The Hidden History of Limerick Skating Rink

If one walks up O'Connell Avenue, Limerick and turns into Clontarf Place, one may see an apartment block, on the left hand side of the street, similar to many built during the "Celtic Tiger" years. Some readers may recall that the Treaty Press operated a successful business for many years at this location. The history of this particular site is however, of major historical importance to Limerick city, in terms of culture and entertainment. From 1876 to 1917 it was the focal point for some of the most innovative entertainment of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Limerick's first roller-skating rink was located here and when the novelty of cinema took hold in Limerick city the building was refurbished to accommodate the growing demand for "moving pictures".

In 1876 the National Skating Rink Company of Ireland announced the opening of a roller-skating rink at Wellesley Place (Clontarf Place) off Military Road (O'Connell Avenue) on 21 May. Roller-skating was a new form of entertainment, which had swept across the world in the 1870s. The idea behind roller-skating or rink was that it provided people who worked indoors in shops and offices, with a form of exercise as well as providing them with entertainment. In Ireland the craze for roller-skating began in the early 1870s and by 1875 roller-skating venues included Bray Skating Rink, The Dublin Skating Rink, Kingstown Rink and Earlsfort Terrace Skating Rink. The National Skating Rink Company of Ireland was established on 24 May 1876 and the company opened the first roller-skating rink in Limerick at the end of May, a second in Waterford on 12 July 1876 and a third rink was opened at Queen's (Cobh) County Cork in December 1876. In early February 1877 a rink was opened at Clonmel and at the first Annual General Meeting, it was reported that the acquisition of The Carragh Skating Company was almost completed and it was hoped to have the rink in Londonerry ready by 14 February 1877. It is also known that there were venues in Trimmore and Killarney although it is unclear when they opened.

It is likely that the initial success of the roller-skating rink in Limerick city prompted the directors of the National Skating Rink Company of Ireland to open other rinks across Ireland. The day after the Limerick rink opened the Limerick Chronicle gave a very positive report on the building reporting that:

"The site chosen for the rink is one of the best that could have been selected. It is situated on the Military road, one of the handsomest suburbs of the city and is within five minutes walk of the principal streets of the city."

The paper's editorial went on to say:

"The area of the rink is about 1,500 yards and one third of this space is covered over so that skating can be practiced in all kinds of weather. The general arrangements are of the most complete description, everything has been done to promote the comfort of the skaters and to make the rink a pleasant place of resort. Waiting rooms and skate rooms for both sexes have been tastefully fitted up and as there is a restaurant on the premises visitors can procure refreshment without being put to the inconvenience of leaving the building."

On the day of the opening of the rink a large crowd gathered outside to watch the invited guests arrive. Amongst the dignitaries invited to attend were Captain Byng (Aide-de-Camp to the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland), Miss Delmege, Colonel and Mrs Bernard and Dr William Carte. Both the invited guests and the members of the public were treated to an exhibition of roller-skating by professional skaters from Dublin. Afterwards some of the invited guests attempted the roller-skating for themselves. It is reported that some of those who tried to skate lost their balance in the attempt although none were seriously hurt. Roller-skating proved very popular with the citizens of Limerick city. According to the report of the first meeting of the National Skating Rink Company of Ireland, the Limerick venue generated sales..."
Limerick Roller Skating Rink,
Wellesley Place, Limerick.

GRAND XMAS CARNIVAL!

Extract from the Limerick Chronicle, 28th Dec., 1909:—

GRAND CARNIVAL at the ROLLER SKATING RINK.
A BRILLIANT SUCCESS!

For many years past a more brilliant, novel, and altogether picturesque spectacle has not been witnessed in Limerick than the "Grand Fancy Masked or Evening Dress Carnival" which was held at the Roller Skating Rink, Wellesley Place, on Thursday evening last, the 23rd December. It was the first Carnival organised by the Directors since the opening of the Rink a couple of months since, and they and all who took part in the function which provided great social enjoyment and the keenest interest...
of £758 15s.6d. in the first three months it operated. The palace had become so popular in Ireland that the National Skating Rink Company of Ireland was able to trade successfully on the Dublin Stock Exchange. However, the success was short lived. On 15 May 1878 it was reported that the company had gone into liquidation. Shortly afterwards the roller-skating rink in Limerick was sold off. According to the Irish Times there were three bidders for the business, Daniel Tucker put in a bid of £500, John Lavertine (a wine merchant from Limerick city) put in a bid of £300 and there was a third undisclosed bid from a third person. After protracted negotiations the rink was sold to Daniel Tucker. In 1880 the owner of the rink was John Lavertine. Strange, when John Lavertine died in 1916 the obituary in the Limerick Chronicle makes no mention of the fact that he owned the premises or if he had sold it on. It is likely that sometime in the 1880s John Lavertine closed down the rink. By the mid to late 1890s roller-skating had, like other novelties, become less popular with the public. An analysis of both the Limerick Chronicle and the Limerick Leader shows that the roller-skating rink was not mentioned nor was it advertised in either of the newspapers in Limerick city. With the arrival of cinema to Ireland in 1895 Limerick citizens had a new novelty to entertain them. Although it has to be said when the cinema was first brought to the Theatre Royal by the then proprietor Mr Fogarty on 24 April 1896, the Limerick Leader editorial was less than impressed saying that the Cinematograph [sic] is itself an entertainment replete with novelty. By 1905 the cinema was gaining in popularity, short films such as 'Trip to Switzerland' and 'Local Pictures' provided audiences with moving pictures of events that had happened locally, nationally and internationally and proved very popular with Limerick audiences. In 1900-5, Wellesley Place was owned by Stephen Dowling and he leased it to Patrick Molloy, who used it as a builder's yard. Sometime in late 1906 the premises changed ownership again and it reverted back, for a short time at least, to a roller-skating rink. Mr Edward Kild (a provisions merchant from Limerick) was a director of the new skating company and Mr George Ledger was the company secretary. In November 1909 the Limerick Chronicle reported that work on the new roller-skating rink (to be called the Rink Palace) was nearly completed and it would open shortly. It would seem from the description of the building that it had a more opulent appearance than before:

Limerick Skating Rink medal (Limerick Museum)

An example of the type of entertainment to be found at the Rink Palace was depicted in an advertisement on 21 December 1909. The advertisement announced the 'First Grand Fancy Masked or Evening Dress Carnival' to be held on Thursday 23 December 1909. The band of the 5th Royal Munster Fusiliers supplied the music and prizes were given to the best-dressed male and female. The returns for the 1911 National Census of Ireland show that there were at least six people employed at the Rink Palace, as follows:

Joe Thompson (17) Messenger Boy, George Collins (17) Porter, Allie Moore (28) Pro-Skater, Thomas Simpson (48) Caretaker, Elizabeth Mary Neagle (21) Office Girl and James Montgomery (24) Manager. The new skating rink, like its predecessor, came to a sudden demise. Cinema had continued to develop and in 1910 the first commercial films began to be made. The first director to start making commercial films in Ireland was Sidney Olcott whose first film 'The Lad from Old Ireland' received critical acclaim on 4 June 1910 it was announced that the Rink Palace was to re-open as the Rink Electric Picture Palace (it was also called the Rink Picture Palace). The first short film shown on the opening night was the funeral of King Edward VII. Other films included, 'The Man Hunt', and 'The Queen of Burlesque.' The ticket price for this first show was 1 shilling for stalls and front row and 6 pence for the pits and the promenade. The Rink Picture Palace continued to provide a roller-skating rink for its customers as well as providing a cinema-house. However, a decision was made to convert the entire building into a cinema and in 1911, the Rink Picture Palace became the first purpose built cinema in Limerick city. It was not just the variety of films offered, such as 'Getting Shoes Re-Heeled' and newsreels from WE Gazette (all of which were charged on a weekly basis) that made the Rink Picture Palace special. It also offered prizes to those who attended the cinema. On 22 May 1911, it offered six return tickets to the seaside towns of Kilkee in county Clare and Ballybunion in county...
Kerry. On 12 June 1911, return tickets to London for the Coronation of King George V were offered as prizes. In order to compete the Theatre Royal located two blocks away (which also operated as a cinema) began to offer prizes to their audiences. The first prize drawer was for tickets to a local boat regatta. A subsequent draw offered cash prizes to their patrons ranging from ten shillings to two pounds.

As a further competition to the Rink Picture Palace the Gaiety Theatre offered by Donald McCarthy & Sons opened in 1912 at 45, Georges Street (O'Connell Street), which was subsequently the premises of City Hall parking lot when a Pianoforte or Piano Department, it was announced that they intended setting up a "Biop Theatre with high-class cinema." Like the Theatre Royal and the Rink Picture Palace, the Gaiety Theatre also offered prizes to their patrons. The Rink Picture Palace, already facing stiff competition from the Theatre Royal now had to contend with a second cinema house, within a couple of blocks of its premises and all three cinema venues were vying for the same audience. While it is not possible to determine exactly what caused the decline of the Rink Picture Palace, it is clear that after September 1912, it had begun to lose prominence in terms of media coverage in Limerick city. By 1915, the business had changed owners and now traded as 'Jameson Rink Palace' and by the 2 March 1917 this too had gone into liquidation. By 1918 the premises had been converted back into a builders yards and was used by James McMahon, Builders Providers.

The roller skating rink at Clontarf Place has certainly had a chequered history. From its initial beginning in 1578 it proved immensely popular with the citizens of Limerick city. Cinema offers provided an opportunity to be transported to exotic climates and to places that they would never have seen in their lifetime. It allowed them to escape for an hour or so from the humdrum of everyday life. Roller skating could not compete with the entertainment value that cinema provided. It is likely that the expensive prizes, such as travel tickets and cash, coupled with the arrival of more cinema-houses in Limerick city, such as the Gaiety Theatre in 1912 were the cause of the decline of the Rink Picture Palace. The newer cinemas-houses were located more centrally and in 1917 when the Rink Picture Palace, now called the Jameson Rink Palace, went into liquidation it marked the end of another Limerick city business, albeit a short lived one. Sadly today there is no physical evidence in Clontarf Place to show where this impressive entertainment venue once stood and what it might have looked like. All that is left are the fragmented records, which historians have to piece together in order to reconstruct the history of this once proud entertainment venue.

REFERENCES
1. The work Margaret Lyddy has done on the Rink Picture Palace must be acknowledged, see Margaret Lyddy, St Joseph Parish: A History (Limerick, 1999).
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4. Ibid 23 October 1876, Irish Times, 3 February 1877.
5. Ibid 3 February 1877.
6. Limerick Chronicle 1 June 1876.
7. Ibid.
8. Freeman's Journal 19 October 1876.
10. Ibid 15 May 1876.
11. Irish Times 26 March 1878.
15. Limerick Leader 24 April 1916.
24. Ibid 13 May 1911.
26. Ibid 10 July 1912.
27. Ibid 10 June 1912.
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