

'Limerick, city and county, boast the highest high-tech productivity in the State and the highest wages in electronics.'

Limerick—in the grip of a renaissance

THE executive from Aughinish Alumina was "effing and blinding" his way along the main estuary route to the plant. His company Volvo (changed every two years) was taking a battering from the coastal road which overlooked the spectacular seaway, claimed to be the longest and deepest in Europe.

Jutting out into the Shannon, the plant sits on its island site like an environmental case-study. It is the largest single overseas industrial investment in the Republic, cost a billion dollars to build—and pumps out 700 permanent wage packets a week: around £19m a year. It provoked tangential local industries, leavens with prosperity its rural hinterland, functions under stringent environmental control—and is the shape of the future.

Many of its employees have one foot still on the family farm and another inside the gates that provide them with an enviable life-style, even by the standards of the most privileged urban earners. Upholstered by generous company benefits and vacations, they live in spacious houses among green surrounds as far flung as 30 miles away—some across the estuary into Clare or in the Tipperary uplands.

After a while, the Aughinish executive's passenger also began to get exasperated by the state of the roads. The passenger was Sean Murphy, Limerick county manager and titularly responsible for the state of the roads. He was

on a regular fact-finding visit to his largest rate-payer: £1.2 million a year—the second largest in the State after Guinness.

"It's heart-breaking to be without money for roads," he admits. "But with central funding, there's nothing I can do..." Sean Murphy upturns the prevailing excuse that Ireland is too poor to build sustaining routes. "It's not that we're too poor to build roads—it's that we're poor because we don't build them."

His view is corroborated by industrialists in the region. Cathal O'Shannon, of Alumina, says that the estuary would have another three or four plants of equal size, if the road network was there to facilitate traffic.

As it is, the juggernauts still grind through parts of Limerick City, quaking its medieval foundations as they jig-saw through a morass of ring road, teetering between finished and unfinished stretches of by-pass.

The money ran out years ago, leaving a maze, without rhyme or reason, that in theory should skirt the city. Instead, urban building is going on on either side of the unfinished by-pass, attracting clutches of travellers. Not the best advert to lure multi-nationals everybody agrees—moral responsibility aside.

The city, celebrating its 300th anniversary of the Williamite sieges, has been riven with internal dissensions on how to cope with the modern-day siege caravans outside its walls.

But this is just one blot on the underlying prosperity. Limerick, city and county, boasts the highest hi-tech productivity in the



By Kevin O'Connor

State and the highest wages in electronics. Since the 70s, it has sustained its Irish version of Silicone Valley, sinewed with corporations like Howmedica, Analog, Wang, Kostal—all spawning their own research and development units, the determining factor in manufacturing autonomy.

That limpet expertise, dovetailing with the University of Limerick bias towards research, has weathered the international recession, albeit with cyclic "dips." Currently, there is another blip on the curve as the Irish outposts of the multi-nationals shiver in response to the chill in the corporate bodies. But no one doubts that were it not for the expansion of the mid-70s, the area would be much worse off.

Overlay the strategic thinking of GPA and Aughinish, underpin the formidable forward views of Tony Ryan and Ed Walsh, gurus of aviation and academic strategy—and you have some of the reasons why even lousy roads will not deter the renaissance upsurge of life in the region.

(Sample: Ryan has endowed a Chair of Aviation Research in the University of Limerick, to dovetail with his major aircraft maintenance, Shannon Aerospace—a joint venture with Lufthansa and Swissair, started with £80 million).

Those are the kind of indices which presage the next quantum leap in the region's growth, keying into the three most powerful national economies in the Western world. Corporations from America, Germany and Japan are embedded in the Limerick area, with a vested interest in seeing it prosper.

The interest is more than nominal. Last month a passenger car-

upbeat version may be gleaned from outsiders, who see renewal and rebuilding on all sides.

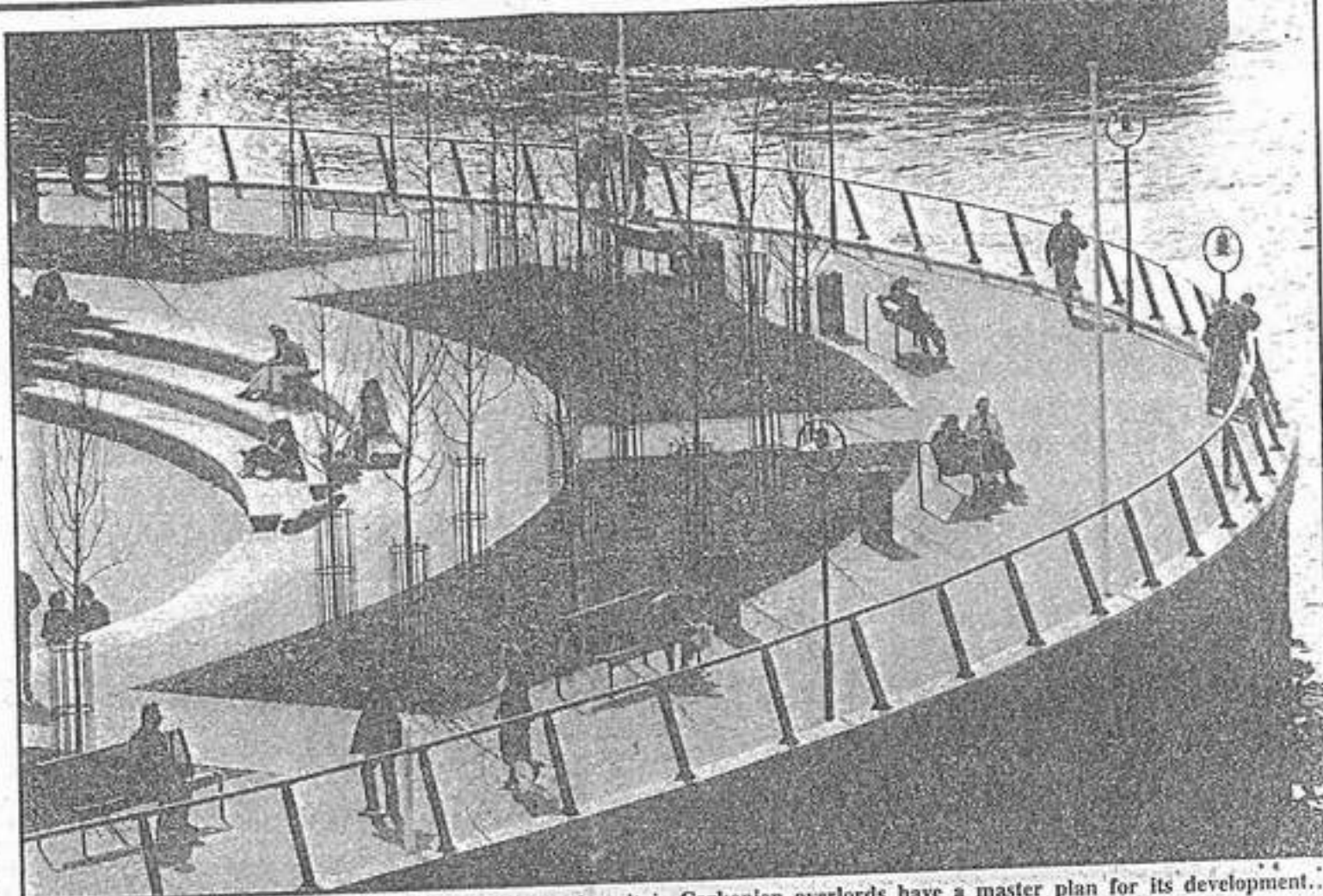
Why, then, is Limerick city and county the net beneficiary of multinational confidence on a grand scale, when much of the rest of the country is depleted by the absence of same?

There's a very Limerick answer to that—the curse of St Munchin and Three Corkmen. The Curse was vented by the mendicant St Munchin, left without a bed in Limerick, that the native would perish in his own place and the foreigner prosper. Whoever left the saint without a bed in 700 AD, has a lot to answer for...

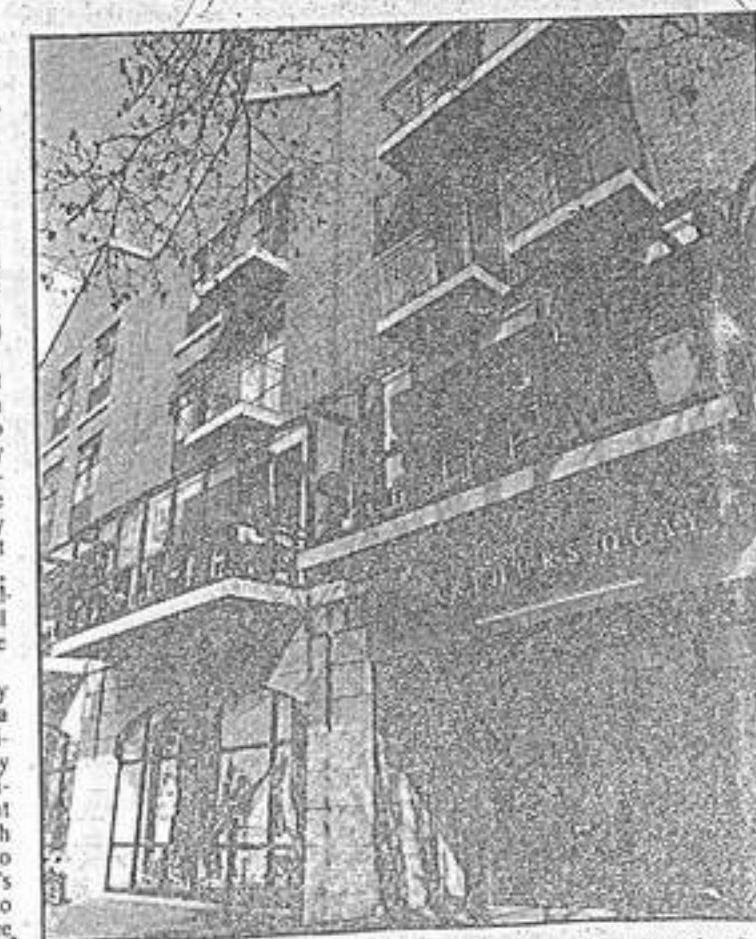
Whimsicality aside, the most powerful agents of change in a decade are three Corkmen who respectively run the university and the city. Ed Walsh's luminous vision has transformed the former NIHE, now the University of Limerick, into the most potent business university in the State, prime pumping a Technological Park whose eventual acreage will employ 15,000 hi-tech jobs by the year 2000.

By then, too, the adjoining city will have been revived with a modern stratum built on its medieval ruins, masterminded by city manager Jack Higgins and architect Jim Barrett. Their silent connection is that they are both Corkonians, as is Ed Walsh. So powerful is the pull of Walsh's creations, that the city intends to stretch its boundaries to embrace his Castletroy fiefdom which is technically in the county.

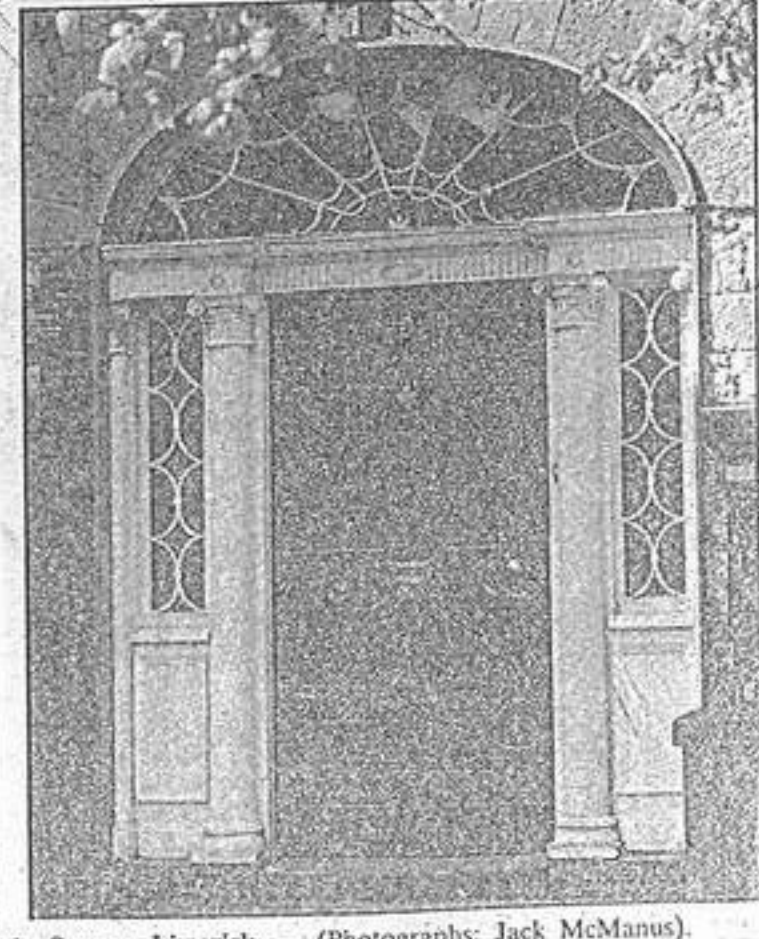
The plan is to pitch the city boundaries in a five-mile lasso around the immediate county areas, taking in what is already "urban" but administratively still



The new park at Arthur's Quay, Limerick... the city's Corkonian overlords have a master plan for its development.



Offices at Arthur's Quay (left) and a doorway in John's Square, Limerick. — (Photographs: Jack McManus).



WHICH begs the question as to the development of "the real county"—the rich farming

packed," says Damian Patterson, a local builder. "But the time you do notice it is at Christmas. The town hops with the young back—from everywhere."

Sean Murphy cites a string of embryonic facilities along the seaway towards the Kerry coast... "A marina in Glin, the interpretative centre in Lough Gur which had 15,000 visitors last

the Local Government Act relinquish the powers hitherto held in ministerial grasp like a Lotto disbursement? A few days after me, local politicians queued-up in



... passenger also began exasperated by the state of roads. The passenger was Sean Murphy, Limerick county manager and titularly responsible for the state of the roads. He was with the modern-day siege caravans outside its walls. But this is just one blot on the underlying prosperity. Limerick, city and county, boasts the highest hi-tech productivity in the

area would be much worse off. Overlay the strategic thinking of GPA and Auhinish, underpin the formidable forward views of Tony Ryan and Ed Walsh, gurus of aviation and academic strategy — and you have some of the reasons why even lousy roads will not deter the renaissance upsurge of life in the region.

(Sample: Ryan has endowed a Chair of Aviation Research in the University of Limerick, to dovetail with his major aircraft maintenance, Shannon Aerospace — a joint venture with Lufthansa and Swissair, started with £80 million).

Those are the kind of indices which presage the next quantum leap in the region's growth, keying into the three most powerful national economies in the Western world: Corporations from America, Germany and Japan are embedded in the Limerick area, with a vested interest in seeing it prosper.

The interest is more than nominal. Last month a Japanese corporation planted 500 cherry blossom by its business park on the Shannon banks, and endowed a Chair of Japanese Studies at the university. The Americans opened a \$10-million hotel — the Castletroy Park Hotel — with rooms convertible from office by day to bedroom at night, angled towards business conferences. Such is their belief in the region.

The German region of Hohenlohe Kreis has twinned with Limerick, wants to take a regular placement of nurses and engineers and is currently swapping business students. The American companies Analog, Verbatim and Howmedica are so impressed with the brightness of their local workforces that they have "rationalised" plants in other territories rather than Limerick.

It is not a bad picture, though if you listen long enough to native begrudgery you will hear gloomy tales: "Did you hear that 50 were let go from... I swear to God! But then pessimism and envy are as ingrained as Georgian grime in the Limerick mind. A more

decade are three. Corkmen who respectively run the university and the city. Ed Walsh's luminous vision has transformed the former NIHE, now the University of Limerick, into the most potent business university in the State, prime pumping a Technological Park whose eventual acreage will employ 15,000 hi-tech jobs by the year 2000.

By then, too, the adjoining city will have been revived with a modern stratum built on its medieval ruins, masterminded by city manager Jack Higgins and architect Jim Barrett. Their salient connection is that they are both Corkonians, as is Ed Walsh. So powerful is the pull of Walsh's creations, that the city intends to stretch its boundaries to embrace his Castletroy fiefdom which is technically in the county.

The plan is to pitch the city boundaries in a five-mile lasso around the immediate county areas, taking in what is already "urban" but administratively still "rural". It make sense: 65 per cent of the county's street lighting and footpaths are in the city suburbs; of Sean Murphy's 108,000 county occupants, a quarter live in the city.

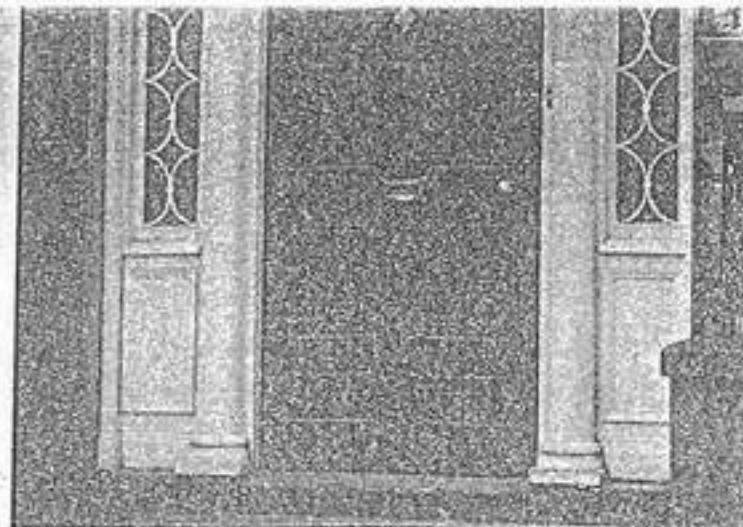
In the past 20 years, the city's creeping urbanisation has eroded into the county's fabric. The change will merely acknowledge the reality.

When that happens, through instruments of local government reform, Limerick will be a vastly enlarged city, with an instant additional population. It will have the university and technological campus at Plassy on the east and Raheen Industrial Estate on the west, as countervailing energisers of growth.

In its centre, refurbished tottering Georgiania will be underpinned upon its medieval foundations, giving a traversible walk-about core to its New Age. That at least is the master plan. Given the progress so far and the intent of its Corkonian overlords, there seems no reason, short of the unforeseen, why, it should not happen.



Offices at Arthur's Quay (left) and a doorway in John's Square, Limerick. — (Photographs: Jack McManus)



Tony Ryan (left) and Ed Walsh. "gurus of aviation and academic strategy" whose formidable forward views are making quite an impact in Limerick.

Managing plants worldwide

PROFESSOR Noel Mulcahy, a vice-president of the University of Limerick, is one of the few natives holding influence in the city's power base. He throws a wide eye over the expansive acres of Plassy, seeing in its future the future of the region. Already, the Plassy spread of labs, office and business parks occupies an area quarter that of the entire city of Limerick — in a fraction of the time-scale.

An engineer by profession, he analogises in terms of "critical mass producing diffusion of energy". He means the university will develop jobs throughout the county: "We lead in so many areas of research that I've lost count — somewhere around 40 companies are involved here — and growing. We do things here that nobody else does — that's why the multinationals are here, to access the high-cost design they cannot afford themselves.

"We have a whole spread of original applied research. We started with digital and computers and micro-processing in the '70s. Now its optoelectronics. Don't ask me about some of our research or I'll frighten you.

"Some of our students never finished; they were so good after two years, they went off to manage plants around the world. They send people back to us all the time.

"We really are at the cutting-



Professor Noel Mulcahy. "We really are at the cutting edge of scientific research."

edge of scientific research. Why do you think the Japanese are here in such numbers? On a typical day in the '80s, we had about 1,400 people working on campus — now it's 3,400. It will be 7,500 by the mid-90s and 15,000 by 2000.

"We are the key to the prosperity of the Shannon Region. Once we get into 'outreach programmes' we will put down hi-tech plants in Abbeyfeale, Askeaton, Rathkeale — all the way down to Tralee. To do that, you have to have a self-sustaining critical mass of energy and people. That's what we are," he says.

Facts about the county

AREA: 1,037 square miles. Total population: 164,569. Urban: 61,464, Rural: 103,105. Principal towns: Limerick: population 56,279, Newcastle West: population 3,370, Rathkeale: population 1,815. Local Authority: Limerick County Borough Council (17 members); Limerick County Council (28 members).

Principal industries: Limerick city — Atlas Aluminium Ltd; Fulflex International Ltd; Krups Engineering Ltd; Neodata Ltd; Analog Devices B.V., Raheen; Auhinish Alumina Ltd., Askeaton; Castlemahon Food Products Ltd; Kostal Iri Ltd, Abbeyfeale; Verbatim Ltd, Raheen; Wang Laboratories Ltd, Castletroy; Wyeth Ireland Ltd, Askeaton;



Airport industry; Agriculture: dairying, mixed farming. Unemployment rate: Limerick County Borough: 29.2 per cent, Limerick Co: 15.3 per cent. Net migration: Limerick County Borough: -7,209; -24.6 per thousand; Limerick Co: plus 2,370; plus 4.5 per thousand.

(Statistics in these panels are based on the 1986 census figures — the most recent national figures available.)

WHICH begs the question as to the development of "the real county" — the rich farming hinterland that stretches along the estuary and splices off at Newcastle West, westwards towards Kerry and deep south to Cork.

Newcastle West is the crux of the matter, caught between its traditional fellow-feeling with Kerry and yet dependent upon Limerick's expansion to fuel its own future.

Here again, there is an easy annexation by the most powerful industrial force — Limerick. Here, too, a consanguinity of history and economics which determine its character. And here, as well, the fulcrum of the crisis that characterises rural Ireland. The fact is, attested by all, that traditional farming is in its last fallow twitches.

This, in the Garden of Ireland, the hallowed Golden Vale of rich pastureland, whose grass the historian McCauley described as "verdant even beyond the verdure of Munster... feeding some of the finest cattle in Europe.

Not as much now. Where west Limerick tilts into north Kerry, cattle herds are drastically depleted, farmhouses are for sale or abandoned. On a June Saturday with the land hazy under heat, I drove along the estuary to Newcastle West. I knew this countryside as a boy and unless boyhood is forever tinged with a busy glow, I registered with shock the amount of unworked fields and overgrown homesteads.

In the square in Newcastle West a sign said "Fresh Dingle fish" and the accents of the market traders were sing-song north Kerry. In spite of improvements in the square, Maiden Street is semi-derelict and unemployment is high. With the collapse of agriculture and the factories tight, the only place to go is — out.

"The young leaving is such a fact of life now, that you hardly notice the teenagers waiting for Slattery's coach with their bags

packed," says Damian Patterson, a local builder. "But the time you do notice it is at Christmas. The town hops with the young back — from everywhere."

Damian Patterson lives in a designer house outside the town. Like many of his neighbours his living is not tied to agriculture. Building contracts take him to Limerick and to Dublin. "I've the best of both worlds — always glad to get back again."

Quite how long "both worlds" can survive occupies Sean Murphy. He concedes that "farming is gone: everyone tells me so, anyway". Therefore his own plans for the "rural" part of the county lean towards tourism and visitor facilities: "That's where I'm putting my money and thinking..."

Sean Murphy cites a string of embryonic facilities along the seaway towards the Kerry coast... "A marina in Glin, the interpretative centre in Lough Gur which had 15,000 visitors last year, expand the marine facilities in Foynes."

Inland towards Cork, he cites the Killinane Co-Op project: "They had nothing going for them — no lakes, mountains or sea. But they got together and marketed farmhouse holidays and country treks. Last year they took £1½ million in revenue from Continentals."

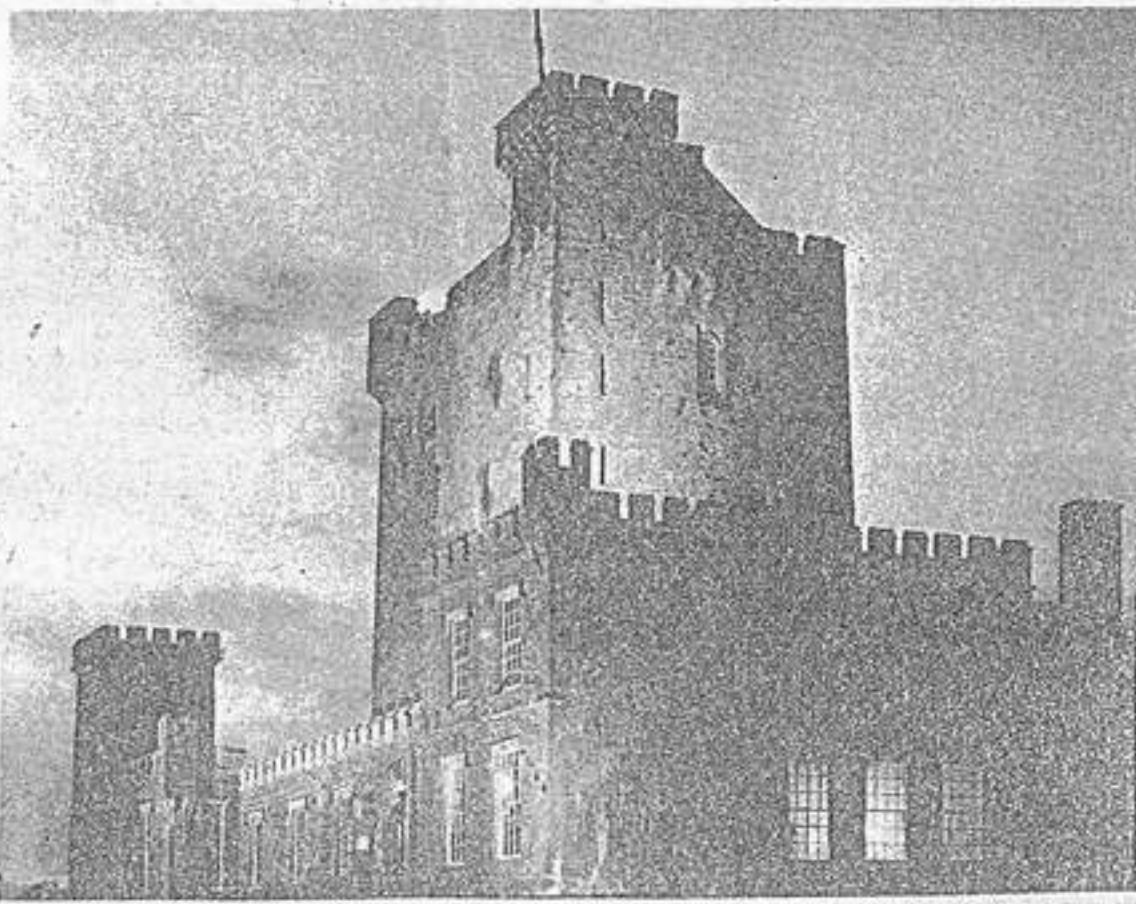
He intends helping those who help themselves. "Co Limerick used to be a place that people drove through on their way to somewhere else. I want to change that."

But what about money? Will

the Local Government Act relinquish the powers hitherto held in ministerial grasp like a Lotto disbursement? A few days after the county manager spoke with me, local politicians queued-up in fawning obeisance to press the flesh of Minister Flynn. Thereby hoping to shake down a few shekels for the roads.

Several, of different parties, afterwards claimed varying amounts. Clearly it is local election time. Clearly, too, not a lot has changed in the 400 years since the Elizabethans came into this part of the country and forced the Desmonds to bend the knee that they might have rights of passage through their own lands.

Tomorrow: Conor Brady on Offaly.



Thomond Castle... part of Limerick's rich historical heritage.