

Spirits in Bondage

The Granary in Michael Street is now one of Limerick's landmarks. It is near Mathew Bridge, which crosses the Abbey River, and is visited by thousands each year. It owes its origin to Philip Roche (John), one of Limerick's merchant princes, who built it in 1787 as a store for cereals, flax and rape seed. My own connection with it dates from the 1930s when I went to work as assistant to my granduncle, Mr. Michael O'Brien, who operated both the Granary and warehouse in Patrick Street as bonded premises. In those days we knew the Granary as the Mardyke warehouse because this was the old name for the adjacent quay developed by Limerick Corporation in 1715. In my days there, whiskey and tobacco were stored in bond. The massively built vaults created the ideal atmosphere for whiskey to mature to perfection. In those days it was normal for wine and spirit merchants to buy whiskey from the distillers. This was known as "first shot" and was colourless and much too raw a product to be drunk. The whiskey came in 52½ gallon capacity hogsheads made of oak and which had been used to hold sherry. The hogsheads were received into bond, where they remained for seven or more years. During that time, in the ideal conditions provided by the vaults, the whiskey matured and took on the accepted colour from the residue of sherry remaining in the oak of the casks interior.

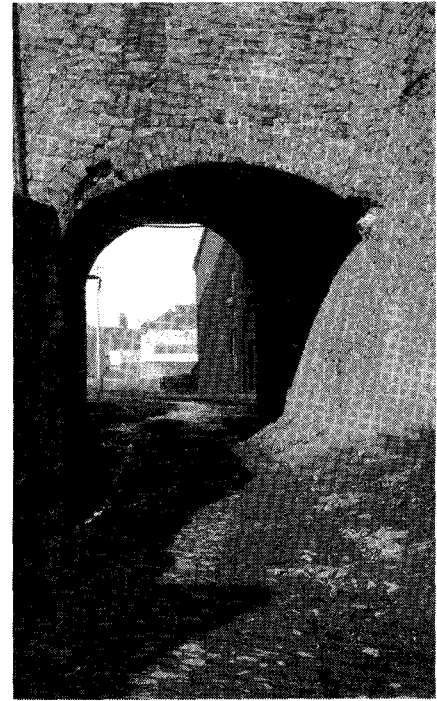
My granduncle's income was derived from the rent charged for the storage of the hogsheads. The owners of the whiskey were charged a weekly rental per hogshead, so a careful record had to be kept. When an owner drew stock from bond, a customs officer took a sample to determine the alcoholic strength of the

by Morgan McCloskey

spirit and from this to estimate the duty to be paid. An allowance of 10% was made for evaporation of the spirit over the time spent in bond. Not all customers required a full hogshead at a time and in that case a smaller quantity, usually a firkin of 9 gallons was 'racked' or drawn off by a suction pump from a matured hogshead.

I have seen it reported elsewhere that the Mardyke warehouse was leased to the Customs and Excise, but that is not so. My granduncle was obliged to provide office accommodation for Customs officers, and this was located just inside the gateway where there is now a restaurant. The door to each vault had two padlocks - one belonged to the operator and the other was a Customs & Excise lock. This was the system of security designed to ensure that no spirits were drawn without payment of duty. The Customs' lock contained a piece of paper on which was written the date and time of locking. This paper was perforated by a ring of spikes attached to a circular drum which rotated when the key was turned to open the door and removed a circular piece from the paper. The paper was removed and pasted into a record book together with the times of opening and closing the vault door. A new piece of paper was then put into the padlock and the door was locked by Customs and the operator.

In the upper floors of the Mardyke warehouse tobacco leaf was stored. This came from America in loose casks about four feet in diameter. These were unloaded in the yard and hauled up by a hand-operated winch hoist. Once upstairs the casks were rolled along the wooden floor to their storage position, and during



View through the archway to the Abbey Kinema on Barrington's Mall.

Limerick Museum.

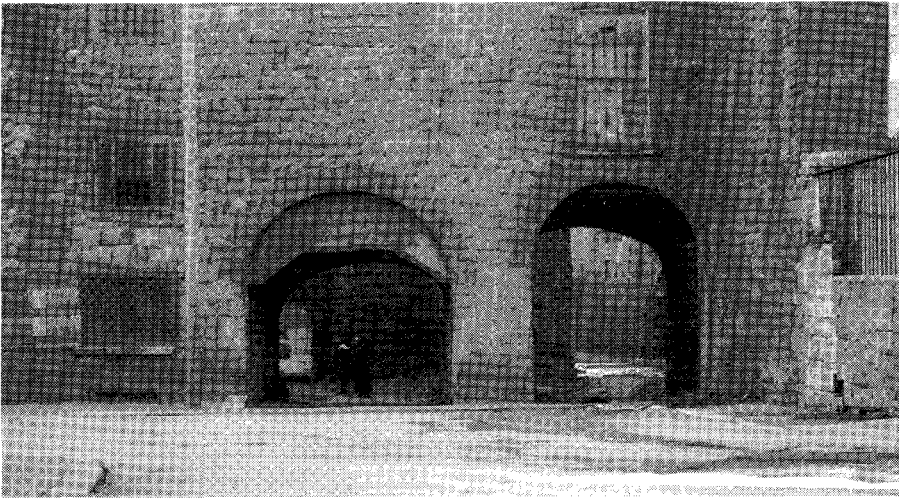
this operation a certain amount of tobacco dust came out of the gaps between the staves of the casks. Over the years a thick dust collected on the floors which had to be allowed to remain because the Customs officers did not allow the porters to sweep the floors because the dust was mostly snuff and was, like tobacco, subject to duty. As a newcomer, I learned this the hard way when the porters carried out their usual trick on a newcomer by contriving to make me walk the length of the floor of one of the tobacco stores. As they knew I would, I raised enough dust to start me sneezing for quite some time.

The Patrick Street warehouses were located behind the old town hall and were used to store wine, sherry and brandy. Bulk wine came in large barrels called 'pipes', which held 126 gallons. While there was a tax on tea, this was also kept in bond at the Patrick Street warehouses. Somewhere quite near, there must have been a handball alley, as the players occasionally came to recover lost handballs.

My granduncle was known as 'Red Mick O'Brien' from the colour of his hair. He was my grandmother's brother, and his brother was Paul O'Brien, who was Mayor of Limerick from 1925 to 1927. 'Red Mick' also owned one of the two Turkish baths in Limerick at that time. He liked to bet on the horses and had developed his own peculiar system of selecting which to bet on. This happened each morning in the office where we still had stand-up desks. He would open the newspaper at the racing section and then, by a system of



The Granary, Michael St., in the late 1930s. Limerick Museum.



Entrance archways to the Granary at Bank Place.

Limerick Museum.

selecting playing cards, decide on which horses to place his bets. It was unwise to interrupt this ritual.

He was, as I recall, a very courteous man and treated all females as ladies. One of his sisters, the widow of Dr. Madigan, was named Christina and was a regular visitor to what had been the family home at No. 62, Henry Street, then the home of my grandparents, Thomas James McCloskey and his wife Agnes (nee O'Brien). Whilst we all knew the lady as Aunt Chrissie, she was unfailingly addressed as Christina by her brother, Red Mick, and although my grandmother may have been called Aggie, she always got her full name from her brother.

"62" was seldom without visitors. There was the immediate family of eight children - five boys and three girls - and their children who, in turn, followed the same tradition of dropping in, even after my grandmother died and it had become the home of one of the daughters who married William Shute. Sadly, demolition had left only memories. One of these is connected with Hanrahan's pub, which was next door on the Newenham Street side. Both had back gardens with a high dividing wall and set into this wall was a kind of serving hatch where the occupants of "62" could obtain their refreshment without having to frequent the pub.

'Red Mick' maintained that there were only two good doctors - Dr. Jameson and Dr. Power, and he used whiskey to condition his hair and to massage his feet. He was known to go on the occasional binge which usually ended by his admission to St. John's Hospital, which was then staffed by nuns in full religious habits. It took some time for him to descend, as it were, from whatever cloud he was on and during that time he re-christened his attendant nuns with his own names. On a visit to him I remember being introduced to Sister Rosebud, Sister Buttercup and Sister Primrose. Perhaps this was his unconscious reluctance to use the names of the saints after whom the nuns were called. On another visit to him in St. John's, he invited me to have my throat cut with a circular saw. That time I had gone to get a cheque signed so that I

could make up the wages to pay the porters employed at the warehouses. When I presented the cheque to the clerk at the bank he smiled when he saw the signature and asked "Is he on the batter again?"

The O'Brien family business had been the manufacture of leather sea boots. These knee-length leather boots were used by seamen and were kept waterproof by regular dressings of neatsfoot oil. There was a tannery in Clontarf Place, quite near to "62", and presumably this is where the boots were made. At "62" there was an inner door in the hallway so that the street door could remain open to allow access to the two front rooms, which served as offices. The Clontarf Place premises went through several phases of use - tannery, cooperage, roller skating rink and finally, a printing works. There could have been other uses and I may not have listed them in the correct sequence, since I was away from Limerick from 1937 to 1988. Years after the sea boot manufacture ceased a Lithuanian sailor came looking for a pair of sea boots. It appears that the headquarters of the O'Brien business was at Capel Street in Dublin, and such activities probably ceased when they became unacceptable as

housing encroached both in Dublin and Limerick. Thomas J. McCloskey, having married Agnes O'Brien, came to live at 62 Henry Street in March 1886, so it is possible that business activities at the house had ceased by then.

Red Mick's brother, Paul, was with an American oil company and was one of the early motor car owners in Limerick. It was a Ford and I remember him showing me the mileometer which was housed in the hub of one of the front wheels.

It was Red Mick who was instrumental in having Arigna coal brought to Limerick during the coal shortage of the 1914-1918 war. This came to light when I drew his attention to what appeared to be a small pile of slaty stones lying in a corner of the Patrick Street premises. Exposure over the years had caused the anthracite-type Arigna coal to take on that appearance. He maintained that all the Irish railway lines had been so sited as to make the mining of minerals uneconomic.

He was selected to be a member of a delegation to petition the British Parliament on some matter and he decided to 'fortify' himself for the undertaking. The result was that he set off for London with his luggage, consisting of just a brown paper parcel, clutched under his arm and from which he would not be parted. However, he was refused entry to the House of Commons until he parted with his treasure, which turned out to contain nothing more dangerous than his pyjamas.

One day when I was walking with him out near the White Gates in Rosbrien he paused, excused himself and removed his hat to gaze, in reverential attitude, at the sky. He said he had been communication with the sun god. He had been a member of the famous Redemptorist Confraternity, but business had prevented him attending on two occasions. On the third occasion he was a little late and arrived just in time to hear his name being "read out" from the altar, apparently the penalty for non-attendance in those days. He considered this so unjust that he turned about and walked out of the church and never again entered one until he did so in a coffin.



Michael Street in the early 1940s showing Civil Defence bunkers.

Limerick Museum.