

THE BATTLE OF THE TAIL RACE

by Michael McCarthy

The year 1932 was a memorable one. February signalled the end of the ten year old Cosgrave administration. March saw the formation of a new government under de Valera. April brought the worst employment figures since the depression began, with over 31,000 out of work. June was marked by the celebration of the fifteen hundredth anniversary of St. Patrick's coming to Ireland and the Eucharistic Congress. But it is July perhaps that is best remembered by the majority of Limerick people, old enough to remember, and by the Abbey fishermen in particular. During the second week of July the Abbey fishermen took on the army, police and water bailiffs in a series of engagements which have since been known as the Battle of the Tail-Race.

For centuries the Abbey fishermen and the river Shannon were practically synonymous. For hundreds of years the fishermen plied their narrow fishing cots between the city and Doonass where they exercised their ancient skill of the snap net. During the Williamite siege of Limerick the fishermen were, reportedly, given special privileges. By the 1700s they were recognised as an incorporated body. And by 1905 the forty-odd fishermen, drawn from eight to ten families, emulated the Limerick tradesmen of previous centuries and took to themselves the rather grandiose title, "The Abbey Guild of Fishermen". But in the 1920s the death-knell was sounded for their salmon industry, worth an estimated £20,000 annually. The building of the Shannon Scheme was to destroy their main source of livelihood and to terminate their long tradition of association with the river.

Fears for salmon fishing on the river were generated among the Abbey fishermen with the publication of the plans in the mid-1920s for the electrification of the Shannon. The river was to be dammed at O'Brien's Bridge, diverted into a seven-mile head-race with a hundred foot fall into the tail-race before returning to the main river below the Lax Weir at Parteen. This plan meant that the main volume of water from the Shannon would be syphoned off, creating another river with a much stronger current which in effect would destroy the Lax Weir and any other fishery above it as far as Killaloe. Up-running fish would not be able to pass from the tail-race to their spawning grounds and those returning to the sea would be trapped in the head-race.

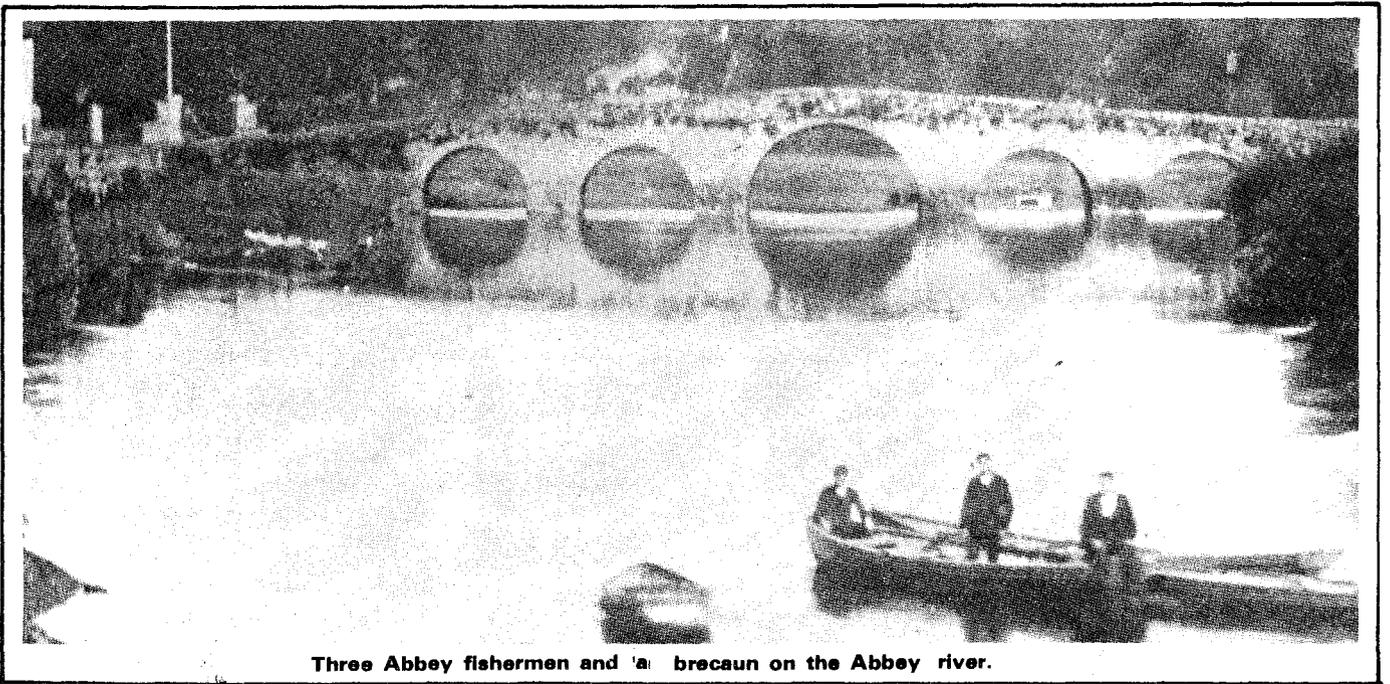
Two other factors increased apprehension among the

fishermen. Firstly, the Minister for Industry and Commerce, Patrick McGilligan, bluntly stated in 1925 that the White Paper on the Shannon Scheme "definitely foreshadows that it might be necessary to neglect the fishing interests in the cause of power production. It foreshadows that fishing interests will not be allowed to predominate against the greater interests of power production". Secondly, some of the best salmon waters in Europe and North America were being destroyed as a result of industrialisation. Rivers were being harnessed for industry thereby preventing the salmon from reaching their normal spawning ground; also pollution resulting from industrialisation was simply decimating stocks. Ireland's rivers had suffered relatively little in this regard but the next few years were to see that change.

The 1925 Shannon Electricity Act made the Minister for Industry and Commerce liable for any damages to Shannon fisheries due to the construction of the Shannon Scheme. This, however, was little consolation for the Abbey fishermen who would be faced with the prospect of leaving their industry and being retrained for some other employment. Even at this stage the fishermen argued that money could not compensate them for what they would lose if measures were not taken to protect their industry.

The debate continued throughout the construction period of the power station. The owners of the 50-odd stake weirs and approximately 100 nets on the river continually lobbied T.D.s and assiduously made representations to government departments on the issue. Curiously enough, the year 1927, when building operations at Ardnacrusha were in full progress, was a record year for some of the fisheries.

On Monday, July 22, 1929, the official opening of the Shannon Scheme was performed by President Cosgrave. For the following weeks water was allowed to trickle into the canal, slowly filling the head-race so that the banks would not give under the weight of the volume of water. By October, electricity was being generated at Ardnacrusha - an achievement which was looked upon as tangible proof of Ireland's independence



Three Abbey fishermen and a brecaun on the Abbey river.

and separate statehood. Less than two miles downstream, the worst fears of the Abbey fishermen had been realised; their fishing grounds had been sacrificed for progress and they themselves had become the most recent victims of industrialisation.

From the very outset fishing was prohibited in the tail-race where hundreds of salmon were dying daily. It was alleged by the **Limerick Leader** that "the high mortality amongst fish is due to pollution of water caused by the dumping of 'spent' salmon or slats which are held up in the head-race". Spawning salmon were also entering the tail-race and were unable to travel further upstream. Besides, millions of salmon fry were mangled by the turbines. Various attempts were made to overcome these problems. The idea of a ship-lift to accommodate the salmon at the intake dams proved to be impractical primarily because the fish would not face into still water. The Limerick Board of Conservators placed a barrier of electrified chains at the mouth of the tail-race so as to prevent the fish going upstream but this too was unsuccessful.

Cumann na nGaedhael left office in February 1932. By this stage the Abbey fishermen and their families were in a bad way having been deprived of their livelihood for the past three years. Ironically, they still had their fishery rights. The arrival of the Fianna Fail Government brought fresh hope to the fishermen, particularly as de Valera's constituency of Clare was affected by the Shannon Scheme and some of his constituents had made representations to him on the fisheries question. One newspaper reported: "The fishermen have repeatedly called on the Cosgrave Government to stop this state of affairs, and now expect the Government that has the lot of the plain people at heart to act immediately and to do something to save those fishermen and their wives and children from starvation".

On Tuesday July 5, 1932 in the Dail, a Limerick deputy, James Reidy, asked the Minister for Lands and Fisheries, Patrick Rutledge, "if he will state what steps are being taken to prevent the destruction of salmon in the tail-race at Ardnacrusha, and if the people engaged in the salmon-fishing industry whose means of livelihood have been interfered with by the Shannon electrical development will be permitted to fish the tail-race and thus enable much valuable food to be saved from destruction". The Minister replied: "The staff of my department have been inquiring into a recent finding of dead salmon in the tail-race at Ardnacrusha and if the cause of mortality can be discovered I shall consult with the Minister for Industry and Commerce as to the steps to be taken to prevent its recurrence. I am not prepared to revoke the By-law prohibiting the use of nets in the tail-race." This reply seemed to have been the last straw for the fishermen. By the weekend they had resolved to defy the ban on netting in the tail-race unless stopped by superior force. Their decision was conveyed to the Limerick Fishery Board of Conservators on Monday, July 11. The Board requested the fishermen to reconsider the decision but this was refused. Positions had now been taken for what was to follow.

That night, at 11.30, the full fleet of the Abbey fishermen numbering 24 boats, each containing two men, gathered at St. Thomas' Island. On the stroke of midnight the fleet approached the tail-race. An official of the Fishery Board shouted to the fishermen from the bank that fishing inside a particular mark was prohibited. The warning went unheeded and the fishermen continued on their course. Bailiffs in three motor boats patrolled the mouth of the tail-race. Gardai were also on duty in launches. Hundreds of onlookers lined the banks. Slowly the angling cots arrived and some of them nosed over towards the bailiffs' hut to extend their line in order to make it more difficult for bailiffs and police to prevent their entry to the canal. The turbines at Ardnacrusha had been turned on at full strength creating a tremendous current which made the handling of the light fishing boats more difficult. The next few moments are described by William Lysaght in his book **The Abbey Fishermen**: "there was a moment of hesitation, but with a cry of 'Up Garryowen' and a few deft strokes of their paddles, Randy and Lully Hayes sent their boat surging in between the chains behind one of the launches. This was the signal for concerted action. In a matter of minutes all the boats were inside - the

battle was on." Some boats made to go upstream towards the Power Station. The bailiffs followed. The crowd cheered the fishermen on. From Parteen Bridge stones were thrown at the boat injuring one bailiff, Thomas O'Connor, though not seriously. Nine nets were seized. The names of 42 men were taken by the gardai. Three boats, reportedly heavily laden with fish, escaped. Four or five shots were fired in the air to disperse the crowd. The last net was seized close to 3 a.m. and then the boats returned to their base at the Sandmall.

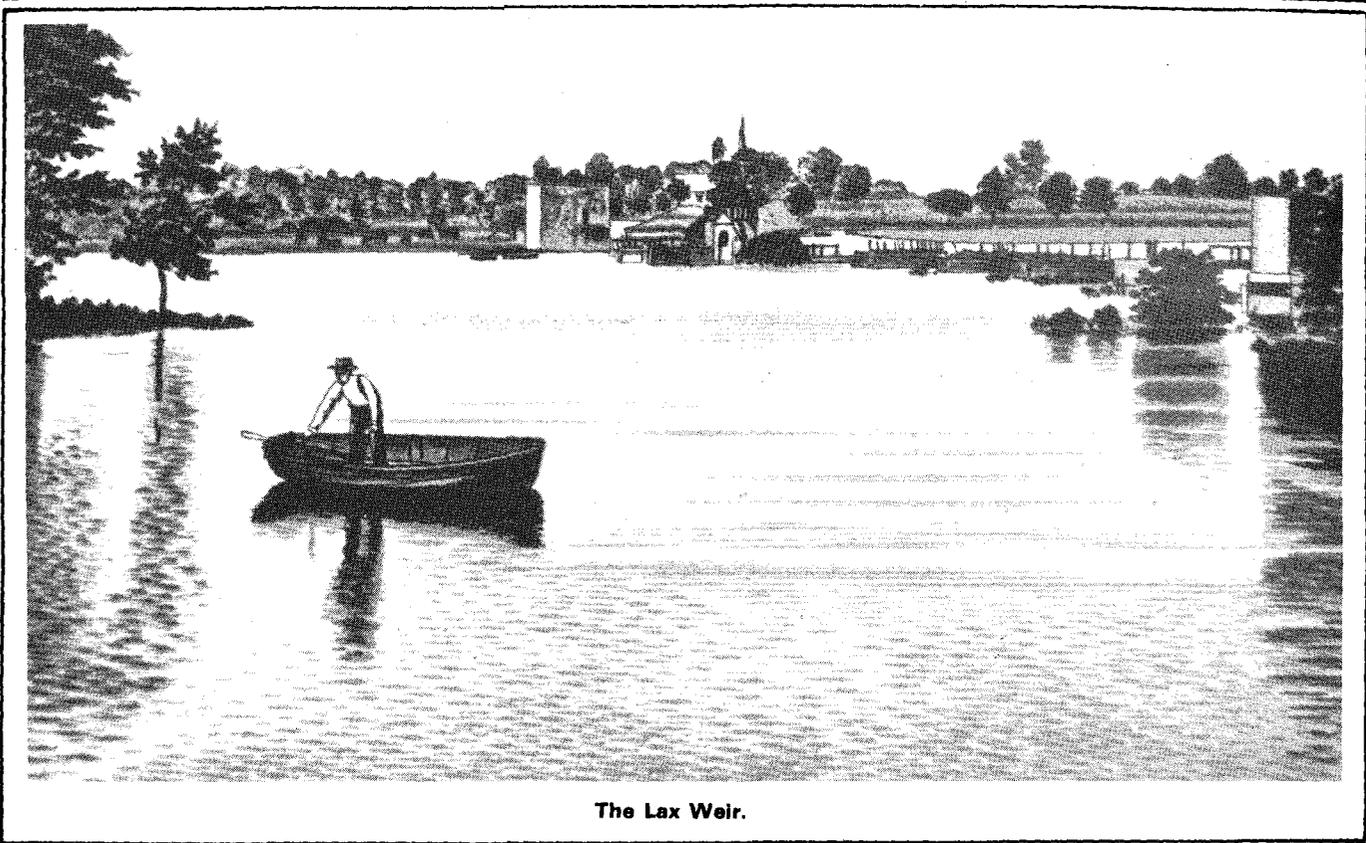
On the following day, Tuesday, the fishermen planned their strategy for that night, and at 8 p.m. the full group assembled at the Sandmall. Almost immediately they dipped paddles and set out for the tail-race forty-five minutes away. Peadar O'Donnell, the former Sinn Fein T.D. for Donegal, was present that night as a reporter for **An Phoblacht** and gives an eye-witness account of the events: "I arrived at the tail-race one of the war evenings; a wet evening but crowds of Limerick folk were there waiting for the fishermen to come. Police in great numbers; a dark bundle of a dozen men over near a shed were pointed out as the bailiffs. And a-lack-a-day, the man in charge of the bailiffs was one who had a great reputation among the Volunteers. I felt terribly ashamed for him as I drew near to the crowd of the bailiffs. I talked to him: what I said doesn't matter, I suppose. Then I did a meeting of the bailiffs. I asked them to go on strike for the night and I put my heart into the talk, while bewildered policemen with horned, stumpy necks pushed into the crowd. And I would recognise again one face full of enthusiasm when I seemed to be winning the bailiffs. But I lost." At this point the fishermen appeared in view and approached the tail-race. The crowd cheered. Peadar O'Donnell continues his account: "The bailiffs went to their motor boats: the war was on. Just picture it: two powerful motor boats full of well-coated bailiffs wait while frail two-men shells of boats go quickly into the tail-race. Out go the nets. And the crowd cheers. When a salmon strikes the cheers become a roar. Suddenly the motors are set going and in come the bailiffs boats. The scene suddenly becomes sickening; the motor boats crash in among the coracles and grappling hocks reach out. There is a crash and a man of the McNamaras is overboard; clothes, boots and all, he is down the mill-race of the flood. But the bailiffs hang on to their prey, the boat and the nets. McNamara swims ashore. The crowd rush to the water's edge and there is excitement.

"Policemen with drawn batons move about, some imploring, some threatening. One policeman reminded me of Mickey James in **Rat-Pit**: I expected him to invite us to sniff the scent of the dead men on his baton. Suddenly there is a stampede: military with fixed bayonets are clearing the embankment: police are using batons.

"I picked up a docker out of the dirt of the road into which he had been hammered by police. I witnessed this incident from the start: the docker, another of the McNamaras, just would not run: he was sulky, grudging, but that was all. He was struck with a baton: I saw a policeman box him, another kicked him, kicked him heavily. A man in a rain-coat - I was told he was a police officer - was in the group that hammered the man. I got the man from the police and I drove him into Limerick: his face was bleeding, his clothes were a mess. But the man was quite gentle: he just wouldn't run from the police. I saw a few other incidents that were shameful to the police, and in any case the man in the rain-coat was there: policemen seem to think that the presence of an officer demands roughness from them: they reminded me of a buck-navvy gaffer when the travelling ganger appears. I saw incidents where guards were considerate".

The curtain of darkness brought an end to the baton charging and stone throwing for one night. In all 17 boats and 10 nets were seized; 10 boats escaped. Forty-eight names were taken. The confiscated nets and boats were put in a military lorry and brought to Sarsfield Barracks. During the night a party of military patrolled the banks of the tail-race.

Wednesday brought a flurry of activity at national level. The Minister for Lands and Fisheries, representatives of the Department of Industry and Commerce and local politicians met in Dublin to discuss the situation in an attempt to take some heat



The Lax Weir.

out of it. In the meantime the fishermen regrouped their depleted forces and prepared for that night's foray.

At 10.00 p.m. ten boats entered the tail-race. A huge crowd turned up to watch, even though the military were on duty. The boats were allowed to enter the tail-race but once there the bailiffs closed in. Shots rang out as the fishermen resisted. Pandemonium broke out on the banks once more as people stampeded. The military on duty with fixed bayonets ordered people back to a certain distance. By 3.00 a.m. all ten boats were in the possession of the authorities.

On Thursday, it was rumoured that the fishermen were building rafts. Denis Hayes, a fishmonger from Roche's Street, Limerick, acting as intermediary for the fishermen, confirmed that the rumour was true. But he said that he would not be supplying them with nets because of the danger of a drowning tragedy. He also announced that the men would not be marching to the Employment Exchange that day to demand unemployment benefit on the grounds that they could not now earn their livelihood; it was decided instead to wait the arrival of the local T.D.s from Dublin where they had been negotiating with the Minister for Lands and Fisheries.

Friday night saw the fishermen's final protest at the tail-race. Four men arrived with one-and-a-half-boats! The two men in the stern of the derelict craft were soon swamped; the other boat and net were confiscated. Again a huge crowd attended.

While these events were taking place on the river, a meeting of Limerick Corporation was unanimously adopting a resolution protesting against the naked militarism, reminiscent of the Black-and-Tans, carried out on the tail-race during the week. The excesses of the military and garda force also came in for condemnation at a Labour Party meeting.

At any rate, as far as the fishermen were concerned the Battle of the Tail-Race was over but their campaign continued.

On Saturday, the full group of fishermen attended a meeting in St. Mary's Hall. Limerick Trades Council and the Labour Party were also represented. Deputies D. Bourke and J. Reidy reported on their negotiations with the Minister for Lands and Fisheries and said that the Minister proposed to close down the turbines during weekends with a view to releasing fish from the tail-race and that he would be introducing a Bill in the Dail dealing with Shannon Fisheries during the autumn session. The fishermen met in closed session later in the evening and rejec-

ted the Minister's proposal. They decided that since they were not allowed to fish at weekends anyway closing down the turbines then would be of little use to them.

On the following Monday, July 18, the fishermen had their boats and nets returned to them. Months later charges against the fishermen of illegal fishing were dropped.

In spite of pressure from the fishermen, from Limerick and Clare T.D.s, from various bodies in the United States and in spite of the Government's awareness of the need for legislation, fisheries could not find a place on the cluttered legislative programme of the Dail until late 1934. Sean Lemass, Minister for Industry and Commerce, introducing the Bill clearly indicated to the Abbey fishermen that their battle had been lost. He emphatically reiterated McGilligan's principle that fishing interests would not be allowed to predominate against the greater interests of power production.

The debate itself was surprisingly low-keyed considering the turbulent times in fisheries during the previous few years. Limerick and Clare T.D.s put Lemass under a certain amount of pressure but he was not prepared to concede ground: "The position is that it is almost impossible to contemplate the adoption of any scheme that does not include acquisition of the various fishing rights of the Abbey fishermen. Are we to abandon the whole idea of trying to organise and develop the resources of the Shannon fisheries because of the trouble of acquiring the interests of that group? Are we to throw away what may prove to be a very valuable national asset because it happens to be politically inconvenient?" He was adamant: the ESB would be taking over control and management of fisheries on the Shannon and adequate compensation would be paid to interest groups. He argued: "I think the position of the Abbey net fishermen will be safeguarded in this sense, that they will be rewarded fair compensation not merely for the acquisition of their property, but also for the fact that the right to fish with nets is being terminated. There will be no safeguard in the sense that they will be allowed to continue to fish after the operations of the Shannon Fisheries Act, as they fished in the past". In the final stages of the Bill he added: "The Abbey fishermen ... are a community of people who have exercised their right of fishing in the Shannon over a long number of years, and merely to give the present members of that community the present value of their fisheries would be inequitable.

Consequently it is proposed to supplement the compensation by another sum to be determined by the arbitrator, a sum which will take into account again the fact that the members of that community are losing their means of livelihood, and that it will not be practicable for them to transfer themselves to some other river and there exercise their skill as fishermen".

The Bill passed all its stages by February 1935 when it became Law.

But it was not until four years later after numerous sittings of a public inquiry, court litigations, an amendment to the Shannon Fisheries Act, and considerable personal and family hardship that the final phases of compensation were paid to the fishermen. It was ten years since they had set out on their campaign to save their industry. They had lost, but in taking on successive governments, the army and police they succeeded in creating their own history. Only a few Abbey fisherman now survive but their history underscores the old lesson that per-

sonal need still bows to the workings of the market.

REFERENCES

Coogan, T.P. : **Ireland Since The Rising**, London, 1966. Dail Debates, 1925 - 1937.

Limerick Leader, 1926 - 1939.

An Phoblacht, 1932 - 1933.

W. Lysaght, **The Abbey Fishermen**, Limerick.

The Watchword, 1932.

Herbert, Robert : **The Lax Weir and Fisheries Stent of Limerick**,

North Munster Antiquarian Journal, Vol. 5, Nos 2 & 3, 1946-47.

Murphy, J.A.: **Ireland in the Twentieth Century**, Dublin 1975.

Lyons, F.S.L.: **Ireland since the Famine**, Suffolk 1979.

Here is the list of Abbey fishermen, their remarkable nicknames, their addresses and ages, and the amounts of compensation paid to each of them in 1938.

NO:	NICKNAMES	ADDRESS	AGE	COMPENSATION		
				£	s.	d.
1. Patrick Clancy	1. Netter	2, Sheep Street	71	749	6	4
2. Michael Clancy	2. —	7, Nicholas Street	63	894	9	0
3. John Clancy	3. Gakes	10, Nolan's Cottages	61	875	4	8
4. John Clancy	4. Sugans	Fish Lane	59	885	0	4
5. James Clancy	5. Dick	3, Brown's Lane, Edward St.	50	761	14	4
6. John Clancy	6. Diddles	1, Glue Yard Lane	31	798	9	4
7. Gerald Clancy	7. Riley	Ivy Cottages, King's Island	31	700	9	4
8. Patrick J. Clancy	8. Poppy	59, Mungret Street	24	585	3	4
9. Thomas Clancy	9. Tawdy	1, Robert Street	24	637	3	4
10. James Clancy	10. Bud or The Yank	3, Brown's Lane, Edward St.	23	507	19	0
11. John Clancy	11. Mickey Pick	3, Browne's Lane, Edward St.	22	482	14	8
12. Michael Clancy Jnr.	12. —	1, Glue Yard Lane	27	162	0	0
13. John Clancy	13. Cauly	43, Upper Clare Street	41	472	0	0
14. Joseph Clancy	14. Buckets	Athlunkard Street	31	388	0	0
15. Martin Clancy	15. Young Martin	Athlunkard Street	71	692	0	0
16. Thomas Hayes	16. Hackney	4, River Lane	70	797	2	0
17. Robert Hayes	17. Napeoleon	Campbell's Bow, Broad St.	66	935	13	4
18. Martin Hayes	18. Rab	Athlunkard Street	64	1,000	9	0
19. John Hayes Snr.	19. Bone	6, New Rd. Pennywell	58	347	16	0
20. Patrick Hayes	20. Sunlight	24, Broad Street	51	626	14	4
21. Michael Hayes	21. Lully	5, Francis Abbey	47	769	12	8
22. Patrick Hayes	22. Randy	Island Field	44	769	12	8
23. Thomas Hayes	23. Bantrum	Island Field	35	724	2	4
24. Christy Hayes	24. Susi or Sonny	2, Watergate	31	635	9	4
25. Christy Hayes	25. Rialto	2, Cornmarket Row	31	667	9	4
26. Michael Hayes	26. Starry	21, Mungret Street	26	546	12	0
27. John Hayes Jnr.	27. O.K.	6, New Rd., Pennywell	26	529	12	0
28. Patrick McNamara	28. Todsie	3, Sheep Street	64	1,000	9	0
29. Peter McNamara	29. Smuts or Iron Man	Meat Market Lane	60	974	0	2
30. Patrick J. McNamara	30. Tons of Money	Sir Harry's Mall	46	769	1	3
31. Patrick McNamara	31. Balla	2, Glue Yard Lane	30	513	19	7
32. Peter McNamara	32. Boar	3, Fish Lane	37	878	10	1
33. Robert McNamara	33. Dutch	2, Creagh Lane	37	817	10	1
34. Aug. McNamara	34. Rabbit	3, Meat Market Lane	36	787	6	7
35. James McNamara	35. Elbows	3, Sheep Street	35	976	2	3
36. John McNamara	36. Munchin	O'Halloran's Lane, Thomondgate	33	737	17	11
37. Joseph McNamara	37. Beaver	9, Fish Lane	30	448	4	11
38. Aug. McNamara	38. The Music Man	3, Sheet St.	26	648	11	11
39. Peter McNamara	39. Peerie	2, Meat Market Lane	25	488	7	7
40. Joseph McNamara	40. Young Todsie	3, Sheep Street	24	173	0	0
41. Michael Shanny	41. Old Mike	Lower Park	73	738	10	7
42. Patrick Shanny	42. Vinegar	Island Field	65	819	13	3
43. John (Sean) Shanny	43. —	Lower Park	55	1,040	7	3
44. Patrick Shanny	44. Der	Lower Park	53	1,058	2	11
45. John Shanny	45. Brass Band	Lower Park	54	988	2	11
46. Michael Shanny	46. Young Buckshoes	Lower Park	50	873	14	3
47. Patrick F. Shanny	47. Feeney	Lower Park	42	788	8	3
48. Patrick Shanny	48. Pat the Thatcher	Lower Park	41	823	3	11
49. James Shanny	49. Jones	Lower Park	35	787	2	3
50. John Shanny	50. Tucker	Lower Park	31	733	9	3
51. Michael Shanny	51. Young Mike	Lower Park	27	569	16	3
52. Michael Shanny	52. Shirter	Lower Park	26	512	11	11
53. Patrick Shanny	53. Woods	Lower Park	24	498	3	3
54. Joseph Shanny	54. Young Joe	Lower Park	24	498	3	3
55. James Shanny	55. Forty	Lower Park	45	718	0	0