The 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 improvement 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.

By Phil Lovett

Sarsfield Bridge at the turn of the century.
and provided for the election of other Commissioners in addition to those ap-
pointed under the 1823 Act and their replacement by election on death or
other vacancy. The Act empowered the
Commissioners in addition to those ap-
replacement by election on death or
Bridge Commissioners to borrow up to
right to acquire by compulsory purchase
at Curraghgour and
proposed interference with water flows.
enquiry it was to be found that their
commenced. They were also given the
right to acquire by compulsory purchase
for the works and the power to levy a
charge of 3d per ton on coal imports.
Under these provisions the Com-
missioners spent more than £50,000.
Russell’s Quay cost £3,356. The sum for
Harvey’s Quay was £1,628-15-0, while
Spacehill’s Quay was constructed for
£622.
Lord Gort accepted £5,000 in com-
ensation for the loss of his £1,100 an-
ual fees as Water Bailiff of the Lower
Shannon, an ancient office which in-
olved 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 local agents had become so impatient
at the slow progress of works under the
auspices of the Bridge Commissioners
that the Board of Works had been in-
fluenced to write to the Bridge Com-
missioners that a line of private quays
be built by them under the design of a
dock. However, the Bridge Com-
misioners 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 Lieute-
nant 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 “Scarce 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 cer-
tain 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 Har-
bours. Shores, and navigable Rivers of
Our United Kingdom of Great Britain and
Ireland”. (7) The Tidal Harbour Com-
misioners 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 Valen
tia proposing that he should en-
quire into the Harbour of Limerick. The
Bridge Commissioners, seemingly ex-
cited by the interesting inquiry which such
an enquiry would present, resolved to in-
vite “the following Noblemen and Gen-
tlemen 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 Montagle, the Knight of Glin,
Samuel Drennan” etc. and wrote to
them in the following terms: “As this oc-
casion is one that may or rather must
lead to the most auspicious and impor-
tant results in favour of Limerick, and
all the surrounding country, we are confi-
dent 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 har-
bour master, the engineer and principal
for a floating dock and the Mayor and the
Chairman of the Limerick Chamber of
Commerce. In his sub-
sequent report he gives every indication of
being totally overwhelmed by the argu-
ments 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)
On the basis of their success with
Cap-
tain Washington the Bridge Com-
misioners, 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 on-
slaught for funds to build a floating dock
attained success and on 5th October
1846 the Bridge Commissioners were
instructed (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. Cap-
tain 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 comprehen-
sive report (15) submitted to the Com-
misioners (and adopted by them for
transmission to the Admiralty) gave the
following account of progress to date:
“Ships of one thousand tons burthen
are discharging 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 wall, a depth of
22 feet of water at Spring Tide: the area
will be near 5 acres and afford ample ac-
commodation for fifty large tonage
ships; these works are to be completed in
three years”. But by July 1848 W.J. Owens, the
engineer employed by the Limerick Har-
bour Commissioners was much less op-
timistic 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 being 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, 1863 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 two years later on 11th July, 1855 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:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Amount</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Excavation</td>
<td>£2,883-15-6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masonry</td>
<td>£10,501-4-6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boundary Walls</td>
<td>£35-0-0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dams and Caisson</td>
<td>£1,200-0-0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steam Engine and Pumps</td>
<td>£1,800-0-0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Sluice Gates</td>
<td>£1,200-0-0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At £75 each</td>
<td>£300-0-0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18,120-0-0 10 per cent £1,812-0-0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19,932-0-0 SAY £20,000-0-0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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 this 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 dock he requested 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 16th 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 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.

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