

# An Act of Bravery Rewarded

In 2006 Limerick City Museum received a donation of the Royal Humane Society's<sup>1</sup> medal and accompanying certificate, awarded to Richard J. Lee in 1881 for saving the life of a young boy who had fallen into the Shannon.<sup>2</sup> The *Limerick Chronicle* of 25th June 1881 reported the incident as follows:-

"A few evenings since, about eight or nine o'clock, a little boy named Molloy, the son of the late caretaker of the Roman Catholic Institute, was saved from drowning by Mr. R.J. Lee in a very heroic manner. It appears that the little fellow, with a number of juvenile companions, was fishing in the dock at the eastern side of Wellesley Swivel Bridge,

by Brian Hodkinson

near the Turf Quay, when he fell into the water, the tide being at its lowest ebb at the time and he was rapidly carried westwards by the current. A crowd soon gathered on the bridge and piers, on alarm being given; and Mr. Lee happening to be returning from his residence at the time, seeing the crowd enquired the cause of their assembly, when he was informed by the toll-keeper that a boy had fallen into the dock. No one seemed able or willing to save the drowning child, but Mr. Lee at once, ran over the bridge and down the steps leading to the watch-house,

underneath the Fitzgibbon statue, divested himself only of his coat, and jumped into the water, a depth of about twenty feet at the imminent risk of his life, as the ground is shingly underneath near the pier but he contrived to leap so as to avoid striking the ground. When in the water, he swam towards the western opening, and after a few strokes found that he could walk, which he did, the water being only up to his waist. The boy had this time sunk underneath the rapid current, when Mr. Lee called out to those on the pier to point out where he was, which they did, when Mr. Lee rushed forward into the current, seized the little fellow as he was about passing through the western opening into the whirlpool there, held him up until a boat was brought round, into which he was placed, and taken ashore apparently lifeless, but he was shortly after returned to animation. This is the fifth life Mr. R.J. Lee has saved at the imminent risk of his own; and a memorial has been forwarded to the Royal Humane Society to award him their gold medal, which he so richly merits."

The London based Society met on 12th July and decided to award Lee their silver, rather than gold, medal. The following day, as reported in the *Limerick Chronicle* of the 14th July, Mr. Richard O'Shaughnessey M.P. for Limerick telegraphed Jerome Counihan, the Mayor, that the award had been made. Counihan immediately wrote to the *Chronicle*:

"Dear Sir, - You will oblige by publishing the enclosed telegram received by me from Mr. Richard O'Shaughnessey M.P. On learning the particulars of the gallant rescue by Mr. R. J. Lee of young Molloy, from the rapid current of the Shannon near Wellesley Bridge, and of which you published details, Mr. O'Shaughnessey with his usual good will, promptly placed the particulars before the Humane Society, and the Mayor and other citizens also taking ready action in the matter, the result will be found in the telegram which I subjoin.

It afforded one particular gratification to be the medium of communicating the telegram to my friend, Mr. Lee, as one of my relatives owes his life to that gentleman's courage, when, some years back, he rescued him likewise from the depths of the river."

The medal was subsequently sent to the Mayor for presentation.



The three Lee brothers, by Henry O'Shea, Canon Joseph W. at left, Samuel Edward at right and Richard John standing at centre back

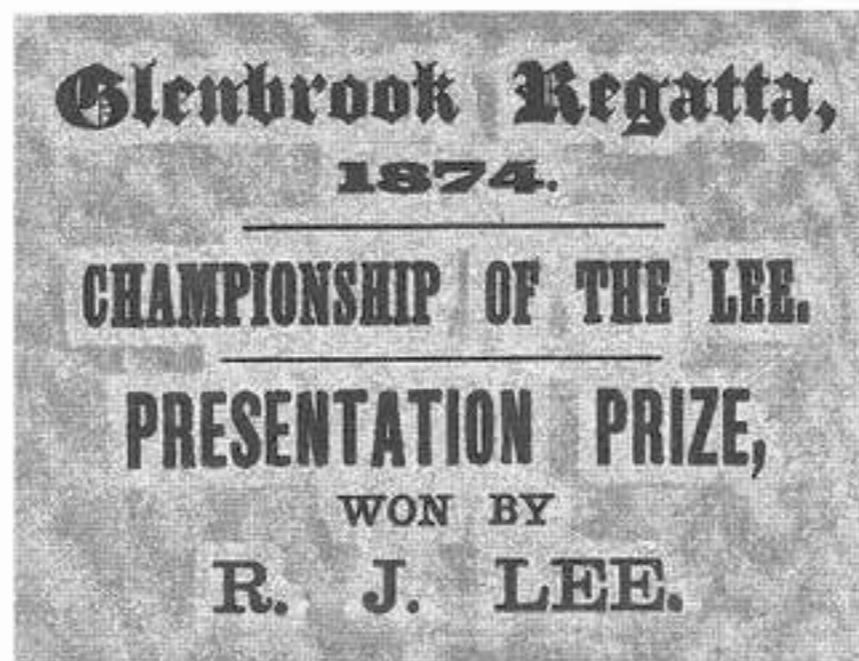


Obverse and reverse of the Royal Humane Society awarded to Richard Lee (LM2006.0138)

Richard Lee was a member of the family, which owned the City Foundry near High Street. As a member of the Limerick Boat Club he would have been familiar with the waters around the bridge. He was a keen rower and served terms both as Captain and Vice-President of the club.

**REFERENCES**

1. The Royal Humane Society was founded in London in 1774 by two medical men, William Hawes and Thomas Cogan, who were keen to promote techniques of resuscitation.



The Society is a charity that grants awards for acts of bravery in the saving of human life and, also, for the restoration of life by resuscitation.

Awards may be granted to those who have put their own lives at risk to save or attempt to save someone else. The awards granted for these acts of bravery include bronze, silver and gold medals and Testimonials on Vellum or Parchment. For more information on the society see: <http://www.royalhumanesociety.org.uk/>

2. (LM2006.0138)