

Renewal meeting speeds reprieve of St. John's Square

The movement towards a renewal of St. John's Square got off to a great start last week when an open-air meeting in the historic spot was held by a group of literary and archaeological personalities. The story of the Square, its houses and those who lived in them was told by Eileen Egan from a script prepared by Seamus O Cinnéide. The script was introduced by two quatrains from Frank O'Connor's translation of the "Farewell to Patrick Sarfield" and the mood was created for the riches of history that were to follow.

The Renewal Meeting sponsored by Taisce brought 250 people to Saint John's Square. Among them were Anna Fitt, doyenne of Limerick historical enthusiasts, whose reminiscences about the Square's later residents were listened to with interest. Mr. Fitt proudly pointed out the beautiful drinking fountain, opposite the cathedral, given the citizens by his ancestors.

Dairine Byrne, of the Castle Readers, who assisted Taisce by providing script and poems readers for the meeting, read from Roisin de Niall of the County Library and compiler of "A Bibliography of Limerick" about Sean O'Connor, her grandfather, who was an Irish teacher in one of the Square houses in the pioneer Gaelic League days. The house is marked by an epitaph with the words Leabharlann An Bhuidhín Leighin over its door. Here Fr. Murphy, of the Cathedral conducted Irish classes from O'Gormley's textbooks, helped by Sean O'Connor, sixty years ago.

Canon Fraser, accompanied by his daughter and Fr. Collins, C.C. St. John's Cathedral, looked on and listened from the doorway of the Old Men's Hostel—an appropriate ecumenical touch which would have delighted its former resident, Canon Frederick Langbridge, who was referred to in the script read by Eileen Egan.

Mr. John ("Jacko") Moynihan, from Mungret Street, who possesses a treasure of memorabilia about the area round Mungret St. and St. John's Square, said that the stonework in the facades of the Square houses were living reminders of the skill of the old Limerick stone masons and should be preserved.

After the meeting several local personalities went to Barrett's pub, traditionally known as Sean na Scáibh's pub, Church Street. One of its walls is the wall of the tomb of this legendary Mayor, buried according to local folklore in St. John's Churchyard, which adjoins the pub.

Gathering

Included in the Sean na Scáibh's gathering were Mayor Jack Bourke, Mr. Joe O'Malley, Mr. and Mrs. George O'Malley, Mrs. Diamond O'Malley, Alan Carson, Campaign Director, Taisce; Kitty O'Malley, local secretary Taisce; Mr. and Mrs. Brian Geary; Pat Leydon, Kitty Bradin, Claude and Dairine Byrne and Eileen Egan of the Castle Readers and Seamus O Cinnéide.

Earlier in the Square Alan Carson, Campaign Director of Taisce, who spoke at the renewal meeting said the beauty of the Square and its houses had impressed him so much that he asked Taisce's head office to make their renewal a special project adding that it was a successful plea.

Pat Leydon said that as a modern architect he saw the renewed Square providing prestige flats and offices and suggested that it be grabbed.

Mr. Michael Gary, Chairman, Limerick Taisce, presided and thanked the speakers, readers and all who attended the meeting.

Eileen Egan prefaced Seamus O Cinnéide's script with the following stanza from Frank O'Connor's "Farewell, Patrick Sarfield":

Farewell, Patrick Sarfield,
wherever you may roam,
You crossed the sea to France
and left empty camps at home.
To plead our cause before
many a foreign throne,
Though you left ourselves and poor Ireland overthrown.

So, goodbye, Limerick, and your homes so fair,
And all the good friends that quartered with us there.
And the cards we played by
the watchfire's glare,
And the priests that called us all night to prayer.

Script

The spirit of the Square, its history, people and legend, is captured in the following script by Seamus O Cinnéide:

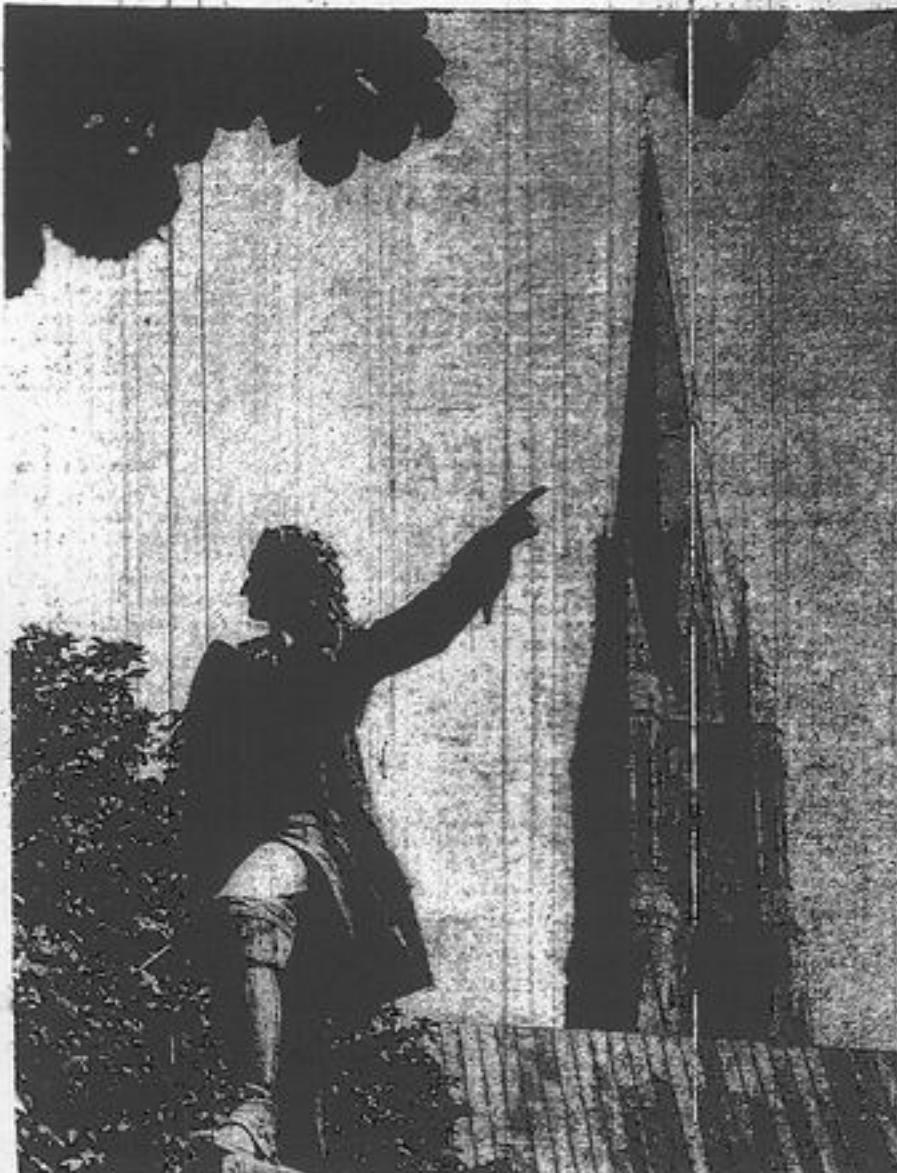
The goodbyes and tears for Sarfield and his soldiers were half a century gone when the opportunity to build this Square and its houses came to the Anglo-Irish gentry. The last hurrahs, too, for exiles-soldiers-victory at Blarney were ended when the houses were begun.

Of the town wall which extended from nearby St. John's Gate towards the west was demolished in 1751 and a wide unoccupied space here invitingly awaited the landed gentry of Clare and Limerick, who needed Town Houses as places to lavishly entertain friends during the season.

Travel in those days was beset by rocks and infuriating impediments — a Clare historian tells how a Madam Norton, of Bunratty, had to have a task force of twelve men accompany her carriage to clear the Craoloe mountain road of huge boulders to allow free passage.

The Houses

The St. John's Square houses were initiated by John Purdon, a landed proprietor of Tenevane, Co. Clare. Edmond Sexton Pery, later Viscount Pery,



The statue of Patrick Sarfield enhances the historical background of St. John's Square area.

builder of Newtown Pery, as Georgian Limerick is still called was Purdon's associate in the enterprise. Pery was the ground landlord and other associates were the Reverend Mrs. Smyth, William Monks of Terce and the Reverend William Cecil Pery.

Articles of arrangement stipulated that each be built for Henry Smyth, William Monks and William Cecil Pery. Five other houses were to be built at the joint expense of Purdon and Pery, the ground landlord. Sizes, costs and plans were to be uniform. The architect, if any, remains anonymous — if he existed, he could say, like Wren, about Saint Paul's: "Look around you, here is my monument!"

Messrs. Smyth, Monks and Cecil Pery acquired a house each by their contribution to the enterprise fund. Purdon acted as the building superintendent and after completion it was found that each house cost £500.

Sexton Pery kept one for his own use and his residence there let to these tenants: Mrs. Dorothy Crump, widow of General Crump, she later married the earlier-mentioned Rev. Cecil Pery, later elevated to the peerage as Viscount Glentworth; Mrs. Catherine Fitzgerald; another widow, who transferred her title to George Rose; Alexander Franklin; and Rich Borrough of the Borough family of Queris, County Clare. The rent was uniform £20 a year. Edmund Pery soon followed the endemic example by leasing his own house to Ambrose Wilsons of Cahercorish.

Canons Frederick Langbridge, M.A., of Oxford, and Rector of St. John's — just across the Square — adapted the Dickens novel, "A Tale of Two Cities," for the stage for Martin Harvey, the famous actor-manager. A novelist and poet, two lines of his are still quoted to point a proverbial truth:

Two men look out through prison bars:
One sees only mud, the other stars.

Canon Langbridge, an Englishman, won the protective respect and friendship of his Catholic and Irish National neighbours and citizens. During times of strained relations between them and the Unionist element he rejected (with a robust) the R.I.C. insistence of a guard force. The largely Catholic committee of a local institution insisted that he be paid his Protestant chaplain's salary despite the absence of any Protestant inmates!

Roseland, his daughter, was a stylist and popular novelist. Appropriately his grave is sited in front of Saint John's Church door in its little and historic churchyard.

Before these houses came these environs had associations with distinguished and heroic figures in Limerick's history — and some bizarre ones too who affectionately linger in our folk memories and their social gallery abode away from St. John's Square.

Sean Na Scáibh, the legendary brogue-peter, who became Mayor because the wrangling Corporation couldn't agree to a suitable candidate, rests in a tomb in Saint John's Churchyard. Another tomb was built by an 18th century Russell and furnished with a table and chair, so that he could visit it while alive and acclimate himself with his abode in the next life.

Philip Roche, in late medieval times, decorated his tomb with emotive panels showing all the instruments and events of the Sacred Passion of Our Lord — you can still see them near the church wall.

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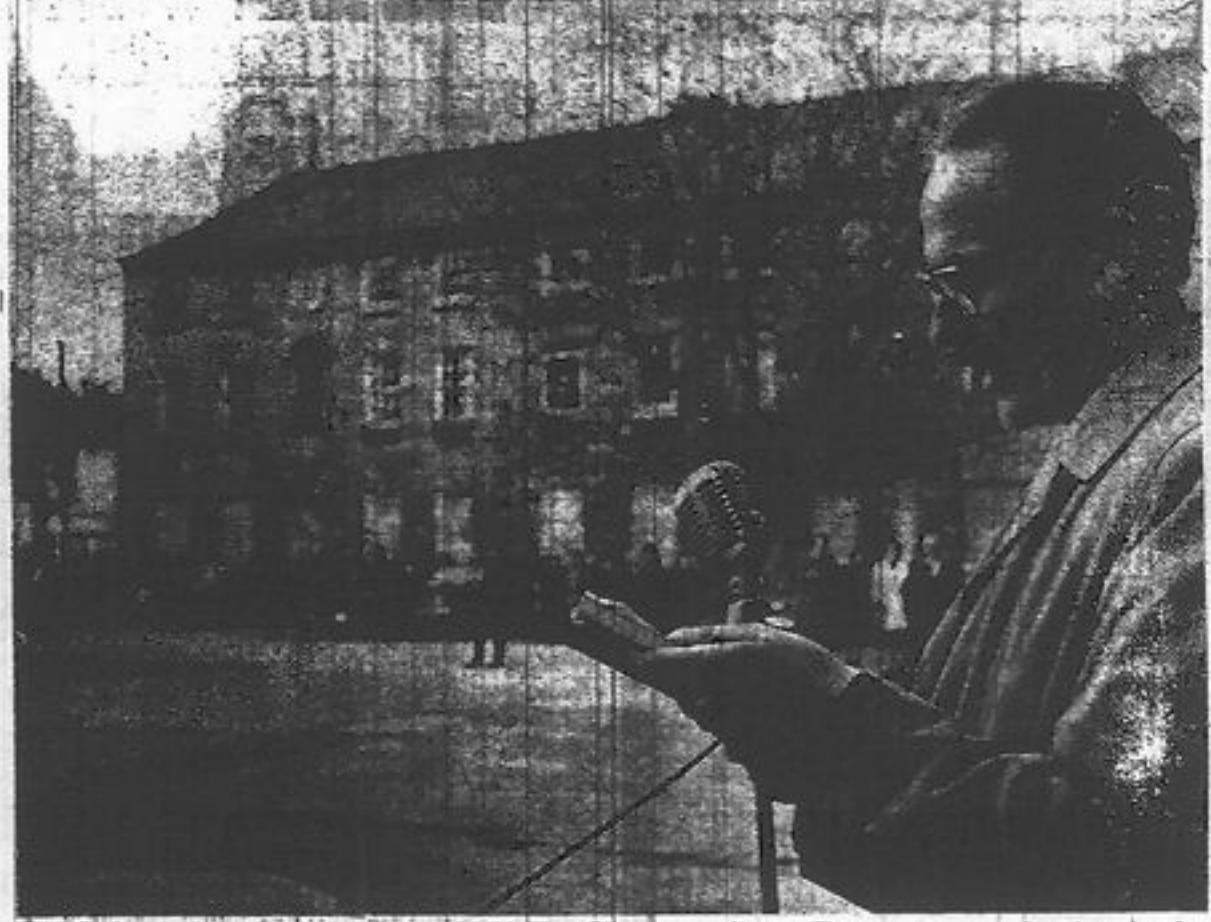
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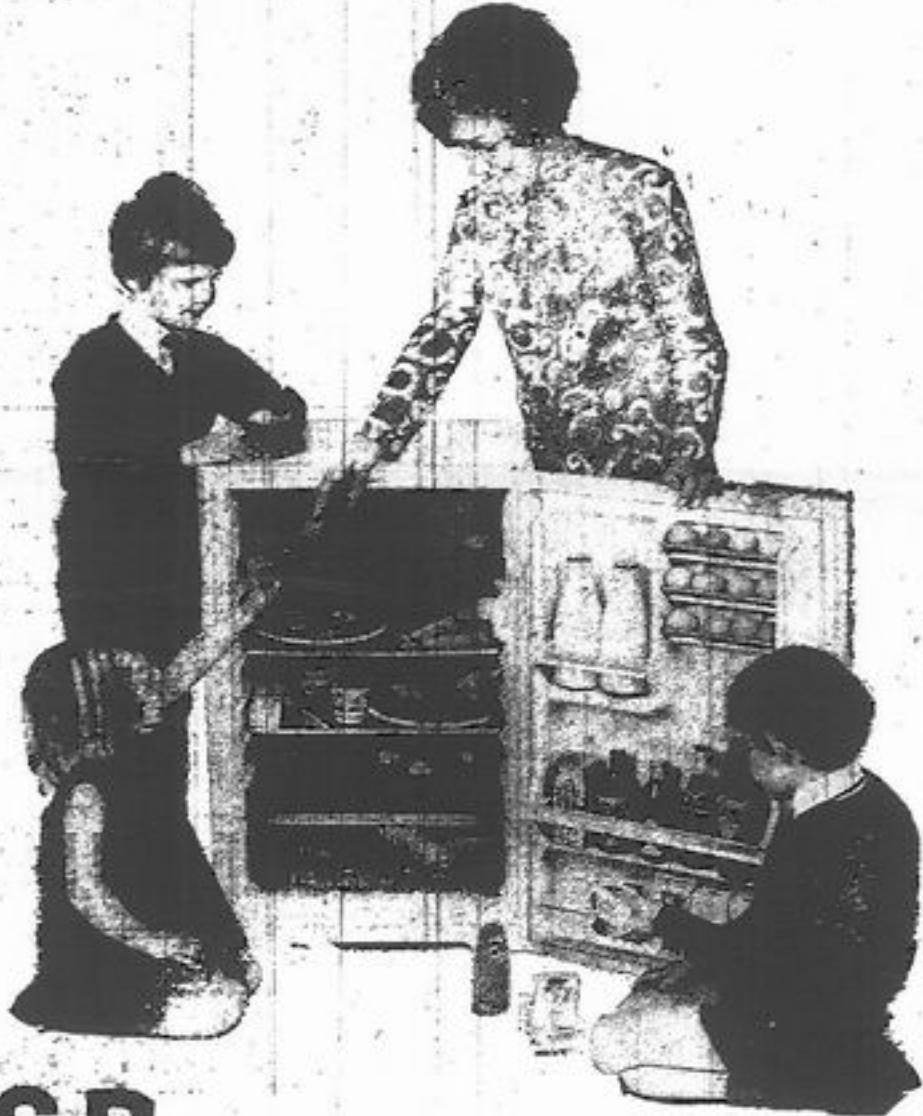
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Nick Browne, of the Castle Readers and Mid West Players, reading a Yeats excerpt condemning the destruction of great houses. A section of St. John's Square in the background.

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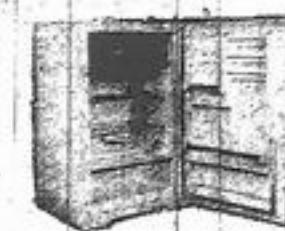
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