

Limerick's Stonemasons are proud of their craft

One of Ireland's oldest chartered societies

By Richard Naughton

LIMERICK is Ireland's oldest chartered city, and many of its buildings are lasting monuments to one of Ireland's oldest chartered societies. The Brick and Stonemasons' Society of the City of Limerick was granted its charter in 1677. A tribute to the craftsmanship of its members was paid by Russian industrialists in 1890, when six Limerick masons, experts in the lining of furnace boilers and retorts with firebrick, travelled with technicians from one of our local bacon factories to start the bacon-curing industry in Russia.

An interesting and unique heirloom of the Society is an apron which was worn in the tradesmen's processions of bygone years. It has been preserved by the Gleeson family for generations, and is probably the only one of its kind in existence. And it is the apron which inspired the Irish song "The Mason's Apron".

Four of the six stonemasons who went to Russia in the winter of 1890 were Paddy Bourke, Denis O'Keefe, Frank Kenny and Joseph Kemmy. The ancient craft of brick and stonemasonry is one of the most important sections of the building industry, and down through the years Limerick brick and stonemasons have been recognised as peerless in their craft. Russian bricklayers could not compete with them in the lining of boilers, and this international recognition was another great honour for the Limerick Branch.

Still in possession of the Kemmy family is the passport issued to Joseph Kemmy on October 31, 1890. It reads: "We, Robert Arthur Talbot Gascoyne Cecil, Marquess of Salisbury, Earl of Salisbury, Viscount Cranborne, Baron Cecil, Peer of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, a member of Her Britannic Majesty's Most Honourable Privy Council, Knight of the Most Noble Order of the Garter, Her Britannic Majesty's Principal Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, etc., do request and require in the name of her Majesty all those whom it may concern to allow Thomas Kemmy (British Subject), travelling on the Continent, to pass freely without let or hindrance and to afford him every assistance and protection of which he may stand in need. Salisbury." The sheet of paper with its copperplate writing, now yellowed and faded with age, is probably the only remaining historic link between Limerick and the founding of an industry in Czarist Russia.

OLD LIMERICK FAMILIES

Thomas Kemmy, grandfather of the present Branch Secretary of the National Union, came of a family known in Garryowen for centuries. A great stonemason, he helped in the building of St. John's Cathedral and was also an expert in bricklay and furnace work. His son, the late Michael Kemmy, started his apprenticeship in the building of St. Munchin's Church, and worked at his trade for a number of years on the permanent way of C.I.E.

The Society's youngest ever Secretary is James Kemmy, and he brings to his work the energy of youth. James, who is with the Corporation Maintenance Dept., was the only provincial delegate from the Union to attend the Congress of Irish Unions in Galway last July. He represents the Union on the Limerick Trades Council, the Apprenticeship Committee, the Delegate Board of the Mechanics Institute and the Area Joint Council for the Building Industry. A brother, Joseph, is an apprentice mason, and another brother, Mick, who also worked at the trade and is now in the U.S.A., was a well-known Spike Rovers' Limerick and 'Youths' International soccer player.

Other Limerick families at present active in the trade and who can trace their associations with it back through the centuries are: MacNamara, O'Flynn, Kennys, Malones, Ryans, Gleasons, O'Dohertys, Tuohills, Anselows, Leahys, Flannerys, Cavanaghs, Meendes, Buckleys, Sheehans, Walshes, O'Donoghues, O'Hallorans.

Cordial relations always existed between the Limerick Society and Messrs. Kennys. Some fine examples of the work of these leading builders are St. Munchin's Church, the Municipal Technical Institute, O'Connell Avenue, and Lansdowne Park housing estate.

A name which predominates in the Society's local membership list is that of MacNamara, who trace their ancestry to the Firlbois MacNamara, of Clare. There are eighteen of the name in the trade, and this number includes six brothers, John, Thomas, Michael, James, Robert and Gerard. The family claim to have built in their time Quin Abbey, Truagh Castle and Bunratty Castle. The brothers' grandfather, the late Johnnie MacNamara, worked on the building of the Carnegie Library, Pery Square, and the National Bank, O'Connell Street. One of the brothers, John, a great lover of



Mr. William McNamara, Quarry Road, Thomondgate. At 89, he is Limerick's oldest stonemason and is seen here at a job of pointing in his home.

STONE MASONS ARE SPORTSMEN

Judging from the fine sporting records of many Limerick masons, it is easy to appreciate the fact that the O'Flynn brothers, who have represented Shannon Rugby Club in the various grades from junior to senior. Frank, Charles and Michael made local rugby history when they played in the front row for Shannon against Sunday's Well in 1954—the first year that the local club went senior. Frank, a junior inter-pro, still holds for Shannon as does Paddy. Both Paddy and Frank are also medal holders. Their father, the late Joseph O'Flynn, was a former Shannon and Garryowen forward. A junior and senior inter-pro, he won a junior cup medal with Shannon in the 1924 season and a senior cup medal in Garryowen during the 1924-25 seasons. Cousins of the O'Flynn brothers, who also played with Shannon, are John O'Flynn, a junior inter-pro, his brother, Anthony, who holds two junior cup medals. Another mason who was in the winning of a Munster Senior Cup with Shannon is Donogh Flannery. In the season 1955-56 he was a superb senior inter-pro hooker. Donogh has rowed with the Athlone Club and is also an inter-provincial person.

Oldest mason in Limerick is William McNamara, Quarry Rd., Thomondgate. Now with 89 months on his belt, Mr. McNamara has the proud record of being for 70 years a member of the Arch-Confraternity of the Holy Family, and he was only presented with a medal in recognition of his long membership. An excellent man at his trade, he has worked in many churches and schools throughout Munster. A famous tenor of the 1930's, who is a member of the society, Patrick Sheehan, Jnr., is another. He was one of the first Limerick men to sing on Radio Eireann, and he won a competition for the best Irish singer in the Theatre Royal, Dublin.

NOTABLE PERSONALITY

One of the most notable personalities in the mason's trade was the late Patrick Bourke, B.C. For close on half a century he was identified with the business and public life of Limerick. On the completion of his apprenticeship as a stone mason, Paddy worked for some years as a journeyman and then started as a building contractor. In his time he erected several buildings in the city, including the Power House, O'Curry Street and the wing of the Redemptorist Monastery, Mount St. Alphonsus. He was a member of the Board of Guardians from 1899 to the dissolution in 1922, and sat continuously on the City Council for thirty-seven years. He was an active Nationalist from his youth. A great story-teller, his description of what happened at the siege of Clontarf was always lively and picturesque, and it was similar when regarding a few friends with the escapees of what he called the "Rolling Bugaboo." The generation that remembered them had passed away; he was one of the last—an upright citizen and a friend of the poor.

Stonemasons are sportsmen, too! Frank O'Flynn (left) with Donogh Flannery and Paddy O'Flynn, who helped Shannon R.F.C. win the Munster Senior Cup in season 1960-61.

His son, David, was also held office as President. At different periods, Patrick O'Flynn has held the positions of secretary and President in the past 20 years. One of the best-known masons in Ireland, he has worked all over this country and cross-Channel. He has represented the Society at many Conferences of the Master Builders' Federation, and with this body cordial relations have existed down the years with the Limerick masons, one of the Society's most experienced members. In his period over 45 years at his trade, and is at present a member of the Council of the Society.

A most efficient secretary of the Society was William Leahy. He played a major part in the formation of the Limerick Building Trades Union, and was the Society's first delegate to it. When building first commenced at Shannon Airport, William was responsible for extending the Society's control there. He was also honoured by being chosen as teacher of the Bricklaying Class in the Technical Institute, a position he held with distinction for a number of years.

Present officers and Committee of the Society are—John McNamara, President and Chairman; James Kemmy, Secretary and Treasurer; Committee: Charles O'Flynn, Frank Kenny, Michael McNamara, Aiden O'Halloran, Jnr., James McNamara, Patrick O'Flynn.

THE MASON'S APRON

Former of the many Limerick families with long and honourable associations with the trade is the O'Flynn family of Garryowen. William, now aged 88, is the oldest member. His brother, John, was a bricklayer and heavily in his eighties, was recognised for the longest time in the trade and the pride he took in his work.

The apron which gave its name to the song, "The Mason's Apron," has been in the possession of the Gleeson family for many generations, and William can remember its being worn by his grandfather on ceremonial occasions. The apron, believed to be the only one of its kind in Ireland, was a combination of brass plate and leather, with a silver clasp on the side, and a silver hat and white apron. At the top, a hand is depicted holding a trowel, and beneath is the motto, "Amor, Honor, Justice." Joseph Gleeson and William McNamara will be honoured with a presentation by the Limerick masons to mark their long and distinguished services to the trade and to the Society.

THE MASON'S DIALECT
The Limerick Brick and Stonemasons' Society has a record of



Mr. James Kemmy, secretary of the Limerick branch (left), and Mr. John McNamara, president, holding the ceremonial mason's apron which inspired the Irish jig. The apron is believed to be the only one of its kind in existence and has been in the possession of the Gleeson family for many generations.

ation that remembered them had passed away; he was one of the last—an upright citizen and a friend of the poor.

SOME PAST AND PRESENT OFFICERS

Specialist in tiling for a long number of years are the Anselow family. They have worked on various contracts in Limerick and throughout Munster and their work is in the highest traditions of their craft. Another of the finest tilers in the Society is John Trillill, who was Secretary for over fifteen years. He gave sterling service to the Society, and gained a very high reputation for his integrity.

Other well-known past officers were the late Patrick Malone, Patrick O'Flynn and William Leahy. President for over 25 years, Patrick Malone was a gifted organiser and outstanding trade unionist. His dynamic leadership was responsible for keeping the Society in being during the 'thirties and 'forties, when the building industry was experiencing a lean period. The Union's strong position to-day is in no small way due to his hard and

unbroken and continuous existence down through the centuries. It is a branch of the Ancient Guild of Incorporated Brick and Stonemasons, which is the only union catering for brick and stone masons in the Republic.

It is a traditional custom of the trade that before an apprentice is put to work he must be brought to Union headquarters and have his indentures signed by officials. Some of the clauses in the older indentures make quaint reading, but he shall not contract matrimony within said term.

he shall not play at cards, dice tables or any unlawful games; he shall not haunt or use taverns, ale-houses, play-houses.

Masons have their own language which is a form of dialect with an Irish derivative. This language, which has been handed down from generation to generation, is still spoken on occasions, and in fact a dictionary of it was compiled many years ago.

Limerick masons live up to the great and honourable traditions of the past. Many of the hospitals, schools, churches, public buildings, bridges, castles and the dignified Georgian architecture of many of Limerick's streets stand to the memory of their craftsmanship.

But masons do not have need to build anything in memory of themselves alone. If you want to see their monuments, look about you.



Six McNamara brothers are stonemasons. Pictured here with their nephew, Jimmy, junior (centre, back row), are: Front row (left to right)—Michael, James and Thomas. Back row (left to right)—Gerard and John. Unavoidably absent from the picture is youngest brother Robert.

T.E. are forgetting Limerick

(by Tom Tobin)

NOT every little boy and girl in Limerick can have a TV set and indeed a great many of them have none.

Yet it is amazing to find that very few of them miss their favourite programme.

Over in Garryowen, off the Ennis Road, I know a small group of boys who are fortunate in having a young buddy who has a TV set.

And little John McDonald never forgets his buddies. He invites them to his home every evening to watch "Redella Berrand".

Along the colourful streets of Limerick you will see groups of small boys watching their favourite programme at their special store window.

But it was in Kevin Hartigan's popular public house, off William Street that I spotted something different.

Peeping through the door were young Sean Whelan and Dan McMahon... watching the most popular TV show of them all—Paddy Crooke's "School Around The Corner".

No one could be so cruel as to deprive them of their simple pleasure. Guess the programme they would not dare miss? Yes, that's it "Have Gun Will Travel".

Boys and girls in Limerick are hoping that Paddy Crooke and Theima are not forgetting them and they would like to know when the "School Around The Corner" will be filmed in Limerick. And for that matter so would many of us "old-timers".

However, it strikes me that Limerick is not getting a fair deal from Teles Eireann in programmes generally apart from an excellent news coverage in words and film.

A little word to Paddy Crooke and Theima on behalf of the boys and girls of Limerick—"How about a trip down our way soon?"

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