

# Irish Estates, Corbally Limerick – Some Reflections

The opening decades of the twentieth century in Limerick city saw an exodus of the middle classes away from the inner to the outer suburbs. Subdivision by unscrupulous landlords had rendered Georgian townhouses to little more than tenement slums. These cramped living conditions encouraged tuberculosis outbreaks and the air was a cocktail of smells from the tannery and the abattoirs to supply the bacon factories. This shift was further intensified by the provision of government subsidies on new houses for owner-occupiers in response to the housing shortage of both private owner-occupiers and local authority housing. There was a lack of building materials during the inter-war years which severely curtailed house-building but undeterred the government encouraged local authorities to continue building, making use of the supplies still available.<sup>1</sup> Limerick had a readily available building material in concrete from the cement factory that operated in Mungret from 1938.

For centuries Corbally remained a sparsely populated area except for a scattering of small but highly ornamented demesnes such as India Ville, Park House and Corbally Palace.<sup>2</sup> Corbally Palace was the residence of landowner Pierce A. Shannon.<sup>3</sup> Shannon had purchased the greater part of the townland of Corbally from Col. William Thomas Monsell in 1833 for £22,000<sup>4</sup> developing the present Corbally Road. He built up a thriving business in the Corn-



Houses in Corbally Estate in 2009

(Emma Gilleece)

by E Gilleece and C O'Carroll

market where he traded as a wholesale ironmonger and ships chandler. His business ventures stretched as far as the Baltic region and Russia. When Limerick Corporation was reformed he took his place in the city administration becoming mayor in 1844. He also orchestrated for Corbally to be included within the city boundaries. His son Patrick Aloysius Shannon began leasing Corbally Palace and tollhouse in 1856. The house was not included in the rental

but it was eventually sold in 1867. This large three-storey house was last recorded cartographically in 1956.<sup>5</sup> It became the residence of Church of Ireland Bishop of Limerick until it was demolished to make way for St Munchin's College in 1958.<sup>6</sup> All that remains of Corbally Palace is the entrance gate on the Mill Road. The diocesan seminary had previously been at Park House, a mansion purchased in 1809 for R.C. bishop Dr John Young and located further down Corbally Road.<sup>7</sup> Eventually, it too was knocked down for the housing development College Park in the 1960s.

Recognising the urgency to accommodate the housing needs of the emerging professional middle classes Limerick Corporation identified 'Mr Vaughan's Lands at Corbally' in 1935 as suitable for a housing site with picturesque view of the river Shannon. This site too was once a fine mansion called Lanahrone House (referred to as Albert Villa in Griffiths Valuation 1850).<sup>8</sup> Lanahrone House was the residence of St Clare Hobson and stood well in from the road and commanded a splendid view of the river.<sup>9</sup> Its gate lodge was on Corbally Road near the Constabulary Barracks (today Sunnyside Montessori School). This greenbelt to the north was far enough outside the city to be near the countryside but still easily commutable to the urban centre. It epitomised the Garden City model of early twentieth century urban planning. The era of the 'big house', the last bastion of luxury in Ireland was over. A request was made 'to take the necessary steps to acquire portion of the lands as a housing site.'<sup>10</sup> The land remained undeveloped for a decade with the Town Planner scheduling it as 'a high-class residential area' according to the City Manager's Minutes.



Park House, which was demolished



LANAHRONE AVENUE,  
LIMERICK.

30th September, 1948.

Secretary,  
Limerick Corporation,  
Limerick.

Dear Sir,

I shall be most grateful if you will kindly let me know whether there are any requirements of the Corporation with which I have to comply before opening an Employment Agency or if there are any special regulations relating to same.

Thanking you,

Believe me, Sir,

Yours very truly,

*J. Esten-Cleverly*

J. Esten-Cleverly.

Letterhead, 57 Lanahrone Avenue, Limerick (Limerick Museum)

In February 1947 Irish Life submitted their offer to purchase the Lanahrone site<sup>11</sup> and Irish Estates Ltd began construction of the houses after the signing of the deeds on the 3 October 1947.<sup>12</sup> The Irish Estates is a wedge shaped scheme with its single entrance on Corbally Road. The roads of the estate were laid out in 1948 and in April of that year the Managing Director of the Irish Estates Ltd corresponded with the Limerick Corporation regarding the naming of the avenues.<sup>13</sup> They were named Plassey, Lanahrone, Abbey, Shannon and Rhebogoe. Lanahrone Avenue comprising of sixty houses that were first constructed in 1947-48 then contractors O'Sullivan Bros subsequently acquired a section of the site and built 74 houses. The Land Registry deeds outline that the houses were to be rented and not bought outright. The rent charged at £4 per week was related to what a middle class family could afford. According to one resident<sup>14</sup> who moved into the estate in the 1960s there was a portacabin in the fork in the road near the entrance which housed an estate manager who took care of the maintenance. It was another privilege of renting a property in the Irish Estates.

The estate comprises of 140 flat-roofed, semi-detached houses with garden to front and rear. Indicative of the occupants' social status, each house is furnished with a driveway to park their car and a garage. They are variations of the same International Style of house with simple concrete canopied entrance and originally would have had screwed metal casement windows. The beauty of these homes is their geometric simplicity. What makes this estate even more unusual for Limerick is the sense of space created not only by the generously large roads but also from the lack of boundary walls. This boundary-free layout is reminiscent of North American housing schemes with its expanse of green very pleasing to the eye. The original layout of the houses generally consisted of a ground floor with hall, cloakroom, drawing room, dining room and kitchen. The kitchen included the 'mod cons' of the day with Bakelite wall switches, the latest solid fuel cooker that heated the water supply and a butler's pantry. Upstairs there were 3-4 bedrooms each with a fireplace and built-in wardrobes and a bathroom. The luxury of an indoor bathroom in the forties is not to be underestimated. The 1946 Census re-

corded that of the 662,000 private dwellings in the country only 15% had a fixed bath, while just 23% had an indoor lavatory.<sup>15</sup>

It is important to spell out the origins and corporate structure of Irish Life and their subsidiary company Irish Estates Ltd. It was first established in 1939 as a state body and gradually absorbed other Irish assurance companies who had got into financial difficulties. Subsequently British companies withdrew from the Irish market and transferred their portfolios to Irish Life. These included the Prudential, Britannic, Liverpool Victoria Friendly Society, the Friendly and the Refuge. The customers of Irish Life were mainly working class families who required burial and limited life insurance. Irish Life employed a great number of collectors who called weekly to collect premium instalments. In recent years Irish Life has greatly expanded by acquiring other financial institutions. Early this year it was sold to the Great-West Lifeco of Canada for €1.3 billion.

The organisational structure of Irish Estates Ltd was quite unique for its time in Ireland. The concept which involved the combination of builder and all technical consultants, architects, engineers, in a single organisation was proposed and set up by Frank Boyland who had wide experience of the US construction industry. He was a director of Irish Estates Ltd. It was envisaged that Irish Estates could construct investment properties for the Irish Life investment portfolio as well as offering a cost effective 'one stop shop', to companies seeking to have built structures such as housing, cinemas or factories. The first such project to be undertaken was the Irish Estates. Their view was mainly based on representations received from the Department of Industry and Commerce, Aer Lingus and the various transatlantic airlines that had bases at Shannon Airport. All were seeking family accommodation for their staff. The scheme was designed by architect W.J Convery who was directed by Boyland to produce an American style housing estate. This was to appeal to the employees of airlines such as American overseas airlines Pan Am, Sabena and Tiger who all lived in the Irish Estates during that period. Despite the fact that Shannon was prospering during this era the demand for houses in Lanahrone was relatively weak, costs turned out to be considerably greater than originally anticipated. The project was an economic failure for Irish Estates Ltd. Eventually all of the previously rented houses were sold to tenants and others. Prior to the 'Celtic Tiger' era formal enquiries into the activities of State institutions were virtually unknown. However one exception was Irish Estates Ltd as outlined in a formal report *Enquiry into Irish Estates Ltd Inspectors Report*, which was commissioned by Dáil Éireann in October 1963.<sup>16</sup> The basis for the enquiry was a series of allegations regarding possible irregularities made by the then company secretary E.G. Doody. His allegations referred to excessive prices paid for various sites, cost overruns, losses on house sales as well as interference by directors in the

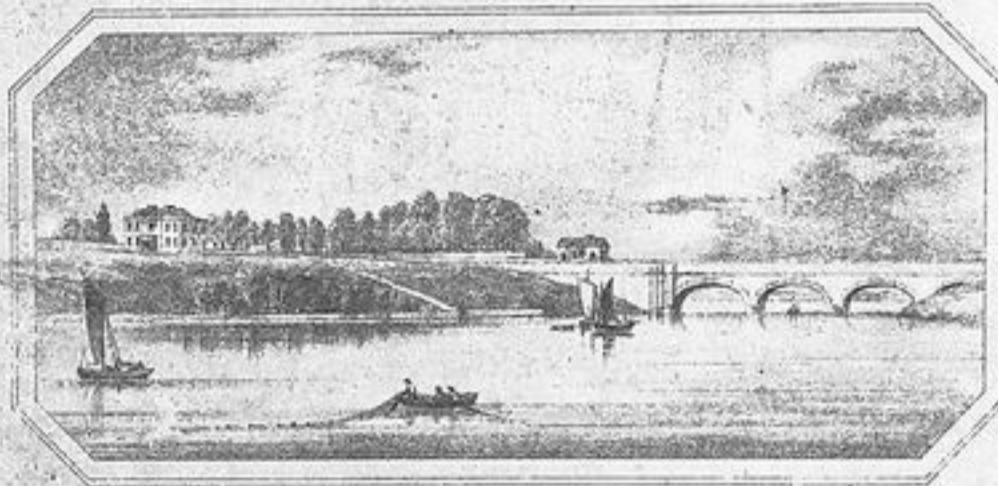
IN THE COURT OF THE COMMISSIONERS FOR SALE OF INCUMBERED ESTATES IN IRELAND

## CITY AND BOROUGH OF LIMERICK.

Sale at LIMERICK, on SATURDAY, the 19th day of JULY, 1856.

In the Matter of the Estate of  
PATRICK ALOYSIUS SHANNON, Esq., Owner and Petitioner.**RENTAL AND PARTICULARS**

OF THE VALUABLE FEE FARM ESTATE,

Consisting of HOUSES,  
IN THE CITYLITHOGRAPHED AT DR WHITTY'S OFFICE, 15 HENRIETTA STREET  
CORBALLY HOUSE & TOLLHOUSE.STORES, and PREMISES  
OF LIMERICK,Producing a Rental of £530 7s. 9d., also the  
**FEE-SIMPLE LANDS OF CORBALLY, IN THE BOROUGH OF LIMERICK,**

Containing above 284 acres, English Statute Measure, producing a net Yearly Rental of £917 13s. 4d.; and also

The Estate of the Owner in this Matter; a sufficient portion of which

**Will be Set up for Sale by Auction,**

IN 23 LOTS AS STATED IN ANNEXED RENTAL AND MAPS, (if not previously disposed of by Private Contract.)

By Mr. JAMES MARSHALL, Auctioneer.

BY ORDER OF THE COMMISSIONERS,

At LIMERICK, on SATURDAY, the 19th day of JULY, 1856,

At the hour of One o'Clock, p.m. Pursuant to the order for Sale in this Matter.

For Rentals and all further Information, apply at the OFFICE OF THE COMMISSIONERS, 14, Henrietta-street, Dublin; to WILLIAM KEATING CLAY, Solicitor for the Owner and Petitioner, having Carriage of the Sale, Office, 25 College-Green, Dublin; EDWARD MILLING BEAUCHAMP, Esq., Limerick; ROBERT ANGLIM, Esq., George's-street, Limerick; DAVID FITZGERALD, Esq., Limerick; HENRY K. SHAW, Esq., Street, Liverpool; Mr. MILLER'S Incumbered Estate, Jostrey, Edinburgh; and Messrs. MALTBY, ROBINSON &amp; JACKSON, Bank Buildings, London; or to Dr. WHITTY, Civil and Mining Engineer, 15, Henrietta-street, Dublin.

Printed at the Office

WHITTY, 15, Henrietta-street, Dublin.

Front of rental has a lithograph of Corbally Palace and tollhouse, 19 July 1856

(Limerick City Archives)

work of the executives. The inspector's findings were generally inconclusive but from that time onwards the scale and activities of Irish Estates Ltd continued to diminish.

Over the years a number of well-known people lived in the estate. They included Desmond O'Malley TD Cabinet Minister and founder of the Progressive Democrats, Jim Kemmy T.D. and historian, Tom McDermott, former City Manager, Peter Donnelly poet and senior executive with Shannon Development. Others included John Gormley founder of the Green Party who lived there in his youth, as well as Claude and Darina Byrne both well known actors and members of the College Players. Gerry Ahearn Limerick County Engineer and his wife Maureen, a community activist and frequent letter writer to the Irish Times lived here for many years. The best-known current resident is Jan O'Sullivan TD Minister of State Department of Environment Community and Local Government.

This housing estate represents such an exciting age for Limerick with an International airport on its doorstep, affordable motorcars and sleek design utilising the building materials of the day. The Irish

Estates marked the beginning of intensified speculative building in the Corbally area and the end of the 'big house.' It was a slice of the American dream in the suburbs of Limerick city.

## REFERENCES

- 1 DLGPH, Memorandum on housing, 12 July 1943, NA, DT S/13059A.
- 2 Not to be confused with Corbally House nearby which was built in 1824 and is today Corbally House Nursing Home.
- 3 Shannon built up a thriving business in the Cornmarket where he traded as a wholesale ironmonger and ships chandler. He owned property totalling 284 acres including George Street, Bedford Row and Robert Street.
- 4 Maurice Lenihan, (1866) *Limerick; its history and antiquities, ecclesiastical, civil and military*, 473.
- 5 Seán Spellissy (1998) *The history of Limerick city*, 142.
- 6 John Fleming and Seán O'Grady, *St Munchin's College Limerick, 1691-1761*, 110.
- 7 Park House is recorded in the Down Survey Map of Limerick in 1657.
- 8 Griffith's Valuation of Limerick City, 128. Described in 1856 as a large mansion house 'erected by the late Mr Shannon' and occupied by John Co. Drydale. National Archives: Encumbered Estates Court Rentals (O'Brien), Shannon, 19 July 1856, 41:28, MRGS 39/019/-39/020.
- 9 Kevin Hannon, 'The Corbally District,' OLJ, 26 (1989), 25.
- 10 Limerick City Council Minute Books 3 Oct. 1935 L/MIN/18.
- 11 'Submitted offer of Mr D.J. O'Malley, Solr. to purchase the fee simple interest of the Corporation in the plot of ground situate at Corbally adjacent to Athlunkard Bridge, containing 37 perches. L/MIN/20.
- 12 'Cement workers hold up building' the *Irish Times*, 30 Aug. 1947 and L/MIN/34.
- 13 L/MIN/21 Limerick City Archives.
- 14 Interview (2009) with Mr Paddy Reidy, resident at 35 Abbey Ave.
- 15 CSO, Census of population of Ireland, vol. 4, 1946 (Dublin, 1954), 214-5.
- 16 Dail Eireann Debate *Enquiry into Irish Estates Ltd Inspectors Report* 23 Oct 1963 (PR 7384).