

THE CORBALLY DISTRICT

Like other districts around the city of Limerick, Corbally has, for the past sixty years, been undergoing a gradual transformation. Houses have spread everywhere. Up to the thirties, it was a sparsely populated rural district; today it is a considerable town in itself.

Before the building of Athlunkard and Park bridges, the whole area was, more or less, isolated. The land around the canal and the area now known as Healy's Field was an impassable morass, while the tides and flood waters of the Shannon swept up to the gardens of the residences along the Mill Road. The only land approach to Corbally was by a narrow road which was a continuation of the present St. Patrick's Road. This can be traced through Singland Cross, Rhebogogue Cross and the canal bank (on both sides), and through Lower Park. A smaller road linked Pennywell Lane with the ferry that operated near the present O'Dwyer Bridge. This road was transformed by mother nature to a green velvet pathway, lined with beautiful hawthorns. It was known to many generations of local folk as Paddy's Hedge, and was probably the most frequented 'lovers' lane' around the city for two hundred years. In my own time, it was also the happy hunting ground for some of the clergy from St. John's Cathedral, who often put the courting couples to flight.

A public house - probably a shebeen - stood in this boreen about 250 yards from the canal bank, at a point where it turned a sharp angle. Perhaps the proprietor of this alehouse gave his name to the place. Ha'penny well was situated on the canal bank at the entrance to the boreen.

Sweeping down from the high ground of the 'Bun Ard' are the water meadows of Lanahrone, partly taken over by the splendid houses which were built at the end of the nineteen forties by Irish Estates Ltd. The Clare ferry operated near the site of Athlunkard Bridge.

A radical change in the social order of Corbally and Park took place in 1757 when the Shannon Navigation Canal cut through the two roads which served as the only avenues to the city. The whole area became an island, bounded by the Shannon, the Abbey River and the canal, and having only a small hump-backed bridge over the latter waterway at Madden's Lock to connect up the old road with Pennywell Lane.

THE BRIDGES

The construction of Park Bridge during the terror of 1798 proved a great boon and opened up the delights of Corbally to many people for the first time. The building of the beautiful Athlunkard Bridge by the Pain brothers in 1830 provided the second avenue from the city to Co. Clare. Even before the building of the bridges, efforts were made to contain the

BY KEVIN HANNAN

tides and flood waters of the Shannon by raising strong embankments between the Lax Weir and the site of Park Bridge.

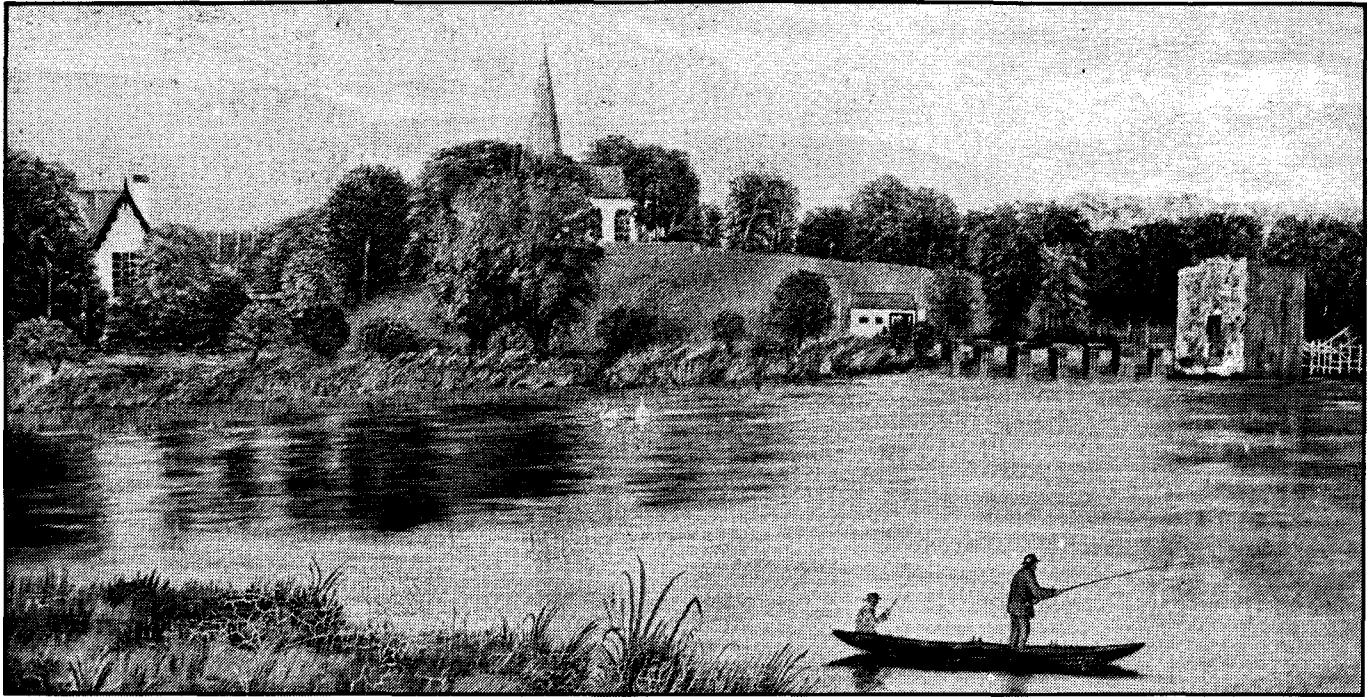
After the building of Athlunkard Bridge, the citizens started their picnic excursions to the Church Fields - the area downstream of the bridge on the right bank - a wholesome amenity that can never more be enjoyed as a result of an ill-planned scheme of houses which spoiled the tranquility of the place and ruined a heartening panorama of green and silver, stretching to the foot of the Clare hills, with the tapering spire of St. Patrick's, at Parteen-a-Lax, lending a pastoral touch to the splendid scene.

THE MILLS

The special features that gave so much character to Corbally were the mills and the Lax Weir. The former were demolished during the Second World War years and no trace remains. There were two mills close to each other. The old mill was built by the Bindon family, who also had a fine mansion close by. It had an undershot wheel that was worked by a stream which owed nothing of its forces to a milldam, the natural fall of the river having been sufficient to provide constant power. The tailrace, which curved to the river almost directly opposite the



Corbally Mill and the Shannon River, 1842.



The Lax Weir, with St. Patrick's Church, Parteen, in the background.

Liberty Stone (this large stone can be seen in the river at low tide opposite the little car park at the end of the Mill Road), has been long filled in.

Great improvements were made by the Gabbett family, who next came into possession of the mill and part of the lands. The millrace was cleaned and made wider, and the long narrow strip of land, which was an island formed by the millstream and the river, was planted with trees. This, in the course of years, became lovingly known to generations of trippers to Corbally as Gabbett's Grove.

The great mill dam was by far the finest and longest structure of its kind to be seen anywhere, and was constructed in conjunction with the new mill, which came into the possession of John Norris Russell, described by Lenihan as 'the most enterprising merchant that Limerick ever saw'.

Though the American-style steel rollers, introduced by James Bannatyne in the 1880s, revolutionised flour milling, Corbally mills worked into the 1920s.

THE LAX WEIR

The oldest and longest lasting feature of Corbally is the Lax Weir, though nothing now remains but the tottering and overgrown piers stretching across the river at the tail of St. Thomas's Island. In compliance with an act of parliament, under Victoria, the weir had an open gap, forty feet wide and in the main flow of the river. This was known as the Queen's Gap. Down through the years, the various owners and lessees were jealous of the numbers of salmon availing of the free passage through the weir, so much so that many stratagems were employed from time to time to discourage the fish from availing of the gap. On one occasion a number of stuffed otters were placed in menacing situations to scare

the fish. Spur walls were raised from the gap to deflect fish into the traps, or cribs. These practices were the subjects of litigation in the courts for much of the latter half of the nineteenth century.

The weir owners had control of the fishery well into the estuary, and long-lasting disputes with the Strand fishermen were constant features of public interest. The most notable action, indeed one of the most important in the legal annals of this country, was the famous case of the fishermen of Limerick versus Malcomson, the lessee of the weir. The case was fought for years by John O' Dea, representing the fishermen of the Strand, Crosbie Row and Town Wall. After years of legal argument, the case was decided in favour of O'Dea in the Irish Court of Error, nine judges out of the twelve deciding against Malcomson. Tragically for O'Dea and the fishermen, the decision was reversed by the English House of Lords. O'Dea died in the fever hospital of the Workhouse in 1864.

The weir, which was established by the early Danish settlers, had a most chequered history and passed through many owners and operators. Among its better known early proprietors were the Dominican Friars, who had much property in the area. In the early 1800s, it was in the possession of Limerick Corporation. Thomas Little operated it under lease for ten years prior to 1834, when it was leased to Poole Gabbett at an annual rent of £300. On the death of Gabbett in 1845, the Malcomson family of Portlaw, Co. Waterford, became the new owners. It is of interest to note that the Limerick Steamship Company was founded by this family. In 1860, the family also erected a public fountain in Athlankard Street, in the north wall of the ruin of William Bourke's house.

The flour milling family of Bannatyne

acquired the Corporations' interest in the weir in 1885 and operated the fishery for many years. The last owners were the Lax Weir Fishery Company. Snap and seine nets were also used in conjunction with the fishery.

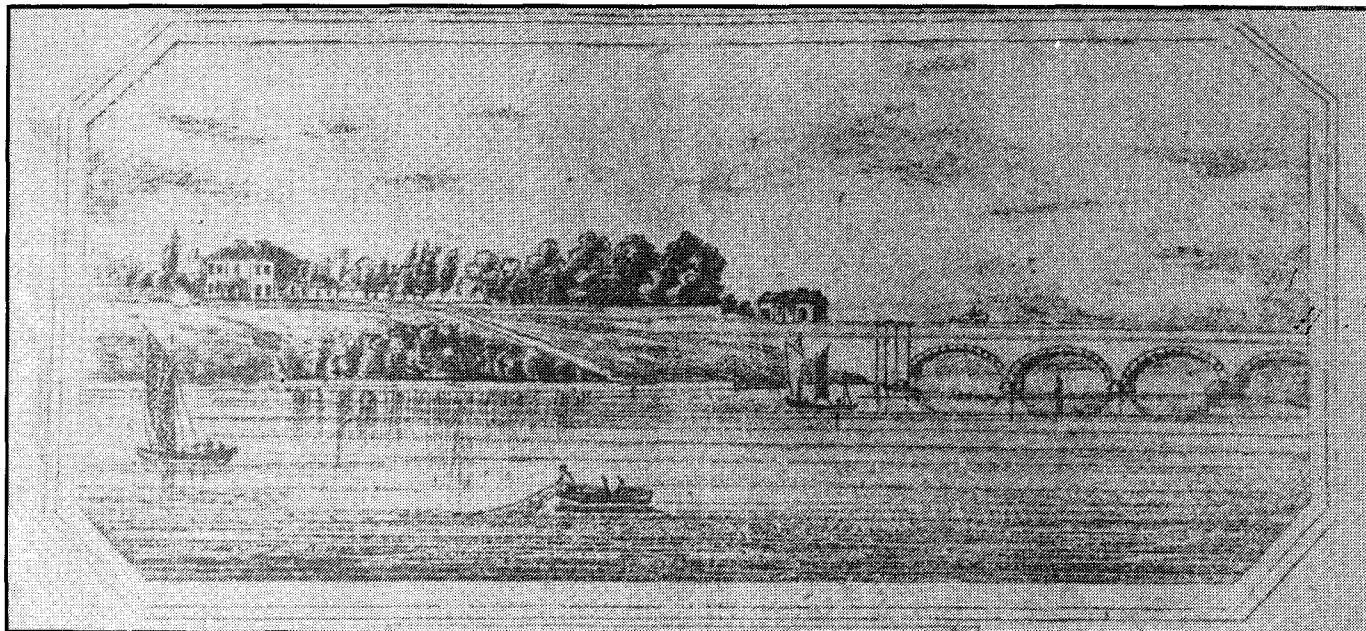
Under the Shannon Fisheries Act of 1935/6 fishing rights of the Shannon were vested in the Electricity Supply Board, which was bound by these Acts to make every effort to make good the damage done to the river by the Shannon Scheme. They afterwards operated Thomond Weir for forty years without the statutory free gap!

The grand sweep of water between the weir and the mill-dam has been known to generations of fishermen and anglers as the free water. Here they could ply their craft without let or hindrance, immune from the attentions of bailiff and landlord. The stretch suffered much, however, from the effects of the hydro-electric works.

ST. THOMAS'S ISLAND

St. Thomas's Island is situated between the weir and the mill-dam. From the mill pier, it looks like a mound of green velvet sloping gently from the river. A few hawthorns break the smoothness here and there, and the upstream end is fringed by some white willows. There is also the inevitable ivy-clad ruin: this was once a fine house built by a wealthy gentleman named Tuthill. There were several owners down through the years, including a man who was confined to the island for six days of the week and who could cross to the mainland only on Sundays, when he was immune from the attentions of a process-server (the writ could only be served on weekdays).

The island was the property of the Dominicans, who also had a church of ease there, prior to 1583, when they were



Athlunkard Bridge, the Tollhouse and Corbally House, 1842.

dispossessed of everything and driven underground.

In later years, the island was owned by a farmer for a short time. It was the custom of this man of the soil to bring his milk to town twice a day in the summer-time. An astute policeman, stationed at the constabulary barrack at the junction of the Mill Road and Corbally Road, noticed that the farmer carried many more tankards than the number of cows he milked would warrant. On examination the suspected vessels contained poteen! Further investigation revealed an elaborate distilling complex was hidden on the island.

KILQUANE

Looking across to the Clare shore, above the island, we can still see the stone wall surrounding the ancient churchyard of Kilquane. There is little else to indicate the situation of this hallowed spot since the cutting down of the splendid yew trees in the early 1970s, except the ivied ruin and a few of the taller memorials that peep over the wall. Here was a place, so close to the city, that gave one a strange solemnity of feeling - a feeling that is sometimes part of a visit to a remote country churchyard, without exciting the more disturbing thoughts that usually follow a visit to a much used cemetery. The isolation and tranquility of the place is fast coming to a close as the drab tentacles of concrete and roof-tiles stretch out to engulf it.

The district of Kilquane (Parteen) was in the parish of St. Patrick's before 1704, after the passing of the Registration Act, decreeing that . . . 'after the festival of St. John the Baptist in 1704, every popish priest remaining in the country should give a return of his name, his place of abode, of his age, of the parish of which he pretended to be parish priest, of the place and time he was ordained and of the name of the bishop or ordinary who ordained him'.

The parish priest of St. Patrick's, Fr. Malachy Ryan, registered in St. Francis' Abbey, where several other priests of the county and liberties suffered the same humiliation. (The city clergy registered at the Tholsel). Owing to infirmity, he was unable to travel to Ennis to register for that part of his parish which lay in Co. Clare, so Kilquane was ceded to Killeely (afterwards Parteen/Meelick). The two churches in Parteen today are dedicated to St. Patrick.

Perhaps the most interesting feature of Killquane is the strong traditional belief that Philip McAdam, who lies buried there, was the traitor who assisted the Williamites in their crossing of the river to the Clare shore. There is no historical evidence to support this contention.

The churchyard also holds the grave of Fr. Matthew Moloney, parish priest of St. Mary's and vicar-general of the diocese in the years leading up to the Williamite occupation. He administered the affairs of the diocese in the absence of the bishop, Dr. John Moloney, who was in France during that period. After the treaty, he was sentenced to transportation beyond the seas. It is not known if this sentence was carried out, though it is certain that he was brought to Cobh for embarkation, but it is equally certain that he is buried in Kilquane, where his grave is marked by a massive stone slab which was fragmented shortly after its erection. This is said to have been the work of infuriated Williamite supporters who recognised it when attending a funeral.

THE HOUSES

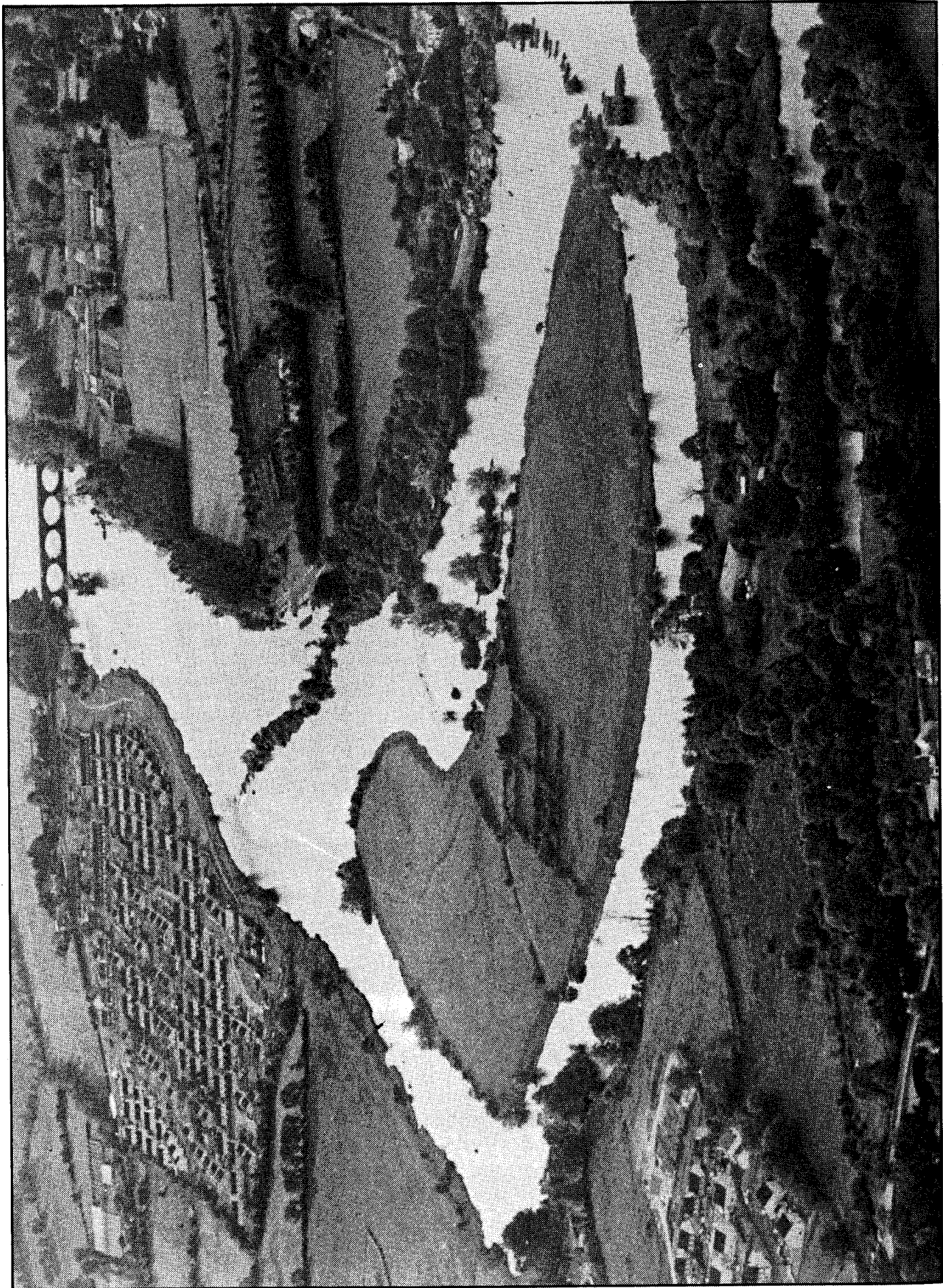
Park House, demolished in the 1960s in the development of the housing estate of College Park, was a fine mansion standing in its own grounds when purchased by Dr. John Young in 1809 for use as the diocesan seminary, which he had established at Palmerstown in 1796, and afterwards moved to Newgate Lane and

Peter's Cell. Later, the college was moved to Lord Limerick's house at 103 Henry Street. *Park House* then served as a bishop's residence until Dr. George Butler purchased the mansion that stood on the site of the present college. This was formerly the home of a prominent local merchant, Pierce Shannon, who had purchased the greater part of the townland of Corbally from Col. Monsell in 1833. Shannon was a man of outstanding drive and enterprise, for he built several of the fine houses in the district and laid out the grounds. He also laid out and developed the present Corbally Road from the top of the Mill Road to Athlunkard Bridge.

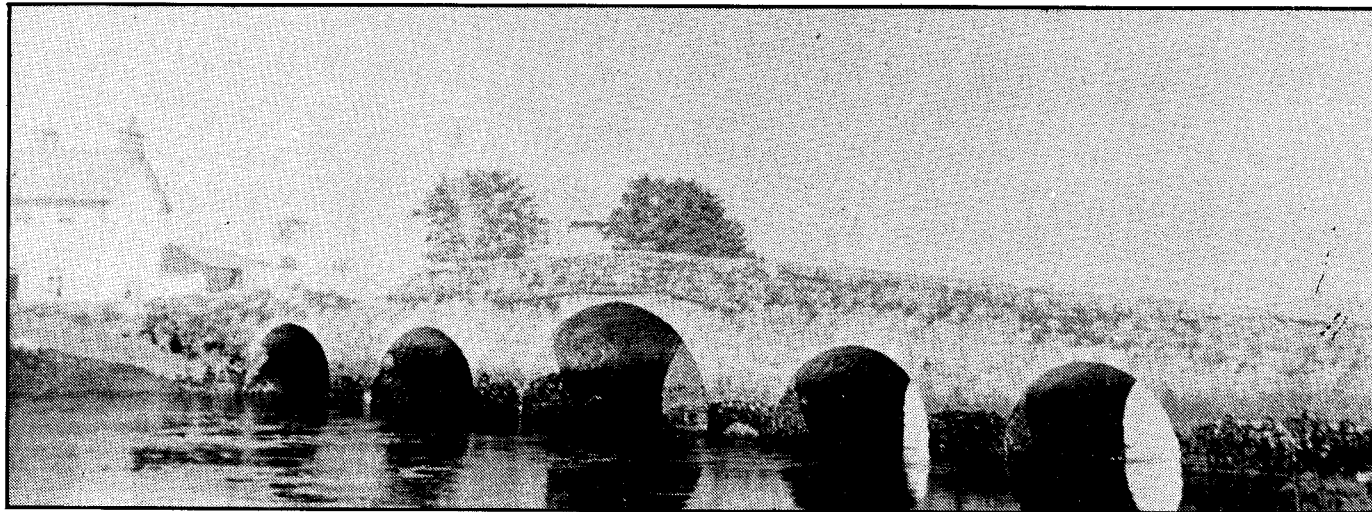
He became an alderman of the Limerick Corporation and was elected mayor in 1844. While in office, he used his great influence to have the city boundary extended to Corbally and Park. He died suddenly while conducting a meeting of the Corporation and is buried in St. Munchin's churchyard.

Some fine residences stood on the high ground at the right hand side of Corbally Road. *Janemount* was the home of bakery proprietor, Stephen Tubridy. Next was *Avondale*, home of the famous hatter, Van Eesbeck, whose premises were at the William Street/O'Connell Street corner. Next was *Ashton Cottage*, which changed hands many times. *Roseville*, the residence of William Holliday, with its most beautiful garden, was the showpiece of the district. Trippers to Corbally could not pass the gate without feasting their eyes on the exotic wonderland. St. Clare Hobson's residence, *Lanahrone House*, stood well in from the road and commanded a splendid view of the river. The site, and much of the lands, has been taken over by the Irish Estates housing development. Hobson is reputed to have been the first man in Limerick to drive a motor car.

William McDonnell, of *India Ville*, could claim another 'first': he introduced the manufacture of margarine to Ireland.



St. Thomas's Island, with Athlunkard Bridge in the background.



Old Park Bridge, Corbally.

McDonnell, who died in 1921, had a long and honoured life in the public life of the city, and was prominently identified with its commercial and industrial interests. His name, as city treasurer, is to be seen on the entablature of Spillane's tower which was built on the Corkanree embankment in 1870.

The well known Dean Bunbury lived at *St. Anne's*, next door. This was, at one time, the Church of Ireland deanery. Next was *Geraldine*, once the home of the Postmaster General. *River View*, next on the way out, was the home of John Able, a man who certainly lived up to his name. He erected an observatory on the roof of the house and spent much of his time looking away from the earth. With the co-operation of his immediate neighbour, Ned Fitt of *Mary Ville*, he built a perfectly round gatelodge between the two properties, the building being devided in the centre, internally.

Other fine houses were *Woodlands*, *Mary Ville*, *Mary Villas*, *Roseneath*, *Lax Weir Cottage*, *Myrtle Lodge*, *Corbally House*, and the most beautifully situated of all, *Corbally Cottage*, the home of the Walnutt family. Some of these houses still stand: others have lost their value and identity through the encroachment of modern housing. Many of the buildings reflected the judgement and good taste of their owners and of those who selected and laid out the sites. We should be grateful to those early proprietors for their foresight in planting the beautiful trees which are now in their full maturity. The great Californian redwood in the garden of John Dundon's beautiful home was one of those planted in 1815 to celebrate the victory of Waterloo. These splendid specimens, planted at that time, were known as Wellingtonias.

Not far from the old gate to the Bishop's Palace was situated the Killeen graveyard, where, for many years, the remains of unbaptised infants and suicides were buried. The practice of prohibiting the interment of these in consecrated ground prevailed into the present century. Nowadays, many are ashamed to admit that such practices ever existed.

In recent years, many of these places were consecrated and used as general cemeteries.

O'Driscoll's well known hostelry was in the possession of a ropemaker during the building of the Limerick/Ennis railway in 1859. Since the railway line could not be diverted from intersecting the rope-walk, a small bridge was erected over the permanent way so that the craftsman could continue with his industry. This bridge can be seen at the end of Mr. O'Driscoll's car park.

The Bard of Thomond lived for a while in a small cottage near Park House during the episcopate of Dr. George Butler, who was believed to be a very rich man. The Bard once remarked afterwards that he "lived on the estate of the mitred millionaire". No doubt this uncharitable remark was a result of the bishop's refusal to give his imprimatur to the Bard's voluminous 'Anthems to Mary' - poems in praise of the Blessed Virgin which the bard had sent to him for his approval and which were returned without comment.

PARK BRIDGE

Until Athlunkard Bridge was finished Park Bridge, built by the Vandeleur family, was private property. During that time there were clauses in the leases ensuring an abatement of £2 per acre for Corbally tenants if the bridge should fall into disrepair.

The approaches to the bridge, on both sides, had sharp angles. The only approach from the city side was by Sir Harry's Mall, as Athlunkard St. was not constructed until 1824. The building of the approach road on the other side presented great difficulties, as the area was largely a swamp. Of the two right angles in the roadway near the bridge, one, the 'Goose's Corner', was long renowned as a meeting place for the boys and girls of St. Mary's parish. Dances were held there in the summertime; on other occasions the elders puffed away the hours planning and debating.

Early in the last century poultry markets were held at the corner, especially at

Michaelmas, when those who could afford a goose would never miss the market. A Michaelmas goose was just as important at that time as the Christmas turkey is today. It is believed that on one occasion many of the geese on offer at the market were found to be suffering from a strange disease which resulted in the slaughter and burial of the geese on the spot: hence, the 'Goose's Corner'.

KENNEDY'S BRIDGE

A short distance downstream of Athlunkard Bridge, on the Limerick side, can be seen a small single arched bridge; this is all that remains of an attempt to build a bridge across the river by a wealthy merchant named Kennedy. The undertaking was well advanced when the might of the river asserted itself and the project was abandoned. The arch is till known as 'Kennedy's Bridge'.

CORBALLY CASTLE

The situation of Corbally Castle baffled many historians of the area in the past. Even the painstaking Lenihan failed to find any trace of it. The elusive building is mentioned in many old documents but its whereabouts was unknown. The mystery was cleared up recently in a rare and original map in the Hunt Museum at Plassey. In this the situation of the castle is clearly set out opposite the Island point where the Abbey River leaves the Shannon. Its complete disappearance can be explained in the adjoining embankment, known as 'Stoney Bank'. I believe that the entire fabric of the castle was used in the construction of this bank.

THE MILL ROAD

The Mill Road is one of the oldest thoroughfares in the city. It served as an avenue from the Lax Weir to the city from very early times, long before the mills were built. To-day it retains little of its old-world charm: modern housing 'development' has robbed it of much of its character, and the grand sweep of the Shannon to which it once led is now the quiet weed-choked remains of a great river.