

Limerick mer

FROM the very beginning the merchants of Limerick contributed largely to the development of the city, architecturally, commercially and culturally. Far back as 1495 the Guild of Merchants was incorporated in the city; this was the forerunner of the Chamber of Commerce, which has been such a vital force in the life of Limerick.

Up to a short time after the Treaty of Limerick the Trade Guilds, headed by the Guild of Merchants, actively participated in the administration of the Civic Government of the city; thereafter they lost out to an Orange clique who stripped them of all authority and misappropriated all public charities and public funds; they brazenly took to themselves almost all the

Corporation estate at leases of 999 years at shamefully low prices.

The Guilds fought back in sustained agitation and succeeded, in 1720, in successfully petitioning the government to examine the

malpractices of the Roches (not to be confused with the Catholic Roches, of which more anon) and having them declared unfit to govern the city. Pery was ably assisted by the Dean of Limerick, Rev. Charles

of one of the people's strongest defenders against the Penal Laws, Most Rev. Thomas Smyth, Church of Ireland Bishop of Limerick (1695-1725). These consolidated their position in the Corporation by admitting

out and building in the infant modern city. The corrupt Corporation made every effort to continue bleeding the fugitives, but to no purpose. Pery, through his great skill as a lawyer and politician,

until 1805, when they built the grand new Commercial Buildings across the Abbey River. This was afterwards to become Limerick's best known institution as the "Town Hall." In 1815 they were incorporated by Royal



My Limerick



A weekly series
by KEVIN HANNAN

legality and justification of the customs levied on the citizens, both Catholic and Protestant. Undeterred, the clique, headed by the Roches, continued with their misgovernment until 1750, when Edmond Sexton Pery, then 31 years of age, came to the rescue of the citizens by exposing the

Massey, and John O'Donnell of Trough Castle.

But there were other gangsters waiting in the wings and ready to step in and carry on the rape of the city. These were the Smyths, Prendergasts and Verekers, all closely related and, ironically, descendants

supporters from all over the country as "Freemen" of the city, and at the same time ignoring the legitimate rights of the merchants and tradesmen.

Soon after Limerick was declared an open city and the walls thrown down the merchants turned the tables on the bandits by clearing

ensured the independence and security of the intrepid pioneers, who afterwards appointed their own commissioners to administer their new territory.

THE COMMERCIAL BUILDINGS

The Guild of Merchants continued to meet in the old coffee rooms in Quay Lane

Charter as "The Chamber of Commerce of Limerick."

The Chamber continued to meet in the Commercial Buildings until 1833, when they purchased the beautiful home of Michael Gavin in George's Street (O'Connell Street). This house had been the property of the Maunsell family of Plassey, who also built it. It was sold to Mr. Gavin in 1820 after the collapse of the Bank of Limerick (Maunsell's, 6 Bank Place). The family also sold four other houses in George's Street at that time in an effort to meet the demands of their creditors.

The Chamber to-day is one of the most interesting buildings in the city. It is maintained to matchmaker's specifications and boasts some valuable furnishings and paintings. A splendid painting of Thomas Spring Rice dominates the board room (I wonder was this the work of Sir Martin Archer Shee?). The finest treasure, however, is the "Chairing of Spring Rice," a splendid work attributed to William Turner. This depicts Rice addressing the citizens outside the Commercial Buildings (Town Hall) during his chairing through the city in honour of his great victory over Col. Vereker in 1820. There is a wealth of detail in this very elaborate work with the banners of the various trade guilds faithfully displayed. The painting, which was carefully restored by the Chamber, is one of Limerick's most valued treasures. It is in safe keeping and is not likely to be sullied by being displayed close to any of the daubs that have made a mockery of our Municipal "Art" Gallery.

THE CITY BUSINESS PREMISES

I wonder did anyone ever try to visualise the city without the contribution of the merchants? The great warehouses which were once such a special feature of our dock land, the bacon factories, Cleaves, the great clothing factory of Peter Tait, the granary in Michael Street, and O'Callaghan's and O'Donnell's tanneries and, above all, the splendid business premises in the New Town, especially the monster houses of Cannock's, Todd's and McBirney's (Roches Stores), which dominated our city centre for many generations. Unfortunately, the two latter were destroyed by fire, Roches Stores in 1946 and Todds in 1959. These were re-built, but in a far less dignified and prepossessing style. Far more unfortunate was the destruction of Cannocks, the most imposing building in O'Connell Street. This, with the magnificent clock tower, was demolished, not by fire or tempest, but by

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chants of note

cool calculated human agency, to make way for a far less pleasing structure. The grand clock, which was as much a special feature of Limerick as the Nelson Pillar was to Dublin, was replaced by a "modern" version, much to the displeasure of many citizens, who were saddened at the substitution by this Disneyland fantasy for the old familiar clock which had faithfully recorded the passing hours since 1888.

Many of the merchants took great pride in their premises, and in many cases no expense was spared in securing the services of the best architects and builders. Boyd's splendid premises are still the finest ornament in William Street. The Boyd family lived at "Kilmoyle" in the North Circular Road, now the beautiful home of Most Rev. Dr. Newman, Bishop of Limerick.

The late Mr. William Holliday, of "Rose Ville," Corbally, was associated with Boyd's for 64 years and was managing director for many years. He had the honour of being President of the Chamber of Commerce for almost forty years. He was High Sheriff of the city in 1910/1911. He died in 1930.

CLEEVE'S

Sir Thomas Cleeve, who died in 1908 at the age of 64 years, was one of the most outstanding characters in the commercial life of the city. He was the son of Edward Elms Cleeve of Richmond, Quebec. He

came to Limerick as a youth to assist his uncle, Mr. Jaurneux, proprietor of J. P. Evans and Co. of Thomas Street and O'Connell Street. Through his outstanding ability he rose to a prominent position in the firm and eventually became the sole proprietor.

He established the Condensed Milk Company of Ireland which, with its caramel and chocolate factories, made Limerick manufacture famous throughout the world.

Frederick C. Cleeve, one of the two surviving brothers of Sir Thomas, died at "Woodland", his beautiful mansion in Castleconnell (now Castle Oaks Hotel), in 1928, in his 77th year. He was a member of the Harbour Board and took a lively interest in the welfare of the port. He was also a member of the Chamber of Commerce.

THE SPAIGHTS

The Spaights, Francis and James, father and son, were an integral part of Limerick life for the greater part of the last century. Francis started his timber importing business in Sarsfield Street, about the site of the old Imperial Bakery building. From that point the ground sloped to the river, there being no bridge or Dock Road at the time. The timber was drafted up the sloping ground from the river to his yard. After the development of the Dock Road more extensive premises were secured by the riverside.

Spaight will be for ever

remembered not as a merchant but as a ship owner. The numbers of poor emigrants who fled the country through the port of Limerick in the aftermath of the great famine runs into hundreds of thousands. During these years Limerick was a thriving tourist centre in reverse. The hundreds who thronged the city had nothing to spend; they were simply waiting for a vessel to take them away from it all. The ships, all small vessels of a few hundred tons, usually returned in ballast. Among the better known of these was the "Jane Black" and the ill-fated "Derry Castle." Then there was the "Francis Spaight", which figured in one of the most dramatic sagas of the sea. She was lost in 1835 while on a return journey to Limerick with a cargo of timber. The captain and crew survived several weeks in the demasted floundering vessel without food and water by devouring two of their fellows.

Spaight retired to a beautiful mansion on the shores of Lough Derg, which he named "Derry Castle." The business was carried on by his son, James.

James Spaight was M.P. for Limerick, and elected High Sheriff in 1853. He lived at No. 77 George's Street (O'Connell Street). This house had a fine balcony and an outside light fitted over the fanlight to assist visitors at a time before street lighting. While he was Mayor in 1856 he

assisted in the ceremonial of laying the foundation stone of St. John's Cathedral. On the death of Richard Russell, of Plassey, Spaight was elected to succeed him as president of the Chamber of Commerce.

In 1867 Spaight succeeded in influencing the Conservative Government to wipe out the debt on the harbour which amounted to £175,000, a staggering sum, which had long oppressed the trade of the port.

Though the family has died out in the city, the name is still preserved close to the scene of their early activities.

JOSEPH PHELPS NEWSOM

Another name still preserved on the spot in which it was first noticed is Newsom's. Joseph Phelps Newsom, a Quaker, started his business selling Smith's coal and bar-iron in a yard in what is now known as Upper Denmark Street, but which was known during Newsom's tenure as "Newsom's Lane." Like all other members of his faith, Newsom was strictly honest and upright. He is recorded as having continually assisted the poor impoverished nail makers by giving them the iron they required and accepting some of the nails (clouts) as payment. In those days nails were made by hand in the cellars of old town, where the monotonous hammering caused the least annoyance to the families living overhead.

Newsom's business prospered and in due course his

premises were extended to William Street. The integrity of the firm is, and has been, a bye-word down through the years. Though the original proprietor has long since passed on, his name is much in evidence over the grand new premises in William Street and the yard where he sat beside his heaps of coal and iron is now a car park for the firm's customers.

THE ROCHE'S

The better known member of this family was Philip Roche (John), who left us the famous granary,

which he built at great expense in 1787 in Michael Street, the largest and most ambitious building in the city. Along with the granary, Philip owned a number of houses in Patrick Street.

Roche, who was a Catholic and forbidden to purchase property, acquired the sites through the assistance of his great friend and relative, Most Rev. Cecil Pery, Protestant Bishop of Limerick.

Continued next week.

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The Blood Transfusion Service Board will be holding Blood Donor Clinics in Limerick City at:

ST. JOHN'S PAVILION, LIMERICK

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 15, 1993

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 22, 1993

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 29, 1993

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 5, 1994

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