Limerick has had a system of local government since the close of the 12th century. In the year 1195 the Normans took control of the city and the surrounding area. They had garrisons in castles on both sides of the Shannon - Carrigogonnel on the south bank and Bunratty on the north. A provost was appointed for the city. This was an annual office and in each of the following years a successor was appointed. The introduction of English government was carried out by John, Earl of Morton and Lord of Ireland. He granted a charter to the citizens of Limerick in 1197, thus extending to the city the privileges already granted to Dublin, enabling the citizens to choose a mayor and two bailiffs. In the reign of James I, a charter by that monarch allowed the citizens to choose sheriffs in place of bailiffs. These, with the mayor, performed the municipal government of the city. The offices of mayor and sheriff have continued up to the present time.

The constitution of the first counties or shires began in the time of King John and were in the provinces of Leinster and Munster. Their purpose was to make effective the rule of English Law in Ireland.

Under the feudal system the Norman knights were given estates on conquered lands and in return were bound to give service to the king in time of war. They were also bound to pay certain dues to the king. A king's officer was appointed in each county to collect these monies and to gather armies when needed. A king's sheriff was also appointed in each county. He was bound to make a visit of inspection to his administrative area twice during his term of office. He also summoned feudal tenants twice a year to meet the king's visiting judges at the county town. At this assembly the sheriff selected twenty-three of the chief landowners and this body was known as the Grand Jury.

It can be said, therefore, that in the original feudal system is to be found a form of local government and this system was to last in Ireland in some form even to our time.

The grand jury system in Ireland developed and operated very differently from that in England. In this matter it could be said that the Normans “became more Irish than the Irish themselves”.

The walled city.
The city of Limerick was a county in its own right by royal charter. The county system was only effective in areas where the king’s writ ran. Before 1297 only the counties of Dublin, Waterford, Cork, Kerry, Limerick, Tipperary, Louth, Connaught and Roscommon were delimited. In 1297 the counties of Meath and Kildare were formed. Then, for nearly three centuries, until the reign of Henry VIII, there was no further development. At that time Westmeath was separated from Meath. Early in the next reign Laois was formed into Queen’s County in honour of Mary Tudor and Offaly became King’s County after Philip II. The boundaries of County Wicklow were established in 1578 and in the following year Connacht was divided into Sligo, Mayo, Roscommon, Clare and Galway. The counties of Longford and Cavan were also formed, while Leitrim did not become a county until 1833. Ulster was divided into counties in 1610. Clare did not return to the province of Munster until 1660.

Thus, though the system of local government as we know it today is a comparatively modern creation it still retains reminders of a remote past. The legal framework of our present local administration however, came to us directly from the British parliament in the 19th century. It was a product of the contemporary English philosophy and, though it may have been suitable for the English people, no consideration was given to its suitability for the people of this country.

The Irish Poor Relief Act 1838, was the first important step to introducing representative local bodies to Ireland. In England the responsibility for poor relief had rested on the civil parishes since the reign of Elizabeth I. The Poor Relief Act 1834, changed the system in England by the union of a number of parishes in order to provide a larger area of administration. In each of these unions a workhouse was provided to accommodate the destitute poor of the district. A board of guardians was elected to govern each union and was subject to the strict supervision and control of the Poor Law Commissioners in London. But the operation of the system proved more difficult than had been anticipated. In certain areas existing parish authorities fought hard against the idea. Some of the parishes, prior to the Act of 1834, had given outdoor relief to able-bodied workers when their wages were low. This had increased the poor rate on the wealthier classes.

The Royal Commission, whose report led to the enactment of the statutes of 1834 for England, and 1838 for Ireland, recommended that an able-bodied man looking for relief should be compelled to earn it in a workhouse where his condition should be made less desirable than that of the lowest labourer outside. This was called the “Workhouse Test”. The British Government calmly applied the same system to Ireland in 1838, even though there was no tradition of parish government in Ireland and no parish areas existing here. It was to be an act “for the more effectual relief of the Poor in Ireland”. The real object, however, was not so much to mitigate the sufferings of the poor as to prevent them from going over to England. The problems of poverty in England and Ireland were totally different. The immense amount of destitution in Ireland would have involved huge expenditure if the Poor Law was to be really effective, but the British Government had decided that property in Ireland must support the poverty in Ireland and so shift the burden from England.

Thus the Poor Law system was applied to Ireland without reference to any existing institutions or to totally different degrees of poverty. The workhouses in County Limerick were in the unions of Croom, Killaloe, Limerick, Newcastlewest and Rathkeale.

One of the English Poor Law Commissioners came over to Ireland to put the scheme into operation. In his first circular letter to his assistants he made known his views on the difference between the two countries:

In one respect we shall find an advantage in the application of the law in Ireland over what we experienced in England. As regards legal provision for the relief of the poor, Ireland is, at present, entirely a blank and it is open to us to establish one rule, one system, in detail as well as in principle, throughout the whole country instead of modifying and adapting arrangements to previously existing institutions as we were frequently compelled to do in England. We may therefore hope that our work in this country will be on the whole more orderly and harmonious than we were able to make it there.

This was pure bureaucratic and civil service jargon at a time when the Poor Inquiry Commission had estimated that nearly two and a half million persons in Ireland starved every year.

To sum up it can be said that the modern system of local administration is mainly based on the Local Government (Ireland) Act, 1898, the purpose of which was to put local government in Ireland on a representative basis. Administrative counties with county councils were created. Six cities were made county boroughs in which the corporations had almost all the functions of a county council as well as the functions of a borough corporation. Kilkenny, Drogheda and the town of Galway, which had ranked as counties for grand...
jury purposes, ceased as such and
merged with the administrative county.

Belfast, Cork, Derry, Dublin, Limerick
and Waterford remained as counties in
their own right with certain autonomous
powers to hold property, to sue and
be sued. The geographical county of Tip-
perary forms two administrative coun-
ties, having been divided in 1838 into
two ridings, north and south. The term
"county" had already been applied to some
shires in England and denotes a third
part, but in its application to Ireland such
preciseness was overlooked.

Allowing for many defects, the
system gave the Irish people a great op-
portunity for political education. The
local bodies established had some 4,000
members and, with regular elections, a
certain movement of new members oc-
curred every three years. The boards of
guardians and district councils were
much more active than county councils.
There was a better type of rural
representative on smaller bodies. In the
larger counties the difficulty of travelling
to meetings in the county's main town
led to representation being confined to
substantial landowners, shopkeepers
and publicans. Travelling expenses were
not paid, so tradesmen, labourers and
small farmers could not afford to attend.

In 1898, the first election
by council coincided with the drive of the newly-formed
United Irish League to unite nationalists
and the occasion gave a great oppor-
tunity for a display of political strength.

From this beginning the practice
developed of using local authorities for
political purposes. A great amount of
time was taken up at council meetings
with speeches on national political
problems and in proposing various
resolutions highly critical of British rule
in Ireland.

Up to 1899, the right to vote was
circumscribed to those who were ratepaying
occupiers or owners of property. The
qualification varied. In boroughs it was
£10 yearly value; in other towns it was
£4 and £5 in others.

In the Poor Law Unions the guardians
were elected by ratepayers on a system
of plural voting. The more property
occupied the greater the number of votes.
One vote was allowed up to £20 valua-
tion. The number of votes increased by
stages to six at £200 valuation and, in
addition, if the occupier paying the rate
was not entitled to deduct any part of it
from his rent, the number of his votes
was doubled. Voting by proxy was
allowed.

Under the Local Government Act
1898, multiple votes, proportionate to
the amount of rateable property, were
abolished. Householders and persons oc-
cupying part of a house were now entitled
to vote. The act made the parliamentary
electorate, peers and qualified women
the electorate for local government elec-
tions.

The next stage in enfranchisement
was reached in 1918 when married
women of thirty years of age or over got
the vote. In 1935 every citizen of 21
years or over received the franchise, thus
assimilating the Irish people to the
parliamentary franchise of the 1922
Constitution. Finally, the voting age was
reduced to 18 years or over, in the past
decade.

The term of office for members of a
local council was, at first, three years.
In 1953 the term for holding office as a
member was increased to five years.

Proportional representation was
introduced by local act in 1918 for the
borough election in Sligo. The system
was generally applied to Ireland for the
municipal and urban elections in 1920.
The object of proportional representation
was to give proper representation to
minorities, each electoral area or con-
stituency returning at least three members,
but preferably more.

The British Government had in-
troduced the system for Ireland only,
with the obvious intention of giving in-
creased representation to the pro-British
minority of the population and reducing
or destroying the Sinn Fein majority at
the polls. The fact that Sinn Fein ap-
parently professed its loyalty to the system
occasioned a good deal of surprise. The
Daily Mail in its issue of 6th January,
1920, observed that the fact that "Sinn
Fein, instead of opposing a change, de-
claredly designed to cripple its power
should willingly help in its development,
is more than remarkable". The same
newspaper noted that "incredible as it may
seem, not a single penny could be ob-
tained from the Government for the pur-
pose of explaining the system to the vot-
ers." The assumption of the British
Government seemed to be that the less
instructed mass of the Irish people for-
came the victim of Sinn Fein and that
those confused by the new and in-
tricate system would spoil their votes.
However, instruction in the new system
was carried out by the Sinn Fein or-
ganisation with such thoroughness
that the number of spoiled votes recor-
ded was less than 2.5% in parties in propor-
tion to their electoral strength and
to administer the service on a county
basis. The restrictions on the payment of
outdoor relief were removed so that
able-bodied persons would not have to
enter the workhouse. A county home
was to be established for the aged and
infirm poor and a county hospital for
medical and surgical cases. The adm-
istration was to be carried out by a
county board of health, formed from
members of the county council. These
changes were formally legalized by the
own government in 1923 and applied
throughout the state.

It soon became evident that there
was a striking contrast between the
strict central control exercised over the
officers of the numerous Poor Law
authorities, dating from 1838, and the
loose control exercised over the larger
and fewer local authorities, established
in 1898. It had long been one of the
planks of Sinn Fein policy - announced in
the early years of the century - to have
a "local Civil Service" recruited by com-
petition of merit rather than by the con-
dition of vote, remunerated on rational
lines and available for service in any part
of the state. Hence in the years 1923 and
1926, side by side with the changes that
were made in the structure of local
government, changes were also made in
the conditions of service of local author-
ity. In 1926 the Local Appoint-
ments Commission was set up to control
the appointments to all senior posts in
the Local service - the object being to
remove the danger of corruption in mak-
ing appointments locally. It was not es-
ential that all appointments made under
local authorities be filled by the Commis-
sion - promotion could, with the sanction
of the Minister, be made - but in practice
almost every important office was filled
through the Commission.

A new system of local government in Ireland was
modelled on the English system, but a
fundamental change occurred in the
1930s with the adoption of the Ameri-
can-type system of city and county
management. City councils were ap-
pointed to the cities of Dublin, Cork,
Limerick and Waterford. In 1943 county
managers were appointed to each of the
major counties, while the smaller ones
were joined for similar management pur-
poses. Boards of health were abolished
and their functions and powers were
transferred to the relevant local council.

Representative local government was
drastically altered by the transference
of some of the members' powers and
duties to the chief executive officer - the
city or county manager. However, some
important functions were reserved to the
electoral members in assembly.

The next step in the modernization
of local government occurred in 1970 with
the creation of eight regional health
boards and the transfer of all health
functions to them from the city and
county councils.