

HOUSING AND SOCIAL CONDITIONS: 1830-1940

by Jim Kemmy

The familiar hour-glass shape of Limerick emerged during the 15th century when both the English and Irish towns were enclosed by walls. Little expansion took place outside the walls until the 18th century, when relatively peaceful conditions were stored. In the period 1750-1840, the city became a major centre of commerce.

The growing population in England, as well as the expanding colonies of North America and the West-Indies, encouraged the growth of the Irish provision trade. The population of the city grew dramatically from 11,000 in 1700 to 40,000 in 1792 and 59,045 in 1821.⁽¹⁾

Given the cramped living conditions of the medieval city, it was inevitable that Limerick could spread beyond the walls, and so came the demolition of the walls in 1760 and the building of the new town, on the west side of the stone ridge south-west of the old city. Planned by the talented continental engineer, Jean de Arcort (Ducart), the construction work was sporadic, and the whole scheme was not completed until about 1830. Several new approach roads, quays and bridges were built in this period, as the city was reorientated on a new axis, and the focus shifted from the English and Irish towns to George (now O'Connell) and William streets. With the expansion into Newtown Pery, the number of houses in the city increased from 4,900 in 1792 to 20,208 in 1831.⁽²⁾

But the exodus from the old city which followed the building of the magnificent brick houses in the new city did not include the poor and did little to improve their slums in the English and Irish towns. Henry D. Inglis visited the city in 1834 and later wrote about his journey.⁽³⁾ He spent a day in visiting those parts of the city where the greatest destitution and misery were said to exist.

He entered forty houses and met some hundreds of people. Although he wrote, 'I will not speak of the filth of the place; that could not be exceeded in places meant to be its receptacles', he went on to give a vivid description of what he had seen:

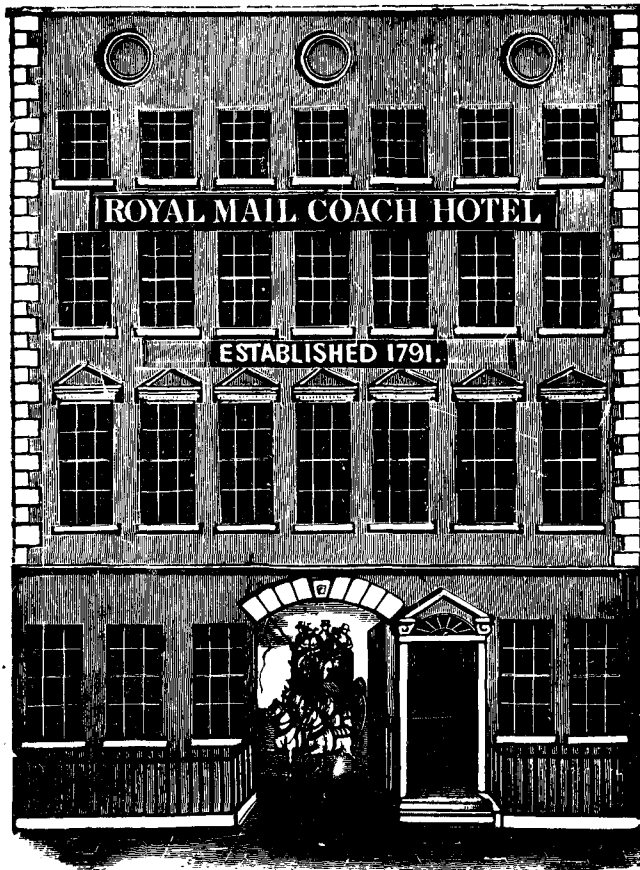
'Let the truth be imagined and it will not be beyond the truth. In at least three-fourths of the hovels which I entered there was no furniture of any description save an iron pot - no table, no chair, no bench, no bedstead; two, three or four little

a potato. In one which I entered I noticed a small opening leading into an inner room. I lighted a bit of paper at the embers of a turf which lay in the chimney and looked in. It was a cellar about twelve feet square; two bundles of straw lay in two corners; on one sat a bed-ridden woman; on another lay two naked children - literally naked with a torn rag of some kind thrown over them both. But I saw worse even than this. In a cellar which I entered, and which was almost quite dark and slippery with damp I found a man sitting on a little sawdust. He was naked; he had not even a shirt. A filthy and ragged mat was round him; this man was a living skeleton; the bones all but protruded through the skin; he was literally starving'.

Although the exodus from these stygian confines was tailing off by 1829, Matthew Barrington rejected the idea of building his hospital on a virgin site in Newtown Pery. Instead, he chose a site almost on the boundary between the Irish and Englishtown, overlooking the Abbey River. The middle classes had already vacated George's Quay, and more had gone from Merchant's Quay by the time the hospital was completed in 1831, though some of those in the fine Georgian terrace on Charlotte's Quay were still there in the early 1850s, for we find them complaining of the sight of 'too many coffins being brought from the hospital's mortuary on George's Quay right in front of their eyes'.

The hospital was located where the Barringtons wanted it to be, in the heart of the old city, in the midst of the people it was intended to serve. It was constructed of limestone on a triangular piece of ground which was formerly the main guardhouse, the administrative military headquarters on King's Island. It was bounded on the left by Mill Lane, a long, narrow thoroughfare that joined the quay with Mary Street, between the present hospital building and St. Mary's bandroom; on the south by the Abbey River and on the west by Mary Street.

Up to the 1830s, the distinctive Dutch



'... one of the best inns in Ireland—the large, neat and prosperous one kept by Mr. Cruise'.

bundles of straw, with perhaps one or two scanty and ragged mats rolled up in the corners unless where these beds were found occupied'.

As he penetrated deeper into the labyrinth of lanes, the poverty and wretchedness became worse:

'The inmates were some of them old crooked and diseased; some young but emaciated, and surrounded by starving children; some were sitting on the damp ground, some standing, and many of them were unable to rise from their little straw heaps. In scarcely one hovel could I find even



George (now O'Connell) Street, in the mid-19th century.

gables of Mary Street were tenanted by the upper classes, but afterwards came into the possession of the ordinary people, the houses being divided by the estate agents into small units, usually comprising of only one apartment in which a whole family would be accommodated: some of the houses provided shelter for up to six and seven families, and often had a tradesman such as a shoemaker or nailor living on the ground floor with his family.

The insanitary lanes, with their open sewers and rows of overcrowded cabins, were the causes of much ill-health, and the Limerick Corporation and local health authority met with little success in tackling the problem of the slums, and were content to allow charitable bodies and the hospitals to deal with the results of the squalor rather than redress the source of the problem. The wretched living conditions of the poor were taken for granted, and few houses were built by the public authorities to alleviate these conditions until well into the present century.

In 1842, eight years after the visit of Henry D. Inglis, another travel-writer arrived in Limerick. William Makepeace Thackeray brought all his descriptive powers into play in his portrait of the place and its people, as he powerfully contrasts the quality of the housing in the new and old parts of the city:⁽⁴⁾

'They say there are three towns to

make one Limerick; the Irish Town ... the English Town with its old castle ... and finally the district called Newtown-Pery. In walking through this latter tract, you are at first led to believe that you are arrived in a second Liverpool, so tall are the warehouses and broad the quays; so neat and trim a street of near a mile which stretches before you. But even this mile-long street does not, in a few minutes, appear to be so wealthy and prosperous as it shows at first glance; for the population that throng the streets, two-fifths are barefooted women, and two-fifths more ragged men ... After you get out of the Main Street the handsome part of the town is at an end, and you suddenly find yourself in such a labyrinth of busy swarming poverty and squalid commerce as never was seen – no, not in Saint Giles's where Jew and Irishmen side by side exhibit their genius for dirt. Here every house almost was was a half ruin, and swarming with people: in the cellars you looked down and saw a barrel of herrings, which a merchant was dispensing; or a sack of meal, which a poor dirty woman sold to people poorer and dirtier than herself: above was a tinman, or a shoemaker, or other craftsmen, his battered ensign at the door and his small wares peering through the cracked panes of

his shop'.

During his visit, Thackeray stayed at 'one of the best inns in Ireland – the large, neat and prosperous one kept by Mr. Cruise'. He singled out the apple-women for special mention, 'clustering upon the bridges, squatting down in doorways and vacant sheds for temporary markets, marching and crying their sour goods in all the crowded lanes of the city'. And the ubiquitous children were to be found on all sides:

'... and a pretty tender sight it is in the midst of this filth and wretchedness, to see the women and children together. It makes a sunshine in a dark place, and somehow half reconciles one to it. Children are everywhere. Look out of the nasty streets into the still more nasty, back lanes: there they are sprawling at every door and court, paddling in every puddle; and in about a fair proportion to every six children an old woman – a very old, blear-eyed ragged woman – who makes believe to sell something out of a basket, and is perpetually calling upon the name of the Lord. For every three ragged old women you will see two ragged old men, praying and moaning like the females. And there is no lack of young men, either, though I could never make out what they were about: they loll about the street, chiefly conversing in knots; and in

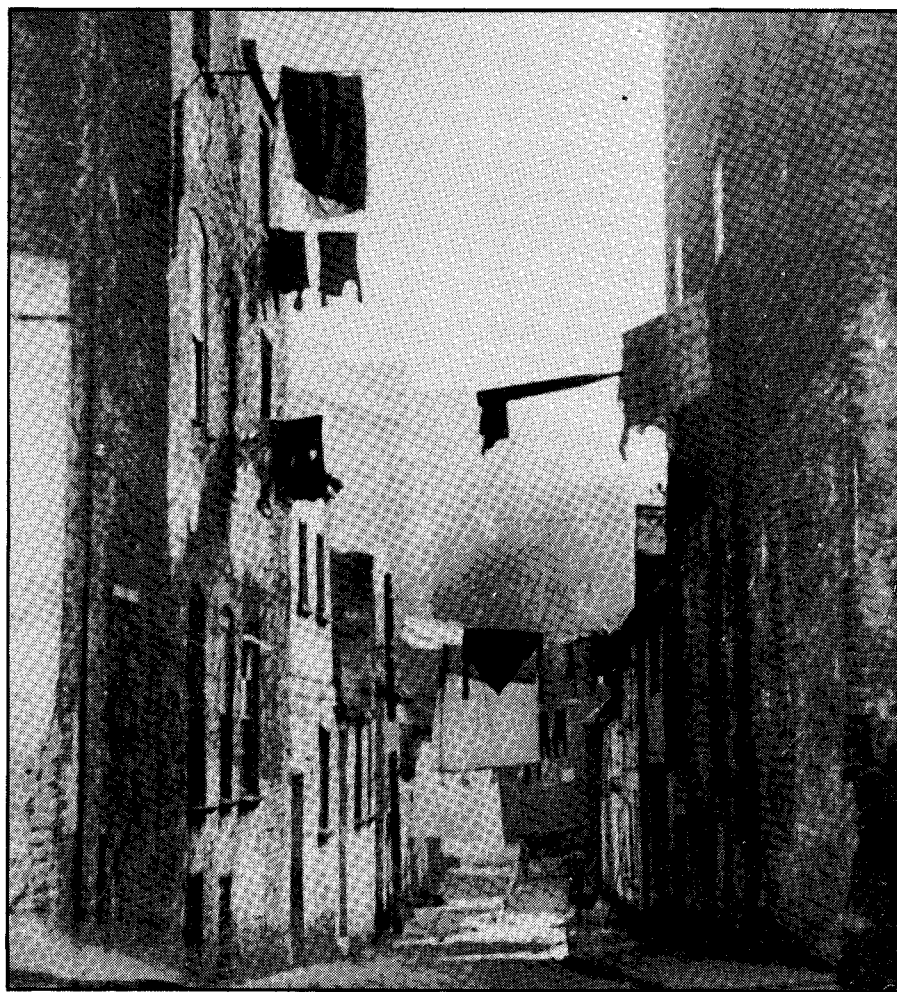
every street you will be pretty sure to see a recruiting sergeant, with gay ribbons in his cap, loitering about with an eye upon the other loiterers there'.

The general economic decline, the intensive trade competition, the growing unemployment, the rapidly increasing population and the Famine of 1845 brought an economic recession. Commenting on this decline in 1866, the historian Maurice Lenihan observed: 'In 1800 there were 20 tanneries and 1 pawnbroker, but in 1865 there were 20 pawnbrokers and 1 tannery'.⁽⁵⁾

Kevin Hannan has written about the effect of the economic decline on the housing market in the second half of the 19th century:⁽⁶⁾

'After the gentry had gone, many of the fine town houses were turned into tenements. This transformation resulted in their run-down appearance, which was only relieved, here and there, by the various colours of the household washing which festooned the improvised clothes-lines stretched from the upstairs windows – front and back – with the assistance of sweeping-brushes set horizontally from the window sills – Some of the lanes branches from the main streets were approached through small archways, or openings, a little larger than ordinary doorways, which could only be distinguished from the latter by the absence of the actual doors. This system allowed for the continuation of the street line, with an unbroken terrace of houses concealing the less prepossessing labyrinth of lanes and alleys that criss-crossed the back street areas. Even in those far off days, the planners turned the best side out – an exercise still favoured today'.

An old school register of the 1850s of the Brother Welsh Memorial School in John Street, contains the following place-names from Irishtown area: Scabby Lane, Mass Lane, Scott's Lane, Goat's Lane, Bushy Lane, William's Lane,



Arthur's Mews, off Francis Street, in the 1930s.

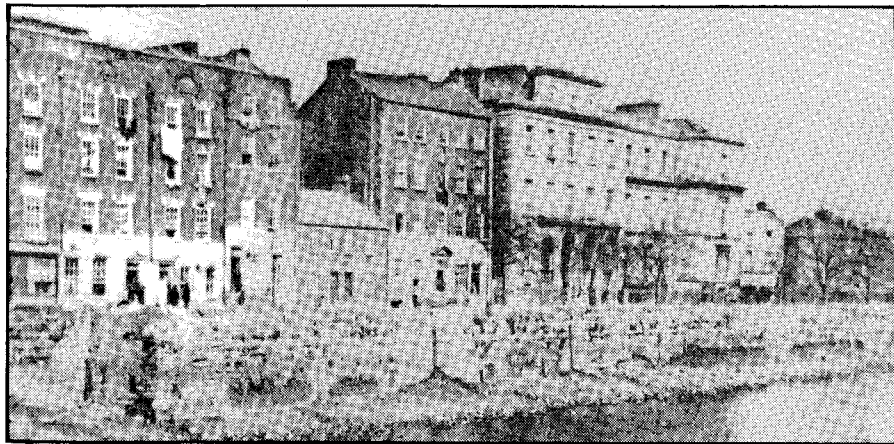
Monaghan Lane, Ball Alley Lane, Sheehy Lane, Jones's Lane, Garvey's Lane, Moloney Lane, Curry Lane, Hatter's Lane, Barrack Lane, Joss's Lane, Moore's Lane, White Wine Lane, Forker's Lane, Repeal Alley, Pencil's Lane, Purcell's Lane, Magdalen Lane, Town Wall and Black Bull Lane.

In the same register, the trades and occupations of the fathers of the pupils are set out in a copperplate hand. They are worth recalling; rag-gatherers,

wheelwrights, thatchers, chandlers, coffin-makers, basket-makers, labourers, fishermen, brass-founders, grave-diggers, fishermen, whip-makers, stage-keepers, dairy-men, coopers, dyers, tailors, auctioneers, glaziers, weigh-masters, blacksmiths, tinmen, varnishers, stonemasons, nailors, bootmakers, last-makers, mill-wrights, snuff-grinders, slaters, fiddlers, candle-makers, cage-makers, pavers, lime-burners, pipers, woolcard-makers, bellows-makers, pipe-makers, soldiers, coachmen, car-makers and weavers.

Kevin Hannan has examined the brutal way in which many of the old trades and tradesmen were cast aside in the economic scramble:

'Many of these trades and callings, like those that followed them, are now extinct, and the monies derived from the long and tedious practice of them allowed little or no indulgence in the luxuries of the day. It was a time when the dreadful conditions under which the working classes lived were taken for granted. There were no trade unions as we know them to-day, no dole, no social welfare or unemployment benefits: there was nothing but the poorhouse. The pride of many of the destitute



Barrington's Hospital and George's Quay '... in 1932, a number of tenement houses collapsed there ... and the homeless were forced to erect tents ... by the riverside'.



would not suffer them to accept the "hospitality" of the "big house across the bridge": they preferred the slow death from starvation in their own hovels'.

The Limerick Public Health Committee minute books from the 1880s onwards are full of recommendations to have houses all over the Englishtown and Irishtown 'whitewashed inside and out'; this treatment, apparently, was the only known antidote to the spread of contagion. The buildings on Charlotte's Quay screened the network of lanes and bow-ways that made up the most fetid part of the Irishtown, with its huddled families surviving in such places as Palmerstown and Taylor's Row (52); Osborne Lane and Hall's Bow (16); James' Street (12); Barrack Lane (13); lane off Cornwallis Street (13); Bushy Lane (5); Mulcahy's Alley (8); Guinea Lane (2); Sheehan's Lane (2); Scott's Lane (3); West Watergate (5); Flag Lane (5); Sullivan's Lane (5); Bell Tavern Lane (3); Kerwick's Lane (6); lane off William's Lane (5); Thomas Court (9); William's Lane (14); John Street (47); White Wine Lane (15); Roseberry Lane (10); Milk Market Place (7); Alley's Lane (6); Sam Dickson's Lane (17); Old Francis Street (24) and Repeal Alley (12): in all 378 families living without water on tap or a flush toilet. The same conditions obtained all through King's Island, especially in the area known as the 'Abbey', made up of Courthouse Lane, Castle Lane, Sheep Street, Gaol Lane Bow, Long Lane, River Lane, Glueyard Lane, Fish Lane, Little Fish Lane, Bumpy's Lane and Flag Lane.

The extent to which these families depended on 'their' hospital is incalculable, and its contribution to their survival can never be fully assessed. But despite the work of Barrington's, life in the warren of lanes and alleys, by any standard, was harsh and unhealthy. The rearing of pigs, fowl and donkeys in backyards, and sometimes even in kitchens, was widespread. An entry in the Health Committee diary book for 1884 refers to '... the state of Mrs. Spellacy's kitchen in Kerry Bow where she keeps a pig', and the incredible situation in Black Bull Lane where 'Johanna Bourke kept a donkey, two pigs and a flock of poultry in a back yard where the donkey had no room to turn about'. Again we find an even worse situation in Hall's Bow (off Gerald Griffin St.) where James Ryan kept two pigs in

a 'hole off the kitchen'. A little further away, in Carr Street, there was a reference to the insanitary state of Thomas Ryan's house 'where he keeps pigs under the stairs'.

In 1885, the Health Committee dealt with such matters as '... the state of James Punch's yard in Cornwallis (Gerald Griffin) Street ... flooded with stagnant water and sewage; and a fearful smell from the boiling or rendering of horse flesh in a premises in the cabbage market'.

The people became conditioned to the foul odours, for the streets and lanes were rarely without heaps of manure and stagnant pools. The general condition of



A 1940s' view of Arthur's Quay.

the city streets was summed up by Dr. Browne, the local government inspector, in 1891, when he reported on '... the filthy condition of the streets and lanes of the city ... the ashes, house slops and manure being deposited in the public street. The sewers ... are not properly trapped or sufficiently ventilated. It will not be possible to keep the streets and laneways clear until each house is provided with running water, sanitary conveniences, and the means of disposing of house slops, etc.'

Thus the high unemployment and widespread poverty were manifested in many ways but particularly in housing. In the last decades of the 19th century and the first three decades of the present century, Limerick had one of the worst housing records in the country. In the years 1887 and '88, the Corporation built some small clusters of houses in the Sandmall, Athlunkard Street, Mary Street, Peter Street and St. Francis Place, but these schemes had little impact in the overall housing situation. Between 1891 and 1911, the number of houses in the city increased from 5826 to 6,305; of these only 5807 (92%) were inhabited.⁽⁷⁾

The population of the city showed a slight but steady growth between 1891 and 1926, when it reached 39,448, but the poverty, bad housing and emigration continued. From 1851 to 1911, Limerick

City had lost 189,429 people through emigration.⁽⁸⁾

In 1911, the census of Munster showed that there were a total of 1,005 one-roomed tenements in the city which housed 3,054 people, 76% of whom lived in rooms containing three or more persons.⁽⁹⁾ In 1915, the medical officer's public health report stated that 1,669 houses in the city were unfit for human habitation. A breakdown of this figure showed that 692 houses were in a dilapidated state; 977 were 'in want of ordinary basic sanitary facilities' and 681 'should be absolutely closed'.⁽¹⁰⁾ In August, 1916, a local priest, Fr. Devane, told a meeting of the Limerick Trades and

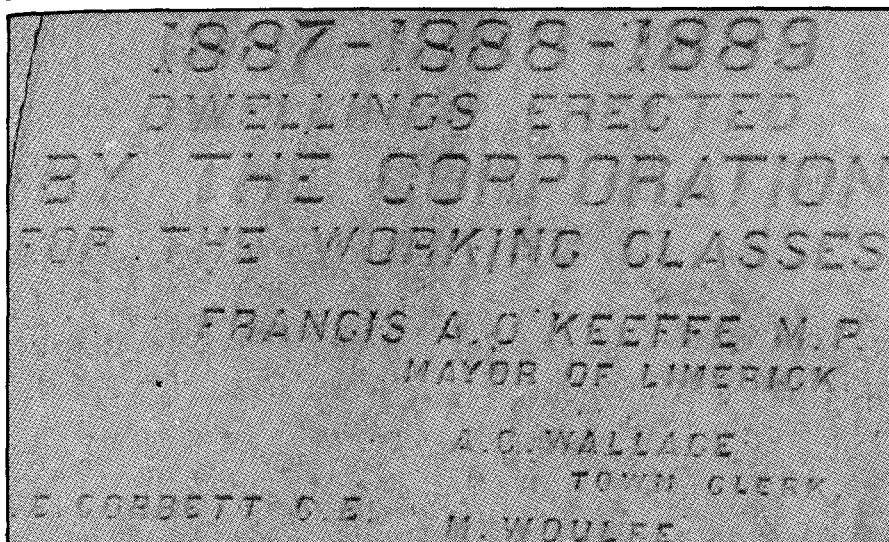
Labour Council that 38% of the local population lived in one or two rooms, as compared to 4% in Belfast and 8% in Derry.⁽¹¹⁾

The 1917 annual health report stated that 1,812 houses in the city were 'unfit for human habitation', 852 warranted no other action than 'immediate closure', 635 were without a water closet and 245 had no yard in which to site such a closet.⁽¹²⁾

The seriousness of Limerick's housing problem was stressed in 1918 when the *Irish Opinion* commented that '... the problem in Limerick is much greater than that which Dublin must solve ...', and that at least £800,000 was needed to begin the solution.⁽¹³⁾ Indeed, in 1917 the Town Tenants' Association, trade and labour societies and the Plot Holders' Union recognised the gravity of the situation and combined, with the backing of the Trades' Council, to form the Limerick Housing Committee, 'to agitate for better housing conditions for the working classes'.⁽¹⁴⁾

In 1918, the Limerick working class broadsheet, *The Bottom Dog*, repeatedly criticised the poor housing in the city. In its edition of 11 May, 1918, a writer, signing himself 'W.J.L.' did not mince his words, as he invoked stirring Christian principles to make his case:⁽¹⁵⁾

'Is there outside Hell anything approaching the conditions under which the poor are forced to live in 17 Jones's Row? White's Lane is the same. Pump Lane, Dixon's Lane, Hell's Lane, Walshe's Lane, Punche's Lane, Upper Carey's Road and Roxboro Road all bereft of sanitary convenience. Boys, girls, men and women eat, drink, sleep and wash in these dens. Rents are squeezed from the poor of these houses by owners ... It is against the laws of God and man to leave these helpless



Limerick Corporation houses for the working classes, at the Sandmall, 1887-'88-'89.

beings any longer in chains. Put your backs against the walls and shout, shout shout - "Pay no rent! Pay no rent!" Raise the standard of Christ high! Make Limerick ring with your shouting and topple over the edifices of your wrath ... What of the Public Health Act? Has it become inoperative? If an owner fails to put a house in sanitary condition the Corporation must do it. Why, then, is it not done? ... we suggest that the people themselves take the law into their own hands - Pay no rent for houses unfit for human habitation, and keep on paying no rent until approved accommodation is forthcoming. The guts, excreta, dogs and children rolled up in parcels in lanes and alleys of Limerick (and left to dry and rot) because no man of grit can be found to tackle the slum owners ... In his report dated 7th November 1916, Dr. E.J. O'Riordan, M.R.C.V.S., Inspector under the Dairies and Cowsheds Order, stated that he visited all cowsheds and cattle under his supervision, and found all the cattle healthy and the cowsheds clean. Pigs, sows, cows, horses, cats live well and are clean in Limerick. Christ's image and likeness are left in sewerage stewing, stewing until - oh merciful Heavens until Limerick's young manhood, Christianises it. Up lads! Give it to them hot and - no surrender!

But, despite this agitation and the work of the Limerick Housing Committee, little improvement was brought about in housing in the 1920s, even after the advent of self-government. In 1932, a number of tenement houses collapsed in George's Quay, about twenty or thirty yards from Barrington's Hospital. The Corporation had no accommodation available to house the homeless people, who were forced to erect tents on the grass margin by the riverside in front of

the site where there houses had stood. Shortly afterwards, Eamon de Valera came to Limerick to campaign in the general election. He saw the tents and asked about their occupants. On his return to power, he cleared the way for the building of twenty-five houses in the Castle Barracks to accommodate the hapless tent-dwellers.

Although it had been estimated in 1918 that 2,000 new houses were needed,⁽¹⁶⁾ the Limerick Corporation had, by 1932, only built 297 houses in the city.⁽¹⁷⁾ During the course of a public inquiry held in the same year, it was stated that much of Limerick was without sewerage facilities and that almost one-third of the city consisted of laneways and alleyways, half of which were 'a menace in themselves' because of the lack of sewerage.

The introduction of the Housing Miscellaneous Provisions Act in 1932 provided local authorities for the first time with a state subsidy for the provision of houses for 'the working classes'. After the passing of this Act, a campaign was launched to clear away the insanitary hovels in Limerick and other cities. During the next eight years, up to 1940, the Limerick Corporation built a total of 942 dwellings.⁽¹⁸⁾

The year 1936, the mid-term of this period, marked an important development in the social and economic history of Limerick. The festering slums, that had for so long pockmarked the city, were finally tackled, and already the greater part of the Island Field housing estate had been completed. The new scheme, renamed St. Mary's Park, was occupied by people who had previously lived in the ghettos of the Irishtown, Boherbuoy and the Abbey.

In September of the same year, the local building contractor, Pat Molloy, who had earlier completed 480 houses in the Island Field, at a cost of £450 per house, successfully tendered the sum of

£29,823 for 74 extra houses there. The same contractor had just completed the concreting of all the principal streets of the city, with the exception of O'Connell Street, which had already been surfaced by another local contractor, 'Paver' Dillon, six years before. The year 1936 also saw the start of the O'Dwyer's Villas (Thomondgate) and Janesboro housing estates and the large scale housing development at Prospect.

People who lived through this period could not help making the comparison between the fearful conditions of the slums and the sparkling, new dwellings in their airy, spacious locations. But there were many tenants in the Island Field houses for whom the grand vista of the broad sweep of the River Shannon, with its picturesque backdrop of the Clare Hills, held few charms. They dearly longed for their battered but beloved hovels, with all the attendant privations and squalor, where they and their families had lived out their lives. Other new residents complained that they had been moved too far out from the centre of the city, and inveighed against their isolation from their old, familiar haunts.

With the new houses came the freedom from the nocturnal drudgery of trimming smelly paraffin lamps and emptying even smellier toilet pails. The novelty of switching on the electric light was an exciting pleasure, not to mention the convenience of the flush toilet.

During the next twenty years, the Corporation continued its housing programme, until finally all the slums were demolished. In looking back over the past 160 years, it can, at least, be said that Barrington's Hospital just about managed to outlast the slums that brought it into being.

References

1. *Morphology and the Growth of Limerick* by G.T. Bloomfield, 1959.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *A Journey Through Ireland, During the Spring, Summer and Autumn of 1834* by Henry D. Inglis, London, 1834.
4. *An Irish Sketch Book of 1842* by William Makepeace Thackeray, London, 1843, p.p. 138-144.
5. *The History of Limerick* by Maurice Lenihan, Dublin, 1866, p. 529.
6. Unpublished manuscript by Kevin Hannan.
7. Census of Population.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*
10. Medical Officer's Report, 1915.
11. Minute Book of Limerick Trades and Labour Council, 25 August, 1915.
12. *The Bottom Dog*, 15 December, 1917.
13. *Irish Opinion*, 28 February, 1918.
14. *Irish Opinion*, 8 December, 1917.
15. *The Bottom Dog*, 11 May, 1918.
16. *Limerick Chronicle*, 7 February, 1918.
17. *Limerick: Official Guide*, 1976.
18. *Ibid.*