

# THE WELLESLEY BRIDGE

By Phil Lovett

Limerick, anciently called "Luimneach-na-Luingeas" (1) or Limerick of the ships or fleets, first came to prominence as a port when the Vikings from the Hebrides established a base there in the 10th Century. In 964 "Mathgamain of Dal Cais defeated the Norse at Limerick at the battle of Sulchoid and sacked their city" (2) which he continued to hold under his brother Brian Boru. In 1175 the Norman, Raymond Le Gros, with the assistance of the King of Ossory, took possession of the city. The Normans were particularly interested in ports as sources of revenue and port towns were given special privileges through charters. Limerick was granted her charter "on the 19th December, 1197, the ninth of Richard I extending to the city the privileges already granted to Dublin". (3) In 1400 when Irish ports had entered a period of decline Limerick was seventh in importance after Drogheda, Dublin, Wexford, New Ross and Waterford, Youghal, Cork and followed by Galway. (4)

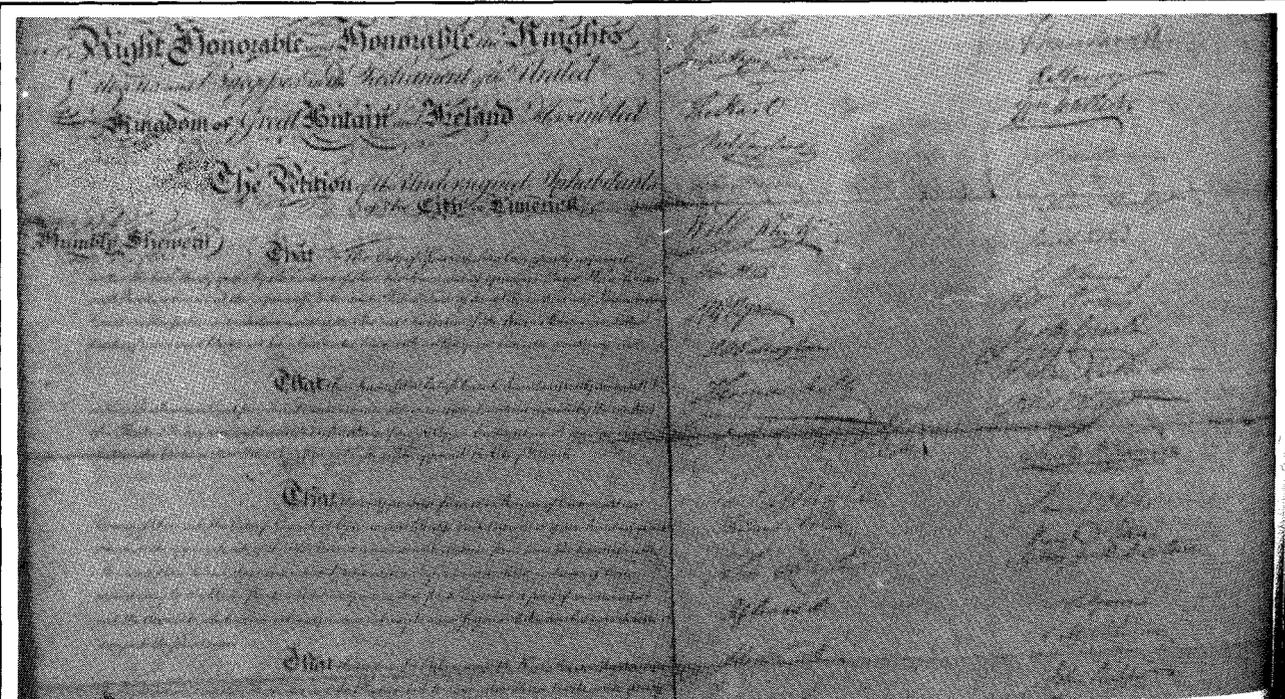
The Elizabethan Wars had a deleterious effect on Irish trade with the Continent but it revived somewhat in the 17th century after James I had granted freedom of foreign trade and the West Indies were opened up to Irish goods. There was a further decline in trade in the late 17th century with the introduction of various restrictive navigation acts. By the mid-18th century a provision trade was developing in Limerick and, as one writer put it, "the period 1750-1840 was the climax of the town's position as a great centre of commerce", (5) and it was in this period that the inadequacy of the harbour became apparent.

The old harbour of Limerick began upstream of the present Sarsfield (formerly Wellesley) Bridge at the junction of the Abbey river and the mainflow of the Shannon and extended downstream for 1600 yards, the lower portion of which, it was said, "rather deserves the name of a roadstead than a harbour" (6) where ships at low tide lay aground on an irregular rocky bottom. From the middle of the 18th century, as both maritime and inland trade ex-

tended along with the growth of Limerick as a city (7), local merchants built quays which were named after their owners. Meade's Quay was the furthest downstream, and others were Harvey's, Russell's, Spaight's, Kelly's and Arthur's Quay, built on reclaimed land by Patrick Arthur in 1776, and its name has survived to this day. The harbour at Limerick was the terminus of the inland Shannon navigation which by 1804 was linked with the East Coast by the completion of the Grand Canal. The upper portion of the harbour was described as "the resort of numerous turf-boats", (8) which surely indicates a significant source of fuel for the city in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century.

There were substantial commercial interests, however, to make the city a maritime port and, while prior to 1823 the Corporation and mayor had some jurisdiction over the harbour, the Limerick Chamber of Commerce, which had been incorporated by Royal Charter in 1815, actually controlled the pilotage of the Lower Shannon, made payments for salvage services to deserving individuals to encourage "similar exertions on like occasions in future", (9) and undertook buoyage to mark some of the rocks in the river. By 1822 it appeared that there were two ideas whose time had come, firstly, the construction of a new bridge across the Shannon as the bulk of the city was now downstream and westward and, secondly, the construction of a floating dock. The Chamber of Commerce seized the opportunity of a visit to Limerick, in February, 1822, by Mr John Grantham, civil engineer, who had been appointed by the Government to survey the Shannon, in order to impress on him by representations that he should look for suitable sites to erect a bridge and build a floating dock.

Grantham duly submitted in May 1822 a report with



The Petition to build the Wellesley Bridge.



The Wellesley Bridge, with Arthur's Quay in the background.

plans, drawings and estimates for a "Wet Docks" and a new bridge. The Chamber of Commerce, on 10th October, 1822, drew up a memorial from its directors to the Board of Works asking them to consider Grantham's report and whether parliamentary authority should be sought to obtain funds for the purpose of building a bridge and dock, based on repayments to be made from the revenues of the harbour and bridge tolls. However, in the following year of 1823, the act of 17th June entitled "An Act for the Erection of a bridge across the River Shannon and of a Floating Dock to accommodate sharp vessels frequenting the Port of Limerick" was passed following a petition to King George IV, signed by Thomas Spring Rice, M.P. and 45 other prominent citizens.

The petitioners were in fact named in the act which incorporated them as the Limerick Bridge Commissioners with full power for the erection of "One Stone Bridge with One or more Swivel Bridge or Drawbridge or Bridges therein or adjoining thereto, over the said River Shannon below the said Bridge called Thomond Bridge" and to erect a floating dock, piers, quays, gates, walls and other works. The location of the bridge was prescribed: "Said Bridge shall be built over the said River, adjoining or near to the End of Brunswick Street in the Parish of Saint Michael in the Suburbs of the said City, to the North Strand on the opposite side of the said River".

Authority to finance the bridge and dock development up to a limit of £100,000 was granted to the Commissioners of Public Works, subject to their approval of the actual plans. The act empowered the Limerick Bridge Commissioners "to appoint at such salary ... as to the said Commissioners shall deem fit a proper and discreet person to be Harbour Master of and for the Port and Harbour of Limerick". The act also empowered the Bridge Commissioners to appoint a treasurer, clerk, receiver, collectors, and other officers and servants as necessary. The Commissioners were authorised to impose rates and duties on exports and imports to and from the port of any goods, merchandise or commodities (with the exception of coal). The Commissioners were also empowered to collect tolls from users of the bridge. All such tolls, rates and duties were to be put into a joint fund to be applied to the purchase of premises for the Commissioners to carry out the purposes of the act.

The Bridge Commissioners were empowered to make by-laws for the regulation of the conduct of persons and

vessels frequenting the harbour facilities. The Bridge Commissioners were granted the sole right of licensing pilots and were authorized to examine and enquire into the skills and abilities of persons acting as pilots. The Board was also empowered to acquire lands by compulsory purchase for the purpose of the works, with power being vested in juries empanelled for the purpose to fix compensation where the parties could not agree.

Following on the passage of the act, the Bridge Commissioners began to function immediately, and by February, 1824 the Board of Works had agreed to advance £60,000 to carry into effect the bridge plans drawn up by Mr. Alexander Nimmo (10) and the work was to be carried out by the contractors Messrs Clements. The foundation stone of the bridge was laid on October 25th, 1824. The juries investigating claims for compensation on compulsory purchase were active and at the time the foundation stone was laid had awarded £420 to Mr. John Staunton (11) for the acquisition of his yard, his strand on the Shannon and for "the filling up of the Dock called Lyons Dock". Three other cases had been disposed of by this time but in at least one case the Commissioners encountered considerable difficulties with one of their own members who refused to surrender a right of way to them to make the approaches of the bridge from the North Strand. This obstacle in fact remained for more than six years. Detailed correspondence ensued between the Bridge Commissioners and Mr. Daniel Gabbett. An individual effort was made by Mr. Thomas Spring Rice M.P., who wrote on January 3rd, 1830: "I confess I had imagined that the pecuniary benefit that must inevitably and naturally arise to yourself were so considerable and so obvious that you would have rather requested that the road might pass through your own land, and be made at your expense than have sought any compensation, or thrown any obstacle in the way of such a course". (12) However, on 27th September, 1830 the Bridge Commissioners directed their law agent to proceed against Mr Gabbett for the acquisition of the right of way and no further reference to difficulties in this connection appears in the proceedings of the Commissioners.

By 1830, in any case, after six years of work, the bridge was not near to completion and friction arose between the maritime interests represented in the Chamber of Commerce and the Bridge Commissioners about the dangers to shipping resulting from want of proper

precautions by the contractor. The Bridge Commissioners instructed the contractors to take measures to ensure the safe passage of vessels to the upper and lower quays. This remonstrance was the first of many which exhibited the contradiction inherent in building the bridge first out of harbour dues from which maritime interests could derive no benefit until the floating dock scheme would subsequently be undertaken.

The dwindling funds available for the bridge construction despite the revenue from harbour dues which amounted to £7,508 from 1826 to 1831 provided the background to an investigation into the fees and expenses of Mr. Alexander Nimmo the engineer. A sub-committee was appointed on 24th February, 1831 to examine his accounts from 1825 to 1829(13). The sub-committee particularly objected to a claim for £353 for a clerk of works brought in by Mr. Nimmo(14) without the sanction of the Commissioners. On 24th March, 1831 the Bridge Commissioners were engaged in the preparation of a memorial to the Treasury seeking a further advance for the completion of the bridge and docks. An estimate of future expenditure, an estimate of likely revenue and tolls and the balance of the original loan available were all aggregated to indicate a probable deficit of £10,000. The Commissioners, therefore, resolved to apply for £15,000 and Mr. Thomas Spring Rice M.P. was asked to use his influence with the Treasury. On 14th April, 1831 the Secretary of the Loan Commissioners wrote to the Bridge Commissioners informing them that only £6,038-9-2½ remained of the original grant of £60,000 and that no further advances would be made until the works were inspected. The shortage of funds reached crisis point and the Bridge Commissioners in May, 1831 decided at a meeting to write to the Lord Lieutenant for assistance in pressing their case at the Treasury and drew "His Excellency's attention to the great public inconvenience which would arise from any suspension of the works by which upwards of 600 labourers and artisans would be thrown out of employment and the contracts now existing between the Commissioner and Messrs Clements might be vitiated should any interruption of payments occur"(15).

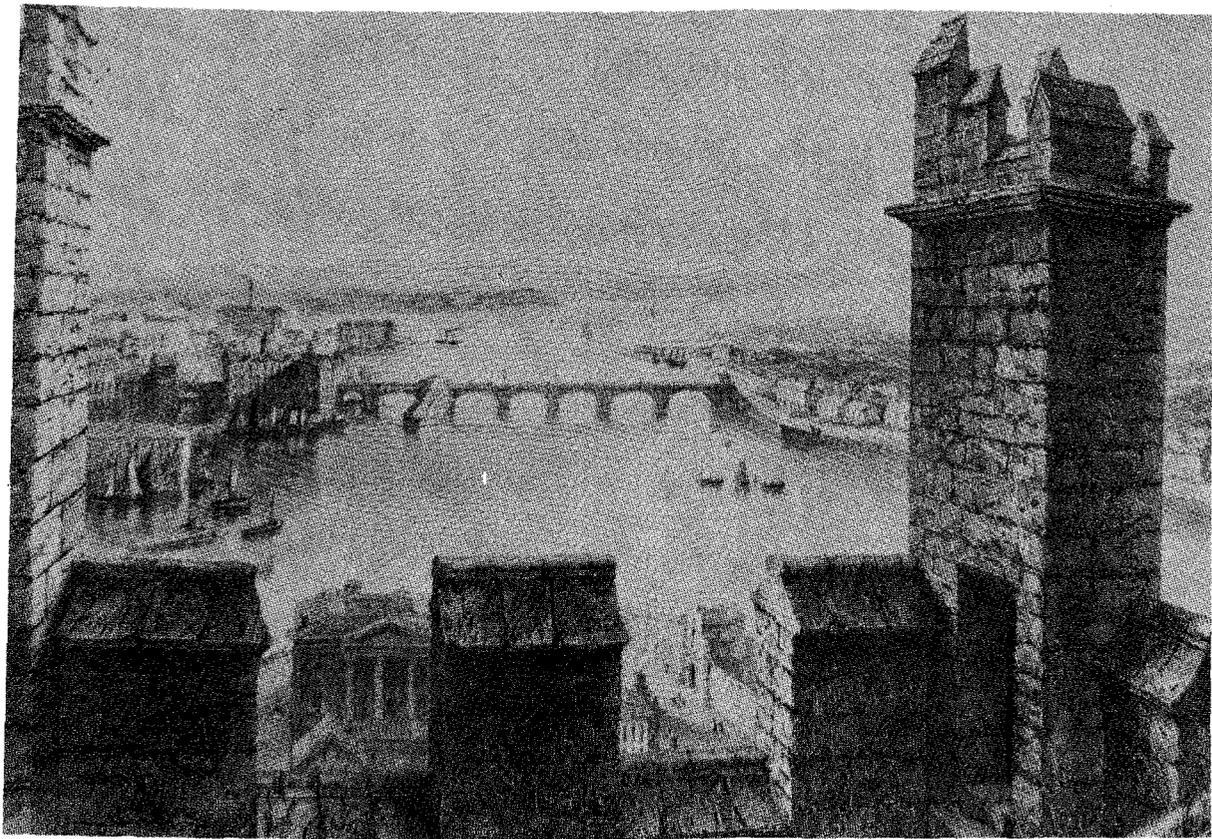
On 1st September, 1831 the Secretary of the Bridge Commissioners was again instructed by the Board to write to the Loan Commissioners requesting postponement of payment of interest on the sum already borrowed and requesting a further advance of £2,500 and stressing that any suspension of the works "would be attended with the most lamentable consequences in the dismissal and destitution of 2,000 persons (inclusive of their families) depending on employment there for support"(16). The Board of Works in May, 1832 sent "one of their members and Mr. Vignolles, civil engineer, to Limerick to inspect the works, and in the following September these two gentlemen attended a meeting of the Bridge Commissioners and produced a memorandum stating that "The Board of Works wish to assume to themselves the task and responsibility of completing the Wellesley Bridge and Works and trust the Bridge Commissioners will have no objection to sanction and agree to such an arrangement"(17). The memorandum went on to say that "payments to the Contractors may be made through the Treasurer of the Bridge Commissioners by their drafts as usual, such drafts however to be drawn only on the Warrants of the Commissioners of Public Works, to be produced by the Contractors on applying for money to the Bridge Commissioners and which Warrants will be received by the Commissioners in Dublin as sufficient vouchers with the receipt of the Contractors attached thereto for so much money. Thus the Board in Dublin would have the sole control of the Works and expenditure, while the Bridge Commissioners would have

ostensible control of the money and the Secretary's account would be greatly narrowed and simplified"(18).

What followed in October, 1832 was a curious episode in which the Board of Works proposed that the engineer whom they would send to supervise the bridge works should be paid out of the salary of Mr. Grantham the harbour engineer, who had been appointed the previous year on the dismissal of Mr. Nimmo. The Bridge Commissioners objected to the reduction of Mr. Grantham's salary but eventually agreed that the new engineer should be paid £75 p.a. out of Mr. Grantham's salary. Presumably encouraged by this success on 25th October, 1832, the Board of Works proposed that the total expenses of the Limerick Bridge Commissioners should not exceed £600 p.a. (including the £300 already agreed for Mr. Grantham and his assistant). The remaining £300 had to cover salaries of the secretary, collector, harbour master and treasurer, as well as rent, stationery, postage and the porter (whose wages were 5s/6d per week). The secretary, collector, harbour master and treasurer were called before a meeting of the Board and the Board of Works' letter was read to them and "notwithstanding their sense of the hardship they have to sustain by a deduction from salaries already but reasonable and moderate in proportion to their respective duties, yet on perceiving the peremptory necessity for mutual sacrifices, concurred in foregoing one third each or thereabouts, of their respective salaries lest, whatever be the hardship on them, they may be reproached with standing in the way of completing the Bridge Works and of great public improvement".

The secretary accordingly agreed to have his salary reduced from £157-10-00 to £100-0-0 p.a.  
The collector agreed to have his salary reduced from £150-00-00 to £100-0-0 p.a.  
The harbour master agreed to have his salary reduced from £80-00-00 to £60-0-0 p.a.  
The treasurer agreed to have his salary reduced from £63-00-00 to £40-0-0 p.a.  
Total: £300-0-0 p.a.

The Bridge Commissioners had noted in the minutes of this meeting: "There exists however one other charge, one on our humanity which it would be cruelty to discontinue, namely a charitable allowance of 5/- a week, to each of three unfortunate labourers so maimed at an explosion at the Bridge Works, while in our hands, as to be incapable of earning their bread and who if not thus supported must perish — there were four but one lately died"(19). Having felt the heavy hand of the Board of Works in this way the Commissioners were justifiably outraged to receive an account on December 6th, 1832 from the Board for £463 for the services of Mr. Vignolles their engineer. The Bridge Commissioners objected to paying what appeared to them as "so heavy an encroachment on the new Loan, a Loan, which as it must ultimately be paid (both principal and interest) by the trade of our fellow citizens so behoves us to guard against any unnecessary inroad"(20). But the Board of Works had the upper hand and in a letter to the Commissioners on January 16th, 1833 stated that they had recommended to the Lords of the Treasury to discontinue any further advances for the bridge works and also that it was "their intention to adopt other coercive measures" in consequence of the Commissioners' refusal to pay Mr. Vignolles' demand(21). The Commissioners carried the fight to the Treasury through one of their members, William Roche M.P. However, the matter was finally decided one year later when the Treasury wrote to the Board of Works agreeing to the payment but stating that "My Lords would have been better pleased had the charges of Mr. Vignolles been calculated on a more moderate scale". With honour thus satisfied, the Bridge



A nineteenth century view of the new bridge from St. Mary's Cathedral.

Commissioners, considering that the decision of the Treasury had been "conveyed in terms fully bearing out the objections we have heretofore made", ordered the account to be paid(22).

The bridge was finally completed and opened by the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, on 5th August, 1835. The Commissioners were then free to turn their attention to other work such as the building of the floating dock and the provision of facilities to ensure the safe passage of ships throughout the estuary.

#### REFERENCES

1. Marmion, A. **Ancient and Modern History of the Maritime Ports of Ireland.** (p.470).
2. de Paor, Liam. **The Age of the Vikings in the Course of Irish History.** (p.102).
3. Lenihan M., **History of Limerick** (p.47).
4. Dudley Edwards, Ruth. **An Atlas of Irish History** (p.192).
5. Bloomfield, G.T. in **Morphology and Growth of Limerick**.
6. Appendix to **Second Report of the Tidal Harbour Commissioners** (1846).
7. **Population of Limerick in 1770** (11,000).  
**Population of Limerick in 1792** (40,000).  
**Population of Limerick in 1821** (59,045).  
(From estimate by E. McLysaght in "Irish Life in the 17th Century) and **Census of Ireland Report** (1821).
8. Appendix to **Second Report of the Tidal Harbour Commissioners** (1846).
9. Minutes of meeting of Limerick Chamber of Commerce (12th February, 1813).
10. Nimmo, Alexander (1783-1832), civil engineer, born at Kirkcaldy, Fifeshire, in 1783, who began his career as a school-teacher and then entered engineering through surveying. He was responsible for thirty harbours and piers and other public works in Ireland and subsequently for railway engineering in Lancashire. He died in Dublin on 20th January, 1832.
11. Document entitled **An Inquisition held and taken at the Tholsel in the City of Limerick on the 27th day of October, 1924.** (LHC).
12. Minutes of meeting of Bridge Commissioners, (January, 1830).
13. Minutes of Bridge Commissioner's meeting (24th February, 1831).
14. Minutes of Bridge Commissioner's meeting (5th May, 1831).
15. Mr. Nimmo was dismissed in June, 1831 and Mr. Grantham, the author of the original bridge proposal, was appointed in his place at a salary of £300 p.a.
16. Meeting of the Bridge Commissioners (1st September, 1831).
17. Meeting of Bridge Commissioners (8th September, 1832).
18. In September, 1832 the Board of Works initiated a proposal to the Bridge Commissioners that a Wet Dock be built opposite Arthur's Quay and suggested a joint-grant would be available from the Board and the Customs and Excise Board. On later investigation, following the Report of Thomas Rhodes on the port of Limerick in 1833, proposals for works upstream of Wellesley Bridge were abandoned.
19. Minutes of Meeting of Bridge Commissioners (25th October, 1832).
20. Ibid. (10th January, 1833).
21. Minutes of meeting of Bridge Commissioners (17th January, 1833).
22. Minutes of meeting of Bridge Commissioners (30th January, 1834).