

# Why Cruise's Hotel is so special to Limerick

JUST ONE more year and Cruise's Hotel will be 200 years old, but will it be there for the bi-centenary celebrations? For all those years it has been Limerick's best known landmark, even long before the challenge of the Treaty Stone. It is sad to think of its passing away and making room for some other building that will — if it develops a good character — take the next two centuries to excite the emotions of another generation.

Cruise's is something special in the city. Its splendid Georgian facade has dominated our city centre for so long that it is hardly possible to imagine what could replace it without stirring the deepest feelings of regret in many citizens. It had close connections with the stirring political events of the last century and associations with some of the most famous characters in Britain and Ireland during that time.

The very popular Earl Mulgrave (we have a fine street named in his honour), described as the "most popular Viceroy that Ireland ever saw", was an honoured guest at the hotel in 1835, when he also opened the new Wellesley (Sarsfield) Bridge. The great John O'Donovan, while working on the Ordnance Survey, failed to get accommodation there in 1830 for the city was



Some of the illustrious Young Irelanders found a little transitory comfort and prestige in Cruise's. John Mitchell, John Francis Meagher, John Kenyon and Smith O'Brien were its patrons in their time. With the exception of John Kenyon, the aforementioned were afterwards to endure the hardships of institutions which contrasted dramatically with Cruise's.

O'Connell and his strong

of the disease which caused much havoc at that time. Five years later the Peoples Park was laid out and dedicated to his memory.

Another member of the Russell family, assisted by a Joseph Matterson, established the first bacon factory in Limerick early in the nineteenth century. This firm introduced a number of Danish experts to instruct a local staff in the skills of bacon curing. In a short time the firm was chartering ships to trans-

assets to his successors.

Cruise died on July 25, 1887, in his 86th year, and was buried in St. John's, only a few yards from the original owner of the hotel, George Russell (Francis).

John Joseph Cleary, the next owner, made many improvements in the place, including "hot water baths and showers", and many other refinements. He also advertised his possession in forceful and extravagant language, claiming that his hotel was "patronised by all the leading families in Europe". Cleary was Mayor in 1873 and '74.

Most prominent of the more recent proprietors was the Flynn family.

The hotel was commandeered by the occupying forces during the British Military regime, and afterwards commandeered by the Regular Forces during the Civil War. It was handed back to the proprietor in 1922.

The various proprietors of the hotel down the years all contributed to its development and maintenance. The biggest renovation job was undertaken in 1947/8. In July 1948 the "Leader" wrote: "It is expected that Cruise's Hotel, now under reconstruction, will be re-opened next September, though all the work on hands will not then be completed. This is a colossal job, involving a capital outlay in the region of £100,000 (£3,000,000 in present day values). For over one hundred and fifty years Cruise's has been closely identified with the social and political life of Limerick, and Thackeray, in one of his books, wrote in the highest praise of "this historic inn".

Are we now to stand in idle lamentation and see Cruise's suffer the same fate as that

scribed as the "most popular Viceroy that Ireland ever saw", was an honoured guest at the hotel in 1835, when he also opened the new Wellesley (Sarsfield) Bridge. The great John O'Donovan, while working on the Ordnance Survey, failed to get accommodation there in 1839, for the city was bursting at the seams from the thousands who gathered to take the "pledge" from Fr. Mathew. O'Donovan was looking for a quiet retreat to write up an account of his labours in Co. Clare. He afterwards referred to the incident in his notes: "... I am obliged to take refuge in Dublin, where I must put my pencil notes in some order. I could not get a single room in that city (Limerick) in which to sit quietly, in consequence of the awful number of Mathe-wites; and this annoyed me, who am a being of very irritable configuration of nerve, and as anti-Matthussian as I am enthusiastically anti-Matthewusian". One would have thought that there were few among the thousands who flocked into the city with a determination to break their drinking habits who would seek the comforts of the best hotel.

## Tennyson

Among the most distinguished English patrons of the Hotel was Alfred Lord Tennyson and John Bright. Tennyson and his son were guests at the hotel before they journeyed to Curragh Chase where they were entertained by their close friend Aubrey De Vere. Bright, a British Cabinet Minister, was a regular visitor to Castleconnell where he indulged in his favourite pastime — fishing. During one of his visits to Limerick city he was brought on a tour of historic areas by the Mayor and a number of Councillors. He evinced a particular interest in the Treaty Stone. He was entertained by the Mayor and Councillors at Cruises, and, in the course of an address of welcome, the Mayor briefly explained the Treaty of Limerick as follows: "About a century and a half ago England made a solemn contract with Ireland. Ireland promised fealty, and England promised to guarantee civil and religious equality. When the crisis was over England handed Ireland over to a faction that have ever since bred strife and disunion".

The hospitable Mayor can be forgiven for the understatement, and the lesson on one of the most unjust episodes in Irish history made little impression on the redoubtable Tory: though for many years he was a sympathetic advocate of ameliorating measures for Ireland, he opposed the Home Rule policy of Mr. Gladstone. He was one of the politicians who fostered the Anti-Corn Law agitation in 1845/6.

Bright's regular sporting companion, George Peabody, the American millionaire and philanthropist, stayed at Cruises on a number of occasions before going to Castleconnell for the fishing.

Meagher, John Kenyon and Smith O'Brien were its patrons in their time. With the exception of John Kenyon, the aforementioned were afterwards to endure the hardships of institutions which contrasted dramatically with Cruises's.

O'Connell and his strong man in Clare, Honest Tom Steele, were good friends of Edward Cruise and were always welcome in the establishment. After his victory in the Clare election of 1828 O'Connell addressed a huge



**By KEVIN HANNAN**

gathering that overflowed into Arthur's Quay and Patrick Street. On that historic occasion he asked the people if they had ever seen the like before — a Catholic member of Parliament. The only other occasion that so great a crowd assembled outside Cruises's was in the nineteen fifties when the marathon piano player, "Musical Marie", appeared at a first floor window to the thunderous clamour of a sea of deluded admirers. In later years the unlucky Mr. Nixon, President of the United States, made Cruises's his headquarters during his visit to the city.

O'Connell conducted his election campaign from Cruises's Hotel, and Tom Steele made it his home from home. It was from there that he organised the local "Independent Club". These were introduced all over the country to counteract the "Brunswick Clubs" organised in fear and trepidation by the landlords after O'Connell's victory. Cruises's was often so busy that meetings of the Independent Club were held at Canal House.

Among its more prominent guests in the 1870s and 80s were Lord O'Brien of Kilt-nora — "Peter the Packer" — of odious memory, Parnell, John Redmond, and John Dillon. Indeed, every major figure that crossed the stage of Irish politics during the last century enjoyed the hospitality of Cruises's.

According to an official pamphlet on Cruises's published about 30 years ago George Russell (Francis) was the owner of the hotel in 1791. Stratten's directory gives the name of a Mr. Bourne as the founder. Russell was a member of a family who contributed more to nineteenth century Limerick than any other. Russell's father, Francis, was Sheriff of Limerick in 1777, and a descendant, Francis William Russell, was M.P. for the city in 1865. Another relative of this Parliamentarian was Richard, described by Lenihan as "the most enterprising merchant that Limerick ever saw". Richard, who built the present Plassey House in 1863 (now known as the white house) died in 1871 of typhus during an epidemic

Another member of the Russell family, assisted by a Joseph Matterson, established the first bacon factory in Limerick early in the nineteenth century. This firm introduced a number of Danish experts to instruct a local staff in the skills of bacon curing. In a short time the firm was chartering ships to transport Limerick hams to other countries, and thus put Limerick on the map as a bacon curing centre and into the school geographies as another great industry for Limerick.

For the past two hundred years the name of Russell has

dominated the commercial and public life of the city. The family established the Weaving Mill at Lansdowne, and, in 1889, with Thomas Cleeve, established the Condensed Milk Company of Ireland. The family also founded the Lansdowne Shipbuilding Yard close to their weaving mill. Among the fine vessels that left the stocks here was the "Shelbourne", a splendid ship that sailed the seven seas for many years. The Russell family home in the North Circular Road was also named "Shelbourne", and was the finest house in the area. The name also occurs on the Pery Square Tontine list. But it was in the milling industry that the family is best remembered. For the latter half of the last century they were the principal millers in the British Isles, owning and operating water mills at Plassey, Corbally, Singland, Lock Mills; and steam operated mills at Newtown Pery and Askeaton.

## St. John's

The Russell's more positive links with the city are in St. John's churchyard in the Square where three elaborate tombs hold the remains of Limerick's great benefactors.

Though the Limerick family has died out locally for many years, our own Ted Russell — five times Mayor of the city — has kept the name in focus. For well over half a century he has been dominant in the sporting, cultural, industrial public life of the city, and his leadership and integrity have maintained the high standards set by the Russells of the 1800s.

In 1806 the hotel came into the possession of Sam Dixon, who also operated a dye works at the rear of No. 5 John's Square (south). Apparently Sam was unable to cope with the two operations, for the owner in 1809 was Bill Collopy, whose tenancy too was short lived, and we find the Moriarty family taking over.

The next owner, Edward Cruise, close friend of O'Connell and Steele, left a name on the building that has survived the many changes of ownership since his retirement from business in 1854. This is not surprising since his name was one of the most valuable

values). For over one hundred and fifty years Cruise's has been closely identified with the social and political life of Limerick, and Thackeray, in one of his books, wrote in the highest praise of "this historic inn".

Are we now to stand in idle lamentation and see Cruise's suffer the same fate as that which befell the Tholsel? Are we selfishly to deny posterity the thrill and pleasure of feasting their eyes on a three or four hundred year old building, especially since so much has been so far lavished on its maintenance? The mediaeval cities and towns of England would have lost much of their interest and charm if their inhabitants down the years had not left us houses, shops and pubs dating from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries which they have lovingly cared for through many generations. Our policy here has always been the same: "Tear it down if it's too old".

In 1936 permission was given by the City Council for the demolition of the Tholsel in Mary Street. In 1949 a "development" company ran out of cash as they were about to demolish the Savings Bank in Glentworth Street to make way for "a number of flats and offices". This proposed act of vandalism had the blessing of the City Council at the time. Only one voice in the crowd sought the columns of the "Leader" to express her horror and condemnation. That grand old local historian, Ms Emile Bennis, denounced the decision as "a tragedy".

## Great shock

"It comes as a great shock to me", she wrote, "to learn that one of the city's few beautiful buildings is to be pulled down to be used as builders rubble. Such vandalism makes the escapades of irresponsible youths seem trifles".

It is not yet too late to organise sufficient opposition to the destruction of the grand Georgian facade of Cruises's, which has been giving a rare grace and dignity to our principal street for so long.

All is not yet lost. Our city manager and city architect have made great strides in inner-city development — something that has never happened in my lifetime — and have given a new dimension to getting things done. The city is indebted to their energy and foresight, though I must take exception to their acceptance of the various ugly, nonsensical, grotesque, unexplainable, nightmarish mind-boggling eyesores which have been set up in prominent places as "pieces of sculpture".

I do not find it easy to be critical of these two gentlemen who are doing so much for our city, but I must also re-echo the crescendo of condemnation of the four houses in Athlunkard Street which are turned back to front. This was an inexplicable and unparalleled act which goes well to ruin the fine street, and presents no compliment to the splendid church across the road.