

# MILLS AND MILLERS

A mighty murrain, numbers of cattle died.  
This year for four pence is cows raw hide.  
All other things were cheap, a plenty great,  
For twelve pence bought four pecks of finest wheat.

by *Dolly Stewart*

Thus was Davis, Limerick's rhymster-historian, inspired to describe conditions in the city in the year 1485. In all subsequent histories of Limerick frequent references to current grain crops and prices are to be found, whilst ancient newspapers give details of bread assizes and contain advertisements for flour. As an outlet for the products of the fertile Golden Vale, the city was in an ideal position, and so flour and corn milling has always been one of Limerick's leading industries.

According to the Civil Survey of 1654, there appears then to have been four water-worked mills, besides several large horse mills, in operation in the town. At the foot of Newgate Lane, between King John's Castle and the quays built out into the falls of Curraghower, were the Queen's Mill and Thomas Arthur's Mill. In the Abbey River the Comhon Mill on the south side projected from the shore near St. Michael's. On the opposite side on the front of the present Barrington's Hospital, stood Nicholas Arthur's Mill. During the survey of the Abbey River in 1928, the sills of the web of this old mill were located in the bed of the river. These mills were all operated on the rise and fall of the tide, but there is now no trace of any of them.

Sudden and violent storms frequently occurred on the Shannon and the overflowing of its waters did much damage to industry. On February 18th, 1667, a most terrible storm arose during a spring tide which did not ebb for fourteen hours. It rose to the Court House in Quay Lane, overflowing shops and houses, and entire buildings and large quantities of corn were carried away.

On the 30th July, 1698, another storm arose, which had such force on the Shannon that its current was stopped for three hours and people walked across the bed of the river without so much as getting their feet wet. So much damage was done to crops by this storm that the price of wheat rose to 6/9 per bushel, and barley to 20/- the Limerick barrel.

Even in those far away days prices which farmers got for their corn in the city were a never ending cause for complaint, as witness a letter from a Mr. Richard Parsons of Carrigagunnel, dated 30th October, 1761, to his friend, Dean Massy, in which he states that the Act of Parliament which was intended for the protection and good of farmers, "the Corporation vampires" have turned to oppression - "in short, they have made me tired of farming, for I can assure you on oath that these twenty years back except for the last two years, I sent into Limerick upwards of five hundred barrels of corn, that I was so oppressed with the usage I got in Limerick that I would not be any longer in their power, and have entirely quit tillage, nor have I sent one barrel of corn into Limerick those two years past, nor ever will till the times alter."

Prices of most commodities were fixed by the Mayor of the city and issued to the press. The Limerick Chronicle of 1776 contains many such price fixing notices:-

The Assize of bread, by order of the Worshipful Mayor of Limerick, this 19th day of February, 1776, middle price of wheat being £1-16s-8d. per quarter, with 9/- allowance to the baker on household and 8/- wheaten.

Loaf	Wheaten	Household
Twopenny	£1-9-0	£2-0-4
Threepenny	£2-5-4	£3-0-7
Sixpenny	£4-11-0	£6-1-6

I do hereby order all bakers to mark their name and

weight on bread, and if any inhabitants will inform me of a deficiency in the weight, I will not fail to punish the offenders according to Law, and am determined to seize all rolls, bricks and loaves that will not answer this assize - William Gabbett, Mayor.

## CURRAGHOWER MILLS

Imbedded in the wall of the original Curraghower Mill was a stone which bore the following inscription:-

This mill was built by William Joynt, Burgess, A.D. 1672. John Burn, Esq., Mayor.

Lenihan states that its ancient walls once gave shelter to two Irish soldiers who were unavoidably shut out by their friends during a sortie in which a number were massacred by the English. They remained hidden until the grey of morning when they swam over to safety on the far shore. Their names are given as Roche and O'Halloran.

Curraghower Mill eventually fell into the hands of a firm known as "Fisher and Larry Quinlivan" (James Fisher and Larry Quinlivan), and it was described by a contemporary in 1840 as "splendid mill with great water-power". That it did a prosperous business can be judged from the fact that Larry Quinlivan was Mayor of Limerick, at a time when to occupy the civic chair a man had to be in a big way of business. Unfortunately the mill was burnt down about 1850 and was never rebuilt.

After the burning of the mill, Quinlivan continued in the corn business in Upper William Street, but Fisher went to Dublin. James Fisher's father was Joseph Fisher of "Richmond", who died in June 1830 and the "Chronicle" announcing his death, stated he was for many years a principal of one of the first mercantile houses in Limerick. The mercantile house referred to was the very old established business of Fisher, Mark and Fisher, in Francis Street.

It is of interest to learn that Gerald Griffin generally submitted his writings to Mrs. Fisher at "Richmond" for her revision and approval before publishing them.

In 1786, Joseph Massy Harvey, a young Cork man, came as an assistant to this business of Fisher, Mark and Fisher, and in due course married Miss Fisher, and eventually took over the family business which prospered under his watchful eye. He built himself a beautiful house called "Summerville", situated in what was described by Lenihan as "a country road called 'Summerville Avenue'", but so influential were the Harveys that most people called it "Harvey's Avenue". The name still lives on to-day in Harvey's Yard and Shed on the Dock Road.

## PLASSY MILL

About 1824 Major Hedges Maunsell built a splendid cut stone mill at Plassy-mills probably then inferior to none in Ireland - and Harvey's elder son, Reuben, leased from Major Maunsell both the mill and the house at Plassy. He went to live there with the idea of being well removed from his workmen, who were to live in Limerick and come to and from the mill every day in a launch. This arrangement soon came to grief as the time taken travelling was so long that the workmen insisted on being paid for it, but Reuben Harvey would only pay for the time they were in the mill. As a result of this dispute the mill soon closed, and with the exception of a very short time when later worked by J.N. Russell and Sons, it remained closed, and is now but an ivy-covered shell. This, I think, is the first instance of a strike in Limerick.

Harvey maintained his store and office in Francis Street, and as this was long before telegraphs, he communicated between the two places by means of carrier pigeons. The old pigeon-house was to be seen in the yard at Francis Street, where Messrs. Martin McGuire Limited, carried on business.

#### LOCK MILLS

The building of new mills on the north bank of the new canal was begun in 1762 and finished in 1764, "at the expense of Mr. Andrew Welsh and Mr. Edward Usuld of this City, the latter of whom planned the construction of it, and carried every part of his project into execution". It cost the proprietors nearly £6,000 and was called Lock Mills.

The mill consisted three pairs of the best French stones that could be procured, which were fixed on the South side, for manufacturing all degrees of flour and worked by one ingenious waterwheel, and three pairs of common stones on the north side, for the purpose of grinding all kinds of grain, with complete granaries, bolting mills, fans, screens, machines, etc. It contained the first flour machines that were ever used in Ireland for separating bran from flour, and each quality of flour from the other. Large stores were also built for the reception of corn over the mill dam. In short, it was at the time of building justly esteemed the first and finest of the kind in Ireland, and equal of anything of the kind or size in the world.

Contemporary newspapers frequently carried the following advertisement: "First and second flour of superior quality, the produce of American wheat for sale at the Limerick Lock Mill".

But, alas, less than a hundred years later this magnificent building had become almost a ruin, helped along no doubt by famine. During 1814, in consequence of the scarcity of water, canal navigation was suspended. All the flour mills near the city were obliged to cease working, which rendered bread and flour very scarce and dear. Wheat rose to 8/3 per stone.

It may here be remarked that though the commerce of the port of Limerick was considerable, the export of corn was little known and when it was commenced in 1782 by Mr. Honan, an enterprising merchant, Honan had every difficulty that it is possible to imagine from the poorer classes of the citizens, who looked upon the export of cereals as the greatest tragedy that could befall them, and who were backed by the Mayor and the authorities in their interference with the course of trade.

From a petition on the subject of tolls presented to the Irish House of Commons in 1790, it was stated that in the previous year there were exported from Limerick:- Wheat, 21,693 barrels; Oats, 24,806 barrels; Barley, 526 barrels; but such was the demand for Irish grain that by the year 1831 the export of these commodities had risen

to:- Wheat, 169,993 barrels; Oats, 315,731 barrels; Barley, 85,560 barrels.

#### NEWTOWNPERY MILLS

It is small wonder that J.N. Russell and Sons, one of the oldest and largest manufacturers in the south-west of Ireland, added flour milling to their extensive business. In 1810, Newtownpery Mill was built, and in the year 1827 it was fitted with steam machinery, much to the surprise and wonder of the people, who considered the plan neither rational or feasible.

In front of Newtownpery Store in Henry Street (built in 1837) was inserted a stone which was formerly in front of the old Mayoralty House in Quay Lane, which was purchased by John Norris Russell when that building was taken down.

During the disastrous Famine years when flour mills outside the city had ceased to work, these new mills of Russells enabled them to provide breadstuffs to an unprecedented extent to the Unions, where almost instant supplies were required to prevent the Famine actually taking possession inside the workhouses.

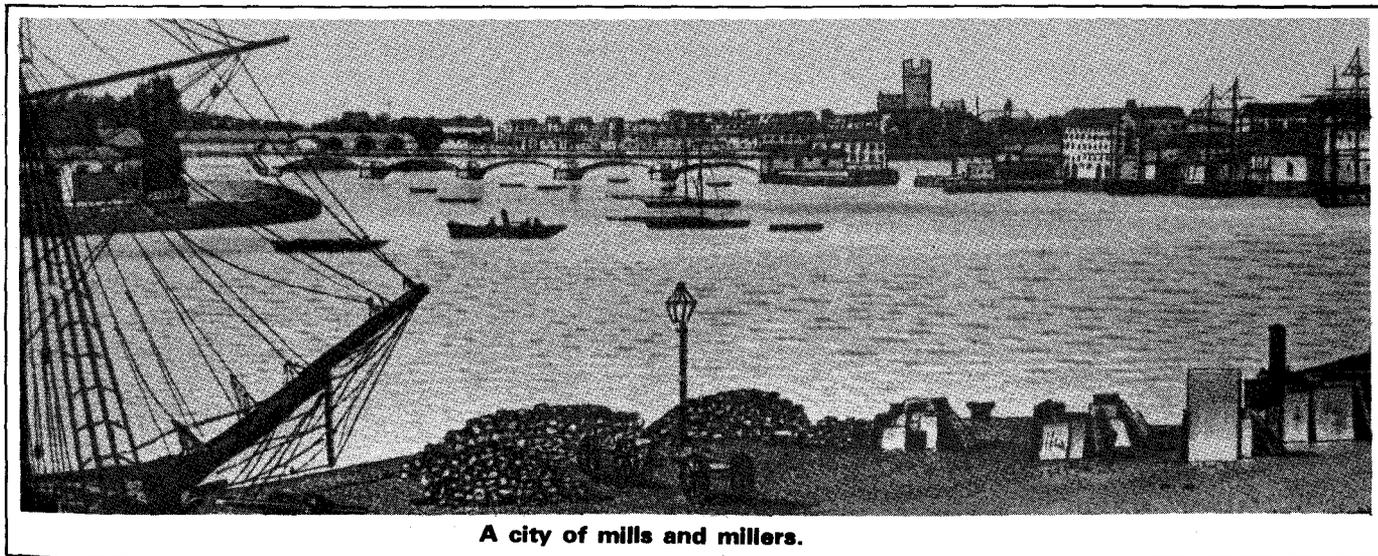
So as the new mills were erected the old ones came tumbling down, leaving little trace of ever having been. In 1763 the mill which stood at the end of Breviter's Lane was taken down, and the new quay continued from thence to the pierhead, where formerly stood a battery of nine-pounders.

Occasionally, wandering around the city, a name brings back a memory. In Upper William Street there is an archway, known to generations of Limerick people as Pike's Bow. This was called after James Martin Pike, another prosperous corn merchant of the olden days, who had his store and residence inside the Bow.

#### THE CITY ROLLER MILLS

In comparison with the other mills the City Roller Mills had a short life. They were built in 1885 by James Bannatyne and Sons and dismantled and sold in 1945. Their site is now occupied by the new Post Office building in Roche's Street.

The two firms, J.N. Russell and Sons, and James Bannatyne and Sons, had a complete monopoly of the flour milling industry in and around Limerick until 1930, when their interests were purchased by Joseph Rank Limited, and a Company known as Ranks (Ireland), Limited was formed. Since then flour milling has been concentrated in one enormous building at Shannon Mills, together with a provender and flaking mill and curing plant, which are amongst the most modern in Europe, and one of the few things which the ancient and most modern have in common is their reliance for power on the harnessing of the river Shannon.



A city of mills and millers.