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THREE TOWNS: LIMERICK SINCE 1691



Eamon O'Flaherty

LIMERICK is a modern city built around and on top of a medieval core. The medieval city, however obscured by centuries of change, still survives in buildings, place-names and street patterns that have endured for at least 800 years in some places. But the modern city, as it developed after the treaty of 1691, added to the medieval fabric in ways that are particularly striking to the urban historian. The two towns of medieval Limerick became three in the course of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The **Englishtown** and the **Irishtown** acquired a rational extension in the ordered geometry of Georgian town planning called the **Newtown**, or **Newtown Pery**. Yet despite the spectacular growth and success of the Newtown, the medieval and the more recent parts of the city preserved their distinctive personalities to an unusual degree. The contrast between the narrow winding streets of the medieval city and the regular, planned grid of the eighteenth-century Newtown is a testimony to the ambitious scale of urban change in Limerick in the modern period. Few cities of Limerick's compact size offer such a comparable sense of the spatial unfolding of the different stages of urban development since the end of the seventeenth century. Fewer still offer a chance to see medieval and modern elements co-existing as they do in the three towns that compose the historic centre of Limerick.

By August 1691 Limerick had experienced two years of siege warfare. The city had sustained considerable damage by the action of the Williamite batteries on the heights of Sing-



Limerick harbour from the south-west c. 1827.

land, south-east of St John's Gate. The area around the gate suffered most, particularly from the concentrated fire that produced the ill-fated breach in the walls near the citadel. The Latin inscription commemorating the rebuilding of St John's churchyard wall is evidence both of the damage caused by war and of the determination to rebuild. Even more severe was the clearing of suburban housing undertaken as part of the work of fortification. Garryowen, or Crotagh, was more affected than Thomondgate in this process, because it lay in the front line of the city's defences. The city's external appearance changed slowly and gradually after 1691, however, since much of the work of rebuilding involved filling the gaps made by the siege rather than extensively changing the city's streets and buildings. Most dramatic, after the sieges, were the effects in February 1693 of the explosion of hundreds of barrels of gunpowder stored in one of the two towers that guarded the quay



Map by W. E. Corbett of Limerick in 1865, detail showing the Georgian Newtown.

where the potato market now stands, demolishing the tower, breaking most of the windows in the city and taking the roofs off many of the houses. Less dramatic, but more important, was the tendency to replace stone with brick in the rebuilding of houses in the principal streets. The Dutch gables of these houses reflected the influence of new fashions in domestic architecture in Ireland and Britain in the decades after the arrival of William of Orange.

The advent of brick did not, however, banish the local limestone from the streets of Limerick. The polished marble, or limestone, described by Father Wolfe in the sixteenth century continued to be favoured, particularly for important public buildings, throughout the eighteenth century. Limerick's historians have tended to paint a very gloomy picture of the city in the sixty years between the treaty and the beginning of Edmund Sexton Pery's urban renaissance. Yet these sixty years also saw a considerable amount of development that changed its appearance, particularly that of the Englishtown. Most of the public buildings of Limerick were rebuilt in classical style between 1690 and 1750, and most of them were located in an administrative district centred on Mary Street and Quay Lane, the modern Bridge Street. The mayoralty house, city and county court houses, the prison, bridewell, poor-house and Tholsel were all built or rebuilt in this period. The exchange on Nicholas Street, dating from 1673, was rebuilt several times during the eighteenth century. Nowadays only the façade of the exchange and the Gerald Griffin schools – formerly the city court house – survive from this period.

Although the area near St Mary's Cathedral housed the main administrative and public buildings, the early eighteenth-century city was densely crowded. All the traffic of the port was still concentrated in the small medieval long dock, now occupied by the potato market. The old site of the Franciscan friary at St Francis's Abbey, behind the present Sir

Harry's Mall on the island, was a flourishing industrial district in the eighteenth century. By this period many of the principal markets in the city were centred on the Irishtown, around St John's Gate. The gardens that had occupied a considerable part of the walled area, especially in the Irishtown, in previous centuries had largely been replaced by buildings by 1750. The city had certainly reached the limits of expansion possible within the old walls by the mid-eighteenth century. A combination of economic growth and organised development by Limerick merchants and landowners transformed the city over a period of seventy years after 1750.

Much of the spectacular urban development that transformed Limerick after 1750 is associated with Edmund Sexton Pery. Pery was the descendant of Edmund Sexton, who had been granted the Franciscan friary at the dissolution of the monasteries under Henry VIII. This gave him a substantial estate within the city, but it also gave him possession of the Prior's Land, a large tract running south of the city along the river on which the Georgian Newtown was built. Between 1751 and 1756 Pery developed a square of stone-built houses just inside St John's Gate, thereby initiating a dramatic period of development in Limerick. Though built inside the Irishtown walls, the houses at John's Square represented a new set of architectural values. In 1760 the walls were demolished south of the square to allow rear access, and a new street, later called Cornwallis Street, now Gerald Griffin Street, was laid out.

Pery was not alone in promoting expansion in this period, however, and the development of John's Square in the 1750s was followed very quickly by an extensive programme of building on the riverside between the two historic parts of the city. Central to the construction of the new quays around Baal's Bridge was the increase of the traffic of the port. The government's plan to extend the navigation of the Shannon resulted in grants to make the river navigable between Limerick and

Killaloe, which involved cutting a canal between the Abbey River at Baal's Bridge and the Shannon at Rhebogue. This involved building a lock and system of quays east of the bridge, which together with the Lock Mills were completed by 1765. Baal's Bridge was widened somewhat by the demolition of the houses along its east side, but communication between the Englishtown and the Pery lands to the south was ensured by the building of a new bridge with parliamentary grants in 1762. Between the two bridges regular quays were built – George's Quay and Charlotte's Quay – which were occupied by four-storey Georgian terraces. The architectural highlight of this development was the completion of Davis Ducart's Custom House in 1767.

Within just over ten years the city had broken its old boundaries and was set on a pattern of development that produced the Georgian Newtown by the 1820s. By 1787 Bank Place, Rutland Street and the triangular development of Arthur's Quay, Francis Street and Patrick Street had been built, giving the city its first recognisably Georgian district. It is significant, too, that these developments were undertaken not by Pery, but by two of the leading Catholic merchant families – the Arthurs and the Roches – the latter being also responsible for the enormous grain-store, the Granary, in Michael Street that has recently been restored. More important was the fact that by the end of the 1760s a blueprint existed for the development of Newtown Pery along a north-south rectangular grid, to be built on the Pery estate in South Prior's Land along the axis of a great central street – George's Street, now O'Connell Street.

Politics, commerce and fashion all combined to ensure the success of the rectilinear town plan mapped out by Christopher Colles for Pery's estate in 1769. Politically the Newtown's development was helped by the increasing dissatisfaction of large numbers of the prosperous citizens with the cor-

poration, resulting in repeated efforts from the 1750s onwards to reform the corporation and, from 1808, the establishment of self-government for the Newtown through the St Michael's parish commissioners, who assumed responsibility for paving, lighting and policing the area. The main impetus for change was, however, the sustained economic growth of the period, based primarily on the provisions trade. Although the central core of the Newtown's development was formed by the Georgian terraces of the grid around George's Street, the streets between Patrick Street and the Irishtown quickly developed into a district of warehouses and markets, of which the milk market and the old linen hall at Carr Street are surviving examples. Further south, below William Street, the Georgian terraces were complemented by large stone warehouses, especially on the streets between George's Street and the river.

The initial division of the Newtown into rectangular lots was important in maintaining a sense of unity in the development. This architectural unity, which struck contemporary observers so favourably and which still defines the centre of Limerick, was achieved despite the fact that the Newtown is not the work of a single architect or landlord. Blocks were leased and built upon by individuals over a long period of time and the area did not assume its final shape until the 1820s and 1830s, when the last streets, such as Hartstonge Street, Catherine Place and The Crescent, were built. Pery Square, which was never fully realised, was laid out in the 1830s, by which time the era of Georgian building that gave us the Newtown was coming to an end. But with relatively small variations, the streets leading from the new bridge of 1762 southwards to The Crescent and Pery Square conform to the prevailing canons of eighteenth-century town planning, defining the streetscape by their adherence to fixed proportions and ordered, harmonious symmetry. They combine to form an architectural heritage of great urbanity and considerable beauty.

Cultural life in the eighteenth century centred on the coffee houses of Quay Lane, but the building of the Assembly Rooms on Charlotte's Quay in 1770 and of the Commercial Buildings in Patrick Street in 1806 initiated a migration of fashion and commerce from the historic centre. Theatres, clubs and places of recreation followed the trend. The Limerick Institution opened in 1809 in George's Street; Roche's Hanging Gardens built in 1808 and Joseph Fogerty's Theatre Royal of 1841, both in Henry Street, added to the relocation of the commercial and fashionable centre of Limerick in the Newtown. The success of the new development was clear, for the centre of gravity of the city moved inexorably southwards from the 1770s onwards as public and commercial buildings were increasingly located in the new district. After the establishment of Maunsell's Bank in Bank Place in 1789, new banks were concentrated predominantly in O'Connell Street and Glentworth Street during the nineteenth century as commercial interests abandoned the old city.

With the movement of population south, there was a corresponding pattern of church building in the newer parts of the city. The migration of the more prosperous part of the population was reflected in church building by all denominations in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The most striking development in the pre-Victorian period, however, before the massive expansion of the Catholic Church, was the scale of building by the Church of Ireland and other Protestant churches in the city up to the 1840s. An octagonal stone church, which was never completed, was originally to have formed the centrepiece of the Newtown. St George's Church was built in 1789 as a chapel of ease for the Church of Ireland in George's Street, but later became a bank after the building of St Michael's in Pery Square in 1844. Four Presbyterian, Methodist and Quaker chapels were built in the area between 1812 and 1821, replacing earlier buildings in the Englishtown. Trinity

Chapel in Catherine Place, built in 1834, still adds dignity to the street on which it stands, though now converted into offices.

In the early nineteenth century the orderly development of the Newtown streets contrasted with the more haphazard growth of the quays downriver of the new custom house. Quay building, like house building, had been undertaken by individuals but these privately-built quays, still often identified by the names of the original builders, proved inadequate to the growing demands of the port and a series of massive improvements, funded by loans from the government, culminated in the building of a regular line of quays from Honan's Quay to O'Neill's Quay in the 1830s and, in 1853, the completion of the floating dock below Mount Kennet. The original plan of the 1820s envisaged damming the river at the site of the new Wellesley Bridge and creating a modern harbour closer to the custom-house, but this plan came to nothing, partly due to the high costs of the bridge itself. The magnetic attraction of the new port for industry is evident in the large-scale industrial buildings that were constructed around the new docks area in the nineteenth century, increasingly using steam power, the most dramatic of which were the Newtown Pery Mills at Mount Kennet, and Bannatyne's Mills across the river, operating amidst a thriving industrial quarter containing smaller mills, factories, the principal gasworks and dozens of stores and yards, all in close proximity to the docks. As much as the sedate elegance of Newtown Pery at mid-century, the bustling, hard-working docks area, which acquired its own network of residential streets, particularly around the old Windmill district, expressed the personality of the developing city by the middle of the nineteenth century.

The remarkable vigour of Limerick's expansion in the century after 1760 took place at the expense of the historic centre. The desertion of the old city by the wealthier citizens, and

the movement of the port and its related industry to the south, abandoned the old city to a long period of decline and neglect. Despite its historic importance, the Englishtown suffered considerably in the nineteenth century. Although still the seat of the courts, and improved by the building of a new county court house and city gaol on Merchants' Quay, the verdict of observers from the early nineteenth century was of a run-down medieval quarter overshadowed by the modern city to the south. Old St Munchin's Church, at the north end of the Englishtown, was rebuilt in 1827, around the time that Villier's almshouses were built close by, as was St John's Church in the Irishtown in 1843. But these did little to compensate for the relocation of most public building in the newer parts of the town, a move symbolised by the migration of the town hall to Patrick Street in 1843 and the abandonment of the exchange in Nicholas Street. The nineteenth-century Irishtown was a warren of small lanes branching off from the three main streets – John Street, Mungret Street and Broad Street – occupied by small two-room cottages built in rows on either side of the lanes, and producing the highest densities of houses and people in the city. Both the older suburbs of Thomondgate and Garryowen continued to grow as historic extensions of the old city and both reflected the predominantly working-class character of the Englishtown and the Irishtown. Despite its long decline in importance, the historic centre of the city remained the home of the majority of the working population until well into the present century.

The great legacy of the Victorian period was in terms of industrial and institutional buildings rather than domestic architecture. By 1900 there were four army barracks in the city, the largest of them south of the Newtown. Between 1811 and 1825 Mulgrave Street had become an institutional district as an imposing prison, county infirmary and mental hospital were built. The 1841 workhouse in Shelbourne Road replaced the

1774 House of Industry on the North Strand, while the old centre got its share of institutional building through the erection of St John's Hospital at St John's Gate in 1785 and Barrington's Hospital on George's Quay in 1831. Perhaps the most distinctive contribution to the city's architecture was provided by the enormous increase in Catholic churches, convents and schools in the course of the nineteenth century. From small beginnings in the eighteenth century, large imposing parish churches were built in the older parts of the city, culminating in St John's Cathedral in 1859. The growth of the Newtown was registered by the building of substantial churches there by the main religious orders – Franciscans, Augustinians, Dominicans and Jesuits. On an even greater scale were the schools and convents of the new Irish religious orders like the Sisters of Mercy and the Christian Brothers. The pace of expansion continued in the later part of the century and the predominantly Catholic allegiance of the city was forcefully expressed in stone and brick, often in the classical style of the city's architecture, but increasingly in the Gothic revival that was characteristic of the century.

The arrival of the railways after 1848 confirmed the southern shift of the city centre. The railway terminus added to the industrial growth of the area in its immediate vicinity. In 1870 a large new market complex was built between Cathedral Place and Mulgrave Street, connected to the railway by a branch line across Mulgrave Street. The markets and railway district became the centre of most of the city's meat processing factories and the development of railway works and of Peter Tait's giant clothing factory in Prospect provided a south-eastern industrial centre balancing the docks area. Indeed the result was to cramp the potential expansion of the fashionable Newtown, and had consequences for the development of the residential suburbs of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Newtown continued to expand along the line of

O'Connell Street, as Victorian suburbs developed along the military road laid out to serve the New Barracks, now Sarsfield Barracks, in 1798, but the Clare side of the river grew in importance.

Not only were the railways and docks creating an industrial quarter around the Newtown, but also improved land communications were opening the city to its hinterland in the nineteenth century. The opening of Wellesley Bridge in 1835 connected the Newtown to the Clare side of the Shannon. The North Strand was already developing by the early nineteenth century, and the North Circular Road and Ennis Road had been laid out by 1840. The Ennis Road, like O'Connell Avenue on the south side, became an axis of Victorian suburban building, initially in the form of large villas like Shelbourne House and Rose Hill, but near the end of the century there was a trend towards building red-brick terraces along the Ennis Road similar to those on O'Connell Avenue. Park Bridge and Athlunkard Bridge also opened up communication with the north-eastern hinterland. Limerick, which for so many centuries had been a fortified settlement, shielded by the river as much as by its gates and walls, had begun to expand to occupy the surrounding countryside. Kate O'Brien's fictional Limerick merchant family, the Considines, moved from an old house in the Englishtown to a high Georgian house in Newtown Pery and finally to a large villa on the Clare side of the Shannon as they grew rich. Of course the wealth of these families was based on the docks and factories of the nineteenth-century city, just as their cultural world was shaped by the great educational and religious institutions that characterised Victorian Limerick. Despite the physical and industrial expansion of the nineteenth century, Victorian Limerick did not repeat the growth pattern of the previous century. The population of the city declined gradually in the forty years after the Famine and began a modest recovery after 1891. By 1951 the city's population had re-

covered to the level recorded a century before, indicating the relative stagnation of southern Irish urban development in the post-Famine period.

Twentieth-century Limerick has grown out along the axes of development provided by the network of roads and bridges of the nineteenth century. The main suburbs of the present-day city were already taking shape by 1900. Since then the greatest change has taken place in the residential pattern of the population. The densely crowded working-class areas of the medieval city have largely been emptied by public housing projects undertaken since independence, and there has been a corresponding shift to the suburbs. There has also been an enormous change in the industrial face of Limerick with the decline of the port and of traditional city-centre industries. Nowadays the entire legacy of Victorian institutional building is being adapted to changes of use. During the past decade there has been an impressive commitment to urban renewal, which has resulted in the rebuilding of large areas of the historic centre that had been allowed to become derelict. This has improved both medieval and Georgian parts of the city. The civic offices at Merchants' Quay and the rebuilding of Arthur's Quay have shown that modern buildings can be introduced into an old site without destroying its historic character. Rarely, however, has there been such a high level of awareness of the cultural wealth of the city's urban heritage, a recognition that change and conservation are both integral parts of the process of urban renewal.

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'LIKE A LITTLE CASTLE': WATERFORD IN THE MIDDLE AGES

Terry Barry

THERE is in the possession of Waterford Corporation a unique charter roll of late fourteenth-century date. It is made up of a large number of rectangular pieces of vellum (made from the skin of calves) sewn together to make a long, narrow roll, and contains copies of a series of charters and other documents mostly relating to the bitter trade dispute that caused friction between Waterford and its near neighbour New Ross throughout most of the period from the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries. What is even more remarkable about this roll is the sixteen painted illustrations along its left-hand side of English kings and other notable people of the time. At the top of the roll in its centre is a faded painting of the king receiving the homage of the mayor and bailiffs of the city of Waterford. Below it is a representation of the city as seen from across the River Suir, a truly remarkable scene since it is probably the earliest surviving illustration of an Irish medieval city that has survived down to the modern period. It is a fairly stylised view of a gleamingly white medieval city, much as is found in the illustrations in the later and more famous French book of hours known as the *Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berri*. Nevertheless it does portray the basic elements of Waterford's growth and development within the context of medieval Ireland as