

THE WINDMILL

and district

by Jack O'Sullivan



It seems strange that in Limerick generally so little is known about the Windmill and district and there is practically no reference to it in local histories, and so we can only guess as to the beginning of the settlement. It may have started with a few fishermen's houses. In later years a signalling station was erected on a limestone cliff somewhere about the site of the harbour cattle pens. Vessels had to anchor in the pool, and wait a signal from the tower that a boat was available at the old quays berth further up. Boatmen and traders would naturally begin to take up abode in the district to be close up to the ships and shipping. Gradually the place was built there by Launcelot Hill. It was erected on a site almost directly opposite the present Little O'Curry Street (formerly Little Frederick Street). It was a large, tall, round, stone building, pierced

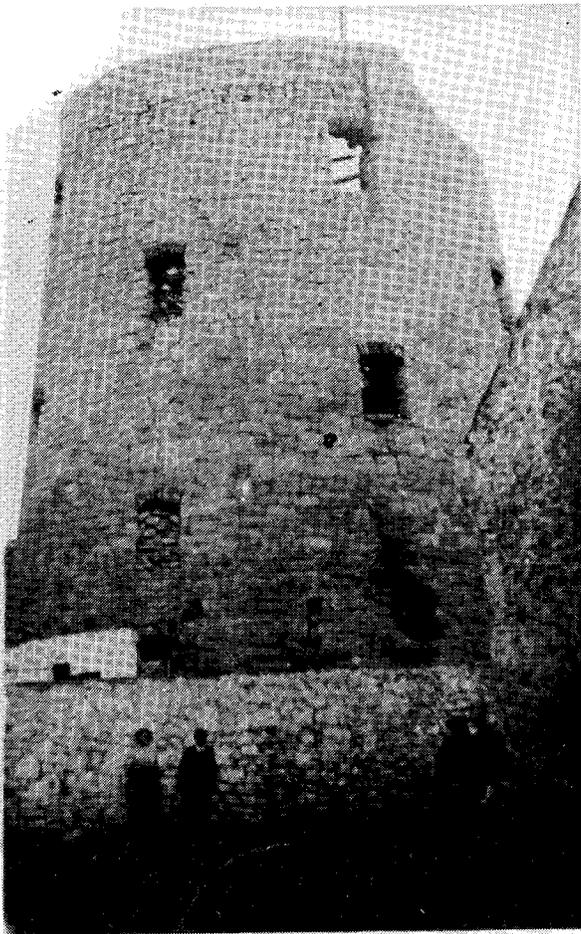
by windows, and according to the older people could be seen from any part of the city.

The windmill does not seem to have had a very long active existence as a fire occurred in it on January 29th, 1803. This fire was probably not very serious, and the mill must have worked afterwards, as we find that it was again burnt down on November 15th, 1813. In an account of the last fire we read that "The machinery was all in motion, though on fire, a brisk gale of wind blowing, the night dark, and the spectacle awfully and sublimely grand". The Globe Insurance lost by this fire £1,339 19s. 5d., which was paid on February 10th, 1815, to Laurence Durack. According to local tradition the windmill never worked afterwards and was finally demolished completely in 1915-1916 and the stones removed as ballast. While on the site I met Mr Browne who had a smith's shop there, and he told me his wife's grandmother had worked in the mill as a girl and it was a paper mill. He then brought me to the rear of the site (I was amazed at its height from the Dock Road and Mount Kennett) and he pointed towards the foot of Mount Kennett and said: "My grandfather told me that is where the Spanish ships unloaded their barrels of wine". I was also fortunate in obtaining from this man an old sketch of the Windmill which had been purchased by his wife in a second-hand shop down town, about thirty years ago.

Before leaving the question of the windmill, while it is known that there was one on the site of Mr. Collier's house at Greenpark, I wonder is there anything left to show the whereabouts on the Ennis Road, demolished in 1811?

What is known as Windmill Street ran from Henry Street down to the Dock Road, the end being very steep and necessitating a flight of steps to reach the road. Before the erection of the quays, a shipyard, owned and run by a man named Steen, was somewhere on the town side of these steps. Little Frederick Street and Cogan Street are on the left-hand side of Windmill Street, and run on to Frederick Street (Frederick streets large and little, are now O'Curry streets). All the land on this side belonged to a Mr. Cogan, a Liverpool merchant who imported sugar in barrels. The street is called after him, and he built some fine stone houses there. To the river side of Cogan Street, and in a passage to the Dock Road, are some houses, one rebuilt by the late Mr. J. Russell, of the Shannon Foundry.

There is still among the oldest people in the Windmill the belief that previous to Russell's house the site was occupied by either a hospital or quarantine station, which was burned down; opposite is the ruin of what was evidently a fine spacious house. The old people still describe it as "a fine big house with spacious rooms and cellars underneath". Two storeys were taken off the original house, and later it was used for some time as a tenement and then left derelict. It had the reputation of being haunted. No one has any idea who built or owned it. At the entrance to Windmill Street proper on the right



The windmill from which the district took its name.

was a large flour store of John Russell and Sons, later used as a paper store by Guys. The windmill was on this side and the rest of the buildings were dwelling houses and business premises. The houses on the left side were more pretentious with fine rooms. The first, a three-storey house, had one strange peculiarity - all the windows were at the back; it also had a fine spacious back garden and a carriage gate at the side. Local tradition says that the man who lived there was a Sunday man, hence the windows at the back, and he could only be seen on Sundays, when he could not be arrested for debt. It is also said that the last man to attend Mungret Protestant Church lived in that house and he went out by carriage every Sunday.

Next came four nice houses known as Hogan's Terrace. These had well-kept front gardens, coped stone wall and railings in front. In one of these houses a family named McSweeney lived. They had a chandler's business in William Street, and emigrated to Liverpool, where one of them became the leading shipowner of his time. To get some picture of the Windmill before the building of the quays, we must remember that high water mark was somewhere up O'Curry Street, the Windmill, and Mount Kennett, and vessels floated up at high water. At that time, many of them came in ballast and threw out the ballast, which was mostly chalk, and even to-day you have not to dig very far to find this chalk in a line from the Limerick S.S. Co. offices out to Spaight's yard.

Ships were thus right up against the door steps of the Windmill, and it is only natural that practically all its inhabitants were in some way connected with ships and the sea. There were, of course, very many sailors, but we had also captains, pilots, sailmakers, ship carpenters, interpreters, agents, chandlers, lodging-house keepers and shoemakers, who specialised in seaman's boots, and dealers of all kinds. In fact, it was said at the time, that anything and everything ships and sailors needed could be supplied from the Windmill. One woman made oilskin coats and hats; another knitted and sold thousands of socks; another made and repaired nets. In addition, there was a school of navigation in the house at the corner of Little Frederick Street and Frederick Street; it was run by a Mr. Murray.

Other sides of life were not neglected and a Mrs. O'Sullivan ran a day school for young children and a night school for the elders. A kind of hedge school was also run during the holidays. This was a mixed school.

A widow named Mrs. Gates (her husband had been a captain; I came across his name in an old directory) had a laundry in Little Frederick Street, where she employed some girls. A well known maker of Limerick lace lived also in the district, and did a good business with visiting captains and crews. There was a dancing master who taught step and ballroom dancing (he also taught at Laurel Hill), and a famous concertina player. The Howards had a sail-making loft in Little O'Curry Street, and a yard in O'Curry Street. In this was a flag pole, on top of which, as a weather vane, was a yacht in full sail.

A butcher visited the Windmill on regular days, and set up his table. Fishermen also came to sell their catch, and country people from Mungret came with their produce. Some of the prices will be remembered by the older Windmill people: Steak and chops, 7d. and 8d. per lb.; leg of mutton, 8d. per lb.; shank beef, 2d. per lb.; veal 1/- per hind quarter; large ling or cod, 1/- per fish; plaice, 6d. per doz.; mackerel, 1d. and 3d.; butter, 6d. per lb.; eggs, 5d. and 6d. per doz.; potatoes, 3d. per stone; chickens 10d. a pair.

The Windmill was really a self-contained village, and I think it explains the lack of interest shown by the rest of the city in the everyday life of the district.

I heard a man say many years ago, "they are queer people in the Windmill; look at some of these names". All

the strange names were inevitable in such a place. Foreign, British and Scotch captains and sailors spent a lot of time in the district. Some of them settled down there, or married Windmill girls, and hence such names as Genoux, Ketlabug, Roberts, Sciascia, Hennigar, Shepherd, Alta, Shroeder, Goerin, Gibb-Gettings, Neilson, Anderson and De Ferrar. It is no wonder that when someone asked what flags should be hung out there during some celebration a wag replied, "The flags of all nations". Some of the owners of these names, besides being sailors, also acted as interpreters, and were often needed at that time.

It is interesting to remark here that some of the old people claim that the Windmill girls were the first to dance the waltz, having been taught by German and Austrian sailors. This is possibly true, as we know that it was frowned on by "the best people" for a long time.

Ships, all wooden of course, at the time, had to be overhauled and repaired in the Dry Docks here. I have heard of complete overhauls - "Northbrook" arrived dismasted and jury rigged; the 'Elliott', very badly storm damaged, and the 'Alconcagua', which had been on fire". These were busy times for the ship carpenters - McInerneys, Howletts, Enrights and others - and I remember as a boy seeing repairs being carried out to ships in the Dry Dock. George Howlett, a ship carpenter, was a well-known character round the Docks and district. He lived in Windmill Street. His father, Michael Howlett had been a shipwright before him. George was a friend of Sir Thomas Myles, who was interested in yachting, and a good story is still told about them.

Crews at the time were paid off here, and either went away or stayed in the Windmill lodging houses until another berth turned up. One sailor left stranded and hard up was a big negro. Taking pity on him, George gave him a job on a ship he was repairing in the Dry Dock. During his work, he fell from the staging and injured his back. He was laid up for some time, and showing no signs of improvement. George suggested he should go up to Dublin to see Sir Thomas Myles, who seems to have had a special grudge for Windmill people, to whom he was always "Tom Myles". George told the negro to say he was a friend of his. The black man duly arrived in Dublin and when Sir Thomas came to the hospital and asked for the Limerick man, he naturally must have felt a bit surprised and, asking him was he George Howlett's friend, the man replied: "a cousin," to which Sir Thomas answered: "I know George had a lot of cousins, but I never knew he had a black one, but I suppose he was reared on a white milk bottle, and you on an ink bottle". I heard this story from a few sources.

Sailmakers and pilots also had busy days and they were pretty well occupied all the time. Practically all of them lived in the district. In the days of the direct sailing by Spaight's McDonnell's and Harvey's boats to America, they were mostly manned by Windmill men, and the night before departure was "a live wake". Dancing went on all night and everyone gathered on the quays in the morning to wish them God speed. These vessels usually left in the fall of the year, and returned the next fall. Their return was, of course, also a time of jubilation, after the long hazardous voyages. For some reason, the crews first went to Kennedy's store (later Wickham's shop, in Newenham Street) the kit bags left piled outside. These gave notice to passers-by of the men's arrival, and elaborate preparations were made in Windmill for the sailors' homecoming. The crews, meanwhile, made up for their long separation from Guinness.

There were some local ballads about these ships. Unfortunately none have been preserved. I remember just the last line of one which I had heard from my grandfather: "The Windmill boys are coming in the General O'Neill". In trying to find out about this ballad, I



Some of the Windmill houses, December, 1983.

got from Mr. Jack Hanrahan two lines of what was evidently a parody, and went as follows:

"No more shall people dread
Black eyes or broken head,

For the rowdy boys are gone in the 'General O'Neill'".

He also contributed another line worth recording and which referred to a local ship leaving the port: "manned by Limerick men, Askeaton boys, and two from Glin". Returning crews always brought presents home, and my grandfather told me that he saw the crew returning from one particular voyage, and each man had a new galvanized bucket and a twig brush, evidently novelties at the time.

Emigrant vessels also left the quays, and some of the emigrants stayed in the Windmill while waiting for their ship. Some years ago I received from an old Limerick man in New York a cutting from an American paper, showing a brig, "The Mary", commanded by Captain Hogan, of Arthur's Quay. It was published in connection with the centenary of the arrival in America of some people who founded a colony there. I thought at the time they came from Co. Limerick and were Palatines. I only remember one ruined image, probably Delmege. They sailed from the Custom House Quay, and there was also a statement in the account of the voyage, that as they lay anchored in some American port, "the bosun this day being in liquor fell overboard and was drowned".

Of course, there were stories of the old Limerick "General O'Neill", "Jessie", "Jane Black" and "Francis Spaight". The best known was the rather gruesome one of the "Francis Spaight". Jack London made it famous in his book, "Then God Laughed". Its captain, O'Gorman, is buried in St. Munchin's graveyard. The Harbour Master told me that O'Gorman's relatives became famous makers of diving suits and gear.

The outstanding characteristic of the people of the Windmill was their friendship and loyalty to one another. This is still noticeable, especially among the older generation. They seemed to be one big family and joys and sorrows were shared alike. No wonder a wake was such a general affair, everyone attended, so that houses adjoining the corpse house were thrown open to take the overflow. Clay pipes and tobacco were provided for the men, snuff for the women and, of course, refreshments.

Everyone turned out for the funeral.

The Windmill wrenboys were quite an institution and jealously guarded their territory. They had the usual fantastic dress and blackened faces and a holly bush tied to a long stick; this contained a miniature coffin which in turn was supposed to contain a wren. Their song wound up - "I up with the stick and I give him a lick, and brought him home to the Windmill".

New Year's Eve was the big night. Houses were all cleaned up; doors thrown open; people went from house to house wishing a happy new year to each other. When the bells pealed, a procession was formed; in which any sailors in port joined in. They provided instruments like guitars, banjos and mandolines joining in. It must have been a merry affair as they made their way to St. Mary's Cathedral.

We had many stories naturally of the damage done on the night of the "big wind". Though I thought that some of the tales were a bit tall, a **Limerick Chronicle** report shows that they were not exaggerated. The account is also interesting in showing the number of vessels at the quay on that night, January 6, 1839, the night of the "big wind".

The **Chronicle** calls it a hurricane, and says the names of the vessels damaged were the "John Weovil", "Magnessa", "Wasp", "Martha", "Aroitus", "Idea", "Arab", "Jane", "Triton Hotspur", "Anneas", "Oxonion", "Harmay", "Universe", "Rossit", "Aunty", "Packet", "Traveller", "Janet", "Martin", "Robert Haimey", "Julia", "Raven" and "Richmond Lass". The vessels above the bridge escaped damage, and they were "The Pearl", "Helen", "Atty", "Alarm", "Prince William", "Maloma", and "Bellona". In addition, small river trading boats were wrecked and some of those on board lost. From the list of these ships, one can understand how busy the quays must have been. All these ships must have been well-known in the Windmill. In my own time, as boys, all knew the "Aurora Volante", "Globe", "Uzziah", "Diamond", and other regular traders. Two of their captains lived close to us so we could always get aboard their vessels when they were not working.

Fast and slow passages were a general topic in the district, the most remarkable fast one being the voyage of a blue nose barque, "The Ivictut" - 17 days from the

mouth of the St. Lawrence to the mouth of the Shannon; and slow, the coasting boat, "Constant" - 9 months from Ardrossan, in Scotland, to Limerick, a series of mishaps and weather-bound in two West of Ireland bays caused the delay.

Captain Sweetland in bringing Russell's steamer, "The Brandon" into Kilkee Bay and taking off Mr. Russell, the owner, was also regarded as having performed a noteworthy feat of seamanship. This vessel was lost on the Arran Isles. No lives were lost, but two Scotch trading steamers went down with all hands including several Windmill men.

Many of the pilots lived in Frederick Street. Their sons were our chums, and many a time we sat down and listened enthralled as the fathers gave us an account of their voyages. The names of Rangoon, Sydney, Cape of Good Hope, The Horn, 'Frisco, meant more to us than mere geography. One old pilot (not from our district) used to tell a famous story. I would not care to vouch for its veracity (I actually heard three versions during my inquiries). The one I prefer is as follows:

"Once we were wrecked on a desert island, and when we got ashore we were surrounded by savages, with bones in their noses and big spears in their hands. We were afraid that we would be killed and maybe eaten, but finally we were brought before the king. Myself and the rest were still frightened, but I noticed that the queen was looking hard at me. Suddenly, she jumped up, put her arms around me and said in the name of so and so, how are they all in Arthur's Quay and how is Limerick, and who was she but the sweep's daughter from next door to me at home. After that nothing was too good for us".

In another version of the story, it was the King of Egypt, in another the Sultan of Turkey, but the queen was always from Arthur's Quay!

I wonder how many among us remember the old

Norwegian barques that brought blocks of ice, each vessel having a windmill to keep the water pumped out, and also a pram on board. Readers will wonder why a pram was on board, but in this case it was only a small boat of peculiar shape.

Another memory is the wonderful singing and music provided by some Italian crews, as they passed back to their boats at night, and I still remember some of the words of the old sea shanties: - "Blow the Man Down", "Blow Breezes Blow", and many others.

Many of the pilots lived in O'Curry Street. No account of the street would be complete without a reference to the City Militia. This Corps was raised in 1793 and consisted of 469 men with J.P. Smyth Commandant. In the old Garda Barracks building in O'Curry Street (previously a Sailors' Home) a tablet, still inset in the wall of the dayroom, reads as follows: "The first stone of this building was laid by the Earl of Carlisle on the 11th July, 1851. During the mayoralty of the Rt. Worshipful James Spaight, to whose zeal, energy and success in obtaining subscriptions for its erection throughout the United Kingdom, the sailor is indebted for the comforts of this home".

I have vivid memories of the Militia, an artillery corps of reservist, part-time soldiers, who assembled for annual training. The days of assembly and dispersal were hectic days for the locality, when the wives and families always turned up with the men. Paths and doorsteps were packed, and all doors were kept rigidly closed. The men arrived, dressed anyhow, but later emerged transformed in uniform, having undergone a bath, shave and hair-cut in the meantime. Drilling was carried on in Harold's Field (now O'Curry Place), to the tunes of a small band whose noise (I cannot say music) woke us every morning at a very unaccustomed hour. But the really big day was when the Militia set out for training - women and children from one of the end of the street to the other in attendance.



THE RIVER SHANNON, LIMERICK

Looking towards the Windmill from Sarsfield Bridge.



The 'flags of all nations street', Eucharistic Congress celebration, 1932

Porter in pint and all other kind of bottles was in evidence and in use everywhere. There was constant squabbling and occasional fighting. Many of the men were of the tinker fraternity, and their private feuds were always renewed at this time. The march to the station was accompanied by weeping wives and children, though the men were only going to camp for training. The women held pint bottles in their hands, which they passed at intervals to their marching relatives. During these times, the police kept very discreetly out of the picture.

There was a general sigh of relief in O'Curry Street after it was all over, and the streets cleared of broken bottles and rubbish. At the other side of the street, and opposite a big house at the corner of Little O'Curry Street, formerly the Navigation School, (later a lying-in hospital, now a private house) one could see a long railing in front. This was the railing of the "Tripegloos" wrecked on the "Bridges" Rocks near Ringmoylan. Its boiler was for many years at the right-hand side of the street, opposite the Limerick Steamship Company offices. In Mount Kennett, at the other side of the Windmill, people say that the corner house at the turn off Henry Street on the left-hand side, was once used as an hospital, and the small door on the Mount Kennett side was where the coffins were taken out.

In an old directory of 1877, I came across an interesting advertisement worth mentioning, if only to show the cost of travel at that time.

"Hugh McPhail and Co., agents and ship owners, Clyde and West Scotland Direct Steamers, Mount Kennett Quay".

"The powerful new Screw Steamer, Earnholm, 100 A1 at Lloyds, cabin, passengers to Glasgow, fare 17/6; return available, one month, 25/-; deck, 8/-, single, no return; children half-price".

I found the reading of the directory and talking to the old inhabitants interesting and informative. For instance,

this advertisement in an 1877 directory: "Annacotty Paper Mill and Peafield Oil Mill; orders for paper and rope, oil to Peter Arthur".

Old people I questioned told me the following: A chandelier-maker lived in Arthur's Quay. He was a foreigner, and made chandeliers from angled glass and beads, to quote my informant. Another man saw a comb-maker at work near Punche's Row. Another returned to tell me that the first priest to go to Australia is buried in St. Michael's graveyard at Watergate, and that some relatives came here and found his grave some years ago. I also found out that Limerick Diocesan School was situated at Hartstonge Street, and that its president in 1887 was Rev. Joseph Bourke.

I would like to thank Miss Sweetland for her help in preparing this paper. In fact, all the intimate details of life in the old Windmill were collected by her. Also I thank Mr. Frank Ebrill, who first supplied the name Durack and thus helped me to definitely identify the Windmill itself; also for the answer to a question - Was Denny's Store once a hospital? He informed me that his grandfather had told him it was used as a fever hospital during the famine, and had seen, when going to his wool store in William Street, corpses of people lying in the gutter. These unfortunates had died in their struggles to reach the hospital. Ebrills then did a good export trade direct to France, and principally in lambs' wool, taken from lambs of a certain age and mostly used for vestments. They also brought Frenchmen here to do the expert carding.

From what I have written of the Windmill I think you will agree that it was very much a village in itself. It was brought into existence by the old sailing vessels. With them it enjoyed its period of prosperity and glory, and with their decline, the Windmill faded. Today the place is only a shadow of its former halcyon days - the days of sail.



The Windmill today.