

The Walls of Limerick

Limerick's two most important buildings, St. Mary's Cathedral and King John's Castle, were built in the Englishtown (King's Island) in 1168 and 1210. The structures were built of durable blue-grey Limerick limestone and have survived the ravages of time, clime and siege to this day.

Limerick became a walled city in the 13th and 14th centuries, with the completion of the enclosure of the Irishtown. There were seventeen gates in the walls, twelve in the Englishtown, on the north side of the city, and five in the Irishtown, on the southern side.

Though the French commander of the Jacobite Army in the period before the 1690 Siege of Limerick, General Lazun, extravagantly claimed that the stone walls could be demolished with "roasted apples", the walls survived the three seventeenth century sieges largely intact. When most of the walls were eventually knocked down, in 1760 and afterwards, the demolition was carried out by local developers in order to allow the cramped city to expand to the south-west into what was to become known as Newtown Pery.

By this time, Limerick limestone had already earned a wide reputation for its quality and general attractiveness. The Wellesley (now Sarsfield) Bridge was completed in 1835 and never before had the local stone been shown to better advantage.

As well as being used extensively throughout the neighbouring counties, the stone was also exported to London and had been used, among other projects, in the building of a pillar opposite the House of Commons. And the House itself was to feature in a bitter controversy involving Limerick limestone. When Charles Barry (the architect who designed the building) was selecting the material to construct the new

Commons, he passed over the Limerick stone in favour of Bolsover stone.

His decision had political and economic repercussions in Limerick and led to a lively correspondence in the *Limerick Chronicle* in March and April, 1840. Michael J. Staunton, the owner of quarries in Garryowen and Ballysimon, in letters to Charles Barry and Thomas Spring Rice (Lord Monteagle), strenuously pressed the claim of his material over that of Bolsover stone. In his campaign he enlisted the aid of local architects and engineers, including the eminent James Pain.

However, Charles Barry was not easily deflected and remained impervious to the end. The campaign failed and Bolsover stone was duly used in the building of the Houses of Commons. In fairness to Barry it should be pointed out that he had taken elaborate precautions and gone to considerable trouble and expense in selecting the material.

In recent decades, much good work has been carried out in maintaining and refurbishing the remnants of the city's walls. We owe a great deal to the pioneering work of the late H.G. Leask and the Limerick Corporation's senior archaeologist, Celie O'Rahilly, for their studies, particularly for their efforts in retracing the original outline of the walls.

With the urban renewal programme for the rebuilding of the Irishtown now nearing completion, it is essential to preserve and consolidate the most substantial part of the walls remaining, the Ramparts, at Lelia Street. The provision of a linear park will also do much to enhance the site of the bloodiest battle in the 1690 siege. Despite their pock-marked and battered appearance, the walls continue to give our city its own distinctive character and maintain a tangible and unbroken link with our chequered past.