

# Limerick: The Englishtown

**T**HE ENGLISHTOWN is the oldest part of the city and occupies the southern end of King's Island, a tract formed by the Shannon, here divided into two streams, of which the narrowest and most rapid is called the Abbey River. Both are tidal, with tides of over fourteen feet. The term, Englishtown, came into use as the original inhabitants who were unwilling, or unable, to assimilate English culture, customs and language were squeezed out by the invading Anglo-Normans. This was the earliest part of the city to be walled in, first by Vikings, secondly by Anglo-Normans. The island's natural features, the surrounding water and the dependable water supply ensured the security of its inhabitants. By 1450 the surrounding countryside was in a state of unrest due to the prevailing power of the "Irish enemy and English rebels". The loyal, but beleaguered, citizens of the Englishtown survived because supply ships, protected by Henry VI (1422-1455), brought the provisions they needed, sometimes from as far away as France.

**THE FORTIFICATIONS**, which had included the Englishtown alone, were extended to enclose part of the ground on the southern bank of the river between 1450 and 1495. Richard Stanhurst wrote in 1577; "The town is planted in an island, which plot in old time, before the building of the city was stored with grass ... yet the river is so navigable, as a ship of 200 tons may sail to the quay of the city [which was both] sumptuous and substantial". In an old map of the city displayed in the Hunt Collection in Plassey, the part of the island on which the Englishtown was located is shown as being completely walled in and surrounded by water. A moat or secondary channel of water separated the town from the upper two-thirds, or so, of the island. This map can be dated to some time before 1611 as it pre-dates the building of the bastion in King John's castle. Another fortification is shown on the west side of the island, north of St. Munchin's Church as well as tower-house on the east bank of the Abbey River, in Corbally. **THE LIMERICK MINT** may have come into operation between 1195 and 1199, possibly under the direction of Siward, the first

recorded Limerick moneyer. King John tightened up the administration of his Irish Lordship, in 1200, by reserving to himself all Irish pleas regarding the Crown, the exchange and the mint. During the Scottish wars of Edward I (1272-1307) the Irish economy was bankrupted by his Justiciar, Sir John Wogan, in an effort to mobilise Irish resources. In 1467 another mint was established in the city. Until then the Irish chieftains had been reluctant to adopt the use of coinage. But when a monetary economy came into play with the "surrender and re-grant" policies of the English Crown, they discovered the benefits of turning their followers into cash-paying tenants.

**THE EXCHANGE WALL** forms part of the eastern boundary of St. Mary's Church. This facade of hewn stone with its seven blocked-in Tuscan columns, linked by a handsome balustrade, faces Nicholas Street although the rest of the building has been demolished and now forms part of the churchyard. The Exchange was erected as a local administrative centre in 1673, was rebuilt in 1702 and 1777, and eventually fell into disuse when the Town Hall was opened in Rutland Street in 1846.

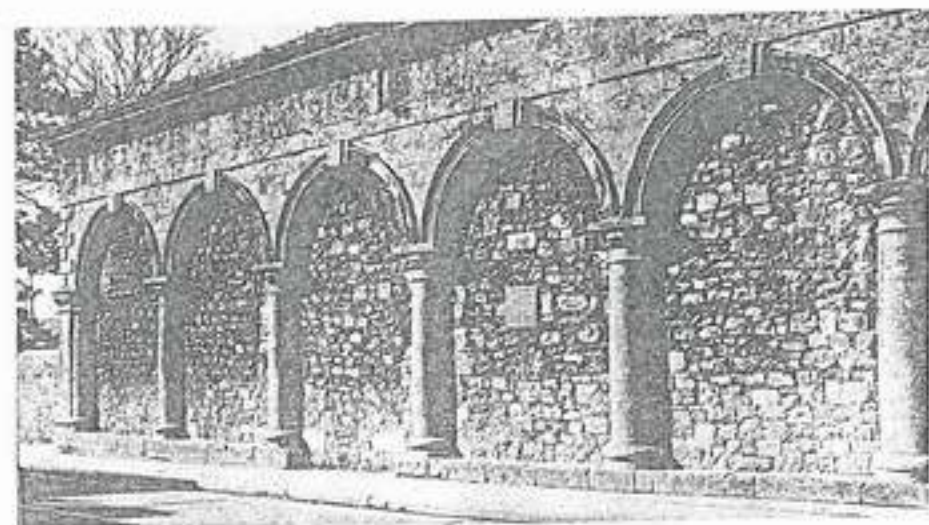
**THE NAIL**, a brass table standing on a short pillar, was set up in the Exchange by Robert Smith, Mayor of Limerick, in 1685, at his own expense. His name was engraved on it

and the Limerick saying "To pay on the nail" originated with this monument. After the closure of the Exchange it was moved to the Town Hall in 1866 and is now in the Limerick Museum.

**THE CITY COURTHOUSE**, or the Gerald Griffin Memorial School, is located on the site of the Augustinian Abbey founded by the O'Briens during the thirteenth century. The City Court-house was built on the same site in Quay Lane or Bridge Street in 1640. This was later replaced by the present edifice erected between 1763-1765 at a cost of £700. The Quay Lane facade of this structure follows the curve of the street. The most spectacular of the cases tried here was that of John Scanlan who was executed on 20 March, 1820, for the murder of the *Colleen Bawn*. Fr. Brahan, the Catholic parish priest of St. Mary's Parish, bought the old court-house for £200 on 3 September 1845.

**THE CHRISTIAN BROTHERS** spent £500 on renovating the building before opening it as a school on 2 February, 1846. Initially four brothers taught 560 pupils in this converted court-house in which Gerald Griffin had witnessed the trials of John Scanlon and Stephen Sullivan for the murder of Ellen Hanley, the *Colleen Bawn*.

**GERALD GRIFFIN (1803-1840)** was born in a house that stood on the corner of Old Dominic Street and Love Lane on 12



The Exchange wall.

December 1803. His family moved out of the city, to Fairy Lawn, in 1810, until his parents eventually decided to emigrate to Pennsylvania. Gerald was reared in Adare and Pallaskeny, the ninth son of a large family. Originally he had intended to study medicine and had been left, with two sisters and a brother, to the care of an older brother who was a doctor in Pallaskeny. He moved to Limerick where he worked as a reporter and helped in the formation of a dramatic society before moving to London in 1823. John Banim (1798-1842) encouraged him to write and he worked as a reporter, book reviewer, parliamentary reporter and translator. The publication of *Holland Tide; or Munster Popular Tales* established him as a successful writer in 1827, and in 1829 he published *The Collegians* which was based on the *Coleen Bawn's* story. At the height of his fame he burned his manuscripts and joined the Christian Brothers. From 1825 he had been troubled by rheumatism and recurrent illness. He succumbed to typhus, in Cork, on 12 June, 1840.

**THE COUNTY COURTHOUSE**, on Merchant's Quay, still serves its original, and the city court-house's purpose. It was designed by two local architects, Nicholas and William Hannan, and was completed at a cost of £12,000 in 1810. It replaced an older county court-house which had been erected in 1732 on the site of the ancient Franciscan Abbey. The present structure is a quadrangular building with a portico supported by four tall pillars which was designed to contain civil and criminal courts, jury-rooms and other offices concerned with the dispensation of justice.

**THE CITY JAIL** was demolished in 1988. It had been completed in 1813 in an area formerly known as the Dean's Close. Public

hangings had taken place in front of the jail which had been designed with a stage, or drop, in front to facilitate spectators. Elizabeth Fry, the prison reformer, visited here. Both city and county prisoners were kept in the city jail in 1821. Before its eventual demolition the building served as a sweet-factory.

**THE THOLSEL**, in Mary Street, was founded in 1449. This was the city's earliest town hall, or court, and at one stage served as a jail. When John Howard, the prison reformer, visited here in 1788 he pointed out various defects which probably resulted in the erection of a newer city jail. In 1837 it was the chief civil court with the mayor and

sheriffs presiding as judges, assisted by the recorder, when present, as assessor, and the town clerk as protonotary. This court was held under the Charter of Henry V, which gave pleas, real and personal, to any amount arising within the county of the city. The court sat every Wednesday; the process was either by attachment against goods; action against the person; or the issuing of a writ to summons someone who was in hiding. The Tholsel was demolished over half a century ago but a small portion of the structure remains behind the shop of the same name built on its site.

**FANNING'S CASTLE**, in the grounds of the Technical Institute, Barrington's Quay, is a late-sixteenth or early-seventeenth century house built by a merchant of that name. It was the home of Dominick Fanning, the Mayor of Limerick, executed by the Cromwellians for his part in the defence of the city in 1651. Thirty years later, in 1681, it was occupied by another mayor, Francis Whitmore, and tradition relates how Patrick Sarsfield stayed here during the Williamite siege. The windows are unusually large for a fortified residence. Another building was added to the original fabric at a later stage.

**PETER'S CELL** takes its name from an ancient nunnery built by Domhnall Mór O'Brien for the Canonesses of St. Augustine in 1171. The foundation was dedicated to St.



The Gerald Griffin Memorial School

Peter and was encompassed by the north-eastern walls enclosing the fortified Englishtown. Peter's Cell survived as an area name despite the disappearance of the nunnery and the walls; but today it applies only to a lane leading into Bishop Street. The Augustinian Convent of Killone, in County Clare, became the mother-house of Peter's Cell after 1189.

**THE PETER'S CELL THEATRE** was established some time before 1760 when some entrepreneur converted part of the ruined convent into a playhouse complete with a stage, boxes, a pit, one gallery, and a few dressing rooms. Spranger Barry, manager of two theatres, one in Dublin, the other in Cork, instituted a regular summer season here in 1760. Seats cost fifteen pence for the boxes, ten pence in the pits and five pence in the gallery. Audience participation was a feature of the performances as the Limerick bucks and dandies vied with each other, even by walking onstage, to display their finery. Fruit-sellers sold peaches at one fifth of a penny each (one old half penny), an unusual refreshment for that time and place. This theatre was still in use as late as April, 1770.

**ST. SAVIOUR'S DOMINICAN FRIARY** may have been founded by Donnchadh Cairbreach O'Brien in 1227 on land donated by the English King. Edward I made a grant in 1285 in which he mentioned the affection

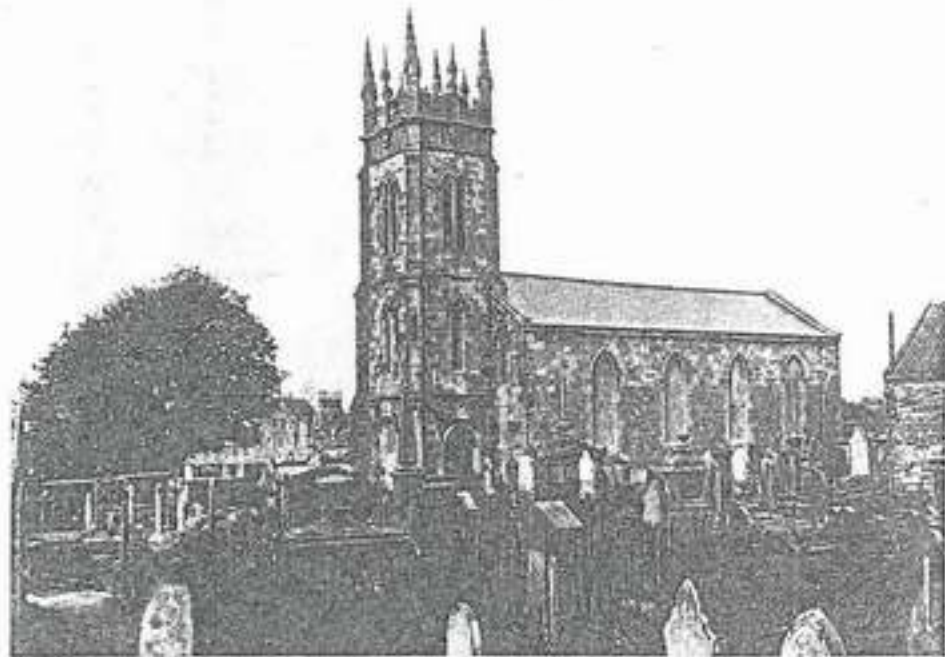
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St Munchin's Church of Ireland Church.

its retention of an episcopal throne, a link pre-dating Domhnall Mór O'Brien's foundation. St. Munchin is supposed to be buried in the churchyard. The church, was disused, neglected and vandalised until recently. Carved memorials had been ripped from the tombs, the graveyard was badly littered, the church roof was in poor condition, holed in places, and the entrance and windows were sealed off. St. Munchin's was restored by the Civic Trust over a six month period. On 13 March 1989 the renovated structure was leased to the Island Theatre Company by the Civic Trust but an exclusion clause in the lease prohibits its use for public performances. The present church, designed by the Pain brothers and erected for £1,460 in 1827, is a handsome edifice with a square tower embattled and crowned with pinnacles. St. Munchin's was also the burial ground of the Smyth's, Lord Gort's family.

**METHODISM** was introduced into the city by Robert Swindells who preached his first sermon on the parade of the Castle Barracks in 1748 or 1749. Soon afterwards John Wesley visited Robert Swindells. They formed the Methodist Society and rented the old church of St. Francis's Abbey where the Methodists remained until they spent £600 on erecting "a handsome edifice near the city court-house". In 1812 they built a new Wesleyan Chapel in George's Street but in 1815 a religious controversy split the congregation in two. The Wesleyan Methodists kept possession of the George's Street preaching house and the Primitive Wesleyan Methodists retained the old one. The dispute arose concerning the expediency of the original group's preachers administering the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

**THE VILLIERS' ALMS HOUSES**, and schools, were endowed by Mrs. Hannah Villiers in her will which was established in the Court of King's Bench in 1815. In 1826 an

Limerick, where he built a church upon the river island on which the city was established. When the local people refused to help Munchin build his church he is said to have laid a curse upon them to the effect that strangers would flourish while the natives perished.

**ST. MUNCHIN'S CHURCH OF IRELAND CHURCH** was erected in 1827 almost on the same site as an older edifice said to have been built in 561. Tradition claims that the older structure was burnt by the Vikings. This was borne out by a stratum of ashes discovered when the foundations of the present building were being built.

The ancient parish church of St. Munchin may have served as a cathedral long before St. Mary's was built. Despite all the renovations and re-buildings over successive centuries one of the unique features of this church, as late as the nineteenth century, was

he bore for the friars of Limerick whose house was founded by his ancestor. Donnchadh Cairbreach was buried here in 1242. In 1462 the Earl of Desmond rebuilt the priory. It was suppressed in 1541. In 1644 Pope Vincent X established a university in St. Saviour's for the Catholic Confederation. Only one wall and some fifteenth-century, and later, carvings survive. The latter have been placed in two grottoes. In 1837 "a nunnery had been established: attached is a large school for girls, who are gratuitously instructed by the ladies of the convent". The convent is now known as St. Mary's.

**ST. MUNCHIN**, or St. Mainchin, an early bishop, is said to have been the nephew of Bloid, King of Thomond, and a disciple of St. Patrick, who asked him to convert the inhabitants of Connaught to Christianity. In later years he became Prior of Mungret and is generally accepted as the first Bishop of



Villiers' Alms Houses.

Elizabethan-style building, designed by the Pain brothers, was erected in the Bishop's Garden, by Mrs. Villiers' trustees. The structure "consists of a centre and two projecting wings, the former being surrounded by a cupola; it contains apartments for 12 poor widows, each of whom receives £24 Irish per annum; and there are two school-rooms". Despite some modernisation the building remains basically unchanged. The garden wall in front of the alms houses is part of the old city wall. It extends to, and includes, some of St. Munchin's Churchyard.

**THE BISHOP'S HOUSE**, in Church Street, may have been designed by Francis Bindon (1698-1765), the architect who pioneered pal-



The Bishop's House.

ladian-style Irish architecture, although the Civic Trust dates it back to the seventeenth century and claim it is the oldest standing domestic dwelling in the city. The Civic Trust re-roofed the building, quite recently, and intend to restore it completely to provide themselves with a permanent base. This was the residence of the Church of Ireland Bishops of Limerick until they moved to Park House in the early nineteenth century. Its most famous resident was, or is, the *Bishop's Lady*, Limerick's most famous ghost, immortalised in the Bard of Thomond's poem, *Drunken Thady and the Bishop's Lady*. There were only four carriages in use around the city between 1740 and 1750. These were "the Bishop's, the Dean's, and one other clergyman's and one neighbouring gentleman's". By 1776, with the growth of Newtownperry, there

were 183 four-wheeled carriages in the district.

**ST. MARY'S COURT** was originally known as the Doctor Hall's Alms Houses. In 1761, under the terms of his will, "the present neat and convenient edifice was erected, which contains apartments for thirteen men and twelve women, who receive each five pounds a-year, school rooms, with apartments for the teacher, and a chapel, where the clergyman of the Established Church celebrates divine service twice a-week". The buildings were restored in the mid 1970s.

**THE CITY BREWERY**, near the Golden Mills, was located in Newgate Lane, between the Old City Jail and King John's Castle. This

was also known as the Newgate Brewery and was one of the earliest established in the city to make beer for public, rather than private, consumption. It was founded, and owned, by the Fitt family in 1739. Ale, pale ale and porter were brewed here in 1866.

**ANDREW CHERRY (1762-1812)**, songwriter, dramatist, playwright, comic actor and wit was born in what is now the post office in Bridge Street. *The Dear Little Shamrock of Ireland* was his best-known song and he is also remembered for a letter he wrote to a former manager; "Sir- I am not so great a fool as you take me for! I have been bitten once by you, and I will never give you an opportunity of making two bites of

A. Cherry."

**QUAY LANE** was mentioned by the playwright, John O'Keefe, in his *Recollections*

which were published in 1826; "I knew Mr. Ferrar of Limerick, a printer, bookseller and author; he wrote an excellent *History of Limerick* which a few years ago I read with pleasure. His little shop was at the corner of Quay Lane. Ferrar was very deaf, yet had a cheerful, animated countenance, thin, and of middle size."

**ST. FRANCIS ABBEY** was founded before 1279, the year a Franciscan of Limerick, Br. Malachy, was postulated to the See of Tuam. He was rejected by Pope Honorius IV in 1286. The exact date of its foundation is unknown but T.J. Westropp suggested that it could have been founded by Donnchadh Cairbreach O'Brien before 1241 or by William Fion de Burgo who had died by 1287. He also gave a third date and founder, 1350, by Mary, Countess of Desmond, which has been disproved by the 1279 appointment. This first Franciscan Friary was located between Sheep Street and Sir Harry's Mall, north-east of Jail Lane. It was known as St. Francis Abbey, and even though its buildings have all long since disappeared, it is still remembered in local names like those of the Abbey River, Chapel Lane and St. Francis' Abbey Lane. Fion de Burgo, Thomas de Clare and Richard de Clare were buried here. St. Francis Abbey stood outside the city walls, to the east. After the Reformation its lands were parcelled out and many of its buildings put to profane use. The church, dormitory, cloister and hall were demolished, only buildings useful to a farmer were retained. The choir was turned into a court-house and Edmond Sexten received a grant of the property in 1543. He kept the friars here, as his tenants, until 1548. The Franciscan Order was re-established elsewhere in the town in 1615 and a chapter was held there in 1629. On 23 June 1636 all but one of the Sexten tenements in St. Francis Abbey, Richard Coyne's, were burned. The friars returned to the area for a while in 1687 but were forced to leave soon afterwards, in 1691. The old county hospital was built on its site in 1765. The Franciscans erected a well-built spacious chapel in Newgate Lane where they remained until they moved to Henry Street where they had "an elegant structure in progress" in 1827.

**EDMOND SEXTEN** was Mayor of Limerick in 1535. His grandson, and namesake, managed to get legal title to freedom from rates and taxes on St. Francis Abbey in 1603. In 1609 a grant of King James I certified that the former choir was suitable for holding assizes and sessions for the county, as a result of which Edmond Sexten enjoyed two votes in the Corporation, and the Mayor and Corporation were obliged to present him with the first salmon taken in the sea weir each