

More Urban Townlands - Mount Kennett, Courtbrack and Corcanree

In the early part of the nineteenth century the planned city of Newtown Pery began to take shape. A parallel development took place along the south bank of the Shannon into rural areas such as Mount Kennett, Courtbrack and Corcanree. The development of the quays was accelerated when the building of Wellesley (Sarsfield) Bridge began in 1824.¹ The quays that had been built by private individuals in accordance with the original leases on riverside plots were unmaintained and inadequate. The movement of Limerick docks downriver meant that mills and grain stores were erected convenient to the newly developed quays. The development continued despite the fact that the new bridge was not completed until 1835, and it took a further nineteen years before the new docks were opened.² A contemporary account of the newly opened docks stated: "The floating dock covers an area of 8 acres built of solid and native limestone, the depth of walls being 30 feet, the depth of water 20 at neap and 25 at feet at spring tides, the entrance 70 feet

by Tony Browne

for the purpose of admitting transatlantic steamers. The daily average number of labourers employed in its construction was 300, of mechanics 50. The entire cost was £54,000 and of this £39,000 was expended in labour - the remainder in materials".³

In 1875 a refreshment room was erected "at the east side of the middle gate leading to the Dock Road for the use of workmen whose meals were brought to them" at a cost of £335. In 1880 the Harbour Board decided to erect a clock tower at the dock and it was later described as follows: "It is in the Italian style of architecture and is a fine specimen of work in cut limestone, the quarries of which, of a superior quality, about Limerick are inexhaustible."⁴

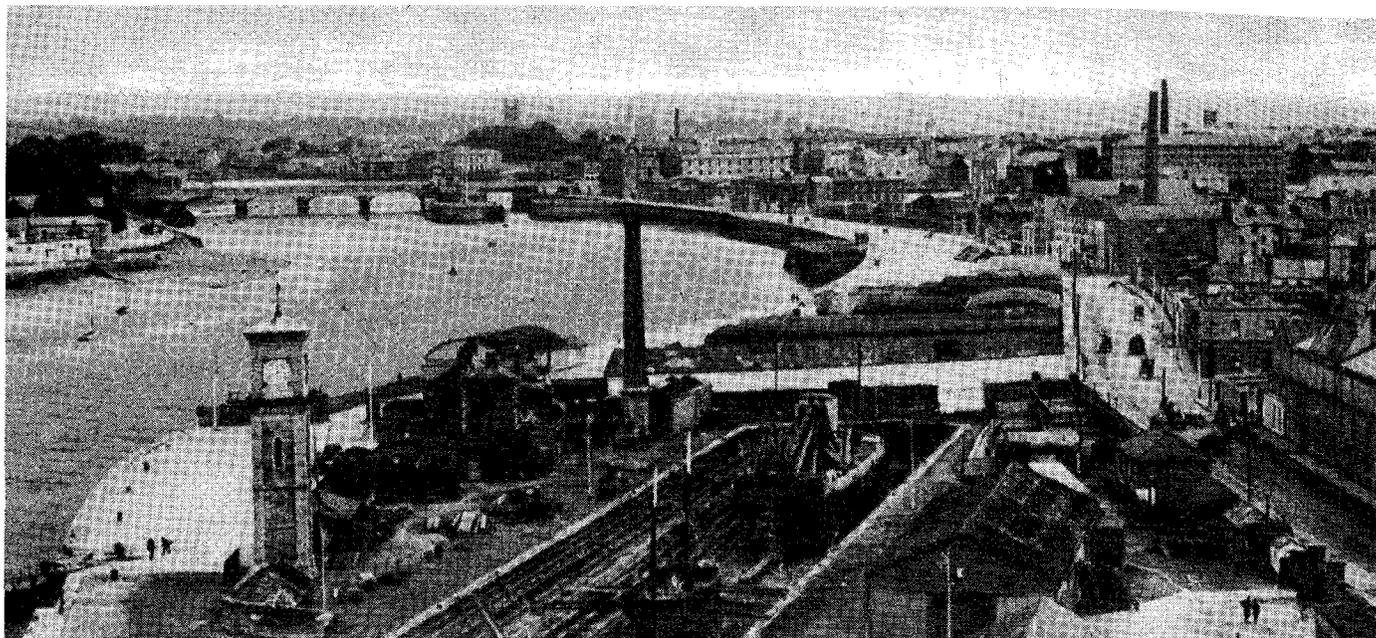
The extension of the quays downriver meant that a large rural area became enveloped in a new urban sprawl. The first area adjacent to Newtown Pery was Mount Kennett.

Mount Kennett

The townland of Mount Kennett, in St. Michael's Parish, covers a rectangular shaped area surrounded by the northern side of Henry Street, Frederick (O'Curry) Street, New Mungret (Dock) Road and Hartstonge Street Lower. It includes Windmill Street, Meade's Quay and Steamboat Quay.⁵ In 1829, Charles Walker founded the first lace factory here in "a large building with spacious rooms which afforded ample accommodation for the workers which at that time numbered about five hundred." He invested £20,000 (over £1 million modern equivalent). After about seven or eight years during which the business was carried on at Mount Kennett, Mr Walker was obliged to give up the store to the landlord, who required it for his own use. The business moved to Mulgrave Street, where it continued to prosper until Mr Walker's death in 1843.⁶ In 1841, it employed 1700 in the manufacture of Limerick lace which was famed throughout the world.⁷ An indication of how the area of Mount Kennett was undeveloped may be gleaned from the



Valentine's postcard showing the Docks, Corcanree behind, c. 1940.



Postcard view of the docks in the late 1940s.

Limerick Museum.

account of a meeting of hurlers there on a Sunday morning in 1832. The meeting was called to decide a wager of goal, with an equal number on both sides from two stores in the city. They dispersed on the arrival of a few City Police.⁸

Up to recently the main feature of Mount Kennett was its workhouse.

Mount Kennett Workhouse

During the Great Famine, Limerick Union found it difficult to cope with the increasing number of destitute people seeking accommodation in the Union Workhouse. Rather than extending outdoor relief, the Guardians decided to open auxiliary workhouse accommodation. Several such auxiliaries were opened at various locations around the city. By common consensus, the worst example existed at Mount Kennett. The building was one of Russell's large grainstores and totally unsuited for accommodating the sick and dying. The store had long been in a dilapidated and crumbling condition. The number of inmates (male adults) was 292 in early 1849. The height of the "day room" was 5 ft. 2 in. beam to floor in places and 5 ft. 10 in. in others. The refectory was constantly flooded in wet weather, and the officers could not decide whether it was from ground springs or oozing in from outside. The sick, who were two to a bed, complained that for breakfast they received no more than a noggin of skim milk.⁹ Revolts by the inmates occurred. That of 24 June 1850 was reported in the *Limerick Chronicle*¹⁰:

"Riot at Mountkennett Workhouse. The pauper inmates of this establishment, numbering 1,200, chiefly boys of 12 to 16 years, who are all maintained in idleness at the expense of the impoverished ratepayers of the Limerick union, again revolted on Monday in consequence of two ringleaders who had been recognised exciting their comrades to in-

subordination, having been curtailed of the usual dietary served out for breakfast! Uproar and violence prevailed to such an extent as to cause general alarm in the neighbourhood. In fact the house the entire of Sunday previous, was in a state of boisterous tumult. Lord Clare, chairman of the board of guardians, who was in the city when the riot occurred, promptly called upon Dr. Gibson, J.P., who was then presiding at the Police court, and upon being apprised of this outbreak, he immediately procured the assistance of a strong party of constabulary, under Head Constable Joynt and Constable Shannon, and proceeded direct to the auxiliary workhouse, where a scene presented itself of the most fearful and menacing character. The juvenile paupers stood aloof, while from 600 to 700 incorrigible and desperate vagabonds faced the authorities and Police, with a cry of "murder the Peelers." Stones were hurled at them, and four of the Policemen were badly hurt in the conflict. The extraordinary forbearance evinced by the constabulary, when wantonly assailed by a pampered band of young ruffians, is deserving of much praise; and to the activity and resolution of Dr. Gibson, under such trying circumstances, is attributable the result of the melee, which did not terminate until he had read the riot act and the Police loaded and come to the charge with fixed bayonets; when, fortunately, further extremes were unnecessary, (many having been well punished with carbines) as the rioters retreated to their wards. During the disturbances which prevailed locks, bars, and bolts were demolished, window glass broken, and a breach of over 20 feet made in the high wall which surrounds the premises."

A damning report on conditions had already been laid before the Board of Guardians:¹¹

"Mr. John C. Delmege, after minutely detailing the various defects of the establishment, and its total mismanagement by its officers, thus concludes his report with the following startling observations:-

'On no one point can I congratulate this Board on the present state of Mountkennett auxiliary poorhouse. It is truly in a most deplorable condition. A most melancholy want of employment presents itself everywhere. We had actually to force a few men to store some loads of turf scattered on the yard, and only succeeded by stating that they should get no dinner until the work was done; and this in a house containing 1200 men and boys! A total listlessness and apathy pervades this vast assembly of living souls, officers, as well as men. No spirit - no energy - no life - no discipline - no decency or morality is there: all is disorder and discontent. One dead calm - one monotonous prostration of intellect or industry broadly characterizes this plague spot from civilized society. Time, is here, only valued or measured by, in its dull rounds, appeasing at uncertain intervals, the morbid cravings of half satisfied appetites.'

The Board unanimously agreed that the Master be called on to resign, and that the Porter be dismissed."

By August 1850, the infamous workhouse was closed down and the remaining 320 inmates were transferred to the parent workhouse.¹² The shell of the building that housed so many destitute people during the famine was finally demolished to make way for the recent development of offices and an hotel.

The fine stone building at the northern side of Henry Street which once housed the Shannon Arms Hotel among many other ventures and which is now overshadowed by new office developments is also in the townland of Mount Kennett. This building was originally the site of



Villier's School, Henry Street, in the 1940s.

Limerick Museum.

Villier's School which was built in the late 1830s and funded by a bequest from the will of Mrs Hannah Villiers. It served as a school for boys and girls and in recent times the school relocated in the North Liberties off the North Circular Road.¹³

A Proposed Dock Road Brewery

In 1895 Limerick people were excited at the prospect of a new industry starting in the city. It was proposed to locate a brewery at the Dock Road, suitable because of the number of inexhaustible springs there which the brewery would require. These were possibly the same springs which oozed through the walls of Mount Kennett Workhouse half a century earlier. The London company responsible for the project promised that employment would be provided both in the construction of the brewery and, more importantly, local labour would be employed to run it. However, the Redemptorist Order, who were located near the new site, objected to locating a brewery so near to their church, and also questioned the wisdom of locating a brewery in Limerick at all, as it would lead to increased drunkenness. They backed down in the face of criticism from the working class and labour movement, who were strongly in favour of the project. It was all in vain, as the proposed brewery never developed. It was the supremacy of Guinness on the Irish stout market rather than clerical intervention which led the London investors to withdraw the financial support which was vital for the success of the project.¹⁴

The Windmill District

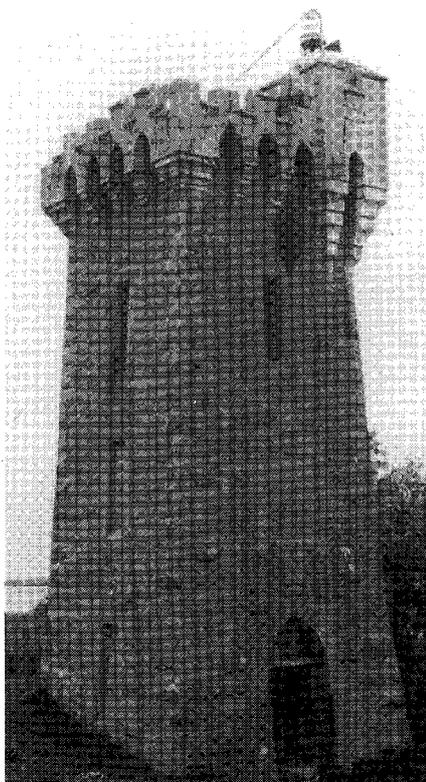
The district known as Windmill stretches from Henry Street the Dock Road. Apart from the street of the same name, the district also takes in Little Frederick (O'Curry) Street and Cogan Street. The windmill which gave the name to the

district was one of three known in the city, and was built by Lancelot Hill, a Limerick merchant. Another windmill was on the site of Mr. Collier's house in Greenpark and the other, on the Ennis Road, was demolished in 1811. Lancelot Hill built his windmill on the site of a former signalling station and it was described as a large, tall, round stone building, pierced by windows and according to tradition, could be seen from any part of the city. Shortly after it was built it went on fire on 29 January 1803. It returned to working order, but a second fire on 15 November 1813 disabled the mill for good. During the fire "the machinery was still in motion, though on fire, a brisk gale of wind blowing, the dark night and the spectacle awfully and

sublimely grand." The windmill was finally demolished in 1915-1916 and the stones removed for ballast.¹⁵ Near the site of the old mill was a large house at no. 5 Frederick (O'Curry) Street owned by the Russells¹⁶ of Mount Kennett Ironworks, later known as Shannon Foundry. Local tradition held that this house was built on the site of a quarantine station or hospital which was burnt down. An interesting feature of the district is the steps from the end of Windmill Street to the Dock Road, now sadly enveloped by modern development. These steps originally led to the water of the Shannon, as the river came as far as here, and even further up at high tide. Chalk which was used as ballast in boats was often dumped along here and can still be found along this area of the Dock Road when the topsoil is removed. The Windmill district, like Park on the other side of the city, was a self-contained area of specialist people living on its outskirts and continued to thrive as a community despite being encircled by an urban sprawl. The specialities of the people of the Windmill were primarily related to the sea. Sailors, pilots, sail-makers and shipwrights all found a home here and added to the variety and charm of the whole area.¹⁷ The wide variety of nationals living in the area was evident in a cry of the time "Men of all nations, come in for your dinner."

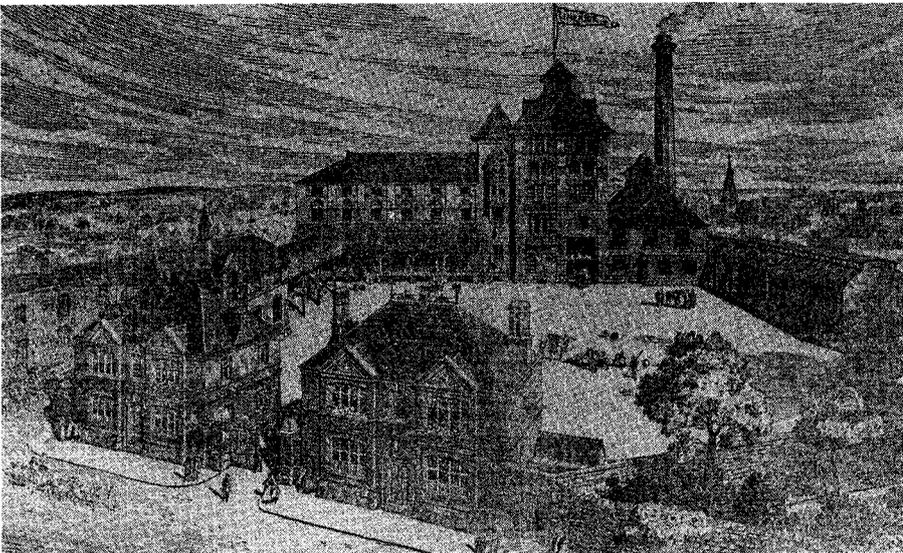
Corkanree

The "Marsh of the King," Corcadh an Rí, was held by Limerick Corporation in the Civil Survey of 1654-56¹⁸ and was subsequently let to various people. In 1836, an area of about 45 acres exclusive of the bank and spur was advertised for letting. It had been held by the representatives of Sir Richard Harte and the area was described as being situated near the bounds of Courtbrack and Ballinacurra and also bounded by the River Shannon and the Creek of Ballinacurra. A condition of letting was that the tenant would keep the bank in proper repair and the Corporation would not be liable for any damage by floods getting over the banks.¹⁹ A bid by Mahony Hart of £150 was beaten by Captain Garrett Hugh Fitzgerald, who bid £180 and was allowed £40 to erect two new sluices to replace the two bad ones.²⁰ In 1817, Fitzgerald retired from a captaincy in the British Army and in 1838 became Mayor of Limerick. He supplied potatoes to the city for twelve years from the 200 acres of land he held in both Courtbrack and Corcanree. The Great Famine spelt ruin for Fitzgerald and it is ironic that he almost discovered a cure for the blight that ruined him by steeping the seeds in bluestone rather than spraying the plant with the solution. He eventually ended up as an assistant emigration officer at Tarbert, Co. Kerry.²¹ The Famine also took the life of his eleven year old son, who died of Kilrush of scarlet fever.²² The sale of his lands under the Incumbered Estates Court was advertised in the *Limerick Chronicle*²³ as follows:



Spillane's Tower.

Limerick Museum.



View of the proposed Dock Road brewery, with the Redemptorist church in the background.

COUNTY AND CITY OF LIMERICK Incumbered Estates Court.

In the Matter of the Estate of Garrett Hugh Fitzgerald, Owner. Thomas Lysaght, Petitioner.

Pursuant to the Absolute Orders made in this matter, bearing date respectively the 29th June, 1850, and 25th January, 1851, the Lands of COURTBRACK, situate in the parish of St. Michael, and partly in the south suburbs of the City, and the residue in the county of Limerick, containing 87a 0r 17p, more or less, held under lease for lives renewable for ever, bearing date the 4th December, 1789, subject to the yearly rent of £166 3s 1d sterling, and a Pepper Corn Renewal fine, and £3 13s 8d Tithe Rent charge, and now valued at the yearly sum of £310 13s 0¹/₂d.

Also the Lands of CORKANREE, adjoining the said Lands of Courtbrack, and in the county of Limerick, containing 124a 2r 32p, per Ordnance Survey statute measure, held under the Corporation of Limerick for a term of 999 years from the 28th June, 1836, at the yearly rent of £160 sterling, and now valued at the yearly sum of £189, per Griffith's valuation, will, by the direction of the Commissioners, be Sold by AUCTION, in Two Lots, at the Stores of Messrs. Merrick Brothers, in Patrick-st., Limerick, on SATURDAY, the 3rd day of May, 1851, at the hour of One o'Clock pm by H. N. Seymour, Auctioneer.

Corkanree, as the name suggests, was marshland subject to flooding by the River Shannon. An Act of Parliament passed in 1865 empowered Limerick Corporation to make an embankment to prevent flooding and to add to the city a portion of Corkanree that had been in the county. It would also provide the citizens with a healthful and much needed park and promenade.²⁴ In 1870 the Corporation took on the ambitious project of building the embankment and promenade so that people could walk along the Shannon banks four or five abreast. The cost of construction of what was to be called "the

citizens embankment" would be funded by letting the new rich pasture on an annual payments basis.²⁵ Two approaches to the new promenade were approved, one from the dock wall and the other from the road, which would be protected by ornamental gates. The unsightly and unhealthy marsh was now a dry grass fertile surface, with cattle cropping the luxuriant pasture where once only cranes and frogs were fattened.²⁶ Corkanree became the site for refuse disposal at what became known as the city dump. It continued to be subject to flooding. One man by the name of Harry Bowee, who lived in a car on the dump, owed his life to his rodent neighbours who warned him of the advancing flood when they woke him with their frightened screeches as they scrambled for safety in advance of the onrushing waters. The dump is now closed and has made way for industrial development.

At the close of the nineteenth century, Commercials Football Club, which won two all-Ireland football titles, had their grounds at Corkanree, rented from the Corporation for an annual fee of £5, and the Corporation retained the use of the grazing.²⁷ It was the venue for many inter-firm matches such as the Inter-Drapery challenge between Cannocks and Todds, as well as inter-county fixtures.²⁸

Spillane's Tower

A prominent feature in Corcanree, which has now been enveloped by industrial buildings, is the small gothic-style round tower known as Spillane's tower or the snuff box. The opening of the new roadway along the northern bank of the Shannon has made the squat tower-like structure more visible. The origin of the name dates back to the last century when the Spillane family erected the tower as an aid for navigation, to guide ships coming up the estuary. The Spillanes were importers of tobacco and snuff, hence the name given to the tower. They also manufactured the famous "Craven A'A" cigarettes. The proprietor, George Spillane, lived at "Tivoli" on the North

Circular Road, which became the new home for Villiers School when it relocated from Henry St. The tower served a similar purpose as the building that preceded the windmill upriver, and in later years it marked the start of races in the old Limerick regatta. Less sporting types used the snuff box for target practice, taking rifle pot-shots at the navigation light at the top of the structure.²⁹

Another feature of note in this area was an island with the intriguing name "Hells Gate Island," with an area of 16 perches, which was listed in Griffith's Valuation of 1850. Like the lost island of Atlantis, it is now submerged in the River Shannon and known nowadays only to the pilots who work on the estuary.³⁰

(to be continued).

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