

215 YEARS  
OF SUPPORT

# The History of Limerick Chamber

On a cold October day in 1840, a large crowd gathered at the Corn Exchange, in what is now Limerick's Milk Market. Among them were stonecutters, cabinet-makers, weavers, and fishermen of St. Francis Abbey. The tradesmen were gathered to present a subscription to Daniel O'Connell on behalf of the guilds of Limerick.

'The Liberator' was, according to the Freeman's Journal, "in a Repealer's coat of grey frize (sic) with velvet collar and yellow buttons...a truly noble specimen of a genuine Irishman [in] the simple and homely garb of the people." Those people were all members of craft guilds, part of a long tradition of commercial organisations that began with the Limerick Guild Merchant of 1197 – the forerunner of the modern Chamber of Commerce.

In their book "Limerick's Merchants, Traders & Shakers – Celebrating two centuries of enterprise", Matthew Potter and Sharon Slater write that the Guild Merchant of the 12th century was "very similar to the modern Chamber of Commerce in that it sought to promote the economic development of the city, and worked to uphold the interests of the community".

The history of our current Limerick Chamber begins in the early 1800s, when Limerick was under the control of a Corporation. Initially formed as part of the royal charter of 1197, the Corporation was effectively a form of local government, responsible for collecting taxes, maintaining law and order, electing representatives, and overseeing the day-to-day operations of the city. It was traditionally led by prominent members of local society, from a variety of religious backgrounds.

During the era of Ascendancy rule between 1691 and 1778, the Penal Laws came into effect, effectively removing Catholics from all positions of authority and influence, including those within Limerick Corporation. "The Protestant Ascendancy created a disconnection between the Protestant dominated Corporation on the one hand and the Catholic majority on the other. It also broke the traditional strong links binding the City Fathers to the commercial and manufacturing élite, many of whom continued to be Catholic," write Matthew Potter and Sharon Slater.

As "the commercial centre of North Munster", Limerick had prospered during the Georgian economic boom, and its business community had swelled as a result. Many of them moved into the new neighbourhood of Newtown Pery, where they forged social and professional connections. Historian

Jennifer Moore writes that "the corruption (of the Corporation) bred a new city and a new way of thinking."

Frustrated (and in many cases, excluded) by what became an unrepresentative, ineffectual, and deeply corrupt Corporation, a number of these merchants began to meet informally in a coffee shop on Bridge Street (then Quay Lane) to discuss local business activities and concerns. "The local government system no longer reflected the wishes of the commercial classes and Limerick ceased to be governed as a business friendly city. Ultimately, this rupture led to the establishment of a Chamber of Commerce in Limerick," notes Matthew Potter.

In 1805, this group of merchants formed the Commercial Building Company, with one hundred members each contributing £65 to construct the Commercial Buildings at Rutland Street (now part of the proposed Opera Square development). The elegant seven-bay building was said by contemporary observers to be "a very ornamental and commodious building", containing "one of the most spacious and elegant coffee-rooms in Ireland." Its total build cost reached £8,000 (which Matthew Potter and Sharon Slater estimate to be the equivalent of some €2.5m today).

Within a short time, this group became known as the Limerick Chamber of Commerce and commenced an astonishingly busy schedule of improvements in the city. From 1807 until 1852, it was described as being the most active chamber in the world.

The Chamber began with taking over the duties that had been largely abandoned by the Corporation at the time. "Not only was the Corporation a sectarian body, it had also given up most of its activities; it no longer regulated trade and commerce, oversaw market operations, or even ensured the streets were clean," says Matthew Potter. "This is where the Chamber stepped into the breach, and began to perform a series of functions that really belonged to a local authority." This included the collection of tolls, the regulation of the butter trade, the management of the harbour, and the building of Sarsfield Bridge (then Wellesley Bridge) to facilitate trade between Limerick City and Clare and beyond. They also contributed funds to promote agricultural improvements, protect salmon fisheries, and repair the city's market.

To protect its members, the Chamber realised it needed to apply for separate legal status. It was subsequently granted a Royal Charter of King George III in 1815, making it one of the five oldest chambers of commerce in Ireland and the UK. It's

noted in the book *“Limerick’s Merchants, Traders & Shakers – Celebrating two centuries of enterprise”* that very few chambers were granted Royal charters — indeed, Waterford’s Chamber was the only other recipient at that time.

In 1833 the Chamber moved to its present home, at 96 O’Connell Street (then George’s Street). The boom times had effectively ended with the Act of Union in 1800, and Ireland entered a period of depression which wouldn’t lift until the last days of the Great Famine in 1850. In the meeting at the Corn Exchange in 1840, a representative of Limerick’s Guilds said that *“previous to the accursed union there were 1500 journeymen weavers at full work in this city. Now there are but 70, and these not half employed. We hear the old tanner tell that he recollects to see eighteen tan-yards at full work in the parish of St. Mary alone; now there is but one. The shoemaker tells the young men (a historical truth) that Limerick exported treble more boots and shoes previous to the Union than are made there by the journeymen of the present day, while the importation of British manufacture has driven their and all other trades to ruin, misery and despair.”*

While Limerick did see the Industrial Revolution transform its fortunes like Belfast, Glasgow, or Birmingham, it did have a strong manufacturing tradition, which led to the emergence of a number of factories focused on food, clothing, footwear, and tobacco. The Chamber of Commerce welcomed investment from large-scale companies such as these, who provided much-needed employment for the city. Its efforts to improve the port also helped to maintain Limerick’s position as a key strategic base for many years.

On a day-to-day basis, it supported its members with commercially-useful information and statistics via magazines, newspapers, and industry publications which were invaluable in a pre-internet age. It also lobbied politicians, submitted petitions to Parliament, and represented the city’s interests in the expansion of the railway, the development of local infrastructure, and the improvement of the postal service. It played a major role in establishing the Limerick Market Trustees, which took over its oversight of this hub of commercial activity. The Chamber appealed to its members in four ways that Matthew Potter and Sharon Slater list as: purposive or expressive benefits (supporting shared causes); solidarity benefits (fostering a sense of belonging); material selective benefits (access to its library and resources); and insurance benefits (protecting against unforeseen circumstances).

In 1840, as part of efforts to reform the city’s leadership, the old, corrupt Corporation was abolished, and replaced by a new Corporation spearheaded by a City Council. The Chamber supported these reforms because they would reintegrate the city’s mercantile élite into the political process — although most of the population without property would remain excluded.

By 1852 the Chamber had given up a lot of their hands-on commitments such as toll collection and harbour oversight, as these gradually came back under the remit of the city’s (new) Corporation. This spelled the end of the Chamber’s most

industrious period, and it became more of a typical chamber of commerce, acting as a voluntary association. It did continue to play a key part in the city’s unfolding history, however, including the First World War in 1914, the Limerick Soviet of 1919, and the War of Independence, Civil War, and the foundation of the Irish State in the 1920s.

The economic stagnation that followed was reflected in the Limerick Chamber of Commerce, which was poorly funded and largely inactive for decades. The renovation of its headquarters in 1944, the revision of its by-laws in 1945, and the establishment of Limerick Junior Chamber in 1961 were the first sparks that would lead to its phoenix-like revival.

In the 1980s, the Chamber underwent what Matthew Potter and Sharon Slater call a *“metamorphosis”*, in which it began to reemerge *“as a significant player in the economic life of both Limerick and the Mid-West region.”* It expanded its catchment area, forged links with EU partners, and embarked on exciting initiatives abroad. A decade later, it turned its attention to two major priorities: Limerick Market and Shannon Airport. The former was restored to great success, reviving the location as a hub of local commercial activity. The latter’s gateway status was salvaged, and its importance as a major aviation hub protected.

By this time, the Chamber’s representatives included women, as Beatrice Keville and Deirdre Halpin — the first official female members — were welcomed in 1981. Over the following years, Chamber members met with prominent visitors including President Mary Robinson, Taoiseach Albert Reynolds, and US President Bill Clinton.

The Millennium ushered in a period of prosperity in Ireland which became known as the Celtic Tiger. The Limerick Chamber of Commerce was at the forefront of many of the city’s most exciting initiatives, from city centre redevelopment to the advancement of its educational bodies. It also changed its name in 2005 to *‘Limerick Chamber’*, in keeping with efforts to unify the movement across Ireland.

It shepherded its membership and community through the dark days of 2008 and 2009, when Limerick suffered the loss of many jobs. Although its membership dropped by 20%, it continued to represent the city’s interests on regional and national stages, pressing for increased investment and resources for the struggling city. This resulted in what is now known as *‘Limerick 2030’*, a history-making plan for the economic and social development of the region.

Although the global pandemic paused many of the Chamber’s most ambitious goals, the team pivoted quickly, providing much-needed support to a business community that was largely shuttered for extensive periods of time. Now, as we emerge from that period, the city is facing new challenges on a local and geo-political scale. However, through its 215-year-old history, the Limerick Chamber has proven itself able and willing to not just survive, but thrive.

## A MERCHANT CITY, THEN AND NOW

# The Evolution of Limerick's Business Environment

Limerick has long been an attractive, strategic location to commercial-minded visitors, beginning with the overnight arrival of a fleet of Vikings in 922 AD. Led by a Danish nobleman, they formed a clay and wattle settlement on Inis-Sibtonn, now known as King's Island.

There they quickly established commercial roots, including a tithing system in which the native Irish people were forced to pay leaders taxes, redeemable in the form of produce, slaves or gold. One Viking leader is said to have demanded an ounce of gold for every nose; those unable to pay would have to sacrifice the appendage. He found his cruel and powerful advance halted, though, by the O'Briens of Clare, whose most famous son was Brian Boru.

Over time, these Vikings and Irish clans of Munster merged and established a thriving market environment, with links all over Ireland and beyond. Sharon Slater and Matthew Potter's book *"Limerick's Merchants, Traders & Shakers - Celebrating two centuries of enterprise"* credits Limerick's Vikings with introducing to the city *"urbanisation, coinage, a separate mercantile class, and a business friendly administrative system."*

When the Normans arrived in 1169, they brought about *"an economic revolution resulting in the thirteenth century becoming one of the most prosperous periods in Ireland's entire history."* They attracted an "influx of colonists from England, Wales, France, and Flanders; introduced modern agricultural and commercial techniques; and brought about major improvements in infrastructure." They also embarked on a relentless period of construction, establishing some 330 towns and villages, mostly in Munster and Leinster. This was in part to form local government strongholds to be managed by sheriffs, bailiffs and other royal officers who were loyal to the crown.

The Norman King John saw Ireland as an untapped source of funds and was determined to access its wealth. In the early 13th century he put down rebellious Anglo-Norman settlers and bestowed royal charters on significant settlements, including Limerick, which was of national importance. A contemporary writer described it as being *"washed by the Shannon, without dispute, the chief of Irish rivers; it is incredible what a quantity of fish you find here. King John of England, pleased with the agreeableness of this city, caused a very fine castle and bridge to be built there."*

As a result of this charter, Limerick grew quickly, albeit in two different directions. The area we now know as King's Island was referred to as 'Englishtown', encompassing almost 30 acres. It was populated by the Anglo-Norman settlers, their families, their staff and an abundance of religious orders. The land just south of the river became 'Irishtown', the home of the native Irish and assimilated Vikings, who were most likely craftspeople, working with metal, leather, and food.

These two towns, along with some 5,000 acres of rural land, were ruled by the Corporation, which was established under the charter to administer justice, regulate trade, and oversee the maintenance and development of the city's infrastructure. Archaeologist Brian Hodkinson's research of historical manuscripts of the time demonstrates the rich commercial connections being formed: in 1236 a group of Italian merchants - including Bellicoci, Boneshalti and Caranzone - sued a bishop for sums owed. French wine flowed into the city to be enjoyed by the élite, although it was heavily levied, then as now. Other exotic imports included fine cloth and jewellery, as well as salt and spices.

The harbour (located beside our modern Potato Market) was a hub of international and national commerce, while the market (at the gates of Irishtown) became the focus of local trade. The annual fair was the highlight of the year, lasting first for eight days, and later for fifteen. All activities were regulated and tolled by the Corporation, who reaped considerable profits – not least from Lax Weir in Corbally, which was abundant with fish. Much of this was exported to European kingdoms, along with local hides, timber, and raw wool. Evidence of the economic success of this period can still be seen today in the expansion of St. Mary's Cathedral. Nicholas Street and Mary Street became the main thoroughfares, chosen as the site of many merchants' fine homes and later, in 1449, the Corporation's first city hall, The Tholsel.

The charter also provided for the formation of the Guild Merchant, which, according to Sharon Slater and Matthew Potter was *"very similar to the modern Chamber of Commerce in that it sought to promote the economic development of the city, and worked to uphold the interests of the business community."* The Black Death (1348 -51) is thought to have wiped out up to half of Limerick's small population of 2-3,000 and the economic crisis that followed gave rise to craft guilds, which were more narrow in their remit, focusing on particular



crafts, skills, or trades. The first such guild in Limerick is believed to have been that of the Barbers and Surgeons in 1470. Craft guilds, the Guild Merchant, and the Corporation tended to work in relative cohesion to control wages, prices, qualifications, and quality in medieval cities like Limerick.

The effects of the plague rippled across Irish society, leading to increased instability, compounded by the gradual collapse of English rule. In 1413, Henry V granted Limerick a charter that allowed it to operate with virtual independence until the Tudor conquest that ended in 1603.

From there followed a century of sieges, taking place in 1642, 1651, 1690, and 1691. Sharon Slater and Matthew Potter write that *“the Cromwellian conquest of Ireland in the 1650s resulted in the overthrow of Limerick’s traditional merchant élite after 450 years.”* This effectively meant the supplanting of Catholic landowners by what became known as the Protestant Ascendancy, compounded by the draconian Penal Laws. *“The Catholic merchants possessed expertise, stock, and trading contacts with the Continent developed over many generations. With their expulsions, Limerick’s economy was ruined.”*

Excluded from almost all positions of influence, industrious Catholic families turned all their attention to commerce. Some, including the Arthurs and Roches, along with well-known Quaker families like the Harveys became highly successful in their endeavours, leaving their architectural mark on the city. The wealthy Protestant aristocrat Edmond Pery (later 1st Viscount Pery of Newtown-Pery) spearheaded the development of South Prior’s Land in 1770, which would eventually include our modern O’Connell Street, where Limerick Chamber’s offices now stand. This coincided with a period of prosperity, during which many of the city’s most affluent families moved into Newtown Pery, rather than hunkering down in secure country mansions. This brought a new vibrancy to Limerick, which was transformed from a war-torn garrison town to a lively, modern city.

Despite the inadequate (and corrupt) leadership of the Corporation at this time, Limerick’s economy was expanding rapidly, benefiting hugely from its strategic port location in the heart of the Golden Vale during a period of frenetic international trade. Arthur Young, visiting from London in 1776 noted that the city had gone from boasting four carriages (belonging to three clergymen and a gentleman)

to 183 in some 30 years, indicating the influx of wealthy inhabitants. By the end of the century, there was even a windmill positioned in Newtown Pery, demonstrating self-sufficiency and cutting-edge technology. The Georgian boom of 1750-1815 saw Ireland’s economy grow by *“a total of 400 per cent and in 1815 was five times bigger than it had been in 1730”* according to Sharon Slater and Matthew Potter. *“As a result, population grew rapidly, vast wealth was created and a huge building boom transformed both urban and rural areas. The country’s infrastructure was also revolutionised with the building of roads, bridges and canals.”*

It’s no coincidence that it was in these busy years that the Limerick Chamber of Commerce was formed, beginning with a collection of like-minded merchants in 1807. They set about regularising, improving, and expanding the city’s business activities, to great success.

As always, the boom wasn’t to last, and the Act of Union in 1800 is generally regarded as the beginning of the end of this golden period. The power that had been previously devolved to local authorities was now wielded directly from London, to devastating social, political, and economic effect.

This became particularly acute as the Industrial Revolution transformed Britain into a production powerhouse, leaving southern Irish cities like Limerick far behind. That’s not to say there were no factories in the region, however. Far from it; bacon producers included Mattersons, Shaws, O’Maras and Dennys; flour millers encompassed the Russells, Bannatynes, Goodbodys and Ranks; dairy products were manufactured by Cleeves; and clothing factories such as Tait’s emerged.





*Clune's ceased production in 1968 and 1981 respectively. The clothing industry virtually disappeared when Limerick Clothing shut down in 1974, after 124 years in production, followed by Danus in 1975. In 1983, Ranks ceased production, marking the end of Limerick's proud milling tradition. The famed bacon industry disappeared with the closure of Matterson's in 1986 and O'Mara's in 1987."*

New international employers took their place, including the German-run Krupps Engineering, South African diamond company De Beers, American manufacturer Analog Devices. Later, Dell Computers, Aughinish Alumina, and Moneypoint also provided extensive jobs. All of this, however, coupled with Shannon Airport's development, pushed the region's commercial activity out of the city and into industrial estates.

The city became somewhat neglected until the Celtic Tiger arrived in the early years of the Millennium. This saw major development in the city's infrastructure and architecture, including bridges, a tunnel, and the sky-scraping Riverpoint building. Emigration — long a feature of Irish society — was halted, and for the first time in the nation's history, large-scale immigration occurred, as many fellow Europeans made their homes in Limerick and beyond. This unprecedented period of economic growth ended with a crash in 2008, which was keenly felt by Limerick workers, many of whom lost their jobs.

The years that followed were exceptionally difficult for the region, but they did give rise to the amalgamation of Limerick City and County Council and the establishment of a task force, special committee, and many discussions, the culmination of which is now known as the Limerick 2030 Plan, which was launched in 2013. Designed to be implemented over 20 years, the plan has seen significant success already towards its stated aim of guiding *'the economic, social and physical renaissance of Limerick City Centre and the wider County/ Mid-West Region'*. It is joined in this endeavour by Limerick Chamber, and the many stakeholders who work to make our city a better place.

Many of the sites currently being developed as part of this plan are former bastions of commerce in Limerick's long history. When completed, the works will see Opera Square, Cleeve's Riverside Gardens, and The Garden Centre all become vibrant commercial hubs once again — continuing the efforts of those who sailed here in longboats, sent merchant ships to exotic locations, dispatched pork, lace, and military uniforms all around the world, and manufactured electrical devices, diamond jewellery, and computer chips. All of whom have played a valuable role in making Limerick the dynamic, ambitious, and business-friendly city that it is.

*"Limerick continued to be a great trading city, and its business community also comprised numerous merchants, retailers, and publicans, a sector which increased in both numbers and importance after 1871,"* write Sharon Slater and Matthew Potter. Despite the devastating effects of the Great Famine of 1845-1852, *"the industrial profile of Limerick remained comparatively unchanged for 150 years (1820s to 1970s), "during which two sectors predominated, food / drink / tobacco and clothing / footwear."*

Then as now, many of the biggest employers were sons not native to the city, such as the bacon-producers John Russell and Joseph Matterson, both of whom were English. Peter Tait (Limerick Clothing Factory) was Scottish, and Sir Thomas Cleeve (the Condensed Milk Company of Ireland) was Canadian.

The 20th century was a time of momentous change for Ireland as a whole, and Limerick played a major part in key events, including the War of Independence and the Civil War. In 1919, the city's many workers staged a general strike, which became known as the Limerick Soviet. It lasted just two weeks — and cost some £42,000 in wages — but catapulted the city onto international news headlines as a result.

The *'Emergency'*, as World War II was known in Ireland, the Anglo-Irish Trade War, and the government's protectionist policies had a profound effect on Limerick's agricultural economy, with emigration rising steadily as a result. By the 1960s a new, more outward-looking era was dawning, and the country experienced strong growth, boosted by Ireland's entry to the European Union in 1973.

However, these changes also saw the loss of many of Limerick's traditional industries. As pointed out by Sharon Slater and Matthew Potter, *"Limerick's two tobacco factories, Spillane's and*