

THE SANDMEN

By Kevin Hannan

The word "sand" conjures up picturesque camel trains and fiery sunsets, holiday resorts with their golden beaches, and the sand castles of our childhood. Poets have gone into raptures about it; children cannot resist it; and the barefoot walk on the cool-firm carpet of the beach has its own peculiar magic. But for most people in Limerick the word also brings to mind the loaded sand cots, with their gun'les awash, being towed along the canal from Plassey.

Sand has played an important role in the life of the city. For centuries it has been the chief constituent of mortar and plaster - and, more recently, of concrete. Indeed it can be said that Limerick has been held together by it from its foundation.

Up to the time of the Shannon Scheme almost all the sand used in the building trades came from the Shannon, where the deposits were continually replenished by the Mulcair floods. Abundant supplies were brought along on these occasions from the sandy hills stretching along its catchment area between Rearcross and Brittas, supplemented by further supplies from the Newport and Clare rivers, and the many smaller streams along its course. During the floods the sand, clay and gravel give the water a rich creamy colour as it thunders over the rocks and heights along its channel, and falls to the bottom in the quieter waters of the deep stretches, where the carrying stream is arrested in its mad rush. The first great settling occurs at the point where the Mulcair meets the Shannon. Here a huge delta has been formed by the accumulation of sand and clay. Numerous black sallys, white willows, and red alders, give the place a wooded appearance, while the luxuriant vegetation all round makes it almost impossible to negotiate a passage through it. The next fall takes place in the sluggish deep below Plassey Bridge. The great current of pre-Shannon Scheme days carried the sand further downstream to the head of the estuary and deposited great quantities in the stretch between the Island Point and the Lax Weir.

Sand was dredged from the river by the sandmen, a hardy breed who came from a number of old Limerick families in the heart of the "Parish" and were engaged in

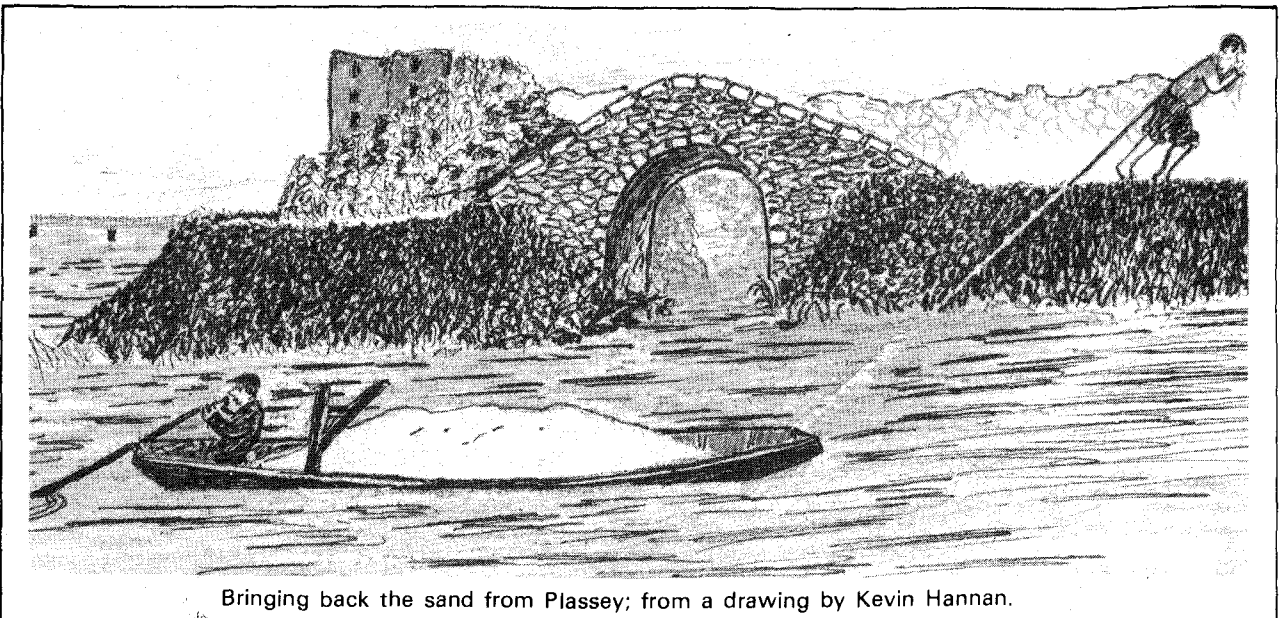
the work for centuries. The sandmen never changed their methods of work but sallied forth, to the very last, with the gear bequeathed to them by their great grandfathers.

For all their hard work and meagre earnings they appeared content with their labouring lot. While their hardiness could be attributed to the physical fitness demanded and maintained by their active lives, their contentment was bolstered by their dietary, which was spiced with regular quotas of that favourite of the pint-drinking epicure, packet and tripe, and to their generous partiality for the pint itself, which has long been the elixir and sustenance of many of those in energetic occupations.

The sand barge, or cot, as it was more commonly known, was the ugly duckling of all small river craft. Simple in structure, it was about thirty feet long and five feet in the beam. Squared and sloped fore and aft, it had a small jib and hand-winch astern for raising the loaded dredge after it had been pushed into the river bed by the single operator standing on the gun'le. There were several anchors and grapnels, plenty of rope, and, of course, the essential wooden bailer, or "skeef".

Power and steering were provided by a heavy sweep set in a socket over the stern. When circumstances permitted the craft was bow-hauled by one of the two-men crew. It was altogether a lubberly and ungainly vessel, yielding to control with only the greatest apparent reluctance, and exerting the crew's energies to the full. The labour of loading and hauling the sand was increased considerably by the need for almost constant bailing out of water draining from the load. Circumstances often so combined as to make it imperative for the winch-man to bail with one hand and raise the dredge with the other at the same time.

Up to about seventy years ago, all sand was taken from the stretch between the Lax Weir and the Island Point. Unloading took place at the appropriately named



Bringing back the sand from Plassey; from a drawing by Kevin Hannan.

Sand Mall. Breaches, or gaps, along the river wall facilitated the work; these had gates which were closed at night for the protection of children and others. It is recorded that a certain well known "character", having imbibed not wisely, but too well, at an adjacent groggery, opened one of these gates thinking that he was home, and walked into the sobering stream of the Abbey River. Fortunately he was rescued by a number of fishermen coming from Quilligan's Bar. The Mall was characterised almost from its foundation by the heaps of wet sand along the roadway, and the general activity of the sandmen and carters.

After the abandonment of the dredging in the Island Point area, all work was carried out at the deep below Plassey Bridge, and cargo was unloaded at the old canal harbour, close to the Lock Mills. This venue was less hazardous than the former one, and permitted use of much larger cots. Only small loads of four or five tons at a time were taken in the Island Point area.

Different types and grades of sand and gravel lodged in certain areas along the watercourse and were known intimately to the sandmen, who anchored their cots directly over the sand deposits as if by intuitive perception. Gravel was raised principally in the winter time when the seasonal dearth in building activity cut back the demand for sand. Most of this gravel was used in the surfacing of driveways and garden paths of the "big houses" in and around the city, where it was considered a rare delight to walk on the crunchy multicoloured carpets from the shores of Clouncaree, or the mouth of the Clare Blackwater.

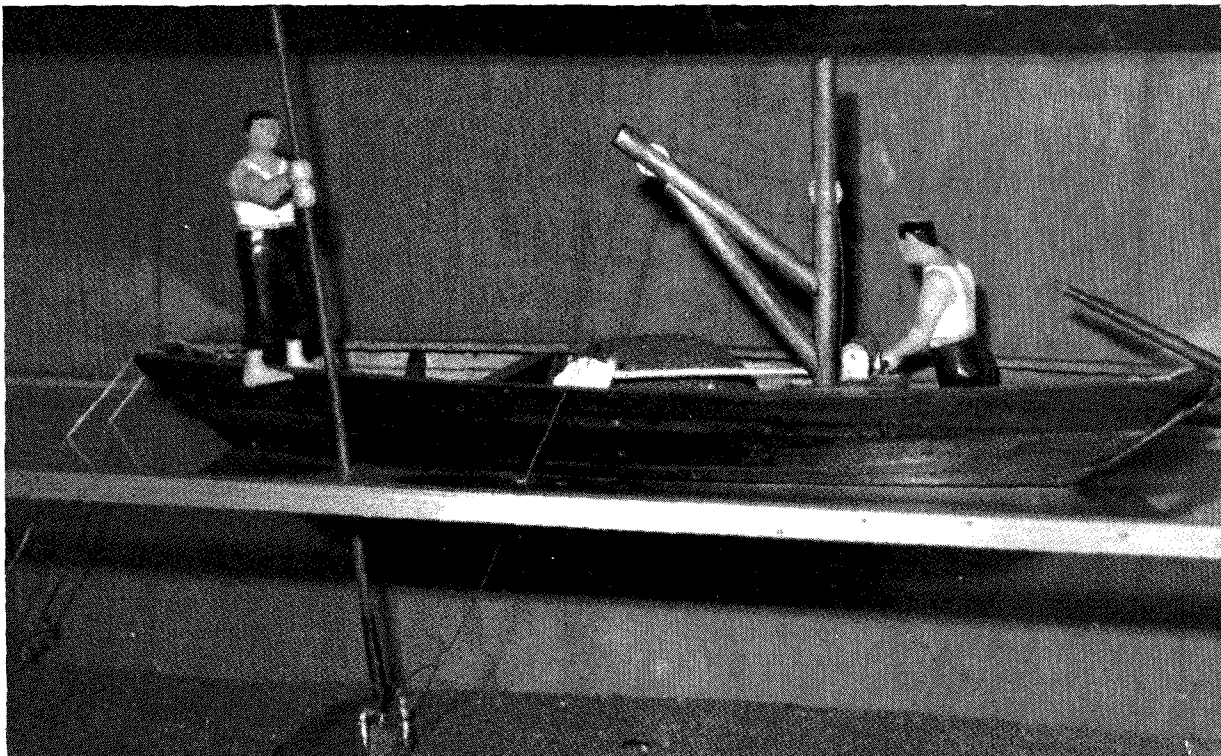
The construction of the Shannon Scheme marked the turning point in the fortunes of the sandmen. Sand was required in such unprecedented quantities for this great engineering feat, that only the opening up of pits in Limerick and Clare could supply the needs. River sand was still in demand, however, and the ancient trade was carried on until the mid-fifties, when the last load was brought to the old sand quay by Mike Shanahan.

For a long number of years before the finale, the comparative advantages of river and pit sand were argued in the locals around the "Parish", and outside it. Many of the older plasterers, masons, and other craftsmen believed that the river variety was by far superior to that which was excavated in the pit. But it is difficult to believe that these convictions went very deep, as no evidence exists of any move to prolong the life of the Limerick Sandmen's Association, which died because the demand for its once indispensable product disappeared. However, blame cannot be attached to the tradesmen or the sandmen themselves for this change. Simple economics and modern machinery and transport called the tune, and the curious, legendary occupation had to come to an end, just like the nailers of 'Change Lane, and the chairmakers of the Irishtown. The sandmen had made a contribution to the local scene just like the others. The end was silent, if not altogether painless, and another era was closed.

Some of the sandmen emigrated and others found employment in the building industry. It is certain that the work in their new jobs was not as tough or as dangerous as their old occupation - and they were certainly better paid.

Despite the rigours of the trade, most of the sandmen were healthy and long lived. They were highly respected in the community in which they lived, and many excelled in different branches of sports and athletics. The record of the great athlete, Rory Frawley, in winning five Munster Senior Cup medals while playing with Garryowen calls for special mention.

The Crowes, the Frawleys, and the Shanahans are no longer summoned to their daily labour by the hoarse cry of the early morning heron and the riverside bird chorus is lost in the clear air. There is a strange loneliness since the sandmen left - strange to those who remember the shadowy figures and their long hours of back-breaking work delving the golden shore.



The sandmen at work; from a model made by Bobby Duhig.