

A Market Gardener's House in Limerick: an architectural and social history

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This article springs from an architectural and photographic survey of a thatched house in Park undertaken prior to its demolition in 1991. Recognising that the house was once typical of the buildings in an area that served Limerick City as a market garden, the author, also using interviews with the family who inhabited the house, oral history and written sources, will piece together an economic and social history of the area.

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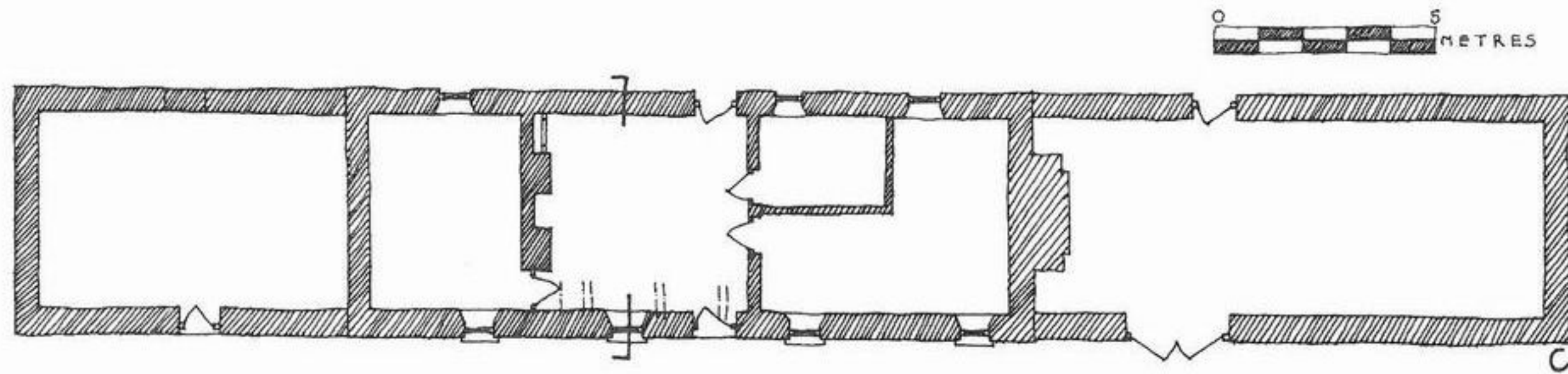
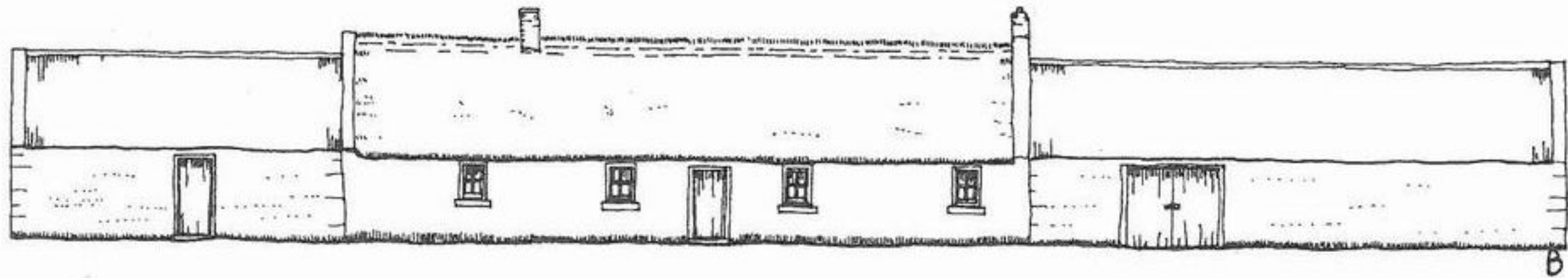
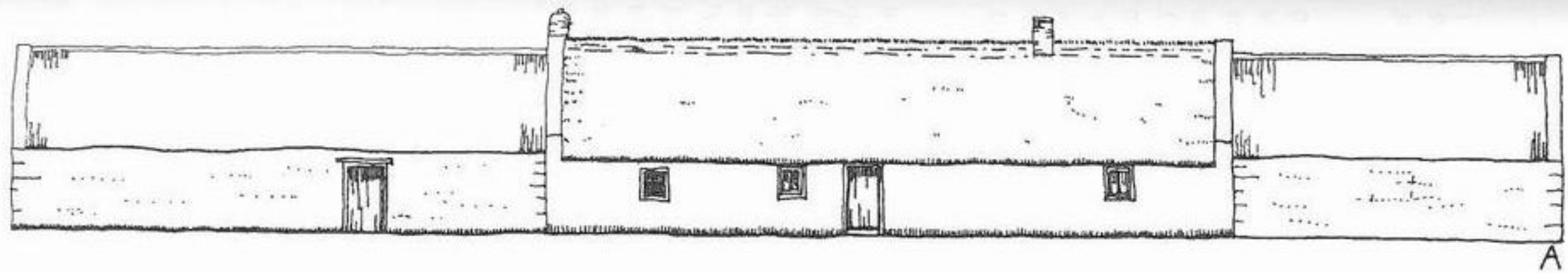
In 1991 a thatched house on Old Park Road in Corbally, once the dwelling of a family engaged in market gardening, was demolished. The two elderly men who were living in the house found accommodation in one of the new houses that were constructed on the site. Not only had concrete block and artificial slate replaced lime washed stone and thatch, but one of the few remaining indicators of the market gardening tradition of an area known as Park, which was becoming a suburb of Limerick, had been destroyed. In 1991 it seemed that an important link with the past had been snapped. Yet at that time the suburbanisation of Park had been largely confined to one area and the rest of the new houses had been built on existing roads, so that the older road system and a number of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century houses remained. Now, in the middle of a national economic boom, the construction of several new estates has almost entirely superimposed a new order.

If a sense of loss shadows development in late twentieth-century Limerick it was probably not absent in 1757 when Park, an area that spread along the eastern edge of Limerick city, was divided by a canal, and old north-south routes were disrupted. Or in 1859 when the railway to Ennis cut through the area again, dividing plots and creating another barrier (Illus. 1 & 2). Always within the orbit of Limerick City, Park has undergone continuous change over the years, as the urban centre has appeared to impose itself on what was predominantly a rural area. Yet it is too simple to regard Park as the easy rural victim of an aggressive urban neighbour. As a market gardening area it had a symbiotic connection to the city and its status was ambiguous, combining urban and rural, sometimes uneasily, always distinctively. This is the increasingly intangible tradition that can be partially reconstructed, using the demolished house as a pointer.

The house, 50 feet long and 16.5 feet wide, stood directly on the road, flanked on either side by outbuildings, one 40 feet long, the other 25 feet long, both the same width as the house. A return to the rear of one of the outbuildings had recently been demolished.¹

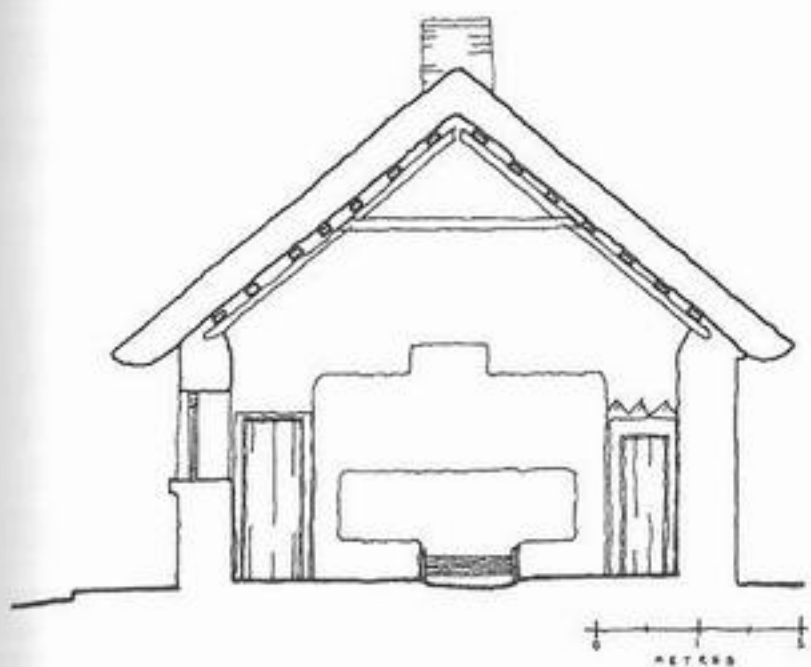
*12 Harbour View Terrace, South Circular Road, Limerick.

¹The house was surveyed on 11 May 1991, just prior to its demolition.



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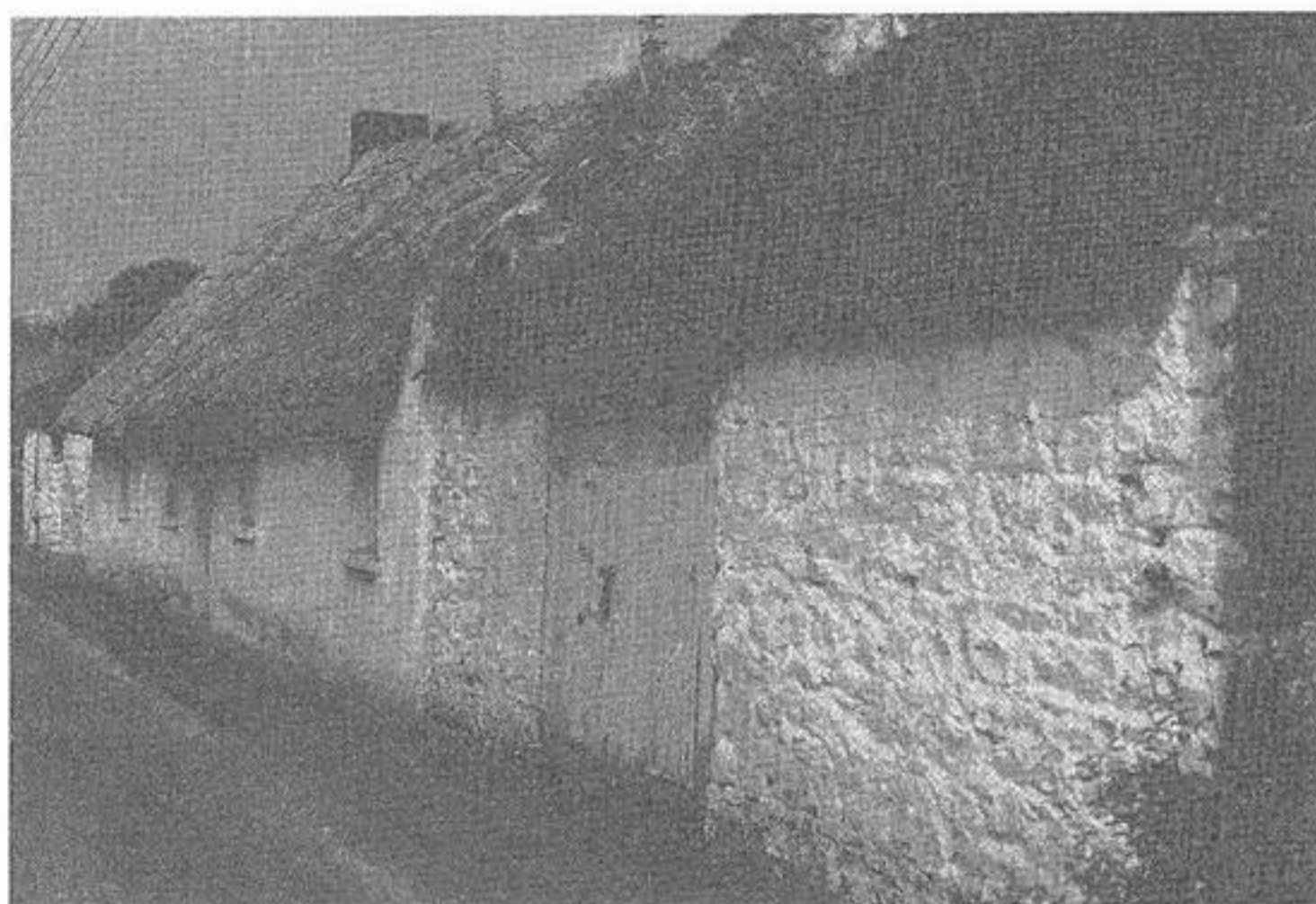
Illus. 3. A. Rear elevation; B. Front elevation; C. Plan



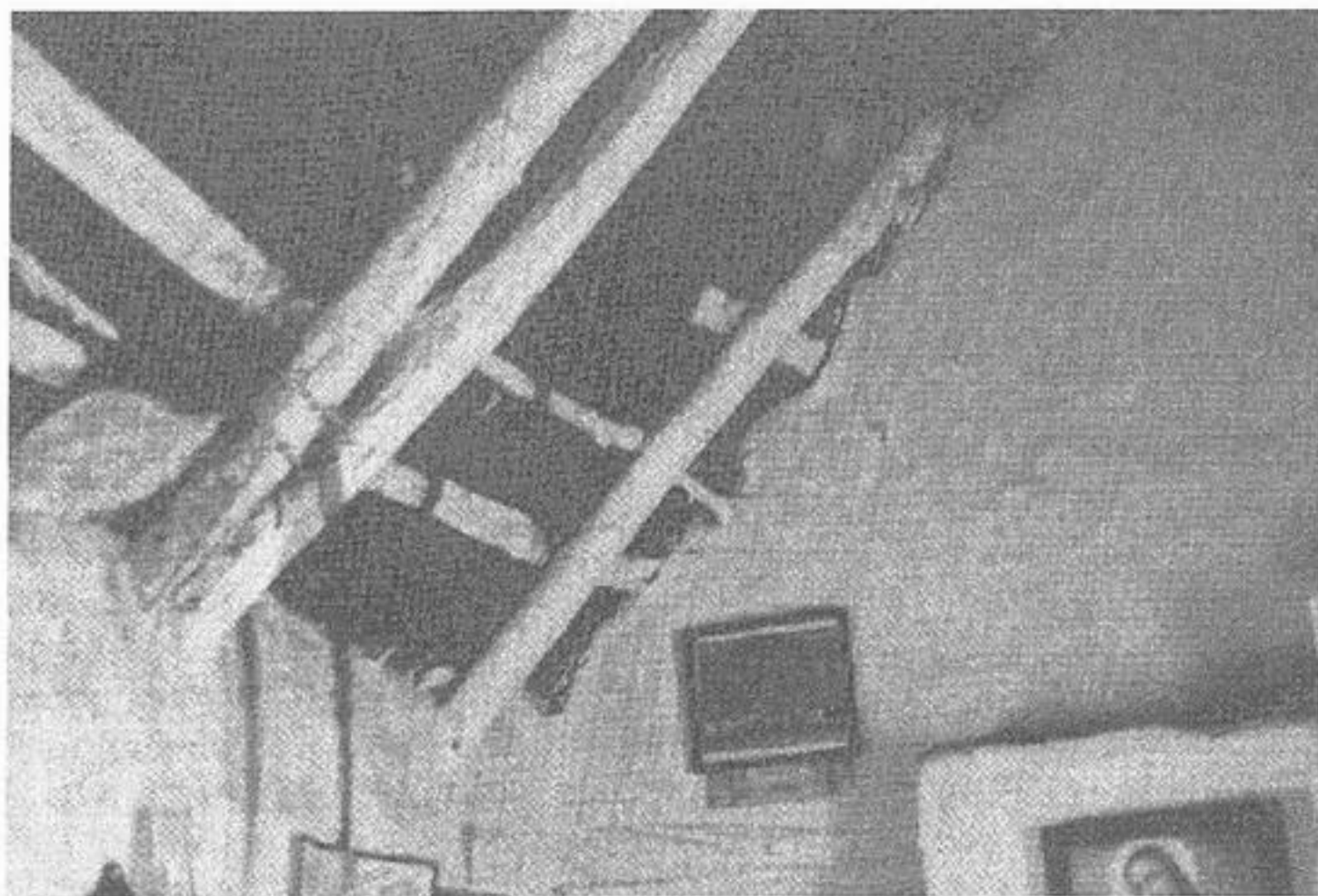
Illus. 4. Section through kitchen.

(Illus. 3 & 4). All three remaining structures were single storey and built of rubble stone with lime mortar. The house was plastered internally and externally with lime plaster, and outside it was painted a yellow ochre (Illus. 5). The outbuildings were unplastered and whitewashed. The house had gable walls and a thatch roof, the gables rising above the thatch, one in concrete the other in brick, suggesting that they had been raised since the house was first built. Slender axe-hewn branches, four inches by two inches, positioned in pairs, each pair about two feet apart from the next, formed the rafters; two of them were tied with a sawn-wood collar (Illus. 6). Battens supported the

reed thatch. There was no internal lining to the thatch. The house had two partitions dividing it into three rooms running from front to back, one of which, on the south side, had been further divided leaving a small room and a larger room with a vestibule. There was a windowless loft above this area, accessible by a ladder. There were two outside doors, positioned opposite each other, leading into the middle room which also contained the hearth. This hearth, seven feet long with low walls to either side defining a smaller area for a grate, was vented by a brick chimney. There was another brick chimney on the south gable which vented a hearth in the barn. The house had four opening double casement windows on the road side and three smaller single casements to the rear. The outbuildings had roofs constructed of sawn timbers and corrugated iron coverings and one gable was capped with cement. There had been a barn at right angles to the southern outhouse projecting into the small rear garden which was destroyed before the other buildings.



Illus. 5. Front of house (thatched) and outbuildings. (Photo: J. Hill)



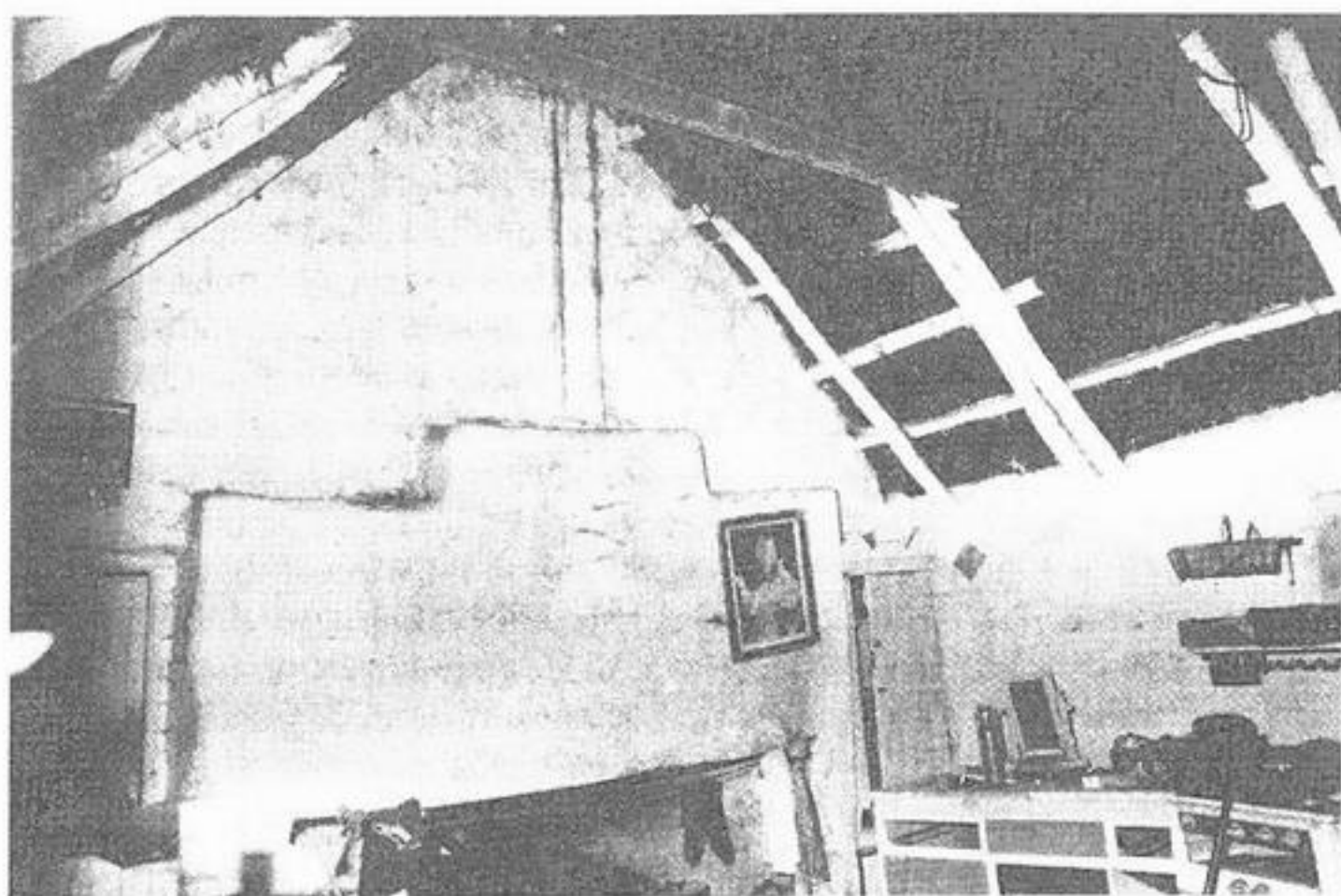
Illus. 6. Kitchen ceiling. (Photo: J. Hill)

The house was in a very dilapidated state when surveyed in 1991. The thatch had long needed replacing but had only been patched and tied down in places. There were plants growing out of the roof and the gable walls. The mortar had leached from exposed stone and brickwork. The land had not been cultivated since 1979 when John O'Halloran (b. 1910), the half brother of the two elderly brothers living in the house, had retired.² He had died eight years later. Since then not only had electricity, gas or water not been brought into the house, but there seemed to have been few repairs and little re-decoration and, on the day I visited, with the brothers' departure imminent, possessions in the house were scattered, or in boxes and bags. Outside more items were piled behind a makeshift wall of doors, gates, barrels and ladders in what looked like a state of siege as the surveyors measured the garden and the fields for the new dwellings. The rubble from the demolished outhouse stood where the building had been.

Despite the disorder in the house, the middle room could still impress the visitor as the heart of the house. The fire burned as it always had, a kettle stood on one of the low flanking walls of the hearth, and two sugán chairs stood by the fire (Illus. 7). This was the kitchen, dining and living room. A bottled gas cooker stood next to a timber dresser. The room behind the fire was a bedroom. Behind the south wall of the kitchen the larger room, once a parlour, was now a bedroom, and the smaller room, once a bedroom, was now used for storage. The loft was now unused.

The house was built sometime between the very late eighteenth and mid nineteenth century by the father of a John O'Halloran, born in 1831, who farmed the land in the late

²Information about the family and house came from an interview with Margaret MacNamara, the niece of the two elderly Ryan brothers.



Illus. 7. Kitchen interior. (Photo: C. Ní Cheallacháin)

nineteenth century.³ The axe-hewn rather than sawn timber rafters, suggest, but do not prove, an earlier rather than later date. The fire grate is of a late nineteenth-century design and the parlour is known to have been constructed later. There is evidence that the family had a measure of prosperity in the early twentieth century: a family photograph of the period shows John O'Halloran, the son of the late nineteenth-century John O'Halloran, and his wife as a well dressed couple, and his children had professional training; his son, born in 1910, became an accountant before taking on the farm, and his daughters, born between 1910 and the early 1920s, became nurses. The 1901 census also lists a farm servant as an inhabitant of the house, although he may not have been a permanent part of the family. The relative prosperity might also explain and approximately date the outhouses with their sawn timber roofs and provision for heating animal feed; animals, which tended to be grazed on water meadows rented at an annual auction would only come with relative prosperity.⁴ It was during this period that two windows were added to the front façade of the house, for the 1901 census lists only two in total.

Griffith's Valuation of 1850 for the buildings of properties in Park composed of house, offices and land reveals that the O'Halloran structures were among the larger ones; it can be assumed that the house would have been proportionately larger than the majority of its neighbours. It was though, not the largest. Of 17 such properties in the Park townland the O'Halloran buildings, valued at £1. 11. 0, were the fourth largest; the larger ones were valued at over £2. 0. 0.

³John O'Halloran was the owner of the house in the 1901 census when he was 70 (born in 1831). Presumably he was the John O'Halloran who was a witness in the Town Park Case (see below) in 1882 when he stated that his father built the house. The earliest possible date for the house would be c.1790 and the latest date c.1845; the appearance of Eliza Halloran in Griffith's Valuation of 1850 suggests that the elder John O'Halloran had died by this date.

⁴Patsy Harrold, 'The Park Danes, Part 3'. *Old Limerick Journal*, Spring 1983, p.37.

While the materials with which the house was constructed derived from what was available locally —limestone was quarried at nearby Thomondgate, bricks had been made at nearby Singland since the late eighteenth century, and reeds were harvested annually at Coonagh on the banks of the River Shannon — the style of the house makes it readily comparable with surviving dwellings of West County Limerick, and the size allies it with the houses of the relatively prosperous farmers. Of the houses of county Limerick that Caoimhín Ó Danachair reviewed in an article in the *North Munster Antiquarian Journal* in 1946, it is most like a house which he described as a 'larger farmhouse of West Limerick,' although this house was slightly grander, being ten feet longer and four feet wider. It was also four rooms long with a larger parlour behind the fire from which another bedroom opened. All rooms though, spanned the front and rear walls. Park house can also be compared with a small one-roomed cabin in Castletroy, an area just outside the city in the nineteenth century. This cabin, which used sawn timbers, possibly cast-offs from an city builder's yard, and displayed brick arches over the windows which are reminiscent of those found in urban houses from the early eighteenth century, indicates the extent to which the house in Park was allied to rural rather than urban building traditions. With its roof timbers nailed together to form a rudimentary truss and one gable severely cracked due to insubstantial foundations, the Castletroy cabin also seems poorly constructed, and the house in Park by comparison, is revealed as a substantial building built by people who were knowledgeable and confident in their use of traditionally available materials.

One striking feature of the O'Halloran house was its symmetry; the door to the road had two windows and the house a barn on either side (Illus. 5). There were also two chimneys. The symmetry of the barns was only approximate (they were different lengths) and the effect of symmetry emphasised by ochre plastered walls between whitewashed stone, and thatch between corrugated iron, is probably explained as the different ways in which dwellings and barns were built, repaired and decorated. The symmetry of the chimneys was also inaccurate and fortuitous. However, the windows at the front of the house were almost exactly symmetrical and two were added nearly a hundred years after the house was originally built not only to enhance the interior but, arguably, with an awareness of appearance, a motive that might be supported by the fact that giving two windows to the south room, although pleasant, was not necessary.

The ideal of symmetry derives from the classical tradition in architecture, a tradition which had been thoroughly assimilated by the builders of large country houses by the nineteenth century in Ireland.⁵ In cities and towns it was sash windows, fanlights in doors and other details rather than symmetrical compositions that had been adopted from the classical tradition in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, although symmetry was finding its way into the detached villas that were being built from the early nineteenth century on the edges of cities like Limerick.⁶ Largely confined to the aristocratic and bourgeois sections of society in the countryside and rarely found in the dwellings of farmers, classical details had been assimilated into the vocabulary of urban carpenters, builders and metal-workers and had been applied to houses of all classes except those of the very poor in cities and towns. The use of symmetry and the general formality of the design of the house in Park may have reflected an identification with the city. Alternatively it may have derived from the aspiration

⁵See Brian de Breffny and Rosemary ffolliott, *The Houses of Ireland*, London 1975.

⁶See Judith Hill, *The Building of Limerick*, Cork and Dublin 1991. Some of these villas were built in Corbally and still stand.

for higher status, or an awareness of fashion, attitudes more common at that time in urban than rural dwellers. Other Park houses displayed features such as rusticated keystones and quoins which indicated a greater commitment to a classical appearance for it implied the employment of the masons that usually worked for wealthier clients.

In common with small houses in many parts of rural Ireland the kitchen in the house in Park was the centre of the house: it was in the middle of the building; it was into the kitchen that external and internal doors opened; it was the room where the family cooked, ate, and gathered on a daily basis and where most visitors were received; and it was the symbolic heart of the house. This can be compared to the houses of urban workers where the kitchen was placed at the back of houses two rooms thick which were built on narrower plots than rural houses. Although the kitchen was often the centre of family life, the fact that it was not in the middle of the house nor the place by which a house was entered, reduced its symbolic importance. In many parts of rural Ireland there were traditions which spelt out the crucial importance of the kitchen.⁷ And in Park too, one ritual survives in memory: Patsy Harrold has related how on 'Hansel Monday,' the first Monday of the New Year, a young boy in each house would traditionally be given a half crown hansel by his mother who would then usher him out of the back door, close it, and open the front door to admit him, welcome him back into the house and relieve him of his money. 'Half-crowns were never too plentiful in Park,' she added.⁸

In towns the need for privacy, coupled with the narrower plots, had a greater bearing on the ordering of a house; the difference between the more public front and private back took precedence. The front door represented the house to the world outside and was often elaborately decorated. And the windows of the front room were hung with lace curtains, partly to give a measure of privacy to those inside, but also as a public gesture; they were decorative and clean, and projected an image of order and harmony within. In the countryside where houses were often isolated there was less need for privacy or keeping up appearances, and lace curtains, where they might be afforded, were less common. The house in Park had lace curtains on the front windows, still washed by the brothers' niece in 1991 (Illus. 8). It is possible that they reflected the fact that the Park houses were closer together, that the road to the city ran past the house, and that city standards were not so far away; the semi-urban density of this area and the proximity of the city.

The furniture and ornaments in the house also reflected a mixed rural and urban tradition. Opposite the sugán chairs and deal table, items that were commonly found in the larger rural houses, was a dresser displaying willow ware crockery, lustre ware and highly polished brass candlesticks. Such pine dressers were made in rural areas, notably in Bruff in County Limerick, but the ornaments, imported, or made in factories or large workshops, had urban origins. They suggest some identity with, or emulation of, urban culture.

Park is in some respects an imaginative construct which has been manifest in oral and literary tradition. Sometimes Park refers to the townland of Park, sometimes to three townlands — Park, Rhebogue and Singland (the area indicated on Illus. 1) — which have a

⁷Henry Glassie, *Passing the Time: Folklore and History of an Ulster Community*, Dublin 1982

⁸Patsy Harrold, 'The Park Danes', *Limerick Socialist*, January 1978, p.5.

shared history. This greater area is roughly contained by an arm of the Shannon, and while it is mostly flat, it rises to low hills towards the south, and peters out into water meadows by the river. In the seventeenth century this area stood outside walled Limerick. However, with



Illus. 8. Window on front façade. (Photo: J. Hill)

the construction of forts in the mid-seventeenth century about half a mile beyond the walls of Irishtown, Lower Park and Rhebogue came within the besieged area of Limerick, a situation clearly shown on William Webb's map of the Siege of Limerick dated 1651. Here Park and Rhebogue are distinguished by a dense pattern of narrow fields, and bisected by a road leading to the salmon weir at the northmost bend in the river.⁹

The Civil Survey of 1652 reveals that this was an area of orchards, pasture, arable, meadows, bogland and corn mills owned by a number of different interests; the corporation were the proprietors of pockets of common pasture and bogland, Rhebogue was largely owned by Thomas Arthur, an alderman in the city and a Catholic, and Lawrence Comyn held Park for his wife who was a Catholic. This rural area, adjacent to the city, was one of many rural aspects of the city — there were fields and orchards within and without the walls, a salmon weir also supplying the citizens with food. William Petty's map of c.1655 indicates that the Lower Park estate had a house, Park

House, and that on one of the hills to the south in Singland was the city gallows, on Gallows Green. This, together with Fair Green near Gallows Green, indicates two other urban functions relegated to this area just beyond the city's boundaries.

The relative peace of the eighteenth century no doubt allowed the farmers of Park to pursue their livelihoods largely undisturbed, but unfortunately there are no records of whether that livelihood had developed into the growing of fruit and vegetables and production of milk for the market of a city that was no longer confined by walls. In 1798, about forty years after the canal drove its way through the area, bisecting, for example, a breen that ran from Pennywell to the King's Island ferry, the current Park landlord proposed to erect a bridge at the point where that ferry ran.¹⁰ It was at least partly financed by the

⁹Paul Kerrigan, *Castles and Fortifications in Ireland, 1485-1945*, Cork 1995, p. 92.

¹⁰Patsy Harrold 'The Park Danes, Part Two', *Old Limerick Journal*, Winter 1982, p. 25.

tenants whose rents were raised. However, another clause added to the old leases which stipulated that the holder was to receive an abatement of £2.00 per acre if the bridge should at any time fall into disrepair, suggests that the tenants were numerous and prosperous enough, and perhaps vocal enough, to establish their presence. The bridge was rebuilt in 1865. The present bridge, O'Dwyer Bridge, dates from the 1950s.

In the nineteenth century further physical integration with the city and the surrounding area was provided by the construction, in 1824, of Athlunkard Street on King's Island, Corbally Road and Athlunkard Bridge, which established a major route from the city through Park townland into County Clare. The Dublin road, which improved communications with the city, first appears on a map drawn in 1803. In 1840 most of Park and some of Rhebogue and Singland were incorporated into the municipal boundary (the remainder in 1950) which meant that many of the inhabitants became subject to borough taxes.

One of the first indications that Park was operating as a market garden comes from a survey made in 1841 of the estate of John Joseph Henry who owned the greater part of Singland.¹¹ The surveyor, William Hickie, noted the richness of the soil and valued the land as town fields and vegetable gardens. He made it clear that a more lucrative valuing of the land as building ground was not realistic as 'Limerick is at present overbuilt,' and that the inhabitants have built their villas and gardens on the other side of Wellesley (now Sarsfield) Bridge. However, he did advise Henry to remove the tenants from the Dublin Road plots to the centre of the estate to free this land for 'persons possessing small yearly incomes and obliged by business or otherwise to reside in the vicinity of Limerick [who] might be induced to take lots, varying from two to five English acres, and erect neat cottages on them.' The tenants who were to be treated in such a cavalier way had small areas of land which had been sublet to them, for 400 acres of a 519-acre estate was let to one man, 'who derives a considerable profit by subletting.'

Maurice Lenihan in his history of Limerick, published in 1866, gave a succinct account of Park in the mid-nineteenth century :

'Park is a townland within the municipal boundary of Limerick. Park House is the residence of the Catholic Bishop of Limerick. The inhabitants of Park are amongst the most thrifty and industrious in any part of Ireland. They pay from £8 to £10 an acre for their patches of land, the largest holders are not more than from three to four acres. They cultivate vegetables, with which they supply the citizens; they rear cattle and pigs, and grow potatoes and turnips to feed their cattle and pigs, and for their own use also. They manure the land very highly, and being within the Borough they are subject to high rates and taxes. There has been much emigration from Park in recent years, of young men and young women especially.'¹²

This picture can be partially filled in from Griffith's Valuation of 1850, and the report of The Town Park Case of 1882 at the Limerick Land Appeal Court in *The Limerick Chronicle* in which a number of Park tenants gave details of their livelihood.¹³ Each townland was

¹¹Patsy Harrold, *op.cit.* fn. 4, p.35.

¹²Maurice Lenihan, *Limerick: Its History and Antiquities*, Limerick 1866, p.473.

¹³*The Limerick Chronicle*, 1 April, 1882.

owned substantially by a single landlord in 1850; Park by Messrs Harrold and Frances Gabbett, Singland by John Joseph Henry, Rhebogue by Rev Thomas Moore. The majority of the tenants held between one and four acres, made up of one larger plot on which was a house and offices and land, and several smaller plots of land or 'garden' and occasionally a second house. Some had only a few roods or perches. The quality of the land varied; it was suggested at the Appeal Court that two classes of land be recognised. John O'Halloran, had two acres, one rood and 28 perches (an increase from 1850 when an Eliza Halloran held one acre, two roods and 20 perches) valued at £9.15.0. He thus had an average-sized holding on relatively good ground. The Ordnance Survey map of 1870 shows that the houses and outbuildings were built at well spaced intervals along the roads with about an acre of land behind stretching in long relatively narrow fields delineated by straight dotted lines.¹⁴ In most cases the lateral extension of the buildings roughly defined the width of the plot. In addition there were areas of land beside the river and the flooded area next to the canal which were divided into roughly rectangular fields and would have provided some of the extra perches for the farms. Some of these water meadows with names like 'the Handkerchief,' 'the Star,' 'the Square Acre,' 'the Long Acre,' were auctioned annually for pasture.¹⁵ The map also shows how the railway divided existing fields; in the case of the O'Halloran's and their immediate neighbours, the railway ran close to the house so that gates had been cut through the embankment to connect their fields (Illus. 2). A relatively small number of families dominated, indicating that, apart from emigration during and after the Famine, families had a loyalty to the area.

The farmers were described in the court case as poor. A witness outlining a typical family's household economy argued that it was not unreasonable to expect to make £50 an acre but that £46 would be spent on achieving that, leaving only £4 'to provide 'bed-clothes, feed, and educate the family.' Much of the high annual outlay — on wages for a labourer (£26), manure (£8), seeds (£1), disposing of produce (£5) (all prices for one acre)¹⁶ — reflected a decision, made by the majority, to farm intensively. All the witnesses cropped their lands twice a year and for this they needed manure, good seeds and labour. One witness claimed that he needed to produce two crops a year in order to pay his rent. However, the double crop may also be explained by the proximity of the market and a culture of hard work; the farmers were prepared to pay more and work harder to produce two crops a year which they knew they could sell with relative ease even though the income was not high. Most farmers, including John O'Halloran, produced an early crop of potatoes followed by turnips, parsnips and cabbages, all sold in the markets of Limerick.

These were held at Wednesday and Saturday markets around Cornmarket Row, Mungret Street and the potato market.¹⁷ The farmers also supplied individual institutions and hotels directly. The court case made no mention of animals, but Patsy Harrold, drawing on oral sources, has described how the women brought the vegetables on carts pulled by donkeys, or carried milk in buckets balanced on turban-like cloths on their heads. They would return to their houses in the evenings with the same buckets packed with groceries bought with the milk money. Milk was also sold door to door from carts. Geese, chickens and eggs were sold

¹⁴Some of this is reproduced on the 1870 map (Illus. 2).

¹⁵Patsy Harrold, *op.cit.* fn. 4, p. 37.

¹⁶The price for manure is high. The list also included £2 for taxes and allowed £4 for rent.

¹⁷Patsy Harrold, *op.cit.* fn. 4, pp.36-37.

at a market known as Goose Fair, by Park Bridge; an echo of the medieval habit of establishing markets at the place where farmers and travelling craftsmen entered the city. Towards the end of the nineteenth century some of the Parkmen supplemented their income with casual employment, using their horses and carts in the city's bacon factories, railway and docks. One of the witnesses in the appeal case, Daniel Reddan, worked on the railway while his brother worked their plot.

This brief account of their lives indicates the close, reciprocal relationship between the people of Park and the city. But it tells us little of how the people of Park viewed themselves and the city, and how they were in turn viewed in the city. For Richard Ross-Lewin, a Church of Ireland clergyman passing through Park on the way from his Kilmurry parish to the city, the Parkmen presented a picture of hard work and contentment. In his poem, 'Men of Park,' he created a static, picturesque image of the farmers at work on land framed by the Clare hills and the spire of St John's Cathedral and dominated by its bells. He concluded:

No time for politics labouring there
Neath those lovely, lonely hills of Clare,
Ever and always they seem content,
For hearth, and home, and a well-earned rent,
And rest but comes when they're stiff and stark,
To the sturdy, homely men of Park.'

Michael Hogan, the Bard of Thomand, unearthed something of the outsider status of Park in his fourth 'Shawn-a-Scoob' in which he described a deputation of town councillors to the Catholic Bishop in his house in Park. Hogan set them on Park Bridge:

Now the Sand Mall they pass, and Park Bridge they soon enter,
But they come to a sudden standstill in the centre;
Hark! hush! - What the doul on the bridge can delay 'em?-
Holy Job! 'tis the Silver Bells ringing Te Deum!
Up rolled from the water their weird vibration
Of music saluting the grand Deputation
Of pawnbrokers, pork-sellers, whiskey retailers,
Tobacconists, scribes - every section but sailors.'

The bridge built to span a river is presented here as a transition between the two separate places.

But Park in 1882 had an ambiguous status. This was dramatised in The Town Park Case. Although the eighty tenants were appealing the sub-commissioners' recent readjustment to their rents, the definition and status of market gardening was also effectively being debated. Although on average rents had been reduced from over £8 per acre to about £6 an acre, the tenants argued that this was still too much to allow them to 'live with any degree of comfort.' The details about their livelihood demonstrated to the court that they were farmers. That the borough rate which many of these tenants paid was a financial burden was not an issue: it was accepted, and one witness noted that it gave him a vote in city elections. The point was that the economics of agriculture could not sustain a rent based on an urban valuation. The landlord interest argued that the lands should be classified as town parks, and tried to suggest that agriculture was incompatible with the city. *The Limerick Chronicle* reported, 'If the

court should decide [that the holdings are agricultural holdings] they will be practically holding that there are one hundred agricultural holdings within the municipal boundary of the city of Limerick. The absurdity of such an idea did not need to be demonstrated.' This, though, was not generally considered to be such an outrageous idea: *The Limerick City and County Directory* of 1884 listed 27 farmers in total for Limerick, of which eleven were in Park, Rhebogue, Singland. The judge, too, was happy with an agricultural element to the city, stating categorically that the holdings were not townparks and asking rhetorically, 'if they are not agricultural holdings what should they be designated?' The newspaper continued its report: 'If the lands were used to grow potatoes, turnips, and cabbages, should they on that account be deprived of their character of agricultural holdings, and should they not be treated in the same way that the court would treat lands used for similar purposes at a greater distance from the town. He was of the opinion that they were agricultural holdings, and therefore on both points the court decided in favour of the tenants.' This meant the lower rents, but it effectively also acceded to the tenants' view that they only belonged tangentially to the city.

Culturally the people of Park had a foot in both rural and urban camps. That they had close connections with the neighbouring rural community is evident from marriage patterns. Matchmakers were employed to find spouses who were not only accustomed to farmwork but would also bring land into the family. Margaret MacNamara, the niece of the John O'Halloran who died in 1987, records that in addition to the land adjacent to the house the family owned land in Corbally near the salmon weir and in Ballysheedy, which had come into the family when O'Halloran's mother had made her second marriage. While, apart from merely regarding the city as a market for their produce and a potential source of casual employment, many of the men belonged to Redemptorist confraternities, worshipping in that church on the far side of the city, and many children attended the school run by the Sisters of Mercy convent on King's Island.¹⁸ Their houses reflected both urban and rural traditions, and the texture of their lives was mixed; cock crow woke them in the morning and passing trains on the Ennis-Limerick line signalled breaks in the working day.

In the absence of diaries, autobiographies and poems written by the people of Park, it is almost impossible to discover how they viewed themselves. However, surviving accounts of Park traditions reveal a distinctive and self-sufficient culture.¹⁹ The greater part of the three townlands lay in the parish of St. Patrick's, and the church and its saint were the focus of many of the traditions. With the confidence of people who assume that their families have lived continuously in one place, and with the characteristic directness of folklore, their myths associated contemporary families to St Patrick, giving ancestors direct contact with the saint: he converted the chief of the Cuneens when he visited Singland and baptised him at the well which still survives; a Parkman, who was not named, stole the silver shoes of his ass, and another refused to give the saint a sop of hay for the hungry animal, replying, 'Sure, we are only draggin', eliciting the curse, 'That ye may be always draggin'.' Surviving artefacts helped to perpetuate the myths, giving them a concrete manifestation; an iron bell from an old church dedicated to the saint was kept by a Parkman after the church was demolished, while a carved fifteenth-century stone kept from a later church and set in the wall of a house was regarded as a good luck object. The well, reputed to be a place where an angel appeared

¹⁸Patsy Harrold, *op.cit.* fn. 10, p.16.

¹⁹Patsy Harrold, *op. cit.* fn. 8, pp. 4-5.

to St Patrick, was dedicated to the saint; a boulder at the base of the well is venerated as a place where he knelt in prayer, its two worn grooves said to be the imprint of the saint's knees. A Catholic chapel for St Patrick's parish was built in 1750 by Richard Harold on Park Hill where there had once been a Williamite battery. When a new church was built by his son in 1816 it was on the new road to Dublin. This was the church the O'Hallorans attended, where Margaret MacNamara's mother was christened.

Some traditions related to farming. At midnight on the night before St. John the Baptist's Day (24 June) a member of each family would walk up and down the family's plots with a lighted torch made of turf steeped in paraffin placed inside a sop of hay on top of a broom handle, to ward off evil spirits for the coming year. The traditions associated with St. Martin, regarded as a mischievous, cantankerous spirit, nicely assimilated the developments of the nineteenth century. The patron saint of milling, he was meant to have prophesied that the district would mill blood, and the prophecy was regarded as fulfilled when the mill at Singland was used to convert blood from Limerick bacon factories into fertiliser. The sieges and battles of the seventeenth century during which this area had been traversed by armies had also been retained in the local collective imagination, and become a source of local identity. Lenihan, impressed by the local people's readiness to point out and relate the traditions of the 'relics' of the siege, noted that a 'standard pillar' of King William, described as the pillar on which the Royal Ensign of William was raised during the siege of 1690 still existed, as did King William's Well near which, he was told, a large flag or standard lies buried in a field.

The people of Park were regarded as being of Viking origin. Michael Hogan, for instance, referred to 'the Danes' in his second 'Shawn-a-Scoob' pamphlet, published in 1868. This myth derived in part from the families who identified a variety of origins for themselves. It was also a convenient myth for city dwellers, for by giving the Parkmen a different ethical origin, their distinctive way of life could be explained and their outsider status made legitimate. Attributing Viking origins to the people of Park could be tied in with the historical fact that the Vikings had established a settlement in Limerick in the ninth century and with the story that the Normans had later supplanted them. This idea was given some legitimacy when Maurice Lenihan quoted from a charter made by King John in the thirteenth century in his *History*. Lenihan recorded that King John gave William de Braosa the 'honour of Lymerick with all its appurtenances' retaining 'in our demesne the City of Lymerick and the Bishoprics and Abbeys, and retaining in our hand the cantred of the Ostman and the Holy Island.' Some of the family surnames, such as Harrold, were regarded as having Norse derivations. The practice of defining fields with isolated stones known as bound stones still used in modern Denmark, instead of the continuous walls and hedges more common in Ireland, was also cited as evidence of their Viking origins.²⁰

The Parkmen were regarded in the city in terms of absolutes: the city people either noted their extreme thrift and hard work (there were rumours they worked through the night in their fields) or they regarded them as superstitious and dirty. The latter is a not uncommon label under which marginal groups must often live, as current attitudes to the travelling population in Ireland can testify. There was apparently sufficient evidence to substantiate the judgement. There were the piles of manure outside each house in Park.²¹ Ironically the source of much

²⁰Patsy Harrold, 'The Park Danes, Part 1,' *Old Limerick Journal*, Autumn 1982.

²¹Kevin Hannan, 'The Park Danes, Part Four', *Old Limerick Journal*, 1983, pp.38-40.

of this manure was the city streets and lanes, and the market gardeners' early morning journeys to collect the waste from pigsties, toilets and stables, dumped in the streets supplemented the corporation's half-hearted attempts to keep the town serviced and clean as well as earning themselves their insanitary reputation. This inspired a rich seam of stories in the city, such as the account of the Parkman whose cart, piled with dung, had broken down, and whose only concern was for his manure — 'Come out quick and mind the manure,' he is reputed to have shouted, 'don't let anyone steal it before I get back with a new wheel!' Meanwhile children chanted verses about 'Dirty Park,' 'They pile their dung outside their doors, As high as Mary's steeple.' The presence of the gallows provided fertile ground for stories which seemed to illustrate the Parkmen's superstitiousness, such as the repeated disinterment of a hangman who had been buried in St. Patrick's graveyard which was adjacent to the gallows.

Market gardening in Park continued until well into the twentieth century, the activity gradually ceasing as farms were sold, and the distinctive community disappearing as families moved away and traditions became redundant and were forgotten. It was a withering away that was accompanied by the building of new houses and the influx of new families employed in the city. Park has gradually become a suburb in the modern sense of the word, a place of houses with gardens on the outskirts of a city, essentially augmenting the early nineteenth-century suburb of Corbally with its large villas, although areas of water meadow still remain.

Because the study of Park has turned on the relationship between urban and rural characteristics and culture in a peripheral area of Limerick, it seems appropriate to conclude by considering the role of the rural in cities. In the Middle Ages urban and rural seemed to coexist easily with townspeople engaged in cultivating fields and orchards and rearing animals within the walls of their towns and cities.²² Although the poorer city dwellers in places the size of Limerick would continue to rear animals and grow food on allotments, and water meadows and marshes remained on the outskirts of cities, urban design theory as it was developed in seventeenth-century Europe and applied in eighteenth-century Ireland regarded cities as urban environments in which nature made only a controlled appearance in city parks. This partly explains why the Park market gardeners were not regarded as full members of urban Limerick in the nineteenth century; they were disqualified by the nature of their occupation and the rural environment in which they lived. They were able to serve the city and be served by it, but not to be an intrinsic part of it. The nineteenth century also saw the growth of suburbs in which nature was admitted into the city behind the walls of private gardens. Twentieth-century urban ideals have not substantially changed beyond the introduction of the idea of the green belt to prevent excessive sprawl. However, in the absence of careful planning either for city parks or green belts and at a time when pressure to build houses makes all unbuilt land within the city's boundaries attractive, the danger is that the rural aspect of Limerick will be drastically reduced, and there will be no compensating parks.

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²²See Lewis Mumford, *The City in History*, London 1961.