

# Sauntering in Sarsfield Street

*with Randel Hodkinson and Tom O'Farrell*

Sarsfield Street greets the entrant to Limerick city after crossing Sarsfield Bridge. Like many city thoroughfares and landmarks both street and bridge did not retain their original names. The bridge was originally named Wellesley Bridge to commemorate Field Marshal Arthur Wellesley, 1st Duke of Wellington, KG GCB GCH PC FRS (1769 –1852), an Anglo-Irish soldier and statesman who was one of the leading military and political figures of the nineteenth century. The bridge was opened on 5 August 1835, following eleven years construction. It was designed by the Scottish engineer Alexander Nimmo and based on the Pont de Neuilly in Paris. It was a particularly important development for the city as it allowed expansion to the northern shore of the river. The bridge was renamed Sarsfield Bridge, to commemorate Patrick Sarsfield, the Earl of Lucan, who is renowned in Limerick for his role in the Williamite War and the 1691 siege and Treaty of Limerick. Apart from the beautiful architectural design of the bridge some interesting features are the rowing clubhouses at either side of the bridge. Shannon Rowing Club was founded by Sir Peter Tait in 1868 and has a very elegant clubhouse on the northern side. Limerick Rowing Club, founded in 1870, is on the southern side of the bridge. Unfortunately this building was extensively damaged in a severe storm in February 2014 which lifted the roof off.

In relation to the construction of the bridge Limerick historian Maurice Lenihan records:

No one applied himself more zealously to the successful realisation of this project than Mr. Thomas Spring Rice... Several objections had been raised to the advance of the money for the proposed bridge but on 6th Feb 1824 Mr Rice addressed a letter to the President of the Chamber of Commerce announcing that the Marquis of Wellesley, Lord Lieutenant of Ireland had approved the report of the Commissioners recommending a grant of £60k for the bridge and dock. It was anticipated that the tolls from the bridge would be very lucrative but the opposite was the case. Eventually in 1865 the tolls were rented to the firm of John Norris Russell & Son at £400 p.a.



Shannon Rowing Club Clubhouse

Some of the tolls applied in 1856 were –

For every horse mule or ass laden or unladen and not drawing, the sum of one Penny

For one horse or other beast of draught drawing any such carriage the sum of four Pence

The Sarsfield Bridge monument commemorates the 1916 Rising and is located on the bridge just above the Limerick Rowing Club building. An earlier monument on this site was a statue of Viscount Fitzgibbon, flanked by two Russian cannon captured during the Crimean War. Fitzgibbon was killed in the charge of the Light Brigade at Balaclava in 1854. This statue was blown up by the Irish Republican Army in 1930. The present memorial commemorates, among others, two former Mayors of Limerick (George Clancy and Michael O'Callaghan), who were killed by British forces in 1921. The quays on the northern shore are named Clancy Strand and O'Callaghan Strand in their honour. On the night of 2 February 1920 Lena Johnson, aged 21 was shot in proximity to Shannon Rowing Club by Crown forces while hurrying to her home in Thomondgate, on her return from work in the Coliseum Cinema.



Fitzgibbon statue replaced by 1916 memorial

Sarsfield Street was formerly Brunswick Street which commemorated the then British Royal family. On the passing of Queen Anne in 1714 the crown passed to George the First, King of Great Britain, France and Ireland, Duke of Brunswick - Luneburg and Defender of the Faith.

Entering the street from the bridge on the





Republican veterans march past Spillane's factory on way to the 1916 memorial in 1956,



Swinburn's Hotel

Shannon Rowing Club side, one was greeted by the Shannon Café and immediately next door at number 15 was the location of the Turkish Baths which traded from 1894 to 1925. The magnificent facade of Spillane's tobacco factory at 16-17 was no doubt admired by many visitors to the city. Spillane's moved to these premises in 1899 having traded for over 70 years as tobacco manufacturers in William Street. The new premises previously served as a granary for the firm of James Bannatyne & Sons. Spillane's renovated the building in order to commence the manufacture of cigarettes as well as continuing to manufacture their famous tobacco brands – 'Limerick Roll' and 'Garryowen Plug'. Over the years Spillane's expanded into some neighbouring buildings, including the Turkish Baths and by 1930 operated from Sarsfield Street only. Spillane's continued to trade until 1958 when the business was bought by a Dublin firm Murray & Co, which transferred all the machinery to its Dublin factory. In 1961 the firm Stokes & McKiernan relocated to these premises from Bedford Row. This firm had been founded in 1911 initially supplying creameries with belting and glassware and by 1961 had expanded into the cycle, motor-cycle, motor, electrical and radio wholesale trade.

Limerick Echo Printing & Publishing Works was located at number 19 and a 1930 billhead lists the proprietor as Christopher O'Sullivan. On his passing in 1936 his obituary records a gentleman with a long and distinguished career in journalism.

#### Death of Mr C. O'Sullivan

We announce with regret the death of Mr Christopher O'Sullivan, editor and proprietor of the *Limerick Echo* which occurred at his residence in Sarsfield Street,

Limerick, yesterday morning, after a short illness.

Mr O'Sullivan began his journalistic career with the *Munster News* and during the stormy period of the Land War and the operation of the Coercion Act his duties as a reporter brought him into many parts of the country. He often recalled the stirring days and particularly scenes associated with the Bodyke evictions.

For a brief period Mr O'Sullivan was editor of the *Limerick Leader* before he founded the *Limerick Echo* in May 1897. He acted as correspondent of the *Irish Independent* from the date of establishment of that paper by the Parnellite Party and took a prominent part in the Fenian Amnesty movement.

In the 1960s, Finn Brothers Photographers operated from number 19 specialising in press, commercial and wedding photographs.

Limerick Commercial Mart was located at numbers 20 and 21; the firm was established on 1 June 1837, 'for the purpose of receiving every description of Property for Sale, on which advances in cash are made when required.' Auctions were held every Wednesday with private sales every day. By the 1880's it was the premises of the veterinary practice of P Johnstone and by 1914 there was still a veterinary practice at number 20, but under the management of Arthur O'Leary. John Whelan operated a public house at number 21 trading as the Lansdowne Bar. Another public house traded at number 22 in the ownership of William Hickey. These three buildings (numbers 20, 21 and 22) were demolished in the late 1970s to make way for a new thoroughfare, Liddy Street, connecting Sarsfield Street to Honan's Quay. This new

street was named in honour of Joseph P (Rory) Liddy, who was Mayor of Limerick in 1958 and 1970.

Many readers will recall the Imperial Bakery (number 24) a high class bakery and confectionery specialising in wedding cakes. Webb's butcher stall occupied number 25 up to the late 1980s. In 1920 it was the home of Councillor Emily Crowe the first lady elected to Limerick Corporation. Cannock & Co at 26-27 and J McBirney & Co Ltd at 28-30 have been long associated with the drapery trade in the city. In the 1850s George Cannock purchased the drapery business of Cummine & Mitchell, 139 George Street (O'Connell Street) and thus began the origins of a household name in the drapery trade in Limerick and beyond. Another industrious gentleman, Peter Tait was, also at this time, taking tentative steps in the drapery business commencing with the manufacture of shirts while also in seasonal employment in Cannock's. By 1858 Tait had become the largest employer in Limerick and in November of that year John Arnott sold his interest in Cannock's to Tait. Tait was responsible for the ongoing expansion of business and developed the manufacture of gloves in Cannock's. In June 1862 he negotiated the purchase of extensive property in Brunswick Street (Sarsfield Street). Two years later as managing director of his clothing factory and of Cannock's, Tait had established himself as the largest clothing manufacturers in the British Isles.

Continuing on this side of the street to the junction with O'Connell Street the premises has served as major drapery establishment, for over 150 years. In keeping with the many fine buildings on the street these buildings had a beautiful façade and the names over the door down the years include Slattery O'Neill & Co, John McBirney &



Co Ltd, Roche's Stores (Limerick) Ltd and currently Debenhams. The building was completely destroyed by fire in January 1948. A newspaper account tells how

The fire was detected at 1.30 a.m. by Mr George O'Brien, (Limerick Hotel, Sarsfield St) and Detective Officer Sherry who were conversing at the corner of O'Connell St and Sarsfield St. Observing what appeared to be either smoke or fog issuing from the premises of Roche's Stores in Sarsfield St they proceeded to investigate. They found the basement just inside the hall door, was in flames. The Fire Brigade was summoned with all possible speed but in the space of minute's tongues of flame shot skyward --The damage is estimated at about £500,000 and eighty employees are out of work. -- The Fire Brigade under First Officer Gough were given invaluable help by the Army, Shannon Airport Unit, the Cork Fire Brigade and private hose services from Messrs Cannock and Todd's.

The building we know today was opened with much fanfare on Friday 18 May 1952 and afforded Roche's Stores the bragging rights of having, 'Ireland's most modern store'.

Crossing to the opposite corner brought the shopper to 1 George's (O'Connell) Street and Messrs Flavin & Co family grocers. It was subsequently occupied by E G Fitt who also traded as general grocers. In later years it has operated as a pharmacy the proprietors being Dermot Foley, Ryan's and currently Niall O'Sullivan.

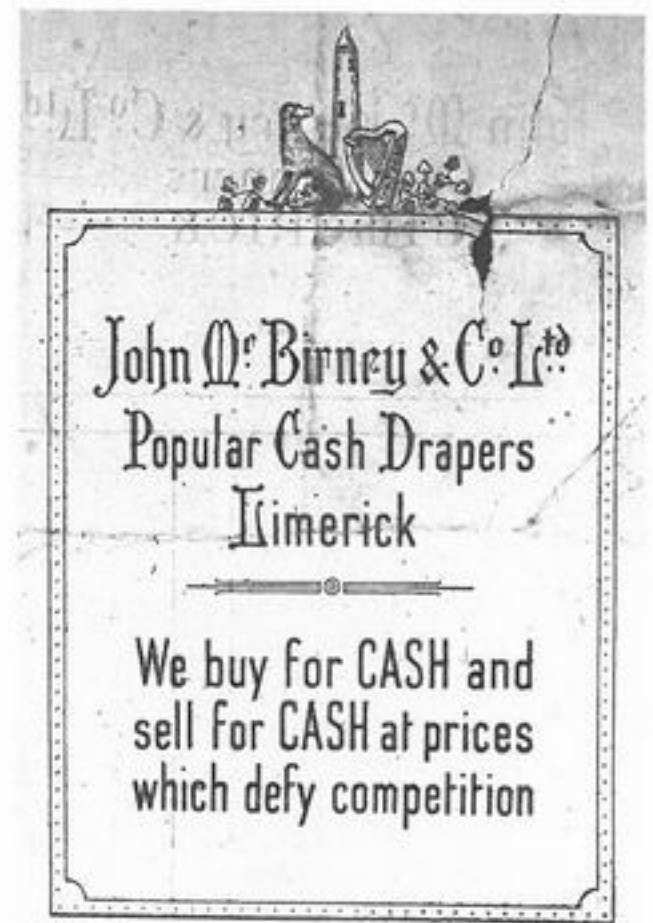
Next door at number 1, Messrs J P Evans and Co did an extensive trade as seed merchants. By the 1880s the business was under the proprietorship of Thomas Cleeve who in 1860 had travelled from Canada to commence working in the firm of J P Evans who was a relative of Cleeve through his maternal line. In 1883, Cleeve started a new enterprise, the Condensed Milk Company of Ireland, in conjunction with two local businessmen. The company manufactured dairy products, such as condensed milk, butter, cheese and confectionery with its headquarters located in Limerick city, on the northern bank of the River Shannon. The business expanded over the next twenty years to become the largest of its type in the United Kingdom. Cleeve was also a senior partner in the Cleeve Canning and Cold Storage Company based in British Columbia. In 1899, Cleeve was voted onto Limerick City Council. That same year, his fellow councilors elected him as High Sheriff of Limerick City, the Queen's representative in the city. He held the position again in 1907 and 1908. In 1900, Cleeve received a Knighthood from the Lord Lieutenant, following a visit by Queen Victoria to Ireland.

Swinburn's Hotel occupied numbers 2 and 3 and in 1840 was the location for a concert by the Limerick diva Catherine Hayes. It was also the same venue where Franz Liszt gave two concerts in 1841, the tickets for the performance costing 5 shillings. It was popular amongst the City Militia with regular balls taking place and also dramatic performances. It was later Bowler's Limerick City Hotel and subsequently passed to Mr J.G O'Brien a founder member of Limerick Cycling Club and Mayor of Limerick in 1927/28. Messrs John McBirney had a tailoring department at number 3 and they also had their electricity generating plant housed there until the arrival of the Shannon Scheme in 1929. The premises next door at numbers 4 and 5 'put bread on the table' for Limerick people, as it was the location of a bakery for several decades. In the 1880s Thomas Riordan had a bakery there and it was later owned by Joseph Carmody and was recorded as one of the biggest bakeries in the city. An article in the *Limerick Consumer* in October 1979 informed the reader that:

Carmody did an extensive trade over the counter and queues could be seen right through the day. A custom of the time, not seen any more, was women carrying pillow cases into the shop and having bread loaded into them. 'Outsides' or 'crusties' as they were termed were sold at a lower rate and they were much in demand by the poorer section of the community. Four men used to serve at the counter and sales were nearly always made by bargaining. So many loaves were thrown on the counter and offers made for the lot. A couple of small loaves were thrown in to clinch the bargain.

John Daly & Co later took over the business. John Daly (1845-1916), was an Irish revolutionary and a leading member of the Irish Republican Brotherhood. He was uncle to Kathleen Clarke, wife of Tom Clarke, who was executed for his part in the 1916 Rising. She was a leading member of the IRB as was her brother Ned Daly, who was also executed in 1916. Daly was active in politics serving as MP for Limerick City and he also held the office of Mayor 1899-1901.

The Catholic Literary Institute was at the corner of Sarsfield Street and Henry Street. Established by Bishop Edward Thomas O'Dwyer in 1875 the institute incorporated reading rooms, meeting rooms, a billiard room and a large function room on the ground floor. In 1953 it was the location of an attempt by 'Musical Marie' to play the piano non-stop for 133 hours. The *Limerick Leader* on 9 November recorded a successful outcome for Marie. This building also served as the headquarters of the Irish Transport and General Workers Union.



Advertising poster for McBirney & Co.

At the opposite corner of the junction with Henry Steer, is an equally ornate building at number 8 which has been occupied by Billy Higgins, Tailoring Specialist and Gents Outfitter since the late 1950s. The name over the door in the 1930s was L Hurley, Wholesale & Retail Newsagent, Stationer and Tobacconist. In the intervening years it was occupied by J Murphy Electrical and Plumbing supplies. The premises at number 9 has a long record as a public house with the licensed vintners trading there down the years being J Byrne (Brunswick Bar) Michael Ryan, William Gleeson and then traded as Riddler's. An emigration agency managed by M Moroney was at number 19 in the 1880s. Between these buildings and the bridge J Toomey, farrier and the coal stores of Richard O'Dwyer and Sons traded for a number of years...

Although predominantly a centre of commerce the following news article from 1945, depicts Sarsfield Street in a different light.

#### Street Incident

Several persons were knocked down in Sarsfield Street on Wed night, when a young bullock ran amok. The animal was walking along the street when it was startled by a barking dog. In frenzy it dashed at pedestrians some of whom were knocked before they could get out of danger. One woman was treated for scalp wounds in Barrington's Hospital subsequently.

The animal rushed from side to side of the street, charging anybody foolhardy enough to try and re-capture it. Large crowds watched from various vantage points, only to be scattered when the maddened animal



rushed towards them. On several occasions large plate glass windows in shop premises narrowly escaped. Gardaí from William Street station and some soldiers made numerous efforts to secure the bullock, which for two hours defied all their efforts. Eventually it was secured with ropes and led along the Ennis Road struggling wildly.

There was a sad ending to the story, as it was later ascertained that the bullock broke away from its captors and on Thursday morning it was found dead near Caherdavin.

Billhead for Daly's Bakery



Billhead for A.J. O'Leary V.S.



Billhead for McBirney & Co.



Extensive premises of Slattery & Co.



Images courtesy of Limerick Museum.

Randel Hodkinson and Tom O'Farrell are members of the Thomond Archaeological and Historical Society ([www.thomsoc.blogspot.ie](http://www.thomsoc.blogspot.ie)) currently serving as President and Deputy President respectively. In 2008 as part of the society's summer outings the guided a tour of Sarsfield Street and their research material is reproduced in this article.