Historic gun-runners: Limerick links

There is expected to be strong support from sailing circles in the Limerick area for the new drive to restore the historic yacht, Asgard. The yacht will be restored to full racing condition at a cost of £65,000, half of which will be raised by public subscription, matched pound for pound by the Minister for Defence.

Asgard was the yacht used by one of the great figures of 20th century Irish history, Erskine Childers, to import arms for the Irish Volunteers in July 1914, in support of Home Rule.

The weapons, however, would be used in the 1916 Rising. The Asgard did not visit Limerick until after it was brought back to Ireland from England in 1916 by the Irish Government, which had purchased it as a sail training vessel and had had it extensively repaired.

Initially, it was used to train members of the Naval Service and An Slua Muirí, with a large number of Limerick members of the naval reserve using the boat in its original condition.

Later, however, with some modifications made, it was used to train civilians, mainly men and women, under Captain Eric Healy and paid a visit to Limerick. The replacement vessel has paid many visits to Limerick, over the past two decades, and a very large number of young Limerick people have trained on it. The vessel was taken out of service in 1974, thirteen years after it was purchased by the Irish Government as a sail training vessel and historical artifact, and put on permanent exhibition in Kilmainham Jail in 1979.

A successor, the much larger sail-training vessel, Asgard II, championed by yachtman Charles and Hughie Hargrave, was built at Tyrrell’s boatyard in Arklow.

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One final Limerick area connection with Asgard is that the cost of restoring the yacht will be borne by the Minister for Defence, Michael Smith, who has taken a personal interest in the project.

The other half of the cost will be covered by public subscription.

Asgard, in Norse mythology, is the home of the gods.

Donations may be sent to The Asgard Restoration Project (Tech, 1st Floor, National Museum of Ireland, Dublin 3)

The gun-running: how and where it happened

The 1914 gun-running operation with Asgard recalled, in a curious sort of way, the espionage novel, “The Riddle of the Sands” written by none other than Erskine Childers himself, some years earlier.

The book was, in recent years, made into a film and adapted for television several times, the most recent being only a few weeks ago. The book was set in the times of the time. The titles were meant to be in support of the Irish Volunteers and Home Rule, in opposition to the already armed Ulster Volunteers who were opposed to Home Rule for the whole of Ireland and who had earlier imported a larger cache of weapons and ammunition from Germany, also clandestinely.

However, the weapons for the Irish Volunteers and childers. However, the weapons for the Irish Volunteers and pilot given to him as a present by Collins — he had taken the Republican side during the civil war — had not been found.

Shipyard, for its part, continued on with the Royal Navy to become an incredible irony when the head of Naval Intelligence during the Great War — a kinsman of Childers’ own “Riddle of the Sands” — sailed, of course, with Childers on board. The Asgard itself had its own share of irony — it fell
The gun-running: the leading personalities

ERSKINE Childers, hero of the Howth gun-running of 1914, was father of the late President of Ireland, Erskine Childers, and grandfather of the recently-deceased Erskine Childers III, the highest-ranking Irishman ever within the United Nations administration in New York. In its long history the yacht Asgard, with which the gun-running operation was carried out, has had a number of connections with Limerick. Of those who travelled on board the Asgard with Childers, for the gun-running, was Mary Spring Rice. She was the unmarried daughter of Lord Montague of Mount Trenchard, Foyes, himself one of the Spring Rice family noted for their contribution to Irish affairs.

The tall stone column at the centre of the People's Park, the Spring Rice memorial, bears lasting testimony to the esteem in which the family was held. Atop the column is the effigy of Thomas Spring Rice, who became Chancellor of the Exchequer and who was born at 2 Merchants' Quay, in the Chamber of Commerce building, on O'Connell Street. The painting of the Chairman of Spring Rice, the Celestial, is in the National Museum building, and is the painting of the Chairman of Spring Rice, the Celestial, in the National Museum building. The mother of the poet Aubrey de Vere, of the member of the family, was a Spring Rice. Mary Spring Rice, one of the outstanding women of her generation, and, as one noted authority put it, an outstanding example of Protestant Irish nationalism, was involved in the Gaelic League and conducted Irish classes at Mount Trenchard and seaclocha in the grounds of the mansion. She was a friend of Douglas Hyde, founder of the Gaelic League, who was later to become the first president of an independent Ireland (1916).

She was also a great woman of the celebrated pioneer yachtsman, Conor O'Brien, of nearby Foyes Island, and was a kinswoman too of the Young Irelander and parliamentarian, William Smith O'Brien, of Cahermore, Ardfog, one of the great figures of 19th century Irish nationalism. Conor O'Brien himself was a great patriot, but he was also a great patriot, but he helped out with the logistics of the Asgard gun-running, along with Bulmer Hobson and Barrett Boatwright. He later managed a gun-running effort of his own, sailing his yacht, the Menhiska, into Kilcoole, Co Wicklow, with a contingent of weapons. O'Brien, whose house can still be seen on the shore of Foyes Island, facing the village, was later the first Irish viceroy to circumnavigate the globe in the 1930's. He brought back a kilo of the tri-colour of the new Irish Free State all the way. His exceptional skills of navigation and seamanship were reaffirmed when he delivered the boat, sailing it with a 108-foot boat, from Ireland to the Falklands - the boat has now been brought back to Limerick for permanent exhibition.

Asgard in full sail, subsequent to its return to Ireland in the 1960's.