

# A century of achievement for St. Michael's rowing club

By DENIS O'SHAUGHNESSY

BACK in the early part of the 19th century with abject poverty the lot of most of the Irish people, drunkenness and consequent unlawfulness was highly prevalent throughout the land.

A Corkman, Fr Theobald Mathew, began a temperance crusade that was to have far reaching effects, with untold numbers joining up and forsaking their wickedness. When he came to Limerick in 1839, it was reckoned that over 100,000 took the pledge at an open air rally in the centre of the city and one of the first temperance societies in the country was founded as a result, St Michael's.

The Society flourished during that century, culminating in the building of a magnificent premises where members, after taking an oath of abstinence, could play billiards and snooker, read books in the library, take part in drama, debates, etc.

Sporting adjuncts to the Society then became popular with Gaelic games being particularly strong towards the end of the century, but teams were turned out in all types of disciplines: rugby, cricket, soccer and table tennis.

Rowing was one of the most popular of sports in the city during the end of the 19th century and St Michael's members came together and founded the rowing club in 1901, one hundred years ago.

To mark this auspicious occasion, a centenary regatta was to have been held in O'Brien's Bridge last weekend but as most clubs are in a valley period of the season, entries were not sufficient to go ahead. However, a special centenary dinner is being held on Saturday night, Oct 13, in the Limerick Inn where members and their friends will gather and celebrate in style 100 years of honest and successful rowing endeavour.

Like all great clubs, St Michael's had humble beginnings, which was in a makeshift boathouse which had been vacated by Shannon Rowing Club in Corcanree.



A 1980's picture at St Michael's with Cyril and Paddy Mullins, Denis O'Shaughnessy, the late Frank O'Mahony and Paddy Egan.

club four competing in the scratch races founded off Barrington's Pier. Some of the crew panicked and jumping from the craft upset it, and two, Paddy McInerney and Tom Brawn, were drowned. The rest of the crew made the shore and safety.

Hard to believe in this age of fiscal plenty, but it took St Michael's 23 years to rise to the purchase of their first new boat, a four, christened "The Tower" in 1924.

The first trophy at national level came in 1928, when at the Tailteann Games in Dublin, the club won the gold medals in the under-age fours. The junior eight went unbeaten in 1930 with the late Paddy Stapleton on board. With the nucleus of that crew the following year the eight made a great bid for the senior eights championship which was held in Limerick over the old Docks course. They had a substantial lead over eventual winners Emmets of Galway in the heat when a few bad errors cost them the race.

In 1933 the old boathouse in the Docks was demolished to make way for the extension scheme and after rowing out from Athlunkard and the old Curraghmore club for several seasons, the present clubhouse was opened in 1941.

Secretary at the time was Paddy Beegan who served in that capacity for no less than 31 years. In 1945 Bill Carmody, still happily with us, stroked the maiden eight that went unbeaten and would have been favourites for the championship but in an era of extreme fiscal shortages,

country.

A young man by the name of Dermot Henihan, who was later to hold the distinguished office of IARU president for no less than seven terms, was captain in 1978 and like Paddy Treacy before him, had huge regatta successes.

However, despite all the triumphs of these years, the club had yet to win a championship, and eventually, after a 77 year wait, success in this sphere came at last when in Enniskillen in 1979 the Junior A Eight, with Niall Hogan stroking and Dermot Henihan captain and coach, at last landed an Irish championship.

There was great rejoicing in O'Callaghan Strand and even more so the following year when, with a few astute changes from Henihan, the eight landed the intermediate title at Inniscarra, the first time in 35 years the cup had come to Limerick.

The club was now entering the most successful era of any Limerick club and in 1983 the first senior title came when Larry Sherin and Niall Deloughrey landed the pairs title in Blessington.

1984 was a bitter sweet year with many achievements and one huge disappointment. Larry Sherin, Niall Deloughrey, Niall Hogan were in the Irish Lightweight 8 who put up a magnificent performance in Montreal when being pipped for the bronze medal, finishing in fourth position in the final. Sherin and Deloughrey retained their senior pairs title in Blessington and Jim Aherne stroked the intermediate 8 to record a

double was recorded in the junior eights and fours in Enniskillen masterminded by Justin Sherin and Pat McInerney.

A new kid on the block by the name of Sam Lynch brilliantly stroked both crews to victory and he went on to become one of the youngest ever strokes to lead the intermediate eight to a championship success. This was also a momentous year as the first steps in bringing the clubhouse up to modern standards commenced and was completed with the opening of the new state of the art gymnasium in 1996.

Donal Hanrahan landed the intermediate sculls in 1994 and the following year was to see the club land its most important race in a century of endeavour. This came at Inniscarra when the senior I four, stroked by Donal Hanrahan, landed the "blue riband" of Irish rowing, the first time since the Pa Healy led Shannon four won in 1907.

In the Olympics in Atlanta the Irish Lightweight Four went heartbreakingly close to landing the bronze medal. On board was St Michael's oarsman by the name of Sam Lynch and from that momentous day onwards he was to traverse a path that had many twists and turns but that led eventually to the highest possible honours in the form of a gold medal in the lightweight sculls world championship in Lucerne.

1996 was what was described in the Monday edition of the Limerick Leader as "Limerick's Greatest Ever Weekend

prophetically he predicted afterwards, "It will be the first of many".

In his attempt to retain the lightweight sculls title in Inniscarra the following year Sam lost his oar when the gate in his rowlock opened and he was dumped unceremoniously into the water. Consolation came when he teamed up with Gearoid Towhey to win the senior double sculls.

Fittingly, at the start of the new millennium, St Michael's were again on the championship winning rostrum, annexing the intermediate fours in great fashion and were robbed for a unique double when the eight failed narrowly. Stroking the four was a young oarsman by the name of Hugh Lynch, maintaining a winning trend established by his illustrious brother Sam.

And who is to say that St Michael's latest success story, Dave Sheehan's annexation of the novice sculls championship this year, is not the first step in what could become an illustrious career like that of Sam Lynch, and will finish at the end of the rainbow?

Sam signalled his intentions of going all the way to the top of world rowing when at Zagreb last year he won the silver medal. It is now history how he went on to win the gold at Lucerne this year. It was a fitting achievement in this the club's centenary year, that its greatest ever oarsman should gain such a momentous honour for his club, city and country.

It is a tribute to the club that took in and fostered his rowing talent down the years and indeed to the countless young oarsmen down the century who in St Michael's learned the art of discipline and fair play in a type of sport whose values, now regarded as outmoded, the modern world has lost sight of.

There has hardly been a year since the home internationals were introduced in 1978 that St Michael's have not had a representative, a criterion of the consistency of the club in that period.

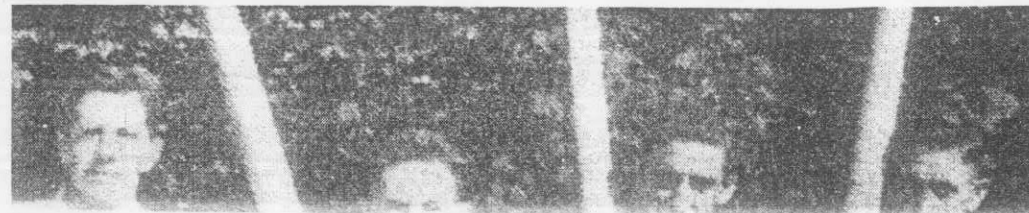
From those humble beginnings many years ago, St Michael's have become one of the most respected and successful commercial clubs in the country. During that period the club has produced many great crews and oarsmen, many of whom



Irish elite pairs champions, Larry Wherin and Niall Deloughrey with the Mayor of Limerick, Terry Kelly in 1983.



The first championship winning crew of St Michael's, winners of the Junior A Eights in 1979. Back: Vinny O'Driscoll, vice-pres; Austin Leddin, Derek Daly, Barry Smith, Dermot Woodhouse, Niall Deloughrey, Dermot Henihan (captain and coach). Front: P. O'Driscoll, cox; Niall Hogan (stroke), Michael Phelan (president), Pat Leahy, Philip Hackett.





cessful rowing endeavour.

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First captain was Vin Merritt with a committee which included Ald. Michael Joyce, who went on to become an MP, John O'Dowd, Joe O'Donoghue, T. O'Connor, Frank Geary, Dan Hannon, Jack Stapleton, T. Toomey, Paddy Walsh and Dan Griffin.

The first crew to leave the slipway was a maiden eight comprised of Henihan, Cantillon, Hayes, Brinn, O'Dowd, O'Connell, McCormack, Hanrahan and the honour of the club's first win fell to the junior four comprised of Jim Griffin, Pat Hannon, Jack Hanrahan and Bob Quin, who won the Murphy Cup in Limerick, and also won at Dublin and Cork.

The club's first eight success came in 1906 when they won the coveted Quin Cup at Limerick Regatta and solid wins followed in junior eights, and under-age fours.

A milestone came in 1913 when the club won their first senior race, the Limerick City Challenge Cup at Limerick with a crew comprised of Jim Griffin, Pat Hannon, Jack Hanrahan and Bob Quin.

With the war intervening, there was little activity for the rest of that decade, but some domestic competition took place, one event which was to result in an appalling drowning tragedy.

As darkness fell on the evening of July 1, 1918, a

served in that capacity for no less than 31 years.

In 1945 Bill Carmody, still happily with us, stroked the maiden eight that went unbeaten and would have been favourites for the championship but in an era of extreme fiscal shortages, the money was just not there to travel up North.

Christy Hardiman was captain in 1955 when the club had a then record nine wins and the following year was a watershed when the club won their first ever senior eights race, at Galway, followed by success in the coveted Shannon Rowing Club Challenge Cup in Limerick, with Mick Phelan stroking, Paddy Egan cox, and Cyril Mullins captain.

Cyril was there in 1959 when the club had a great haul of 14 trophies.

Through the sixties and seventies the Garda club dominated especially in junior and maiden events, and Limerick clubs, with the odd exception, had to be satisfied with minor placings.

One of these exceptions came in 1968 when an all local Garda eight rowed in the St Michaels colours and swept all before them, winning eight races, but missing out on the championship. Captain was Ted Phayer, one of the great characters of the club.

1969 was a watershed in the history of St Michaels when, under Paddy Treacy, the club dominated in many grades, a total of 36 races being won. It was from this great year that St Michaels went on to build the many successes at national level that has made them one of the foremost clubs in the

performance in Montreal when being pipped for the bronze medal, finishing in fourth position in the final. Sherin and Deloughrey retained their senior pairs title in Blessington and Jim Aherne stroked the intermediate 8 to record a great national double.

With these two titles landed, and with the three international lightweight plus Pat McInerney, who had been a sub, St Michaels were expected to put up a determined bid for the senior eights championship. The ensuing tussle with Neptune has now gone into folklore with the two crews locked together all the way up the enclosure. Great club member Austin Reid had the unenviable task of declaring Neptune the winners by a mere two feet, the nearest to date the club has got to landing the Big Pot.

1985 saw the then coveted Leander trophy landed in Cork, the first time in over half a century it came to Limerick.

The next couple of years saw St Michaels establishing itself as the dominant force in junior national rowing, winning several championships in all grades, with Donal Hanrahan and the late Brendan Murphy proving the outstanding strokes.

By the clubs newly established standing, there followed a few quiet years regarding championships, broken just once by a fine junior pair win in 1990 with Garret Hartney and Maurice O'Brien aboard.

St Michaels were back with a bang, however, in 1993, when an unexpected but highly welcome

die honours in the form of a gold medal in the lightweight sculls world championship in Lucerne.

1996 was what was described in the Monday edition of the Limerick Leader as "Limerick's Greatest Ever Weekend in Rowing" when, at Inniscarra, Limerick crews won three senior championships. These came when St Michaels and Shannon composited to win both fours events, coxed and coxless, and brilliantly stroked by Donal Hanrahan.

Shannons Brian Collins was also in both fours and went on to add a record breaking (from a local viewpoint) third trophy when he won pairs with Fergal O'Callaghan. Both clubs combined again to have a crack at the senior eights championship and after a great race Neptune held on to win by two-thirds of a length.

Missing out on this bonanza was Sam Lynch who was over in Atlanta with the Irish Lightweight Olympic Four and the whole nation held their breath as the crew were narrowly deprived of a medal, finishing in fourth position.

In 1997 Donal Hanrahan became the most successful local oarsman ever at local level winning his fifth championship with Albert Maher in the senior double sculls title.

Sam Lynch's first tentative steps to gain world sculling glory came in 1998 when, after a traumatic period of injury, he stepped out in Inniscarra and won the lightweight sculls in great style. It was his first win in singles competition and

From those humble beginnings many years ago, St Michaels have become one of the most respected and successful commercial clubs in the country. During that period the club has produced many great crews and oarsmen, many of whom have went back and passed on to aspiring oarsmen, both men and women, the torch of a great sport that hopefully will flourish throughout this new millennium and whose club song will be sung with gusto for many a year yet to come:

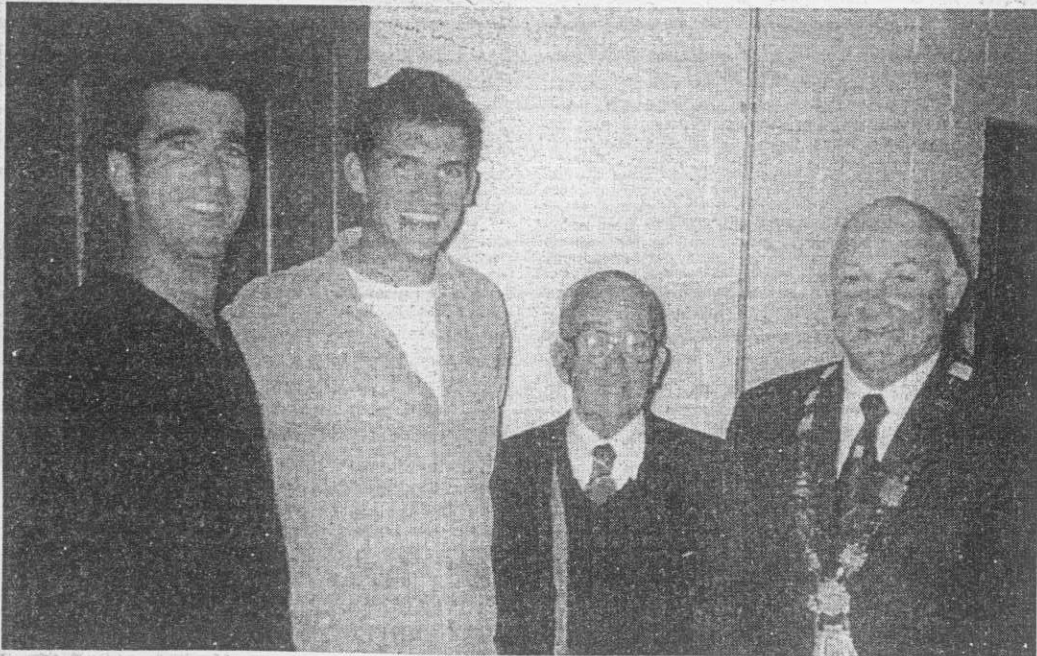
*Down by the glen and the bushes,  
Down by Barrington's Pier,  
This there the crowds will gather  
To give St Michaels a cheer.*

*And we'll all swing together with our bodies  
between our knees,  
And we'll all swing together with our bodies  
between our knees.*

Captain of St Michaels in their centenary year is Pat McInerney, a fitting choice as he has been one of the great servants of the club down the years, and president is Kieran Kerr, who by happy coincidence was a FIFA judge in Sam Lynch's gold medal winning final. Details of the centenary dance can be had from either: Pat at 455287, or Kieran at 229158.



The first schoolboy crew to row for St. Michael's, at Cork Regatta, in 1954. Left to right, Michael Gilligan, capt.; Colm Crowe, Sean McNamara, Noel McNamara, Ger O'Mara. In front Billy Marshall, cox.



Sam Lynch (second from left) at the celebrations to mark his gold medal win in the world championships this year with Tom Larkin (left), Paddy Mullins and Kieran O'Hanlon, deputy mayor and former oarsman with the club.



Celebrating St Michaels championship wins in 1993 at a reception in the Civic Centre.