

Limerick Breweries

By John Keane

Brewing is one of the most ancient of domestic arts and has been carried out in Limerick throughout the centuries. The earliest brewery of which there is an authentic record is the City Brewery, near the Golden Mills, in the oldest part of the city, close to King John's Castle, with the river Shannon bounding it to the north. The Danes possessed the secret of brewing the heather - and Danish ale continued to be remembered in tradition - but the secret had departed.

Brewing beer is a sophisticated technique requiring considerable skill, but it was one that was known in the Middle East some 4,000 or more years B.C.

Up until the eighteenth century beer was brewed by and large in the home and not in commercial breweries. In 1821 a Mr. Ellman, an old man and a large farmer in Sussex, gave evidence before a Committee of the House of Commons "that forty years ago, there was not a labourer in his parish that did not brew his own beer; and that now, there is not one that does it, except by chance the malt be given him". (2)

The reasons for the decline in home brewing were brought about by the increased tax on hops, the enormous tax upon the barley when made into malt and, of course, the growth of the commercial brewers.

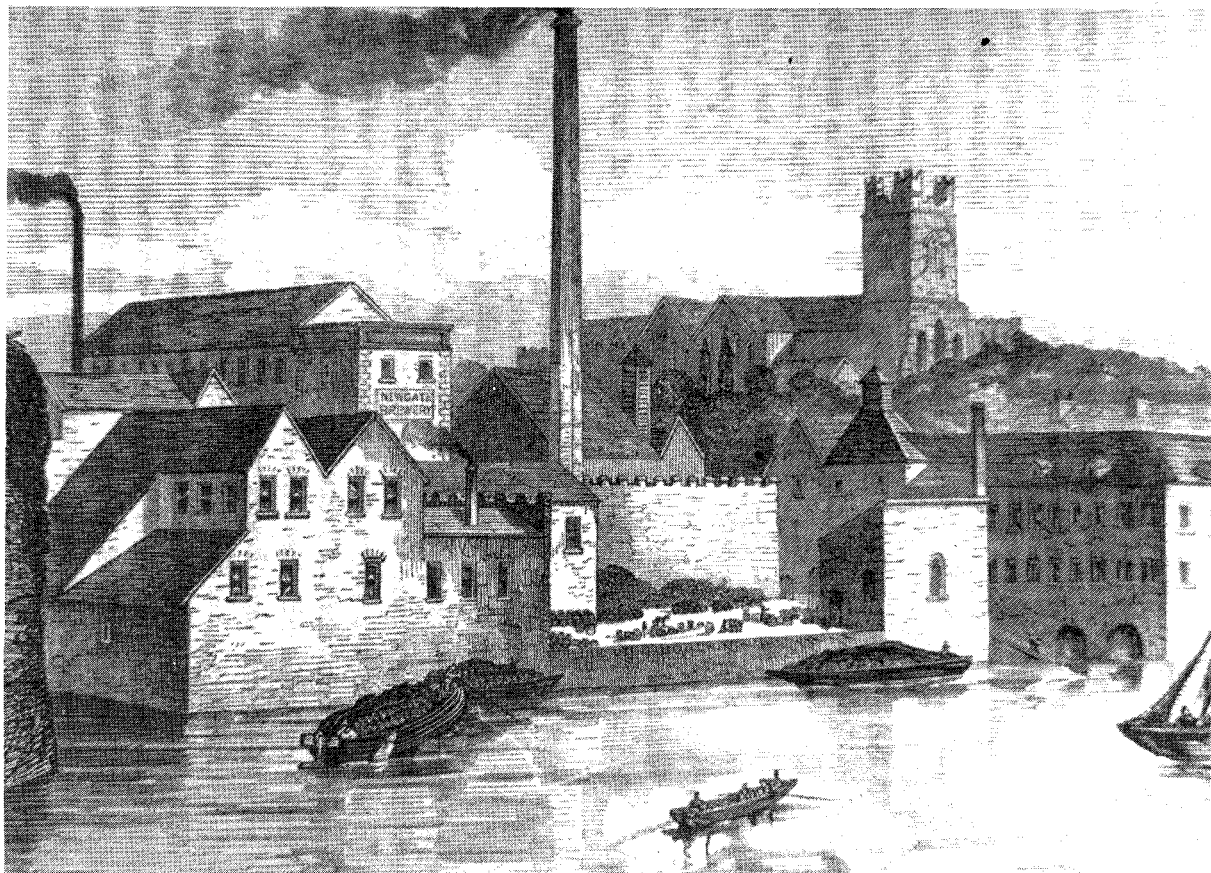
The drinking of beer in the middle ages and up until the nineteenth century had a different social purpose from that of today. In former days water was very often

not safe to drink. It could be rendered harmless by the sterilising effect of fermentation, which is why for centuries weak, 'small' beer was the standard drink at meals. Since it was weak it could be (and was) consumed in large quantities.

No short article on Irish breweries could be written without mention of the national drink porter and of course the largest manufacturers of stout or porter in the world, the firm of Guinness.

Porter was first brewed in London by Ralph Harwood in the year 1722. It contained roasted barley which gave it its characteristically dark colour. Harwood's new drink quickly won popularity with London porters and thus acquired the name by which it was to become generally known.

On 1 December 1759 Arthur Guinness entered his now familiar signature for the first time in the minute book of the Brewers and Malsters Corporation of Dublin. He had taken a premises at St. James Gate on a 9,000 year lease and an annual rent of £45. In 1799 Arthur Guinness brewed the last traditional Dublin ale and started instead to brew the then new drink porter. (3) In time Guinness porter became widely popular and it is now being brewed in such places as London, New York, Canada,



The Newgate Brewery of Messrs Fitt and Sons from George Measom's Railway Guide, 1866.

Nigeria and many other countries.

Other old Irish breweries still in production are:

- * Smithwicks, Kilkenny, est. 1710.
- * Murphys, Cork, est. 1856.
- * Beamish and Crawford, Cork, est. 1792
- * Cherry's Brewery, Waterford, est. 1806
- * MacArdles, Dundalk, est. 1859

The following is a list of breweries which operated in Limerick from 1739 onwards:

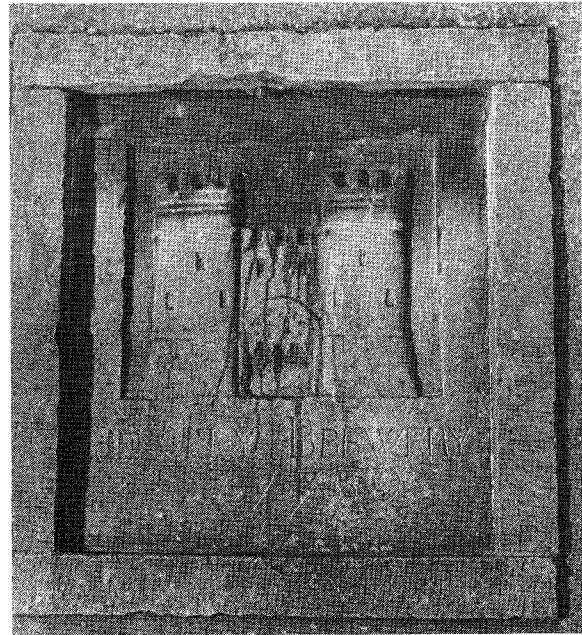
1. City Brewery
2. The O'Connell Brewery
3. St. John's Brewery
4. Thomond Brewery
5. Palmerstown Brewery
6. Canal Brewery
7. Miss Tucker's Brewery

The City Brewery, as already mentioned, was one of the oldest breweries in Limerick. It was situated in Newgate Lane, between the old City Gaol and John's Castle, with the river Shannon on its north and Nicholas Street to its south. The stone of this building (see photograph) bears the inscription of the city arms and "The City Brewery 1739". Fortunately, this stone has been preserved and is incorporated in the gable wall of a house in Nolan's Cottages. Parts of the walls of the brewery still exist today in Newgate Lane.

A detailed account of this brewery, then known as Fitt's Brewery, was given by George S. Measom in his book **Tours in Ireland**, published in 1866. He gives the title and address of the brewery as follows:- "Matthew Fitt & Sons, Ale and Porter, and Pale Ale Brewers, Newgate Brewery, Parish of St. Nicholas and Munchins Limerick". He tells us that this brewery was one of the first established in the south of Ireland and was then owned by Messrs. Fitt, the sons of the founder. Alma Fitt, the noted banker and antiquarian, was a descendant of one of the owners.

Measom then goes on to say:

"Messrs. Fitt have a large sale for strong beer and pale ale, as well as for porter and stout. Their brewery is one of the largest in Ireland, and affords great facilities for operations of magnitude, standing upon a large plot of land adjoining the Cathedral, and extending to the banks of the Shannon, from whose bosom it is a picturesque object. On entering the premises we observed, on the right hand, two large ale and porter cellars, each of enormous dimensions - on the left, reached by a short flight of steps, is the washing loft, where are two mash tuns holding 50 gallons each, and a large hop jack. From this room the visitor ascends to the copper loft, containing three large coppers of iron and copper, boiled by steam. In the top room are several tuns, each holding 100 barrels; there is also another and larger tun room containing four tuns, holding 70 barrels each. The cooler department, where the fans are moved by steam, will interest the visitor. In reaching this room we pass the large refrigerator, chiefly used in summer. In the yard are the pumps busily engaged in lifting water from the sparkling Shannon; and near to the offices are the 30-horse power boilers, and also the large hot air apparatus for cask cleaning and drying; the hot air being blown through the casks by a fan, moistens, cleanses, and dries. On the left of the principal entrance to the brewery are the scalding coppers, and to the right two long vaults with Saxon arches; these vaults are most interesting, and no one with the slightest love for archaeology should fail to visit them; the Saxon arches, still untouched by the reformer's chisel, will be viewed by every lover of



The 1739 memorial stone of the City Brewery.

native art as precious relics of antiquity.

"In Saxon strength that Abbey frown'd,
With massive arches broad and round,
That rose alternate row and row,
On pond'rous columns short and low."

"Close by these vaults is the shaft 90ft. high; and at this spot may be seen the remains of the Old Newgate, and on a wall the City Arms, close to which are the large stone cellars; one of them was in days long since the kitchen of the Deanery attached to the Cathedral. The Dean's wine celler is still discernible.

"We now visit the malt-house near to the City Gaol which was formally a Limerick Lace factory; from there we pass into Newgate lane, and ascend to the fine barley lofts, joined by oat store and general store rooms, and from it to the grass-covered Abbey Court; "tread lightly; this is hallowed ground". Here some few years since, the Messrs. Fitt discovered a large quantity of human bones; adjoining the Abbey Court are the ruins of the Deanery joined by the garden, in which the Monks of Old often wandered; this garden is directly over the ancient vaults to which we have referred. Standing upon the old wall, surrounding the garden, we have a pretty view of the beautiful Shannon and the City of Limerick - including the bridge of Thomond, near to which is the celebrated Treaty Stone, removed here by the corporation during the mayoralty of J.R. Tinsley, Esq., in 1865. Glancing to the left we see the Barracks and Wellesley Bridge and upon it the statue recently erected to the Hon. Fitzgibbon, the son of the Earl of Clare, who died at Balaclava. We now take leave of the Newgate Brewery, feeling assured that all lovers of the healthful and delicious beverages included under the general term of "beer" will have, during their stay in Limerick, an opportunity for testing to their fullest content a knowledge of its production by visiting this most respectable, famous and old-established brewery.

"Ale is stout and good,
Whether in bottle it be or wood;

'Tis good at morning, 'tis good at night;
You should drink while the liquor is bubbling bright;
'Tis good for man, woman, and child,
Being neither too strong, nor yet too mild.'

"Thus sings the poet; and we imagine that few persons would disagree with him on this palatable subject, especially with a bottle of Messrs. Fitt and Sons' famous Ale before him.

"The firm export to Wales and Manchester". (4)

O'Connell Brewery, though not the oldest Limerick brewery, is perhaps the best known. The foundation stone of the building is still preserved in the Limerick Museum. The inscription on the stone reads: "This malt-house was built by John O'Connell April 16th, in the year of Our Lord 1780". The brewery was erected on a site between Greenhills and Musgrave Street, bounded on its other sides by the road in front of the Market's Field, and the Rope Walk, opposite St. Joseph's Hospital. Some of the finest porter in Ireland was brewed there for over one hundred years until its closedown in 1881, when the premises were taken over and converted into a factory for the manufacture of blood and bone manure. Because of the unpleasant smell, this factory soon closed down and was taken over by a milk company until 1895 when a row of houses called Grattan Villas was built. Later on Garryowen Villas (1897), Geraldine Villas (1899) and Fairview Terrace (1905) were built on the site. These houses were occupied by soldiers from the Strand and Artillery barracks. (5)

Johnny O'Connell, whose family owned the brewery, was the leader of the so-called "wild raking Garryowen clan". High-spirited frolics and anti-social behaviour was the accepted pastime of the wealthy young men of the day. Their deeds, and O'Connell's physical and athletic prowess, were immortalized in the famous song **Garryowen in Glory**. The first two verses extol the virtues of drinking brown ale instead of spa water.

NEW BREWINGS OF PALE ALE.

To our Customers and the Public.

Allow us to solicit your orders for our NEW BREWINGS of the above ALE, which we have now ready for delivery. In the manufacture of

PALE ALE

we have been most particular, to meet our increasing demand for it. We are as usual supplied with

XX ALE AND DOUBLE STOUT PORTER,

Both engaged to Bottle well.

These are steadily increasing in consumption, the quality being approved of.

An 1867 advertisement for Fitt's ale and porter.

St. John's Brewery, was situated on what is now St. John's Girls' School. It was a small brewery, and the site of the present Cathedral was then occupied by a number of small houses. The old R.C. church then stood near where the Sarsfield statue is situated at present. The Cathedral itself was begun in 1856, and the spire which is 280 feet high, was not completed until 1883.

Thomond Brewery occupied an area off Old Clare Street and was one of three remaining breweries in 1865. It was owned by Messrs. Stein. After the brewery was demolished a reformatory for girls, run by the Good Shepherd nuns, was established there. The reformatory was very often occupied by poor women who, in the eyes of society, had become disgraced, often by becoming pregnant out of wed-lock, and being disowned by their families. These women led an extremely tough existence under the harsh regime of the nuns. The brewery itself is unlikely to have survived in production beyond the mid-1870s, for in a newspaper report of 1879 the premises were already being described as "the old brewery". The article, under the heading "Clare St. Brewery", reads: "At

THIS MALT HOUSE WAS
BUILT BY JOHN O'CONNELL
APRIL THE 16th IN THE YEAR
OF OUR LORD 1780

The 1780 foundation stone of the O'Connell Brewery.

Mr. Bernal's auction salerooms this day the old brewery in Clare St. was again put up for sale, and on this occasion with better success than before. Mr. Archibold Murray (Senior) was declared the purchaser for the sum of £250 and fees".

Palmerstown Brewery was built in an area between Mungret Street on its north and Palmerstown on its south, with Old Francis St., to its east, and Benson's Lane to its west. After the brewery was demolished the site became a scrap-yard, and later on the Sean Heuston housing scheme was built on the site. During the slum clearance of the 'thirties the inhabitants were re-housed in St. Mary' Park. Part of the site is now occupied by Newsoms Ltd.

The Canal Brewery, as its name suggests, was built on the north bank of the canal and fitted up as a brewery by Messrs. Walker and Co. of Cork, at an expense of £25,000. This building now became one of the finest establishments of the kind in Munster; but it did not prosper for any length of time. (6)

Miss Tucker's Brewery was owned by the woman who gave her name to the business. The building was situated at the rear of No.5 North St. John's Square. The house is now occupied by a butcher's shop.

As we have seen, though several fine breweries had flourished in Limerick, by the late 1880s none had survived. One of the factors involved in their decline and eventual demise was the opening of the canal system from Dublin to Limerick. This allowed the large breweries like Guinness to supply Limerick with ale and porter and at a price the smaller breweries were unable to compete with.

Though the introduction of the larger breweries like Guinness set the trend for the eventual closing of the local plants, the Limerick breweries did not give up without a fight. At a weekly meeting of the Guardians of the Limerick Union, held on October 15, 1872, John Cronin T.C. proposed, according to contemporary press reports, that "the resolution ordering that Guinness's porter be supplied to the house be rescinded". He did not see why they should not take Garryowen porter instead of the Dublin porter.

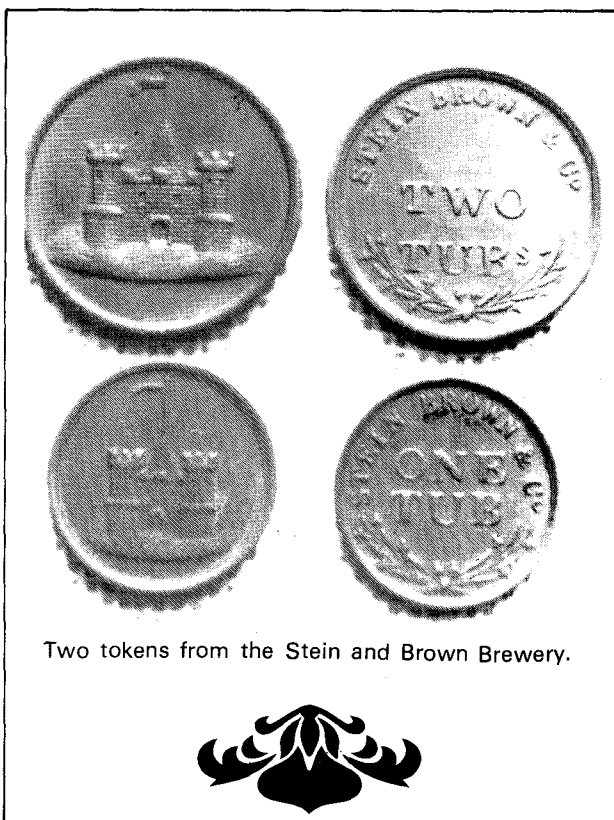
The Mayor seconded the motion. "The Garryowen porter was supplied to the Lunatic Asylum for a long time past and not a single complaint was made against it", he said.

Alderman Myles said he held in his hand a certificate of an analysis of the Garryowen porter made by Dr. Cameron, who certified it to be unadulterated and good.

Lord Clarina opposed the motion. "They were not there to protect local trade, but to protect the poor and the rate-payers. They were aware that Guinness's was the best porter in the world and he believed that the medical officers were in favour of continuing it in the hospital", he stated.

Alderman Quinlivan said that no doubt Mr Guinness was a very eminent brewer, but they should know that Mr. Fitzgerald served his time to the best brewer in London. "Mr. Fitzgerald had the advantage over Sir Arthur Guinness in that - he bought his own barley in Limerick, and made his own malt and the porter he manufactured was considered by some second to none in Ireland. It was proverbial that the men of Garryowen discharged their duty in every respect and not only did the men do this but the women were also alive to the interests of the city ('hear, hear')", he concluded.

Mr. Cronin's motion was carried by the meeting without a division, though it is doubtful if it was ever implemented by the Board of Guardians.



Two tokens from the Stein and Brown Brewery.

The decline of the brewing industry in Limerick was used by Maurice Lenihan in his **History of Limerick** as a pointer to indicate the decline of industry in general and the high level of unemployment amongst the labouring classes. He wrote: "In 1800 there were twenty tanneries and but one pawnbroker's office in Limerick. In 1865 there are at least twenty pawnbroker's offices, and only two tanneries. In 1841, the number of breweries were four. In 1865 there are three". (7)

Brewery workers who were still employed at their trade in 1885 would have considered themselves fortunate in comparison to other workers. Brewery employees had one of the highest rates of pay in the country as the average annual rate of pay for different industries in that year shows:

1. Brass Work and Metal Work	£51-2 shillings.
2. Breweries	£50-13 shillings
3. Engineering	£45-18 shillings
4. Small Printing Works	£36-17 shillings (8)

In 1895 a proposal to build a large new brewery on the Dock Road, Limerick, was abandoned for economic reasons after objections by the local Redemptorists (See **The Old Limerick Journal**, No.3).

No further attempts were made to revive the old breweries or to establish a new one. Guinness had won the battle of the breweries not only in Limerick but throughout most of the country.

SOURCES

1. **History of Limerick**, Maurice Lenihan, 1866.
2. **Beer and Skittles**, Richard Boston, 1976.
3. **Guinness**, 1979.
4. **Tours in Ireland**, George Meason, 1866.
5. **The District of Garryowen**, Paper, Joseph Keyes, **Limerick Leader**, 23/5/1945.
6. **History of Limerick**, Maurice Lenihan, 1866.
7. *Ibid.*
8. **Industrial Relations 21**, **British Parliamentary Papers**.