The Lax Weir and Fishers Stent of Limerick

By R. Herbert.

According to a recent theory formulated by Dr. Adolf Mahr and based on the latest archaeological research, the earliest inhabitants of Ireland settled on the first river fords they met with as they sailed up the Irish rivers. These people lived a simple non-agricultural existence, subsisting on the fish and game which were so plentiful all around them. He calls them the "Riverford" people from the sites they chose to dwell on, and suggests a date between 4,000 and 2,000 B.C., for their era of existence. There is definite evidence for the presence of these people in the Shannon valley and at Killaloe, and there can be little doubt that similar evidence would be found for the fords around the city of Limerick had not successive waves of inhabitants wiped it all out. The site of the present weir, known as the Lax weir, conforms in every respect with Mahr's "Riverford" sites, and we can say, with confidence, that the Limerick fisheries have been exploited for at least 4,000 years.\(^1\)

Various traditional accounts are given for the building of the great salmon weir stretching right across the river from Corbally to Parteen, and the most likely one is that it was built by the "Danes." The word, "lax" is the scandinavian for salmon, and at least we need hardly doubt that the Northmen made use of the weir when they ruled the city of Limerick. Perhaps it was they who first built the stone structure which has survived, more or less, in outline, to the present day.

Another tradition, held by the Abbey fishermen with such conviction that it was stoutly maintained by them in the law courts, was that it was built in the eleventh century by the Dominican Friars whose convent reached from Barrack Street (now the Nunnery) to the King's Island, this building at the time being too small to entertain the number of candidates offering, the Priors of the Order with a view to accommodating them, built a retreat college for them in St. Thomas's Island and at Rosbrien, where a Dominican burial ground is now in full request. The students of St. Thomas's Island (which island then abounded with plenty of wood) betook themselves to the erection of the weir, and succeeded in forming a sort of basket or crib by means of which they were able to take such quantities of salmon as enabled them not only to supply their own tables, but the tables of every religious community in Limerick, including the nobility...\(^2\)

This tradition, for we call it no more, is open to many objections, the most potent being that the Dominican Order was not founded till the year 1217 and did not come to Limerick till 1227, when Donough Cahirbreac O'Brien built their house for them,\(^3\) while we have documentary evidence of the existence of the fishery as early as the year 1200.\(^4\)

Supporting this theory is the statement of De Burgo, repeated by Archdall and Ferrar: —"This sumptuous monastery... had... the fishery of the salmon weir at St. Thomas's Island..."\(^5\)

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1. New aspects and problems in Irish Prehistory: Presidential Address, to the Prehistoric Society, for 1837, by Adolf Mahr. Ph.D.
2. P. Coghlan's report of the late fishery case, in which Poole Gabbett, Esq., was plaintiff... 1840, p. 134.
5. Lenihan's Hist. of Limerick, p. 650, and other authorities.
The Limerick Lax weir is the largest stone weir in the country. It extends from the old mill at Corbally on the south shore to the Church of Parteen on the north shore, and is approximately 1,500 feet in length. It consists of a number of stone piers about 30 feet long stretching right across the river, and divided by spaces varying from fifteen to forty feet. Twelve of the piers on the north shore were rebuilt in cut stone by Messrs. MacAdam and Little, who leased the fishery from 1818 to 1834. The rest consist merely of loose stones encased in wood. About seventy years ago the old man who acted as night watchman on the weir said he remembered when the piers "instead of being cased in wood, consisted of rough basket-work filled in with stones." The cribs or hurdles were then (that is in 1578) and even within our own memories raised on stones, full three feet over the ebbing of the tide; so that when the tide was out—their(sie) being then no gaps in the weir—the salmon could not get into the cribs until the tide made.

In the centre of the weir was a gap of fifty feet for the escape of salmon to the upper reaches for propagation purposes. This was known as the King's Gap of Monerea and seems to have existed from time immemorial. In the time of George III the weir owners throughout the country began to close these gaps and a law was framed directing that all fishing weirs should have a twenty-one feet gap. This was ignored as was a similar act of Queen Victoria until the year 1863, when it was rigidly enforced. Thus it came to be known as the Queen's Gap and it existed until the erection of the new fishing weir by the Electricity Supply Board, when it was completely closed up. An interesting if somewhat tricky method of evading the law was related at the Limerick trial, Gabbett v. Clancy and Dwyer, in 1840: "Mr. Doras followed M'Adam, who placed a dog representing an otter, in the centre gap of the weir, to prevent the fish from going up the Shannon. This dog was covered in an otter's skin, with copper ears and glass eyes, which so frightened the fish that they retreated and forced their way into baskets or cribs, sooner than face so dangerous an opponent as an otter." (2, p. 129).

The most interesting present feature of the weir is the watch-tower situated a short distance below the weir and near the Clare or North shore. It consists of the lower part of an old castle, and has a sort of corbelled bartizan and some of the original narrow window slits, but it has been much modernised and has lost most of the features whereby one could date it. In all probability it was used down the years for guarding the fisheries; and in recent years it must have been the scene of many a gay feast when the Mayor and Common Council came to claim and to eat the salmon which were their perquisites out of the fishery.

As already stated, the Limerick fisheries first appear in the records in the year 1200. In that year King John confirmed a grant to William de Braose of the honour of Limerick "with all its appurtenances in wood and plain, in meadows and pastures, in waters and mills, in fish-ponds and fisheries and ponds, in ways and pathways and in all other places and other things to that honour pertaining well and in peace, freely and quietly, wholly and honourably, with all its liberties and free customs, and as freely as others our chief Barons.

6. A "List of all stone weirs in England, Ireland and Scotland, stating the breadth of each such weir and the size of the gap maintained in it." White Paper. 1863.

of Ireland more freely hold by the aforesaid service . . . .(4) This honour had originally been granted to Philip, William's father, but he had not been able to enter into possession owing to the strength of Donal Mor O'Brien. (4) William himself was in trouble with the King shortly after the grant quoted and lost his property, but he quickly made his peace, and was restored to it in 1202. (8)

The history of the Limerick Lax-weir is the story of one law case after another, and while this can have been no help in the improvement of the fishery, it has ensured that the fishery has been well documented down the ages, and has made the task of the historian a comparatively easy one. The last great law case lasted from 1859 to 1862 and ended up in the House of Lords. All the official documents that could be found relating to the fisheries, whether from state or municipal sources, were gathered and printed as an appendix to that case as a guide to the Lords in their decision. This appendix has been made great use of in the following history, and while we quote the individual charters, &c., from which extracts are made, they can all be found together in that excellent appendix.(9)

The very first grant of John to William de Braose was also the cause of the very first law-suit. Edmund, the Bishop of Limerick, claimed that the fisheries were his property and not the Crown's, and to compensate him for the loss of them he was granted "ten pounds of silver for ever, every year . . . in exchange of the mill seats of Limerick and the fisheries of Limerick."(10) This happened in 1215, and in the following year Geoffrey de Marshall was instructed by King John to give the Bishop "in the cantred of Limerick or without, ten librates of land . . . for the ten pounds which our venerable father every year was accustomed to receive at our exchequer, so that he be acquitted thereof . . . ."(11) This does not seem to have been done, for the Bishop received his £10 for many a year after.

In 1247 Maurice Fitzgerald, Justiciary of Ireland, rented "a certain weir in our water of Limerick for a triennial term and not beyond . . . ." to the citizens of Limerick at a rental of one hundred marks. (12) The citizens kept the weir for three years and paid faithfully, but when they came to surrender the lease after the three years, not finding it profitable, Fitzgerald compelled them to hold it and his successors did likewise until 1275. In that year they complained to Edward I and an inquisition was held into this and other matters concerning Limerick. It transpired that the weir was only worth twenty marks a year while in 1272 Maurice le Blund and Walter Addar, on behalf of the citizens, had paid £73 6s. 8d. for that year, and £220 for the three years preceding. (13) Edward was a just king, so he took the weir back from the citizens and remitted the debt of £685 which they owed for the rent of it. (14)

Thomas

8. Patent Roll. 4th King John
12. Inquisition, 4th. Edward I
13. Inquisition, 4th. Edward I
de Clare was instructed to get the best he could from it,\(15\) so it was let to Robert de Saint Edmund for “how much they are worth in each year, according to their true value . . . to be held so long as it shall please us. . . .”\(16\)

But Robert de Seynt Emun’s plight was no better than that of the citizens. He complained bitterly to the chancellor that he had been serving the King faithfully in Ireland for sixteen years; that out of the one hundred pence by the year and two robes, promised to him by Sir James de Handelaye for his services, he had but received two robes and “nothing of the one hundred pence”; that the King had granted him “the weirs and the fisheries in the waters of Limerick,” for his service, and that he had faithfully paid 20 marks a year since, the valuation put on the weir by the Inquisition of 1275; that he was now being charged £25 and that it was most unfair and more than the fisheries were worth; that he demanded another inquisition to be held, or else that he would pay “what it is worth from one year to another.”\(17\) Robert’s plaint was heard and he was exonerated from paying anything over the twenty marks, but even this does not seem to have satisfied him and he disappears as a tenant of the weir.\(18\)

From then until King Edward’s death the weir was fished for the benefit of the Crown. The keepers “of the weirs of the Lord the King of the Schynen,” were Maurice the Glovere and Robert de Trym, but they also seem to have fallen into debt, and “in the quindene of the purification of the blessed Mary, all the money which Maurice le Glovere owes to the same King of the issues of the weirs of Limerick for the time when the said Maurice was keeper of the same,” was paid by Adam Payn and Simon fitz Thomas, manuceptors.\(19\)

In the first year of his reign (1308), Edward II granted the fishery to David, Bishop of Killaloe, at a rental of sixteen marks by the year.\(20\) Five years later it was granted to the citizens of Limerick on the same terms, and for five years.\(21\) The fishing must have been extremely bad (probably through interference from the “Irish enemy”) for the citizens paid no more than £10 for each year and were acquitted of the balance.\(22\) The next grantee was Edmund le Botiller, Justiciary of Ireland, who received it for ten years at a rent of seventeen marks yearly.\(23\) In 1331 it was again granted to the citizens for five years at a rent “as much as those who heretofore held those weirs were accustomed to render for the same.”\(24\) The citizens were again apparently unable to make any real use of the weir and were acquitted of the arrears due (£25). During all this period the Bishop of Limerick was receiving his £10 per annum compensation. It was usually paid to him by the bailiffs or sheriffs of Limerick, who were given credit for it in their accounts with the Crown.\(26\)

\(15\) Pipe Roll, 5th. Edward I.
\(16\) Mandate to Justiciary, 6th. Edward I.
\(17\) Letter from Robert de Saint Edmund to the Chancellor, 6th. Ed. I.
\(18\) Original Mandate Roll, 13. Edw. I.
\(20\) Mem. Roll, 1st. Edward II.
\(21\) Mem. Roll, 6th. Edward II.
\(22\) Pipe Roll, 10th to 13th. Edward II.
\(23\) Pat. Roll, 11th. Edward II.
\(24\) Orig. Roll, 4th. Edward III.
\(25\) Pipe Roll, 1st to 12th. Edward III.
\(26\) Most of the Pipe Rolls already quoted.
In 1338 the weir was granted to John de Balstot, clerk, engrosser of the Exchequer, for ten years. It was not clear how much John was paying for the weirs and an "extent" of them was made. John then promptly paid up, "wherefore, he should not be charged or accused of any deceit in this behalf towards the Lord the King." (27)

Next lessees were Simon de Doure and David Fox, who were granted in 1344 "the weirs aforesaid, together with the fishery, and other profits thereout arising . . . for the term of three years, rendering thereout, by the year, twenty and four pounds." Simon and David seem to have been exceptional for they paid up fully, at least for the first half of their term, and were acquitted. (28)

John de Balstoece (Balstot) then found himself in trouble. Having paid up like a man the amount decided on by the "extent" made by Hugh de Burgh, he found himself interfered with by the next Justiciary, Ralph de Ufford, who caused the extent to be superceded, and detained John in the custody of the Marshall of the Exchequer until of the issues of the weirs aforesaid, he fully accounted, to the great damage and grievance of the same John, and contrary to the form of the commission aforesaid . . . ." John petitioned the King and his grievance was remedied, Ufford himself being compelled to sign the acquittal, he "being willing that the same John, by reason of the account aforesaid, by us, our heirs, or ministers whomsoever, should not be in any manner molested, or aggrieved in future . . . ." (29)

John Banbury, "citizen of our city of Limerick," was next to receive a grant of the fishery, for one year; and this was renewed in 1388, "by the manucaption of Richard Bultyngeford and Thomas Pyll . . . so long as it shall please us." His rent was £20 at the "Feasts of Easter and St. Michael, by equal portions." (30)

In the same year it reverted once more to the citizens, and was committed "to the Mayor and Commons of our city of Limerick, and to our beloved Patrick Fox . . . ." for seven years at £20 a year "so that the residue of the issues and profits of the fishery aforesaid, shall be faithfully expended upon the repair of our city aforesaid by the supervision of any person by us for this purpose assigned . . . ." (31) Fox himself was appointed auditor to ensure that the Mayor and Commonalty spent the money for the purpose intended, and it is interesting to note that the auditor in those days had power to "amerce all and singular persons who to you in the premises shall be hostile, or the account before you to render, and by their bodies, if it shall be necessary to arrest and to our prison commit, there to remain until the account aforesaid they will render . . . ." (32)

In the year 1414, by the Charter of Henry V to the citizens of Limerick, the weir was made over to them for ever. The Charter reads "and the profits of a certain fishery which is called "Lex Were," with its appurtenances, to the

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27. Mem. Roll, 18th. Edward III.
29. Pat. Roll, 19th to 20th. Edward III.
same mayor and commonalty, and their successors for ever."(33) Incidentally, this is the first time we find it called the Lax Weir, and, in the Case before the House of Lords in 1865, Sir Hugh Cairns suggested that the reason for this name was that shortly before that time some Norse fishermen had been brought specially to Ireland to conduct the salmon fishery here.(9)

This grant to the citizens of Limerick was confirmed by the charter of Henry VI in 1423,(34) but it was, apparently confined to the lax weir and did not include the fishing above or below it. In 1576 Queen Elizabeth granted to Edward Mollyneux, gentleman, "The weirs, commonly called the fisher's stent, near the city of Limerick, which do lie from the Lax Weir, or Common Weir, in the east part, until the river nigh to Castle Donell, in the west part, with all the customs, duties, profits, commodities and emoluments to them, and every of them, pertaining and belonging, or which of right ought to appertain and belong, parcel of Her Majesty's ancient inheritance, and of long time concealed."(35) This is a most interesting grant, particularly in the phrase "and of long time concealed," (he was told to hold them for twenty-one years at a yearly rental of 53/4d.) for it suggests that before this time, the fishery and lax weir were considered one and the same fishery, as it later was held to be. The grant was later the cause of long suits between the leasees of the weir and the Abbey fishermen, the latter maintaining that Castle Donnell was within half a mile of the lax weir, near Parteen, while the leasees placed it in Meelick, at the mouth of the Meelick river (where it is shown in the map of Limerick in Pacata Hibernia). The former also maintained that if it did extend to Meelick, it referred only to the weirs and not to the whole extent of the river between the Lax Weir and the Meelick river.(2)

Elizabeth's attempt to get money from the gift which her ancestors had already given to Limerick was a failure. Mollyneux held the fisher's stent for four and a half years, but never paid a penny's rent for it.(36) In 1582 it was made over to the Corporation at a rent of 6/8d., one-sixth of what Mollyneux had promised to pay.(37) The Corporation seems to have paid its mite faithfully, and in the year 1597, they only owed 4/53d., the current half-year's rent.(38)

In 1609, James I, in his charter to Limerick made a re-grant of the fisheries to the citizens and also gave them Admiralty jurisdiction over the Shannon: — "And we do, for us, our heirs and successors, solely separate and distinguish by these presents the city aforesaid, and so much of the River Shannon aforesaid as extends for three miles beyond the said city of Limerick towards the north-east, and as far as the mouth or entrance of the high sea towards the southwest; and all and singular creeks, sea-shores, and rivulets, belonging to the same, within the same limits and precincts of the city aforesaid, and all their goods and chattels, and things real and personal, lying within the said city, henceforth, hereafter, and at all future times, as to the like

33. Charter Roll, 1st. Henry V.
34. Pat. Roll, 2nd. Henry VI.
36. Rent Roll, 40th. Elizabeth. (6/8 sterling was worth 8/103 Irish, &c.).
37. Rent Roll, 40th. Elizabeth.
38. Rent Roll, 40th. Elizabeth.
causes hereafter mentioned, whereof the aforesaid mayor, sheriffs, and citizens, by these presents, may have a maritime and admiralty jurisdiction . . . .”(39) It was later decided that this important charter gave the Corporation complete jurisdiction over the fishing of the Shannon from three miles above the city to the sea, and the leasees of the weir at the end of the 19th century claimed the right to all manner of royal fish, “that is to say, sturgeon, whales, porpoises, dolphins, regos, grampus, and all other fish whatsoever of great or large size.” In exercise of this right, they sent a royal sturgeon to the King and refused to yield it up to the Board of Trade, in which Crown rights were then vested.

After the Cromwellian wars, the “Limerick salmon wears and nett fishing” was confiscated and granted by the Commonwealth to Robert Playstead, Joshua Bennett and Robert Pawsey at a yearly rental of £165 0s. 0d. (40) On the restoration, Charles II granted to Sir George Preston, “all that the fishing of pike and salmon, and other sea fish and eels, in the great Salmon Weir called the Lax Weir, in the River Shannon, mearing on the north with the lands of Bancke, on the East with Thomas his Island, and on the south with the lands of Corbally, on the west with the said river of Shannon, formerly belonging to our crown, but enjoyed by the Corporation of Limerick, paying a rent into the Exchequer of our said kingdom of Ireland; and also the fishing of pike and salmon, and other sea fish and eels in the salmon fishing; and eel weirs of Garrivoe, which lieth in the Shannon, and county of Limerick, and which was formerly the property of William Lord Baron of Castleconnell; also the fishing of pike and salmon, and other sea fish and eels in the river of Shannon, belonging unto Callagh Itroy (Castletroy), formerly the property of Theobald, Lord Baron of Brittas; and also the fishing of pike, salmon and other sea fish, and eels, of one-half of the eel weir of Callaghbeolan (underneath Plassy House) in the said river of Shannon, mearing on the north with the other half of the said weir belonging to the Earl of Thomond . . . . and also all and singular other fishings of salmon and pike, and other fish in the said river of Shannon . . . .” (41) Sir George Preston, who was apparently a great favourite with the King, got all these and many other Irish fisheries for a total annual rent of £5. He seems to have got the grants by suggesting that the owners of the Fishery, including the Corporation of Limerick, were false in their allegiance to the Crown, and that therefore their property ought to be confiscated. The Corporation appealed against this confiscation of their rights and won the appeal. (42) In the meantime Preston had sold the fishing rights to George Mathew of Thomastown, and James Clarke of Dublin; and so, to ensure that the latter persons could have no claim whatever against them the Corporation bought out whatever rights they might have for £1,500. (43)

While the action was pending, the Corporation had leased their rights in the fishery to Jonah Lynch, a Limerick merchant at £32 a year. The lease included the interesting clause of “reserving thereout unto the mayor of the said city for the time being, upon each fishing day, one of the best salmon taken or to be taken in the said net fishings, if demanded, he the said mayor paying the

40. Commonwealth Rent Roll. 1657.
42. Indenture, dated 31st October, 36th. Charles II, &c.
43. Do.
sum of eight pence for every such salmon, and also the benefit of every Saturday night’s fishing during the whole time of Lent, which shall be duly brought to the house of the said Mayor.”

In 1676 the “Net fishing and Fisher’s stent,” were publicly canted and fell to Edmund Carroll at a rent of £60, “saving to the mayor for the time being the duties heretofore accustomed of his fishing in Lent . . . .”

Of the £1,500 paid in compensation to Mathew and Clarke, the Corporation paid £300 and Sir William King, Robert Smith and Henry Turner, paid £1,200, and were granted the fisheries as security. The Corporation undertook to pay off the debt, together with 10 per cent. in six years, and at the same time demised the property to John Leonard at a yearly rental of £200. In this lease the perquisites retained for the mayor were “the second best salmon coming from the said weir every day in Lent for eight pence sterling, and the second best salmon from the said netfishings in the same time of Lent for the like sum of eight pence sterling, Sundays always excepted; together with the benefit of fishing with four nets every Saturday night during Lent aforesaid; saving likewise to the Right Rev. Father in God, the Lord Bishop of Limerick, for the time being, and all other persons whatsoever, his and their several fees, customs, dues, fishings, perquisites and advantages, as the same is or hath been accustomed time out of mind, out of the said weir and netfishings, or either of them, saving likewise to every member of the Common Council of the said city, for the time being, the liberty to call for and have one salmon, or two peales, to be eaten in the castle belonging to the said weir, when and as often as such member shall request the same. And saving to all other freemen of the Corporation for the time being this liberty likewise, to call for and have one salmon or two peales, to be eaten in the castle aforesaid once a year, when such freemen shall request the same, paying ninepence sterling for every salmon, and four pence sterling for every peale . . . .” One wonders how poor Leonard, who had also to “keep the said weir, with the cribs, baskets, hurdles and castles thereunto belonging, in good and sufficient repair,” could make any money at all from the fishings, on this lease, from which it also appears that William Rule and John Rice had been tenants sometime before the year 1684.

The fishing must have improved greatly in value, or else the cessation of the wars which to this time had been almost without end, must have greatly increased its workability, for in 1719 it was granted to George Roche, John Vincent, John Higgins, Rawley Colepoyys, and Francis Sargent, aldermen, and David Davis and David Bindon, burgesses, on a lease of 99 years and a rent of £552 a year. There was also a fine of £1,200 to be paid. The perquisites retained were similar to those the grant to John Leonard, except that the salmon could be eaten on St. Thomas’s Day, as well as in the castle. Another and very excellent stipulation, one which might, with profit to the citizens of Limerick to-day, be imposed on the Electricity Supply Board, was that the tenants “shall publicly, every Friday morning, expose for sale and cant all the fish taken in the said weir and net fishing, every Thursday night and Friday morning . . . .” Finally, there is a covenant to send and deliver to every member of the Town Council, one salmon at the beginning of every season, as they shall be taken either in the weir or net fishing, without fee or reward.

44. Corporation Lease, 8th February, 23rd. Charles II.
45. Limerick Corporation Assembly Book, 1676, p. 145.
46. Indenture, dated 7th April, 1st. James II.
47. Corporation Lease, dated 18th May, 1719.
If ever there was an onerous lease, this would appear to be one, compared with all the previous leases; but apparently it was not so, for the Corporation books show that the leasees, who styled themselves the Salmon Weir Company, paid up fully to the end of their term of 99 years—or rather their total arrears for the period was £1,550, and the Corporation agreed to accept £800 in full settlement. (48) It was during the term of this lease that the trouble first commenced with the Abbey fishermen, who claimed, from time immemorial, the right to fish all the waters around the city, except those pools actually resulting from the weir or weirs, and adjacent to them. "The first of those persecutions were commenced by John Smith, Esq., who was one of the tenants under the Corporation, by the Lease of 1719. He was the first to offer any resistance to these poor men, by arming a party of men in the dead hour of the night, and firing on them while exercising their lawful calling. In this murderous pursuit he only succeeded in wounding one man, named Thomas Lyddy. This Mr. Smith was the uncle of Lord Gort. Mr. Smith was followed in the weir by Mr. G. Vincent, conducting tenant. He adopted, in part, a portion of his predecessors movements, and hired a posse of men to fire on the fishermen while fishing in the King's waters, the same as they had done from time immemorial. His murderous designs failed him too; for his hirelings, notwithstanding having fired several ball cartridge shots, only succeeded in wounding one man in the eye, named Michael Lyddy, who died soon after. This was the first death. Mr. Vincent was succeeded by Mr. Thomas Burke in 1805. Mr. Burke became tenant to the Weir Fishery Society, at a rent of £1,150. This gentleman also had recourse to arms, in order to put down net fishing; and arming himself and his men, he pursued them down the river, fired on them, and wounded one of them in the hip, named Thomas Clancy, who labours under its effects to this day. For this the fishermen obtained informations against Mr. Burke, which were sent before the grand jury, Lord Gort, foreman, who ignored them on the representation of Mr. Burke, who stated to the Corporation jury 'that if they found the bills, and that a conviction was held against him, he should surrender the weir ... Having obtained assurances of support in his tyrannical views, he continued tenant up to 1813; but never attempted to try the question by law." (2) p.127/8.

When the lease of the Salmon Weir Company expired, the Corporation let it to Messrs. Little and MacAdam, who, in 1827, were ejected for non-payment of the rent, and A. J. Watson and G. H. Fitzgerald were appointed to take charge on behalf of the Corporation. It was Little and MacAdam who built the stone piers on the Clare side of the weir, and, I suppose, broke themselves in the process. (49) The lease was at a rent of £800 a year, subject to the gaps being kept constantly opened, and I have already referred to the ruse adopted by this man's agent, or his successor, in preventing the salmon from escaping through these gaps. The struggle with the Abbey fishermen continued, and one, John Hartigan, was wounded in the eye by a shot and died in a few months after. The "respectable" citizens of Limerick began to take an interest in the proceedings, and, having, in any case, an axe to grind with the corrupt corporation, the "Independent" party took up the case on behalf of the poor fishermen. Money was subscribed for the legal defence of the fishermen's case, and one of the most important law trials, or rather series of trials, began. In 1816 the fishermen won the first round, and Colonel Vereker was severely reprimanded for showing favouritism towards the leasees of the weir and against the fishermen. (2) p.128/9

48. Corporation account of arrears of rent, 1797; and, Corporation receipt for arrears paid. 4th February, 1819.
49. Corporation certificate of authority. 2nd June, 1827.
Finally, in 1834, the fisheries were leased to Poole Gabbett for 99 years at £300 a year. Gabbett died in 1845 and his executors leased the property to William Malcomson of Portlaw, Waterford. Gabbett first followed the course of the previous leasees in using force to eject the Abbey fishermen, but, fearing to fall foul of the law, soon changed his tactics and began to institute legal proceedings against them. James Clancy and Michael Clancy were convicted and imprisoned for three months in 1836; Thomas Clancy (red), Thomas Clancy (black), Thomas Lyddy and Patrick Cherry, were imprisoned for three months in 1839; and in the same year were convicted Michael Connors, Robert Hayes, James Lyddy, James Hayes, James Mack, John Lyddy, Thomas Lyddy, Michael Hartigan and John Shanny. "Thomas Lyddy the young died from the fright in a few days after being enlarged."  

In 1840 John Tobin, fisherman, of the North Strand, was fined £4 12/3½ and his boats and nets were forfeited; and in 1845 judgment was obtained against Thomas Clancy and Thomas Dwyer in the Queen's Bench. The next action was by William Malcomson against John O'Dea, Patrick O'Dea and Thomas Meany, and the case was brought to the House of Lords before it was finally decided in favour of the plaintiff. The argument of the plaintiff was that he had the sole right of fishing the river from the Lax Weir to Castle Donell, near the mouth of the Meelick river, about five miles down the Shannon; that of the defendants was that the only right he had was to fish any weirs and their pools within that extent, that is, pools caused by the weirs. They also claimed that Castle Donell was not near the Meelick River but in Parteen, about a quarter of a mile from the Lax Weir. In this regard they make an interesting reference to a number of pools into which salmon used go while waiting for sufficient water to allow them to go through the weir. They were known as "Poolbeg," "Laculla," "Thonisrea," "Amore," "Amanagh," "Ahculla" and "Cragthuler." They also claimed that Amanagh stone, which I understand can still be seen in the river, and the Lax Weir were the bounds of the Fishers' stent, that part of the river where the Corporation had sole fishing rights.

At the end of the 18th century stake weirs (a Scottish system of catching salmon) began to appear down the river, until in 1862 there were fifty-four in all in the lower reaches of the river. These were erected by the owners of the banks down the river. Malcomson, through his agent, Joseph Robinson, endeavoured to persuade the Admiralty that these weirs were a danger to navigation, and that they should be removed. But after a thorough investigation, including a survey of the weirs, the Admiralty realised that Malcomson was more interested in his own fishery than in the navigation of the Shannon, and took no action in the matter.

In the year 1885, the Corporation found themselves in financial difficulties and sold their interest in the Salmon Fisheries in the Landed Estates Courts, and they were acquired by Alexander Bannantyne, the miller, of Woodsdown, near Limerick. From the latter they were acquired by the Lax Weir

50. Corporation lease.
51. Lease from administrator of Poole Gabbett to Wm. Malcomson.
52. Certificate of conviction, dated 29th April, 1840.
53. Judgment obtained by Poole Gabbett in the year 1845.
The salmon “draw” from Doonass to Barrington’s Pier, based on the Ordnance Survey, by permission of the Minister of Finance, and specially prepared for this paper by Mr. A. B. Killeen, B.E.
Company, consisting of a London syndicate, who, in addition to fishing the weir, operated three draft nets at the Clare Railway Bridge, one snap net between the Weir and Thomond Bridge, and six draft nets on the Lower Shannon.

The operations of the Electricity Supply Board changed the flow of the river and ruined the Lax Weir Fishery, though, curiously enough, the year 1927, when operations were in full progress, was a record year for the fishery. When the 1834 lease expired, the property was acquired by the Electricity Supply Board who, in order to counteract the changed flow of the Shannon, abandoned the lax weir and erected a new weir of modern type between the Clare Railway Bridge and Thomond Bridge. With this efficient modern machine every salmon passing up the river is counted before being released, if such is their lucky fate. All the privileges of third parties, such as Bishops of Limerick, Mayors, Common Council, &c., have either been bought out or abolished, and there are no more merry salmon feasts on Caslaun-na-Corran. Even the salmon's chance, the Queen's gap, has disappeared completely, and with it the citizens' chance of buying a Shannon salmon, peale, or even eel, in the Limerick markets.

There remains only to tell what is known of the Limerick Fishermen's Guild. The answer is nothing factual—if we except the statement of Patrick Coghlan, reporter on the Limerick Reporter, and Secretary to the net fishermen in their struggles against Gabbett in 1840:—"The Corporators pulled together in the management of the weir fishery up to 1725, when some of them began to speculate and farm it to the great injury of the public and the net fishermen who, up to that period, were more the owners of the fishery than any other body (the fishermen being then an incorporated body)." (p. 13) There is also a vague tradition that during the siege of Limerick by William, the fishermen were granted a pass to enter and leave the city to carry on their trade, and that a medal was struck to commemorate the occasion. I can find no foundation for these statements in any document examined, and believe if there ever were any evidence of the existence of such a guild it would have been brought forward, as most valuable evidence, in some of the many fishery trials.

However, though the Abbey fishermen may not have been officially recognised as a trade guild, they were undoubtedly banded together into an association, which made rules and regulations for the control of their industry. They divided up the river among each other by lottery, and every "draw" had its Irish name. As the Abbey fishermen are now dying out, their trade having been taken from them, it is important that these Irish "draw" names be placed on record, and the following account of the river, from Doonass to Barrington's pier, is almost word for word, as I took it down from John Clancy of the Strand, an old Abbey fisherman:

An Enuire is a part of the river which is allotted to a crew of four men by lottery. The winning crew can fish this portion of the river for twenty-four hours, from ten o'clock one morning to the same time the following morning, and no one else can fish there.

The fishermen's team consisted of four, in two boats, called "Brochawns." This boat, a type of cot, is peculiar to them, and not found anywhere else in Ireland. The club with which they killed the fish was known as the "criostair," corrupted (?), later to "the priest."

The first Enuire is called Doonass, and stretches from Saint Senan's Well on the Clare side to the Waterworks on the Limerick side. It is about
half a mile in length and contains the following “draws.” On the Limerick shore are Tarrawnsohui, Soughdubh, Big Eddie, North Gutter, South Gutter, Shore Eddie, North Leen, and South Leen. (Leen being derived from the flax pool thereabouts).

The second Envire is called Barraluinge. On the Clare shore, the draw is Tarrawnnullagh. On the Limerick shore the draw is Roingahouldah, adjoining the Mount Shannon Estate.

The third Envire is Geentass. On the Clare shore the draw is from the mouth of the old Blackwater, called the Booger, and Geentuogh. On the Limerick side, centre-ways from Mount Shannon wood lies Geentass one and two.

The fourth Envire is called Poulnalauns. The draw from the Clare shore is Luragadh (to mid river on the Limerick side). Near the end of Mountshannon wood but above Castletroy on the Limerick shore lies the south Poulnalauns to mid-stream, with Cragarach, meaning rocky bottom.

The fifth Envire is called Bunabha. The draw from the Clare shore to mid-stream at the mouth of the Muleaire river, is Immeragas. On the Limerick shore are Tarrawnaslune and Beeger.

The sixth Envire is called the Cut or Dam, from the time the old Board of Works cut the bed of the river here in order to take the pressure of water from the Limerick lands. It runs from the Cut to mid-stream opposite Castletroy. On the Limerick side of the river are Slune, Drominayne, Faill Drominscoir, Paddy and Feebeg. On the Clare shore are Pouladerideen, Clogheen, Faillmor, Doolin and Mulqueeney. This comes in from the tail of the cut or dam on the Clare shore to mid-stream at the Castletroy falls.

The seventh Envire is called Tawnymhor, extending from below Castletroy Falls down to Shanny’s pub on the Clare shore. The draws are Tragh-knock and Tawnymhor. On the Limerick shore the draws are Snamiceu, or the Scour of the fall, the Lower Hole, Lughnahaile.

The eighth Envire is called The Heights of Dromin Beg. It extends from Shanny’s pub to the old Plassy Bridge. From the Clare shore to mid-stream the draws are The North Flat, Keadaime, Tarrawnthomais. The draws on the Limerick shore are The South Flat, The Bull Dogs, which lie in the vicinity of Plassy, and Skittogue (from the lower islands to Plassy).

The ninth Envire is Cragarach or Rough Bottom, extending from Plassy Bridge to the Canal boat take. The draws on the Limerick shore are Tulleragh, Cullough, and Cragarach. On the Clare side the draws are Ardan Crohoo, or crooked height, The Hills and Hollows.

The tenth Envire is Lugshinnell. It lies below the third small bridge on the Plassy bank and continues to the old Limerick waterworks pumping station on the Plassy banks. The draws are Dromroe, Blister, and Jones’s Hole, which finishes the Rhebogue water intake works. Dromroe comes in below the third Bridge at Plassy and until you reach the fourth bridge, to mid-stream.

The eleventh Envire is called Bealanowna, from below Rhebogue water works to well below the mouth of the old canal. This was fished from one shore to the other and it all went by the above name.
The twelfth Eunuire is called Callagh Beolain or Curraig for short (\?). It lies between the island of Lanarone down to the old salmon weir at Corbally. The draws are as follows on the Limerick shore to mid-stream, Swan Drop, above the S.E. point of Lanarone. There are also some lamprey eel beds here; The Middle Draw, between the centre of Lanarone and the Limerick shore. On the Clare shore are Ahaun, at the cut carried out by the Board of Works to drain the water off the Limerick lands. Below this point the draw Davy comes in. It lies on the tail of Lanarone, on the north side of it. Also from the tail of Lanarone runs Feehub for 100 yards till it embraces Ail Shura running from the shore connecting Clare with Limerick (\?). It lies in the vicinity of the lands of Gleanncorraide. Then come Shura, the Kiln Heights, Finnoe, the Upper Neck, Poulahurradh, to the Athlunkard Bridge on the Clare shore. On the Limerick shore the draws are Shore Goulach and Outer Goulach, on to the Bridge.

From below the bridge the draws are Soughmor, on the Limerick shore to mid-stream down to the mill dam. On the Clare shore the draws are Glassa Crubeen, Lagnafearna, to mid-stream of the dam on the Clare shore.

Below the dam the draws are, The Monk, Garraidhe, Dubhnauna, which lies from the upper point of St. Thomas’ Island to Corbally dam. On the other side of the island are Lugbraun or the Quarry Hole, which winds up in the back of the lax weir.

Below the weir the draws are Garbh, Caim, Liggaun, Traghoo, Law-dromatho, all on the Clare shore.

From Parteen Creek to the Railway Bridge on the Limerick shore the draws are Auminnick, Amoor, the Rooin, Drominnhor, Caulahass, Dromin Garbh, Dromin Bhuidhe.

Below the Railway Bridge on the Limerick shore the draws are Bealac-nahown (at the mouth of the Abbey River), Tearnacroooha, Craobh. On the Thomondgate side the draws are Ail, Charity, Dromatho, Poulacrobb, and the Cashed Draft, which is now taken up by the E.S.B. salmon weir.

Below Thomond Weir to the falls of Curragour was formerly called Eunuire, because it was a common fishery. The draws are Achullagh, below Thomond Bridge on the Clare shore; Tarrawneecum and the Middle Ardauns. Loganeira, Beal or the mouth of the falls. Below Curragour lies Shawongour or Traghranour, also Tearnanmahwnge, which comes in from Sarsfield Bridge to the Lansdowne Factory. There is finally Leenthown, which runs to the lands of Old Church at Barrington’s Pier.

All these names have been taken down, more or less, phonetically, and I leave the attempt to derive them from their Irish originals to someone better versed in Irish and with a more intimate knowledge of the actual pools and draws.