

Limerick Stone and Stonemasons

The first people to build in limestone in the Limerick area were the prehistoric settlers who lived at Lough Gur. About 3,000 years B.C., they built a series of strange stone circles, many of which are still standing. Much of the original city of Limerick, built on King's Island, was constructed with limestone. Indeed, it could well be said that stone is synonymous with the city. When local and many other people think of images of Limerick, they invariably think of the Treaty Stone, the Walls of Limerick, St. Mary's Cathedral or King John's Castle – all stone structures.

Our craft is the oldest in the world. Our handiwork is seen everywhere, in town, country and village. The men who have gone before us have left us a heritage to be proud of; and we feel our own contribution has been for the good. With hammer, mallet and chisel we have

by Jim Kemmy

shaped and fashioned rough boulders ... we are a little group of craftsmen ... doing our work as well as we can ... Every graveyard, every old church, every old building keeps reminding us we are not as good as we think. They are our models and very exacting they can be ...

Thus Seamus Murphy, in the preface to *Stone Mad*, his masterly study of stone cutting in his native Cork, described his craft and his fellow craftsmen. Limerick, like Cork, has a long and interesting history in the quarrying, cutting and building of stone.

The nineteenth century was the heyday of stone building in Limerick and in Ireland. Though the city's two most important and historic stone structures, St. Mary's Cathedral and King John's Castle were built in the English town (King's

Island) in 1168 and 1210, the demolition of the Walls of Limerick in 1760, resulted in the expansion of the old city into Newtown Pery and the erection of some impressive stone structures.

The development of the new city brought a big increase in building activity. The granting of Catholic Emancipation in 1829, with the subsequent upsurge in church and school building, gave further impetus to this growth. The Georgian architecture of Limerick is renowned for its symmetrical brick houses but Newtown Pery also contains more stone structures than any other part of the city.

Even during the bleak Famine years of the 1840s, stone building continued with the construction of the workhouses and other public buildings. In the 1850s the Commissioners of National Education built schools in Limerick and throughout the country.

Limerick itself rests on a bedrock of limestone and it was only natural that



Stonecutters at work at the Limerick Dock extension, 1934. David Clohessy in second from left.



Decorative stone columns at front of Carnegie Library.

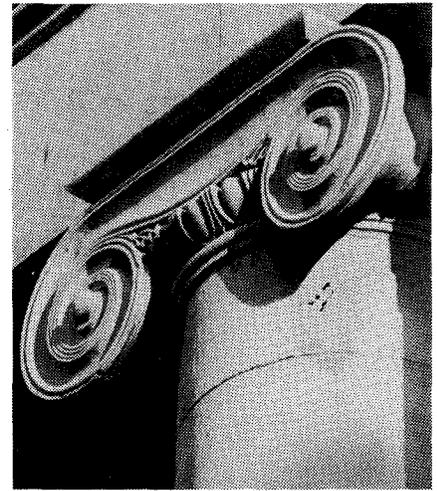
architects should turn to the abundant supply of this indigenous local material when it came to the design and structure of new buildings. Where did this limestone come from? Limerick had many fine quarries - Hall's, Gough's, Mullins's, Ballysimon, Lansdowne, Rhebogue, Southill, the two Garryowen quarries and Foynes in the county. Indeed, in an age when locomotion and transportation were difficult, it was not uncommon to open new quarries as close as possible to the buildings about to be erected.

Limerick limestone earned a wide reputation for its quality and general attractiveness. The foundation stone of the Wellesley (now Sarsfield) Bridge was laid in 1824 and never before had the local stone been shown to better advantage. The bridge, which cost £90,000 to build was designed by Alexander Nimmo, who modelled it on the Pont Neuilly on the Seine, was opened in 1835 by the Earl of Musgrave, Lord Lieutenant of Ireland.

And there is much to appreciate in the other four stone bridges spanning the Shannon and Abbey rivers.

As well as being used extensively throughout the neighbouring counties, Limerick stone was also exported to London and had been used, among other projects, in the building of a pillar opposite the House of Commons. And the House itself was to feature in a bitter controversy involving Limerick limestone. When Charles Barry (the architect who designed the building) was selecting the material to be used in the new Commons, he passed over the Limerick stone in favour of Bolsover stone.

His decision had political and economic repercussions in Limerick and led to a series of emotive letters in the *Limerick Chronicle* in March and April 1840. Michael J. Staunton, the owner of quarries in Garryowen and Ballysimon, in letters to Charles Barry and Thomas Spring Rice (Lord Monteagle) strenuously

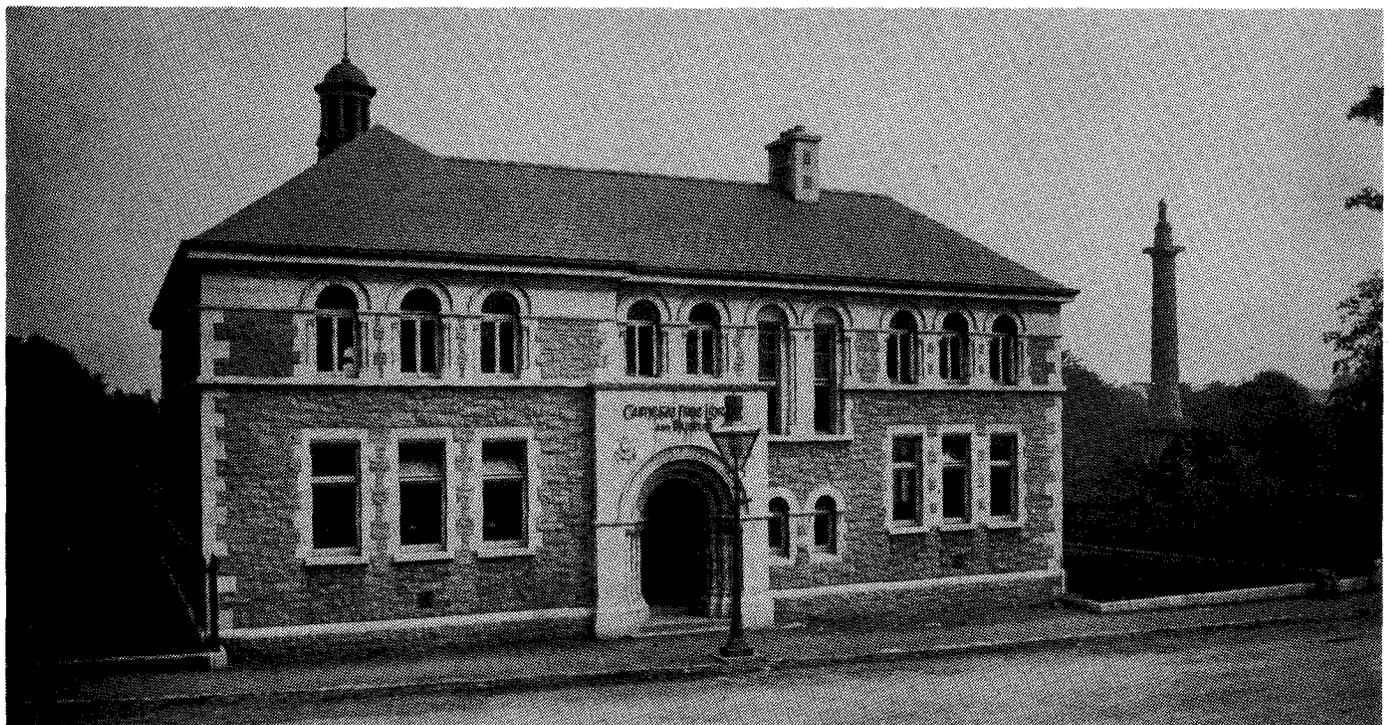


Ornamental capitals at entrance to Mid-Western Health Board offices, Catherine Street.

pressed the claim of his material over those of the Bolsover stone. In his campaign he enlisted the aid of local architects and engineers, including James Pain. In his letter to Lord Monteagle, Michael Staunton wrote:

My informant adds that your Lordship admits it (Limerick stone) is as a most durable material but of an "abominable" colour. Is it possible my Lord, you could have expressed yourself thus? Did the people of Limerick hear of this fact, think you my Lord, that that beautiful pillar in Pery Square which your humble servant and the Barrington family caused to be erected in 1829, or thereabouts, would be suffered to support your effigy a day longer than that intelligence reached their ears.

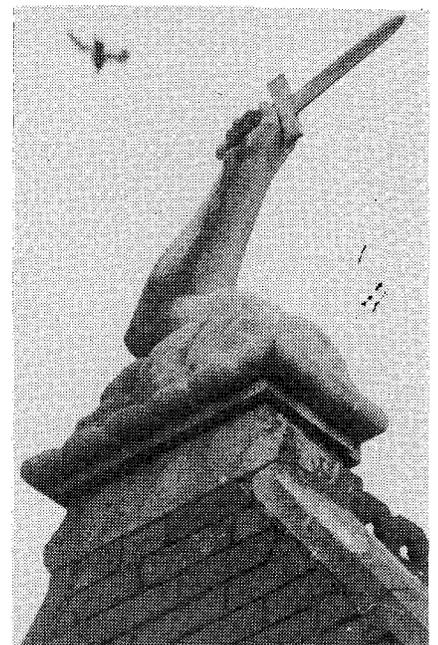
He concluded his letter with this appeal: "Your Lordship often took me by the hand and assured me that anything you could



Carnegie Library, Pery Square, in the 1920s.



Gargoyles on front of Leamy's School, Hartstone Street.



Heraldic feature at Boru House, Mulgrave Street.

do would be done for 'my name or family'."

In a letter to Charles Barry, dated 27 April, 1840, Michael Staunton countered Barry's objections concerning the "sombre appearance and expense of workmanship" of the Limerick stone. He wrote: "Mr. Staunton presents his compliments to Mr. Barry and begs leave to enclose him a certificate from a few of the many gentlemen of his own profession in the south of Ireland ..."

In their recommendation the architects and engineers stated:

We the undersigned Civil Architects and Engineers in the South of Ireland do hereby certify that the Limerick limestone is a very fine material for general building purposes, being of good colour, free from flint joints, of great durability and easily worked; it may be had in any

sized blocks; and we strongly recommend its being used for any national work. The quarries are inexhaustible.
Thomas Deane and Co.

James Pain

William H. Owen
William Wallace

But this appeal was of no avail. Barry's reply of 28 April was curt and to the point:

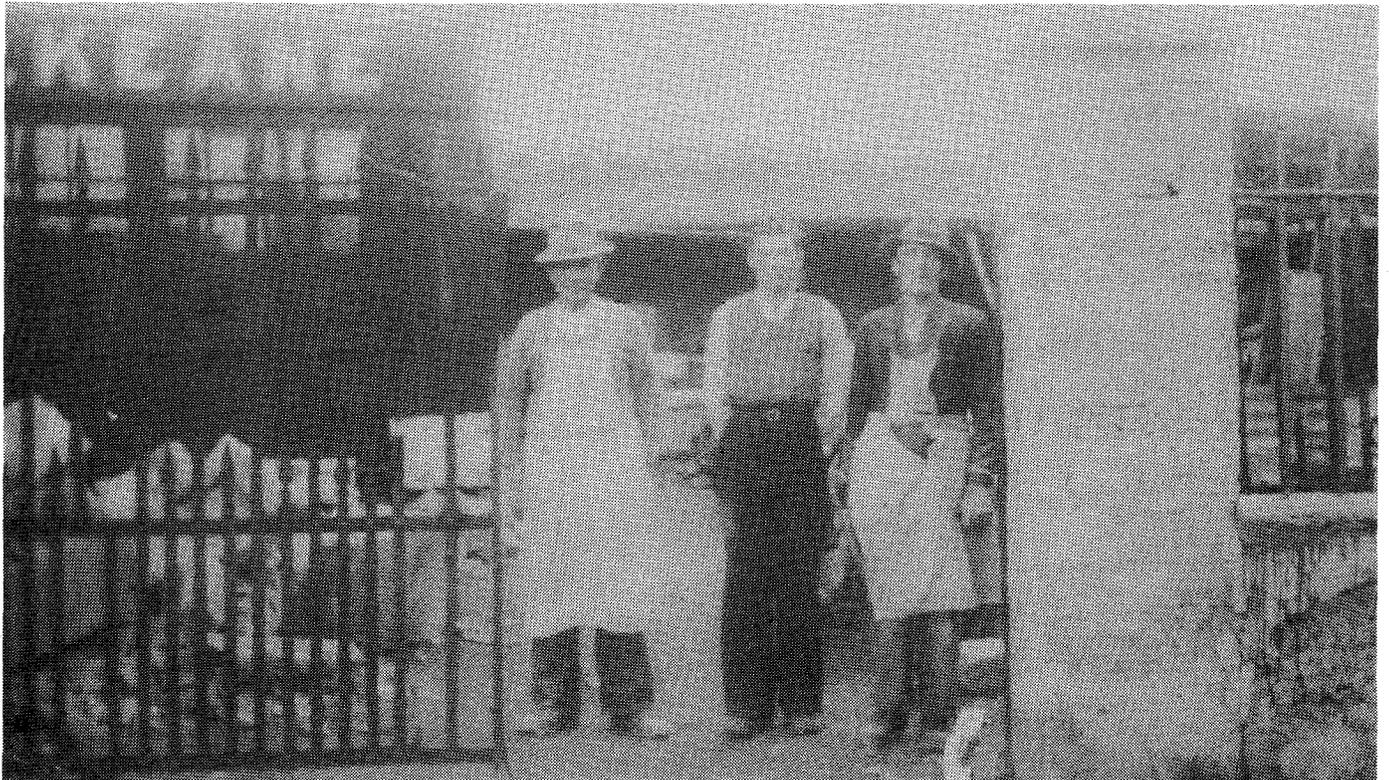
Sir - I have to acknowledge the receipt of your letter of yesterday's date. Having more than once expressed to you my opinion of the Limerick stone and its ineligibility for the new houses of Parliament, I must beg to decline all further correspondence on the subject. I am Sir, your most obedient Servant.

Charles Barry.

But Staunton was not content to let matters rest there. On 25 June, 1840, the

following petition from Limerick was presented to the Houses of Parliament:

The Petition of the undersigned Inhabitants and Operative Workmen of Limerick and its vicinity, Most humbly sheweth, That Petitioners approach your Honourable House with confidence that you will have justice done to their city, and to a numerous class of workmen, who would be benefited by the employment of the Ballysimon Marble in the erection of the new Houses of Parliament, and cause the late decision on that subject to be re-considered, as the preference said to be given to the



Bill Keane, Christy Hennessy and Andy Keane, outside Keane's Monumental Stoneyard, Garryowen, in the 1940's.

Bolsover Stone is at variance with the judgment of so many scientific men, who have declared the Marble of the Ballysimon quarries to be in every respect superior to that selected by Mr. Barry: and Petitioners respectfully beg to direct the attention of your honourable House to the opinions expressed by Sir Anthony Carlile, Mr. Adams, Mr. Bardwell, the Mining Journal, and other equally competent authorities in England, and in Ireland to those of Sir Thomas Deane, Messrs. Pain, Wallace, Owens, and other eminent architects, besides the general press of both Countries, which all speak in favour of the Ballysimon Marble, for its durability, its imperviousness to moisture, the beauty of the several structures whereon it was used, and, what petitioners humbly submit should be a strong inducement towards its obtaining the preference, the vast saving of expense, a material point not to be overlooked where such a large outlay of public money is to take place; and as Mr. Barry has never inspected the Ballysimon quarries, although we understand it was his duty to make a general trial, your Petitioners conceive that he had no just grounds for the selection of a stone every way its inferior, which, as workmen who have had experience for many years in England, Scotland, and France, we unhesitatingly assert, and which the specimens to be seen in various parts of England will fully prove.

Petitioners therefore humbly pray, That in a building of such magnitude and national importance the interests of the public will be considered, by having the different species of stone submitted to an impartial and scientific test; and, should the decision be adverse, they will respectfully acquiesce; but they humbly hope that a question in which so many thousands are interested, will receive that degree of calm and close investigation which it so imperatively demands.

And your Petitioners shall ever pray.

Jeremiah Naughton.

Richard Raleigh.

Denis Dunn.

&c. &c. &c.

However, Charles Barry was not easily deflected and remained impervious to the end. The campaign failed and Bolsover stone was duly used in the building of the Houses of Commons. In fairness to Barry it should be pointed out that he had taken elaborate precautions and gone to considerable trouble in selecting the material. Long before the first stone was laid, he had suggested to the Commissioners of Woods and Works, in a letter of 5 July, 1838, that a group of experts should tour the country with him to inspect quarries and old buildings in order to pick the best type of stone for the job. After six weeks and the expenditure of the then considerable sum of £1,300 on the tour, Bolsover stone was chosen and, when the quarries there ran



Above and right, gargoyles at Glenstal Abbey.

out, Anston stone was substituted.

But, as time showed, neither stone proved sufficiently durable to withstand the assaults of London rain, fog and smoke. In 1861, a committee made up of two professors and Edward Barry, a son of Charles, recommended the application of chemical processes to check the deterioration in the stone. So maybe there was some merit, after all, in the trenchant criticisms of Michael Staunton, concerning Bolsover stone. Thus ended this acrimonious chapter in the history of Limerick stone.

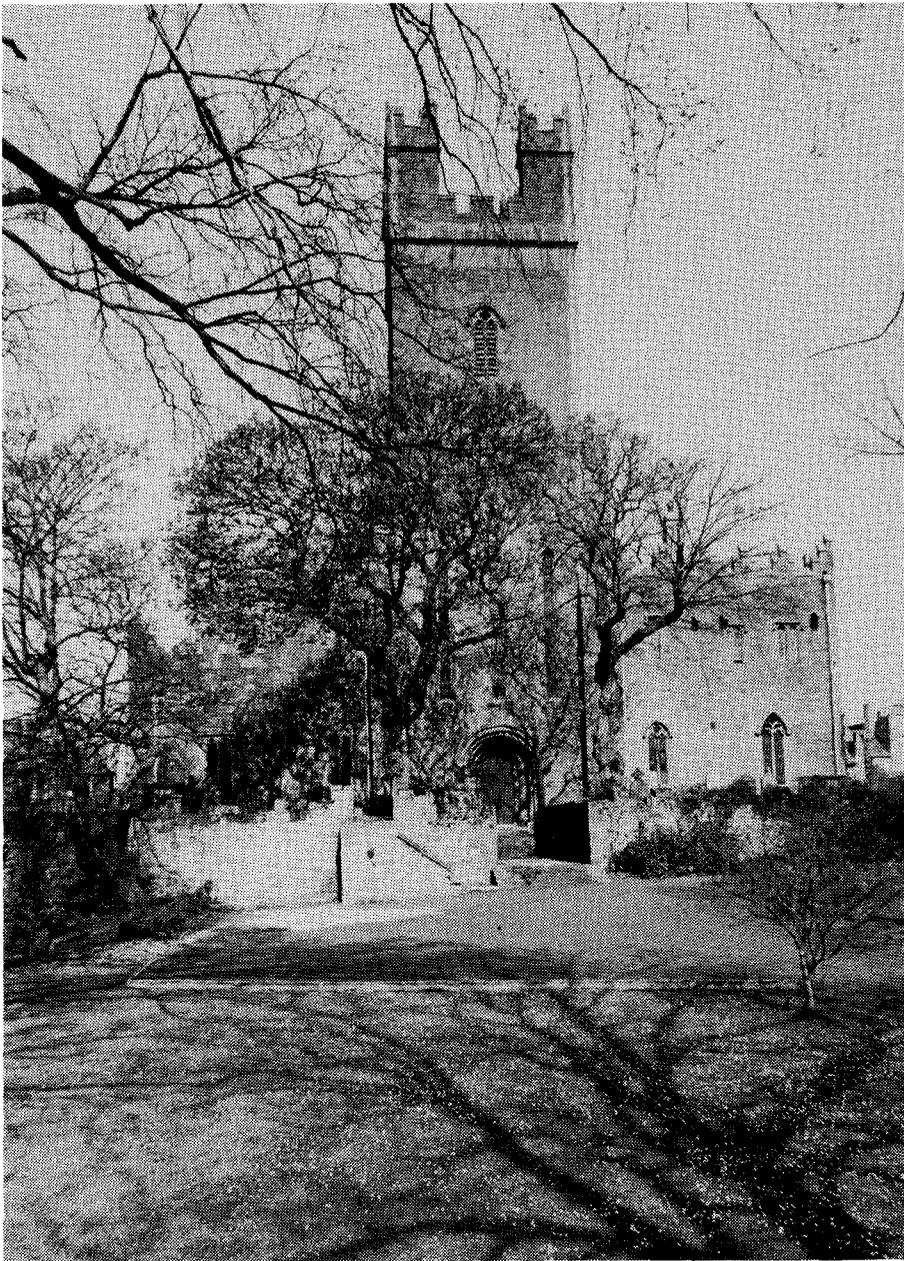
Despite the loss on the export market, the home demand for the stone, in the building of churches, schools, shops and houses, continued to grow. Where did the masons who built the structures come from? Though some English stonecutters came to this country in the second half of the nineteenth century to augment the numbers of Irish stonecutters, it seems certain that the workers who built the Model School and other such buildings were all local men.

Because of the continuity in stonecutting and building throughout the nineteenth century, Limerick stonecutters and masons were first-class tradesmen and passed on their skills to their apprentices. Seamus Murphy worked in Limerick on various projects. In one of the most memorable chapters in his book *Stone Mad*, he tells why the Cork stonecutters regarded a Limerickman named O'Dowd as the best stonecutter in the country.



He records the conversation of a stonecutter nicknamed Nedgill:

I don't care what you think, but the best man this country ever produced in our line was a stonecutter by the name of O'Dowd and a Limerickman to boot. To see the man working was a treat. He made stonecutting look simple and you would wonder why the blazes you had to



The West Door, St. Mary's Cathedral.

serve seven years to it. I don't know how he did it, but he had a system of working which left everyone else standing ... 'twas enough to make any man give up the trade and go peddling bootlaces, because you'd be ashamed of yourself working near him. What used to beat me was that you got the impression he was taking it easy and sure he'd be walking away from you. I remember we were doing a moulded cornice for a bank, and big stones there were ... I think there were six of us. We had a man from Waterford, a man from Dublin, from Ballinasloe and Tralee, along with myself and O'Dowd - 'twas like an inter-county competition. And they were all good men. Well, the Ballinasloe man was the first to get ahead, he was used to the Ballinasloe stone and could cut it like cheese. At the end of the second day he was walking into them. Then the Dublin man showed up. None of us took much notice of O'Dowd. He'd only been jobbed a few days before and we didn't know exactly what he was made of. But

by the time we were finished with the cornice we had good reason to know. He finished his job a day and a half ahead of me, and I was a good few hours ahead of the rest - and into the bargain his job was better masoned than mine.

And, of course, some excellent stonecutters came to ply their trade in Limerick. It is not generally known that Patrick Pearse's father, and brother, Willie, both stonecutters, worked in St. Mary's Cathedral, in the early years of the present century. They cut and erected a rood screen and it is a fine job of craftsmanship by any standards.

The stonecutters and masons, though closely related in terms of work and skills, were, and still are, separate trades. The stonecutters generally carried out the cutting and shaping of the ornamental and finer stonework, including monuments and headstones, and usually worked in yards away from the building site, and did not take part in the actual laying of the stones in mortar and cement. The mason,

as well as laying all the stones, also cut or "dressed" the stonework that formed the main structure of the building. Both trades used hammer and chisels, with the stonecutter using a mallet for the more delicate work and the mason a trowel in the laying process.

The masons were among the first of the old trade guilds and later, the trade unions. The Limerick Brick and Stonemasons' Society was chartered in 1677, and has a minute book dating back to 1743. Some colourful ceremonial aprons, scarves, sashes and rosettes of the Limerick masons and stonecutters can be seen in the labour history room at the City Museum, John's Square.

The masons had a secret language of their own called *bearlagar na saor*. When I started my own apprenticeship to the trade, in the early 1950s, bits of the language were still spoken by some of the old masons. The general form and grammatical structure of the *bearlagar* (as it was known among local masons) was that of Gaelic in most parts of Ireland, but the masons in the English speaking parts used an English framework. The vocabulary also contained many words from a variety of other languages.

The connection between freemasonry and the stonemasons' trade has been well established. A little known aspect of the history of Irish freemasonry was the discovery of the nearly 500 year old Baals Bridge Square, during the excavations of the foundations of the bridge over the Abbey River. The wording on the square is as follows: "Upon the level by the Square/I will strive to live, with Love and Care".

The days when stone was the main material used in most buildings are long since gone but the trades of stonecutter and mason are still alive and flourishing in Limerick. Though Galway Cathedral is likely to be the last complete stone church to be built in Ireland, there are a variety of stone projects at present under construction in Limerick and throughout the country. And many of today's apprentice masons are getting a thorough grounding in all aspects of stonework at the Limerick Civic Trust project at the Ramparts section of the old city walls at the Irishtown. The refurbishment of Limerick's most attractive stone building, the Custom House, in preparation for the opening of the Hunt Museum, is about to commence.

Another impressive stone structure, the Model School, was built in 1853 at a cost of about £6,000. It was money well spent, and was a good investment in the future of the city. It is a "model" stone building in every sense of the word. The structure shows the whole range of the stonecutter's and mason's skills in stone, hammered, pitched and punched to shape and size. After a destructive fire, the school was magnificently restored in 1986.

In a world of change and destruction, Limerick stone buildings have stood the hardest test of all - the test of time. It is a heritage worth preserving.