

THE GRANARY

BY JIM KEMMY

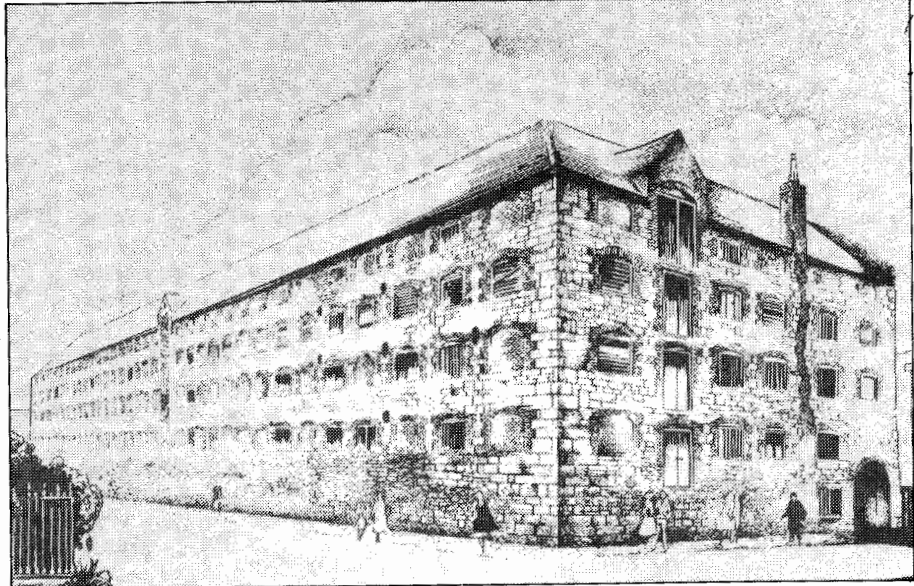
In 1760, the walls of Limerick were demolished and the city was extended to the south and the south-west into South Prior's Land. This third town was named Newtown Pery after the man who was mainly responsible for its construction, Edmund Sexton Pery.

Up to the time of this development much of the area surrounding the site of the building now known as the Granary, was a marshland called Mardyke, to which sportsmen came from the old city to shoot snipe. The earliest recorded reference to the place is to be found in the *White Manuscript*, written in the 1760s which states that the land was owned by a prominent local family in the 18th century named Vincent.

Another reference to the area was given by Maurice Lenihan in his *History of Limerick*, published in 1866. He tells us that in the year 1715, "the Corporators of Limerick ... commenced to make some improvements. On the large strand, which was then westward of west water gate, they built a new quay, now known by the name of Mardyke". The provision of this quay was the first step in the reclamation of the marshland.

Further information is given in the contents of a lease of land "at Mardyke, St. Michael's Parish, Limerick, granted on 25th March, 1747 by the Lord Mayor and Sheriffs of the city of Limerick to Mary Sexton".

In 1787, Philip Roche (John) bought the ground on which he built the huge grain store, familiarly known to generations of Limerick people as the Mardyke Warehouse. He is reported as having spent "an enormous sum" on its construction. Philip Roche was described



The Granary. From a drawing by Hilary Gilmore.

by a contemporary as "a merchant prince and venturer". According to the *White Manuscript*, Roche became one of the greatest merchants in the south of Ireland. His father fitted out a great ship, "mounting 14 sixteen pounders - the first ship of its kind ever seen in Limerick - for the West India trade".

Philip Roche carried out a large scale business in the export of flax, cereals and seed and also supplied general provisions on contract to the government. At that time, flax was grown extensively in the countryside surrounding Limerick. The city, then as now, served as a regional capital and provided a variety of markets and stores. Philip Roche was undoubtedly influenced in the location of his store by the proximity of the old harbour only a few hundred yards from the building.

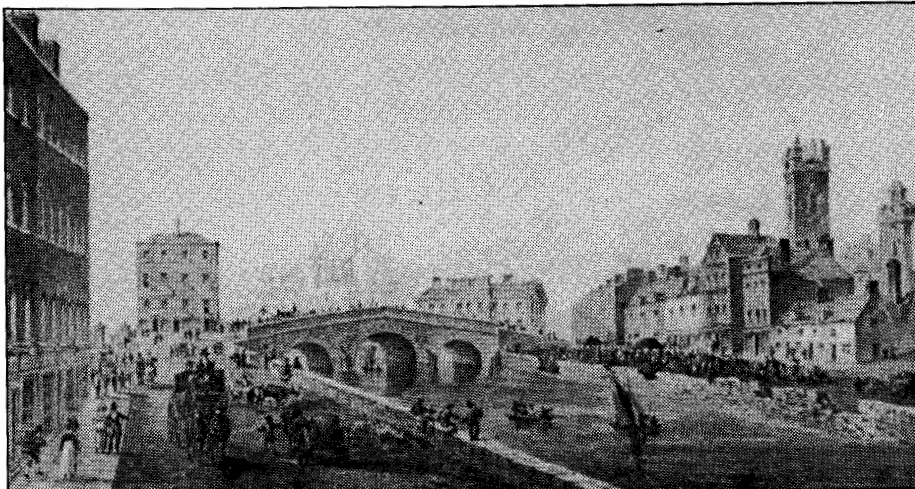
Philip Roche was a charitable man and frequently gave grain to the starving people of the city. He also served as a member of various committees set up to help the sick and needy poor.

Philip Roche died on 4 June, 1797, and is buried in Drumbanny churchyard. In a report of his death in its edition of Wednesday, 7 June, the *Limerick Chronicle* wrote:

On Sunday morning, died at his seat in Newcastle, after a short illness, Philip Roche John, Esq., of this City, well known as one of the most extensive Merchants in the Kingdom - Panegyric, which has nothing new to bestow on the dead was never new to bestow on the dead was never more justly applied than to his character; by his deservedly lamented death, the industrious Farmer as well as the numerous Poor, have lost a valuable friend, his Family and best of Husbands and Fathers, and the World in general a good and wise man. His remains were interred in the Family vault in Drumbanny Churchyard.

The end of the 18th century was a turbulent period in Irish history. Just across the road from the front of the store, two lamp posts were set opposite each other on the centre of the bridge spanning the Abbey River. They were strong enough to serve as gallows, and some people were hanged from them during the 1798 rebellion.

In the 19th century ownership of the store passed to Thomas Kelly, a nephew of Phillip Roche. The nature of the business also changed when the building



Charlotte Quay, drawn by S.F. Brocas, 1819.

was rented to the custom authorities as a bonded warehouse for spirits, wine and tobacco. The store continued to serve that purpose right down to the 1970s when bonding operations ceased here. Other owners in this period were the Warren-Darley and O'Brien families.

So, for more than a century and a half, the warehouse fulfilled an important function in the life of the city. Indeed, it could well be said that it was the "spiritual" Mecca of local wholesalers and publicans, as they journeyed to and fro in the collection of their wares.

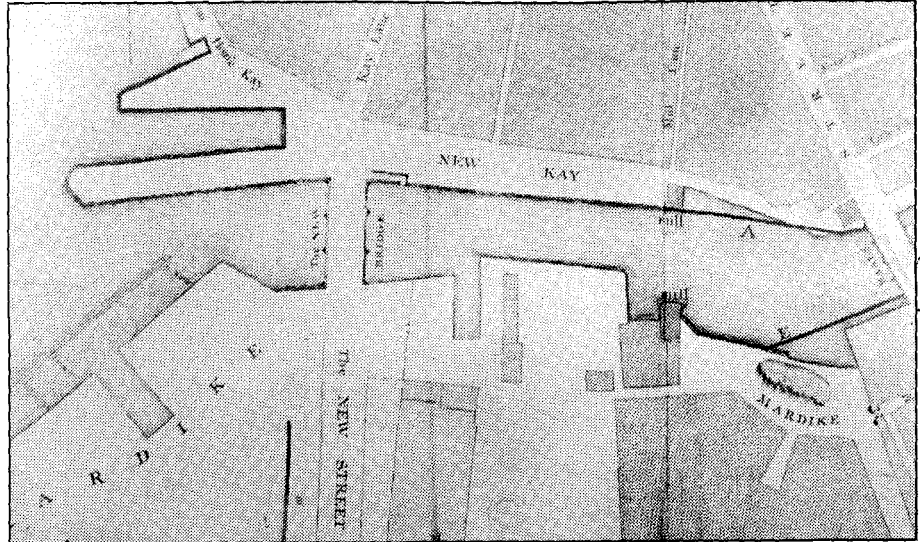
The spirits, after being brought from the distilleries, were stored and racked in the warehouse and were only released for public sale when they had attained the regulated condition.

The racking of the spirits, especially the whiskey, was an intricate and labour-intensive task, involving periodic samplings of the slowly maturing liquid. It has been suggested by a few disgruntled publicans and envious observers that the excise officials brought more than a professional degree of relish to their sampling operations. However, it would not be easy to exculpate all the officers from this charge, for many were dedicated disciples of Bacchus.

The maturing alcohol gave off a medley of rich, pleasant odours through the big, wooden casks which intermingled with the pungent aroma of the tobacco, making the store smell like "a land of spices".

The tobacco came in big barrels made of American oak staves. This wood was of a very high quality and was much in demand by building workers.

In February, 1980, the Shannon Free Airport Development Company negot-



Plan for continuing the New Quay along the Abbey River, c. 1762. Limerick Museum.

iated an option to buy the building from Michael Harkin. Subsequently, Cooneen Limited, a property Investment Company, acquired the building and carried out the development of the Granary at a cost of £3 million.

The original structure, with its limestone walls and vaulted brick ceilings on the ground floor, remains intact. A new slated roof and windows have been provided. A concrete framed office wing and a hanging garden and waterfall in the courtyard have been added. Two intermediate floors were removed and replaced by a single floor which gives greater height at both storeys. The old and new buildings are linked by a glass encased staircase. A number of arched openings were created to provide a brick-faced open plan layout at lower and

upper ground floor levels. The restored building has a total floor area of 52,000 square feet.

The Granary now houses the Limerick City Library, the Mid-West Archive, the Shannon Free Airport Development Company's Regional Office, the Irish Trade Board, Eolas, the Limerick College of Graphic Art and Design a tavern and restaurant.

Since 1787, the Granary has stood as a monument to the enterprise of Philip Roche. It is a fine example of the industrial architecture of Georgian Limerick. The restored building shows how an old structure can be imaginatively adapted for modern, functional use. In today's new world of concrete and glass, the Granary has given physical expression and real meaning to urban renewal in Limerick.



Bank Place in the 1920s.