

The Crescent

by Denis M. Leonard

Each day thousands of people pass through The Crescent, at the top of O'Connell Street, Limerick, few of whom take the time or interest to pause for a brief period to reflect on the architectural, historical and general heritage of the area. I was one of the many thousands of pupils who attended the Crescent College, year in year out, oblivious to its surroundings. It was only when Limerick Civic Trust undertook the restoration of The Crescent project that I developed a belated appreciation of this unique place. For such a small area, less than 200 years old, it has a remarkable heritage.

To put The Crescent into context one must examine the origins of Newtown Pery. In 1760 Limerick was proclaimed an open city and the demolition of the mediaeval walls began. Around this time the building of the Georgian town commenced. The main leaders connected with this movement were Edmund Sexton Pery, who owned most of the land, his brother-in-law, Sir Henry Hartstonge, the Russells and the Arthurs. The new town was laid out by Davis Ducart, an Italian designer and architect, and Christopher Colles' excellent map of 1769 very clearly shows the plan of wide straight streets in gridiron pattern. The plan allowed for a number of prominent architectural features, one of which was located in the uppermost part of the main street. Colles' map shows The Crescent, as we know it today, in a square or diamond shape.

Lands nearest to the mediaeval Englishtown and Irishtown were built on first and some of the earlier developments took place in the John's Square/Rutland Street areas. The New Town was divided into various sites and plots, and leased to developers. This was the case in The Crescent, which was one of the last areas to be developed in Georgian times. The building of the project can be attributed to three people. The Reverend John Hoare, Chancellor of St. Mary's Cathedral, developed Nos 1-9 on the east side in the early 1800s. Thomas Quinlan was granted leases in 1837 to build Nos. 10 and 11. During the same period Hoare's brother-in-law, Robert O'Callaghan-Newenham, a Limerick architect and property developer, was developing the west side where the Jesuit Church stands today. His scheme ran into financial trouble and this side of The Crescent was never finished. The Newenham Street corner remained an open site until the mid-1900s, when the Crescent College was extended.

A quick perusal of city maps confirms



Edmund Sexton Pery, Speaker of the House of Commons of Ireland.

the course of the development. Colles' map of 1769 shows a plan for a square or diamond development. The 1823 map shows the development of two unfinished terraces of houses in a Crescent shape. The 1840 map shows the east side completed and a vacant plot at the Newenham Street corner. Subsequent maps record the emergence of the Jesuit Church and the O'Connell monument. Two of the developers of The Crescent have streets named after them in Newenham and Quinlan Streets and, at one stage, the New Street, near Punch's

Cross, was called Hoare Street, presumably after the reverend gentleman. Originally The Crescent was known as Richmond Place or Richmond Crescent, named after Charles Lennox, 4th Duke of Richmond and Lord Lieutenant of Ireland in 1807. It was later renamed The Crescent, presumably at the same time George's Street was renamed O'Connell Street, around the turn of the century.

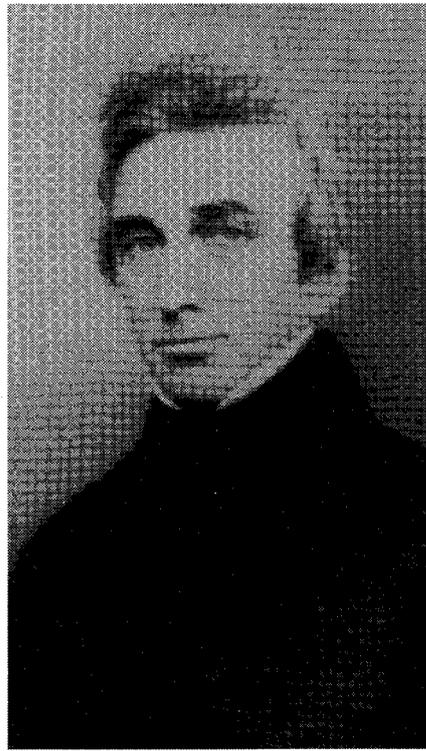
The newly developed Crescent was an upper middle class residential area. Twelve of the 'Nobility, Gentry and Clergy', listed in Slater's Directory in 1846,

lived there. Amongst the occupants were many well-known 19th century families, such as Cox, Creagh, Delmege, Evans, Gubbins, Hall, Maunsell, Peacocke, Rose, Smyth, Vereker, and Westropp. An interestingly-named occupant in 1824 was Thomas Disney Jnr.

A.J. O'Halloran in his 1928 book *The Glamour of Limerick*, writes:

the houses on both sides were tenanted by plutocratic families with aristocratic tendencies, and it is recorded that, on fine summer evenings, it was usual to have the space on which the monument stands occupied by a band belonging to one of the infantry regiments in garrison. Here 'By kind permission of the Colonel and officers' they would render 'choice selections' for the delectation of the plutocratic ladies aforesaid, while the latter, seated at open windows, drank tea and flirted. Doubtless it must have been a pleasant sight in those days to glance around and observe all the bewitching fair ones imbibing Pekoe in rhythmic sympathy with the haunting symphonies of the military band, while the general populace watched their doings with hungry and respectful interest, and the pretty little housemaids peeped their admiration of the bold soldier boys from upper windows. With the coming of the O'Connell Statue those halcyon days vanished forever, because the plutocratic ones could not abide even the memory of 'that agitator', and as quickly as their circumstances would warrant they packed their household goods and The Crescent knew them no more.

Mention of O'Connell reminds us that this very fine lifesize bronze statue, standing



Bernard Mulrenin's portrait of John Hogan, in the National Gallery of Ireland.

on a 13 foot high granite pedestal, was made by the renowned sculptor, John Hogan, and cost £1,000. It was his second memorial to be erected in memory of Daniel O'Connell in Ireland and was unveiled by the Mayor of Limerick, Dr Thomas Kane, on 15 August, 1857, at a civic ceremony attended by several thousands of people. It is said that one of Limerick's foremost merchant princes, Richard Russell, who lived in Crescent House in the centre of the west side terrace, kept his window blinds shut upon

the arrival of the O'Connell monument.

In his biography of John Hogan, published by Irish Academic Press in 1982, John Turpin gives much information on the sculptor and his work:

He was commissioned by the 'Limerick Committee for the O'Connell Testimonial' to make a posthumous bronze statue of O'Connell for that city (for £1,000). Unfortunately, Hogan (who appears to have lost all faith in Irish committees) got the wrong impression that unless he agreed to a fee of £600, the job would be given to another; the sheer cost of materials would have been in excess of this. William Carleton spoke to Hogan at the moment when the sculptor thought he had lost the commission. 'On that very night, such were Hogan's apprehensions for his family that he was seized with an attack of paralysis which rendered his right, his working arm, useless for several months'. Hogan was attended by Dr. William Stokes and Dr. Wilde, Dublin's leading doctors (Stokes was a close friend of Petrie the archaeologist, who had written so laudably on Hogan's work). This attack took place in 1855 and marks the beginning of Hogan's decline in health, leading to his death three years later. Nevertheless, Hogan worked quickly on the commission. He visited Paris in 1857 to attend to the casting of the statue in bronze, and it was inaugurated in The Crescent, Limerick, on 15 August, 1857. He was present at the ceremony and delivered a nationalist panegyric: 'I have represented O'Connell in his ever solemn dignity, and in his earnest but not impassioned expression.' It is certainly not a conception of O'Connell as orator



The O'Connell Monument at The Crescent, with Quinlan Street and O'Connell Avenue in the background, circa 1900.



The Crescent and O'Connell Street at the turn of the century.

and leader, but as statesman and sage. Although it is a bronze taken from a plaster, its form is essentially that of a figure carved in stone. In this, his final free-standing portrait statue, he still showed his subject wrapped in elaborate antique drapery. Hogan added at the unveiling ceremony that, should Limerick wish it, he would be interested in making a statue of Patrick Sarsfield.

John Turpin also provides details of the payments made to John Hogan during the course of the work:

The first instalment of £100 was paid by Eugene O'Callaghan on 7 February 1856. The second, of £400, was paid on 22 September 1856 and the third and final one for £500 on 19 June 1857. On 14 May 1857 Hogan was granted permission by the RDS to exhibit it temporarily in their courtyard.

The whole project cost £1,300. The monument was adorned by an ornate railing and four gas lamps. These were removed in the 1960s to cater for the growth in motor traffic. Two of these lamps may be seen today in the grounds of the Ryan Ardhu Hotel.

There are some interesting commemorative stone plaques at the Newenham Street corner building, i.e. the Crescent Assembly Hall/Theatre. Over the entrance to the theatre is a very fine carving of the Crescent College crest. Another stone commemorates the completion of the school extension in 1946, but the most important stone of all, dated

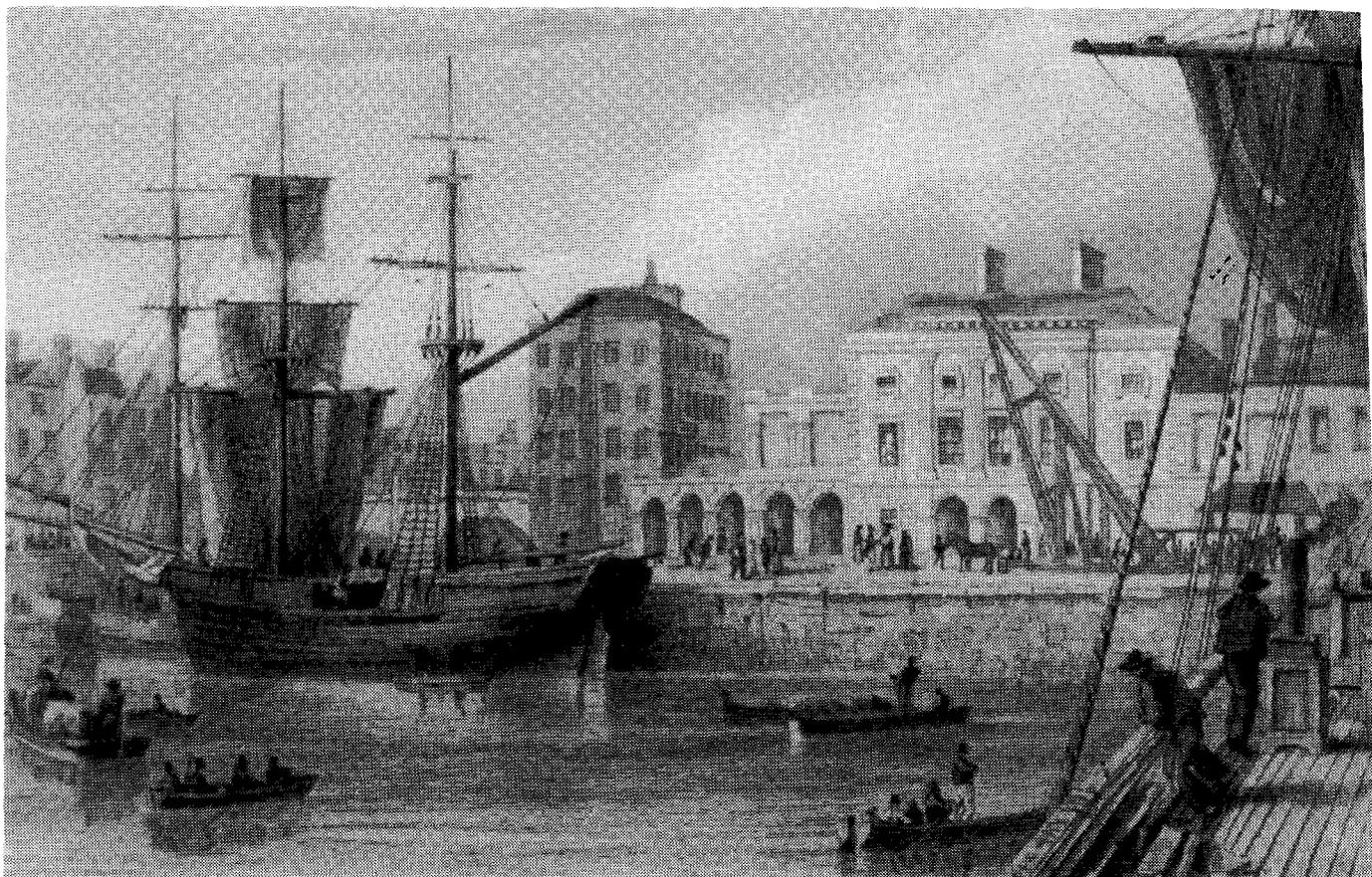
1634, originates from the first Jesuit establishment in Castle Lane. This is one of the few items left to remind us that a Limerick-born priest, Fr David Wolfe, was the first Irish member of the Jesuit Order and the first Papal Nuncio to Ireland after the Reformation. He arrived in August 1560 and in 1565 established a grammar school for boys in Limerick, which was the first Jesuit school in Ireland. Another Limerickman in the community at that time was Fr Edmund Daniel, S.J. who was hanged, drawn and quartered in Cork in 1572 and became the first Jesuit martyr in Europe, dying for his loyalty to the Catholic faith. There was an oratory in Castle Lane, off Athlunkard Street up to

1773, when the order was suppressed and the oratory closed.

The Jesuits returned to Limerick in 1859 at the invitation of Bishop John Ryan and occupied No. 1, The Crescent, on the corner of Lower Hartstonge Street. The building had formerly been used by the Sisters of the Faithful Companions of Jesus as a temporary dwelling. The development of the church soon followed in 1862, when the Jesuits bought Crescent House from Richard Russell, who had then moved to Plassey. I have tried, in vain, to establish when and why the limestone porch was added to this house. Interestingly, it resembles the Hartstonge Street entrance to No. 6 Pery Square and



The Crescent in the 1950s.



The Custom House. "Lands nearest to the mediaeval English town ... were built on first."

the Barrington Street entrance to No. 1 Pery Square.

The present church building was begun in 1864, in what had been the garden of Crescent House. The plans were drafted by Charles Geoghegan, a well-known architect in his day, but the man responsible for the building was William Corbett, a Limerickman and, until his death in 1903, the Limerick Corporation's City Engineer. When the church was opened on 27 May, 1868, it was named the Church of St Aloysius. However on 27 January, 1869, the Feastday of the Holy Name, the Church was dedicated and re-named the Church of the Sacred Heart. It was the first in Ireland to be so named. It is also of interest to mention that the altar consecrated in 1876 was the first in this country so dedicated, under the title of Our Lady of Lourdes. William Corbett's design for the high altar was regarded as a masterpiece. It was made in Rome at a cost of £1,000, comprising 22 varieties of precious marble.

On 10 March, 1859, the Jesuit Fathers opened a school at No. 1 The Crescent which was also to serve as a junior seminary for the diocese. The college building had its entrance from Hartstonge Street and was originally called "St Munchin's College". In the late 1860s Bishop George Butler decided to found a diocesan seminary, staffed by his own priests, and the college then became officially known as the Sacred Heart College, in line with the church. In 1862 the Jesuits purchased three Tontine buildings towards the southern end at "considerable expense" and the college

was enlarged to cater for the growing number of students. The school entrance, as we know it today, was opened in 1900 and the new school building on the corner of Newenham Street was completed in 1946. The less said about this building the better, but a great opportunity was lost when the original design for this school was not built. The Jesuit Order still owns a quarter of all The Crescent property but, interestingly, the building which they first occupied in 1859 on the Hartstonge Street corner was demolished in the early 1970s, when the New Ireland Assurance offices were erected on the site.

Reference to the Tontine buildings recalls an unusual connection with Furnell's Limerick Bank. In Eoin O'Kelly's book *Old Private Banks of Munster*, published by Cork University Press in 1959, he states:

The only public or semi-public account which I have been able to trace to its books was "The Crescent Lottery Scheme, Richmond Place". This was a scheme in connection with the building at what is now the "Crescent", Limerick, of "three elegant houses", on ground, the property of one Richard Peppard, and deserves more than passing notice. The enterprising Mr Peppard, having had the plans prepared by his architect, Robert O'Callaghan-Newenham, put them on show and invited the public to purchase 600 lottery tickets at a price of six guineas each: 136 tickets were to benefit, 133 of these to draw cash prizes, amounting in all to £800, and the three first prizes were to be "£50 per annum for life". The remaining funds were more

than sufficient to erect Mr Peppard's "three elegant houses", but it is not known if he got his scheme completed before the bank failed.

The most recent development of note was Limerick Civic Trust's restoration project at The Crescent when a considerable amount of the exterior features were restored to their former elegance. Both terraces were floodlit to create a striking night time effect. This restoration work was recognised and rewarded when "The Crescent Restoration Project" won a European Architectural Heritage Award in 1992. This was a notable achievement, considering that there were only 44 awards and 953 entries. The work of Limerick Civic Trust at The Crescent is not finished yet, as planning permission has been granted for a major upgrading of the O'Connell Monument site. The plans include the building of a water feature, floodlighting the monument, and the reinstatement of the four lamps.

In many cities and towns throughout Ireland and Britain there are plenty examples of crescents. A lot of these are far more elegant and spectacular, but the uniqueness of the Limerick Crescent is the double terrace of houses in the same locality. I am also convinced that one would have to travel far to find another area with such a fascinating history. I can only hope that the revival of pride and interest in Limerick's architectural heritage will ensure that The Crescent will continue to be one of the foremost features in New Town Pery, as visualised by Pery and his contemporaries 200 years ago.