

# THE WALLS OF LIMERICK

BY KEVIN HANNAN

It is not easy to imagine that only a short 230 years ago, Limerick was completely enclosed by stout stone walls, and a person wishing to leave or visit the city had to do so through one of its seventeen gates, and, if carrying goods, had to pay a fee to the toll-keeper. Tolls were payable at the gates commanding main roads leading to and from the city and opening on to the river. Thomond Gate, Mungret Gate and St. John's Gate were the principal portals. Tolls were put up for letting each year, and at the three main gates, tolls always commanded the highest figure. In a record of 1672, noted by the historian Maurice Lenihan, the tolls of St. John's Gate were let for one year of £100.10s. The tolls payable were as follows:

<i>Pack of Wool</i>	<i>3d.</i>
<i>Bag of Hops</i>	<i>3d.</i>
<i>Pack of Cloth</i>	<i>3d.</i>
<i>Firkin of Butter</i>	<i>1d.</i>
<i>Hogg</i>	<i>½d.</i>
<i>Sheepe</i>	<i>½d.</i>
<i>Aquavitae-Pot</i>	<i>3d.</i>

Gates were closed at a regular hour each night, later in summer and earlier in winter, much like the pub closing hours at the present time.

When the Anglo-Normans had established themselves in the city in the late twelfth century, their first instinctive urge was to fortify it. In those days, there was little rest, people lived all the time in fear of invasion by neighbouring factions – land has always been the bone of contention (and still is): it was a time when might was right. Those who lived in rural areas, and could afford to do so, built themselves strong tower-houses, where they were safe from attacks by their enemies, while the food and water lasted. The entire countryside is dotted with the remains of these fortified houses.

The work of putting Limerick in a state of defence against outside attack began early in the thirteenth century with the building of King John's Castle. Lenihan tells us that, in 1237, a toll was

granted for the purpose of enclosing the city with a wall. By the end of the fourteenth century, the island city was well fortified, having two main gates at Thomond Bridge and Baal's Bridge, and nine lesser gates, whose functions have never been explained. Along the river between Baal's Bridge and the castle there were three gates: Creagh Gate, Key Gate, and Bow Gate, all remembered today in the streets which once led to them, Creagh Lane, Quay (Key) Lane (now Bridge Street) and Bow Lane (now Augustine Place). These gates led only to the river, and their situations so baffled our historians that they evoked neither explanation nor detailed observations. Apparently, the gates opened on to the river, which was an important lifeline to the city. Bow Gate and Key Gate certainly opened to the harbour. It must be noted that the customs' duties at the Key Gate and Bow Gate were the same as those at St. John's Gate, but the business was much slacker, as the tolls were let for only £20 a year. This indicates that trade through the port in the seventeenth century was rather poor. The position of Newgate, which, according to H.G. Leask, was across Nicholas Street, between the present Newgate Lane and St. Francis Place, has long baffled explanation and still remains a mystery. The function of the five northern gates from the castle to Baal's Bridge is equally difficult to explain. They all opened on to a breen, part of which is still to be seen on the Island Road, which led to Baal's Bridge Gate. It is likely that this road was inundated during times of heavy Shannon floods and spring tides, as the river at that time was not contained by embankments. The twin sallyports in the city wall that cut through the Dominican Priory, still preserved in the grounds of St. Mary's convent, tell their own story. The Dominicans had to have access to their six or seven acres outside the walls.

## The Irishtown

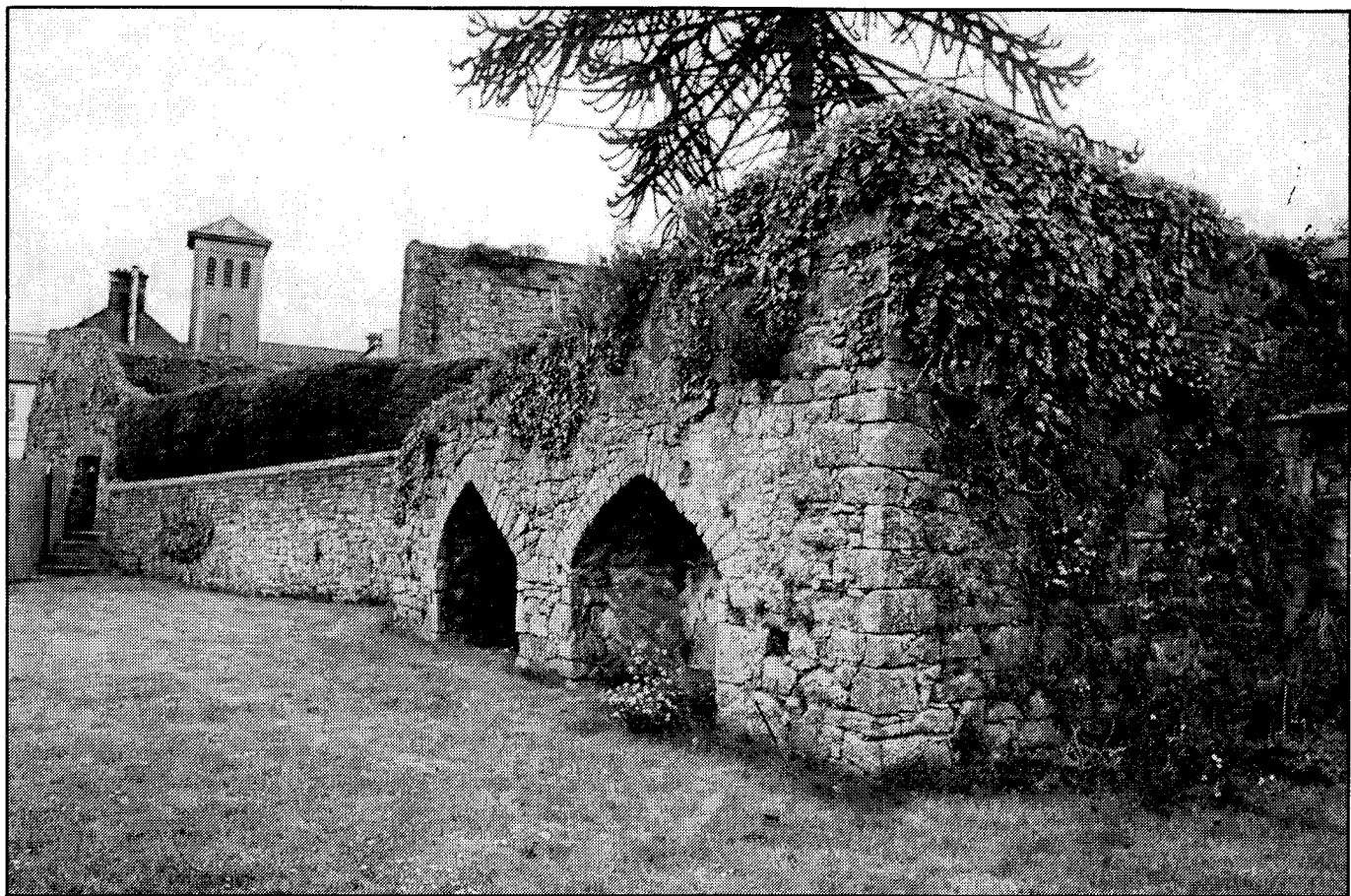
During the early years of the Norman occupation, many of the natives were

gradually squeezed out of the old town, not being amenable to the strange habits and customs of the occupiers. Others were deprived of their property and unceremoniously turfed out. Most of these settled in the southern suburb and formed a considerable community, which became known as the Irishtown, a name still much in use today. This became so important an enclave, straddling the major roads to Kilmallock and Mungret, that it was decided to build a great wall around it. This work was slow and went on through the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Towards the end of the fifteenth century, the citadel complex was completed, the main features of which are still well preserved: the gate house and inner gate can be seen in the grounds of St. John's Hospital.

Obviously, the Irishtown fortifications were much stronger than those in the Englishtown; they were much longer under construction and had to be stronger, as they were without the protection of surrounding water. Later on, during the respite following the retreat of the Williamite forces to winter quarters after their failure to take Limerick in 1690, the walls on the eastern and south eastern side of the city were strengthened by great earthen ramparts. But this was the end of fortified Limerick, as the hopes and resolution that went into the strengthening of the defences proved useless against the turn and treachery of events.

The walls were to stand for seventy years after the Treaty but only to evoke memories of terrible times gone before.

From the middle of the eighteenth century, the citizens of walled towns and cities all over Europe began the task of throwing down the once life-supporting fortifications which could no longer afford them protection from the advances in artillery power. In this melancholy exercise, Limerick was no exception. After the old place was declared an open city in 1760, no time was lost in dismantling the walls. There seems to have been no constraints or emotional attachments in the work of opening up



*Sallyports in the walls of Limerick, in the grounds of St. Mary's Convent.*

the city to the four winds, and the fragments we admire today owe nothing of their survival to any pre-arranged plan or to the loving care that one might expect from those who might have thought of presenting posterity with the gift of parts of the stout old walls, which had frustrated Ireton, William of Orange and de Ginkle.

Despite the greater awareness in recent times of the importance of fostering the remains of our city walls, those who sought to have them placed in the control of some appropriate authority got nothing more than icy platitudes, recriminations and expressions of a desire to see the responsibility resting with someone else.

The responsibility of the Office of Public Works stops with King John's Castle; but who has responsibility for the fragments of the walls scattered over the Irishtown and Englishtown? These would have been flattened years ago were it not for the sanctuary afforded by their situation. A splendid example of this immunity from vandalism can be seen and enjoyed in the grounds of St. Mary's Convent; likewise the fine stretch of wall between the New Road and Old Clare Street has been protected, up to recently, by the complete privacy of its situation and by the ramparts on the city side which reach almost to the top of the wall in places. This work was not entirely in vain, for the strengthening

treatment applied at that time has helped to preserve this fine section of the wall, whose crumbling masonry has never resounded to the restorer's trowel.

The two sections in Watergate are badly in need of restoration, especially the short stretch at the rear of Joss's Lane. The fine part in Playhouse Lane has been restored by the Limerick Civic Trust, in conjunction with a local property developer. This was the ugliest piece of masonry imaginable and came into view for the first time after the buildings that completely surrounded it were removed some years ago. Before its restoration, it bore witness to its long-time use as a boundary between the back yards of the houses on the western side of Black Bull Lane and Harrison Lee's foundry, pockmarked here and there throughout its length with slipshod infill of every description, and surrounded by filth and rubbish.

Thanks to the intervention of the Office of Public Works, the Thomond Archaeological Society and Limerick Corporation, further damage to this section of the wall was prevented. The inner facing stones were restored and arches made during the use of the site as a foundry were secured by Limerick Civic Trust, acting on the advice of the Office of Public Works. During the restoration, a medieval gunloop, long covered over, was rediscovered, refuting doubts expressed by some at the time

about the authenticity of this part of the city wall.

The wall between the guard house and St. John's Gate, the inner gate, and the wall abutting it was recently restored through the good offices of the then chairman of the Civic Trust. This work of preservation is most important, as the remains of the city fortifications are of great interest because of their historic role in the sieges of Limerick.

While every fragment of old town and city walls in England are under close protection, the ancient walls of Limerick have no official protectors. One would have thought that our local authority would gladly have taken into care these valuable parts of our heritage, but as far back as 1930, we find that efforts were being made to pass the responsibility to the Office of Public Works. The *Limerick Leader* of that time reported: 'The Corporation Improvements Committee recommend that the remains of the old town walls should be in charge of the Board of Works under the National Monuments Acts. The old town wall is outstanding in our annals as having been connected with the sieges of Limerick etc.' A query by Alderman Madigan at a subsequent meeting elicited the dismal information that 'the Board was not interested'.

Sad to relate, things have not changed much in this respect. Those who care are still all too few.