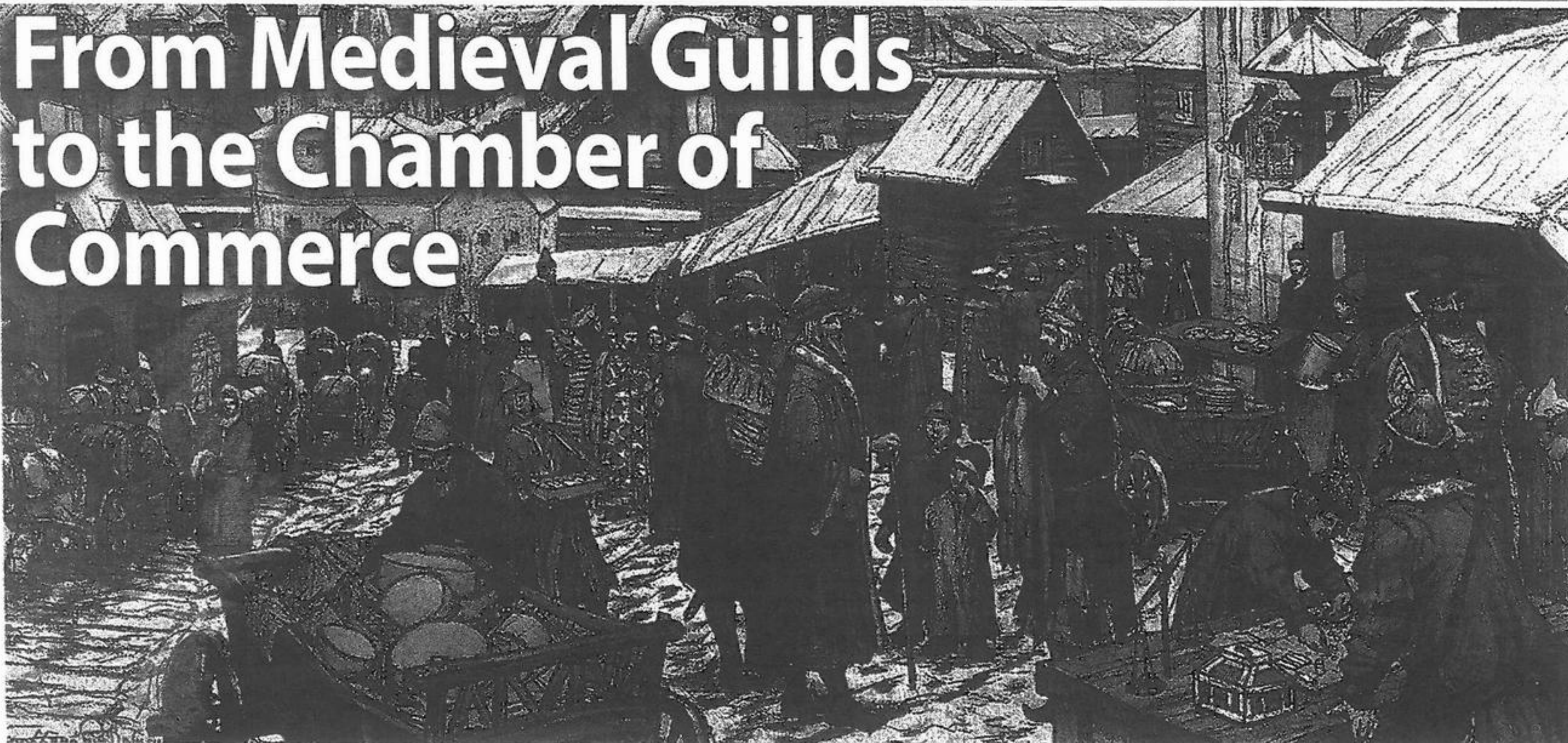


# LIMERICK THROUGH THE AGES

## From Medieval Guilds to the Chamber of Commerce



A Medieval market scene

RACHAEL KEALY

In October 1840, an article appeared in the *Freeman's Journal* newspaper, recounting a lively meeting of the National Repeal Association in Limerick. Held at the Corn Exchange (in the modern Milk Market), it was attended by the 'Liberator' Daniel O'Connell, who was dressed, the journalist wrote, "in a Repealer's coat of grey frieze (sic) with velvet collar and yellow buttons...a truly noble specimen of a genuine Irishman (in) the simple and homely garb of the people." He was greeted with rapturous applause by a packed audience of tradesmen, who were there to present a large subscription to him, on behalf of the guilds of Limerick.

They included stonecutters, masons, carpenters, cabinet-makers, weavers, painters, coopers, tobacconists, hatters, nailers, bakers, fishermen of St. Francis Abbey, broguemakers, smiths, woolcombers, coachmakers, pipemakers, founders, sandmen, slaters and plasterers, millwrights, ropemakers, chandlers and iron founders. Some of these skills are still much in demand, such as masons, painters and plasterers. Others have been largely replaced by mass manufacturing and modern machines, such as coachmakers, nailers, ropemakers and chandlers (candle-makers). It's not an exhaustive list, by any means - these are merely the guilds of Limerick who supported the Repeal movement - but it does grant the reader an impressive insight into the heart of trade and commerce in 19th century Limerick.

While formal bodies of tradesmen and women

have existed since Roman times, modern guilds came about in the early Middle Ages, as tradesmen, merchants and artisans began to form groups. These included masons, carpenters, carvers, glass workers and the like. Uniting together under a banner helped to advance their interests, bring recognition to their craft, and ensure a set of standards were followed. The latter was particularly important in the days before corporate regulation: even the mere act of grocery shopping could be lethal when stones were added to spices, vegetables were coloured with copper, plaster of Paris was mixed with sugar, and milk was diluted with flour and dirty water. Reliable weights and measures were key to ensuring fair exchange at markets, and the men who were in charge of this aspect of trade were known as grossers, giving rise to the current term 'grocers'.

The guilds were rigorous in their training, too: apprenticeships were started early (when boys were just thirteen or fourteen), long (seven or eight years) and expensive (the boys were often indentured, meaning they had to work back the cost of their training before they were free).

One of the earliest mentions of guilds in Limerick is in 1307, in a reference to a 'gyhalda', or early guildhall. In 1495, the first Guild of Merchants was formed in Limerick, to advance the commercial interests of the city. It later incorporated the Trade Guilds. Each guild had a master and wardens, who would enforce its rules. They met four times a year, at Michaelmas, Christmas, Easter and midsummer, usually at various inns, and were under the general control of the Merchant of the Staple, which was, according to historian Robert Herbert, a



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A Medieval apprentice baker at work

A plaque commemorating where the Chamber of Commerce once stood

predecessor to the chamber of commerce. The guilds operated a monopoly within the city walls, as a person must belong to a guild in order to practice his trade. This they jealously guarded, using their combined purchasing power to secure lower prices for raw materials, which they sometimes sold on at highly inflated prices, operating as a sort of cartel.

As religious tensions rose in the decades before the Siege of Limerick, new rules were introduced in 1672, calling for every guild member to take an oath of supremacy and pay twenty shillings. This largely precluded Catholic and Quaker members, who had been very active and engaged in the guilds. Historian Jennifer Moore, who carried out a great deal of research on this subject, writes that this was "an attempt to lure more Protestant merchants to Limerick than the successful Catholic ones." It may have also, she says, "signalled the decline of the guilds."

The historian Kevin Hannon

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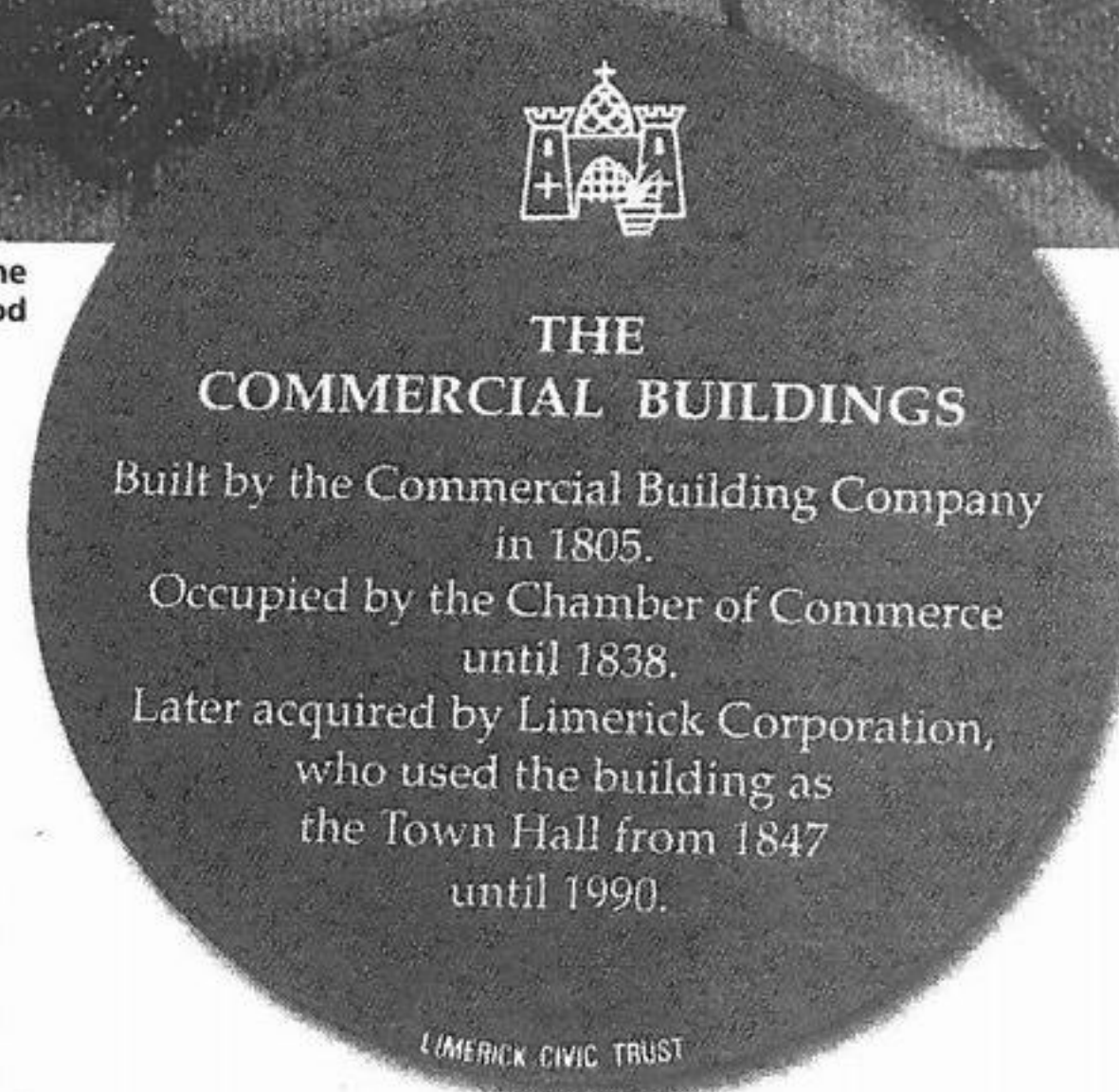
had this to say about the fate of the guilds after the Treaty of Limerick: "they lost out to an Orange clique who stripped them of all authority and misappropriated all public charities and public funds." He is referring to the Corporation, which was known to have been intensely corrupt at the time.

The Corporation itself exists, according to Jennifer Moore, by both prescription and charter, the first of which was granted in 1197. It was designed to afford Limerick the same privileges enjoyed by the citizens of Dublin, and so establish a similarly vibrant and wealthy centre of power for the English in the west. This basic concept was maintained throughout the centuries, as successive rules were introduced to ensure that it was staffed by members fiercely loyal to the Crown. This inevitably gave rise to sectarian divisions and abuse of power. It commanded complete control over the business activities of Limerick, ranging from "one to

three miles north and four to five miles south of the city, exclusive admiralty of the Shannon from three miles above the city to the sea and all inside the city walls."

As the groups included some of the best-known businessmen and tradesmen in Limerick, they were already very much involved in the social life of the city. This they capitalised on by fully embracing the pomp of the age, dressing in colourful outfits and taking part in flamboyant processions through the city. Jennifer Moore notes that they enjoyed hefty entertainment budgets, which was spent to mark special occasions. One of these was the proclamation of peace with France, in 1756, for which they spent £118 5s, before spending £13 later that year on ale, when war was declared against France.

According to Kevin Hannon, the guilds (made up of tradesmen and merchants) fought back against the corruption in "sustained agitations", assisted

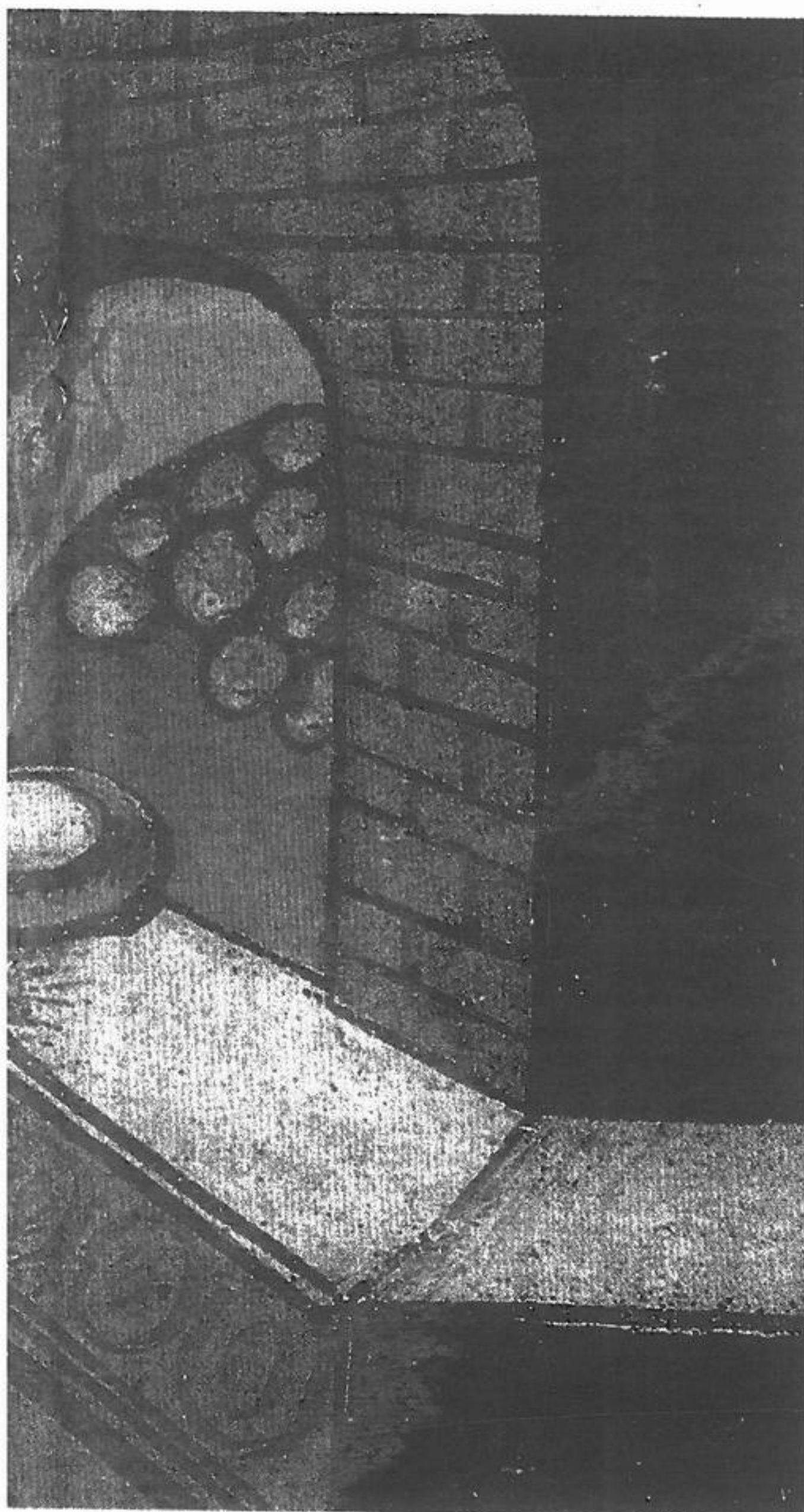


by a young Edmond Sexton Pery, but there were "other gangsters waiting in the wings and ready to step in and carry on the rape of the city." He names these as the Smyths, Prendergasts and Verekers, who, he says, packed the Corporation with their supporters, whom they made freemen of the city. This accolade was handed out in abundance to useful acquaintances, no matter where their locale, under a grace especial, supposedly only granted to men of exceptional

character. It was also given automatically to any man over the age of twenty-one who was the eldest son of a freeman, a man over the age of twenty-one who was married to the daughter of a freeman, and an apprentice to a freeman, who has served at least seven years. In practice, the title meant that they could roam the city bounds without paying any tolls, which made the conduct of business much more affordable.

Mr Hannon points to the construction of Newtown Pery as





a game changer, which was outside of the city walls and therefore the grip of the Corporation. Jennifer Moore wrote that "the corruption (of the Corporation) bred a new city and a new way of thinking." It had an immediate effect on the economy of the city: in just four years, from 1796 to 1800, Limerick's trade increased by some 115% per cent, renewing its status "as the commercial centre of north Munster."

Across the river, the guilds formed their own Commission to oversee the new neighbourhood, and began meeting on Quay Lane, before building in 1805 the new Commercial Buildings on Rutland Street (later the Town Hall, and later again the site of the Mid West Business Institution). Paid for by public subscription, it contained, according to a contemporary observer, "one of the most spacious and elegant Coffee-rooms in Ireland, and a number of fine apartments (sic)." There they met as the newly-named Commercial Building Company,



*The Directors were responsible for management of funds, disposal of property, and ordinary affairs of the Chamber.*

although the Chamber of Commerce was officially founded during a meeting in May 1807, when it was decided that "it appears to this meeting that it would be serviceable to the trade of this city to establish a Committee of Merchants or a Chamber of Commerce."

In June 1815 they received a Royal Charter from King George III and became the Chamber of Commerce of Limerick, making it one of the five oldest Chambers of Commerce in Ireland and the UK. They remained in the building until 1833, when they bought what is now 96 O'Connell Street. It had originally belonged to the Maunsell family (of Plassey House and Milford House), but they lost it after the banking crash of 1820.

According to the modern Chamber of Commerce, "The 1815 Charter required that this management committee be made up of nine directors, at least three of which, had not served as directors the previous year. Five directors constituted a quorum and to qualify as a director, a merchant had to earn a minimum of £1,500 per annum."

"The Directors were responsible for management of funds, disposal of property, and ordinary affairs of the Chamber." For example, they leased the right to tolls on potatoes and corn from Limerick Corporation for a rent of £1,500 a year. The directors also regularly established sub-committees to investigate 'specific concerns'. One of these, no doubt, would have been the continuation of successful trade following the Acts of Union in 1800, generally agreed to have spelled the end of the economic boom of 18th century Limerick. In the meeting at the Corn Exchange in 1840, a representative of the Guilds read out a letter detailing the fate of the tradespeople and merchants of the city since 1800. He said that "previous to the accursed union there were 1500 journeymen weavers at full work in this city. Now there are but 70, and these not half employed. We hear the old tanner tell that he recollects to see eighteen tan-yards at full work in the parish of St. Mary alone; now there is but one. The shoemaker tells the young men (a historical truth) that Limerick exported treble more boots and shoes previous to the Union than are made there by the journeymen of the of the present day, while the importation of British manufacture has driven their and all other trades to ruin, misery and despair."

This had become particularly acute after 1815, when, the Chamber details, "Limerick suffered the effects of deindustrialisation, which meant that there was unemployment and poverty. Nineteenth-century Ireland outside North-East Ulster did not experience indus-

trialization and actually underwent a process of deindustrialization, largely due to its close proximity to the world's first and most dynamic industrial economy. Like other Irish cities outside Ulster, Limerick did not develop into an industrial city."

That said, it did have a manufacturing tradition, which led to the emergence of a number of factories, often established by immigrants to the city, such as the bacon-producers John Russell and Joseph Matterson, both of whom were English. Peter Tait (Limerick Clothing Factory) was Scottish, and Sir Thomas Cleeve (the Condensed

Milk Company of Ireland) was Canadian. They, along with other entrepreneurs, established "four bacon factories (Mattersons, Shaws, O'Maras and Denny's); flour mills (such as Russells, Bannatynes, Goodbodys and Ranks); dairy products (Cleeves); and clothing factories (such as Limerick Clothing and Danus)."

Then, as now, the Chamber of Commerce was responsible for welcoming investment from large-scale companies such as these, who provided much-needed employment for the city. They also worked hard to ensure that Limerick Port did not lose

its position as a key strategic base. It actively lobbied for improved land and sea access, petitioning King George IV for permission (and funds) to build a floating dock and new bridge, which was completed in 1835 and is now known as Sarsfield Bridge.

Limerick is one of the oldest and most vibrant commercial hubs in Ireland, and the long history of its tradesmen, merchants and entrepreneurs goes some way to demonstrate the important role they played in bringing it to its position today, facing into a bright economic future.



Peter Tait was a prominent Limerick businessman