

JANESBORO AND DISTRICT

LIKE MANY other suburbs of the old city of Limerick the area south of the point where the railway line crosses the Roxboro Road was once a quiet and salubrious district boasting a few fine residences that housed some wealthy families. These are set out in the 1841 Ordnance Sheets as "Janesboro", "Rathbane", "The Lodge", "Ivy Cottage", "South Hill", "Beech Hill" and "Fort Prospect". The sites were well chosen, on the activity of a hill that commanded a panoramic view of the city with the splendid backdrop of the Clare hills.

The first radical change in the scene was the development of the Great Southern and Western Railway between 1848 and 1859. Though this was the first major alteration in the picture the real transformation of the district did not take place until the late 1930s and '40s when the great Janesboro and Rathbane housing schemes were developed, thus providing splendid modern type dwellings for the working classes in a district long reserved for the middle classes. In due course the Kennedy Park, Keyes Park and South Hill housing developments provided one of the most populous suburbs of Limerick.

Obviously the spiritual welfare of the numerous families uprooted from their city parishes and transplanted in the wide-ranging parish of Donoughmore could hardly have been catered for if Fr. Fred Rice, the then parish priest of Donoughmore, did not expend his great energies in establishing the splendid new Church of Our Lady Queen of Peace. Providentially, he foresaw the great population expansion of the years ahead.

Unfortunately, some of the interesting historical associations of the old place are inclined to be forgotten or overlooked. According to the old maps the greater part of the parish of Our Lady Queen of Peace was in the parish of St. Nicholas. This did not matter a lot since the area was so sparsely populated, but in reality the parish of Donoughmore covered the whole area from St. John's to the outward bounds of Cahernorry, at least from the time of the registration of the clergy in 1704. At that time Fr. William Flemming registered for the parishes of Cahernorry, Caheravahally and Donoughmore. This area was substantially the extent of the parish of Donoughmore before the parish of Our Lady Queen of Peace was founded.

While Fr. Fred Rice has a lasting memorial in the new 'Janesboro' church, that of an earlier parish priest of Donoughmore, Fr. Timothy Halpin, is now obliterated. This was the little rustic boroen that turned off to the left of the main road near South Hill and was known to generations of schoolboys and courting couples as "Father Halpin's Boroen". Fr. Halpin died May 15, 1900.

The 1841 ordinance sheet also delineates St. Patrick's Well, which, according to tradition, was used by St. Patrick to baptise a number of convicts from the district before he plodded on to his better known location at Singland. The map also shows the famous 'Wind-pump' a short distance at the rear of South Hill House. This was a very deep well from which water was pumped by a small windmill. Waller's Well is also set out in this map. It was quite common in olden days for whole districts to be named after wells, such as Pennywell, Coleman's Well, Patrick's, etc. Thus Waller's Well was a rural district well known to Limerick's citizens for many generations.

It may be of interest to touch upon some of the more notable residents of



Janesboro Church pictured at the blessing in 1942.

the 'big' houses in the area. Rathbane House and stud was owned at the turn of the century by a wealthy retired rubber planter, William Wellington Baily. As a very young man Baily made good in the rubber trade in Brazil, and done much better after he settled in Malay, where it was found that the soil and climate were far more suitable for the cultivation of the precious rubber than Brazil; furthermore, Malay was a British possession and labour was almost for nothing. Baily amassed a huge fortune before he was forty years old, but he also became infected with malaria, a circumstance which compelled him to seek a change of climate to minimise the effects of the dreaded disease. Thus he found solace with his horses in the rich greenery of the fields around Rathbane. He was lucky took with the horses; his stallion, "Batchelor's Bouble", sired the winners of some of the principal races on both sides of the Atlantic, and was a household name in the horse racing world in the early years of the century. The grave of this horse was marked by a large commemorative slab up to a few years ago when it was stolen.

Baily bought Plassey House and estate, now the headquarters of the N.I.H.E. (University of Limerick), where he enjoyed the last five years of his life before the malaria finally caused his death in 1910. His wife, Blanche, lived on at Plassey until 1931, when she retired to an estate in Clifden. She died in the '50s.

South Hill House was the home of Limerick's famous rags-to-riches hero of the nineteenth century, Sir Peter Tait, whose life story reads like a fairy tale. Tait was born in Shetland in 1828, his father was Thomas Tait from Tingwall. While still in his teens Peter left his island home to seek his fortune. He arrived in a sloop at Limerick harbour in 1846 and secured a position as a draper's apprentice at the firm of Cumine and Mitchell (afterwards Cannock's). Both proprietors of this firm being Scots it is understandable that the lad from Shetland would be employed in preference to a local, though Scotsmen in general were in demand as drapers' assistants at this period.

Apprentices 'lived-in' at the large stores at the time but most were left off during the slack period from October to April. Thus young Peter Tait found himself on the streets of a strange city with only a few shillings in his pocket. His offer to the management of the firm to work, without pay, for his bed and board having been turned down the enterprising young man bought him-

self a hawker's basket and went from door to door in the lanes and streets of the city selling small articles of haberdashery. His enterprises prospered, and in a short time he was selling articles of drapery, mainly to sailors disembarking at the harbour after lengthy voyages.

In a remarkably short time Tait had made enough money to open his own business premises in Bedford Row where he employed a number of women making shirts and caps — in those years everyone wore a cap. Soon he was back in his old firm, not as an apprentice, but as a full partner. The firm was now "Cannock and Tait".

At this time the Singer sewing machine had just been perfected and the ambitious young Shetlander saw the potentialities of its use. Limerick being a garrison town Tait was well aware of the great difficulties and expense in providing uniforms for a whole regiment at a time when every stitch had to be made by hand. Full of confidence and expectation he consulted the Lord Lieutenant in Dublin and explained his plan to manufacture army uniforms quickly and cheaply by a revolutionary system of employing a number of workers each performing a different operation in the manufacture of the garment. This man was so impressed with Tait's idea of mass producing uniforms that he prevailed on the war office to support the project. Tait was given a contract to equip a regiment with uniforms, to be supplied to the Central Military Stores in London. He succeeded so well in fulfilling his undertaking that the authorities gave him an unlimited contract to supply the army in general.

Tait was now well and truly on the road to prosperity. He purchased an old auxiliary workhouse in Lord Edward Street and worked there for some time before erecting one of the most modern factories in Europe on the site.

In due course Tait supplied uniforms to the forces engaged in the dreadful Crimean War and afterwards to the Confederate forces during the American Civil War, breaking the Yankee blockade of the American ports on one memorable occasion with his steam ship 'Evelyn', one of his three ships which transported his finished uniforms from the port of Foynes to America and England. His other vessels were 'Elvey' and 'Keepie'.

By this time Tait was a rich young man with many of his early ambitions already realised, so he decided to settle down in earnest. He married Rose Abraham, the beautiful

daughter of Thomas Abraham, of Fort Prospect, the magnificent mansion not far from the splendid South Hill House where he settled down with his bride.

That the young tycoon never allowed success to go to his head was evidenced in the hawker's basket which he kept hanging in the hall at South Hill as a reminder to himself and all visitors to the house of his early days as a struggling waif.

Tait was also an outstanding success with the people of Limerick. He subscribed to every charity and made his name synonymous with acts of benevolence in all directions. He was a good employer and treated his workers generously. He was elected Mayor in 1865 and held the office for three years. In 1867 the citizens decided to erect a fitting memorial to him in recognition of his services to the city; this is the handsome clock tower in Baker Place, known as "Tait's Clock".

Like many a good man that went before him Peter came a 'cropper' when he entered politics. He stood as a Tory candidate in the '67 general election and was defeated. After this event his popularity began to wane, but many who disagreed with his politics were really sorry for him. The big man might have recovered if he had learned the lesson of his election defeat, but he succumbed to the temptation to enter as a candidate in a bye-election in his native Shetland in 1873, where he banked on the support of his family's widespread friends and connections. But, he was wrong in his calculations — the Shetlanders appeared jealous of his rise to prosperity in Ireland and gave him no support. He was defeated and the shattering effects of the disaster resulted in a loss of interest in his business.

After a few years Tait retired to England (he had a house in London) and left the control of the factory to his son, who, lacking his father's knowledge and ability, caused the business to decline. It was afterwards rescued from closure by a group of local businessmen who stepped in and set up a new company.

Tait, for ever the adventurer, found his restless spirit too difficult to control: we find him in the late 1880s failing in a cigarette manufactory which he established in India.

Sadly the greatest benefactor that Limerick ever knew died at Batoum, South Russia — far from his happy home in South Hill — on December 15, 1890, leaving only £50 to the world!

Other famous names associated with the district are remembered in Donoughmore churchyard. South of the church, and a

little to the right as you enter the churchyard is an altar tomb surrounded by an iron railing and entwined with briars and other rank vegetation. A few years ago I cleared away some of the growth from the top slab and noted the following inscription:—

"This tomb contains the remains of Turlough O'Connell who descended from the ancient Barons of Upper and Lower Connolloe, his son John and also his grandson John Connell and Margaret Clanchy wife of the 2nd John — it also contains the remains of George John O'Connell, son of the 2nd John who died 13 February 1853 aged 52 years The last of his race. May their souls rest in peace."

The last named referred to was none other than the famous "Jonnie Connell" of "Garryowen in Glory". Who does not recall the lines in the well known song? *"Jonnie Connell's tall and straight; And in his limbs he is complete; He'll pitch a bar of any weight, From Garryowen to Thomondgate."*

O'Connell, whose father was the proprietor of the well known Garryowen Brewery, was the rumbustious leader of the famous Garryowen gang who 'delighted' in rampaging through the city after dark. Even the people of the Englishtown had a healthy respect for O'Connell's gang, and the Bard of Thomond did not overlook their depredations in his well known "Drunken Thady and the Bishop's Lady"; in this poem he describes the midnight scene outside St. Mary's Cathedral on Christmas eve night:—

"The sweet toned bells of Mary's tower Proclaimed the Saviour's natal hour! And many an eye with pleasure glistened, And many an ear with rapture listened! The gathered crowd of charmed people Dispersed from gazing at the steeple; And homeward tread of parting feet, Died on the echoes of the street; For Jonnie Connell, the dreaded man, With his wild raking Garryowen clan, Cleared the streets and smashed each lamp, And made the watchmen all decamp!"

To avoid the embarrassment of the continuing com-

plaints about the behaviour of their wayward son the O'Connells had him domiciled with relatives in Cork. The circumstance resulted in the decline of the famous Garryowen gang:—

"Garryowen is gone to wreck Since Jonnie Connell went to Cork."

Connell's exile in Cork was motivated by the strong desire of his folks to get him away from the 'devilment'. The drastic move had the desired effect, not only for Connell but for his pals in his old gang, whose boisterous and wayward activities ceased forthwith. After a number of years Connell returned, not as leader of the Garryowen boys, but as a mature and responsible citizen who had outgrown his youthful inclination to lawlessness. Though he was noted all his life for his charitable donations to the poor of Limerick he is hardly remembered other than as the legendary hero of "Garryowen in Glory" and in the fast fading inscription on his tomb in Donoughmore.

On his own instruction O'Connell was buried at midnight, and by torchlight, in keeping with an old family tradition. He was attended in his last illness by Rev. George Butler, C.C., St. Michael's, who was later to become Bishop of the Diocese.

Donoughmore also holds the graves of the Kellys and Roches of Limerick, the most notable of whom was Philip Roche (John), who built the Granary (recently renovated) at Michael Street in 1789, ten years before his death. Roche was a prosperous grain merchant who exported large quantities of rape and flax seed to England and the continent in one of his father's heavily armed ships.

The massive slab in the Chancel of the old church marks the grave of the Fitzgibbons of Ballysheedy. Here in this ever so quiet corner lie the remains of the grandparents, and many other relatives of John Fitzgibbon (1749-1802), the 1st Lord Clare, and Lord Chancellor of Ireland, reputed architect of the rebellion of 1798 and the Act of Union which followed it. The last of the Fitzgibbons to be buried here was Captain John Fitzgibbon, of the County Limerick Regiment. His coffin had to be borne sideways owing to the narrowness of the sloping doorway of the old church.

We must not forget the old church in Donoughmore which is now in danger of complete collapse. It is probably Limerick's earliest Christian foundation. It is regrettable that so little has ever been written about the place despite the historical importance of its proximity to the ancient round castle of Rathard which occupies the site of the more ancient 'Rath-Arda-Suird'. It is also within sight of the castle of Lickadoon, and the birthplace of the Archbishop of Cashel, Dr. O'Hurley, who was martyred for the faith in Dublin in 1584.

According to some authorities the church is coeval with Mungret and some even suggest that it is the work of St. Patrick's own masons, Caeman, Cruithnech and Iuchraid, or the 'Goban Saer' himself who succeeded them. One of the unique features of the building is the great size of some of the stones used in the construction, particularly the massive lintel over the doorway, this is 6 feet 9 inches in length; its vertical height, 2 feet, and its depth, 3 feet 3 inches. Many other pieces of the fabric are almost of Cyclopien dimensions.

Even in ruin this old building must be considered the Mother Church, not only of Donoughmore, but also of the parish of Our Lady Queen of Peace.