The Rise And Fall Of Georgian Limerick

Introduction

One of six Georgian properties built in 1738, Number Two Pery Square, Limerick, still exudes the splendour of ancient Greece and Rome. Having been painstakingly restored between 1996 and 1999 it was finally re-opened to the public on December 10th, 1999 by, then, President of Ireland, Mary McAleese. Paradoxically, having been built towards the end of the Georgian era (1714-1830), as the crisis of the Great Famine loomed, its use has once again been curtailed by economic decline. For, 'boom and bust' were not just 21st century preoccupations but rather central features of life in Georgian Limerick as well.

Georgian Era Economics

In 1779 'free trade' within the British economic zone helped to create a period of unparalleled prosperity for Georgian Ireland - named after the reign of four Hanoverian Kings called George (I-IV). Trade was liberalised and as a result, new markets emerged in textiles, food processing, glass making and publishing. The effects on Irish society were enormous with the average wage doubling and the cost of living rising dramatically. Indeed, new authorities like the 'Inland Navigation Authority' had to be established to supervise the resulting building boom. The country also underwent a population boom with the numbers of people living on the Island rising to four million – Dublin was now the second largest city in the British Empire (behind London). Irish cities remained essentially small and densely populated medieval centres, however. Their redevelopment began with the establishment of a 'Wide Streets Commission' (1757), which focused on creating wide and spacious Georgian boulevards. House rent doubled nationally from 1780 and quadrupled in some places. Indeed, just as in recent times, property speculators began a race to buy land, on which to build new houses. As a result of this 'property bubble', expansive monetary policy, lax credit standards and direct lending of easy money to speculators became the norm. Indeed, the Bank of Ireland was typical of this unregulated sector having boards of directors composed of several private bankers and prominent property developers. Soon, it had succeeded in multiplying its own money issue by over 360 percent in just ten years. The result was a Georgian property boom of unprecedented proportions.

by John Rainsford

The Speculators Of Pery Square

In 1752 Limerick was still a fortified town, described by one visitor, (Richard Pococke) as 'a dirty, disagreeable place'. However, by the mid-18th century, its fortunes began to change as agricultural exports to Britain boomed. Indeed, in 1760 the British government, finally, removed Limerick's fortress status and tore down the front doors of Georgian properties were typically flanked by Doric columns and had elliptical fanlights providing light to the hallways below.
its old garrison walls opening the city to further growth and development in the process. Edmund Sexton Pery (1719-1806) was a well-known philanthropist, MP and Speaker in the Irish House of Commons who had a grand vision for his native city. Although land was extremely scarce at the time (entrepreneurs having invested heavily over the previous 25 years) an area of virgin land lay on the outskirts of the city called ‘Newtown Pery’. Here, a lavish series of townhouses were planned which would encompass those classical pre-occupations with squares, parks, crescents and circuses.

In November 1834, a meeting of interested parties was organised, at the offices of Daniel Barrington (the ‘Crown Solicitor for Munster’). He was also the legal representative of the Pery family and received an annual income of £15,000.

It was he who created the ‘Pery Square Tontine Company’ and found the investors necessary to finance the building of 48 houses (in eight terraces of six houses each) on the finest residential land still available in the city. Unfortunately, only six of the scheduled 48 ‘Upper Market’ terraced houses were ever actually built. Nevertheless, the Pery family saw the advantage of converting some of their property lots into cash. By leasing the land to developers they could earn both rental income and annual ground rents through the retention of the freehold title. In due course this would make them one of the wealthiest families in all of Limerick. Indeed, reminiscent of the ‘cosy cartels’ of modern times, Joseph Barrington, father of Daniel, facilitated this development by acquiring part of the adjacent land (‘South Priors Land’) from the First Earl of Limerick (Edmund Henry Pery). In a Lease dated May 31, 1831, he connected George Street (O’Connell St.) to the ‘Newtown’ via a road later named ‘Barrington Street’ (1833) in his honour.

In November 1834 and again in January 1835 two advertisements were placed in the ‘Limerick Chronicle’ in order to attract investors. While little progress was made in 1835, in May 1836 another meeting was agreed. This time, share instalments were paid at the offices of D.F.G. Mahony and Sons, with actual construction taking place from 1836 until the spring of 1838. The supervising architect was James Pain whose grandfather, William Pain, was the author of the definitive ‘Practical House Carpenter’ (1789) — a reference work for Georgian architecture in the British Isles. He was, also, one of the founders of English architecture. In August 1838 tenants were sought for one of the six houses completed and by October 1838 four houses had tenants with the sixth completed in 1839. Such persons were drawn from the upper middle classes and professional or business elites who were able to afford rents in excess of £120 per annum. They included the Crown Solicitor and land agent for Pery Square, Daniel Barrington, who occupied Number One Pery Square. The Chief Police Magistrate, Thomas P. Vokes, became the first occupant of Number Six Pery Square. The Reverend Mr. Willis operated a school for ‘young gentlemen’ at Number Five (until he died in 1846) while a Mrs Lloyd (in Number Three) was a widow. Peter O’Brien, a wine merchant and Michael Gavin, a provisions merchant, were also tenants. George McKern owner of McKern’s Printers (founded 1807) and Alderman Henry Watson, a four times Mayor of Limerick and proprietor of the Unionist ‘Limerick Chronicle’, were both shareholders.

Matthew Barrington, a brother of Daniel Barrington, also assisted the project. In 1839 he commissioned architect William Bardwell to build Glenstal Castle (now Abbey) near Murroe, in County Limerick, in the Norman Revivalist Style. The Barrington’s also financed the building of Barrington’s Hospital (1831) on George’s Quay and the erection of the Spring Rice Monument (1829) in the Public Park, near Pery Square. The Tontine financial scheme, of which two Pery Square investors had prior experience, was chosen to raise the necessary finances. Daniel Barrington drafted the Articles of Association (Charter Party Agreement) to govern the affairs of the ‘Pery Square Tontine Company’, for which a prospectus was launched in January 1835. The ‘Company’ created an investment opportunity for shareholders who would benefit from the rental income raised. The original shareholders nominated certain named individuals for their shares. As each nominee for a share died the surplus shares were re-distributed amongst surviving shareholders thus increasing the value of each dividend offered.

However, the ‘winner takes all’ approach, of earlier Tontines, was reviled...
under recently enacted legislation. This was reflected in the ‘Charter Party Agreement’ of the ‘Pery Square Tontine Company’. Now, one single winner was replaced by the last six shareholders who would each get a house. In this way the ‘Pery Square Tontine’ raised capital worth £10,680 with 89 shares having a paid-up value of £120 per share. The construction value of each house (1836-1838) was £1,780 compared to £1,116 per house on the Crescent in 1811.

‘Tontines’ As Financial Instruments

Ballentine’s Law Dictionary defines the ‘Tontine’ as ‘an arrangement in which equal sums of money are contributed by a number of persons to a pot or kitty (Escrow) and the total sum is awarded to the participant who outlives the others’. Tontines were a popular financial instrument in countries like England, France and the USA in the 18th and 19th centuries. The term originated from Italian banker Lorenzo De Tonti (1602-1684) who in 1633 created a fund in Naples from which a dividend was paid to shareholders each year. Upon the death of a member the share was forfeited and the dividend redistributed amongst the survivors. It was the state, however, which received all the capital once the last shareholder died. The French used the device extensively under Louis XIV (1638-1715). In 1889, for example, ‘the Sun King’ established a ‘Tontine’ which lasted for well over 40 years with an investment of $1,500 yielding $367,500 to the last survivor. Indeed, the ‘Tontine Latzuge’, which began in 1791, lasted until 1868.

In the USA ‘Tontines’ were used to finance building programs but were banned when some shareholders began to die mysteriously. The ‘Tontine Act’ was passed by the English Parliament in 1683 and further legislation was enacted under George III (1738-1820). Indeed, Irish playwright Richard Brinsley Sheridan wrote the play ‘School for Scandal’ (1777) with one character joking: ‘I hear he pays as many annuities as the Irish Tontine’. A ‘Tontine Coffee House’ was even built in New York (1792-1794) and located along the waterfront near Wall Street. Here meetings took place between shipowners and merchants. It was a kind of ‘International Shipping Exchange’ with many Irish Sea Captains procuring freight for the return voyage to Ireland having deposited their emigrants on the quays nearby.

In 1702, 24 auctioneers and brokers, in commodities, met under the ‘Buttonwood Tree’ to sign the ‘Buttonwood Agreement’. This allowed them to by-pass federal laws, forbidding the trading of government stocks in public, by trading in the Tontine Coffee House instead.

The meeting led to the founding of the ‘Wall Street (NY) Stock Exchange’ by these early ‘Stockbrokers’. Indeed, ‘Tontines’ were used to finance a number of property developments in Limerick also. For example, ‘The George Street Tontine’ involved the construction of nine houses built by the ‘Limerick Tontine Building Company’ (1806). Buildings were constructed in Mallow Street, Hartstown Street and what is now the Belltable Arts Centre.

Local architect Robert O’Callaghan-Newenham launched the ‘Richmond Place West Tontine Company’ in 1807. However, substantial refinancing led to the eventual construction of just three houses with 35 investors. These included, Andrew Watson, City Alderman and co-owner of the ‘Limerick Chronicle’ newspaper. His business partner was the merchant Alderman Dennis Fitzgerald Mahony. The Jesuit’s ‘Crescent College’ occupied the site by 1882. The Reverend John Hoare created the ‘Richmond Place East Tontine Company’ between 1805 and 1809. Here the poor and some unfortunate from the debtors goal were given sanctuary in coal bunkers beneath the pavement. A ‘Castleconnell Tontine’ was established in 1812 leading to the construction of four new houses, which still stand today.

The 89 shares in the ‘Pery Square Tontine Company’ were owned by 23 shareholders who are named in the Schedule of the Charter Party (Articles of Agreement) published by George McKern in 1841. The Pery and Barrington families, together, held 39 of the 89 shares, giving them outright control of the ‘Tontine Company’. Shares became extinct following the death of a nominee, who was initially appointed.
with a view towards longevity. Shareholders were also free to sell valid shares on the open market. Indeed, Alderman Henry Watson purchased six shares and nominated His Royal Highness Prince Albert (then aged 22 years) as a nominee for one of his shares. Nominees gained nothing from the process with the scheme being designed to self-extinguish over a period of time. Prince Albert married Queen Victoria in 1840, just as the 'Pery Square Toutine Company' commenced business, but he died in 1841—his share expiring also.

William Croker Deacon was the youngest nominee aged only one year old with Thomas Williams, being the oldest, at thirty years. They were both related to and sponsored by members of the Barrington family. It was the duty of the Secretary of the Company to maintain a Share Register listing the surviving shareholders and a 'death list' was compiled regularly from obituaries in the newspapers. Dividends were paid twice yearly to surviving shareholders and the amount paid out increased as the number of shares decreased over time. Each shareholder had to prove, to the company Secretary, that his or her nominee was still alive in order to receive their dividend. However, this often proved to be a difficult task as some nominees were not so easily traced, having died incognito.

**Housing The Georgian Elite**

In looking to the glories of the past a prosperous Georgian elite, in Limerick, spared no expense in showcasing their exclusivity. The Pery Square townhouses would be composed of four storeys located over spacious basements below. High quality 'ashlar' stone, taken from local limestone quarries, was used on the ground floor and basement exteriors while good quality red/brown brickwork was used on the upper floors. There were 27 stone staircases situated conveniently around Limerick City then. Local building stone (pale grey-blue limestone) was of good quality and located in large blocks, which were both durable and slow, weathering. In contrast, Dublin's 'Calp' limestone and imported Dorset 'Portland' stone were of poorer quality leading to the rapid deterioration of Georgian Dublin in later years.

Ironically, the terraced block, which was the defining feature of the Georgians' 'Newtown', had its origins in the Great Fire of London (1666). Now, fire resistant brick provided a measure of both solidity and safety in line with fire restrictions laid down by the Building Act (1707). A walled 'Parapet' some 18 inches high was also built above the roof line both in front and to the rear, hiding a double-pitched roof, which gave the Georgian House its classic 'box shape'. From 1709 onwards, exposed woodwork was further discouraged by the insistence that window frames be set back a minimum of four inches from the outer wall. Under the 1771 Building Act terraced houses were classified according to four types called 'rates' ('nobility', 'merchants', 'clerks' and 'mechanics') each with separate building specifications required for the number of storeys, thickness of walls and window patterns.

Typically, Doric columns flanked the front doors of these properties and each had an elliptical fanlight providing light to the hallway. These flanks attempt to replicate the glories of the Roman triumphal arch in the style of Andrea Palladio's (1508-1580) definitive work 'Four Books of Architecture'. The end houses are also located slightly forward with side entrances giving the illusion of Palladian wings. Forged iron railings, set in limestone plinths, protect the deep basements and are pointed in spear heads, originally painted green, in recollection of the bronze weapons of antiquity. Below lies the basement 'moot' which provided some protection against any 'non-desirables' that might stray into the 'Crescent'. Coal deliveries were made via metal coalhole covers on the pavement, marked 'P' (Pery Square), so that no inconvenience was given to the genteel inhabitants inside.

The window bays of the houses are vertically aligned from the basements recalling the templar columns of antiquity and the first floor iron balconies run the full length of the façade, supported by projecting corbels. The Pery family hired Italian architect Davis Ducart to design the 'Newtown—modelled on the royal elegant of cities like London and Bath'. However, it is thought likely that James Pain was the architect of the Georgian Houses therein. He had already completed important commissions for the gentry of Munster and was a leading figure in the 'Pery Square Toutine Company'.

Together with his brother George, who was based in Cork, they designed Dromoland Castle, County Clare, Mitchelstown Castle, County Cork and the early phase of Adare Manor, in County Limerick. They also designed St. Michael's Church, in Pery Square (1844) having trained in England under the Regency architect, John Nash. Extensive use was made of vernacular materials in the Pery Square area. Indeed, only the pine floors have been made from imported Baltic or North American wood. Limerick brick, for example, was widely available since the 17th century with several brick works located along the Shannon. These provided rough or 'core' bricks suitable for the inner layers of the exterior walls.

County Clare brick, from the Fergus and Bunnarty Rivers, was transported to Limerick to provide a higher level of facing. Any ironwork, for example, the coalhole covers, balconies and railings were contracted out to local foundries. The stone flags, used in the lower basement, are from a large quarry situated at Moneypoint in County Clare. Roofing slate was obtained from slate quarries in Killaloe and Tipperary. These were both transported to the city by canal, with any glass coming by sea, as no glassworks were located nearby.

The entrance hall and stairs of Number Two Pery Square have a unique 'marbling' effect on the walls. This 'marbleised' paintwork was fashionable in the early 19th century as a throw back to the glories of ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome. Laid down in 'block layer' patterns and extending to the top of the house the resins used in the paint have darkened naturally over the years. The front rooms of these houses were used as offices or libraries from which gentlemen conducted their business. They might also act as a front parlour to receive visitors deemed unworthy of the first floor drawing rooms.

The back rooms of the ground floors were used as breakfast parlours and/or dining rooms with a partition wall hiding a shallow arched recess through which meals could be served. The first floor stairs were dominated by elegant curved banisters with an extra first floor room or 'return' having four big windows overlooking the garden. This area has abundant natural light and could so easily have been
used as a place for reading, needlework or confidential chats befitting a 'ladies room'.

Two drawing rooms, located on the first floor of Number Two Pery Square, are called the 'Piano Nobile' or 'Noble Floor', which are of Italian origin. These rooms held the precious family silver, paintings and furniture shielded from damaging sunlight by shutters and curtains.

The front room of the two faces over the park, then a private amenity for Georgian residents. Interconnecting double doors could be opened to create one large room for soirées at which guests played piano, sang ballads, waltzed and dined. The main staircase leads to a second floor with a 'master bedroom' and 'lady's boudoir'.

There is also a third floor with servants' quarters.

The basement, meanwhile, was uniquely divided into two levels by a 'Mezzanine Floor'. This allowed the housekeeper to supervise kitchen staff through a window in her sleeping quarters. Along with the coal vaults on the lower level there were also sleeping quarters for the servants on the upper level, space for extra storage and 'boy's beds'. This was a feature not seen in the Georgian Houses of Dublin, London or elsewhere.

The restored urban garden outside is also unique having a rectangular lawn, straight paths, flowerbeds, plants, trees and shrubs from the 18th century. Herbs and culinary shrubs were grown here to provide the householders with food, organic medicine and a remedy for stomach ache. Rosemary leaves and leaves from the Bay Tree were used to flavour meat. A south facing wall allowed fruits, like pears, to grow and ripen as the brick retained heat well. Finally, two 'privies' were located at the back of the garden, one of which was for the servants' use only.

Both were built behind a brick wall to keep them out of sight of any visitors. A 'Coach House Lane' existed here, used to stable horses, carriages and store hay. It was accessed via 'Coach House Lane' and was much larger than the usual 'mews' building to the rear of such houses. This access point also allowed the 'Night-Sell Men' to take away human waste from the 'privies' via a 'tradesman's entrance' - without causing the nobility any offence.

Winners And Losers Of The Georgian Lottery

The seventh and last nominee of the 'Pery Square Tontine Company' was Joseph Thomas Barrington who died in 1913. His death triggered the 'Scheme of Survivorship Clause' of the 'Charter Agreement' ending the company's existence. All assets of the 'Company' and the six houses at Pery Square were to be divided amongst the last six shareholders as decreed. Amazingly only two of the original 89 shares remained in the families of the original 23 shareholders. The Pery family, who held 18 shares in 1840, had just one by 1913. The Barrington family who owned 26 shares in 1840 had none by 1913. Instead, members of the Vanderkiste family bought the shares, which had been launched on the open market, following the deaths of Daniel and Matthew Barrington.

In 1840, when the Tontine began, the Vanderkiste's were tenants and not shareholders. John Vanderkiste shared a house at Number One Pery Square with Daniel Barrington to whom he was related by marriage. When Daniel died in 1843, John Vanderkiste became Land Agent to the Earl of Limerick in his place. When Alderman and Trustee of the Company, Henry Watson, died in 1860 the shareholders asked Vanderkiste to take over the running of the Tontine. He took up residence in Number Six Pery Square in 1870 and remained there until his death in 1893. Both he and his brother William bought numerous shares in the 'Pery Square Tontine Company' over the years. In 1883 John Vanderkiste died (without having any children) leaving all his shares to his brother, William, then, died in 1908 leaving the shares (23 of the remaining 56 live shares) to his widow Sophia Vanderkiste.

The founder of the family was ironically called 'Freegift' William Vanderkiste - as he seen on his 'Manumission Certificate signed in Cork, in 1813. William and his family moved to Limerick in the 1820s when he took up the post of 'Comptroller of the Port of Limerick'.

In 1913 (100 years after William's wedding) daughter-in-law Sophia received the deeds to Numbers One, Two and Three Pery Square. She was the single biggest winner of the Tontine eventually holding three of the six remaining shares. She was 77 years old. In January 1919 she sold Number Two Pery Square to Stephen and Mina McCarthy at the tender age of 83 years old. She might have had four shares as one of her nominees, Joseph Thomas Barrington, died in 1913 aged 79 years, leaving only very senior nominees to inherit. Also, in that year, Sir Vincent Nash, an estate agent in Limerick, gained possession of Number Four Pery Square. His father, James, purchased a share in 1884 from the Mahony estate. Colonel Cecil James Perry obtained possession of Number Six Pery Square and George Miller Harvey, Number Five. They were the lucky winners of a lottery scheme, which borrowed heavily from Darwinian notions about 'survival of the fittest'.

The Georgian End Game

The seeds of disaster in the Georgian era were sown by the revolution of 1788, which caused a recession in the country. Furthermore, the disbanding of the Irish Parliament led many gentry to flee abroad, especially to London. With the wealthy in exile expenditure decreased in the Irish economy and financial hardship became prevalent. Dublin, being essentially a political city, suffered more than Limerick, which retained its prosperity as a port, right up to famine times. Eventually, however, vast swathes of Limerick, Cork and Dublin became home to tenement buildings where once great Georgian mansions stood. Indeed, an 'Encumbered Estates Court' was set up (like today's NAMA) to deal with the effects of the resulting crisis.

By 1845, the Great Famine had caused the gentry, in Ireland, to lose vast fortunes, leaving their once lavish Georgian homes to be sold off cheaply. In most cases they were unceremoniously subdivided and rented to multiple families. Not surprisingly, Tuberculosis, Cholera and Typhoid became endemic to them. The resulting housing crisis lasted well into the 1960s with author Lee Dune writing 'Goodbye to the Hill' about his own experiences growing up in the Dublin tenements of the 1940s. The book graphically recounts how his fellow children (many barefoot and naked) died like flies of disease and malnutrition. Without any maintenance the old Georgian mansions rapidly deteriorated taking only a decade for many to become ruins.

Conclusions

The Pery Square 'Crescent' was the last example of Georgian townhouses to be built in Limerick. It was completed in 1838 under the guidance of the 'Pery Square Tontine Company'. Unfortunately, only six of the scheduled 48 upper market terraced houses were ever actually built. After 1838 the appetite for Georgian Houses faded and emigration seemed to make more sense for the Georgian elite following the 'Great Famine' of 1845.

Today, Number Two Pery Square, Limerick, stands as a reminder of the great architectural influences of the day. However, while we must appreciate the aesthetic excellence of the 'Georgian House and Garden' we must also acknowledge the serious social inequality that lay behind it. It is ironic that the future of Number Two Pery Square is currently in doubt following an economic crisis similar to that, which put-paid to the Georgian era itself.

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