

Limerick Boat Club's Great Tradition



As a result of improved social conditions in England in the second half of the nineteenth century in particular, a major upsurge in organised sport took place in that country. At a time when the sun ne'er set on the vast empire, this sporting revolution was sure to follow in the colonies, and Ireland was no exception. Trinity College were innovators in introducing these major sports to Ireland, cricket games being recorded as far back as 1834. In 1854 a rugby club was formed, now acknowledged as the second oldest in the world, only Guy's Hospital in London can claim seniority.

Trinity were also first in forming a rowing club, having their origins in the Pembroke Club in 1836. As non-college oarsmen were part of these crews, it was

by Denis O'Shaughnessy

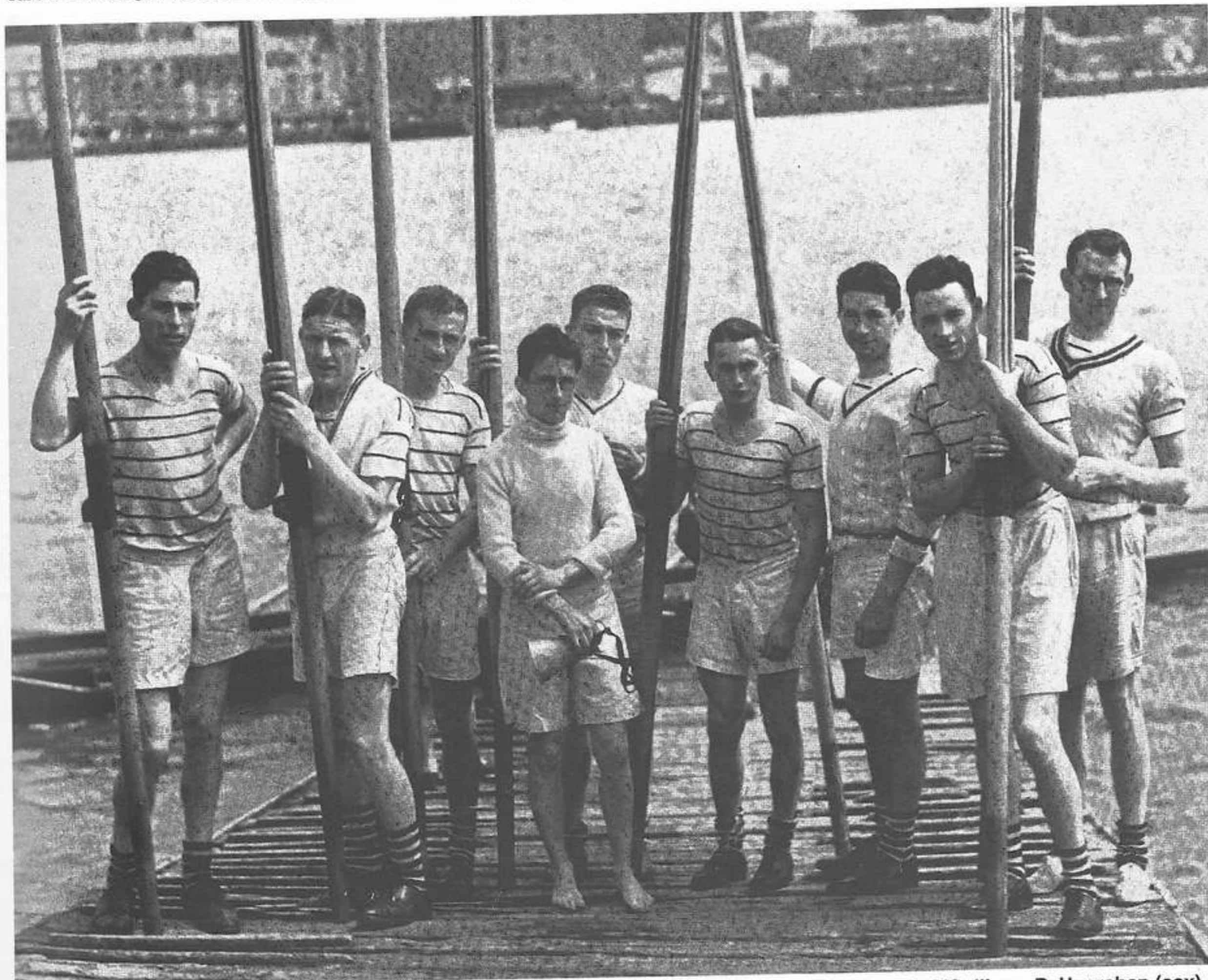
decided to form an all-college club, and this came in 1847, the founding year of the Trinity College Boat Club. The club took part in the inaugural Limerick Regatta in 1870 and since then, the famous white and black striped colours have graced the fixture even to the present day.

While there is a proliferation in old prints of Limerick showing rowing boats on the Shannon, some four-oared (these were used on a commercial basis either fishing or plying goods), there is no evidence of organised rowing in the city until the 1860's. Undoubtedly, fishermen held contests on the river, the Old Abbey and Plassey Regattas being organised in

the main by fishermen, the Abbey guild in particular. Up to the middle of the last century, salmon fishermen competed at Limerick regatta in their gandelow boats; a term used in the Shannon estuary, but in Harbour Board reports they were called gondolas. There were also races for the Abbey fishermen in their fragile brecauns. Money prizes were awarded to the winners, which debarred them from competing for the official rowing clubs.

The most prominent club in the city in the first two decades of rowing was undoubtedly Limerick Boat Club. It was not the first to be founded though: next-door neighbours Shannon Rowing Club was inaugurated in 1866, the first official rowing club to be founded in Limerick.

Limerick Boat Club was soon to follow and we learn from the files of the *Limerick*



Limerick Boat Club senior eight, New Ross Regatta, 1939. L. to R.: J. Hall, stroke; M. N. Wixted, S. O'Sullivan, B. Hanrahan (cox), K. D. O'Sullivan, W. Walpole, J. C. Sheahan, G. Barry, J. A. McGuire. Defeated by U.C.D. by a canvas for the Irish Championship

Chronicle that following a meeting in the reading room of the Athenaeum in 1870, the club was founded. In that founding year the club held no less than two regattas, one of a local nature, the other a public regatta, both attended by up to 15,000 spectators who "were treated to such excellent sporting fare that the success of the annual fixture was assured." Thus Limerick Regatta was instigated, still going strong, and celebrating its 140th anniversary this year. It is, apart from the Limerick horse races, the longest surviving sporting fixture in the city. Interestingly, races were rowed around marked buoys in those early days, the first "straight" race being held in 1873.

A glance at some of the early members' names reveal Boat Club's exclusiveness with entrepreneurs James Spaight, A. A. Shaw, J. Russell and William Spillane being prominent in the formation of the club. Spillane was mayor at the time and was elected as the club's first president: his donation of £10 to the club was a major sum of money then. His memory is recalled in Spillane's Tower, a mile or so downriver from the docks.

Boat Club members in the early days were in the main of the ascendancy class and the when the funeral service for Queen Victoria was taking place in St. Mary's Cathedral in 1901 the *Limerick Chronicle* reported that the club flew the Union Jack at half mast.

Prominent in the early years with Limerick Boat Club were the sporting Barrington family, the most outstanding being Charles, thrice winner in the prestigious Henley Regatta with Trinity. He presented a decorative oar to Boat Club, still in the possession of the club. Three of the brothers, Croker, Charles and William, made history in 1876 when being part of the Trinity squad that travelled to represent their college and their country at the international regatta in Philadelphia. Coming up to the event, the crew practised on a stretch of the Mulcaire near Glenstal Castle, home of Croker Barrington and also on the Shannon in the Docks area. The *New York Herald* gave great coverage to their arrival in New York reporting that as the ship docked one of the crew shouted 'Get ready for the Fenians' to the dignitaries gathered on the docks.

According to rowing correspondent Michael Johnston, Croker and Charles Barrington were responsible for introducing eights rowing to this country - in the early 1870's - having been successful in this sphere in Henley with Trinity College. Limerick Boat Club quickly took to this discipline and was the first in the south to introduce eights and fittingly, in 1877, beat the masters, Trinity, at Limerick Regatta.

In 1872 the Harbour Board granted Limerick Boat Club a site on the lay-by adjacent to the then Wellesley Bridge, the foundation stone of a modest boathouse

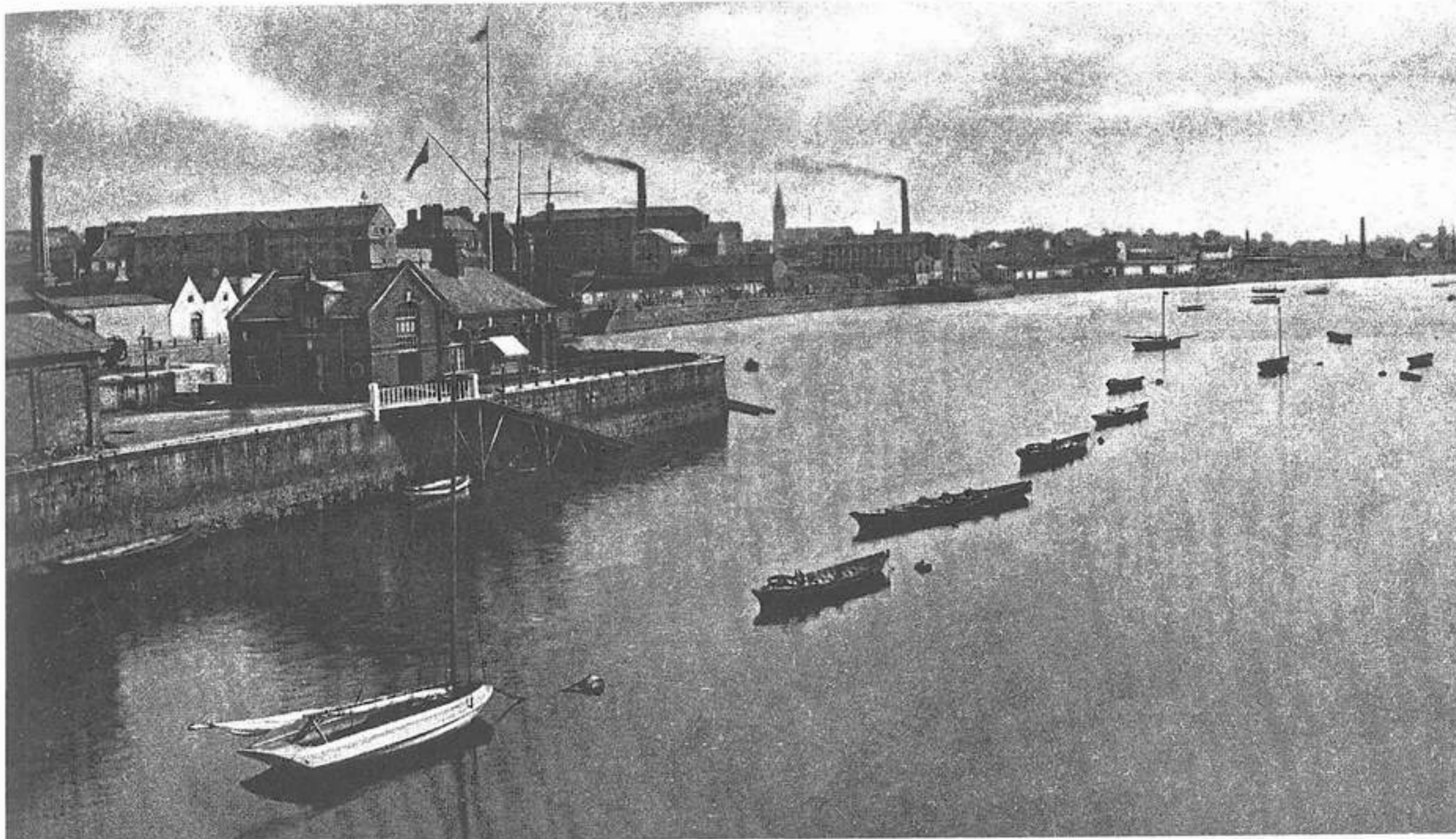
being laid by Mayor Spillane. This small building was just long enough to accommodate a four-oared racing boat and provided a diminutive dressing room. This was all the accommodation available to the members until 1872 when a new boathouse was built on the site of the present one. Its construction, however, was faulty and the committee, declining to pay the contractor in full, a lawsuit followed. Providentially, on the day the case was held in court, a severe gale lifted the roof onto the bridge and damaged the walls and some of the boats. The committee, not surprisingly, won their case and the present boathouse was built the following spring. In 1885, the present clubhouse was built, its proposed demolition and development on the site, being the cause of much controversy.

With Limerick Boat Club now well established on the western side of Wellesley Bridge, Shannon RC decided to apply for permission to erect their clubhouse on the eastern side. The Harbour Board Commissioners, however, had reservations, not without cause. They maintained both clubs would now be too adjacent "which would result in bouts of fisticuffs." They eventually granted Shannon permission, but they were proved right about the fisticuffs: there were several fracas in the early years between both sets of oarsmen which resulted in the tunnel connecting both clubs under the bridge being closed off.

Limerick Boat Club was one of the



Limerick Boat Club's greatest crew, the senior eight, winners in 1927 of the Leander trophy (Cork), IARU Senior Eights Championship (Cork) and the Shannon RC Cup (Limerick).
 Back (left to right): Ken Ray, W. W. Stokes, W. L. O'Donnell (cox), L. Harkness, Martin Maguire, Bruce Murray (coach).
 Front row (l. to r.): W. F. Treacy, Tommy O'Donnell (stroke), Jim Ewart, J. Stern



Skylines of the Limerick Docks area in early nineteenth century, now utterly changed. Limerick Boat Club is in the foreground, one of the few buildings still extant. Pleasure boats for members' use, can be seen on the river, all having their own particular names such as *Thomond, Shamrock, Parteen, Maigue, Shannon*, etc. To the left is *Falcon*, a 17 ft. sailing boat, also for members' use, presented to the club by J. O. Myles, president, 1924 (Limerick Museum)

founding members of the original Irish Amateur Rowing Association but the word "amateur" was a misnomer as, at some regattas, winning crews were awarded money prizes. The Boat Club found this practice repugnant and they, and some other clubs who were not in accord, seceded from the Association. The effect of this defection by Limerick Boat Club left the local regatta in abeyance for some time but all ended well with the formation of the Irish Amateur Union in 1899, which Limerick immediately joined.

Boat Club, as they were popularly known down the years, were one of the first clubs in the south to recognise the value of top class coaching and in 1901 they brought over A. A. Stewart from London to train the crews. Unfortunately, he died suddenly during his short tenure here. In his memory, and as an appreciation for the care and kindness of the club to his father in his final illness, his son presented a handsome silver challenge cup, which up to recent times was rowed for annually by the club scullers.

With its strong membership of ascendancy class in those early years, it was not surprising that there would have been a major input of members in the First World War, 1914-18. No less than 28 members enlisted with five losing their lives (A. H. Fitzmaurice, R. H. Hayes, C. S. Kenny, drowned; G. T. Shaw, M. E. Dinsmore, died) with A. E. Kerr, C. O'Neill and W. MacAulay being listed as wounded. Rowing was suspended in the country from 1915 until the Armistice in 1918.

One of the best-loved and well-remembered members of the Limerick club was

Bruce Murray, renowned oarsman, and trainer, as they were then titled, and secretary of the club for half a century. An institution, in those early times he rowed for fifteen years and was captain and coach for many years afterwards. His crowning glory came in 1927 when he coached the senior eight, stroked by Tommy (Knocker) O'Donnell, to the ultimate prize in Irish rowing, the IARU Senior Eights championship, in Cork. Remarkably, Murray was 72 years of age at the time. The Bruce Murray Cup, for schools fours, was presented to the Limerick Regatta in memory of this legendary figure.

Another well remembered and revered figure in Boat Club and indeed the city, was Alma Fitt, for so long associated with the Limerick Savings Bank, or Stony Jug, as it was popularly known, in Glentworth Street. Alma, a member of seventy years standing, was part of an infamous decision at Limerick Regatta when his crew was deemed to have been cheated out of a fours race. Piqued, the club authorities had special gold medals struck which they presented to their mistreated crew.

Rowing always got good coverage locally and correspondents, especially in the *Limerick Chronicle*, were forthright and sometimes scathing in their comments of the efforts of Limerick crews. In July, 1881, for instance, readers were treated initially to a glowing account of the regatta but things turned considerably sour when the reporter turned his attention to the performance of Limerick Boat Club:

"Seldom in the annals of Limerick Regatta has it been our fortune to witness

such a pleasant meeting on the Shannon as that which came off today under the auspices of Limerick B.C. At intervals the July sun poured down its glorious rays on the adequate holiday makers, the water danced and rippled in the bright light, and shouts of bookmakers and the merry laughter of spectators, both fair and otherwise, went floating across the river.

"As regards the contest, the less said, perhaps, the better, as regards our local crews. We confess we have very little sympathy for them – for one of the clubs at least, Limerick Boat Club. In the L.B.C., disunion seems to reign supreme, and though we say it, we do not for one moment wish to throw a slur on the captain – who we believe is most energetic – for what a can a single man's efforts avail? It is the individual members, and they alone, who are to blame for the failure, which has of late attended their oars. Supplied with good boats and a first class trainer, they were nevertheless unable to win back renown for the club and for this ancient city. The simple secret is that they won't train!"

Bookmakers attended the regatta in those days and one wonders did the irate correspondent have a few bob on Limerick B.C.? He also had a cut at Shannon Rowing Club:

"Some misguided Shannon men backed their own eight in the Shannon R.C. Cup but it was throwing money away. The blue and whites, stroked by Hickston, had to give way to the superior skill of the Varsity men."



Club veterans, 1996: Brendan Hanrahan, Clem Casey, Tony Tynne, president: Phil O'Doherty, Sammy Hall

Regattas in the early days were held in such diverse venues as Castleconnell, O'Brien's Bridge, Kilrush, Blackrock (Cork) and Killaloe, and silver trophies won at these regattas (some still in the possession of the club) testify to the success of Limerick B.C. oarsmen.

The greatest triumph, however, came in 1927 when at Cork Regatta the club annexed the coveted Irish Senior Eights Championship, the ultimate prize in Irish rowing. They were presented with the magnificent silver perpetual trophy (see photograph of winning crew), which unfortunately was stolen some years back in Dublin and melted down for its silver content.

The day of this Cork Regatta coincided with the funeral of Kevin O'Higgins, former Minister for Justice, assassinated in Booterstown, Co. Dublin, and the fixture was put back to 2.30 as a mark of respect. Not for the first time, sport and the history of the country had interweaved.

Surprisingly, there is a just a one-line entry on the race in local papers, but according to piqued Athlunkard supporters present in Cork that day, their crew was comfortably ahead at a vital stage. Inexplicably, the "Parish" club, who had won the race here four years earlier, started to fall back (recriminations followed later that some crew members were not fit) and Limerick B.C.'s Tommy O'Donnell, seizing the opportunity, stroked his crew to a famous win by half a length.

Betting men would have made a fortune on the Boat Club that day, their odds being huge, the *Cork Examiner* commenting:

"Limerick rowed a beautiful oar all the way, though as usual when a crew from this club wins they had not many friends in the betting market."

Also in the winning crew was W. W. Stokes, a member of another great sporting Limerick family, with milling proprietor Martin McGuire and solicitor Bill Treacy also aboard.

There were nine entries for the race from all four provinces, a record entry that

has never been equalled. There were suggestions, however, that with such a large amount of boats in the race, some of the crews got poor starts, and at the year's AGM of the rowing union, it was recommended that the amount of boats should be limited in future championship races.

These were the glory years for Limerick B.C. The same season no less than sixteen races were won. At Limerick Regatta, Boat Club won all the events except one, the Ladies Plate, to Shannon, and came out with seven trophies, the biggest sweep ever by a local club at the home fixture at a time when just maiden, senior and junior events were on the card.

Incidentally, the season 1927/1928 will go down as the most successful year in Limerick sport, when Limerick B.C. won the Senior Eights Championship, LPYMA the Irish Senior Hockey Cup and of course, Young Munster's legendary win in the Bateman Cup.

Limerick B.C. defended their Irish championship the following year at Galway, but were unlucky to come up against Emmett RC, a crew from the western city that was to become a legend. Drawn from Menlo, a few miles upriver from the city, most of the crew were Irish speakers. The river was their main mode of transport and rowing came naturally to them. Two years later at Limerick Regatta, L.B.C. had a chance of revenge but again the westerners proved too strong when retaining the championship, thus entering the pantheon of legends in Irish rowing. Boat Club had some consolation when winning the prestigious Leander trophy at Cork Regatta, a feat they achieved again the following year.

In 1939 Limerick B.C. went very close to winning back the Irish championship. One of the club's great members was the late Bertie Wixted, for so long associated with Limerick Regatta, and he claimed that at New Ross in 1939 his crew were "robbed" of repeating the club's great senior eights win of 1927. He and his crewmates were certain that their boat had crossed the line ahead of UCD, but to their consternation the judge awarded the race

to the college club. Recriminations from L.B.C. officials followed but to no avail, the judge famously stating: "what are ye complaining about, ye won the two fours races didn't ye." The race was the first rowing event to be broadcast live by Radio Eireann, and according to some long-gone old-timers in L.B.C., the commentator could not mention what weather conditions were like due to strict war censorship. This can be taken with a grain of salt, however, as the regatta was held in July and war wasn't declared until September 1939.

While Limerick BC was never destined to repeat the heights of those great years, they were nonetheless always a force in Irish rowing. Twice, in the mid-forties, the club won the magnificent Shannon Rowing Club Challenge Cup for senior eights at Limerick Regatta coxed by Brendan Hanrahan and in 1949, with Jim O'Neill as captain, the club won sixteen races, being highly successful at Limerick, Galway and Cork Regattas. The following years saw the club win many good races, particularly in the Quin Cup in Limerick and some great wins at Cork.

Amongst some of the great L.B.C. coxes down the years was the late Phil O'Doherty, who amassed the staggering total of 300 wins in his career. Phil's forte was the Quin Cup for maiden eights at Limerick. This race was usually a massed start, with on some occasions fourteen eights lined up opposite Spillane's Tower. A heart-stopping sight for spectators to see the boats charging up river, but a nightmarish job for starters to get them away. It was only the lion-hearted official who would declare a false start, knowing the task that awaited him lining up the crews again, especially in the prevailing south-westerly wind. Local cunning coxes knew certain starters without such courage and took advantage thereof, getting their crew away before the official "off." Phil O'Doherty was one of the most cunning. Boat Club walls are dotted with photos of Quin Cup winners! Other successful coxes with the club included Dr. M. J. Roberts, Dick Roche, Brendan Hanrahan and Tony Tynne.

Fittingly, for a club who initiated Limerick Regatta, Limerick B.C. has provided some great officials to the running of this fixture down the years. Among them were Bertie Wixted, Phil Doherty and Tony Tynne, the face of L.B.C. for many years, and one of the main organisers of the regatta for as long as anyone can remember.

Rowing in Limerick Boat Club has been in abeyance for some seasons, but members are hoping that with the provision of a new premises in the proposed development alongside Sarsfield Bridge, that this great sport will again thrive in a club that has played a major part in rowing in city and country since its founding year in 1870. In the meantime, former captain and president of the club, Noel Malone, is teaching his young charges from Colasite Ciaran, Croom, the rudiments of this great sport in the club, thus maintaining a tradition that stretches back 140 years.