

# is told in a fine new book

Indeed credit must be paid to fulsomely to the Sisters of the convent because it was they who saved the industry which would otherwise have died at that time.

The community of the Good Shepherd convent, who arrived in Limerick in 1849, initially made Valenciennes and Brussels lace and embroidered vestments.

The industry was then given another major boost when, in 1883 lectures were held in the Athenaeum rooms on lace design and Florence Vere O'Brien came to the city as a bride.

Florence and her husband Robert - the grand-parents of Veronica Rowe one of the authors of this book, lived in Oldchurch, near Barrington's Pier.

Florence Vere O'Brien spearheaded a new approach to Limerick lace, bringing it out of the purely commercial and into a field in which it was in demand by the fashionable and those of artistic bent who followed the Pre-Raphaelite artistic movement.

Mrs Vere O'Brien organised a supply of quality materials, the best new designs - many of them based on the wild flowers of the district, and she organised market outlets in the leading stores and amongst her friends in the nobility.

In 1888 the Limerick School of Art started to teach lace design and Alexander Shaw gave £50 to start a lace training school which was opened in Bank Place the following year.

There 20 young girls were taught - while many other women produced lace in their homes in Englishtown.

Later the Lace School was moved to 112 O'Connell Street where in 1893 the modern equivalent of £28,500 worth of lace was sold.

It comes as a surprise that in spite of that turn-over and the fact that a good worker made only 7/- (35p) or the equivalent of £20 a week today the lace school did not return a profit until 1898 and then only £70/6/5 or the equivalent of £4,000 to-day.

Items produced were not cheap.

A wedding handkerchief cost the equivalent of between £13 to £26 today; wedding veils cost the equivalent of about £445 today; fan-covers about £40 and veils to ear over the face when riding in the early motor cars cost an equivalent of £43 in to-day's money.

Apart from the dedicated lace workers and organisers Limerick produced some great designers.

In the late 19th century Limerickman Michael Hayes was in demand in the best lace centres of Ireland and Britain for his prizewinning designs.

Mrs Vere O'Brien's lace school closed in 1922 at a time when lace had become less fashionable.

It is fortunate that the Good Shepherd convent continues the tradition and that others such as Fr Joe Young has encouraged the lace industry again and Audrey McCormac continues the tradition to-day.



**PHOTOGRAPHED** at the Bank Place lace school, in 1899 were Mrs Rice and manager Miss Dunne along with young ladies learning lace. This lace training school opened with eight pupils in May 1889 in two small rooms at the top of a house in Bank Place. Very quickly other students joined. The older lace workers from King's Island were involved on occasions. This picture is illustrated in *Limerick Lace; a Social History and Maker's Manual* by Nellie O Cleirigh and Veronica Rowe.



**The Superintendent Mrs Rice watches over the girls whose lace won awards at the International exhibition in Dublin in 1907.**



**MRS Vere O'Brien's Limerick Lace School for training young workers. The manager Miss Dunne and teacher Mrs Mary Kenna are included here. Note the gas lights and the light from the obviously large windows.**



# The story of Limerick lace



Mrs Florence Vere O'Brien with daughters Jane and Flora in 1905.

By **DYMPHNA BRACKEN**

A NEW book on Limerick lace has been published.

Limerick Lace; A Social History and Maker's Manual, is written by Nellie ó Cléirigh, lace-collector and social historian, and Veronica Rowe, designer and grand-daughter of Florence Vere O'Brien, a major promoter of Limerick lace a century ago.

Limerick lace was started in the city in 1829, by the Rev Charles Walker who has travelled through Ireland in search of a good centre in which to establish his lace industry. Lace is delicate linen thread woven into patterns through an openwork fabric.

He decided on Limerick because of the tradition of sewing, gloves, military uniforms (Tait's) and white embroidery worked for Glasgow merchants and London shops.

The introduction of this extra industry helped the women of Limerick and their families in the various periods of famine in the early 19th century and brought artistic lace into the homes of the fashionable of Europe and the USA in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Walker opened his first lace factory in rented accommodation in Mount Kennet.

Investing £20,000 in setting up the business or over £1 million in today's money - he soon had 500 girls employed, 300 of them in one room.

He also had his market established as he worked directly to supply a large

London store.

It was not easy to get a job with Walker.

Each applicant had to produce a birth certificate, to prove that she was between 11 and 14 years of age; a doctor's certificate to prove that she was healthy and a character reference from an influential member of the community.

Limerick girls adapted quickly.

The industry was new because the machine net on which it was made had only come on the market six years previously.

Machines were not able to embroider designs into net and so merchants required conscientious and good workers who would deftly embroider designs.

So successful was the industry in the city that other English, Cork and Dublin merchants opened centres here.

It was a sweated labour industry and this may have been why so little Limerick lace was bought in the region in the early 19 century.

The numbers employed, though, are impressive.

About 1840, Walker had two factories - one in Mulgrave Street and the other in Kilrush.

Between the two he gave work to 800 women with 300 extra working on his pieces in their own homes.

In a factory in Glentworth Street there were 700 women employed; in Abbey Court 500; in Clare Street 310; in Patrick Street, 120 and many others were employed working in their own homes for smaller concerns totalling almost 3,000 women working on Limerick lace.

The well-known international company Courtaulds, has their premises in Clare Street and it introduced modifications to the embroidery which was then adopted by the others.

Being market driven the proprietors were diligent in seeking the best designs, visiting Brussels, Caen and other continental lace centres regularly to ensure that Limerick lace remained the most modern designs.

So, about the time of the famine, the women of Limerick made lace shawls and skirts, capes, bodices and vests flounces and trimmings, wedding handkerchiefs and infant's socks.

About the time of the famine too a "good" lace worker could earn about 75 a week which must have contributed greatly to the local economy.

Their work was brought by Queen Victoria and the Queen of the Belgians; as well as by members of the nobility.

So successful was the Limerick lace industry that it won awards at international exhibitions and other Limerick lace centres were established in Kilrush, Gort, Kinsale, Cor Youghal, Kenmare, Kilarny, Caherciveen and Glengarriff, Waterford and Dunmore East.

However, by the early 1850's machines were introduced to Nottingham which were able to produce lace in the Limerick style.

Entrepreneurs turned their interest to the machines.

By 1877 there were over 110 women making lace in Limerick 70 of them working for Cannocks; other firms included Todds and some other concerns.

Nobody invested in good materials or worried too much about marketing.

The work was coarse and some women were reduced to trying to peddle their lace at the railway station or at fairs.

But Limerick lace entered a different stage in the 1880s when the Good Shepherd Convent turned to making Limerick lace.



Mrs Vere O'Brien's Limerick Lace School, at 48 George Street, in 1907.