

LIMERICK CHRONICLE

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DOWN MEMORY LANE WITH THE COUNTRY'S OLDEST TITLE

A parish that is all but gone

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BURIAL grounds are relatively hard to obliterate. Though this has been successfully achieved here and there throughout the century, more especially in more recent years.

At least one regular Limerick churchyard - Killalee - has all but disappeared over a period of 40 years by a kind of insidious vandalism that gnawed away at the features of the place until there is precious little left to identify with a graveyard.

This was formerly in St Patrick's Parish, and almost in the shadow of the spire of St John's Cathedral.

St Michael's parish churchyard in West Watergate almost suffered the same fate.

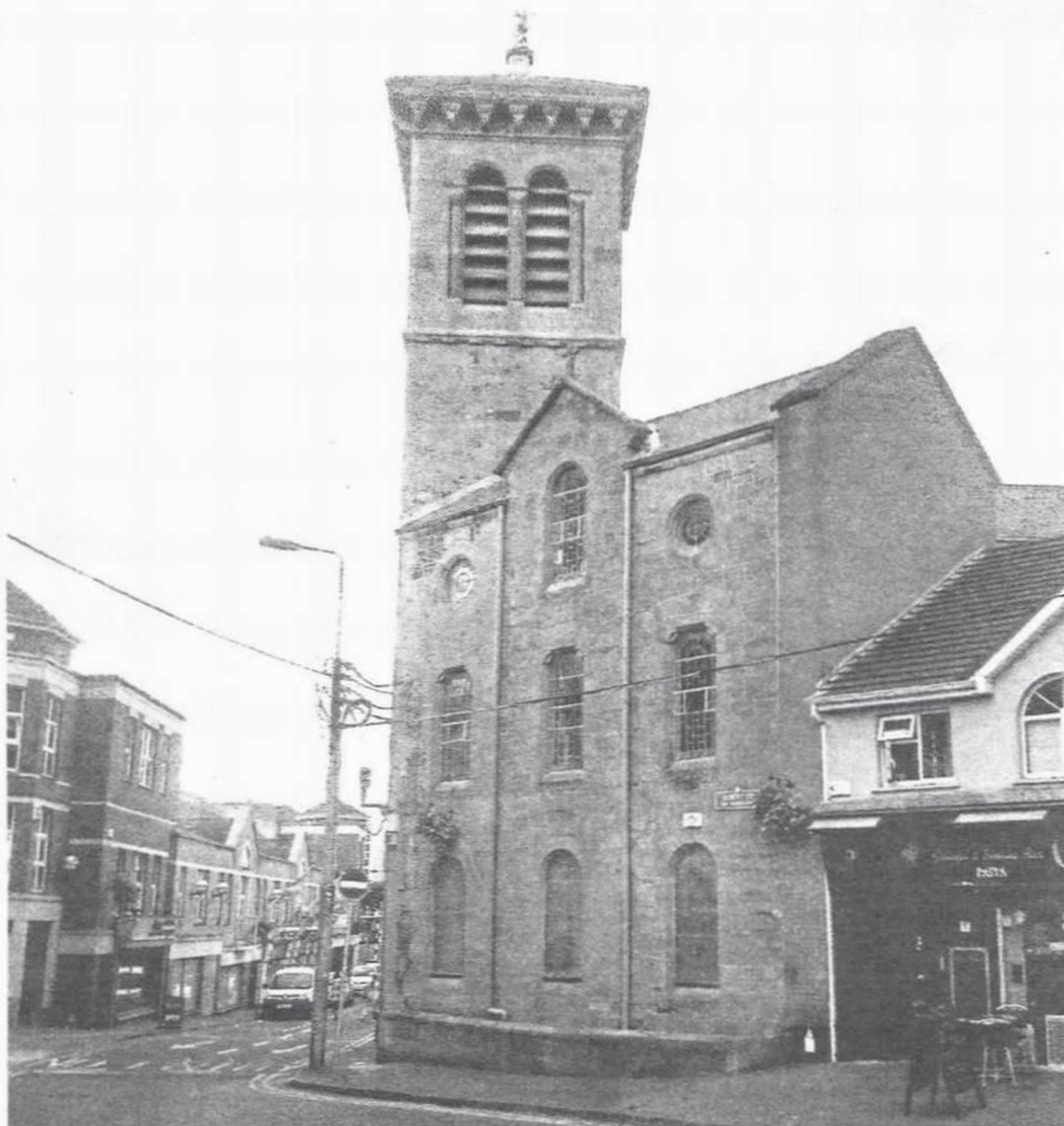
Neglected and vandalised as it was, many 18th and 19th century memorials remain, though some are badly damaged.

The graveyard has been in disuse for a century and in all that time the parishioners led by their clergy and City Fathers, have pretended that the place did not exist.

Even when the slums that surrounded and overlooked it on all sides were cleared away some years ago to leave its elevated and unkept mass in isolation, there was no attempt made to repair the broken boundary wall or re-establish the few memorials that survived, to some extent, a century of vandalism and desecration.

The only bright spot in the picture was the lone sycamore tree which had been recycling its greenery over the graves for more than a lifetime before it fell to a municipal chainsaw a short time ago.

There is little here to excite the morbid feelings one is wont to experience in a cemetery, no modern memorials, or other signs of recent calamity to disturb the sober severity of our reflections, nothing but a few barely decipherable inscriptions on broken and half-



The parish of St Michael's is one of the five original parishes of Limerick city. The Down Survey of the 1650s references the parish of St Michael's as a desolate area containing "a partly ruined castle and mill seat at Beall na Corrie (Ballinacurra); a few thatched cabins; the Priors mill near the churchyard and a few gardens belonging to the vicar and Archdeacon and some city gentlemen."

sunken stones to tell us of the passing of people through another age.

I am happy to say, however, that the rot has now been stopped and that the sacred place has been restored to a respectable condition by the caring hands of the Limerick Civic Trust.

In the course of the work of

restoration, the gravestone of Ellen Arthur was uncovered.

This lady, who died in 1805, was brother of Patrick Arthur, whose chief memorial is Arthur's Quay.

She is remembered in Ellen Street.

St Michael's is old - we don't know how old - but the earliest reference to it proves

that it existed at the beginning of the thirteenth century.

It may have been a Danish foundation, but it is more likely to have been established by the Normans, as St Michael was a great favourite with them.

Of interest too is the fact that the church was built on

an island in accordance with the early tradition of dedicating high places.

Notable examples are to be found in Skellig Michael, Mont San Michelle, and St Michael's Mount.

The little island outside the Watergate was formed by a distension of the Abbey river immediately above Baal's

bridge and running along outside the city wall and meeting with another inlet of the river (the Mardyke) which covered an area now occupied by part of Michael Street.

The church is clearly set out in a number of sixteenth-century maps. And depending on the accuracy of those documents, the building had a square tower ad side isles.

Whatever the reason for establishing a church in such desolate and disagreeable slob land, the allegiance of its few parishioners remained staunch.

Almost all these were resident inside the walls, for it must be remembered the most densely populated part of the parish was enclosed in the city after the Irishtown was fortified in the fifteenth century.

From early times St Michael's was a poor, and consequently, an unimportant parish.

We find a record of 1302 showing that the rector received "being taxed two shillings in the list of two taxations" annually.

Though the remains of the church had disappeared by the 1650s, the parish was administered from that time, and all through the seventeenth century, from the sexton's house in the churchyard where vestry meetings were held all through this period.

A radical change in the fortunes of the parish occurred after the throwing down of the city walls.

The long deserted territory became a busy place, with buildings going up to well-defined plans.

The last quarter of the 18th century saw every building worker from the city, and a wide area around it, in full employment and the opening years of the new century saw no slackening off.

Though the population of the parish had increased enormously, there was no move to replace the old Watergate church, which had, before it fell into ruin, been used exclusively by the Protestant parishioners.

Continues next week