

# The 1841 Census

by Tom Ryan

**L**imerick, like all parts of Ireland, was in the shadow of disaster at the time of the 1841 census. The city had a population of 48,391 (26,955 females and 21,436 males) in a borough of 23 parishes, or part of parishes, including the tideway of the River Shannon, on 2,618 acres of land.

By drawing from census figures and their breakdowns, it is possible to catch a glimpse of the conditions in which people lived just prior to the famine.

Some 9,686 families occupied 5,255 out of a total of 5,866 houses. Of these families 2,334 lived in 961 first-class dwellings, with 631 accommodating single families. There were 107 two-family homes; 49 three-family dwellings and, at the poorer end of the scale, 26 six-family warrens. Further down the scale two houses contained 18 families, while 22 families were incredibly sardined into one structure. A total of 412 fourth-class houses accommodated single families; 48 were two-family homes; 5 were three-family dwellings and one housed four families. Some 4,167 families, or about 45% of Limerick families, lived in fourth-class accommodation.

Figures show that wage-earners, or breadwinners, numbered 19,454 people, including 683 below 15 years of age. There were 28,937 others, 15,908 children below



A food riot. Engraving, *Pictorial Times*, 10 October, 1846.

15 years of age and 13,029 older people.

A further breakdown of census figures shows that 21,122 people were 25 years or younger, just less than three-fifths of the population. There were 6,961 children of five years or less. Between the ages of 16 to 25 there were 6,139 females and 3,956 males. Some of this disparity could have come about because many men were

abroad as soldiers, sailors or emigrants. The 16 to 25 age group would have been the most active in terms of work. It is worth noting that land agitation and other forms of resistance and conflict which had gone on in the area had been answered by deportation, imprisonment or execution. Catholic Emancipation was a fact of life by the 1840s. And the R.I.C. were well established in and around Limerick at the time.

The total population of Ireland on census night, 6 June, 1841, was recorded as being 8,175,124, with 4,155,548 females and 4,019,576 males. The census seems to have been compiled as thoroughly as conditions would allow. A listing amongst errata in the census volume admits that 100,000 males in the rural part of Wexford were not included in the count. Large numbers of homeless people, including victims of evictions living along the sides of the roads and paths of the country, were probably not counted. Many people did not know how to read or write; so, for example, in the countryside it must be assumed that landlords' agents accurately compiled the census figures. Many landlords would have been unable to supervise counting as they were away in Britain for most of the time. The census lists for Ireland were destroyed; it is the census breakdown which remains.

It is recorded that the population increase for the time was 5% per decade; it is likely then, by 1845 and 1846, as the famine took hold, that the population was considerably higher than the number recorded in the June, 1841 census. When



'Attack on potato store'. Engraving from the *Illustrated London News*.



Three armed men lie in wait. Engraving, *Historic Times*, 1 June, 1849.

those who existed on the margin of Irish society are considered, it leaves one to wonder what the actual rates of mortality were during the famine years from 1845, through 1848, to 1853, the year British parliamentary papers record the famine as having ended.

Limerick was extensively garrisoned, and this heavy military presence had prevented organised rebellion in 1798. In that year many were executed on Mathew Bridge; others being taken and killed in their native place. Floggings and other public tortures were practised. Joseph Cripps, then Limerick's Mayor, was party to the suppression.

Turmoil reigned in 1807, 1811, 1812, and Limerick was under martial law from 1815 to 1817, when, in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars, Ireland experienced famine conditions.

Violence continued and churches were burnt. In 1822 part of Bruff was burnt and the magistrate, Major Going, was shot in Rathkeale. In Churchtown, Co. Cork, 1,500 men rose in insurrection.

In the 1830s police barracks were built around Limerick city at Ballyneety, Fanningstown, Roxborough, Turnpike and Ballysimon. Some more were established at Drombanna, Four Elms and Power's Cross, Roxborough, in the 1830s. Records for Ballyneety and Cahernorry show that the unrest continued.

By 1836, 76 special constables served

in 10 stations around Limerick. Civil police were set up in 1822, and in 1836 some 176 men served under a Chief Constable in 38 stations countywide. In 1836 the two forces amalgamated, becoming the R.I.C.

The compilers of reports on emigration and shipping conditions stated that most

trouble and hardship was caused by shipping agents trying to fill lumber ships returning to Canada and the U.S.A. The agents preyed on the poorest labourers, who were often gullible and were convinced that it was to their advantage to seek prosperity in the New World with their families. The agents told these people that the journey would take eight to ten weeks instead of 12-14 weeks. This played into the hands of ship provisioners, who cleaned out the last of the unfortunates' savings. Hungry and sick, they were eventually dumped with nothing on the far shore.

John Buchanan, Quebec Immigration Agent, reported that in mid-1840 Patrick Leary was detained for 25 days after the appointed day of sailing, and Peter Scott, with 13 in family, was similarly detained for 21 days. Mr Buchanan wrote: "I can assure your Lordship that the cases set forth in these affidavits are not of rare occurrence, and that it would be difficult for language to exaggerate the amount of suffering caused by similar practices". Dr M.C. Taylor, in describing the lodgings of Irish labourers in Liverpool, said: "It would far transcend the power of words to describe the horrors of these dens". This, then, was the state of conditions before the famine.

#### SOURCES

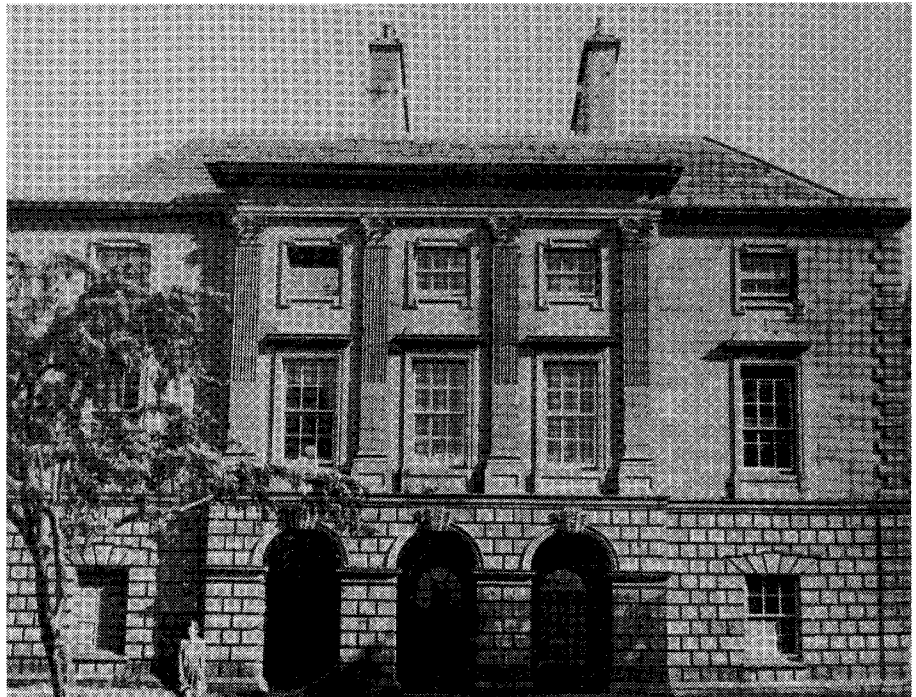
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The Custom House, beside the Limerick Port.