

TURNPIKE ROADS IN CO. LIMERICK

by P.J. Meghen



When I was a small school boy, I had to learn off by heart many verses of English poetry. One of these masterpieces that remained in my memory was "John Gilpin." The worthy John was a London merchant and on a day's outing, his horse bolted. The poet tells us:

"Away went Gilpin – who but he?
His fame soon spread around –
'He carries weight.' 'He rides a race!'
'Tis for a thousand pound!
And still as fast as he drew near
'Twas wonderful to view
How in a trice the turnpike-men
Their gates wide open threw."

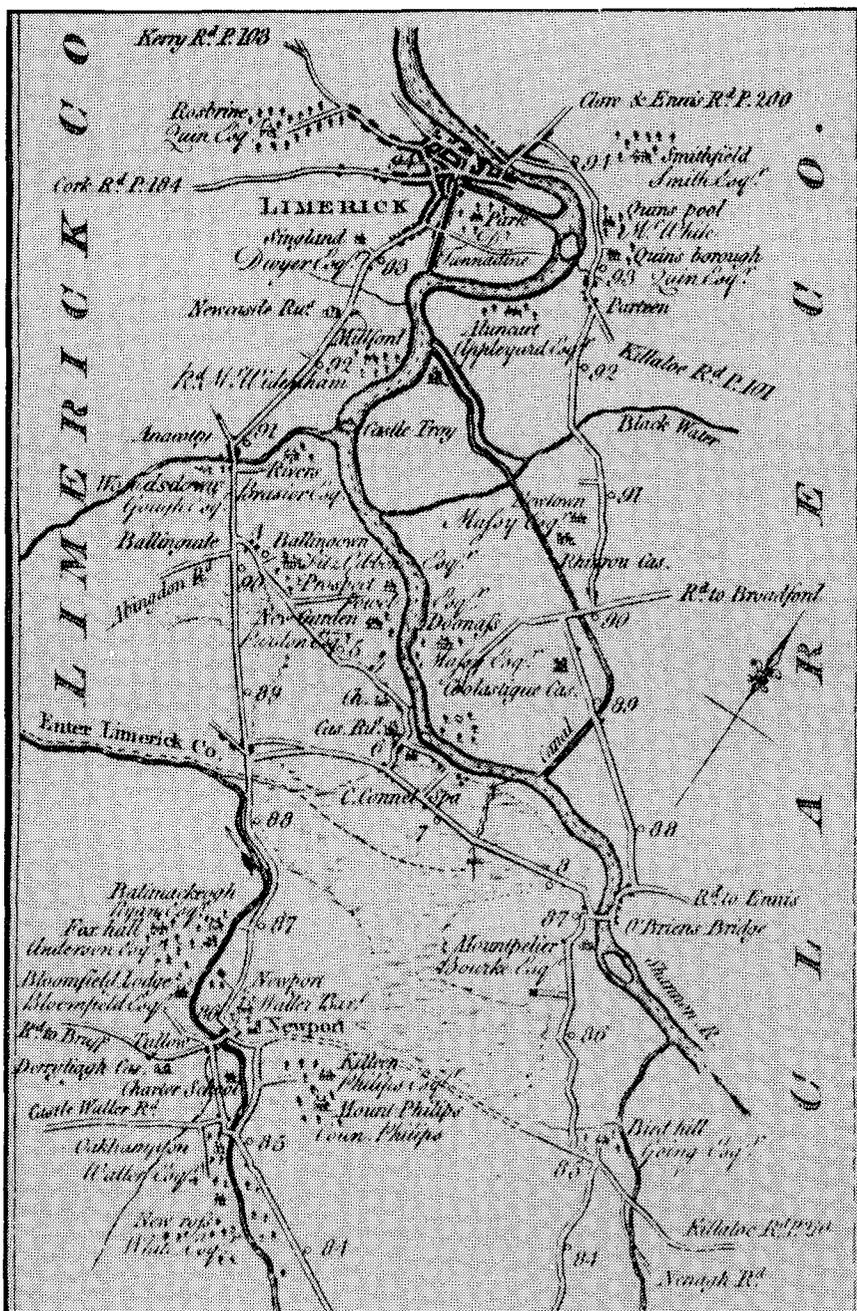
This was my first introduction to the idea of toll-gates across a road and I thought it was a purely English institution. Later, however, I came to know the song by Samuel Lover known as "The Low-Backed Car." You may remember the verse which goes like this:

"As she sat in her low-backed car,
The man at the turnpike bar
Never asked for his toll but just rubbed
his old poll
And looked after the low-backed car."

So I came to know that we had turnpikes in Ireland too. Since coming to the County Limerick, I have had occasion to study the history of our county roads and finally satisfied my curiosity about the origin and the story of these turnpike roads. It is almost a forgotten chapter of our road history but I feel that some account of it will interest readers and will help them to study such roads in their own parishes.

The idea started in England the reign of Charles II. Trade and industry were growing in importance in those years and the traffic on the roads increased very much. The road surfaces were not able to take the heavy wagons which came into use and it was decided to make the traffic pay for the cost of making better roads. An act of parliament was passed, in 1663, declaring that:

"the ancient highway and post-road from London to York and so into



Roads along the course of the Shannon River, from 'The Maps of the Roads of Ireland', by George Taylor and Andrew Skinner, 1778.

Scotland, and likewise from London into Lincolnshire in many places of the road, by reason of the great and many loads which are weekly drawn

in wagons ... is very ruinous and become almost impassible inso-much that it is very dangerous to all His Majesty's liege people that pass

that way..."

and justices of the peace were to appoint persons to take sums of money "in the name of Toll or Customs to be paid for all such horses carts, coaches, wagons, droves of cattle as shall pass."

The idea proved fairly successful and soon spread to many other important roads in England and Wales. Travellers from Ireland to London became acquainted with the idea and the news of the new method came back to Dublin. Naturally in Ireland it was in the vicinity of Dublin that the road problem was most acute. The turnpike idea appealed to the county residents. So we find in the Journal of the Irish House of Commons, in 1729:

"A petition of the Grand Jury, Justices of the Peace and several Freeholders and Inhabitants of the County Dublin in behalf of themselves and all the freeholders and inhabitants of the said County setting forth their extraordinary expense in keeping the said roads of the said county in repair and that the erection of Turnpikes will be a more equal way of amending the said roads and praying this House will take same into consideration, was presented to the House and read."

Readers may wonder at the interest of the grand jury in the matter but it is well to remember that there were no county councils in those years. Instead, the sheriff of each county used to select twenty-three of the large landowners in each county to meet in the county town. This body was called the grand jury. It was their job to look after the county roads, and to insist on every inhabitant giving six days' labour on the roads of his parish. Large farmers would be compelled to send a man with horse and cart for six days. When this work was not sufficient, the grand jury could make contracts for the roads and levy a rate, that was known as the county cess, on all the occupiers of land in the county.

It will be obvious that the setting up of turnpike trusts would relieve the ratepayers - hence the petitions to the Irish Parliament. The members of parliament in those years were all large landowners so naturally the Irish Parliament acted quickly and the first Irish Turnpike Act was passed in 1729. This dealt with the Naas Road and the Act set out:

"Whereas the highway or road leading from the City of Dublin, through Kilmainham and Rathcoole, to the town of Naas, and thence to Kilcullen Bridge, in the county of Kildare, by reason of several hollow ways and of many and heavy carriages frequently passing through the same, are become so ruinous and bad, that in the winter season many parts thereof are impassable for waggons, carts, cars, and carriages, and very dangerous for travellers, and cannot by the



An 1837 map of Co. Limerick, from Lewis' 'Topographical Dictionary'.

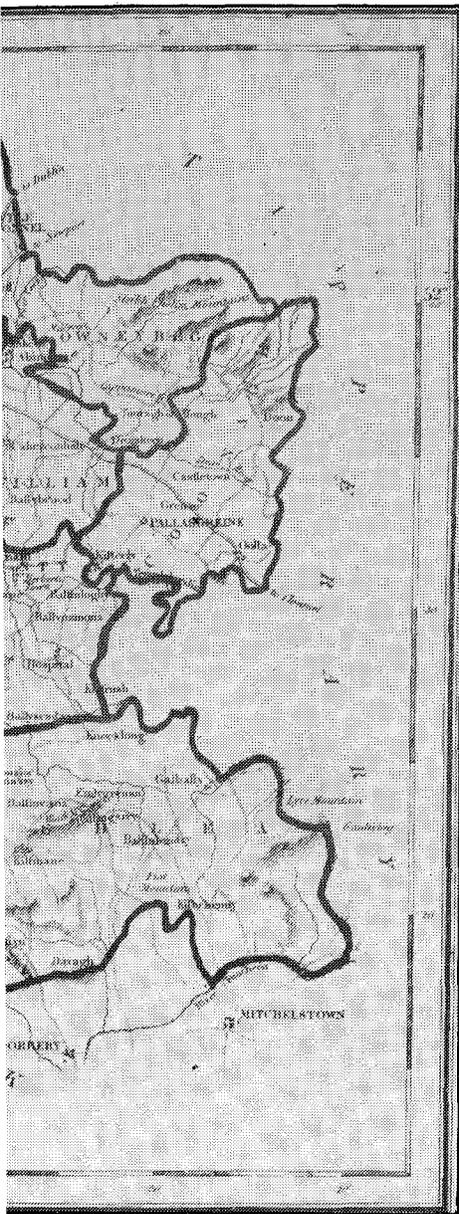
ordinary course appointed by the statutes of the realm, be effectually mended and kept in repair."

The act then named certain trustees who were to hold office for twenty one years and who were empowered to erect toll-houses and gates and collect tolls. This act was followed quickly by a number of similar acts dealing with the main arteries out of Dublin. In an article like this I could not deal with all these roads so I propose to confine my account of the working of the scheme to the turnpike roads in the Limerick vicinity.

The first Limerick act was passed in 1732 and stated:

"Whereas the highway or road leading from the town of Newcastle in the county of Limerick through the towns of Rathkeale and Adare in the said county to the city of Limerick, and from thence through the towns of Bruff and Kilmallock in the said county of Limerick, and from thence to the towns of Ballyhowra, Mallow and White-Church in the county of

Cork and from thence to the said city of Cork by reason of the several hollow ways, and of the many and heavy carriages frequently passing through the same, are become so ruinous and bad that in winter season many parts thereof are impassable for waggons, carts, cars and carriages and very dangerous for travellers, and cannot by the ordinary course appointed by the laws and statutes of this realm be effectually amended and kept in good repair: wherefore and to the intent that the said highways or roads may with convenient speed be effectually amended and hereafter kept in good and sufficient repair so that all persons may travel thro' the same with safety: be it enacted ... that [names of trustees] who are hereby nominated and appointed trustees of the said roads, and the survivors of them, that they or any five or more of them, or such persons as they or any five or more of them, shall authorise and appoint shall and may erect, or cause to be erected, one or more gate or gates, turnpike or turnpikes in,



upon, or across any part or parts of said highway or roads; and also a toll-house or toll-houses, and there shall receive and take the tolls and duties following before any horse, mare, gelding, ass or mule, cattle, coach, Berlin, chariot, calash, chaise or chair, waggon, wain, cart, car or other carriage shall be permitted to pass same."

It will be noted that the phrasing of all these acts followed the one pattern so that an account of the Limerick-Cork Act will serve to explain them all. The number of trustees named was generally large - in this act there were 186 trustees. These included the Protestant bishops of Cork, Cloyne and Limerick; the mayor of Limerick and the mayor of Cork, as well as aldermen from each city; and then a long list of owners of estates in Limerick and Cork who were probably eligible to serve on the grand juries in those counties. It was obvious from the wording of the act that if five members were sufficient for a working quorum, it was not expected that many

would ever attend the meetings. At their first meeting, they were to appoint collectors and surveyors. Each section

subjoined return from the official document for one week in June, 1742."

	Rate s d	Per Week Number	Total £ s d
Coach and six horses.....	1 0	2	2 0
Coach and four horses.....	6	2	1 0
Chair and one or two horses.....	3	30	7 6
Cart with one horse.....	1	120	10 0
One horse with rider.....	1	240	1 0 0
Every back load.....	½	480	1 0 0
Cattle per score.....	10	100	4 2
Calves, hogs, sheep per score.....	5	200	4 2
			3 8 10
This would for 52 weeks be.....		£178 19 4	
Other revenue.....		£ 25 0 0	
Total.....		£203 19 4	

of the road was to be treated separately; the trustees for the Newcastle to Limerick section were to meet at Rathkeale and the tolls on that section could only be applied to the expenses of that section. The Limerick to Cork section was to be divided at Ardskeagh on the county boundary and the tolls collected in each county retained for the expenses of the portion of the road in that county. The trustees however were to meet at Kilmallock for this section.

The position of course at first was that the trustees had no money and as they had to build toll-houses and place gates across the road at a number of points and then repair the roads, the acts provided that they could borrow money on the security of these tolls. Actually, the turnpike trust debentures became a speculation just like railway shares a hundred years later. So we find that in practice, the turnpikes were administered by the people who lent the money on the original debentures. The creditors soon found that the traffic on these roads was not so great as they had imagined and the period of twenty one years would not be long enough to enable the capital to be recovered with interest. Luckily, the affairs of this Limerick-Cork road came before the Irish Parliament on a number of occasions and we are able to get some idea of the financial affairs of the trustees. In addition, Maurice Lenihan, the historian of Limerick, includes in his book the following note on the finances of this road:

"The returns of the Bruff or Limekiln Turnpike for the nine years ending in 1741 showed an average of about £62 per year, Ardskeagh Turnpike £85 and Blackboy £195. Out of this income, wages of collectors and other monies were deducted, leaving a very small comparative nett income. To afford an idea of the character and quantity of the traffic by the principal turnpike (the Blackboy) in this year, we give the

These returns give an interesting picture of road traffic at the time. It shows the numbers who preferred to ride on horseback than to travel in any vehicle. Coaches were a rarity and even goods traffic seems to have gone more on pack-horses than by wagon. This seems to bear out the statement that Arthur Young made in his *Tour of Ireland* when discussing the traffic in Limerick, that "between 1740 and 1750, there were only four carriages in and about Limerick, the Bishop's, the Dean's, and one other Clergyman's and one neighbouring Gentleman's."

The creditors realised that their money could not be recovered in the period of twenty one years from 1732 so they approached the Irish Parliament for a new act in 1745. This gave them an additional period of thirty-four years to the original twenty-one. The tolls were increased by about fifty per cent. in this act for the County Limerick portion of the road only; in County Cork the tolls were to remain the same. Another change was that the road now went direct from Kilmallock to Charleville and from Charleville to Buttevant. By a special clause no gate or turnpike was to be erected at any place nearer than one English mile to the town of Charleville.

The increased tolls however do not appear to have saved the situation because we find in the records of the Irish Parliament that the creditors of this road came back in 1766 praying for relief again. Apparently, a sum of £6587 had been borrowed for the Newcastle to Limerick section and the tolls were not sufficient even to pay the interest in full, so that now the arrears of interest amounted to another £6,000. Parliament agreed that it was reasonable to do something for the petitioners and directed that a bill should be prepared. Some opposition developed to this course and a petition of the gentlemen, clergy and free-holders of the county of Limerick was lodged with parliament in May, 1766, stating that "upon the

whole, the Petitioners with great humility look upon the present Bill for increasing said Tolls, should it pass into law as greatly oppressive to the Poor and grievance to all passengers." The creditors came back with another petition repeating their claim that the revenue from the tolls on the Newcastle-Limerick section, was insufficient even to meet the interest. In this they state the "Annual Produce of the Tolls and Duties from Newcastle to Limerick does not exceed One Hundred and Sixty Five Pounds deducting Treasurer's salary and other incidental charges." *They also claimed to have spent large sums of money in repairing their respective roads over and above what they were allowed by the trustees for the purpose.

This bill seems to have never reached the statute book and the road continued under the act of 1745. Undoubtedly traffic was now increasing because in 1776, Arthur Young reports that, "In Limerick district, now 183 four-wheeled carriages: 115 two-wheeled ditto." He does not describe the condition of the turnpike roads in County Limerick. He must have travelled from Limerick to Kilmallock on his visit to Castle Oliver and on his return from Cork and Kerry he came over the road from Rathkeale to Adare. Elsewhere in his book, however, he roundly denounced the turnpike roads "as so many jobs" so in all probability the County Limerick stretch did not impress him either.

As the years pass on, we can only guess that the roads continued to be made as formerly. The turnpikes were not too popular and in the Statute Book for 1787, we find an "Act for preventing the wilful destruction of turnpike gates, and for the better securing the payment of tolls at such gates." However, to return to our Limerick road; in the spring of 1790, the creditors are once more back to the Irish Parliament with a petition. This a long recital of their troubles and they are urgently seeking an extension because the additional years given in 1745 have now expired. It reads:

"A petition of the mortgages on the turnpike road leading from the town of Newcastle in the county of Limerick to the city of Limerick and from thence to the bounds of the county of Cork, whose names are thereunto subscribed, was presented to the House and read: setting forth, that the act of 19 Geo. II chap. 19, will expire with the present session unless revived; and that it appears by the account returned on oath by John Maxwell, treasurer of said road, in pursuance of the order lately made by the House, that the entire principal sum laid out on the faith of Parliament for promoting the material intercourse opened by said road is

still due and unpaid; that neither the petitioners, nor those whose representatives or assigns they are, have at any time received more than the legal interest on the principal sums so advanced, but for some years the revenues have not afforded more than 4 per cent. for which the petitioners are obliged to keep above 40 miles of a very broad road in repair at an expense sometimes exceeding their interest money, owing to the advanced price of wages and the

holders in the said counties of cities, will be loaded with a very heavy expense for presentments, in addition to those they are at present subject to for public works, charities, prisoners, salaries and other matters; and therefore praying relief."

They were successful in getting another act and this apparently carried on the arrangement until 1831. During these years, the traffic on the road increased greatly. The Post Office introduced mail coaches and these had to



The roads along the course of the Shannon Estuary in 1778.

general avidity for manure on account of the increasing quantity of tillage and other causes, while the revenues of the said road have been gradually decreasing, owing, as the petitioners suppose, to the number of roads obtained by individuals since the passing of said act of 19 George II, by which many avoid payment of such gates as are appointed by said act; the petitioners further state, that they have received their debentures or mortgages on said road, either as a provision settled on, or bequeathed to them, or for valuable consideration and therefore will be materially injured if said act be not continued with amendments; and that if said act is suffered to expire, the petitioners, with the other land-

pay tolls on the turnpike roads in Ireland. Later on, Bianconi introduced his cars and these must have added to the revenues also. The Newcastle road seems to have been the subject of a final act of parliament in 1830 and carried on as a turnpike until the passing of the Abolition Act in 1857.

A commissioner had been appointed in 1856 to inquire and report on the propriety of maintaining or abolishing all or any part of the turnpike roads existing in Ireland at that date. The result was the act of 1857, which was entitled "An Act to discontinue the taking of Tolls on the Turnpike Roads now existing in Ireland and to provide for the maintenance of such roads as public roads." This act authorised the appointment of a Turnpikes Abolition

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Commissioner who was to inquire into the affairs of these roads and who was empowered to make an award setting out a fair value for the mortgages and an allowance of not more than six years interest on these mortgages. These amounts were to be levied by the grand juries, half as a county charge and half as a barony charge.

The roads were then to be handed over to the counties and the grand jury had to provide for them in each area as ordinary public roads. The Commissioner was to sell all property belonging to the Turnpike Trusts and apply proceeds to the debts or to relieve the county rate.

So in the grand jury presentments for 1859 in County Limerick, we find the various awards of the Commissioner and the sorrowful report of Thomas Kearney, Esq., County Surveyor for the Eastern Division of the County Limerick, as follows:

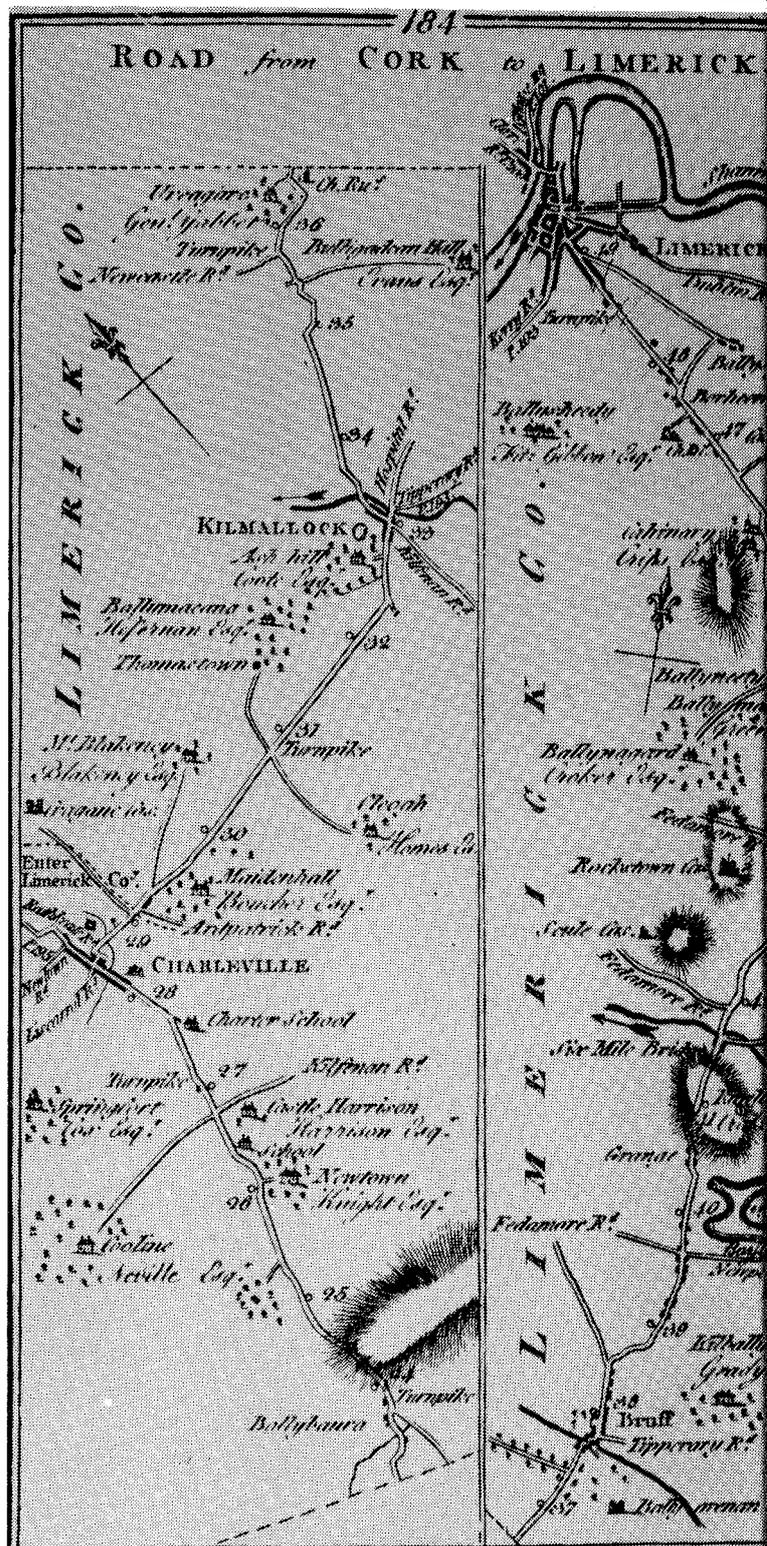
"The increased cost is principally caused by the new letting of the late turnpike Road from Limerick to Charleville which amounts in all half yearly to £446 for 24½ miles."

"The portion of the late turnpike Road from Limerick to Newcastle which lies within the baronies of Pubble Brien and Coshma, in length 11¼ miles, was in such a wretched worn out state before the abolition of the turnpikes that in the absence of other applications, I was obliged to apply at Sessions for a special presentment at 5/- per perch on 2,286 perches thro Pubble Brien ... and for a contract of 2/6d. per perch per year for five years on 1324 perches thro Coshma but the state of the road was so very bad that no contractor would tender for either of those works and in the circumstances the Grand Jury ordered me to have them executed which I did to the best of my ability."

Thus the turnpike road from Newcastle West to Limerick and on to Charleville passes from our view as a special undertaking and merges with the ordinary public roads of the county. It is one of the few turnpike roads of which much detail has been preserved. It is interesting to note that it took six acts of parliament at various dates to deal with its affairs. While the experiment may not have produced good roads, it apparently saved the county rates during the years that it operated. It lasted much longer than many of the other turnpikes in the vicinity.

Turnpike Road Acts

1755—An act for making and amending the road leading from the town of Mallow in the County of Cork thro the lands of Dromdown, Killmaclinan and Lisgriffin to Newcastle in the County of Limerick and from thence to the Fair-place of Glin in the



The road from Limerick to Cork, 1778.

said County of Limerick and from thence to Killmeany in the County of Kerry.

1737—An act for repairing the high-road from the town of Tomivarah in the County of Tipperary to the town of Silvermines as also to the town of Nenagh and from the said towns of Nenagh and Silvermines by Shally-Orchard through the town of Tullo in the said County to the City of Limerick.

1733—An act for repairing the road from Tubber near the town of Ennis in the County of Clare and from thence to North Liberties of the County of Limerick.

1768—An act for making a road from the Town of Newcastle in the County of Kerry thro the County of Kerry thro Rathkeale in the County of Limerick.