

The People's Park and the Free Library

It became customary during the nineteenth century for local governments to accept an ever widening definition of civic responsibility. In Limerick the commissioners of the parish of St Michael had shown what could be achieved if urban services were systematically extended and maintained. When the corporation inherited the jurisdiction and resources of the new town, there was pressure to sustain the commitment of their predecessors and extend the services throughout the city. The corporation erected the potato market on Merchant's Quay in 1843 and public walks and embankments were constructed around King's Island. There was also legislation that nudged city corporations into accepting a measure of responsibility for the health and education of their inhabitants. There was the Public Libraries Act of 1855 which established the principle of a free library service. In 1874 the corporation took the decision to provide a free park for the citizens. A lease for 500 years was obtained from the Earl of Limerick for Pery Square and the surrounding, vacant ground. So it was that Limerick's only square was converted into Limerick's first public park.

Pery Square had never been completed. The map of 1870 shows the railed and landscaped centrepiece floating in a sea of blank paper. The plots, deep enough for house, garden, back office, coach house and lane, had been levelled, but only the tontine building and the church had been completed. These buildings filled one corner of a square that could have taken 60 houses and been the size of Berkeley Square in London. They were however, part of the prestigious residential enclave that was becoming smaller and increasingly isolated by the encroachment of industrial and commercial developments and the spread of lower class housing.

The railway, which aristocratic interest had prevented from penetrating the new town, had halted at the far side of the square. The line to Tipperary had been opened in 1848 and with the building of the station on Nelson Street in the early 1850s a new complex of warehouses, goods yards and packing sheds had sprung up close to Pery Square. Almost immediately to the south, along the same road, Tait's army clothing factory and associated housing was another indication that the Georgian new town had reached its limits. To the west, by the river, the construction of the new floating docks almost parallel to Pery Square meant that the gas works, new mills such as Bannatyne's and the paraphernalia of dock development were also in relatively close proximity to the houses of the wealthy middle classes.

For some years now many of these families had been acquiring properties in the countryside of Courtbrack and Farrenshone just outside the city. The villas of Summerville, Richmond and Laurel Hill, built by quakers in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, already formed an essentially rural suburb to the south of the city. On the other side of the river Tivoli and Shelbourne were among the houses that were built after the 1840s. Each house was set in its own grounds with a gate lodge at the road (North Circular Road). These residences gave their inhabitants the illusion of a landed position. The country setting also became associated with health and privacy at a time when large parts of the city were becoming crowded and insanitary. Wealthy families thus increasingly sought the suburbs in preference to the town as the place to bring up their children.

Thus it was that Pery Square became available to the corporation. The need for a park had become apparent as housing conditions worsened in the older parts of the city