

Alms Houses lose almshouse label

NEW LIFE AND NEW NAME FOR HISTORIC BUILDING

BY RICHARD NAUGHTON

AN EVENING of wine, cheese, art and auction on Tuesday next, September 14, at the widows' alms houses in Nicholas Street, Limerick, will mark a challenging and concluding stage to five years of voluntary work by a group who are dedicated to brightening the twilight years of 20 of our elderly citizens.

Highlight of the evening will be a sale of pictures, objects d'art and 'knick-knacks' by the prominent Limerick auctioneer, Mr. Conn Shanahan.

Exhibition

There will be an art exhibition and a cheese and wine party, and all is part of a campaign to raise £1,000 towards making this historic alms house building comfortable for the 20 elderly people who occupy it.

The tiny alms house range was built in Nicholas Street in 1681 and its history and the work of restoration by a committee chaired by the Mayor, Senator Ted Russell, is told in an attractive folder.

It is thought that the houses which occupy the former site of St. Nicholas Church—were built for the officers of King William's army of occupation after the siege of 1691.

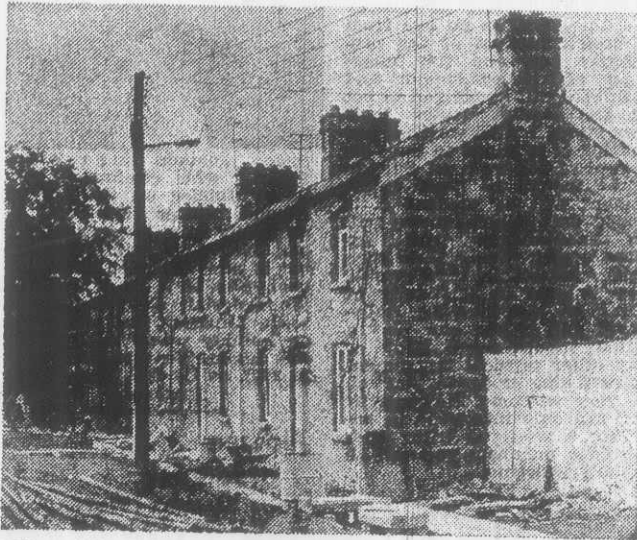
According to Fitzgerald's and McGregor's history of Limerick, the houses became Corporation property in the early nineteenth century. "Twenty reduced widows have apartments in this house, with the use of a garden and forty shillings a year."

The building consists of a terrace of five houses, each with four apartments.

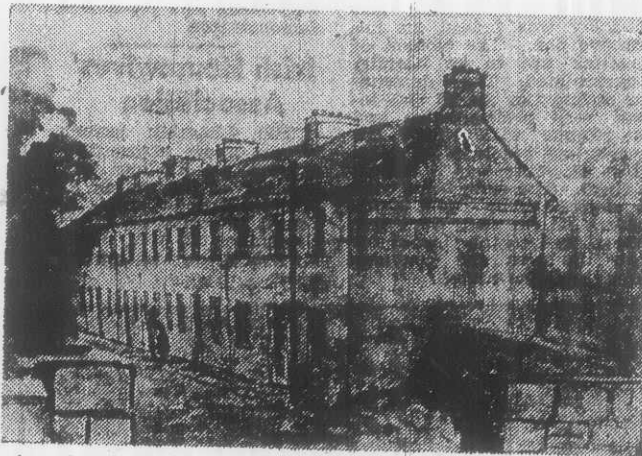
"For generations," the folder tells us, "the building lay in near ruin and neglect, cut off by high stone walls from the expanding city. Years of official indifference added to the dreaded conditions of the apartments . . . old people were expected to live out their last years in a condemned building."

In 1970 the task of restoring the alms houses to 20th century standards while retaining their historic character was tackled by a group of voluntary workers.

It was a tough task. The



The old Widows' Alms Houses in Nicholas Street in the final stages of restoration by a voluntary group of workers.



A painting by Jim O'Farrell of the old Widows' Alms Houses in Nicholas Street before the work of restoration began.

apartments were damp and dreary, with rotting timbers and cold flag floors.

But it was tackled bravely and resolutely.

"Centuries of old mortar and limewash were removed from the exterior walls revealing the old stone and brick in near perfect condition, but requiring painstaking pointing.

"The apartments had to be wired and replastered. Running water had to be installed. Fireplaces and new windows had to be provided."

In the past five years about

one hundred volunteers have helped in the work. Others have donated money; charitable organisations have given furniture.

Now, the interior work is almost finished and all that remains is the restoring of the exteriors and the re-designing of the garden.

The workers are led by Mr. Joe Scallan, a secondary school teacher. Outlining the final stages, he says: "Doors and windows will be of the 1691 period; gas lamps will be erected in front of the houses,

and rustic seating will be provided in the garden. The place will be renamed St. Mary's Court, thus removing the almshouse label forever."

He adds: "Local people and local firms have been very helpful. And AnCO, the Industrial Training Authority, have re-designed and rebuilt the railing on the gate to the houses."

It will take over £1,000 to complete the work and a special fund raising campaign is now being launched. The restored building will house elderly widows and spinsters and old men. They will provide comfort and tranquility to twenty of such people in the autumn of their lives.

You can help

Next Tuesday's fund raising evening can be helped by gifts of pictures, objects d'art or 'knick-knacks'; by sending a subscription, or by attending the cheese and wine party.

Intending benefactors may contact the hon. sec., Anne Reidy (telephone 45222 or 43739 after 6 p.m.), or the hon. treasurer, Maurice Kerr (telephone 44622).

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