St. Michael's Rowing Club: the early years

by Denis O'Shaughnessy

Back in the early nineteenth century, abject poverty was the lot of most Irish people, and accounts left by visitors to Limerick tell of particularly appallingly, drunkenness and lechery witnessed in the Fishtown and Englishtown areas.

It was not surprising then that drink, much of it illicitly brewed, had such a huge hold on the populace, and the attendant misery that resulted brightened the land. Among the bright spots in shining armour was Fr Theobald Mathew, and his Temperance crusade proved extraordinarily successful, countless thousands flocking to the banner of Temperance, with over 100,000 people taking the pledge at a rally in Limerick city centre in 1836.

St Michael's Temperance Society was founded in that year and went on to become a model of its type for the whole country, culminating in the building of the magnificent premises in Henry/Cecil Street in 1909, where members who had sworn off the demon drink could meet in social and recreational surroundings.

The Society became an important institution in the city, and its drama and musical events, sporting and other recreational activities provided a great social outlet for many down the years. In a time of great want, was established and a fund subscribed to by members and from which those who became unemployed could draw.

As organised sport started to gain popularity towards the end of the nineteenth century, the Temperance Society members were not found wanting in forming teams in different disciplines and established their own playing grounds in Corcanaree in the Dock area. Three teams were fielded: in rugby (two members, Michael Joyce and Ald. Tom Prendergast were founder members of Garrywoolen), cricket and GAA.

The Society had the distinction of playing the first game of hurling in Limerick when St Michael's played Shamrocks. The GAA football team was very successful, beating Commercials in the first ever county final in 1887. Commercial, however, objected, claiming that St Michael's fielded seven rugby players; their objection was upheld and Commercials went on to win the first ever All-Ireland football final for Limerick.

St Michael's football team was just one of the many sporting successes of the Society down the years, and internationals were turned out in four different disciplines. The rowing club, in particular, now 114 years in existence, has been hugely successful, producing two Olympians, two world champions, 271 internationals, and 59 Irish championships won since 1979.

Two outstanding St Michael's personalities of the early twentieth century were Michael Joyce, a Shannon river pilot, who went on to become an MP for Limerick, and Edward O'Dwyer, the formidable Bishop of Limerick, both of whom were great friends. Possessed of a caustic wit, the bishop, on being presented with a function, heard Joyce being described as a pillar of the Temperance Society, and commented: "Sure, but I had to plaster cracks on that pillar on a few occasions."

On another occasion a deputation from the Society went to meet the bishop in his palace in Curragh to put forward what was then a daring plan to open up the dance in the Temperance Hall to the public. Delighted when he acceded to the request, the wind was quickly taken out of their sails when showing them to the door His Lordship proclaimed: "I will add just one proviso, and that is that no women will be allowed."

When Shannon Rowing Club opened their new boathouse on Sharrig Bridge in the late nineteenth century, they vacated their old timber boathouse in Corcanaree which St Michael's Temperance Society members eventually took over. From there they set out for Limerick, in a yawl named the Shannon Lass which in members and friends made pleasant trips downstream, sang all the great favourites of the time, and picnicked on the islands there.

From these aquatically minded members, the idea of forming a boating club was spawned. It is generally accepted that 1900 was the founding year with the club being affiliated to the IRAU the following year. First captain was the aforementioned legendary Michael Joyce. Demands on his time in Westminster left Vin Merritt doing most of the work and he became captain the following year. The founding committee members were Ald. Michael Joyce, John O'Dowd, Joe O'Donoghue, T O' Connor, Frank Cearcy, Dan Hannon, Jack Stapleton, T. Toomey, Paddy Walsh and Dan Griffin.

The old boathouse was a modest affair, with an earthen floor and semi-circular roof made of felt. Anyone who felt like a shower after a spin had to pull a chain which tilted the contents of a large water tank down on top of them and it was described as being akin to being hit by the Niagara Falls. Unsuspecting new members to the club were encouraged to take a shower so the old members could enjoy their reactions when hit by the volume of water. On one occasion an unsuspecting victim called down looking for the captain and some joker told him to pull the chain and the language used when the water came cascading down is not recorded.

In February 1903 the roof of the old boathouse was blown off in what the old members referred to as the night of the big wind, but some fund-raising efforts resulted in a replacement roof being erected.

The first crew to leave the slipway was a Maiden Eight comprised of Henihan, Carillo, Hayes, Brinck O'Dowd, O'Connell, McCormack and Harran. The honour of the club's first win in their initial year fell to the Junior Four comprised of Jim Griffith, Pat Hannon, Jack Harran and Bob Quin, who won the Murphy Cup in Limerick, and also won at Dublin and Cork.

The club's first eight success came in 1906 when they won the coveted Cup in Limerick Regatta. Included in that crew was Michael Hartney, who in 1918 wrote the country's first rowing notes, in the Limerick Leader, under the pen-name "Olympian". A prominent IRA activist in the War of Independence, he was later to become Mayor in 1945. Solid wins were to follow in ensuing seasons, in Junior Eights and Fours, and under-age Fours.

The Senior Eight Championship was held in Limerick in 1913 and there was great excitement in the St Michael's camp when their crew, stroked by Paddy O'Dwyer, was seen as a strong favorite. The crew approached Barrington's Pier. Lying second was Athlunkard, followed by Trinity, Neptune and Shannon. However, the Parish crew began to make inroads into the St Michael's lead, who were still ahead at the three-quarter mark, and A.B.C. went on to win the race by a length from Trinity with St Michael's falling back to third. A good measure of compensation was achieved when the First Senior Four won the Limerick City Challenge Cup, thus creating a milestone as this was the club's first win at senior level. The crew comprised K. O'Grady, J. O'Neill, G. Howlett, P. O'Dwyer, P. Henihan (cox). Both the coach E. O'Toole and captain Joe O'Halloran became an institution in the club. They held off a determined Athlunkard bid to win by three feet.

The following year the Ladies Plate was won at Limerick and the club was well on its way in senior ranks.

Appalling tragedy

With the Great War intervening, there was little activity for the rest of that decade, but...
some domestic competition took place, one event which was to result in an appalling double drowning tragedy.

As dusk was falling on the evening of June 27, 1918, a Club Four comprised of Thomas Brawn, Christopher O'Neill, John Butler, Frank O'Brien and Patrick McInerney, cox, were competing in a re-row in the annual scratch races between local clubs. The boat ran into rough water above Barrington's Pier and started to ship water, and the opposition crew, seeing their plight, advised them to stay as they were and they rowed away to fetch help.

The Leader described the tragedy the next day:

One of the crew, Tom Brawn, in a moment of excitement, got out of the boat and being unable to swim, was drowned though several plucky attempts at rescue were made by the stroke, C. O'Neill. Paddy McInerney, the cox, was next to leave the boat and being heavily clothed was unable to reach the bank. Another member of the crew who remained in the boat was rescued, as the crew stayed afloat.

The bodies of the two young men were recovered at 3 am the next morning. The funeral scenes were described as being especially poignant and the Leader report stated: “seldom did a tragedy evoke so general and widespread a sorrow and all over the weekend a gloom seemed to have hung over the city.”

The late Frank O'Brien, who was just thirteen at the time, witnessed the accident from the pier, and maintained the drowning could have been averted if the crew had stayed calm and kept their oars in the water and waited to be rescued. He also maintained that the club boats were not good at the time and a tear in the canvas could have let the water in. He added that the cox, McInerney, who was a good swimmer, should have thrown off his oilskins, which eventually dragged him under.

The club and the city were shocked by the drownings and huge crowds turned up for the funerals. Shannon Rowing Club postponed their annual dinner and many votes of sympathy were sent to the club. The accident left a lasting memory and Paddy Beegan, long time secretary afterwards, never rowed again.

It took the club some seasons to recover from this tragedy, but eventually they did, and in the early twenties a new generation of oarsmen donned the colours, guided by mentors such as Pat Henihan, John O'Dwyer, J. O'Connell, Ned Naol and Tommy Hourahan.

Though it was the height of the War of Independence. In 1920 rowing continued and Michael Hartney, mentioned earlier on, wrote in his rowing notes that St. Michael's had a good number of oarsmen in training and advised that “time is the most essential asset to success and working on that principle, as well as using their backs and feet there is no reason why they should not succeed.”

Hartney referred to the great disturbances of the time said that spectators watching crews in training from the banks were scarce due to the “atmospheric conditions prevailing.” He wrote that he was looking forward to the upcoming Limerick Regatta but events dictated that he never got to see or report on it. A few days before the regatta his shop in Davis Street was blown up by the Black and Tans (for the second time) but luckily he nor his family were at home. Hartney was a well known IRA activist and was taken by the Tans as a hostage in their Crossley tenders when they went on patrol through the city. He was on the Republican side during the Civil War and in an affray in Adare his wife was shot dead by Free State troops.

The 1920 regatta went ahead with St Michael's Malden Eight being swamped in the Quin Cup. The last race was fixed for 6 pm but was near 9 o'clock when it came up, prompting the Limerick Chronicle correspondent to sniff: “Such an occurrence cannot be regarded as calculating the best interests of the sport in the city.”

It took St Michael's 22 years to rise to the purchase of their first new boat, a Four, named The Tower, in 1923. It was named thus after a series of fund-raising carnivals which were to be held in the grounds of the Redemptorist Church but had to be switched to the grounds of the Ordinance Barracks in Mulgrave Street. The intention was to raise £50 for the purchase of the Clinker Four but the carnivals proved such a success that a profit of £1,500 was made, a staggering amount for that era.

With these proceeds, it was decided to hire a professional coach from England. Dan Corderney spent six weeks with the club and the members of the time maintained that he helped raise the standard of rowing in the club.

A famous boat in the club at that time was a side-sweeper Clinker Eight, the John Lea, which was so heavy that it took eighteen men to launch her onto the water and if one made a mistake the whole eighteen would fall under her. It was known as the boat that could not sink. The craft was described as being like a bed of lorry going up a hill. With all the rattling and noise emanating from it and it was said one could hear it coming up the river before you
could see it and oarsmen going out next were ready as it could be heard in the distance. Besides steering and coaching the crew, the cox was required to be adept at repairs and he usually had a repair kit at the ready for the inevitable part of the boat to come loose.

Trips on pleasure rowing boats were popular summer pastimes in those days and all rowing clubs had a fleet of them moored outside their boathouses. St Michael's was no exception and had no less than ten pleasure boats at one stage in which members could row up or down the Shannon, according to their fancy.

Boats had to be transported to the railway station in those days for regattas in such venues as Cork, Galway and Waterford and they had to be brought all the way from the club followed by a crowd of youngsters and inevitably people would stop to see the sight of a the 64 ft long Eight being manhandled and wish the crew the best of luck.

In 1926 the club launched their first ladies crew which included Julie Callaghan, Bessie O'Dea and Maura Kennedy and rowed against a Shannon R.C. crew at Limerick Regatta.

In those days a character called 'Skipper' Dineen was the club caretaker, and in an age of practical jokes, he was left one evening in a bonfire's chair at the top of the club's 60 feet flagpole which he was about to start painting. The members left thinking he would be stranded but Skipper, an old sea dog, managed to slide down the rope under his own steam.

A lot of good oarsmen were lost to other city clubs due to a lack of senior rowing in the club through the 1920's and the Shannon RC Eight which won the Leander trophy in Cork had no less than seven former St Michael's oarsmen on board.

The first trophy at national level came in 1928 when at the Tailteann Games in Cork the club won gold medals in the under-age Fours, with a crew comprised of J. Hanrahan, J. Whelan, T. Troy, J. McNamara, C. Howard (cox). The Junior Eight were awarded diplomas and this crew provided the nucleus of what was to become St. Michael’s then most successful Eight since their foundation.

This came in 1930 when the Junior Eight went unbeaten, winning at Galway, Limerick and Cork. Unfortunately, the championship in this grade had yet to be established, and the crew would have been warm favourites to take the title. Paddy Stapleton, who was stroking, was a well loved character who went on to give a lifetime of devoted service to the club. Behind him were men of the calibre of Joe Whelan, M. Hanrahan, J. O'Halloran, J. Tobin, P. Troy, J. McCutcheon, J. Howard. Cox was the genial Frankie Hough who steered the club to some fine victories down the years and the captain was Joe O'Halloran.

New York Cup

Due to the great depression of the 1929's emigration was rife and like all sporting bodies in the city, St Michael's lost many of its great members to the United States. They did not forget their ties with home, however, and they formed their own association in New York, working in many tangible ways for their old club. This i-
cluded, in 1931, the commissioning of a
new fine Eight, named Miss America and
which went on to serve the club in senior
ranks for more years than anyone can care
to remember. Finance was raised through
dances and concerts.

The association also presented the New
York Cup to Limerick Regatta in 1936, the
first winners being Athlunkard, and this
was competed for over many years as a
Second Maiden Four race. Confined to
local clubs, the only regatta in the country
which had such a competition, it was the
cause of controversy, and objections arose
from outsiders on several occasions.

There seemed to be no shortage of
advice to crews from rowing correspon-
dents in this era and in 1933 No. 7 wrote
in the Limerick Leader, stating a very ob-
vious fact: "The St. Michael’s senior men
are working in clock time but there is
a lack of speed in some of the other
boats that would not be evident if all pulled
their weight!" He went on to state that
some of the crews were splashing, "which
acts in the same way as a break on a motor
car or bicycle. Common sense will convey
that it is tantamount to backing water. This
defect can easily be overcome before the
regatta, and the crews will not by any
means last when the shot is fired."

In an era when carmen started training
in the month of March or April (many
of them would have to wait until their
rugby season was over) "Tub" in the Lim-
 Erick Chronicle made a suggestion that
carmen should keep fit during the winter
by playing rugby "so that by the time the
rowing season comes around, when they
step into the boat they will be at least half
trained and the hard work of rowing will
not tell so much as it would have if they did
not keep fit during the winter."

In 1933 the old clubhouse in Corcaunoe
was demolished to make way for the ex-
tension to the Docks. The club now rowed
out of St. John’s Boat Club in Curraghboy
for a stint, but Athlunkard was their base
for several years. Writing from New York,
Ted Forsyth said they had heard great
reports about the club’s stay at A.B.C.,
whom he was told were delighted to ac-
commodate them, and he hoped the
Parish club "would be first to the finish in
many races in the season ahead."

During this period there was talk of
Limerick Boat Club going out of rowing
and the suggestion was made that St
Michael’s should try to acquire the pro-
cesses. This was raised at a special A.G.M.
in 1937 and was overruled and Dr Cowpar,
vice-president of the club, who was in the
chair, suggested that a suitable site should
be procured. He asked Bishop Keane, to
donate £400 towards the cost if the club
raised the same amount.

New clubhouse

Many fund-raising events were initi-
ated including a novel amusement centre
Pleasure Land at the Galway Theatre
where Clancy’s Electrical later traded.
Eventually a site for a new premises was
acquired at O’Callaghan Strand from the
nearby Cleeve’s Condensed Milk Com-
pany, but a few years of very hard physical
work lay ahead as major filling had to be
put in place. With many commoditites and
money becoming scarce with the advent of
World War II, the building of a new club-
house was a task of major proportions,
but the members threw their weight fully
behind the scheme.

Another source of finance for the build-
ing fund was from the famous concerts in
the Savoy, organised by a committee head-
ed by Ned Connaughton, and some of the
country’s greatest artists were hired
which included Northern tenors, James
Johnston and Josaf Locke, and also Limer-
ick’s Josephine Scanlon and James Penny.
One benefactor to the building fund was
one of Ireland’s greatest comedians, Jimmy
O’Dea, who gave the proceeds of a mid-
night concert in the Savoy.

The new clubhouse was opened in 1941.

Exiled members in New York presented the New York cup to Limerick Regatta
in 1936. Athlunkard were the first winners

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Amidst much jubilation and relief, it was
officially opened by Bishop Keane, in
the presence of the Mayor, Ald. Dan
Bourke, and representatives of the other
rowing clubs, and other guests. The total cost
of the new clubhouse was £3,000. One man
who put great work into the attainment of
this milestone was Paddyegan who for
a remarkable period of time, almost forty
years, was Secretary of the club.

First captain of the club after the open-
ing of the new boathouse was Joe Whelan,
one of the club’s great stalwarts and highly
respected members. Transport during the
war years was scarce and unreliable, with
the shortage of coal necessitating train
engines at times to run on turf. Crews were lucky to get as far as Cork and maybe Galway. Club supporters and sometimes even the crews, travelled with boats on open-back lorries, the Eights and Fours, then all in one piece, having to be ferried on huge, cumbersome, wooden cradles, which had then to be lifted off the back of the lorry when returning to the clubhouse at all hours of the morning after regatta dances.

Petrol was severely rationed and sometimes crews from Cork, travelling with their boats by lorry to Limerick, had to unload the boats in Ballinacura and walk them all the way to the Docks due to a strict 50-mile limit on travelling. Ned Connaughton came to the rescue of two ABC men, Willie Reid and Tom Earle in 1943. Both had to vacate the train at Athlone on their way to Galway Regatta and having taken their bicycles, were setting out to complete the long haul to Menlo. Ned came along in a taxi and took the two ABC men on board, bikes and all.

Even the crews were sometimes required to travel on the back of the open lorry conveying the boats. Cyril Mullins remembers as a young member having to sneak on the back of the lorry as it slowed down at Pennywell, the driver was not too happy with having to convey supporters as well as the boats and some of the crew.

While the club was now the proud owners of a new clubhouse, the crews had very little success and senior rowing for most of the 1930s and well into the 40s was non-existent. An example of this was the Miss America, for lack of use, was still in pristine condition fifteen years after it was bought in triumph to the club and so frustrated was captain Ned Connaughton that in 1943 he decided he was going to enter a Senior Eight for Limerick Regatta come hell or high water. In a very conservative age, the committee went against him, their argument being that the oarsmen had not come through the ranks by qualifying. Ned maintained that the captain should have the power to enter the crew he liked and not getting his way, resigned his position.

Ironically, the first win recorded in the Fine Eight, 16 years after it was commissioned, was by an Athlunkard crew, stroke by Eddie McNamara, who won the Shannon RC Cup in Limerick. The boat was given willingly in deference to the Athlunkard's hospitality in the years in which the St Michael's clubhouse was being built.

The dearth of success in these years was exemplified when the club produced an unbeaten Maiden Eight in 1945. Incredibly, this was the first successful Maiden Eight in almost forty years, the previous win being in 1906. Billy Carmody was stroke, Tommy Hanrahan captain and Dick O'Halloran coach.

Up to 1945 the Maiden Eight had to row in an outmoded and cumbersome side-senior craft, which was a huge drawback. Dick O'Halloran was gifted with his hands and using the still pristine Miss America as a model, converted the old Clinker Eight into a centre seated boat and also managed to correct a warp which was a further improvement.

At Limerick there was a huge entry for the Quin Cup and despite their win in Athlone, the St Michael's Maiden Eight were quoted at 12 to 1 by the bookies, who attended regattas in those days and from whom cute rowing supporters often made good money. Paddy Mullins was one of the lucky punters who backed St Michael's that day and collected a handsome amount of money.

The crew also won in Cork, and the success-starved members went to town in the Rebel city that night. The regatta dances went on until all hours of the morning and it was often daylight when crews got back home and would then have to face the unloading of the two-ton cradle and boats as the lorry driver usually needed his vehicle next morning. Paddy Egan and Cyril Mullins famously decided to take a room in the Metropole Hotel in Cork that night. Word got round and a succession of late night revelers from the club in search of rest invaded the room through the night, resulting in very little sleep for the occupants. "There was up to twenty sleeping in the room," recalled Paddy. "Even the curtains were taken down to use as a cover." It was a major operation for the invaders to get past the porter next morning without being detected.

Great workers in the club during the forties, in a period of little success, included Tommy Hanrahan, Joe Whelan,
Dick O'Halloran, captain from 1945 to 1954, Christy 'Lamb' Howard, who coxed successfully over three decades, Frank Hough, Jack McCutcheon, Paddy Beegan, amongst many others.

Rugby affinity and confraternity

St Michael's had great affinity down the years with Young Munster R.F.C. In the era before rowing became an all-year round sport, many oarsmen doubled up playing rugby with Young Munster during the winter months before turning their attention to rowing in the spring. Down the years St Michael's crews were littered with such dual-sport participants. An example was the double-winning Munster Junior Cup team of 1959 and 1960 which had Paddy Treacy, Ger O'Mara, Noel Kilbridge, Jim Purtill, Paddy Wallace, Cohn Crowe, Ed Quinn, Joe Casey, all St Michael's oarsmen, all on the winning XVs. There were many other oarsmen who starred with Young Munster down the years, one notable being Richio Daly, who captained them to win the Munster Senior Cup in 1980, after a losing streak of over forty years.

This dual sporting affiliation did not always work in the best interests of the rowing club and in an era of mostly nil-nieman rugby and consequent low scoring games, draws were frequent results which meant that the rugby season encroached on the rowing training season. The late Bill Carmody recalls that the non-rugby playing oarsmen often prayed that they would be knocked out in the early stages of the cup competition so the players could come down on time for the rowing races.

During the height of the Arch-Confraternity years in Mount St Alphonsus, which at one time was reckoned to be the biggest in the world, the vast majority of the oarsmen and mentors in St Michael's would have been members. As a matter of fact, one of the rules dictated that members of St Michael's had to be members of the Confraternity before gaining admittance! The annual week-long Confraternity Retreat was held in March and a list was put up in the boathouse for members attending, so that they could be excused from rowing that week.

The power of the Church at that time was exemplified as the President, who was either the administrator of St Michael's or one of the C.C.'s, had the power to veto any decision taken by the committee if he did not agree with it.

Being a Temperance Society at that time meant that oarsmen were supposed to be teetotallers, but this rule was not strictly adhered to. Vigilant committee members often reported oarsmen they saw breaking the rule at regattas which resulted in the culprit being brought before the 'green table' and given warnings to mend their ways. Suspensions sometimes followed.

One of the most spectacular sights at any regatta at that time was the Quin Cup for Maiden Eights at Limerick with up to a dozen crews facing a harassed starter. A win against so much competition was rightly regarded as a major achievement and in 1950 the club Eight, stroked by Donal O'Connell, had a memorable victory. Christy Hardiman was in No. 7 and up the boat were A. Meehan, T. O'Brien, M. Galvin, M. Gilligan, N. Fitzgerald, M. Shine (bow) and G. Howard was cox. They also had a great win at Cork, gaining revenge for their championship defeat by beating Waterford.

The first schoolboy crew to compete at a regatta did so in Cork in 1954 with a crew.
A near run thing . . . In 1968, St Michael's Maiden Eight, were turning opposite Limerick Boat Club when a gust of wind dashed their craft against the pier of Sarsfield Bridge. All nine crew members were thrown into the water but thankfully escaped.

comprised of Colm Crowe, Seamus and Noel McNamara, Ger O'Meara and Billy Marshall (cox). There was a conception up to this time that rowing for anyone under 18 was harmful as the body was still developing and it took another few years for this outdated idea to be dispensed with.

Around this era, younger members of the club felt that the old order had been too long in control and were keeping back the club with outdated methods and blinkered outlook. At an A.G.M. there was a coup which resulted in the old hands being ousted and a memorable comment was overheard for the benefit of the upstarts from one of those ousted as he made his way out of the meeting “I hope they never win nothing”.

Christy Hardiman, who had great organisational skills, was captain in 1955 and the club had a haul of nine regatta wins, the best to date. These came thanks mainly to the efforts of the Junior Four of P. Treacy (bow), T. Bourke, J. Devereux, M. Phelan (stf.), P. Egan (cox). The Under-age Four was the other successful crew comprised of N. Kilbride (bow), S. Blake, P. Treacy, J. Devereux.

The shortage of funds in those days was exemplified by the story of the ordering of a new ‘Four’ but the house committee went to cancel it as they maintained they had not the necessary finances. Eventually they agreed to make the money available if the rowing club cut expenses by not attending regattas that season! A compromise proposed by Christy Hardiman regarding fund-raising was eventually accepted in which half the funds raised would go towards regatta expenses and the other half towards the new boat.

First Senior Eight win

The year 1956, was to prove a momentous one, when for the first time in the 56 year history of the club, a Senior Eight race was won. This came when a crew comprised of T. Cooney (bow), N. Kilbride, C. O’ Shaughnessy, T. Bourke, S. Meehan, T. Phayer, P. Treacy, M. Phelan (stf.), P. Egan (cox) won the Palmer Cup in Galway and went on to land the Shannon RC Cup in Limerick. There was great rejoicing in the club at this achievement, with the Miss America at last seeing success with a blue and gold clad crew aboard. Cyril Mullins was captain and Christy Hardiman vice-captain. In Cork, the Trinity cox in opposition to the Second Senior Four used an old ploy when shouting at stroke Archie Meehan that he was finished! Unfortunately for Trinity, the ploy backfired as it charged up Archie, who shouted back “I am in my arse” and they went on for a memorable win.

The Junior Four, doubling up as under-age, had a great season in 1958 with a panel comprised of Ger Barry stf., Dan Frawley, Tom Conway, S. Pierce, George Ryan, winning all over the country. Captain that year was Cyril Mullins and it was the most successful as regards the amount of trophies won in the history of the club, fourteen in all being landed.

Tough going through the 1960’s

For most of the 1960’s the Garda Club dominated, particularly at Maiden and Junior level. Local rowing correspondents, including this writer, found it a tough job keeping the rowing notes going with the best of local crews coming second to the Garda Club all over the country. A well known member of St Michael’s once called my efforts in the Limerick Leader extolling a local crew’s efforts as being akin to “the fairy tales of Ireland”.

An instance of the Garda Club dominance was the Maiden Eights championship in 1960 when they won with seven men: one of the crew fell ill during the week, but so arrogant were they that they elected to row without a replacement and duly won with the seven oarsmen. ‘Aspirant’ wrote in the Limerick Leader that “many of our oarsmen play rugby in winter time and until
such time as we train all the year round, like the Garda, we are doing our time. A knock-on effect was that very few of our oarsmen were qualifying and senior rowing was practically non-existent in the city."

In 1968 there was a big influx of Garda to the club and they were to make up the big majority of a highly successful Maiden squad. With Paddy Treacy as captain, Ted Phayer as vice-captain, and Mick Marrinan coach, the Eight, though beaten at Cork, had five wins on the trot all over the country with the Four also successful.

Their most notable success came at the top regatta of the year at Metro when they won both Eights and Fours. The winning Eight was Mick Murphy (bow), Charlie Brennan, Ben Sullivan, Liam Quinn, John L. O’Sullivan, Martin Keane, John O'Connor, Peter Holland (stl.), M. Moore (cox).

The win at Metro was a particularly sweet one as the club had not won in Dublin since 1928, when they won the Tailteann Under-age Fours.

A close run thing at Sarsfield Bridge

An incident on the water in early season 1968 was a close run thing and it was a miracle that there were no drowning fatalities. Indeed, it had the initial hallmark of a tragedy that could have been far more serious than that of 1918 when the two St Michael’s crew members Brawn and McNerney were drowned off Barrington’s Pier.

The Maiden Eight, comprised of Garda members coxed by Bill Cunningham, got into difficulties during training when the boat ran into very turbulent conditions at Sarsfield Bridge. The craft swamped and then split in two with the entire crew were left holding on to one section of the boat.

Austin Reid was on the water at the time coaching two St Munchin’s oarsmen in a tub. They went to proffer assistance but as they approached two of the stricken crew tried to climb aboard and as a result the tub swamped. So now, instead of nine people floundering in the water, there were twelve.

Sarsfield Bridge at this stage was lined with horrified spectators as they watched the drama unfolding below them, with the oarsmen trying to hold on for dear life. Providence was at hand, however, as near-by Limerick Boat Club members, led by Tony tyne, launched a craft and effected a rescue. The Fire Brigade also played their part, lowering ladders over the wall at Clancy Strand which some of the crew availed of.

By some miracle, all twelve escaped unscathed, but the memory of the ordeal will be forever etched in the memories of those involved in the terrifying ordeal.

A year to remember

The year 1969 was one to remember for St Michael’s when their crews swept all before them at regattas all over the country “St Michael’s are national club of the year” reported the Evening Press, and the Limerick Leader with the heading “The year of St Michael’s” gave over the back sports page to the crews and the 36 trophies they had amassed. Paddy Treacy and vice-captain Ted Phayer and all the coaches were the objects of much congratulation.

Hard to believe, but now in competition for almost seventy years, the club had raised only one senior eight flag in all that time. All that was to change in 1970 and for the first time ever, a Limerick crew was to beat the then dominant Garda crew at Senior Eight level. This occurred at Carlow when for the first time since 1956 the club won at this level and recorded the second win in this discipline. The history making crew was Mick Marrinan, who was coach; Mick Murphy, Ben Sullivan, Charlie Brennan, John Walsh, Pat Cunneen, Joe O’Farrell, Ray Ogan; Mickey Moore cox.

The Maiden Eight had a good win in the Quin Cup at Limerick Regatta in 1974
and Cormac Liddy stated in the Limerick Leader that this was one of the most exciting finishes of the day, the verdict being a mere canvas from Limerick B.C. He added that Athlunkard won the Women's Novice Four but were disqualified for having a male Cox.

**Diamond Jubilee**

There were notable celebrations in 1976 to mark the diamond jubilee of the founding of the club. It was marked with a special regatta organised by the club and a dinner in the Parkway Motel. Paddy Treacy was captain and Ted Phayer and Christy Maloney vice-captains.

In 1978, Dermot Henihan as captain, saw a remarkable six wins being recorded at Metropolitan Regatta, which constituted a local record. The achievement could be taken in context when it was recalled that at one stage for a period of thirty years no crew from Limerick had won a race of any kind at this prestigious regatta.

With 34 regatta wins that year, St Michael's had now become a major force in Irish rowing but the Limerick Leader's 'Apartment' bemoaned the fact that it was 1954 since a Limerick club had last won a championship (Shannon RC Maiden Eights) and particularly that St Michael's had yet to win an IRAU title in their almost eighty years history. He added "it must now be a matter of time, considering St Michael's consistent form of recent seasons, before this bogey is laid." He was right. The following year the club won their first Irish championship after 78 years of endeavour and the greatest era of the club and Limerick rowing took off.

**Minutes extracts**

Some snippets from the club's minute books give a flavour of the activities on dry-land and make interesting reading. In 1958 a letter was read from B O'Connell of Lee B.C. suggesting that St. Peter be adopted as the patron saint of oarsmen and that in future the rowing season be opened with a special church service. Cyril Mullins thought that oarsmen already had a patron saint. The committee were in favour of the idea and suggested that the incoming committee consider it. The same year it was proposed by Tom 'Snacky' Tobin that the club buy a second-hand car for transportation to regattas. The suggestion was not acted on as it was felt that it would not be economical. It was decided that oarsmen make their annual Confraternity Retreat about three weeks after rowing commencements. Bud Ciancy's band failed to turn up for a club dance and his services were dispensed with. Paddy Benson was hired at the rate of £7 if there were 150 in the hall and pro rata.

In 1959 Neptune R.C. wrote to ask if the club would send delegates to a meeting in Dublin to discuss the possibility of having an Irish crew compete in the Rome Olympics the following year. It was agreed to give the Miss America to Frankfurt R.C. competing at Limerick Regatta. A proposal to give boatman Michael Joyce an increase of 10 shillings in his wages was defeated and he was awarded 5 shillings. A sum of £110s. was taken from a girl's handbag in the cloakroom at the weekly dance and even though the club was not liable, it was decided to reimburse her.

Mention of Michael Joyce recalls a great character who was boatman in the club for many years. His was not an easy job, working through mud at low tide hauling up the boats. Invariably with a pipe stuck in his mouth, he famously fell into a high tide from the slipway one evening and surfaced, with his beloved pipe still firmly clinched in his mouth!

In 1961 a request to Shannon R.C. for a loan of their Clinker Four for the season was turned down. The reason given was that rowing had ceased in that club and that the boathouse was locked up. With huge crowds expected for the Munster Senior Hurling Final in Limerick it was suggested that the club be opened to sell tea and sandwiches, but as there was not enough time to prepare, the suggestion was not acted on. Captain Paddy Stapleton presented Joe Whelan with a trophy for clubman of the year at a meeting in 1961, amidst great acclaim. John Drake suggested that a nationwide raffle be organised, the prize to be a television set. It was reckoned that it would take the committee two weeks of hard work to sell out the cards and the matter was deferred. Paddy Stapleton volunteered to sell tickets for a billiard cue at the Christmas Handicap but on the suggestion of Michael Phelan it was decided instead to raffle a box of chocolates which Cyril Mullins volunteered to procure. Later on another raffle was organised and the grand prize was two balcony tickets for the films at the Savoy plus a box of chocolates and packet of 40 cigarettes. Second prize was two tickets for the stalls plus chocolates and 40 cigarettes.

In 1962 it was the club's turn to run the Head-of-the-River race and the Royal Showband and the Dixielanders, were to be written to regarding playing at the dance in the Stella Ballroom. Cyril Mullins suggested that Limerick Regatta be boycotted if the proposed finish be brought to Shannon Street, and Athlunkard would support the claim.

In the early 1970's an apology was received from the captain of a local rowing club for abusive language he had used towards a St Michael's crew member during the course of a regatta. The letter was accepted. The name of the offending captain and club shall remain undisclosed to protect the guilty.

![St Michael's Rowing Club boathouse as it is today](image-url)