A MILESTONE IN CEMENT

For many Irish people, the 1930s was a bleak period of unemployment, poverty and emigration. Some of our older readers will have their own personal – and sometimes painful – memories of the time. Looking back on the decade can, therefore, bring some mixed feelings.

The construction of the Shannon Hydro-Electric Works (the Shannon Scheme) made the greatest impact on the lives of the people, and also made it possible for successive governments to launch the industrial revolution of the 1930s. New factories sprung up like mushrooms all over the country, and if some of the products did not measure up to the imported variety at the beginning, protective tariffs ensured a ready home market.

Limerick, already renowned for its well established traditional industries – bacon-curing, milling, clothing manufacture, tanning, timber yards and the docks – was favoured with a new factory for the manufacture of shoes, at Mulgrave Street, a 'nut and bolt' enterprise, near the harbour, and most important of all, a cement plant at Castlemungret, three miles from the city centre. These industries provided opportunities for those who were permanently barred from jobs in the traditional industries, which were almost exclusively reserved for members of families long associated with them.

The announcement in the *Limerick Chronicle* of 21 May, 1936, that Limerick had been chosen (along with Drogheda) as a centre for the cement industry created much excitement in the city, though the choice of location was not unexpected. Fifty years before, survey engineers had declared that the almost limitless quantities of limestone and blue clay in the area of the Shannon Estuary, just west of the city, were ideally suited to the manufacture of cement. Among the other factors which influenced the decision to site the factory in Limerick were the availability of imported fuels and, of course, a ready-made market.

In the following month, a site was selected in the midst of the millions of tons of raw material at Castlemungret, and soon Limerick had its own cement for the first time. From its beginning, on 11 April, 1938, the product of the factory hardly needed tariff protection, as it was considered by experts to be as good as any foreign brand.

Limerick cement was in demand right from the start of its production. Towards the end of the decade, in 1939, Shannon Airport was laid out further along the Estuary, amid the high grasses and sprightly hares, at Rineanna. Thousands of tons of cement were used in the construction of the runways and terminal buildings.

The close of the 1930s saw the end of the sandmen – the Shanahans, Crowes and Frawleys – who had long delved the Shannon for the sand used in the various building projects in the region. The opening up of the many sand and gravel-pits outside the city spelt the death-knell of this old but back-breaking occupation.

Further down the Shannon Estuary, other changes were taking place. The year 1938 saw the first commercial crossing of the Atlantic by air, and Foynes became the transatlantic base for the new 'flying-boats'.

And, of course, 1939 saw the start of the Second World War. Many Limerick men and women left home to seek work or to enlist in the British forces, some never to return. Brave local seamen, many of them from the Windmill district, daily risked their lives in bringing cargoes of food, fuel and other goods, in Limerick Steamship Company ships, to and from the city. The war took its terrible toll on all sides, and some of these Limerick seamen perished on the high seas. Their little-known story deserves a wider appreciation.