

RIC Consolidation in Limerick 1919-1921

by Tom Cooney

In January 1919 when County Inspector Yates, head of the RIC for Limerick city and county, completed his annual 'Nominal Return of Men', he had at his disposal a force of 357 officers and men. This report was completed annually and it was submitted to the Inspector General at Dublin Castle in January of each year. While it is not an absolute record, as it does not reflect the changes that occur throughout the year, it is very useful, in the sense that it provides an annual snapshot of the RIC. The 'Nominal Return membership' for Limerick was broken into two sections, one covering the city and the other covering the county. The city and county were broken down into eleven police districts, each of which was in the charge of a district inspector. There were a total of fifty-six police barracks, six within the city and fifty-one in the county. A number of the barracks on the periphery of the city, Ballinacurra, Caherdavin, Blackboy, Ballysimon and Kilmurry (Castletroy) were included with the county returns. Immediately reporting to each district inspector was a head constable, a rank that seemed to be equivalent to that of a sergeant major in military terms. Each individual barrack was under the control of a sergeant and the garrison strengths varied from 32 constables at William Street to a Sergeant and three constables in most of the smaller rural barracks. William Street Barracks was the county headquarters and in addition to the thirty-two constables, there were ten sergeants, a district inspector, a head constable along with the county inspector, making a total of forty-five officers and men.

County Inspector Henry Edmund Wingfield Yates was born in Hertfordshire in England. Yates was a sixty-year old career officer in January 1919 and he had joined the RIC as an officer cadet around 1882. Although obviously well connected, he was a man of limited ability, but with no shortage of belief in that ability. His actions in Limerick in the sensitive years from 1912 to 1919 were in stark contrast to those of his military counterpart, Colonel Sir Anthony Weldon. He seemed to have no had great grasp of the sensitivities of the Irish political situation, while Weldon had a complete control of issues in the city by virtue of his intellect and integrity. When he employed a newly trained mounted unit that had no previous experience of crowd control, he was responsible for provoking the riots that broke out in the city in October 1912 following a pro-Unionist rally at the

Theatre Royal. He further exacerbated matters by drafting in 300 police to try and control the riots, and it was only when Yates and the RIC were confined to Barracks that a number of priests, led by Father Aidan Mangan, Director of the Arch-Confraternity, brought matters under control.

In 1919, Yates had charge of 357 men, of whom 91% were Roman Catholic. Of the remainder, 30 were described as Protestant and one man, Constable James Robert Hay, who was stationed at Ballingarry, was listed as a lone Presbyterian. Relations between the RIC and the population of the city and county had always been fairly civil, if not entirely friendly. However, as 1919 progressed the RIC, especially in the remoter rural areas, began to come under pressure from the IRA. This pressure took the form of social ostracisation and non co-operation. There was no direct attack on the police barracks, but their vulnerability became more and more apparent. It was against this background that the process of consolidation of the RIC began. Among the first barracks to be evacuated in County Limerick were those at Athea and Herbertstown.

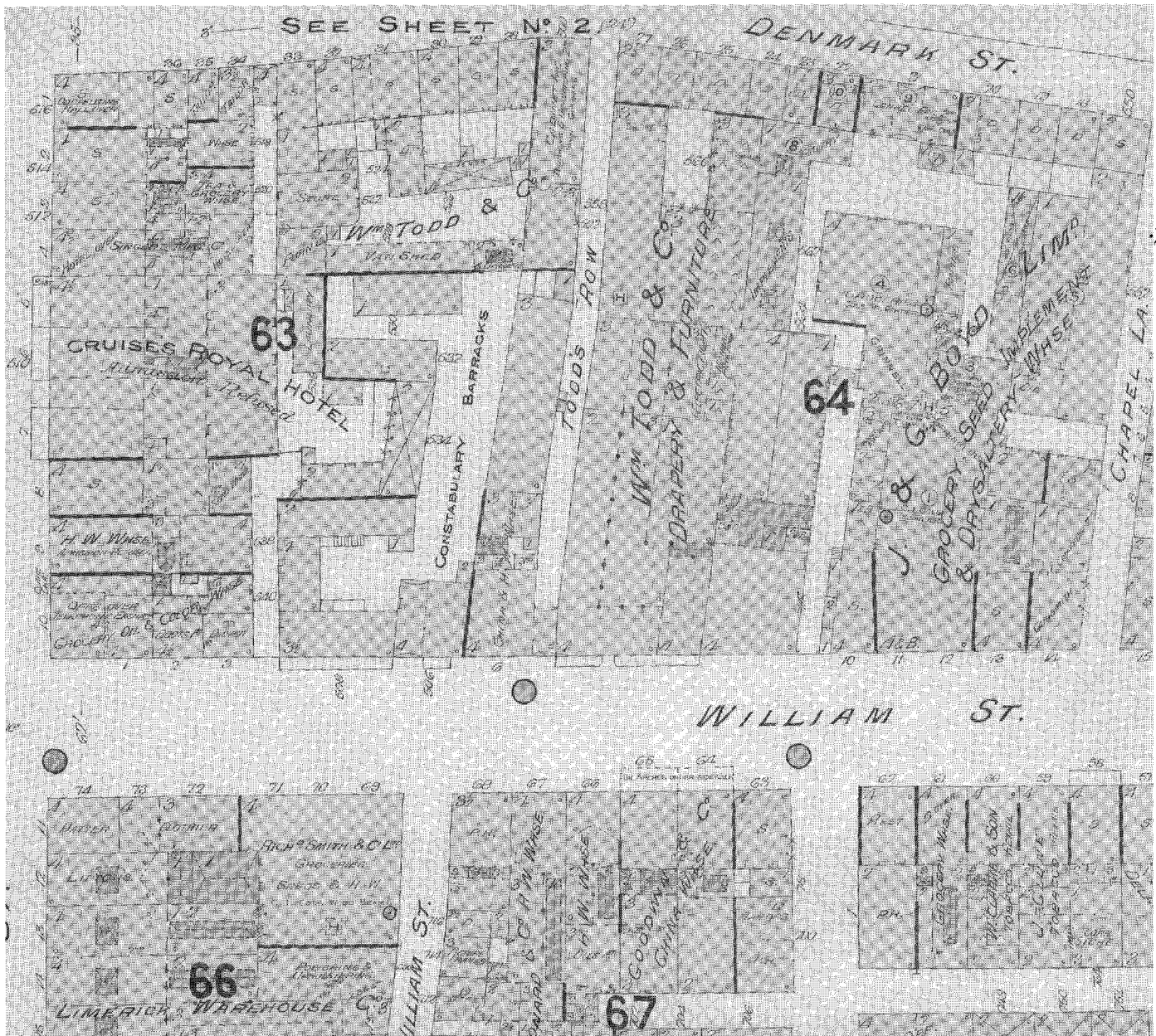
Ironically, the last sergeants at both Athea and Herbertstown were to die in the course of the following two years. Sergeant Tobias O'Sullivan was posted to Kilmallock following the closure of Athea and he led the resistance to the IRA attack on the barracks in May 1920. Following the destruction of the barracks at Kilmallock, O'Sullivan was posted to Listowel on promotion to the rank of District Inspector. He was shot dead at Church Street, Listowel, in January 1920 by an IRA unit under the command of Con Brosnan.

Sergeant Patrick Hearty, a native of South Armagh, was the last sergeant to serve at Herbertstown before it was closed. He was shot dead in Mallow Street, Limerick, when he and his companion, Sergeant Dunphy, were ambushed by an IRA patrol under Michael Hartney. In total, fourteen barracks were closed during 1919, but the decision on barrack closures did not always make sense. For instance, the Barracks at Pallaskenny was closed in the autumn of 1919 and the garrison was transferred to Kildimo. The sessions house or courthouse continued to operate in Pallaskenny, while police protection had to come from Kildimo. It was while they were on the way back to Kildimo from the spring sessions, in

March 1920, that the Kildimo RIC patrol was ambushed and Constable Patrick Moran was seriously wounded. In addition to the fourteen barracks that were closed in 1919, four others, Kilmeeedy, Caherconlish, Ballysimon and Blackboy Pike, were only partially occupied. This appears to have been an extremely dangerous and contradictory situation, as the garrisons were reduced, but there was still a presence.

The first full-scale attack on a police barracks in Limerick occurred at Murroe in January 1920. The IRA attack at Murroe was unsuccessful, but if the mine which had been placed against the barrack gable had exploded inward instead of outwards, there is no doubt but that the barrack would have been demolished. Ironically, one of the garrison at Murroe, Patrick Foody, was killed about twelve months later in the Dromkeen ambush. The first successful barracks attack in County Limerick occurred at Ballylanders in April 1920. It was about this time that a major reconsolidation of RIC barracks occurred in Limerick. In total, thirty-four barracks were closed in the county and the Thomondgate Station was closed in the city. The subsequent closure of the post at Caherdavin meant that all police inhabitation on the north side of Limerick city had ceased. On the night of Saturday 3 April 1920, the IRA burned all the evacuated barracks to ensure that they would not be reoccupied. In retaliation, the RIC, with the assistance of the newly arrived Black and Tans, burned a number of creameries in east Limerick and west Tipperary. In the course of the barrack burnings two members, John Collopy & Denis Maher, were seriously injured in the destruction of Kilmurry Barracks at Castletroy. Maher was maimed for life and Collopy died in December 1920 as a result of his injuries.

The final consolidation of the RIC would appear to have led to some anomalies. These may have been of a temporary nature, but they do reflect confusion and disorganisation within a force that always prided itself on its sense of clarity and organisation. In Askeaton, for instance, a garrison of seventeen constables reported to a single sergeant when the overall national ratio of constables to a sergeant was about four to one. In Newcastle West, in contrast, seven sergeants are listed in a garrison with only thirteen constables. In the Pallasgrean or New Pallas police district, Inspector Sanson was in charge of four barracks, Doon, Oola, Pallasgrean and Cappamore, which were in close proximity to each



Insurance plan of the city, 1897, showing the location of William Street barracks

(Limerick Museum)

other, and a fifth barracks at Fedamore, which was about twenty miles away from the cluster of four. Why Fedamore was not assigned to the police district at Bruff, which was only six miles distant, has never been explained.

It was this anomaly that was seized on by the IRA when they ambushed Sanson and his convoy, at Dromkeen, while he was on his way back from delivering pay and supplies to the garrison at Fedamore, in February 1921. The decision as to which barracks were to remain open seems to have been determined more by physical capacity than by strategic location. This is reflected in the fact that Sanson's cluster of four barracks were in such close proximity, while in other parts huge tracts of the county were without a police presence.

By 1921, the police authorities seem to have seen the light and County Inspector Yates was 'retired'. The new County Inspector was an Antrim man, Captain John Morton Regan. Regan was also a career officer in the RIC, but he had taken

time out to serve in the army during World War I, unlike a large number of his fellow officers, who found all manner of excuse to avoid joining up. An examination of individual files of RIC officers reveals an amazing pattern of what can best be described as 'a reluctance to join the army' when requested to make themselves available for service by Joseph Byrne, RIC Inspector General, in 1916. These same men were vehement in their pursuit of deserters from the front.

The force that Regan commanded in January 1921 was a far cry from that which Yates was in charge of in 1919. Of the 545 men listed, only 237, or 43%, were recorded as Roman Catholic. 291 men, or 53%, were listed as 'Protestant' and the remainder were either Presbyterian, Baptist or Wesleyan. The change in the religious mix of the force reflects the changes that had occurred and the fact that the recruitment campaign in England had far outstripped the number of resignations of native catholic Irish.

In the period from January 1919 up to

December 1921, when the last recruits were drafted for the area, Limerick received an influx of about seven hundred recruits. This figure, taken in conjunction with the nominal strength in January 1919, comes to a total of between 1,000 and 1,100 men. The attrition rate in the force, however, was extremely high when taking in the resignations and retirement of original members and the rate of dismissal and discharge of the new recruits. The last draft of recruits to the RIC in Limerick arrived in the city on 10 December 1921. Coincidentally, in one of the last draft of recruits, there was a Peter Robert Tait from Aberdeen, a name long associated with one of Limerick's greatest industries.

SOURCES

Nominal Returns of RIC - British National Archives, Kew.
 RIC Rolls - Irish National Archives, Dublin.
 Service Records of RIC officers - Irish National Archives, Dublin
 Limerick Leader files.

DISPOSITION OF RIC IN LIMERICK 1919-1921

*	BARRACK	1919				1920				1921			
		DI	HC	Sgt	Con	DI	HC	Sgt	Con	DI	HC	Sgt	Con
1	William Street	1	1	13	40	1	1	16	37	1	2	14	112
2	John Street	1	1	2	8	1	1	2	9	1	1	4	17
3	Boherbuoy (Edward St.)			2	8			2	7			3	20
4	Docks (O'Curry Street)			1	5			1	8			4	18
5	Mary Street			2	5			2	6			3	18
6	Thomondgate			1	5			1	6	Closed			
1	Abbeyfeale	1	1	1	7	1	1	1	8	1	1	1	18
2	Adare	1	1	1	5	1	1	1	6	1	1	3	21
3	Bruff	1	1	3	4	1	1	2	8	1	1	3	21
4	Kilfinnane	1	1	2	4	1	0	2	6	1	0	2	10
5	Newcastlewest	1	1	1	8	1	1	3	12	1	1	7	13
6	New Pallas	1	1	1	4	1	1	3	6	1	1	2	18
7	Rathkeale	1	1	1	7	1	1	1	7	1	1	1	11
8	Ardagh			1	3	Closed				Closed			
9	Ashford			1	3			1	5	Closed			
10	Askeaton			1	5			1	4			1	17
11	Athea			1	3	Closed				Closed			
12	Ballinacurra			1	4			2	8	Closed			
13	Ballingarry			1	4			1	6	Closed			
14	Ballylanders			1	4			1	6	Closed			
15	Ballyneety			1	3	Closed				Closed			
16	Ballysimon			1	2			0	*2	Closed			
17	Blackboy			1	3			0	*3	Closed			
18	Broadford			1	3			1	5	Closed			
19	Bruree			1	4			1	5	Closed			
20	Caherconlish			1	3			0	*2	Closed			
21	Caherdavin			1	3			1	0	Closed			
22	Cappanahane police post**			0	0			0	3	Closed			
23	Cappamore			1	3			1	8			1	12
24	Castleconnell			1	3			2	4	Closed			
25	Castletown			1	3			1	7	Closed			
26	Clarina			1	4	Closed				Closed			
27	Croom			1	4			1	5			1	13
28	Doon			1	4			1	6			2	15
29	Dromcollogher			1	5			1	6			2	14
30	Elton			1	3	Closed				Closed			
31	Fedamore			1	3			2	4			2	12
32	Foynes			1	5			3	8			1	14
33	Galbally			1	4			2	8			2	17
34	Glin			1	5			2	8	Closed			
35	Grange			1	3	Closed				Closed			
36	Herbertstown			1	3	Closed				Closed			
37	Hospital			1	4			2	6			1	14
38	Kildimo			1	3			2	6	Closed			
39	Kilmallock			1	5			2	8			1	18
40	Kilmeedy			1	3			*1	0	Closed			
41	Kilmurry			1	4			1	2	Closed			
42	Kilteely			1	3	Closed				Closed			
43	Knockaderry			1	3	Closed				Closed			
44	Loughill			1	3	Closed				Closed			
45	Mountcollins			1	3	Closed				Closed			
46	Murroe			1	3			1	5	Closed			
47	Oola			1	3			1	5			1	13
48	Pallaskenry			1	4	Closed				Closed			
49	Patrickswell			1	2			2	5			2	15
50	Shanagolden			1	3	Closed				Closed			
51	Strand			1	2			1	5	Closed			
52	Tournafulla			1	5	Closed				Closed			
		9	9	75	264	9	8	75	281	9	0	64	471
	Total			357				373				553	

* Denotes partial occupation
 ** Temporary police unit

DI: District Inspector
 HC: Head Constable

Sgt.: Sergeant
 Con.: Constable