

OLD AND NEW: King John's Castle (above) is being refurbished, while developments like Arthur's Quay (above right) have changed the face of Limerick.

City where the past is present

URBAN RENEWAL

From the refurbishment of King John's Castle to the £15 million Arthur's Quay Centre, Limerick is being renewed, reports ANNA NOLAN.

THE exciting archaeological remains recently unearthed at King John's Castle have been aptly described as "good news and bad news" for Limerick. The finds, ranging from the 7th century right up to the 18th, give the first physical confirmation of Viking settlement at Limerick, and have the potential to become a major tourist attraction.

In the short term, however, they will delay the completion of the refurbishment of the castle, and the opening planned for St Patrick's Day next year will be delayed for several months. Work was already being done against the clock to get the castle ready for the expected tourist invasion during Treaty 300, the commemoration of the siege of Limerick and the subsequent broken treaty. Built around the year 1210, the Castle is one of three focal points in the restoration of Limerick's mediaeval quarter. The other two are St Mary's Cathedral, built around 1170, and the Civic Centre, which is now occupied by the corporation.

The mediaeval restoration project was planned by a task force of Shannon Development, Limerick Corporation, Limerick Civic Trust and the Office of Public Works. Projected expenditure currently stands at well over £10 million. King John's Castle is being refurbished with public and

EC money, while a £3 million appeal has been launched to pay for a major rescue job on the fabric of St Mary's Cathedral. Work on the cathedral has already produced some interesting discoveries. The Civic Centre is a private development, costing about £6.5 million.

A Heritage Trail leading from the Granary, itself an award winner for urban renewal, links the Castle, the Cathedral, the Civic Centre, the Treaty Stone, the Bishop's Palace and other attractions. The hitherto undeveloped riverside area has been opened up for walks, revealing some most attractive vistas.

Arthur's Quay car park is being turned into a civic park of unique design, with a strong maritime focus. It is expected to be completed by the end of November this year.

Limerick Civic Trust, a voluntary body which has been quietly improving various corners of the city, has restored the Potato Market, the Bishop's Palace and other features of the Mediaeval Quarter. Also contributing voluntarily to beautifying the city

are its private practice architects, who have produced 11 designs for improving public space, at the request of the corporation.

The corporation is paying for one of the designs to be implemented, and looking for sponsors for the others. An announcement of the first such sponsor is expected shortly, according to Jim Barrett, the City Architect.

History is just one side to the Limerick renewal story. The designated areas scheme has led to over one million square feet of new buildings, mainly office space.

The biggest building project in Limerick completed so far, the £15 million shopping/residential/office/car parking development at Arthur's Quay, opened last autumn, dramatically altering the face of Limerick. Recently, a planning application has been filed for a £30 million prime pedestrian shopping area close by. This brings to over £90 million the total planned and completed investment in development in the city.

A large proportion of the investment arises from the original designated area scheme of around 50 acres. As well as Arthur's Quay, it includes about £13.5 million worth of development at Charlotte's Quay —

mainly office buildings, with a residential/shopping/leisure element and an aparthotel.

Other notable developments in the designated area include another mixed commercial and residential development at an advanced stage at Lock Quay, and houses, and apartments and commercial space in Johnsgate.

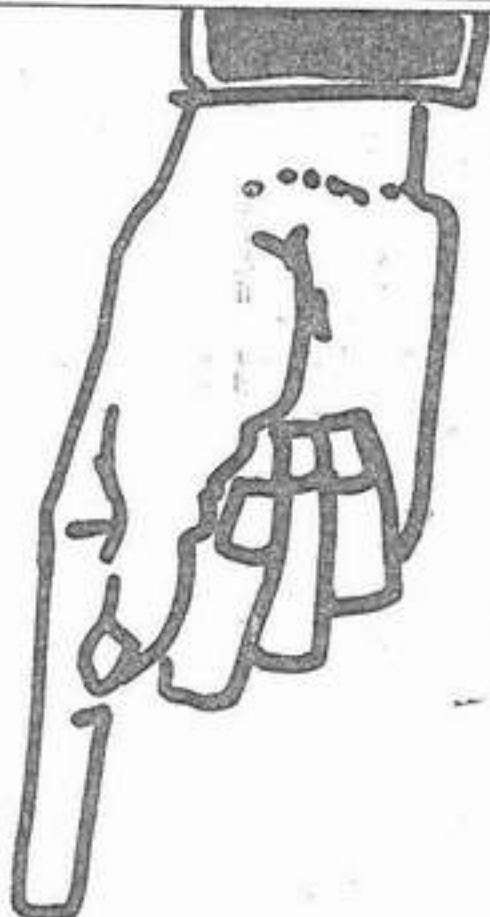
The corporation owned much of the land in the original designated area, and encouraged investment by doing its homework, clearing much of it for title and ensuring that it had been studied archaeologically where it was thought appropriate. The land was offered under licence to developers, to cut down on the risk of speculators buying sites and leaving them undeveloped.

In contrast, only about 2.5 acres of the newly designated area of 40 acres belongs to the corporation. This site is at Mount Kenneth, near the Docks. The corporation has now selected a developer for this site, according to Jim Barrett.

"The production of a detailed feasibility study for hotel/leisure/conference complex is imminent, and we are confident it will prove positive," Mr Barrett told *The Irish Times*. "There is also a new development for office space planned nearby, and we are pleased to see the concentration of new developments spreading."

A major development outside the designated areas is a cinema, entertainment, shopping and apartment complex almost completed on the city centre site of the old Savoy cinema, in its time the biggest cinema in Ireland. The new complex is to contain five cinemas, with apartments, shops, and sports and leisure facilities.

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Michael Tiernan, developer, and Joe Kenny, manager, pictured in Arthur's Quay.