

# THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE PORT OF LIMERICK IN THE 19th CENTURY

**T**he expenditure of large sums of money on the construction of the Wellesley Bridge over a period of almost ten years, derived from levies on imports and exports as provided for in the Act of 1823, had by the early 1830s given rise to considerable uneasiness on the part of the maritime interest who were no nearer to having safe facilities for shipping than they were in 1823.

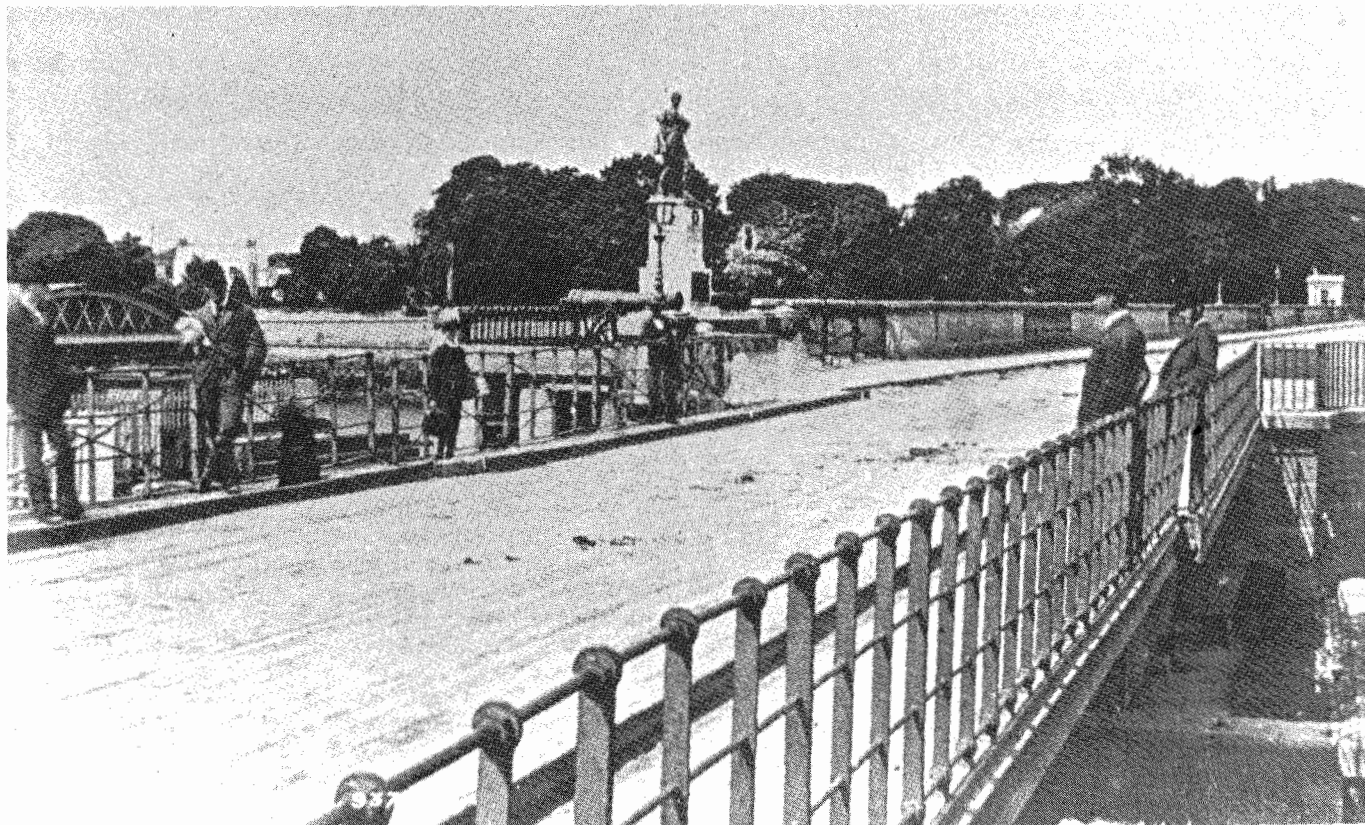
Representations to the Government led to the appointment of Thomas Rhodes, civil engineer, to furnish plans, reports, and estimates for improving the Port of Limerick. Mr Rhodes' exertions were complemented by those of a House of Commons Select Committee on Shannon Navigation (1834) which concentrated on the benefits which would come to internal transport from the im-

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provement of the Lower Shannon. Rhodes' concept was that a dam or a weir across the river at Kelly's Quay would create a pool which could float ships at all stages of the tide. Ships would enter and leave the pool through locks. The plans for extensive engineering works included proposals for the erection of a dockyard, two tidal-powered mills and, as a further incidental benefit, the possibilities for land reclamation behind its massive embankments would be created. Thomas Rhodes was fresh from the construction of the great Saint Katherine Docks in London, adjacent to the Tower where he

had acted as deputy to the famous Thomas Telford who had praised him for his "dexterity as a mechanic, his superior skill, and unremitting attention". (1) He estimated the cost of works at Limerick in total would come to £82,756-10-0, allowing for 1,400 yard of sewerage pipes from Arthur's Quay to discharge downstream of the pool.

An amending Act was passed in 1834 with the specific purpose of benefiting the maritime interest and referring to the fact that trade had doubled since the passing of the first Act, it went on to acknowledge that "the shipping have as yet received no advantage from these works". The Act appointed three additional Commissioners i.e. the Mayor of Limerick, the President of the Chamber of Commerce and one of the Commissioners of the Parish of Saint Michael



Sarsfield Bridge at the turn of the century.

and provided for the election of other Commissioners in addition to those appointed under the 1823 Act and their replacement by election on death or other vacancy. The Act empowered the Bridge Commissioners to borrow up to £200,000 for the execution of the works and to pay compensation to mill owners at Curraghgour and Corbally mills if on enquiry it was to be found that their properties would be damaged by the proposed interference with water flows. The river was to be surveyed for this purpose before the quays or weir were to be commenced. They were also given the right to acquire by compulsory purchase all the private quays and areas necessary for the works and the power to levy a charge of 3d per ton on coal imports. Under these provisions the Commissioners spent more than £50,000. Russell's Quay cost £3,356. The sum for Harvey's Quay was £1,628-15-0, while Spaight's Quay was constructed for £622.

Lord Gort accepted £5,000 in compensation for the loss of his £1,100 annual fees as Water Bailiff of the Lower Shannon, an ancient office which involved the enforcement of any warrants against seamen or shipping in that part of the river. (2)

A contemporary account (3) indicates that Rhodes' works failed at a preliminary stage for the reason that the shingle bed of the river was so permeable by water as to make dam work useless; secondly, that the depth of water which could be impounded would be insufficient for any useful purpose as a dock. Other engineers came to the conclusion that the obstruction caused by such works would in time cause extensive flooding in the city. (4) By 1836 it appears that some interests had become so impatient at the slow progress of works under the auspices of the Bridge Commissioners that the Board of Works had been influenced to write to the Bridge Commissioners that a line of private quays be built immediately by those desirous of doing so. However the Bridge Commissioners rebutted this proposal as contrary to long-standing policy for the erection of public quays. It seems that some interest was engaged in promoting this proposal which surfaced again at a later public enquiry (5) though it was never acted upon.

Over the next decade no progress other than the improvement of the quays ensued and in 1839 we find that Lieutenant Woulfe R.M., then in charge of the survey of the Shannon, wrote to the Bridge Commissioners imploring them that from a sense of duty they should do something about the state of the Lower Shannon. He stated: "I have seen enough to excite my surprise at the neglected state in which the navigation is allowed to remain for want of buoys, beacons, and leading marks". (6) He goes on to say that "Scarcely a vessel ever goes up or down the river without

grounding;" and suggests that some obstructions could easily be removed. The implication of this letter is of a certain paralysis of harbour works which is again echoed in a major public enquiry. This was carried out by the Tidal Harbour Commission which had been set up on February 1st, 1845 with "full power and authority to inquire into the state and condition of the Tidal and other Harbours, Shores, and navigable Rivers of Our United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland". (7) The Tidal Harbour Commissioners surveyed 260 harbours and havens "comprising a mass of valuable information". (8)

On September 12th, 1845 Captain John Washington on behalf of the Tidal Harbour Commissioners wrote to the Limerick Bridge Commissioners from Valentia proposing that he should enquire into the Harbour of Limerick. The Bridge Commissioners, seemingly excited by the opportunities which such an enquiry would present, resolved to invite "the following Noblemen and Gentlemen to attend, also the High Sheriff of the City and County, the M.P.A. of the City and County, the Earl of Limerick, Lord Monteagle, the Knight of Glin, Samuel Dickenson" etc. and wrote to them in the following terms: "As this occasion is one that may or rather must lead to the most auspicious and important results in favour of Limerick, and all the surrounding country, we are confident of your disposition to cooperate on so interesting an occasion". (9)

Captain Washington arrived in Limerick on Thursday, 18th September, 1845 and proceeded to examine under oath the secretary, the collector, the harbour master, the engineer and principal pilots as well as the vice-president of the Chamber of Commerce. In his subsequent report he gives every indication of being totally overwhelmed by the arguments presented in Limerick for the provision of a floating dock and then asked the rhetorical question "why then should such a measure be delayed?" He appears to have accepted that the main cause for such a delay is the fact that the substantial income of £4,000 p.a. arising from harbour dues is entirely committed to the Board of Works for the repayment of earlier advances, especially those for the bridge. He finally concludes that for the future prosperity of the Limerick region a floating dock is absolutely necessary: "One essential link, however, in the chain is wanting, a sheltered port of easy access, with a floating dock for the security of shipping - this Limerick has not, but this Limerick easily might have, and ought to have, and without it the energy of her merchants is paralysed, and her natural advantages of position are, in a great measure, thrown away". (10)

Following on their success with Captain Washington the Bridge Commissioners, perhaps realizing that funds for public works were becoming

available for the relief of distress in Ireland, drew up a petition to Parliament for funds for the development of the port and refer to the fact that "at the present time by the visitation of Providence much distress from want of the means of purchasing food by the poor labouring classes is likely to arise in this part of the United Kingdom". (11) In the following month they submitted their estimates of costs of the proposed new works to the Board of Public Works and stressed that the expenditure of this sum (£35,000) "will not only be a means of increasing the security for the repayment of sums already advanced by vastly adding to the revenues of the Port, but what is a most desirable object at this moment - it will afford employment to a large and needy population". (12) This renewed onslaught for funds to build a floating dock attained success and on 5th October 1846 the Bridge Commissioners were informed (13) by the Board of Works that the Lords of the Treasury were prepared to sanction a loan amounting in the whole to £50,000. Having thus secured the funds which they sought, the Bridge Commissioners were faced with the task of actually getting the physical work done which, as it turned out, was just as difficult as getting the money.

The passing by Parliament of the Act of 9th July, 1847 redesignated the Limerick Bridge Commissioners as the Limerick Harbour Commissioners and authorised them to borrow up to £50,000 for the construction of harbour works including the floating dock. Captain Washington had remarked in his report (14) "Indeed all parties now seem to have agreed that Mead's Quay is the right place for a floating dock, and the ground there is actually purchased for this purpose, and in possession of the Government", and it now only needed the exertions of the Board of Works, who under the Act were to be responsible for the actual construction works. In February, 1848 the Harbour Master, Captain Randall, in a very comprehensive report (15) submitted to the Commissioners (and adopted by them for transmission to the Admiralty) gave the following account of progress to date: "Ships of one thousand tons burthen discharge their cargoes at the Quay; Contracts have been lately perfected by the Board of Public Works in Ireland for constructing and building Floating Docks at the South West extremity of the City, the entrance to which will be 45 feet in width, and having over the sill, a depth of 22 feet of water at Spring Tide; the area will be near 5 acres and afford ample accommodation for fifty large tonnage ships; these works are to be completed in three years".

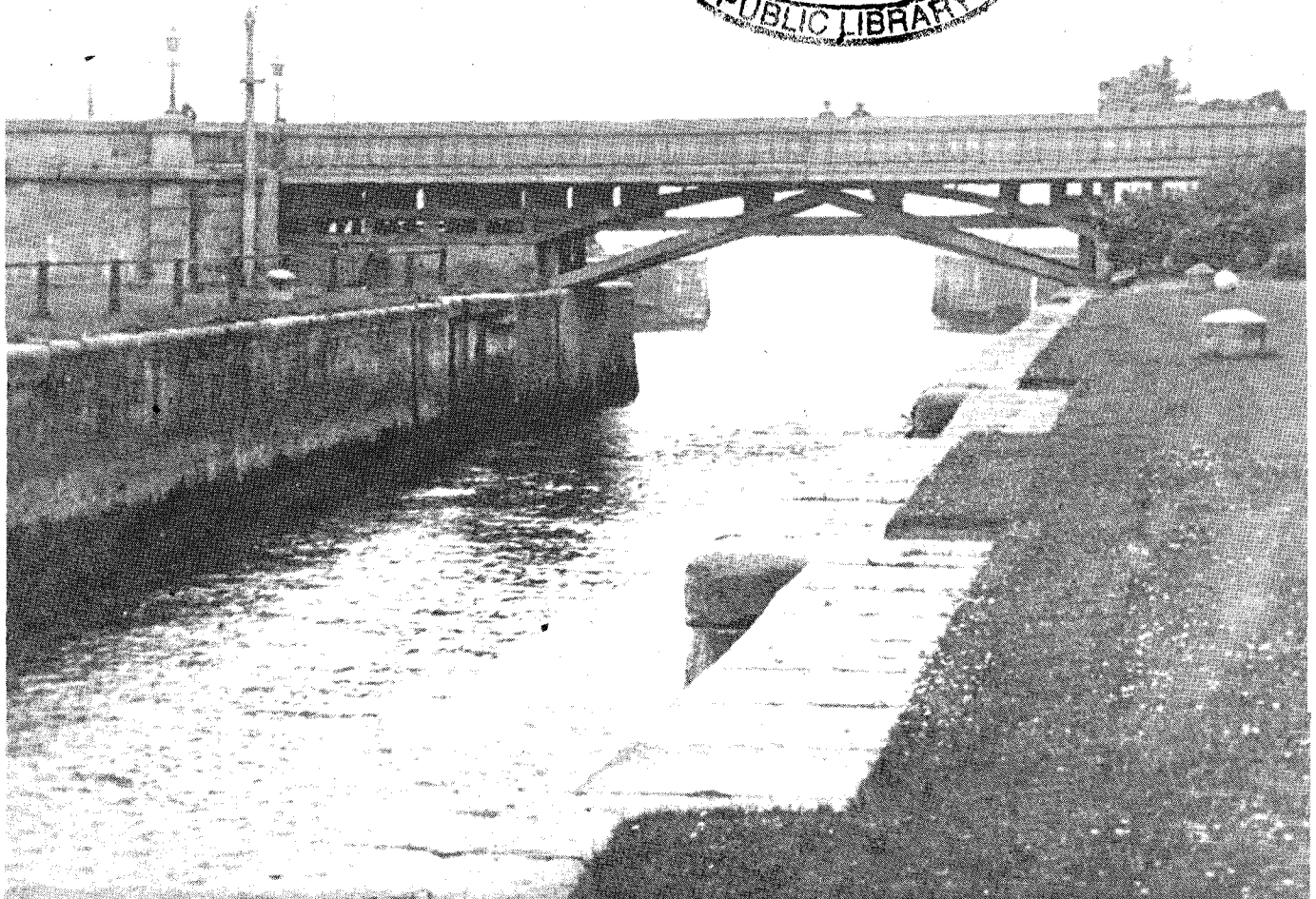
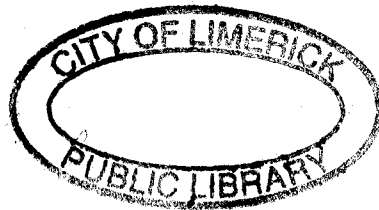
But by July 1848 W.J. Owens, the engineer employed by the Limerick Harbour Commissioners was much less optimistic and reported (16) that "judging from the past progress made, and con-

sidering that very little can be done in the winter months that it will be fully six years before the shipping interest can enjoy the benefit of these Floating Docks". Two months later, in September 1848, the Harbour Commissioners passed a resolution; "That this Board concurs with the inhabitants of this city in their great anxiety to have the Dock works recommenced forthwith in order, first to give employment to a great number of Labourers who are in destitution, and secondly to remove the just cause of complaint of the rate-payers who are so heavily taxed without deriving any benefit, and further that the Harbour is so crowded at present that more than 20 vessels cannot discharge their cargoes for want of berth-room which causes continual unpleasantness between Masters and Merchants, and therefore have to impress upon the Board of Public Works the necessity that exists for giving all expedition to the Works, and thereby allay the public outcry". (17)

But three months later in January, 1849 the newspaper the **Limerick Reporter** carried an article entitled "The Floating Docks - The Board of Works" (18) which said: "It is melancholy to contemplate the numbers of our citizens and labourers walking about the streets idle in these dismal times, when the greater number of them might be employed in the progress of these works, so entirely concerning the shipping interests of our city. The average weekly receipts of harbour duties is exceeding large; but from the Board of Works having the chief control of management those docks, that before now ought to have been nearly completed, are as yet scarcely commenced. The Bridge Commissioners appear to be mere cyphers, meeting from week to week, yet able to effect nothing, because of the arbitrary position of the Board of Works ... The Commissioners should be very peremptory with the Board of Works, and firmly demand their immediately be-

ing placed under the direction and management of some competent and responsible undertaker. If not successful, the subject should be made one of enquiry at the opening of the approaching session of Parliament". In response to this chorus of complaint the Board of Works wrote to the Harbour Commissioners (19) in February, 1849 saying that they had "made arrangements for the instant recommencement of the Dock works".

On July 6th, 1849 the foundation stone of the floating dock was laid by the Mayor, John Boyce, and four years later on September 26th, 1853 the floating dock was formally opened by Earl St. Germans, Lord Lieutenant General, and General Governor of Ireland. To celebrate the long awaited event "there was a grand procession which moved to the pier at the Wellesley Bridge, where the Steamer 'Rose' was in waiting, and received His Excellency accompanied by



The old Swivel Bridge.

his staff, with the Mayor, Representatives of Public Bodies and Members of the Parliament of the County and City. The 'Rose' then steamed slowly into the Dock, and on entering it, the artillery fired a salute and the military band on board played the National Anthem. On landing at the West side, His Excellency declared the dock opened for the trade and commerce of the city. The Royal Artillery then fired a salute of 21 guns". (20) After the thirty-year wait this indulgence in ceremony may only seem a little excessive.

The physical details of the floating dock were given in a report in the **Limerick Chronicle** of Wednesday, 28th September, 1853 as follows: "The floating dock covers an area of 8 acres built of solid and native limestone, the depth of walls being 30 feet, the depth of water 20 feet at neap and 25 feet at spring tides, the entrance 70 feet, for the purpose of admitting Transatlantic steamers. The daily average number of labourers employed in its construction was 300, of mechanics 50. The entire cost was £54,000 and of this £39,000 was expended in labour - the remainder in materials."

As the work on the floating dock was coming to an end in 1853 the Harbour Commissioners decided that a graving dock would further enhance the position of the port and decided that "the site at the south side of the river in immediate connection with the Floating Dock would be most eligible" (21) and ordered that a draft Memorial be prepared asking the Treasury to advance the necessary money. But the plea for further funds to the Treasury was not readily answered, for twelve years later on 11th July, 1865 the Harbour Commissioners requested their resident engineer, Mr. Long, "to prepare a plan and estimate of a new Graving Dock in connection with the present Floating Dock" (22) for submission to the Board of Works immediately as "Ships now requiring repairs to any extent, are obliged to go from Limerick to other harbours to get the needful repairs executed".

In August 1867 the engineer, Mr. Long, presented his estimate (23) as follows:

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<b>Excavation</b>	<b>2,883-15-6</b>
<b>Masonry</b>	<b>10,501-4-6</b>
<b>Boundary Walls</b>	<b>235-0-0</b>
<b>Dams and Caisson</b>	<b>£1,200-0-0</b>
<b>Steam Engine and Pumps</b>	<b>£1,800-0-0</b>
<b>4 Sluice Gates</b>	<b>£1,200-0-0</b>
<b>At £75 each</b>	<b>£300-0-0</b>
<b>18,120-0-0</b>	<b>10 per cent £1,812-0-0</b>
<b>19,932-0-0</b>	<b>SAY £20,000-0-0</b>

The Harbour Commissioners resolved

after considering their engineer's plans that he be given twenty pounds to go to London to consult with an eminent engineer and report back to the Board. The engineer, J.N. Coode of London, reported that "The conditions at Limerick in respect of the nature of the foundations, the absence of any difficulty in the way of keeping the works free from water, the character of the stone on the spot and within the Commissioners' own property, and the rates of labour in the district are perfectly favourable". But he went on to state that he considered the sum of £20,000 as estimated by the Harbour Commissioners Engineer, Mr. Long, to be only barely sufficient to construct a dock of 400 feet in length and therefore recommended that a Dock of 350 feet in length be sanctioned first and "leaving the question of further length to be determined when experience shall have shown whether the sum of £20,000 will suffice to cover the cost of the Dock more than 350 feet long". (24)

The Harbour Commissioners agreed to accept the modified plan and on 7th November, 1867 they received a loan of £23,779-9-1. The long awaited work on the graving dock began in December, 1867 and the harbour engineer, Mr Long, reported that he had started the works but "there being no tools or implements in the Harbour store a full complement of men cannot be employed until these are supplied. I have commenced the excavation on the site of the Dock and am engaged in closing the ground to keep off all idlers from interrupting the workmen". (25)

On 17th February, 1868 the labourers engaged at the graving dock works went on strike and the Harbour Commissioners in considering the situation decided to form a Committee of Works to confer with Mr Long on all matters of importance pertaining to the dock works. This Committee recommended that "the wages of the labourers at the Graving Dock be increased to 10/- per week, the Workbell to be rung at 6 o'clock in the morning and 6 o'clock in the evening". (26) The Commissioners noted at their meeting on 9th March that "the labourers had resumed work on the 18th ult., after the strike, at the terms fixed by the Board".

Two years later, in 1870 the harbour engineer, Mr Long, reported that the amount expended to the close of 1869 was £6,881-1-9 adding, "The progress has not been quite so speedy as expected in consequence of the chief part of the work being stone dressing, which is necessarily a slow process but there is now a considerable stock of cut stone on the ground which will ensure steady progress. I may also add that the usual period allowed for constructing a graving dock of a similar size and class is three years". (27) Further labour-relations problems emerged in the following year and continued spasmodically throughout

the next two years and in November, 1872 the Harbour Commissioners were presented with a Memorial by Alderman Connolly on behalf of the citizens complaining of "the want of energy displayed in the construction of the Graving Dock" (28) and calling on the Board to expedite its completion. The graving dock was finally completed after six years work and it was formally opened in the presence of His Excellency, Earl Spencer, K.G., the Lord Lieutenant on 13th May, 1873.

#### REFERENCES

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5. Appendix to **Second Report of Tidal Harbour Commissioners** (1846).
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9. Minutes of meeting of The Limerick Bridge Commissioners (15th September, 1845).
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12. Ibid. (26th March, 1846).
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14. **Second Report of Tidal Harbour Commissioners** (1846).
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16. Minutes of meeting of Limerick Harbour Commissioners (24th July, 1848).
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25. Minutes of meeting of Limerick Harbour Commissioners (3rd December 1867).
26. Minutes of meeting of Limerick Harbour Commissioners (17th February, 1867).
27. Minutes of meeting of Limerick Harbour Commissioners (7th February, 1870).
28. Ibid. (25th November, 1872).