

If the glove fits... history of exceptional craftsmanship in Limerick

Known across the empire: Limerick gloves become famous for their quality

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GLOVES loves so fine they could fit in a walnut shell", this is the delicacy by which the historic Limerick gloves were known. Limerick gloves were commonly thought to have been made with 'chicken skin', this is a misnomer as the gloves were in fact made from the calf fetuses. This material was lighter and more elastic than other common glove materials of the time, namely deer, sheep or lamb skins. This material gave the Limerick gloves a distinct and recognisable yellow colour.

The Chronicle of April 11, 1835 wrote of the process:-

"Celebrity of Limerick Gloves - It used to be the custom of the south-west of Ireland to slaughter many cows while in calf. The skins of these unborn calves were of extraordinary fineness and delicacy, and from such was prepared the leather of which the celebrated Limerick gloves were made.

This processes however, is almost discontinued, and whatever merit the Limerick gloves may still possess, is owing to the skill of the manufacturer, and not to the superiority of his raw material."

The first known manufacturer of these famed Limerick gloves was Cornelius Lyons. Lyons was registered as a glover based on Main Street [Mary Street], Englishtown in the 1769 trade directory of the city. He showed off the fineness of his gloves by packing each pair in a walnut shell, which proved to be a very effective marketing strategy as they were desired by even royalty. The gloves would continue to be packed in this fashion by the Lyons family until the 1830s.

Daily, for two weeks from February 16, 1786 a notice was posted in the Sanders's News-Letter stating:-

"Limerick Gloves. James Lyons, Son and Successor of the Late Con. Lyons, (who was the original and sole Proprietor of the much admired Queen's Gloves) thinks it incumbent on him to inform the Public, that he does not supply any Shopkeepers with said Gloves, and that and sold for his Father's and his Make in Dublin or elsewhere, are an imposition.

"All Orders for Gloves to said Lyons shall be duly executed in Lim-

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erick, where alone they can be had. Limerick, 11th February, 1786."

By 1788, Cornelius' son James Lyons was registered as 'Manufacturer of Queen's gloves'. The Museum of London holds a pair of Lyons made Limerick gloves from 1816 owned by Princess Charlotte.

In 1820, there were four main glove makers in Limerick, James Lyons, Mary Street, Michael Burke, 24 Patrick Street, William Dwyer, 35 Patrick Street and John Sullivan, Bridge Street.

Sadly, James Lyons died around 1833, childless and the last link back to the original Limerick Gloves died with him.

The Chronicle of September 11, 1839, wrote that at the "Newcastle Races there will be a race for a Ladies' Bonnet plate, to be rode by gentlemen, wearing Limerick Gloves, and Caps trimmed with Limerick Lace."

The decline in Limerick gloves began in the 1820s in two main parts. Firstly, in 1825, which removed the prohibition of foreign gloves into the British market. The smaller Limerick companies could not cope against the sudden influx of gloves from throughout Europe, these foreign gloves were much more varied in fabric and style and due to this they could keep up with fashion trends where Limerick gloves could not.

Secondly, other companies outside of Limerick began producing poorer quality gloves under the name of Limerick gloves, which lowered the appreciation for the original product and severely harmed their reputation. Due to this, by the 1840s, most Limerick gloves on the market were produced in Cork.



Patrick Street was the home to high fashion for well over a century from Burke's Limerick gloves in the 1820s to hats on show in October 1955. It was once the place to shop for those with style

Despite this decline, Limerick manufactured Limerick gloves remained popular with the young Queen Victoria. The Chronicle of November 2, 1839 wrote:-

"Mr Burke, of Patrick-street, glover to her Majesty, has received an order from Winsor Castle, per Sir Gore Ouseley, for 12 dozen pair of celebrated Limerick gloves for her Majesty's own use. The order, when completed, is to be forwarded by Miss Ouseley, of the Crescent."

A month later on December 7, 1839, the Chronicle wrote that "Mr. Burke, of Patrick-street, Glover to her Majesty, last evening forwarded

per mail to the Marquis of Normanby, Home Secretary of State, the second consignment of Limerick gloves for her Majesty's special use, per Royal order."

In 1867, there was only one traditional glove maker left in Limerick, Thomas Burke, 1 Bedford Row. Thomas was the son of Michael Burke and he took over the glove factory on Patrick Street in January 1843 following the death of his father.

The Chronicle recorded his father's death on January 18, 1843, "Friday last, after a short illness, Mr Michael Burke, celebrated as the

manufacturer of the Limerick Gloves, Patrick-street, an honest, industrious, and respected citizen, much regretted."

The Limerick between locally made Limerick gloves and Queen Victoria was severed with the death of Thomas Burke on July 27, 1869. The Chronicle wrote, "This evening, at 19, Henry-street, after a short illness, Mr. Thomas Bourke, glove manufacturer."

The Limerick Museum, Henry Street, holds a pair of Limerick gloves from about 1800, with one of the gloves still folded into half a walnut shell, true to their origin.