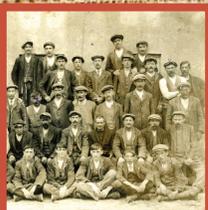
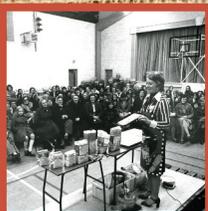
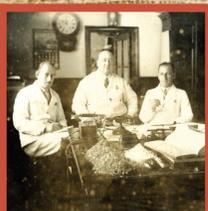
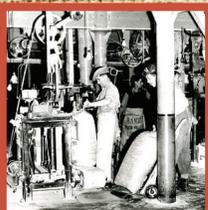


thriving pride
lifestyle people
Limerick energy
culture sports days laughter
government social generations
challenges economy industry
families tradition unions

CECIL MERCIER & THE LIMERICK RANK MILLS

BY DR EDWARD WHELAN



RANKS
WAS THE
HEART OF
LIMERICK...





CECIL MERCIER & ██████████ THE LIMERICK RANK MILLS

BY DR EDWARD WHELAN

Ranks was the heart of industrial Limerick 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.

As Mayor of Limerick I am delighted to accept this collection of archives for preservation in the City Archives as it is a collection that resonates with the identity and development of the city. The mills on the Dock road are part of our industrial heritage and demonstrate that Limerick was a city of work and enterprise.

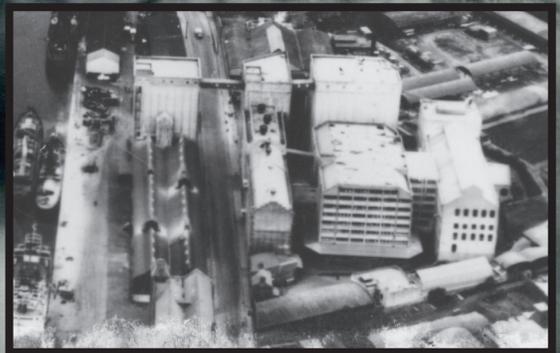
This booklet is published on the occasion of the Mercier's family's donation of the Cecil Mercier papers to Limerick City Council Archives. Cecil Mercier spent over forty years working in the Limerick mills and the papers are a remarkable collection of documents, diaries and photographs relating to Ranks and the milling industry in Limerick from 1923. The collection illustrates the importance of Ranks to the city and provides a unique glimpse into the city's industrial and social history.

ClIr Maria Byrne
Mayor of Limerick
12 October 2010

RANKS

CECIL MERCIER

MILLING INDUSTRY



RANKS
WAS THE
HEART OF
LIMERICK....

Limerick City has a long tradition in the milling industry, dating back to medieval times. In fact at the turn of the nineteenth century it would have been difficult not to be near a mill or a grain store, or see a grain ship or barge at the docks in Limerick City. Limerick has always been a major industrial centre, as companies such as W.J. Shaws and Sons, Matternsons, and Tait's Clothing Factory earned the city an international reputation for manufacturing.¹ Among all the many companies that were based in the city however, Ranks mills hold a special place in Limerick people's affections. Ranks was not just a business it was a community within Limerick that defined the city as a working city and operated as a key artery for the city's development and character.

In the nineteenth century the milling industry in the city was transformed by new technology. In 1810 John Norris Russell established a mill at Henry Street, known as the Newtown Perry Mill. James Bannatyne took over a mill in Roches Street in 1858 which he developed greatly, and which became known as the City Mills- the name Bannatyne can still be seen on the silo standing on the Dock Road. At the turn of the twentieth century there were other flour and animal feed mills in and around the city such as the Lock Mills at the junction of the Abbey River and the Grand Canal and the maize mills in Mount Kenneth and Mallow Street. There was also a mill in Corbally which was in operation from the eighteenth century. The Goodbody family had been involved with the milling industry from 1826 when Robert Goodbody acquired a mill in Clara. When the Goodbody's bought the Bannatynes mills from James Bannatyne in 1893 they established a controlling interest at all the mills and grain stores throughout the city. The local milling industry entered the twentieth century in a strong condition and boomed during the First World War.

In 1920 Cecil Mercier was appointed as mill manager to the Bannatyne's City Mills. His father had worked in the industry for many years and had known the Goodbodys. David Claude Mercier (known as Cecil) was born in Limerick on January 19th 1898. He was educated at Methody College in Belfast and then commenced milling training, following in his father's footsteps. He enlisted in the British Army during the First World War in 1917 and trained as an officer in Newark, England and after training was sent to France. In 1928 Mercier was described as 'a war veteran who served in France in the Royal Engineers'.² Upon the end of the war he worked in Manchester with Henry Simon Ltd and received 'valuable experience in mill reconstruction in France, London and Bristol'.³ It is a testament to the young Mercier's

1. Frank Prendergast, 'The decline of traditional Limerick industries' in *Made in Limerick* (Limerick, 2003), II, pp. 8, 16.

2. *Progress and development in the Irish Flour Milling Industry, 1928* (Mercier Personal Papers), p. 11.



abilities and skills that he was appointed to such a responsible position at such a tender age. The position of a mill superintendent was a very important one for the mill, the local milling industry, and, given the sector's importance in the local economy, for the whole city.

The young Mercier was soon faced with many difficulties and challenges. The end of the First World War and the disruption caused by the Irish Wars of Independence and Civil War had a disastrous effect on the Irish economy and the milling industry was not spared. The price of flour fell and there was stiff competition from British millers who were seeking markets in Ireland to offset the drop of demand in the United Kingdom. Soon Cecil Mercier was not only managing the Bannatyne Mills but also the Newtown Perry Mills. By the late twenties he was also involved in dealing with mills in County Cork. The Goodbody's began to overhaul the old Newtown Perry Mills-in a bid to improve the mills competitiveness-all of which was overseen by the young Mercier. It was a difficult period for labour relations in the mills. The milling process had to become more efficient and modernize. Mercier was obliged to institute a number of changes in the mill workers routines and work practises. This led to much labour unrest in the mills- Mercier helped to allay much of these tensions while modernising the work practises of the millers. The Newtown Perry mill plant after its reconstruction was deemed to by a journalist in 1928, to 'be at the forefront of modern milling'. The same journalist 'noted Mr Mercier contribution to the mill and its modernisation'.⁴

By the late twenties the Limerick mills were experiencing real difficulties. The mills were not milling anywhere near their capacity and were regularly shut down. There was clearly a need for drastic action. Mercier undertook a major and thorough review of the mills and their work practices and urged even greater modernisation of work practices and even more flexibility- influenced by developments in industrial management abroad in America. This led to serious industrial unrest in the Limerick Mills over pay and conditions. In 1929 a labour convention, which Mercier attended, agreed new terms and conditions for mill workers in the city. At this time the Irish milling industry was under great pressure and the industry sought tariffs to ensure its survival in the face of cheap flour imports. Mercier was active in the debate regarding the imposition of tariffs and was an expert witness at the grain tribunal of 1929 urging government support for the industry. He also deplored the lack of input from experts such as himself into the proceedings of the grain tribunal.

3. Norman Campion (work colleague)

4. Progress and development in the Irish Flour Milling Industry, 1928 (Mercier Personal Papers), p. 10



The gradual reduction system of milling was widely practiced in France and Hungary in the 19th century. Redefined because an important milling system and many process and machine innovations originated in Hungary.

Rolling systems were widely accepted by the major milling countries at that time America, Great Britain and Hungary. Each country's millers adopted slightly different means to achieve their objectives but the basic principles of breaking down the wheat to middlings, purification, further grinding of the cleaned middlings and sifting were incorporated into the process.

Gradual reduction of the wheat grain is the principle on which the theory and practice of modern flour milling is based. As the process goes in importance, the division and subdivision of the grain as it passed through the mill multiplied, by many times, the need for separate conveying of mill stocks. Thus great improvements had to be made in mechanical handling in the mill. Automation in the milling industry has been practiced for over 100 years and is still in progress as economic production costs are sought.

A SEED
The wheat grain as a seed is fitted for reproducing the plant from which it came. The grain is an embryo plant with a radicle which can grow into a root system and a plumule which can develop into stems, leaves and ears.

A tough skin protects the inner seed from soil organisms which would attack it. The inner seed mass is the food reserve on which the young plant lives until it has developed a root system.

WHICH IS MILLED
The purpose of milling is to reduce the wheat grain to a fine powdery flour. A single grain makes about 20,000 particles of flour. In wholewheat flour all parts of the grain are included, but in producing white flour the seed coat and the embryo are not used.

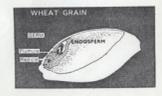
FOR OUR NUTRITION
The flour which comes from the grain of wheat is used in making bread and biscuits, cakes and confectionery, puddings and pies. This wheaten flour is rich in carbohydrates for energy, protein for growth and development, the essential B vitamins for good health, good nerves and good digestion and important minerals like iron for healthy blood and calcium for strong bones and teeth. Whole wheat made from wholewheat still contains the essential ingredients and hence is a valuable source of dietary fibre.

Flour gives us fibres that are good to eat—and the carbohydrates essential to good health. What is more, the seedcoat, or wholewheat, can be used in making whole flour are valuable food for livestock, and so help to provide us with eggs, honey, meat and milk.

HISTORY OF FLOUR MILLING



Know your Wheat Grain



with compliments
Ranks
Home Baking Advisory Service
113 Pelham Road, Dublin 7. Telephone 104152.

Ranks
Home Baking Advisory Service
113 Pelham Road, Dublin 7. Telephone 104152.

CHOCOLATE SANDTOW/CAKE/OUTERLIES

6 oz.	RAISIN FLOR., DEF.	1/2 lb.	MILK.
6 oz.	RAISINS	1/2 lb.	Cocoa.
7 oz.	Caster Sugar	1/2 lb.	DRINKING Chocolate.
			Eggs.

METHOD
Place the flour, cocoa and drinking chocolate into a mixing bowl. Have the margarine soft and add, together with other ingredients, to the dry mix. Beat well for 2/3 mins. or until light and fluffy.

DRINKING - Divide mixture between two deep 7" tins. Bake 350° F. Use Mark 4 Top approx. 40/45 mins.

CAKE - Bake in grasspound lined 6" deep cake tin or a grasspound ring tin. Bake at 350° F. Use Mark 4 Top approx. 1 1/2 hours.

OUTERLIES - Place tablespoons of mixture in paper cases lined with grease patty tins. Bake towards the top of the oven, 375° F. Use Mark 7.

Test all cakes before removing from the oven, the centre top should feel firm to touch.

TO DECORATE SANDTOWS - When cool cut off tops and split them in two. Pipe 1/2" of cream on top of cake and spread 'icing' on whole. Dust with icing sugar.

CHOCOLATE FILLING CAKES - Cream 2 ozs. margarine until light. Gradually beat in 7 oz. icing sugar together with 2 teaspoons beat well until light, adding some more sugar or water to give required consistency.

STICK CHOCOLATE SANDS - Mix 5 ozs. grated chocolate with 2 1/2 of hot water and beat mixture over small sandpaper. Remove from heat and beat in 5 ozs. icing sugar. Beat until smooth. Spread on cake.

RANKS RADIO PROGRAMME - From 10pm to 12.30am RTÉ Radio 1.



RANKS
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LIMERICK....

By 1930 the local milling industry was in crisis. On the 1st of January 1930, Mercier noted in his diary that 'The Lock and Corbally Mills shut down for good'.⁵ The Goodbody's were beginning to experience real financial difficulties. It was also the year of the Wall Street Crash and the beginning of the Great Depression- the price of commodities, including flour and animal feeds collapsed. In 1930 the Limerick Chronicle reported that there were 'many unemployed in the city'.⁶ The rising numbers unemployed and workers falling incomes reduced families' disposable incomes and this in turn caused the demand for bread to decline.

During early 1930 the city was filled with rumours of a potential takeover of the local milling industry. It was common knowledge that the local mills were in jeopardy. In early 1930 both of the city's main mills had temporarily shut down due to excess stocks of flour. In 1930 the Limerick's mills were acquired by Ranks (UK) Ltd. The takeover occurred after a great deal of secret negotiations between the Ranks Group and the Goodbody family. In March 1930, Mercier wrote in his diary 'Mr J.P. Goodbody broke silence- takeover to go ahead'⁷. Ranks were one of the largest importers of flour into Ireland- and it held approximately 30% of the market. Ireland was a key market for Ranks as the country had a high level of bread consumption. They had set up in Ireland to avoid being excluded from the Irish market by tariffs, which were introduced two years after their buyout of the Limerick mills by the first Fianna Fail administration. J. Arthur Rank, founder and chairman of Ranks and a regular visitor to Limerick, had been invited to invest in the city by some local acquaintances. J. Arthur Rank, one of the best known industrialists of his era, and his family, were to show a keen interest in the Limerick mills and the city, over many decades. The Ranks takeover was viewed with some scepticism by many in the city and the country at large. Fianna Fail was hostile and Frank Aitken was worried about 'English economic penetration' fearing it could increase British influence in Ireland.⁸ The Labour party was opposed to foreign ownership of flour mills and urged nationalisation. The government party, Cummann na Gael's attitude to Ranks presence in Ireland, was lukewarm. Mercier refers to 'agitation in the press'⁹ aimed at turning public opinion against the takeover in 1930. Ranks detractors disliked the idea of a British Company taking over a strategic industry in Ireland. The Trade Unions and local politicians were not as hostile to the Ranks takeover- yet they too were suspicious of Ranks. They feared that Ranks take-over of the mills would lead to

5. Mercier Diaries, P89/9/ 1 Jan. 1930.

6. Limerick Chronicle, 14 Jan, 1930, p.2.

7. Mercier Diaries, P89/1 Mar. 1930.

8. Oireachtas Debates, Dail Eireann, vol.43-5 July, 1932.

9. Mercier Diaries, P89/ 13 Mar, 1932.



massive redundancies. In 1932, Limerick Corporation threatened to withhold planning permission from Ranks for an extension to the Dock Road site unless they guaranteed jobs at the mills. In 1938 there was 'A public Meeting in Town Hall presided over by Alderman Browne T.D. –protesting against the new mill'¹⁰ It was to take many years before the suspicions of Ranks were to be allayed.

In 1934 it was announced that 'Ranks to become shortly an Irish Body Corporate Company'.¹¹ Ranks (U.K.) undertook a shares issue, only preference shares were available to Irish people. A new company was formed called Ranks (Ireland) Ltd. This was done to conform with government legislation related to foreign investment in Ireland. The vast majority of ordinary shares were retained by Arthur Rank and his family. This ostensibly Irish owned company in reality was owned by Ranks (UK). Arthur Rank was chairman of Ranks (Ireland), for many years and his son succeeded him after his death. Ranks Limerick management was obliged to report to Ranks in London and took instructions from the British based company. However local business people played a prominent part in the business and the Goodbody family, notably James Goodbody continued to play a very active role in the company.

Ranks acquisitions of the Limerick mills resulted in radical changes to the local milling industry. During the 1930's and into the 1940's, Ranks began to rationalise the industry in Limerick. Many historic and long established mills in the city were closed. Mallow Street Mills was closed around 1935. In 1932, work began on Silo no 2 on the Dock Road, on the site of the old Bannatyne grain stores. An animal feed mill was constructed on the Dock Road site in 1935-36, leading to the transfer of men from the Mount Kenneth mill. In 1937, Cecil Mercier noted the 'first news of the Government's permission for new flour mill on Dock Road'.¹² Construction on the new mills began soon after. The Dock Road site had not been Ranks first choice. Ranks had hoped to build the new complex at Foynes because of its superior port facilities. Local labour was employed on the new development – fulfilling a promise made by Arthur Rank. The construction of the new mills generated much needed employment in the city during the severe economic depression of the decade. By 1941 the new flour mills and stores on the Dock Road were in operation and the complex was known as the Shannon Mills. Mercier was heavily involved in the erection and development of the new mills on the Dock Road. The opening of the new mills meant that 'the City Mills were shut for good'- in 1942, something which

10. Mercier Diaries P89/ 17/23 Jan, 1938.

11. Mercier Diaries, P89/27 Feb, 1934.

12. Mercier Diaries, P89/16/ 15 Oct. 1937.

CORRESPONDENCE

IRISH TRANSPORT & GENERAL WORKERS' UNION

H. O. Reference

Dated 192 _____ Branch _____

Old.

VI When men and boys are employed for a period without a break, they should be treated as constant employees.

VII The Staffing of Malrow Street Mill.

VIII Boys belonging to the E.O. The being unworked boys should be paid as usual etc.

IX System of Staffing wages. We request that night workers be paid on Friday afternoon.

Yours Faithfully
John Couchoy
Branch Secretary

IRISH TRANSPORT & GENERAL WORKERS' UNION

H. O. Reference

Dated 7th May 1929 _____ Branch _____

America
Address 91 O'Connell Street

James Goodbody Esq
News Columnist
Rocky Point
Quebec

Dear Sir:

I give below names of our representatives in your employment, who will be attending conference with you on Thursday week at 11 AM -
 Edward Power Newtown Park
 Daniel Egan St. George
 John Courtney St. George
 Edward Brown St. George
 C. Wynnian St. George

Arranging arrangements made by you without the President & receive above (in event of accident) can be convenient if arranged.

Yours Faithfully
John Couchoy
Branch Secy

IRISH TRANSPORT & GENERAL WORKERS' UNION

MILL HANDS 1 JUNE 1942

STANDARD WAGES

Grade	Rate	Hours
Foreman (P. Callender)	47	26 0 0
-do-	44	5 10 0
-do- (7)	44	4 - -
Hullerman	44	3 35 6
Purifierman	44	3 5 11
Silkman	44	3 9 4
-do- (Asst)	44	3 9 3
Flow feeder	44	3 5 11
-do- (Asst)	44	3 - -
Offal feeder	44	3 9 3
-do- (Asst)	44	3 9 3
Stitcher	44	3 9 11
Screensman	44	3 9 11
-do- (Asst)	44	3 9 11
Knabber	44/47	2 5 -
Boys	44/47	5 6 10
Tiering	47	3 4 1
Leading (Leader)	47	4 10 -
-do-	47	4 10 -
Foreman (J. Presley)	47	3 15 -
-do- & part watching	47	3 6 10
-do- (J. Bennett)	47	4 4 -
Checkers (3)	47	3 9 4
-do- R. Anderson	47	2 8 -
-do- J. Duggan	47	2 8 -
-do- J. Higgins	47	2 8 -
Power House (Boy)	47	3 4 10
Yardman	47	1 1 -
Beaver (woman)	47	4 - -
-do-	47	4 - -
CLERICAL: J. McGuire	47	4 - -
J. Tobey	47	3 10 -
P. Kelly	47	2 10 -
H. O'Leary	47	2 10 -
H. Keane	47	2 10 -

Double time midnight Sat. to 6 a.m. Mon. others as the said shift.

WATCHMEN - CITY MILL & NEWTOWNPARK: 10/- per night.

CARIN LIGNITE 60 per day extra.

SUBSISTENCE ALLOWANCE: 10/- per week. (10/- Mill) 1/2d. others 1/2d. per shift.

Those under 21 years, half rate.

EMERGENCY BONUS: 4/- after first 2 hours & 1/-, none on 5/-.

DAY WORKERS: 44 hour week.

SHIFT WORKERS: 44 hour week.

WIFE: All under 18 years one & 40 hour week.

EMERGENCY BONUS: 4/- 10-12-40; 6/- 12-11-40; 5/- 9-9-43; 1/2

PROPOSED LABOUR SCHEDULE

MAKING LOPI.

CITY MILL.

COLLIERIES: NEWTOWN CITY MILL & NEWTOWN PARK MILL

MINING STAFFS.

	CITY MILL		NEWTOWN PARK	
SHIFT	MEN	BOYS	MEN	BOYS
1st Floor Peckers	5		3	
2nd " "	5		3	
1st Floor Stitchers	5		11	
2nd " "	5		11	
Flour Cart Boys		3		3
" hold "		3		11
Offal Peckers	5		6	
" Stitchers		3		11
1st Feedermen	5		11	
2nd " "	3		11	
TOTALS	11 Men	9 Boys	18 Men	3 Boys

FLORIN PACKING.

It is proposed to dispense with services of

greatly saddened Mercier.¹³ The old Newtown Perry Mills were no longer used as a mill- but were still regularly used as a grain store. In 1969 it was sold by Ranks and demolished in 1971. Apart from the milling of animal foodstuffs most of the city's milling sector was focused upon the Shannon Mills on the Dock Road from the early 1940s.

Cecil Mercier was retained as mill manager at the Limerick mills and generally held the same duties as under the Goodbody's. The Ranks takeover presented a major challenge to the existing staff and management, especially Cecil Mercier. Mercier was a pivotal figure in these developments and helped in the transition. As mill manager he was also closely involved in negotiations during these years of change with the mill workers union (I.T.G.W.U.). This was a real challenge in 1930 he noted 'that labour is in a bad state-little would cause a strike'.¹⁴ There were regular disputes over wages and the employment of youths and casual workers throughout the decade. Another major challenge for Mercier was increasing government regulation. The government sought to encourage tillage farming in Ireland in order to ensure that the country was self-sufficient in foodstuffs. Shannon Mills like other Irish mills were obliged to mill a certain percentage of Irish grain. Mercier was again central to the implementation of all these measures in Ranks. The early 1930's were difficult for the mills there was a world-wide depression and Ireland was engaged in a trade war with the United Kingdom. Mercier 1932 in his diary he noted that 'things appear to be unsettled in the country' and this was leading to a fall in business.¹⁵ However by the late 1930's, the Limerick Ranks Mill was a highly profitable and sophisticated operation.

In 1939, Europe exploded into war. Ireland's neutrality spared it the horrors of the conflict, yet Ireland as an island nation was faced with a crisis. The nation was reliant on imports for many essential commodities. The country was faced with a dilemma – how was it going to supply itself and even feed its population. The Ranks mills in Limerick were subjected to strict government supervision, like all the other flour mills in the country. Flour mills were seen as vital in the country's efforts to feed its population. Limerick's Shannon Mills was arguably the largest in the state in these years and its ability to produce flour was vital for the whole region and the country. The country's ability to import foreign grain was severely reduced. It was not just grain that was in short supply but everything from electricity to machine parts.

13. Mercier Diaries, P89/ 6 June, 1941.

14. Progress and developments in the Irish milling industry 1929, pp. 5,6; Mercier Papers.

15. Mercier Diaries, P89/11/ 27 Oct 1932



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Millers like Ranks of Limerick, were obliged by the government to increase supplies of flour for the Irish market in these extremely difficult conditions. In January 1940, Mercier noted that the mills 'Australian wheat was nearly exhausted'.¹⁶ As a result the mills had to increasingly rely upon Irish wheat which was often difficult to mill. Mercier as mill manager was again closely involved in implementing the government's directives. The government set down what percentage of flour was to be extracted from the grain. The government demanded high extraction rates – the percentage of the wheat that was used to manufacture flour. These greatly challenged the ability of Mercier and the rest of the Ranks workforce. Ranks workers were at this time not just engaged in a business they were participating in a national effort to feed the country. In the words of Mercier in a private letter to his father- the mills were 'not just a tool for making money she has fed many millions'. 1942 was an extremely difficult year- the wheat harvest had been poor the previous year and there had not been a single grain ship in Limerick harbour, for the entire year. In the Dail the spectre of famine was raised by opposition T.Ds. There were preparations for bread to be rationed and there were real fears of a crisis in the food supply. The government demanded that the extraction rate be raised again. This was a great challenge to even a master miller of the skill of Cecil Mercier. The Limerick mills like the other mills in Ireland were able to produce enough flour to avert bread rationing in 1942. The quality of flour was very coarse and poor, and made very unappetising bread. Mill workers were viewed as key workers in the national effort and by order of the government, received a weekly bonus above that of other industrial workers whose wages were strictly regulated. This bonus to flour workers increased every year during the Emergency. Their success like other Irish mill workers in their efforts can be seen in the fact that there was no bread rationing in Ireland for the entirety of the war.

Ranks and its employees contributed even further to the country's efforts during the Emergency. The Shannon Mills had its own volunteer fire brigade as mills were traditionally viewed as fire hazards. During the Emergency the Ranks fire brigade was united with the Auxiliary Fire Service. The company's fire brigade was overseen by Cecil Mercier for the duration of the war. In 1941 Mercier noted that 'we marched from Strand Barracks with the rest of the AFS to Sarsfield Barracks'.¹⁷ The Ranks fire brigade regularly trained with the AFS service in preparation for any air-raid. The company's fire brigade long continued to serve the city- aiding the fire service in its

16. Mercier Diaries P89/19/ 15 Jan 1940.

17. Mercier Diaries, P89/ 21 May, 1941.



thriving pride
lifestyle people
Limerick energy
culture laughter
sports days
government social generations
families economy industry
tradition



RANKS
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fire-fighting duties. The Ranks fire men helped to fight ‘one of Ireland’s biggest fires’.¹⁸ This was the great Todd’s fire which caused considerable damage to the city centre in 1959.

Cecil Mercier came under intense pressure during these years. In 1940 he wrote in his diary ‘Every hour of my day is filled-pressure of work is very great’.¹⁹ His diaries often reveal him working late into the evening and usually working six days. It must be remembered that much of the Shannon Mills site was build during a time of war and shortages presenting Mercier with grave difficulties. Yet he managed to overcome these difficulties and was a highly respected figure among the workforce and the wider community. He showed a great commitment to the Shannon Mills and to the industry as a whole. He was especially concerned about quality and everyday sampled the flour produced by the mill personally. He took great pride in the quality of flour that the mill produced and even during war-time struggled to ensure that the flour was of the finest quality possible. Mercier personally supervised the selection and training of many apprentice millers in the Dock Road site to whom he passed on his knowledge and experience. Many of these millers, in turn passed on their knowledge and expertise to other mills throughout the country.

Limerick’s Shannon Mills plant came to be seen as the parent plant for all the Ranks operations in Ireland. The company’s head office in Ireland was at 104 Henry Street. For many years Ranks Ireland held its Annual General Meeting in Limerick, These were usually attended by one of the Ranks family. The mills themselves were central to the economy of the city. The mills employed a significant but not huge amount of people- usually only a couple of hundred although the numbers expanded and contracted as the work in the factory was seasonal. The mills however provided many other benefits to the city’s economy. The wages of Ranks workers were vital to the city- the mill workers expenditure helped to generate demand for goods and services in the city’s shops. The Shannon mills also for many years had a company barge, the S.S Garryowen that unloaded grain from ships in the Estuary. Much of the grain was transported through Limerick port and this provided much needed work for the many Dockers in the city. The presence of the Mills encouraged the development of the city’s infrastructure- the expansion of the docks in the city was partly initiated to deal with the establishment of Ranks. Furthermore, the investment by Ranks in the Dock Road- gave others confidence to invest in the city. The presence

18. Irish Independent, 25 Aug, 1959.

19. Mercier Diaries, P89/19/ 4 May, 1940.



RANKS
WAS THE
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LIMERICK....

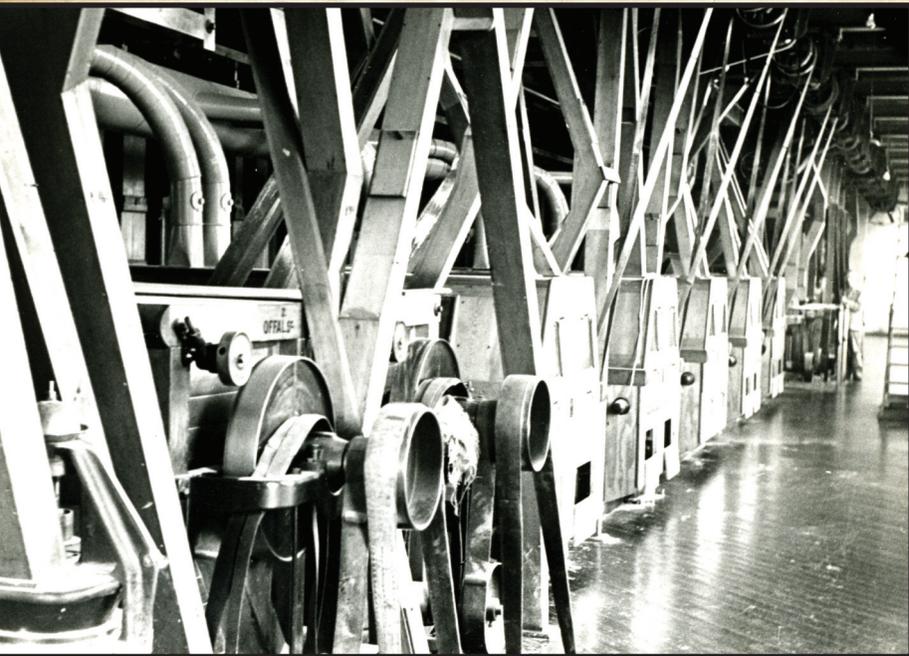
of large employers like Ranks encouraged the City Corporation to embark upon the many public housing schemes such as Janesboro, that were commenced in the late 1930's and early 1940's. Ranks Mills also impacted upon the city's hinterland. Its constant demand for grain encouraged the development of tillage in Counties Limerick and Clare. The company's animal feed plant, which produced the famous Blue Cross range of feedstuffs, was also vital for the livestock industry throughout the West of Ireland.

Cecil Mercier for over four decades oversaw the mills in Limerick. What was it like to work in the mills during these years? Traditionally, Ranks was regarded as a good place to work, one that paid good wages, even contractors or casual workers were relatively well paid. The company could be a very considerate and progressive employer. In 1932 Arthur Rank urged Cecil Mercier to establish a Sports and Social Club. At this time such a thing was almost unheard of in Ireland. Later on the company encouraged its employees to pay into a company pension fund- this was a necessity in this era as the state welfare system was inadequate. The Shannon Mills Benevolent Fund was established. Its President for many years was Cecil Mercier. A company doctor was appointed in 1944 and in 1947 'a pension scheme was announced' by the company.²⁰ From an early date the Shannon Mills offered their employees benefits that few other workers locally or nationally received.

Traditionally, in Ireland and elsewhere mills had terrible reputations as places of work. The working environments in mills were notorious for their harsh conditions and for being unhealthy. Ranks Shannon Mills was no exception even though over the course of the years, government legislation and union agitation caused conditions to improve. The mills machinery made the complex hot and noisy. Then there was the persistent problem of dust from grain and flour. Much of the work undertaken at the Shannon Mills site involved heavy lifting. The loading and packing of the heavy flour sacks was physically demanding. Workers in the stores, known as 'tiering men' whose job it was to stack flour bags in the warehouse, were ordered to stack 'ten stone bags of flour seven high.'²¹ The 'tiering' men regularly objected to this and the issue of 'tiering' or stacking flour bags was a constant source of friction between the men's union and management. Many women also worked at the Dock Road site. They worked in the 'returnable flour bags department'. In this department women recycled old jute flour bags so that they could be re-used. The work could be physically demanding and for many years they were only paid piece rate. Many

20. Mercier Diaries P89/27/ 10 Dec, 1947.

21. Mercier Diaries, P89/34/15 Mar, 1954.



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of the workers were casual employees and could be laid off at short notice- in December 1946 during a quiet period at the mill, Mercier noted 'all casual staff out- we have sufficient men'.²²

Work at the mill could also be dangerous. Throughout its existence there were accidents involving mill workers and machinery. Over the years there were three deaths from industrial accidents at Rank owned premises in the city. However, despite all the dangers and challenges the mills were much loved by many of their employees. Cecil Mercier was not alone in his dedication to the mills and its development. Ranks were good employers and this partly explains the attachment many ex- employees feel for the company to this day. Many people were able to better themselves and to raise and educate their families thanks to their positions at Ranks. The loyalty that people had for the mills ran deeper than that. Flour milling was a critical industry and it helped the nation feed itself through many difficult times and people from all walks of life and of various religious persuasions felt proud to be associated with such an important industry. The mill was also a family affair. It was not uncommon for several members of the same family and several generations of the same family, to be employed at the same time in the mills. We can gauge the millworkers' commitment to the mill from the major fire that occurred in the Newtown Perry Mills in 1933. A fire broke out in the Grinder House and threatened to sweep through the entire mill. In the words of Cecil Mercier 'all believed there would be a complete loss'. The plant was saved by the 'heroic efforts of the staff'.²³ The mill hands had bravely fought the fire- at this time the city had only a very basic fire service. Many of the workers had their clothes burned as they fought the fire. The mills were much more than a job to generations of employees.

The aftermath of the war was difficult for the city and the country. The disruption caused by the war and extreme wet weather led to a scarcity and shortage of grain in the country. There were even concerns about the food supply in some areas of the country. Mercier in his diary noted that 'mills shut down as the Irish wheat is exhausted and we await arrival of the new crop'.²⁴ Ranks in an extraordinary effort, paid their staff to go to rural areas to help the farmers salvage the crops from the sodden field. Some of the staff were part-time farmers and they were sent home to do likewise. The government intervened to alleviate the situation and in 1946, bread was rationed in the country. Again there were pressures upon mills like Limerick's

22. Mercier Diaries, P89/25, 27 Dec, 1946.

23. Mercier Diaries, P89/12/ 23 Aug. 1933.

24. Mercier Diaries, P89/ 25/Aug, 1946.

*'be at the forefront of
modern milling'*

*'all casual staff
out- we have
sufficient men'*

*'in 1942 no grain
ship unloaded at
Limerick docks'*

*'Every hour of my day is filled-
pressure of work is very great'*

*Mr J.P. Goodbody broke
silence- takeover to go ahead'*

*'Flags are flying from
the top of new 15000
ton silo to celebrate
its completion'*

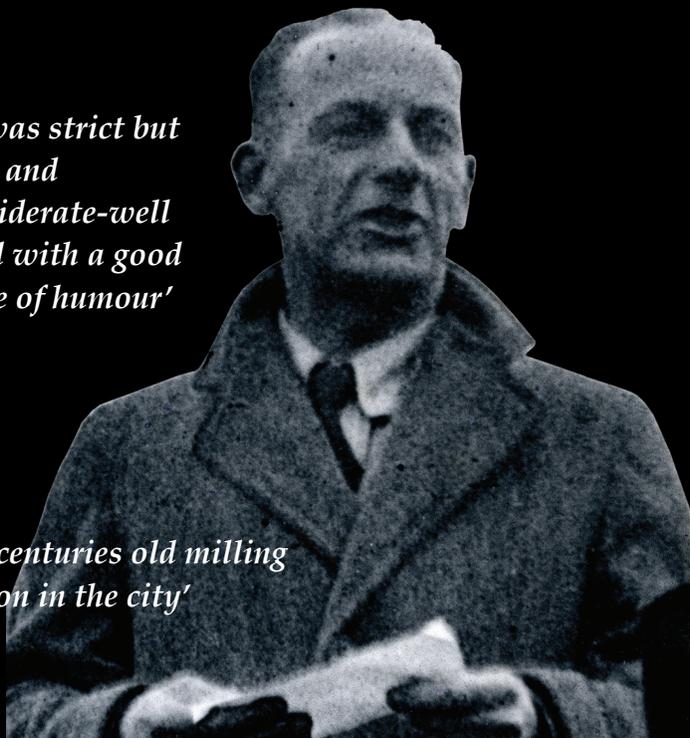
*'mills shut down as the Irish wheat is
exhausted and we await arrival of the
new crop'*

*'Ranks to become shortly
an Irish Body Corporate
Company'*

*'not just
a tool for
making
money
she has
fed many
millions'*

*'he was strict but
kind and
considerate-well
liked with a good
sense of humour'*

*'seven centuries old milling
tradition in the city'*



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Shannon mills to maximise its production of foodstuffs. Mercier as manager once again rose to the challenge of ensuring that the mill produced enough flour to enable the bread ration to be maintained. Despite these difficulties, the company entered the post-war period with a great deal of confidence and made ambitious plans for the future. Mercier oversaw the continued expansion of the mills in these difficult times and with evident self-satisfaction wrote in his diary in 1954, 'Flags are flying from the top of new 15000 ton silo to celebrate its completion'.²⁵ The post-war optimism soon was dissipated. The 1950's were marked by high unemployment, mass emigration and economic depression in Ireland. Ranks did not escape the difficult times and the company's profit margins came under pressure. The demand for flour fell- after the removal of a government subsidy for bread in 1957.

Ranks were forced to cut costs and a programme of rationalisation begun in 1958. Mercier was again pivotal in this often difficult process which provoked industrial unrest in the complex. The company initiated a programme in the mills which sought greater flexibility from the workers. Ranks sought to overhaul its entire operations in Ireland. Cecil Mercier was to play a pivotal role in this rationalisation programme. Mercier's expertise was recognised by the Board of Ranks (Ireland) and in 1958 he was appointed as the Limerick Mills Industrial Officer. He was also appointed to oversee the other Ranks Mills in Ireland from Buncrana to Cork. This position involved Mercier supervising not only the Shannon Mills but all the Rank groups milling operations in Ireland. He was to oversee the modernisation of Rank mills throughout Ireland. The company's calls for more flexibility led to an unofficial strike in Limerick. For three days the flour mills were shut. The mill workers eventually accepted the proposals of the company and new work practices were adopted in the mill.

The Ranks scheme to improve the company's competitiveness ultimately benefitted Limerick. More of the company's activities were concentrated upon Limerick. The company's offices in Henry Street became the administrative hub of the entire Ranks (Ireland) operations after 1960. The rationalisation and efficiency programme initiated by Ranks in the medium to long term improved the company's position and enabled it to benefit from the country's economic take-off in the 1960's. After over forty years service in the Limerick milling sector- Cecil Mercier retired in 1963 a highly respected figure in the industry he loved and in the wider community. Cecil Mercier left a formidable legacy. The company that Mercier left in 1963 was in a very strong position- it was still one of the largest mills in Ireland and a relatively

25. Mercier Diaries, P89/34/ 2 Oct 1954.



seven centuries old milling tradition in the city...

Secretaries | Day Foreman | Rollermen | Purifiermen | Silksmen | Cleaners
Rollerfloor Cleaner | Flour Packer | Wheatfeed Packer | Assistants | Dredgermen Bleachers
Imp. Man | Improver | Apprentices | Screensman | Washerman Screens Chemist
Girl/Boy, Bakery | Girl/Boy Laboratory | Road Checker | Laboratory Asst. | Siloman
Firemen | Moisture Testing Man | Sack Storers Piece Worker | Scalper & Alleyway Man
Truckers | Canteen Staff | Managers

*... generations of workers -
generations of Limerick families*

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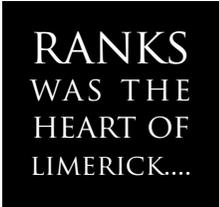
profitable enterprise. This at a time when the number of mills in the country was much reduced due to falling demand for flour and oversupply. After the 1959 strike the mills enjoyed a prolonged period of industrial calm- this was unique in the 1960s and 1970s, when striking workers were a fixture of everyday life.

However, eighteen years after his death the Ranks Mill closed-a thing 'he would have been most unhappy to see'.²⁶ The company entered the 1970's in relatively good shape on the surface. However there were problems undermining the mills ability to compete in an increasingly competitive market. The government's control of the milling industry remained and they were reluctant to raise the price of flour. While the Irish flour mills such as Ranks of Limerick made a profit- the profit was not adequate to encourage the investment in new technology that the mills required for its future viability. Furthermore the consumption of bread in Ireland was falling rapidly. Perhaps the greatest threat was from Ireland's accession to the E.E.C. This threatened to open up the Irish flour market for the first time in decades. Ranks (Ireland) decided on a radical course of action. In 1975 the company announced the closure of the Limerick Mills. After a local campaign of resistance the company relented- although there were some redundancies. The company received I.D.A. grants that allowed them to invest in the company. However, Ranks began to lose market share and it began to suffer losses and its share price collapsed. There was growing penetration of the Irish market by foreign flour importers. In 1983 the company announced the closure of the Limerick Mills. The announcement provoked a wave of anger in the city and among the workers- there were strikes and sit-ins. Ranks closure was widely seen as a betrayal. The protests were to no avail and the mills shut down. The closure of Ranks of Limerick ended seven hundred years of milling in the city and came to symbolise the city's decline, as an industrial centre in the 1980's. Yet Ranks was not forgotten- it is still remembered fondly by its former employees and their families. Ranks reputation extends beyond those with a personal connection to the mill. The mills provide the city with an example of a company that not only provided for its employees and benefitted the local economy but also a model of how a company, in a variety of ways can contribute to, and enhance the local community.

26. Norman Campion (work colleague)



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