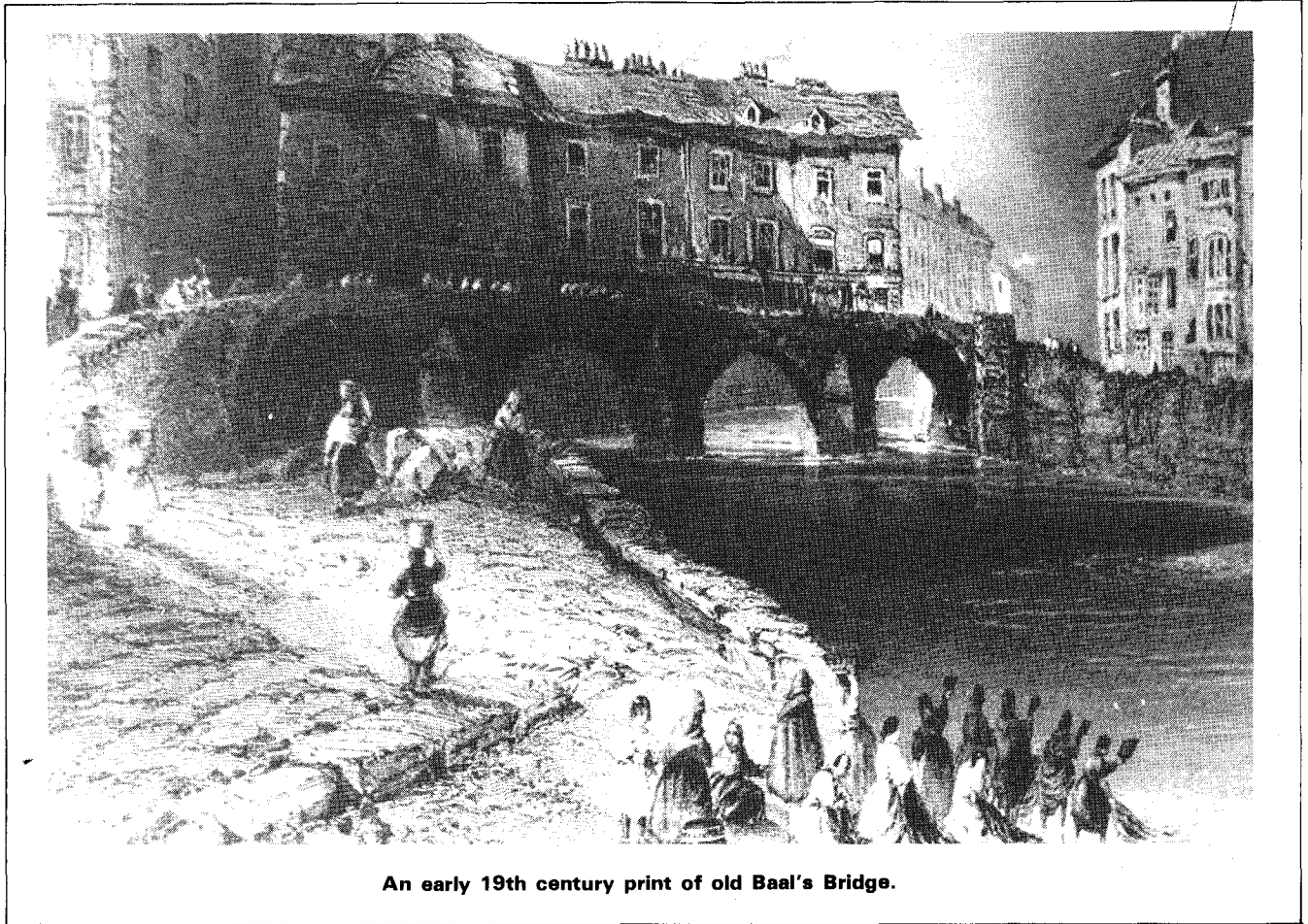


# THE 17th. CENTURY CITY

A Topographic Study by THOMAS F. O'SULLIVAN



An early 19th century print of old Baal's Bridge.

**A**s one would expect of a city which was the chief centre of commerce and the seat of both civil and military government of the south west of the country, Limerick in the 17th century was second in importance only to Dublin. With its castle, its walls and towers and outer defences, it counted as the strongest fortress in the kingdom, and as such was the theatre of some of the decisive events in our history.

Although in area it was but a relatively small fraction of the size of our modern city, nevertheless it was, according to the standards of the time, a very considerable place, its houses large and well built, and its streets and lanes and markets forever busy with a large volume of trade.

Its geographical position at the head of the estuary of the Shannon, 60 miles from the sea, at the junction of that river with the Abbey river, ensured that from its earliest foundation, it would grow to be a town of great importance and its growth and development into

the walled city of Limerick were influenced from the beginning by the peculiar topographical features of its situation.

The first town, founded on Inis Sibhton, later to be called King's Island, expanding to meet the needs of an increasing population, and a change in the political economy of the country, spread out to the north side of the Shannon and the south side of the Abbey river. But only where strategic necessity required it, and local topography permitted, was the city enclosed by walls. So it was that at the beginning of the century Limerick consisted for the greater part of a walled city with, outside the walls, its North Liberties extending into Thomond across the Shannon, and its South Liberties as far west as Mungret and as far east as Lisnagry. By the mid century the walls had been strengthened and repaired and Limerick was nearing the peak of its existence as a fortified city. Soon it would undergo three fateful sieges and after another century its great walls, now obsolete, would be

levelled.

Although it has been compared in shape to a spider and to an hour glass, a better simile would be, perhaps, to say that it resembled the figure 8. This is best appreciated by a study of the map prepared soon after the siege of 1651, and which is reproduced on our front cover. It consisted of two parts, the upper and northern part of the figure being the older English Town and the lower southern part, the much later Irish Town, which had formed around the western exit from the English Town at Baal's Bridge. Between both these towns within a town, flowed the Abbey river, and Baal's Bridge spanning this stream formed the connecting link between them. Thomond Bridge, at the north end of the English Town lay across the Shannon, joining the city to its North Liberties and that part of the kingdom which lay west of the river.

As well as its castle and its massive walls and gates, it derived considerable protection from the nature of its situation. On the west and north it was

protected by the Shannon, on the east and south by the Abbey river, and again in the south and south west by low lying marshy lands. No great heights dominated it, and during the greater part of the year the flooded lands of Groody in the north and east, with Ballinacurra in the west, presented almost insurmountable barriers. The only land approach suitable for heavy transport, then open to the city, lay along the limestone ridge projecting into the town from the south east.

While the English Town had been enclosed by walls since at least as early as the 12th century, the work of erecting walls around the Irish Town, or Base Town, as it was called by the English, was begun only about 1395, and it was finally enclosed about the end of the 15th century. In contemporary maps the walls are shown as being high and strong, and protected at nearly regular intervals by towers. Fortified gates guard the roads entering the city, and around the whole was a great fosse or ditch. Outlying defence works protected the walls.

The most important work in the fortified city was the great castle of King John, or, as it was variously called, "The Castle of Limerick", or the "Queen's Castle". Built in the reign of King John, it stood on the side of the Shannon near the north end of the English town, guarding the river fords and Thomond Bridge and dominating the Thomond shore, the King's Island, and the town itself. This great fort of rectangular shape had three round towers and in the corner facing the town was a massive bulwark or platform of masonry with 6 pieces of artillery. Even to-day the castle is in a good state of preservation, and except for its massive masonry platform, which has long been demolished, part of most of the buildings, shown in an excellent map of 1611, still remain. Unfortunately, some years ago it was seen fit to fill the castle yard with rather inappropriate dwelling houses. The castle itself stood a siege five weeks before it fell to the Irish army in 1642 and although severely damaged then, by both artillery, and mining and counter-mining, it was soon put into good repair to play again a prominent part in the sieges of 1651 and 1690-1.

The town wall ran northward from the castle along the river front to the Island Gate, thence back south east, almost paralleling Island Road, Peter's Cell, and St. Francis Abbey to the Abbey river to Baal's Bridge, thence along the side of the river to the key or harbour, near the present County Court House and from that north again to the castle. In the Irish Town it ran from Baal's Bridge and the nearby East Water Gate to the Black Battery, thence west by St. John's Gate to the Devil's Tower, (1) thence north again to Mungret Gate and West Water Gate

and Baal's Bridge. The extent of the works at both St. John's and West Water gates may be judged from their descriptions in the Civil Survey of 1654. The former is described as the citadel about St. John's Gate, which contained a great stone house with a cross house, the great castle on the gate, and a large plot of ground made use of as a citadel. Part of these buildings are now in St. John's Hospital and traces of more can be seen in the grounds. The works at Water Gate consisted of a great "Sytadle", about its gate, containing nine houses, and Water Gate Castle.

In all, the town walls had a circumference of about three miles and enclosed an area of some 70 acres. Inside this walled area, forming as it were the spine of the English and Irish Towns, was the Main Street (or High Street), running from Thomond Bridge in the former to St. John's Gate in the latter. This street included the present Nicholas Street, Mary Street, Baal's Bridge, Broad Street and John Street. Paralleling the Main Street in the English Town on the east was St. Dominick's Street. Lanes crossing the streets at right angles ran from the walls on the Shannon to those fronting on the Little Island and the Abbey river. In the Irish Town the principal thoroughfares were Broad Street, John Street and Mungret Street. These led to the gates of the same names, through which ran the roads rising to the higher ridge of limestone in the south and east, along which ran highways connecting the town with the rest of the country. Outside the walls, to the left of St. John's Gate, was the market place and on the right the main road led to Kilmallock by way of the present Garryowen and Greenhills. To the left a road (present Pennywell) led to Groody and Newcastle. Beside this latter road, near the present Good Shepherd Convent, was the Gallows Green, where the saintly Bishop, Albert Terence O'Brien, and his heroic companions were executed after the city had been yielded to Ireton.

The names of the old lanes are of interest and, indeed, many of them survive to the present day. Some of the principal ones were: Creagh Lane, Jenkin's Lane, Tholsel Lane, Monk's Lane, Hemlin's Lane, Abbey Lane, Fish Lane, Bishop's Lane, Flag Lane, Gaol Lane and Whitehorse Lane.

The gates of the English Town, beginning at Thomond Bridge, and following clockwise the circuit of the walls, were:-

- Thomond.
- Thomond Bridge.
- Island.
- St. Peter Cell.
- Abbey North (or Little Island)
- Gaol Lane.
- Fish Lane.

- Baal's Bridge North.
- Creagh Lane.
- Bow Lane.
- Castle Water Gate.

New Gate is shown in Speed's Map as lying across the main street at Newgate Lane.

The gates in the Irish Town, beginning at Baal's Bridge, were:-

- Baal's Bridge South.
- East Watergate.
- St. John's.
- Mungret.
- West Watergate.

The bridges of Limerick, two in number, were both structures of some antiquity, and if narrow, were strong and well built. Thomond Bridge, dating possibly from 1210, was a fine level structure on 14 arches with a fortified gateway at the city end, and a castellated gateway and drawbridge at the seventh arch from the city end. Baal's Bridge, joining both parts of the city, was probably erected early in the 14th century. It was a structure of 5 small arches. Although Speed's Map does not show houses on it, an earlier map of about 1590, (2) shows at least one house on each side and a fortified gate at either end. The Civil Survey enumerates two houses on the north side of the bridge. It had been known previously as the Tyde Bridge (or Tide, Thy, Thye), and its position as the connecting link between the English and Irish Towns, on their main streets, and also on the route for all traffic to and from Thomond, ensured that it was the busiest part of the city and one of the most congested.

While the parochial divisions of the city are outside the scope of this paper a short note on them is necessary. The English Town contained the whole of the parish of St. Mary and part of the parishes of St. Munchin and St. Nicholas. Irish Town contained the greater part of St. John's parish and a part of St. Michael's. In the North Liberties adjoining the city, were part of St. Munchin's and part of St. Nicholas' parishes, and in the South Liberties the parish of St. Michael and part of that of St. Nicholas. In the South-east Liberties was St. Patrick's.

Just as the castle dominated the fortified city, the Cathedral Church of St. Mary, almost in the centre of the English Town, was the most prominent of all the civil and ecclesiastical buildings. Founded at the end of the 12th century by King Donal O'Brien, extensively re-built and extended in the 13th and again in the late 15th centuries, it has withstood the rigours of war and the ravages of time, and is today still in use as a Cathedral. After the surrender of the city to Ireton much of its property was plundered and some of its ornaments defaced. The maps of the period show that the Cathedral

buildings occupied much more ground than they do to-day. The Dean's House and the College adjoined the church to the north, the bishop's house and garden lay between Thomond Bridge and the Island Gate, with the town wall separating them from the river.

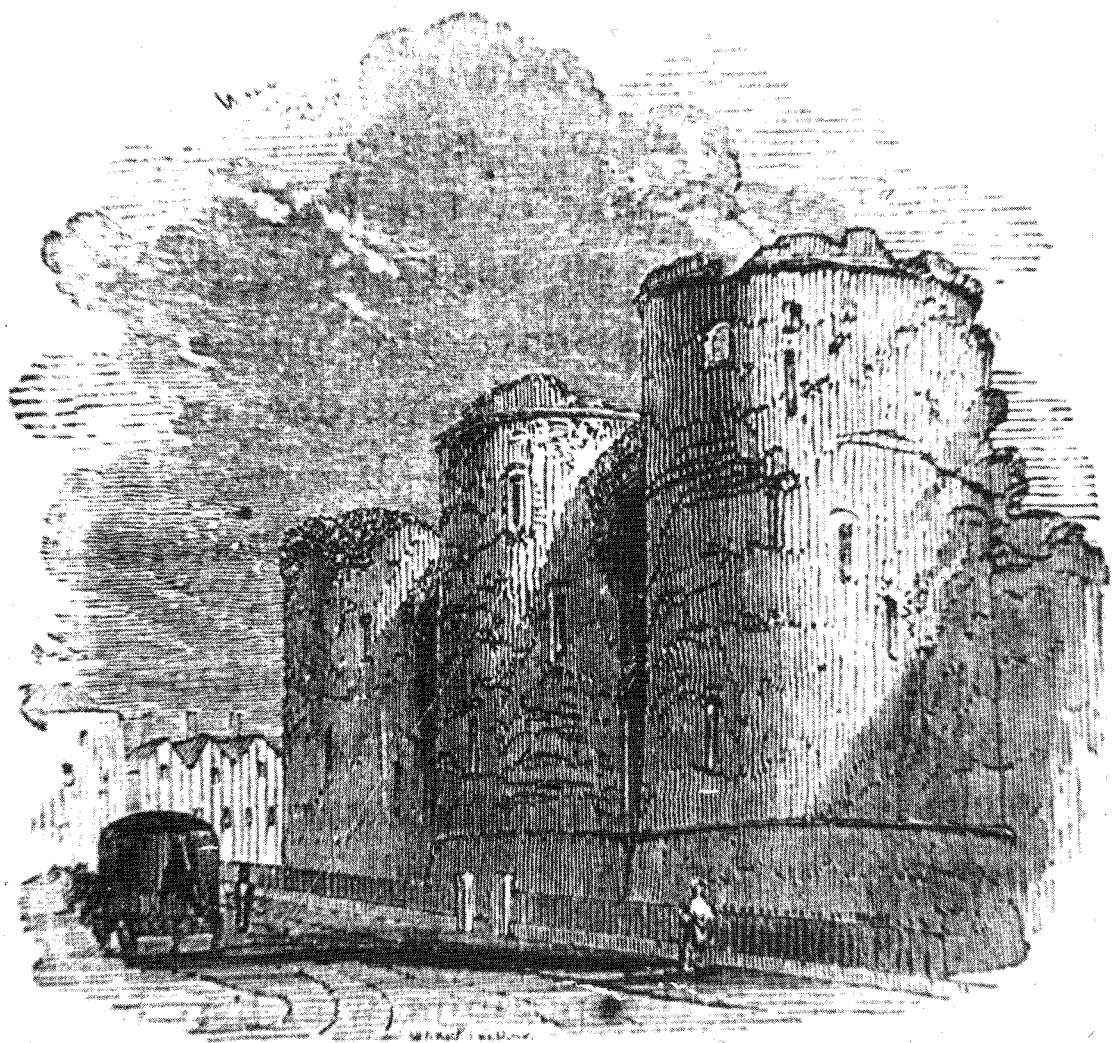
Other notable ecclesiastical buildings in the English Town were: St. Francis Abbey, St. Peter's, St. Dominick's and the church of St. Nicholas. This latter was situated at Newgate Lane and the present Nicholas Street, between the Cathedral and the castle, and from its graveyard the Irish army began to tunnel their mines in the siege of the castle of 1642. In the Irish Town were St. John's Church, near the Cathedral, and St. Michael's, near Watergate. This church stood without the walls on an island in the foreshore of the south side of the Abbey river, the ditch surrounding it connected with that river and the town moat. The church

buildings were destroyed probably during the siege operations of 1690-1. The island has long since ceased to be, since early in the 18th century the increase in commerce caused new quays to be built on the south shore of the Abbey river. As the city, by 1760, had ceased to be a fortress, the levelling of the walls was begun. Six years later saw the demolition of West Watergate and its adjoining walls; the whole area was soon filled in, new streets and houses were built on what had once been the muddy foreshores and low-lying fields. To-day, the site of old St. Michael's is more than a hundred yards from the river side.

The principal public buildings were situated in the English Town, including the Tholsel, in Mary Street, the old City Courthouse, in Quay Lane, or Bridge Street, as it is now called, the old County Courthouse in St. Francis Abbey, and the Exchange, adjoining the Cathedral, erected in 1672. In the Irish

Town, the Shambles Castle, near John's Gate and Thomcore Castle, near Mungret Gate, were occupied as citadels in 1654.

Along the Main Street and other principal streets, especially in the English Town, the houses of the leading citizens, mostly built of stone, gave the city an appearance of strength and dignity. These great houses, with their battlemented walls, were so impressive that Limerick was known as the "City of Castles". Dineley described them, rather grandiosely as tall, and built of black and polished marble, and he also described the streets as being paved with black marble. The black basaltic stone of the district takes a high polish and it is probable that at least some of the exterior work was polished, and that the same stone, broken to small size, was used to pave the streets. (4) That the houses were large structures, there can be no doubt,



LIMERICK CASTLE.

An 1820 drawing of King John's Castle by James D. Harding.

as dimensions of them are given in the Civil Survey. Few, if any, modern residences could compare in the areas given therein. The great stone house of Alderman Pierce Creagh on the High Street of the Irish Town had 100 feet streetward, in Cufry Lane, 110; in Langable, 80, and in South Lane, 80. Luke Gernon, who resided in the city, in his "Discourse on Ireland", written about 1620, in describing the city says: "In the High Streete is builte from one gate to the other in one forme, like the Colledges in Oxford, so magnificent that at my first entrance it did amaze me." He is not so kind, however, in his adjectives descriptive of the interiors.

Of the houses enumerated in the Civil Survey, 66 per cent. were of stone, and some 30 per cent. of cage work, the remainder being cabins or various other types. These cage work houses, which were framed in timber and covered with thatch, slates, tiles or other materials, were then beginning to decline in numbers, to be replaced by the stronger and more fire resistant stone built types. A number of those enumerated were already in decay, as witness the description of one in the parish of St. Mary. "An ould Cadge worcke, upon the north side of Kea Lane, ready to fall, nowe in the occupation of James Guntter".

The cabins of the poorer classes occupied the back lanes and courts of the town, and these, usually built of wattle and covered with clay and thatch, were easy victims to some of the fierce fires that raged now and then up the town. One of these destroyed many houses in Quay Lane and Creagh Lane in 1618, and another, in 1620, destroyed all the thatched houses in Bonfield's and Hemlin's Lanes.

Four water-worked mills, besides several horse mills, were in operation in the town. At the foot of Newgate Lane, between the castle and the key (5) built out into the falls of Curraghour were the Queen's Mill and Thomas Arthur's Mill. While in the Abbey River the Common Mill on the south side projected from the shore near St. Michael's and on the opposite side, in front of the present Barrington's Hospital, stood Nicholas Arthur's Mill. This is described as "a mill called Mullin Ighte on the River of Limiche". (6)

The great key at the south-west corner of the English Town at the junction of the main river with the Abbey river, was the focus not only of the extensive sea borne trade of the city, but also of the very great river traffic carried on the Shannon, the country's principal waterway. Built about 1500, there was on the west side dividing the harbour from the Abbey river, a wall some 600 ft. long projecting into the Shannon, which with a smaller wall to the north completed the outer works. In the harbour larger vessels lay in the long dock

and the smaller river craft at the smaller quays on the north side. The long wall, built on two levels, the lower or working level, above high water, supported on arches, an upper platform much used as a walk by the citizens. Gernon describes it as "This wall is extended from the towne wall into the middle of the ryver and it was made for defense and a harbour for shipping. It is in lengthe about 200 paces and it is a double wall. In the botome it is a mayne thickness and so it continueth until it be raysed above high water. Then there is within it a long gallery, arched overhead, and with windows, most pleasant to walke in, and above that a terrace with fayre battlemts and at the end of it there is a round tower with two or three chambers".

This tower carried six pieces of artillery and made of the quay a well protected safe harbour. During the siege of the castle a boom was laid from this tower to the Clare shore to prevent help arriving from the English ships in the Pool. A large open area on the land-ward side of the key gave ample space for the discharge and loading of merchandise. This great area was closed by a fortified gate at the Quay Lane end.

A wide sweep of river, unencumbered by the present day Sarsfield Bridge and its locks or the quays and docks of the modern city, spread from the key in a clear expanse as far as Tervoe. The river, unrestrained by the embankments of to-day, spread from as far as the present Patrick Street to the high ground of the Clare side. Light draught boats waiting their turn at the quays, lay at anchor in the area now corresponding with the foreshore at Arthur's and Honan's quays. The deeper ships from abroad lay at anchor in the Pool, a mile below, before proceeding to discharge at the key.

Outside the walls of the city, and in Thomondgate district, were the impertinent cabins and hovels of the poor and the dispossessed, the hewers of wood and the drawers of water, on whose labours depended the carrying out of the hard work and the manual tasks demanded by any large city. These humble dwellings were the first to be destroyed in time of war. Bereft of shelter of the walls, if they were not already destroyed by the needs of defence, they were soon torn apart by the attackers. The unpopularity of friendly troops engaged in this work of destruction was manifested openly before and during the sieges by the dwellers without the walls.

The South Liberties of the city embraced the area south of the Shannon to Cahivally, west to Mungret, and east to Lisnagry; the North Liberties extended from the river west to Coonagh, north to Caherdavin, and east to Monabraher. This large area without the walls is for a great part included in

our modern Limerick, a city of wide streets and roads, with modern suburbs, some of them greater in area than the city of 300 years ago. Within that greater Limerick, however, there may still be traced the line of the old walls and the gates and buildings, which even to-day still influence the shape and growth of the newer city.

## REFERENCES

- (1) **The Devil's Tower and the Black Battery stood as towers on the west and east corners, respectively, of the Irish Town south wall. They mounted 5 or 6 peices of artillery and during the siege of 1690 were particular targets of the attackers. The Black Battery adjoining the great breach made then (the present New Road at St. John's being the site), suffered severely and was eventually taken by assault by one of William's regiments of Brandeburgers. The battery having been already mined, was blown up by the defenders with great loss of life to the regiment. St. John's Gate and Citadel between the batteries, was seized by Col. Fennell and the English Army allowed entry, in his betrayal of the city to Ireton in 1651.**
- (2) **John Speed, an English antiquarian, published maps of the English counties and one general map of Ireland and one each for the four provinces. Speed, who was a tailor by trade, was never in the country, and obtained his materials at second hand; hence his map of 1610 of Limerick is more picturesque than accurate. The map of the city area, 1590, the original of which is in Trinity College Library, is much more accurate; it is mentioned in the Civil Survey of 1654 (p. XXV).**
- (3) **For an account of this church see "St. Nicholas' Church" by Monsignor Moloney in "Analecta Limericensia", No. 1.**
- (4) **Recent excavations along Mary Street show traces of the various road formations of earlier days. Under the cobbles of the late 18th century an older pavement, formed of rough limestone in small pieces, was observed.**
- (5) **The spelling "key" in the Civil Survey and in other sources has been retained for readier identification.**
- (6) **During a survey of the Abbey river about 1928, the sills of the weir of this mill were located in the bed of the river.**