

Recalling one of Limerick's most celebrated crafts

Nostalgically reviewed by AIDAN CORR

LOCALLY, the name Kemmy is synonymous with the building industry and one of the proud possessions once held by the family was a passport, issued by the Marquis of Salisbury to Joseph Kemmy on October 31, 1890, enabling him to "pass freely and without hindrance" from this city to Russia to assist in the lining of furnace boilers and retorts with firebrick as the Czarist country started its bacon-curing industry.

Today the union has changed its name, because of developments within the industry, unemployment and emigration, and is known as the Building and Allied Trades Union with a local membership of 150.

Branch secretary for 34 years, Jim Kemmy, who first took on the mantle in 1960, spoke this week of the oversupply of masons at present and the drastic reduction of apprentices coming into the trade due to the recession within the building industry.

"High productivity and mechanisation have all played their part in the reduction of our membership," he said, "and our trade union now encompasses tilers and monumental stonemasons."

While Limerick is Ireland's oldest chartered city, its Brick and Stonemasons Society is one of its oldest societies, receiving its charter in

1677, and many of the city's buildings are lasting monuments to men who were peerless in their craft.

Paddy Bourke, Denis O'Keefe, Frank Kenny and Joseph Kemmy were four of the six stonemasons who brought their craft beyond the Iron Curtain in the winter of 1890; men dedicated to their trade, pioneers of international co-operation who undertook the challenge of sharing their skills with their Russian counterparts - some of whom could not hold a candle to them when it came to lining boilers.

Thomas Kemmy, grandfather of Alderman Jim, was a member 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 fireclay and furnace work. His son, the late Michael Kemmy, started his apprenticeship in the building of the St. Munchin's Church, and worked at his trade for a number of years on the permanent staff of C.I.E.

Jim Kemmy became the society's youngest ever secretary and he brought with him the energy of youth. Employed with the Corporation Maintenance Department, he was the only provincial delegate from the union to attend the Congress of Irish Unions in Galway in his first year of office, represented 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.

Jim's brother, Joseph, was also an apprentice mason at the time of Jim's appointment as secretary, while another brother, the late Michael, former left-footed legend of Limerick senior soccer, also worked in the trade before emigrating to America. Other

prominent Limerick families involved in the trade some thirty years ago included the MacNamaras, O'Flynn's, Kennys, Malones, Ryans, Gleasons, O'Dohertys, Tuthills, Anslows, Leahys,

Flannerys, Cavanaghs, Meades, Buckleys, Sheehans, Walshes, O'Donoghues and O'Hallorans who between them were responsible for some fine examples of work which remain a monument to their craftsmanship, such as St. Munchin's Church, the Municipal Technical Institute and the Lansdowne Park housing estate. One of those families, the McNamaras, who claim their ancestry trace back to the Firbolg McNamaras of Clare and in 1963 there were eighteen of that name employed in the trade in the city including 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, Johnnie McNamara, worked on the building of the now defunct Carnegie Library in Pery Square and the building once the premises of the National Bank in O'Connell Street. One of the brothers, Jim, was in charge of the construction of Young Munster Pavilion which was built by voluntary labour.

The O'Flynn's were also not alone prominent in local building circles but also in the sporting arena in the 1960s with five brothers playing in the Shannon colours. Frank, Charlie and Michael made local history when they played in the front row for Shannon against Sunday's Well in 1954 - the first year that the Parish club went senior. Both Frank and Paddy went on to win senior cup medals while their father, the late Joseph Flynn, was a former

Shannon and Garryowen forward winning a junior cup medal and three senior cup medals in his career.

Patrick Sheehan of Janesboro was also a well-known and personality within the Stonemason's Society in the 1930s and as well as being a master tradesman, was a noted local tenor winning the Best Irish Tenor award in the Theatre Royal in Dublin and going on to become one of the first Limerick men to sing on Radio Eireann.

One of the most notable personalities in the mason's trade, however, was the late Patrick Bourke, B.C. who, for close on half a century, was identified with the business and public life of Limerick. On completion of his apprenticeship as a stone mason, Paddy worked for some years as a journeyman and then started as a building contractor, being responsible for the erection of such city centre buildings as Power House, O'Curry Street and a wing of the Redemptorist Monastery at Mount St. Alphonsus. A member of the City Council for thirty-seven years, Paddy Bourke was an active Nationalist, a story-teller of high quality and a man who perpetuated accounts which were being lost to a new generation.

The Anslow family were specialists in tiling for many years in the city and plied their craft in the highest traditions throughout Limerick and Munster, while John Tuthill, who was secretary of the society for over fifteen years, gained a huge reputation for his tiling and secretarial integrity. Other well known officers of the past included Patrick Malone, Patrick O'Flynn and William Leahy who held positions of importance within the Society over a period of forty-five years. William proved to be a most efficient secretary and played a major part in the formation of the Limerick Building Trades Group, was responsible for extending the Society's control when building began at Shannon Airport and was chosen as teacher of the bricklaying class at the Technical Institute.

The Gleeson family of Garryowen was also a name synonymous with the trade and the apron which gave its name to the famous dancing jig, "The Mason's Apron," is reputed to have been in the possession of this family for many generations. The apron, believed to be the only one of its kind in Ireland, carries a painting of three castles, a

visor, soldier's breastplate and shamrocks with a mason at each side attired in silk hat and white armlets. At the top a hand is depicted holding a trowel, and beneath is the motto, "Amor, Honor et Justitia."

In the past it was a tradition 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 made quaint reading: "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 or play houses."

A Society which once had its own dialect, handed down from generation to generation, the Stonemasons have remained part of Limerick folklore and the historic Mason's Apron is today proudly on display in the City Museum.

"We intend adding a further piece of stonemason history to the museum shortly," Jim Kemmy. "We have in our possession possibly the oldest minute book in the country which dates back to 1743 and records some of the earliest meetings of the society."

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At the presentations of the diploma in Information Technology, at Limerick Senior College, were (from left): Madeline Flynn, Majhella Toomey, Barry Getlevog, Ashling McInerney, and Fiona Foley.

