

The Use of the Castle of Limerick: Seal and City Motif

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HISTORIANS ARE dependent on the survival of records. The historian of Limerick corporation is disadvantaged for there is such a paucity of surviving documents that it invites the speculation that at some time the mayor and aldermen in a zeal

of denial, or inspired by a resolution to make a new start which made past actions look like past sins, or in a passion for neatness, destroyed the old records. The inauguration of the Reformed Corporation in 1840 may have been the occasion for this. Alternatively, Limerick has had the sort of history in which there have been plenty of opportunities for the accidental destruction of mere paper and wax along with the thousands of deaths and the breaching, blowing up or tearing down of walls.

Early Medieval Charters

With the disappearance of land grants and conveyances, patent rolls, records of official enquiries and corporation memoranda from the city any primary evidence that the charter granted by John as Lord of Ireland in 1197, or by Edward I in 1292, endowed Limerick with a common seal is lost. That Limerick had a common seal is possible, if not likely. Dublin had one, and Limerick was given the privileges already granted to Dublin in its charter of 1197, as Dublin was given the privileges of Bristol. For, as ports, all these towns were given trade monopolies and allowed to establish merchant guilds. In Dublin it was not, however, until a form of self-government had been worked out under King John's charter of 1215, completed by Henry III's charter of 1229 which authorised the electing of a mayor by the citizens, that the common seal seems to have been granted.¹ The date at which this took place in Limerick was probably 1291 in the charter granted by Edward I which, having quoted from John's charter, adds: 'We have also granted to the said citizens, that they may of themselves yearly elect one Mayor, a discreet and proper person, and faithful to us, for the good government of the said city; so as that such Mayor, when elected, be presented to us if there present, if not to our Justice of Ireland, and shall swear allegiance to us'.²

By granting charters to Irish towns which created a framework for trade, which were designed, with clauses establishing rents for holdings and hundred courts, to attract more settlers from England and Wales,³ and which established a measure of self-government, the Angevin kings were acting in their own interest. Twelfth-century conquest had been spearheaded by ambitious Anglo-Norman lords, and the feudal system allowed them to become lords of the lands they claimed. With the granting of charters to towns their inhabitants were given freedoms and privileges which allowed them to act independently of the Anglo-Norman overlords within a physically (the towns were soon walled) and legally defined area. Underpinning this were of course the castles towering over the wattle and daub houses of the towns and dominating the surrounding country. Incontrovertible evidence of Anglo-Norman arrival, within the context of a town they became the symbol of royal as opposed to Anglo-Norman control; manned by the King's army, embedded in the town where those whom the King had granted rights lived and worked.⁴ It is not surprising then that the castle was an often used motif on the common seals of these towns and cities where it can be read as symbolising the mutually dependent relationship of the king and the

recently enfranchised citizens who were in coalition against the nobles, both Anglo-Norman and Gaelic, established in the countryside beyond the town walls.

The seals varied. The Dublin seal, inscribed *sigilum civitatis Dublinie*, displays a many-storied, three towered castle, each tower punched with a series of round-headed openings like a medieval depiction of the tower of Babel.⁵ It has archers leaning from the top of the side towers, bows taut with arrows in position, trumpeters below, two men sounding horns from the top of the central tower and an armoured figure with shield and sword standing in the open gateway at the base of the castle. The obverse bore a warship, recalling the fact that thirteenth-century Dublin was obliged to defend the coast.⁶ The Kilkenny seal of about the same period is also triple towered and manned. The Limerick castle motif, of which the earliest surviving examples are from coins of the mid-seventeenth century (see below) and which may represent a medieval seal, displays a less complex structure with only two towers, plainer with loop holes, robust in appearance with its stonework indicated, less dramatic without the soldiers.

Tudor and Stuart Charters

Successive kings reconfirmed the charters of their predecessors, increasingly as the Middle Ages progressed, without alterations. In the sixteenth century however, after a period in which royal control had slipped in Ireland, the Tudor monarchs embarked on what has been described as a reconquest of Ireland. Henry VIII was declared 'King of Ireland' by the Irish parliament in 1541, there were plantations in Munster and Leinster. Royal policy rocked between coercion and conciliation in which an extension of the medieval administration based on towns, the building of forts and garrisons, and the idea of a self-sufficient colony, were each tried.⁷ The extension of the rights, freedoms and privileges of urban citizens obviously had its place in this as part of the less expensive, more conciliatory way of asserting royal authority and establishing good relations with the colony. It is in Elizabeth's charter to Limerick of 1575⁸ that there is the first known mention of a seal for the city, discussed without reference to a predecessor:

And that the Mayor, Bailiffs and Citizens shall have a common seal to be for ever used by them and their successors in transacting all their matters and business whatsoever and that it shall and may be lawful to the forsaid Mayor, Bailiffs and Citizens and their successors to break, alter and renew said seal at their pleasure from time to time as they shall think expedient.

This alterable design was not described in detail, suggesting in fact that it was already in existence.

Civic privilege was enhanced by civic insignia, and Elizabeth I granted a civic sword described as a royal gift rewarding the loyalty of the citizens, 'whereby they may be henceforth held in more honourable esteem', which was decorated

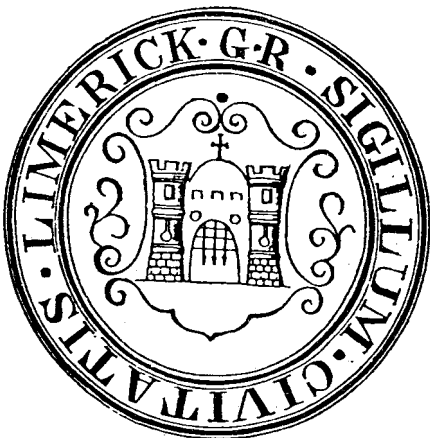
with the royal ensign - Tudor roses and *fleur de lys* - and intended to indicate that the mayor had the power of life and death.⁹ It was to be carried before the mayor by a sword bearer wearing a 'hat of maintenance', also granted by the charter. The new insignia was associated with enhanced status; Elizabeth's charter, reciting the 'fidelity and obedience' of the citizens in the 'most wicked rebellion by Gerald, Earl of Desmond and his confederates against us and our Royal power, very lately attempted and perpetrated,' also declared Limerick to be a city which:

shall be and remain for ever hereafter, a city in itself, and the citizens of the said city be, and for ever hereafter, shall remain one body corporate and politic in deed, fact and name, by the Mayor, Bailiffs and Citizens of Limerick.

Limerick Corporation officially gained the right to employ mace-bearers to carry maces in James I's charter of 1609.¹⁰ The presence of four such officials carrying the large and elaborate maces before the mayor, or presiding over the Tholsel Court and the Mayor's Court of Conscience, would have greatly added to the dignity of the proceedings. The earliest surviving maces are dated 1739. Their decoration fuses royal and local insignia: the arms of George II decorates the flat of the heads while the body of the heads are embossed with three royal devices" - the rose and thistle on one stem (denoting the unification of England and Scotland), the harp (denoting Ireland), the fleur-de-lys (surviving from the medieval possessions in France and first used by the Plantagenet King Edward III as a royal badge) - and a fourth device represents Limerick - with a plain, two-towered castle.

City Seal

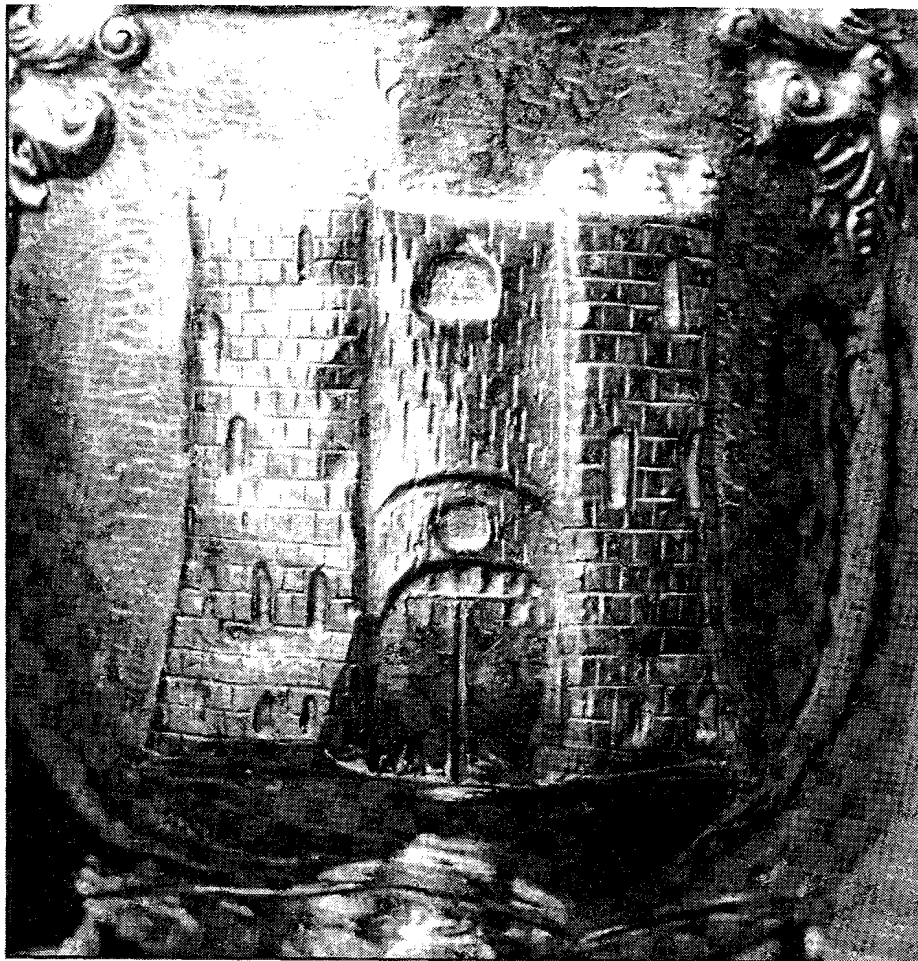
This device was simpler than the seal cut in George I's reign (1714-27)¹² which gives the central wall of the castle a domed top, surmounted by a fixed Maltese cross, the portcullis raised. It is placed within a notional shield composed of a simple cartouche and around the perimeter is the inscription *SIGILLUM CIVITATIS LIMERICK GR*. This seal was still in use at the end of the eighteenth century: fixed to a certificate of freedom dated 1793 it is in fact the earliest surviving use of this seal.¹³



City Seal cut in George I reign (1714-27)

City Motif

Although Elizabeth's charter allowed



Castle design on Mace Head 1739

for the **redesigning** of the common seal, there seems to have been three different versions of the Limerick device in use concurrently in the eighteenth century in different contexts. This suggests that people designing the silversmith marks, the stones for prominent **buildings**, medals and map decorations which display the mercurial device went to different sources; that there was no well defined authority or standard. It is the plainest design, with only two towers, that seems to have been the oldest.



Jonathan Buck (Senior's)
Hallmark c. 1710

Two surviving tradesmens' tokens issued in the absence of sterling coin in the Cromwellian period¹⁴ incorporated this simple castle with the legend *City of Limerick* on one side and, *Change and Charity* surround-

ing 1658 on the other. In 1673 the corporation ordered that these farthings should also be used in the city and liberties at a much higher rate, until they were recalled later in the same year. The simple Limerick castle was used by silversmiths as a hallmark in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century. Jonathan Buck's (senior) mark included a three-towered castle, the central tower lower than those flanking, on silver dated to c. 1710.¹⁵ This was used twice in the hallmark and alternated with his initials decorated with two stars. Some pieces of silver dating from the late seventeenth century - including a chalice and paten from Askeaton dated 1663, an Ennis chalice of 1685 and a Limerick Cathedral flagon of c. 1695 - also contained a hallmark depicting a castle and stars.¹⁶ It has been suggested that Sir Geoffrey Galway, Mayor of Limerick in 1600, was the inspiration for the maker's mark: the castle represented the city of which he was mayor; the stars were derived from the Galway coat of arms where they formed part of the fourth quarter of his heraldic shield along with Baals Bridge, the quarter that was granted to Sir Geoffrey's predecessor, John de Burgo of Galway, after his successful defence of the bridge in the mid-fourteenth century. A silver freedom box given to a Williamite soldier in 1693 bearing a sketchy version of the castle in a shield,¹⁷ the mace of 1739, a stone set into the city brewery with 1739 carved beneath (and now in a wall of the civic offices) and Christopher Colles' map of the city dated c. 1769 all also display the simplest version of the castle, which when compared with later versions and especially at the larger scale, tend to look unfinished.

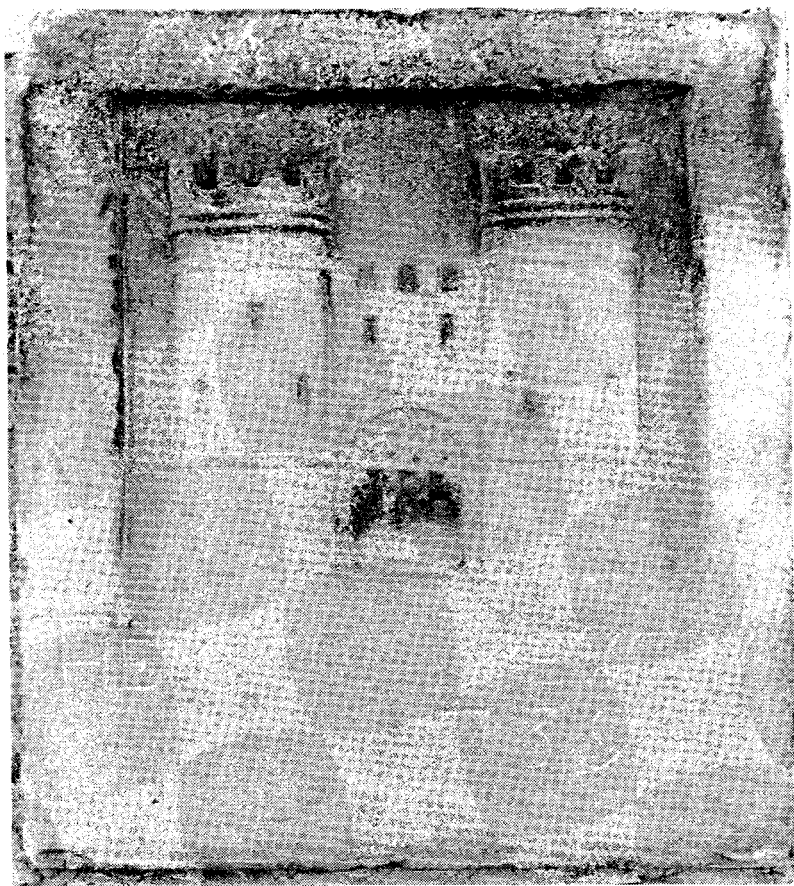
Meanwhile a design which gave the central portion of the castle a triangular top on which was set a flag, was also in circulation. A toll stamp inscribed *Tholsel Court Limerick*, whose flag was decorated with what looks like the cross of St. George, the patron saint of England, is probably the earliest surviving design of this type, although it is difficult to date. The Tholsel Court was still in operation in 1835, although the Tholsel building had been replaced by a gaol in 1750. The toll stamp is, however, thought to date to the early eighteenth century¹⁸ and a certain naivety in the bowed walls distinguishes it from the structurally detailed designs of the nineteenth century. Flags were attractive to the military and this design was used to decorate the lid of a silver freedom box given to John, Earl of Loudoun, commander of the 30th regiment, on its departure from the Limerick garrison in 1751. The flag incorporates the cross of St. Andrew, the patron saint of Scotland, Loudoun's family home.¹⁹

The Volunteers, military bodies set up in the late eighteenth century by local nobles and gentry, were prolific producers of uniforms, medals and coins. They seemed to have preferred the triangle-and-flag version of the Limerick device, judging by surviving artefacts. The Loyal Limerick Volunteers, an amalgamation of the Limerick Union Corps and the local Friendly Knot of St. Patrick, produced an attractive flag embroidered with the Limerick castle presented at the centre of an amalgamation of cannon, flags and pikes within an oval, based on the design of a trophy.²⁰ Decorating the other side was a crowned harp, indicating loyalty, less usual in Volunteer iconography than the uncrowned harp asserting Irish identity. The Limerick castle had been the centrepiece of the silver



Silver Freedom Box, Limerick 1693

medal struck for the original Limerick Union Corps in 1776. A medal, presented after the 1798 battle of Collooney to the privates of the Limerick City Militia, one of the militias set up by the government in the early 1790s, alarmed by the possible ramifications of the French Revolution in Ireland, shows the same castle in some relief surrounded by a laurel wreath. Government fears had been realised in 1798 when a French invasion force, led by General Humbert, landed in Killala Bay in Co. Mayo, and were joined by a number of Irishmen. They were met at Collooney in Co. Sligo by the Limerick City Militia under Colonel Vereker, and there was an engagement on 5 September. Although not a decisive incident, Collooney had caused Humbert to reconsider his plan to take Sligo town, and its celebration by the government (Vereker received the thanks of

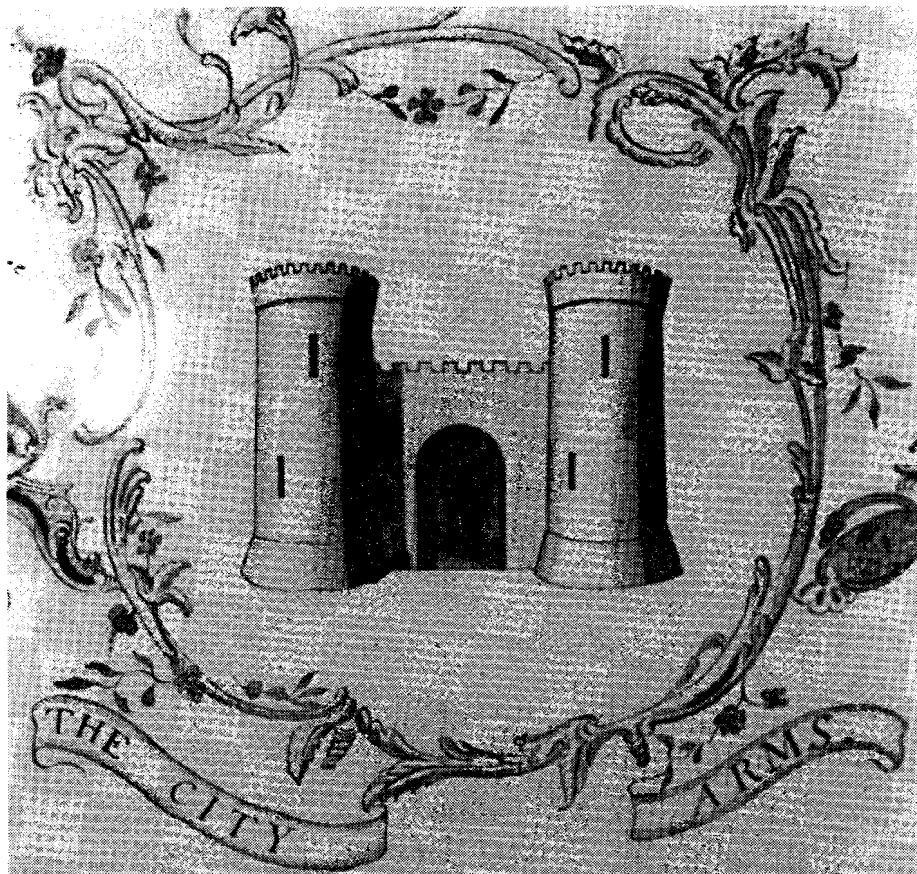


City Brewery Stone 1739

parliament) was a propaganda exercise, clearly expressed in the carefully designed, well-struck medals.

Apart from its use on the seal, the design incorporating the round-headed tower and cross was not used in the eighteenth century. Ferrar in his history presented the triangle-and-flag castle as the 'Arms of Limerick'. Fitzgerald and McGregor followed Ferrar in their history of 1827 giving a description of the 'arms': 'The Arms of the City of Limerick are argent, a castle, triple-towered, proper, the centre tower of a conical shape, and terminated with a flag staff bearing the British ensign - the portcullis of the entrance to the castle, elevated'.

Nineteenth-century designers of Limerick devices tended to use one of the two more elaborate forms. The Treaty Stone plinth, erected in 1865, a monumental context for the city device, used the conical tower and cross version (decorated with a shamrock and the motto *Urbs Antiqua Fuit Studiisque Asperrima Belli*),²¹ as did the city directories of 1886 and 1913. On the other hand the

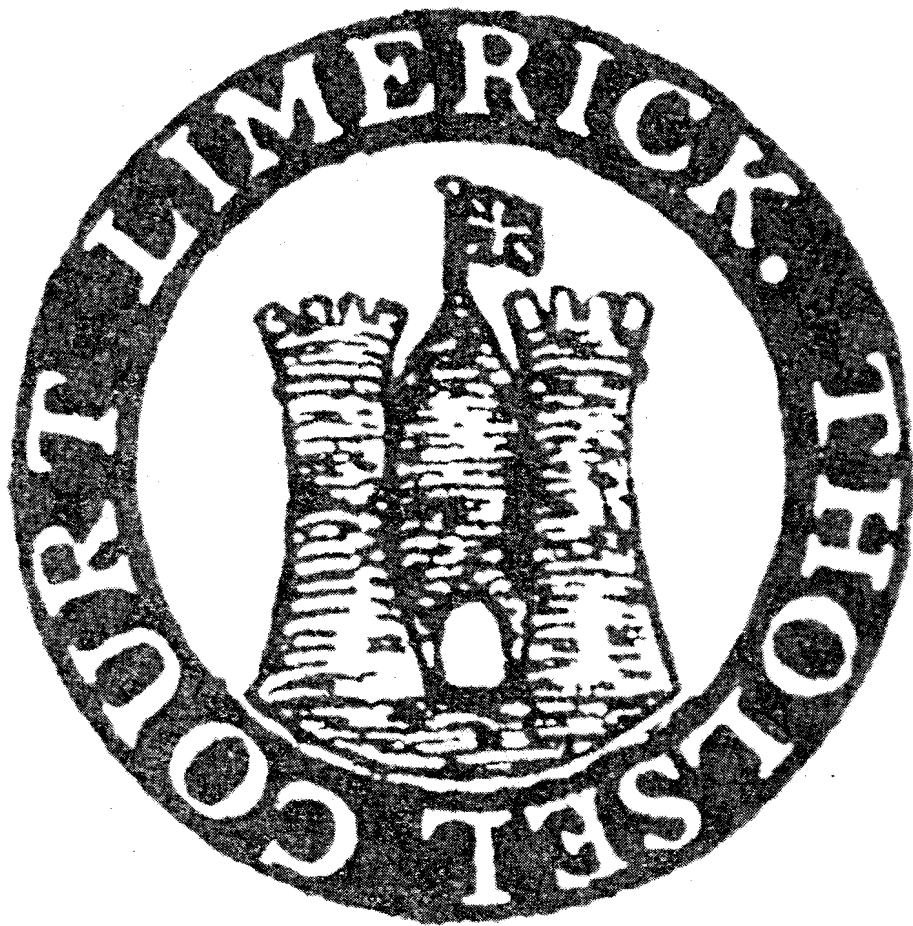


Castle design on Christopher Colles map 1769

tokens designed for the Stein Brown distillery's efficient purchase of grain dated to c.1830-40²², the gold embossed castle on Dowd's history of Limerick of 1890 and the Limerick Slaters' Guild ceremonial apron used the triangle and flag. The Peter Tait token of c.1862 used the unusual combination of a triangle and cross.

A Coat of Arms?

Lenihan's attempt to reconstruct the imagery of a stone set into Mungret Gate in 1643 in his history of 1866 sparked a controversy about the 'ancient arms of Limerick', not unusual at a time of romantic interest in the distant past. In an appendix he acknowledged that the drawing of the castle in the text which was purported to decorate the stone (then still to be seen in a wall of the mill at Plassey) was inaccurate. Assuming the castle to be the arms of Limerick, the draftsman had produced one of the current designs used to identify Limerick; in this case decorated with a flag. Lenihan had the inscription printed neatly next



Tholsel Court Toll Stamp, possibly early eighteenth century

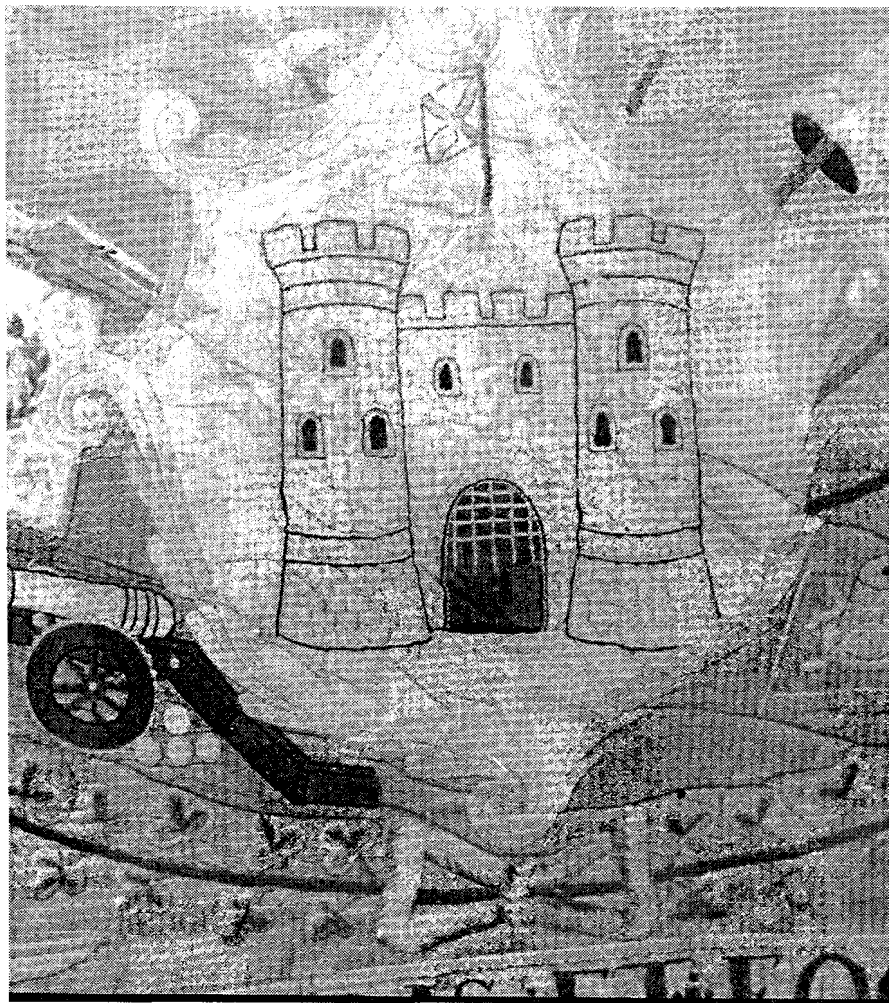
to the drawing. The actual motif and inscription, drawn from life in the appendix, records the irregularity of an old stone carving, and shows three separate towers. This episode reveals the precedence often taken by idea over observation in recording historical phenomenon. One reader had suggested that the three towers, which recall the simple version of the Limerick motif, was the ancient city arms, which differed from the more elaborate seal. Lenihan himself argued that the George I seal was an 'exact copy of a more ancient seal, and that by prescription and right, it contains a true representation of the ancient accredited arms of Limerick'. About fifty years later Fox-Davies revealed in *The Book of Public Arms* that although Limerick city had a 'correctly emblazoned' armorial bearing - a quartered shield, two of which quarters bore the royal lions and two the Limerick castle, 'on each tower an obtuse spire with a weathercock, on an arch over a curtain wall a cross flory ar' - the castle differed from the seal and



Lid of 'loudoun' Silver Freedom Box 1751

the arms were unrecorded.²³ He concluded: 'It would be well if some one would get the arms recorded and confirmed in Ulster's office to establish an accepted coat'. The office, now in Dublin, maintains that the arms are still not registered.

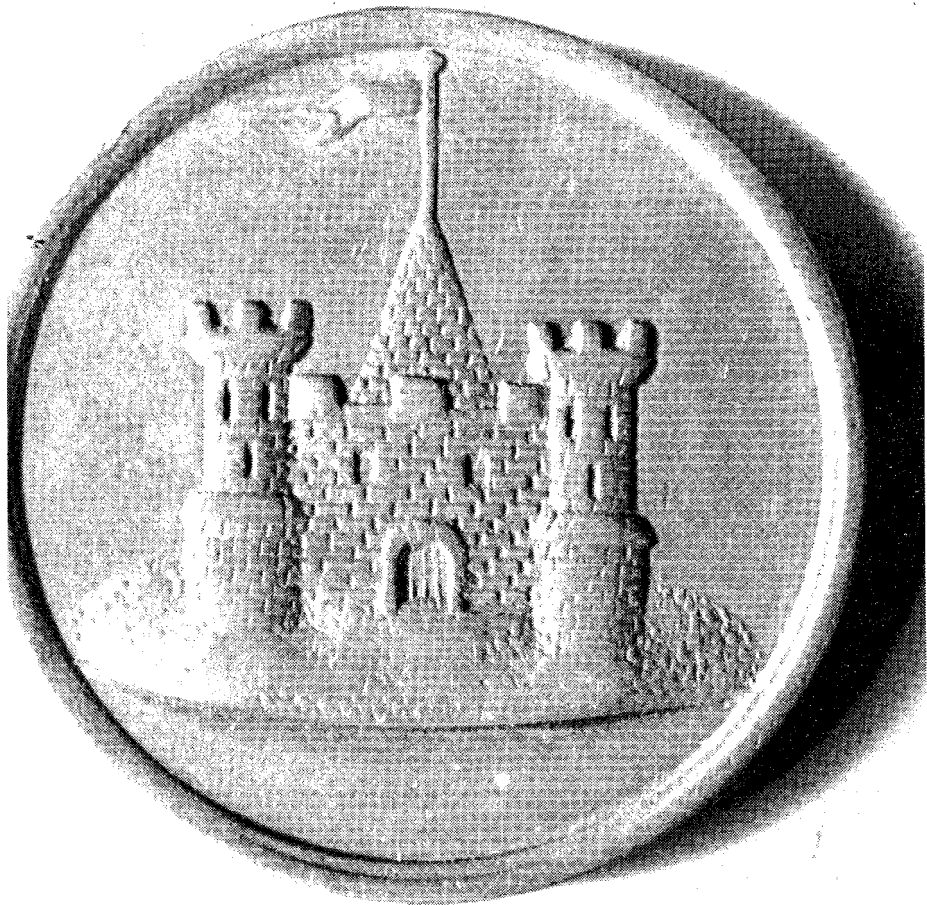
So, a seal, presumably early medieval in origin, although all evidence for this is gone, is apparently evident in the copies and adaptations made by others for what have proved to be less ephemeral artefacts than documents: those that officially denote the city such as the devices used to decorate freedom boxes, and the decoration of the maces; those that denote connection with the city such as silversmiths' hallmarks; those that draw attention to prominent buildings such as the city brewery. A seal dated to George I's reign does not initially find an imprint except in wax; a variation with triangle and flag is more popular than cone and cross in the late eighteenth century for silver and brass. And by the mid-eighteenth century this variation of the seal is being presented as the city's



'Loyal Limerick Volunteers' Flag late eighteenth century

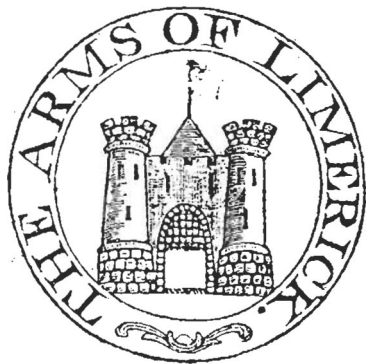


Collooney Medal presented to the privates of Limerick City Militia - 1799

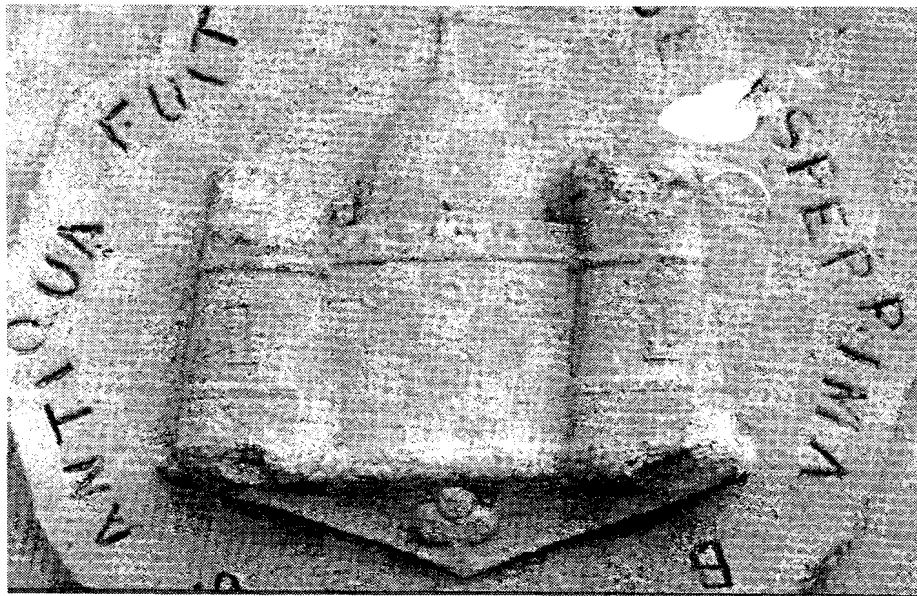


Stein Brown Distillery Token c. 1830-40

coat of arms, technically a design related to a shield, and a device which could differ from the seal, as **is** the case in Dublin, but which are popularly regarded as the same thing; denoting the identity of a place. Despite debate in the nineteenth century and the continued confident display of variety, there is a recognisable kernel which is equated with the city. Imagination has become fact, what is broadly associated with the city becomes its official representation in the popular mind. But heraldry, developed by the Normans, retains its technical character;" the arms must have a prescribed form in which a recognised system of devices are related according to



'Ferrar' Coat of Arms - 1787



Castle device on Treaty Stone plinth - 1865. Mutilated over the years by souvenir hunters

fixed rules; they must be recorded. The arms of Limerick, unrecorded, do not officially exist, while Limerick, represented by a single castle, as in their coats of arms are Drogheda, Carlow, Cashel, Kilkenny, Trim, and Tralee, is secure in its iconography.²⁵

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