

ARTHUR'S QUAY

BY JIM KEMMY

For about 500 years, the Arthurs were one of the most prominent families in Limerick. Maurice Lenihan, in his *History of Limerick*, gives this account of the family's genealogy:

... the name claims a more special notice than we have hitherto devoted to it; there were no less than forty-eight Arthurs, mayors, etc. of the city; commencing at a very early date, and proceeding downwards, in rapid succession, until the change brought about in and after the days of Queen Elizabeth, since which period, the name has appeared, 'few and far between', on the Municipal Roll. In the Catholic Church too, the Arthurs flourished as bishops and priests, and they gave many an illustrious member to both orders in the ministry, and several who have reflected credit on our country. Dr. Thomas Fitz William Arthur, from whose MSS. I have so frequently quoted in the course of this work, gives ... the names of ancestors so far back as the year 1066; and states, that the first of the name who came to Ireland, arrived with the invader, Henry II., in 1170 – who conferred high honors on him in 1178, as well as great quantities of land – and having related the achievements of Thomas Arthur, who died about A.D. 1204, aged 76 years, he proceeds to narrate the actions of others of the race and name.

Accordingly, Limerick history is filled with references to the Arthurs as merchants, members of the professions, administrators, clergymen and holders of public offices such as mayor and sheriff. The history of the family is fairly well documented and various writers, including Maurice Lenihan, Michael Moloney, E.H. Bennis, Richard Hayes, J.B. Lyons and Kevin Hannan, have written about some of the leading members of the family.

At a glance, three members of the family stand out: Nicholas, a buckaneering merchant who travelled far in pursuit of his trading ventures, and who spent two years as a prisoner of the French in Mont St. Michel; Richard, who was born in 1558, and served as bishop of Limerick from 1623 to 1646, and Dr. Thomas (1593-1674), who has been described as 'the most influential citizen' of the city in his time.

Limerick history owes a great deal to Thomas Arthur for the remarkable chronicle he kept throughout his life. These documents, which came to be known as the Arthur Manuscript, con-



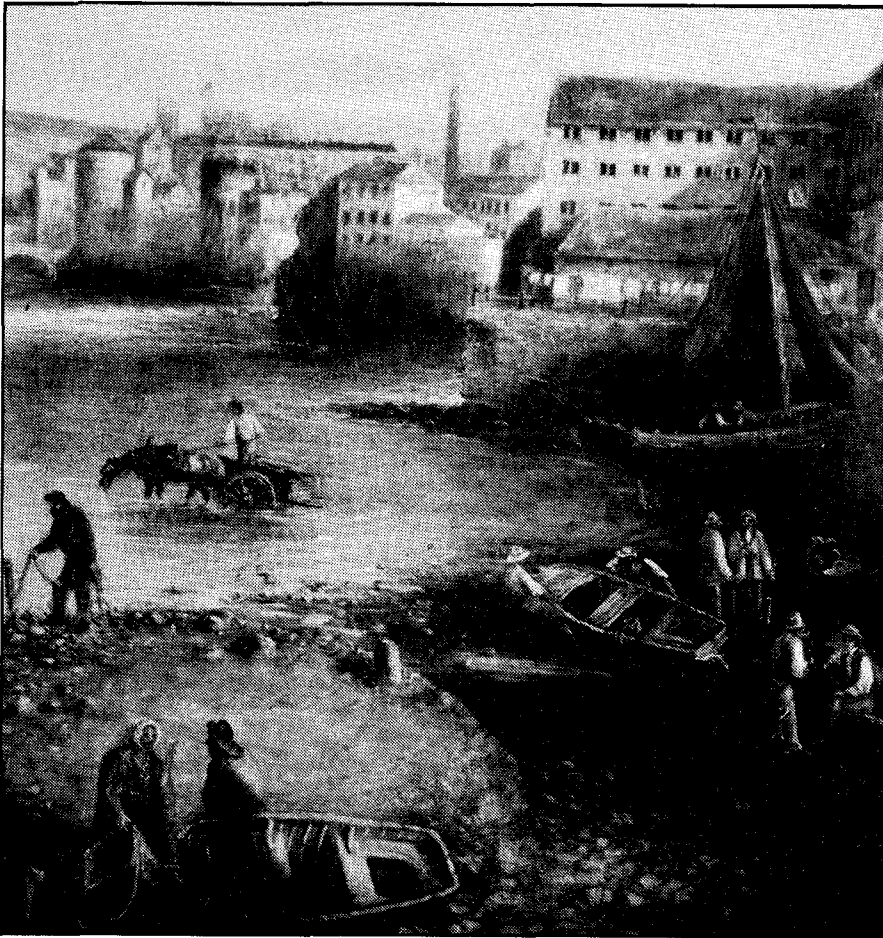
Memorial at St. Michael's Church, Denmark Street, Limerick, to Patrick Arthur, who died on 16 December, 1799.

tain daily entries from 1619 to 1666 of the names of patients, the fees paid by them and, in many cases, notes on the diseases from which the patients were suffering; records of business transactions concerning land and house property in Limerick City and County; transcripts of chapters, inventories, bulls, wills etc., from the 14th to the 16th centuries and miscellaneous writings in verse and prose, mostly in Latin.

In due course, the Arthur Manuscript passed on to Maurice Lenihan and he quoted freely from the documents in his

history. Towards the end of his life, Lenihan fell on hard times, and the story is told that he could not afford the price of a pair of shoes to take him to Mass on Sundays. Economic survival forced him to sell his precious manuscript to the British Museum, where it has remained to the present day.

Of course, other Arthurs also left their mark on Limerick's development. After the demolition of the city walls in the 1760s and the commencement of the building of Newtown Pery, the Arthur family came to the fore. Up to this time,



From a painting of Arthur's Quay, circa 1860, by Charles Mills.

this part of Limerick was a slobland and was subject to regular flooding when the Shannon overflowed. Maurice Lenihan has described the area before Newtown Pery was built:

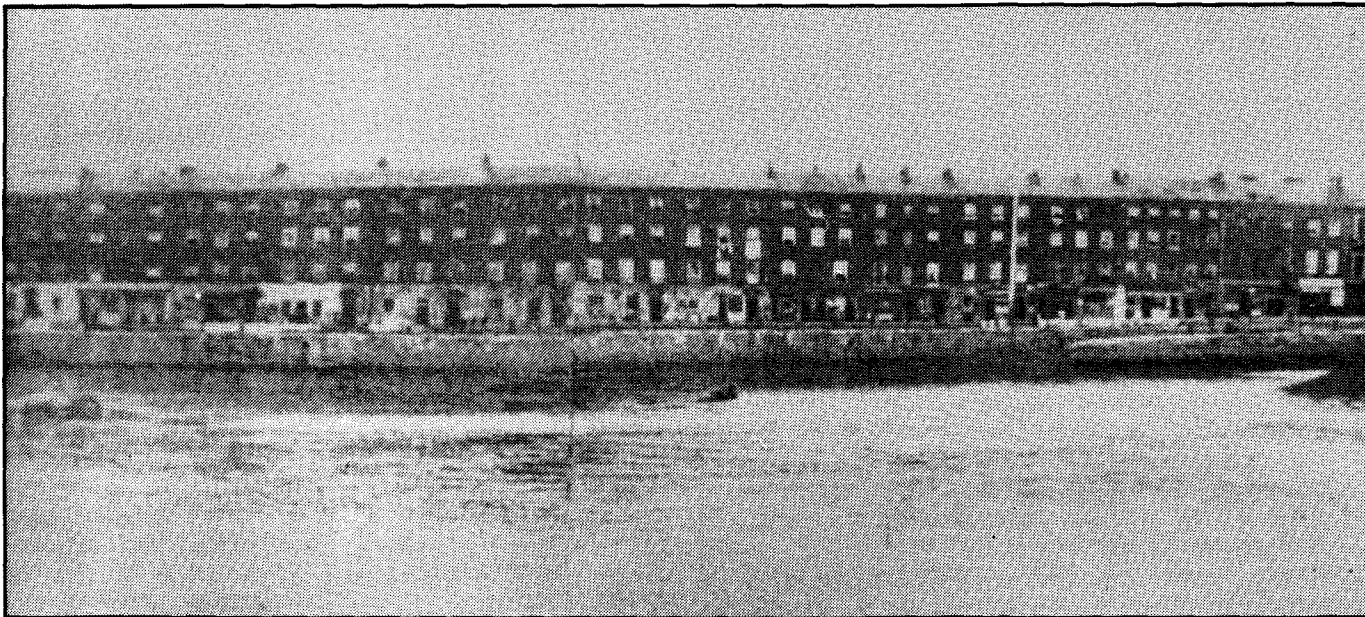
Meadows and carcases then occupied the grounds down to the water's edge. Captain Creagh, an old and highly respectable gentleman, who died some years ago in Cashel, informed me in 1851, that he remembered shooting snipe in Patrick Street, on the ground on which the houses on which the office of the 'Reporter and Vindicator' is one are built - that the ground in question was a marsh which the tide covered, and that it was unfit for building on when he was a boy.

In his article, 'Arthur's Quay', published in the Journal of the Old Limerick Society in December, 1946, E.H. Bennis wrote:

... the Arthurs, with commendable enterprise, undertook the developing of this waste land. They built a quay for the double purpose of carrying out this development scheme and the berthing of their ships. They laid out streets and lanes and named them after themselves. Francis Street and Patrick Street after Francis and Patrick Arthur and Ellen Street after their sister. Prominent was the fine row of residential houses ... erected on the quay facing the river. These houses at once became the popular residences of the elite and wealthy of both the English and Irish towns. Their position



Selling turf at Arthur's Quay, circa 1900.



Arthur's Quay, 1913.

was superb, looking out on the River Shannon, which, when the tide was in, looked like a beautiful lake, or, when out, there was the musical roar of the cataract of the Curragour Falls. The quay itself was enlivened with sailing ships continually coming and going. Across the river (there were no rows of houses then on the Clare side), the view stretched right away over woods and hills to the beautiful old country mansion of the Arthurs at Glenomara, backed by the Broadford hills and the great horseshoe forest reaching nearly to the mountain top.

The houses were built to get the full benefit of the afternoon sun, and, when viewed from the Clare side on a summer afternoon, presented a fiery red no artist could do full justice to.

The building of the Arthur's Quay houses did not go unrecognised in the local press. At a time when hours were long and wages small, the Limerick masons seized on the opportunity to increase their earnings. Though the quay itself had been built by Patrick Arthur and completed in 1773, the house-building project had been undertaken by Francis Arthur, who hit back by placing the following advertisement in the *Limerick Journal* on Monday, 7 March, 1791:

MASONS WANTED

Mr. Francis Arthur finding notwithstanding the great advance given in wages to the masons of this city they have again associated themselves, and have formed New Law, to lay builders under greater inconvenience. Mr. Arthur, as one, is determined not to submit to it – He is now ready to contract, by the perch, with good masons, for the building of 3 houses and offices in front of Arthur's Quay. The masons finding all manner of attendance – the materials being delivered on the quay.

Country masons will meet every protection and encouragement.

The dispute was resolved and the houses completed. On Monday, 20 June, 1791, Francis Arthur again advertised in the *Limerick Journal*:

ARTHUR'S QUAY

Mr. Francis Arthur will let the house, between the houses taken by Sober Hall Esq., and Wm. Holland Esq. in front of the quay: it is nearly complete with locks, grates and chimney pieces, and ready for the reception of a family, with coach-house, yard and stable for four horses.

The rent is 40 guineas a year, without a fine, at the option of the tenant.

The houses were duly let and Arthur's Quay became one of the city's most attractive residential areas for the merchant princes. Development works and other changes continued in the surrounding district. Lenihan records that in April, 1846, 'the sum of £600 was offered to Mr. O'Hara, as assignee of Mr. Arthur, for his interest in the Commercial Buildings, and accepted, for a Town Hall for the meetings of the Corporation, etc., instead of the Exchange in the English town'. He further relates that, on 30 October, 1846, a 'memorial for the loan of £10,000 to Lords of Treasury for embankment of Arthur's Quay, and erection of places for corn markets, etc.' was announced.

However, by the time Maurice Lenihan came to write his history, further changes had taken place in Arthur's Quay, and the houses had ceased to be fashionable for the merchants, who had moved on to other parts of the city and county. Lenihan records: 'Men of enterprise had already begun to take ground and to build; one was Mr. Patrick Arthur, merchant, who built a Quay, which soon became a fashionable part of the city, ("Arthur's Quay" is now, 1865, occupied only by petty dealers and turf-vendors)'.

During the latter part of the nineteenth century and the early decades of

the present century, turf became synonymous with the quay. Kevin Hannan has written:

I will remember the time the quiet waters at Arthur's Quay became once again ruffled and agitated by the movement of many small river craft-hookers, yawls and not a few nondescript vessels, all heavily laden with turf. This was in 1926, during the great general strike in England, and all coal supplies to this country were suspended. Long before the emergence of Bord na Mona, and the only alternative fuel was peat – better known as 'turf' – but, due to the transport difficulties of the time (there was little or no road transport of fuel over long distances), this was hard to come by. The only turf supplies regularly available in very limited quantities were those which were brought into the city from Annaholty bog in Castleconnell by donkey and pony carts, and hawked about the streets and lanes at five sods for tuppence.

The great strike was, therefore, an ill-wind that blew good for someone – this time the impoverished small-holder of south-west Clare, who had little else of the world's goods than an abundance of turf, and no way of turning it into cash. With the unexpected and unprecedented demand for their hard-won harvest from the bogs, every suitable vessel along the estuary between Kilrush and Labasheeda was brought into service to sail up in the tide with its precious cargo to Arthur's Quay (this time Honan's Quay was also referred to as 'Arthur's Quay'), where hundreds of eager buyers lined the quays. Though it was a sellers' market, the turf was sold at sixpence a kish (a large basket). This trade lent great colour and animation to the historic old place, and the noisy, crowded scenes were reminiscent of its palmy days. The turf was trundled away, mainly to the working class districts, in every kind of wheeled device, box-cars (now seldom seen), old prams

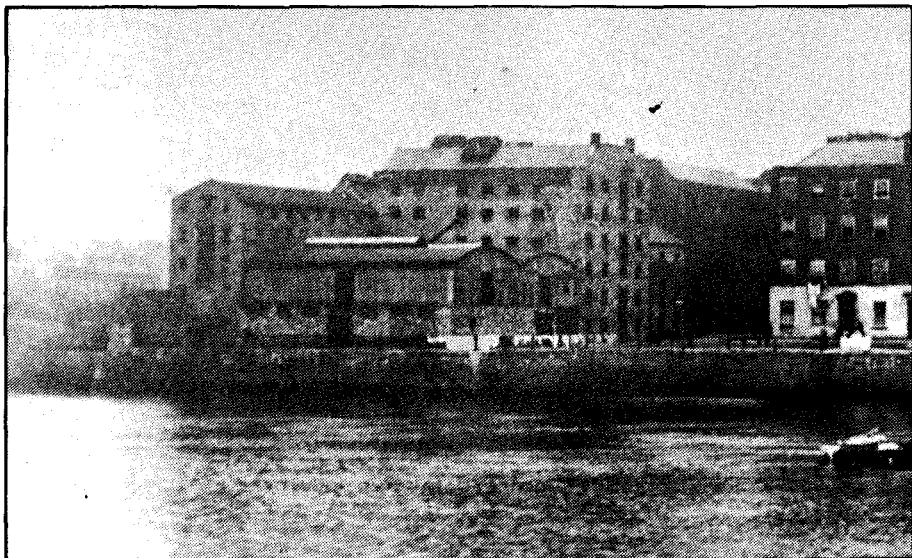


Arthur's Mews, at the rear of the quay houses, in the 1930s.

and chair-cars, while some of the hardier fellows brought great bulging bags away on their backs.

The houses had continued to decline throughout the second half of the nineteenth century and fell badly into disrepair. By the 1900s, the dwellings had become tenements. Large families were often reared in single rooms. Located, as they were, so close to the river's edge,

some of these families did not escape the danger of the twice daily tides that lapped the quay wall and, with such a death-trap so close, tragedies were all too frequent. Bringing up a family in such a hazardous place was a constant worry for parents. In 1911, the city coroner held inquests into the deaths of no less than nine people, mostly children, who had been drowned in the waters of Arthur's Quay.



Martin McGuire's Curragour Mills at Arthur's Quay, circa 1935.

By the 1950s, many of the houses had begun to crumble away and all were eventually demolished. In the 1960s, the Limerick Corporation filled in the quay and slipway and pushed out the waters of the river to form a car-park.

With the building of the biggest shopping complex in the city in 1989 by the building firm of Sisk Construction for the developers Michael Tiernan and Owen O'Callaghan, Arthur's Quay has taken on a new lease of life. And work has already started on the Limerick Corporation's civic park project. A raised, curved riverside embankment, to be faced with stone, a tree-lined promenade, a garden, a central amphitheatre and a bandstand are among the features planned for the park, to be constructed in front of the shopping centre.

Kevin Hannan has placed the new development in its historical context:

When Patrick Arthur tackled the slobland and west of the overcrowded and congested harbour and started building the great stone quay that was to keep his name and memory very much alive for the next 200 years, he created quite a stir among the merchant classes, and, indeed, among the people generally, and when the fine row of splendid red-bricked houses were built well back, and precisely parallel with the quay's edge, the whole complex was the most talked about and interesting feature of the city, and that interest did not flag even when the houses disappeared and the quay itself was covered up. Though the place has been utterly transformed, the name and memory of Patrick Arthur is once again in the news. As if with affection and fidelity the present most ambitious replacement of the old buildings that once gladdened the eye of Arthur himself now bears his name. In the light of modern techniques and building methods, the enormity of the task undertaken by Arthur was not less than that of the present outstanding ornament to the city.

SOURCES

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