

THE COUNTY CLUB

BY KEVIN HANNAN

Those of us who remember the old County Club in O'Connell Street will recall the great porch which took up nearly three-quarters of the footpath, leaving only a narrow stretch which hardly allowed two persons to walk abreast. While the citizens constantly complained of the inconvenience of having to walk on the roadway, especially when some gossipers stopped for a harangue outside the club, the night watchmen welcomed its shelter, particularly on stormy winter nights and, on occasion, when nights which were not so stormy.

William Makepeace Thackeray, during his visit to Limerick in 1842, might have noticed the watchmen if that critical gentleman had ventured out of his snug bedroom at Cruise's during the small hours; but he did notice the daylight denizens of the out-works of the mysterious house. After highlighting the poverty of the citizens, and the dirt and squalor of the old city, he paused on the "mile long street" to extol the "handsome clubhouse", but quickly reverted to the

imperious tone that pervades much of his general description of Ireland and the Irish: "... with plenty of idlers lolling in the portico".

To most citizens it was a mysterious place; other than the chosen few who were numbered among its members, no one was ever inside the door. It was just as far removed from the majority of people as the Masonic Lodge in the Crescent, or the various convents of the religious orders around the city.

The club was founded in 1813 by a group of wealthy men from the City and County of Limerick, who were commonly known as "the gentry". Twenty-five years before, the same class in Dublin founded their retreat from common mortals and called it the Kildare Street Club. In Cork, the Sackville Street Club was established in 1794.

Up to the founding of the Limerick Club, the gentry had nowhere to socialise except in one of the exclusive coffee houses in Quay Lane, where the ever present danger of having to rub shoulders with a clodhopper-made-good, or even a tradesman, was a deterrent to

some of the more squeamish of the "laud-i-daws". The coffee room in the Commercial Buildings in Rutland Street (erected in 1805 and afterwards the Town Hall) was an improvement on the Quay Lane for social intercourse, and had the added advantage of being a little farther away from the haunts of the working classes.

At that time, many of the county gentry were taking advantage of Edmond Sexton Pery's offer of leases for ever, at ground rents, by building town houses in New Town Pery, as the new city development was then known. Apart from the added social advantage and prestige attached to owning a town house, the sanctuary afforded from the disturbed state of the country was an added incentive and may, sometimes, have outweighed all the demands of human vanity.

Since there were so many of the "quality" domiciled in the city, and not to be outdone by their peers in the metropolis, they decided to establish their own club in Limerick. Under the chairmanship of Ned Croker of



The County Club in George (later O'Connell) Street, with its great porch.

Ballinagarde, the following committee was elected to set about the purpose of founding the club:

Edward Croker, Ballinagarde.
 William Gabbett, Caherline.
 Joseph Gabbett, High Park.
 Sir H.D. Massy, Doonass.
 John Croker, Croom Castle.
 John Vereker, Limerick.
 Arthur Dickson, Limerick.
 James O'Grady, Raheen.
 Richard Lloyd, Tower Hill.
 Thomas Arthur, Glenomera.
 John Westropp, Attyflyn.
 William Ryves, Castlejane.
 Gerald Blennerhasset, Riddlestown.
 Heffernan Considine, Derk.
 Bolton Waller, Castletown.
 David Roche, Carass.
 Thomas F. Royce, Nantenan.

The Club House

The members secured the lease of the town house, in George's (O'Connell) Street, of one of their members, Mr. Pryce Peacock. This fine house, according to the centenary booklet, published by the club in 1913, had a frontage to George's Street of 25 feet, and contained two parlours, two drawing-rooms and five bedrooms. There was also a basement, and a stable and coach-house at the rear which were later converted to recreation rooms, one of which was fitted out with two billiard tables.

A Richard Talbot was appointed as the first caretaker with the grand title "Master of the House". An agreement was made with him to "keep the house (finding coals, candles and oil, with wages and diet of all servants except waiters) for £300 and the billiard tables".

The master of the house was also responsible for the operation of the ballot during elections of new members. He had to keep an account of all who took part in the ballot, which entailed the dropping of a black or white bean into a drawer. At the end of the ballot, the master withdrew the beans in the presence of the members and checked the colours and numbers. One black bean in seven barred an applicant. This was the first time that the term "black-balling" was heard of in Limerick. More than fifty years later, two city boat clubs adopted the same system to ensure the barring of those undesirables who had to earn their bread by the sweat of their brows, and thus keep the clubs exclusive to the "lotus eaters".

Only the very best food and wines were kept and dispensed in the club. The following item from the minutes of a meeting of January, 1815, indicates their interest in keeping up stocks in the club:

That Mr. Monsell be requested to choose a hogshead of the best claret when in Dublin, and that two dozen Madeira and four dozen claret be got from Messrs

Studdert and Gabbett, the same as was provided at the dinner yesterday.

The following is a record of a subsequent decision:

Mr. Heffernan Considine is requested when in Dublin to select and pay for one hogshead of claret at £45, and a hogshead of port at £52, to include all charges.

Among the many stringent rules of the club the following activities were prohibited:

Smoking, swearing and making useless noises in the pantry. Strangers or spirits not to be introduced in the pantry. The waiters not to be allowed to wear coloured or black handkerchiefs when supposed to be dressed, or stand at the hall door.

In due course, smoking was banned completely in the house, but the drug being just as addictive in those days as it is to-day, it was found impossible to enforce the no-smoking rule. As a compromise, a smoking-room was provided for smokers, which accounted for the great majority of members.

This ban on smoking was quite remarkable at a time when the lethal dangers of the habit were as yet unknown. It has been suggested that the smoking ban was the work of the snuff-taking members, most of whom were born in the eighteenth century and were the elders of the club, commanding the respect of the younger members.

A year after the founding of the club, a splendid theatre was established close beside it at a cost of £4,000. This magnificent edifice, which provided entertainment for Limerick's theatregoers after the destruction by fire of Heaphy's Theatre in Gerald Griffin Street, failed after eight years, accruing considerable debts, and was purchased by the Augustinians for £400. The friars had long been looking forward to their deliverance from the lack of accommodation in their small church in Creagh Lane which they had erected in 1778. The Prior, Very Rev. Fr. Cronin, spent a further £600 on alterations and improvements which transformed the theatre into a very beautiful church.

This was a major catastrophe for the members of the Limerick County Club. Almost any other kind of activity would have been more welcome than a Roman Catholic church. Amid dismay and indignation, the following resolution was passed at a special meeting:

That we have seen with great regret that the theatre of this great and respectable city has got into the possession of gentlemen for the purpose of converting it into a place of religious worship and thus to deprive the inhabitants for ever of a theatre: that we are clearly of opinion that this is neither a fit nor proper situation for any place of religious worship: and that the proposed establishment must be a great inconvenience to all the neighbourhood and particularly to this club.

The resolution went on to empower the

club committee "to take every legal step in their power to resist any encroachment on their premises which may in the slightest degree annoy or inconvenience the club".

The committee saw nothing wrong with the theatre so near their premises; but the siting of the church in George's Street, and right beside them, was unthinkable. Despite all the feverish protests, the church remained; the resilience of the Augustinians was more than a match for the club's opposition.

The disappointment of the members at their failure to discourage the friars may have been the reason for the club to pass the following resolution in 1825:

That the present Club House is quite inadequate to the comfort and convenience of the members, and it appears to us more eligible to build a new house than to expend money on the present establishment.

At that time, the committee had in mind a vacant site close to the home of one of its members, Michael Gavin, who had purchased his house from Major Maunsell after the collapse of the Bank of Limerick in 1820. The site is now occupied by the Bank of Ireland. Gavin's house was purchased in 1832 for £2,000 by the Chamber of Commerce and has been its headquarters ever since.

The club did not move, however, as the representatives of the late Pryce Peacocke agreed to more accommodating terms of tenancy. It was then decided to extend the clubhouse to a vacant plot at the side. (O'Connell Street was not completely built up at that time).

In January, 1838, the "Big Wind", caring no more for the gentry than the beggarman, blew the roof of the clubhouse into William Street.

In 1890, the name of the club was changed from the "Limerick Club" to the "County Club", after the circulation of strong rumours that some of the county gentry had ideas of opening a rival club in the city. The new name seems to have pleased the county gents, for the rumours died away.

The club ceased operations in 1896, after going into voluntary liquidation, but opened the following year, after a general re-organisation. In 1913, when the club published *The County Club Limerick: A Short History of a Hundred Years of Club Life*, many of the original founding family names were still serving on its committee, but their days were numbered.

The original objectors to the Augustinian church were the city's most prominent citizens but they were all long since dead in the 1940s when a spacious stone church was erected on the site of the theatre, and, ironically, the clubhouse itself was transformed into a monastery for the friars. Despite declining vocations for the priesthood, the Augustinians have managed to maintain their church and monastery into the 1990s.

Est modus in rebus.