

ST. JOHN'S GATE

by Kevin Hannan

Cathedral Place, now a busy thoroughfare, was quiet enough before the coming of the bacon factories and the markets. That part between St. John's Cathedral and Smyth's Row was originally named St. Nicholas Street, and that part extending to Mulgrave Street, Ramper's Road. The whole street was afterwards named Chapel Street, and after the building of the Cathedral it came into its present title - Cathedral Place.

After the corn market had been removed from its old site at Mungret Gate and set up in the fine open space at the west side of the Cathedral, the whole area smelt of new mown hay all the year round. This was much appreciated by the local people, who were thus enabled to tolerate the less prepossessing odours from the pig market a little further up the street.

These markets have long ceased operations, but there are many who remember the hay carts, which were an unforgettable feature of the place. Only the heads of the poor, overburdened beasts could be seen as they drew the heavy and cumbersome loads long distances to the market. Straw was also brought in and sold in the same manner.

The corn trade had died shortly after the transfer of the markets to Cathedral Place. This change was brought about by the closure of the rural water mills and the setting up of the roller mills in Limerick.

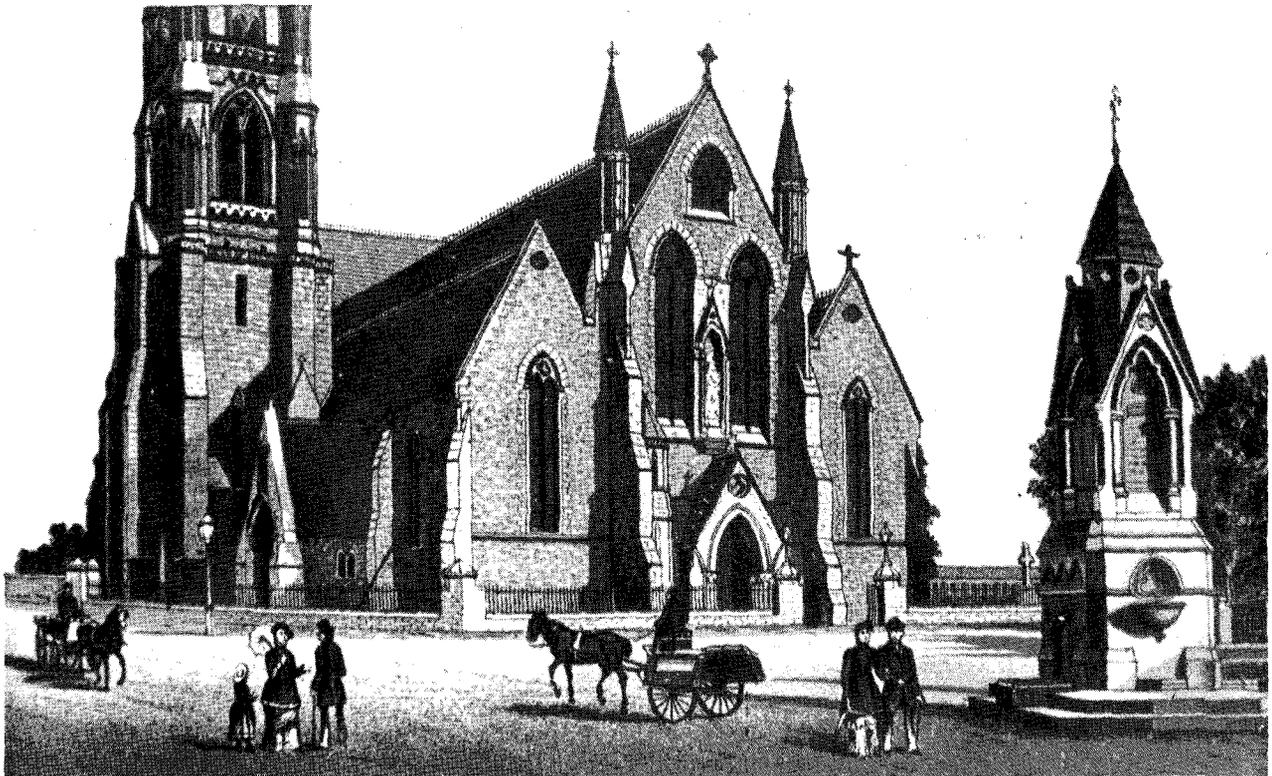
Hay and straw were purchased in great quantities by the hundreds of horse and donkey owners in and about the city, and also by certain of the poorer classes who could afford no better than straw bedding. A number of "Hay and Straw" stores served as retail outlets.

The adjoining butter market was also a busy and colourful place. Butter was sold in the "lump", or in firkins - small wooden hooped casks - and was brought to town on carts of ever description from the surrounding counties. It was judged by taste and consistency of colour, and the numerous cow hairs, and other flotsam that often showed up against the bright background were accepted as if the adulteration was unavoidable.

A Mrs. Bourke, who kept a public house opposite the presbytery gate (now O'Mara's), was known as "Taste Me Butter", from her custom of inviting prospective buyers to sample her wares. In those days butter was not of a uniform standard quality, but varied greatly according to the expertise of the market.

On the roadside outside this market stood Molly Gleeson's pump, a celebrated meeting place for the people of the district before the fountain was erected in the Cathedral square. There were many such pumps around the parish, some of which survived up to a few years ago. The one at Black Boy Pike was in constant use up to the 'fifties.

A carnival atmosphere pervaded the adjoining pig market on market days. On arrival, horses and donkeys were untackled and allowed to rest after their long journeys; while the owners stood by their creels until the grunting and squealing occupants found new owners. Groups of schoolboys, on their way home from the nearby Sexton Street Christian Brothers' school, were often to be seen enjoying the lively jargon of the buyers and sellers, as they excitedly waited for the dramatic clinching of the bargain with the traditional spit and slap on the palm.



An 1880s view of the Cathedral and Fountain.

The local professional pig buyers had little time for this ancient Celtic bargaining system, and usually enjoyed the benefits of a buyer's market. They were a small but relatively comfortably fraternity who merely acted as middle-men between producer and bacon factory. They were always deemed respectable, if for no other reason than the obviously lucrative nature of their avocation, which also excited the envy of those who had to work hard for a bare existence. It can be said, too, that they were the special envy of some of the local middle classes - school teachers, bank clerks etc. - whose educational qualifications were high but whose earnings fell far short of the pig buyers.

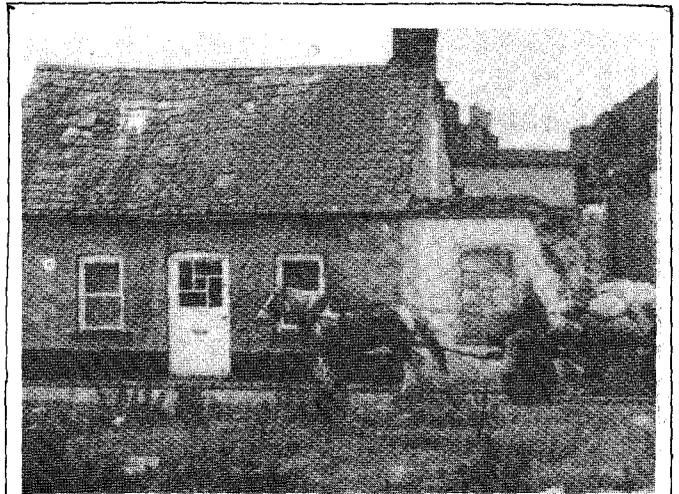
On the whole they were decent respectable fellows, though the independence and arrogance of some of their members is still highlighted in the course of conversations about "old times". Who has not heard the story of the pig buyer who demanded that the wheels be taken from a farmer's cart so that the animals in the creel could be more easily examined?

Alas! the pig buyers have gone the way of the coopers and the sandmen, and the pigs themselves are rarely seen on the "crubeen".

Close to the markets, on the Cathedral side, stands the Sarsfield memorial, lately freed from the foliage of the horse chestnut trees that surrounded it. The story of this magnificent statue goes back to the 1830s when the Sarsfield Memorial Committee was established. This body met from time to time, with the very best of intentions, over a period of more than forty years, before the fruits of their lubberly labours produced our finest statue, and at the same time stirred up a political cauldron that resulted in the refusal of the Town Council to grant permission for the erection of the memorial in any of the sites suggested by the committee - by this time augmented by a number of councillors. After deliberations lasting more than a year and a half, a site in Upper Mallow Street, near the Park Gate, was suggested. Other sites mentioned were: O'Connell Street, near the Bank of Ireland, Bank Place and the North Strand. However, a resolution was passed by the Corporation selecting the Bank Place site.

Ambrose Hall, the veteran Town Councillor, made a strong objection to "... placing so fine a statue, intended to last for all time, in this failing locality in which there will not be a house standing twenty years hence, and which meantime exhibits a melancholy picture, and is otherwise objectionable on account of its nameless associations". It was finally decided to seek a suitable location outside the control and jurisdiction of the Corporation, and shortly afterwards the present site in the Cathedral grounds was offered to the committee and gratefully accepted. For nearly a hundred years it has remained in semi-obscurity, unknown to thousands of visitors to the city - and not a few citizens. When one considers that the memorial was placed in its present position because no more suitable site was available at the time, and that we now have a City Council untrammelled by affiliations that would militate against a move, the gallant general's statue should now be taken out of the shadows and set up in St. John's Square, where it could be seen by visitors and locals.

Of Sarsfield himself only the glory is remembered, but the sad aftermath of his flight to France, his tragic death, and the premature dissolution of his family is rarely touched upon. There are many who may not be aware that his last resting place is unknown; this may be accounted for by the strange practice which obtained on the continent of leasing graves. It is probable that the remains were taken up after the lease had expired and reinterred in the "Fosse Commune", or common pit, there being no one to renew the lease. Head stones were also removed on such occasions.



An old John's Gate house.

Sarsfield's death in the prime of life was a melancholy anticlimax to an outstanding career, and a sad ordeal for his wife and only son who remained at his bedside at Huy, whence he had been brought from the battlefield of Neerwinden, near Lauden, where he had received his fatal wound.

In her delightful little book on Sarsfield Alice Curtayne writes: "In reduced circumstances she and her son lived on near the grave of Patrick Sarsfield as though clinging to the last support of their exile". The young Duke of Berwick visited the mourners on a number of occasions and married the widow in 1695. She died two years later.

Berwick, who was the illegitimate son of James II by Arrabella Churchill, had his step-son commissioned in the Spanish army, where the courage of the young Sarsfield was rewarded with the "Collar of the Golden Fleece". He afterwards saw service in the French army, and returned to Ireland in 1715 in the hope of raising an army. It was a hopeless escapade and, with a price of £1000 on his head, he was lucky to escape to France. He died at St. Omar in the same year, the last of his race.

Perhaps the more prominent exhibition of the statue - Lawlor's masterpiece - may foster a revival of interest in our greatest folk hero.

The entrance to Garryowen Road marks the site of John's Gate, the most important portal in the old city fortifications. This was the main approach to the city and the letting of the tolls here commanded the highest price of all the main gates. It was here that Henry Ireton and de Ginkle were handed the keys of the city, and many other notable characters of our history, including Rinuccini and Edward Bruce also entered here.

Close to this gate stood the Citadel, the guard house and gates of which can still be seen in the grounds of St. John's Hospital. On the eastern side of the guard house stood St. John's tower, the magazine containing the ammunition for the defence of the Irishtown. Unfortunately this was demolished in the 1830s to make way for an extension of the hospital.

At the Pennywell end of the hospital enclosure stands the pitiful remains of the Devil's Battery, which once was a strong tower, situated where the wall turned at a right angle towards East Watergate. The fortifications here bore the brunt of the fierce cannonade from the batteries set up on the heights of Singland. The main breach was made at a spot now marked by the elevator attached to the hospital.

Close to the breach at the eastern side was situated the famous Black Battery, an underground magazine that exploded during the assault on the breach, killing a number of the crack Brandenburg Regiment. It is not known if the

explosion was accidental or otherwise.

The remains of these battered fortifications stand as a reminder of that vital period in the history of our city when the might of the Williamite army was held at bay outside the walls of Garryowen.

St. John's Hospital was founded in 1780, in the Citadel guard house, by Lady Lucy Hartstonge, wife of Sir Henry Hartstonge. This remarkable woman, who was also sister of Edmond Sexton Pery, was stirred by a desire to assist the fever-stricken inhabitants of the festering lanes of the city. At this time the word "hospital" meant nothing to most people. Physical injuries and disease were treated, after some fashion or other, in the homes of the patients. Surgery, as we know it to-day, was unknown, though Dr. Sylvester O'Halloran was making a brave bid to look into the future in his hospital in St. Francis' Abbey, which was founded fifteen years before.

After a short time provision was made for the treatment of venereal disease in women - a highly prevalent and dreadful malady for which there was no cure. The institution then became known as the "Fever and Lock Hospital".

The nursing sisters of the Little Company of Mary were introduced in 1888, and their exacting standards of efficiency and general administration abilities have made the hospital one of the finest in the region.

Across the wide thoroughfare of the Cathedral square, and in perfect conformity with the storied district stands the Protestant parish church of St. John the Baptist, surrounded by its centuries of graves. The graveyard once extended beyond its present enclosure. It was tucked into its familiar tidy shape in 1693 when the existing wall was laid out. Local residents have seen many graves unearthed in the surrounding thoroughfares during the road-making and cable-laying of the 'thirties.

Up to the late 'forties, when the many yews, oaks, sycamores and hawthorns were cut down, the place was a verdant oasis in the teeming jungle of the Irishtown, and a sanctuary for the feathered songsters who thrilled out their lives over the graves of bishops and priests and the merchant princes of eighteenth and nineteenth century Limerick.

Generations of workers in the square and in the surrounding lanes and streets were once called to their daily labours by the bird chorus from the churchyard.

It is a very quiet place now, save for the odd evening blackbird pouring out its heart from some stony perch. There is no sound from the church. The beautiful organ has been destroyed, and the old familiar bell that never failed to call the worshippers every Sunday morning at 10.15 a.m. was taken away ... to an unknown destination. There are many sleeping here who made much of the history of Limerick. Chief among these must be Sir John Bourke, Baron of Brittas, who lies in a nameless grave.

The story of the life and death of this noble and courageous Norman chief will be told in another issue of the *Journal*, suffice to say that he was tried for high treason for having mass celebrated in the great hall of his castle in Brittas and sentenced to be hanged, drawn and quartered. After sentence, he was offered a free pardon and the return of his property if he renounced his religion. This he refused to do. He was hanged at Farran-croghy, a few hundred yards from John's Gate (The Good Shepherd laundry stands on the very spot where he gave up his life.)

Through the intercession of some of his influential friends, his body was not mutilated in accordance with the savage sentence, but was borne to St. John's churchyard and laid to rest. This event took place in 1607.

Farran-croghy was the common place of execution before and after this hanging. On these dread occasions it was customary for the citizens to assemble on the city wall, which overlooked the place. Father Quin's lane, an



Patrick Sarsfield.

ancient avenue between John Street and the Town Wall gardens, was the main access to this section of wall, and one may well imagine the great crowds choking up its narrow confines at times of executions.

The town wall in this area is well preserved and stretches from the New Road to Old Clare Street. The observer will notice that the wall on the city side is banked up almost to the summit. This strengthening was carried out in the period of respite between the first and second Williamite sieges and demonstrates the enterprise and determination of the garrison during that frantic time. The wall between East Watergate and the Devil's Battery was particularly vulnerable to the cannon on Park Hill (in the area of the present scout hall).

For some time after the general demolition of the walls this section remained standing until the construction of the new road to Pennywell, when about 70 feet of it was cleared away. Parts of Curry Lane and John Street were also swept away in this project, as these thoroughfares ran right up to the hospital grounds.

Pennywell, known in other days as "the Village", was a quaint, old world suburb, tenanted by a people who took great pride in their community and who shared their joys and sorrows as a matter of course.

"The Village" was made up of two rows of thatched mud cabins that stretched from John's Gate to Cloughaun. The building of Clare Street in the 1770s cut it off neatly from the more ancient districts of Park and Singland. The thatching of the roofs gradually gave way to slates, and only a few survived beyond the first few decades of the present century.

During the latter half of the last century many houses on the northern side were acquired by the nuns of the Good Shepherd community and the space was used to enlarge their grounds. Some of the houses on this side were of stone and were built by the Harrold family of Pennywell House.

The families who had lived so close to each other for so many generations were finally scattered in the 'fifties when the present more spacious but less colourful dwellings were erected in the back gardens of the old cabins.