

The Limerick Soviet Shilling Notes – 1919 and 2019

Gary Oddie

The Irish war of Independence began in January 1919 between the Irish Republican Army and British forces. Many skirmishes took place as part of the guerrilla war and several self-declared soviets were formed across Ireland during this early period of the conflict.

On the 9 April the British army, using the Defence of the Realm Act, declared Limerick as a Special Military Area, where passes would be required to enter and leave the area from the 14 April. On 11 April, Union meetings took place in Limerick and a general strike was called, also to start on 14 April. The committee controlling the area under siege called itself a Soviet in the original sense of a self-governing committee. On 15 April, paper money was printed to act as local currency with denominations; 1/-, 5/- and 10/-, that would be accepted by local shops accepted in local shops. The Committee was in charge of an area that included the railway station, and the whole of the town and thus organised the supply of food inside the soviet. Passes were required to enter and leave the controlled area. On 27 April, talks between the two sides resulted in the end of the strike and the ending of the Special Military Area.

The whole episode has been very well described in three books.^(1,2,3) The paper money first came to the attention of collectors in the early 1970s and a comprehensive listing of the early mentions of the notes was given by Derek Young in 1985.⁽⁴⁾ The topic has been revisited more recently.⁽⁵⁾

The illustration below shows a 1 shilling note, typical of the series.

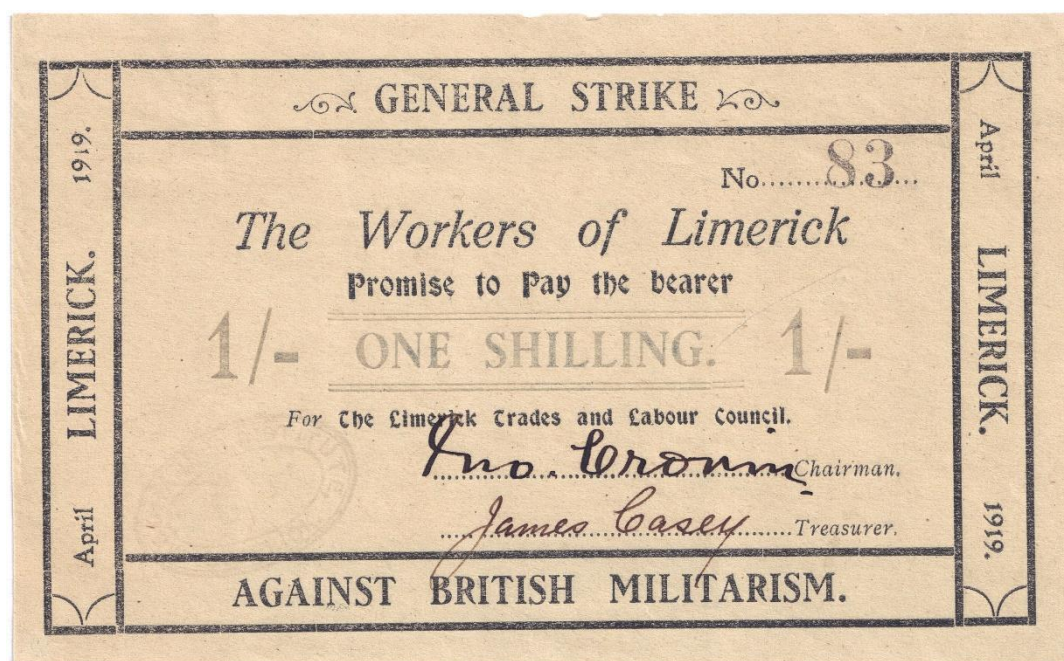


Fig. 1. Limerick Soviet shilling issued 15-27 April 1919. 141×86 mm.

The main design is printed in black and the denominations of each note are printed in different colours; the 1/- in blue/purple/grey, the 5/- in green and the 10/- in red. The colour of the inks varies, as do the colour and quality of the paper stock used for the printing. There are no water marks and the only security features are an oval rubber stamp, in purple, usually on the front lower left, with MECHANICS INSTITUTE LIMERICK around a central shamrock and the manuscript signatures of the Chairman and treasurer of the soviet., John Cronin and James Casey.

The above notes are a summary of brief a “show and tell” given to the IBNS London Branch on 24 Feb. 2022, where I also gave a list of serial numbers that I knew to exist.

Subsequent correspondence with Jonathan Callaway revealed he had a more comprehensive list that he has kindly allowed me to reproduce (* in museums etc):

1/- 3, 38, 81, 83, 185, 262*, 307, 308*, 341*, 362*, 399* (11 + 1 unnumbered)
5/- 1, 10*, 55, 56, 93*, 101, 117, 123, 145*, 148*, 166*, 167, 195* (13 + 1 unnumbered)
10/- 1, 22*, 26, 42*, 162, 164, 261, 275*, 285*, 286, 296, 310*, 311, 357 (14 + 7 unnumbered)

The notes of the Limerick Soviet were listed in the first edition of the standard catalogue of the Paper Money of Ireland.⁽⁶⁾ A new edition will be published in the near future with a longer section devoted to the Limerick issues.

Whilst carrying out some on-line research/rummaging in preparation for the “show and tell”, I was completely surprised to find the following. This had completely missed my previous searches and forms the main reason for writing this note.

The Limerick Soviet Shilling Project^(7,8,9)

In March 2019, as part of the centenary of the Limerick Soviet, six local artists were commissioned by the Limerick Urban Co-op to produce designs for notes that would circulate during April 2019. Consistent with the original 1919 issues, the notes would have denominations of 1, 5 and 10 shillings. Any proceeds from the project would be split between NOVAS (a homeless charity across southern Ireland) and The Sanctuary Runners (charity with runners raising sponsorship money for asylum seekers and refugees).

The project was organised by artists Ciaran Nash and Fiona Woods. A contemporary newspaper report summarised an interview with Ciaran Nash⁽⁹⁾ which I summarise - He was working at the Wickham St Studios, Limerick, when asked by the Limerick Soviet Centenary committee what contribution he would like to make to the commemorations. He was already exploring the language of protest movements and the history of civil disobedience. The aim was to produce a temporary system of exchange based on the currency issued by the workers of Limerick protesting against the imposition of martial law by the British army in 1919. The notes though valid until 1st May 2019 could be seen as a trial run for a local currency taking back some control of the local economy in the same manner as the Bristol or Totnes Pound.⁽¹⁰⁾

The notes are printed on 100gsm paper, stamped and embossed and are 133×72 mm. The paper has no water mark or other security features. The vouchers were sold in packs comprising 5×1s, 1×5s and 1×10s from shops around Limerick, including the following:

The Celtic Bookshop, Rutland Street
The Urban Co-op, Ballysimon
Lucky Lane, Catherine Street
The Commercial Bar, Catherine Street

and could be spent at the same places along with select businesses at:

The Milk Market

A total of 100 packs of notes were printed. The exchange rate for these tokens was 1 shilling = 1 Euro, though care was taken in the wording and advertising so as not to contravene any currency laws. The scheme expired at midnight on 1 May 2019 and the notes were collected up on 3 May 2019. The notes were subsequently sold as commemorative art objects.

Figure 2. shows a close up of the embossing on the notes which reads LIMERICK SOVIET 100:



Fig. 2. Raised embossing on the right-hand side of the back of each issued note.
The black is the closest font that could be found. 32×25mm.

The websites are still active, and emails received a reply from Ciaran Nash, the artist who designed the Type 1 One Shilling note. A full set of issued notes was later kindly supplied by his father. With the exception of the type 1 five shilling note the issued notes look exactly like the images on the website and have been reproduced below. A faint grey line has been added around the white stock paper to identify the edge of the note.

There are two fronts for each denomination and a common back for all the notes, though the main printing colour of the notes follows that of the 1919 issues with 1 shilling in purple, 5 shillings in green and 10 shillings in red.



Fig. 3a. Front of type 1, one shilling note.



Fig. 3b. Back of type 1, one shilling note.

Four-digit serial number printed in black on back, embossed from front to back.



Fig. 4a. Front of type 2, one shilling note.



Fig. 4b. Back of type 2, one shilling note.

Four-digit serial number printed in black on back, embossed from front to back.



Fig. 5a. Front of type 1, five shilling note.



Fig. 5b. Back of type 1, five shilling note.

Four-digit serial number printed in red on back, embossed from front to back.

The design (and execution!) of this note is by artist Kerry Guinan. Still based in Limerick, but working across Europe, her works range from performance arts to digital media and highlight the relationships between labour and property in capitalist societies.

The note has been burned through with a candle flame and then the flame has been extinguished with water. When dried this has caused some cockling of the paper. This is the intended design and the digital mock-ups appearing on the website include an image of a burn mark printed on one side of the paper, as shown below.



Fig. 5c. Front of unissued type 1, five shilling note.⁽⁸⁾



Fig. 5d. Back of unissued type 1, five shilling note.⁽⁸⁾

This is the digital mock-up of the design, taken from the website and thus lacks the serial number and embossing.



Fig. 6a. Front of type 2, five shilling note.



Fig. 6b. Back of type 2, five shilling note.

Four-digit serial number printed in red on back, embossed from front to back.



Fig. 7a. Front of type 1, ten shilling note.



Fig. 7b. Back of type 1, ten shilling note.

Four-digit serial number printed in red on back, embossed from front to back.



Fig. 8a. Front of type 2, ten shilling note.



Fig. 8b. Back of type 2, ten shilling note.

Four-digit serial number printed in red on back, embossed from front to back.

References and Acknowledgements

- (1) Cahill, L. *Forgotten Revolution. The Limerick Soviet 1919*. 1990, reprinted 2019.
- (2) McNamara, M. *The Limerick Soviet*. 2017.
- (3) Haugh, D. *Limerick Soviet 1919 - The Revolt of the Bottom Dog*. 2019.
- (4) Young, D. The Limerick Soviet and its Notes. *Coin and Medal News*, Feb. 1985 pp. 54-57.
- (5) MacDevitt, M., Banknotes of the Limerick Soviet, April 1919, *Coin News*. Nov. 2015, pp. 76-79.
- (6) Blake, B. & Callaway, J., *Paper Money of Ireland*. Published by Pam West, 2009, pp88-89. The forthcoming second edition will have a longer section on the topic.
- (7) Owens, C. Limerick Shilling Project celebrates centenary of 1919 Soviet.
<https://www.ilovelimerick.ie/limerick-soviet-shilling/>
- (8) <http://saiocht.ie/wordpress/>
- (9) Anon. Soviet shilling project could be a trial run for local currency. Limerick Post online:
<https://www.limerickpost.ie/2019/04/17/soviet-shilling-project-could-be-a-trial-run-for-local-currency/> 17 April 2019.
- (10) Singer, G.J., *British Transition Town Money and Other Alternative Currencies*. 2019.

Many thanks to Jonathan Callaway for sharing his data on the known 1919 Limerick notes and for finding the Limerick Post online article. Thanks also to Ciaran Nash, organiser of the 2019 project and designer of the type 1 shilling, for his quick and useful replies to my enquiry, for providing a set of the issued notes to be copied and for permission to use the images.

Postscript 8th November 2023

There is a web page maintained by Martin MacDevitt which is kept up to date with the latest discoveries of new examples of the original series of notes.

<https://www.irishpapermoney.com/limerick-soviet-notes-1919.html>

