

● Keeper of the tollhouse, John Hunt at his new town residence

□ Pictures: MICHAEL COWHEY

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Tollhouse keeper at Thomond Bridge

JOHN Hunt's new residence is a dream. In fact it gives a whole new dimension to the modern town house experience, and stands majestically, like something of an anachronism in the streetscape of inner city renewal in Limerick.

John, whose parents, the late John and Gertrude bequeathed the priceless legacy of the Hunt Collection to Limerick, which in turn resulted in the marvellous Hunt Museum, lives in the tollhouse, at Thomond Bridge.

It is a place of immense charm and unbelievable simplicity, with a spiralling staircase ascending to a third floor, and narrow slit windows giving the loveliest light effects ever in rooms where you'd imagine you couldn't swing a cat but which are more than adequate for town living.

The view of the Shannon and the Clare hills from a more spacious room on the top floor, is simply breathtaking.

When he bought the house first, John thought of having his office up there in the top room.

"But then I decided that it wouldn't be such a good idea. I'd never get anything done. I'd be looking out over that scene all day."

But how does somebody get to buy such a distinctive Limerick landmark complete with turrets and much more authentic looking than the officially vandalised structure across the road?

Simple! It went on the market, and when John saw it advertised he

rang the auctioneer, expressing interest. He has restored the

AT HOME . . .
with John Hunt of
Castle Street,
Limerick

luck when he got it. It was idle for a long time, and no-one is more surprised than John himself that neither the Corporation nor Shannon Development thought of buying it when it went on the market.

"By right, I think it should be in public ownership," he said.

Incidentally, he had just bought it, and was in the process of restoring it with great care, when Shannon Development rang

building with great taste. "It is a part of Limerick history, and you have to keep that at the back of your head. There is always an element of responsibility involved," he said.

Arts consultant and freelance journalist, John says that he is currently trying to 're-invent' himself.

"I'm trying to get away from the nine to five situation, plus overtime. I've been there and done that and

I have a young family and I want to spend some time with them."

He is however, a director of the Hunt Museum, and has recently been elected chairman of the Tyrone Guthrie centre in Annamakerrig in Monaghan. He is also on the board of the Island Theatre Company.

"But there was a time when I had so many commitments that I had no time to earn a living.

“By right, I think it should be in public ownership . . .”

I had to pull back a bit," he said.

Working from a laptop in his office in the tiny kitchen on the

ground floor of Toll House, he does arts reports and feasibility studies, travelling the country to arts exhibitions.

He does a lot of radio work too, mainly for RTE's arts programme "Rattlebag".

He is delighted with the evolution of the Hunt Museum.

"It has become an institution in the short space of four years," he points out.

"But what I have

generate more activity. We've had concerts in the yard which gave a great buzz. I'd like more of that kind of thing, but then I suppose you'd have to depend on a lot of good will and good weather."

He is particularly happy with the Museum's educational programme, and nothing pleases him more than seeing kids who might have been awed on their first visit, making themselves completely at home on later visits.

"It brings life to the place, and enhances it for visitors too."

His other home is in Dublin with his wife Patricia and the three children, Jack 10, Paddy 9 and Miriam 8, but they all love the tollhouse, and for the kids, even if it means having to sleep on a mattress on the floor, this is their castle.

● From a top floor room, John has one of the most breathtaking views in Limerick.

