

O'Curry Street home for seamen that never was

Local historian Dr Tadhg Moloney is currently completing a study on the history of the landmark O'Curry Street building that has a chequered past.

by Marle Hobbins

THIS year sees the expiry of the 99-year lease on the stand-alone redbrick building on O'Curry Street, known to many as a former Garda Station.

What once must have been an imposing residence, the building, when completed in July 1856, was officially opened as the Limerick Sailors' Home by the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, the Earl of Carlisle in the presence of the Mayor of Limerick, James Spaight.

Recording the development, the Limerick Chronicle reported that there was "no better cause than the institution of a Sailors' Home in Limerick," which, given that some 1,500 seamen passed through the city annually, was an appropriate endorsement.

Such accommodation for sailors was already established in Dublin, Belfast, Cork and Cobh (then Queenstown) and the drive to provide a similar facility for Limerick emanated from the city's business men who regularly met at Limerick Chamber of Commerce meetings. Chief among these were, Francis Spaight, a leading shipping merchant of the city and the Right Rev Dr William Higgin, the Church of Ireland Lord Bishop of Limerick.

From a record of the times, it is clear that sailors coming

ashore at Limerick Docks and heading into the city, were fair game for attack, robbery - and more!

"Without accommodation to which he might escape from the sharks and sharpers who are watching to lure him into vice, misery and crime, the poor sailor can be deprived of his hard earned wages, the property of a wretched wife and perhaps, helpless brood of striving children and even, as is often the case, strip him of the very clothes on his back."

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It was also recorded that it was "the modus operandi of women connected to lodging houses along the river, that led to ruinous results, but the harbour administration promised to put an end to it as soon as the Sailors' Home was up and running".

Nothing can be achieved without money and soon a subcommittee was set up to collect for the building fund -

initial donations from Bishop Higgin and other businessmen ranged from £5 to £10 each, with the Bishop promising to donate £5 yearly and a list of subscribers records that they agreed to an annual donation of £80

The Limerick Chronicle of the day highlighted the virtues of having a sailors' home in Limerick.

"The number of sailors using the home in Dublin for 10 months in 1851 was 264, and in 1852, it had risen to 376.

"Furthermore, had there not been such a home, these men would have been exposed to depraved desires, not to mention the ruses and flagrant pressure the unthinking sailor would have been subjected to by all manner of sharp dealers".

In the meantime, the Limerick Harbour Board was approached with a request to grant a site, and such a site on Frederick Street was agreed to at one shilling a foot, equalling £3 ground rent annually but by August 1854, the site had been given free of charge. The Harbour Board also subscribed £100 towards the building of the home, which gave them an input into any plans that were to be drawn up.

By April 1856, advertisements were placed in the local newspapers, seeking Tenders for construction of the building. Two quotes were received. One from Patrick McNamara for £960, and the other from J Hunt for £1,144, and Mr McNamara's quote was chosen.

Within one year of the foundation stone being laid, the building, described as "handsome," was complete.

Comprising of two large upper rooms with apartments underneath, parlours, dining room, office, bar, pantry and kitchen, the building had accommodation for 30 sailors

"It will always contain a ward for those who may be destitute but the rooms are splendidly furnished and the walls beautifully ornamented with appropriate naval paintings, mirrors and other accessories that import brilliancy to the apartments and reflect the summer light entering the large panes of the tastefully formed windows".

From the outset, the home was to be embroiled in controversy and allegations of a sectarian nature.

At an acrimonious meeting of the Harbour Board in November 1826, the councillor, John McDonnell, one of 13 ship owners in Limerick, and who described himself as "a Catholic ship owner", became the moral



Randall Hodgkinson, Deputy President, Thomond Archaeological and Historical Society and Tadhg Moloney at the old Garda Station on O'Curry Street.

spokesperson for Catholic sailors who might visit the Sailors' Home and who, he feared, might be subjected to proselytism.

He called for the Catholic Bishop of Limerick to be included on the Board of Trustees of the Home, to allay any attempts at proselytism.

In an editorial, the Limerick Reporter congratulated Cllr McDonnell on the stand he had taken on the issue, giving credence to his assertion that sailors' homes had, to a large extent been proselytising institutions, by publishing a list of tracts and periodicals that were stocked on the bookshelves of the Sailors' Home over a 12 month period.

Cllr McDonnell claimed that as he was the only Catholic ship owner in Limerick, he should have been invited to become a

member of the committee.

However, Mayor of Limerick, James Spaight, pointed out that he had collected over £1,000 for the Sailors' Home from every denomination and said that "everything of a sectarian nature should be wiped out from the management of the institution, that there would be free trade in religion and that the clergymen of every denomination had free access to the institution".

Despite this well meaning statement, the home remained closed to the very people for whom it had been constructed - the sailors.

Controversy and allegations of a sectarian nature continued to surround the building, with James Spaight denying that he had refused the use of the home to the Christian Brothers and the Jesuit Order who wanted

to use it for educational purposes, and with both offering to pay a favourable rent for its use.

When Spaight asserted that due to the decline of trade in the port, the Sailors' Home was not required and that the value of the building had depreciated, he was correct. He rented it to the Limerick City Militia for use as a depot. The tenancy of the building by the Militia was less contentious and by 1869, it was known as the Artillery Depot Barrack despite the ongoing objective of the Sailors' Home Committee to have it opened as a refuge for sailors.

The Militia were tenants of the Harbour Board for 37 years and paid an annual rent of £50. It was apparent that from this point in time, the Sailors' Home Committee ceased to exist.



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