

The Sieges of Limerick Synopsis

Over the course of 50 years, between 1642 and 1692, Limerick was besieged four times, bringing untold misery and suffering to its citizens. As a well-fortified and strategically placed city it was a key location for the Irish and a key target for Cromwellian and Williamite forces. Limerick and the various sieges was the theme of the Society's weekend outing which took place on the weekend of 24 - 26 September 2016.

The Siege of King John's Castle, Limerick , 15 May - 23 June 1642.

As the rebellion of 1641 spread throughout the country, the English settlers of Limerick and the surrounding counties took refuge in King John's Castle. Before long over 800 men, women and children huddled within its walls. On 15 May 1642 the Irish army, commanded by Sir Garret Barry began their attack on the castle. Lacking siege artillery with which to reduce the walls, the Irish were forced to dig tunnels beneath the walls i.e. mining. The defenders reacted by digging countermines and a number of engagements were fought underground between the defenders and the attackers. The remains of some of these tunnels have been uncovered in the archaeological excavations at the castle and can be seen in the excellent museum at the castle. On 21 June part of one of the walls collapsed and short of food and ammunition the defenders were forced to ask for terms. They surrendered on 23 June 1642.

Ireton's siege of Limerick June - October 1651.

By January 1652 only the province of Connaught and the counties of Clare and Kerry remained in Irish hands. In May that year the Cromwellian forces advanced on the line of the Shannon with Ireton leading the main army against Limerick. On 2 June he successfully forced a crossing of the Shannon at O'Brien's Bridge. This enabled him to invest the city closely on all sides. He surrounded the city with trenches and batteries and on 14 June his siege batteries opened fire. Two assaults were beaten back by the Irish under Hugh Dubh O'Neill and Ireton was forced to rely on bombardment and starvation. From August on he had an additional ally - the plague, which broke out in the city. O'Neill conducted an active defence, mounting frequent sallies but on 27 October, his forces weakened by hunger and disease, he was forced to surrender.

The Sieges of Limerick, 1690 and 1691

In the great war of the kings that raged in Ireland from 1689 to 1691, there were two sieges of Limerick; and they were amongst the most significant engagements of the war. The first siege conducted by King William III in 1690 ended in failure. His army was confined to the east side of the city; the effectiveness of his siege artillery was greatly diminished by Sarsfield's daring Ballyneety raid on his train; the breach he eventually made in the Irishtown wall was too narrow; and the garrison put up a very determined defence. The second siege in 1691 was conducted by General Ginkel. He was aware of the shaky state of Jacobite morale after the heavy defeat of Aughrim. He did not attempt an assault, but conducted a heavy bombardment of the city. As the weather deteriorated he finally divided his forces and crossed the Shannon upstream of Limerick to invest the city on both sides. With no sign of a promised French relief fleet and facing a bleak winter, the Jacobite commanders then surrendered Limerick on terms.

The Ballyneety Raid 1690

After the Boyne defeat in 1690, the Jacobite commanders re-grouped at Limerick and determined to continue the war. King William invested the city on the east side, awaiting the arrival of his slow-moving heavy artillery train to open a breach in the walls. While the train was camped for the night at Ballyneety about 30 kilometres east of Limerick, it was caught in a surprise attack by 500 Jacobite mounted troops led by Patrick Sarsfield. They had crossed the Shannon at Killaloe and made their way through the Tipperary mountains before falling on the Williamite train during the night of 11/12 August. Two guns were split, the other six dismounted and all the powder blown up. The raid was an international sensation. It greatly lifted Jacobite morale, and it delayed and curtailed William's bombardment of Limerick. He was forced to attempt an assault on an inadequate breach in the Irishtown wall, which the garrison successfully repulsed. This prolonged the war for another year and persuaded Louis XIV to continue his support for the Irish army.



