

ST. JOHN'S SQUARE

Limerick was still a fortified city when John Purdon and Edmond Sexton Pery started work on the building of St. John's Square. This was just sixty years after the Treaty, and there were people still alive who had vivid recollections of the horrors of the sieges. Many of the wealthy proprietors who resided in the Square from the beginning owed much of their wealth to the plunder of native properties during that turbulent period in the history of Limerick.

Some authorities tell us that the Square was set out in an open space west of St. John's Church. This was meant to imply that an open space existed there at that time, and that there was nothing to do but build the great stone houses around it. In reality, there was no open space in the Irishtown. The wealthy families who sought spacious and luxurious town houses made sure that there was no congestion, so it is certain that a number of old dwellings were demolished before the foundations of the Square were laid out. But despite this clearance, the aristocratic residents could not avoid the daily sight of the teeming masses of the poor in the warren of lanes all around the backs of the houses. The Square houses were occupied mainly during the winter months. The contrast between the opulence of the few wealthy families and the squalor of the huddled poor was stark and fixed.

Originally the Square was made up of eight houses in perfect symmetrical order. Some time afterwards two additional houses were added, one at each side. Although these were much larger than the others, and had a superior finish in cut stone, they fitted exactly into the original pattern. The houses were afterwards numbered 1 to 5 on each side, that is, the numbers were duplicated and started at the narrow entrance to Gerald Griffin Street.

Even to-day the Square stands as a monument to the genius and enterprise of Pery. It was the forerunner of his great scheme for developing the city into a more modern and open format — an ideal that found full expression in the magnificent streets of New Town Pery.

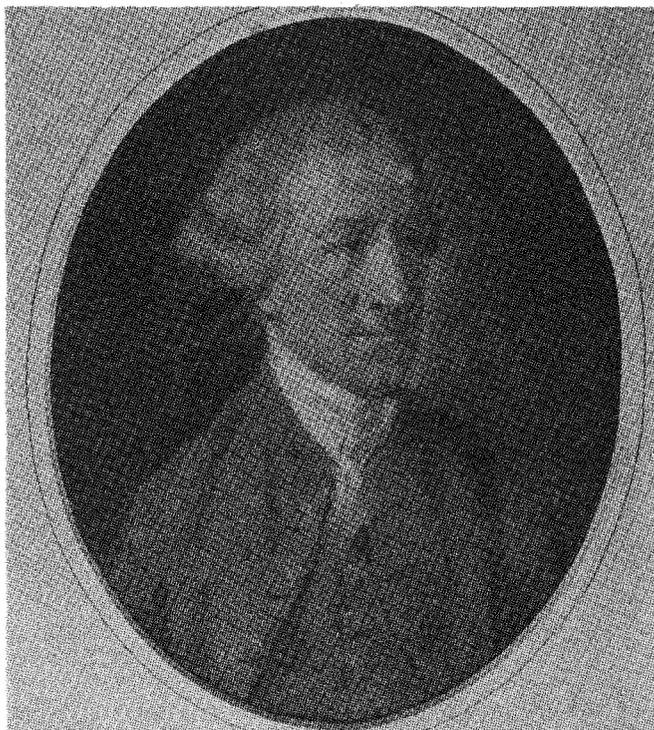
One cannot help feeling that as a town planner Pery was centuries ahead of his time. He gave us the fine thoroughfares that are catering for to-day's chaotic traffic, while in more recent times the Limerick Corporation gave us Farranshane Road, where even the pedestrians must sometimes walk in Indian file.

There can be no doubt that the great expanse of the Square, with its striking contrast with all other areas in the old city, was due to the foresight of Pery who, from the very beginning, appears to have cultivated a remarkable hatred of the narrow and cluttered up thoroughfares of the city.

Pery and Purdon each took a house for themselves in the Square. The others were let out at £32 per annum. Among the early tenants were Vere Hunt from the fairyland of Curraghchase, William Monsell, Tervoe, Rev. William Cecil Pery, Alexander Franklen, Ambrose Wilson, Caherconlish, Dorothea Crump, Catherine Rose and Richard Borough.

It is interesting to note that Dorothea Crump, widow of General Crump, was afterwards married to William Cecil Pery. Pery succeeded his father in the vicarage of St. John's, and later became Bishop of Limerick. He was afterwards created Lord Baron Glentworth of Mallow. Wm. C. Pery was the first to reside in the new Bishop's Palace in Henry Street. He has the unique distinction of being remembered in three of our principal streets —

by Kevin Hannan



A 1790s pastel portrait of Edmond Sexton Pery, by Hugh Douglas Hamilton.

Glentworth Street, Mallow Street, and Cecil Street — surely a record for any town or city in Ireland.

That the owners of beautiful country mansions could leave their exotic gardens and parklands to dwell in the fetid and fever-laden atmosphere of the eighteenth century Irishtown would be hard to explain if one was not aware of the pains that most people will endure to satisfy the demands of human vanity. To own a town house was the "in thing" in those days, and such a circumstance was sufficient to swell one's pride to the first magnitude.

With the development of the new town on the high ground overlooking the Shannon, the residents of the Square became restive, and soon the exodus began from the drab atmosphere of the Irishtown to the more fashionable New Town Pery.

Sam Dixon remained on to start a dyeworks at the rear of his residence, No. 5, on the south side. Standing with one's back to the churchyard gate, his was the end house on the left hand side. Charlie Unthank, son of the famous Joshua Unthank of Mungret Street, was appointed resident manager of this industry, and in due course became the owner. Up to recent years the rear entrance to this house at Brennan's Row, where there was a blacksmith's forge (Paddy O'Neill's), was known as the "Dye House".

Around this period Dr. John Geary, when discussing living conditions (between 1786 and 1792) refers to "the appalling conditions of a dwelling near Miss Tucker's brewery in John's Square". The only house in the square having a dwelling close up to it was No. 5 on the north side (Corcoran's). Miss Tucker's brewery must have occupied the rear of this house. As far as can be ascertained the name of Tucker does not occur in the list of tenants of



St. John's Square, built in 1751.

No. 5 South, which was also close to other dwellings at Chapel Lane (now Canter's Range). Furthermore, it was unlikely that a dye works and a brewery could be accommodated in the same backyard.

A detachment of the garrison took over No. 2 on the south side and built a new wing at the rear and a fine cut stone entrance at Barrack Lane. The military moved out when the new barracks were completed in 1798 (now the Sarsfield Barracks).

No. 3 on the north side (now the men's hostel) became the Church of Ireland rectory for St. John's parish. The magnificent Georgian doorway of this house, together with the lamp standard — a reminder of the days when wealthy householders provided their own street lighting — were additions made, perhaps, by the Church Body. The original doors of these houses were drab and plain, without any form of ornamentation. More than one observer suggested that they were more like back doors than front doors.

The last rector to reside here was Rev. Canon Langbridge, an Englishman of letters, who was well loved by all classes and creeds in the parish — and far outside it. The Rev. Langbridge, who spent most of his life in Limerick, was a man of high literary talents, and was the author of a number of books of short stories and poems. It is regrettable that none of his poetry relates to his adopted city. These long out-of-print works — many of outstanding merit, are mainly lyrics inspired by the plight of the hawkers and street musicians of the London of his day. He collaborated with Sir Martin Harvey in dramatising "A Tale of Two Cities". This remarkable work titled "The Only Way", was loudly acclaimed in literary circles, and enjoyed a widespread popularity for many years. One of his two daughters, Rosamund, was also a gifted writer, and had at least one novel published, but, unfortunately, we know very little about it, except that it was banned by the Limerick Carnegie Library Committee, a circumstance which need not reflect in any way on the author, as the Committee in those years was made up of some diehard puritans.

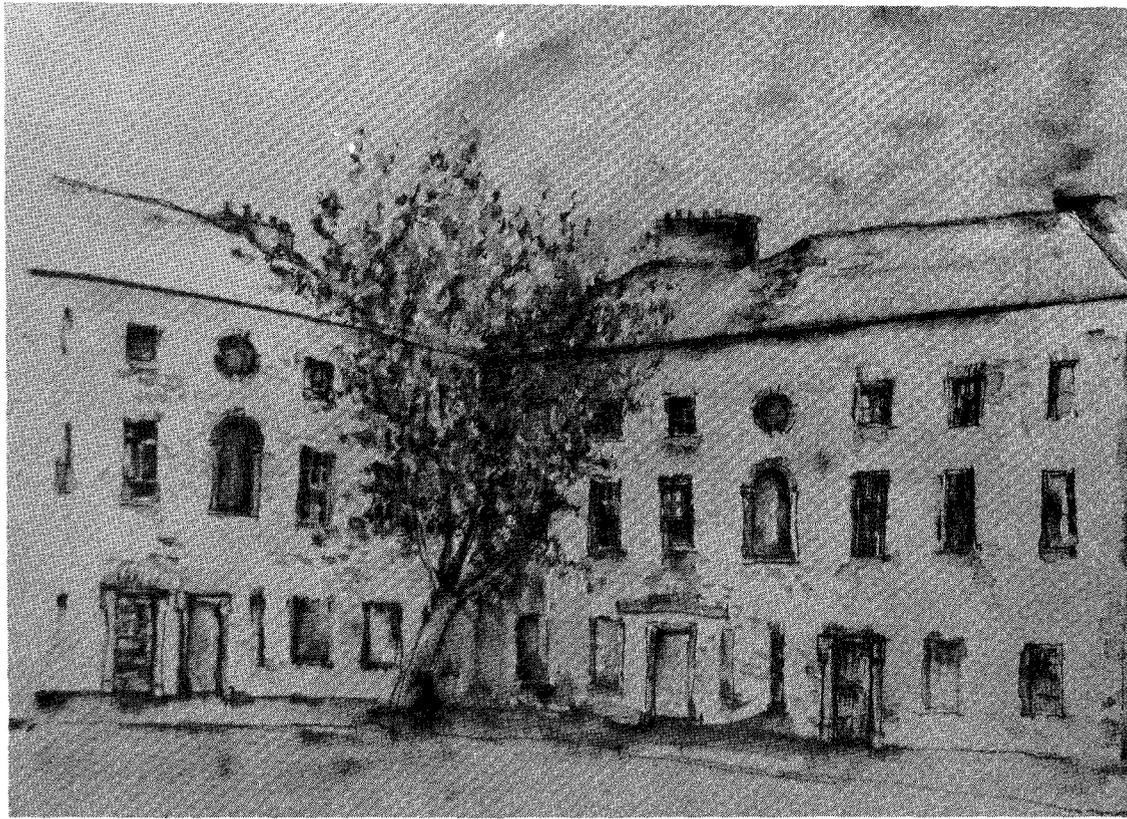
When he first took up residence in the Square the Canon was advised by an old clergyman to take precautions against attack by the savage and superstitious natives. Indeed, his adviser, who apparently had no time for the common people of the parish, suggested the fitting of iron grills on the windows of the rectory.

The Canon, disregarding these overtures, mixed freely with the local people, with whom he became a great favourite. That he was held in the highest regard by all classes was proved during the riots which followed an anti-Home Rule meeting held in the Theatre Royal in October 1912. On that infamous occasion the homes and business premises of many Protestants had their windows and doors smashed. Even the Protestant churches did not escape the fury of the mob. But the Canon in St. John's Square was not forgotten by the people amongst whom he lived. The members of St. John's Temperance Society mounted guard outside the Rectory, and also patrolled the grounds of the churchyard, to insure the protection of the church against sacrilege.

Further proof of the high regard in which he was held was shown when his salary as Church of Ireland chaplain to the Mental Hospital was increased through the influence of the priests of the parish. He died in 1922, and is buried in St. John's churchyard, a few feet from the door of the church.

As the years rolled by, some of the houses were let out to substantial middle class tenants, many of whom sublet to others. In due course the houses on the south side, with the exception of No. 1 and No. 2, became working class tenements, as did No's 1 and 2 on the north side. No. 4 on the north side was a tenement for a time, up to about sixty years ago, when it once again became a private dwelling.

The ground floor and basement of this house, which is now the headquarters of St. John's Catholic Boy Scouts, was occupied by Otto Hazelbeck around the turn of the century. Hazelbeck, a German who had emigrated from Manchester, engaged in the then little-known craft of sausage and pudding making. He was a man of remarkable business acumen and carried on his trade in



A drawing of St. John's Square North by F. O'Brien, 1973.

the cellar.

It was his custom on Friday nights to invite all the heads of households in the upper part of the house to William Wheeler's public house next door (now Corcoran's butcher shop) and buy two drinks for each.

When the local bacon factories began to produce sausages on a large scale Hazelbeck adapted his business to the manufacture of sausage casings. This trade was still being carried on by the family up to recent times.

Up to the end of the 'twenties No. 1 South was owned by St. John's Temperance Society. At that time it moved to the commanding officer's house at the Ordnance Barracks in Mulgrave Street. The last privately owned house on the south side was No. 2 and was owned by John Cross, whose brother Joe carried on a funeral undertaking business at Barrack Lane. The Cross family has always held a high place in the esteem of the citizens, and its members are noted for their honesty and fairness in their dealings with the public.

Those of the houses which had been let as tenements gradually fell into decay and when the tenants were rehoused in the 'fifties and 'sixties, there were six ruined houses left in the Square. The vandals moved in like pirannas and completed the work of destruction. Nothing was left but the shells, there being no market for old stones.

By the early 'seventies the old Square was all but dead. There was still some life on the north side, but for the passer by it was a lonesome place, full of ghosts and sadness, for what evokes our saddest thoughts more than the abandoned habitation of man?

In 1962 Pluinthead O Ceallachau, the then City Architect, made the following recommendations:

(1) In view of the uniqueness and of the intrinsic architectural qualities of St. John's Square, it is con-

sidered well worthy of preservation, both in the interest of Limerick and in the national interest.

- (2) St. John's Square is sufficiently small to be capable of preservation without exorbitant expenditure.
- (3) I recommend that every effort be made to preserve St. John's Square, and that favourable consideration could be given to the reconstruction of six houses in the Square to provide residential accommodation.

These recommendations were not acted upon for more than a decade, and in the meantime building costs had risen considerably. Eventually a private developer tackled the ruins on the south side, while the Corporation began restoration work on No's 1 and 2 on the north side. This was to be Limerick's contribution to European Architectural Heritage Year, and what a worthy one it was.

Happily the restoration of the Square is secure. Four houses on the south side are now in occupation, and the lighted windows during the winter nights make a warm and welcome sight. There is still much work to be done on these houses, but at least they are occupied, and the danger of demolition is past. Work on Nos 1 and 2 North has been completed and the restored buildings have been converted into the City Museum, the Regional Archivist's offices and six occupied flats. The thorough job carried out here has ensured the preservation of the buildings for the next five hundred years.

Soon the traffic that is now thundering through the Square will be canalised from the new road through John Street, Sean Heuston Place into Gerald Griffin Street, Pedestrian traffic only through the flagged Square will further restore some of the pristine splendour of the place. The whole project is a heartening indication that our important links with the past will not be lightly obliterated.