

Post SPECIAL REPORT

CRAFT

Limerick lace is stitched into the fabric of the city's history

HAND stitched into the social fabric of the city, Limerick lace is renowned far beyond the seams of its delicate designs. Amid signs of a revival of this unique craft, **Andrew Carey** reports on how Limerick became synonymous with lace making.

ROSBRIEN woman Eileen Browne has been stitching designs and patterns into Limerick lace for over 25 years and her love for the fabric continues since her very first stitch was thrown.

Eileen's first experience of lace making came when she wanted to create a veil for daughter's communion.

"There were classes in the Tait Centre at the time and I did them – I just took a liking to it and as I loved needle work, I thought it would be a great way to make this something special.

"It was something I was well aware of and Limerick lace has been gifted all over the world and I just wanted to be part of that fabric and history and create something special for my daughter. Little did I know that I would still be doing it today", she said.

Eileen's table display of examples of her work bears testament to the history of Limerick lace itself which dates back to 1829.

The stitches and techniques used today are identical to those used when Queen Victoria and Prince Albert became supporters and lovers of the famous embroidery.

"This isn't a business – this is a love for lace and for the Limerick way of making it. There was a huge amount of time put in to it and there always was. That's what makes it so unique", Eileen explains.

"I remember it being made in the Good Shepherd Convent and if there was a wedding veil to be done, there were six women doing it and there was a big long frame with three on either side."

The Good Shepherd Convent is located on the original site of the Walkers Lace Factory on Clare Street and it was there in 1850 that a young Belgian teacher was asked to give classes on the art of lace-making.

One of the star pupils went on to become the Good Shepherd sister and took the name of Sr Philomena.

As she embroidered the last of the fine detail into her current work, Eileen recalled: "We have a great history in lace and one that I would love to see come back to life again".

When one examines the gossamer-like quality of Limerick lace, some pieces that take more than 65 hours to make, its variety of intricate hand-embroidered stitches and the beauty of its design, it is easy to understand why a Limerick lace wedding veil, christening robe or evening stole, are looked upon as heirlooms and treasured from one generation to the next.

Perhaps the finest specimens and most intricate designs are to be seen in the magnificent range of albs, surplices and altar-falls that have been supplied to churches all over the world.

Given its universal exposure it's hardly surprising that Mayor of the Limerick metropolitan area Michael



Sheahan has called for Limerick lace to be "revived to its former glory".



HISTORY

But what of its history?

"Limerick is famous for its beautiful ladies and fast horses," American President John F Kennedy famously remarked during his visit to the city in June 1963.

The then Mayor of Limerick, Frances Condell, gifted a Christening robe made of Limerick lace to his wife Jacqueline who was pregnant at the time – with the inscription on the seam reading, "from one mother to another".

The robe signified more than a token of good wishes and kind thoughts as it also represented one of the city's most unique artistic achievements.

Last December, an important new book profiling the 200-year history of Limerick lace was launched.

Researched and written by Dr. Matthew Potter and edited by Jacqui

Hayes, both of Limerick Museum and Archives, 'Amazing Lace, A History of the Limerick Lace Industry' documents



how lace making emerged as one of the most important industries of any kind to operate in Limerick over the past two centuries.

At its peak in the early 1850s, an estimated 1,800 people were employed in Limerick City making lace. Over many decades, it produced a large output of lace products, from dresses, christening shawls and ecclesiastical robes to handkerchiefs and doilies.

"Limerick lace was one of the greatest craft industries in Irish history and one of the most famous and beautiful laces in the world," explained Dr. Matthew Potter.

"The book was compiled using newspaper accounts of Limerick lace, including working conditions, adverts and accounts of where it was sold, as well as contemporary accounts by visitors to Limerick, trade directories listing lace manufacturers in Limerick at different dates, the private papers of manufacturers Florence Vere O'Brien and Maude Kearney, and Census returns.

"Many of the images featured in the book come from our own collection in Limerick Museum and Archives, plus the private collections of Florence Vere O'Brien and Maude Kearney, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and the National Archives of the United States", he explained.

Editor Jacqui Hayes even went as far as to state that the social history of Limerick was altered by the lace industry.

"Limerick lace provided employment to a significant proportion of the female workforce who, in turn, supported or helped to support a large number of dependent relatives. In 1851, it was estimated that each lace worker maintained two or three other family members," she explained.

The significance of Limerick lace as the city's leading brand name also resulted in its usage in a number of contexts. During the 1920s and 1930s, one of the most famous horses in the world was the celebrated show jumper 'Limerick Lace' ridden by Major Ged O'Dwyer from Bruff.

Limerick Lace was worn by generations of famous women including Queen Victoria, American First Lady Edith Roosevelt and Countess Markievicz. Generations of churchmen also wore Limerick lace which was also used to decorate sacred vessels and altars.

In 2014, Limerick composer Bill Whelan marked his native city's designation as the first national City of Culture by writing a flute concerto for Belfast flautist Sir James Galway entitled 'Linen and Lace' in honour of the major textile industries associated with their respective native cities.

"Whelan's naming of his piece demonstrated how deep were the roots

185 years ago, Limerick lace still continued to be closely associated with the city," explained Ms Hayes.

'Amazing Lace, A History of the Limerick Lace Industry', a lavishly illustrated book about one of the most famous chapters in the history of Limerick, is available in O'Mahony's Bookshop, O'Connell Street, Limerick.

BACKGROUND

Limerick lace is a specific class of lace which evolved from the invention of machine made net in 1808. It is regarded as a form of hand embroidery on machine made net and is a 'mixed lace' rather than a 'true lace', which is entirely handmade. It comes in two forms: tambour lace, which is made by stretching a net over a circular frame like a tambourine and drawing threads through it with a hook, and needlerun lace which is made by using a needle to embroider on a net background.

The Limerick lace industry was established in 1829 when Charles Walker, an English businessman selected a premises in Mount Kennett, Limerick city as the location for a lace factory and it was produced mainly in factories for the first forty years of its existence.

Between the 1830s and 1860s, several lace factories operated in Limerick, mainly in Clare Street and Glentworth Street. It was also made in Cannock's and Todd's department stores.

In the 1840s, Limerick lace making was introduced to a number of convents and convent-run institutions, both in Limerick and elsewhere. In 1850, it was introduced to the Good Shepherd Convent on Clare Street as well as other religious institutions including the Presentation Convent in Sexton Street and the Mercy Convent at Mount Saint Vincent, on O'Connell Avenue.

It was disseminated widely throughout Ireland by Catholic nuns anxious to provide employment at the time of the Famine. They introduced it to several other convents including Youghal, Kinsale, Dunmore East, Cahirciveen, and Kenmare.

In the 1860s, the spread of machine made lace from Nottingham brought about the collapse of large scale factory-based lace making in Limerick and many of the lace makers lost their jobs.

However in the 1880s, Limerick lace underwent a significant revival due to the activities of Florence Vere O'Brien, an English lady who married into the O'Brien family of Dromoland Castle. She began to employ several former factory workers to make lace for her in their own homes, which she then sold.

In 1893, she established a Limerick lace school in George's (now O'Connell) Street which taught skills, provided workrooms and was used as depots where the lace was sold. After their training was completed, the former pupils usually became lace workers, working at home and using the school as their depot.

In 1904, Mrs Maude Kearney, a daughter of James Hodgkinson, founder of the famous firm of specialists in church decoration in Henry Street, Limerick, established a lace making business which she called the Thomond Lace Industry.

Based in Thomondgate, it employed between fifty and eighty workers at the height of its success.

After the Second World War, Limerick lace declined rapidly but the tradition is still continued by a number of individual lace makers and lace classes.



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