

The Irishtown

When possession of the city of Limerick had been consolidated by the Anglo-Norman invaders the English way of life became the order of the day. The habits, customs and culture of the English were soon firmly established. However, this process would have been painfully slow if the natives had to undergo the full process of anglicisation. The occupiers could hardly wait for this to happen, so resolute were they in making a home from home of the old city. The citizens had to go. They were squeezed out of their island town, and most found sanctuary in the southern suburb across the Abbey river.

The district here straddled the roads to Kilmallock and Mungret and soon became so densely populated by the native Irish that it found a new and very appropriate name - the "Irishtown". The old city became the "Englishtown". There are not many nowadays who refer to the island by the latter name, but the Irishtown lives on in the folklore of the people.

by Kevin
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Even up to Cromwellian times this historic district lived up to its name. According to the Civil Survey of 1654 all its landlords and tenants are described as "Irish papists". There is one exception: one Christopher Sexton is shown to be of "English interests".

Mungret Street and St. John's Square were the elite residential areas in the Irishtown, but the gentry had hardly settled down in the latter complex when Limerick was made an open city. The walls were thrown down, and those who could afford to get away from the slums and the smells took building sites in the Pery property along the river, downstream of the city.

After the gentry had gone, many of the fine town houses were eventually turned into tenements. This transformation resulted in their rundown ap-

pearance, which was only relieved, here and there, by the various colours of the household washing which festooned the improvised clothes lines stretched from the windows - front and back - with the assistance of sweeping brushes set horizontally from the window sills. The condition of the stairs and hallways reflected the carelessness of the changed ownership and in due course the buildings themselves crumbled to premature decay.

Thus the period pieces of old Limerick were left to rot, and only the most durable buildings, some with the interesting adornments of antiquity, survived the indifference of a people who, largely, gave no indication of an interest in preserving anything for posterity. Alas! the disease has proved to be hereditary, and its transmission through so many generations has not diminished its destructive influences.

Space was at a premium when the city walls were intact and room to live in was sorely limited, hence the cramped conditions in the warren of narrow, in-



Murphy's shop, Broad Street.

sanitary lanes that were the capillaries of the main arteries of the Irishtown - Broad Street, John Street and Mungret Street. The disappearance of the walls made little difference to the ordinary citizens: they remained in their warren well into the present century.

Some of the lanes branching from the main streets were approached through small archways, or openings about the size of doorways, and could only be distinguished from the latter by the absence of the actual doors. This system allowed for the continuation of the street line, with an unbroken terrace of buildings concealing the far less prepossessing labyrinth that criss-crossed the 'back lane' areas. Even in those far-off days the street makers turned the 'best side out' - an exercise still favoured today.

While some of the lanes and smaller streets were cobbled, the majority had earthen surfaces. All had channels, or, to be more precise, open sewers, running down their centres. In wintry conditions the earthen surfaces were churned into a gooey mess of pig-manure and household slops. This fearful substance was usually dehydrated in the heat of the summer and disseminated through an atmosphere that could be almost cut with a knife.

During the latter half of the nineteenth century the Limerick Public Health Committee was fighting a constant battle with the incredible squalor of the old city, and particularly the Irishtown. The development in the waterworks towards the end of the century, the wider distribution of piped water, and the improvement in the sewer and drainage systems, saw the tide of battle turn in favour of the Committee. Up to that time the water for domestic use was still being drawn, in many cases, from wells and pumps, all of which were polluted to varying degrees.

In 1886 there was a serious outbreak of fever in the Industrial School attached to the Good Shepherd Convent. The report of the analyst who examined samples of water taken from the two pumps in the institution's grounds stated that "... the water received on the 31st May is excessively hard, and excessively bad. I have seldom met with a so-called potable water which so closely resembles sewage". Water from other parishes was described as "turbid", "highly polluted", and "unfit for human consumption".

As late as 1889 the water drawn from the pump attached to St. John's Hospital was found to be "unfit for potable purposes".

This situation is remarkable when one considers that in the mid-1820s an elaborate scheme was launched by the Waterworks Company to erect two large reservoirs at Gallows Green on the site of the old Cromwell's Fort; these contained 600,000 gallons of water which was pumped from the Shannon by means of a 40 horse-power steam



Four brushmakers outside McSweeney's Market House, C. 1910.

engine.

The public fountain in front of St. John's Cathedral was erected by the Pery Jubilee Committee in 1865, during the mayoralty of John R. Tinsley, and proved of great benefit to the citizens. People came from many areas outside the Square to avail of the water, and at the same time engage in an interchange of gossip from the various districts.

A large number of water carriers were catered for here, as the fountain had four outlets, two for filling large vessels, and two fitted with iron goblets for on-the-spot drinking and the filling of small vessels.

By modern standards life in the lanes and alleys of the parish was unbelievably uncongenial. The rearing of pigs, fowls, and donkeys in backyards, and sometimes even in kitchens, was widespread. An entry in the Health Committee Diary of 1884 refers to "... the state of Mrs. Spellacy's kitchen in Kerry Bow where she keeps a pig", and the fantastic situation in Black Bull Lane where Johanna Bourke "... kept a donkey, two pigs and a flock of poultry, in a back yard where the donkey had no room to turn about". Again we find an even worse situation in Cornwallis Street

(now Gerald Griffin Street) where "James Ryan kept two pigs in a hole off the kitchen". A little further away, in Carr Street, we find a reference to "... the insanitary state of Thomas Ryan's house where he keeps pigs under the stairs".

In 1885 the Health Committee dealt with such matters as "... the state of James Punche's yard in Cornwallis Street ... flooded with stagnant water and sewage" and "... a fearful smell from the boiling or rendering of horse flesh in a premises in the Cabbage Market".

In those days the people were well used to smells, for the streets and lanes were rarely without heaps of manure and stagnant pools. The general condition of the city streets is summed up by Dr. Browne, the local Local Government Inspector, in 1891, when he reported on "... the filthy condition of the streets and lanes of the City ... the ashes, house slops and manure being deposited in the public street. The sewers ... are not properly trapped nor sufficiently ventilated. It will not be possible to keep the streets and laneways clear until each house is provided with running water, sanitary conveniences, and the means of disposing of house slops, etc."

The number of lodging houses in the parish during the nineteenth century is bewildering. From the number of applications for registration of lodging houses in the last quarter of the century one concludes that there were not less than 200. This figure includes unregistered houses, many of which operated despite the close surveillance of the Night Watch, whose job it was to report offenders. The condition of some of these institutions, more of which were situated in the airless and sunless labyrinth of the Irishtown, can best be left to the imagination of the reader.

Where did all the lodgers come from, and who were they? They were the vagrants, the wandering minstrels, the ballad singers and the beggars. Then we had the farm labourers who racked their bodies in the fields and gardens of the countryside for as little as two shillings a day. Like their vagrant friends, they weren't too particular about where they stretched their weary limbs - they couldn't afford to be.

In the 1830s a certain street singer and beggar named Galvin was well known in the Irishtown. He was given little assistance from the people, and he could find lodgings nowhere. He slept in sheds and hallways around the parish and found enough food to keep body and soul together through the alms of the more charitable, whose compassion had been excited by his wretched condition.

However, the people in general had no time for one whom they believed to be the executioner of Bold Robert Emmet.

An old school register, which came into the hands of the late Dick Naughton, and on which he wrote a delightful article, contained the following street names in and around the Irishtown: Scabby Lane, Mass Lane, Scott's Lane, Goat's Lane, Williams's Lane, Bushy Lane, Monaghan Lane, Ball Alley Lane, Father Quin Lane, Garvey's Lane, Sheehy Lane, Jones's Lane, Moloney Lane, Curry Lane, Hatter's Lane, Barrack Lane, Joshue's Lane, Moore's Lane, White Wine Lane, Forker's Lane, Repeal Alley, Pencil's Alley, Purcell's Lane, Magdalen Lane, Town Wall and Black Bull Lane.

Many of these old places have vanished, and now their situations can hardly be traced by the oldest inhabitants.

In the same register the trades, or occupations of the fathers of the pupils were set out in a grand copperplate hand. They are worth recalling here. There were: rag-gatherers, wheelwrights, thatchers, chandlers, coffin-makers, basket-makers, labourers, brass-founders, grave-diggers, fishermen, whip-makers, stage-keepers, dairy men, coopers, dyers, tailors, auctioneers, glaziers, weighmasters, blacksmiths, tinmen, varnishers, stonemasons, nailers, bootmakers, lastmakers, mill-wrights, snuffgrinders, slaters, fiddlers, candle-

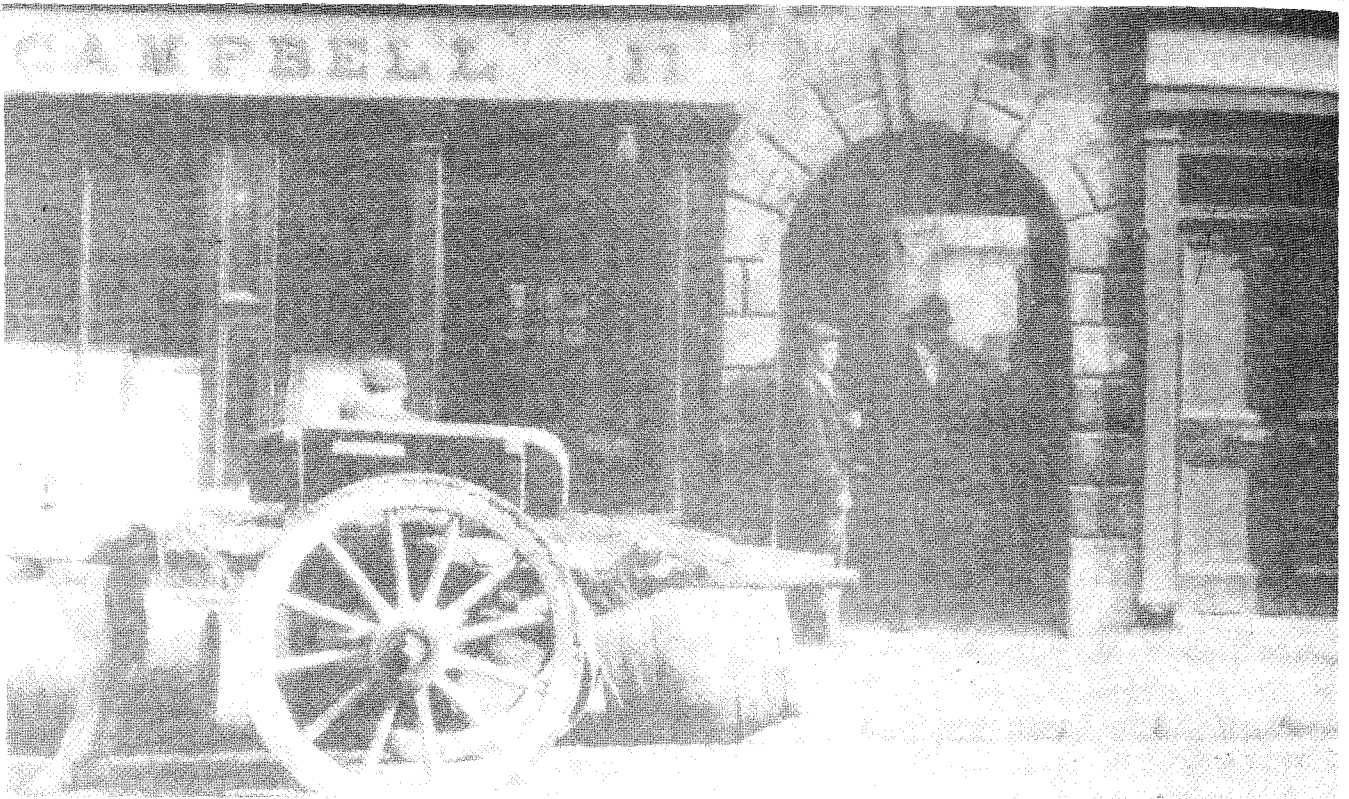
makers, cage-makers, pavers, lime-burners, pipers, woolcard-makers, bellows-makers, pipe-makers, soldiers, coachmen, car-makers and weavers.

Almost all these trades and callings, like many of those that followed them, are now extinct; and the monies derived from the long and tedious practice of them allowed little or no indulgence in the luxuries of the day. It was a time when the terrible conditions of the worker were taken for granted. There were no trade unions as we know them to day, no dole, no social welfare or unemployment benefits: there was nothing but the Poorhouse. There were many destitute souls whose pride would not suffer them to accept the "hospitality" of the "Big House across the bridge": they preferred the slow death from starvation in their own hovels.

Pipe-making was carried out well into the present century. The Merrit family of Broad Street were probably the last of this fraternity. Whip-making, brush-making and agricultural carpentry were carried on up to recent years by the Barretts, the Sweeneys and the Smiths, respectively. John Caulfield of Garryowen, practised the most curious craft of all - he repaired broken crockery by stitching pieces together. He usually worked on large dishes which were sometimes family heirlooms. The stitching was done with soft steelwire through holes which were bored with



Broad Street, c. 1930.



Campbell's Bow, Broad Street.

great skill and patience. Most of his work was brought in by hopeful owners to the firm of Goodwins, by whom Johnny Caulfield was mainly engaged.

Before 1873, when an English firm, the United General Gas Company, was set up in Watergate, there was no street lighting other than that provided in the three main streets by the feeble glimmering of oil lamps or waxtapers through the windows of the dingy shops. Oil lanterns were provided at some busy corners, but generally the gloom of night was complete. The distribution of the gas was slow, but gradually the lamps and lanterns gave way to open gas jets (mantles were still unknown). Gas was sold at fifteen shillings per one thousand feet and, though it was generally felt that this charge was excessive, the firm enjoyed a monopoly for many years.

The citizens finally applied the only effective remedy for the high charges by forming the Citizens' Gas Company. This concern sold gas for five shillings per thousand feet - a third of the existing charges. This measure speedily reduced the charges of the United General Gas Company to a like figure.

In due course the Corporation purchased the interest of the Citizens' Gas Company, and in 1878 a resolution was passed at a Corporation meeting to purchase the United Company's works with a view to the amalgamation of both plants. In pursuance of this scheme a Bill was drawn up and introduced to the House of Commons, where it was duly made the subject of a Committee of the House and finally passed.

There were many in the Corporation at that time who felt that the venture

was a gamble that afforded them only a poor chance of success, for the threat of electricity as a superseding agency was on everybody's lips. In November 1878 the following announcement appeared in the local press:-

"Electric light, with Siemens patent apparatus, will be exhibited at the Rink on every Monday, Wednesday and Saturday commencing Saturday, the 30th., inst., from 7.30 to 10.00 a.m. Admission 1/- skates free. Engine and machine room free.

The Forresters' Band will attend.

Arrangements have also been made for a grand fashionable exhibition commencing on Saturday, 30th. inst., and every Saturday until further notice, from 4.30 to 6.30 p.m. to afford ladies and gentlemen living at a distance from the city an opportunity of seeing the electric light without the inconvenience of staying late in town. Admission 1/-, skates 6d.

A Military Band will attend'.

After this exhibition and with the widespread interest in the new and revolutionary method of illumination, the members of the Corporation felt that they had backed a loser by taking control of the gasworks. However, they had made their decision and accepted responsibility for an undertaking that has served the people well right down to the present day.

All through the last century crime was at a far lower level than it is today. Though the stygian blackness of the city afforded cover and sanctuary for every type of criminal, the penalties attendant

on conviction were so severe, and so rigorously applied, as to deter even the most desperate. Indeed the times were so depressed that there were many in dire straits, some of whom were forced by their abject poverty to take chances; if caught they were punished with draconian penalties.

There is the disgraceful case of the poor woman who was sentenced to seven years' transportation beyond the seas. Her only crime was the larceny of a few ounces of sugar from a shop in Mungret Street.

On the whole the people lived in less fear of vandals and thugs than they do today. In many ways society has come a long way but the savage instincts of some people have not benefited from the enlightening effects of a more congenial and civilized way of life.

To-day the Irishtown presents a picture of neglect. Sites of ancient buildings have remained cleared for more than half a century. A few eighteenth century houses survive in John Street and Broad Street, while Mungret Street has completely lost its character.

The backlane areas have, fortunately, disappeared, and, with the exception of Sean Heuston Place which replaced part of one of our most appalling slum areas, no attempt has been made to rebuild on the same ground.

The Watergate high rise flats may be taken as an exception to this lack of development, but then there is a serious doubt about the acceptability of this type of accommodation.

Only St. John's Churchyard and the old highways to Kilmallock and Mungret remain as links with pre-Norman times.