

SHANNY'S PUB

Sure 'til many a tale that is told of this place,
That has passed, like its owners, without a trace.
("Shanny's" by Kevin Hannan.)

by Jim Kemmy

Three sisters of the well known family of Abbey fishermen and market gardeners, the Shannys, kept a bar in Plassey. This pub became a regular rendezvous for the Abbey men and Limerick anglers.

The Cratloe-born journalist, John Walsh has described the way out of the city to Plassey:

If you set out from the centre of Limerick on the Dublin Road, you will presently find a small river keeping you company on your left hand and a hump-backed bridge over it. A little way ahead you can see the beginnings of a canal, which sets out bravely towards Dublin but thinks better of it a mile on and cadges a lift from the Shannon. That way lies Plassey, the haunt and retreat of all those on the run from "respectability".

In his work *The Fourth Siege of Limerick*, P.J. (Cushy) Ryan has given us his own distinctive description of Plassey itself and of its central attraction for many people — Shanny's Pub:

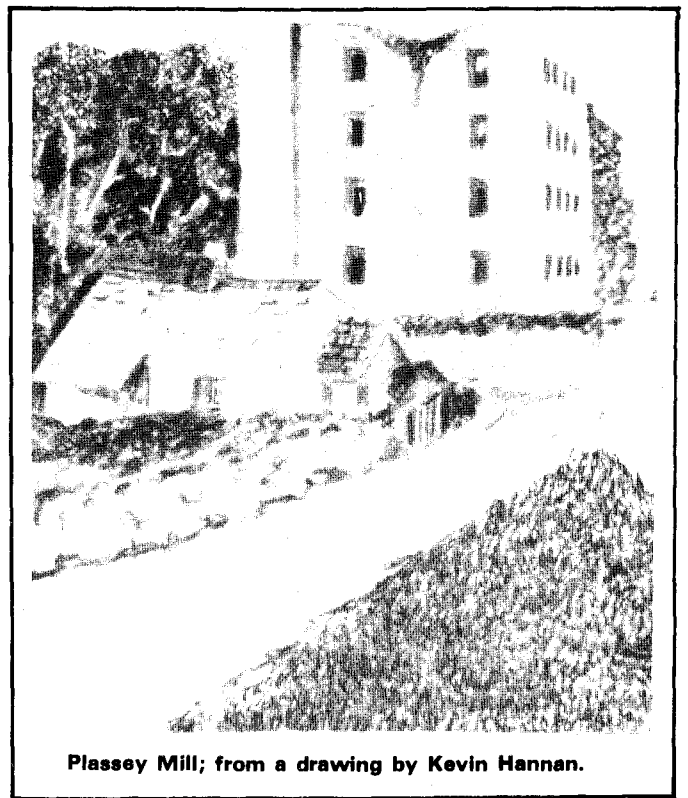
An annual regatta was held at Plassey Mills ... being two miles from the city it had the attraction of country air and scenery ... It was attended by family parties who started out around ten in the morning with ample stocks of food and cooking implements. They made a picnic day of the event. The roaring torrents of water rushing through the broken sluices and tailrace of the ruined Plassey mill gave the place a memorable air of romance and danger. In the afternoon, while the children sported or slept in the sun, some parents thirsty for adventure, could cross the narrow black bridge to the Clare side of the river. They needed no mariner's compass to swing to the right by the river's bank. Two hundred yards from the bridge and fifty feet from the river, set in green fields, was a small low thatched house of refuge - Shanny's Pub. Some drank their pints in the pub or outside on benches; others filled three-quart tin cans with the flowing gold and drank at leisure among the greenery.

Another pen-picture has been given by Kevin Hannan:

"It is obvious from "Cushy's" tantalising tale that those who remember Shanny's Pub will not easily forget "the parlour splendours of that festive place". It had a peculiar attraction for all those who came to Plassey. Perhaps it was its unique location, its fairy-tale approach along the towpath by the river, across the plank over the drain and through the big field. It was a very special place to shelter in during squally October days, when the bridge was obscured by the incessant sheets of rain driving up from the south-west. The warmth within the walls, the lively conversation, the smell of stout and sawdust, and the friendliness of the Shanny sisters made the pub a haven for every Waltonian that ever plied line and lure in the river there. Known colloquially as "The Thatch", the house was also a refuge of hospitality for pilgrims out of Limerick and out of farmhouses and cottages from the surrounding countryside.

"Perched boldly close to the river's edge, just above the Plassey Bridge on the Clare shore, the pub was a spiritual and temporal oasis for wayfarer and fisherman. A stranger might pass it by, pausing only perhaps to admire the lilac trees, or the roses that reached right up to the thatch, if his attention was not arrested by the legend painted on a wine-coloured board and fastened on the wall between the parlour window and the front door: **Catherine Shanny, licensed to sell beer, wine and spirits to be consumed on the premises.**"

The Shanny sisters were daughters of an Abbey fisherman



Plassey Mill; from a drawing by Kevin Hannan.

who secured his liquor licence through the good offices of the salmon angling gentry, with whom he was popular as a raconteur and paddleman. In those days, the success of the salmon angler depended on the skill and rivercraft of the paddleman. And who knew the river and the likely haunts of the salmon better than an Abbey fisherman?

The sisters had two brothers; one emigrated to Australia and never returned; the other was killed in a fall over the cliff at Plassey Mill dam while on his way home after taking ill while fishing with his crew above the fall.

Kate Shanny was probably the best known publican in the Limerick district in her day. Everybody knew her, and even when some of the city publicans set out on a busman's holiday, they strolled up the bank to Shanny's.

Kate was always careful to refuse drink to those whom she judged to have had enough. Ann, the younger sister, was second in command, though never allowed the principal part in the barrel-tapping ceremony. Kate was the boss, and Ann seemed happy enough to see the responsibility in some one else's lap. Mary (the Widow Cullinan), who came in between in age, took no part in the running of the bar, but spent most of her time complaining about the inclemency of the Irish weather. She had spent many years in American and was always referred to as "The Yank".

Kate and Ann were expert boatwomen and could manage a brecaun or angling cot with the best. They always kept their own boat. That the mighty winter floods held no terrors for them was proved in 1927 when the highest water in living memory isolated their home. Against all advice, they elected to stay, though they had to walk about the house on planks for several days. At that time, parts of Plassey bank were inundated and the water flowed through the hand railings of Plassey Bridge.

The Abbey fishermen rarely passed the door on their way upstream. It was usual to see a pair of brecauns pulled up on the grass below the house. Fishing rods resting against the thatch also told their own tales.

**And the rods at the thatch,
With the door on the latch,
And Kate had no match
For her speed to despatch
A pint with frog's eyes,
Or a whiskey to size.**

Fishing, whether by net or rod, is an activity that is invariably more rewarding if followed by a pint in congenial surroundings. And the Shannys provided an ample supply of this beverage, as Kevin Hannan has poetically testified:

**Anglers and Abbeymen sat here,
To joke and chat and drink their beer.
There was Todsie, Jim Kane, John Shanny and
Cockrum,
Rob, Riley, Randy, Napoleon and Bantrum.
Gakes, Tawdy, The Shaun, Boar, Beaver and Bud,
Lapping up enough beer that would make a good
flood.
Helped on by their buddies of that ancient clan,
Dutch, Slobby, Susi and bold Paddy Tan.
But the anglers well matched them in numbers and
vigour,
Conceding them little in swamping the liquor,
There was Gallagher, Fitz, Jim Lane and Pa Healy,
Pa Madden, Connell, Jim Ryan and Da Daly,
Bolstered up in the game by Jack Close and Mick Han-
nan,
Pat Morrissy, Lane, Jack Butler and Gannon.
The company and chat were well worth the trip,
For great lore and tradition were steeped in each sip.**

The turning point in the fortunes of the Shannys occurred with the great tragedy of February, 1930, when three well known salmon anglers were drowned after their boat struck one of the piers of Plassey Bridge. It was said that Kate was never the same afterwards. Some of the anglers who had taken out licences to fish during that season never wet a line again.

Business continued for a few years but things were sadly changed. The gloom cast by the tragedy pervaded Plassey. Kate and Mary died in 1936, and were laid to rest with their ancestors in the old churchyard of St. Mary's. Ann became the sole owner of the old home and soon attracted the close "attentions" of what seemed an endless host of apparently dedicated friends. In less than two years, her fortune, which was said to be fairly considerable, was dissipated to the last farthing, and immediately afterwards her erstwhile "friends" vanished. The bar was closed for business in 1938, only a few months after the Abbey fishermen had left the river for ever. "The Thatch" had seen the golden days of angling on the river and died with the snap-net fishing. It went out forever with the brecauns.

Ann lived on for nearly twenty years in abject poverty, which was shared by the family's faithful companion, Kitty. When she died in the late fifties, Ann was laid beside her sisters in the Cathedral churchyard.

Shortly afterwards, the remains of the house were bulldozed by a local farmer. The sight of the razed pub evoked the following lines:

**This is the spot where Shanny's stood,
By the stream near Plassey Wood.
Here, where the three sisters toiled,
The nettles now grow, dank and wild.**

**No trace of thatch or garden bright.
No welcoming windows or cheerful light.
No clink or glass is heard within,
Nor Kate's shrill voice above the din.**

**No voices in the evening air,
Linger in this place so bare,**



Shanny's Pub; from a drawing by Kevin Hannan.

**Nothing but this mouldering mound
To mark the pub on Plassey's ground.**

Another poetic epitaph of Shanny's was written by an anonymous fisherman-poet. Titled, **An Old Angler's Dream**, the verses convey all the sadness and nostalgia for Plassey and its pub in times past.

**I oft times think as my days draw nigh
Of a pub near Plassey Mill,
Of a field and hedge, all blossom starred,
Where the anglers drank at will;
And when the dark would shroud the scene,
Hushing the merry din,
Ann Shanny would look around and ask:
"Well, boys, are ye coming in?"**

**'Tis many and many a year since then,
And the pub near Plassey Mill
No longer echoes the anglers' feet
In the place so still, so still.
I see it all as the shadows fall,
Though many a year has been
Since last I heard Ann Shanny ask:
"Well, boys, are ye coming in?"**

**Those memories cling as the waters ring
O'er the falls midst rocks and sand;
Those islands small, past the Garrison Wall,
And the angler with rod in hand.
As the salmon leaps and the wild life peeps
From shuttering rock and rill,
I can hear Ann say, in her old dear way,
"Well, boys, are ye coming in?"**

**I wonder when the great shadow falls
On that last short earthly day,
When we say goodbye to the riverside,
All tired with fishing and play,
When we step out in that other land,
Where Peter so long has been,
Will we hear him say as Ann Shanny of old:
"Well, boys, are ye coming in?"**