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FEATURE

Shannon Region

High-tech and tourism distinguish the region

HIGH-TECH and tourism are the distinguishing features of the Shannon region. The region provides about one-third of the country's electronics and computing employment, although it contains only about 11 per cent of the population. It has also strengths in engineering and services, with software and international financial services showing vigorous growth.

There is a richness of beauty spots and tourist attractions, known both nationally and internationally — the Cliffs of Moher, the Burren, Bunratty Castle and Folk Park. Current tourism projects include the revitalisation of Limerick's mediaeval quarter and a major marina development at Kilrush.

The usual benefits that go along with tourism, such as good hotels, entertainment and sporting facilities are there for the residents, without the concomitant overcrowding experienced in many tourist resorts. The region, which takes in counties Limerick, Clare, North Tipperary, South and Southwest Offaly and North Kerry, is strongly agricultural, and therefore is sufficiently uncrowded to cope with the influx.

Pivotal to tourism activities, and to a great extent to the operation of high-tech industries, is the presence of Shannon Inter-

INTRODUCTION

ANNA NOLAN reports on the blend of strategic location and determined development that has brought vigorous growth to the Shannon region.

national Airport, whose gateway status is the subject of much national argument. Whatever the pros and cons put forward by both sides of the argument, it is safe to say there would be consternation in the region if this status were altered.

Employment compares well with the national average. Between January 1st, 1988 and December 31st, 1989, Shannon Development created a total of 5,708 new jobs, a net increase of 1,884 when job losses are taken into account. Although the picture for the region as a whole is healthy, there are unemployment blackspots, notably in areas of Limerick city.

Employment in manufacturing and financial services is currently over 27,000 according to Shannon Development. International-class companies of overseas parentage account for a high proportion of this employment. Most of the overseas companies originate in the US, which provides about 60 per cent of foreign investment. West Germany accounts for about 20 per cent and the UK for about 10 per cent.

Japanese companies will figure more strongly in these percentages, if all goes well for a plan to attract component manufacturers to use a dedicated area in Plassey Technological Park as a base to serve the larger Japanese manufacturers in Europe. The first company to sign up for the Japanese parts manufacturing centre is understood to be currently recruiting staff and details of the company are expected to be announced in the near future.

High hopes

The region is home to Irish-grown world players such as the GPA aircraft leasing group. This company, which now has North American, Japanese and other European shareholders, as well as Irish, controls all its operations from its headquarters in Shannon.

The setting up of Shannon Aerospace, GPA's new venture with Lufthansa and Swissair for aircraft maintenance and refurbishing at Shannon, has

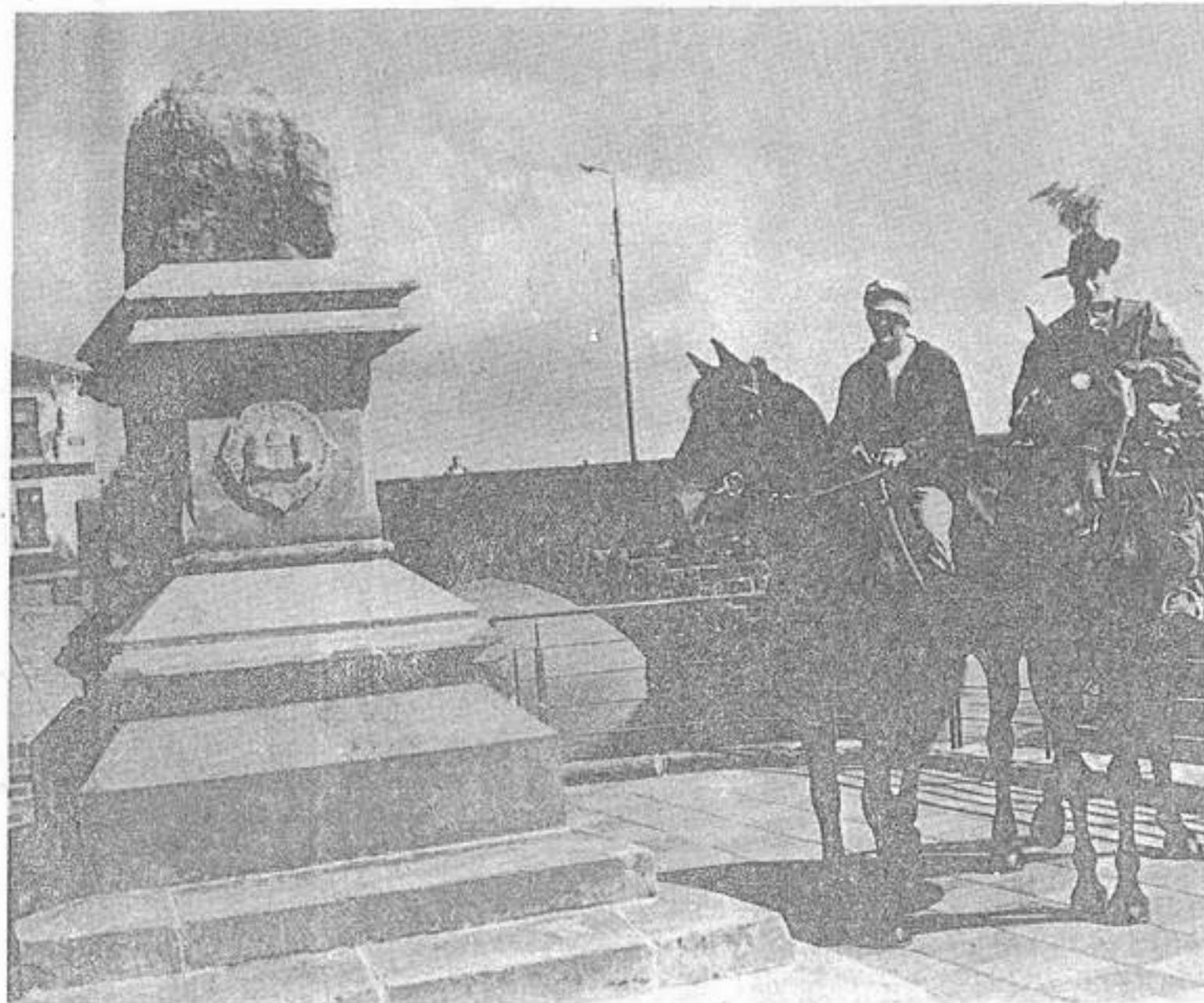
given a big boost to the area, with jobs planned to run into several hundreds quite quickly. And there are high hopes for an aviation technology park, which would set the seal on Shannon as a leading world aviation centre.

The region is well served educationally, with full-time third-level institutions such as the Limerick College of Art, Commerce & Technology, Thomond College of Education, Mary Immaculate College, Tralee RTC and the University of Limerick. Plassey Management and Technology Centre provides mainly part-time, evening and distance education for people who are already employed.

Additionally, there are many other post-Leaving commercial schools and colleges, a school of music, and a range of excellent second-level schools.

A recent milestone for the newly created University of Limerick was its first conferral of an honorary doctorate, which was awarded to the President of Ireland, Dr Patrick Hillery. The University is currently planning an increase in student intake in the next academic year, in response to the government request for more places to be made available nationally.

Also planning changes is CoACT, which is to have its first full time industrial liaison officer appointed in the near future, and which is hoping for a new building programme.



Limerick's Treaty Stone: historical landmark in an area of rapid development.

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