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FRIDAY JANUARY 19 2007

End of an era at Thomond Park

A SPECIAL celebration is being planned across the city this weekend to mark the last ever Heineken Cup match at Thomond Park in its current form.

This week saw Limerick City Council grant planning permission for the redevelopment of the ground which means it will close for business after this weekend.

The final pool 4 match in this years Heineken Cup promises to be an epic affair as the current European Champions, Munster, take on the former champions, the Leicester Tigers.

At 5.35 on Saturday evening the historic stadium, which has played host to many special occasions down through the years, will be packed to capacity.

Over 14,000 passionate fans have managed to get their hands on illusive tickets and hundreds of thousands more will watch every kick and lineout on television screens across the continent.

Since it hosted its first ever match in November 1934, Thomond Park has been the undoubted spiritual home of Irish Rugby. Its unique atmosphere and the knowledge of the local fans is legendary.

Munster have never lost in the Heineken Cup at Thomond Park and some of the greatest matches in the competition have been played there, most notably the "miracle match" against Gloucester in 2003.

Thomond Park, as it currently stands, will forever remain in the history books as the venue where the mighty All Blacks were conquered on October 31 1978. Munster emerged victories 12-0 and many people who were there on the day insist "The All Blacks were lucky to get nil."

Giant flags and replica jersey's have been erected across Limerick City Centre ahead of this weekend's match and street entertainment has been organised in the build up to the game.

Rugby Pundit George Hook will present his popular drivetime radio Show on Newstalk from the George Hotel on Friday evening and the BBC television cameras were at Jerry Flannery's bar this Thursday to sample the atmosphere.

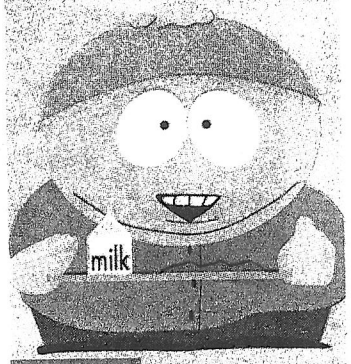
The main focus of the pre-match build up will be "The Red Army March" from Bedford Row to Thomond Park.

Led by the CBS Pipe and Drums Band every Munster fan is being encouraged to take part to show their appreciation of the joy that Thomond Park has given them for over 70 years.

Munster fans to paint the town red this weekend.

Munster fans to paint the town red this weekend.

INSIDE
Five page Munster rugby special



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Four-page tv guide to help plan your weekend viewing

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Thomond Park last stand

OVER 14,000 passionate rugby fans, including Taoiseach Bertie Ahern, will pack into Thomond Park this Saturday evening for the last ever Heineken Cup match to be played at the historic venue before the wrecking ball moves in.

This week, Limerick City Council formally granted planning permission for the redevelopment of the ground which will see its capacity more than double to 29,000.

Former Munster and Ireland star Cllr Gerry Mcloughlin, was one of those who voted in favour of the project at a special meeting on Monday night.

"I am delighted the stadium is being kept in the city, it is an elevated site and the field is not going to be moved around so future generations will be playing on the same field. Every young person in Limerick wants to go to Thomond Park either to play there or to support Munster," he said.

There have been many special occasions at the spiritual home of Irish rugby down through the decades, most memorably the "miracle match" against Gloucester in 2003 and the 12-0 victory over the All Blacks on October 31, 1978.

That victory is enshrined in sporting folklore and it is claimed that 100,000 Limerick people attended the match.

Many of those who played that day were immediately catapulted into the realm of sporting heroes, where they remain to this very day.

Ahead of this weekend's clash with Guinness Premiership side the Leicester Tigers, Munster have never been beaten in the Heineken Cup at Thomond Park since its inception in 1995.

Incredibly, that unbeaten run extends to over 30 matches and many of the current players will openly admit the fear of being the first to lose at Thomond often drives them on.

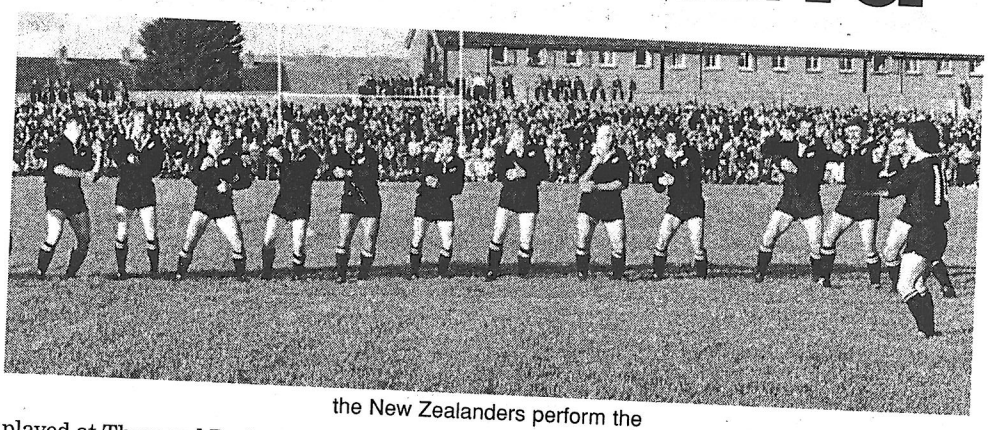
History will record that the first ever match to be played at Thomond Park featured Young Munster and Bohemian in November 1934. For the record Young Munster emerged victorious 8-0.

Although synonymous with rugby, Thomond Park has also hosted the occasional soccer match.

A number of European and FAI cup matches were played there in the 1960s, and in 1980 Limerick United played Tottenham Hotspur in a pre-season friendly.

Undoubtedly, there will be an air of nostalgia this weekend as fans and players say farewell to the present Thomond Park .

But the weekend is also about ensuring that the current Heineken Cup champions secure a "home" quarter final as they try to retain the holy grail of European club rugby.



the New Zealanders perform the

Landsdowne Road may have had its "last stand", but this weekend of celebration in Limerick is guaranteed to surpass anything that Dublin 4 had to offer on New Year's Eve.

Munster flags and giant replica jersey's have been proudly erected across the city and a weekend of activities have been specially organised which will culminate at 5.30pm on evening just before kick-off.

Before that there will be a rugby mural competition and street entertainment in Limerick city centre.

Munster fans are also being encouraged to take part in the Red Army Parade which will begin at Bedford Row at 3.30pm on Saturday.

"The historic march of fans from the city centre to Thomond Park will be a massive display of appreciation for the joy and entertainment that the old grounds have provided over the decades," said Mayor Joe Leddin.

"I would appeal to as many people as possible to join the Munster Rugby Supporters Club parade on Saturday as a mark of support and appreciation for all the pleasure that the old Thomond Park has given fans," he said.

As the countdown for the final Pool 4 match reaches its peak, the scramble for tickets is also intensifying.

This Wednesday evening two terrace tickets for the crunch encounter were sold on ebay for over £Stg1000.

For those who don't get tickets, Saturday's match will be broadcast live on SkySports and there will also be live coverage with Len Dinneen on Limerick's Live 95FM.

Heroes: the Munster team who beat the All-Blacks on October 31, 1978

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WISHING MUNSTER THE BEST OF LUCK AT THE LAST GAME IN THOMONG PARK

Door closes on an historic chapter of sporting history

IT may not yet be the last game played at the venue before the redevelopment programme is completed, but when the final whistle sounds at Thomond Park this Saturday night, it brings to an end a golden era of Limerick and Munster rugby.

It will be a nostalgic occasion, not alone for those who had the distinction of playing on the hallowed Thomondgate turf, but also for those who filled its once rickety wooden stand or braved the winter cold on its concrete terrace steps.

Almost everybody in this rugby-mad city has a Thomond Park tale. A special memory that they keep close to their hearts and disclose instantly when it becomes a topic of conversation.

For most of us there have been good times and bad times at the grand old stadium and for this writer, two stand out.

Of all the Munster achievements at Thomond Park since they first qualified for the play-offs in 1998, the pool game against Saracens in 2000 remains special.

The atmosphere at the venue that night contributed to one of the most exciting games in the short history of what was to become a highly successful Heineken Cup.

Munster trailed in the dying minutes, had a huddle under their own posts, drove upfield, forced a throw-in five metres from the Saracens line and Keith Wood went over for the try. O'Gara's touchline conversion gave Munster the victory and set the scene for further magical occasions at Thomond Park over the next six seasons.

The win over the All Blacks in 1978 will always remain a highlight of Limerick's most famous sporting venue. That was the afternoon when Munster rugby reached international status and the achievement has yet to be equalled on this island.

It is fitting that one of the victorious Munster team that day, hooker Pat Whelan, is now leading the development programme for the new stadium.

Thomond Park also had its brief association with the round ball.

In 1960, Limerick AFC played the Young Boys of Berne in the opening round of the European Cup at the venue, going down 5-0 to the Swiss side before a packed attendance. It was the first time that the rugby goalposts were removed and replaced by the soccer goals.

Soccer returned to the Thomondgate venue in the 1960s for FAI Cup games against Bohemians and Waterford but the most memorable senior soccer tie at the venue was a pre-season friendly between Limerick United and Tottenham Hotspur in 1980 when Glenn Hoddle scored four of the finest goals you could wish for on any balmy Limerick August evening.

Here are some people's best memories of the Thomond Park as we knew it:

Declan Kidney (Munster coach): "I have good memories of the venue, as a player with the school and the club and as a schools coach as well as with Munster, of course.

"The only regret I have is that my father didn't let me go to the All Blacks match in 1978. I think I had to do an exam that day, so I missed it."

Sean Moloney (former Young Munster player): "I would rate the Saracens match the best. That was a super game and one that I will never forget. I also have some great memories of playing there in cup games with 'Munsters.'

Paul O'Connell (Munster captain): "I scored a hat-trick in a schools game there some years ago when I was playing for Ard Scoil Rís. Thomond Park is pure Munster. It's nothing special to look at, a big lump of concrete, but it changes into a very special atmospheric venue on Munster rugby days."

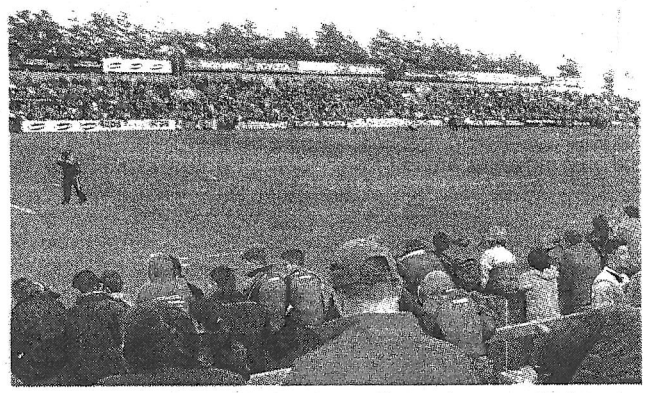
Gerry Moore (long-serving official at Thomond Park): "The game against Saracens in 2000 was brilliant. The atmosphere that day was quite unique and it is said that the venue held the biggest ever crowd for a European Cup game. O'Gara's conversion from the sideline, under pressure, after Keith Wood's try was unforgettable.

"After that my favourite Thomond Park memory is the 1980 Munster Senior Cup final which Young Munster won. That to me was very special."

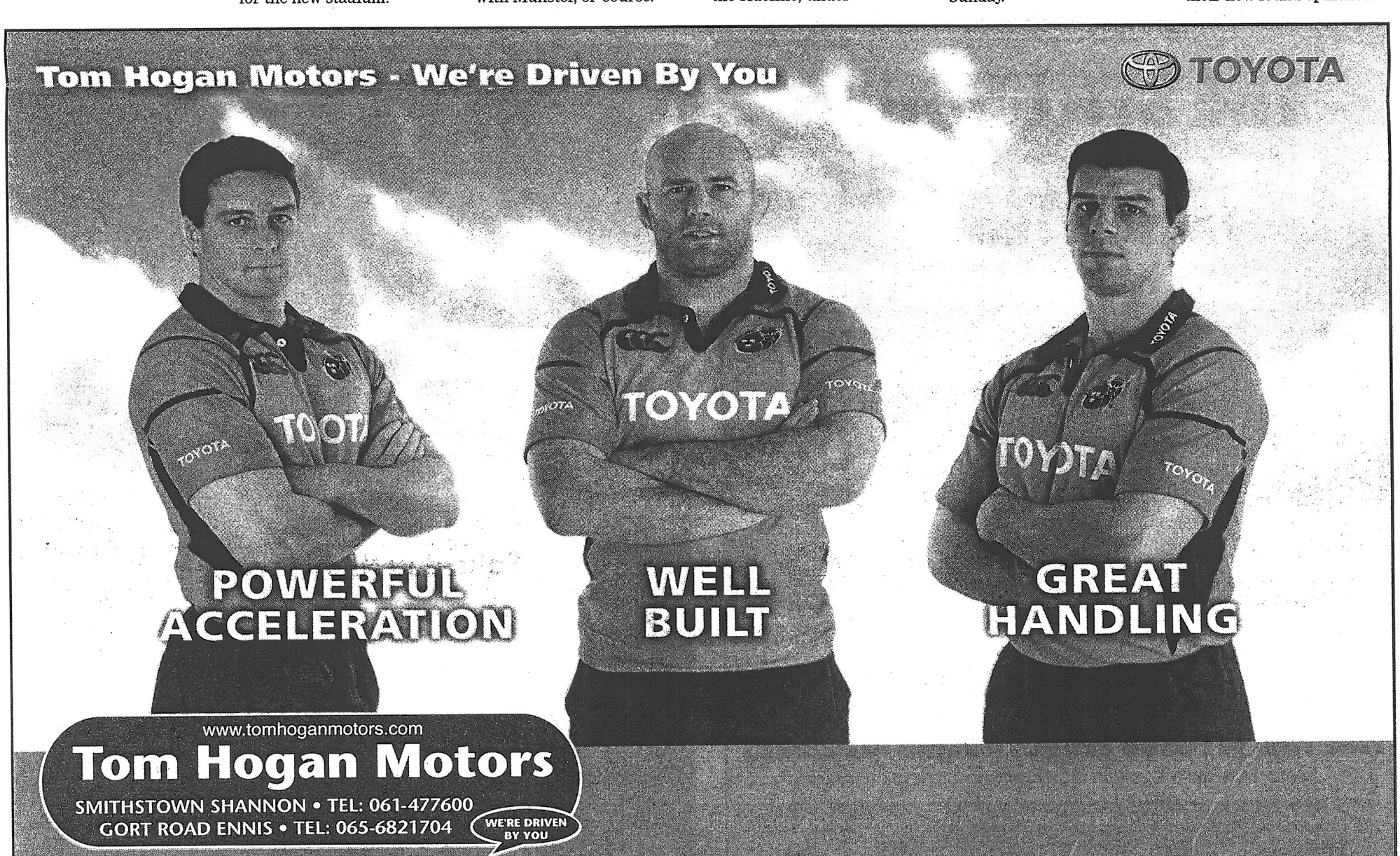
My personal memories of Thomond Park go back to the early 1950s. I seldom missed a Saturday visit to the venue, my father being a keen Bohemians fan and like most sporting fanatics in this city, it was rugby on a Saturday and the Markets Field for soccer on a Sunday.

The old wooden stand would rumble to the sound of stamping feet as shouts of 'feet Garryowen' would rise up in Munster Cup games. St Mary's Fife and Drum Band would provide the pre-match entertainment with shouts of "up, up, up" ringing out from the terraces in an effort to entice the band leader to throw his staff into the air.

After this Saturday, the ball and chain and the bulldozers will move in and the 'ghosts of Thomond past' will seek comfort in their new-found opulence.



The Thomond Park playing surface will remain untouched as the venue begins its re-development following this Saturday's Heineken Cup meeting with Leicester Tigers (5.35). (LL)



Thomond Park is unusual, special, it's difficult" says Keith Wood

"I REMEMBER trying to explain to the lads in the dressing room beforehand that this place (Thomond Park) is unusual, it's special, it's difficult.

"And if you go there presuming you are going to win without putting in the hard work all over the pitch, then it just won't happen for you.

"But I just don't think I could get that impression across to the 'Quins players properly.

"Munster literally kicked the lard out of us during the 80 minutes."

Although a decade has passed since, Keith Wood vividly recalls the scene inside the visitors' dressing room at Thomond Park in January 1997.

Wood was back in Limerick leading a star-studded NEC Harlequins side out for a clash with Munster in the pool stages of the Heineken Cup.

Some 10,000 Munster fans are inside the ground for the visit of one of the aristocrats of English club rugby.

'Quins had beaten Munster 48-40 in a scintillating encounter at The Stoop earlier in the competition.

The Munster players and supporters had revenge on their mind.

"It helped create a brilliant atmosphere . We had the most unbelievable team," Wood recalled.

'Quins 'unbelievable' team contained the likes of seasoned internationals, Will Carling, Thierry Lacroix, Jason Leonard, Gareth Llewellyn and Laurent Cabannes.

"I suppose the supporters at Thomond Park that day were shouting for me and against me in equal measure," Wood said.

"The atmosphere was terrific It was very hard going for us and we were completely out-played.

"I would have said that we were a far better team on paper than Munster.

"But that has traditionally been the case at Thomond Park. You look at visiting team's line-up with a whole load of big names on it, but they just don't have the same team ethic as Munster have.

"The Munster team ethic was especially evident at Thomond Park."

"We had beaten Munster at home and despite losing to them in Limerick went on to reach the quarter-finals of the Heineken Cup that season.

"We came out of the group and Munster didn't.

"But Munster fairly well wiped the floor with us in Thomond that day."

Saturday's final Pool 4 game of the season between Munster and Leicester Tigers marks the end of an era at Thomond Park.

The venue is set to be redeveloped into a state-of-the-art stadium boasting a capacity of more than 26,000.

While Wood experienced a Heineken Cup defeat with 'Quins in '97, he enjoyed some thrilling moments there with Munster in the 1999/2000 season, none more than Munster's dramatic win over Saracens at the venue in January 2000.

Some 15,000 supporters crammed into the stadium for the clash against high-flying Saracens.

Wood played a key role in ensuring Munster's successful passage into the quarter-finals of the competition.

It was Wood who crossed for the last gasp try which reignited Munster's hopes of reaching the quarter-finals.

Wood recalled: "The match was Saracens was memorable for many reasons.

"I made a mistake in the last few minutes of the game which led to them scoring a try.

"We were behind.

"The chat behind the posts among the players after that try was scored was simple. 'We were just going to work our way up the field and we will score.'

"And everyone believed that, including the supporters.

"We scored (Wood himself got the touchdown) and Ronan (O'Gara) added the conversion points in off a post. The final score was 31-30 to us and we were through to the quarter-finals. Amazing.

"For some strange reason there was never a doubt for even a second that we would lose that game. In lots of ways that was the start of the Munster phenomenon in the Heineken Cup.

"It was incredibly exciting rugby.

"Beating Stade Francais in the quarter-final that season was another highlight. We won the game 27-10 and it was pretty easy, really.

"They were such a good team at the time."

Wood is one of the few rugby enthusiasts who can't say for sure whether he was at Thomond Park in '78 when Munster beat the All-Blacks.

"I am on the record as saying that I could have been at that All-Black game in 1978, but I have no idea," he admits.

"I am one of the few guys who doesn't know whether they were there or not.

"I am sure my late father was there. I was six years of age at the time and may or may not have been there on the day."

His first clear memory of being present at a match there is watching his late brother Gordon playing for Bohemians against Garryowen at the start of the 1980s.

Among Keith Wood's own highlights of playing club rugby at the venue was a famous AIL clash with Shannon in the 1991/'92 season.

"Of the big games I remember playing at Thomond Park myself would have to include a Garryowen v Shannon match in the All-Ireland League at the start of the 1990s," Keith Wood recalled.

"The place was jam-packed for a club game. It was just fantastic.

"We won that day on the way to claiming our first AIL title.

"It was brilliant. The match with Shannon was one of my best ever memories of playing in Thomond Park."

Wood believes the close relationship that exists off the pitch between Munster players and supporters is a key factor in generating the red hot atmosphere on match days at Thomond Park.

"Thomond Park is special because the supporters are incredibly close to the pitch and to the players," Wood explained.

"The players would know a lot of the supporters inside the ground personally and vica versa.

"They would know them by name. That is unusual in professional sport.

"The stadium and the stand as it is is bloody awful. The special atmosphere has to do with the supporters. I don't have any doubt about that at all.

"It is a fairly bleak place when it's empty.

"You can probably hear comments from individual supporters a bit more during games than at other grounds. You hear the odd wag comment when you are throwing the ball into the line-out, for instance.

"But you hear the noise more than anything else.

"Munster will get beaten there at some stage. Even when that happens it will still be an incredibly difficult place to play.

"I think some visiting teams get too caught up in the fact that Munster haven't lost a Heineken Cup fixture there.

"It's a very intimidating place to play with people so close to the pitch.

"It is unbelievably noisy and then suddenly unbelievably quiet when you are goal-kicking.

"But Munster are a really good team too. Very often they don't get the full credit that they deserve. They have an awful lot of good players."

As for this Saturday's

showdown with Leicester, Keith Wood says he expects Munster to win and maintain their unbeaten home run at Thomond Park in the Heineken Cup.

"The record will go at some stage, and Leicester are capable of winning in Thomond Park," Wood said.

"But I don't believe they will beat Munster on Saturday. The guys who pull the strings for Leicester are, in my opinion, lacking the experience necessary to do so successfully in a game like this.

"And of course Munster are a hell of a team."

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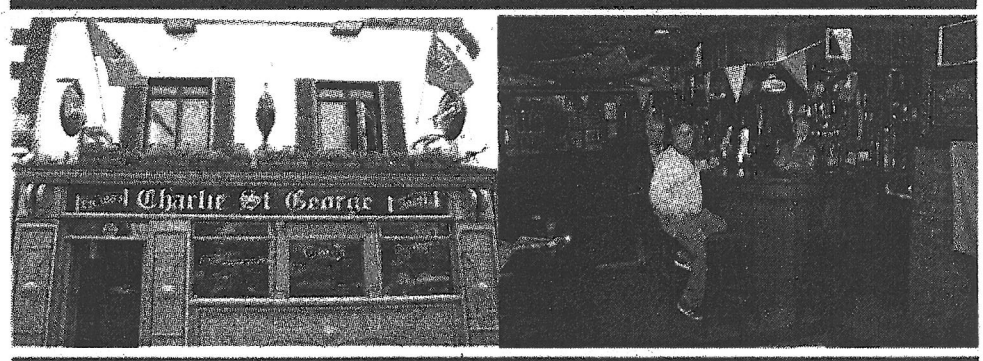

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Tracing the 80-year history of rugby's spiritual home

AFTER almost 80 years of use Thomond Park face its first major development that will double the capacity from 13,000 to 26,000 to cater for the phenomenal support generated by the success of Munster in the European Heineken Rugby Cup.

The following for the game in Munster and Ireland has increased and bigger stadiums are required to accommodate the huge volume of spectators since the game went professional on Sunday, 27 August 1995.

Thomond Park is now recognised as the spiritual home of Irish rugby where Munster has enjoyed some of their greatest moments in the oval ball game.

Much has changed since the early years of Limerick rugby when a game was played on any green area that was available. It was a little hit or miss and not organised as it is today. When the Munster Branch was formed in 1880 with Sir William Goulding as first President some semblance of order was brought to the game in the province but it would be many years later before the North Munster Branch emerged.

Back then the Market's Field was the only enclosed venue where all finals were played and it was probably the most overused patch of real estate in Limerick and its surrounds.

So much so at the beginning of the 1930-1931 season local players, mentors and rugby lovers in Limerick expressed their concern as to the poor condition of the playing surface that was now the norm at the Market's Field.

The ground, owned by a consortium of local businessmen, was at that period hired out for all sports including rugby, G.A.A., athletics, bicycle racing, soccer ect. It was also a venue for travelling circuses, sideshows, band parades, indeed any event that would attract spectators for an outdoor show.

The dilapidated state of the pitch was a continued worry for local sporting lovers. The usual method of complaint in those far off times was through the local newspapers.

As a result and with a realistic need to purchase a ground of their own a deputation from the North Munster Branch approached the I.R.F.U. with a view to buying a ground for rugby only. The idea was embraced by all concerned and the Rugby Union sanctioned a grant of £1,5000 towards the project and the Munster Branch also promised £1,000 towards the purchase of a new ground.

Finance was also raised locally and 50 guarantors of £20 each were required. Such was the keen interest by individuals and the business sector, one hundred and eleven pledged the finance required without much effort.

Local officials looked at and rejected likely pitches at Greenpark, Fairgreen and the County Ground on the Ennis Road before finally agreeing on the purchase of Foley's Field at Hassett's Cross for £1,130. The area covered seven and a half acres and would give ample space for a stand, dressing rooms and an enclosed pitch. The terms of agreement had been signed and work on the ground was expected to begin at once.

Little did the local committee know that almost four years would elapse before the first game would be played on the new ground?

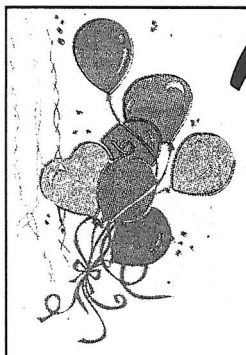
Despite repeated appeals from the committee there was a marked reluctance by the IRFU and the Munster Branch to provide the finance required to have the pitch enclosed.

A court action about payments for grazing rights, the death of a cow and a court case were other reasons for the delay. The first match, a Munster Senior League fixture, between Young Munster and Bohemian was eventually played on Saturday 17th November 1934. It was also fitting that the official opening and the first ever match staged at the now famous Thomond Park should be played on the fiftieth anniversary of organised rugby in Limerick.

To Young Munster went the honour of winning the initial game played on the new sod by an 8-0 scoreline. The winners centre Michael Fitzgerald will be remembered as the first player to score a try and Eddie Price who kicked the first conversion. Joe McNeice added a second try to complete the scoring in what was undoubtedly a day to remember in the history of Limerick rugby.

In 1934 the last Munster Senior Cup final was played at the Markets Field when Garryowen defeated Sunday's Well 6-0. Four years later, 1938, the first Munster Senior Cup final was played at Thomond Park when Young Munster recorded a 4-3 win over University College Cork.

On Wednesday, November 1st, 1995 the Pat Murray led Munster played and defeated Swansea 17-13 in the first ever game in what was then the 5 Nations European Cup later the Heineken Cup.And the rest is history.



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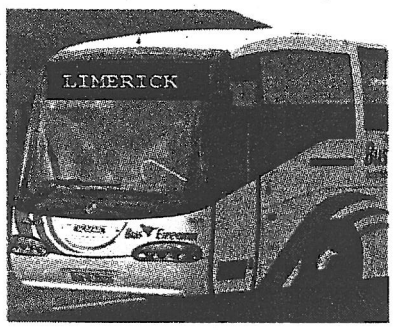

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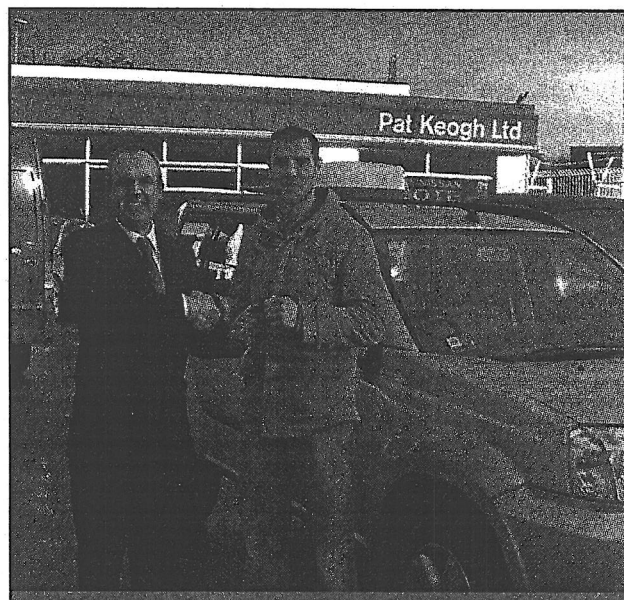

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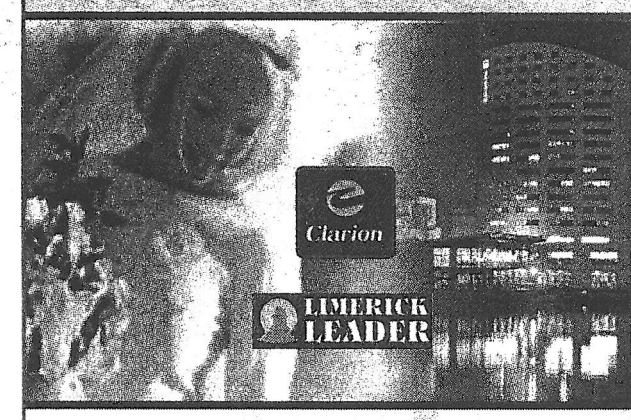

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