

# Medieval Limerick 500-1500

The history of Limerick stretches back to its establishment by the Vikings as a walled city on King's Island in 812, and the granting of Limerick's city charter in 1197.

The original pre-Viking and Viking era settlement on King's Island was known as Inis Sibhtonn and Inis an Ghaill Duibh.

The earliest provable settlement dates from 812; but earlier settlements in the area surrounding King's Island are traceable. Antiquity's map-maker, Ptolemy, produced in 150 AD the earliest map of Ireland, showing a place called "Regia" at the same site as King's Island.

Saint Munchin, (Mainchín mac Setnai) the first bishop of Limerick died in 652, indicating the city was a place of some note. In 812, Danes sailed up the Shannon and pillaged the town but were forced to flee when the Irish attacked and killed many of their number.

The *Annals of Ulster* record a Viking in Limerick in 845 AD. Permanent settlement had begun by 922. In that year a Viking jarl or prince called Thórir Helgasó led the Limerick fleet on raids along the River Shannon. Two years later, the Dublin vikings attacked Limerick, but were driven off.

The last Norse king of Limerick was Ivar of Limerick, an enemy of Mathgamain mac Cennétig and later his famous brother Brian Boru. He and his allies were defeated by the Dál gCais, and after slaying Ivar, Brian Boru annexed Norse Limerick to make it the new capital of his kingdom.

Brian Boru's sons were usually called Kings of north Munster. In 1164, Donnchad mac Briain became King of Munster. His successful reign founded monasteries and nunneries, and in bestowing his Limerick Gothic palace to the church he styled himself King of Limerick.

The arrival of the Normans in 1173 changed everything. Domnall Mór Ua Briain, the last "King of Limerick", burned the City to the ground in 1174 to keep it from the hands of the new invaders. The Normans, under Prince John, captured the area in 1195. In 1197 granted the city its first charter, and its first Mayor, Adam Sarvant, ten years before London. The castle, built on the orders of King John was completed around 1300.

Limerick prospered as a port and trading centre. The city opened a mint in 1467. A 1574 document prepared for the Spanish ambassador attests to its wealth:

*Limerick is stronger and more beautiful than all the other cities of Ireland, well walled with stout walls of hewn marble...there is no entrance except by stone bridges, one of the two of which has 14 arches, and the other eight ... for the most part the houses are of square stone of black marble and built in the form of towers and fortresses.*

In the 15th and 16th centuries, Limerick became a city-state isolated from the principal area of effective English rule -the Pale.

*Credits for information go to: King John's Castle, Limerick Civic Trust, Limerick City Museum & St Mary's Cathedral.*

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*Created and written by The Hunt Museum for the Medieval Quarter*



## King John's Castle

Step inside the walls of Limerick's most iconic landmark! Discover the stories of ruthless King John, the noble knights, and rebellious natives. Located at the heart of Limerick's medieval quarter, King John's Castle brings to life over 800 years of dramatic local history.

## Limerick Civic Trust Walking Tours

Discover the oldest parts of Limerick City in context with the contemporary environment. Walk Limerick's story with- the city where the English ruled, where the Irish resisted, where the tide turned and the modern city grew.

## St Mary's Cathedral

The Cathedral has seen many changes as the city expanded around it and it remains today the oldest and most historic building in Limerick. No trip to the City is complete without visiting this historic building at the very heart of this ancient metropolis.

## Limerick City Museum

The Museum's collection illustrates the history of Limerick and its people. The displays include archaeological artefacts, Limerick silver, Limerick lace, examples of local printing, military artefacts and much more.

## The Hunt Museum

Exhibiting one of Ireland's greatest private collections of art and antiquities, dating from the Neolithic to the 20th Century, including works by Renoir, Picasso and Yeats, the Hunt Museum is an all-round cultural experience.

# LIMERICK MEDIEVAL TRAIL

**HERITAGE ON YOUR DOORSTEP**





## 1 King John's Castle (1210)

Built on the orders of King John, one of Europe's best preserved Norman fortresses. It's purpose was to defend the river crossing and protect the Norman Kingdoms on the east side of the river from the Gaelic tribes on the west side. The five sided rectangular castle with it's high curtain walls is unusual in that there is no keep.



## 2 Thomond Bridge (1840)

Likely built on the site of medieval bridge, possibly erected in 1185 to link the Castle to the Clare side of the Shannon River.



## 5 Sally Ports (1237)

Twin access points in the city walls, giving the Dominican's access from the Dominican Friary to their 6 or 7 acres beyond the walls.



## 3 St. Munchin (patron saint of Limerick) (1827)

Appointed by St Patrick as it's first Bishop. He established the first church on this site. According to tradition the original church was the first cathedral of the diocese of Limerick, built in 561 AD.



## 4 Remains of the City Walls

A toll was granted in 1237 for the purpose of enclosing the city with a wall, which, in the C13th, surrounded King's Island.



## 7 Nicholas Street & Mary Street

Once the historical and cultural centre of medieval Limerick. It was the high street, full of shops and taverns. Saint Nicholas of Myra (Santa Claus) was revered as the patron saint of sailors and seafarers. Here, as in many medieval ports, his name was given to a church close to the quays.



## 6 St Saviour's Dominican Friary (1227)

Founded by Donough Cairbreach O'Brien, (buried here in 1241) and substantially rebuilt in 1462. Suppressed under Henry VIII, the priory was granted to James, Earl of Desmond in 1544. It was destroyed during the sieges of 1690/91, when Williamite soldiers smashed the founder's statue. Remaining is the church north wall, with Gothic windows from the rebuild, and traces of domestic buildings.

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## St Mary's Cathedral (1168)

The oldest building in Limerick. Originally the Royal Palace for the Kings of Thomond, it was gifted to the Church in 1168. The palace, in turn, had been built on the site of the Viking meeting place, or Thingmote – the Vikings' most westerly stronghold in Europe. The romanesque West Door came from the palace, the C15th misericords are unique in Ireland and the only surviving pre-Elizabethan carvings. There is also a 'Leper's Squint'.



## 14 The Hunt Museum Medieval Collections (500-1500)

Over 1000 items including: The Antrim Cross, a Bavarian Aquamanile for handwashing in C15th, a Watering Pot, a C13th Syrian Raqqa Bowl, Italian Maiolica Jars, a Sheela na Gig, a C14th Beaufort Tapestry, Viking swords and skates and a carving of St Thomas à Becket



## 8 Castle Lane (access via a Castle visit)

A reconstruction of some medieval buildings including a granary, labourers cottage, and gabled houses.



## 9 Medieval Fireplace 1500's

Between two stone medieval houses of the late C15th. On the north wall is a round-headed doorway with chamfered limestone jambs and on the south the fine medieval fireplace on the first floor. The fireplace is decorated with incised relief and floral scrolls. Below your feet is a medieval undercroft and remnants of medieval burgage plots.



## 10 Bourke's House (c.1168)

Athlunkard Street, one of the oldest houses on King's Island, Limerick. Local lore says that Bourke House is as old as Saint Mary's Cathedral, and that it was built ca 1168 by Domhnall Mór O'Brien, after he donated his palace as the site for Saint Mary's Cathedral.



## 13 Merchant's Quay (1500)

The site of the Potato Market, originally a small medieval long dock for the loading and unloading of goods.



## 11 The Tholsel (1449)

The name is probably from two old English words: toll, meaning tax, and sael or hall, the place where tolls were paid. It was the city's first town hall, also serving as a customs house, a court house, and a chamber of commerce. It was the main court in the city, authorised by a 1413 Henry V granted charter. It had four storeys and a plain façade.



## 15 Limerick City Museum Medieval Collections

Has hundreds of items including Viking artefacts, coins minted in Limerick during the reigns of King John and Edward IV, silver ingots, tiles and pieces of sculpture.