

The Limerick Sailors' Home

TADHG MOLONEY

The background to the building of a home for sailors in Limerick in the 1850s is discussed and the political and sectarian disputes which it caused are analysed. Never apparently used for its original purpose, the building became a depot for the city militia and later an RIC barracks. No longer used by An Garda Síochána it has recently been declared a Protected Structure though its future remains uncertain.

On 11 July 1856 during a visit to Limerick city, the Earl of Carlisle, Lord Lieutenant of Ireland,¹ in the presence of the Mayor, James Spaight,² a prominent merchant in the city, laid the foundation stone for a home for seamen in Frederick Street (now O'Curry Street). This was immediately followed by Lady Chatterton,³ wife of Major-General Sir James Chatterton, the Commanding Officer of the district, christening the building to be the 'Limerick Sailors' Home' by breaking a bottle of wine on the stone.⁴ A correspondent to the *Limerick Chronicle*, signing himself 'An Old Subscriber' was to be more prophetic than he realised when, after praising the initiative, he warned 'let not the laying the first stone of the Building be an empty pageant'.⁵

Limerick was behindhand in providing a home for sailors as lodging places had already been established in Dublin, Belfast, Cork and Queenstown (now Cobh), which was an auxiliary to the Cork home and were being run most successfully.⁶ It was estimated that fifteen hundred seamen passed through Limerick annually and it was considered that half of them needed a home, having in all probability being paid off at the end of the voyage.⁷ The impetus to provide such a home in Limerick emanated from a group of middle class individuals who held positions as government officials of shipping and of mercantile interests, who considered that 'for the moral and social elevation of a class of men on whom, more than any other, the maritime supremacy, commercial greatness, and general prosperity of this kingdom depend' and that sober, properly fed

¹ George William Frederick Howard was born 18 April 1802, the eldest son of George Howard, sixth earl of Carlisle and Lady Georgina Cavendish, daughter of William, fifth duke of Devonshire. During his time in parliament he supported Catholic Emancipation and the repeal of Jewish disabilities. As chief secretary for Ireland 1835-41 he had passed in the House of Commons the Irish Tithe Bill, the Irish Municipal Reform Bill, and the Irish Poor Law Bill. He succeeded as the seventh earl of Carlisle in October 1848 and served as lord lieutenant of Ireland from 1855 to 1858 and from 1859 until he retired due to ill-health shortly before his death in 1864. *Dictionary of National Biography*, vol. x (London, 1973) pp 19-20.

² Matthew Potter, *First Citizens of the Treaty City: The Mayors and Mayoralty of Limerick 1197-2007* (Limerick, 2007) pp 118-19. James Spaight served on Limerick City Council for twenty-eight years and was to serve two terms as mayor of Limerick City, in 1856 and 1877. He was an MP for the city for one year, 1858-9.

³ *Limerick Chronicle* (hereafter *L.C.*), 12 July 1856.

⁴ *L.C.*, 12 July 1856. A casket including the coins of the realm was also deposited in the foundation.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 25 July 1856.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 12 August 1854 & 6 November 1862.

⁷ *Munster News* (hereafter *M.N.*), 5 November 1862. The *Limerick Chronicle* reported that an estimated 2,000 sailors had visited the port regularly between November 1861 and November 1862 and that half of them were foreigners, *L.C.*, 6 November 1862.

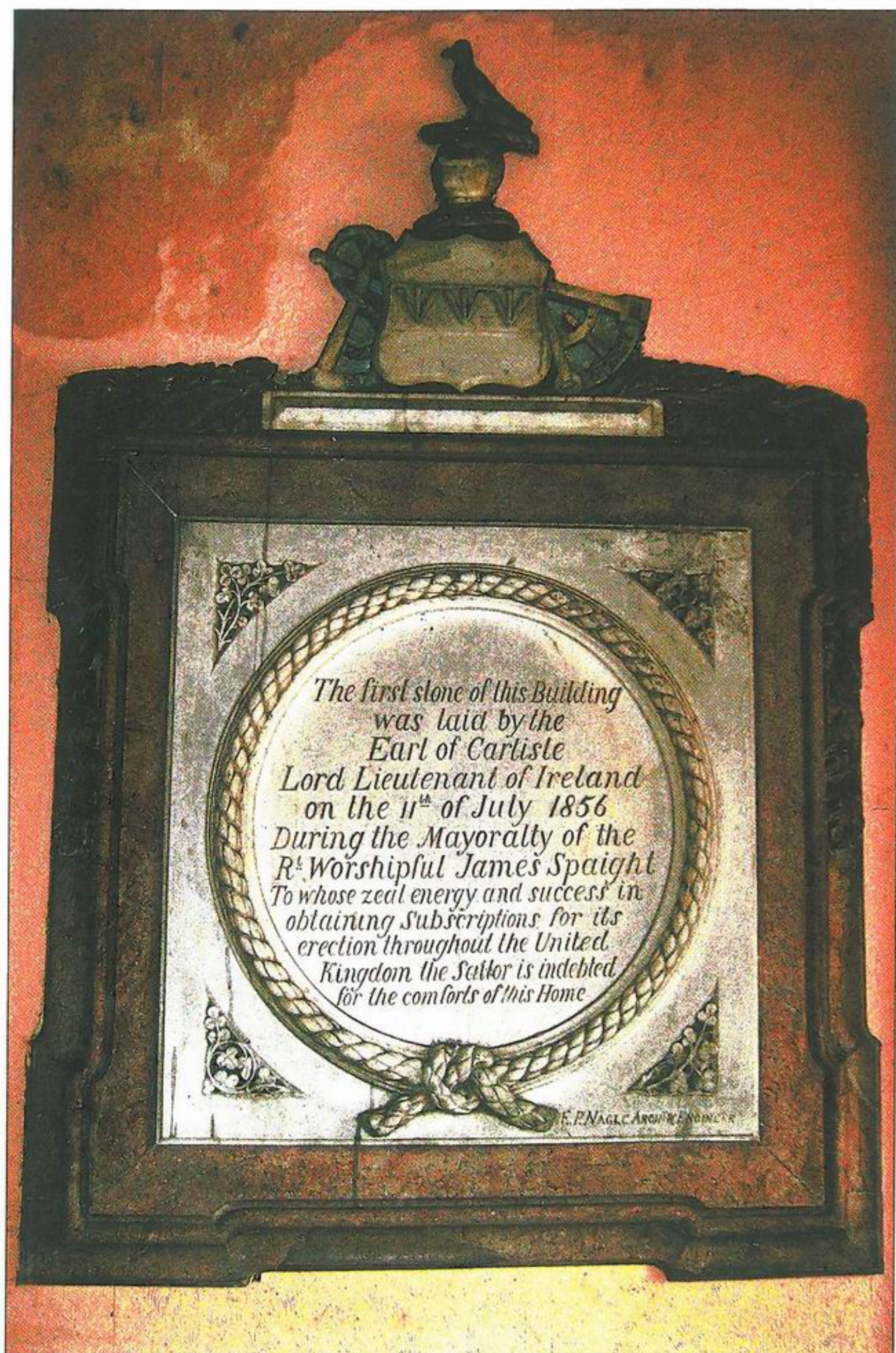


Fig. 1 Plaque in the Sailors' Home commemorating the laying of the Foundation Stone of the building

and rightly clothed sailors would be an asset to their interests.⁸ They came together originally at the Limerick Chamber of Commerce, George Street (now O'Connell Street) three years previously on 1 February 1853. The meeting was chaired jointly by the President of the Chamber, Francis Spaight, a leading shipping merchant of the city and the Church of Ireland Bishop of Limerick, Dr William Higgin.⁹ Such an idea had been gestating for some time in the minds of these men.¹⁰ An extract from a letter written by Francis Weldon Walshe, Registrar of Seamen's Certificates, who was present at the meeting, indicates their concerns about the:

Wretched depravity and vice, the robbery and wrong which the poor sailor is exposed in his present condition, without an asylum to which he might escape from the sharks and sharpers who are watching to allure him into vice, misery and crime, that they may deprive him [the sailor] of his hard earned wages (the property of a wretched wife, and, perhaps, helpless brood of starving children), and even, as is often the case, strip him of the very clothes on his back.

Furthermore, it was noted that it was the *modus operandi* of women connected to lodging houses to board ships along the river but the harbour administration promised to put an end to it as soon as the sailors' home was up and running. One of those present read a segment of an act of Parliament giving permission to impose a fine of £20 on any person going on board a ship without the permission of the Captain before it berthed at the docks.¹¹

At this meeting a sailors' home committee was established, with a sub-committee of five members also formed to organise the collection of money for the building fund, and it was expected that the merchants, ship owners, agents, ship masters and the sailor himself would make donations. Most of those present made initial contributions ranging from £10 to £5 each, with the Bishop indicating that he would donate the sum of £5 yearly.¹² By the time the second meeting of the committee was held they had collected £182, including a donation of £10 from the committee of the London sailors' home. A month later the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, the Earl of St. Germans, became the patron of the home.¹³ The enthusiasm of the Limerick Sailors' Home Committee was shown by their placing of an advertisement in one of the local newspapers seeking 'a trustworthy Man and Wife, who have no incumbrance, to perform the duties of House Steward, Cook, Caretaker, etc ... satisfactory references will be required, as to character and efficiency.' The joint salary was to be £20 per annum, which would also include food and accommodation and over the following weeks the committee received numerous applications for the positions that were to be designated 'the office of Master and Matron of the house', which at this time was to be located in a large house in Henry street.¹⁴

⁸ *L.C.*, 12 August 1854

⁹ T.W. Moody, F.X. Martin & F.J. Byrne (eds), *A New History of Ireland: A Companion to Irish History Part II* (Oxford, 1984) p. 421. The Right Rev. Dr. William Higgin was Bishop of the United Dioceses of Limerick, Ardfert and Aghadoe, 1849-53.

¹⁰ The occupations of these men were Collector of Customs, Comptroller, Government Emigration Agent and the Registrar of Seamen's Certificates.

¹¹ *L.C.*, 2 February 1853.

¹² *Ibid*, 2 February 1853. The members of this sub-committee were Robert Rodger, Treasurer, W. Cochrane, John Sidley, Joseph Robinson and Captain Ellis.

¹³ *Ibid*, 12 February, 30 March 1853. Edward Granville Eliot, the third Earl of St. Germans was Chief Secretary for Ireland 1841-5 and Lord Lieutenant 1852-55, *DNB*, vol. vi (London, 1973) pp 603-4.

¹⁴ *L.C.*, 12 February, 23 March & 6 April 1853.

As if to strengthen the argument further for the necessity to have a sailors' home in Limerick, the *Limerick Chronicle* in another column on the same date reported that thirty ships had entered Limerick docks during the previous four days. The crews of these ships had no place of refuge to go to and were therefore subject to the 'allure of depravity, depression and violations of the law,' the very activities that the existence of a sailors' home would have helped to prevent. The following month saw sections of the report of the Dublin sailors' home published in the *Limerick Chronicle* in an effort to provide what it described 'as a stimulus to our fellow citizens to promote the good cause in the opening of a sailors' home at Limerick'. It highlighted the virtues of having such a home in Limerick, indicating that the number of sailors' using the home in 1852 had risen to 376. Thirty-one of these sailors' were non-natives, some of whom could not speak a word of English, and had there not been any home they would have 'been easy prey to designing and wicked persons'. Prominence was also given to the fact that accommodation was provided for fifty-eight shipwrecked men who after a period of recovery were transported to their homes. The Dublin home had also provided a savings bank, where sailors had deposited £756 over the year and most of it was paid to their families. If there was not such an asylum in existence, much of this money would have been lost to unscrupulous people.¹⁵

Interestingly the committee had received an undertaking from the Board of Trade that there would be a bank including a shipping office in the new home,¹⁶ however, the Board failed to honour its promise, refusing to incorporate them into the building after it had been completed, contending that the Collector of Customs was required to discharge his duties as the controller of shipping in the custom-house headquarters at the docks. It subsequently transpired that sailors who had arrived in the city during 1856 had lodged a sum just short of £800 in the shipping office at the custom house to be forwarded to their families.¹⁷ This later on led Michael R. Ryan, a member of the committee to comment that 'he feared it would not prove remunerative if it had not the advantages which the Board of Trade originally promised to it'.¹⁸ This was not the first time that the committee had received a negative response from the Board of Trade. Five years earlier, when the committee was in its infancy, it had sought a grant of financial aid towards the building of the home from the Board but was refused on the grounds that they had 'no means to contribute towards the sailors' home at Limerick'.¹⁹

The benefits accruing from the home in Cork were outlined by Captain Stewart, R.N., secretary of the Cork sailors' home who came especially to address a meeting of the committee and subscribers, in order to expedite the project. He stressed that because of the existence of the home in Cork, the police were not troubled on a regular basis by wayward sailors and 'the shipping interests and ship owners, have confidence in the steadiness of mariners who frequent the Home'. Consequently they were sober and in a fit state for work, wearing good clothes as soon as they were required, with a ready supply of money at their disposal. He contrasted this with those sailors who allowed themselves to be ensnared by what he termed "Crimps", they 'are ragged, dissolute, and penniless – often in such a disreputable state of nakedness, that a master would be ashamed to ship them'.²⁰

¹⁵ Ibid, 16 March 1853.

¹⁶ Ibid, 2 February 1853.

¹⁷ Ibid, 8 October 1856.

¹⁸ Ibid, 4 December 1858.

¹⁹ Ibid, 30 March 1853.

²⁰ L.C., 12 August 1854. In some newspaper reports his name was spelt as Stuart. L.C. 5 February 1854, 6 November 1862 & 17 February 1863.

In the meantime, the Limerick Harbour Board had given a site for the home on lands that they possessed on Frederick Street, 'not exceeding a frontage of sixty feet, at one shilling a foot, equal to three pounds ground rent per annum.'²¹ However, by August 1854 the site had been given *gratis*.²² Two years later the sailors' home committee wrote to the board declaring that the trustees of the sailors' home were prepared to pay £3 annually for the site on the basis that they remain as the tenants 'only as long as the building was used as a sailors' home'.²³ The Harbour Board commended those who were the originators of the plan, and subscribed £100 towards the building of the home, which gave them an input into any plans that were to be drawn up in relation to this venture. They also undertook to ask the Board of Works for authorisation to deduct £100 out of the harbour dues for the purpose.²⁴ Thirty-two years later, James Spaight, either with tongue in cheek or suffering from memory loss, denied categorically that the harbour authorities had subscribed anything to the building fund.²⁵ Clerical philanthropists also supported the venture. The Rev. Richard Dickson promised to subscribe £100 but only if the committee raised a comparable amount from other sources.²⁶ By 1854 the committee had been expanded to include some of the main gentry of the city and county; the Marquis of Lansdowne, Earl of Clare, Lord Monteagle, Earl of Dunraven, Lord Clarina, Lord Massy and Viscount Guillamore. The two MPs for Limerick City, F.W. Russell, and Robert Potter and one of the MPs for County Limerick, Wyndham Gould were also included. The other members were Captain Studdert, Colonel Vandeleur, Lieutenant-General Fleming, Sir Burton McNamara and John Long.²⁷ In February 1854, the committee had advertised for plans to be tendered for the construction of the sailors' home, with a projected cost of £600, with the successful design to receive an award of £5. From the plans submitted that of Edward P. Nagle, C.E., Architect was accepted.²⁸ By August 1854, as £213 had been collected through subscriptions, the committee decided to proceed with the construction of the building. In the event it would cost approximately £1,700.²⁹

The lands in Mount Kennet, on which the site given by the Harbour Board was located, were rented to Edward Harold, an insurance agent employed by Scottish Union Insurance in George Street who resided at Upper Mallow Street. The secretary of the Board was instructed to approach him with the authority to serve notice of eviction or to come to some arrangement whereby he would be prepared to concede the piece of land.³⁰ This led to an exchange of correspondence between both parties over a period of time. The first in June 1853 complained of 'the inconvenience it would be to him to have the

²¹ Limerick Harbour Board (cited hereafter L.H.B.) Minutes, Shannon Foynes Port Company, 14 April & 19 May 1853. L.C., 21 & 27 May 1853.

²² L.C., 12 August 1854.

²³ *Limerick Reporter* (cited hereafter L.R.) 12 September 1856.

²⁴ L.H.B. Minutes, 4 February & 16 June 1853. L.C., 12 February 1853. The Board of Public Works had possession of the bridge tolls and harbour dues. Maurice Lenihan, *History of Limerick*, (Limerick, 1991) p. 471.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 24 November 1885.

²⁶ L.C., 13 August 1856 & M.N. 20 April & 27 April 1867. The Rev. Richard Dickson resided at Vermont, Clarina, Co. Limerick and was the Vicar and Rector of Kilkeedy for sixty-eight years, from 1799 until 1867, when he died at the age of ninety-one years. I am grateful to Dr. Matthew Potter for making me aware of these references.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 12 August 1854.

²⁸ It was envisaged that the house would have a kitchen, pantry, with a housekeeper's parlour and bedroom, a reading room, dining-hall, and smoking-room with accommodation for 30 beds, in addition to having baths or washing rooms attached. L.C. 11 February & 1 April 1854.

²⁹ L.C. 6 November 1862. In February of the same year, it had declared that it had cost £2,000. Five years previously it had been estimated that it would cost about £1,500. M.N., 11 July 1857 & 26 April 1862.

³⁰ *Slater's National Commercial Directory of Ireland* (Manchester, 1856) pp 291 & 307; L. H. B. Minutes, 19 May 1853.

property he rents from the board encroached upon...and trusting the Commissioners would deal fairly with him by way of compensation'³¹ and in August 1856, he asked for £14. 15s. 0d. Some members of the board contended that it was not from them that he should seek recompense from but from the Sailors' Home Committee. However, it was agreed as he had to give up the site, at which he had been a tenant at the behest of the board, it was their responsibility to reimburse him. The mayor, James Spaight as the chairman of the committee took the responsibility to consult with Harold on the matter though the outcome of this is not recorded.³²

The question of paying the cost of what daily expenses might be incurred after the home was up and running was raised at a meeting held on 9 August 1854. To quantify the daily expenses of a home that did not yet exist was impossible but it was decided to refer to the experience of the Cork home. The number of sailors availing of the facilities of the home there was small, averaging between twenty-eight to thirty, compared to 170 when the home had first opened. The sailor paid for his own maintenance at a cost of two shillings daily, for which he got breakfast, dinner, tea and the use of a bed of which the full compliment of 24 were always full. Expenses such as rent, gas and newspapers, which cost under £60 a year, were paid for out of funds raised by voluntary subscription. It was also made known that the Admiralty had been fairly liberal with their donation to the home in Cork, as was Queen Victoria and the Royal Exchange Insurance Company.³³

By April 1856, the committee was in a position to place an advertisement in the local newspapers calling for tenders from builders³⁴ and at a meeting held in August, it was announced that they had received quotes from two builders, Patrick McNamara for £960 and from J. Hunt, C.E., for £1,144, a difference of £184 and while a decision on granting the contract to the successful tender was adjourned, the former was eventually chosen,³⁵ obviously because he was the cheapest. Within one year of the foundation stone being laid, the building was almost complete. It was described as a 'handsome building' consisting of two big upper rooms, with

Apartments below, parlours or day and dining rooms, with office, bar, pantry and kitchen, admirably designed and neatly finished for their future purposes. The chimney places in the several apartments are composed of silicious stone, a composition that hardens as it grows old, and in its primary state is susceptible of any degree of ornamental moulding, taking colour well ... The Institution will comprise accommodation for thirty sailors. It will always contain a ward for those who may be destitute of the means of self support... They are splendidly furnished and the walls of the rooms beautifully ornamented with appropriate naval paintings ... and mirrors and other accessories that import brilliancy to the apartments, and reflect and refract the summer light entering through the large

³¹ *L.C.*, 4 June 1853.

³² *L. H. B. Minutes*, 13 August 1856 & *L.R.* 15 August 1856. Twenty-five years later Edward Harold was again to claim compensation from the Harbour Board. This time it was for the loss of a field adjoining the site of the Sailors' Home, which the board repossessed. He declared that he had been a tenant of this field 'for the past 40 years' and had expended 'upwards of £90' on developments including garden and boundary walls, which had to be kept in constant repair. If Harold expected a substantial sum by way of reimbursement, he was to be sorely disappointed as the board only paid him £15. *L.C.* 22 March 1881 & *L. H. B. Minutes*, May 1881.

³³ *L.C.* 5 February & 12 August 1854.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 26 April 1856 & *M.N.*, 30 April 1856.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 13 August 1856 & *M.N.*, 11 July 1857.

panes of the tastefully formed windows that afford light, air and extensive and varied views on all sides. The rooms in their undivided length and breadth are 47 feet by 19 [feet]...³⁶

Also, on a wall in the room to the right of the hallway, a stone and marble memorial was placed commemorating the laying of the foundation stone. It bears the following inscription:

The first stone of this Building was laid by the Earl of Carlisle, Lord Lieutenant of Ireland on the 11th July 1856 during the Mayoralty of the Rt. Worshipful James Spaight, to whose zeal energy and success in obtaining subscriptions for its erection throughout the United Kingdom, the sailor is indebted for the comforts of this home. Edward P. Nagle, Architect and Engineer.³⁷

A sextant with an anchor and diving helmet and a bird adorn the top of the plaque, while there is a decoration consisting of shamrocks and a rope design at the bottom.³⁸ The home, however, still lacked equipment and appliances for making it habitable and on 11 July 1857 the doors of the home were opened, not to admit seafaring men, but in order to allow a bazaar to be held 'in aid of the Funds for finishing and fitting up this Institution...' with all the necessary accoutrements.³⁹

What happened next is unclear but it would appear that the sailors' home was never actually used for its original purpose. There are no surviving references to its operation. Within two years it was apparently empty when it was used to accommodate voters during the election of 1859 and by 1865 there were already proposals to adapt it for other purposes. Both the Christian Brothers and the Jesuits had sought to rent it as a schoolhouse while it was also proposed to utilise it as an orphanage. This was to lead to a major controversy involving Spaight and his political opponents with allegations of religious discrimination.

Indeed from the outset, the proposed home was embroiled in controversy and allegations of a sectarian nature. A very robust and acrimonious debate took place amongst several members of the Harbour Board at a meeting in November 1856. John McDonnell, a member of the Corporation and one of the thirteen ship owners in Limerick,⁴⁰ who described himself as 'a Catholic ship-owner of large tonnage' expressed the fear that Catholic sailors would be subjected to proselytism in the home and would not have 'the strong moral character to resist such overtures'. He argued for the inclusion of the Catholic bishop on the board of trustees of the home, which he believed would allay the fears of these sailors and counteract such activities as the placing of 'tracts and periodicals' of a proselytising nature on the bookshelves in the home.⁴¹ The *Limerick Reporter* in an editorial congratulated McDonnell on the stand that he had taken on this

³⁶ *M.N.*, 11 July 1857.

³⁷ Edward P. Nagle was an architect and engineer from Dublin, active from the late 1850s until the 1870s, and is possibly the Mr. Nagle who worked in Limerick in the 1850s. Irish Architectural Archive: Biographical Index of Irish Architects.

³⁸ I am grateful to Mr. Randel Hodkinson for this information.

³⁹ *L.C.*, 20 June 1857.

⁴⁰ *Slater's Directory*, p. 311. The other twelve ship owners were; James Bannatyne, Harvey Brothers, James Harvey & Co., Matterson & Sons, William Oake, John Norris Russell & Sons, Richard Russell, John Sharp, Sidley Brothers, James Spaight, William Spaight & Francis Spaight & Sons.

⁴¹ *L.R.*, 28 November 1856.

issue and gave credence to his assertion that sailors' homes had been to a great extent proselytising institutions by publishing a list of such 'tracts and periodicals' that were stocked on the bookshelves over a twelve month period, between 1 May 1855 to 29 April 1856 in the library of the London sailors' home, which was under the chaplaincy of the Church of England. It then listed a plethora of these books, periodicals and tracts that were to be found in the library, thousands of which were in foreign languages such as Spanish, Portuguese and Dutch.⁴² McDonnell also claimed that, as he was the only Catholic ship owner in Limerick, he should have been invited to become a member of the committee. He queried how it had been established with only two Catholics on a committee of twenty-three.⁴³ William Carroll,⁴⁴ the secretary of the Harbour Board, and also of the Sailors' Home Committee, replied that it was constituted from those who paid subscriptions and that no person who had not donated was on the committee.⁴⁵ A fellow Catholic commissioner, Michael R. Ryan, who had just been elected as a town councillor⁴⁶ disclosed that McDonnell had refused to give a subscription when he was approached. Ryan also proclaimed that he would not have anything whatsoever to do with the home if it was a proselytising institution and would retire from it instantly. He added that: 'it is paying a bad compliment to the Catholic gentlemen who are on the committee to say that they would allow proselytism ... Mr. Laurence Quinlivan⁴⁷ and other Catholics are on the committee ... If Catholic gentlemen did not subscribe to the sailors' home their names would not be on the committee. He went on to reveal that because he had previously been a sailor he knew that the majority of seafaring men were either 'Wesleyan, Methodists and Presbyterians' and if there was to be a Catholic bishop, it would follow that there would have to be representatives from all of the other religions.

The mayor, James Spaight, who was to figure prominently in future deliberations regarding the home, chaired the meeting, and insisted that it was made distinctly clear from its very inception that there would not be any religious distinction allowed and that was the reason why there was not any advocate of any of the religious denominations in the city asked to serve on the committee. He went on to say that:

⁴² Ibid, 2 December 1856.

⁴³ The *Limerick Reporter* newspaper supported the stance taken by John McDonnell, pointing out that there were nineteen Protestants (exclusive of the Chairman), and two Catholics (exclusive of one of the Secretaries), and only five ship owners. The list is as follows; James Spaight, Mayor of Limerick, The Earl of Limerick, The Earl of Dunraven, The Viscount Guillamore, Francis Spaight, President Chamber of Commerce, Robert Rodger, Vice-President Chamber of Commerce, Richard Russell, Joseph Robinson, James Bannatyne, John Sidley, William Cochrane, D. Colquhoun, Collector of Customs, E. Pagden, Comptroller of Customs, Captain W. Ellis, R.N., W. Randall, Harbour Master, Michael R. Ryan, Francis W. Walshe, John Mullock, L. Quinlivan, Richard Wilson, Captain Stewart, R.N., and William Carroll, Hon. Secretaries.

⁴⁴ *M.N.*, 17 December 1887. William Carroll was appointed as secretary to the Harbour Commissioners in 1867, a position he held until 1886. Prior to this, he was the collector of tolls for the Port of Limerick. He was secretary of the Chamber of Commerce for almost fifty years and was also secretary of the Limerick Market Trustees and the Limerick – Foynes Railway Company, in addition to being an agent for the National Assurance Company of Ireland. *L.C.*, 3 January 1852. He resigned as secretary of the Sailors' Home Committee in September 1872 and William Cochrane was appointed in his place. *L.C.*, 28 September 1872.

⁴⁵ *L.R.*, 28 November 1856.

⁴⁶ Potter, *First Citizens of the Treaty City*, pp 120-1. Michael Robert Ryan served on Limerick City Council for eighteen years (1856-74) He was Mayor in 1859 and High Sheriff of County Limerick in 1873. He had served in the merchant navy for a time and then worked in the family business, Ryan Brothers, ship brokers and general commission agents, after which he worked as an agent for a number of landowners.

⁴⁷ Ibid, pp. 112-13. Laurence Quinlivan served on Limerick City Council for thirty-four years and as Mayor from December 1849 serving out the remainder of the previous incumbent John Boyce's term of office and then for the whole of 1850. He was the proprietor of Quinlivans Hotel located at 10 William Street and later became a corn merchant in Upper William Street.

He had collected over £1,100 for the Sailors' Home, and that was the mite of every denomination of Christians. Greeks and even Jews had contributed, as well as every denomination of Protestant and Roman Catholic. He invariably stated to them, when they spoke to him of the system to be carried out, that everything of a sectarian nature should be wiped out from the management of the institution; that there would be altogether free trade in religion, – and that the clergymen of every denomination of religion by their presence at the laying of the foundation stone had free access to the institution and a right to take charge of the consciences of those belonging to their profession. He did not think it right to make any rule infringing that declaration, and he must quite fearlessly declare that since its establishment there was nothing approaching to dissent on the principle on which it should be fairly and honourably worked.⁴⁸

Spaight had, between the laying of the foundation stone in 1856 and 1859, gained possession of the home through a lien, due to the inability of the sailors' home committee to pay the balance due to the contractor following the completion of the home.⁴⁹ This was to have ramifications of a very serious nature in future deliberations regarding the home.

Allegations that the building might be used for sectarian and proselytising purposes were to surface eight years later. The possible sale of the home to the Protestant Orphan Society was discussed at a special meeting of the Harbour Board held on 8 October 1864 and a decision was arrived at that the sailors' home committee should be cautioned to the extent that 'no party whatever have any power or authority to sell or let these premises without our authority...[or] the consent of this board'.⁵⁰ Three months later in January 1865 at another meeting of the board, the issue was again raised and an objection made 'that a building, which cost £1,700 should be sold for £434', which was to be paid to James Spaight. It was also disclosed that the 'building was refused to be rented at £30 a year...for the purposes of a Catholic Seminary', and that it should not therefore 'be sold to another clergyman of a different persuasion for a like purpose'. The board's solicitor was instructed to institute any legal proceedings necessary to prevent any attempt at this happening.⁵¹ Then in the general election campaign of that year, James Spaight, who not for first time stood as a Conservative candidate for one of the two seats as a representative for Limerick city in the House of Commons⁵² was accused by his Liberal opponents of engaging in an agreement to turn the building over 'to the Protestant Orphan Society,⁵³ which is purely sectarian in its character, and is, besides, more than

⁴⁸ *L.R.*, 28 November 1856.

⁴⁹ Lien is a legal term for a right to keep possession of property belonging to another person until a debt owed by that person is discharged. Spaight's lien on the building had increased from £278. 6s. 3d. in 1862 to £349. 14s. 3d in 1864 and to £400 in 1865. The latter two increases were explained by the fact that a payment due to a contractor had been omitted from Spaight's account and added interest on the debt. *L.C.*, 20 June 1865. Spaight was later to state that he had paid the contractor the amount owed, which was around £400. *L.C.*, 28 September 1871.

⁵⁰ *L.C.*, 8 October 1864. This meeting was called following a report of a meeting in Abington Church of the Doon Branch of the Limerick Protestant Orphan Society that appeared in the *Limerick Chronicle*, 24 September 1864, in which it was stated that the procurement of the Sailors' Home in Limerick for the Orphan Society 'was nearly completed, where thirty boys will be admitted'.

⁵¹ *L.C.*, 3 January 1865.

⁵² B.M. Walker (ed.), *Parliamentary Election Results in Ireland, 1801-1922* (Dublin, 1978) pp 292-3 & 360. James Spaight had been elected as an MP for Limerick city in 1858 but was defeated the following year in 1859. He was to contest the general elections of 1865, 1868, 1871, 1874, 1879, 1880, 1883 & 1885, which was the last one that he contested and was defeated in every one.

⁵³ The ethos of the Limerick Protestant Orphan Society was unconditionally Protestant but it emphasized from its inauguration that it was not a proselytizing concern, see Catherine Enright, 'A Study of Limerick Protestant Orphan Society 1833-1900' (M.A., University of Limerick, 2003).

suspected of active sympathy with proselytism'. He was further accused of refusing the use of the building to the Christian Brothers and the Jesuit Order, who wanted to use it for educational purposes, although both organisations had offered to pay a favourable rent for it. These charges were to be reiterated throughout the period of the election on behalf of Spaight's two liberal opponents, Major George Gavin, MP⁵⁴ and Francis William Russell, MP,⁵⁵ by their respective election agents, John O'Donnell, T.C.,⁵⁶ and Patrick Lynch, solicitors at meetings held at their committee rooms and at St. Mary's and St. Michael's parishes. Both meetings were attended by a sizeable number of Catholic priests, who were also among the twenty-seven clergymen who signed a petition outlining their reasons for opposing Spaight's election, one of which was the issue of the sailors' home. Lynch, representing Francis Russell indicated that it was:

Thanks to some of the staunch supporters of fair play who are members of the Harbour Board, he (Spaight) hadn't it all his own way. There are men on that Board whose names will ever be honoured - thanks to Richard Russell, the friend of civil and religious liberty, Mr. Spaight did not succeed. Mr. Russell said 'I would sooner see that building levelled to the earth, than see it the cause of religious discussion in this city'.⁵⁷

Taking a cue from his election agent, Francis W. Russell who had accompanied Spaight to London when he was collecting contributions for the 'presumed' purpose of building a sailors' home, claimed in a letter published in two local newspapers, to have by his presence 'mainly assisted in obtaining a very large sum of money' from the commercial classes there and now declared that only for his brother, Richard, the home would have been handed over to an institution, 'which, however useful, was sectarian and limited in extent'. He also referred to an application for the use of the home, made by a benevolent organisation (not named) and whose convictions were compatible with the greater part of the city's populous but was refused by Spaight.⁵⁸

O'Donnell and Lynch made another serious assertion. This time it was about the use by Spaight of the home for another purpose and was proven to be true. During the 1859 general election Spaight had used the home for the seclusion of voters who were in the main brought in from rural districts.⁵⁹ O'Donnell and Lynch highlighted this by writing to the Board of Works, a copy of which was read out at a meeting of the Harbour Board. They charged Spaight with the improper use of the home by lodging these voters 'on land the property of your Board [of Works]'. The Board was requested to ensure that this

⁵⁴ *L.C.*, 23 & 26 October 1880. Major George Gavin was elected to Parliament as an MP for the city in 1858 but lost it on petition. Having being re-elected in 1859, he remained as an MP for fourteen years until the 1873 general election when he did not stand again.

⁵⁵ Walker, *Parliamentary Election Results*, p. 292. Francis William Russell was to represent Limerick City as a Liberal MP for nineteen years having been elected in 1852 and dying in 1871, *L.C.* 31 August 1871.

⁵⁶ Laurence Fenton, *The Young Ireland Rebellion and Limerick* (Cork, 2010) pp. 36, 40, 51, 180 & 201. John O'Donnell had been a supporter of the Young Ireland Movement in Limerick, having become involved with William Smith O'Brien in 1846. He was to become the secretary of the Sarsfield Club of the Irish Confederation, which was the political wing of the Young Ireland Movement. He was also a member of the Council of the Irish Confederation (1848). Following the failed rebellion of 1848 at Ballingarry, Co Tipperary, O'Donnell went on the run but returned to Limerick to his solicitor's practice after receiving assurances about his safety towards the end of 1848.

⁵⁷ *M.N.*, 3 June, 5 July 1865 & *L.C.*, 11 July 1865.

⁵⁸ *M.N.*, 24 May 1865 & *L.C.*, 25 May 1865.

⁵⁹ House of Commons. *Minutes of Evidence taken before the Select Committee of Limerick City Election; with the proceedings of the committee (1859)*, (London, 1859) p. 60. This committee met to investigate irregularities that were alleged to have occurred during the 1859 general election in Limerick City.

would not happen again but they had received an appeal from the greater part of the sailors' home committee who did not want to give up the administration of it. They felt therefore that it would have been inexpedient to interfere in a building 'vested in the Trustees of the Sailors' Home'. However, the debate that ensued on the matter at the Harbour Board meeting prevented such use from taking place again and it was agreed that the Board should pay the debt owed in order to gain possession for their own intentions, thereby making sure that 'no creed or sect in the city should be offended'.⁶⁰

Spaight was not without support. A correspondent in the *Limerick Chronicle*, signing himself 'Vindex', argued that James Spaight's brother William represented him on 'the committee who manages its affairs; and that his vote would weigh as much as Mr. Spaight's in any division of opinion among them'. Spaight echoing this view, stated at a Harbour Board meeting that 'he had no more control at the Sailors' Home Committee than any other member of that body; and from the beginning to end he had claimed no more right to the disposal of the house than any one else on the committee. He had a right to give his vote regarding it, and so had any other member'. This was being economical with the truth as he had a veto with the lien that he possessed. Michael R. Ryan, who had previously supported Spaight, now believed that his position was no longer defensible. However, he was right when he asserted that due to the decline of trade in the port, the home was not required for sailors, as 'they should have sailors to give [it] support in order for it to be a sailors' home' and that the value of the building had depreciated due to its non occupancy 'as every one knew that leaving a large building of that kind continually without fire or care of any description should cause it serious injury'.⁶¹ The value of the home had in fact decreased considerably due to its uninhabited state from fifty pounds in 1862 to thirty pounds in 18 February 1865 and to twenty-five pounds during the period 1867/8.⁶²

Spaight was not a person who accepted defeat lightly and was not going to allow such setbacks to prevent him from claiming some financial benefit from his possession of the home. He therefore decided in 1867 to rent it to the Limerick City Militia who were looking for a depot and stifled any discussion on the issue when it came before a meeting of the Harbour Board,⁶³ declaring that 'the Harbour Board could not deal with the question, which should be referred to the Sailors' Home Committee', where of course he had control.⁶⁴ The tenancy of the building by the militia was less contentious and was by 1869 called 'the Artillery Depot Barrack'. It was still, however, the objective of the Sailors' Home Committee to have it opened as a refuge for sailors and with this in mind they had only four years earlier initiated a plan whereby a list of subscribers was drawn up from amongst the merchants and others who were prepared to pay an annual donation of £80 to support the purchase of the necessary furnishings and open the home. Before these donors could be approached it was necessary to repay the debt owed to Spaight but nothing came of it.⁶⁵

⁶⁰ *M.N.*, 15 July 1865.

⁶¹ *L.C.*, 6 June 1865 & *M.N.*, 7 June 1865.

⁶² From information supplied by S.F.P.C.

⁶³ K. Donnelly, M. Hctor, & D. Walsh, *A Rising Tide: The Story of Limerick Harbour*, (Limerick, 1994), p. 64. The Limerick Harbour Board was under the provisions of the Limerick Harbour Act 1867, composed of fifteen elected Commissioners, five from the importers and exporters, five from the harbour rate payers and five from the Limerick Corporation with the Mayor of Limerick and the President of the Chamber of Commerce of Limerick *ex-officio* members.

⁶⁴ *L.C.*, 9 April 1867. The Limerick City Militia was also known as the City of Limerick Militia Artillery, L.H.B. Minutes 19 December 1871.

⁶⁵ *L.C.*, 20 June 1865, 17 August 1869 & L.H.B. Minutes 2 August 1869.

The reluctant acceptance of the militia as occupants of the home by the Harbour Board is shown by a meeting held during the month of April 1872. Alderman Eugene O'Callaghan took a principled stand in objecting to the use of the home by the militia, indicating that 'there is a strong resolution on our books which binds us to confining it to the purpose of a sailors' home, and we are bound by that resolution'. But economics was more important than altruism and even O'Callaghan believed that the home should not be tenanted for just fifty pounds per annum. Other members were of the same train of thought, one expressed the view that he was in agreement with O'Callaghan 'in some respects, but if he got sufficient rent he would be for letting it' and another stressed that the home's continued use by the militia meant that 'it would be kept in good repair until such time as we are in a position to take it up'.⁶⁶

The initial movement for the Harbour Board to take possession of the home, obviously with the approval of the Board of Works, was made at a meeting of the former in August 1869 where it was resolved that:

The building erected on our property at Frederick Street for a Sailors' Home and now occupied as a Militia Barrack be redeemed by payment of Mr. Spaight's claim thereon and on its legal transfers to the Board for the purpose of...[taking] steps to apply it to its intended object as a Sailors' Home.⁶⁷

A committee was established to negotiate with the sailors' home committee, with the intention of implementing the provisions of the resolution. Ironically one of the men selected to serve on this committee was James Spaight who had a vested interest in the outcome of the deliberations. It was after all Spaight who held the lien on the building and who was the chairman of the sailors' home committee.⁶⁸ The progress of these negotiations is not recorded, though O'Callaghan reiterated his objection to the proposal at a further meeting of the Board in September.⁶⁹ At the next meeting of the Harbour Board on 16 October 1871, their solicitor was instructed despite opposition from Spaight, to 'take the necessary steps to obtain possession of the premises in Frederick Street intended for a Sailors' Home'⁷⁰ and by 1872 arrangements had been put in place by the Board so that formal possession could be taken from James Spaight, his debt of £443.10s.8d having been paid. The Harbour Board's secretary and solicitor, with Spaight in attendance, met with the adjutant of the militia, Captain Lyons, on 30 September 1872 to comply with the legal formalities at the home, whereby the tenancy was surrendered. James Spaight then handed formal possession of the home to the secretary, who in turn gave occupancy back to the militia, who then became the tenants of the Harbour Board for thirty-seven years.⁷¹ The Board were now in receipt of £50 rent, paid by the militia

⁶⁶ *L.C.*, 23 April 1872. Alderman Eugene O'Callaghan was a successful leather merchant who supported Daniel O'Connell and was in favour of the repeal of the Act of Union. He was mayor of the city in 1854. He served on Limerick City Council continuously for twenty-seven years (1841-68) and again for another twelve years from 1869 to his death in 1881. He was the grandfather of Councillor Michael O'Callaghan who had served as mayor 1920-1 and was murdered on 7 March 1921, Potter, *First Citizens of the Treaty City*, pp 124-5.

⁶⁷ *L.H.B. Minutes* 2 August 1869.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 2 August 1869. The other members of the committee were Richard Russell, Alderman John R. Tinsley, Richard Power, Robert McDonnell, Richard Phillips & M. R. Ryan.

⁶⁹ *L.C.*, 28 September 1871.

⁷⁰ *L.H.B. Minutes* 16 October 1871. Spaight had proposed an amendment to prevent this, which he lost on a division of nine votes to four.

⁷¹ *L.H.B. Minutes* 22 July, 4 & 14 October 1872, 11 October 1909.

annually⁷² and as landlords they were liable for any repairs that needed to be undertaken to the outside of the building.⁷³ It would appear that from this point in time that the sailors' home committee ceased to exist.

The building was vacated by the militia in December 1909 and again reverted to an unoccupied state. It was to remain so for two years before a new tenant moved in. The Harbour Board had met two months before the militia moved out and decided that the leasing of the premises should be advertised. Reference was made by William Holliday⁷⁴ to allowing it to be used as a police station to which the Mayor, Thomas Donnellan,⁷⁵ *ex-officio* chairman of the Board, while not ruling this out altogether remarked that 'it would be a curious thing to put six policemen where there was a regiment of soldiers before'. Other members had different ideas about the building; Alderman Michael Joyce, MP,⁷⁶ wanted a site for workmen's homes and J.H. Roche, J.P., believed that it would have been useful as 'a fine technical institute'.⁷⁷ Then in October 1910 and again in May 1911 applications for the tenancy of the home were received from Alfred Wylde, a businessman from nearby Henry St.⁷⁸ His first offer was apparently ignored and his second approach included an offer of £35 per annum for its use on condition that the building would be 'on a long repairing lease free of rates and taxes'. This proposition was not considered as the Board stated that it was not in a position at the time to negotiate with him. They were in fact involved in discussions with the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) about the use of the premises.⁷⁹

It became evident that the committee established by the Harbour Board to discuss terms with the RIC, was intent on getting them to become the new tenants. This was due to the necessity for the Gas Committee of Limerick Corporation to expand their works on the Dock Road and their desire to acquire the existing RIC barracks located beside it. During the month of April 1911 the Harbour Board committee reported that the Gas Committee was unable to acquire any other premises and that it would be in the interest of the city to facilitate them in acquiring the barracks. The Harbour Committee recommended to the Board a two pronged approach to deal with the matter, which was approved. The RIC were served with notice of relinquishment of the Dock Road

⁷² *M.N.*, 8 January 1879. This was increased by £5 on the authority of the War Office in 1879. Spaight had alleged at a meeting of the Sailors' Home Committee in September 1871 that there had been hindrance by bureaucrats in obtaining the rent owed by the City Artillery, which amounted to £430. *L.C.*, 28 September 1871.

⁷³ *L.H.B. Minutes* 13, 28 January 1873, 20 October, 17 November, 15 December 1873, 23 November, 7 December 1874, 18 November 1907. There was an occasion where an application from the adjutant of the militia requesting certain repairs to be done to the home was refused by the Board, however, on examination of the tenancy lease it was found that the Board were committed to making all external repairs.

⁷⁴ *L.C.*, 21 January 1924. William Holliday was the Managing Director of J & G. Boyd Ltd.

⁷⁵ Potter, *First Citizens of the Treaty City*. p. 161. Thomas Donnellan, an extensive farmer in Thomondgate, served on Limerick City Council from 1891 to 1911 and 1914 to his death in 1924. He was mayor of Limerick for two successive terms (1908-10).

⁷⁶ Potter, *First Citizens of the Treaty City*. pp 158-60. Michael Joyce, MP, a river pilot, represented the Custom House Ward on Limerick Corporation 1899-1920 and was mayor of the city for two consecutive years (1905-07). He was an Irish Parliamentary Party MP for Limerick City (1900-18), President of the United Kingdom Pilots' Association (1910-23). He died on 9 December 1940, *Limerick Leader*, 9 December 1940.

⁷⁷ *L.H.B. Minutes* 11 October 1909 & *L.C.*, 12 October 1909.

⁷⁸ *Guy's Limerick Directory 1912*. (Limerick, 1912), p. 19, *L.C.*, 23 December 1909 & 15 January 1910. Alfred Wylde resided at 49 Henry Street from where he carried out his business of window cleaning, general house jobbing & carpet cleaning. He was also an agent for the sale and distribution of fire alarms, having previously been the Captain of the Limerick Fire Brigade. He died in England in 1925, *L.C.*, 10 January 1925. I am grateful to Mr. Randel Hodkinson for the latter reference.

⁷⁹ *L.H.B. Minutes* 8 October 1910 & 22 May 1911.

Barracks, while they were at the same time offered the ex-militia barracks 'which would be desirable to let to them', obviously with the intention of having a continuous police presence in the area. The Gas Committee accepted the Board's offer that they pay a rent of £20 a year in addition to rates and taxes.⁸⁰ In the meantime the police remained at the Dock Road Barracks as discussions regarding the terms for the occupancy of the Frederick Street building continued for another eight months.

A comprehensive agreement between both parties was finally concluded by December 1911 with County Inspector Yates of the RIC initially accepting the Board's terms on behalf of the constabulary authorities until the contract was signed by the mayor, Timothy Ryan,⁸¹ *ex-officio* chairman of the Harbour Board and Sir Neville F. F. Chamberlain, K.C. B., K.C.V.O.,⁸² of Dublin Castle, the Receiver for the Constabulary Force of Ireland on 25 March 1912. It stipulated that:

The said lessee and his Successors and his and their authorised assigns from the thirty-first day of December one thousand nine hundred and eleven...for...the full term of ninety-nine years Yielding and Paying therefore and thereout yearly and every year during the said term unto the said lessees their Successors and assigns the yearly cost or sum of Twenty-five pounds to be paid ... in equal half yearly payments on every Thirteenth day of June and Thirty-first day of December. In each and every year during the term ... and any buildings to be erected thereon shall be used solely and exclusively for the purpose of a police barracks and for no other purpose whatsoever without the consent in writing of the said Lessers their Successors or assigns ... that he the said Lessee his Successors and his and their authorised assigns shall and will within Two years from the date here expend a sum of Three hundred and Fifty Pounds in repairing and improving the said demised premises in accordance with plans and conditions to be approved of to the satisfaction of The Commissioners of Public Works in Ireland.

Also included in the lease was a clause protecting the slab tablet memorial, which 'shall not be removed altered defaced or otherwise injured'.⁸³

The RIC maintained a presence here for eleven years until 1922 when they were disbanded following the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty. At the outbreak of the Civil War forces opposed to the Treaty took over the military installations and police barracks in Limerick including the building in Frederick Street, which was occupied by Fianna Éireann.⁸⁴ However, with the upper hand being gained by the Free State military, the anti-

⁸⁰ Ibid, 28 April 1911, 26 June 1911 & 24 July 1911. Shortly before the Harbour Committee issued its report, the engineer related to the Board that damage had been caused to the outside of building in Frederick Street by robbers and that the police had apprehended them. S.F.P.C., L.H.B., 27 March 1911.

⁸¹ Potter, *First Citizens of the Treaty City*, p. 162. Timothy Ryan was the manager of J.P. Evans & Company, 131 O'Connell Street and a consulting engineer with the Condensed Milk Company of Ireland, Lansdowne, Limerick. He served on Limerick Corporation from 1905 to 1914 and was mayor for three successive years (1910 to 1913).

⁸² *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (Oxford 2004-2010). On line access, 9 February 2010. Sir Neville Francis Fitzgerald Chamberlain was Inspector-General of the Royal Irish Constabulary 1900-16. He is perhaps most famous for being the inventor of the game of Snooker.

⁸³ Indenture between Limerick Harbour Commissioners and the Royal Irish Constabulary, registered on the 27 March 1912, which is in the possession of the S.F.P.C. The clause protecting the memorial was placed in the lease on the specific instructions of the Board to the Law Advisor L.H.B. Minutes 29 January 1912. The RIC had asked for whatever repairs needed to be done to be carried out by the Board, which was estimated to be around £375. L.H.B. Minutes 8 August 1911.

⁸⁴ The Republican youth movement founded in 1909 in opposition to the Boy Scouts.

Treaty forces withdrew and attempted to burn the building down but through the actions of local residents, who were fearful for their own safety, as the Gas Works and Electric Power Station were situated nearby, prevented a potential catastrophe of immense proportions from occurring.⁸⁵ When the Garda Síochána, the direct successors as outlined in the lease and responsible through the Office of Public Works, for its maintenance took over the building, it was immediately repaired for their occupancy. However the building has not been used by the Garda Síochána in recent years. The ninety-nine year lease terminated at the end of 2010 and the building reverted to the Shannon Foynes Port Company (S.F.P.C.), who is the direct successor of the Limerick Harbour Board in January 2011.⁸⁶ The S.F.P.C. sought a Section 57 (2) declaration in accordance with the *Planning and Development Act 2000* on 1 September 2009, which resulted in the building being declared a Recorded Protected Structure.⁸⁷

This historic building, which has considerable architectural merit has suffered from neglect and become very dilapidated. Originally built to provide a service for sailors, it was destined not to be used for that purpose. After lying idle for a period, during which time the importance of Limerick Port had become much reduced, it was used to accommodate the forces of law and order, occupied first by the Limerick City Militia, then by the RIC and finally by the Garda Síochána, who subdivided the rooms for their own purposes throughout the years of their tenancy. Although the Office of Public Works, handed back the lease to the S.F.P.C., after protracted negotiations, the building is now again unoccupied and its future is uncertain.

⁸⁵ *L.C.*, 22 July 1922. The residents on seeing smoke and flames coming from a top window on the side of the building facing the river procured a double line of hose and broke down the front door to gain access to the roof where they got the fire under control, thereby preventing any serious damage to the structure. Interestingly almost eleven years previously a fire at James McMahon's timber yard, which backed on to the property caused some damage at the Sailors' Home. The Harbour Board received £24 from Yorkshire Insurance Company to cover this damage. *L.H.B. Minutes* 12 June & 24 July 1911.

⁸⁶ www.sfpc.ie. The Shannon Foynes Port Company was formed by the amalgamation of Shannon Estuary Ports and Foynes Company under the Harbours Act 2000. The Shannon Estuary Ports was established by the Harbours Act 1996, from the former Limerick Harbour Commissioners and the Foynes Port Company was also established by the Harbours Act 1996, from the former Foynes Harbour Trustees. I am grateful to Mr. Frank Lynch, Secretary of the S.F.P.C., for accessing the minutes of the Limerick Harbour Board for the period covered by this article.

⁸⁷ Limerick City Council Section 57 Declaration, Record of Protected Structure Number S 291, 30 September 2009. The legal protection afforded by the Act extends to the whole of the structure including the interior and the land lying within its curtilage.

