

Ranks Mills

The Industrial Heart
of Limerick City





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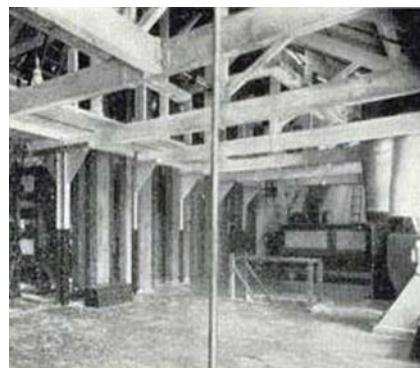
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Limerick Docks with the Garryowen shed and Bannatyne stores 1961
Limerick City Archives

Ranks Mills

The Industrial Heart
of Limerick City

BY Dr Edward Whelan | EDITED BY Jacqui Hayes



Prologue

Milling was one of Limerick's oldest industries and Ranks Mills on the Dock Road was Limerick's flagship industry from 1931 until 1983. The longevity, size and steadfastness of Ranks in Limerick meant that it became entwined with the core and identity of the city. Ranks defined the city's landscape and provided the logic for much of Limerick's infrastructural development and housing. The wages from the industry provided the lifeblood of the city, allowing generations of men and women to raise their families. The history of Ranks informs a great deal of the social and economic history of Limerick and its citizens in the twentieth century.

The donation of Cecil Mercier's papers to Limerick City Archives in 2010 provided the catalyst to this publication. Cecil Mercier was the Mill Superintendent from 1920, until his retirement in 1962 and his papers provide a unique insight into the mills working life for over four decades. An oral history project on Ranks Mills between Limerick City Archives and students of Mary Immaculate College has ensured that the memories of the former staff inform the historical narrative. An archive has been built from the documents and photographs donated to the City Archives by the former staff and their families and these images illustrate this history. This publication reflects the City Archives commitment to preserve and document the history of Limerick and its citizens.



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Photograph of a Barron grinder machine at the provender mill
Limerick City Archives



CHAPTER ONE

Milling and industry in Limerick: A historical perspective

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Ranks staff on board the SS Maple c.1960
Courtesy of George Spillane

Milling and industry in Limerick: A historical perspective

Ranks in Limerick 1930-1983

Ranks Ltd. began operations in Limerick in 1930 and continued in business in the city for over fifty years. Ranks, a British company, was one of very few foreign owned companies in Ireland for over three decades. In scale it was second only to the American owned Ford Car Manufacturers in Cork, but as the supplier of a staple food source, it was a critical industry of strategic national importance. It was a highly sensitive issue when the Limerick mills fell into foreign ownership in 1930, in a country where the potato famine was still a folk memory, and political independence was a reality for just eight years. That a British company was successful for such a long time, in a critical industry, within the prevailing economic philosophy of protectionism, is of interest within the national context.

Industry is the beating heart of a city around which radiates infrastructure, commercial activity, housing and communities, where people can rear their families and educate their children based on sustainable employment. The longevity and stability of Ranks and the milling industry in Limerick means that its story resonates deeply with the development and identity of the city and its people.

Ranks were able to withstand initially hostile Irish public opinion with an adroit policy of respecting local and national concerns. After the Wall Street Crash in 1929, Ranks effectively rescued the local milling industry, and became one of Limerick city's key employers over a span of five decades in the twentieth century. The mills were central to the economy of the city and the region and helped feed the city and the country throughout World War II when wheat could not be imported. Having purchased the Limerick mills from the Goodbody family, Ranks Ltd continued to employ Goodbody family members in key positions. The Goodbodys always represented Ranks on the The Irish Flour Millers Association as effectively the public voice of the company.

Ranks were fortunate as they entered the Irish market just before trade tariffs were erected in 1932, and from then the company played the game of a regulated market very well. Ranks were so successful in their Irish enterprise that they managed the market in an effective cartel with the other flour millers, especially with Odlums. Ranks market share at 30 per cent, was effectively guaranteed in an informal arrangement between the Irish Flour Millers Association and the Government. The Government in turn, diplomatically ignored the millers' arrangements in order to provide both a guaranteed price and market for one of its priorities- tillage farmers and Irish wheat. The game began to change slowly from 1957 onwards, when the government withdrew subsidies and began to prioritise lower prices for consumers, but insisted on continuing support for the tillage industry. Profits were squeezed throughout the 1960s and investment in Limerick began to wane. This lack of investment along with the local and national opposition to rationalisation and cost reduction was to all but condemn the company to closure in 1983. The decline of Ranks can be used to illustrate the decline of the traditional protected industries in Limerick from the 1960s onwards.

Ranks was not just a job. For many in Limerick, working in Ranks was a badge of honour and the company became synonymous with Limerick city. It was very much a family business where several generations of the same family worked together. Ranks for its workers was a community and a way of life. Drawing on interviews with former employees of Ranks the experience of work in our recent past will be explored as well as the manner in which the mills, like the city's other traditional industries shaped Limerick's history and identity. The experience of Ranks in Limerick illustrates the direct effect that international forces and official policy have on a local industry and in turn on a city.

Merick Chamber of Commerce

Friday the 29th April 1811

A meeting of the Committee this day

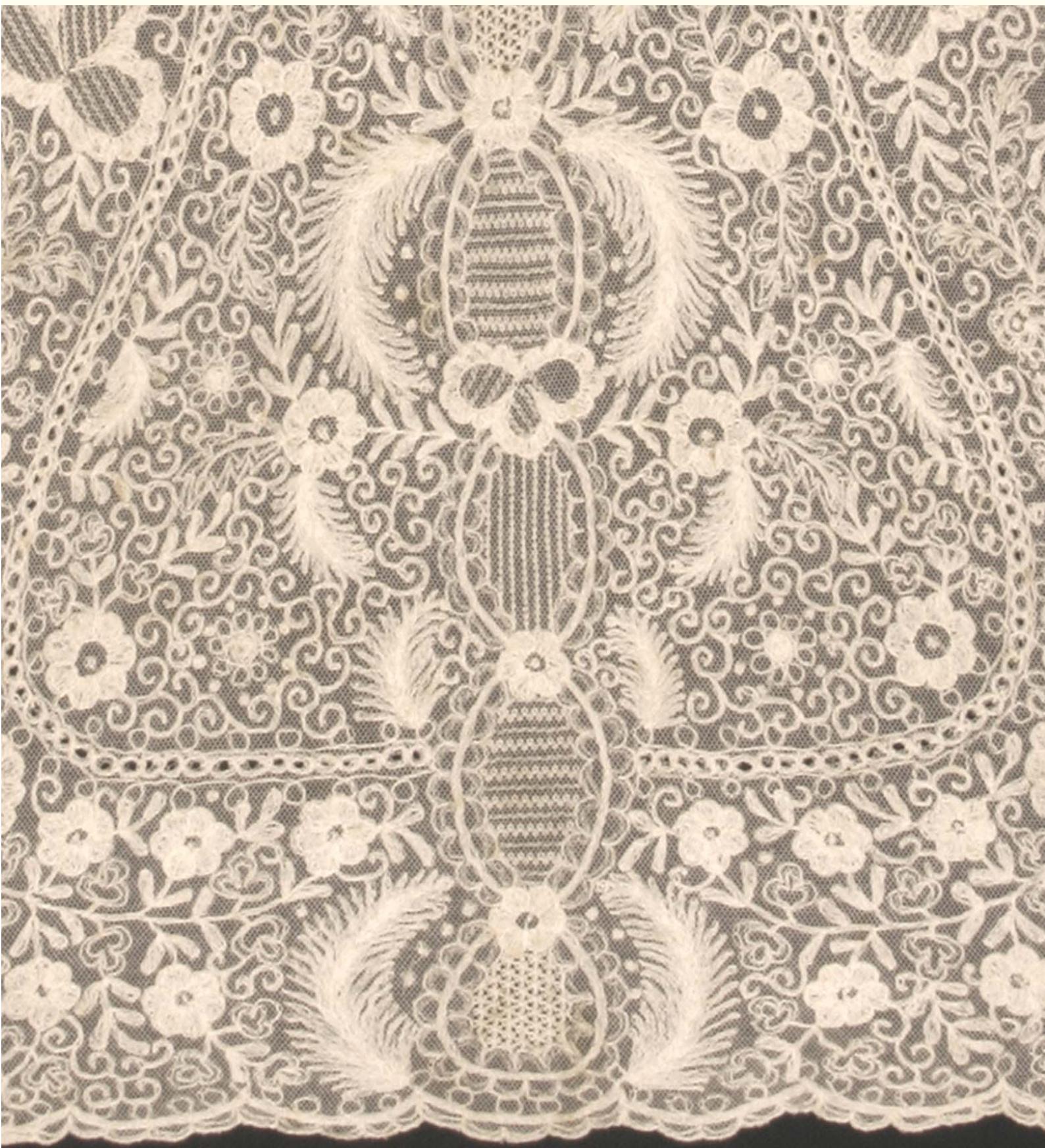
Present

Joseph Fisher William White, Thomas Kelly,
John Whanard, Edmond Ryan

Absent

John Stark, Martin Greagh
John Brown, & James Phelps } Out of Town
Resolved that our Secretary be directed, to procure
names for flagging the Bulla Weigh House, against
Next Meeting... In consequence of the expenses of
Bulla Weigh house, having exceeded its income, for
several years past it is proposed for consideration, to
raise the Export Rate on Bulla from 1/4 of the present rate, to
one penny off Tuckin.

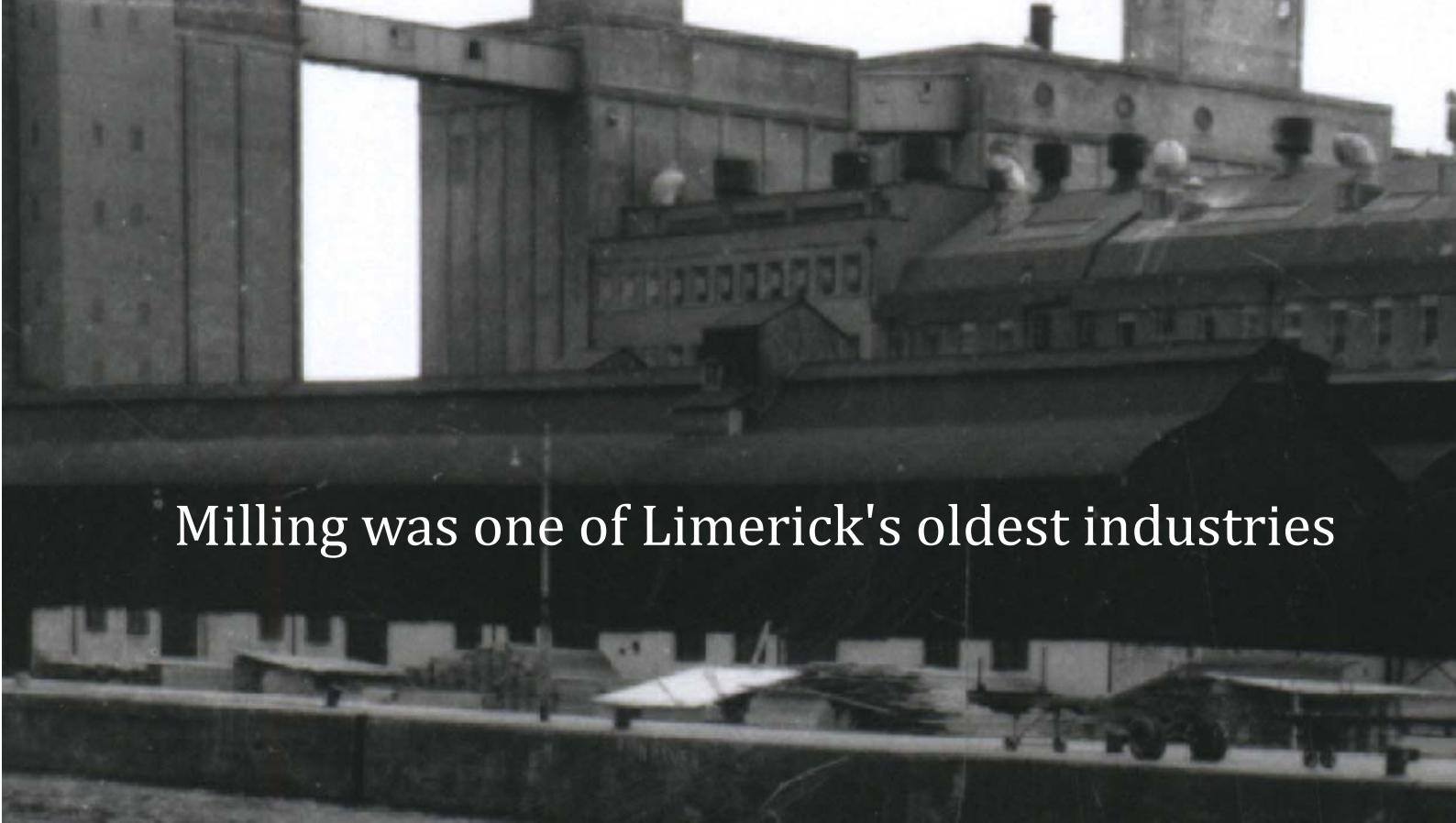
Resolved that the Secretary be directed to write
to Han Morrell, desiring he may discontinue his
agents after the end of this Month - and also acquaint
Stephen Clossey that the Committee have resolved
to take trial of him, at his offer for one month.



An example of Limerick Lace c.1900
Limerick City Museum



Limerick Clothing Company factory workers c.1914
Limerick City Museum



Milling was one of Limerick's oldest industries

Ranks takeover of the Limerick mills in 1930 ushered in a new phase in the long and illustrious history of milling in Limerick. Milling, the process whereby grains are turned into flour for consumption, has long been a feature of life. It is one of humankind's basic technologies and a key to the growth and development of human culture and society. Since the introduction of farming in Ireland, people have ground various grains into flour, mostly by hand. Limerick has a tradition dating back at least seven centuries in milling. Archaeological evidence shows that sophisticated water mills and drying kilns were present in the region from a remarkably early date. One authority has noted 'there are more scientifically dated mill sites of the first millennium in the province of Munster alone than there are in the rest of Europe'!¹ Limerick grew from a Viking trading settlement- and like all early Norse towns, probably had water mills operating in its environs. Limerick was a centre of milling throughout the Middle Ages and Early Modern Period when the milling of oats was the most important milling activity. Flour milling only gradually became more important in the later part of the eighteenth century when demand for wheaten bread increased among the affluent urban dwellers.

In the eighteenth century many merchants operated water or wind mills in the city including the Quaker Joshua Unthank. The industrial revolution in England caused the Irish economy to grow rapidly as demand for agricultural produce rose. This growth was fuelled in 1780 by the granting of free trade between Ireland and Britain.² Interest rates were low and many private banks opened. The Maunsell family opened a bank in Limerick in 1780, the first modern bank in the history of Limerick. Credit became more freely available and there was a massive rise in land transactions. Additionally the construction of the Shannon Navigation Canal enabled Limerick's merchants to transport produce over greater distances and gain new markets. The local milling industry soon made rapid strides.

The Cochranes of Killmurry operated a mill in Singland, known as the Bloodmill.³ This was an impressive six-storey site, driven by two water wheels. In 1763 the Corbally Mills were erected to take advantage of the increased demand for flour. Andrew Walsh built a then state of the art mill on the new canal.⁴ The Lock Mills completion in 1764 marked a new era in milling and industry in Limerick and indeed Ireland. These mills were equipped with the new 'bolting mills'- allowing the grain to be treated mechanically. The Lock mills were an elaborate complex- six storeys high with granaries, out offices and stores. Local mills benefited from the boom in the demand for flour and milled oats in the region. Limerick was entering a period of growth and benefiting from the provision trade, it exported butter, oats, bacon and small amounts of flour, especially during the Napoleonic Wars. In 1806, local merchants came together and founded the Limerick Chamber of Commerce and they sought to improve local harbour facilities and promote trade in the city.

Napoleon's defeat at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815, signalled an international economic slump and Limerick's mills entered a period of turmoil which was reflected through the city's other industries. In 1813, a drought had closed some local mills, the price of flour began to slump and the Lock Mills closed to be briefly used as a brewery.⁵ The Maunsell Bank failed and this 'unforeseen catastrophe' caused 'unexampled distress' in the city and county.⁶ Limerick's growing population, at this time was sinking deeper and deeper into poverty. After Waterloo, to add to the economic gloom, increasing competition from English factories, decimated the traditional handicraft and domestic industries. Limerick hand loom weavers and tanners



were devastated at this time. The downturn in the Limerick milling industry was mitigated by Government legislation. In 1815 the British parliament, where Irish MPs had sat since 1801, prohibited the import of corn and this boosted the milling industry and grain production generally.

While the 1820s and 1830s were exceptionally challenging times, they also saw the founding of much of Limerick's traditional industries. The Limerick bacon curing industry was founded in the 1820s when the Englishman John Russell introduced bacon-curing techniques from Berwick that were adapted by local curers. Soon the city was winning renown for its hams and bacons.⁷ In 1828 lace making was established when Charles Walker, from Oxford in England brought twenty four girls to Limerick to teach lace-making and set up a factory in Mount Kennett.⁸ Limerick proved attractive to British entrepreneurs because of the 'cheapness of labour'.⁹ Despite the challenging circumstances local business' proved resilient and innovative. Many Limerick merchants prospered, especially those involved in the North American trade. The importation of wood from the New World eventually led to the establishment of Limerick's famous timber importers and saw mills such as Spaights.¹⁰

Limerick's prosperity in the decades before the Famine was largely based upon the milling and grain trade. The milling industry was revolutionised thanks to the vision of one man, John Norris Russell, a member of an old Limerick Protestant family. He opened the famous Newtown Pery mill in 1810 at Bishop's Quay, and in 1827 he brought a steam engine to power the mill. The urban mill now became independent of its traditional sources of power, wind and water. John Russell's business expanded rapidly during the decades prior to the famine driven by a rise in the consumption of bread, locally and nationally. The arrival of the new steam technology in Limerick improved the local economy dramatically and enabled the mills to meet the rising demand for flour. Steam powered many of Limerick's mills and factories and a steam barge operated on the Shannon canal, vastly improving communications.¹¹ The city operated as a 'gateway to the West of Ireland' and the Limerick quays came to be lined with mills, workshops and warehouses in the nineteenth century.¹² In 1842, W.M. Thackeray called parts of the city a 'second Liverpool'. However, he also noted Limerick's dire poverty 'where two fifths of the women are barefoot and two fifths of the men ragged'¹³

Old technologies in the milling industry persisted well into the nineteenth century, with a tidal mill at Clancy Strand and several windmills in or near the city but increasingly well-capitalised limited companies began to dominate the milling sector.¹⁴ By the 1820s, James Hogan and Sons Ltd, had reopened the Lock Mills as mainly a flour mill. They also owned the Corbally Mills, in which Poole Gabbet, a wealthy grain merchant was a partner. These new partnerships were necessary as investment in milling was becoming increasingly expensive. To take advantage of the canal system near the city, Major Hedges Maunsell built a new water mill at Plassey. This mill was later taken over by the Quaker Reuben Harvey, who was also manager of the Harvey Mill at Francis Street where Sarsfield House now stands. The Limerick mills were fed by both local and imported wheat-at an early date grain was imported from North America. James Bannatyne earned a fortune importing and distributing wheat from Montreal. Over time the Russell family, building upon the success of their Newtown Pery Mill took over several local mills, including, The Blood Mill and Lock Mills and they re-opened the Plassey Mills after a fire and bankruptcy of Reuben Harvey.



Ranks Mills



P89 3 6
Scene from the quayside near Ranks Mills 1961
Limerick City Archives

Corbally Mills



Lax Weir with Corbally Mills in background
Limerick City Museum



City Mills



The former City Mills extending from Roches Street into Anne Street

Newtown Pery Mill



The former Lock Mills, Grove Island

The Famine and economic dislocation

The Famine devastated the region surrounding the city. Limerick had one of the highest death rates for an urban centre in Ireland, with some 7% of the city's population dying in 1847.¹⁶ Many country mills closed in the county, due to the widespread economic and social dislocation of the times, with tillage particularly affected. The mills in the city endured hard times during the Famine and at least one-grain store at Mount Kennett closed. This store became a notorious auxiliary workhouse for the duration of the crisis.¹⁷

Yet even during these years of starvation and death, there were opportunities for others. The shortage of potatoes and the lack of any native alternative meant that great efforts were made to import maize. In 1845, Ireland imported 7,000 tons but by 1848, some 632,000 tons of maize were imported.¹⁸ This maize or 'yellow meal' was used by the government relief scheme to help the starving and Limerick was a key distribution centre for this maize. Russell's Limerick mills made a considerable profit from the demand, as there was little milling capacity in the West of Ireland, the worst affected area in the Famine.¹⁹ After the Famine maize continued to be important in the Irish diet. The corn was milled into a flour and it was consumed by the poor as a gruel. The repeal of the Corn Laws in 1848 made the importation of maize and other grains much easier and local millers were quick to seize the opportunity offered by the rise in maize consumption. Russell's not only served the needs of the local community they also distributed maize meal throughout the country. Utilising the canal system, they supplied large grain merchants by barge as far away as Athlone in the 1860s. Increasingly farmers fed milled corn to livestock and given the increase in grazing during the latter half of the nineteenth century this expanded the market for milled maize. By 1890 the Newtown Pery Mills owners were the biggest millers of maize in Ireland and one of the biggest in the British Isles.²⁰

Post-Famine

Milling entered a period of growth in the post-Famine era as the rural poor became consumers of bread, especially soda bread, as the population moved away from reliance upon potatoes. In this period Limerick really emerged as a major milling centre in Ireland. There were many mills large and small in the city and its environs, such as Harris Mills and Bakery at Mount Kennett, founded by James Harris, grandfather of the actor Richard Harris.²¹ These mills and other industries provided much needed employment in this period and without them the city's poor would have been in a worse condition. This was an era in which many Limerick people bought hay for their bedding. Recovery in the aftermath of the Famine was difficult for many industries especially the tanneries. Limerick's Lace makers initially did well, employing 2000 women in the city- but by 1870 this industry was in decline.²² There was much industrial development-the Limerick Clothing Factory was established in 1850, by Peter Tait, a Scotman, which specialised in uniforms and exported them around the world.²³ Cleeves, which became renowned worldwide for its condensed milk, was also established at this time. Trade benefited from the construction of the floating dock opened by the Lord Lieutenant in 1853. There was much unemployment and underemployment. Yet despite the difficulties local and foreign entrepreneurs did much to reverse Limerick's decline. The city's population was falling and without the mills and factories the city's fortunes would have been dire.

*'where two fifths of the women are barefoot
and two fifths of the men ragged'*

Bannatyne, Russell and Goodbody Millers

Throughout the 1870s, the Limerick mills continued to prosper even after the onset of the 'Long Depression' and the surge in cheap imported American flour. In the later half of the nineteenth century a new force in Limerick, Bannatyne and Sons Ltd., along with the Russells came to dominate the milling sector. In 1858 James Bannatyne took over a small steam mill in Roches Street. Bannatyne foresaw that the future of milling lay in better quality and cheaper flour using modern technology. His mills were driven by a powerful quadruple expansion steam engine which increased output considerably. He built an imposing grain store on the Docks in 1874, opposite the new floating dock and in early 1879 he consolidated the Bannatyne milling business into the new City Mills on Roches Street. Bannatyne's progress within twenty five years of the Famine was another remarkable example of local entrepreneurship, especially given the state of the economy and the specific difficulties facing the Irish milling industry caused by cheap imports.

Bannatyne and the Russell family recognised the importance of the new Roller Milling technology, introduced in the 1880s.²⁴ This made the Limerick mills more efficient and Limerick was one of the leading milling centres in the British Isles by 1890.²⁵ However the Irish millers' profit margins came under strain, even the large efficient concerns like Russells and Bannatynes, due to imported American flour.

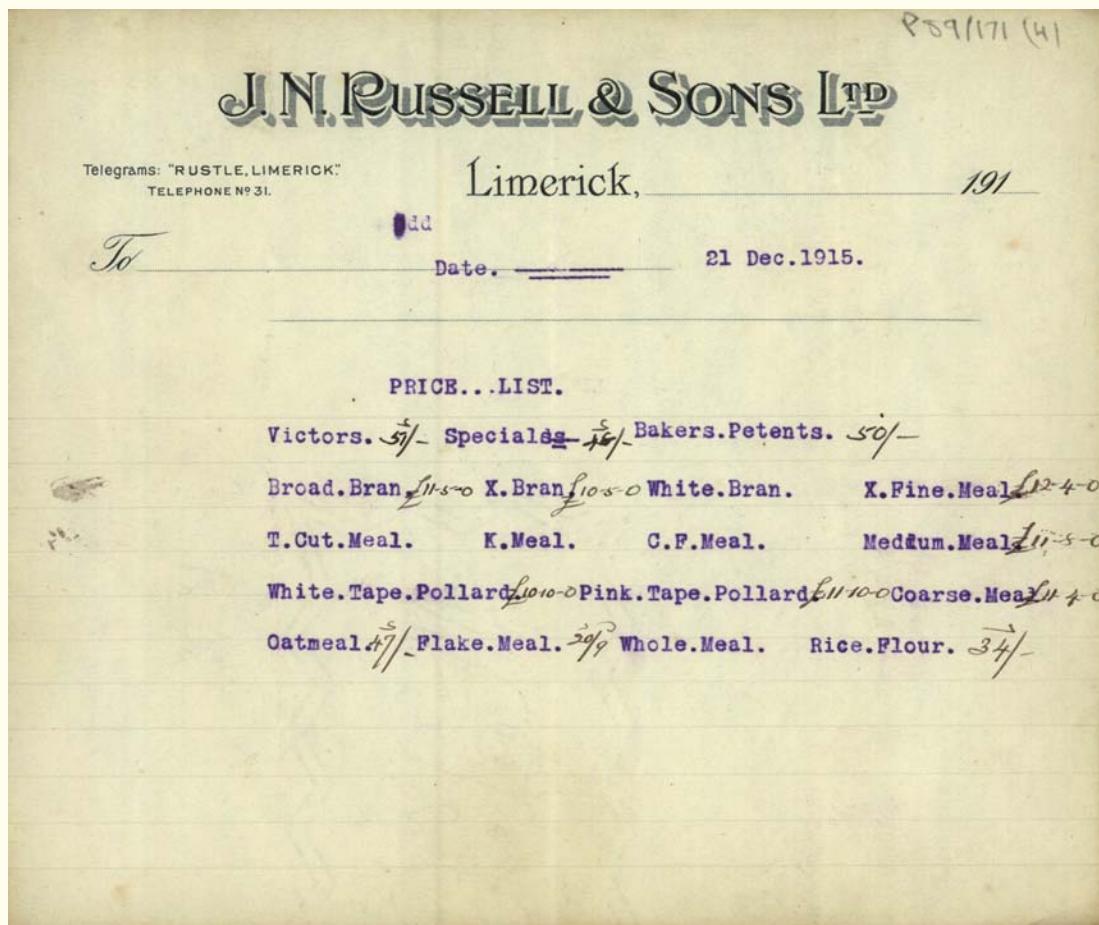
The Russell's milling concerns were managed by the grandsons of the founder John Russell but the company had been in relative decline for many years. The Bannatyne business was performing well but James Bannatyne was an old man and his only son had no interest in the family business. James Bannatyne began to search around for potential investors who would safeguard his mills future.²⁶ His search came to focus on the Goodbodys, a Quaker family from Offaly who had opened a jute sack plant at Clara in 1865. One of their better customers, was James Bannatyne. He was clearly impressed by the Goodbodys and when he decided to sell up in 1893, he offered the company to the family.

The Goodbodys had great difficulty raising the funds required and eventually entered into a partnership with Bannatyne. Gradually the Goodbodys were able to obtain complete control of the Bannatyne business. The Goodbodys were able to acquire Russells milling concerns at a low cost as 'they were pretty run down' by 1898.²⁷ The Goodbodys kept Bannatynes and Russells as separate limited companies, which traded under their own brands. However, because 'of the need to buy out the existing Bannatyne shareholders there was no proper provision for depreciation', resulting in the company being under capitalised. This was to create later difficulties for the company. Goodbodys invested in their new mills and at an early date purchased a pneumatic tug, for unloading grain from ships.²⁸



P89 3 40
Limerick mill staff c. 1937
Limerick City Archives

The Goodbodys expansion into the Limerick milling sector was timely and the local milling industry emerged from a difficult period and experienced a period of growth. By 1900 the world economy was growing again after the 'Long Depression' and competition from American flour imports fell away as American millers focused on the growing home market.²⁹ This together with a growing local market benefited Irish millers. In 1905, it was reported that 'no industry has made as much progress in recent years as the milling industry'.³⁰ The Goodbodys benefited like other Irish millers. The city's mills in the pre-World War period boomed and remained Limerick's premier industry. It was not just the mills that prospered as other local business' took advantage of a recovering world economy. The Limerick Clothing Company was flourishing as the Company had the contract for the Royal Irish Constabulary uniform. Limerick bacon was famous, as were Cleeves products, and these gave Limerick a world-wide reputation for excellent food produce. Unscrupulous merchants often tried to pass off inferior products as 'made in Limerick'. However, this did not bring much prosperity to the ordinary workers and industrial relations became very strained prior to World War I. In 1911, there were 'lengthy and bitter' strikes at the bacon factories and Limerick Clothing Factory. In 1913 Cleeves workers accused the Protestant owners of discriminating against Catholic employees, by unfairly laying them off during the 'slack season' when the firm was quiet. Limerick mills were relatively unaffected by the unrest.³¹



1920's

049/730

MEMORANDA OF POINTS FOR COMING FLOUR MILLING CONFERENCE

Bannatynes Bran Packermen - 3 Shift System.

TOTAL

- X 1. Two men per shift formerly employed, at present only one man employed. He packs 30 cwts. Bran, 30 cwts. pollard, total 60 cwts, per hour. The firm promised help for packing over 48 cwts per hour, and the only relief was a bonus of 3/- per week, per man, and help from Feederman who at most times is unable to assist, owing to increased work on his own job. They demand help while having their meals, etc. Sum 6670

Re Fleur Stitchers 3 Shift System

X 2. Two boy stitchers and one cart boy formerly employed, now only 2 stitchers employed. They cart, pile and sew all flour from the packers, and it takes one boy to keep the scale clear while the other has to machine stitch all bags and attend to the machine. Those boys have no form of relief and they demand help and relief during meals, etc.

General reduction of Labour on packing floor to: 6 men, 3 boys and 1 man in screen room.

2. Fleur & Offal Feedermen, 3 Shift System

X 3. Two men employed as Feedermen. The feeding of flour, bran and pollard varies according to requirements. They have to cart down from top floor of packing loft all the flour, bran and pollard required for the shift, feed same into feeding machines. Keep an accurate account of all stocks on hand. Pay attention to feeding machines. Bleachers agitators, machine drives and elevators, also feeding Bran Packers and Roats and cleaning of floors and cellar. They are scarcely able to perform their own duties, yet since reduction of labour they are compelled to give relief to Bran Packermen. They demand to be freed from giving this relief.

General reduction of Labour Packing Floor to 6 men: 3 boys and 1 man Screen Room.

Fleur Packermen - 3 Shift System

- X 4. Three men formerly employed with extra help when packing small packages such as cwts, 7 stone, and 4 stone. At present only 2 men employed per shift. They pack, weigh and check 76 $\frac{1}{2}$ sacks of flour per hour, together with extra 4 stones from 80 to 140 per shift, or any greater number required by the Firm. This work is a hardship and the men demand help and relief to take their meals and perform the functions of human nature.

Screen Room - 3 Shift System

5. Three men formerly employed, now only one man and one boy. The boy has to do a man's work for boy's rate. When the Manager was approached for the rate of pay obtaining on the job, the man approaching him was left off work and a boy put in his place. The man demands men's rate of pay as this is a permanent job, and the man previously employed to be given the vacancy. General: Reduction of labour in Packing floor to 6 men: 3 boys and 1 man Screen Room.

Presently employed.

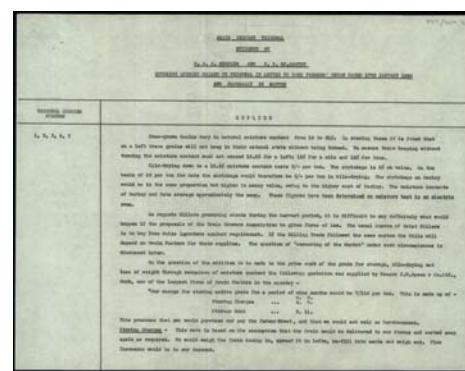


P90 1

City Mills staff, Rothes Street with a bag of Mazovim c. 1935
Courtesy of Michael Kennedy

Tannery Workers

O'Callaghan's Tannery Workers c. 1920
Limerick City Museum



War time prosperity

The outbreak of World War I brought opportunities for many local industries as Ireland was a significant supplier of food to Britain during the 1914-18 period. In 1917, the British government intervened in the milling sector, to keep prices stable and maintain the food supply. They also took control of Limerick's two tanneries to maintain the production of shoe leather for the British Army. The authorities set the price of flour and set the extraction rate- the percentage of grain milled into flour.³² The Limerick millers' made easy and good profits during the war years as flour became increasingly expensive. Cleeves also made an estimated one million pounds profit during the war years. However the rising cost of staples such as flour, was a disaster for the poor in the city.

Post war downturn and national independence

Goodbodys' mills stayed under state control until 1921 as the British Government sought to ensure a reliable food supply. This Government control delayed much needed modernisation at the mills. When the milling industry was deregulated, the Limerick mills faced significant challenges. There was labour unrest during World War 1 and even more so after the war- especially during the period known as the Limerick Soviet, when briefly the workers representatives effectively ran the city. This outbreak of union militancy coincided with the War of Independence and Civil War. The Limerick mills like other local business were affected by looting during the Civil War 'The looting by the Republicans here has been something awful, and the result is that there is very little in the shops (Grocers particularly)'. The Limerick mills continued producing badly needed flour during 1922-23. As rail communications were cut desperate people came 'great distances with carts,' to purchase flour from Goodbodys.³³

Cleeves was forced into voluntary liquidation due to war and labour unrest. The Goodbodys had weathered the unsettled times, relatively well and even entered into a period of expansion. In 1920, they appointed an energetic and brilliant miller Cecil (D.C.C.) Mercier to supervise the Bannatyne Mills under an English manager Spence Collinson. They invested in new technology and machinery for their mills and embarked upon an ambitious and costly plan to overhaul and modernise the Newtown Pery plant and also purchased the Furlong Mills in Cork. However, the national flour mills strike of 1923 allowed British millers, chiefly Ranks and Spillers to export flour to Ireland and gain a foothold in the Irish market. Furthermore, by the mid twenties, the economic outlook had darkened considerably as a series of bad harvests, a deflationary government fiscal policy and high taxes to pay for the civil war and reparations restricted the Irish economy.³⁴

Limerick's industries also suffered due to increasing imports of cheap foreign produce. Soon there was lobbying from Irish industries to impose levies on imported products. The economic situation in Limerick deteriorated rapidly. Throughout the 1920s there was consistently 2,000 officially unemployed, a figure greatly underestimating the problem in Limerick and only a minority of these were entitled to unemployment relief.³⁵ Underemployment was also a scourge. It was an annual feature of the bacon industry that hundreds of butchers were laid off when business was slack.³⁶



The first Irish Free State government of Cumann na Gael was economically conservative and generally adhered to the principle of non-intervention in the market-place. However, Limerick benefited from their decision to construct the Shannon Hydro-Electric scheme and approximately 3,000 men found employment on the project from 1926-1929.³⁷ In 1927, the Government also re-opened the former Cleeves Plants as the Dairy Disposal Company. Limerick Corporation began to build social housing later in the decade and supported the Harbour Commissioners plans to build a dock extension.

The Limerick mills also began to suffer in the poor economic climate. The demand for flour and animal feed fell. Despite increasing efficiency on the shop floor, Goodbodys were in real difficulties. In 1928 their bankers, the Bank of Ireland demanded that they find some outside investors and threatened to withdraw credit. The renovated Newtown Pery had re-opened in 1927 and was described by a trade magazine as being at the 'forefront of modern milling'.³⁸ Yet the Goodbodys were receiving a very poor return on their investment due to massive flour imports. James Goodbody, a prominent member of the Irish Flour Millers Association, lobbied in vain along with other millers, for the imposition of tariffs and duties upon flour imports to save the industry.³⁹ The competition from British millers was too intense for the Irish millers and the entire industry was in meltdown. The majority of Limerick's tanners, bacon curers and timber yards owners sought tariffs to protect their struggling business'. The Cumann na Gael Government preferred to allow the market to run its own course but reluctantly agreed to the establishment of the Tariff Commission (1926) to investigate the issue. Flour and other milled products were not granted tariffs by the Commission, despite the establishment of a Grain Tribunal to investigate the issue. Cecil Mercier attended as an expert witness and was appalled at the decision.⁴⁰ Indeed, little was done to protect Limerick's other industries, although the Limerick Clothing Company did benefit from restrictions on imported clothing. The situation was critical for the Goodbodys and they along with the other Irish millers entered into a cartel with British Millers, including Ranks to fix the price of flour in Ireland in 1929.





The Great Depression and the arrival of Ranks Ltd in Limerick

By early 1930, in the wake of the Wall Street Crash, almost all of the traditional industries were in crisis and Limerick's mills were on the verge of bankruptcy. The bacon curing industry was facing its own battle for survival and in 1931 O'Mara's and Denny's closed their operations in the city. To compound the difficulties the Shannon Hydro-electrical scheme was to finish construction that year and the revenue it generated for the city and its port would be lost.

The city faced a host of social problems and suffered from the 'twin evils' of poverty and unemployment. One city councillor referred to the unemployed 'as starving in and around the city'.⁴¹ The slums in Irishtown were comparable to the notorious Dublin slums and the city had a very high incidence of tuberculosis and infant mortality.⁴²

Goodbodys were in a very weak position as the firm was in severe financial difficulties. The firm had never been properly capitalised and had taken out large bank loans for investments. 'The family had been taking out too much dividends to fund their generous lifestyle'. Bank of Ireland refused to extend it any more credit until they secured further investment, and this was unlikely after the Wall Street crash. The firm was being financed by the Goodbody family and others deposits in Bannatyne's Ltd- if these were withdrawn the mills would close. Goodbodys were forced to turn to the British Millers, Ranks. Harold Goodbody, through Bannatyne's accountant Mr Bevin made the initial approach to Ranks.⁴³ He had previously worked in the office of Ranks accountants. Another account relates that two local businessmen also acted as conduits between Goodbodys and Ranks.⁴⁴ These tentative negotiations took place in great secret. Both parties were very worried in case that news of the deal would leak out. The negotiations took place in 1929-only seven years after Irish independence. Goodbodys may have feared that any press coverage, would have provoked a nationalist backlash against the proposed Ranks takeover and lead to the collapse of any deal.

The Goodbodys were in a dire situation and their only way out was to reach an agreement with Ranks. Ranks business strategy was to invest in Ireland to protect their share of the Irish market. The Irish market though small, was lucrative as the consumption of bread was higher in Ireland than in Britain. Ranks Ltd supplied the Irish market mainly from its gigantic mills in Birkenhead, near Liverpool. Protectionism was increasingly popular during this period. After the Wall Street crash it was introduced in most countries, to some extent. Fianna Fáil, was committed to Protectionism, and it was popular with the public and unions. Even the Cumman na Gael government, began to impose some tariffs, such as a levy on imported bacon in 1931.⁴⁵ The takeover of the Goodbodys' mills in Limerick and elsewhere would allow Ranks to pre-empt the expected tariffs.





Joseph Ranks Ltd

Joseph Ranks Ltd had been founded in 1875 by Joseph Rank, the son of a prosperous miller and a devout Methodist. In 1885 he established a mill in Hull where he employed the most modern technology, enabling him to succeed in the cut-throat milling sector. In 1911, Ranks built a modern mill at Birkenhead, to produce flour for the North of England and Ireland which was sold through agents in Ireland. James Harris and Sons Ltd of Mount Kennett were agents of Ranks in Limerick. Joseph Rank became one of Britain's greatest philanthropists. After the war his two sons J. V. Rank and J. Arthur Rank became more involved in the business and expanded it greatly after the British government de-regulated the milling industry. J. Arthur became involved in film making and established The Rank Organisation in 1937 which produced films. He owned cinemas in Britain and Ireland, including the well-known Savoy Cinema in Limerick. J.V. and J. Arthur Rank were very influential in British milling circles and in industry generally. By 1930 their company was the largest milling combine in Britain and one of the largest in the world. J.V. Rank was to take a very close interest in the company's Irish operations. He was chairman of Rank Ireland Ltd and was a regular visitor to Limerick mills as he had a keen interest in local horse and greyhound racing.⁴⁶

The negotiations between Goodbodys and Ranks continued through late 1929. On the first of January 1930 an agreement in principle was reached between the Goodbodys and Ranks whereby Joseph Rank Ltd took over the entire Goodbody operations. As part of the agreement, Ranks paid off Goodbodys business debts. Preference shareholders in the Goodbodys business had their shares purchased at a reduced rate. The ordinary shareholders received nothing and the Goodbodys appear to have made nothing out of the takeover -indicative of the critical state of the mills finances. The takeover was not announced immediately.

On the same day that an agreement between Ranks and Goodbodys was reached in Limerick the Lock and Corbally Mills were closed.⁴⁷ These two historic mills had long been crucial to the Limerick economy and had been landmarks in the city. Their closure was not a real surprise as the mills were both water powered and the Shannon Scheme Hydro-electrical scheme was going to lead to a drop in the river which would effectively deny the two small mills their source of energy. These mills were the last water mills in the city and with their closure an ancient way of milling, passed into history. The traditional mills, like the Abbey fishermen whose way of life was much altered by the Shannon Scheme, were the victims of progress and modernisation.

On the first of March 1930 James P. Goodbody announced that Ranks were taking a stake in their Irish business.⁴⁸ Initially he stated that the takeover was only a '*fusion of interests*'. On the fourth of March J. Arthur Rank visited the Limerick mills for the first time. He was to become a regular visitor to the city and even purchased a house, 'Shannon Lawn' on the South Circular Road. J. Arthur Rank regularly attended the greyhound and horse racing meetings in the city and county, despite his strong Methodist faith. It was clear from the beginning that he was going to adopt a hand's on approach in Limerick. The idea of a partnership was underlined by the continued presence and role of James Goodbody as managing director while his brother Harold also became a director. In reality Ranks was totally in charge and the Limerick mills were under the



total direction of the London office. Ranks took over Goodbodys debts and the Goodbody family received nothing except a reduced value for their shares. The 'partnership' between Goodbodys and Ranks fooled no-one, in the media, politics or the public. The British firms takeover of the Limerick mills, was viewed as a national issue as Limerick flour mills were seen as important national economic assets. The takeover ignited an intense controversy among the press, politicians and the public. Many were simply scandalised that a key industry could fall into foreign ownership. The newly formed Irish Press was particularly opposed to the takeover. They worried that Ranks would simply close the Irish mills and import flour from their British mills-leading to massive job losses and a body blow to the economy. Public meetings were held in opposition to the takeover and they called for the Government to keep the mills in Irish hands. Many especially those sympathetic to Fianna Fáil were worried that British ownership of such a strategic industry could facilitate an economic blockade of the country. A blockade that would not only harm the country economically but also may have curbed its recently found freedom. The left, especially the Labour Party, deplored Ranks takeover of the Limerick mills. They feared that the British millers would dominate the market and establish a monopoly.

Limerick's reaction to Ranks was pragmatic and there was little opposition to the takeover in the city. Limerick Corporation refused to condemn the Ranks takeover. Some pundits in the newspapers deplored the city's apparent welcome extended to Ranks. Limerick's reaction was also influenced by its history and development. Since the early nineteenth century outsiders from elsewhere in Ireland and beyond had done much to advance the city.⁴⁹ Furthermore, the city's industries had long drawn workers to Limerick from elsewhere in Ireland and beyond. Many English and Scots worked in the area as technicians or managers. John O'Donnell a mill engineer from County Down worked at the City Mill from 1889 until 1942. Many ordinary workers also worked in the city's industries, such as the Englishman John Copues, who worked at Bannatynes Mills in the early twentieth century.⁵⁰ Limerick had been a garrison town for centuries and generally the British soldiers and local population had co-existed peacefully and marriages were not uncommon. In general Limerick's business people and local representatives saw the benefits of outsiders in the city.

Despite the storm of controversy over Ranks takeover of the Goodbodys Mills in the city, the actual takeover of the mills was seamless. On 7th March 1930 the Goodbodys assured the public that there would be no 'material change in the general management or policy'.⁵¹ Cecil Mercier remained as mill superintendent with responsibility for all the mill and grain stores in Limerick. James Goodbody was still a director and Mercier reported to him in regard to day to day affairs. There were no Ranks employees appointed to positions of authority in the management of the mills or even employed on the 'floor'. Furthermore, Ranks did not, initially, introduce its own logo onto the flour and other products milled at its Limerick plants. The flour and meals were marketed under the Bannatyne's logo - such as 'Eclipse' and 'Sunrise Flour'. The real authority lay with Ranks however. The Chairman of Ranks was a regular visitor to the mills and kept a close eye on his tours of inspection. Mercier was answerable to Ranks Head Office at 'Millocrat House' in London. The management were expected to follow instructions from their superiors in London and report regularly on affairs at the Limerick mill.



Ranks established themselves in Limerick at an extremely difficult period but they rose to the challenges of the times and established a world-class milling operation that became synonymous with Limerick. In this they joined an illustrious line of local and foreign entrepreneurs that established international industry in the city- Mattersons, Russells, Shaws and their prosperity followed the same curve. Ranks lasted longer than the majority of the other traditional industries but lack of investment from the 1960s, along with a high cost base meant the company became increasingly unprofitable. The experience of Ranks in Limerick demonstrates that international economic forces such as the Great Depression and national government economic policy, have a direct impact on local economies, either creating or denying many of the opportunities for a successful business and city.

P89 10 4 1
Cecil Mercier, mill manager demonstrating the removal of small seeds in the milling process to visitors c. 1948
Limerick City Archives



View of Ranks Mills yard with silo in the background
Limerick City Archives



Milling and industry in Limerick: A historical perspective

P89 3 19

Spence Collinson, mill manager of the Newtown Pery Mills c. 1920
Limerick City Archives

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- 27 Information supplied by Michael Goodbody
- 28 Note: This was the first Garryowen
- 29 Irish Independent, 30 January 1905
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- 34 Mary Daly, 'The First Department; A History of the Department of Agriculture' (Dublin, 2002), pp.61-62
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- 46 After Joseph Rank's death he was succeeded as chairman of Ranks (Ireland) in 1954 by his nephew Arthur Rank, who held that position until 1972. In 1962 Ranks purchased Hovis-McDougal and the new company was known as R.H.M. Arthur Rank in turn, was succeeded by Joseph Mac Arthur Rank, a nephew who was chairman of Ranks (Ireland) until the company's demise
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CHAPTER TWO

Ranks Mills, development, growth and stagnation, 1930-1970

P90 4 1

L-R: Sam and James Copues. The Copues' like many Limerick families had a long tradition of working in the Limerick Mills c. 1930

P89 10 5

Visitors inspecting equipment in Ranks Mills c. 1948
Limerick City Archives



P90 12 4

The Garryowen pneumatic tug at work c. 1970
Courtesy of Christy Long

P89 3 10 31

Mount Kennett mill staff with John
Stockil, manager on the left c. 1930
Limerick City Archives

P89 10 30

Staff at Newtown Pery Mill c. 1930
Limerick City Archives

Ranks Mills, development, growth and stagnation



Ranks: The construction of a modern mill in Limerick

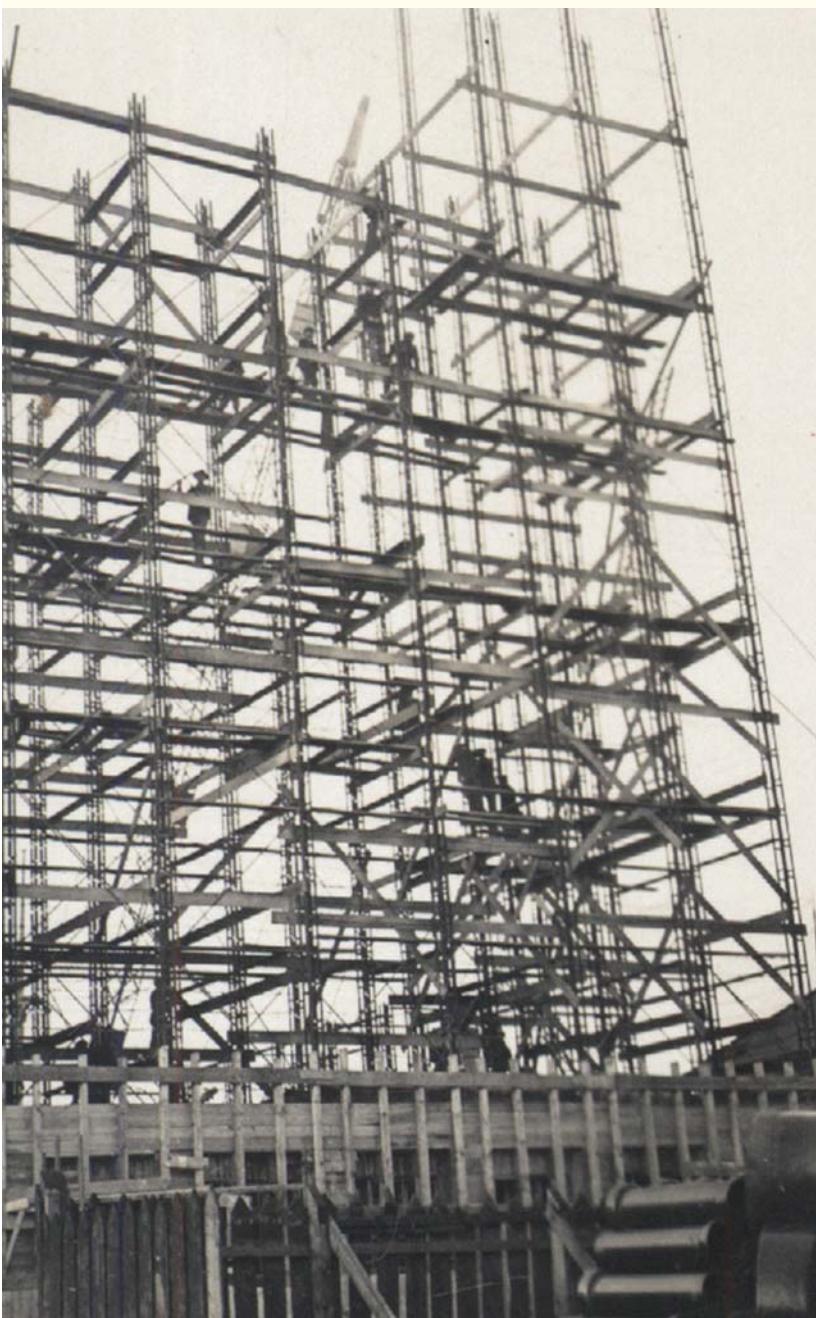
Ranks modernised the Limerick milling industry and succeeded in constructing a world class mill during a period of economic contraction and war. Ranks invested heavily in Limerick to develop a milling complex on the Dock Road that dominated that entire area into the modern era. Ranks was at the forefront of developments in business and was among the first to introduce computers into the production and administrative processes. The security of a regulated market justified this investment for many years and allowed Ranks to provide some of the best paid jobs in the city. As the level of profits tapered off through the 1960s investment also began to decline and rationalisation proved difficult, the mill fell behind mills internationally. This was to have disastrous consequences for the local mills.

Ranks from the start had ambitious plans for Limerick. It was soon made clear that Limerick would be the centre of its operations in Ireland, although the management was answerable to London. It was clear to Ranks on their first covert visits to Limerick prior to the purchase, that Limerick's mills required major investment to make them efficient. The company also saw that the mills locations were not ideal. They were all adjacent to the Dock, but none of them could directly receive imported wheat and maize, which came by sea. This made them very inefficient as the imported cereals had to be unloaded off ships then taken by 'hoppered' trucks or by horse and car to the various mills.¹ In England all of Ranks mills were built on dockland sites to facilitate easy access of imported cereals. Ranks also saw that there was excess milling capacity in Limerick-despite the closure of the Lock and Corbally Mills in 1930. As part of their takeover of the Goodbody group, Ranks had acquired the Newtown Pery Mill, the City Mill, the Mallow Street Mill, Mount Kennett provender mill, and many grain stores, in Limerick City. Ranks also acquired mills at Clara and Cork². There were also small independent millers in Limerick such as Croom Mills. The problem of overcapacity was compounded by the international depression as demand for flour fell. There was a clear need to rationalise the local industry.

A move to the Dock Road

Ranks solution was to establish a new modern mill, which would produce high quality flour and animal feed.³ It planned to erect it alongside a quay- to cut transport costs. Ranks initially inspected a site in Foynes and considered concentrating all the milling operations there.⁴ From a logistical point of view this made perfect sense - Foynes had its own port and could cater for larger tonnage grain vessels than Limerick but from a public relations point of view it would have been very controversial. Opening a mill at Foynes would have resulted in the closure of all or some of the Limerick city mills, and this could have antagonised Ranks customers and the government. Ranks shrewdly made the decision to open a new mill on the Limerick Docks, near the old Bannatyne grain stores. They planned to concentrate all the local milling capacity and storage facilities on the Dock Road site.⁵ The British millers began to build a new silo on the Dock Road in early 1932 and hired in a Dublin building firm to carry out the work. Showing a clever understanding of local politics, J.V. Rank insisted that only local labour be employed. The construction of the new silo offered much needed employment in the city during a period of great hardship. This gesture of Ranks earned them a measure of goodwill in the city and with the unions. The silo was constructed in rapid fashion - it was built at a rate of four feet per day. Ranks were very demanding as according to one of the contractors- they insisted on only the highest quality of work. The silo was built out of concrete and steel. Steel was difficult to procure at this period, and Ranks scoured Europe for old gunmetal which they melted down and used in the construction of their silo. Each functional activity of the Limerick mills, such as wheat storage was set up as a limited company, to benefit from a loophole in the tax laws. When the law changed around 1970, quite a few of the companies became non-trading. Ranks expanded further in Ireland with the takeover of the Hallinan Mills in Cork at this time.

'a sad day for many of the men in our City Mill'



Opposition from Sean Lemass

In 1932 the Fianna Fáil administration, with a policy of promoting Irish mills and industry, blocked the British Company's Dock Road project. Sean Lemass, Minister for Industry, wrote to Ranks stating that non-national mills would not be allowed to expand.

This decision by Lemass caused great controversy in Limerick. The local unions welcomed the Minister's decision as they feared that a new modern mill would lead to massive redundancies. The business community was more sympathetic to Ranks. Some viewed Lemass' decision to block the licence to Ranks as a blow to both the city's economy and development. The concentration of Limerick's milling industry onto one site was linked to the construction of a rail line from Colbert Station to the Docks. Funding had been raised for this and some work had even begun. In January of 1932, Limerick Harbour Commissioners had granted the tender to a Dutch company and those involved in this project wanted Ranks to build the new mills on the Docks to ensure the success of the rail extension. Lemass was adamant and boldly stated that he did not care if the rail extension never went ahead - Ranks was not getting the licence. Fianna Fáil was accused of discriminating against Limerick because its local mills were owned by an English company. Lemass' refusal to grant the licence was a devastating blow to the railway extension and the planned project was never completed.

The passage of the Cereal Act of 1933 caused great upheaval in the Irish flour milling industry. Ranks were obliged to undertake major changes in order to comply with the Act, which was designed to boost Irish mills

Photograph of a Ranks silo under construction c. 1935
Limerick City Museum



and tillage farming. Ranks were legally obliged to purchase and mill a certain percentage of Irish wheat.⁶ The need to mill Irish wheat tested the millers' capability to store the grain delivered to them at harvest. The majority of the Irish grain was delivered from late August until late October, the 'Wheat Season'. It had to be stored safely and securely until it was required and involved a massive logistical operation. Ranks Mills in Limerick appear to have had adequate storage space at first, thanks to its new silo. Furthermore, it could utilise stores across the city, such as the store on Bedford Row. However in 1934 even Ranks had to invest in extra storage space. The Cereals Act of 1935 imposed the cost of wheat storage entirely on the millers. Irish wheat had a high moisture content and it had to be 'dried' before it could be milled. Ranks invested in 'dryers', which dried the grain by blowing hot air through the wheat. A new docking bay for lorries was built and new Bedford Trucks purchased to deal with the 'Wheat Season'. These investments were costly. The purchase and storage of large quantities of Irish wheat resulted in more bureaucracy and Ranks hired more clerical workers.

Ranks, continued to apply for a licence to consolidate the Limerick mills onto one site. Lemass refused as he was suspicious of the British millers intentions in Limerick. Undeterred, Ranks pressed on with their plans for development and the company's second new silo was finished in the Spring of 1935. This had to be built to deal with the vast quantities of Irish wheat arriving at the mills every autumn- and because of this, the government did not object to its construction. In 1934 Ranks decided to open a new feed mills at the Dock Road and to modernise the Mount Kennett provender mills.⁸ This was commenced despite the moribund state of the feed milling industry and the dreadful state of the livestock industry due to the Anglo-Irish Economic War when calves were practically worthless. Increasingly, Ranks were moving away from steam power to electricity to drive its mills, which was supplied from the new Hydro-Electric plant at Ardnacrusha. This shift to electricity occurred in other Limerick industries and indeed with home consumers in the 1930s.⁹

X To report at New Mill to Mr J Gallender at 8^{A.M.} on 3rd June. P89/820

- 30 B Higgins ✓
17 J Malone ✓
57 W J Spencer ✓
18 W Connors ✓
37 P D O'Connell ✓
58 B Bowke ✓
6 W Kennedy ✓
16 B Barry ✓
4 P H C Devaney ✓
93 E Purcell ✓
44 W Moran ✓
96 B Madigan ✓
85 S Halvey ✓
16 W O'Brien ✓
26 J Bowke ✓
28 S Copus ✓
7 F Nelligan ✓
22 W Hussey ✓
23 J H Cormack ✓
48 C Bowman ✓
38 J Stackpool ✓
39 P D Reilly ✓
48 W Connors ✓
59 H Fleming ✓
24 A Copus ✓
56 P Bowke ✓
25 P H C Mahon ✓
50 W Spencer ✓
54 J Sheehan ✓
32 J Hussey ✓
11 J D Keeffe ✓
60 E Woodrow ✓

All Power Plant Staff to report to Mr Mallo at 8^{A.M.} at Newtown Petty on 3rd June.

All others to report to Mr J Bowman at 8^{A.M.} Monday 3rd June.



The rise of Irish industry

The protectionism of the 1930s, alongside government aid to Irish companies, led to a reversal of fortunes for Limerick industries. The bacon factories were busy, although they were increasingly regulated, like Ranks. Mattersons expanded its Cannery. There were even new factories. There was a new clothing factory in Patrick Street in 1934 and the Limerick Shoe Company was opened in 1935.¹⁰ Limerick's population rose for the first time in over a century. The number of new factories was not significant however and indeed was far less than the number created elsewhere, especially in Cork and Dublin. The city's industrial base was not large enough to provide employment for many in the city and its hinterland's rising population. From the late 1930s, Ranks and Limerick bacon curers were to complain frequently that their profit margins were inadequate due to government regulations. This occurred in all the 'protected' industries.¹¹ As a result there was a lack of investment and over time, Irish firms were unable to compete internationally. Despite all the government interference, Irish protected industries formed local cartels, similar to that established by Ranks and others in the milling industry and these tended to push retail prices up and quality down.

P89 82 1
List of men transferred from Mount Kennett Mill to new provender mill, Dock Road, 1937
Limerick City Archives

Shovelling coal into a boiler at Mattersons Cannery. Steam power remained important in local industry until the 1950s
Cox Collection, Limerick City Museum

P60 24
Mattersons delivery trucks c. 1930
Limerick City Museum

P89 179 10
The Garryowen vessel undergoing repair and painting in dry dock 1922
Limerick City Archives



Progress in steps: A and B Mill

Despite Lemass' refusal, the company was almost by stealth, slowly building a modern milling complex on the Dock Road. A third new silo was built in 1937, to deal with the increasing amount of Irish wheat being delivered to the mills. In late 1937, Lemass did a policy u-turn and granted a milling licence for the Shannon Mills site. His decision was probably influenced, by the need to maximise flour production, in the event of a possible war in Europe.¹² Ranks immediately began construction upon two new flour mills at the Shannon Mills site. There were to be two mills, an 'A' and a 'B' mill. It was intended to close the City Mills and Newtown Pery Mills and transfer staff to the new mills. The project had no sooner begun than war broke out. The construction of the new flour mill on the Dock Road continued despite shortages. Many of Limerick's industries had to find alternate raw materials. Some of the timber yards in the city began to source their material elsewhere- James McMahon secured supplies from Latin America. Ranks transported machinery from the old mills- much of this was relatively new. However some of it was old- to the frustration of Cecil Mercier; 'to reuse the old dust collectors; a great disappointment.'¹³

Production at the new 'A' mill was postponed as Ranks needed another licence to operate the mill. This forced J.V. Rank to fly to Dublin in his private plane where he secured the licence in person. In June 1940 the new 'A' mill was opened for production. It was staffed mainly by mill hands from Newtown Pery, which was shut and used to store wheat, until the 1960s. The new 'A' mill soon proved very efficient and was producing a high grade of flour. There was a new urgency to produce flour as the war in Europe intensified. Soon any flour milled at the new plant 'went straight out the door'. Work then began on the new 'B' mill at the Dock Road site and on a new laboratory and stores. However, the new grain stores could not be finished as there was not enough timber for the floors. As Ireland entered the autumn of 1940- the threat of invasion became real. Germany or Britain could both attack the vulnerable Republic. There were plans drawn up for the defence of the state and this involved the protection of strategic assets. It was feared that Ardnacrusha Hydro-electric plant would be a target for an air-raid. If this were destroyed it would leave the Mid-West region facing a power crisis. Sean Lemass insisted that the City Mills be retained-it had been due to be dismantled in 1941.¹⁴ The City Mills were steam powered and could still be used even if Ardnacusha was attacked and destroyed. City Mills was 'mothballed' and kept in reserve. It remained in readiness throughout the war and was dismantled in 1946.

11

Wagstaffe,
Limerick.

Saturday
(January 1941)

My dear Dad,

Many things have happened over the past 21 years. This 7th June is a sad day for many of the men in our City Hill. She shuts down for good in a few hours & what a record she has behind her 1883 when the first 7 sack plant was erected to 1941 when she is turning out 35 sacks per hour. 58 years. John P. Donnell went to the firm of Bamford & Co. in that year & he is still hale & hearty & clear of brain & able to design or plan as well as any man after all that time. Truly he is a wonderful man & exceptional. I saw him walk home the same old way slightly tilted to one side & some steady gait

at nearly 2nd & too am lonely at the
thought. though I have time with so much
at Shannon & fine office you. I am going in
to play my respects & run in to see her wheels
come to a stop. There is something
hurting about that will, she represents
several generations of men's efforts & there
was her for over $\frac{1}{3}$ of her life as a flour mill
over 21 years & 3 months. though there
is no adversary for it I feel of course I go
in & see the end. She is more than a
good to make us very. she has fed millions
of the best of our country men. She is a
link with the great past. She has held
her own through trying periods. She
lack of interesting things & do in the garden.
but somehow I can tell her I. I used to go
in & see that great old plant settle down
to a stand still.

3

Arrived day 19th 1920, when you brought me in
& introduced me to Mr. Woolbody & I made
my first appearance here.
been a terrible week & again I have to tell
you that all my plans are going smoothly
every we are accounted for & planned
there will ultimately be about 40 odd for
furniture - 25 of them to our plant Miss
balloons flower plant stuff. John - well
only 17 have had pens in notice - there
are over 60 girls of age. There are
over 60 to go. They are not displaced
with the previous 34 - few weeks remaining
that I understand is higher than many
other previous elsewhere. I am having my
hair at 5th & hope to get to suit before
leaving you at 6th. We had a big
evening of shopping & machinery yesterday at
the new B mill but will not be in
for about three or four days or more. I

Now graduation now is very high. In getting
98% or 99% over the required 95%. Besides
improvement is not down from 48% to 80
% of all the schools which handle all kinds
of produce however in the last
four years however in the last.

Later

I saw the old mill sitting down. The others
now in the mill about 70 years old. It
is a lawyer who has been deceased today and
having found having found
off his shift this morning having
his overalls & the clothes, but he forgot
to remove his new shirt & tobacco. After
I heard he had got very drunk & was
dancing at the top of Rock St. One thing
all the men speak well of my consideration
for all employees & that I have gone
as far as I possibly could & help them
in the evening I spent weeding out
knots & spreading some gravel. Then he

has been away from school for past two days
as her mistress Mrs. Gilburn has graduated
from our schools. David went to a
play tonight at his school & enjoyed it
very much.

City Mill is off 90 on holidays straight,
Sharon on 7 staff return to work on Tuesday
after their holidays. David is
covered the floor of my
office with maple from the Johnson
mill floors. It is a very good job.
I had a will offer from Mr. Her. Nelson
which I refuse. John will come for the
last school report. I will close for the
present with love from G. David Penn
& your ever loving son
Geo.

5.

i been away from school for past two days
as her mistress Mrs. Gilburn has graduated
from our schools. David went to a
play tonight at his school & enjoyed it
very much.

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& your ever loving son
Geo.

Despite the shortages, Ranks continued to develop the Dock Road site and at the beginning of 1941, the millers were operating two flour mills, the old City Mills and the new 'A' mill. Work continued apace on the new 'B' mill and it was completed by May 1941. Mill hands from the old City Mill were transferred to the new 'B' mill. Its completion was an occasion of great joy for Rank's staff-they were personally congratulated by Arthur Rank for their work. On the 7th of June 1941 the City Mill closed 'a sad day for many of the men in our City Mill'.¹⁵ Many of the staff were transferred to the new 'B' Mill. This was not the end of the work as construction continued on new office buildings, a warehouse and on the silos. The new Shannon Mills were particularly impressive. James H. Roche described '*the layout as a whole as a masterpiece of engineering skill*'.¹⁶ Some 400 workers were employed at the complex and this increased during the busy wheat season.

The almost complete absence of maize meant that little animal feed was being produced by the plant. Ranks found the idle provender mill workers temporary work on the construction site. The opening of the 'B' mill resulted in redundancies for many mill hands. Older workers were given generous settlements with pensions. Some younger men also were obliged to leave the mills.

Those selected by the management were mostly single men.¹⁷ It was hard for the young men to find work in Limerick, as unemployment was high. There was full employment in Derry a city at war, but there were extremely limited opportunities in a city at peace. There was the question of what to do with the provender mill hands- construction work at the Shannon Mills site was almost finished by the end of 1941. They could no longer be given work as labourers and there was simply no maize to mill. The management in agreement with the Transport Union, urged J.V. Rank to find unemployed provender mill hands work in England, an indication of the severity of the unemployment crisis in Limerick. In the event J.V. could not find the men any work- he probably did not want to be seen to be facilitating Irish emigration to England, a controversial issue at the time.¹⁸

The provender mill re-opens

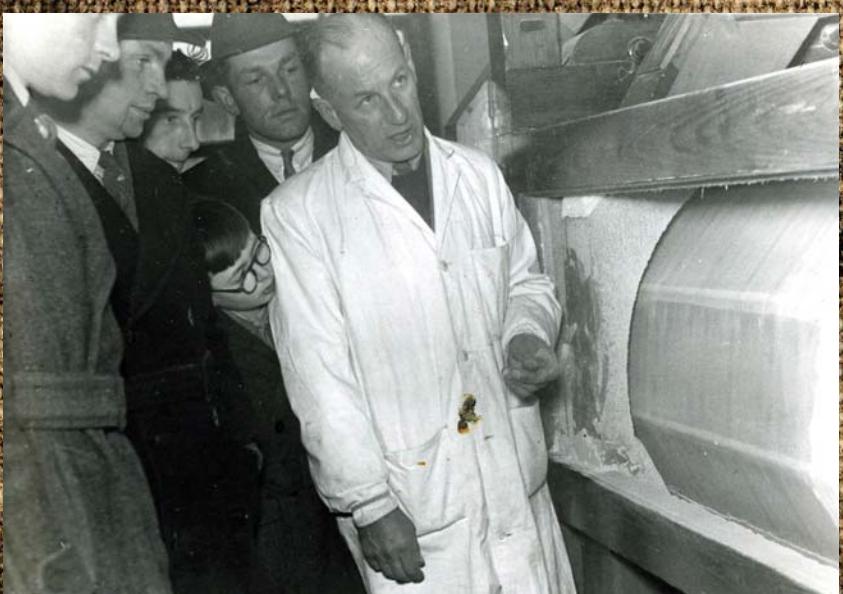
The Shannon Mills and Mount Kennett provender mill re-opened after the war.¹⁹ However, maize remained very scarce and most of the feed produced at the mill came from by-products of wheat and meal. If maize had been available Ranks products would have found a ready market as in 1946, much of the country's fodder was lost due to poor weather. There were reports of animals dying of starvation in parts of the country.²⁰ Furthermore, the scarcity of maize resulted in high prices for pig meal which had disastrous consequences for the bacon curers of Limerick. The shortage of animal feeds had made pig breeding uneconomical and there had been a major drop in the pig population.

The bacon industry could simply not get enough pigs to slaughter and cure- its very existence was called into question. In April of 1946, there were calls for the bacon industry to be nationalised. Shaws the oldest bacon factory was in dire straits and in 1947 was taken over by Clover Meats. Ranks, aware of the needs of the bacon industry, developed a new mash, hoping to capitalise on the demand for pig feed and they decided to build a cubing plant at the Dock Road site. This new plant was envisaged to supply farmers in the pig, cattle, sheep and poultry sectors. The construction of the new cubing plant, which was to produce animal feed rations, was well under way in early 1949.



P90 14 12
Ranks Flour Mill exterior c. 1985
Courtesy of George Spillane

P89 3 28
View of Limerick harbour taken from Ranks Mills c. 1940
Limerick City Archives



Blue Cross products

Ranks began marketing its feed products under the Blue Cross brand with a major advertising campaign aimed at farmers. The company began to develop new products at this time. The company's directors ordered Ranks Limerick management to experiment with barley in the production of feed, as barley was relatively easy to grow in Ireland. The company conducted its own experiments. Ranks investment in its feed milling division was to pay dividends as the Blue Cross Brands became a great success throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Blue Cross Brands were skillfully promoted by Ranks who often employed former G.A.A. stars as salesmen. Ranks and Odlums came to dominate the feed industry by 1960 and this led to worries about a cartel arrangement in this sector similar to the flour market.

Storage Storage Storage

Storage was becoming an increasing concern for the company, as Irish wheat output increased after the war and by law the millers were obliged to take in much of the crop. To deal with the issue the company decided to build a new silo- the fourth silo at the Shannon Mills site. In December of 1953 a Dutch company was awarded the contract. As usual Ranks used mainly local labour and building materials. The new silo was complete by the summer of 1954 in time for the wheat season.²¹ The wheat arrived late and was exceptionally wet.²² The Ranks mill superintendent described it as 'wringing wet'. This was a great challenge to the Limerick millers- it meant that they had to dry and re-dry large quantities of wheat. This was not just a technical challenge it was also very costly. At this time the mills overhauled the wheat intake system for the 'Wheat Season', due to the pressure of receiving large amounts of wet Irish wheat annually. Ranks also increased the numbers engaged in testing the wheat and constructed more dryers, which were located in the silos.²³ To exacerbate the situation the local millers had to get the permission of the London headquarters to raise the level of H₂O, in their flour as the quality of the flour was poor and customers complained.

Ranks in the early 1950s employed roughly 500 people and this could increase to 1000 during the wheat season. Ranks continued investment in Limerick was not typical of the time. Limerick's other traditional industries were beginning to stagnate at this period due to lack of investment. Nestled behind the protective trade barriers, they didn't need to invest to secure markets, and their profits could not justify large scale investment. The companies management were often old fashioned. There was a lack of product development and the companies were heavily regulated. The industries were geared towards the home market and failed to find export markets. Cleeves, in the 1930s', had exported condensed milk all over the world but by the mid-1950s, they were only exporting to Malta.²⁴ Limerick, like the rest of the country was stagnating in the 1950s as no new industries developed in the post-war period, much to the alarm of local politicians.²⁵ Limerick was riven by unemployment and social problems. Hungarian refugees, fleeing Communism, at home, were reluctant to stay in the impoverished city, despite being greatly appreciative of the welcome and kindness given to them by Limerick people.



Limerick as the nerve center for Ranks operations

In the late fifties Ranks purchased mills in Dublin and Donegal. In 1960, there was a proposal to relocate the Ranks offices from Henry Street to the Shannon Mills. Lord Rank claimed that the relocation of the offices to the mills would enable the '*executives to be on the spot to deal with problems*'. The new Limerick offices were in reality built to facilitate a rationalisation of the Ranks administration. In April 1960 the staff at all the Ranks offices throughout Ireland were informed that the company intended to centralise its clerical work. Limerick gained, at the expense of Ranks office staff elsewhere in the country, as Ranks new Limerick offices now handled most of the clerical and administrative duties for the company. In the early 1960s the company invested heavily in the provender mills making it one of the most advanced in the country. In 1970, the company bought one of the first computers in the city, which was used to calculate components for animal feed stuffs.

P90 22 4
Office staff outside Ranks office,
Henry Street c. 1950
Courtesy of Anne Ashton

P90 22 3
Office staff at the window of
Ranks Office c. 1950
Courtesy of Anne Ashton

P89 3 10 28
Ranks demonstration to the Irish
Countrywoman's Association c. 1970
Limerick City Archives



Management

Poor management was a problem throughout Irish industry and lagged behind international modern techniques and skills. Furthermore, many managers had family or personal links to the business. There were moves at this period to improve the quality of Irish management, in the interests of the Irish economy. This had first been urged in the 1950s but only came to fruition in the 1960s. During the late 1960s, Ranks had reviewed its Limerick operations and found that Limerick management practices were outdated. This led to a streamlining of management and the introduction of new practices using forecasts and targets. Ranks was at the forefront of the new developments in Irish management training and were among the first Limerick companies to initiate a management training programme for its company. Recruits spent time in each department of the business. Other Limerick companies followed, developing their own management training schemes and by the 1970s they were common. From the early seventies onwards the company increasingly contracted out much of its office work to Cara, a Dublin company, which computerised the company's records. This led to some redundancies in the offices.

Fall in bread consumption

Bread consumption was falling from the 1950s onwards and this led Ranks to invest more in marketing and new products. Ranks began to package its products in a more attractive manner and invested in a 'small packaging department' in the 1950s. This produced, smaller more convenient packages of flour which were aimed at the Irish housewife. Ranks also created a home baking advisory service, based in Limerick using modern media to advertise Ranks Flour. However, despite these efforts, the consumption of bread continued to fall, while Ranks new management was not able to control costs, unlike Odlums.

P90 15 5

Lord Ranks and other Ranks staff at the retirement of Sam and Alphonsus Copues and Elizabeth Kirwin, Lord Rank is seated in the centre c. 1955
Courtesy of Michael and Albert Copues

P90 15 1

First Provender Mill Social c. 1955
Courtesy of Michael and Albert Copues

P90 16 3

Ranks Directors, Management and staff
Front Row L-R
Maurice Goodbody, Major T.R.W. Deakin,
Peter Greenwood, unknown, Myles Stubbs,
(standing behind him) Bob Matthews
Second row (ladies only)
Unknown, Brid Dowling, Josephine Brereton,
Cath O'Herlihy
Courtesy of Ted O'Connor



Repair and maintenance

The level of capital investment by Ranks on its Limerick complex became limited after the early 1960s, apart from investment in fork lifts which greatly reduced the need for casual labour. In the early 1970s there was a major investment in the provender mills, but this ran overtime and over cost. Apart from this and a general overhaul of the mills in the early 1960s, the level of capital expenditure, namely spending on machinery and buildings was much reduced. Ranks level of profits could not justify the much needed large scale investment required for the Shannon Mills complex. Ranks, as it operated in the heavily controlled flour market could not earn an adequate return on its past investments and this deterred future investment. As a result the Limerick mills became increasingly uncompetitive, as Ranks did not invest in the latest milling technology. Much of the machinery used by the flour mills dated from the 1940s, although it still remained reliable.²⁶ The Garryowen, the pneumatic tug, was still operating in the early 1980s, even though it had been built in 1921. That the mills operated was due to the maintenance staff, often assisted by some of the old mill workers, whose skills were invaluable in keeping old machines running. Much of the company's capital investment was diverted into securing ever more storage space, to deal with the huge amounts of Irish wheat that the company was obliged to take by the government. The company had to secure storage space at Cahir in an attempt to cope with the wheat harvest in 1968.²⁷ This lack of investment was to greatly contribute to the closure of the mills and when protectionism was dismantled in the 1970s the industry was very vulnerable to foreign competition.

End Note

- 1 P89/60, Mercier Papers, Limerick City Archives (LCA)
- 2 OHP/RK/21, Oral History Interview Joe Malone, LCA
- 3 Irish Independent, 4 November 1930
- 4 Burnett, 'Through the Mill', p.89
- 5 P89/10, 11 March 1931, LCA
- 6 P89/13, 19 February 1934, LCA
- 7 Irish Independent, 4 May 1935
- 8 P89/124, 5 June 1935, LCA
- 9 17 February 1931, Irish Independent
- 10 Irish Press, 6 October & 24 July 1934; 10 July 1935
- 11 Limerick Leader, 13 February 1939
- 12 OHP/RK/11 Oral History Interview Albert Copues; Irish Independent, 2 January 1937, LCA
- 13 P89/20, 28 February 1940, LCA
- 14 P89/20, 8 February & 6 & 8 June 1940, LCA
- 15 P89/50, LCA
- 16 Irish Press, 31 May 1941
- 17 P89/20, 28 May 1941, LCA
- 18 P89/22, 5 September 1942, LCA, Patterson, Ireland since 1939, pp.61-69
- 19 P89/128, 4 July 1949, LCA
- 20 Daly, 'The First Department', p.287
- 21 Ibid. 14 September 1956
- 22 Limerick Leader, 27 November 1954
- 23 Limerick Leader, 27 November 1954
- 24 P94/6, Cleeves Papers, LCA
- 25 Limerick Leader, 23 July 1952
- 26 OHP/RK/1, Oral History Interview Tony Clohessy, LCA
- 27 Irish Independent, 31 August 1968





CHAPTER THREE

Ranks, Government regulation and the politics of milling

P90 14 3

Ranks staff from the Returnable Sacks Department c. 1955
Courtesy of Mary Owens

P90 22 7

Ranks staff in Caherdaniel in May 1961
Jack O'Keefe, Florence Wardell, Paddy Egan, Jack Sciascia, Tom Quin
Courtesy of Ann Ashton



Ranks, Government regulation and the politics of milling

One commentator in the 1960s claimed that the Irish milling industry was the most 'regulated industry in the country'.¹ Government regulation initially benefited Ranks, especially protectionism, but ultimately Government regulations and pricing policy contributed to its demise and closure. Flour was a staple food for the population and animal feed was essential for the state's key industry, agriculture. The flour and feed milling industries were seen as vital for the Irish economy by successive Governments. From the 1930s onwards, Government regularly intervened in the Irish milling industry. To understand Ranks Mills, it is necessary to assess the array of Government regulations that the plant had to operate under and to analyse their impact upon the business, success and eventual closure of the mills.



P89 3 10

Photograph of Jim Kirpatrick, Spence Collison, D.C.C. Mercier and a woman seated at a desk in Mercier's' office in
Newtown Pery Mills c. 1920

P89 3 7

Newtown Pery Mill staff c. 1935
Limerick City Archives





Fianna Fáil and Protectionism

The new Fianna Fáil Government of 1932, sought national economic self-sufficiency in order to guarantee Irish sovereignty and to promote national prosperity. The ownership and future of the milling industry was near the top of the new Government's agenda. There was great uncertainty and worry among many in the milling industry concerning the new Government's intentions.² In pursuance of Fianna Fáil's policies, the Control of Manufactures Act (1932) was passed. This legislation sought to limit foreigners' involvement in native industries. This Act did not affect Ranks greatly as millers were exempt from the terms of the act. Ranks were a British company in a country where anti-British sentiments were strong.³ Ranks went about its business quietly and was clearly willing to adapt to conditions in Ireland. The British company continued to trade under the old brands and logos of Bannatyne and Goodbody. No British managers were appointed to the local mills. Ranks were pragmatists and did not want to antagonise the Irish public who were its customers. In June 1932 Ranks had the flag of the Irish Free State hoisted over the mills for the first time.⁴ This demonstrated to Limerick and to the Irish nation that Ranks Mills was an Irish operation and committed to Ireland. It was a typically shrewd move by Ranks.

Tariff walls

In May 1932 a tariff was imposed upon imported maize. Maize was consumed chiefly as part of animal feed and the tariff was designed to encourage Irish farmers to grow cereals for animal feed. The tariff on maize caused feed prices to increase and was a blow to the livestock industry and to Ranks important livestock feed business. The Government also announced a tariff on every sack of imported flour from the 1st of September 1932. This made imported flour prohibitively expensive for Irish consumers. A quota on the amount of flour that could be imported was also introduced. The Government imposed the tariff and quota to encourage self-sufficiency. They believed that behind the tariff walls the indigenous milling sector would prosper and expand.⁵ Ranks acquisition of mills in Limerick and Cork had proved to be a timely investment. If they had not purchased the mills and continued exporting flour to Ireland the duties and quotas would have rendered their flour uncompetitive and they would have lost their share of the Irish market. The reaction of the Goodbody's is unknown. They had lobbied for such a tariff on imported flour for years. If they had been able to persevere for another two years their mills may never have come into the hands of Ranks. The introduction of bacon tariffs saved the local bacon industry. Mattersons and O'Mara's bacon factories had been on the verge of liquidation in 1929. They had managed to cling on and after the imposition of a tariff on imported bacon soon returned to profitability.⁶

‘most regulated
industry in the country’

P90 15 6

Returnable Sacks Department c. 1955
L-R: Josie Shinors, Ann O'Brien, (Marie) Boland
Front- Elizabeth Kirwin
Courtesy of Albert and Michael Copues

P90 14 1

Photograph of a group of Ranks workers on board a ship docked in Limerick harbour.
Back Row L-R: Ed Doherty, V. O'Donnell, Mick Bowman,
Front Row: Deny Walsh, Tom Clancy, Seamus Murphy,
Gus O'Neill and Bill Long
Courtesy of George Spillane

Ranks Mills taken from the Dock Road c. 1940
Limerick City Museum



The Cereal Act 1933

The Cereal Act of 1933 was central to Fianna Fáil plans for the tillage and milling industry in Ireland. It revolutionised the milling industry in Limerick and Ireland and set the pattern for the industry for the next five decades. It imposed great costs upon millers such as Ranks as they now had to purchase and mill more native Irish grain.⁷ The Act was intended to promote local cereal growing and reduce dependence on imported grains. As a result every cereal farmer had a guaranteed market. Furthermore, every mill was licensed by the appropriate authorities and had production quotas imposed on it and was fined if they exceeded these.

This dramatic legislation was to present major practical challenges for the Limerick mills. The biggest challenge was the order that a certain percentage of Irish wheat was to be employed in the milling of flour. Irish wheat had a high moisture content due to the climate. This made it difficult and expensive to mill and the flour was of a poor quality. Millers normally used imported grain. To process more Irish wheat into flour required technical adjustments to the milling process. Irish wheat had to be dried to reduce its moisture content, prior to milling. Ranks had to invest in more storage facilities and machines to dry Irish grain before it could be milled. Ranks mixed imported wheat with Irish grain to produce its flour. This was a great technical challenge for the Limerick millers.

Profits for millers: high prices for consumers

The impositions on importing foreign flour had effectively granted Irish millers a monopoly on the sale of flour in Ireland. The impact on Ranks flour operation was dramatic. By January 1933 both of the Limerick flour mills at the City Mills and Newtown Pery were busy. Imported flour all but disappeared from Irish shops. There was a huge growth in the Ranks flour business.⁸ Because of the tariffs, the cartel between British and Irish millers was ended. New opportunities opened up for Ranks thanks to the Government's protectionist measures. Northern Irish millers had traditionally supplied County Donegal with flour. As they were part of the United Kingdom, a tariff was imposed upon their flour. From 1934 Ranks dispatched large quantities of flour by ship to Donegal. The Control of Manufactures Act (1934) demanded greater Irish ownership of Irish business. This legislation was retrospective and Ranks was obliged to alter its ownership structure. In March, Ranks issued shares for a new company Ranks (Ireland).⁹ Harold and James Goodbody, both directors, believed that the company should have a name other than Ranks, which was a 'red rag to a bull' in Ireland.¹⁰ The shares issue for Ranks (Ireland) was oversubscribed. Despite the apparent changes, the Ranks operations in Ireland were still controlled by the parent company in London. It has been estimated that 90% of the preference shares remained British owned. Again Ranks nimbly played the game of Government regulation and continued to prosper.

By 1939 Fianna Fáil's policies in relation to the milling industry and tillage were apparently successful. There was a leap in the acreage under the plough and new mills had opened. However, there was a price to be paid for this and the consumer was paying for it. Lemass was prepared to accept high prices to ensure Irish self-sufficiency in wheat. This was a real hardship for the poor. Irish flour and bread prices were higher than Northern Ireland and continued to be for many decades. By 1937 Ranks was only one of two major milling groups, along with Odlum's in the country. Ranks controlled 30% or more of the Irish flour markets. Ranks with other Irish



millers formed a new cartel under the auspices of the Irish Flour Millers Association. This benefited the millers as there was no competition and their market share was guaranteed. Ranks market share remained around 33% for 40 years.¹¹ Ranks business was concentrated upon the western seaboard and they had a near monopoly of the flour trade in this region. They set prices and conditions of sale on flour with other millers in the area. Similar local arrangements existed among millers elsewhere in Ireland. This cartel was tolerated by the Government as the millers were purchasing wheat from Irish farmers. Ranks profitability was further boosted by a contradiction in Sean Lemass' policy on flour milling. Flour prices needed to be kept high for the benefit of the wheat growers and the smaller inland mill, yet it was the larger millers like Ranks that gained most from the high price of flour. Ranks was soon making impressive profits and paying its shareholders large dividends. Ranks paid a bumper dividend of between 26% and 29% from 1934 until the outbreak of the Second World War. This proved controversial with opposition politicians claiming that Ranks were profiteering. Pig farmers also accused Limerick's major bacon curers of making excessive profits at this time.¹²

World War II

The outbreak of war in Europe had a major impact on Ireland and on the milling industry in particular. The Irish Government passed the Emergency Powers Act (1939), in response to the outbreak of the Second World War in Europe.¹³ This sweeping act enabled the Government to issue emergency orders in the interest of public safety and the maintenance of essential supplies. These Emergency Orders set the prices of essential commodities. The price of flour was set and Ranks could only sell its product at the Government endorsed rate. All of the other Limerick industries, Cleeves, the Bacon Curers and the clothing factories also had their prices fixed by the Government. Imported wheat became scarce during the winter of 1939, mainly due to a shortage of shipping space. Yet there was an adequate supply of Irish wheat and imported wheat in stock, thanks to the Cereals Act of 1933. There was no bread rationing introduced in Ireland, unlike in Britain. This was critical as bread was a staple food of the Irish population. Ireland was apparently well placed to supply much of its own wheat needs.

Extraction rates

However by early 1940, it was clear that Irish mills supply of imported wheat could not be guaranteed and more flour would have to be ground from Irish wheat. The Government ordered the millers to extract ever more flour from Irish wheat to ensure that the country had enough flour. The resultant flour was of inferior quality and many sieved it at home to improve its quality for baking. The Government increased the extraction rate twice in 1940. In the winter of 1940 Irish millers were extracting at a higher rate than that expected in England.¹⁴ The mills struggled to meet the Government's extraction rate, they could be fined or even have their license to mill revoked by the state if they failed. Ranks' millers struggled to produce acceptable quality flour within the required extraction rate. The flour produced was poor and there were growing customer complaints.¹⁵

LUNDI—14 Octobre, 1940 288—78 LUNES—14 de Octubre de 1940

MONDAY—October 14th, 1940

Sun rises 6:21 : sets 5:10 Lighting up 5:40 High Water London Bridge 12:39 a.m.; 12:52 p.m.

MARDI—15 Octobre, 1940 289—77 MARTES—15 de Octubre de 1940

TUESDAY—October 15th, 1940

Sun rises 6:23 : sets 5:8 Lighting up 5:38 High Water London Bridge 1:17 a.m.; 1:26 p.m.

LUNDON 1940

A.C. office 9 a.m. Offered
to continue residence, now the A.C.,
to receive land from him covering buildings
in the land with the old house.
He said "I'll go to you again,
if we have a new Order".
Lufthand says "are you
offering anything with a high exposure in 7%
debt".
Went over few hill roads
he said "I'll find the
equivalent in the
A.C. just before reaching the Hill
surprise building. I'll take
you off in afternoon about 4 p.m.
I had a meeting with G. C. W.
at C.G.W. We trading in gold, he
no agreement reached at first. Then
G. C. W. agreed to give him
4000 £. to start his business. On this
matter, so. They agreed to do it.
J.C. on Thursday.

Owners asked me to talk
to G. C. W. — our new shop and
they get 10% for each but they
had demanded much more.

LUNDON 1940

10 P.M. 15 Oct. Leaves my
Mylmo & Son of St Albans by road
volumes. Been under Standard
who very good quality of timber
but not 70% of them are not what
good part 75% of them are not what
my office say is good for us working as
they took a very good lot of
on 15% of timber, I am pleased 14
we have taken in the A.C. by the
commodity in the A.C. by the
in opening up the old 40% building
as to building bridge 11:30 in Hill
feet 2 as new bridge 9:30 the 75%
construction. After him in
about 1000 ft & estimated
by him work on new station of
advertising and will be done
on New A Hill bridge or end of
is about 1000 ft ready for work
is off 4 1/2 mi. Ground of framework
this is the beginning of August, an
owner tells me they failed to
get the road with old 10% they
who had been dealing with Keween
superior with Carl Walling So, Keween
they were having a hard time getting the 10%.

OCTOBER

NOVEMBER

DECEMBER

COPY

P89/132.

TO: M. T. & T. COODBOY

RECEIVED ON

MILLERS' CONTROL COMMITTEE

FOR RANKS (IRELAND), LIMITED,
LIMERICK.

32, Nassau Street,

DUBLIN; 11th August 1944

Dear Sirs,

Retail Flour

I am directed to draw your attention to the fact that the sample of Retail Flour which you recently submitted to the Irish Flour Millers' Association was found to be superior to the standard, and the Committee would be obliged if you will take immediate steps to bring your Retail Flour into a line with the standard. I will be glad if you will give this matter your immediate attention.

Yours truly,

for: MILLERS' CONTROL COMMITTEE

A. S. Whitehead, Secretary

RANKS (IRELAND), LIMITED, LIMERICK.

To.....

Mr. D. C. C. Mercier,
Shannon Mill.

In reply
quote GMG/REB.

7th March, 1942.

New Regulation

Kindly note we have been notified by the Flour & Bread Controller to-day that not more than 1½% Screenings can be taken off the Mills.

This cancels the previous instruction limiting the amount of Screenings to 2% which was issued by the Department on February 20th.

Surfoodbord

P89 12

Extract from Cecil Mercier's diaries concerning wheat extraction rates during the Emergency
Limerick City Archives

P89 132

Letter from Millers Committee to Ranks regarding war time regulation of milling
11 March 1942
Limerick City Archives

P89 130

Letter regarding war-time milling regulations 11 August 1944
Limerick City Archives

1941: A year of shortages for Limerick business

1941 was a difficult year for Limerick and its industries due to growing shortages of materials. Continued production depended upon the arrival of raw materials and the disruption of supplies often led to the temporary closure of a plant. There was a shortage of milk in the city due to a Government pricing policy that made dairying unprofitable. This led to great difficulties for Cleeves. Limerick clothing firms could not secure enough material although Limerick Clothing Company did manage to source yarn from Latin America and elsewhere but not in sufficient quantities. The company suspended production of high quality clothes wear and concentrated on providing uniforms to the Irish army. The milling and bacon curing industry both suffered due to the complete absence of maize, vital for animal feed. Ranks modern provender mill was lying idle due to a lack of maize and was only producing small quantities of feed for much of the war. Most of the mills workers were made redundant in 1942.¹⁶

The Government by 1941 was growing increasingly worried about the national wheat supply as imported grain was virtually disappearing. The Compulsory Tillage Orders of 1941 ordered Irish farmers to grow more cereals. This had boosted cereal production but the increased supply of wheat was still inadequate. The shortage of wheat obliged the Government to raise the extraction rate still further. It increased dramatically from 76% in the Autumn of 1940 to 95% in the Spring of 1941.¹⁷ Cecil Mercier wrote, that it seems that 'in Eire we won't have enough wheat to see us through'.¹⁸ It was very taxing for the mill to attain this high level of extraction but it was vital to ensure that the Limerick mills were able to supply the city and much of the western seaboard with the people's staple food. Such was the concern with the supply of wheat that J.V. Rank ordered the Limerick mills to experiment making flour from potatoes in early 1942. Making flour for bread from potatoes was not unknown in Europe. Tests on developing potato flour did not progress far and were soon stopped, possibly, because as other millers discovered later, potato flour was prone to a bread spoiling disease known as 'rope'.¹⁹



Impact of shortages and a poor harvest

As the wheat harvest was gathered in 1941, it became clear that it was going to be insufficient to meet the needs of the country. There were also concerns over the quality of the wheat. It had an especially high moisture content which made it difficult to mill. By the spring of 1942 it appeared that bread and flour rationing was inevitable. There was a national campaign for people to conserve bread by voluntarily rationing their consumption of the foodstuff. It was hoped that this plan would avert the need for rationing of bread and flour. Despite only limited rationing, the price of foodstuffs, already high before the war, was rapidly increasing. Wages were not keeping up with food prices. The poorest were hardest hit. Malnutrition was common according to one medical officer. Undernourishment was blamed for the rise in tuberculosis cases in Ireland. Between 1939 and 1945 it rose by one third. In Limerick in 1942, based upon the national average for urban areas, approximately 100 people died from the disease.²⁰ The situation in Limerick was grave-arguably it was more severe than in a city at war, such as Derry, where tuberculosis rates were actually falling.²¹ The response to the crisis was inadequate. The local chief medical officer called the local Tuberculosis Scheme 'in its present state of organisation and methods unsatisfactory'.²² Before rationing was introduced the Government raised the extraction rate for wheat once again and in February 1942, G.M. Goodbody wrote to Cecil Mercier informing him of official notification of instructions from the Flour Millers Association and the Flour and Bread Controller. 'Extraction goes to 100% as from Monday next'.²³ In effect it required millers to make flour exclusively from Irish wheat. This was not totally unexpected. Ranks had experimented with 100% extraction rate as early as the autumn of 1939. These previous experiments proved of great benefit in the difficult year of 1942. The mill management and workers were able to improve efficiency despite problems with machinery and energy supplies. It is a testament to the ingenuity of the millers and the laboratory staff that the Shannon Mills were able to reach 100% extraction rate.²⁴ Many deemed the bread from the flour inedible but to the starving millions in Europe it was probably a delicacy. Despite Ranks efforts, which included J.V. Rank trying to secure American wheat for Ireland, they were regularly accused of 'profiteering'.²⁵ Lemass defended the high prices as they were necessary for national self-sufficiency in wheat and flour.

The harvest of 1942 was good and this lead to a drop in the wheat extraction rate. The reduction in the extraction rate came partly about also due to medical concerns. There was a sharp decline in the phytic acid levels in the flour milled from 100% Irish. Many health experts believed this was contributing to the rise in cases of Tuberculosis (T.B.) It was fortunate that the extraction rate was dropped, given the dire public health situation, especially in urban areas such as Limerick.²⁶ Shortages were a real concern for the mills. Sacks became very scarce. This lead to the formation of the Returnable Sacks Department which was staffed by women to recycle used bags. This continued until the mills closed. The remaining war years were to prove a constant challenge for the Limerick mills. The quality of Irish wheat was poor and even though the Government's extraction level had been revised down, it proved difficult for Ranks to meet the percentage required. Meeting the extraction rate was a constant worry for the Ranks management.²⁷ On top of this difficulty there was further bad news for the Limerick millers. In the spring of 1944, the Electricity Supply Board (ESB) announced that it had to cut its supply by 10%. This caused great problems at the mills and shifts began to end early because of the energy cutbacks. In March the ESB exempted mills from the cutbacks, although they were obliged to conserve electricity. These power shortages caused great difficulties for Limerick's other industries and lead to the cinemas operating on a restricted basis.²⁸



The millers were monitored to ensure they reached the set extraction rate and were rebuked if the quality of flour was too high. In 1944 The Millers Control Committee wrote to Ranks Ireland informing them that the sample of retail flour supplied was 'superior to the standard and the Committee would be obliged if you would take immediate steps to bring your Retail Flour in line with the standard'.²⁹ Despite all the shortages, the poor quality wheat and the demanding regulations and orders of the Government, Ranks Mills managed to mill large amounts of badly needed flour, during the war years. Ranks had played a critical part in helping the city and the country avoid not only rationing but also hunger. The employees of the Limerick mills had performed a national service and had done much to enable the state to feed itself during one of Ireland's greatest crises.

P90 20 2
Ranks office football team c. 1959

Back Row L-R:
Fonsie Redden, Mick Mannon, Tommy Heaney, Des Noonan, Jack O'Keefe, Ger Kennedy

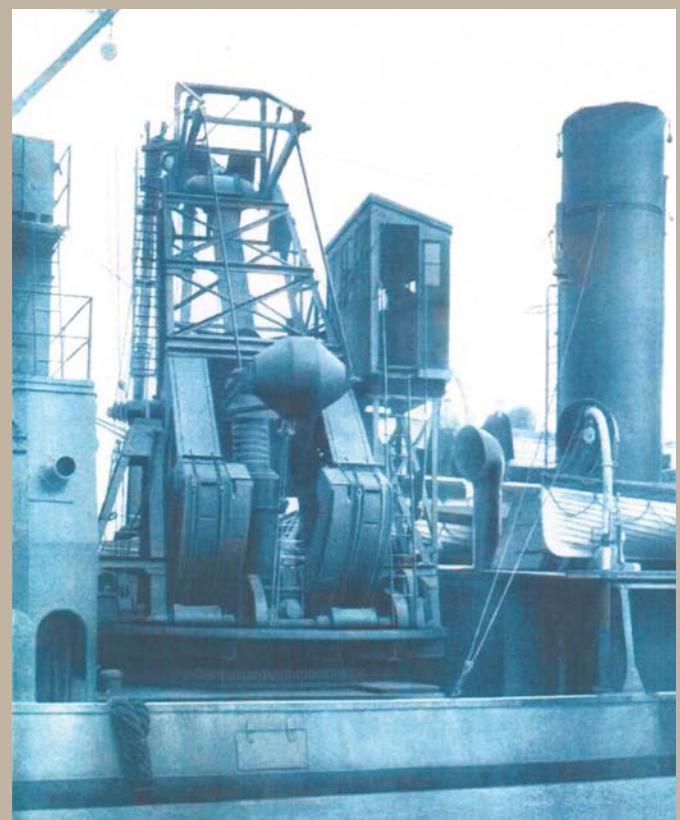
Front Row L-R:
John Noonan, John Flynn, Tommy Branigan, Jack Sciascia, Billy Cox.
Courtesy of Jack Sciascia



Post War 1945-60

Europe was on the verge of starvation after the war. The Irish Government alarmed at the prospect of famine in Europe, established the European Relief Scheme. This despatched badly needed food supplies to Europe. Apparently, Cleeves of Limerick sent much needed dried and condensed milk to Europe as part of this scheme, even though it led to shortages for these vital products on the home market.³⁰ The Government believed that Ireland would not be affected by the European food crisis.³¹ Ranks shared in this optimism and made plans to export flour from its new mills, to the continent. However, by the winter of 1946 the food supply in Ireland became a matter of grave public concern. It became clear that there was a worldwide shortage of wheat. An international committee was set up to coordinate the international supply of wheat. Ireland received very little imported wheat and was forced to rely almost entirely upon its own resources. The Government was obliged to raise the wheat extraction rate to 85% in 1946.³² The extraction rate in 1946, a year of peace was higher than in 1941, a year of war. In May 1946 it was feared that there was only a week's supply of Irish wheat left at the Limerick mills. Ranks of Limerick were obliged to take in damaged wheat from its sister mill in Cork, in order to produce flour. There was international pressure on Ireland to introduce rationing, in order for it to import scarce wheat. This forced the Irish Government to introduce rationing of bread and flour in January 1947.³³ Even without international pressure, bread and flour would have to be rationed, given the scarcity of wheat supplies. The Irish public was issued ration cards for bread and flour. Not all bread was rationed, a certain amount of flour was not rationed or subsidised. This was high quality flour and was referred to as 'luxury' flour. This meant that millers, such as Ranks of Limerick, operated in both a restricted market and in an open market, where regular market forces were at play.

Ranks was not alone in operating under Government regulations and dealing with shortages in the post-war period. Limerick's other industries also had to deal with shortages. In 1947, Cleeves suffered from shortages of milk.³⁴ The local clothing and shoe factories had to work with limited supplies of clothing. Limerick's clothing firms, in common with firms nationwide, had to continue the wartime expedient of using less cloth in making clothes. Fuel was also still rationed. This did not seem to affect Ranks deliveries, but it caused great disruption among other Limerick firms. The City Tannery was obliged to temporarily close down due to the firms inability to transport hides to its business as a result of petrol rationing.³⁵



P89 3 10 17 18
S.S. Garryowen c. 1920 the tug was built on the Clyde in Scotland
Limerick City Archives



P89 3 12
Visitors to Ranks c. 1948
Limerick City Archives

P89 3 11
Cecil Mercier showing part of grain gradual reduction process of wheat to visitors c. 1948
Limerick City Archives

Managing increasing quantities of Irish wheat

Bread and flour rationing was ended in 1953. However, the Government continued to heavily regulate the milling industry. It continued to support the growing of wheat, under the terms of the Cereal Act of 1933. Increasingly, Irish wheat was being grown for subsidies and the fixed price on offer. Many of the wheat farmers had huge concerns and were referred to as wheat 'ranchers'. Some commentators spoke of a wheat 'racket' where farmers grew the crop for the guaranteed price. They were becoming increasingly efficient, in the main thanks to their investment in sophisticated farming equipment. This large-scale cereal production was to cause real problems for Ranks and other Irish millers in this period as the wheat farmers began to increase their yields. This wheat was often of a poor quality and much of it was un-millable. Typical of the challenges facing Ranks due to Government regulations was the bumper harvest of 1960. The mills were unable to cope with the large grain deliveries but had to accept them by law. Ranks mill closed several times during the wheat season as it could simply not store all the cereals being delivered. This caused great frustration and anger among the farmers. The Shannon mills site had a huge storage capacity with stores around the city. However, not even it could cope with the flood of grain. The grain was wet even by Irish standards. This meant that it needed to be 'dried' in the mills 'dryers' for a longer period.³⁷ All of this greatly increased the production costs for Ranks. The company was growing increasingly frustrated with Government regulations, which were pushing up their costs, especially as the rest of the Irish economy was being liberalised.

Ranks from the 1940s to the mid 1960s was generally only a moderately profitable company, despite its arrangements with the other Irish millers and these profits represented a low return on the company's investments.³⁸ This had broadly been the case since the war years. The company was not making an adequate profit to justify all the vast sums it had poured into the Shannon Mills complex and its other Irish business'. The company estimated that it was earning a return of 7.5% when the expected return for manufacturing was 15%. This was due to several reasons including a fall in demand for flour. As societies became wealthier they tended to eat less bread, and this was the case in Ireland in the 1960s. The high costs of meeting Government regulations were another factor, particularly the costs associated with milling Irish wheat. These expenses could be borne by Ranks and other Irish millers as long as the price of flour reflected the millers' costs. The low level of profits made Ranks increasingly reluctant to invest in the Limerick mills and this had long term consequences for the firm.





The price of flour-milling for profit or for the Government?

In 1960s Ireland the structures of protectionism established from 1932 were still in place and the Government set the prices for a whole range of commodities and products.³⁹ Ranks flour was effectively price controlled, as were most of Limerick industries goods, from Cleeve's Condensed Milk to O'Mara's puddings. Sean Lemass had generally accepted the need for relatively high flour prices in the 1940s to secure national self-sufficiency in wheat and flour.⁴⁰ By the 1960s however, Governments were less willing to tolerate high flour prices and any hint of price fixing by millers, although they still demanded that Irish millers abided by expensive regulations and continued to accept Irish wheat. This put the Irish millers in a difficult position. The Government wanted them to mill Irish wheat which was costly, but would not let them raise their prices to levels which justified their enterprise and investment. The price of bread and flour was still an emotive political issue in the 1960s. It was more expensive than in Northern Ireland and there were regular claims in the press that Ranks were trying to establish a monopoly of flour milling in the country.⁴¹ Ranks was targeted because as a public company its profits were published every year. This made it more vulnerable to accusations of profiteering. Odlum's on the other hand was a private company and did not release its figures.⁴²

The issue of the price of bread and flour was referred to the Prices Commission in 1965. This body investigated company's profits and examined if the prices charged were justified. In late 1965 the Commission recommended that the price of flour and bread be reduced. These reductions hit the milling industry hard. The millers appealed to the Government to review the issue, basing their claim on rising costs and the expense of using Irish grains, rather than cheaper wheat imports. The Irish Millers pointed out that flour was more expensive than in Northern Ireland because millers had to mill costly, inferior Irish wheat. Ranks were particularly hit hard by the rising costs in the milling industry including increasing wage demands, which helped to fuel inflation in the general economy. Ranks profits fell the following year from £377,716 in 1965 to £273,832 in 1966.⁴³

The Irish flour milling industry was in crisis by 1966. The Irish Flour Millers Association in desperation, unilaterally, decided to raise the price of flour and bread, flouting the Government's regulation of prices. The Government in response threatened to license the importation of flour from abroad. Eventually, the Price Advisory Body agreed to raise the price of flour and bread, but only slightly. The Irish Flour millers, including Ranks were outraged at the minimal price rise. They began a publicity campaign to show why a price rise was necessary. Maurice Goodbody, a member of Ranks Ireland Board, was President of the Irish Flour Millers Association for the year. He appeared on television and gave newspaper interviews stating the millers' case. Lord Rank also gave several interviews on the issue.⁴⁴ Despite the campaign by the Irish millers the price of flour and bread did not increase. The tide was turning against Ranks in Ireland.

The price of bread and flour was simply too low for the Limerick millers and they stopped making large-scale investments in the company. The profits did not justify expenditure on modern technology and capital goods. This had disastrous long term consequences for Shannon Mills, as large scale investment in the flour mills was largely discontinued from the mid-1960s. While the low price of bread and flour was a major problem for Ranks and all mills, management in Ranks at this stage also failed to control costs, leaving very little money available for vital investment. Ranks was over-manned. It had simply too many workers by international standards. There were also too many managers and company cars. Ranks main rivals Odlum's, by keeping a tight grip on costs were able to continue investing in modern milling equipment and technology.



Decline of Limerick's traditional industry

Most of Limerick's traditional industries were in difficulties by the mid-1960s. The clothing manufacturers and Limerick shoe factory were worried about increased competition from foreign manufactures, especially after the Anglo-Irish Trade agreement of 1965. Cleeves condensed milk and tinned cream range of products were under threat from the growing popularity of household fridges. The city's bacon curers were beset by appalling industrial relations.⁴⁵ In 1966 the city's last tannery closed. Yet despite all the problems in these industries the city and its economy was relatively prosperous. Limerick was benefiting from the Shannon Free Trade Zone. During the 1960s the numbers employed in Shannon's factories and Airport rose dramatically with approximately 500 new jobs annually. Many employed in Shannon's factories were from Limerick city.

There were regular bus services between the city and Shannon Industrial Estate. Corus Iompair Éireann (C.I.E.) ran special services, collecting workers from estates such as Rathbane, and taking them to Shannon. There were several multinational companies in the city, attracted by the Industrial Development Authority (I.D.A) and Government incentives. The most significant of these was Krupps, one of the traditional giants of German industry. They had set up an electrical appliances plant in 1963. Krupps did not locate in Shannon because the freight charges at the airport were prohibitive and the company exported goods, at least initially through Limerick port. By 1966, Krupps employed approximately 500 people.⁴⁶

From the late 1960s onwards, the Irish milling industry received a series of overdue price rises for flour. This made Ranks more profitable and by 1970, it was one of the biggest companies on the Irish Stock Exchange. There was another bitter dispute between the Government and millers over flour prices in 1971, as even with price rises the company was not earning an adequate return on capital. A drastic and unpopular rationalisation and investment plan was probably needed at this stage to secure the future of the plant. If the company had insisted on reducing costs and improving efficiency at this time they could have boosted their profits and would have faced the new era ushered in by Ireland's E.E.C. membership, in a much stronger position.

Limerick Clothes
Cleeves
Limerick Bacon
Tannery
Limerick shoe factory

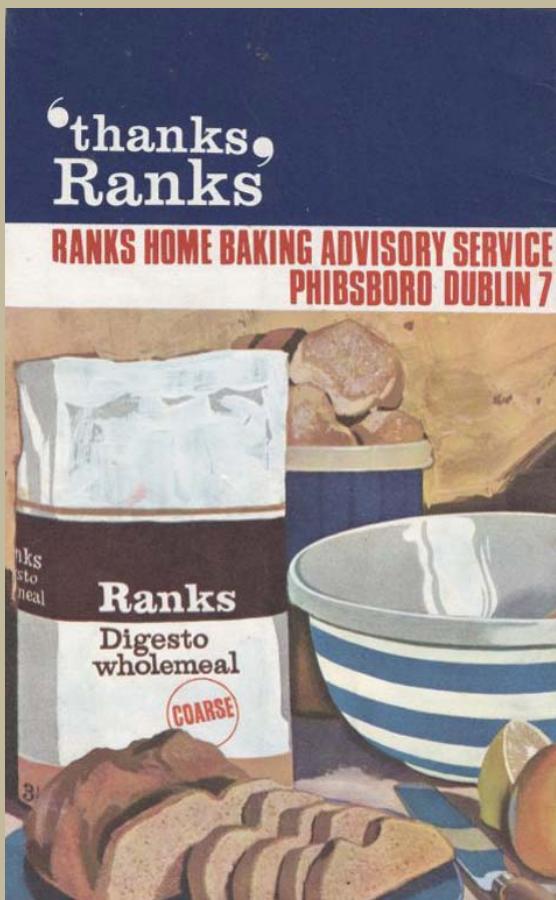
A New Era: Membership of the European Economic Community (E.E.C.)



1973 brought massive changes to Irish agriculture and industry. The old protectionist practices were abolished overnight and technically, anyone could now freely import flour. Flour imported from Britain would have been much cheaper than Irish flour as British mills were much bigger and had the advantage of economies of scale.⁴⁷ However, membership of the E.E.C. did not bring a flood of flour imports from Britain as Ranks parent company decided not to export flour to Ireland, in case it would damage its Irish investments. Ranks (Ireland) parent company in the U.K. also received the agreement of other British millers not to dump flour on the Irish market. The largest Irish supermarket chains also decided not to import flour-partly out of fears of a union backlash. The Irish Transport and General Workers Union (I.T.G.W.U.) was eager to see the limitation on foreign flour imports in their members' interest and the majority of Irish mill workers were members of the Transport Union. The Irish Millers Association agreed with the Irish Farmers Association to buy Irish wheat at a certain agreed price. As a result, despite the abolition of the Cereals Acts, the status quo remained and Irish millers were still buying their wheat from Irish farmers.⁴⁸ This meant that Ranks mills did not initially have to face full-blown international competition unlike other Limerick industries. However by 1982 there was increasing importation of British flour, as it was simply cheaper than native flour. This led to a disastrous drop in sales for Ranks. Along with other Irish millers they lobbied the Government to restrict the flood of imported flour. The Irish Government was bound by the E.E.C. not to interfere. For the first time since the early 1930s, Limerick's mills had to operate in a free market.

Ranks established themselves in Limerick, in order to preempt the imposition of duties on flour imports. The British millers evaded these by obtaining the Limerick Mills. Without this action, Ranks arguably, would never have established themselves in Limerick. The Fianna Fáil protectionist policies, ironically granted a guaranteed market for the British company and allowed them to generate impressive profits in Ranks (Ireland) early years.

However, even though Ranks operated behind tariff walls and was safe from internal competition, in the main because of its arrangements with Odlums' and other smaller millers, the company made generally modest profits. Government regulations eventually pushed up costs, while Ranks like other Irish millers could not increase the price of their product. Ultimately, Ranks did not receive an adequate return on their investments and together with high costs the company could not invest sufficiently in the mills. As a result when restrictions on imported flour were lifted, the company could not compete. Ranks fate was similar to that of the other Limerick's traditional industries. Government policies initially enabled them to flourish but Government pricing policies and costly regulations reduced profitability and hence investment in these firms. Ranks needed to rationalise and modernise in the 1970s to equip itself for the future where modern profitable mills operated with very few personnel. When the traditional industries were obliged to operate in a free market they were too inefficient to adjust to the new reality and went out of business and into history.

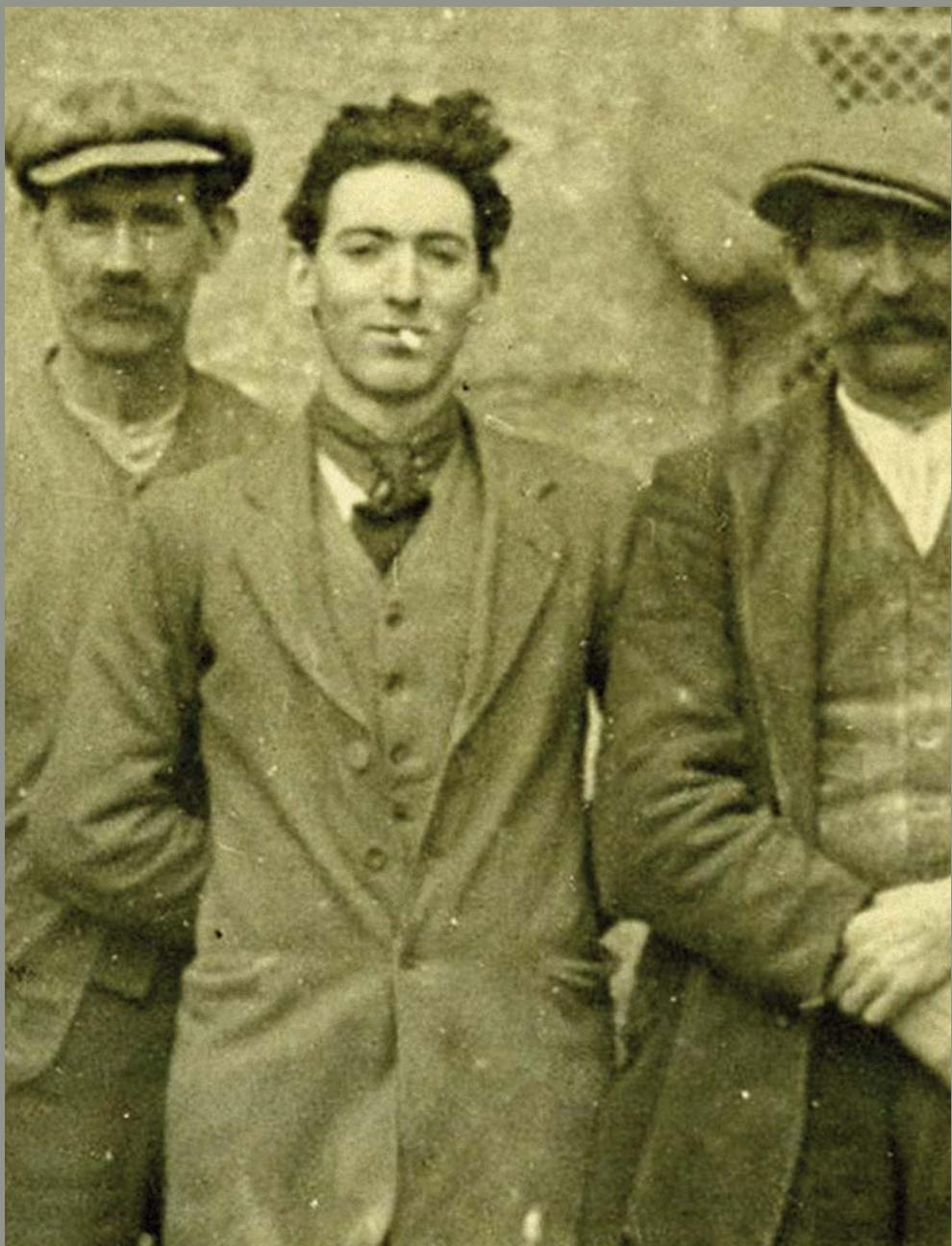


P90 3 6
Advertisements for Ranks products c. 1970
Courtesy Frances O'Brien

P89 190 4
Advertising Display for Ranks Friendship Flour,
Limerick City Archives

End Notes

- 1 Farmers Journal, 3 April 1966
- 2 P89/13, Limerick City Archives (LCA)
- 3 Irish Independent, 28 Mar 1932
- 4 P89/15, 21 June 1932, LCA
- 5 Akihiro Takei, 'The Political Economy of the Irish Flour-Milling Industry, 1922-45 in 'Irish Flour Milling', pp.150-3 6 LCA P89/11-12 January 1932
- 6 P89/11, 12 January 1932, LCA
- 7 OHP/RK/17, Oral History Interview Jack Sciascia, LCA
- 8 P89/14, 3 March 1935, LCA
- 9 Irish Press, 12 March 1934
- 10 Information supplied by Michael Goodbody
- 11 OHP/RK/17, Oral History Interview, Jack Sciascia, LCA
- 12 Limerick Leader, 21 December 1935
- 13 Emergency Powers Act (1939)
- 14 P89/20, 14 October 1940, LCA
- 15 P89/20, 12 December 1940, LCA
- 16 P89/21, 13 January 1942, LCA
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- 18 P89/8, 15 March 1941, LCA
- 19 Irish Independent, 15 April 1942
- 20 Oireachtas Debates, 31 January 1945
- 21 Patterson, 'Ireland since 1939', p.66
- 22 L/AH/PH/1/9/3 (18), LCA
- 23 P89/130, LCA
- 24 P89/22, 28 February 1928, LCA
- 25 Irish Press, 7 May 1941
- 26 Daly, The First Department, p.231
- 27 P89/23, 8 January 1944, LCA
- 28 Irish Independent, 10 June 1944
- 29 P89/132, 11 August 1944, LCA
- 30 Irish Press, 23 August & 11 May 1946
- 31 Oireachtas Debates, 9 July 1945
- 32 Irish Press, 10 February 1946
- 34 Daly, The First Department, p.264
- 36 Ibid. p.268
- 37 Irish Press, 16 May 1947
- 38 Connaught Tribune, 17 September 1960
- 39 Irish Press, 4 September 1960
- 40 Nenagh Guardian, 4 January 1965
- 41 Ibid. 12 December 1966
- 42 Irish Press, 7 May 1941
- 43 Ibid. 3 June 1965
- 44 OHP/RK/16, Oral History Interview Ted O'Connor, LCA
- 45 Irish Independent, 8 August 1965, 14 December 1966
- 46 Irish Press, 7 January & 14 March 1967,
- 47 OHP/RK/1 Oral History Interview Tony Clohessy, LCA
- 48 Limerick Leader, 10 April 1966
- 49 OHP/RK/14, Oral History Interview Paddy Deegan, LCA
- 50 Farmer's Journal, 7 August 1976



P89 3 10 41
Mill workers on strike c. 1922
Limerick City Archives

Roches Row
Houses were built here by millers for their staff
in the late nineteenth century



CHAPTER FOUR

Industrial relations at Ranks

Industrial relations at Ranks

By the 1960s Ranks Mills in Limerick had very good industrial relations, at a time when strikes and sit-ins were common. It is clear from the mill superintendents Cecil Mercier's diaries dating from 1922, that this wasn't always the case, and tensions between management and the unions feature regularly in his daily notes. Industrial relations in Ranks remained an ongoing concern for management but they were generally contained, and rarely boiled over into strikes. The industrial calm of the 1960s in Ranks which lasted almost up to its closure, was exceptional and unique in a city with a reputation for industrial unrest.

Paternalism

Traditionally, Limerick millers had a paternalistic attitude to their workers. One mill owner built houses for his workers in Roches Row.¹ J.V. Rank as a Methodist, and great philanthropist continued this paternalistic attitude to the mills workers when his firm took over the Limerick Mills. Ranks paternalism extended to the broader community -on one occasion J.V. Rank when being driven to the mill, spotted a boy wearing a shirt with 'Ranks Flour' still visible on it. It was common in Limerick for sheets, pillows and tea towels to be made from high quality Ranks cotton flour bags. J.V Rank had the car stopped, he got the boy's name and address and every Christmas after that the boy received a postal order from J.V Rank.²

Wages fall in the wake of World War I

During the First World War the Limerick mills made substantial profits as flour prices soared while Limerick mill hands received substantial rises in their wages - along with other workers in local firms, from the tanneries to the timber yards. Post-war contraction and national independence blew cold winds economically and the millers were unable to pay high wage rates as flour prices collapsed and mills and other industries struggled to survive. All of Limerick's traditional industries experienced industrial unrest, mainly over the issue of wage reductions. Strikes led to the break-up of the formidable Cleeves empire of dairies and factories in Munster. In 1923, the mill owners successfully reduced the mill workers wages, despite a national strike.³ Cecil Mercier became responsible for all the Goodbody mills in Limerick and Cork in 1924 and vigorously undertook a drastic review of work practices in the mills and sought to reduce the workforce.⁴ Mercier, influenced by modern management practices complained that there was no 'system in the mills' in Limerick.⁵ Mercier's innovations in the mills antagonised the mill hands.⁶ From this date onwards the relationship between employer and employee at the mills were regularly strained. The unions in the mills were weak, as was the rest of the union movement in Ireland. By the mid 1920s their membership had fallen drastically and were bitterly divided. Wages dropped nationally as the new Free State government held firm in its dealings with the unions, providing soldiers to safeguard the German firm Siemens Schuckert from strikers during the construction of the Shannon Hydro-Electric Plant.



P90 14 16

A photograph of prize giving after a billiards tournament for Ranks employees c. 1960

Back row L-R: Unknown, unknown, Fonsie Lysaght, Michael Daly, Davy O'Keefe, unknown, Joe Purcell, Mick Ryan, unknown, unknown, Mick Cross, Jim McCormack, Charley Woodrow.

Second Row, L-R: Edward Sciascia, Michael Donovan, unknown, Paddy Quinlivan, Noel McClosker, unknown, Paddy Dillon, unknown, unknown, Jim Kennedy, Sean Purcell, Edgar Woodrow, Tony Keane, Mick Bowman, Tom Burke, George Spillane

Front Row L-R: Joe Thompson, Christy Carey, Paddy Fitz, Donal Sheehan, Alf Bromell, D.C.C. Mercier, Tim Moroney, Joe Sheehan, Paddy Walsh, Sean Moore, Mickey Kiely

Courtesy of George Spillane



Ranks take-over and a rise in workers' power in the mills

In 1930 the takeover of the Limerick Mills by Ranks, a British company, put the mills' unions in a much stronger position than the general workforce as the British millers were keen to avoid controversy. The takeover saved the mills from closure but as national sentiments were easily bristled in the newly independent state, Ranks were keen to placate local opinion and treaded carefully with labour. The unions in the mills exploited this situation. Most permanent mill hands were members of the Transport Union, while some drivers and engineers were members of the Engineers Union. The mills also employed many casual workers who were not unionised. The unions began to press for these 'casuals' to be 'put on the clock' or in other words to be made permanent, and management agreed to take on some of the casuals as permanent. Soon there were further demands from the union as on the 22nd of September James Goodbody at a private meeting with Mercier urged him to avoid 'a strike at all costs'. On the 30th of September Cecil Mercier wrote that 'labour was in a bad way'.⁷ The management were eager to avoid a strike and the unions and management disputes continued into 1931 as the Transport Union demanded that only its members be employed on a permanent basis in the mill, with the exception of those positions associated with the Engineers Union. The management agreed - a remarkable turn of events indicating how unwilling the British company were to engage in any industrial disputes in their early years in the Free State.

Local management had not changed however and Cecil Mercier, known to be firm but fair, remained at the helm of the Limerick Mills. Many at Ranks London H.Q., like P. Jones, a senior Ranks miller, were 'not enamoured of Southern Ireland from a business point of view'. Ranks directors felt they had given enough to the unions and wanted more efficiency in the mills. When the mill hands at Mount Kennett went on strike in March 1931 management decided that there would be no discussions until work resumed. In April following a meeting with the Engineering Union, one of the directors stated that in dealing with the unions 'we will give nothing away'.⁸ The Union continued to press management over issues- yet they were not in a strong position as once the company was prepared to make a stand and face a strike, the union could do little, especially as demand for flour had fallen due to the Great Depression and many people were turning to potatoes as their staple food. A strike might have been even welcomed by management as a way of reducing their stocks of unsold flour.



The new Fianna Fáil administration was much more sympathetic to labour than Cumann na Gael and in general Ranks gave ground to the union in the period after the election of Fianna Fáil as union membership increased in Limerick and elsewhere during the 1930s.⁹ Ranks unions could be influential allies in support of Ranks position in Limerick and Cork but the company balanced this with the need to restrain the influence of the unions to keep costs low and productivity high. The company proposed a pension scheme for all employees and a Shannon Mills Benefit committee composed of union members and management was set up while some employees received a pay rise in November 1932. The Transport Union demanded movement by Ranks on the 'packing' issue - the weight of bags packers had to pack and the height they had to be stacked. When the company employed casual non-union labour for packing duties there was a threatened strike.¹⁰ The increasing self-confidence of the union membership can be seen in the assertiveness of the Engineering Union, the smaller of the two unions in the Ranks Mills, representing those who worked the engines in the mills, their assistants and some drivers. They began to lobby for more benefits for their members and sought equal recognition with the Transport Union.

REPORT ON CONFERENCE WITH MEMBERS OF THE IRISH
TRANSPORT & GENERAL WORKERS' UNION, 11 a.m. 9th MAY, 1929.

Present:- Local Organiser, Secretary, and Vice-President
of the I. T. & G. W. U.

City Mill - Patrick Power,
Daniel Clancy,
John Buckley,
George Ryan,

Newtown Pery - Thomas Carroll,
Edward Browne,
Patrick Doyle,

Mount Kennett C. Moynihan,

Matters discussed agreeing to Numbers on Men's
Memoranda of points.

1. City Mill.

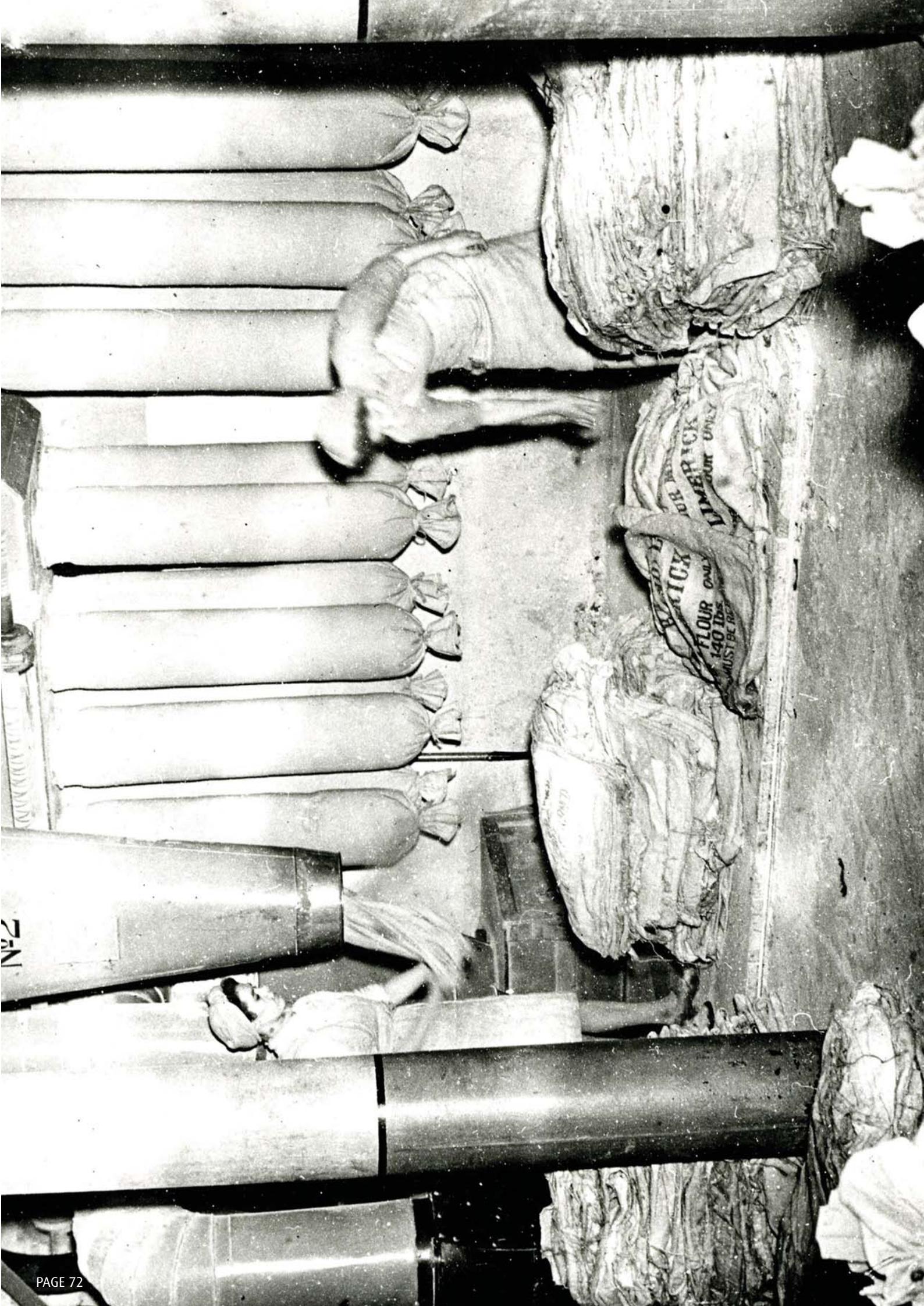
Bran Packer Men.

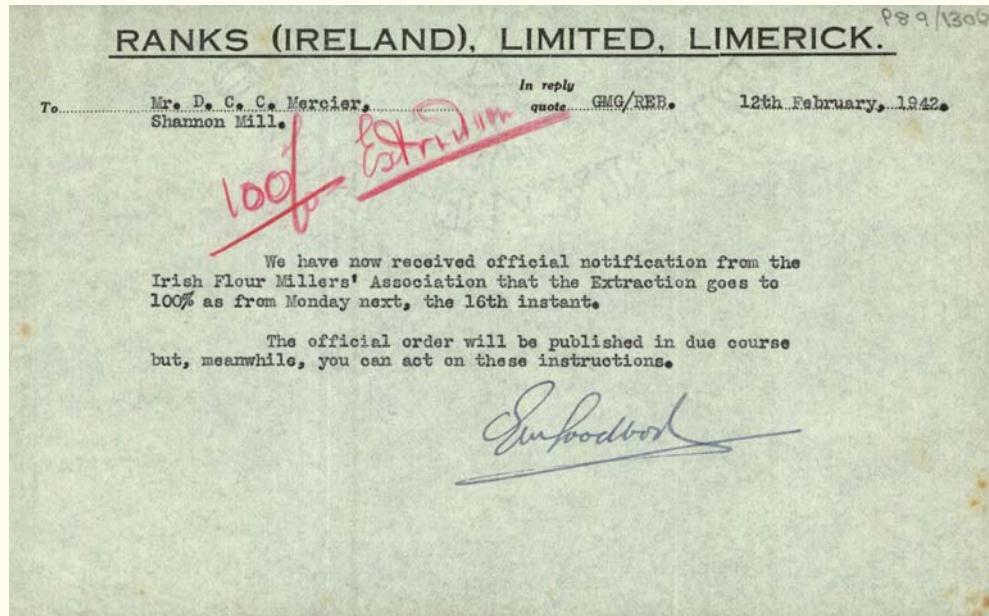
We agreed that these men had as much work as they could do, and the application for relief would be considered.

We did not agree that the Feeder-men had so much work to do that they could not relieve the Bran Packers as at present.

We cannot give these men extra help without incurring extra expense, but we do agree to a scheme whereby they will have relief for Meals. We cannot, however, arrange for reliefs to be given to cover all hours of the day.

Method for reliefs set forth on accompanying proposed solutions.





The Joint Industrial Council

Industrial relations had effectively come under government control by the mid-1930s in the milling industry. The Joint Industrial Council, comprising civil servants, employers and unions was set up to arbitrate over labour relations in Irish industry, including the Limerick mills.¹¹ The Industrial Council helped to improve industrial relations at Ranks and led to more stable and productive relations between unions and employers in the milling industry. Disputes between mill hands and mill owners were referred to the Industrial Council and under this system the mill hands secured a rise in wages in 1937 and eventually a reversal of the wage cuts of 1923. There were generally positive labour relations in the mills for most of this period and this was also the case with other Limerick industries, where workers conditions and wages improved and labour relations were relatively good.

In 1937 The Fianna Fáil Government, which opposed foreign ownership of native industries made a policy u-turn, when they granted a licence to Ranks to build a new flour mill on the Dock Road site. Ranks intention was to transfer the labour from the two existing flour mills to the proposed new flour mills on the Dock Road. The unions opposed the expansion as they feared that the closure of the older mills would lead to redundancies. The unions did not take industrial action, but they did begin a public campaign against the mill expansion and lobbied the Government to suspend the licence granted to Ranks to expand on the Dock Road site. They also enlisted the support of local politicians and on Sunday the 23rd of January a public meeting was held at Limerick Town Hall presided over by the City's Mayor. The dispute dragged on for some time and in 1939 a meeting between the management and unions was organised and it was agreed that there would only be limited job losses, that older and single men would only be affected and that they would receive generous severance payments or pensions.¹²

The stress of war

Mill workers played a vital role in feeding the nation during the Second World War and the Government provided them with an Emergency War Bonus - in contrast to many other sectors where wages were frozen under the 1940 Wages Standstill Order.¹³ All strikes were effectively outlawed by the Government and any disputes were referred to the Joint Industrial Council for arbitration. The unions still claimed that the Emergency bonus was not enough given the spiralling cost of living due to the shortages. Ranks Mills hands were better paid during the Emergency than many other workers in Limerick but they still suffered hardship. Ranks was aware of this and participated in a scheme that lent their employees money to purchase tools and seeds, in order to grow their own food. At this time, garden allotments, were to be seen all over the city, in a bid to keep the city and its population fed.¹⁴

LUNDI—26 Febrero, 1940 57—309 LUNES—26 de Febrero de 1940

MONDAY—February 26th, 1940

Sun rises 6:54 : sets 5:33 Lighting up 6:3 High Water London Bridge 3:41 a.m. : 4:8 p.m.

LUNERICK M/126

FEBRUARY 26th. Spent all day at my office in New Hill. Buying series of old maps etc. with my own new flour mill with my expenses to expense makers of roads for my supply etc in case of fire. It is believed that his should not be any hindrance but that it is not necessary, but that would save time in a few days. I have been working to all flour mill machinery. Spent some time at the Surveyor's office for the Surveyor's plan which showed up this afternoon.

MARDI—27 Fevrier, 1940 58—308 MARTES—27 de Febrero de 1940

TUESDAY—February 27th, 1940

Sun rises 6:52 : sets 5:35 Lighting up 6:5 High Water London Bridge 4:24 a.m. : 4:52 p.m.

LUNERICK M/126

MARCH APRIL MAY JUNE

9th. Spent 2nd & 3rd to 6th in phone albums for all supplies of antipersonnel bombs for New Hill - Agreed to forward bomb, requesting them to forward bomb of their orders as we are now greatly handicapped here since no arrival Sept 1st office to P.M. London & Reg'd office agree to come on 2nd & wrote numberless letters to New Hill. Received letter of N.P. of New Hill blocking up inventories against the requirements of B Hill. The P.M. Hill regulations for the government of B Hill also sent letter further stating that P.M. requirement & C Hill supplying memorandum of P.M. & C Hill regarding conveyance were unanswered.

26 27

New Hill at 67% demand of 1st now very advanced.

Food Shortage

1. ARE YOU AWARE THAT THE IMPORT TO EIRE FROM OUTSIDE SOURCES OF ALL CLASSES OF FOODSTUFFS BOTH FOR MAN AND BEAST HAS CEASED?
2. THAT ONLY A SMALL PORTION OF THE FOOD-STUFFS REQUIRED IN COUNTY LIMERICK WAS PRODUCED IN 1940 IN LIMERICK COUNTY.
3. THAT IF FARMERS, COTTIERS, LANDLESS AND UNEMPLOYED MEN DO NOT TILL IN SUFFICIENT QUANTITY THIS SEASON THERE WILL UNDOUBTEDLY BE A SHORTAGE AND GREAT PRIVATIONS. EVERY PERSON IN THE COUNTY OWES IT TO THE COMMUNITY TO DO ALL IN HIS POWER TO PREVENT SUCH A CALAMITY.
 - (a) FARMERS ARE ASKED TO CULTIVATE EVEN MORE THAN 1/5th OF THEIR ARABLE LAND.
 - (b) COTTIERS ARE ASKED TO TILL ALL AVAILABLE LAND.
 - (c) LANDLESS MEN AND UNEMPLOYED ARE ASKED TO CULTIVATE A PLOT OF GROUND WHICH CAN BE SECURED FROM THE BOARD OF HEALTH.

THE SECRETARY OF YOUR PARISH COUNCIL WILL SUPPLY YOU WITH ALL INFORMATION IN THIS MATTER.

ISSUED BY THE REGIONAL
COMMISSIONER FOR LIMERICK.

McKern's, Limerick

The Government imposed high quotas on the flour industry in order for it to meet the nation's needs while no flour could be imported. Millers received instructions to extract higher and higher levels of flour from wheat. This strained technical knowledge and machinery and led to ever more pressure upon the management and the workers. Managers demanded more work and effort from the mill hands as work practices were tightened up and more discipline was expected of the workers. Tensions were palpable and when one day a supervisor placed a man on an absent worker's machine, contrary to demarcation rules, it led to a lightening strike.¹⁵ Seventy workers at the flour mills were involved as the men stayed out all day- losing a full day's production. The strike was condemned in the local papers as reckless at a time of national emergency and was technically illegal under Emergency legislation, however no further action was taken against the strikers. In September 1942 an Irish Republican Army man was executed in Belfast for the murder of a policeman. Mill hands at Shannon mills stopped work for an hour in protest, possibly indicating some support for militant republicanism, but more likely illustrating frustration with the management, and with conditions at the mills. There were no further overt displays of support for the I.R.A.¹⁶

During the Emergency, crime became a problem in many urban centres, such as Limerick due to poverty and severe shortages. There was a long line of thefts of flour from the mill during the war-as flour became scarcer and more expensive. It became a highly prized commodity on the city's extensive black market. In the winter of 1942, Cecil Mercier, the Mill Superintendent, received a report that a carrier was taking more flour than he was entitled to-in effect stealing flour.¹⁷ The Garda Síochana were brought in to investigate. In early 1943 it was revealed that 50 bags of flour had been stolen and that the People's Bakery had inadvertently bought the stolen goods. Several people were charged over the thefts- including a checker employed by Ranks. These people were later convicted of theft.¹⁸ Cecil Mercier tried to speak for one of the defendants a former 'checker' at Ranks. He failed to prevent the jailing of the man. A former Ranks employee 'found him (Mercier) crying in Shannon Mills Office' after the trial.¹⁹ Thefts of basic foodstuffs and crucial supplies were dealt with severely during the Emergency as a deterrent to others, however it is clear that Cecil Mercier had great sympathy for the Ranks employee implicated in the case. In December 1941 the mill management called in the Gardaí concerning thefts from the mothballed City Mills. It was practically looted of anything of value such as scrap metal, bulbs and wood as none of these items could be imported throughout the war. Everyone returned to walking to work down the Dock Road as bicycle tyres and tubes could not be purchased.²⁰ In February 1945 the Returnable Sack Department was burgled twice and a large number of calico sacks were stolen- probably to be sold as material for clothing as cloth was so scarce and severely rationed. Some employees were implicated in the thefts and charged- the other Ranks employees held a collection for them, indicating sympathy for the men and frustration with the management.²¹

MR REID'S VISIT. STRIKE
JANUARY
AT SHANNON
MILLS

23 WEDNESDAY

Shannon Mills 9th Leaves at
order of volume 1st January 2nd
5th January 6th John Miller
The three Shannon samples
best in colour & stamp paid for
2nd partly the 2nd best being too
the 1st At 9:30 a.m. Colleagues
and I had agreed
and belts on the first lot of
belts forming the additional cost for
order of Shannon Mills - many offers are
not accepted. I informed Mr. H.
He Kennedy President IT&T C.C. told him
had occurred. He said informed me that
most Union members have said he
was going to get men to put up to work
in a shop had left mill for home
I was the first said he would
no 2nd till 4th 10th
indicated by Mr. J.C. to instead
binder of the men ordered to go to the
to work they refused 9th a man
man was told to lay men
equally all men in warehouse staff were
for my staffed all at 5th
I had who was forced to end the
strike strike ending up to the office.



Ranks were a British firm and while the British nation was at war they supported Ranks workers who left to fight. The company did keep open the positions of employees who joined the British forces. One young man who served in the Royal Air Force, the son of a deceased employee, had a position reserved for him with the company until he was demobilised in 1946. This caused some resentment at the time and since. Many of the mills management, such as Cecil Mercier, were former British soldiers, and this may have led to a bias in favour of returning ex-British servicemen.²² Men who had volunteered to join the Irish Defence Forces were the first to be demobilised and several sought their jobs back but Ranks were reluctant to offer these men their jobs back. One of the ex-soldiers claimed he had the right to be reinstated to his old job, under Emergency legislation. Apparently, Ranks only took these ex-employees back upon legal advice and the men were only offered casual positions with the company.

1946 strike

Industrial relations became more belligerent in the post war period. In January 1946 when some men were ordered to put some belts on machinery in the flour mill, they refused and were disciplined with official warnings. Approximately 250 Rank employees went on strike in sympathy in the flour section and picketed the mill and the railway station.²³ The flour mills were shut down. The Limerick strikers were very militant demanding passes from truck drivers collecting flour from the station but court action ordered them to stop this practice. The strike was beginning to jeopardise the city's food supply and fortunately, for all concerned, the strike was not official as the strikers did not have the prior permission of the Transport Union. This meant that the strikers received no strike pay which almost certainly helped to end the strike.²⁴ The strike was settled by the Joint Industrial Council, sitting in Dublin.

This strike marked a watershed between Ranks management and the unions and laid down a pattern for the management of industrial relations in Ranks Mills. From then on, there was a monthly meeting of the employers and the Transport Union. The first such meeting took place on the 4th of March 1946. At these meetings the union raised the concerns of their members with the management. The company at this time also agreed to guarantee the Shannon Mills staff employment even during periods of low demand for flour and animal feed. This agreement resulted in the end of seasonal lay offs at the mills. This was unique in this period as all of Limerick industries laid off workers when business slowed or was poor and Limerick bacon and clothing industries would routinely let their staff go during downturns in the business cycle.²⁵

P89 25

Extract from Cecil Mercier diary concerning
strike at Ranks 1946

Limerick City Archives

P89 3 26

Harvest scene showing a reaper and a
binder c. 1940

Limerick City Archives

P89 90 1

Summary of agreements between unions
and management at Ranks 1936-1944

Limerick City Archives

AGREEMENTS etc.SUSTENANCE ALLOWANCE:

Sustenance allowance is paid at the rate of 1/- per night to MILL WORKERS. The RO LERNEN of both Mills receive 1/2d per night, as also the PURIFIERNEN of "B" Mill.

WAGES INCREASE - AUGUST 1936:

All individuals who were subjected to the full wages reduction in 1923, receive an increase in wages of 4/- as from the first pay day in August 1936. All employees rated as BOYS receive an increase in wages of 3/- as from the same date.

WAGES INCREASE - OCTOBER 1938:

MILL WORKERS of 21 years of age and over to receive 2/- extra per week, i.e., 4d extra per day, in wages, as from 7th October 1938. (Ruling of Judge Shannon, 20-22-38).

WAR EMERGENCY BONUS - JANUARY 1940:

ALL ADULT Mill Workers to receive 4/- War Emergency Bonus to be payable commencing pay week which included 15th January 1940. All BOYS under 21 years of age to receive 2/- War Emergency Bonus.

AGREEMENT 10th DECEMBER 1940:

That MEN employed on tiering will receive 6d/10d, plus Sustenance Allowance of 1/- on night work, and the 4/- War Emergency Bonus per week, plus 8/- Bonus Order No. 228, 1943, and 1/6d Bonus Order No. 1733, 1944.

AGREEMENT 20th NOVEMBER 1941:

That the following BOYS whose gross Incomes were reduced on transfer from City Mill and suffered hardship thereby, shall, at the Directors' pleasure, receive an ex gratia payment which does not form part of their wages, the ex gratia payment to each Boy being as follows:-

J. COUGHLAN 5/- per week	W. COUGHLAN 3/5d per week	S. MURRAY 5/- per week
D. COUGHLAN 4/1d "	T. HARTNETT 4/6d "	J. HUMPHREYS 5/- "
L. MURRAY 4/7d "	H. McNAMARA 5/- "	D. SKEEHEAN 4/1d "
T. O'DOHERTY 4/1d "	K. O'CONNOR 4/7d "	D. O'KEEFE 4/- "

BONUS NO. 228 ORDER 1943:

ALL ADULT MILL WORKERS to receive a Bonus of 5/- per week, later increased to 8/- per week. ALL BOYS under 21 years of age to receive a Bonus of 2/6d per week, later increased to 4/- per week. The Bonus Order is deemed to have come into force on the 6th day of November 1942.

E.P. (No.260) ORDER 1945. BONUS (No.1733) ORDER 1944:

ALL ADULT MILL WORKERS to receive a Bonus of 9/6d per week. ALL JUVENILES (Under 21 years of age) to receive a Bonus of 4/9d per week. This Bonus Order is deemed to have come into force on the 17th day of March 1944.

MILL HANDS OVERTIME:

Double Time Midnight Saturday to 6 a.m. Monday. All other at time and half: BONUS OVERTIME paid after first two hours at 4/- rate only. All under 18 years work a 40 hour week.

PROVIDER MILL 22nd SEPTEMBER 1938:

On and from the first pay day in August, employees are to receive the following increase in wages:-

MEN ::	... 3/6d per week.
YOUTHS ::	... 1/- "

ROPE SPLICING:

C. McDONNELL (Fire Brigade Instructor etc.) when engaged on Rope Splicing is paid at the rate of 10/- per splice.

LAVATORY AGREEMENT:

J. BOWMAN (Yardmen) is paid 2/- per month Lavatory Bonus.

AGREEMENT OCTOBER 1940:

CARPENTERS & JOINERS shall work a 47 hour week at 1/11½d per hour on and after 15th October 1940.

JOINERS, PAINTERS, PLASTERERS: E.P. (No.260) Order 1943. Bonus (No. 224) Order 1943:

BUILDING TRADES: Co. Borough of Limerick, Bonus 1½d per hour on 47 hour week from 5th April 1943. STANDARD RATE, Joiners, Painters, Plasterers: E.P. (No.260) Order, Wages (Standard Rate) (No.160) Order 1943. The Standard Rate of these Tradesmen is fixed by Order at 1/11½d per hour, on a 47 hour week. (Bonus referred to above extra) dated 14th May 1943.

JOINERS, PAINTERS, PLASTERERS: E.P. (No.260) Order 1943. Bonus (No.1259) Order 1944:

BUILDING TRADES: Co. Borough of Limerick, Bonus ½d per hour on 47 hour week from 23rd January 1944. Total Bonus now 2d per hour on 47 hour week.

CARPENTERS: OVERTIME:

1st two hours, Time & Quarter, thence to 10 p.m. Time & Half, thence to starting hour (8 a.m.) Double Time. All others - Time & Half.

FITTERS: OVERTIME:

1st two hours, Time & Quarter, thence Time & Half.

FITTERS & TINSMITH: E.P. (No.260) Order 1943. Bonus (No.943) Order 1944:

FITTERS & TINSMITH to receive a Bonus of 3/- per week, from 5th November 1943. Total Bonus under this Order now 8/- per week.

AGREEMENT - JANUARY 1938:

The minimum rate for Electrician shall be 2/- per hour. Electricians in Dublin, Cork, Waterford & Limerick shall be paid a minimum of 2/1d per hour on and after 26th January 1938.

ELECTRICIANS: E.P. (No.168) Order 1942. Bonus (No.191) Order 1943:

ELECTRICIANS to receive a Bonus of 5/- per week, from 1st January 1943.

ELECTRICIANS: E.P. (No.260) Order 1943. Bonus (No.691) Order 1943:

ELECTRICIANS to receive a Bonus of 3/- per week, payable 21st September 1943, retrospective to 3rd September 1943. Total Bonus now 8/-.

ELECTRICIANS: E.P. (No.260) Order 1943. Bonus (No.1151) Order 1944:

ELECTRICIANS to receive a Bonus of 2/- per week, from 10th January 1944. Total Bonus under this order now 10/- per week.



Relations between the workers and management were relatively good and this was demonstrated during the disastrous summer of 1946. The weather was so wet it was feared that the Irish harvest would be lost. The economy was already devastated by the war and supplies of flour were dangerously low.²⁶ A national effort was needed to save the harvest and the Government called on volunteers to help farmers bring in the harvest ordering Gardaí, soldiers and civil servants to help. Ranks supported the national effort by encouraging its employees to volunteer as harvest workers, offering them full pay while on the farms and providing transport out to the farms.²⁷ The company allowed employees with farms to return home for the harvest. The union co-operated with Ranks in this scheme fully and every one of the Ranks workers volunteered to work as harvesters. Forty-three men were retained at the mill- the rest were dispatched to farms throughout the region. But as the Ranks management noted 'organisation was lacking' and they worried that the crop could be lost. Sometimes those called upon to help farmers were unable to work because of the wet conditions. More and more Ranks volunteers were transported to farms to help with the harvest- usually 40 to 60 were sent out every day in the last fortnight in September. The harvesting proceeded very slowly as the fields were soaking wet and the crop had fallen. The flour mills were only able to re-open on the 12th of September and the flour produced from the wheat was of poor quality due to the wheat's extremely high moisture content. However, it helped to avert food shortages in 1947.²⁸

Ranks workers

Going out to help farmers save the harvest after the disastrous summer of 1946, September 1946
Courtesy of Plunkett Hayes

1950s Management takes a firmer line

Industrial relations remained strained at the mills throughout the 1950s, despite the monthly meeting and the granting of pay rises and reduced working hours to flour mill workers by the Labour Court.²⁹ The disputes did not normally lead to stoppages but they took up a great deal of time and energy. The men's sons were given preferential treatment when it came to securing new jobs- nineteen casual workers were taken on in May 1951 and they were all the sons of Ranks Mills workers.³⁰ There were however regular heated disputes over pay, hours and demarcation which required ongoing management. After the death of J.V. Ranks, his nephew J. Arthur Ranks was appointed chairman of Ranks (Ireland) and began to take a firmer line. At his first A.G.M. the new chairman, asserted his position. He believed that the time had come to reap the rewards of many years of investment and just three days after his appointment, an incident occurred which signalled to every employee who was in charge. On the 4th of February, the mills gates had been locked promptly at the start of the morning shift. Those arriving late were locked out.³¹ It seems that those who arrived late lost a day's pay. On the same day, the chairman warned the company's drivers and their helpers about their conduct, while out on the roads.³² Cecil Mercier, who had been in charge of labour relations until 1946, was restored to his old role. He continued the monthly meetings but he set up meetings with sub-sections of the union such as the feed mills, transport section and flour mills.

There were ongoing labour issues but economic realities strengthened managements resolve in relation to the union. In 1957, the Government ended the subsidies on bread and flour, introduced in 1953 at the time of their de-rationing. This led to price rises and a fall in the consumption of bread. This could not have occurred at a worse time for Ranks as the population of Ireland was falling, due to emigration- especially in the company's key west of Ireland markets. The gravity of the situation was set out by Lord Rank at the Company's A.G.M in 1958. Government's policy to encourage farmers to grow wheat and to oblige mills to accept it meant that they had more Irish crops on their hands than ever before and this was pushing up storage (and drying) costs. Lord Rank referred to the cost of labour at Shannon Mills and hinted that there could be some redundancies.³³ Ranks was not the only Limerick company suffering as Spaight's who had pioneered the timber importation business-was forced into liquidation in 1957 and was taken over and re-opened by James McMahon Ltd. in 1958.

While Ranks management were dealing with these economic challenges, the workers at the provender mill demanded pay rises, as they had traditionally been paid less than their colleagues at the flour mills. This was a running sore for many years. The differential in pay had become even more pronounced during the Emergency as flour workers received a war time bonus while the provender mills had been largely shut.³⁴ Lord Rank informed the Limerick management that they should take a hard line on the provender men's claims and told the management to 'hold tight'. The Labour Court rejected the men's demands for equal pay and the Union tried to apply pressure on the management



P90 16 4

View of Ranks Mills from the Dock Road c. 1960

Courtesy of Ted O'Connor

Mr. Mercier

Floor Milling Superintendent

Limerick

30. 3. 31 p89/81

As arranged at Conference held in Mr. Goodbody's

office on Thursday 26th March 1931. Had the question of apprentice filling Roller floor job to be discussed with you and the Amus representatives. I submit the following terms which we might usefully discuss with a view to reaching a settlement.

(1) That two-thirds of work presently performed by apprentice be given to a suitable mill worker with the usual annual

Holiday relief of Rollermen

(2) That one third of the work be given to apprentice presently filling Roller floor job with the annual Holiday relief of Foremen

I am convinced that this arrangement gives adequate training to the present apprentice to attain qualifications necessary for foremanship.

I shall be glad if you can arrange to meet the following representatives as delegation to discuss these points it being understood that should an agreement be reached in the present case it to be without precedent or prejudice to either side

(Delegation)

E. Browne. Pursees

J. Barstley. Bannatynes

S. Blahey. Bannatynes

Yours faithfully
Daniel Blahey

09061

Important Notice to Members

IRISH TRANSPORT AND GENERAL WORKERS' UNION

Ceathro-Cumann Oibreach Tomáin agus Ul-Úsaocháir na h-Eireann

Liberty Hall, Dublin 1.

ARREARS OF CONTRIBUTIONS

Members more than eight weeks in arrears are disqualified from receiving DISPUTE BENEFIT, LEGAL BENEFIT AND REMISSION OF CONTRIBUTIONS DURING ILLNESS AND UNEMPLOYMENT.

MORTALITY BENEFIT cannot be paid if the member was more than EIGHT WEEKS in arrears on the date of death.

RETIREMENT BENEFIT-see Rule 150.

All applications for benefits must be made through Branch Secretary.



1989

CONTRIBUTION CARD

by warning that Blue Cross animal feed products 'would be blacked' if the feed mill men's demands were not met.³⁵ The provender mill workers went on strike in March 1958 but it was not an official strike, as they had not served strike notice.³⁶ The flour mills were not hit by the strike, although their staff supported the strikers and offered them financial aid.³⁵ There were several offers of mediation but crucially, the local clergy frowned upon the strike and this probably undermined the strikers' morale and commitment.³⁸ The company's directors laid out the terms that would end the strike and on the 8th of April the provender mill men returned to work. They had been out for almost three weeks without pay and they had not achieved their aim of parity in pay with the flour mill workers.

This emboldened the management to implement changes to the working practices at the mill as they saw major problems with over-staffing. There were twenty four packers and the company claimed that only six were required. In late 1958, the company proposed a more flexible approach to working practices. The union reacted angrily and soon refused to meet the management to discuss the issue.³⁹ Industrial relations deteriorated in the spring of 1959, when five men at the provender mill were dismissed for playing cards, while at work. This was considered harsh as the men had finished their work and were waiting for their shift to finish. The sacked men attracted some sympathy as the case was even reported in the Soviet paper Pravda as an example of the unjust capitalist system.⁴⁰ After a failed conference between employers and unions on flexibility, the company issued an ultimatum. The programme of flexibility would be implemented without the support of the union. When some workers disobeyed a manager's instruction they were sacked.⁴¹

This led to a strike among workers and the flour mills closure. Ranks management were unperturbed- the flour trade was slack anyway. On the 29th of April the strikers voted to return to work. The strike had effectively collapsed and the management had won. Management was determined to press their advantage and won several concessions from the workers in the flour mills. The workers had to agree to a flexibility programme and to changes to their work practices.⁴² Ranks management were in a strong position in regards to the unions but did not seek to browbeat the workers. Ranks remained considerate employers and were genuinely interested in their employees welfare. They continued to discuss issues with the unions, although tensions did occur. Ranks management, by a combination of firm but fair management and by respecting the workers entitlements and the unions were able to secure excellent labour relations.

P90 15 8

Lord Rank making a presentation to Elizabeth Kirwin for long time service with Ranks c. 1955
Courtesy of Albert and Michael Copues

P90 15 12

Provender Mill Social Committee 1958
Back Row L-R P. Hayes, G. Kerwin, J. Frawley, S. Moran,
Front Row: C. Sheehan, M. Copues, M.C. Lynch
Courtesy of Albert and Michael Copues

P89 3 24

Cecil Mercier presenting a cup to Tim Moroney winner of the Ranks Social Club billiards competition c. 1960.
Limerick City Archives





1960s calm in the mills

Ranks largely escaped the industrial tensions in Limerick in the 1960s when strikes became a part of everyday life, although the company was affected by strikes elsewhere such as the tradesmen dispute in 1969. Industrial relations in many of Limerick's traditional industries were bad especially over the issues of pay and demarcation. Ranks management did prohibit the clerical workers from holding meetings in Ranks premises and tried to block clerical workers from joining unions in the early 1960s. No strike occurred at this period and indeed there was no strike until the firms' closure in 1983. Ranks, along with Cleeves were the exceptions in Limerick's traditional industries where labour unrest was almost constant. This was because the Limerick mills offered their workers decent wages for the time. Rank's was considered by many Limerick people, as a very good job and there was even some prestige to be had-if you worked in Ranks.⁴⁵ The good wages and generally good conditions did much to ensure good labour relations. Lord Rank thanked them for their 'goodwill' on more than one occasion. Ranks were also willing to work with the union. The provender mill workers received piece meal increases throughout this period and eventually gained parity with the flour mill workers- a long term aim on their part was achieved.⁴⁵ In 1969, Ranks management and unions were able to enter into a productivity agreement which led to more efficient work practices in return for higher wages. This agreement was ahead of its time and unique in Limerick industries at the time, when antagonistic employer-employee relations were the norm.

Ranks management was considered strict, as were other employers at the time. The mill gates like many other Limerick firms gates were shut after the beginning of every shift. Often this meant a loss of a day's pay for a tardy employee.⁴⁶ However, Ranks management had worked with the company for many years. Many of them had risen through the company and this created a management culture where the management tended to be more sympathetic to the workers. There was less of a 'them and us' mentality in the Limerick mills, that exacerbated industrial unrest in other Limerick firms. Clover Meats management, in contrast to Ranks had no previous links to the company or the city and adopted a more adversarial approach to the unions. The company was riven by industrial disputes for much of the period.⁴⁷

After the threatened closure of the mills in 1976 there was an undercurrent of tension between union and employers. The unions were wary of further redundancies and opposed management initiatives aimed at modernisation. However, there was no strike or even threat of strike and labour relations at the mills were still good by local standards, almost to the end. Traditionally, poor labour relations were seen as endemic to Limerick's traditional industries. However, this was not the case in Ranks. There were many difficulties between the management and labour but from the early 1960s', Ranks management and workers had re-established the generally harmonious labour relations that had existed prior to the 1920s. This may have helped to prolong the life of the mills as poor industrial relations certainly shortened the life-span of many other of Limerick's traditional industries. Industrial relations impacted greatly upon a firms viability but ultimately economic factors determined the decline and closure of Limerick's traditional industries.

P90 24 1
Ranks workers and others at a retreat house in Limerick c. 1950

Front Row L-R
John Halvey, John Sheehan,
unknown, Albert Copues,
Fr Murphy, unknown,
unknown, unknown

Second Row L-R
unknown, Christy Carey,
Vincent O'Donnell, Jimmy
Clancy, Jimy Flynn, unknown

Third Row L-R
At the end of the line at the
very right is Paddy O'Neill-
standing behind him is Jack
Touhy

Fourth Row L-R
Second from left is
Joe Malone.
Courtesy of
Geraldine Clohessy

End Notes

- 1 OHP/RK/21, Oral History Interview Joe Malone, Limerick City Archives (LCA)
- 2 Information supplied by Norman Campion
- 3 Irish Independent, 2 April 1923
- 4 P89/57, Mercier Papers, LCA
- 5 P89/1, 9 October 1923, LCA
- 6 P89/3-4, LCA
- 7 P89/10/22 and 30 September 1930, LCA
- 8 P89/11, 14 April 1931, LCA
- 9 Limerick Leader, 6 March 1937
- 10 P89/11, 22 March 1932, LCA
- 11 P89/13, 3 November 1934, LCA
- 12 Irish Independent, 12 April 1938
- 13 P89/20, 26 February 1940, LCA
- 14 L/AH/AS/1/1/5 General Files on Allotments, LCA
- 15 Limerick Chronicle, 24 October 1941
- 16 P89/22 2 September 1942, LCA
- 17 P89/22 14 November 1942, LCA
- 18 P89/23 14 December 1943, LCA
- 19 P89/183/4, LCA
- 20 OHP/RK/15, Oral History Interview Noel O'Neill, LCA
- 21 P89/24, 4 & 6 February 1945, LCA
- 22 OHP/RK/8, Oral History Interview Dermot Hartigan, LCA
- 23 P89/25, 23 January 1946, LCA
- 24 P89/25, 26 & 28 January 1946, LCA
- 25 Irish Independent, 21 November 1956
- 26 P89/25, 6 September 1946, LCA
- 27 Information supplied by Norman Campion
- 28 P89/25, 9 & 10 & 12 September 1946, LCA
- 29 P89/29, 28 January 1949, LCA
- 30 P89/30, 1 May 1950, LCA
- 31 P89/31, 1 & 4 February & 1 March 1952, LCA
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Irish Independent, 17 September 1958
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P91 4

A photograph of a lane in the Watergate area of the city. Some of the ruined medieval city walls are believed to be shown. The houses are all since demolished c. 1940

Courtesy of Michael Kennedy



CHAPTER FIVE

Working in a mill: conditions and risks

P90 22 8

Ranks office staff on a day out in Kerry c. 1961

L-R Pat Creamer, unknown, Carmel O'Malley, Anne Ashton, Josephine Brereton, Florence Wardell

Courtesy of Anne Ashton

Working in a mill: conditions and risks

Working in a mill: conditions and risks

Throughout most of the twentieth century work was often a hazardous affair. The building of the Hydro-Electrical plant at Ardnacrusha resulted in the deaths of many workers and industrial accidents were seen as almost inevitable. If a major construction project was completed without injuries it was the exception and worthy of remark. The mills were small communities but they were traditionally dangerous places to work in. For example, in 1917 Michael Kiely aged 31 was killed at Mount Kennett Mill.¹ Kiely as usual went to work and was seen on one of the mill lofts some five minutes before the poor man met his death quite suddenly. The workman who saw him, on entering the loft again in the time stated observed Kiely lying on his back, a short distance from the machinery, which was in operation, his head fractured and blood coming from both ears. Medical aid was summoned and Dr. Myles quickly arrived, but the injuries proved fatal¹. The inquest took place the same afternoon and the family received no compensation. '*In 1917 my grandfather, was killed in the mill in the Dock Road and he left five kids. A widow and five kids!*'² The milling industry was the second most dangerous industry in Ireland-after engineering. In one year in the 1930s, 200 accidents were reported in Irish mills. This chapter will trace the evolution of attitudes towards fire prevention and safety at work in the context of one of Limerick's critical industries.

Ranks Mills was a noisy and dusty work environment with constantly moving parts and heavy machinery. The mills were usually very hot, the din of the machinery was very loud and some workers suffered damage to their hearing. Before 1950's workers wore their own clothes to work but eventually overalls were issued- a different colour for each department. Machinery was liable to catch fire and the fast moving parts were always a danger to workers. The mills machinery was driven by huge belts which were unguarded by any screens or shields. Chlorine stored, for bleaching bread was considered hazardous.³

All mills are prone to fires as they stockpile dried grains which can heat in storage and ignite. It was inadvisable to place one's hand in a container of grain. During the poor harvests of 1958 the damp wheat coming in was viewed as highly dangerous. *'it cost so much to get it right, most of it could only be used for animal feed you couldn't make flour out of it was so damaged and rotten, if you opened the bag you could see the steam and the smoke coming out of it and you daren't put your hand in it, or you wouldn't have any hand. It was actually on fire in the centre of the bag from the water that was in it.'*⁴

Limerick had a long history of fires at its various mills. The Curraghouer and Plassey Mills were both badly damaged by fires in the nineteenth century, while in 1878, the Bannatyne grain store was also badly damaged by fire. For many decades the city had no professional fire service but some local firms had their own brigades manned by volunteers. At the Bannatyne's fire the local millers Messrs Thomas Harris sent their men with their hand pump engine to deal with the Bannatyne's blaze.⁵ They were ineffective and the stores were burnt to the ground. Ranks Mills, even in the modern era, were vulnerable to fires and the company went to great lengths to prevent fire. The mills management were very conscious of the threat of fire and smoking was strictly prohibited and could lead to instant dismissal.⁶



1934 fire at Newtown Pery

As the milling industry adapted in the early 1930s to the advent of a very high level of Government regulation a crisis occurred that could have had immense consequences for Ranks. On the night of 24 August 1934 Cecil Mercier the Mill Superintendent, was woken at his home by a mill hand. Newtown Pery Mill was on fire. The Mill had been completely renovated in 1927 to a state of the art plant. Mercier rushed to the scene. The fire had broken out in the grinder room and had spread with 'alarming rapidity'. The night-shift staff rushed to put out the fire. The local auxiliary fire brigade and Guards joined in the efforts to put out the fire which could now be seen for miles. At first it was feared that mill staff were lost in the fire but they were soon accounted for. The brigade isolated the area and the fire did not spread to other buildings in the area. A huge crowd gathered on the Dock to view the fire. Three people fell into the river with the congestion and one girl had to be rescued. The fire was soon brought under control. The workers had shown remarkable bravery in tackling the fire. Willie Legear an electrician 'went hand over hands across from the back of the Dock side of the mill to get fire hoses to the fire'.⁷ Many mill hands had their clothes burnt in fighting the fire.

Mercier praised the heroic efforts of the staff in tackling the fire. A tragedy had been averted and the fire, although it destroyed the grinder house, did not disrupt the milling of flour. The heroes did not receive much of a reward from the company. They only received compensation for their singed and burnt clothes and for this they had to wait until the following Christmas. The fire greatly perturbed the management of Ranks. In the wake of the fire the company decided to create a volunteer fire brigade unit for the Limerick mills. Fire equipment was purchased and a works officer from Lancashire arrived in Limerick to instruct the new company firemen. In particular he demonstrated to them the 'splicing of ropes'.⁸

Unions, who were ever ready to complain about wages and conditions took little interest in safety. Health and Safety legislation was almost non-existent. The Government showed little interest in the matter and the first real Irish measures came only in 1955. However, the new Fianna Fáil administration in the 1930s was at least, willing to enforce the legislation that was in place. All accidents had to be recorded and inspectors monitored safety standards. In 1936 Ranks was fined when unguarded shafting resulted in an injury to an engineer at one of its mills.⁹ Safety standards were still low and workers were required to undertake tasks and work in environments, unthinkable today. Thomas Nalley (64), was seriously injured in the spring of 1939 by a crankshaft while cleaning an engine.¹⁰ The engine had been inadvertently turned on - the company should have safeguarded that the engine was unable to operate while it was being cleaned. Mr Nalley's lung was punctured and he developed pneumonia which ultimately resulted in his death in hospital on the 27th of March 1939.¹¹ The company paid for his funeral and was exonerated of any responsibility which lay much more with the individual than the employer in this period.



After a day of ordinary
time was called out at 10th
a fire in the Grander House
Kentown very The
fire was tremendous & all
believed that the will
not be a complete loss
by the heroic efforts of
and at off got it under
control by 10th min. There
were number outbreaks right up
to 5.30th. The damage
is confined to greater house
and water damage has occurred
stocks in New York
went home between 5th

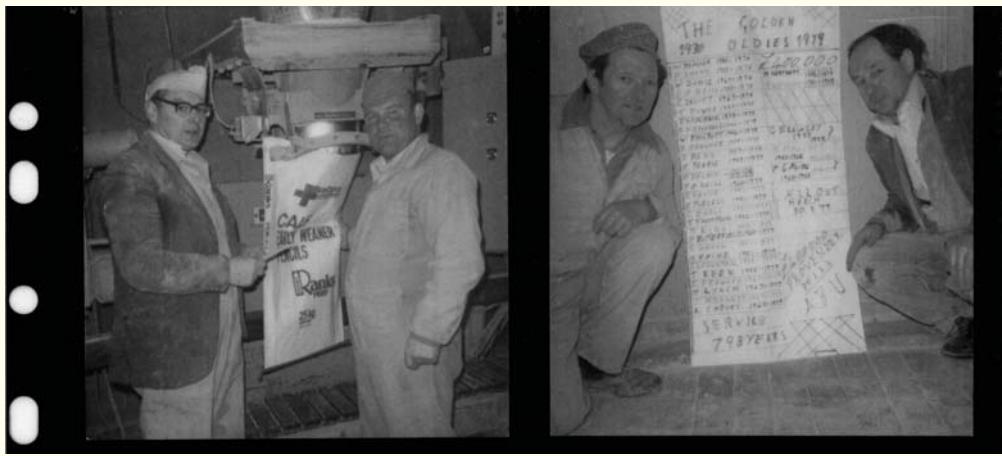


Safety measures

War time saw an improvement in fire prevention and emergency response measures throughout the city. Ranks Mill windows were blacked out as a precautionary measure during World War II as the mills were viewed as a potential target. In 1939, gas masks were issued to residents of urban centers like Limerick. Limerick Corporation, under the Air Raid Protection Act, was legally bound to organise sufficient air-raid shelters for the local population and to provide Air Raid Wardens.¹² Gas masks were issued at Leamy's school. Furthermore under the Fire Brigade Act of 1940 the local authority was obliged to form an efficient firefighting service in their jurisdiction. This placed a great burden on local authorities, which had to fund most of these initiatives from the local rates. Limerick Corporation enlisted the support of local firms in the new civil defence measures. Even though it was a neutral city Limerick was facing a host of difficulties. It was difficult to raise more rates as the city's economy was struggling. Wartime shortages had led to a crisis in industry. Unlike World War I there was no boom in exports and indeed by 1941 bacon exports ceased.¹³ Derry, despite being a city at war, was in many ways better off as its shirt industry boomed while naval bases boosted the economy.¹⁴

During the Emergency Ranks had its own voluntary fire brigade, as had Shaws the bacon curers. The Auxiliary Fire Service was set up to fight the fires caused by air raids-a serious concern after Dublin Bombings of 1940 and Ranks fire brigade was incorporated into the Auxiliary Service.¹⁵ The Ranks firemen were provided with uniforms by the City Manager and the brigade was trained and led by the Mill Manager, Cecil Mercier, a former British army officer. They regularly trained with the city's other fire brigades, usually at the Old Strand Barracks and made a major contribution to the Civil Defence preparations in the city during the Emergency. They helped to fight several fires in the city, including one at Dan O'Connor's stores in William Street in 1943.¹⁶ This contribution was recognised after the war when Ranks firemen with other auxiliary firemen were awarded service medals by the Irish Government in recognition of their contribution to the country's civil defence.¹⁷





Air raid precautions

During the war employers, such as Ranks and the other Limerick industries, had a duty to organise air raid precautions schemes. Ranks were initially slow to organise the air raid scheme but the bombing of Dublin in 1940 led to increasing awareness for the need to improve civil defence measures. The city also had to organise its own air raid warden scheme under the Air Raid Precautions Bill of 1939. This was designed to warn of an air raid and to enable a speedy evacuation of the population from the danger area. Limerick Corporation was also involved in the organisation of the local Air Raid Protection Service. From the spring of 1941 Ranks Mills organised a company of A.R.P. Volunteers from among its employees consisting of approximately 83 employees who were provided with uniforms. Cecil Mercier, was again heavily involved in the organisation and training of the volunteers. Lectures were given on how to react to an air raid and the firebombing of the city. The A.R.P. continued to operate throughout the war.

Accidents at Ranks during the Emergency

Ranks Limerick mills, like every other mills in the country, was very busy during the war. The need to raise output was a constant concern for the company. They were obliged to run three shifts, work holidays and weekends to meet the government quotas. There was great pressure upon the management and workers. This led to ever more risks to workers, many suffered minor injuries during this time and Cecil Mercier wrote of 'several accident cases lately' in October 1941.¹⁸ The union approached the management to place injured men on lighter duties in 1942.¹⁹ The management tried to accommodate those men who had suffered minor injuries by allocating them light duties at the mills. In 1941, Cecil Mercier was concerned that there could be a dust explosion in one of the mills dust rooms.²⁰ Remarkably, there were no serious injuries or fatalities during the Emergency at the mills. Serious industrial accidents were the norm, during the Second World War, in England and America. Many workers were injured or died as a result of accidents at their place of work, as factories tried to meet government quotas, to help the war efforts.

Ranks barge

A Ranks owned barge operated out of a jetty on the Abbey River, named the Eclipse Flower. In 1940 the skipper of the Ranks barge, Thomas Crowe drowned in 1940, on the Abbey River.²¹ He was on board the barge at night guarding a cargo of flour when he fell overboard and his son who was present could not save him. Ranks settled with his family in court for £200 pounds, but denied any negligence in the death of Mr Crowe.²² Working on the barge could be very dangerous and occasionally the barge was forced to turn back due to storms which could sink boats. In the 1940s and 1950s the 'Captain' was an English engineer Henry Franklin. Sadly he fell between the barge and quayside one night at Killaloe and drowned. The Eclipse Flower was taken out of service in the late 1950s.²³

P90 5 4

Workers in the provender mill 1979

In the centre image the men are holding a board with the names and length of service of retiring workers.

L-R:

Christy Earls,
Michael King

John (Jacko)

Frawley,
Sean Heagney

Michael Ring,

Jacko Frawley

Michael Hartnett, Jim Lockman,

Junior Purcell, Martin Lynch, Sean Gavin,
Noel O'Neill, Sean Heagney

Michael Hartnett,

Michael King



P89 3 10 5 8

Cecil Mercier demonstrating mill equipment to visitors c. 1948
Limerick City Archives

P 89 3 10 3

Photograph of Flour Roller Machine 1948
Limerick City Archives

JOSEPH RANK, LIMITED LONDON

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To

All Mill Managers.

From

R.E.T. Amphlett.

Ref.

Milling Dept.,
A.2.

Date

7th June, 1961.

Lifting Tackle of all Descriptions.

Please find enclosed forms which we require you to fill up with every and all types of the various lifting tackle, shackles etc., which come under the requirements of the Factory Act.

We would be obliged if you would give this your immediate attention. It is rather a big job, nevertheless, owing to the seriousness of it we must stress upon you the urgency of letting us have these particulars as quickly as possible.

R.E. Amphlett

Dist. to:-	REV.	ERR.	REH.	WJT.
HWR.	<u>FGO'S.</u>	TBS.	DCCM.	
GVH.	RJG.	FK.	<u>EM.</u>	
RCW.	NRR.	JTN.		
AEH.	HVM.	WW.		
<u>AMB.</u>	<u>AGM.</u>	GA.		
		DG.		
		<u>GW.</u>		

COPY

22nd July 1944

P89 131 (c)

Statistics of Electric Power Consumption to
15th July 1944

<u>Aggregate:</u>	<u>Units</u>	<u>Grain Milled o/280</u>	<u>Units p.brl.</u>
w/e 20th May 1944	394,150	56,196	7.01
" 27th May 1944	395,698	56,957	6.95
" 3rd June 1944	277,347	39,935	6.95
" 10th June 1944	327,810	47,182	6.95
" 17th June 1944	325,701	48,063	6.77
" 24th June 1944	319,468	48,232	6.64
" 1st July 1944	311,597	46,278	6.73
" 8th July 1944	347,506	52,924	6.56
" 15th July 1944	364,933	55,692	6.56

Units used per barrel (o/280) of Grain milled

	<u>Week ended 1st July</u>	<u>Week ended 8th July</u>	<u>Week ended 15th July</u>
Barrow Milling Co.	5.29	5.69	5.17
Walter Brown & Co.	6.90	7.10	6.80
Odlum Ltd., PORTARLINGTON	6.70	6.73	6.62
" NAAS	6.71	6.76	6.73
" MARYBORO'	6.76	6.60	6.50
Dublin Port Milling Co.	7.00	6.20	6.20
Bolands Limited	6.98	6.86	6.95
Dock Milling Co.Ltd	6.75	6.68	6.53
National Flour Mills	6.58	6.60	6.61
Johnston, Mooney & O'Brien	7.27	6.78	7.18
John Furlong & Sons	6.70	6.40	6.70
Bennett & Co.Ltd	9.30	8.80	8.60
Geo. Shaw & Sons Ltd.	6.85	7.18	6.80
Ranks (Ireland), Limited	6.49	6.30	6.28
Waterford Flour Mills	6.90	6.90	6.60
Byrne, Mahony & Co.	7.70	7.15	7.15
Thos. Palmer & Co.	3.30	3.70	-
McDonagh Milling & Trading Co.	3.46	-	-



Post war accidents

Ranks mills were very busy producing flour in the post-war period and this placed continued demands upon the company's machinery, much of which was second hand. In the summer of 1948 there was a series of accidents including a fire in the grinder house, and later a transformer blew up. Fortunately, they were soon under control. There was a more serious fire at the feed mill plant when a machine in the plant caught fire and took ten minutes to contain and quench causing considerable damage.²⁴ On the 14th of February 1951 a screensman Michael Barry slipped and fell and his arm became trapped in a machine. Mr Barry lost his arm. Ranks, after a visit from a government inspector were exonerated of any blame. It seems that someone had removed a safety guard from the machine, which crushed the victim's hand. In August of 1951, a young casual employee Edward Enright was involved in an accident that eventually cost him his life. A sack struck the young man while he was in the provender mill. He was badly injured and taken to Barrington's hospital. He was apparently paralysed and died of his injuries on the 16th of August aged only sixteen. Ranks were not held responsible for Edward Enright's death in a court case the following year. It was held that the young man was sliding down a shoot, which was forbidden, when the accident occurred.²⁵

Mills continued to be hazardous work places throughout the 1950s. In January 1952 a boiler blew up. There were no casualties but these boilers could be very dangerous as a man had been killed at Spaight's Timber Yard by a boiler explosion in 1947.²⁶ In February 1952 a man's leg was badly injured after it was caught in a machine. In May of that year, John O'Halloran, a carpenter, was working on scaffolding in the Garryowen shed. He slipped and fell into the flat bottom of a bin and died of his injuries the same night. He was the father of nine children all under the age of thirteen. The death of John O'Halloran, following on from the death of Edward Enright, moved the Transport Union, to take a more active interest in health and safety. They called on the Ranks management to erect a first aid post on the site. Ranks refused this request and stated that there were already trained first aid attendants among the staff, to deal with any eventuality. The company did erect a new store for the fire brigades equipment.²⁷ Ranks fire brigade was regularly drilled and took part in exercises as fire remained a constant threat. Fire prevention was a priority for the mills management, throughout Rank's history.²⁸ There was a serious fire in one of the grinder plants at this time. This was particularly dangerous as the sprinkler system failed to operate properly and there was considerable damage. Ranks were fortunate not to have experienced the disastrous fires that affected Danus, the City Tannery and Roches Feeds in the 1950s. These led to the temporary closure of these firms. Ranks volunteer firemen assisted the professionals fighting the worst blaze in the city for decades, the great Todd's fire. The heat from the fire was so intense that windows facing the blaze melted, all along O'Connell Street. The fire led to the destruction of an entire block in the city centre.

In September 1955 there was another tragedy at the Shannon Mills complex. A major building project, which included the construction of a Silo no. 4 had been under way at the site and it was in its finishing stages. The work was undertaken by a Dublin firm, Collen. One of their employees was involved in a fatal accident. It is believed that he fell from a height.

The Factories Act 1955

After the Factories Act of 1955, there was a tightening up of health and safety measures in Irish workplaces. This act was arguably the first Irish piece of health and safety legislation. It ordered companies to properly guard machinery, provide adequate ventilation and to begin coordinating adequate health and safety measures. Possibly as a result of this piece of legislation in the mid-1950s, there was a decline in the number of accidents reported. There was greater onus on companies to ensure they provided safe places of work. The modernisation of the plant may also have made it safer.

By modern standards the mills remained hazardous. In April 1967, there was another tragic incident when a young man was killed in an accident involving an elevator at the Shannon Mills site. He was Alphonsus Pearse, a single man aged thirty-two, from Thomondgate.³¹ It appears that he became trapped by the elevator and died on admission to hospital. The accident caused considerable shock throughout the mills. *'Health and safety came and Mr O'Donoghue, as I called him, was very upset. It was my worst experience at Ranks- it was horrific.'*³² The lift was apparently faulty and could operate without the door being closed. This was contrary to the Factories Act of 1955 and Ranks were fined for failing to maintain the lift safely.

In the early 1970s the company was the scene of yet another tragedy. An accident occurred that is still recalled with great sadness to this day. A young man who was a casual worker at Ranks was working in the Garryowen Shed. He was the son of a well known long time Ranks employee 'Son' Murphy. The Garryowen Shed was used to store huge quantities of grain in bins. While working in the Shed the young man fell into one of the grain bins. The victim sank into the bin and suffocated.

Garryowen shed destroyed 1977

On 5th January 1977, the flour mills were the scene of a near disaster when a small fire broke out in the Garryowen Shed, located across the road from the main Ranks mills and stores. The fire swept through the entire store in ten minutes. There were several people working in the store at the time.³³ Regular fire drills paid off as on the raising of the alarm, the stores were evacuated and as the workers left the stores they closed fire doors behind them. This was crucial and probably prevented the fire from spreading to the actual flour mills and the silos.³⁴ The fire brigade was on the scene within minutes and all the local fire units were involved while assistance was provided by Cappamore and Shannon brigades. Ranks own fire brigade directed water upon the burning building from the roof of the flour mills opposite. Ranks employees who were unloading wheat from an English vessel came to the assistance of the firemen trying to bring the fire under control.³⁵ The fire at the grain store was to prove the worst in Limerick for many years as at one point the flames were leaping a hundred feet into the sky.

It soon became apparent that the grain stores would burn to the ground-the fear was then that the fire could result in a large explosion as the dust from the grain was highly combustible. There were also fears that that fire would spread to the Shell Oil Company or James McMahon's timber yards. If the fire spread to these premises with their highly combustible material the situation could become disastrous. Two small ships in Limerick harbour were moved as a precautionary measure.³⁶ The local Civil Defence was also alerted. Crowds of people gathered around Limerick Docks to watch the fire. Many were family members of Ranks employees. After some time the fire fighters had the fire under control. The grain stores had been burned down but fortunately the fire had not spread. The fire brigade kept a vigil at the site all night in case the fire would flare up again. Fortunately, no Ranks employee or any of the Emergency services were injured in the fire. Ranks received insurance but did not rebuild the store, a sign that investment in Limerick was in question.³⁷

FIRE AT LIMERICK PREMISES

The fire which broke out at the Limerick premises on Wednesday, 5th January, was confined totally to a grain store across the road from the mill proper. The mill and main buildings were untouched.

Consequently, employment, production and deliveries have not been affected in any way.

Ranks (Ireland) Limited wish to express their sincere appreciation to the Fire Brigades, Gardai, staff and members of the public for their assistance.



P90 24 3 Presentation of trophy by the Mayor of Limerick to the winning Ranks team in an industrial safety competition 1975.

Back Row L-R: Tom O'Shea, J. Drew, John O'Donnell, P Murray, Stevie Shinnors, T Clohessy, Jack Haugh Front Row Ald Pat Kennedy Mayor, Paddy Deegan, Pat Storan

Courtesy of Joe McDermott

The closed Ranks complex from the air. The waste ground by the silo is where the Garryowen Shed once stood before the fire 1989
Limerick City Museum



Flour dust

Mills were traditionally unhealthy places to work as the storage of grain and the milling process inevitably produced huge amounts of dust. The silos, mills and entire complex were permeated with dust as it escaped from the mill along the Dock Road. '*it was said below, "clean money but dirty work".*'³⁸ They were not alone in this-the bacon factories left the River Shannon red from their refuse and Cleeves poured whey into the river. The atmosphere in Ranks was regularly clouded from the dust and there was a residue of dust found in many places. '*the dust there was unbelievable and in them days there was no masks, there was four of us shovelling into a bin and I couldn't see the man next to me,... it surely killed a lot of people.*'³⁹ Even the office staff, were not immune from the dust. One former office worker said such was the prevalence of dust that her eyes would be '*streaming as if she had hay fever.*'⁴⁰

The presence of large quantities of dust could also lead to a potential dust explosion, a major source of danger.⁴¹ As Limerick mills were extremely dusty places they were always vulnerable to such an event. As well as the potential danger of a dust explosion the dust could exacerbate breathing problems or cause long-term damage to the lungs of workers. Mill workers were widely believed to be more prone to lung complaints due to their regular exposure to dust. While there is no medical or scientific evidence on this subject, there were many cases of Ranks employees suffering from, and dying early from respiratory conditions. The grinding of grain raised a high level of dust and in the 1930s, three men who had worked as grinders at the old Mallow Street Mill all died of tuberculosis. Their exposure to dust may have weakened their lungs and constitution, leaving them vulnerable to infections. It is almost impossible to determine if these Ranks employees suffered ill health because of their working environment. Tuberculosis or consumption as it was known, and other lung conditions were endemic in Limerick at the time, due to poverty, poor nutrition and poor housing. Ranks paid for the medical treatment of several workers with T.B. but refused to admit liability for their employees' illness. The Factories Act of 1955 ordered employers to provide ventilated work areas but respiratory ailments, such as T.B., among a firm's employees was not deemed reportable under the same Act.⁴² Ranks were also concerned over their employees and their families health. After World War II, a company doctor was appointed. Dr. Feely and Dr. James Molloy cared for Ranks employees and their family members for many years.

By today's standards health and safety measures were negligible and this was typical of all the Limerick factories at the time. The unions were not very interested in health and safety generally with the exception of the issue of 'tiering' or stacking great sacks of flour. The legislation regarding health and safety was scant as there was no legal limit to the weight that could be lifted and there was no requirement for an employer to provide face masks.⁴³ Ranks workers rarely wore face masks and people were expected to carry huge weights. There was greater responsibility placed upon the mill worker to act in a safe manner. This changed after the Factories Act of 1955 but even after that date health and safety was treated in a relatively casual manner until the 1970s, when rising insurance claims and EEC regulations brought in radical change.



Working in a mill: conditions and risks

P90 7 1

Photograph taken at Ranks staff dinner.

L-R: Eddie Harris, Jack Haugh, Jack Sciascia and Paddy Deegan, December 1960.

Courtesy of Paddy Deegan

End Notes

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- 5 Limerick Leader, 11 November 1972
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- 7 P89/183/5, LCA
- 8 P89/13, 8 October 1934, LCA
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- 10 P89/18, 1 April 1939, LCA
- 11 P89/18, 27 March 1939, LCA
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- 13 P89/22, 2 March 1942, LCA
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- 16 Nenagh Guardian, 29 June 1940
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- 18 P89/29, 16 May; 24 and 28 July 1948, LCA
- 19 P89/30, 16 August 1951, LCA
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- 22 Information supplied by Norman Campion
- 23 P89/32, 23 February 1953, LCA
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- 26 OHP/RK/2, Oral History Interview Frances O'Brien, LCA
- 27 OHP/RK/9, Oral History Interview Patrick Quinlivan, LCA
- 28 OHP/RK/15, Oral History Interview Noel O'Neill, LCA
- 29 Cork Examiner, 6 January 1977
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- 32 OHP/RK/7, Oral History Interview Michael Hartnett, LCA
- 33 OHP/RK/3, Oral History Interview Joe Kennelly, LCA
- 34 OHP/RK/18, Oral History Interview Ann Ashton, LCA
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- 37 OHP/RK/9, Oral History Interview Patrick Quinlivan, LCA



P90 8 20
Ranks staff prior to trip
to Aran Islands 1977

Back Row L-R: (Mrs P Ringrose) Paddy Ringrose, John Sheehan, Mickey Clohessy, Paddy Fitzgerald, unknown, unknown.

Second Row L-R: Matt Kennedy, Lila Brosnan, Mary Lehane, Mrs J. Sheehan, Andy Lehane, Chris McMahon, Clem. Brosnan, Maureen Clohessy, Theresa Fitzgerald, Tony

Clohessy, Frank Murphy, Bridie Kennedy, Anne Carey, Chris Murphy, Bridget Clohessy.

Front Row L-R: Terry Moran, Sean Heagney, Kitty Noonan, Mary O'Connor, unknown, unknown.
Courtesy of Tony Clohessy



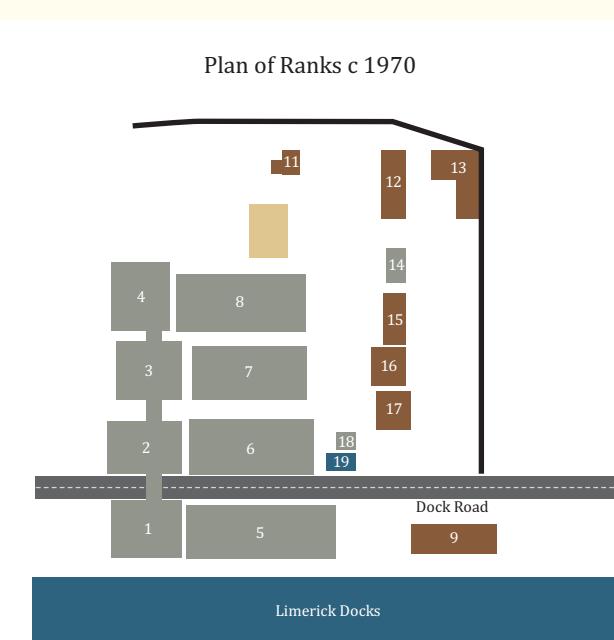
CHAPTER SIX

Working lives in Limerick's mills

P89 3 10 10

Kenneth Brisbane demonstrating a roll fluting machine for two visitors c. 1948
Limerick City Archives

Working lives in Limerick's mills



Ranks Mills and silos dominated the skyline of the southern side of Limerick and for many years the thriving mills defined Limerick proudly as an industrial city, '*they were like the New York skyscrapers*'. The mills didn't just dominate the city physically, it dominated it economically. It was one of the major employers in the city from the 1930s until the 1970s. Ranks not only provided well paid and secure employment, it generated wealth and economic opportunities for the rest of the city and the county. For the staff that worked there for generations it meant more than just a job- Ranks was a community and a way of life. The complex was large, busy and noisy- a hive of activity for its workers. To supply and maintain the mills was an industry in itself as the Ranks Mills created many much-needed spin off jobs in construction, transportation and farming, for the entire region, for many years.

Delivery and handling of wheat in Ranks

Ranks had an elaborate system for handling imported and native wheat. Native wheat arrived by train, lorry or even by trailers pulled by tractors from the first of August until October and was stored in four huge silos. Large quantities of Irish wheat were handled and every autumn a long line of vehicles lined the Dock Road to deliver wheat to the mills. Native wheat was also transported by train, in bulk wagons. The train pulled up the bulk wagons onto a bridge on Carey's Road, '*the contents would be discharged through a hole in the bridge into a lorry*'.¹ Some of the grain was kept at a Ranks depot on Matterson's Row, Carey's Road. 'Checkers' would document the grain delivered and trucks then took the grain to the Shannon Mills, where it was tested before being stored.

Plan of Ranks

- | | | | | |
|------------------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|-----------------|------------------------|
| 1-4. Silo | 5. Garryowen shed | 6. Provender mill | 7. Warehouse | 8. Flour mills (A & B) |
| 9. Bannatyne stores | 10. Garage | 11. Caretaker's cottage | 12. Garage | 13. Offices. |
| 14-16. Trade and maintenance Sheds | 17. Office/laboratory | 18. Weigh-house | 19. Gate house. | |



The Garryowen

Imported wheat came by sea on grain ships which were unloaded mechanically in the estuary by the Garryowen, a combined tug and pneumatic tug suction. At Limerick the depth of water at high tide was not sufficient to permit the entrance of ships drawing more than 18 feet of water, and the nearest point at which the vessels could be allowed was near Shannon Airport. This greatly restricted the size of ships that could enter Limerick Port, unless their load was lightened. In order to bring large ships alongside the quay in Limerick, where their cargo could be discharged, the Garryowen towed a lighter with a capacity of 1,600 tonnes down to the ship. This lighter was called the Derg and was possibly a former Norwegian Whaler. The Garryowen positioned herself between the ship and the lighter and sucked the grain out of the hold and filled the lighter. They then proceeded back to the Docks and the lighter tied up on the far side, while the Garryowen was positioned near the grain silo and stores to await the arrival of the ship. When it was discharged at high tide and departed the Docks. The lighter was brought alongside the Garryowen and emptied. The Garryowen fed the wheat into underground conveyors, under the Docks adjacent to Ranks. The wheat was then sent to the various silos, which could hold up to 45,000 tonnes of cereal. Each of the four main silos held 10,000 tonnes. With the opening of the new entrance into the Docks there were less depth restrictions and the Garryowen was permanently moored where it continued to unload grain from ships at the quayside.²

Milling

Before it could be stored, Irish wheat had to be dried in 'dryers' down to 14 or 15% moisture content. Wheat could then be stored for a considerable time in silos before it was milled. The various wheats were blended in different proportions depending on the type of flour being produced. The wheat was then thoroughly cleaned and sieved to remove chaff and seeds and other dirt. It was then 'conditioned' by adding a little water to toughen up the outer skin so it did not shatter during milling. The wheat was then opened up using grooved steel rollers. One roller held the grain while a second one opened it up. This was done repeatedly, up to twenty times and after each 'rolling' flour and semolina was sieved out. The grain would pass this process until the skin of the grain was only left (bran).³ After final tests the flour was sent by conveyor for packing. Ranks also produced animal feed in a highly mechanised mill, the provender mill. Milled maize, wheat and barley and additives such as minerals and vitamins would be placed upon a conveyor before they were sent to a '*holding bin where all the ingredients would be mixed up*'. Ranks produced feeds for pigs, cows, sheep, chicken, turkeys and horses.⁴

The packing of the flour and animal feed was very labour intensive until the 1970s. Flour and feed flowed into bags from shoots and these bags had to be stitched by hand, using large needles. They were then sent by shoot to the warehouse. Here they were stacked by 'tiering men'. The packing and stacking of flour and animal feed was simplified in the 1970s with the introduction of machines to seal the bags and pallet trucks. Flour and feed were dispatched from the warehouse. Ranks had their own trucks for deliveries, and until the 1950s employed ships and a barge - the Eclipse Flower to deliver flour.



Working hours and pay rates

The mills paid well but the employees worked very hard for their good wages. Ranks paid both its permanent and casual staff well. The mills were the best paid of all the traditional industries in Limerick, although the Pork Butchers were also well paid. Ranks staff worked a 48 hour week in the 1930s and 1940s. This was reduced to 44 hours a week in the 1950s. It was only in the 1960s that the 40-hour week was introduced. Many of Ranks staff worked shift work. This was a three-cycle shift. They worked, days, evening and nights. The day shift began for many years at six in the morning. *'Well there were three shifts that time, you were on six to two; a two to ten shift; and there was a ten to six. Well then you might be asked to work a twelve hour shift; that would be six in the morning to six at night, or six in the night to six in the morning. You'd be on a week of night work, a week of days you know. That was hard work because twelve hours in that environment 'twas tough going.'*⁵ In the 1940s, it was common for those who had worked only 40 hours a week on the night shift to return to work on a Saturday for a further eight hours, to make up their working week, which was then forty eight hours. The work was often physically demanding. One former Ranks worker remembers a young man crying while he struggled to stitch a bag of flour.⁶ The 'tiering' men were expected to carry and stack ten stone bags of flour often 10 high. Many mastered a knack of carrying the cumbersome flour sacks. The men could balance the sacks on their shoulders in such a way as to make them more manageable. One man was so adept at this that he could read a book while carrying a sack.⁷ There was often a great deal of pressure upon the staff and management to devise ways to meet government quotas for flour, during periods of shortages. Ranks' millers had an excellent reputation and they met every challenge presented to them during the Emergency and difficult post-war years. Ranks Mills was one of the great technical training centres and many of their trainee millers went on to manage mills throughout the world.⁸



P90 15 6
The retirement of Sam and Alphonsus Copues and at the front Elizabeth Kirwin
c. 1955
Courtesy of Michael and Albert Copues

P90 7 7
Ranks Service Awards
Front Row
L-R Dennis O'Malley, Paddy Hayes, John Cremin, Gordon Bull, Rose Long, Mick Manning
Standing 1st row
Unknown, Jack Haugh, Paddy Deegan, John Noonan, Michael O'Halloran, Michael Clancy, Joe Kiely, Tony Kearney, Jack O'Docherty
Standing 2nd row
Declan Wallace, Tom O'Shea, Michael Holmes, Albert Copues
Courtesy of Paddy Deegan

P90 19 5
Group photograph at Paddy Walsh's retirement party c.1975
Courtesy of Joe McDermott

P90 8 12
Ranks Pensioners Dinner (Young Munster Rugby Club) mid-1970s
Back Row L-R
Mick Bowman, Tony Clohessy, Pat Brosnan, Paddy O'Brien
Front Row
Tom Heagney, Jimmy Benn, Tom Cassidy
Courtesy of Tony Clohessy





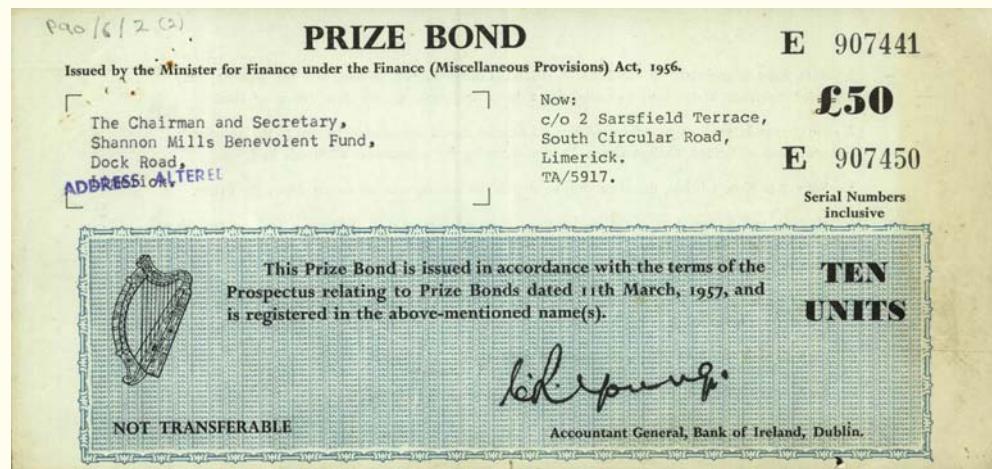
Cecil Mercier

Ranks were fortunate in that they attracted high calibre individuals to work in the mills. Typical of these dedicated and capable employees, was Cecil Mercier (D.C.C. Mercier). Mercier was a towering figure in Limerick milling for over forty years. Born in Limerick in 1898, to a Methodist family he was educated in Belfast and upon graduation, trained as a miller. Mercier served as an officer in France with the Royal Engineers. He was appointed as mill manager of the City Mill in 1920. Soon he had responsibility for Goodbody mills in Limerick and Cork. Mercier was an expert miller who introduced modern working practices into the mills in the 1920s and was an instinctive moderniser and driver of efficiency. After the Ranks take-over he remained in charge of the Limerick mills and oversaw the construction of the Shannon Mills complex on the Dock Road. This placed an enormous burden upon the shoulders of Mercier, but he displayed tremendous energy. That Shannon Mills complex was completed in the midst of a war and shortages is a testament to Mercier's skill and dedication.

His expertise as a miller and manager were invaluable to the mills as they struggled to produce flour during the dark times of the Emergency. Mercier was active in all aspects of the mill-from testing flour and interviewing new staff to union negotiations. In the 1950s, Mercier patented a tool for testing moisture in wheat. He was committed to high standards even though this was not always appreciated by his superiors. J Arthur Rank on inspection tours would read the company's Complaint Book. He wanted a significant number of complaints as too few complaints meant the flour was too good, an indication of high costs.⁹ In 1958 Mercier was promoted to oversee all the Ranks Mills in Ireland. In this capacity he oversaw the modernisation of much of Ranks business in Ireland. He was respected by staff as strict but fair. In 1962 Cecil Mercier retired, having served Limerick milling and indeed the city well during many trying times. His archive includes diaries, correspondence, technical notes and photographs which provide an invaluable insight into the Limerick mills that he worked in for so long.

A family job

Ranks was referred to as one of the last of the old 'family' jobs. Fathers and sons often worked together-indeed two or three generations of a family could be employed at the same time. '*my father worked there and also my uncles and my grandfather- the O'Donnell's- yes Tom O'Donnell my grandfather and Phonsie and my father Paddy O Donnell- it was a family tradition-it was great to get a factory job back that time*'¹⁰ Vacancies were not really advertised as word of mouth played an important role in filling vacancies. Even in the 1970s only vacancies requiring a technical qualification were advertised. Family connections were often essential.¹¹ The mill staff believed that their relatives had a right to gain employment in the firm. They had earned the right for their sons and daughters to be considered for a position with the firm. In the late 1940s there was a gentleman's agreement between employers and employees over the issue. Some of the management liked sons working with fathers, believing that the young men would be obedient and disciplined workers as they were not only under management supervision but also under their father's control at work.¹² Having a relative at Ranks did not guarantee you a position with the company as Ranks were concerned with only employing the best. Generally, although many relatives and family members were employed they had to be deemed acceptable by the management. Ranks, usually managed to attract a high quality candidate to the mills. As



one former employee remarked '*If you had an education, you were offered two jobs - Ranks or the banks. Now that's a fact!*'.¹³ Prospective employees were generally interviewed by the mill manager. '*I had an interview with Mr Mercier -he asked me my name and about my family-he then asked me to read a paragraph out of a newspaper-which I did but I was shaking doing it-and he would listen to you to see if you could read!*'.¹⁴ Prior to the 1960s most people left school early and literacy was sometimes an issue.

Ranks workers generally stayed Ranks workers as it was truly a job for life.¹⁵ Many of the men entered the mills at fourteen or fifteen and stayed there for the rest of their working lives. '*I started at Ranks when I was 15 years of age*'.¹⁶ Employment was not just a contractual arrangement between an employer and employee. There was a genuine sense of company loyalty by the employees. The majority of employees were proud to work at Ranks. It was not just a job or a place to earn a wage, they felt they were part of a community. Typical of the closeness of the mill workers is that when one worker lay dying, his fellow workers 'waked' him and stayed with him in his last hours. There was a great commitment to one's place of work. One Ranks employee, after being injured in an accident, had to be dissuaded by his family from leaving Barrington's Hospital to return to his duties on the Garryowen.¹⁷ People were grateful for the wages they received as it raised many from poverty and allowed them to better themselves and their families. '*But they never complained, 'cause they were happy they had jobs, got on with what they had to do. They were happy to do it. They didn't want trouble, they didn't want to cause trouble. They just wanted to do their job and get paid for it. And that cut across everywhere, right across the board, anyone that tells you otherwise is a dissenter. I've seen all sides of it. I've seen it at management side and I've seen at the workers' side, I went through 'em all. And as I said there earlier on, it was brought into you from a young age. You went in there and you went there to give your life there. It's like as they'd say years ago goin' down the coal mines.*'¹⁸ The company's attitude to its employees was paternalistic as Ranks felt a duty to their workers and their families. This is evident in Cecil Mercier's concern for an employees' disabled son.¹⁹ As in every community there were tensions- the Newtown Pery and City Mill workers when transferred to the Shannon Mills did not always see eye-to-eye. This was reportedly as the City Mills were usually Fine Gael or Labour while the former Newtown Pery men were Fianna Fáil supporters. The 'Free State' allegiance of the City Mills may have originally arisen out of those mills occupation by Republican forces in the Civil War, which was bitterly resented by the workers.²⁰

Ranks usually employed young men and women from the ages of seventeen or eighteen. This came about after an agreement between the Goodbody's and the union prior to the Ranks takeover of the Limerick mills. This reduced the number of teenagers working at the mills. However, office boys were employed mainly as messengers as young as fourteen or fifteen. Until 1968 the majority of Ranks workers were not entitled to company pensions. The company ran a pension scheme for the management. Ranks workers, together in the Shannon Mills Benevolent Fund, operated their own savings scheme to fund their pensions. They received no contribution into this pension fund from Ranks. The Shannon Mills Benevolent Fund purchased Prize Bonds, from its members' savings. Until the 1960s the state pension was inadequate and traditionally men and women worked for as long as physically possible. It was not unusual for men and women to finally retire in their 70s. John O'Donnell retired in 1940 after 45 years of service at the age of 72. Mrs Elizabeth Kirwin, the much loved head of the returnable sacks department retired well into her seventies.

P8976 (4)

PROPOSED LABOUR ECONOMIES.PACKING LOFT.CITY MILL.COMPARISON BETWEEN CITY MILL & NEWTOWN PERY MILLEXISTING STAFFS.

DUTY	CITY MILL		NEWTOWN PERY	
	MEN	BOYS	MEN	BOYS
1st Flour Packers	3		3	
2nd " "	3		3	
1st Flour Stitchers	3		Nil	
2nd " "	3		Nil	
Flour Cart Boys		3		3
" hold "		3		Nil
Offal Packers	3		6	
" Stitchers		3		Nil
1st Feedermen	3		Nil	
2nd "	3		Nil	
TOTALS	21 Men	9 Boys	12 Men	3 Boys

FLOUR PACKING.

It is proposed to dispense with services of 3 flour stitchers (one per shift) and two "hold boys". The total flour staff would then amount to nine men and 4 boys, - this being 3 men and 1 boy in excess of Russells. They would



P90 90 9 1
Ranks laboratory staff c. late 1960s

Back Row
L-R: Unknown, unknown, Chris Scanlon (Chemist)
Ronnie Grant, Joe McKeown, Eddie Sciascia,
Gerard McNamara.

Middle Row
L-R: Anne McMahon, Rita Ryan, Frances O'Brien,
Aileen Lynch, Teresa O'Donovan, Rosemary Clancy.

Front Row
L-R: Lilly McNiece, Pat Creamer, Sheila O'Hara,
Mary Clune.
Courtesy of Ann McMahon



P90 11 1
Ranks staff c. 1940
L-R: William Stockil, Bertie Sciascia, Paddy Rune and George McGuire
Courtesy of Tony Kennelly



Women in Ranks

Mills had long been something of a masculine preserve as flour milling was considered hard and demanding work. In the nineteenth century when generally working conditions in factories were poor, mills were notorious for their conditions. Women were only slowly able to secure employment in the mills and never actually worked in the mills themselves. It was the same in the bacon curers in Limerick. Women did secure employment in Cleeves and the clothing factories but it was only with the introduction of the typewriter and the need for telephonists, in the early twentieth century that more women worked in offices. It was widely assumed that women's dexterity made them more suitable for these tasks.²² Women were employed after the war in the laboratory. Here young women who had some scientific background worked in the testing of wheat and flour.²³ Ranks like other mills had traditionally employed women as tea ladies' and one as a baker who baked bread from flour milled at the mills. Cecil Mercier had a daily ritual where he tasted a loaf to assess the quality, texture, volume and taste of the flour milled at his plant.²⁴

There was considerable doubt in Ranks about employing women but the success of female workers in other firms such as Irish Wire persuaded Ranks to employ women when the returnable sacks department was set up during the war. They proved to be a success and the returnable sacks department remained in operation until the mills closure. Women in the 1940s were by law barred from working shifts. In the 1950s, more women were employed, packing small flour packages. Again, the management considered young men for these jobs. However, the success and especially the dexterity of women convinced Ranks to employ female labour in their new packaging department. The need for new and better packaging also created roles for women in a previously all male preserve in Shaws Bacon Factory.²⁵

Until the removal of the marriage bar when Ireland joined the E.E.C., Ranks generally only employed single women or widows. Many women left Ranks for no other reason than they married. This could be hard on them as young married couples were then obliged to live on one wage. This was especially difficult for many former Ranks female employees,

P90 15 10

Elizabeth Kirwin with retirement gift
Courtesy of Albert and Michael
Copues c 1955

P90 8 8

Ranks office staff c. 1977
L-R: Kitty, Rita Wallace, Bridget Clohessy
Courtesy of Tony Clohessy



as they often married co-workers. In the sixties more and more married women went back to work on a part time basis and this was considered shocking by some.²⁶ 104 Henry Street was the head office for all Ranks activities in Ireland and all A.G.M.s were held here until 1961. In 1962 as part of a rationalisation programme the office was moved to the Dock Road and all financial operations for Ranks Ireland Limited were carried on here in a new open plan office. *'when I went into it first with over a hundred people working, it was like one of those things you'd see in the insurance companies in America where you had these rows of people all at their desks. It was daunting. It was all manual you see. You had a typewriter, not an electric one now. Manual typewriters. Printing, typing up the invoices. So you had these huge typing pools.'*²⁷ This development provided new and well paid opportunities for women.

Women in the sack stores received higher pay than many of their male co-workers in the provender mill, in the 1940s. Ranks created decent and well paid jobs for women, at a time when opportunities were limited, especially in the 1940s and 1950s when for many the only opportunities was shop work or domestic service, *'but any factory job was great'*. With the introduction of computers in 1970 many of these women were made redundant. *'So all this went on then until 1970 and then they started looking at computers because R.H.M. themselves had gone computerised. ... There was a company in Dublin called Park. What they did was come down then and looked at all the prime entry information which people had put on the national cash register cards, you know and see how we can actually put that on, so you were given forms and you filled out the forms manually and then you put them into a box on the train up to Dublin, Collected at the other end of Dublin. Processed overnight. All done overnight working 24 hours a day. Onto the train, back into Limerick. So by the third day you had all the information back, all the invoices back, all the credit notes back, all the debtors ledger information and the general ledger information.'*²⁸

Casual staff

Ranks male mill staff can be divided into two categories; the permanent staff members were referred to as 'men', while the casual workers were known as 'boys' until the 1960s. These 'boys' were usually young men but some of them remained 'boys' for years and were married men. The origin of this distinction between 'boys' and 'men' workers, could lie in the nineteenth century milling industry when boys were employed as casual labour by the mills. This practice was also prevalent in the milling industry before Ranks takeover of the local mills.²⁹ 'Boys' were often employed on a short term or daily basis. *'Ah at that time you got paid fifteen and nine pence a day, but you got by on that. You know. That was pretty good. And the only thing about it was if you went down for a job in the morning there may not be jobs,so you had to go down every morning to get your fifteen and nine bonus a day..... You took most of it home to your mother you know.'*³⁰ The 'boys' or 'casuals' were usually picked by a foreman or a supervisor and were paid on a daily basis as the supervisors kept daily labour books documenting where and when a casual was employed.³¹

Many of those employed, as 'boys' however were also permanent employees and most of Ranks permanent staff began their career as boys. After a period of time, during which they had to prove their capabilities, they were appointed and made permanent. It was very difficult to be

P89 3 21

Photograph of a group of Ranks staff at a social event with Cecil Mercier seated in the centre holding up a bottle of beer. c.1950
Limerick City Archives

P90 22 10

Group photograph of Ranks female staff mainly office c. 1970.
Back Row L-R:
Doreen Walker, Kate Mullins, Mary Lloyd, Maisie Parkinson,
Nellie Hartigan, Rose Long, May Close, Evelyn Smith,
Josephine Brereton, Rita Fitzgibbon, Anne Hassett, Phil ()
Courtesy Ann Ashton

P90 14 3

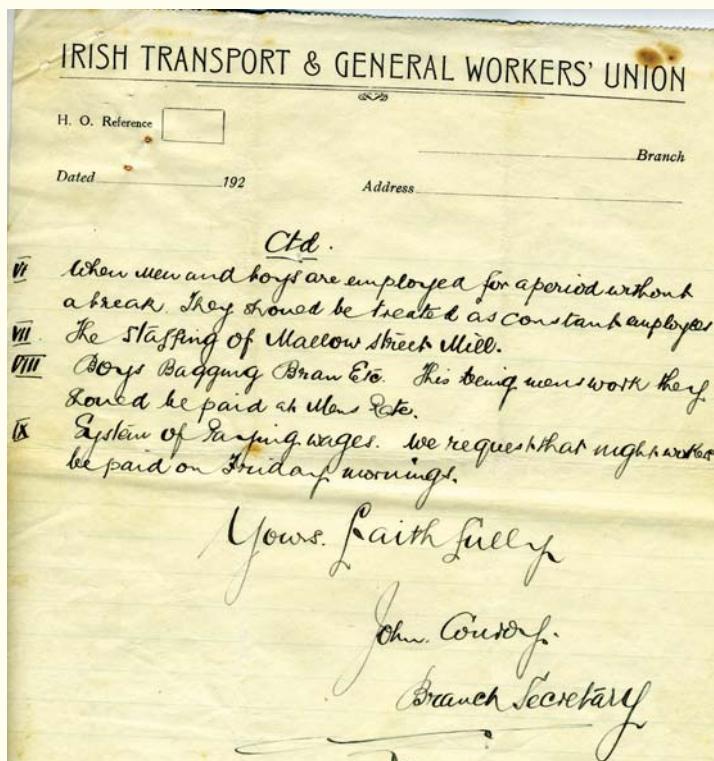
Ranks Sports Day c. 1960
L-R: Jim McCarthy, John Gleeson,
Johnny Cassidy, Christy Connor.
Courtesy George Spillane



'appointed'.³² It was possibly an advantage to have a relation already working in Ranks. 'Casuals' or 'boys' generally performed unskilled tasks such as labouring and cleaning. Ranks management were especially keen on cleanliness. The daily labourers in particular worked in the stores or warehouse, lifting and carrying heavy loads. They often worked as part of 'gangs' that would load the trucks that pulled into Ranks for collections. These 'gangs' were usually headed by a permanent member of staff. It was often 'back-breaking' work and it was common for a new 'boy' to give up on his first day. Ranks casual workers were generally well paid and it provided much needed work for many during periods of high unemployment.

The employment of casual workers was normal in Limerick's traditional industries-in the timber yards, bacon curers, Cleeves and the Limerick Clothing Factory. In some of the Bacon Factories they were referred to as 'Yanks'. Casual workers comprised a large proportion of these firms workforce, including Ranks. *'the foreman would come down along the line in the morning. You had to turn up of course at eight o'clock, to get jobbed if you wanted to be jobbed and the foreman would say, "you, you and you, okay that's all I need today."*³³ Many of those employed mainly by Ranks as 'casuals' also worked for other employers on the Docks or at another Limerick firm.

Ranks employed large numbers of casual workers during the busy wheat season, to help with the intake and storage of the wheat harvest. The practice of employing 'casuals' as day workers or for cleaning and lifting duties continued into the 1960s. However, the introduction of forklifts and pallets reduced the physical lifting of materials and products in the mills. Sacks of flour were palletised and this spelled the end of the practice of employing daily labour.³⁴ The Ranks warehouse once busy and loud with gangs loading trucks became a very quiet workplace, with only a handful of forklift drivers and office staff. Even during the hectic wheat season, there was a much reduced need for casual workers and many of these were third level students on summer holidays.





Ranks and Limerick city

Most of those employed by Ranks lived in the city and many lived in the old lanes, especially during the 1930s and 1940s. These were narrow, over-crowded and often dirty. Many of the houses had half-doors and some of the lanes were so narrow that on New Years Eve, the occupants could shake their neighbours' hands without leaving their houses.³⁵ In the 1940s many Ranks workers left the city centre and moved out to the new Limerick Corporation estates around the city such as St Mary's Park, Thomondgate, Killalee and Janesboro and later during the 1950s Ballynancy, Rathbane, Ballinacurra Weston, Garryowen and Assumpta Park.³⁶ This was largely the case with other Limerick firms at the time. Before the increase in the use of cars from the sixties it was difficult for people from the county or beyond to commute to work in Limerick. Ranks workers usually made their own way to work, often by foot as there was no other way to get to the mills, especially during the Emergency when bicycles and tyres were in short supply. There was simply no option but to walk. Cycling to work was the norm after the war. Owning a bike was something of a status symbol as they were relatively expensive and were often purchased on credit.. *'Bicycles, everyone was cycling. Bicycles, we all cycled. If you had a new bike that time we thought it was like a new car. ... the Dock Road was like Piccadilly Circus in London at that time.'*³⁷ The Dock Road, then home to many industries and firms was described as being 'black' with cyclists.³⁸ Many of the Ranks workers would cycle home for lunch as there were no canteen facilities at the mills for many years. In the 1930s, Ranks workers often had their tea or lunch delivered in 'billy cans' by their family members.³⁹ Mostly workers made do with a kettle, and brought their own packed lunch, as it was only in the 1970s that a basic canteen was opened.

Historically, Irish Protestants and Quakers were the entrepreneurs that established milling business. Many of the leading Irish milling families such as Odlums or Shackletons were Protestants while in Limerick the Russells were members of the Church of Ireland, the Bannatynes were members of Limerick's local Presbyterian community, Ranks were Methodists and Goodbody's were Quakers. Ranks management and directors were all drawn from the local Protestant community and many of the foremen and millers were also Protestants until the mid-1960's.

Limerick was 'a city of churches' as religion played a large part in the lives of Limerick people. Until the 1980s, mass attendance was almost universal among local people. During the war years with its privations, Ranks mill workers, were often given a small bag of flour. At least one worker donated his flour to the Catholic Church where the flour was used to make communion wafers.⁴⁰ Many attended early mass in one of the city's churches. Those from the north side of the city attended the Franciscans, while others would attend the Jesuits or Redemptorists. The Franciscans were especially popular among the Ranks workers. Many of the workers donated a shilling a week deducted out of their wages to the Friars. Some workers donated money to the Redemptorists. Many Ranks workers regularly went on retreat or joined one of the many confraternities or sodalities in the city-the Franciscan Sodality was especially popular. For many years, a mass was held every November in the Franciscans for deceased Ranks workers. This was common in other Limerick firms and organisations, and continues to this day.⁴¹

P90 17 37

Paddy Brosnan in Ranks c.1972
Courtesy of Paddy Brosnan

P89 6 8

Union letter to Goodbodys regarding
employment of 'boys' 1929
Limerick City Archives

P89 3 10 29

Photograph of a small group of staff taken in the yard outside Newtown Pery Mill.
L-R: Sid Ringrose, Millwright, John Stockil, Foreman, Jim Kirkpatrick, Assistant Manager, UK.
Front Row. L-R: Spence Collison and Cecil Mercier c.1920
Limerick City Archives



A 'lovely place to work'



The Ranks Mills were an extremely hot, noisy, dusty place to work. *'The place had to be kept spotless inside, the mill itself had to be polished and made to keep it clean and if any flour came out it had to be picked up, you know.'*⁴² The noise from the mill and the distinctive smell of molasses, used in animal feed, pervaded the air. The manual labour involved in packing, stacking and loading was extremely demanding. Yet the vast majority of the former employees have only positive and happy memories of the mills. There was generally a good working atmosphere at the Shannon Mills across the flour mill, provender mill, silos, docks, and office. *'There was a real camaraderie among the workers. And that was the thing I thought. They were great mixers, everybody was great mixers you know and there were all different characters. Sometimes you'd fall around the place laughing at the idiosyncrasies of them, oh God it was unbelievable. But ah, they were really good. Really good people, you know. To get together for the sing-song it was extraordinary, you know, extraordinary.'*⁴³ Many enduring friendships were formed and these survived the closure of Ranks. The mill staff were a community, reinforced by the many family members, friends and neighbours who worked together.

There was plenty of 'craic' at the mills. Many pranks were played such as putting a mouse down the back of women in the small packing department. The Ranks workers often socialised together, especially on the pubs on the Dock Road. Many were too tired however as the work was very physically demanding. The younger workers would stay out later and many lived for the city's dances. These were often the only glamour during the difficult days of the 1940s and 1950s and were the highlight of the week for many. The dances at Cruises Hotel were especially popular while the cinema, especially the Savoy, which was actually owned by Ranks, was another favourite which had to be booked in advance for the Sunday evening showings.⁴⁴

P89 3 10 36
Mrs Mercier making a presentation on a Sports Day
Limerick City Archives

P90 17 27
Ranks five-a-side football team
Courtesy of Paddy Brosnan

P90 17 37
Ranks football team
L-R: Back Row: Donal O'Donoghue, Joe Kearney, Clem Brosnihan, Bobby O'Halloran, Martin Kiely, Tony Clohessy, Tom O'Shea.
L-R Middle Row Stephen, ()Woodrow, Ted O'Connor, Gerry Caulfield, ()Dillon, ()Sheehan
Courtesy of Paddy Brosnan

P90 20 4
Fr Gus Hourigan saying his mass on Ranks floor. He was a former Ranks staff member and his brother and father also worked at the mills.
Courtesy of Denis Hourigan and Joe McDermott



Social scene

Ranks had a lively social scene as workers and management often organised social events for the employees. In 1932 Arthur Rank had urged Cecil Mercier the Mill Manager to establish a sports and social club. An annual sports day was held in the Young Men's Protestant Association's grounds on the Ennis Road where Ranks workers and families attended.*'there was no place else we ever thought of, only Ranks flour mill. From our youngest day, and I mean from my youngest day, from the day I was eight years of age, was the first time I seen Mr. Mercier. And I saw Mr. Mercier outside in the LPYMA grounds on the Ennis Road, at the annual sports for the employees. And I was in a race, and I won a prize, and he presented it to me. And I'll tell you this, I walked up to him and he said, "Ah Copues, ah, congratulations, I know your grandfather James."*⁴⁵

From the late 1940s Ranks organised a yearly dinner dance and these were extremely well attended. The flour mill workers and the provender mill workers often organised dances and excursions for their members⁴⁶ In the 1970s, a new Sports and Social Club was founded which organised dances, Christmas parties and even published a newsletter. The Club arranged a yearly Christmas Dinner for Ranks pensioners which took place in the Young Munster Rugby Club. *'In 1970 we started off a thing called the Pensioners Dinner, and the first year we brought all the pensioners no matter from what part of the company, retired, or directors retired, or administration or warehouse people, we brought them up. We sent them out all invitations and we brought them into Limerick, into the office. We supplied some drink, and we supplied cigarettes, at the time cigarettes were handed out like confetti and we had a lovely meal in the company, a get together'*⁴⁷ The Ranks workers would collect and drive home the former mill workers. Every second year, the Sports and Social Club organised a flight to the English-Ireland Rugby International at Twickenham. For most, it was the first time they were in an aeroplane. The Ranks workers stayed in a hotel for the weekend and always met with Limerick people who had emigrated to London to reminisce and usually have a sing-along. The Ranks workers often brought over traditional Limerick rashers, sausages and puddings to their relatives in London. One man, who had never flown before, when we landed at Heathrow was so relieved that he got down and kissed the ground. In 1979 when the Pope came to Ireland and kissed the ground upon leaving the plane, Ranks workers reckoned that the Pope had copied that particular Ranks worker. The Sports and Social Club, also organised a float for St Patrick's Day Parade along with many other Limerick firms, such as Clover Meats, Mattersons and Krupps. *'The company had a great float, but once or twice the Social Association put in their own float and we were in direct competition with Ranks. Once when the judges announced the first*

P90 8 3

Ranks day out for a fishing competition
Courtesy of Tony Clohessy

P90 8 4

Ranks staff at Ladies View Killarney, April 1977
Back Row L-R: Martin Kiely, Mick Clohessy, Matt Kennedy, Ger Earls, Frank Murphy.
Centre Row. L-R: Mary Nish, Aileen Kiely, Bridie Kennedy, Maureen Clohessy, Mrs G Evans,
Chris Murphy, Anne Nash. Front Row L-R: Jack Frawley, Bridget Clohessy, Anne Carey
Courtesy of Tony Clohessy



prize the winner was announced to be Ranks- we all shouted out "which Ranks". The Mayor and Councillors got into a huddle on the podium and after a while announced that Ranks Company had won- they could not by-pass the company.⁴⁸ Ranks was famous for its soccer teams. One of the earliest organisers of the inter-firm soccer league was a Ranks worker.⁴⁹ 'Ranks had a very good soccer team- always had, which was huge in Limerick at the time. Many companies had teams, many of the Shannon teams played in the Limerick inter-firm League-at the time there was little soccer in Clare, and Shannon was seen as an extension of the Limerick industrial base. A man that used work in the lab at Ranks, Joe McClune, he was the leading light in the inter-firm league but a lot of the matches were in Shelbourne Park or the Boro and Caledonian Park or the Bombing Field as it was known to me.⁵⁰ Teams from all over Limerick and Shannon played in the league. 'You had ..we'll say you had a Limerick Clothing Factory,You had Clover Meats....You had Mara's Bacon Factory,...You'd have the Cabinet Factory,...You had Spaight's, I played with Spaight's in the firm team.'⁵¹ They were hugely popular and often several hundred would attend the inter-firm's fixtures. Ranks also had a famous choir which sang at events all over the country and at the annual mass for deceased Ranks employees.⁵²



P90 10 1 & P90 10 2

Ranks ladies at a social event
Courtesy of Frances O'Brien

P90 8 18

Ranks Social Association Float, St Patrick's Day Parade c. 1978 L-R: Pauline Lane, John O'Donnell, Rita Wallace, Terry Moran, Phil Dore, Catherine Duffy, Martin Lynch, Bridget Clohessy, Kitty Murphy (-) Anne Carey, Michael Doyle, Kieran Dillon, Tony Clohessy
Courtesy of Tony Clohessy



The end of a way of life

When Ranks closed in 1983, the Mayor of Limerick claimed that '*something of the fabric of Limerick life had disappeared*'. It was the end of a seven hundred year tradition of flour milling in the city. The closure of Ranks greatly reduced the growing of grain in the region and was the final blow to Limerick's traditional industries. Ranks was a 'family' firm where generations of Limerick families found employment. The same names appear for generations...Copues, Wallace, O'Neill, O'Donnell, Stockil, Sciascia, Wallace, Patterson, Haugh, Hartnett, Stockil, Despard, Legar, Spillane, Gabbett, Malone, Spencer, O'Keefe, Hourigan, Sheehan, Stackpool, Woodrow, Callendar, Bourke, Humphries, Hassett, Smith, O'Halloran, Gubbins, McCormack, McDermot, Skinner, Bourke, O'Donoghue, Connery, Moran. Paddy Wallace the weighmaster at Ranks, spent decades at the firm and was the fourth generation of his family to work at Limerick mills.⁵³ The closure was a personal tragedy for all employees, and as very often several members of the same family were employed at the mills, closure hit some families very badly. The fortunes of those made unemployed by the closure of Ranks were varied. Many of the younger employees with trades or clerical skills were able to secure employment.⁵⁴ Some of the maintenance men found work relatively easily.⁵⁵ However many tradesmen, often with years of experience found it difficult to obtain work and some were forced to emigrate. Male unemployment was a big problem in the city and most of the older men were unskilled and had only attended primary school. They could not obtain employment in the newer electronics firms such as Verbatim which had mainly female employees. They knew nothing else but the mill.⁵⁶ Many of these men never worked on a full time basis again. One story is told of two former Ranks employees who never worked again after the mills closure. They had worked together and continued to meet each day and go for a walk along Cleeves Bank. They would stop and sit down and from the opposite bank gaze upon Ranks mills with great nostalgia.

*'something of the fabric of
Limerick life had disappeared'*



Working lives in Limerick's mills

View of Ranks Mills
Courtesy of Cox Collection (Limerick City Museum)

End Notes

- 1 P89/184, Mercier Papers, Limerick City Archives (LCA)
- 2 Norman Campion, Limerick's Maritime Heritage, p.1 (unpublished article), LCA
- 3 Thanks to Norman Campion for this information
- 4 OHP/RK/7, Oral History Interview Michael Hartnett, LCA
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 OHP/RK/15, Oral History Interview Noel O'Neill, LCA
- 7 OHP RK/1, Oral History Interview Tony Clohessy, LCA
- 8 Information supplied by Norman Campion, LCA
- 9 Information supplied by Jack Sciascia, LCA
- 10 OHP/RK/15, 2 Oral History Interview Noel and Teresa O'Neill, LCA
- 11 OHP/RK 5/10/20, Oral History interview George Spillane, Helen O'Dwyer and Ann Carey, LCA
- 12 OHP/RK/14, Oral History Interview Paddy Deegan, LCA
- 13 OHP/RK/11, Oral History Interview Albert and Michael Copues, LCA
- 14 OHP/RK/15, 2 Oral History Interview Noel and Teresa O'Neill, LCA
- 15 OHP/RK/9, Oral History Interview Patrick Quinlivan, LCA
- 16 OHP/RK/3, Oral History Interview Joe Kennelly, LCA
- 17 Information supplied by Judy Long
- 18 OHP/RK/11, Oral History Interview Albert and Michael Copues, LCA
- 19 P89/54, LCA
- 20 OHP/RK/10, Oral History Interview Joe Malone; P95 Letter from James Goodbody to John Browne, 7 July 1922, LCA
- 21 OHP/RK/11, Oral History Interview Michael and Albert Copues, LCA
- 22 OHP/RK/18, Oral History Interview Ann Ashton, LCA
- 23 OHP/RK/2, Mary Noble and Breda Cregan, LCA
- 24 P89 1-30 passim, LCA
- 25 OHP/12 2 Oral History Interview Theresa O'Neill, LCA
- 26 OHP/RK/2 Oral History Interview Breda Cregan and Ann McMahon, LCA
- 27 OHP/12 2 Oral History Interview Theresa O'Neill, LCA
- 28 OHP/RK/16 Oral History Interview Ted O'Connor, LCA
- 29 P89/1-18 passim, LCA
- 30 OHP/RK/7, Oral History Interview Michael Hartnett, LCA
- 31 OHP/RK/5, Oral History Interview George Spillane, LCA
- 32 OHP/RK/3, Oral History Interview Joe Kennelly, LCA
- 33 OHP/RK/14, Oral History Interview Paddy Deegan, LCA
- 34 OHP/RK/11, Oral History Interview Albert Copues, LCA
- 35 OHP/RK/15, Oral History Interview Noel O'Neill, LCA
- 36 OHP/RK/1, Oral History Interview Tony Clohessy, LCA
- 37 OHP/RK/7, Oral History Interview Michael Hartnett, LCA
- 38 OHP/RK/5, Oral History Interview George Spillane, LCA
- 39 Information supplied by Judy Long
- 40 OHP/RK/11, Oral History Interview Michael and Albert Copues, LCA
- 41 Information supplied by Josie Moran
- 42 OHP/RK/14, Oral History Interview Paddy Deegan, LCA
- 43 Ibid.
- 44 OHP/RK /13 Oral History Interview Margaret Whelan, LCA
- 45 OHP/RK/11 Oral History Interview Albert and Michael Copues, LCA
- 46 Ibid.
- 47 OHP/RK/4, Oral History Interview Jack Haugh, LCA
- 48 OHP/RK/1, Oral History Interview Tony Clohessy, LCA
- 49 OHP/RK/2, Oral History Interview Breda Cregan, LCA
- 50 OHP/RK/1, Oral History Interview Tony Clohessy, LCA
- 51 OHP/RK/7, Oral History Interview Michael Hartnett, LCA
- 52 Information supplied by Josie Moran
- 53 Information supplied by Paddy Wallace
- 54 OHP/RK/19, Oral History Interview Ann Carey, LCA
- 55 OHP/RK/1, Oral History Interview Tony Clohessy, LCA
- 56 OHP RK 16, Oral History Interview Ted O'Connor, LCA



Ranks office door
Henry Street c. 1960
Limerick City Museum



CHAPTER SEVEN

Beginning to fail

1972-1983

P90 24 2

A presentation to Dr John Feely, Ranks Company Doctor
Back Row L-R: Christy Carey, Jack Haugh, Matthew Lynch, Andy Lehane, Mickey Dawson (-)
Front Row L-R: Donal O'Donoghue, Dr John Feely and Mrs Feely (nee McMahon)
Courtesy of Geraldine Clohessy

Beginning to fail: Ranks 1972-1983

The 1970s was a challenging decade for all industry as the international oil crises created fuel shortages and high inflation. Ranks began the decade well, but major icebergs were already on the horizon as a constant drop in the public demand for flour, continued government regulation of the price of flour and overcapacity in the industry were added challenges to the milling industry. Ranks high costs in comparison to their competitors, meant that the company was not in good shape to take on these turbulent economic seas. The seeds of the ultimate failure of the company were already sown in the 1960s as Ranks had failed to invest sufficiently due to the poor returns on their massive investment over previous decades in Limerick. Without this investment Ranks in Limerick failed along with Limerick's other traditional industries.

New industry in Limerick

The 1960s were good for Limerick with the arrival of Krupps factory and the presence of Shannon Industrial Estate providing many new jobs, but the early 1970s were even better. Drawn by I.D.A. and Shannon Development grants and incentives, several industrial estates, at Corcanree, Raheen and Roxboro sprang up. The future looked rosy as Ireland's membership of the E.E.C. was widely regarded as a positive achievement that would enhance the country's prosperity. The city and the region as a whole were expected to benefit from the planned construction by Alcan of an aluminium smelter at Foynes and the construction of the National Institute for Higher Education at Plassey had begun.

The surviving traditional industries of Limerick were also operating successfully as the decade began. Danus and the Limerick Clothing Factory were both profitable and the two companies were producing 100,000 suits in 1973. The O'Donovan family controlled both factories. They had recovered from an unsuccessful foreign takeover and had re-established themselves employing about 650 people in 1973 with a strong export sale of their suits.¹ Cleeves was also doing well-its various brands were still popular and many of the workers were working seven day weeks. However, there was some concern over its future. Cleeves was part of the vast government controlled Dairy Disposal Company and the Coalition Government wanted to return it to farmers co-operatives. However, plans to re-locate the Lansdowne operation to Bunratty were shelved.² Clover Meats had re-opened but there were ongoing bitter industrial relations at the company. Ranks welcomed a surprise rise in the price of flour under the National Prices Commission in 1972 which benefited the Limerick mills and the entire Ranks operation. A higher dividend was paid out to shareholders and Ranks Ireland share price hit an all time high of 300 pence a share. The Limerick mills, still the heart of Ranks Ireland, were doing very well.³



Picture of Cleeves staff with trophy for high quality cheese making c. 1960
Courtesy Geraldine Kennedy



Decline of the bacon and clothing industry

Dark clouds were looming however for Limerick's traditional industries as all business had to adapt to open borders in Europe and a devastating oil crisis. Initially, local business' were able to manage the situation and there were no lay-offs although some workers were put on short time. The crisis sparked a period of runaway inflation. Inflation had not been a major problem in Ireland in the 1960s.⁴ *'It must be remembered these were the early sixties. There was no inflation, you know. A bar of chocolate was 6p in 1962 and I think it was still 6 pence in 1970.'* In 1973 however, petrol prices rocketed during the first oil crisis, with an inflation rate in 1973 of 11%, driven by higher wages which pushed up business costs and (critically for Ranks) - the cost of borrowing.⁵ The effects were chiefly felt in 1974 when there were closures in Shannon Industrial Estate and the two remaining bacon curers were struggling in the face of rising costs.⁶ The year was a black year for the Limerick clothing industry as it saw the closure of the two main factories, Danus and Limerick Clothing Company. While a year earlier in 1973 there had been some optimism in the local industry, rising costs and falling demand had resulted in significant losses in the first half of 1974, when Danus sales dropped by 35% and costs rose by 20%. The owners of the two clothing factories had built up debts investing in the plants and in October Danus closed with Limerick Clothing Company closing a month later.⁷

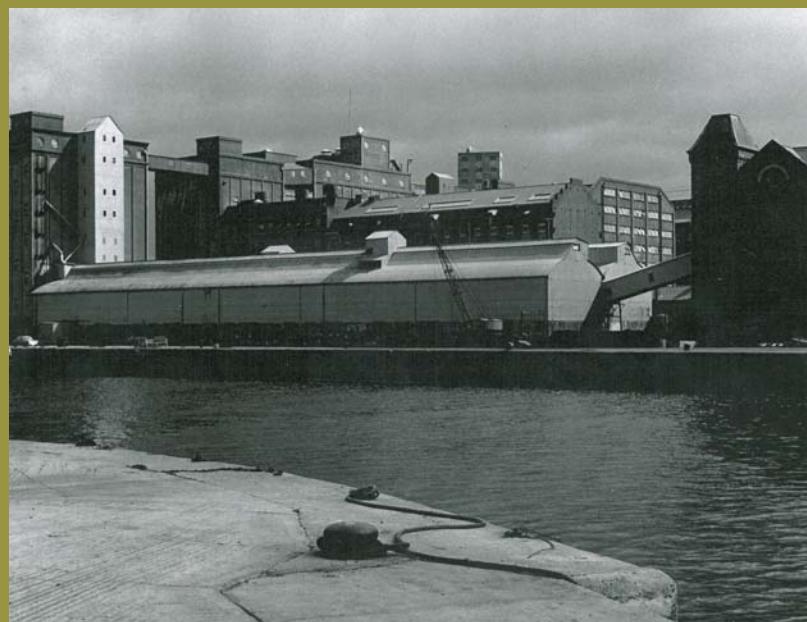
Ranks Mills were apparently the exception to the rule, as they appeared initially to have escaped the downturn in the local and international economy. They were profitable and the future of Shannon Mills seemed secure despite the disappearance of many traditional industries. However, there were major structural problems in the industry. The high quality Blue Cross Brand of products based on extensive scientific research was popular in the region and beyond, but was considered expensive by farmers who increasingly began to purchase feed from local co-ops in lieu of payment for milk. *'You were going to the farmer telling him you had this wonderful sort of animal feed, pig meal and cattle feed and poultry feed and all of that and they'd say "ah sure I've got it from the co-op up the road you know."*⁸ Despite Ranks best efforts to promote its products and home baking, demand for flour- especially retail flour used in home baking, continued to fall by approximately 2% a year, driven by the growth of supermarkets and changing consumer patterns.¹⁰ Consumers started to switch to using pasta and rice and became less dependent on bread in a more sophisticated consumer society. There was overcapacity in the milling industry, notwithstanding the mills rationalisation scheme of the 1950s and 1960s, as there were still 1500 feed mills alone in the country in 1977. In 1974, Odlums made an informal approach to Ranks Ireland parent company, R.H.M., in relation to a possible takeover of its Irish subsidiary. The negotiations were very secretive and not even Ranks minority shareholders were aware of them. Odlums and Ranks agreed to merge and the Minister for Industry assented but shortly afterwards he reversed his decision fearing a monopoly on flour would ensue.¹¹ This proposed merger was the logical conclusion of the millers cartel and a solution to overcapacity in the industry and it may have given the Limerick mills a better chance of survival.



Ranks announces closure

1975 was a very bad year for Limerick's traditional industries - apart from Ranks, who made profits of 1.7 million. Despite the profits, in October Ranks announced its plans to close all its facilities in Limerick. It was a great shock to the city. Limerick needed Ranks as Alcan had deferred its start date for the Aluminium plant at Aughnish. In October, the managing director of the Ferenka plant, Dr Teide Herrema was kidnapped.¹² He was eventually released unharmed by Republican terrorists but there were fears that this could prevent further multinational investment in Limerick. Companies in Shannon were making workers redundant. One thousand out of the seven thousand employed there had been made unemployed by 1975. Three hundred workers at Cleeves were made redundant, as part of a broader rationalisation of the Golden Vale Group who had only recently acquired the plant. All but the cheese-making facilities were closed down. Cleeves products were still popular but the plant was inefficient. There had been little recent investment in the Lansdowne site and political interference over the future of the Dairy Disposal Company possibly hindered its development. Whatever the truth, the Lansdowne site, was but a shadow of its former self. There was some good news as Analog Devices announced that they were establishing themselves in Raheen. They eventually opened in 1976 and there were also hopes that Limerick could become the headquarters for oil companies surveying the Atlantic.¹³

Ranks planned closure would result in 350 job losses. The company was planning for the future - it needed to concentrate its flour and feed milling operations and there was a problem with overmanning and overcapacity. Much of the milling equipment in Limerick was old and it was decided that production was to be moved to Ranks Dublin. The links to Limerick were weakening with a new management structure replacing Lord Rank and Gerald Goodbody after their retirement in 1972. Staff at the mill were shocked by the announcement as the company was profitable but the Ranks workers reacted calmly. There was no instant rush to go on strike, no effort at a sit-in or street protests as had occurred when Limerick Shoe Factory was threatened with closure.¹³ Ranks workers continued to show up for work and went about their routine, although understandably morale was low. Almost immediately, the main union at Ranks and local politicians became involved in negotiations to keep the mills open. The Mayor offered to mediate between union and management and the Minister for the Gaeltacht Tom O'Donnell raised the issue at cabinet. Limerick could ill afford to lose another major employer. In 1972 there were only 1200 unemployed in the city but by 1975 it was almost 5000.¹⁵ Despite the local and national outrage over the issue, the management remained firm in their intention to close the mill.

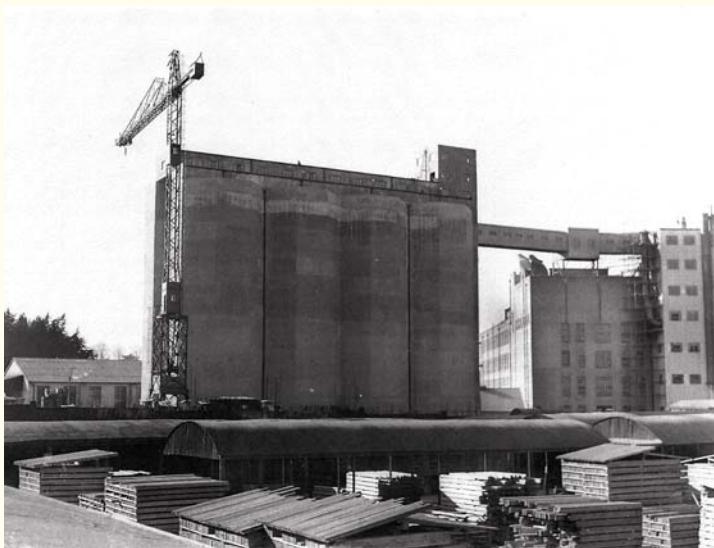


P90 17 35
View of Ranks from one of its silos
c. 1970
Courtesy of Paddy Brosnan

P89 3 10 15
Photograph of Shannon Mills on
the Dock Road, Limerick
Courtesy of George Spillane c.1970.

P90 12 2
View of Ranks yard from the
Dock Road c. 1975
Courtesy of George Spillane

The company held its Annual General Meeting in the city in January of 1976. Many of the company's smaller shareholders were scandalised, by the proposed closure. James Roche, called it a 'cold blooded decision'. He also warned of a danger to the company if they persisted in the management's desire to close the Limerick facilities. In January, some of Ranks largest customers met in Limerick's Chamber of Commerce and expressed their concern at Ranks plan of action.¹⁶ Indeed the reaction of their customers to the Limerick closure was putting Ranks (Ireland) in an awkward position. Ranks were a British Company at a time when many in the Republic were exercised about events in Northern Ireland during the Troubles.¹⁷ This, along with the planned closure of Ranks Limerick mill was in danger of leading to a backlash from its customers. This seems to have eventually led Ranks management to re-think their position. The growing unemployment crisis in Limerick City kept the possible closure a live issue for many. By early 1976 there was as many unemployed in Limerick as in Cork, a city almost twice its size.



P90 16 6
Construction of Ranks Mills Cork c. 1980
Courtesy of Ted O'Connor



Clothing Factory
Limerick Clothes Factory workers demonstrating against
internment in Northern Ireland c. 1971
Courtesy of Limerick City Museum



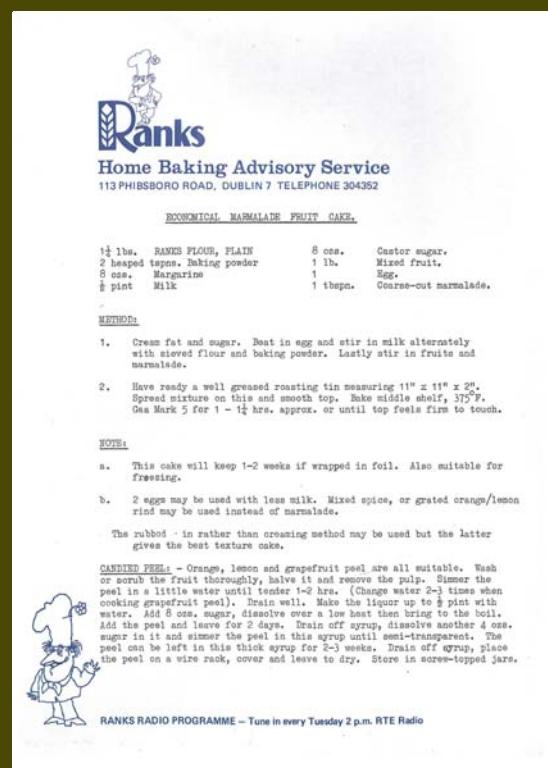
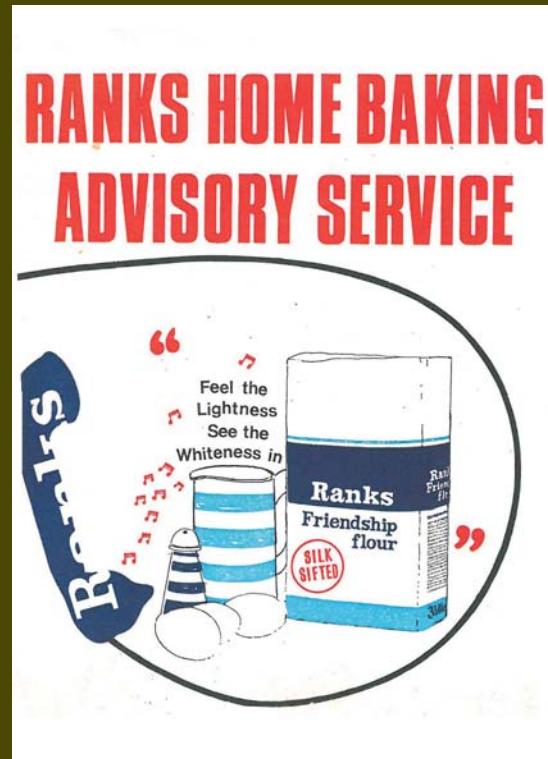
Closure averted

By April 1976 there was a tentative agreement between the unions and the management that Ranks would continue flour milling in Limerick, but the provender mill would eventually close. Ironically, there had been much investment in the provender mill only some three or four years earlier. It was planned that the production of animal feed would be transferred to a new much larger state of the art provender mill at Cork Docks. As a result approximately two hundred jobs were saved and flour milling continued in the city.¹⁸ The success of the negotiations in preventing the total closure of Ranks, was not typical. There were similar lengthy negotiations between employers and workers at Clover Meats.¹⁹ The Pork Butchers Society rejected a new employer scheme to increase efficiency at the plant and the company closed its plant in Mulgrave Street in 1977, leaving O'Mara's as the sole bacon factory in Limerick.

Ranks profitability was undermined as the redundancy terms agreed in 1976 proved disastrous for the firm. Just weeks before Odlums had closed a mill giving six weeks pay for each year of service. Ranks gave the same terms and as many of the men worked since they were thirteen or fourteen this meant massive redundancy payments. Ranks had to borrow to fund the redundancies and found it extremely difficult to manage repayments with the crippling interest rates of the time.

In 1977 Limerick suffered another hammer blow when a minor dispute at the Ferenka plant, led to an unofficial strike. The unions were particularly militant at the plant due to rivalry between the two main unions and the workers went on strike for several weeks. Many Limerick people thought the strike unnecessary. The clergy intervened and urged people to persuade the workers to return to work. When eventually the workers returned to work the company decided not to resume production and 2700 jobs were lost. At the time it was the largest single job loss in the history of the state. The city was portrayed by some elements of the media as a place notorious for industrial disputes, an over-mighty clergy and as an unemployment black spot. A BBC documentary was especially harmful to the city's reputation.²⁰ There was some good news Limerick Corporation were engaged in a much needed programme of urban renewal however. The city's three main industrial estates, Corcanree, Roxboro and Raheen were hives of industrial activity and multi-nationals were eager to invest in the city.²¹

At the Annual General Meeting, of 1978, Ranks announced that the financial situation was critical. There had been a price rise in flour but it did not really benefit the company.²² Ranks costs were simply too high due to its outdated and over-manned mills and top heavy management structure. Odlums had a much lower cost base and benefited from price increases. Ranks announced that the old provender mill would close in April 1979 just as the country's farmers were coping with a lack of animal feed due to a hard winter. The second oil crisis was even more severe as Ireland, which never had much oil reserves at the best of times, was unable to build up any substantial oil reserves after the 1973 crisis. It became increasingly difficult for farmers to obtain animal feed²³. The price of hay soared and the majority of the country's provender mills were working around the clock. Ranks had closed their provender mill and missed this opportunity. The closure of the feed mill on the Dock



P89 178 1
Ranks flour promotion in a supermarket
c. 1972
Limerick City Archives

P89 178 2
Ranks promotions stand c. 1972
Limerick City Archives

P90 10 12
Ranks Home Baking recipes c. 1977
Courtesy of Frances O'Brien

Road had effectively reduced the capacity in the industry and shut the main mill for the western region at the very time they were most needed. The closure was a disaster for farmers up and down the western seaboard. A farmers delegation approached Ranks to keep the feed mill in Limerick open at least until the grasslands had recovered from the harsh winter.²⁴ The need to keep the Shannon provender mills open in expectation of another oil crisis was raised by a Ranks shareholder in 1976; James Roche, of the Limerick milling family had warned the Board not to close the provender mill.

Ranks cut back on its sales people and there had been little development of Ranks products since the 1960s. Ranks at this stage was a classic example of a company 'promoting its own further slump through management and product passivity'.²⁵ By 1980 when Gordon Bull was appointed to head Ranks (Ireland), the company badly needed an overhaul.²⁶ The costs of repaying its huge debts were high while Odlum's was almost debt free. The construction of the new Cork feed mills was a fiasco as the building of the plant had run over costs and had suffered several delays. The company lost its market position as the Limerick feed mill was closed and farmers sourced their feed from elsewhere. The new Cork mill ran at an uneconomical 50% capacity and began to haemorrhage money. It was closed in December 1981 costing the Ranks group £1.7 million.²⁷ Ranks plans for rationalisation were in disarray. Ranks sold the new Cork feed mills and it became a lasting profitable concern. If the money lost in the Cork feed mills had been invested in the Limerick provender mills, it could have remained in business. Feed milling is still carried on in the city by Roches Feeds Ltd. and Dan O'Connor Ltd.

Ranks Flour Mills were the one bright spot in the company's business. The decision to keep the Limerick flour mills open, was apparently justified as the Limerick mills was busy, working three shifts and supplying flour for much of western Ireland. There was a positive atmosphere around the mills but the lack of investment was a clear signal that the company was no longer as committed to Limerick. *Anyone with a pair of eyes could see the decline. They were giving out plenty of over time, but they were running the place down, they wouldn't repair machinery..., so it was obvious to anyone that had any kind of brain that the place was closing down.*²⁸ Some workers were aware that the mills of the future were likely to be highly automated '*you heard stories that there was a mill running in Barry South Wales but only three or four people working on a shift but they had all been updated with modern equipment. There was no conveyors involved - it was all suction- it was sucked and blown the flour would whereas everything we had was old fashioned.*'²⁹ If there had been a program of massive investment and rationalisation at the Shannon Mills site at this time, the flour mills may have had a chance of survival. The I.D.A. offered assistance but there was little further investment in the mills. Union intransigence and their reluctance to co-operate with management, may also have forestalled any badly needed rationalisation plans.



Decision to close

By 1982 Ranks (Ireland) was clearly in jeopardy and the company announced record losses. Shareholders had not received any dividend in years and with the increase in flour imports the future looked grim. Ranks and other Irish millers pressurised the government to restrict flour imports but the Irish government could not restrict imports of flour due to E.E.C. membership. The Irish Millers cartel influence on the flour market was ended by the rise in imports. Ranks Board proposed a drastic rationalisation plan, involving a large number of redundancies in Dublin and Limerick. There were protests at the Limerick mills and the Labour Court intervened. In January Ranks workers staged a strike against the redundancy plan but the situation was deteriorating on a daily basis as Ranks reported that they were losing £7500 pounds a day. Ranks Management and Board decided to cease all its milling operations in the Irish Republic due to persistent losses and high debts. All two hundred jobs were to be lost at the mills. The mills closed on Friday the 4th of February 1983.

Workers at the Dublin Rank Mill immediately staged a sit-in and refused to leave the mills until they were reopened.³⁰ They wanted to continue to operate the mills. Ranks (Ireland) obtained an injunction ordering that they leave the property. When they refused several were arrested and jailed. This caused an outcry and there was much media coverage of the Ranks workers case. Eventually, the Ranks workers were released and upon their release they promptly re-occupied the mills. The workers at Limerick mills were more concerned with securing an adequate redundancy package. As the weeks went by it was clear to them that the company would not substantially raise its redundancy offer to the former workers. Frustration and anger grew among the former employees. There was a deep sense of injustice over the size of their severance package. There were claims that none of the management had been made redundant and those non-union Ranks workers were retained at the plant. It was widely believed that Ranks closed the flour mills because they sought to import cheaper British flour-a claim roundly rejected by the company. The Limerick ex-workers anger boiled over and on the 11 April they voted to occupy the mills. They staged a sit-in to ensure that their demands were met. The unemployed workers had several demands including the right to run the mills themselves and that Ranks were to stop importing flour. Many of the former workers it appears wanted their old jobs more than their redundancies.³²

Ranks were keen to end the sit-in at the Limerick mills as they could not access the large stores of valuable grain held in the Shannon Mills silos and stores. The company engaged in negotiations with the men and their union. In early May, the Limerick workers agreed to an increased redundancy package. In early June, the ex-Ranks workers left the mills for the last time. The new redundancy package offered five and a half weeks service for those who had worked under 41 years at the company and six and a half weeks for every year's service for those who had worked with the company over 41 years. None of the workers were satisfied, with this package and some of the angry ex-Ranks workers called for a boycott on Ranks flour.³³ The ex-Ranks workers from Dublin were not satisfied with the company's new offer. As a result, no sooner had the former Limerick workers ended their sit-in than the Dublin ex-workers occupied the Shannon Mills site. When the company sought to remove the grain they staged a sit-down on the road barring the trucks entrance into Ranks and the Gardai had to intervene to allow Ranks to successfully remove all the grain from the silos.³⁴ Soon after the old mills were abandoned and became a symbol of Limerick's industrial decline in the 1980s. Ranks began importing flour into Ireland soon after the closure. The parent company Rank-Hovis-McDougall (R.H.M) was taken over by Premier Foods in 2007. Rank-Hovis as part of the new group is one of the U.K's leading millers and in 2012 were still supplying flour to some Irish bakeries.



P90 16 8

Ranks managers meeting c. 1980

Front Row L-R:

Michael (-), Sheila Cunningham, Damian Fitzmaurice, David Thompson, Denise Sweeney

Second Row L-R:

Michael Manning, Paddy O'Mahony, Bernie Burke, (-), Ray Carolan, (-), Dan Whelan, Tom O'Connor, (-).

In the group behind are

Don Reeves, Billy Cox, Noel Kerrins, Gerry Dixon, Michael Mulgrew, Billy Cox, Norman Gallagher and Gerry Dixon.

Courtesy of Ted O'Connor

P90 16 2 Group photo of Ranks management and directors Ranks (Ireland) c. 1981

Back Row L-R:

Declan Wallace, Michael O'Connell, Victor Lewis, Seamus Funge, unknown, David Thompson, Michael Holmes, Noel Kerrins, Ted O' Connor, Jack Haugh, Tom O'Connor.

Middle Row L-R:

Tom Lewis, Des Benson, (-), John Cremin, Tom O'Shea, Dr(-), Gordon Campell, (-), Donal O'Donoghue, Douglas McGrath, Bill Roche, Michael Manning, Pat Molloy, Jim Hyland.

Front Row L-R:

Jim Kershaw, Edward Hallinan, Richard Loombe, Don Dineen, Col. Braddish, Sheila Cunningham, Joseph Rank, Gordon Bull, Ronnie Deakin, unknown, Canice Kelly.

Courtesy of Ted O'Connor

Impact of Ranks closing

The closure of Ranks came at a particularly bad time for the city. The country had gone into recession the previous year and there were 9,000 unemployed in the city and county nearing the levels of the 'black 50s'. Shannon Industrial Estate was no longer generating jobs, due to the downturn and unemployment was adding to existing social problems, an increase in crime and a breakdown in the old communities. Once people had sought 'to share with others' it was now a case of 'fight for your own corner'.³⁵

While Ranks closure meant the loss of two hundred jobs it had no longer been the city's major employer for some time. Krupps lost almost 1,000 employees for example when it closed in 1998 and its closure affected the entire region. The closure of Ranks affected only the city as the families that had worked there for generations all came from within a few miles of the factory and had once walked to work. This meant the closure of Ranks was a real disaster for the city.³⁶ The mills had created many spin-off jobs in the city's docks, the haulage industry and local agriculture. Many farmers in the mid-west gave up the growing of grain with the closure of the mills. The psychological effect on the city was immense. The Dock Road had once been a hive of activity, '*but I remember walking up after and you wouldn't see a cat on the road*'.³⁷ Ranks mills had been a symbol of the city's industrial base and Limerick saw itself as an industrial city and industrial community. The closure of Ranks was a bitter blow for the entire city and many former workers remained bitterly disappointed at the redundancy terms. '*One good thing I can say about Ranks... was everyone that was owed money was paid. You know every person that supplied anything down to like a couple of pounds once they could justify with a back up invoice, we got the money sent over from England, the cheques were passed over and we paid everyone.*'³⁸

Many saw the decline of traditional industries such as Ranks Mills as part of the logical progress of the Irish economy as it moved towards technology and electronics. Foreign multi-nationals, companies like Howmedica, the leading medical devices company and Wilo Pumps were providing well paid jobs. Many Ranks workers struggled in the new jobs market. '*I knew men that left the Ranks at that time they never worked no more, no more. Now some of the younger guys got jobs but a lot of them never worked no more, there was no work there. If you were in your forties that time there was no chance of getting a job like you know there was no work there, no work there really unless you had a bit of an influence in somewhere like.*'³⁹ These new industries could not deal with the city's endemic unemployment problem and the life-cycle of some of these new industries was short - Wang, Varian and Atari soon closed. There were attempts to keep the old industries alive, usually supported by Shannon Development or the I.D.A. Loretta Bloom opened in 1983 and prospered for twenty years, before spiralling costs forced it to close but the tradition of clothing manufacture continued with the manufacture of Garda uniforms in the city. There was an attempt to resurrect the Limerick bacon industry when the Limerick Bacon Company opened but this was unable to compete with the industrial scale meat plants. Former Ranks employees purchased some of Ranks old equipment and formed Shannon Granary Flour Company in Clondrinagh, packaging flour mixes for home baking, but it also closed, unable to compete in the crucial supermarket sector.⁴⁰

Overcapacity in the Irish milling sector and government regulations were a burden that did much to contribute to Ranks failure as it left the mills unable to compete when protectionism ended. Ranks was not alone in failing as many historic mills closed at the time. However, there is nothing inevitable in history. It was the only large mill in the west of Ireland. The market for flour was shrinking but there was still a market. In 2003 only about a quarter of the flour used in Ireland was imported. Odlums succeeded in surviving the same challenging times that confronted Ranks and in 2003 owned three flour mills in Ireland.⁴¹ A plan to modernise Ranks with the Industrial Development Authority's (I.D.A.) help never came to fruition. This, and a more creative approach by the management and Rank's parent company, with co-operation from the unions may have saved the flour mill, although a successful modern mill would inevitably have had to become a highly automated plant with few personnel.

BLUE CROSS LIMITED.

PS9/178

IMPORTANT TO FARMERS.

YOU HAVE YOUR OWN CEREALS ON THE FARM AND YOU WANT TO USE THEM FOR YOUR PIGS, POULTRY AND CATTLE. "BLUE CROSS" CAN PROVIDE YOU WITH THE PROTEIN - VITAMIN - MINERAL INGREDIENTS WHICH YOU MUST HAVE.

USE "BLUE CROSS" PIG & POULTRY OR DAIRY BALANCER MEALS WITH YOUR HOMEMADE CEREALS - IT IS NOT NECESSARY TO MIX IN ANY OTHER INGREDIENTS.

PIG & POULTRY BALANCER MEAL :

GUARANTEED ANALYSIS:-

MINIMUM	:	MAXIMUM
CRUDE		
OIL.	PROTEIN.	FIBRE.
3.0%	31.0%	6.0%

RECOMMENDED MIXINGS

	PARTS BY WEIGHT		CEREALS
	BALANCER	MEAL	In Order of Preference.
FOR SOWS AND BONHAMS	1	2	BARLEY, WHEAT, (OATS)
FOR WORKING BOARS	1	2	BARLEY, WHEAT, OATS
FOR FATENING PIGS	1	4	BARLEY, WHEAT, OATS
FOR LAYING POULTRY	1	2	WHEAT, BARLEY, (OATS)
FOR GROWING POULTRY	1	2	WHEAT, OATS, (BARLEY)
FOR TURKEY GROWERS 12 - 16 Weeks	2	3	WHEAT, OATS, (BARLEY)
FOR TURKEY FATENING	1	2	WHEAT, OATS, (BARLEY)
16 Weeks to 4 Weeks before killing			
FOR TURKEY FATENING last 4 Weeks before killing	1	3	WHEAT, OATS, (BARLEY)

THE CEREALS IN BRACKETS SHOULD BE USED SPARINGLY.
WHEAT SHOULD BE COARSELY GROUNDED.

DAIRY BALANCER MEAL :

GUARANTEED ANALYSIS:-

MINIMUM	:	MAXIMUM
CRUDE		
OIL.	PROTEIN.	FIBRE.
2.5%	30.0%	7.0%

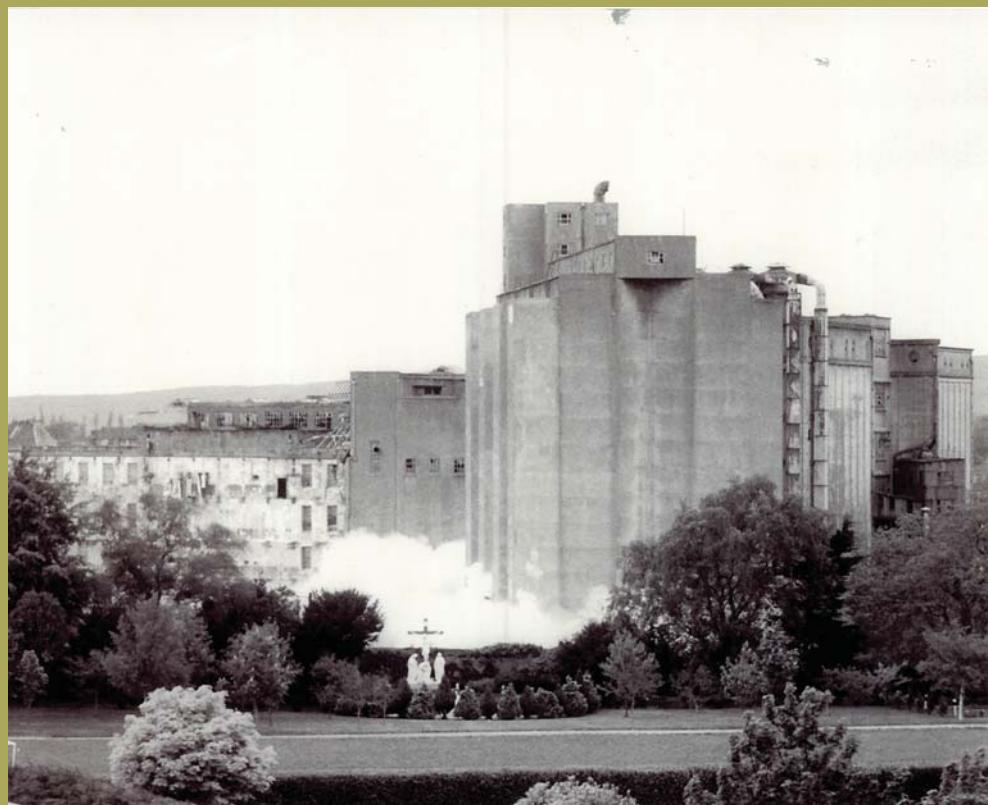
RECOMMENDED MIXINGS

	PARTS BY WEIGHT		OATS, BARLEY
	BALANCER	CEREALS	
FOR DAIRY COWS AND HEIFERS	1	2	
FOR FATENING CATTLE	1	2	OATS, BARLEY

WHEAT MAY BE USED BUT THE WHEAT & BARLEY CONTENT SHOULD NOT EXCEED 15% OF THE MIXTURE, AND THE WHEAT SHOULD BE CRUSHED RATHER THAN GROUNDED.

WHEN YOU HAVE USED UP WHAT YOU HAVE ON THE FARM GET "BLUE CROSS" COMPLETE-IN-THEMSELVES FOODS. THERE IS A SPECIALLY COMPOUNDED RATION IN CUBE PELLET OR MASH FORM FOR EVERY TYPE OF STOCK.

DON'T FORGET ! THE BLUE CROSS ADVISORY STAFF ARE AT YOUR SERVICE. YOU HAVE ONLY TO ASK.



Aftermath

Ranks Mills remained silent for many years after its closure in 1983. In 1989, it was decided to demolish the old mills. The Dublin firm of Sean Hegarty were contracted to demolish the Ranks site. The demolition engineer was John O'Connell, who by coincidence was the son of the foreman who oversaw the construction of the first Ranks silo in the 1930s. On May the 18th, a huge charge of 750lb of commercial explosives was detonated at the main silo. There was a huge dust cloud and when it lifted the main silo was still standing. A further attempt was made on the 2nd of June after the contractors had weakened the base. It was a huge explosion. The silo was actually lifted into the air. But still it stood, although leaning to one side. The local media christened it the 'leaning tower of Limerick'⁴² It was difficult for the demolition team to destroy the main silo as it was located in a built up area. There were two further attempts to blow the main silo up but each time the old building stood defiant. The steel enforced building was resistant it appeared to explosives. Finally, the contractors decided to use the 'ball-crane' method. This involved cranes striking the silo with huge metal balls. This was much more successful and three silos came down in two weeks. After the demolition all that remained of the Ranks site was 'Silo Number One', built in 1932. This silo is an early example of a ferro-concrete structure and is one of only three examples of its kind in the British Isles. It is a listed building and remains a major feature on the Limerick skyline. In 2006 the structure became an object of controversy when an attempt was made to de-list the building and demolish it. This failed and the old silo remains a monument to Limerick's heritage as a major milling and industrial centre.

P90 14 8
A failed attempt to blow up Ranks silo 1989
Courtesy of George Spillane



P90 23 2
Ranks silo being demolished by a wrecking ball 1989
Courtesy of Joe Ranson

P90 23 12
Ranks being demolished by a wrecking ball 1989
Courtesy of Joe Ranson



P90 7 6
Paddy Deegan showing samples of bread to visitors
Courtesy of Paddy Deegan

End Notes

- 1 Limerick Leader, 10 November 1973
- 2 Irish Independent, 23 July 1974
- 3 Irish Independent, 30 January 1973
- 4 OHP/RK/16, Oral History Interview Ted O'Connor, Limerick City Archives (LCA)
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Limerick Leader, 24 March 2007
- 7 Ibid. 16 November 1974 and 31 October 1974
- 8 OHP/RK/16, Oral History Interview Ted O'Connor, LCA
- 9 OHP/RK/1, Oral History Interview Tony Clohessy, LCA
- 10 OHP/RK/14, Oral History Interview Paddy Deegan, LCA
- 11 Norman Campion, Irish Flour Milling since the Second World War, in Irish Flour Milling, p.160
- 12 Irish Independent, 18 October 1975
- 13 Ibid. 29 November 1975
- 14 Limerick Leader, 29 September 1971
- 15 Irish Independent, 11, 12, 16 October 1975
- 16 Irish Times, 19 February 1976
- 17 OHP/RK/16, Oral History Interview Ted O'Connor, LCA
- 18 Irish Independent, 17 August 1976
- 19 Limerick Leader, 21 October 1976
- 20 Irish Independent, 7 January 1978
- 21 Irish Press, 13 June 1978
- 22 Irish Independent, 23 February 1978
- 23 Irish Press, 12 & 14 April 1978
- 24 Farmers Journal, 24 April 1978
- 25 Bakery World, February 1978
- 26 Irish Independent, 23 February 1980
- 27 Irish Independent, 5 December 1980
- 28 OHP/RK/3, Oral History Interview Joe Kennelly, LCA
- 29 OHP/RK/1, Oral History Interview Tony Clohessy, LCA
- 30 Irish Times, 5 February 1983
- 31 Information supplied by Michael Doyle
- 32 Limerick Leader, 11 April 1983
- 33 Irish Independent, 8 June 1983
- 34 Limerick Leader, 23 June 1983
- 35 Irish Independent, 12 & 14 January 1983
- 36 OHP/RK/12, Oral History Interview John O'Donnell, LCA
- 37 OHP/RK/3, Oral History Interview Joe Kennelly, LCA
- 38 OHP/RK/4, Oral History Interview Jack Haugh, LCA
- 39 OHP/RK/3, Oral History Interview Joe Kennelly, LCA
- 40 Information supplied by Albert Copues, Tony Clohessy and Paddy Deegan
- 41 Norman Campion, Irish Flour Milling since the second world war, pp.169-170, 171-172
- 42 Limerick Leader, 11 May, 10 June, 19 July 1989

**RANKS
WAS THE
HEART OF
LIMERICK....**

Ranks established themselves in Limerick in 1930, initially as a British Company. Their takeover of the existing Limerick Mills was viewed with suspicion by press and politicians in the newly independent Irish Free State. However over the years the Ranks Mills, known as the Shannon Mills became a valued part of the city's economy and a much loved place of work for generations of Limerick people...

Ranks were traditionally seen as good employers who paid well and had an early rate the workers could afford if it were sports and recreational amenities and a pension and savings scheme, at a time when such benefits were unheard of in Irish industry.

The company, although British displayed a strong loyalty to the local community. In 1937 the company promised only local labour would be employed on any construction'.

Working conditions in Ranks could be harsh. Some mill workers the Tierney family were known to stand in a store bags ten high; this was a regular source of friction between employer and employee in the 1950s. The mill could even be the destination of fire, with there being a constant threat of fire. Over the decades there were several fires at the plant, for a period the company had its own volunteer fire brigade.

Despite these challenges the Ranks Mills were much loved by its employees and the company was very much seen as part of the community.

seven centuries old milling tradition in the city...

The Ranks Mill was vital to the Limerick economy for many years and was critical for food security during Emergency and the difficult years after when the country's food supply was under threat from abroad and Ranks contributed to Ireland's ability to feed its citizens during these difficult years.

Ranks workers with other mill hands during the war were granted a weekly bonus by the government to reward their efforts in producing an essential foodstuff.

As the years passed falling consumption of bread and the increasing flow of flour imports from the USA made Ranks Mill increasingly uncompetitive and in 1983 the Ranks Mill was shut down, despite widespread local opposition.

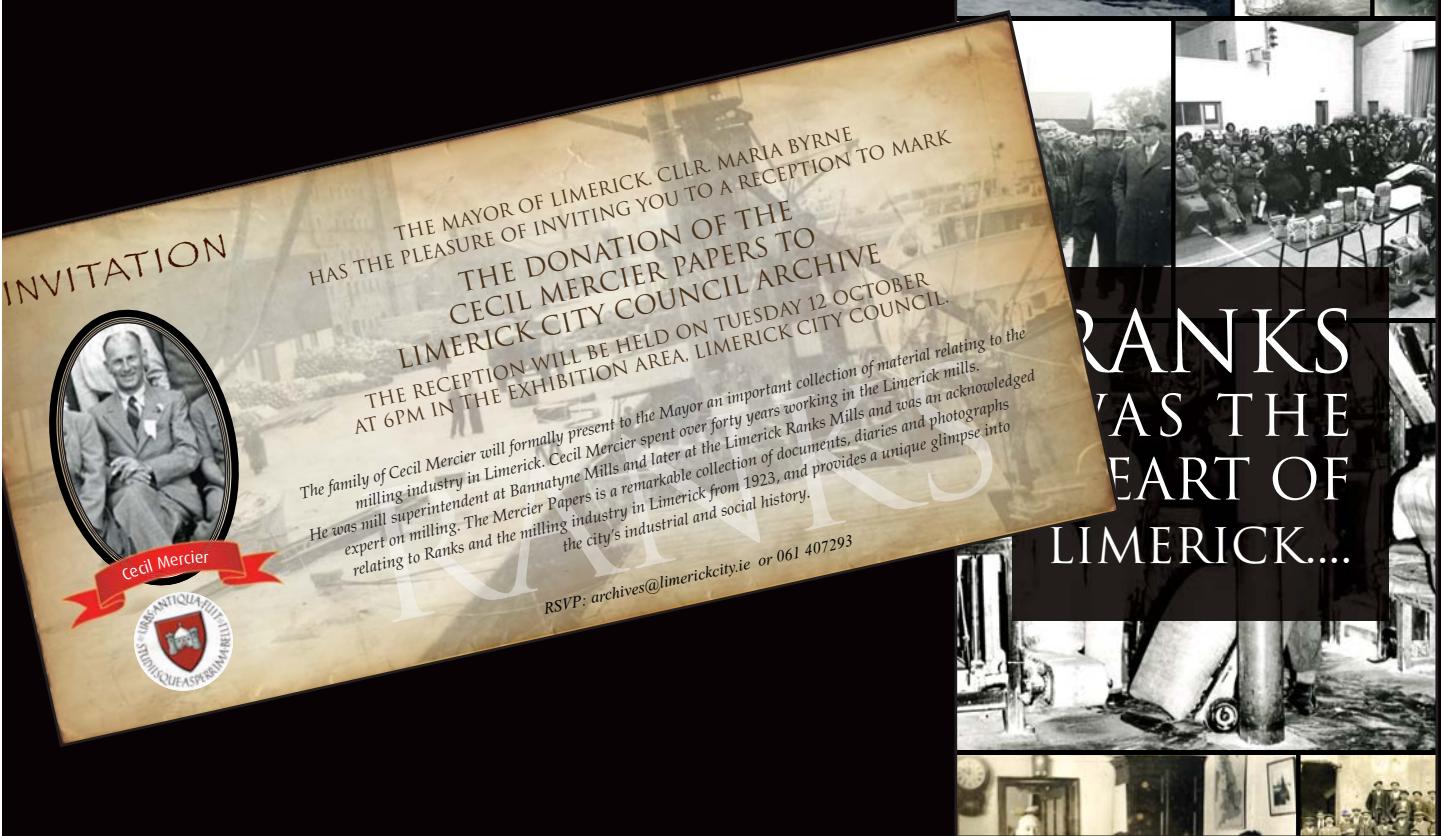
The closure ended 70 years continuous old milling tradition in the city. The Ranks Mill may no longer be just a place of business to its former employees and a place still fondly remembered.

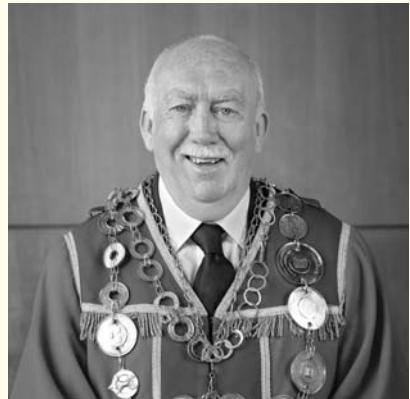
... generations of workers - generations of Limerick families

LIMERICK

Image of one of the panels exhibited on the night of the Donation of the Cecil Mercier Papers

Invitation for the donation of the Cecil Mercier Papers to the Limerick City Council Archive
12 October 2010





As Mayor of Limerick I am delighted to present Limerick City Council's publication of the history of Ranks Mills. Ranks was the heart of Limerick City for most of the twentieth century, as generations of Limerick families found employment in its mills. It is still fondly remembered by its former employees and in the wider community.

The history of Ranks is important in that it tells the story of a vital economic and strategic Limerick industry. The mills on the Dock Road are part of our industrial heritage and demonstrate that Limerick was a city of work and enterprise. The history also illustrates the working lives of the Ranks employees and traces the evolution of work in the city. The work also relates how Ranks was not just a place of work it was a community.

Ranks was a British Company yet became part of the fabric of Limerick life. This history tells the story of how this occurred and the role of Limerick's other traditional industries in the formation of the city. This work is a timely acknowledgement of the great contribution of Ranks Mills and industrial history to Limerick's life and society.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jim Long". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, stylized "J" at the beginning.

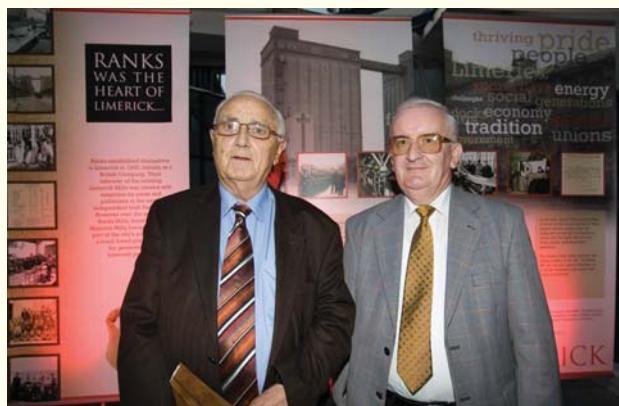
Cllr Jim Long, Mayor of Limerick 2011-2012



Declan Clancy and Jack Cusack at the donation of the Mercier Papers



Michael Copues and Paddy Wallace



Norman Campion and Michael O'Connor



L-R: Ted O'Connor, Tom Heagney, Declan Wallace and David Thompson.



L-R: Betty Bowman, Rita Fahy, John Haugh, Sile McDermott



Patsy, Paddy and Sheila Deegan with Aoife Donnellon and Bob Clancy



L-R: Barry Thornhill, Richie Long and Christy Long



L-R: Michael and Patrick O'Donovan



L-R: Reggie Goodbody, Hjordis and Michael Goodbody



L-R: Mary Noble, Frances O'Brien, Anne McMahon, Pat Creamer and Breda Creegan



L-R: Paul Moloney and Joe Kiely



Night of the Donation of the Cecil Mercier Papers



Acknowledgements

Limerick City Council would like to thank; the Mercier family whose donation of the Mercier papers to Limerick City Archives instigated this project. Thanks to Norman Campion, Irish Industrial Heritage Association who facilitated the donation.

Much of this work is based on an Oral History Project involving former Ranks workers. Many thanks to Dr. Maura Cronin and the students of Mary Immaculate College Limerick, for participating in the Ranks Oral History Project. The former employees and their families who graciously gave their time were; Anne Ashton, Anne Carey, Tony Clohessy, Michael and Albert Copues, Paddy Deegan, Joe Malone, Kieran Kiely, Joe Kennelly, Mary Noble, Jack Haugh, Francis O'Brien, Ann McMahon, Breda Cregan, Michael Hartnett, Dermot Hartigan, Helen O'Dwyer, John O'Donnell, Ted O'Connor, Noel and Theresa O'Neill, Jack Sciascia, David Thompson, George Spillane, Patrick Quinlivan, Margaret Whelan, Bobby O'Halloran and Paddy Lane.

Our thanks to the students who interviewed the former Ranks workers; Jim Donovan, Sarah Mannix, Eoin Lehane, Gerard Deely, James Blackwell, Emma Barrett, Mary McCarthy, Siobhan Mulvihill, Noelle Hogan, Grainne Flanagan, Aisling Browne, William O'Shea, Ciara Culloty, Ailbhe Curran, Aoife Carey, Tara Doolan and Michael Ryan.

Sincere thanks to those who lent or donated photographs and documents for the project, Joe Ranson, Tom and Christy Long, John McDermott, Patrick Brosnan, Denis Hourigan, Michael Kennedy, Kieran Lehane, Sheila Deegan and the Deegan family, Canice Kelly, Geraldine Clohessy, Bobby O'Halloran and Plunkett Hayes.

Special thanks to Michael Goodbody, Declan Wallace, Brian Hodkinson, Limerick City Museum, Mike Maguire, Limerick City Library and Dr. Hugh Maguire, Director of the Hunt Museum for their assistance. Thanks also to Debbie Jacob and James Ring, Limerick Civic Trust who facilitated the research with Limerick City Council.

Thanks to the editing team in Corporate Services, Community Development and the Arts Office in Limerick City Council. Special thanks to Norah O'Connor Corporate Services and Gerard O'Donoghue Planning.

Dedication

This publication is dedicated to the former Ranks workers, their families and to the memory of those now passed away, who spent their working lives in the Limerick Mills.



COLÁISTE MHUIRE GAN SMÁL
MARY IMMACULATE COLLEGE
UNIVERSITY OF LIMERICK

An Chomhairle Oidhreachtach
The Heritage Council





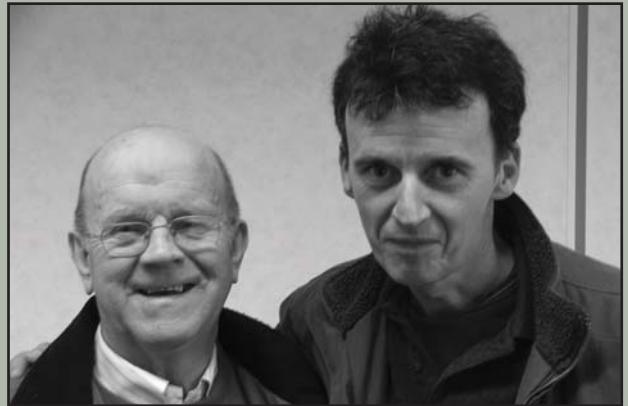
Patrick Quinlivan and interviewer Aisling Byrne



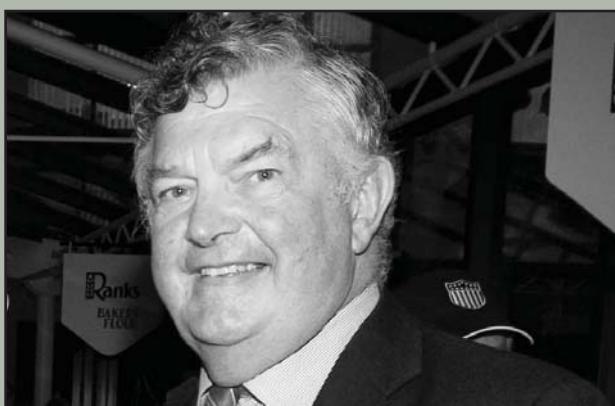
Ann Carey c. 1977 centre of front row at a Ranks Social



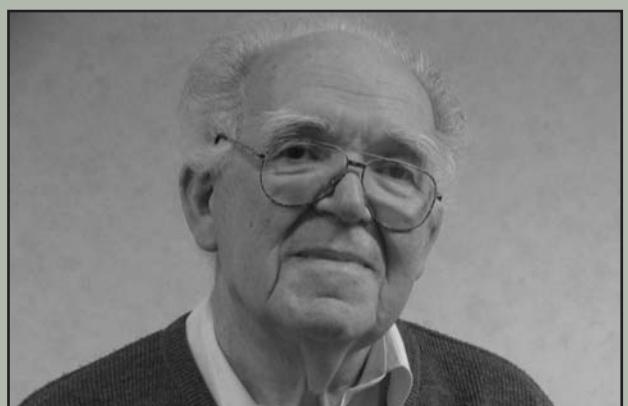
Michael and Albert Copues (interviewed by Aibhe Curran)



John O'Donnell and his interviewer Daniel King



David Thompson (interviewed by Emma Barrett)



George Spillane (interviewed by Catherine Burns)



Ger Deely and Jack Sciascia



Helen O'Dwyer and her interviewer Grainne Flanagan



Jack Haugh (interviewed by Noelle Hogan)



Kieran Kiely (interviewed by Sarah Mannix)



Michael Hartnett (interviewed by William O'Shea)



Michael Hartigan and interviewer Ciara Culy



Noel O'Neil (left) interviewed by Eoin Lehane



Paddy Deegan and interviewer Niamh Fitzpatrick



Mary Noble, Frances O'Brien, Breda Cregan and Anne McMahon



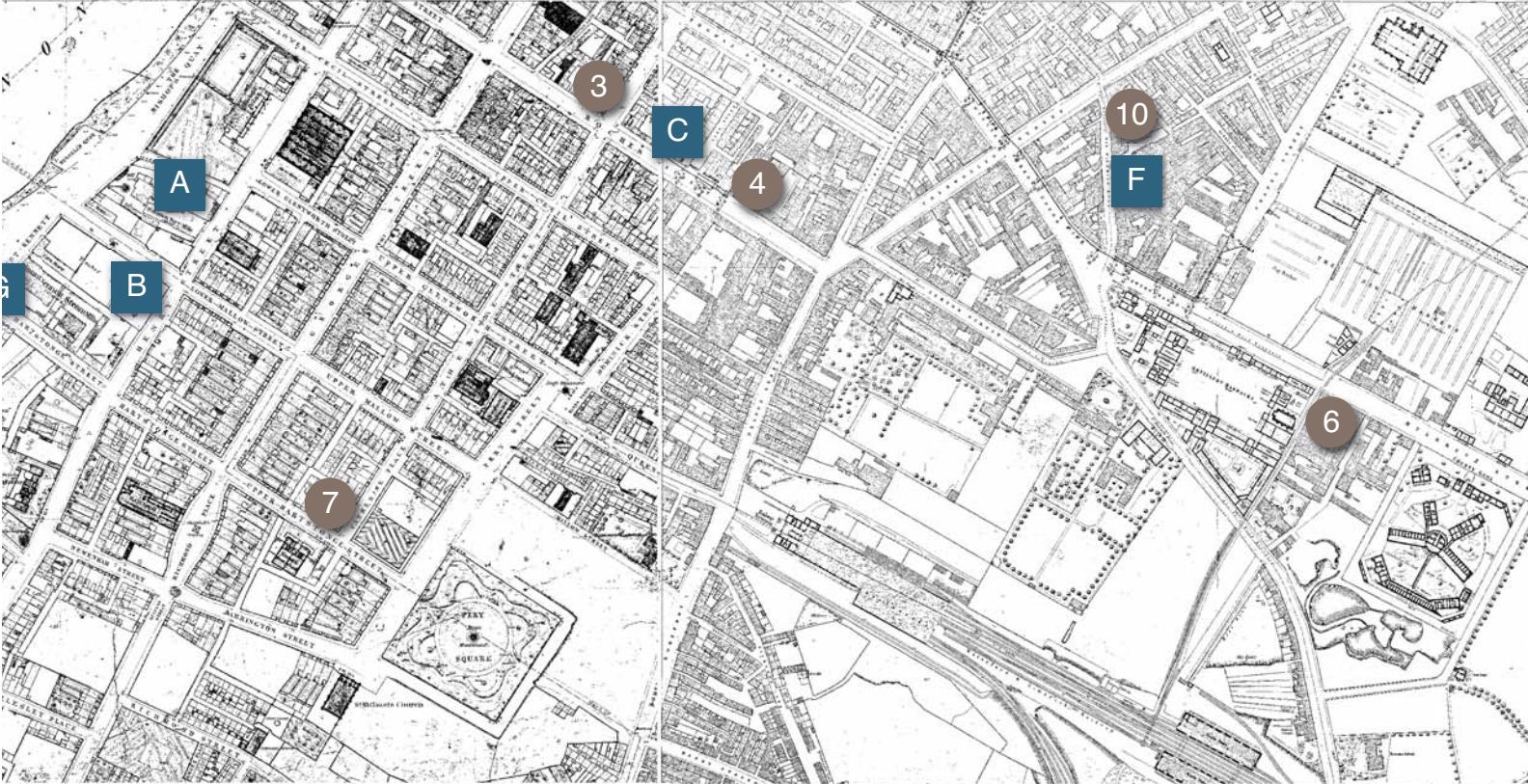
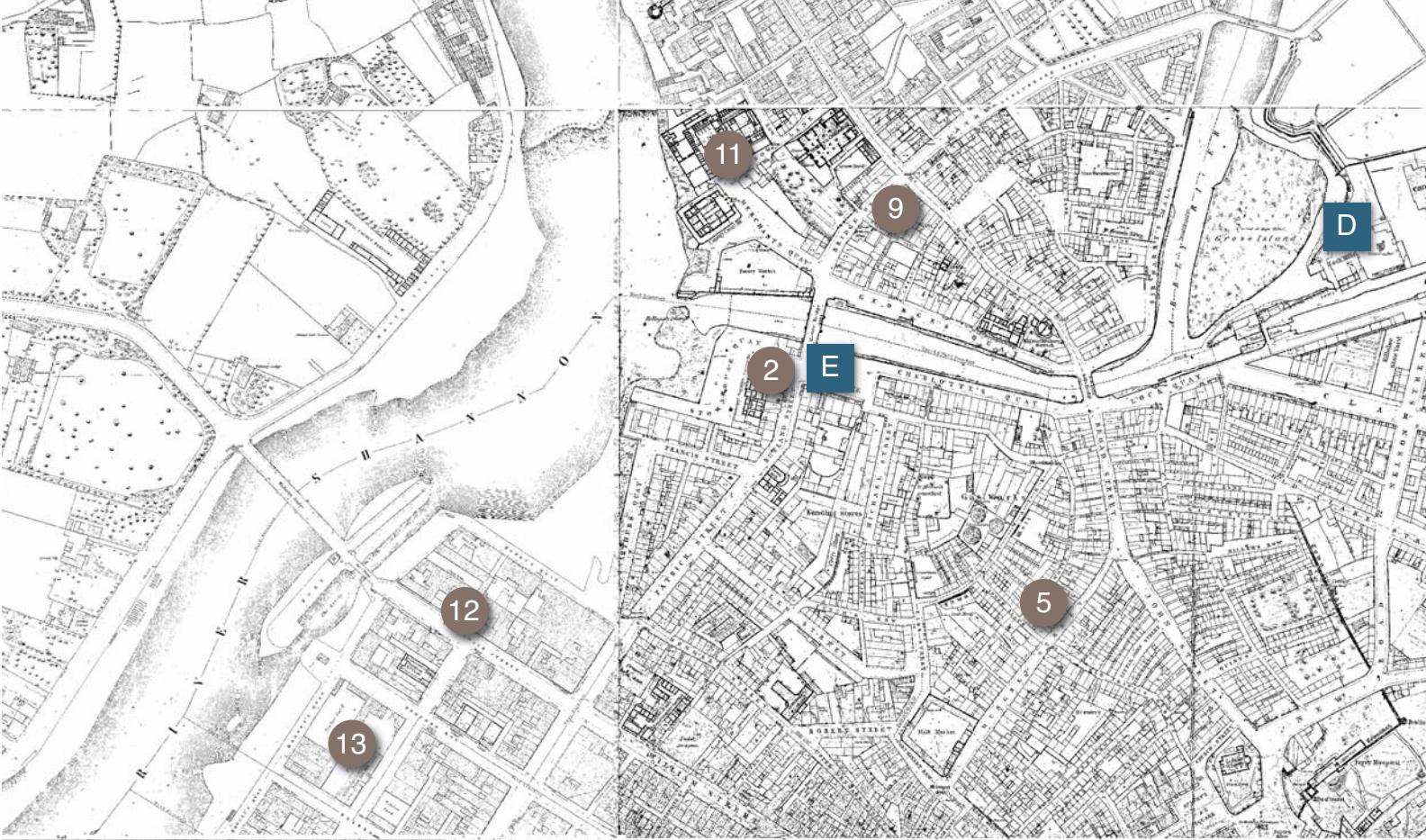
Joe Kennelly and interviewer Siobhan Mulvihill

Map of Limerick Industries

1. Cleeves (Condensed Milk and Confectionary)
2. Irish National Condensed Milk Company
3. J. Mattersons and Son Ltd (Bacon Cure)
4. J O'Mara and Sons Ltd (Bacon Curer)
5. Henry Denny and Sons (Bacon Curer)
6. W.J. Shaws and Sons (Bacon Curer)
7. St Ita's Shirt Factory
8. Limerick Clothing Factory
9. O'Donnell's Tannery
10. City Tannery (O'Callaghan's)
11. Geary and Sons Biscuit Factory
12. Stewart and Co. (Biscuit Manufacturers)
13. Francis Spaight and Sons (Sawmill)
14. James McMahon and Sons (Sawmill)
15. Shannon Foundry

Map of Limerick Mills

- A. Newtown Pery Mill
- B. Mallow Street Mill
- C. The City Mill
- D. Lock Mills
- E. Croom Mills and Bakery
- F. Roches Feed Mill
- G. Mount Kennett Mills
- H. Thomas Harris and Sons Mill and Bakery





P90 15 11

Provender Mill Social, Connolly Hall, 1958, Courtesy of Michael and Albert Copues

Front Row L-R:
Noel Garvin, unknown, 'Tully'
Burke, Mrs Burke, Martin
Lynch, Christy Devitt, Ger
Moore, unknown, Pascal
Hayes, (-)

Second Row
(-) Frahel, unknown,
unknown, Willie Duhig,
unknown, Ger Kerwin,
Mick Copues, Christy
Sheehan, Seanie, Moore, the
rest of row unknown

Third Row
(-) Perse, unknown, Philly
Garvin, Anne (-) Kennedy,
Joe Kennedy, unknown,
Mary Quinlivan, Marie
Boland, Willie Philpot,
Anne O'Brien, unknown,
unknown, unknown,
unknown, Willie Boland,
unknown, Daisy Smith, Bridie
McCormack, Mick Kenny,
unknown, Albert Copues

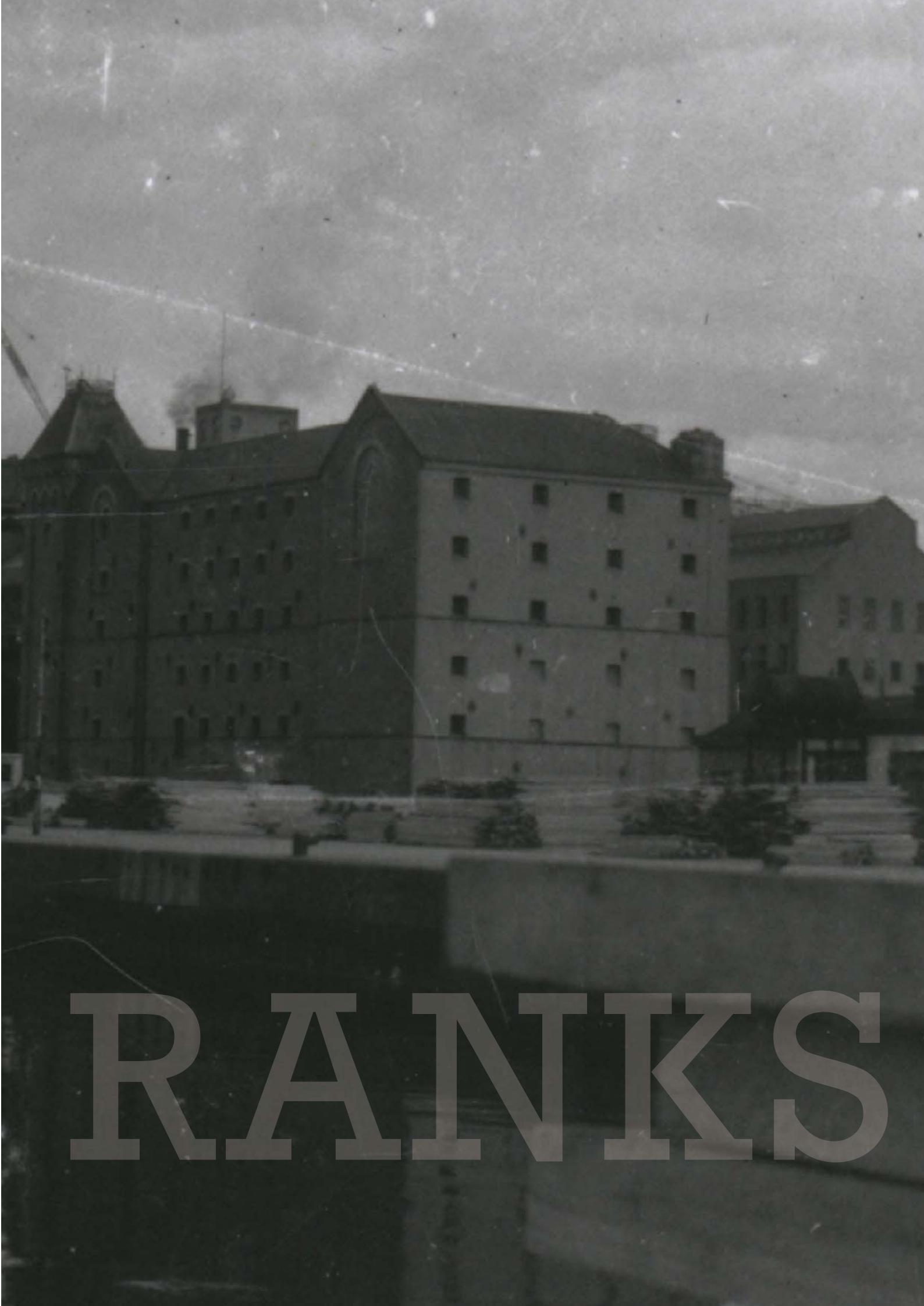
Fourth Row
Ger Drew, Mary Hayes,
Mick Goggin, unknown,
unknown, Gussie Stackpool,
unknown, unknown,
unknown, unknown, Noreen
Moran, unknown, Mick King,
unknown, unknown,
unknown,
unknown, unknown,
John O'Donnell, Sony Greany

Fifth Row
Dick Gavin, Ger Frawley,
unknown, (-) O'Connell,
unknown, Sean Gavin,
the rest unknown

P89 84

List of employees names, job title and rate of pay at Shannon Mills, Dock Road, Limerick





RANKS

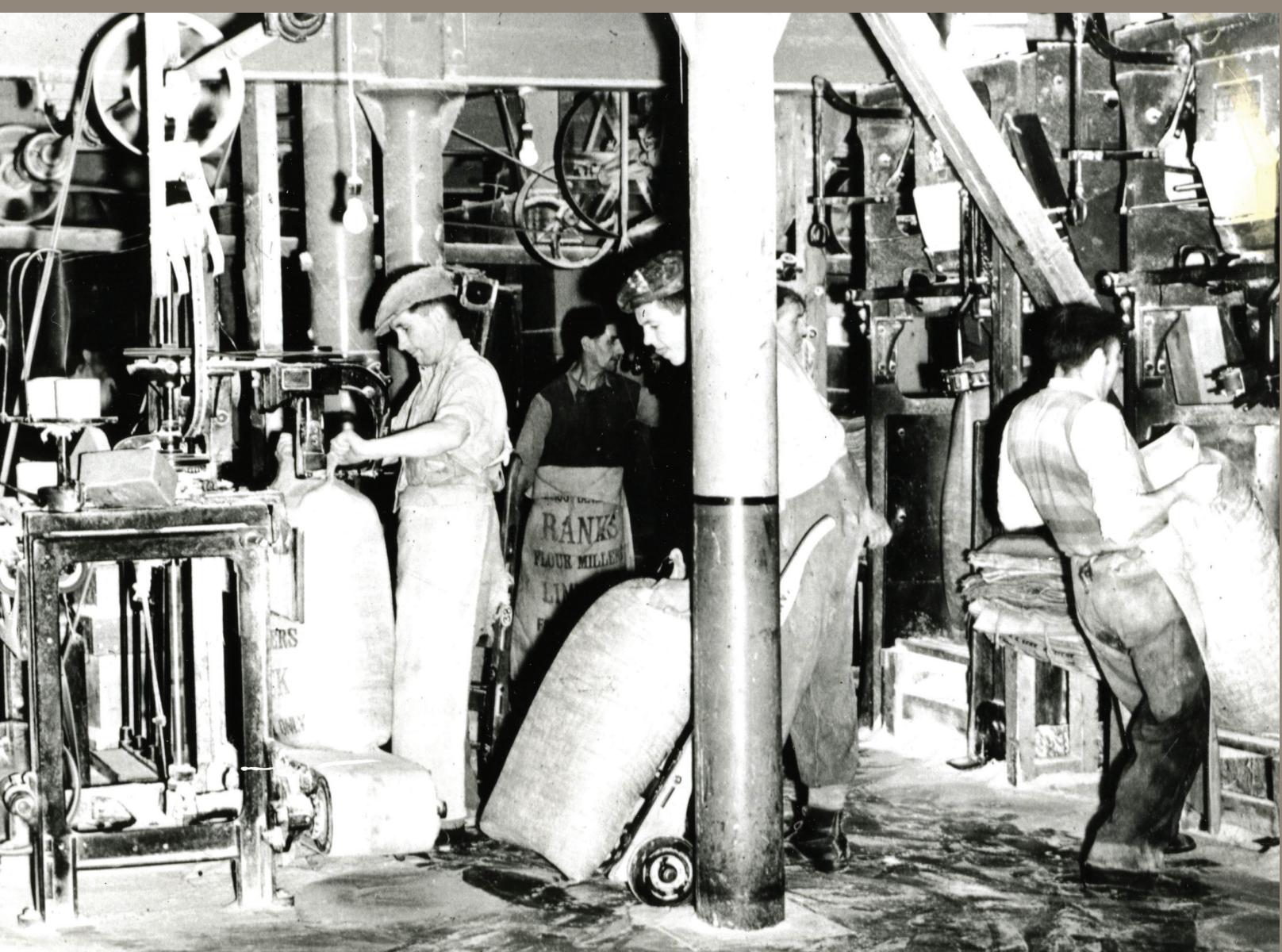
Limerick Archives



Limerick City Archives holds a large collection of archive collections relating to Limerick city. The collections include family papers, business collections and the historical records of Limerick City Council. The archives is committed to collecting key collections relating to Limerick and to providing the best accommodation to ensure the collections are preserved for future generations.

The archives has a large digital archive where many entire collections are available online. All of the archives collected as part of the Ranks project can be accessed here in the form of a multimedia web page. These include including oral histories, photographs and documents.

www.limerick.ie/ranks



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