

Limerick Night Watch

1807—1853



hough it is now over sixty years since the services of the Limerick Night Watch were dispensed with, fond memories of this old institution

live on in local lore. In this article, however, we shall concentrate on the recorded history of the night watch from its origins in St. Michael's parish to its integration as part of the services of Limerick Corporation.

The origins of a night watch in Limerick City date from 1807, when the parish of St. Michael, or Newtown Pery, was placed under the management of twenty-one commissioners. This new body, with the cumbersome title of "Commissioners for the improvement of the Parish of St. Michael", was given responsibility for "paving, cleansing, lighting and watching" the parish.

Unfortunately, the first volume of the minutes of the proceedings of these commissioners has been lost in the course of time, but we are fortunate to have all the minute books from 1819 onwards. From their pages we can glean all we want to know about the night watch—its organisation, personnel, working conditions, discipline, etc. Unless otherwise stated, those books are the source of the information contained in the following pages.

by Chris O'Mahony

For ten or eleven hours every night of the week, the night watch patrolled the streets of Newtown Pery. They checked that doors and windows had been secured; they apprehended drunks, strays, and any unruly or otherwise troublesome people and brought them to the watch-house. There, people were dealt with appropriately—charged or simply kept out of harm's way for the night. In the morning, these became someone else's responsibility; the night watch was over.

NUMBERS

The number of people involved in this protection of property and order varied from time to time. In 1819, the number was increased from 30 to 32 (including a 'constable of the watch', later (from 1843) known as the 'inspector'). In 1823, the commissioners reduced the watch to 26, and in 1843 it was still further reduced to 22.

Besides this permanent force, there was also a varying number of substitutes, known as supernumerary watchmen. This panel was the gateway to the watch proper; it was to this a man was

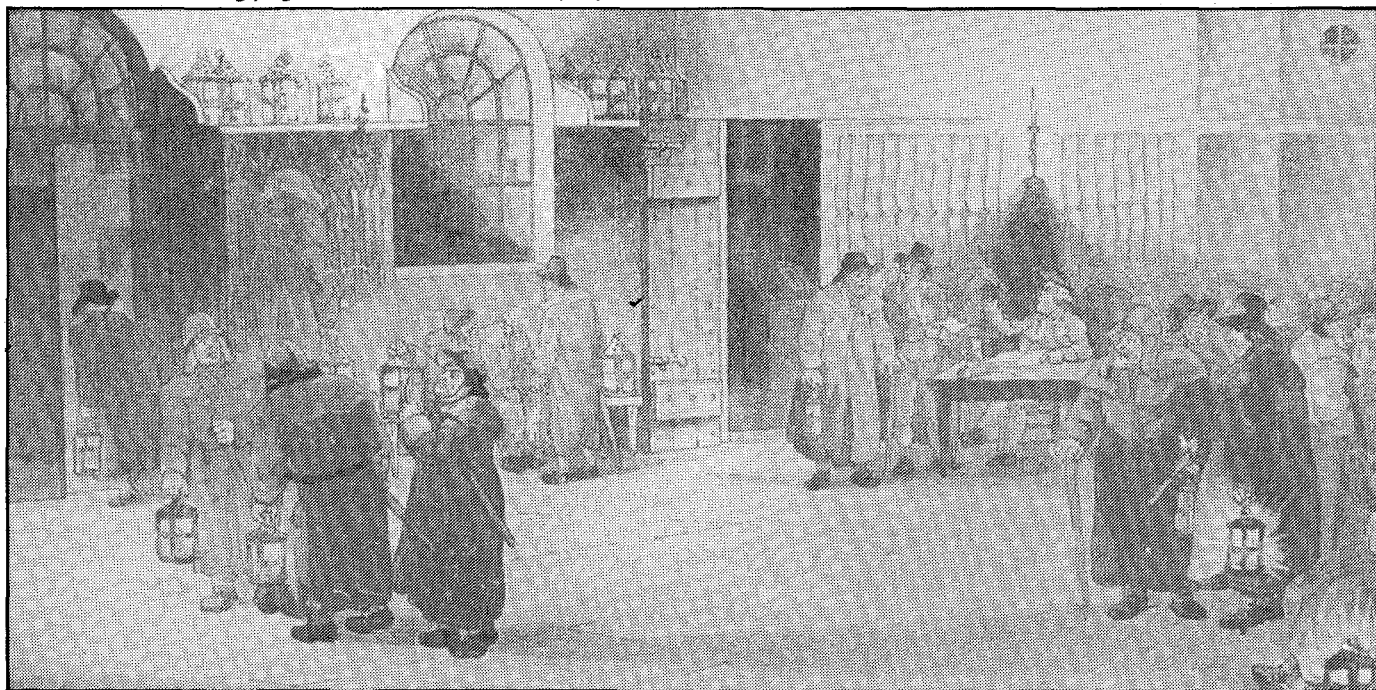
first recruited and through it was trained and moved up the list as each vacancy occurred until it was his turn to join the full-time staff. Whenever this panel was almost depleted, the commissioners simply printed and distributed handbills advertising vacancies for 'active young men'. There wasn't much point in advertising such posts through newspapers which were neither intended for nor read by such as would be likely to apply.

QUALIFICATIONS

The kind of qualities looked for in recruits were: good health, honesty and sobriety, though, to judge by the performance of many, the latter would seem to have been a quality that was in short supply. From 1832, there was also a stipulation that all had to be over 5'7".

PAY AND CONDITIONS

The earliest record of what night watchmen were paid dates from May 1819. That was the shorter, summer shift, and they were then being paid 6/6 a week. That same winter they were



A watchhouse, circa 1818, by Thomas Rowlandson.

paid 8/8 for the longer shift, but in the following spring the watchmen themselves asked for their pay to be levelled off at 7/- a week all year round. Fifteen years later, they received an increase of 1/- a week, but when they asked for another rise in 1837, they were told: "any man who is not satisfied with the present rate of pay is at liberty to resign". By 1845, they were still earning as little as 8/9 for a 70 hour week.

With the job came a free top coat, replaced every two years, and a hat. There was also the famous watchman's pole. In the early days this was quite a long pole, and it had a sharp spear-like head or, sometimes, an equally sharp hook at the end of it. Surprisingly, it was not until 1837 that anyone drew attention to what was termed "the formidable nature" of watchmen's poles. In that year, "to lessen the risk of injury to prisoners", the commissioners ordered a new pole to be designed. It was to have a copper ring at each end and no hook or spear, "so that they might be sufficiently effective, yet less deadly". The concern for the safety of the prisoners was not unfounded; before the new poles had been delivered, one of the watchmen fractured a man's skull with his pole and had to be discharged when he was convicted of manslaughter.

The watchmen also received free medical attention. At first they went to a local apothecary, who supplied their medicines at the expense of the commissioners; in 1828, apothecary John Hogan received £13.18.5. for the supply of medicines since 1825. From that year on, however, the men were treated free at the City Dispensary.

When a man was off sick, he generally received about half-pay. One has to say 'about' as the commissioners would seem to have exercised a certain amount of discretion in this as in other matters. Thus, for example, when one man was very ill and his doctor reported that his only chance was to go to the seaside, the commissioners gave the man £1. Retirement brought a gratuity which could vary according to one's term of service or whether one already had an army pension. One man even got a pension: James Sullivan had given 20 years' service when he retired disabled in 1830; he was awarded 6d a day for life. A man with that kind of service could normally expect a once off gratuity of £5.

Retirement was not always voluntary, but early retirement due to ill-health generally brought a gratuity. Then, too, cutbacks brought redundancies. The six men who were discharged in 1823 received £1 each. But the four men discharged in 1843 got £4 each. One has the impression that in the first cutback, those with very short terms of service were let go, while in that of 1843 the layoffs look more like early retirement.



A watchman in the late eighteenth century.

Naturally, the constable of the watch was paid more than the men. In 1819 his salary was £29.11.6 a year, or 11/4½ a week. The constable then was the unfortunate John Herbert, the only constable ever to have been sacked. One night in 1820, a party entered Swinburne's Hotel to arrest a swindler. John was posted at the man's window to prevent escape in that direction, but the man's wife slipped him "a gold watch and seals" and John turned a blind eye as the swindler escaped through the window. Several people gave evidence of having witnessed this little transaction and John Herbert was sacked. One noted that his successor, James Johnson, received a bonus of £10 every year; maybe honesty needed a little encouragement!

For reasons which we shall discuss presently there was a very high turnover in the nightwatch. To this the constables were an exception. When ill-health forced him to retire in 1830, Johnson (or Johnston, as he is sometimes called) was on 14/- a week, and there were 17 candidates ready to fill his shoes. His successor was 42 year old James Corneal. By 1834, his pay had risen to £1 a week. In 1836, a sub-constable was added to the watch establishment at 10/6 a week, a post which was abolished in the 1843 restructuring. In 1836, Corneal had to retire through ill-health, and was succeeded by Timothy Kerin at £40 a year. This marked a temporary drop in salary; two years later, it was raised to £50 a year in recognition of his efficiency. In

1843, his successor, David Boyd, the first to be called 'inspector', was back to £40.

DISCIPLINE

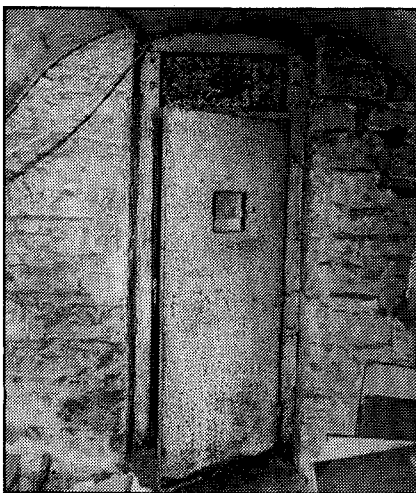
The night shift on the streets of Limerick was long and lonely; for much of the year, it could be dark and cold as well. The watchman had a fairly short beat to cover — maybe two or three blocks — and he didn't spend the whole night walking up and down. He had a little collapsible box, reminiscent of the bathing boxes one saw on beaches long ago, in which he could sit when things were quiet. The cold encouraged men to seek some heat in a nearby hostelry and, not infrequently, some liquid refreshment as well. It was all too easy to fall asleep if you returned to your post thus warmed and refreshed, maybe with a few drinks more aboard than you intended having in the first place. When this happened, there were usually some youngsters about who delighted in sneaking up on a sleeping watchman and stealing his pole.

That little picture summarises most of the things which could get a watchman into trouble: falling asleep at his post, being drunk on duty, having his pole stolen, leaving his post. To fight these failings, the commissioners were very strict about discipline. A first complaint did not bring dismissal, but repeats invariably did, so turnover in the force was quite high in the 1820s. In the 1830s, the commissioners tried to make greater use of suspensions and fines; that cut down on the wastage, but other measures became necessary as well — measures designed to prevent lapses rather than punish them. These measures were organisational, and we shall return to them, but first let's look a little more closely at how some of the above failings were dealt with.

Drink was a major enemy at all times. The commissioners were very concerned about this. Apparently, an unwelcome side-effect was that the watchmen were not too anxious to enforce pub closing times: in 1839 the Mayor of Limerick formally complained to the commissioners that the watchmen "encourage and countenance the sale of sirituous liquors at a late hour of the night by the disorderly publicans". Six months later, however, the watchmen surprised the commissioners by requesting expenses to go to Cork "where they propose to take the pledge against all intoxicating liquors". Those were the days of Fr. Mathew's great crusade, and the commissioners were delighted to pay the men's expenses: they ordered "that to encourage sobriety and temperance, each man be allowed 5/- on the production of his medal and card; and this order to extend to those who have already visited Cork for the above pur-

pose". They were so delighted, in fact, that the following month they extended this order to include the street sweepers as well!

Being absent from one's post was a rather vague charge, in the sense that one would have thought it mattered why one was absent. It took a while for the regulations to take reasons into account; being absent was a serious matter and that was that. Take the case of Morty Sweeny, for example. In 1833, he left his post to go for a drink with John O'Mahony and was subsequently accused of stealing some money from him. He was dismissed. Later, the truth of the accusation of theft was challenged, but the commissioners regarded this as irrelevant to the dismissal; leaving his post was sufficient grounds for dismissal whether he had stolen anything or not.



Cell door at the Limerick Watchhouse, in the basement of the City Hall, Watchhouse Lane.

The commissioners were not unreasonable men; they did try to find out why a man was absent and took account of his reasons. A man who escorted a drunken sailor back to his ship got off with a warning. Pat Noonan escaped dismissal when he was seen coming out of a house of ill-repute, when he explained that he had gone in to light a gentleman's cigar; he was fined 3/6 instead, and a further charge of asking the man for a cigar was dropped.

But the man who changed the regulations was the man who simply admitted to a call of nature, and no one thought of that until 1836! The commissioners "resolved that henceforth when it became necessary for any watchman to leave his post from urgent and pressing calls, he shall communicate his intention to the watchman on the next beat".

By 1836, of course, the commissioners had become much more sophisticated in their preventative approach to discipline. In February of that year, continuous inspection was introduced. The constable and subconstable had to make three rounds of inspection each night in order to ensure that every

man was visited at his post six times a night. To further ensure that this was actually done, the two constables were issued with 75 'tin tickets'. They handed one to every man they visited, and the men had to hand them up at the commissioners' office at 2 p.m. next day.

EXTENSIONS

It is clear from a report published in 1833 on the functioning of various Irish corporations that Limerick Corporation had no night watch. There were some, however, who admired the idea and adopted it. The parishioners of St. John's parish organised a night watch through their vestry, and in 1830 the Collector of Excise appointed a watchman to look after the Excise Stores in Henry Street and asked the constable of the watch to supervise him.

Another extension of the idea was the introduction of a day watch in St. Michael's Parish from 1835 to 1843. There is no discussion of this step in the records; just an order, in November 1835, stating that "for better regulating the parish" five active young men who could read and write were to "be appointed with the present street keeper to act as day police and street keepers". Their duties and uniform were to be modelled on those of the London Police. Their pay was 7/- a week.

Almost nothing is known of this short-lived institution. One is surprised, in fact, that it should have existed at all, when there was a force of constabulary in the city. The most likely explanation for its existence is simple enough. The constabulary was funded from the Grand Jury Cess. The Commissioners of St. Michael's Parish were not liable for that cess and the constabulary therefore paid little if any attention to the parish, whereupon the commissioners appointed their own. This explanation is gleaned from the fact that as soon as the Commissioners became liable for Grand Jury Cess in 1843, they dispensed with the day watch and asked the constabulary to patrol the parish by day.

A more interesting development involving the night watch was the introduction of a fire fighting service. Prior to 1842, fire fighting services were provided by the insurance companies. Usually these looked after their own clients, but one of them was supplying the city (presumably that part of it under the Corporation) with a fire engine on a contract basis as early as 1835, if not earlier. This was the Sun Insurance Company.

Early in 1835, the commissioners began to explore the possibility of having a parish service. They thought the insurance companies would welcome the idea and contribute to its establish-

ment. The Sun Insurance Co. refused because of their contract with the Corporation; Manchester Insurance Company said they had very little fire business; Royal Exchange offered the parish the use of their engine. This latter reply took the commissioners by surprise: they had to admit they had nowhere to put it! For a while they continued to investigate the cost of buying a new engine themselves, but then discussion of the Municipal Reform Bill began and they shelved the idea pending its outcome. As it turned out, that Bill did not affect them, so they returned to the subject in 1841. In September of that year, they took delivery of their new fire engine, "complete with buckets, ladders, leather pipes and every other necessary apparatus". It had been manufactured and supplied by Tilley of London at a cost of £171.8.2.

The members of the first fire brigade were all chosen from the night watch and thus solemnly entered in the minutes of the meeting of 25 January 1842: "The following married men, chosen from the permanent watchmen of the Parish be appointed FIRE MEN, to attend and work the engine in the vent of a fire, to take care of the engine, its hose and apparatus, to keep it clean, and in good condition. Those men shall be paid £1 per year each, and 1/- per day each for every day the engine is exercised: John Hayes, John Flynn, Patrick O'Brien, Cornelius Keating, Patrick Donnelly, Maurice O'Donnell, Patrick Hehir, James McMahon, and Mr. Kerin - Inspector and Superintendent".

This rather solemnly announced arrangement did not last long. The following year, responsibility for the upkeep of the engine was entrusted on a contract basis to the firm of Harrison Lee. The men's £1 a year was discontinued, and, instead, they were to get 1/- for one fire drill a month and 3/- per fire. Of course, if they were called outside the parish the men did better than that. When North British Insurance Company called on their services to help with a fire at Bridge Mill, every man got 7/6.

CORPORATION WATCH

In 1841, Limerick Corporation was reformed, but it still took it a few years to make the night watch a normal city service. A notice of motion, in 1843, showed that some councillors were then thinking in that direction, but Councillor McDonnell's motion to extend the night watch to the parishes of St. Mary and St. John was postponed. It was January 1845 before £250 was voted for watching certain areas of the old town. In May, the night watch finally came into being with the appointment of ten watchmen at 7/- a week, a superintendent at 10/- a week and a watchhouse keeper at 5/-. The

Waterside Pay List of the Night Watchmen, 21st May 1842

| | | | |
|-----------------------------------------|----|-----------------|----------------|
| 1. Michael Donoghue | 14 | 10/- | |
| 2. James O'Connell | 14 | 10/- | |
| 3. John Hayes | 14 | 10/- | |
| 4. John Reynolds | 14 | 10/- | |
| 5. Michael Keating | 14 | 10/- | |
| 6. James O'Donnell | 14 | 10/- | |
| 7. Bryan O'Connell | 14 | 10/- | |
| 8. Michael Harrison | 14 | 10/- | |
| 9. Thomas Mahon | 14 | 10/- | |
| 10. Patrick Hehir | 14 | 10/- | |
| 11. William Keating | 14 | 10/- | |
| 12. Michael Collins | 14 | 10/- | |
| 13. Michael Harrigan | 14 | 10/- | |
| 14. Maurice O'Donnell | 14 | 10/- | |
| 15. John Flynn | 14 | 10/- | |
| 16. John O'Connell | 14 | 10/- | |
| 17. James Keating | 14 | 10/- | |
| 18. Michael O'Connell | 14 | 10/- | |
| 19. John O'Connell | 14 | 10/- | |
| 20. David Donnelly | 14 | 10/- | |
| 21. Edward Keating | 14 | 10/- | |
| 22. Michael Keating | 14 | 10/- | |
| 23. David Mahon | 14 | 10/- | |
| 24. Maurice O'Donnell | 14 | 10/- | |
| 25. John O'Connell | 14 | 10/- | |
| 25. Hours at 6. 0. 0. Each man per week | | 13. 2. 6 | |
| | | 21. 5. May 1842 | John O'Connell |

The watchmen's payroll, 21st May, 1842.

names of this first team of watchmen were: Superintendent, Michael Shiels, St. Mary's watch: John Hickey, Patrick Mongavan, Patrick Brandon, David Condon, and John Gallagher. St. John's watch: John Hinchy, James Cosgrave, Martin Desmond, Patrick Ryan, and John Conlon.

For the rest of the 1840s, the two city authorities continued to go their own way in uneasy coexistence. But, with the Corporation revitalised, it became

increasingly clear that two authorities were quite unnecessary, that the commissioners had served their purpose, and served it well, and that it was time one authority took responsibility for the whole city. In 1853, the two authorities, and with them the two watch establishments, became one. Henceforth, Limerick had one night-watch, which continued to serve the city without substantial change until its dissolution in 1923.