

Walker's Distillery, Thomondgate, with the manager's house on the far left of picture.

THE LIMERICK DISTILLERY IN 1886

The invention of the art of distillation has been attributed to Arabian physicians. Other theories trace its origins to Egypt, India and China, the Arabians being relegated to mere 'improvers' of the craft. It is difficult to give a precise year for the introduction of the distillation of *aqua vitae* (water of life) to Europe, but the date is believed to coincide with the commencement of the art in England, and is generally attributed to the period of Henry II (1133-1189). It is also thought that the skill was known in Ireland before the English acquired it. The name 'whiskey' is derived from *usquebaugh* (*uisce beatha*), the Irish and Scottish Highland's Gaelic word which also means the water of life, and is a corruption of the Gaelic word *uisce*. The word whiskey was coined towards the end of the 1770s, as it is not to be found in any record prior to that time.

In 1886, Alfred Barnard, a Londoner, came to Limerick. He was then a director, and subsequently took over the secretaryship, of *Harper's Weekly Gazette* (later *Harper's Wine and Spirit Gazette*). His visit was part of a mission throughout the United Kingdom, and he travelled extensively by road, rail and steamer. His intention was to publish a description and history of the 28 distilleries in Ireland, 129 in Scotland and 4 in England, which he inspected. During his tour, he acquired a thorough knowledge of the industry, especially of the process, plants and production methods used in the operations.

Barnard began his journeyings with at least one advantage – he believed that good whiskey was the most wholesome spirit in the world. The distillers he

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visited responded equally positively to his investigations, and he was invariably met with courtesy and kindness. He found that the pioneers of the trade were the smugglers of Ireland and Scotland and that their illicit methods formed the foundation on which the vast whiskey distilling interests had been established. Poteen-making was a flourishing business in Ireland and, in 1806, over 25% of the entire whiskey production was estimated to have come from unlicensed stills. In the north and west of the country, where peat and water were plentiful, and poverty endemic, few industries gave as much employment, and none gave so much pleasure. During the years 1811 to 1813, no less than 19,067 unauthorized stills were destroyed by the revenue and military. As many as 6,000 illegal stills were seized in 1820, when the flow of poteen was 3 to 4 times more than the output of 'parliament' whiskey. However, during the nineteenth century, the number of licenced distillers in Ireland declined swiftly – from 210 in 1798 to 23 in 1869. In Scotland and Ireland, the locations of illicit stills, in caves, bothies, byres, ravines and on bleak mountainsides, often became the sites of the later licenced establishments which Barnard explored. He discovered, for example, that, of the Irish distilleries, at least Bushmills, in County Antrim, and two others at Brusna, near Kilbeggan, on the borders of the King's County (Offaly) and Westmeath, had smuggling origins.

In 1823, there was a reduction in the duty payable on spirits, but from then on, throughout the remainder of the

century, there was a gradual rise in the tax. Both Disraeli and Gladstone increased the duty, the latter instituting, from 1860, a uniform levy on home-made spirits in the three countries (Ireland, Scotland and England) at 10 shillings (50p) per proof gallon – the level at which it stood during Barnard's tour. In 1886, consumption in the three countries was as follows: Ireland, 4.9 millions; England 15.2 millions and Scotland 6.1 millions, proof gallons. Ireland had shown a falling trend from 1840 onwards, a decline attributed to the successful work of the temperance missions, but almost certainly also due to the effects of the Famine years, to a lack of grain for making whiskey, and to the decreasing population.

Despite the disappearance of many Irish distilleries, which had shrunk to 28 by this time, Irish whiskey began to enter into competition in England with gin, rum and brandy. In the decade 1866-'75, it attained considerable popularity there; during the 1870s, it was being seriously challenged by Scotch, which was then becoming a fashionable and popular drink. Forceful advertising and hard selling helped Scotch to increase its hold on public taste in England, especially in the London market. The English had to be persuaded to drink whiskey – but which would they choose? In the next decade, Irish whiskey fell from favour, as the following figures show:

Imports of spirits to England

Year	From Scotland, proof gals.	From Ireland proof gals.
1880	1.8 million	1.6 million
1888	2.2 million	1.5 million

Merchants had correctly foreseen that a



Thomond Bridge, with the distillery in the background.

moderately-priced whiskey could be obtained from judicious blendings of malt and grain spirit; in the case of certain undistinguished whiskeys, blending made them palatable and profitable. James Buchanan had already devised his celebrated 'Black & White' blend, which became a distinctive brand name.

By this time, Irish distillers were exporting to every land to which emigrants had found their way. After England, the United States was an expanding market, but they did not overlook possibilities for new markets throughout the Empire, especially in India. There had also been many changes in the working of the distilleries, which had, by then, grown into a legalized and vast revenue-producing industry, and illegal distillation had been virtually stamped out. Under an able staff of revenue officers, the 'evil' had been almost entirely overcome, and the following decennial statement shows the number of detections made over a fifty year period:

Year	Ireland	Scotland	England	Total
1834	8,192	692	314	9,198
1844	2,574	177	213	2,964
1854	1,853	73	301	2,227
1864	2,757	19	84	2,860
1874	796	6	12	814
1884	829	22	5	856

There was, however, a slight revival of illicit distilling in the 1880s in both Ireland and Scotland. Its resurgence in England was almost entirely connected with Irish immigrants, as were the shebeens of Glasgow. The Irish enthusiasm for smuggling produced about

1,000 detections a year in the 1880s, whereas in Scotland the number had fallen to about 20 annually.

Alfred Barnard clearly derived much satisfaction and enjoyment from his journeyings, although they were sometimes long and wearisome, as when he travelled from Galway to Limerick. Having concluded his inspection at Mr. Perse's distillery, Nun's Island, Galway, he set out for Limerick, and this was to be:

one of the most tedious journeys we had experienced during our lengthened stay in Ireland. The train proceeded for a greater part of the way at a snail's pace, through an uninteresting track, and to make matters worse, the railway guard kept the train waiting at several stations whilst he imparted the latest political news and local gossip to the stationmaster and his clerk.

Nearing his destination, the scene changed and Barnard found himself travelling rapidly through more pleasant countryside, along which the fast-flowing waters of the Shannon swept on to the sea. Soon the spires of Limerick came into view, and, shortly afterwards, he reached the Great Southern & Western Railway Station at Nelson (now Parnell) Street. Here he found an 'omnibus' from the hotel waiting for him. After dining, he 'sauntered forth in the cool of the evening to take stock' of his surroundings. He visited some well-filled churches in Newtown Pery, and then strolled along the riverside, before returning to his hotel.

On the following morning, Barnard

was driven to Archibald Walker's Distillery in Thomondgate, by way of Thomond Bridge. Over 70 people were employed there, many for a good number of years. On his arrival, he was welcomed by the manager and conducted on a walk through the establishment. The works and buildings covered more than 6 acres and were built, beside the Shannon, to a functional plan, so as to work largely by gravitation, and there was, naturally enough, an inexhaustible supply of water for every purpose. He commenced his inspection at the maltings and barley-lofts, which formed a large building, 203 feet long and 103 feet wide, designed in the shape and appearance of an old baronial castle, having two small, inner courtyards, each of which was reached through a stone archway.

The grain-lofts, adjoining the maltings, were 110 feet long and 90 feet wide, and were situated over a large bonded warehouse, where a powerful little engine hoisted the grain to these floors at the rate of ten barrels a minute. The two malting-floors were connected with four kilns, two in the centre, and one at each end of the building; two were floored with perforated Worcester tiles, the others with wire cloth; and all of them were heated by open furnaces. The maltings were connected with each other on both floors by two spacious galleries.

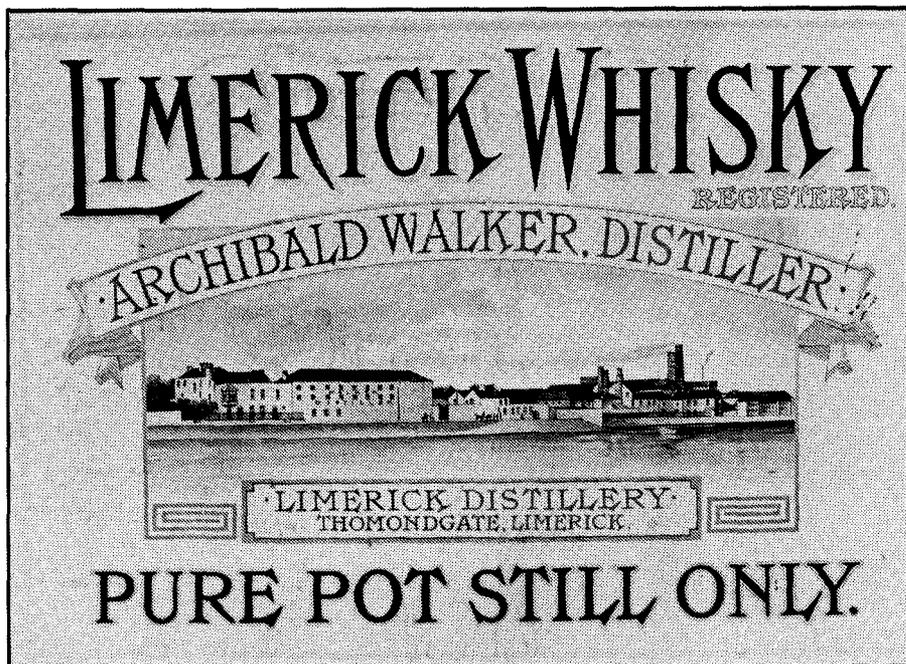
On his way to the mill, Barnard passed through the brewhouse, which contained the four large brewing-tanks, etc. The mill was a spacious, lofty building, divided into two separate departments, one for the grinding of grain, and the other for malt; the former contained four pairs of stones and the

latter two pairs. The engine used in the mill was one of 30 horse-power and, when necessary, could be connected with another of the same size, which drove the machinery of the distillery. In both mills, the grist (grain for grinding) and ground-malt was carried by a double set of elevators and hoppers to the upper floors of the mill, then along a bridge into the grist-loft over the mash-house. The mash-house contained two large mash-tuns, with stirring gear and draining-plates.

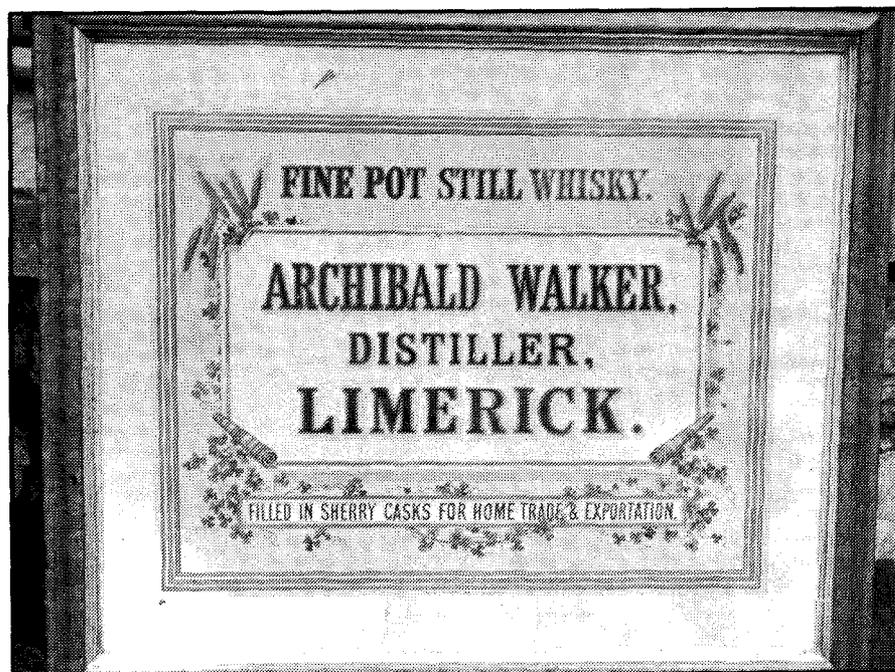
He then inspected the coolers, which formed a part of the roof of the mash-house, and also the water-tanks, placed on the roofs of the adjoining buildings, at a higher altitude to the refrigerators. At the suggestion of his guide, he climbed on to a platform elevated over the tanks, where he had a splendid view of the Clare Hills, the counties of Limerick and Tipperary, the windings of the River Shannon, King John's Castle, then being used as a barracks, and King's Island, on the opposite side of the river, where a party of cavalry were exercising that day. Returning to the main building, he came to the cooling-room, which contained four refrigerators. He also checked the pump-room and the worm-tub of the wash stills, which contained nine copper coils.

Alfred Barnard next inspected the fire-fighting equipment. Six years before, a serious fire had broken out in one of the spirit-safes of the distillery, which interrupted distilling for a week and caused about £2,000 worth of damage. The *Limerick Chronicle*, in its edition of 31 January, 1880, carried this colourful account of the fire and the successful efforts of the three city fire brigades to bring it under control:

On Thursday evening, a few minutes after six o'clock, a fire, which for a considerable time assumed an aspect of a most portentous character, broke out in one of the spirit-safes of the Distillery of Messrs. Archibald Walker and Company, Thomondgate. The origin of the fire was of the most accidental nature, and no blame whatsoever can be attached to any of the employees of the concern. It would appear that the non-condensed spirit-vapour suddenly ignited, the flame immediately spreading to the various inflammable materials around. In a few minutes the entire of that portion of the premises was in a sheet of flame, and as the burning building was in immediate contiguity with the extensive spirit vaults, and explosion for a time seemed to be almost imminent. Had this taken place the entire building must have been entirely destroyed. Upon the ringing of the Distillery alarm bell a large but extremely orderly crowd collected in the neighbourhood of the burning premises. Without loss of time messengers were dispatched to the several engine stations for assistance. At 7 o'clock the Corporation fire engine under Inspector Forrest with his men in full uniform



Bar mirror advertising Limerick Distillery.

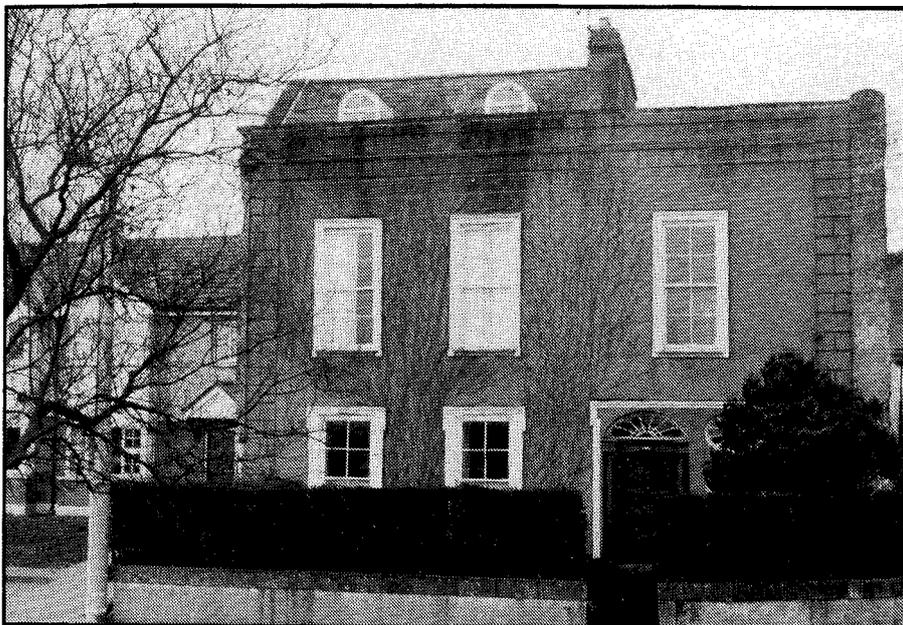


'The whiskey made in this distillery is of good reputation and full-bodied and is said to possess rapidly maturing qualities'.

arrived upon the scene. Five minutes subsequent to this, the Merchants' Fire Brigade came up in dashing style, the engine being drawn by two fine horses ... Accompanying it were the full brigade of the Volunteers, comprising eleven members, attired in brazen helmets, and appointments perfect. Their admirable organisation elicited universal admiration from the assemblage ... It being ... the maiden essay of the brigade at an actual conflagration, speculation was rife as to the manner in which it would perform its devoir. The West of England engine, which for many years past has done such good work for the citizens, was the last to arrive on the scene ... About ten o'clock it became apparent that the fire had been

completely got under control, and by eleven it was altogether extinguished. To say that the young gentlemen who composed the Merchants' Fire Brigade exhibited undoubted proofs, both of discipline and courage, would, indeed, convey but a partial encomium upon their services ... indeed, the admirable services rendered by the brigade, and to their magnificent engine, may be attributed the speedy extinguishing of the flames.

During his visit, Barnard was impressed with the safety precautions. The fire-fighting equipment was the most modern of its kind – fire-cocks and hoses were distributed throughout the distillery and



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ground-boxes with hydrants, were placed along the numerous courts, and all were connected with the watertanks on the top of the building. A fire-engine was also kept permanently on the premises.

Crossing the square, he next entered the still-house, an elevated structure which contained three copper-pot stills. One of the stills was constructed in the previous year for the manufacture of real Irish whiskey, and was regarded as a model still, embracing every improvement which had suggested itself to its renowned builders, John Miller & Company of Dublin.

Continuing his inspection, he went to the spirit store, where he saw the various appliances for casking and weighing the whiskey. Then, passing Archibald Walker's house, which was located within the enclosed premises, he saw the four bonded stores, the excise offices, and the carpenters', engineers', coppersmiths' and brassfitters' shops.

The manager then invited Barnard to

his house, a picturesque old mansion, immediately outside the plant on the very edge of the river. He was much impressed with the scene from the bay-window, which 'commands a view that could not be surpassed from any house in Ireland; comprehending the city of Limerick, the river and shipping, King's Island - where the artillery and cavalry daily exercise, sailing and fishing-boats under the very window, and many other pictures too numerous to mention'. After tasting the 'make', he visited the garden, luxuriant in vegetables and flowers, and went from there to the extensive stables and cartsheds and, finally, to the cooperage.

What was his verdict of the Limerick whiskey? 'The whiskey made in this distillery is of good reputation and full-bodied and is said to possess rapidly maturing qualities. It is designated "Pot Still Real Irish Whiskey", and is sold all over the three kingdoms, and the annual output is 300,000 gallons'.

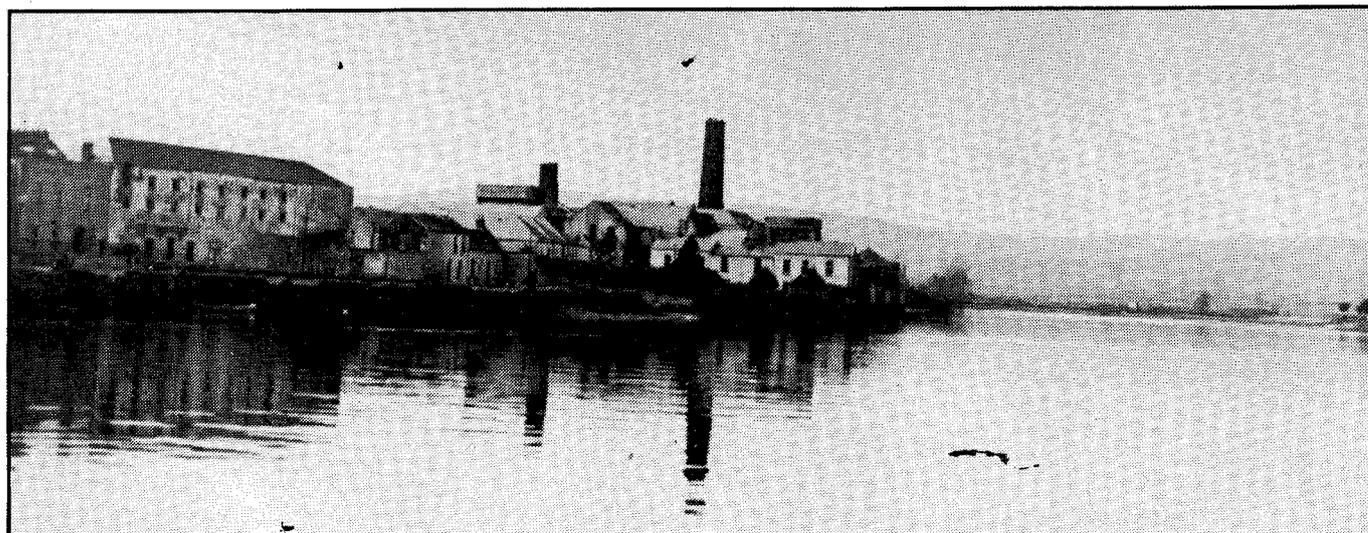
On leaving the distillery, he completed his tour of the city before

returning to his hotel, having arranged to start for Cork by train. Alfred Barnard enjoyed his rambles to over 160 distilleries throughout the three countries, and he sampled the fare in each and every one of them. After his lengthy travels, he stated, with a great deal of delight, pride and some nostalgia, that he could not 'refrain from expressing the delight with which I look back upon my visits and associations with the distillers ... my extremely pleasurable intercourse with them ... a more agreeable and hospitable class does not exist. Everywhere I was received courteously, and in many places with kindly hospitality'.

Alfred Barnard's book *The Whisky Distilleries of the United Kingdom*, was published by *Harper's Weekly Gazette* in the following year (1887). The author, in his preface, modestly claims that he has no practical knowledge of distilling, or even any close connections with the industry, but it is clear, in the words of J.A. Glen, who wrote the introduction to the 1969 edition of the book, that Barnard was a 'Londoner with a lively and inquisitive turn of mind'. He was also a prolific writer and an indefatigable traveller and, in 1889-'91, wrote a monumental four-volume work, *The Noted Breweries of Great Britain and Ireland*. In 1895, another one of his books, *Orchards and Gardens Ancient and Modern*, was published. We are fortunate that he has left us a lively and detailed account of his visit to the Limerick Distillery in 1886.

SOURCES

1. *The Whisky Distilleries of the United Kingdom* by Alfred Barnard, *Harper's Weekly Gazette*, 1887.
2. New Introduction by Miss J.A. Glen to the 1969 edition of Alfred Barnard's book, David & Charles Limited, Devon.
3. *Foclóir Gaeilge - Béarla le Niall O Dónaill*, 1977.
4. *Lewis's Atlas of the Counties of Ireland*, 1837.
5. *Limerick Chronicle*, 29 January, 1880.
6. *Ibid*, 31 January, 1880.



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