

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'.¹

But where did it all start? Kenneth



Ceremonial apron of Limerick Coopers' Guild, mid-19th century.

Limerick Museum.

by Morgan McCloskey

Kilby² 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 some 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'.

Up to the time of the 1914-18 war, cooperage was a trade in the British Royal Navy, a carry over from the days of sail, when casks were used for multiple storage. As the casks were emptied, they were dismantled by the cooper, who numbered each stave for re-assembly and stored the casks flat. A cask in the dismantled state was described as a 'shook' cask and the practice allowed more room aboard ship. We still use the word 'shook' to describe a person or thing which seems not to be in good health or condition.

Regarding the types of timber used in the cooperage craft, Kilby says: 'casks have been made out of all kinds of timber. The earliest ones were made of palm tree wood; later the Celts used Pyrenean silver fir and, no doubt, every kind of timber has been experimented with at various times until the most suitable ones, dependant on availability, quality and competitive costs, became to be favoured by particular branches of the trade'.

'The herring trade used Swedish spruce for cask staves and Scotch spruce and fir for the heads and ends. Earlier in the century American white elm had been used, but timber from old casks, made into smaller ones, was well favoured. For the dairying trade the 'white' cooper used largely oak, but beech, chestnut, ash, elm, teak, pines, fir and even yew (where the taste was not important) were used'.

The qualities looked for by the 'wet' cooper in the timber he used are such that only one timber qualified and that was oak. It has a neutrality of 'taste' so that it does not impart an obnoxious flavour to any contents. It is hard wearing, capable of bending when heated without cracking, it has a tight grain and yet has pores which allows beer, wine or spirit to breathe and mature. Of all the oaks, that from Russia was favoured and became known as Memel oak. This was because it was shipped from the old port of Memel on the Baltic Sea. There were 72 different sizes of Memel oak specification and staves were sold in lots of 1200 pieces. This was a continuation of the old Danelaw system of counting in sixes rather than fives, resulting in a 'long hundred' of 120. It helped when converting £.s.d. because there were 1200 old pence in £5 sterling. Some of the Memel oak may have been imported directly to Limerick, which was a port of some importance by the 17th century. During the year 1825, for instance, over 400 ships visited Limerick port. All of these ships would require provisioning and perhaps repairs to their casks.

In 1868 Ireland exported 255,000 hogsheads (382,500 barrel capacity) of stout to England at 57 shillings a hogshead. In that year the Guinness brewery in Dublin spent £26,000 on cooperage, their coopers making about 34,000 casks, breaking up 9,000 and keeping 100,000 in repair, and this, although the major brewer, was only one of a great number in operation at that time. Little wonder then that minds turned to the possibility of having casks made by machines, and this was inevitable. As early

TO THOMAS SPRING RICE, ESQ. M. P.

SIR, We, the GUILD of COOPERS, of the City of Limerick, impressed with the importance of your political services, and grateful for the distinguished and patriotic part which you have taken in the recent struggle for Religious and Political Freedom, beg leave to tender you our most unqualified approbation of the course which you have hitherto so undeviatingly pursued, and of our fixed and inflexible resolution to support you in that path of honor to which your talents and your merits have exalted you.

To enumerate your exertions in the Great National Cause, and your successful efforts to improve and enrich your native City, though a pleasing task, is rendered superfluous by the conspicuous and honourable part which your name and your character will ever occupy in the annals of your Country.

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

Permit us to take a part in this honorable work; permit us to render unanimously our humble assistance, for though "not storied urn, nor animated bust" can ever sufficiently deplete the language of the soul, still they may serve to present a faint resemblance of the trophy of gratitude which your services have implanted within the bosoms of the Inhabitants of this ancient and honorable City.

William O'Grady, ... £0 5 0	Timothy Minihan, ... 2 6
John M'ahan, ... 5 0	Thomas Ryan, ... 2 6
John Coleman, ... 5 0	Patrick Coleman, ... 2 6
Michael Coleman, ... 5 0	Stephen P'guira, ... 2 6
John Barry, ... 2 6	John Whelan, ... 2 6
Richard Devitt, ... 5 0	Peter M'Grath, ... 5 0
Patrick Keatney, ... 2 6	Thomas Bloomfield, ... 2 6
Francis Cullane, ... 5 0	Ma. M'Namara, ... 5 0
Daniel Cullane, ... 5 0	Michael Manning, ... 2 6
Bertholomew Chune, ... 5 0	James M'Namara, ... 2 6
James Curthy, ... 5 0	John M'Namara, ... 2 6
Patrick Conell, ... 5 0	John M'Namara (John), ... 5 0
James Walsh, ... 2 6	John M'Corrack, ... 5 0
John Boucke, ... 2 6	Thomas M'Namara, ... 5 0
Maurice O'Connell, ... 2 6	Thomas Ryan, ... 5 0
Peter M'Grath, ... 2 6	Denis Ryan, ... 5 0
Robert Moore, ... 2 6	John M'Namara (Owen), ... 5 0
Edward March, ... 5 0	Owen M'Namara, ... 5 0
Patrick M'Namara, ... 5 0	James Casey, ... 2 6
Edward Kirby, ... 5 0	James M'Namara, ... 5 0
Patrick M'Mahon, ... 5 0	Thomas M'Namara, ... 5 0
John Hourigan, ... 2 6	Matt. M'Namara, ... 5 0
Michael M'Mahon, ... 2 6	John Fitzgerald, ... 5 0
John Howell, ... 5 0	John Sallier, ... 5 0
Michael Walsh, ... 5 0	Denis Kennelly, ... 5 0
Cornelius M'Namara, ... 5 0	Thomas Kennelly, ... 5 0
Thomas Duhig, ... 5 0	Denis M'Namara, ... 5 0
John Fitzgerald & Son, ... 10 0	James Kennelly, ... 5 0
Patrick Fitzgerald, ... 5 0	Thomas P'guira, ... 5 0
John Downes, ... 5 0	RM. MOVANA,
Patt Clifford, ... 5 0	Jeremiah Forrest, ... 1 0 0
Wm. Carroll, ... 5 0	John Byrne, ... 1 0 0
John Clifford, ... 5 0	James Forrest, ... 1 0 0
Thomas Toomey, ... 5 0	John Hartigan, ... 1 0 0
Michael Kett, ... 5 0	John Costello, ... 1 0 0
Edward Kennelly, ... 2 6	Michael Forrest, ... 1 0 0
Henry Clanche, ... 2 6	Patt Kelly, ... 10 0
James Murray, ... 2 6	John Suplee, ... 10 0
James Shill, ... 2 6	Wm. Bourke, ... 10 0
Charles O'Connor, ... 5 0	Edm. Bourke, ... 10 0
Michael Halloran, ... 5 0	John Connell, ... 10 0
John Kieley, ... 5 0	Michael Farrell, ... 10 0
John Smyth, ... 5 0	

Advertisement by the Limerick Guild of Coopers in the *Limerick Evening Post and Clare Sentinel*, 15 December 1829.

as 1811 a patent was granted to the firm of Plasket 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 rivalling the containers produced by the coopers. A libel case reported in the *Limerick Chronicle* of 4 May 1886 concerned the Limerick Butter Market and machine-made versus cooper-made boxes. The final nail in the cooperage coffin was the use of metal kegs by the brewers. Some cooperage continues, but the days of the seven year apprenticeship are gone forever.

Limerick Coopers Listed in Trades Directories 1769-1969

- Adams, Michael, Summer St.; B, 1877, 1880, 1884
- 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,B), Cooperage (B), 14, Denmark St; Lr (B5); 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
- Boland, Patrick, Palmerstown; L, 1788
- 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, Boherbuoy (D,S); Sexton St (T); D, 1838; T, 1840; S, 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 Coopers; F, 1769
- Coleman, Thomas, Jones' Place; S, 1870
- Collins, James, Georges Quay; 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,S7,B); Upr William St (S4); D, 1838; T, 1840; S, 1846, 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, Mungret St (G3); K, 1906; G, 1913; 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
- Farrell, Patrick, Thomondgate; P, 1824
- Felton, David, Mulgrave St; B, 1877, 1880
- Fenton, D, Cooperage, Mulgrave St; G, 1886
- Forrest, James, Mungret St; P, 1824
- Forrest, Michael (B5); Benjamin (B7,8), 8 Sexton St; B, 1875, 1877, 1880; G, 1886
- Gavin, Cornelius, Little Creagh Lane; P, 1824
- Gilmer, William, Warden of the Guild of Coopers; 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, Punchs Lane; Row (B8); B, 1877, 1880
- Hannan, William Cooper; Grocer & Spirit dealer (S,B4,H&C); Publican (B) Vintner (G), 5, Upr William St; 44, (G); 4, (H); 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 Upr; G, 1886
Hickey, G, Prospect Row; D, 1838
Hodge, 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 Coopers; F, 1769
Keane, James, Upr Denmark St, (S,B5); 2, Robert St (B7,8); S, 1870; B, 1875, 1877, 1880
Kelly, John & Co, Merchant (*5 gs) (H) & Cooper (LEP), Michael St, (P,T); Member, Chamber of Commerce (P); St Michaels Parish Commissioner for Life (T); H, 1809; 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, Smyths Row, Cathedral Place (B7); 2, Rutland St (B8); 6, Sexton St, (G); B, 1877, 1880; G, 1886
MacAdams, Michael, Summer St; Took part in funeral 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
MacDonnell, John & Patrick, Wickham St; P, 1824
MacDonnell, Pat, St. Francis Abbey; L, 1788
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 & hand churns, tankards, cans, buckets, keelers, pecks & c with plain or galvanised iron hoops, all descriptions of hoops, twigs, tools & c for coopers. 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 (C69); Alphonsus St; also Robert St, (saw mill) (G3); Founded 1830 (C69); K, 1906; G, 1913; C, 1914; 1918, 1925, 1929, 1930, 1938, 1969
MacMahon, Michael, 10, Playhouse Lane; S, 1870; B, 1877, 1880, 1884; G, 1886
MacMahon, Morgan, Master Cooper, James St., off Gerald Griffin St.; B, 1875, 1880, 1884
MacNamara, John, Thomondgate; D, 1838; T, 1840
MacNemara, Laurence, Georges Quay; F, 1769
Mack, Francis, Georges Quay; S, 1870
Mahony, John, Mungret St; L, 1788
Mehan, John, Mungret St; L, 1788
Murnane, Michael, Old Clare St; S, 1870

Neale, John, Pery St; F, 1769
O'Brien, Connor (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) (B), 5, Upr William St (H&C); 4, 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 (G3); B, 1877, 1880, 1884; G, 1886; K, 1906; G, 1913
O'Loughlin, Denis, Jones Place; B, 1875
O'Mealy, James, 7, Gerald Griffin St; B, 1877, 1880
O'Mealy, James, Mulgrave St; B, 1877, 1880
O'Meara, John, Punchs Lane, (Ellen St); B, 1877, 1880
O'Neill, Michael (& Co - B7+), Cooper; & Hoop & Stave merchant (S7) & Timber merchant (B) Jones Place, Watergate (D); Mungret St (S4); O'Neills Buildings (S7); Dock Road (B), D, 1838; S, 1846; S., 1870; B, 1877, 1880, 1884; Ad, B4: Opposite New Docks, importer of staves, wood-hoops, truss-hoops, twigs
O'Neill, Mary; Mrs (G); **Roderick** (K); **Mrs Mary** (C), Cooper; Cooperage (B,G,C), Chapel Lane; 3, Chapel St, (B7); 1, 2, (G3); S, 1870; B, 1877, 1880, 1884; G, 1886; K, 1906; G, 1913; C, 1914; 1918, 1925, 1929
Power, Maurice, Blackbuoy; S, 1870
Power, Maurice, Kellys Range; Took part in funeral procession in memory of Manchester Martyrs 8/12/1867
Power, William, Kellys Range; Took part in funeral procession in memory of Manchester Martyrs 8/12/1867
Punch, David; John (B); **Puncheon, D** (H&C); Master cooper (B7); Ellen St (S,H&C); Punchs 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, Denmark St; P, 1824
Reardon, John, White Wine St; P, 1824
Reddan, John, Mulgrave St; T, 1840
Ryan, Edmond, L, 1788; LC; Ad, LC 19/05/1785: Edmond Ryan, cooper, has good full bounds and casks of all sizes, branded with his name, for sale.
Ryan, Edward, 4, Punchs Row; B, 1877, 1880
Ryan, P, Roches 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, Johnsgate (D); Broad St (S); D, 1838; S, 1846
Smith, William, 11, Garryowen Place, (Cathedral Place); B, 1877, 1880, 1884
 Ad. B4: Late Michael Smith. Importer of staves, wood-hoops & every material supplied in connection with the coopering trade. Opposite Market.
Smyth, Michael (S,B4); **Smith** (H&C,B7,8); **Mrs** (B4grocer); **W.** (G); Cooper, (Master B8), Grocer & Spirit dealer; & Provision (B7+) Vintner (G), Chapel St, (H&C,S,B7,8,); Cathedral Place (B,G); H&C, 1867; S, 1870; B, 1877, 1880, 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, china clay, general builders provider, ironmonger & hardware, P, 1824-C, 1969)
Ward, J C, Ellen St; B, 1880

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2. Kenneth Kilby: *The Cooper and His Trade*, John Baker, London, 1971
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Directories used

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 Lucas Directory, 1786
 Holden's Directory, 1809
 Pigot's Directory, 1824
 Deane's Directory, 1838
 Triennial Commercial Directory, 1840-1842
 Slater's Directory 1846, 1870
 Henry & Coughlan's Directory, 1867
 Bassett's Directory, 1875, 1877, 1880, 1884
 Guy's Directory, 1886, 1913
 Cork & Munster Directory, 1914-1969

Abbreviations of Directory Names

B Bassett B5=1875, B7=1877, B8=1880, B4=1884
 C Cork & Munster
 F Ferrar
 G Guy G=1886; G3=1913
 H Holden
 H&C Henry & Coughlan, 1867
 K Kelly
 L Lucas
 LC Limerick Chronicle
 P Pigot
 S Slater S=1846; S7=1870
 T Triennial

* 1930 is the last year in which the Cork & Munster directory has the heading 'Cooper'.