James McMahon died on 17 December 1899 at the age of 47. He had been chairman of the company, James McMahon Ltd., timber importers and timber and hardware merchants. The firm styled itself 'McMahons of Limerick', a brand still to be seen on cast-iron ranges in the kitchens of some houses. Limerick was, and still is, the headquarters of the company, with the main office and works, until recent years, in St. Alphonsus Street. In 1894 the company had a branch in Clonmel and now branches of the business are to be found in Cork, Tralee, Portarlington and Drogheda. The company also acquired the business of Francis Spaight & Sons Ltd. The familiarity of the name to most Limerick people might make it difficult to realise that the 'James' part of it died one hundred years ago. He was born in 1852, the son of Morgan McMahon (1812-1884) and his wife, May, one of the Skehans of the Morroe area of County Limerick. 'Old' Morgan, to differentiate between him and his grandson who was also a timber merchant, died when James was 32 and when he took control of the business that had been started by his grandfather. Eight years later, in 1892, Slater's Directory carried the following description of the business:

'Mr. McMahon's large and finely equipped establishment forms one of the chief industrial centres of Limerick, affording employment to about one hundred and turning out a variety of manufactures. The business has been carried on by the family for over a century, having been founded by the grandfather, and continued by the father of the present enterprising owner. The premises cover a large space of ground and include saw mills, turning shops, cooperage, wheel and carriage works, all furnished with the newest labour-saving machinery, together with very extensive timber yards well supplied with home and foreign logs and trees. The fine modern plant for every species of sawing, turning, cooperage and packing case operations is the remarkable feature of the place and indicates the progressive spirit and enterprise of the proprietor. The cooperage factory turns out a great variety of articles for trade, house and farm purposes and for the provision and butter factories, and does a large business in the supply of tubs, firkins and boxes for the butter trade. The saw mills are equal to log, band and circular sawing of all descriptions and the turning department to everything in the line from a ladder pin to a mangle roller, not to speak of builders' turnery.
The coach and van factory is the latest
development, and has given a good account
of its capacity, but is the natural outcome
of an original department all along engaged in wheelwright work.
Altogether the concern is one of the most complete and self-contained to be found
anywhere, and its old-established position and high reputation do great
credit to the skill and go-ahead spirit for which the industrial circles of Limerick
have been famous. We may add that
to power is supplied by a fine steam engine
of 40hp and that Mr. McMahon, apart
from his business qualifications, is an
expert in the trades represented and the
soul of the enterprise.'

While that account may be rather fulsome,
it is not untrue and helps to throw some light on the activities in which the
McMahon firm was engaged. The saw
mills which the article mentions were
located in William Street and Sexton Street. An old name-board
bearing the name 'Morgan McMahon'
could still be seen in Sexton Street up
along engaged in wheelwright work.

At some point James gave the company
his own name and this has caused some
difficulty in the acceptance of the claim
that the business was founded in 1830.
This was 22 years before James was born,
so the foundation of the business must, as
suggested in the Slater's Directory article,
surely be attributed to his grandfather,
since his father was only 18 years old in
1830. James, born on 1 November 1852,
was the eldest son of five children born to
his parents. The others were Patrick
(29.5.1854), Ann (20.1.1856), Morgan
(14.2.1857) and Michael (5.2.1860). At the
age of 32 it is probably safe to assume that
James had been engaged in the family business and had, therefore, sufficient
experience to assume control. It is known
that Patrick became a Jesuit. Morgan
worked for his father for some time before
going to America where, it is said, he died
in a gunfight. No other information,
apocryphal or otherwise, appears to be
available about Ann and Michael.

James married twice. His first wife was
a Miss Bridget Edwards from Limerick.
Their second child, their first son, was
named Hugh and was destined to become
chairman of the company known as James
McMahon Limited. Following the death of
his first wife, James married Miss Nora
McElligott from Ballysteen, near Ardfert,
Co. Kerry. One of her brothers was J.J.
McElligott, who became a senior civil
servant and was appointed Governor of
the newly-created Central Bank of the new
Irish Free State. This second marriage
produced another five children: Morgan
Paul (1887), Ellen (1890), Nora (1894),
Bridget (1896) and Margaret, ever after-
wards called 'Baby', who was born in 1898.

By this time James and his new family
were settled in Mount Mungret, where he
began to breed cattle and became
interested in local activities. It also
provided a suitable place where he could
extend hospitality to friends and business
colleagues. Whiskey was not kept in
bottles in Mount Mungret, but in a 4½
gallon keg. What else would a cooper use!

The house was a glebe house built
in 1832 and occupied originally by the rector
of the Church of Ireland church in
Mungret, which had been built in 1822.
Previously the main building in Mungret
Abbey had been used for Protestant
worship. Not far away at a farm in Island
Duane there was a relative of James's, a
Mrs Hayes who, before her marriage to
Michael Hayes had been a Malone from
Gilloge. The relationship was through
James's mother, who was related to the
Malones. Every Sunday it was the custom
of James to drive to Gilloge to visit the
Malones.

Cooperage obviously continued to be
an important activity of the McMahon
company and at the Royal Dublin
Agricultural Society's show of 1883 their
cooperage exhibit was awarded a gold
medal. In 1887 the company won first
prize for cooperage at the Limerick
Agricultural Show. In the 1890s James is
reported in Modern Ireland Directory
to have travelled to Denmark, Sweden and
Holland to study butter packing tech-
niques. A 56lb. wooden box became the
standard bulk pack for butter. The base
of the box was smaller than the top
(sometimes called a pyramid pack) so that
the block of butter encased in greaseproof
paper slid out quite easily when the box
was upended. The blocks of butter were
displayed on shop counters where
prospective buyers were given to taking

Picture taken around 1914 of the office staff of James McMahon Ltd. Hugh McMahon is seated Centre of the front row and on
his left is probably Tom Loughrey who, in 1905, married a sister of Hugh's. Standing on the extreme left in the trendy suit is
Morgan, a step brother of Hugh. He later started his own business.

Photo courtesy Dr. Ann Tierney.
A class at Mungret College about 1897. The boy in the light coloured suit in the centre row is Morgan McMahon who would be living at Mount Mungret at that time. 

Photo courtesy Dr. Ann Tierney.

samples on their thumb nails to taste. Glass screens in front of the butter put an end to this practice. The required quantity of butter was taken from the block by the use of a butter spade, also called a 'scotch' hand, a wooden spatula like a small square paddle, smooth on one side and grooved on the other. The grooves prevented the butter sticking. The piece of butter was weighed and formed into a square shape with the spades and finally wrapped in greaseproof paper, called butter paper, bearing the seller's name. In the Limerick Chronicle of 27 October 1894 in a report on the Irish Dairy Association Show praise is given to the 'fine exhibition of butter packages of every variety shown by Mr. James McMahon of Alphonsus Street.'

However, the business path was not completely smooth. In April 1894, there was a strike by cooperers, some of whom were arrested on charges of intimidating a man who continued to work. James McMahon attended the court proceedings and appealed for leniency towards the accused men saying that they had suffered by being on strike. The dispute probably arose out of the use of machinery in the making of casks and the McMahon company was making use of such machinery. Improvements in the saw mill were also being made. In 1898 Mr. Joseph O'Malley BE was advertising for carpenters and builders to erect a saw mill at the Alphonsus Street premises of James McMahon. This was probably a replacement for the one destroyed in a fire at the timber yard the previous year.

James McMahon was a governor of Barrington's Hospital, and Kevin Hannan told of another connection with the Barrington family. Some time around 1851 'Old' Morgan had loaned the sum of £500 to Matthew Barrington of Glenstal. If this was so it shows that the 39-year-old Morgan was financially sound, since the sum involved was considerable for those times. In February 1851 he had been married in Morroe parish church, which is near Glenstal, and since his wife came from that area one can only speculate as to what influences were at work here.

There can be no doubt that James McMahon was able to use his influence to help improve conditions for his employees, as well as supporting the community at large through his connections with the Barrington family.

This sign could be seen at the top of St. Alphonsus Street. In the background is the spire of the Redemptorist's Church.

The Alphonsus Street premises.
McMahon was a well respected member of the Limerick business community and there can be no better evidence of this than the tributes paid to him following his death and the report of his funeral in the *Limerick Chronicle* of 19 December 1899, which merited a ten inch column. The chief mourners were Hugh McMahon, who was then aged 24, his step-brother Morgan Paul, who was 12, and Richard McElligott, father-in-law to James. Two of the Malones from Gilloge and three of the Maddens, all cousins, attended, together with T.J. Dunphy, a member of James McMahon Ltd, staff who was married to a daughter of James. Two brothers-in-law, Richard McElligott Junior and T. Costelloe, completed the group of relatives. The saw mill and cooperage staff were represented by their manager, Mr. W. Bourke. Also represented were Lord Clarina, Deputy Lieutenant J. O'G. Delmege, Mr. J.S. Cooper of Cooper Hill, Mrs. O'Brien of South Hill, Ald. Stephen O'Mara, Mr. T.J. Ferguson of Francis Spaight & Sons, Mr. S. Dowling and Mr. W. Ebrill. Amongst the very many names listed in the report Mrs. O'Brien was the sole female - perhaps a sign of those times! One of those who attended and also sent a wreath was Michael Hayes of Mungret, whose wife, as already mentioned, was a Malone from Gilloge.

Finally, there remains one question: why was Ellen Malone buried in the James McMahon plot in Mt. St. Lawrence cemetery? I offer a possible explanation. The relationship between James McMahon and the Malones of Gilloge and his regular visits there has been established. On the death of James's first wife (in 1885), there were four children ranging in age from 12 to 3 years. At that time Ellen was aged 49 and unmarried. Who better to take care of the four children, allowing James to remarry in 1886? Perhaps Ellen had already been governess / nursemaid to the children? Were the children living at Gilloge? She died in 1894 aged 58.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

The author is grateful for the help given by James A. McMahon and Dr. Ann Tierney in preparing this article.