

Correspondence respecting loans for the construction of floating docks and markets at Limerick, during the famine

(9 September - 8 December, 1846)

# The Construction of the Floating Docks

by Mark Tierney

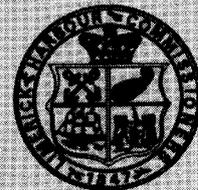
**D**uring the first half of the nineteenth century, Limerick City was expanding rapidly from a commercial point of view, and the old harbour was found to be totally inadequate. An Act of Parliament was passed on 17 June, 1823 "for the erection of a bridge across the River Shannon and of a Floating Dock, to accommodate sharp vessels frequenting the Port of Limerick". The Limerick Chamber of Commerce were the principal movers behind this scheme, but it was Thomas Spring Rice, M.P. for Limerick, who saw the Bill through parliament. It took ten years to complete the bridge, which was opened by Lord Mulgrave, the Viceroy, on 5 August, 1835. It was called the Wellesley Bridge, but later renamed Sarsfield Bridge.

During the years of constructing the bridge, discussions continued regarding the Limerick port and various plans put forward. It was generally agreed that Limerick was badly served from the point of view of a harbour and a floating dock. In 1839, Lieutenant Woulfe, R.N., who surveyed the Shannon estuary, on behalf of the admiralty, wrote to the Bridge Commissioners: "I have seen enough to excite my surprise at the neglected state in which the navigation is allowed to remain from want of buoys, beacons, and landing marks. Scarcely a vessel ever goes up and down the river without grounding".

In the 1840s, the Tidal Harbour Commission was established, and given the job of examining and reporting on two hundred and fifty harbours in Great Britain and Ireland. Eventually, on 18 September, 1845, a meeting of the Tidal Harbour Commission met in Limerick, and proposed the construction of a floating dock for the Limerick harbour. The proposal may well have remained dormant, but for the coming of the famine. Early in 1846, the Limerick Bridge Commissioners pressed the government to upgrade the Limerick port facilities. They argued that the work would help to allay distress among the masses of Limerick people, by providing employment. It was mainly in the context of the famine conditions that the work was begun. It is interesting to note, that these negotiations, which continued throughout 1846 and 1847, led to new legislation passing through parliament for the improvement of the port of Limerick. It also led to the renaming of the Limerick Bridge Commissioners, who were henceforward to be known as the Limerick Harbour Board.

One of the main arguments put forward by the Harbour Commissioners for improving the Limerick Docks, was the statistical table, showing the increased number of vessels using the Limerick harbour, and especially the increased amount of harbour dues and customs duties accruing therefrom. The following Table (taken from the minutes of the meeting of Limerick Bridge Commissioners on 26 March, 1846) shows the increase of traffic using the port of Limerick, between 1825 and 1845:

YEARS	VESSELS ARRIVED	REGISTERED TONNAGE OF VESSELS ARRIVED	AMOUNT OF HARBOUR DUTIES	AMOUNT OF CUSTOMS DUTIES	REGISTER OF VESSELS BELONGING TO THIS PORT
			£ s d	£ s d	
1825	440	46,983	1,211-12-1	58,138-19-8	563
1830	437	45,005	1,483-1-2	86,020-3-8	3,230
1835	476	60,724	1,755-2-8	136,949-8-6	4,173
1840	545	71,218	3,900-8-0	148,802-10-0	12,214
1845	585	76,658	4,204-10-7	192,975-15-2	14,393



The correspondence between the Commissioners of Public Works, the Lords of the Treasury, the Limerick Bridge Commissioners, E.F.G. Ryan, Mayor of Limerick, and the aldermen and burgesses of the borough of Limerick began on 9 September, 1846, and continued to 8 December, 1846:

Correspondence respecting loans for the construction of floating docks and markets at Limerick.

**Commissioners of Public Works to the Lords of the Treasury.**

**Office of Public Works, Dublin,  
September 9, 1846.**

*In pursuance of the directions contained in your Secretary's letter, dated 25th June, 1846, requesting that the plans and estimates for the construction of floating docks at Limerick, may be carefully revised, and your Lordships furnished with a complete estimate for the execution of such works, we have the honour to forward herewith, a modified plan for the proposed dock, at Limerick; and having had the estimates carefully examined by Mr. Macmahon, our engineer, we are of opinion that the work can be executed, and the quantity of land required can be purchased, for a sum not exceeding 50,000l.*

*We would beg leave to call the attention of your Lordships to our letter, dated the 19th May last, particularly to the concluding paragraph, in which we state, as our opinion, that the mercantile body of Limerick, who are so anxious for this increased accommodation, and security for their shipping, should contribute a portion of the sum required. And if your Lordships should be pleased to sanction the loan sought for, we consider it highly important that steps should be taken to compel the Harbour Commissioners to have shoals, &c., in the river, from the sea up to Limerick, properly marked by sufficient good beacons or buoys, so as to render the navigation certain, and that they should be bound to maintain them always in a proper serviceable state, and that some fund should be set apart for this special purpose, as there is no other than that arising out of dock and quay dues, at present in the hands of this Board, pursuant to the provisions of the Act 1 and 2 Wm. IV. c. 33, for the purpose of being applied in repayment of loans hitherto made.*

*We do not send the detailed estimate furnished to the Bridge Commissioners, in consequence of some clerical errors, but it may be mentioned that the estimate did not contain any sum for the purchase of land.*

*Being aware that the sum required, will not cause the estimate to exceed 50,000l., and from the urgent applications made to the Lord Lieutenant, respecting the proposed work, we think it proper to forward the plan at once, accompanied by the detailed estimate, for your Lordships' consideration.*

**Treasury Minute on the above.**

**September 29, 1846.**

*Write to the Commissioners of Public Works that, on a full consideration of the subject, their Lordships are prepared to sanction a loan amounting in the whole to 50,000l., for the construction of floating docks at Limerick, according to the revised plans received with their*

*letter, subject to such further modifications as, on a closer examination of the works, may appear to the Commissioners to be necessary.*

*In coming to this decision their Lordships rely upon the assurance contained in the report of the Commissioners that the cost of the work, including the land required to be purchased, will not exceed 50,000l.*

*Their Lordships request to be furnished with a more detailed explanation of the manner in which the Commissioners propose to carry into effect the suggestions contained in the second paragraph of their letter, and particularly out of what fund they think that the Harbour Commissioners should provide for the expence of beacons, buoys, &c.*

*It is their Lordships' desire that immediate steps may be taken for the final settlement of the plan for the docks, in order that employment may be furnished to the destitute poor at the earliest practicable date.*

**Mr. Walker to Mr. Trevelyan.**

**Office of Public Works Dublin,  
October 27, 1846.**

*By the Boards' directions, I have the honour to enclose herewith, for the information of the Lords Commissioners of Her Majesty's Treasury, the accompanying letter from Sir Matthew Barrington and Co., Solicitors to the Limerick Bridge Commissioners, respecting the construction of the proposed docks at Limerick, and in reference thereto am to state, that on examining the title of the Bridge Commissioners, the Board's Solicitor discovered that the Act authorising certain dues to be levied on the completion of the docks, had reference to a particular site on which the docks were to be built, and which is not that approved of by the Board and the Bridge Commissioners. The proposition of the Bridge Commissioners, as communicated through their Solicitors, is that a new Act should be applied for next Session, legalising the site selected, and that their Lordships should authorise the works to be commenced at once; in the mean time, the Board request to be favoured with their Lordships' views on the question previous to proceeding further.*

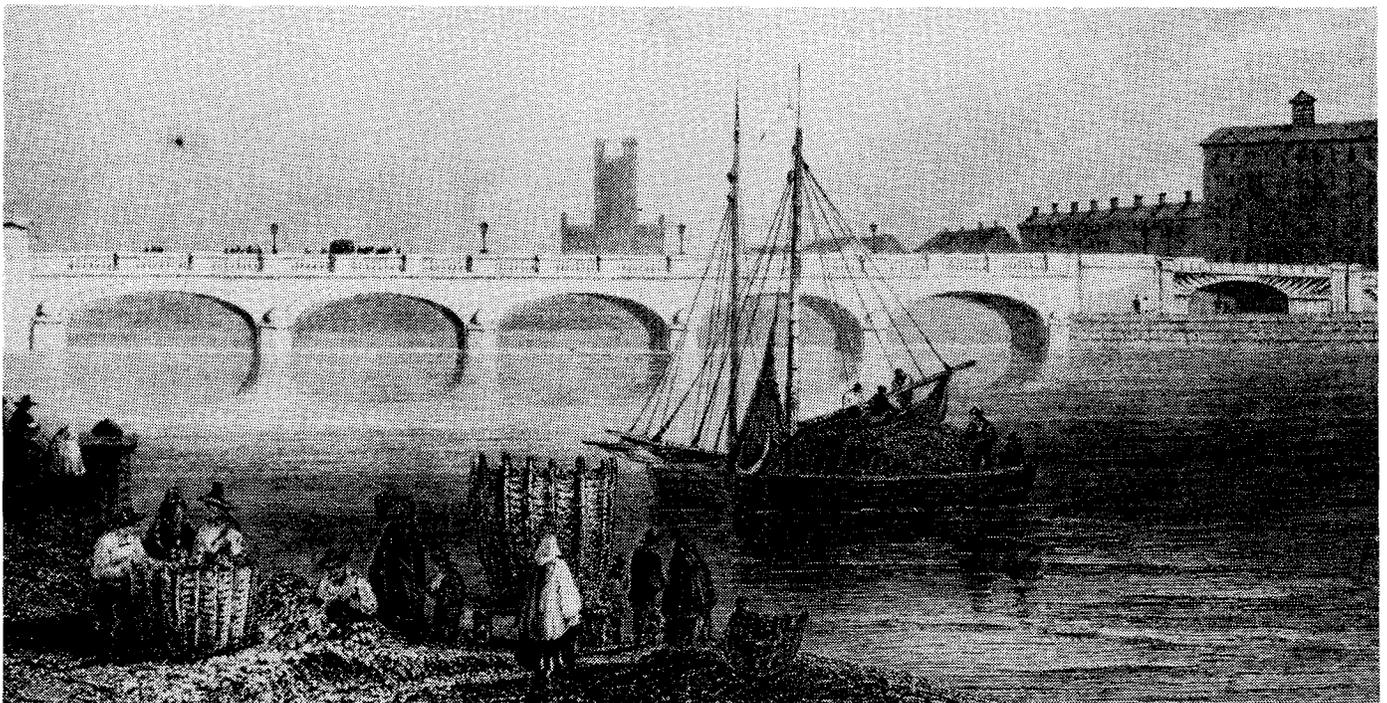
**Enclosure.**

**Messrs. Barrington, Son, and Teffers, to Mr. Stewart.**

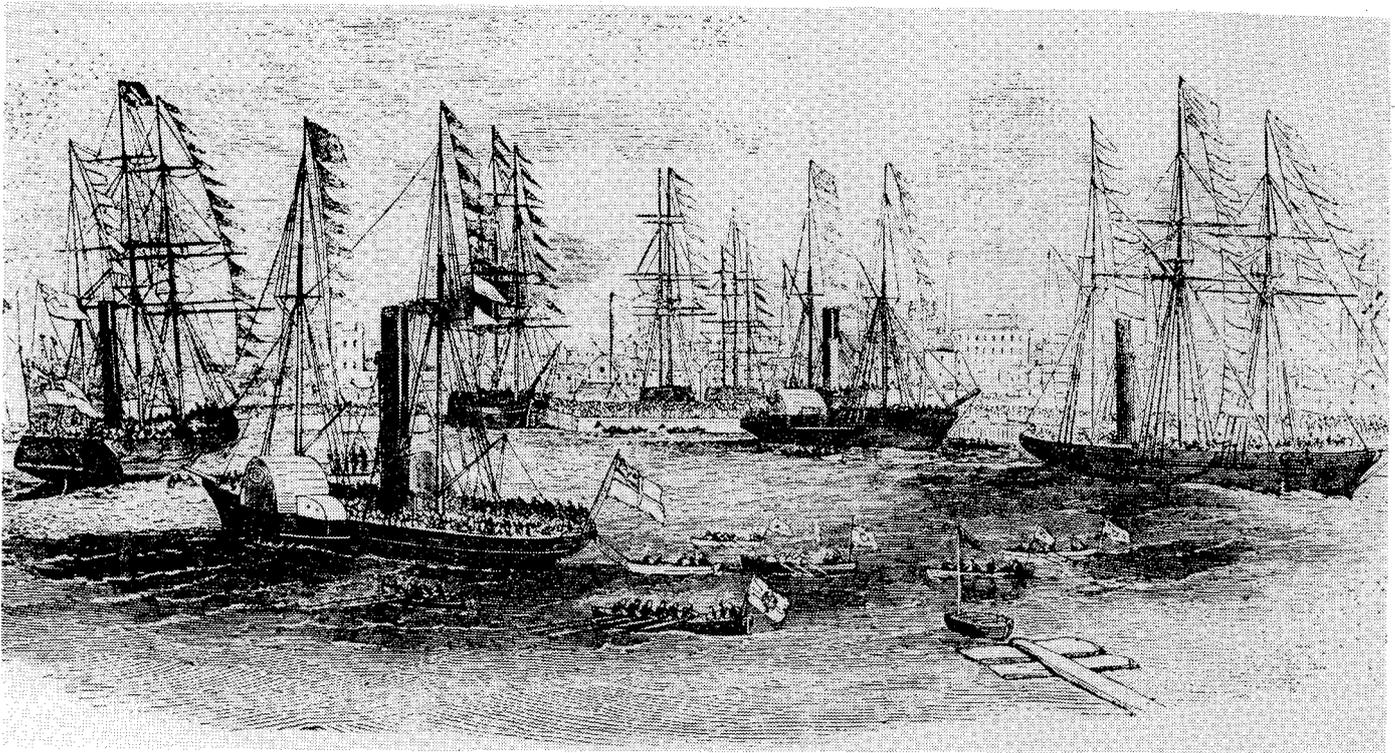
**Dublin, 10, Ely Place. October 20, 1846.**

**Limerick Bridge Commissioners and New Docks.**

*With reference to the interview had with you this day by our Prior and Mr. Harvey, and to your objections to the nature of the security consequent on the alterations of the site of the docks proposed to be erected at Limerick, and agreeing with you that the dock dues, directed to be levied by the amended Act of the 4th and 5th Will. IV., c. 84, on the completion of the docks contemplated by that Act, could not be enforced if the docks were erected in another place without an amendment of the Act, and as it is desirable that no delay should take*



**Wellesley Bridge, 1840.**



Opening of the new Floating Docks, 1853.

place in proceeding with the work, we are authorised to inform you, that we shall at once give the necessary notice, and shall make application to Parliament early in the next Session, to have the site of the docks, as provided for by the said Act of 4th and 5th Will. IV., altered, and that they may be built in such other situation as the Commissioners of Public Works shall direct, and that the tolls and dues provided by said Act, (or such variation or alteration thereof as shall be agreed on by the Limerick Bridge Commissioners and the Board of Works), shall be applicable to such new docks and levied for the same, as fully as if the docks referred to by said Act had been built.

As the Limerick Bridge Commissioners are ready to execute any security your Board now require, we hope you will consider this letter a sufficient undertaking that the necessary applications to Parliament will be made in the next Session, and that the Board of Works will proceed with the works at once.

#### Treasury Minute on the above.

November 3, 1846.

Write to the Commissioners of Public Works, that under the circumstances explained in their letter, dated 27th ultimo, and its enclosure from Sir Matthew Barrington, their Lordships are pleased to authorise the Limerick Docks being at once commenced on the site approved by them, upon the Limerick Bridge Commissioners undertaking in a legal and satisfactory manner at once to give the necessary notice, and to make application to Parliament early in the next Session, to have the site of the docks, as provided for by the Act 4 and 5 Will. IV., c. 84, altered, and that they may be built in such other situation as the Commissioners of Public Works shall direct; and that the tolls and dues provided by the said Act, (or such variation or alteration thereof as shall be agreed on by the Limerick Bridge Commissioners and the Board of Works, and be approved by the Treasury), shall be applicable to such new docks and levied for the same, as fully as if the docks referred to by the said Act had been built.

#### To the Right Honourable the Lords Commissioners of Her Majesty's Treasury.

The Memorial of the Mayor, Aldermen, and Burgesses of the Borough of Limerick, Most respectfully Showeth,

That the rapid increase in the supplies of agricultural produce to the market of Limerick has for a long time made it most desirable that a larger and more commodious market place should be procured for the purchase and sale thereof, than that which is at present appropriated to that use.

That the difficulty of attaining a proper site, and an area sufficiently extensive, within convenient precincts, prevented your

Memorialists hitherto from applying themselves to the accomplishment of this object.

That in consequence of the harbour improvements, and the construction of the new docks for this port, now about to commence under the sanction of your Lordships, the Harbour Commissioners have ceded to your Memorialists the shore and slob at Arthur's Quay, in order to its embankment, for the construction thereon of a corn market sufficiently extensive for that branch of trade in Limerick.

That a large portion of the "Borough fund" of Limerick arises from tolls on agricultural produce, and that your Memorialists feel in duty bound to contribute as much as lies within their power to facilitate all trading intercourse between the farmers and the merchants, and that they know of no means more calculated to effect this than the establishment of a public market, where all buyers and sellers can meet, and where all agricultural produce shall be weighed at public scales, as is the case in the city of Cork; and that your Memorialists, in concert with the Chamber of Commerce, and the great bulk of the traders of Limerick, are desirous of getting an Act of the Legislature to effect this, and to make it imperative on all to weigh in the public scales in the public market.

That to accomplish this public benefit, and to do so without additional taxation or impost upon either the inhabitants of Limerick, or upon the articles which from time immemorial have paid tolls and customs in this city, your Memorialists propose, under the sanction of your Lordships, to borrow from the Commissioners of Public Works the sum of 10,000*l.* upon mortgage of the estates of the Corporation, such sum to be repaid in such instalments and at such rate of interest as have been sanctioned by your Lordships in a similar case lately to the Corporation of the City of Cork, namely, for the erection there of one of that city's public markets.

That the security of the borough income of Limerick is, your Memorialists respectfully submit, amply sufficient for much more than the sum now sought for on loan, its average for the past five years being over 5,000*l.* per annum, and its present liabilities being in the aggregate a sum under 12,000*l.*; and that the present corn market, which is in a locality where building ground, to which it could be immediately after the construction of a new market applied, is very valuable, and that, at the least, a sum of 200*l.* per annum would thereby be available, in addition to the present yearly income.

That your Memorialists while annually, since 1841, expending large sums in the general improvement of the city, have been enabled to liquidate the stated proportions of a loan formerly advanced to their predecessors; and that although, in 1841, at their establishment, under 3 and 4 Vic., cap. 108, the borough owed 14,000*l.*, it now, notwithstanding the outlay of thousands of pounds for local markets,

bridges, and other improvements, owes but a sum under 12,000l, as before stated.

That your Memorialists therefore respectfully submit that security for the loan, and punctuality in its repayment, may be relied upon by your Lordships, and that the sanction thereof will tend most materially to the advancement of the trade and commerce of this city, and at the time while effecting this most important object, be ancillary to the employment of many of the destitute labouring population, in the requisite work of embanking the extensive area set apart for a public market.

Your Memorialists therefore pray your Lordships to sanction and direct the advance on loan of the sum of 10,000l. by the Commissioners of Public Works to the Corporation of Limerick, for the construction of the new corn market therein, and of the approaches thereto.

And your Memorialists will ever pray.

E.F.G. Ryan,  
Mayor of Limerick.

#### Treasury Minute on the above.

November 24, 1846.

Write to the mayor of Limerick, requesting information whether notice of this application has been duly given according to the provisions of the 141st section of the Irish Municipal Corporation Act.

#### Mr. Ryan to Mr. Trevelyan.

Exchange, Limerick, December 4, 1846.

I have the honour to acknowledge the receipt of your letter, and in reply beg to state the provisions of the 141st section of the Irish Municipal Corporation Act, requiring notice of application for money to be given, has been duly complied with.

#### Treasury Minute on the above.

December 8, 1846.

Write to the mayor of Limerick, giving the sanction of this Board to the Council raising a sum of money, not exceeding 10,000l., by mortgage of the corporate property, to be applied to the purpose proposed in the memorial of the Council.

State that the sanction thus given by my Lords will apply to any sum which the Council may borrow either from a private individual, or from a corporate body.

That if the Council should propose to borrow the sum in question from the Board of Works, it will be proper for them to apply to that body.

[Thus the correspondence and, later, the project itself were brought to a successful conclusion. The loading dock was completed in 1853, and was officially opened by the Lord Lieutenant, Edward Granville, the Earl of St. Germans. The *Illustrated London News* of 8 October, 1853, gave the following glowing account of the event:]

The opening of the Docks took place on Wednesday, when the town presented a most animated appearance. The principal hotels, clubs, houses of businesses etc. were decorated with flags and banners. At eight o'clock in the morning, on the firing of a signal gun, all the shipping in the port hoisted their colours, and were gaily decorated. At nine o'clock another gun announced low water, and a number of flags were immediately hoisted on the walls round the Docks.

The Docks themselves are well worthy of a place "on the king of Irish rivers". They are situated about half a mile below the Wellesley Bridge, adjoining Mount Kennett, and about sixty miles from the mouth of the river. They consist of one large dock, covering about eight acres in extent, and are built in the most substantial and solid manner of cut limestone. The walls are thirty feet in depth and there will be twenty five feet of water at spring, and twenty feet at neap tides. The entrance is seventy feet, but was widened to its present extent to admit the largest class of Transatlantic Steamers, should Limerick be chosen as the Western Packet Station.

The entrance gates are constructed according to Wilde and Mallet's new patent, being made on the tubular or cellular principle of boiler plate iron, rivetted in the same manner as the boilers on steamers.

The length of the quayage inside the Dock is 3,000 feet and outside in the river about 1,000 feet more. The depth of the river here at high

water is 28 feet, quite sufficient to float the largest ships of that time - that being the depth drawn by the "Duke of Wellington", while the largest ocean steamers only draw 19.5 feet.

About one o'clock, the different guilds of trades with flags and banners proceeded to the borough boundary where they awaited the arrival of the Lord Lieutenant, and from whence they were to walk in procession to the Wellesley Bridge. The Corporation also proceeded to the same place attired in their robes of office. About half past one, the Viceregal party, in three carriages, arrived at the boundary. Their Excellencies were received by the Mayor, and were loudly cheered. The guilds of trades then marched past the carriage; after which they formed into procession and walked two-and-two into the city. The Corporation, then headed by the sword and mace bearers, then formed into procession and preceded the carriages which were flanked by a guard of honour of the 7th Dragoon Guards. The entire line of the route through the Crescent, George's Street, Brunswick Street etc., was crowded with people of all ranks, and the windows filled with fashionably-attired ladies.

At a quarter before two o'clock, the procession reached Wellesley Bridge, where the traders halted and filed off on either side of the bridge; the members of the Corporation then passed through and were followed by the Viceregal party, her Excellency, the Countess of St. Germans leaning on the arm of the Mayor of Limerick. Their Excellencies were here met and received by the Harbour Commissioners - Lord Monteaigle, Sir Matthew Barrington etc., the band of the 7th Dragoon Guards playing immediately "God Save The Queen".

The Viceregal party then went on board the "Rose" steamer accompanied by a great number of the nobility and gentry; and at about half-past two o'clock the "Rose" steamed out, followed by the other vessels and preceded by the Harbour Master in his boat and went slowly down the river. A few minutes before three o'clock, the "Rose" passed into the dock, the entrance of which was lined by the foremen and workmen and a large crowd of civilians who cheered their Excellencies most enthusiastically.

A troop of the Royal Horse Artillery were stationed on a rising ground to the south of the Dock and fired a Royal salute as the "Rose" entered the Dock. She was followed by several other steamers and all sailed slowly round the entire circuit of the Dock, and the various bands playing the National Anthem. Their Excellencies having landed on the east angle, they were conducted across the bridge, which his Excellency desired the Engineer, Mr. Long to open and proceeded to the opposite side where Mr. Spaight, President of the Chamber of Commerce, read an address to his Excellency.

His Excellency then declared the Dock opened for the trade and commerce of the world; after which, taking off his hat, he desired three cheers to be given for its success. This was enthusiastically responded to.

Mr. Spaight then introduced Mr. Long, the Engineer, to his Excellency, by whom he was congratulated on the creditable manner in which the work had been executed. The Viceregal party then left the Dock and was loudly cheered. In the evening his Excellency was entertained at a grand banquet in the theatre.

[We usually associate the famine with the building of roads, and other less useful works, throughout the county of Limerick. The main concern of the government of the day was to provide work and wages for the starving poor, so that they could buy food. One could suggest that the work done on the Limerick harbour, was one of the most practical and worthwhile undertakings during the famine years. During the construction of the floating dock, an average of three hundred labourers and fifty tradesmen were employed daily. The final cost was £54,000, of which £39,000 was paid to the local labour force.]

#### REFERENCES

- (a) The correspondence is taken from *Parliamentary Papers: Famine (Ireland)* (1847), Vol. 6, pp. 47-50.
- (b) I owe much of the background information relating to the construction of the floating dock to two works: (1) *A Rising Tide: The story of Limerick Harbour* (edited and compiled by K. Donnelly, M. Hoctor and D. Wash, 1994) and Phil Lovett: *The Development of Limerick Harbour and its authority in the 19th century* (N.I.H.E. 'European Studies Project', 1981).