

# LIMERICK CHRONICLE

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at the Limerick Show

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DOWN MEMORY LANE WITH THE COUNTRY'S OLDEST TITLE

## Last hangman of Limerick

**J**AMES Ryan, who died in 1836, was one of the last native Irish hangmen. It is believed that he lived in Rhebogue for a number of years after he had come into the city from the parish of Murroe before he was forced, by the wrath of the local people, to seek sanctuary inside the stout walls of the County Gaol.

There, the Governor engaged him in doing odd jobs around the prison in between his professional engagements.

For some time after the building of the county Gaol, in 1821, executions were still carried out at Gallows Green (Cromwell's Ford) in Singland, and the "Stretcher" - as Ryan was more commonly known - performed every execution there since the early part of the century, including that of John Scanlan and Stephen Sullivan, the murderers of Ellen Hanley (the Colleen Bawn).

Executions were afterwards carried out in Mulgrave Street, outside the gaol, much to the dissatisfaction of the "Stretcher" who is said to have observed the green (Gallows Green) can hold a bigger crowd.

Evidently, he was a man who liked playing to the gallery.

It is hard to understand how the "Stretcher" was allowed to live out a long life and die in his bed.

In accordance with the manner in which the one-sided law administered at the time, we can assume that many of his victims were convicted on meager evidence, and no doubt, many of them were completely innocent.

While the responsibility for these miscarriages of justice rested with the courts, the "Stretcher" had to carry all the blame.

An extraordinary continuation of this blatant injustice ensures, even at the present time, that an Irish citizen is unlikely to be treated with justice in an English Court.

He was hated and shunned by everyone, and anyone found dealing with him in any way was ostracised.

In the summer of 1836 the following colourful news item appeared in the local press:

"This morning, James Ryan, who has been executioner for this and adjoining counties for the past 28 years, breathed his last in the County Limerick jail, at the advanced age of 86 years, having up to the moment of his departure retained all his faculties."

The death of that veteran finisher of the law, Tom Galvin, the late executioner in Dublin, left the seniority



The surviving façade is all that remains of Limerick Gaol which faces Crosbie Row and is part of the Limerick City and County offices at Merchant's Quay

of the profession to Ryan, whose death, rumour has it, was accelerated by the disappointment he felt at no capital conviction having been ordered in his favour either at Ennis or Limerick Assizes, upon which he had calculated with very sanguine hopes.

However, for some days previous to his death, he manifested a religious sense of approaching dissolution, and the visits of the Roman Catholic Chaplin helped to prepare him for that bourne where he had dispatched so many culprits before

himself.

The Tom Galvin mentioned here was the sadist who butchered many of the United Irishmen.

It was he who displayed that severed head of Robert Emmet to the crowd in Thomas Street.

The fun really began after the "Stretcher" was buried in St Patrick's churchyard, only a few hundred yards from the scene of his professional operations.

Three weeks after the funeral the following comment appeared in the Limerick Chronicle of May 9, 1836:

"A brutal exhibition was made in

Patrick's church-yard, where a number of person disinterred the remains of the old executioner, James Ryan, from the forced open coffin, tied a straw rope around the neck and dragged the body out of the churchyard, amidst shouts and execrations, and threw it into a boundary ditch or dyke.

This has been privately interred in or about the gaol, where he was an inmate.

They were found the following morning and re-interred in the same grave by the police, who maintained

a night-and-day vigil by the grave for a fortnight.

But the people of Park had no intention of allowing the sacred dust hangman.

After the guard was withdrawn, the corpse was again taken up and treated as before.

The police gathered the remains of the remains from the roadside at Boreen-a-hoult and brought them to the County Gaol where they were buried among his victims.

This article first appeared in The Leader on September 3, 1996.