the view that it was the oldest bridge in Ireland. The span was much shorter than that at the site of Thomond bridge and access to places like Mungret and Kilcornan were more important than the sparsely populated population of the country to the west of the Shannon.

THE NAME
The name of the bridge has always remained a mystery. In some old chronicles it is referred to as the "Bald Bridge of Limerick," suggesting a bridge without parapets, but Baal's bridge had parapets on its eastern side and a row of houses on the other.

Then it has been suggested that it was named in honour of a pagan deity named Baal, who was supposed to have been converted to Christianity and baptised at Slinglet by St. Patrick. I think this would be stretching the imagination a bit too far. The most likely explanation of the strange name lies in our propensity to corrupt place-names in common usage; indeed hundreds of our place-names have been engaging scholars in a great puzzle solving saga for many years. The bridge may have been known as "Baal's" bridge, corrupted afterward to "Baal's" or "Balls" since it was part of a grant to the Earl of Shannon whose family name was Boyle. Whatever the origins, the name has stuck, almost like the fate of many of our other interesting institutions that have vanished.

RESIDENTS ON THE BRIDGE
The likely last to live in the houses on the bridge were in position before the natives were for their prince chaknings to come along so impericip-

tively they went to seed, as it were; and all too quickly they found themselves ineligible for even the most common of mortal's. Thus the clipped "Proud as a Purdon" was born.

Before the demolition, the Worsall family lived in the house near the Irishtown. They were shoemakers, as distinct from cobbler's: boots and shoes were manufactured on the premises.

The last to occupy this house was Mr. R.M. Cley, a chemist. Next were the Pur-

dons. Then a prosperous silk merchant named David. The last was occupied by Mr. McCauley, a barber.

Davin's house was once occupied by a surgeon named Byrne, who had built a small extension over the river at the rear, perhaps a makeshift inlet. It must have been a do-it-yourself affair, for Byrne fell through the floor one winter's evening into the fast flowing river and was lucky to be rescued by a sailor in the harbour (outside the custom house).

DESTRUCTION
The bridge was taken down in 1829, not because it was structurally unsound but to assist in the realisation of the ambition of the Grand Canal Company to link up with the Shannon Navigation canal at Killaloe and open up a seasonal route to the Atlantic - across the country. Engi-

neers at the time saw Baal's bridge as the first obstacle in achieving this goal; the arches being too small to admit bridge with ease.

After the new bridge was completed in 1830, a span of seventy feet and a rise of fifteen feet, the real obstacle to navigation pre-

sented itself. The engineers had reckoned with the hazards of the river, with its ever changing levels, rivers and floods. After a number of proposals, the project was abandoned.