

King John's Castle

In 1172 Henry II of England landed at Waterford and during his sojourn at Cashel received the submission of Donal Mor O'Brien along with that of other Irish princes. It is not surprising that O'Brien should have thus brought infamy upon his name and city for he had previously entered into alliance with Dermot McMurrough. He remained King of Limerick, however, paying only tribute to Henry and swearing fealty. As long as Donal lived, the government of Limerick was not in English hands, but within four years of his death in 1193, the city was accorded its first charter in 1197 by an English King.

King Henry intended to set up a new Kingdom in Ireland with his son Prince John as king. He had got a crown and gold ring with an emerald setting, from the Pope for the coronation. In 1177 A.D. when John was aged seventeen, his father sent him to Ireland to become acquainted with his future kingdom. Unfortunately, he had bad advisers and he pleased neither the Irish Chiefs nor the Norman Barons. Henry gave up the idea of making John King of Ireland, when Geoffrey, the second of his three sons, died. Soon after this Henry died, and Richard, his

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eldest son, became King. John got a charter for Limerick from King Richard in 1197 A.D.

This charter gave great privileges to the citizens - especially the wealthy ones. It empowered them to have a corporation and to elect a mayor and bailiffs. There is no record of the building of the Walls of Limerick, but they were in existence at this period, for John made grants to his friends within and without the walls.

Richard died after a short reign and John succeeded him as King. In 1210 A.D. he came to Ireland a second time, now as King. At Limerick he built the magnificent castle which bears his name - one of the noblest buildings in the country, until the local Corporation disfigured its old countenance as the direct result of converting it into a housing scheme!

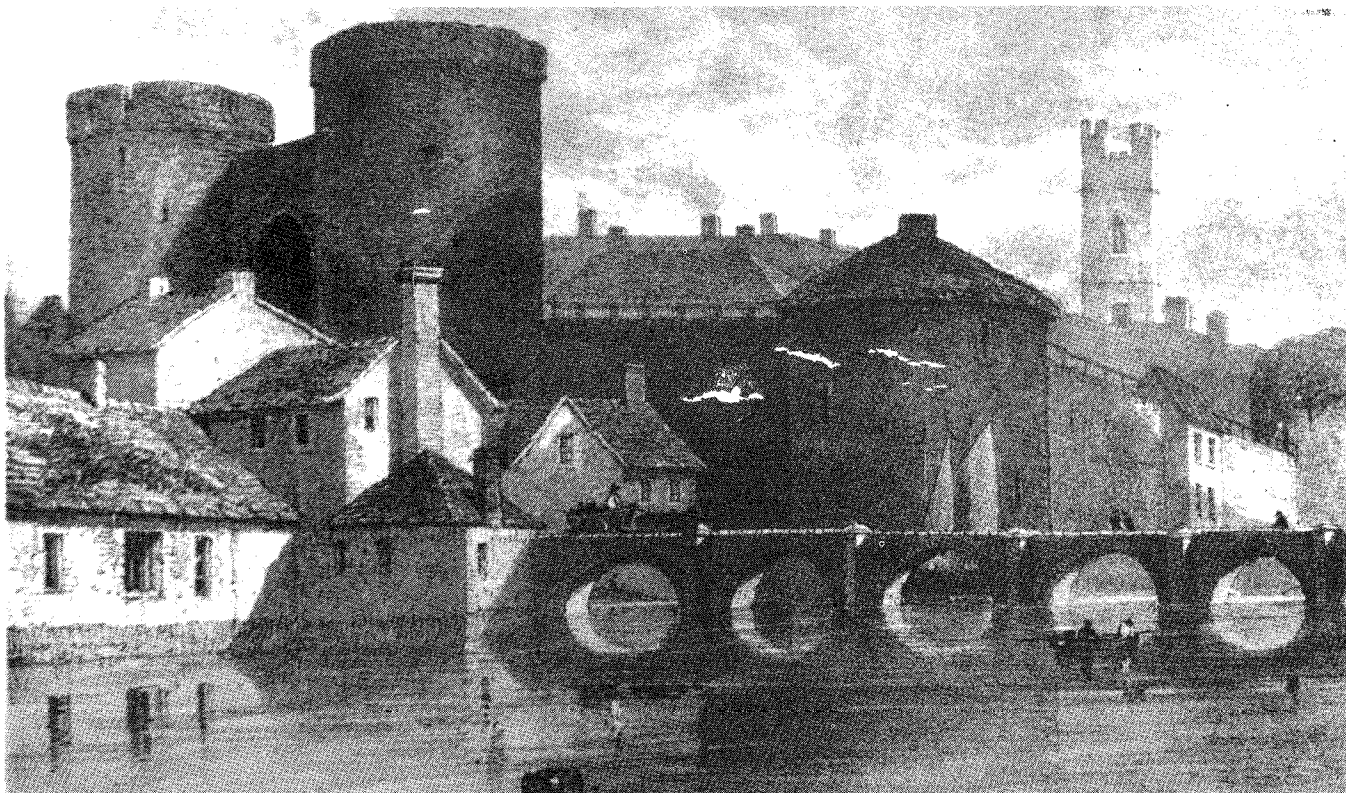
Beside the castle, he built Thomond

Bridge with its fourteen arches and draw-bridge, at a cost of £30, plus slave labour, and which stood the test for more than 600 years, until 1839, when the present seven-arch cut-stone bridge replaced it.

King John's Castle is a remarkably striking specimen of mediaeval architecture. It was intended as a citadel and to dominate the ford or passage which existed at this point. The wars and storms of the centuries seem to have done it little damage, and it is still as sturdy looking as when first erected, not withstanding the hand of the municipal vandal.

For the benefit of present-day students of history, it might be worth mentioning that a little more than a century after the death of King John in 1216, Edward Bruce occupied the city, presiding in the castle in semi-royal state for several months. Also, Captain William Penn of the Mayflower saga, had a son born to him in the castle; whilst John Wesley preached within its precincts.

The several patches of brickwork in the walls, seen from Thomond Bridge, show the extent of the damage done by Ginkel's guns during the 1691 siege.



An early nineteenth century drawing of old Thomond Bridge and King John Castle by James D. Harding.