
ARTHUR'S QUAY

by E.H. Bennis



Arthur's Quay, from a watercolour by Carmel Flynn, 1945.

For over 400 years prior to 1840, the destinies of Limerick were ruled and its civil life administered by an oligarchy of merchants, chief among whom were Arthurs, Creaghs, Whites and others, of whom the family of Arthur took the lead in both commercial enterprise and civic administration. Forty-four times an Arthur occupied the position of Mayor. The Arthurs did a large import and export trade; it was their ships constantly coming into competition with the ships of Galway merchants that nearly led to open hostilities between these two great rival cities, and it was Christopher and Nicholas Arthur who were sent by Limerick to Galway in 1524 to draw up a treaty of peace. This they satisfactorily accomplished. The treaty was duly signed, sealed and witnessed but violated almost before the ink was dry.

Up to the Williamite Siege of 1691, the City Wall of the Irishtown ran along the east side of Michael Street, i.e., behind the present Town Hall, and from this to the river, with the exception of a few buildings, such as St. Michael's Protestant Church and graveyard, the land was derelict.

After the Williamite Siege of 1691, when normal conditions were being restored and peace and prosperity returning, the Arthurs, with commendable enterprise, undertook the developing of this waste land. They built a quay for the double purpose of carrying out this development

scheme and the berthing of their ships. They laid out streets and lanes and named them after themselves. Francis Street and Patrick Street after Francis and Patrick Arthur and Ellen Street after their sister. Prominent was the fine row of residential houses Patrick Arthur erected on the quay facing the river. These houses at once became the popular residences of the elite and wealthy of both the English and Irish towns.

The position was superb, looking out on the River Shannon, which, when the tide was in, looked like a beautiful lake, or, when out, there was the musical roar of the cataract of the Curraghgowan Fall. The quay itself enlivened with sailing ships continually coming and going. Across the river (there were no rows of houses then on the Clare side), the view stretched right away over woods and hills to the beautiful old country mansion of the Arthurs at Glenomara, backed by the Broadford hills and the great horseshoe forest reaching nearly to the mountain top.

The houses were built to get the full benefit of the afternoon sun, and, when viewed from the Clare side on a summer afternoon, presented a fiery red no artist could do full justice to.

Tall, narrow and stately hall-doors and of spartan simplicity, are, as far as I know, associated only with the Arthurs. These hall-doors were in the Arthur's Quay and

Francis Street houses, and a house in Nicholas Street, pulled down about 60 years ago, said to have been the Arthur's Englishtown residence, had one just the same.

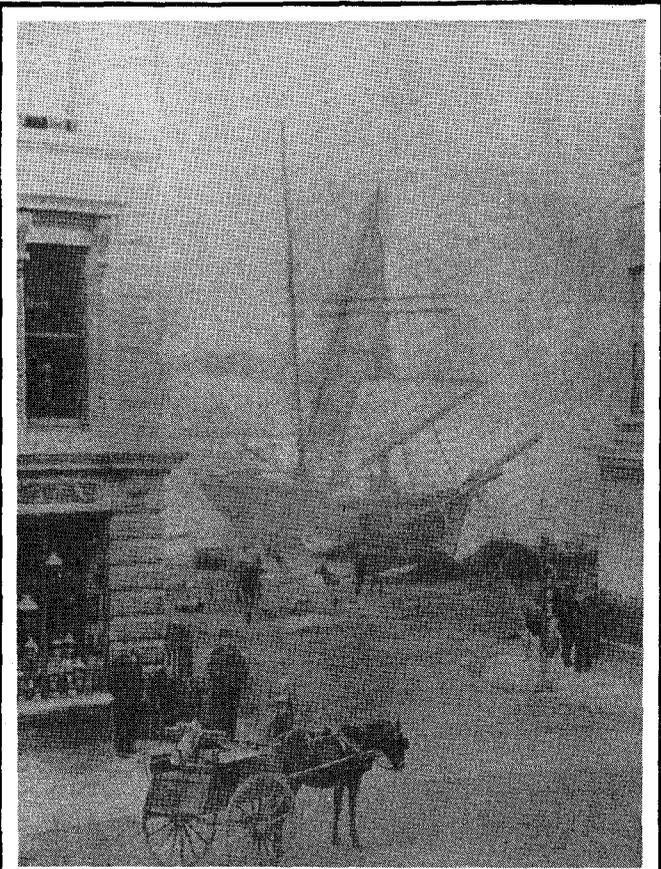
The mill worked by Messrs. Martin McGuire, Ltd., was much the oldest working mill in the city, and was built by Thomas Marks of Francis Street.

The Arthurs had the right of burial in St. Mary's Cathedral, but no burial has taken place there since 1729. Patrick Arthur died 1799 and is buried in St. Michael's, and here, too, is a large tombstone bearing the inscription: "Here lies the body of Ellen Arthur, July, 1805".

Patrick Arthur lived in the house on the quay, at the corner of Francis Street.

How did all this high life come to an end? Changes were taking place, the extension of the city to new and more commodious houses at Newtown Pery, the building of the Wellesley Bridge, the opening of the railway, the stationing of a general in the New Barracks, who arranged for a band to play three times a week where the O'Connell Monument now stands, and the opening of the new quays and docks, diverting shipping to lower down the river, and finally, inexorable fashion decreed the moving to Newtown Pery, and, like a flock of unthinking sheep, her minions unquestionably obeyed. The superb outlook gave place to one of monotonous rows of red brick houses.

"Ichabod" was written on Arthur's Quay, "her glory hath departed", and this once fashionable resort rapidly declined to a mere collection of huxter shops and tenement houses. Even the turf boats that, up to comparatively recently, were so continuously discharging their cargoes of turf, that the expression "turf" and Arthur's Quay were almost synonymous terms, have completely disappeared, and there are some citizens who propose to sweep away this monument of the most progressive and enterprising period of mediaeval Limerick.



A turf boat at Arthur's Quay before the turn of the century.



A full view of Arthur's Quay in 1913.