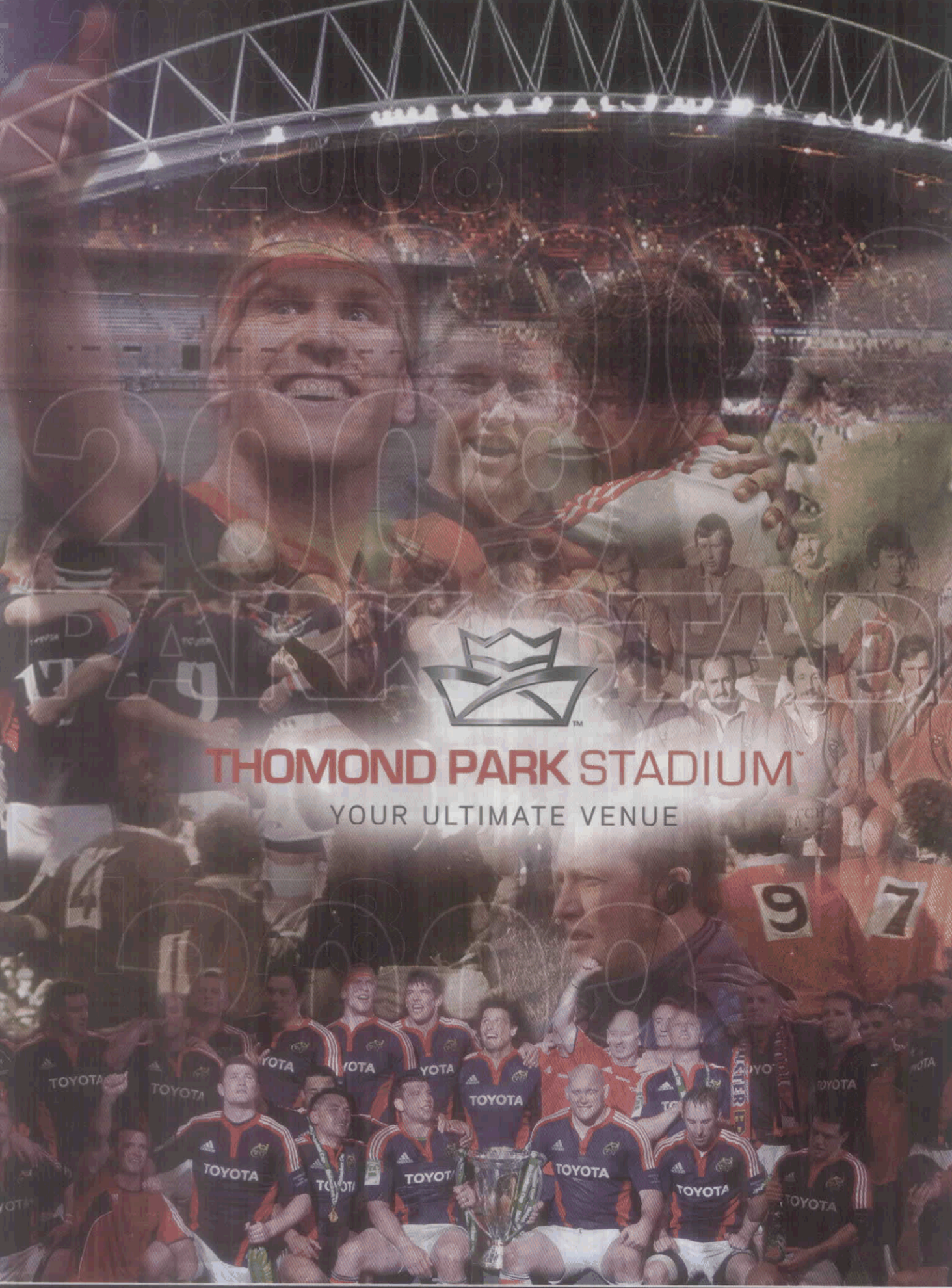

THOMOND PARK STADIUM
YOUR ULTIMATE VENUE

A glow just radiates from the place

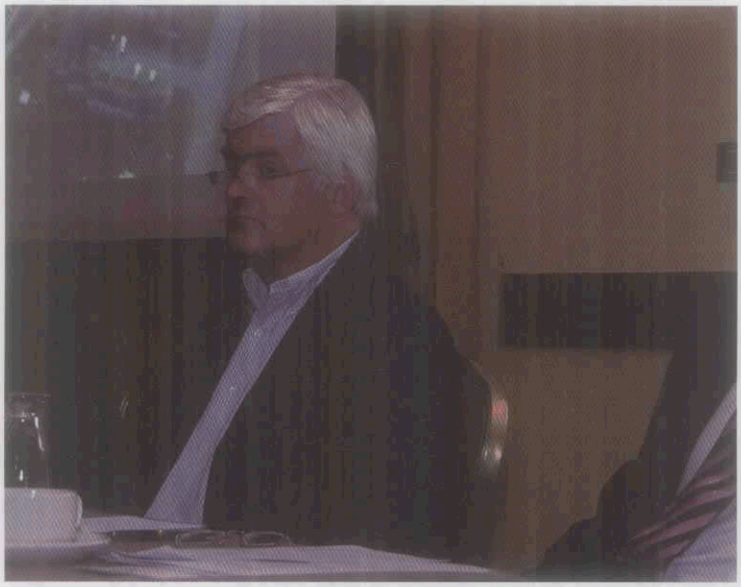
Leader reporter **JOHN HOGAN** talks to members of the Thomond Park Stadium Development Committee about a project that made Limerick deeply proud

"I WAS awestruck by it. I remember thinking I would've given my right arm to be a young fella again just to play in front of that stand. We all would have."

Ken Lyons' recollection of his first time seeing the completed 26,000-seater Thomond Park stadium will resonate with every man or woman who has played rugby in Munster over the years, and indeed with lovers of the game beyond our provincial boundaries.

As a member of the six-man Thomond Park Stadium Development Committee, seeing the finished product was, for the former Munster Branch president and the other members, the pay-off for over five years work.

The 'We' he refers to were the men who made up the committee and now work as the directors of the Thomond Park Stadium, namely; Pat Whelan, John Hartery, Martin Murphy, Munster CEO Garrett Fitzgerald and former president Niall O'Driscoll.



Pat Whelan

In 2003, the idea of redeveloping Thomond Park as an international standard, state-of-the-art stadium first entered public consciousness in controversial style.

O'Driscoll - then president of the branch - said in an interview that it may be necessary to look at a green field site for the new home of Munster Rugby on the Cork side of Limerick city. He was misquoted as saying Charleville may be an option and subsequently incurred the wrath of Limerick's rugby fraternity.

"For a while after, I nearly needed a Garda escort every time I went to a game in Thomond Park," he says.

"We looked at four green field sites, all in the Limerick City area, but we decided on Thomond Park in the end and it was the right decision with the best in the world and it would've been a shame to go anywhere else."

Once it was decided that Munster's home would continue to be Thomond Park, there was the highly contentious issue of buying 16 houses to facilitate the construction of the new East Stand. An unenviable task, for which John Hartery, director of finance and operations with BDO Simpson Xavier in Limerick, held responsibility.

"There were a number of different issues to be dealt with and different expectations from each of the residents, some of them quite elderly," he recalled.

"Certainly the attachment that Limerick people feel to Thomond Park and the love of rugby here made my job that bit easier in the end though."

Thomond Park was opened on time and within budget in October. Each member of the committee credits former Munster player and chairman of the stadium development committee, Pat Whelan, for

"We had regular meetings at which different tasks were assigned and they were carried out on time, simple as that," says Pat Whelan.

"I'd been project manager on a number of developments before and whether it's a big or a small project, it's always about identifying and addressing the key factors. That's just what we did, identified what needed to be done and did it."

And top of Pat Whelan's list of priorities was ensuring the stadium didn't lose its atmosphere for which it had become renowned the world over.

"One of the things we did to keep it familiar for supporters was maintain the same wall around the pitch so the crowd would still be close to the action, except now there would be two 7,500-seater stands behind them.

"It was great to achieve all the tasks that we set out and more besides. One thing that we hadn't anticipated, though, was the positive feeling that it creates in the city in an era of such total negativity, a glow just radiates from the place on big match days."

> "Certainly the **attachment** that Limerick people feel to Thomond Park and the **love of rugby** here made my job that bit easier in the end

> We can be **confident** that the players will continue to revel in the **unique atmosphere** at Thomond Park Stadium.

The Munster Haka

Back to the future

For the Munster players, the atmosphere in the new stadium is just as amazing as before - if not more so

Colm Kinsella
Limerick Leader Rugby Correspondent

GIVEN that a portion of suitable rubble from the demolished 'old' Thomond Park Stadium and adjoining houses at Knocknalisheen was used in the construction of the new €40 million venue, a critical link with the past has been maintained. Reaching into the past to build the future.

The raucous, yet nonetheless intimate atmosphere which prevailed at Munster's recent clashes with the All Blacks and the Sale Sharks, demonstrated beyond doubt that the new Thomond Park Stadium retains its intimidating character for visiting teams. The testimony of the Munster players on that score was compelling.

The November clash with the All Blacks was stirring, gripping pulsating from full whistle until last. It was an occasion that sports fans truly live for, one to tell the grandchildren about, for sure. Munster may have been short some household names for that game, but the men who wore the red jersey were not going to let absent friends down.

The display of pyrotechnics, pageantry, dance and musical entertainment in the pre-match warm up was hugely impressive. The noise which greeted the haka was deafening, especially as Munster's Kiwi quartet stepped forward to lead their team mates in the Kamate Kamate version.

Blacks, revealed that the atmosphere was the best he ever experienced. "I thought the crowd were absolutely unbelievable," Murphy enthused afterwards. "It was hugely important that they got behind us and reacted in a positive way. That was the best atmosphere I have ever, ever seen in Thomond Park.

"The supporters really got behind us. The haka tonight was my best experience in rugby by far. The crowd is usually supposed to stay fairly quiet for it, but I don't think anyone would argue when the crowd started cheering."

Towering lock Paul O'Connell said players can gauge the mood among Munster supporters while sitting in their team coach on the way to Thomond Park. The fans' enthusiasm had played a key role in Munster's 37-14 drubbing of the Sale Sharks in their crucial Heineken Cup Pool 1 victory.

"There is a strong link between the players the crowd, for sure. They sense it when they are needed," Munster skipper O'Connell said. "Coming in on the bus to Thomond Park you could see it, getting off the bus, you could feel it and you could also feel it going out for the warm-up. The fans rose their game, no doubt about it."

Munster lock Donncha O'Callaghan believes the red hot atmosphere of bygone years has been

"I don't like people talking about it as the 'old' and 'new' Thomond," Donncha O'Callaghan said. "It is always the same to the players. You know if you go out and give the crowd something to get in behind early in the match, they will get right behind you and support you to the end. That is hugely important. We feed off it."

Former Ireland and Lions hooker Keith Wood played both for and against Munster at the Limerick rugby venue.

In 1997 Wood captained an NEC Harlequins side which faced Munster in a key Heineken Cup match in Thomond Park a short time after defeating the Irish province at The Stoop.

"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," Wood recalled. "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."

And their fans loved it, of course. We can be confident that the players will continue to revel in

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FOUNDED IN LIMERICK AND PROUDLY INVOLVED IN THE REDEVELOPMENT OF THOMOND PARK

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Thomond Park

redevelopment | design process

Background

Murray O Laoire Architects' (MOLA) involvement in the redevelopment of Thomond Park extends back to 2003 with a request by Mr. Pat Whelan to examine significantly increasing the existing 11,091 capacity stadium. This study, carried out in conjunction with Punch Consulting Engineers (PCE) , examined the options of developing within the existing boundaries of Thomond Park and expanding the site to the east into an area occupied by Limerick City Council and private residences. The second option utilising the enlarged site retained both pitches and most of the existing terracing. The cooperation of existing residents and Limerick City Council to agree to sell their properties was fundamental to the feasibility of this option.

Examination of alternative sites

As part of a following study three alternative sites were examined at the University of Limerick, Groody Valley in Castletroy and Greenpark on the Dock Road. The decision was taken to retain the rugby stadium in its existing city centre location. While city centre stadiums present challenges in relation to event management these issues are outweighed by the vibrancy and atmosphere generated in the city on the day of a big match.

Design brief

Maintaining the atmosphere and close relationship between players and spectators was key. The required capacity was 26,000, with 15,000 seated and 11,000 standing positions. Site constraints included the retention of both the main and practice pitches, the Shannon RFC clubhouse and north, east and south terraces. Following successful negotiations with Limerick City Council and the property owners on the east side the development area extended to Knockalisheen road

Design aspirations

The key design aspirations, in addition to fulfilling the requirements of the brief, were as follows.

- To ensure that a stadium of the scale required had a positive impact on the cityscape and skyline, given its elevated site in relation to the surrounding city.
- The building should integrate with its immediate context. The scale of existing structures in the area is predominantly two-storey with residences located directly to the north and south of the existing stadium. The design challenge to incorporate a large structure in these surroundings was significant.
- The new home for Munster rugby should befit their status as the best supported and leading rugby club in Europe.

These aspirations were set against the backdrop of an extremely challenging project budget where every design decision needed to be justifiable economically.

Exploration of form

The three-dimensional form of the stands is a direct product of achieving optimum viewing for all spectators. The optimum functional layout of a rugby or soccer stadium is generated by accommodating all spectators within 90 metres of the centre of the pitch and within 150 metres of all four corners of the playing surface. This generates an "orange segment" profile where the maximum number of spectators is concentrated on the centreline. This form, curved in both plan and section, provides the maximum height at the centre with the lowest sections at each end. A conventional straight stand option would have produced unequal gables equivalent to a 12 storey building while the scale of the gables of the curved stands is far more modest. The potential impact on neighbours was of paramount importance to the client and influenced the decision to proceed with the less intrusive, functionally superior and more appealing architectural form.

The fact that Thomond Park is not enclosed on all four sides is important so that views into and out of the stadium are maintained. A "bowl" type stadium would eliminate the visual and acoustic connection with the city. The barking dogs of Ballynanty and the hum of traffic on Cratloe road add to the atmosphere when silence descends on the stadium prior to goal kicks. These small but important aspects are an important part of the distinctive character of the stadium.

Roof design

The long arch or rainbow truss solution adopted, designed in conjunction with PCE, is central to the architectural expression of the building, with the trusses being visible from many parts of the city and on its approach routes. The external rainbow trusses overhead leads to extremely light trusses under the roof contributing to the overall visual lightness of the structure internally. Local press reports have commented that "the trusses that sweep across both stands shine like tiaras".

Elevational expression

While the visual impact of the overall form and "rainbow" trusses have the most striking impact at the level of the cityscape, as one approaches the stadium another layer of detail and complexity becomes apparent. The seating bowl is made up of a combination of concrete raker beams with seating units between. The raker beams are supported by inclined steel tubes which, together with the supporting column beneath, form a "tree" structure with "trunk" and "branches" which produces a dynamic fan-like pattern on the elevation. This is enhanced by the decrease in the slope of the "branches" from the maximum angle at the centre to the lowest angle at each end. The end result is ample reward for the exceptional engineering design effort involved.

The other elements of the building such as the cladding materials and fenestration play a background role and are designed to be neutral in expression.

Materials

The key materials used vary from solid to translucent and transparent. All materials selected have a self-finished or natural pigment. Translucent materials are used on the front section of the roof slope and rear and end walls of the seating bowl. This polycarbonate material changes in its appearance with different natural and artificial lighting conditions. The curved perforated anodised aluminium screen used to the rear of each stand on the open concourses also changes appearance from solid to transparent when back-lit. This transforms the appearance of the building from non-match day to match day when the stadium is illuminated and inhabited. The lighting design allows for the installation of lighting which would produce a red glow on the translucent material at the rear of the seating bowl. This would result in a red arch or "halo" effect on match day.

The mix of vibrant seat colours in the ratio 60% red, 30% navy and 10% gold corresponds with the colour mix in the Munster logo. This avoids the monotonous effect of a single colour seat. When the seating bowl is not at full capacity the optical illusion generated by the random seating mix makes the stadium appear full.

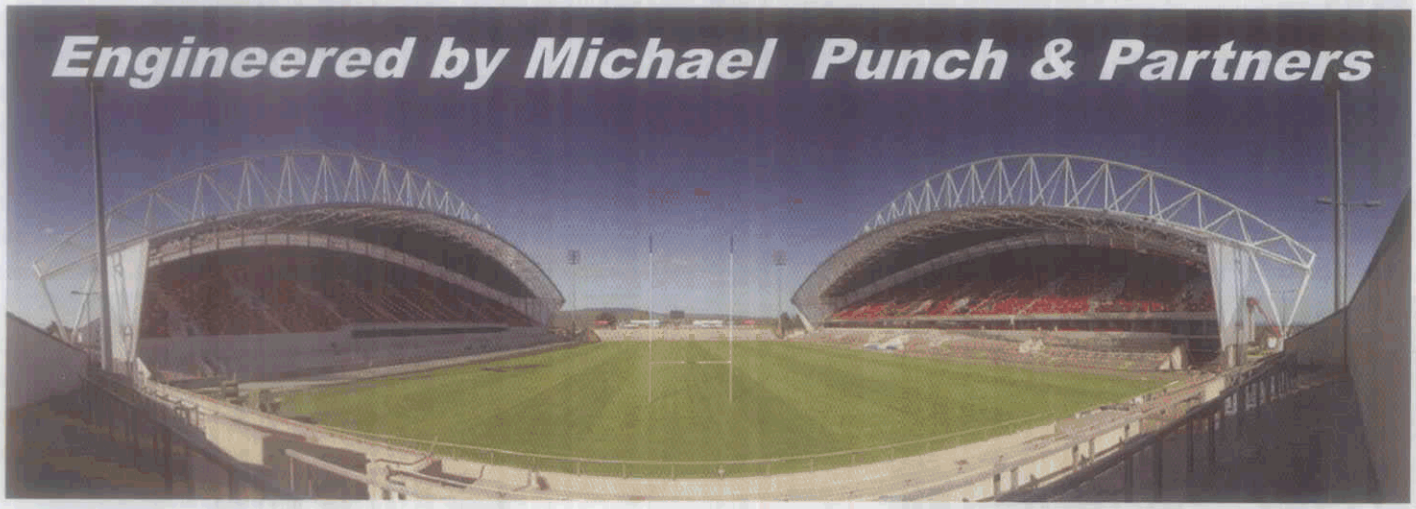
Construction as an event

There are some projects where the construction process generates interest and excitement. In Limerick the construction of the Clarion Hotel and Living Bridge at the University of Limerick and the demolition of the Ranks silos on the Dock road are such projects. Thomond Park is another. The public in Limerick, in particular, have followed the process closely and have turned out to view the activity on key days such as the erection of the "rainbow" trusses. The website www.standupandbuild.com launched by main contractor PJ Hegarty & Sons during the construction process was also hugely popular. MOLA and PCE, have jointly delivered lectures in Limerick and Dublin on the project which were very well attended

Conclusion

The time period from appointment of the design team in February 2006 to completion in September 2008 was 32 months with a construction period of 19 months. Delivery of a complex project of this scale in this timeframe was a major achievement. The construction stage was complicated by the fact that the venue was required to accommodate three home pool games of the 2007/08 Heineken cup season. Also, the main pitch was off limits to the contractor, restricting their working area. In addition to the design of the stadium, the preconstruction stage included two planning applications, a fire certificate application, a Material Contravention of the Limerick City Development Plan, the preparation of two sets of tender documents for an enabling works contract and main contract and the assessment of alternative contractor proposals and tender submissions.

Thomond Park is now a fitting theatre for the many great occasions yet to come. Many new stadiums experience a "bedding in" period in the first season when players and supporters alike adapt to the new surroundings. However, the All Blacks rematch has demonstrated that the redeveloped Thomond Park can be as intimidating, intense and overwhelming as the more modest venue that it replaced.



Michael Punch

HEGARTY
Building & Civil Engineering Contractors

Clarion Hotel

Beacon Court

Thomond Park

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Childers Road

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Building & Civil Engineering Contractors

Main Contractor for Thomond Park Stadium

A venue fit for superstars

Thomond Park Stadium was specifically designed to host pop concerts as well as rugby matches - and this year's gigs are sure to be special

Alan Owens
Limerick Leader Entertainment Correspondent

FORGET everything that went before; there was a moment in the opening spectacle of the Munster All Blacks match that spoke of the truly world-class and all purpose venue that the legendary Thomond Park now represents. As fireworks lit up the stadium and the Limerick skyline and an army helicopter descended from the skies, the full potential of this ground was made apparent to the world. On Saturday June 6 Thomond Park will play host to a spectacle of a different kind as world famous entertainer Sir Elton John becomes the first artist to perform at the newly developed €40 million stadium. The showman will be followed soon after by crooner Rod Stewart, completing the first series of outdoor gigs ever to be held on the historic and hallowed turf. Between the two artists, they have sold in excess of 500 million records. Leaving aside what these concerts represent in monetary terms for the local economy - upwards of 50,000 people will attend the two concerts - the importance of these high-profile events can be measured in terms of putting Limerick firmly on the international map, igniting a blaze of feel-good and positive publicity to help counter some of the more negative stories to emanate from the Treaty City in recent times. Limerick - and the mid-west region of Ireland - now has a truly world class outdoor venue that surpasses nearly all other contenders around this small Island, and the possibilities are endless. But let us step back a moment. There was a stage in the planning for this stadium that the developers and designers realised that the ground would need to cater for more than just sporting occasions, thus it was deemed necessary that the structure must be engineered in such a way as to make large-scale music events viable. Specifically, it was noted that stadiums around the world have been found to be less than satisfactory when used for concerts, so this was addressed in the design stage. The result is a mouth-watering prospect for music fans; forget Marley Park, Croke Park, Lansdowne Road - the superstructure of Thomond Park has been modelled in such a way as to make concerts possible, and the sound should reflect that.

John Cantwell, Thomond Park with Peter Aiken

Rumours had circulated for some time in music circles that the ground was being paved for high-profile concerts in Thomond Park, but it was Peter Aiken who tied the deal together. Aiken's contacts enabled him to something that other promoters might not; namely to bring marquee names to Limerick for the opening concerts - names that would be guaranteed to shift the amount of tickets required for such a venture. This reporter was genuinely surprised by the announcement that Elton John was to be the first artist to appear, but in hindsight the move is an astute one, followed up by the equally astute capturing of Stewart to perform on July 4. The demand for these tickets has proved that the promoters chose well - both are destined to be sell-out concerts and tickets are changing hands on internet website for large sums.

Crucially, the relatively inoffensive and extremely popular nature of the acts have proved invaluable in securing local support for the gigs. Peter Aiken revealed to the Limerick Leader that he had been seeking to stage a concert in this venue for several years, originally approaching the powers-that-be with the prospect of an Andrea Bocelli gig, even before the development of Thomond had taken place. He outlined his amazement at the development that had subsequently taken place and it is clear he is keen to be associated with such a popular venture. But the key voice was that of Thomond Park stadium director John Cantwell, who outlined that these concerts will be the first of many to come. "It would be our intention that this is the first in a series of events. The stadium has to operate, not just as a sporting facility, but also as an event and function facility - the business model dictates that we have to pay our way," commented Mr Cantwell to the Leader. Thus, not only can we look forward to Elton John lighting up Thomondgate with his spectacular show and array of famous hits, as well as Rod Stewart causing fans to go weak at the knees with his gravelly voice and slinky hip-action, but looking ahead there should be more events to keep Limerick music fans well sated.

Simply put, we can't wait.

A NEW LEGEND BEGINS

A MULTI PURPOSE VENUE FOR THE REGION.

From project launch to official launch - almost 600 days later and one of the country's most renowned sporting venues opened for business. Since the unveiling of the design for the redevelopment of Thomond Park on the 27th May 2006, rugby supporters have eagerly monitored the building progress of the stadium that has changed the skyline in Limerick forever. The 146 metre span of the new stands now creates a truly unique landmark for Limerick city, visible from far and wide. The people of Limerick and the Mid West Region now have a multi purpose venue to be proud of.

THE ULTIMATE VENUE

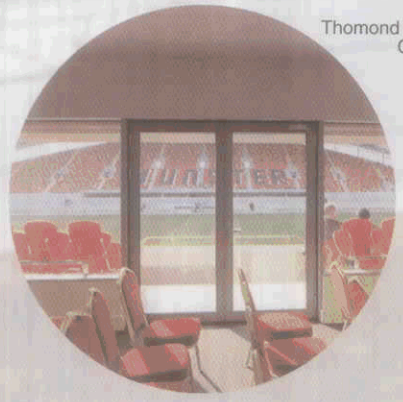
Despite the perception that the Stadium might only be a sporting venue, the level of business activity using the Conference and Banqueting facilities since it opened show the flexibility of the venue for commercial activity. In the past number of months the stadiums conference and banqueting facilities has hosted a number of business conferences, AGM's, a sports seminar attracting 560 people, a technology fair, fashion shows and a number of Gala Balls. The multi purpose nature of the Stadium is best captured by the diversity of events over the course weekend when Thomond Park hosted the Ireland versus Canada international game catering for a hosting a 300 person gala ball, fashion show, international rugby match with full hospitality and musical concert in the space of 72 hours.

CONFERENCES AND EVENTS

When Thomond Park last welcomed the All Blacks in 1978, people watching from the 'Popular Side' or the 'Ballynanty End' could never have envisaged being able to attend meetings, conferences, concerts and weddings at the venue thirty years later. The Stadium can cater for any size conference or meetings. It is ideal for smaller off site meetings while over the past number of months the conference room has accommodated a regional sports seminar for 560 people and a national business conference for 300 people. Some of the countries best known companies have hosted management events and conferences attracted by the number of break out facilities, on site AV supports and the level of catering available at the venue. The conference room boasts the unique views for delegates overlooking the pitch while smaller meetings are catered for in the Corporate Hospitality boxes. If you or your company has any meeting or conference requirement Thomond Park Stadium has the facilities for you in an unrivalled setting.

A multi purpose venue

Thomond Park Stadium Your Ultimate Conference Venue



THOMOND PARK MUSEUM

The opening of the Thomond Park Museum by the All Blacks in November has provided the city with a wonderful new interactive visitor experience. The diverse nature of the museum ensures there is something of interest for everyone. Visitors will see a wide of memorabilia presented to Thomond Park by past and current players from jerseys, medals and even the padre pio picture Paul O'Connell used for the Heineken Cup final. The history of the famed stadium is celebrated with a number of unique audio visual presentations while the famous victory over the All Blacks is remembered with its own dedicated section. The museum also has an interactive element where aspiring Munster players can practice a range of skills and learn about what its take to be a professional rugby player from training tips to nutrition advice. The visit to the museum ends with a specially commissioned video presentation which captures so many of the great memories from Thomond Park.

THOMOND PARK TOURS

Visitors to the stadium can now get unrivalled access to behind the scenes at one of the worlds most revered rugby grounds. The stadium tours will enable rugby supporters sample the atmosphere of the Thomond Park dressing rooms, walking out the famous tunnel, visiting the extensive new stadium facilities including sampling life in a corporate box and facing the media in the media room. The Thomond Park Stadium Tour also brings visitors around the interactive Stadium Museum to sample the history of the stadium and the success of Munster Rugby.

MEDIA IMPACT OF THOMOND PARK STADIUM

One of the many benefits that the stadium will have on the city and region is the level of media exposure it will generate. From the day the first foundations were laid media requests have poured in from all around the world. From sports and news channels to television production companies looking to use Thomond Park as a backdrop for their productions the interest is incredible. The last number of months has been a hive of media activity attracting television crews from all the major UK television networks, European television stations and as far away as New Zealand. The Stadium will also appear as a new holiday option when in Limerick as part of the RTE 'No Frontiers' programme while Nationwide and the Autumn International Rugby preview programmes also featured extensive features on the new stadium.

The nature of media exposure is changing with so much online coverage no to mention the many viewings of the memorable build up to the All Black match in November. The last economic impact study of a Heineken Cu match calculated a value of in excess of €6 million for the level of media coverage generated. This value is calculated based on the potential tourism value it will generate in a region over the subsequent year. With so

Munster Museum

The Saffron Ball 2008 –
Thomond Park Stadium Your Ultimate Venue

many large scale matches and events planned, Thomond Park Stadium will create a multiple of this figure based on the level of exposure these will generate on television, radio, print and online.

THOMOND PARK STADIUM BOARD

We are fortunate that Munster Rugby brought together a tremendous Board who made everything happen under the Chairmanship of Pat Whelan. Board members such as Garrett Fitzgerald, Ken Lyons, Niall O'Driscoll, John Hartery, Martin Murphy and Pat Whelan himself have worked tirelessly to make this vision a reality and tremendous credit is due to all for their efforts. More importantly, all of the Board members are true Munster Rugby men, the majority representing their province at various stages and each have had a long involvement with Munster Rugby over the years. Great credit is due to their hard work, late nights and many meetings. Without their vision and hard work the Stadium would not have become a reality.

PARTNERSHIP APPROACH

One of the successes in delivering the new Thomond Park Stadium has been the forging of so many strong working relationships over the course of the stadiums development. Thomond Park Stadium is indebted to so many, from Limerick City Council and local residents for their support and help in enabling the project get off the ground to the proactive board who drove the project. In order to realise the full potential of the venue Thomond Park will continue to work in partnership with so many businesses, organisations and bodies across the region. As a destination we are working closely with Shannon Development in the promotion of the stadium as another option for visitors to the region while also working closely with the local hotel and conference marketing groups. Many national conferences and events hosted in the stadium have already resulted in joint initiatives with accommodation providers with many promotions in the planning for 2009.

REGIONAL IMPACT

Early indications suggest that the Stadium will have a major impact on the region's economy through the diversity of events it will cater for. A number of major events have already been announced for 2009 with many more in planning which will be a welcome boost to the regional economy. The stadium is in advanced negotiations for a number of additional sports and entertainment events in addition to the Elton John and Rod Stewart concerts been hosted in association with Aitken promotions. An economic impact study conducted for Munster Rugby by BDO Simpson Xavier for a 12,000 capacity stadium generated almost €4 million for the local economy as a result of a Heineken Cup match last season.

The Museum Experience

REGIONAL IMPACT

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The plans in place to develop the Stadium as a multi purpose event facility hosting other sporting events and concerts will make a significant economic contribution to the City and the wider Mid West region. In addition to generating employment opportunities within the Stadium it should also act as an economic catalyst for the area. Conservative estimates of the impact of the Elton John and Rod Stewart concerts suggest revenues of up to €18 million generated directly and indirectly from these events with over 40,000 expected to attend the shows. Since the stadium has opened the management team has been in the enviable position that national and international event promoters are approaching them with a variety of interesting event proposals that will ensure the venue and city is busy twelve months of the year hosting events.

THOMOND PARK STADIUM – KEY FEATURES

- Conference Room catering for up to 560 delegates, theatre style
- Banqueting facilities for 500 people
- 20 smaller meeting rooms in Corporate Boxes
- Full onsite catering for any scale of event
- Complete state of the art AV supports and facilities
- 14 onsite bars and refreshment outlets
- Match day corporate hospitality facilities
- Stadium Tours
- Thomond Park Stadium Museum
- Munster Rugby Club Shop

Tel: 061 421100 www.thomondpark.ie

Ian Buckley – a supporters perspective

Ian Buckley of the Munster Supporters Club

For as long as I can recall, Limerick has always had monuments, buildings, that are marked out as Landmarks, call them what you wish, but they have always been there.

Always meaning something to someone or sparking a memory for someone. From Patrick Sarsfield in Cathedral Place, Cannock's Clock (even though it says Penney's, it's still Cannock's), Todds to Brown Thomas but its still Todds to most. The Treaty Stone may have moved a few feet but to most people, sure isn't it in the same place sure, it just went for a little stroll, to get out of the way from the Bus.

There are some things in Limerick that will always change yet still will remain constant, there's another that changed and will never be the same. The contents of Limerick's banks had been thrown at the architects to draw up plans to rejuvenate King John's Castle , the result , to lump a mass of steel and glass and purchase buckets of white paint , sure that will disguise it. It did not and most of Luimneachs native cringe when passing or thinking of the way it is now.

Just a few thousand metres up the road however, a similar project went underway, Thousands of Tonnes of steel, concrete and Gallon upon Gallon of white paint gave us yet another Monument in the City, it had always been there and like all the above, it changed and yes, it is still the same. Thomond Park.

The Search for a name commenced, the financial windfall that would accompany such a venture was seen by some to be well worth the pain of losing a name, however it was too much to contemplate for most, constant cries in the media to keep the name as it was, sure it's bad luck to change the name of a ship, Thomond park is the ship that has carried Rugby folk off to never neverland time and again, it would be sacrilege to change it some said. There was a valid argument to changing it though and one really could not have blamed the powers that be if they did decide to accept a substantial offer if it were available. Whether it got that far or not, we will never know as they decided to keep the name as it was, well, they added the word Stadium. Pedant so I am.

Thomond Park was always a place that captured the imagination of the Rugby Population and whether it was a Pat Lawler underage tournament or a Munster Senior cup final between Shannon and Young Munster, it always managed to drag emotions from people, to the extent that many have been seen crying leaving the place, laughing and some just completely exhausted, as if they had been playing in games, and this is just the supporter.

My memories of Thomond Park don't span as far as a lot of the people I see there now. I'm only a sprightly 34 years old. I can however recall some of the most amazing days to my mind there.

Most of my early visits to Thomond Park were for Munster Senior League and behind the goals, in what was then a large deadball area, mucking about with whatever other kids were there. Mostly ending up with mud patches on my knees, elbows, ears, face, pretty much everywhere really. That does not happen now, grounds these days are far more controlled, the deadball area is way smaller and I suppose, it's one of those things, and safety has to come first. Nobody wants to see a 17 stone forward careering into a youngfella inadvertently.

This place is something special though, we now here that most often from representatives of teams that visit to play Munster, yet it has always been the same. Whether it was St.Marys V Thomond in a Junior Cup final, or PBC V Munchins in a Schools cup game.

I have been to almost all of Munster's Heineken Cup, Celtic league/Magners League and old interpro games there; I have seen fantastic wins, skin of the teeth wins, dour games, and unimaginable defeats. Yet, the one game that sticks out in my mind and always will, is a Munster Senior League game in the 80s between Shannon and Cork Con. Con had the superstars of course, the Donal Lenihans, Michael Bradleys of this world, Shannon, the Tuckers, Lockie's, Glynns and Sonny Kiely. A great game as Shannon won, but as with most Senior league games then, it started with some ferocious handshakes, all 30 players at the sideline in what was akin to a schoolyard pile up, sorry 29, the then Irish Number 9 was nowhere to be seen .

Jim Galvin scoring that wonder try in the corner against Young Munster in the senior cup, the scenes as Munster's won their first senior cup in decades and also took the Junior cup in the same year (hundreds of goats were relieved), Dodo Reddan rolling the dogs around the pitch prior to the game, the St. Marys fife and drum band playing before the finals, Frankie god rest him leading the Isle.

That's what Thomond Park is, it's the people that grace it, and be it the players, supporters, entertainers. The soul of Thomond Park is not the grass or soil, not the shiny new stands and magnificent facilities, its Joe Soap, Alec Adoo, Specs the Ref, the kid on the wall, the burger seller, and the players on the field.

As for Munster and Thomond Park, we could be here all day.

> "That's what Thomond Park is, it's the **people that grace it**, and be it the **players, supporters, entertainers**

Magnificent Munster - where are they now?

Gerry McLoughlin
Capped for Ireland shortly after the win over the All Blacks in 1978, he went on to win 18 caps and helped Ireland to a Triple Crown in 1982. A teacher, in 2004 he was elected to Limerick City Council.

Les White
White was dropped by Munster the following year, but continued playing rugby in England until he was well into his 40s. He lives in Fareham and still works in the same role for the same aerospace company he was with 30 years ago.

Moss Keane
A permanent fixture for Ireland, he won 51 caps and brought his international career to a close in 1984 at the age of 35. Keane works for the Department of Agriculture and lives in Portarlington.

Donal Spring
Spring went on to win seven caps. One of the players living in Dublin back in 1978, he subseqently played for Leinster. He now heads up a prominent solicitors' practice in the capital.

Colm Tucker
Following the 1978 clash Tucker was called up to the Irish team, but only earned two caps even though he played nine times during the Lions tour of South Africa in 1980. A sales manager, he still lives in Limerick.

Pat Whelan
Won 19 caps for Ireland, the last in 1981. He went on to coach Garryowen, Munster and Ireland A while he also managed Ireland in the mid-1990s. A building contractor, he spearheaded the new Thomond Park Stadium.

Brendan Foley
Won 11 caps for Ireland, the last of which in 1981. His son Anthony remains Munster most decorated player while his daughter Rosie also played for her country. Brendan runs a bus hire company in Killaloe.

Tony Ward
Seven months later he was dropped by Ireland, replaced by Ollie Campbell. Ward later developed a career as a journalist and now writes about the game for the Irish Independent.

Christy Cantillon
Retired from rugby at 28 after he suffered a second cruciate ligament injury. While he never won an international cap, he enjoyed considerable success as a coach.

Moss Finn
Finn won 14 caps and scored four tries for Ireland. He played for 14 seasons with Munster and won a Triple Crown in 1982. He runs Finn's Corner, a popular sports shop in Cork.

Seamus Dennison
Retired from senior rugby in 1981, but returned to play junior rugby for Roscrea for another four years. Dennison won three caps for Ireland and teaches history in Roscrea.

Donal Canniffe
Retired from rugby in 1982 and became a coach with Lansdowne. He lives in Dublin and works for Norwich Union, the same insurance company he worked with in 1978.

Greg Barrett
Barrett never won a full international cap and retired at the age of 32. In 2002 he established his own company, Greg Barrett Financial Services, and still lives in his native Cork.

Jimmy Bowen
Moved to Dublin from Cork in 1981, joining Lansdowne and later St. Mary's, but his playing career was blighted by injury. He is now a manager for a finance company in Dublin.

Larry Moloney
Four days after Munster's clash with the All Blacks Moloney played for Ireland against New Zealand. That outing represented his fourth and final time to play in Irish green. He still works for AIB in the bank's Thurles branch.

October 31, 1978