

150 Years of Limerick Gas



In Limerick, as elsewhere, gas slowly displaced candle and oil power for public lighting in the nineteenth century and maintained this role well into the twentieth. The advantages of gas were obvious and, relative to candle and oil power, it was a cheap, safe and much better method of providing lighting. The hissing, flickering oil lamps had proved difficult and expensive to maintain.

In 1826, the London-based United General Gas Company took over the Hibernian Gas Company in Dublin and soon began to spread its operations to the large urban areas throughout the country. It set up business in Limerick in the 1830s and became the sole manufacturer of gas in the city. But the service was very poor and the people's patience became so exhausted that in the year 1837 a public protest meeting was convened in the City Courthouse, under the chairmanship of Mayor Edmond Moroney.

The agitation in the city continued and a meeting was held at the Parish Office, Upper Cecil Street, on 4th March 1841, to consider the possible formation of a second consumer company. Shortly afterwards, the newly reformed Corporation purchased premises in Watergate for the manufacture of gas, with the aid of a loan of £24,000.

In 1878, following a parliamentary enquiry and the passing of the Corporation Gas Act, the local authority took over the private firm and, in 1884, moved from Watergate to the more spacious premises at the Dock Road.

Throughout the nineteenth century, as gas technology steadily developed, the manufacture of gas became more refined and sophisticated and its use evolved from street-lighting to the lighting of homes and domestic cooking. Meters were introduced in the 1850s, and the forerunner of the gas ring followed in 1867. After the development of the geyser, in 1868, came the invention of the gas fire, in 1882. This fire used an adaptation of a Bunsen burner to give a hotter flame than hitherto. The introduction of the columnar burner came in 1905, to be followed by the grid form in 1925, the neat-flame in the 1930s and, later, the convector gas fire.

During the Second World War, the scarcity of coal hit the local population and many people were glad to avail of the sale of coke at the Gasworks. (Coke is the fuel left over after the gas has been extracted from the coal). During the 1940s, it was a familiar sight to see boxcars, ass-and-carts and horse-and-carts making the trek from the Gasworks laden with the precious coke.

In the 1950s, it became clear that if the gas industry was to survive, new and more efficient manufacturing methods would have to be found. Three factors added impetus to this development. Firstly, the price of oil began to fall after the Second World War; it also became possible to convert liquid oil to gas, and the coal supplies did not improve after the war and continued to remain expensive.

In the Limerick Gasworks it took some further time before coal-based manufacturing gave way to the oil-based process. In fact, it was only in 1974 that the new catalytic oil-gas plant was finally completed in the city. Indeed, with a cruel twist of fate, the transitional works were still in progress when the world oil crisis hit.

In the next decade, the price of naphtha (the material from which the oil-gas was made) increased by more than 1000 per cent and made the production of the gas totally uneconomic. Against this background, the Limerick Gas Company struggled for survival.

In the mid-1970s, the discovery of natural gas, off the Cork coast, gave new hope to the company and to the industry as a whole. The establishment of Bord Gais Eireann (Irish Gas Company), in 1976, provided a central controlling and co-ordinating body to give national direction and guidance to the industry.

A decade later, in 1986, natural gas was piped to Limerick on a spur line from the main Dublin-Cork pipeline. In the same year, the New Limerick Gas Company was formed.

In early 1987, new natural gas pipes were laid throughout the city and the change-over from 'town' gas is now completed. The old manufacturing process has been rendered obsolete and the plant at the Dock Road is nothing more than a relic of industrial archaeology.

The distinctive, pungent smells of coke and gas, which for long pervaded the Dock Road and O'Curry Street, have now evaporated in the mists of time. But the old place still remains powerfully redolent of its past and of the grime, sweat and drudgery endured by generations of workers who manufactured the city's gas supply, in retorts, bunkers and conveyors, over the last 150 years.

And so another chapter in the story of Limerick gas closes as the new era dawns.