The Coopers of Limerick
A Craft of the Past

Coopers, the men who made barrels, or more correctly, casks, were an essential part of the Limerick scene from earliest times. The founders of the city, the Vikings, who were superb shipbuilders, were also skilled cask makers or coopers. As their settlement grew there would have been a demand for items produced by the cooper such as casks, butter churns, wooden buckets, and perhaps storage vats. Excavations at crannogs and peat bogs in Ireland have revealed recognisable 10th century wooden buckets and churns with hoops of willow instead of metal. While coopers carried on their craft all over Ireland, ports such as Limerick had an additional need of the coopers' craft. Exports from the city and the surrounding area - butter, salted meat and other items - required a continuous supply of casks and the provisioning of ships called for casks and for the repairing and cleaning of those carried by the ship.

There was, of course, a limit to what casks could carry and, while salt meat may have been thought good enough for the ship's crew, fare-paying passengers expected more. They were quite well catered for. Fresh milk was available by having goats - some ships had cows - on board. Chickens produced fresh eggs and roast chicken, while sheep and other animals were a source of fresh meat. The livestock was taken on board at the start of a voyage and were killed and eaten as required during the period of the voyage. As my informant at the National Maritime Museum at Greenwich put it, 'It must have sounded like a farmyard on board some ships'.

For a long period the only forms of packaging were the basket, the wooden crate and the cask, which was the most robust and, of course, watertight of these. Nowadays there is so much packaging that its disposal is just one of the many problems of this modern age. In their time, the coopers of Limerick used their craft to further the growth and prosperity of the city. They were highly skilled and highly paid and many of them became master coopers employing several men. Their importance in the city is indicated by the Coopers Society, which was represented on the committee of the Limerick Industrial Society. Eighty four members of this society (employees and employers) contributed to a testimonial to honour Thomas Spring Rice MP in recognition of his work 'to improve and enrich your native city'.

But where did it all start? Kenneth Kilby says that the craft was brought to Britain by the Romans and that wooden casks were called 'cupals' and the makers of them were known as 'cuparius' and that from this we get the word cooper. At the site of one of the most famous of the Roman towns in Britain - Silchester in Hampshire - excavation revealed the remains of casks made of Pyrenean silver fir of 1½ inches thickness. On the inside of each of the staves making up the cask were found carved the Roman numerals indicating their respective positions.

To attain the degree of skill necessary required an apprenticeship of seven years (reduced to four in later times). To protect their craft, the coopers, like many other trades and crafts, formed guilds which operated in a way something like modern friendly societies. Many of these guilds built halls where the members met and where indenture ceremonies of apprentices were held. Some very fine guild halls are still to be seen in Britain today.

The tools used by the cooper have changed very little over the years and the similarity of the cooper's tools being used throughout Europe is a strong indication of a common ancestry. Kilby lists come 80 different tools of the cooperage craft. These are all hand tools needing skill and strength in their use. The names for the tools show a mixture of Viking, Norman French, Old French, Old English and Middle Dutch. The word 'dowel' is derived from the Middle Low German 'dovel'.

by Morgan McCloskey
TO THOMAS SPRING RICE, ESQ., M. P.

Sir, in the Guild of Cooperers, of the City of Limerick: I have the honour to inclose a document of the importance of your political services, and grateful for the distinguished and particular part which you have taken in the recent movement for religious and Political Freedom, that I beg to tender you my most unqualified appreciation of your conduct. I have witnessed with undeservedly charged, and of our national and individual expectations respect to you in that path of honour to which your talents and your exertions have excited me.

To recommend your exertions in the Great National Cause, and your successful efforts to improve and rectify your native City, through a pleasing period, it rendered superfluities by the conspicuous and honourable part which your name and your character will ever occupy to the history of your Country.

You are already aware that to commemorate these efforts, and to perpetuate your name, for the addition and example ofexterity, your grateful Fellow-Citizens have determined to erect a testimonial to your honour, which will bear witness in after-times, of your active virtue, and of your gratitude.

I am to take a part in this honourable project; I wear you tenderly our humble assistance, for though our heart's true, our estimated host can ever sufficiently depict the language of the end shall may serve to present a faint resemblance of the trepidity of gratitude which your services have implanted within the frame of the Inhabitants of this ancient and honourable City.

William O'Grady, &c. &c.

Timothy O'Donovan, &c. &c.

John McManus, &c. &c.

Edward Cowley, &c. &c.

Patrick Murphy, &c. &c.

Michael O'Callaghan, &c. &c.

Charles O'Callaghan, &c. &c.

James O'Callaghan, &c. &c.

James O'Callaghan, &c. &c.

Advertisement of the Limerick Guild of Cooperers in the Limerick Evening Post and Clare Sentinel.

15 December 1829.

as 1811 a patent was granted to the firm of Plaskett and Brown in England for a coopering machine designed to cut the heads for casks. Inventive minds were turned to other aspects of the cooper's trade and soon butter boxes were rivaling the containers produced by the cooperers. A libel case reported in the Limerick Chronicle of 4 May 1866 concerned the Limerick Butter Market and machine-made versus cooper-made boxes. The final nail in the cooperage coffin was the use of metal legs by the brewers. Some cooperage continues, but the days of the seven year apprenticeship are gone forever.

Limerick Cooperers Listed in Trades Directories 1769-1969

Adams, Michael, Summer St; B, 1877, 1880, 1894
Barron, Thomas, Playhouse Lane (Little Gerald Griffin St); P, 1824

Barry, James, St Francis Abbey; L, 1788
Bennett, William, Georges Quay; S, 1870
Blake, John; Catherine (S&D), Cooperage (B), 14, Denmark St; Lr (BS), H&C; 1867, S, 1870, B, 1875, 1877, 1880, 1884
Blake, John, Jail Lane; S, 1846
Blake, Thomas, Denmark St; Took part in funeral procession in memory of Manchester Martyrs 8/12/1867
Blind, Patrick; Palmerstown; L, 1789
Bourke, John; Sir Harrys Mall, (Barringtons Mall); B, 1875, 1877, 1880
Bourke, P, Sheep St; D, 1838
Burns, J (D) Byrnes, John (T), Sexton St; D, 1838; T, 1840
Butler, John, Boheyburu (D,S); Sexton St; (T,D), 1838; T, 1840, 1846
Cahill, Denis, Mardyke; B, 1875
Callaghan, Daniel, Summer St; B, 1877, 1880
Casey, John, Ship St, L, 1788
Casey, Messrs, Thomondgate; L, 1788
Clowden, James, Peter's Cell; Master of the Guild of Cooperers; F, 1769
Colman, Josiah, Jones' Place; S, 1870
Collins, James, Caucas; Took part in funeral procession in memory of Manchester Martyrs 8/12/1867
Costello, John, Kellys Range; Took part in funeral procession in memory of Manchester Martyrs 8/12/1867
Costello, John; Costelloe, Charles, Mulgrave St (D,T,S,B); Upr Williams St (S4); D, 1838; T, 1849, 1870; B, 1875, 1877, 1880, 1884
Cussen, Edward, Brennans Row; B, 1877, 1880, 1884
Donnelly, James, Cooperage, 2, Sir Harrys Mall; G, 1886
Duhig, Daniel, 9, Robert St (K) 10, Munratt St (GK); K, 1906; G, 1913; H&C, 1914, 1918, 1925, 1929
Dwyer, Michael, Black Boy; S, 1870
Dwyer, Michael, Kellys Range; Took part in funeral procession in memory of Manchester Martyrs 8/12/1867
Farrell, James, Thomondgate; P, 1824
Farrell, John, Old Clare St; P, 1824
Faulk, Patrick, Thomas Quay; Took part in funeral procession in memory of Manchester Martyrs 8/12/1867
Fenton, D, Cooperage, Mulgrave St; G, 1886
Forrest, James, Munratt St; P, 1824
Forrest, Michael (BS); Benjamin (BT,8), 8 Sexton St; B, 1875, 1877, 1880; G, 1886
Gavin, Cornelius, Little Creagh Lane; P, 1824
Gilmer, William, Warden of the Guild of Cooperers; F, 1769
Gleeson, Daniel, Chapel St; Took part in funeral procession in memory of Manchester Martyrs 8/12/1867
Glynn, Michael, Chapel Lane, (P,H&C); Hacketts Lane (D); Denmark St (S); H&C, 1867, P, 1824; D, 1838; S, 1846
Griffith, Charles, Punches Lane; Row (BB); B, 1877, 1880
Hamann, William Cooper; Grocer & Spirit dealer (S,B4,H&C); Publican (B) Vintner (G), 5, Upr Williams St; 44, (G), 4; (D), H&C, 1867, S, 1870; B, 1875, 1877, 1880, 1884; G, 1886
Hartigan, David, West Watergate; B, 1875
Hartigan, Patrick, Upr Denmark St; 3, (K); B, 1877, 1880, K, 1906
Harty, Patrick, 3, Denmark St Uprr; G, 1886
Hickey, G, Prospect Row; D, 1838
Hoge, John (T), Thomondgate; D, 1838; T, 1840
Hogan, John, Peter's Cell; L, 1788
Howard, John, Summer St; B, 1877, 1880
Jones, David, Warden of the Guild of Cooper; F, 1769
Kee, James, Upr Denmark St, (S,B5); 2, Tobert St (T,B); S, 1870; B, 1875, 1877, 1880
Kelly, John & Co.Merchant (*5 gs) (H) & Cooper (L,E), Michael St, (F,T); Member, Chamber of Commerce (P); St. Michael's Parish Commissioner for Life (T,B); LEP, 1811,12; P, 1824; T, 1840
Kelly, Patrick, Old Clare St; D, 1838; T, 1840; S, 1846
Kenna, James, Playhouse Lane (Little Gerald Griffin St); S, 1870
Kennedy, Patrick, New Road, Clare St; S, 1870
Kett, James, Smyth's Row, Cathedral Place (B7); 2, Rutland St (R,B5); G, Sexton St, (G); B, 1877, 1880; G, 1886
MacAdams, Michael, Summer St; Took part in funerul procession in memory of Manchester Martyrs 8/12/1867
MacCarthy, John (T); Gerald Griffin St; D, 1838; T, 1840
MacCormack, Denis, High Road, Thomondgate; Took part in funeral procession in memory of Manchester Martyrs 8/12/1867
MacCormack, John, Thomondgate Road; Thomond Road (B7,8); B, 1875, 1877, 1880
MacDowell, John & Patrick, Wickham St; P, 1824
MacDowell, Pat, St. Francis Abbey; L, 1798
MacGrath, Daniel, Clare St; S, 1846
MacGrath, Edmond, Mardyke; L, 1788
MacGrath, Peter, Boherbuoy; S, 1846
MacMahon, James, Cathedral Place (B7,8); Johns Square, Old Francis St & 37, Upr William St (B4); B, 1877, 1880, 1884; Ad; B4; General packing, firkins, hoops, barrel & land churns, tankards, cans, buckets, keels, pecks & with plain or galvanised iron hoops, all descriptions of hoops, twigs, tools & for cooperers. has opened sale store at 37, William St.
MacMahon, James; Ltd (G3); Cooper, Timber merchant & Saw mill proprietor; Steam cooperage, Saw Mills & Packing Case factory (C) & Cement & Slate (C); Builders provider (C690); Alphonseus St, also Robert St, (saw mill) (G2); Founded 1839 (C890); K; 1906; G; 1913; C; 1914; 1916, 1926, 1929, 1930, 1938, 1969
MacMahon, Michael, 10, Playhouse Lane; S, 1870; B, 1877, 1880, 1884; C, 1886
MacMahon, Morgan, Master Cooper, James St, off Gerald Griffin St; B, 1875, 1880, 1884
MacNamara, John, Thomondgate; D, 1838; T, 1840
MacNamara, Laurence, Georges Quay; F, 1769
Mack, Francis, Georges Quay; S, 1870
Maloney, John, Mungrit St; L, 1788
McKim, John, Mungrit St; L, 1788
Marmame, Michael, Old Clare St; S, 1870
Neale, John, Pery St; F, 1769
O'Brien, Conner (S); Mary (B7+); Cooperage (B), Upr William St; S, 1870; B, 1877, 1880, 1884
O'Brien, Cornelius, High St; Took part in funeral procession in memory of Manchester Martyrs 8/12/1867
O'Brien, Henry, Cooper & Publican (B5) & Grocer & Spirit dealer (B7); Sexton St (S7) (B5 - Cooper), Chapel St (B5 - Publican); Cathedral Place (B7); S, 1870; B, 1875, 1877
O'Brien, Thomas, High St; S, 1870
O'Connell, John, Henry St; S, 1846
O'Donnell, John, Cooper & Lodging house keeper & Director (B), 5, Upr William St (H&C); A, Gerald Griffin St (B); H&C, 1867; B, 1877, 1880
O'Halloran, James; Maria (K); T (G3); Playhouse Lane (B,G,K); Gerald Griffin St (G); B, 1877, 1880, 1884; G, 1886; K, 1906; G, 1913
O'Loughlin, Denis, Funeral Place; P, 1875
O'Mealy, James, 7, Gerald Griffin St; B, 1877, 1880
O'Mealy, James, Mulgrave St; B, 1877, 1880
O'Meara, John, Punches Lane, (Ellen St); B, 1877, 1880
O'Neill, Joseph & Co - B7+), Cooper, & Hoop & Stave merchant (S7) & Timber merchant (B) Jones Place, Watergate (D); Mungrit St (S4); O'Neill's Buildings (S7); Dock Road (B), D, 1868; S, 1846; S, 1870; B, 1877, 1880, 1884, 1886, 1886; G, 1906; G; 1913; C; 1914; 1918, 1925, 1929
Power, Maurice, Blackbury; S, 1870
Power, Maurice, Kelliys Range; Took part in funeral procession in memory of Manchester Martyrs 8/12/1867
Power, William, Kelliys Range; Took part in funeral procession in memory of Manchester Martyrs 8/12/1867
Punch, David, John (B), Punches Place, (H&C); Mountain cooper (B7); Ellen St (S,H&C); Punches Place, off Ellen St, (B); Ellen St & Michael St (G); H&C, 1867; S, 1870; B, 1877, 1880, 1884; G, 1886
Quinn, Edward, Cooper & Publican, New Road; Took part in funeral procession in memory of Manchester Martyrs 8/12/1867
Reardon, James, Dennehy St; P, 1824
Reardon, John, White Wine St; P, 1824
Reddan, John, Mulgrave St; T, 1840
Ryan, Edmond, L, 1788; LC; Ad, LC 10/15/1788; Edmond Ryan, cooper, has good full bounds and casks of all sizes, branded with his name, for sale
Ryan, Edward, 4, Ship's Row; B, 1877, 1880
Ryan, P, O'hoeches St; D, 1838
Ryan, Thomas, Denmark St; Took part in funeral procession in memory of Manchester Martyrs 8/12/1867
Ryan, Thomas, Mary St; P, 1824
Sarsfield, James, Old Fish Lane; S, 1846
Sarsfield, James, South Mall; L, 1788
Sarsfield, John, Merchants Quay (T); Court House Lane; House, Georges Quay (S); T, 1840; S, 1846
Sheehy, Henry, Johnsaghe (D); Broad St (S); D, 1838; S, 1846
Smith, William, 11, Garraways Place, (Cathedral Place); B, 1877, 1880, 1884
Ad, B4; Late Michael Smith, Importers of staves, wood-woops & every material supplied in connection with the cooperering trade. Opposite Market.
Smyth, Michael (S,B4); Smith (H&C,B7,8); Mrs (B4grocer); W, (G); Cooper, (Master B5), Grocer & Spirit dealer; & Provision (B7+; Variner (G), Chapel St, (H,C,B7,8); Cathedral Place (B,C); H&C, 1867; S, 1870; B, 1877, 1886, 1884; G, 1886
Spaight, Francis & Sons Ltd., Dock Road (K); Henry St (G3); Cooperage works & box manufacturer, Henry St., Bedford Row & Dock Road (C, 1914-1930). (Merchant, timber, window glass, coal, corn, manure, slate, petroleum, cement, plaster of Paris, agricultural implements, seed, chinch clay, general builders provider, ironmonger & hardware, P, 1824; C, 1960)
Ward, J, C, Ellen St; B, 1880

REFERENCES
1. Limerick Evening Post and Clare Sentinel, 15 December 1829

Dirk's used
Ferry's Directory, 1769
Lucas Directory, 1786
Holden's Directory, 1809
D'Ugo's Directory, 1824
Deane's Directory, 1838
Triennial Commercial Directory, 1840-1842
Slate's Directory, 1846, 1870
Henry & Coughlan's Directory, 1867
Bassett's Directory, 1875, 1877, 1880, 1884
Guy's Directory, 1868, 1913
Cork & Munster Directory, 1914-1969

Abbreviations of Directory Names
B Bassett BS-1875, B7-1877, B4-1880, B4-1884
C Cork & Munster F Ferrar
G Guy G-1886, G3-1913
H Holden
L Coughlan
S Slater S-1846, S7-1870
T Triennial

* 1903 is the last year in which the Cork & Munster directory has the heading 'Cooper'.

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