

12. Summerville House—Harvey's connection

In the early part of the last century the long narrow lane that ran

from the South Circular Road to the Shannon was a quiet cul-de-sac

that probably gave access to farmlands. It came into its own as an important avenue, in the last decade of the seventeenth century, after Joseph Massey Harvey built his beautiful house mid-way down the land and just above high water mark — at that time the Dock Road did not exist and the high tides of the Shannon were not contained by an embankment.

Harvey was a young Corkman who had come to Limerick in 1786 as an assistant in the firm of "Fisher, Mark and Fisher", at Francis Street. This was a thriving mills and granary complex at that time.

Shortly afterwards Harvey married Miss Fisher, and in due course took over the business. (Sarsfield House now occupies this site).

He named his grand new house "Summerville", but for a century afterwards the lane-way was known as "Harvey's Avenue", and his house was better known as "Harvey's". Today the avenue is famous as the "Short Avenue" and, officially "Summerville Avenue."

A smaller house at the opposite side of the lane, and nearer the river, shown in the 1841 ordnance sheet as "Little Summerville House", is said to have been built by Reuben Harvey as a dower house for his mother.

The Fishers lived at "Richmond", a short distance from "Summerville" (in

Ashbourne Avenue). It is of interest to note that Gerald Griffin usually submitted his writings to Mrs. Fisher for her revision and approval.

Joseph Harvey's eldest son, Reuben, succeeded to the business, and leased the great mills at Plassey from the Maunsell family. This activity is dealt with elsewhere.

The Harveys, who were Quakers, are interred in the little graveyard at Ballinacurra, a place endowed by the family. Joseph Massey Harvey died, at the age of 70, on the 22nd of October, 1834. His wife, Rebecca, predeceased him by exactly one year, and was buried in the beautiful garden of Summerville. It was said that Harvey, who was very devoted to his wife, could not suffer himself to be separated from her even in death. In the official inventory of burials at Ballinacurra the following note appears: "The remains of this friend (Rebecca Harvey) underwent temporary interment in the garden house at Summerville, the residence of her husband." She was aged 70.

The last member of the family of which we have a record was Hannah Christy Harvey, who died in 1874, aged 86. Reuben died in 1866, at the age of 77.

The beautiful trees planted by Joseph Massey Harvey were well on their way to maturity when "Summerville" was purchased by another milling family, the Goodbods.

Only the best food and wines were kept and dispensed in the club, the following item from the minutes of a meeting of January, 1815, indicates their interest in keeping up stocks in the club:

"Mr. Monsell be requested to choose a hogshead of the best claret when in Dublin, and that two dozen Madeira and four dozen claret be got from Messrs. Studdert and Gabbet, the same as was provided at the dinner yesterday."

The following is a record of a subsequent decision:

"Mr. Heffernan Considine is requested when in Dublin to select and pay for one hogshead of claret at £45 and a hogshead of port at £52 to include all charges."

Among the many stringent rules of the club the following activities were prohibited:

"Smoking, swearing and making useless noises in the pantry. Strangers or spirits not to be introduced in the pantry. The waiters not to be allowed to wear coloured or black handkerchiefs when supposed to be dressed, or stand at the door."

In due course smoking was banned completely in the house, but the drug was just as addictive in those days as it is today and as a compromise a smoking room was provided for smokers, which accounted for the great majority of members.

This ban on smoking was quite remarkable at a time when the lethal dangers of the habit were as yet unknown. It

has been suggested that the smoking ban was the work of the snuff taking members, most of whom were born in the eighteenth century.

A year after the founding of the club, a splendid theatre was established close beside it at a cost of £4,000. This failed after eight years and was purchased from the liquidator by the Augustinians for £400. The friars had been long looking forward to their deliverance from the lack of accommodation in their small church in Creagh Lane which they had erected in 1778. The Prior, Very Rev. Fr. Cronin, spent a further £600 on alterations and improvements which transformed the theatre into a very beautiful church.

This was a major catastrophe for the members of the Limerick County Club. Old Nick and a horde of his demons would have been more welcome than a Catholic Church. Amid dismay and indignation the following resolution was passed at a special meeting:

"That we have seen with great regret that the theatre of this great and respectable city has got into the possession of gentlemen for the purpose of converting it into a place of religious worship and thus deprive the inhabitants for ever of a theatre: that we are clearly of opinion that this is neither a fit nor proper situation for any place of religious worship: and that the proposed establishment must be a great inconvenience to all the neighbourhood and particularly to this club."

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