

LIMERICK CHRONICLE

Celebrating
250 years -
1768 - 2018

INSIDE THIS WEEK



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DOWN MEMORY LANE WITH THE COUNTRY'S OLDEST TITLE

Russells help build a legacy

FROM THE ARCHIVES

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LIMERICK CHRONICLE HISTORIAN



THE founder of the Limerick branch of the Norman family was Nathaniel Russell, an "Officer of the troops" who fell at the Cromwellian Siege of Limerick in 1650. His grandson, Philip, was Sheriff of Limerick in 1744. Philip's son, Francis, became Sheriff in 1777. Francis married Elizabeth Norris and their son John Norris Russell would develop a milling empire in Limerick.

The door on the tomb of the Russell family in St John's Church reads "Che Sara Sara" (what will be will be) a motto that travelled down through the Russell family and one they lived by. John Norris Russell erected the tomb during the rebuilding of the church and redevelopment of the churchyard in 1852, in memory of his father Francis Russell who died on August 25, 1800.

John Norris Russell and his sons left a permanent mark on Limerick. Russell was a merchant, a shipowner and industrialist. His eldest son Francis William Russell was the MP for Limerick city from 1852 until 1871. His second eldest son Thompson Russell was the Sheriff of Limerick. While in 1877, People's Park opened in memory of his second youngest son Richard Russell. His youngest son Arthur Russell was the last of the brothers to manage the family's milling business.

The Russell family lived in several important houses in Limerick. Many of these houses are still standing but used for other purposes today. Some examples include Plassey House, which is now part of the University of Limerick; Milford, now owned by the Little Company of Mary and used as a nursing home and hospice; two houses on the North Circular Road, Shelburne now part of Ardscoil Ris and Thornville; The Crescent House, which later became the Jesuit Church and residence in the Crescent; as well as country estates Ballinacarriga near Rathkeale, Faha and Patrickswell.

John Norris Russell was born in Limerick in 1774 and set about building a great business empire,

John N. Russell & Sons, which continued in business until 1903. At its height, the Russells' conglomerate employed some 2,000 souls.

In 1810, he built the huge Newtown Pery Mills on Russell's Quay, a site now occupied by Riverpoint. Later he acquired a number of other mills and built others in the city, eventually owning the Lock Mills, Plassey Mills, Singland Mills and Corbally Mills. He also acquired Askeaton Mills in County Limerick. In 1827, he introduced steam instead of water to power the rollers, to the astonishment of many of his contemporaries.

Eventually, he became the largest miller in the South of Ireland.

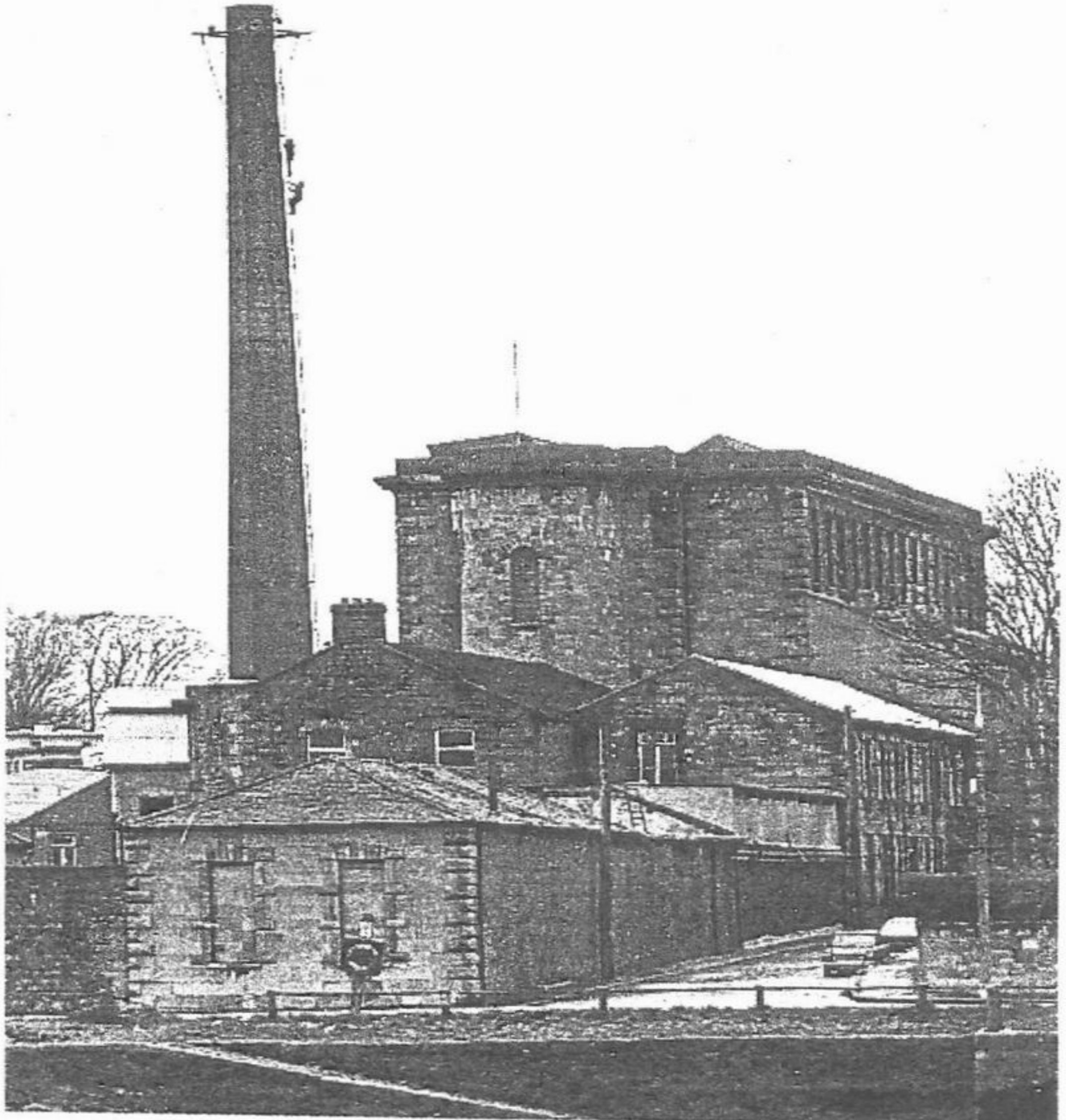
Milling was only part of Russell's business. He also had his own shipyard. He helped establish a steamship company in 1850 and later took it over. In 1851, he constructed one of the largest industrial buildings ever seen in Limerick, the Lansdowne flax spinning and linen weaving factory on North Circular Road, later the Cleeves and Golden Vale premises.

John Norris Russell took an active part in public life. In 1843, as with his father and grandfather before him, he served as sheriff of the city. He sat on the Limerick City Council for a year from 1841 as a Liberal and supporter of reform. He was one of the founders of Limerick Savings Bank.

Russell was married to Cork woman Maria Thompson and they had seven sons (two of whom died young) and two daughters, all of whom were born in Limerick. Starting from his eldest son, Francis William Russell (1799-1871), Thompson Russell (1801-80), Richard Russell (1803-71), Augustus Russell (1808-80) and Arthur Norris Russell (1810-90).

John Norris Russell died at his house in 109 George's Street on 30 April 1859, and was interred next to his father in his family tomb in St John's Churchyard. The Chronicle reported on his death.

"This morning, to the deep regret of his family, at his house, George-street, in his 85th year, John Norris Russell, Esq, principal of the extensive firm of J. N. Russell & Son.



What we know today as the Cleeve's building was originally built as a flax spinning and linen weaving factory on North Circular Road by John Norris Russell

During a long and active life he fulfilled all the duties of a true Christian. He was a gentleman of the highest honour and integrity, beloved by his family and respected by a large circle of friends. His energy and enterprise largely increased the trade of his native city, and by the extensive employment he gave, happiness and comfort were spread amongst thousands. His remains will be interred on Thursday morning, in the family vault at St John's Church."

John's four sons continued the

family business as well as their own projects until 1871, when two of the brothers passed away within a day of each other, leaving the two surviving brothers to carry on without them for a few more years.

His eldest son Francis William Russell was educated in Trinity. He entered the world of politics and spent most of his adult life in London, leaving his brothers in charge of his share in the family business. On August 30, 1871, he died suddenly in London. The previous day his younger brother Richard

Russell died at his home Plassey House, Limerick.

Thompson Russell married Marianne Blood, daughter of Edward Maghlin Blood and Frances Roche, on December 2, 1834. He passed away on December 22, 1880. The following day the Chronicle gave an overview of his life.

"It is with much regret we announce the death of this venerable gentleman, which occurred last

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poets, who both published and performed ballads on the streets of Limerick for the highest bidder.

During the 1865, elections O'Driscoll and Walsh were hired by Timothy Morrissey of Clare Street to perform ballads to excite the public in favour of the Liberal Francis William Russell and against the Conservative James Spaight and his supporters. Russell was the MP for Limerick from 1852 until his death in 1871.

It is not known if Russell knew of

influence electors to vote for them.

Terence O'Driscoll, sworn and examined by Mr. [John] Doyle - 'What profession are you?'

'I am a poet and singer (laughter), and it was in that capacity I was employed at the late elections to compose and sing street ballads. I entered into an agreement with Mr Morrissey at the Newtown Pery Mill. Six hundred copies of the first song were printed but we would not sing them unless we got our wages. We were humbugged at the last elec-

Isaac Butt replaced Francis William Russell as the M.P. for Limerick following the death of Russell in 1871

tion before that. I told Morrissey that I and my comrade, Walsh, wanted 5/- a day each for singing the songs, and £5 each if the candidates were returned. We sang for 12 days up to the day of the poll.'

Mr Doyle - 'I have here the manuscripts of the Poets Lament (loud laughter). It begins:

My name is O'Driscoll
A singer by trade;

Myself and my comrade
We never were paid.'

His Worship, after looking at the songs handed up to him for perusal, asked - 'Did you expect to be paid for exciting animosity, to incite the people in the streets to strike each other and smash each other's heads?'

Witness - 'It was for that I was employed. The more excitement I

this, he was knighted in 1887. He passed away on January 21, 1892.

The Chronicle on January 23, 1892 recorded that the "remains of this deeply-lamented gentleman - one off the most useful and representative citizens Limerick has ever had - were interred this morning at St Mary's Cathedral, amidst the most widespread expression of regret. Quin, we believe, is the family burial place of the Spaight family, but owing to Sir James's long connection with the city of Limerick, St Mary's was chosen as his last resting place."

Russell family's large impact on Limerick felt today

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

night, at his residence, Shelbourne, in the 80th year of his age, after a lengthened and active career as senior member of the great mercantile firm of John Norris Russell and Son. He was second son of the late John Norris Russell - his late brother, who represented this city in Parliament for over twenty years, having been the eldest son - and on the demise of his father, at a patriarchal age, Mr Thompson Russell became the head of the firm, his elder brother's Parliamentary residence in London not enabling him to hold that position; and his close attention to business was such that he was scarcely ever known to enjoy a holiday or trip to the seaside. He was the very embodiment of a merchant, laborious, cautious, and calculating; and in times of great depression, when other great houses came crashing to the ground like an avalanche over a precipice, that of John

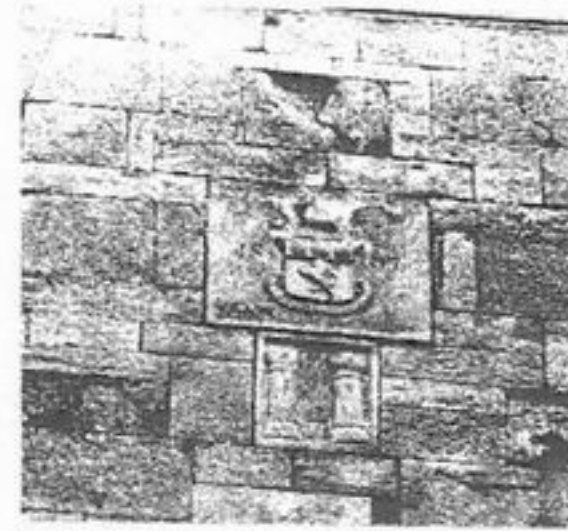
Norris Russell and Sons always held its mighty head aloft, until to-day it enjoys a foremost place amongst the greatest mercantile firms in Ireland. Mr Thompson Russell, though holding so high a station in the mercantile world was yet a homely gentleman, simple and unostentatious in his habits, and with an amiability of manner almost amounting to a weakness. He was affable with every one with whom he came in contact in a business way or otherwise; and his familiar face will long be regretted from the Harbour Board, Chamber of Commerce, and Market Trustees, whose meetings he regularly attended until failing health obliged him a few years ago to relieve himself both of the burden of the cares of his own establishment, and of attending on those boards. The deceased held the Commission of the Peace for the county of Limerick. His sole surviving brother, Mr Arthur Russell, has now become the senior member of the firm."

Richard Russell was the active partner among the brothers and headed the business from 1859, when his father died, until his own death in 1871. Described as a 'generous and considerate master' to his employees, he continued to expand the Russell businesses, including the takeover of the Plassey Mills from Reuben Harvey.

Russell was one of the leading public figures in Limerick. At the time of his death, it was stated that 'underneath a somewhat earnest and excitable temperament, Mr Russell had a good kind heart.' Richard continued the family tradition and served as sheriff for two years beginning in 1847. He sat on both Limerick City Council and Limerick Board of Guardians. He was also one of the city's most notable philanthropists. Limerick's first park, the People's Park, was created and opened in 1877 in his memory. The entrance archway reads, 'Pery Square. This public park was formed by subscription. In memory of Richard Russell the land being given by the Right Hon'ble. The Earl of Limerick'.

Russell was married to Mary Dickson and they had seven children, three sons and four daughters, sadly only three survived to adulthood. Richard was interred with his father in St John's Churchyard.

Augustus Russell was the only of his sons to join the military. He be-



The plaque bearing the name John Norris Russell on the old Newtown mill, on Henry Street was photographed by the Leader photographer in 1970, just prior to the demolition of the mill

came a colonel in the Indian army. He died of bronchitis in Brighton, England on January 6, 1800. His body was returned to Limerick, by train, to be interred with his family vault. The Chronicle of January 13, 1880 noted his return to Limerick, "on the arrival of the train the coffin was immediately placed in a hearse, supplied from the establishment of Mr Michael O'Regan, Cecil-Street".

Arthur Russell passed away at Lemonfield, Co. Limerick on February 8, 1890. The Chronicle recorded his death as "Mr Russell was but a few days ill, having been in town, no later than Monday last. He

complained of a slight cold next day, which on yesterday assumed a serious aspect, and at half-past ten this morning the venerable gentleman breathed his last. He was in his 80th year. Since the death of his brother, the late Mr Richard Russell, the deceased gentleman was governing member of the firm, and up to the time of his death took an active interest in its large transactions. He was a gentleman of a kind retiring disposition, a capital business man, and indulgent to his employees, and one 'whose word was as good as his bond', to use the remark of a friend who had known him long. Mr Russell was Vice-President of the Chamber of Commerce for a number of years, and quite recently was re-elected to that position. He was a member of the Harbour Board, and had also been connected with the Market Trustees but latterly did not mix much in public business."

The Chronicle reported that on the day he was interred in his family vault in St John's Church as "very inclement, there being heavy fall of sleet, which rendered everything out of doors most unpleasant.

Today, there are only a few reminders of the Russell family left in the city; these include the memorials to Richard Russell in People's Park, an arch bearing the name John Norris Russell on the Canal Bank, the ruins of the Plassey Mills and most notably the Cleeve's building.