

Cruises Hotel

For almost two centuries Cruise's Hotel has dominated our principal street, indeed the very name has personified Limerick in every corner of the country. It is to Limerick what the "Pillar" was to Dublin, and when one looks at its splendid facade proudly sporting the date of its establishment, which indicates its 199 years, they look into a little bit of the eighteenth century.

Now, like an old-time criminal on death-row it awaits the coup-de-grace at the hands of a "developer", who proposes to knock it down "to make way for a modern complex," and this with the blessing of our City Fathers! This sorry business must take us back in sad remembrance to the days when our city council were particularly noted for their lack of fidelity and affection for our architectural heritage. In 1936 the then City Council gave permission for the destruction of the Tholsel in Mary Street to make way for a small shop!

Objectors

A number of objectors to this proposal to transform Cruises into builder's rubble were taken to task recently on the grounds that the "development" would generate much needed employment for building workers. Fancy sacrificing a most interesting and historic feature of our city because its demolition and replacement with concrete and glass — glass and concrete, would provide employment for a number of workers for a few months! I wonder where these people would draw the line in providing employment for building workers?

But the greatest tragedy of the destruction of Cruise's and other buildings in the vicinity would lie in the beginning of the breaking up of the grand pattern of the eighteenth century lay-out of the city, which has been our pride and joy, and the envy of those who came from cities and towns where the streets and buildings just happened in a disorganised way.

Cruise's is something very special, and is something well worth preserving, not alone for ourselves but those who will come after us. The building has endearing associations for many of our citizens, even for those who never stepped inside its door. 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. Though it has been in private ownership for two centuries it is an integral part of our city and not something to be destroyed by those whose only interest lies in profitable commercial enterprise.

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 including politicians, sportsmen, world renowned writers and other international celebrities.

On the great occasion in 1835 of the official opening of the new Wellesley Bridge (now Sarsfield Bridge) the popular Viceroy of Ireland, Earl Mulgrave (we have a grand thoroughfare called after him), who performed the opening ceremony, was feted in Cruise's where he was the guest of Honour. 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 Father Matthew. O'Donovan weary after his work in the fields of Co. Clare, was looking for a quiet retreat to write up an account of his labours. 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 Matthewites; and this annoyed me, who am I, being of a very irritable configuration of nerve, and as anti-Matthusean as I am enthusiastically anti-Matthusean."

No doubt O'Donovan relied much on the wee drop after his arduous daily labours around the countryside in all weathers. 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.

Among the most famous figures in nineteenth century history who were patrons of the hotel were William Makepiece Thackeray, who as a young reporter for the Times stayed at the hotel. While he wrote a long ballad lampooning the Young Irelanders; this was a vicious attack for which he afterwards apologised. Alfred Lord 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.

Minister

John Bright, a British Cabinet Minister, was a regular visitor to Castleconnell where he indulged his favourite pastime — fishing. During one of his visits to Limerick City he was brought on a tour of its 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 Cruise's, 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 has ever since bred strife and disunion."

The hospitable Mayor can be forgiven for the understatement, and the lesson on one of the most saddest 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 Cruise's on a number of occasions before going on to Castleconnell for the fishing. Some of the illustrious Young Irelanders found a little transitory comfort and hospitality 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. It was during their stay in Cruise's that their politics evoked the ridicule of Thackeray.

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 gathering that overflowed into Arthur's Quay and Patrick Street.

In later years the unlucky Mr. Nixon, President of the United States, made Cruise's his headquarters during his visit to the city.

O'Connell

O'Connell conducted his election campaign from Cruise's Hotel, and Tom Steele made it his home from home. It was from there that Steele organised the "Independent clubs". These were introduced

all over the country to counteract the "Brunswick Clubs" set up in fear and trepidation by the landlords after O'Connell's victory. Cruise's was often so busy that meetings of the local Independent Club were held at Canal House.

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

According to an official pamphlet on Cruise's published about 40 years ago George Russell was the owner of the hotel in 1791. Stratton'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 descendent, 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 saw." Richard, who built the present Plassy House in 1863 (now known as the White House) died in 1871 of typhus during an epidemic of the disease which caused much havoc at the time. Five years later the Peoples Park was laid out and dedicated in his memory.

The Limerick Chronicle tells us that a Mr. Russell and Mr. Matterson established the first bacon factory in Limerick early in the nineteenth century. This Company 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.

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", which was the finest house in the area. They also purchased "Tivoli" from Barringtons. 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 Plassy, Corbally, Singland, Lock Mills; and steam operated mills at Newtown-Pery and Askeaton.

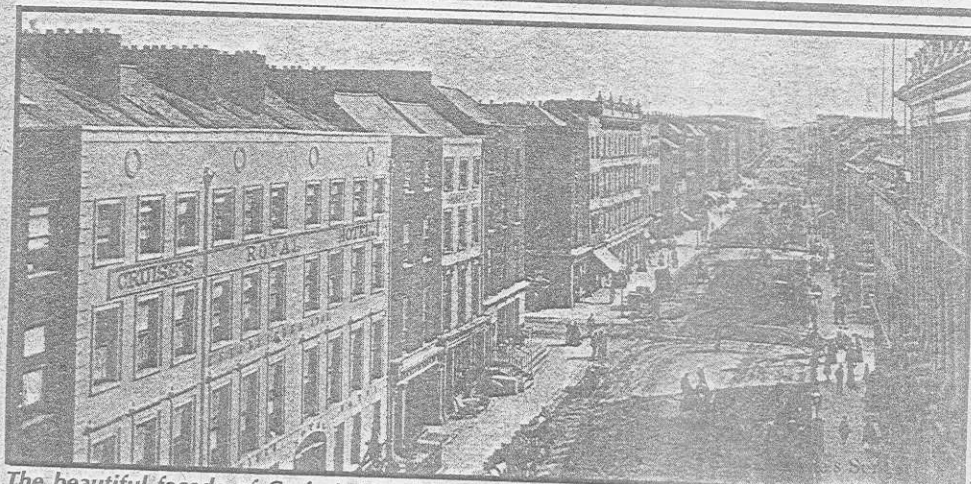
Positive

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, T.D. and Senator — has kept the name in focus. For well over half a century he has been dominant in the sporting, cultural, industrial and public life of the city, and his leadership and integrity have maintained the high standards set by the Russell's of the 1800's.

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 on 1809 was Bill Collopy, whose tenancy too, was short lived, and we find the Moriarty family taking over.

The next owner, Edward Cruise, was most colourful of all the proprietors and left a



The beautiful facade of Cruise's Hotel, now almost ready for the developers' diggers and shovels.

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 valuable assets to his successors.

Cruise died on the 25th July, 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 ex-

travagant language, claiming that his hotel was "patronized 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 hand will not then be completed. This is a colossal job, involving a capital outlay in the region of £100,000 (£3m 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 which befell the Tholsel? Are we selfishly to deny posterity of 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 they not left us houses, shops and pubs dating from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries which they had lovingly cared for through many generations. Our policy here has always been the same: "Tear it down if it's too old".

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 to generate employment for local building workers". 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, M/s Emile Bennis, denounced the decision as "a tragedy".

"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". Surely the same sentiments can be applied to Cruise's today.

— KEVIN HANNAN

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