

# Building Ireland gets bird's eye view of St John's Cathedral

■ No longer Ireland's tallest church building, still plenty to admire about St John's

MIKE DWANE

LIMERICK'S glorious St John's Cathedral will be the main focus of attention when the RTE series Building Ireland switches its attentions to the Treaty City next Tuesday evening.

The presenters will also examine Limerick's 19th century bridges and other civil engineering projects along the Shannon during the broadcast (RTE One at 7pm on July 29). This will include an appraisal of Sarsfield Bridge and the infrastructure around the docks.

And the programme will also take a look at the blue limestone blocks typical of Limerick which became a prized building material around Europe during the 19th century.

But it is the story of how St John's was designed (by Charles Hardwicke) and built that will be of particular interest to many Limerick viewers.

And while the Diocese of Limerick has - as reported in last week's Limerick Leader - relinquished its claim to having Ireland's tallest church building, there is still plenty to admire about St John's, according to architect and Building Ireland presenter Orla Murphy.

She describes St John's, construction on which began in the 1860s, as quite unusual for its era. Those wondering why the cathedral doesn't have the flying buttresses so beloved of architects of the day can tune in to find out.

And because the spire of St John's was only completed in the 1880s, there are clear differences between it and what lies beneath.

"There's a clear difference in the design approach between the spire and the main body of the church. Locals here have always called this the cathedral tower not the spire. The tower is square and the spire is octagonal," says Ms Murphy.

"But it's in the decorative details where we see why this spire is a purer representation of the Victorian Gothic than the church itself. Every detail was made to emphasise height, moving towards the heavens so columns' elongated arches became pointed, all the while accentuating the drama and the move towards the heavens," she adds as she gets a close-up look on a crane.

Until recently trumpeted as Ireland's highest church building,

the Diocese of Limerick has recently revised down its height of St John's by almost 50 feet, meaning Cobh, Killarney and Maynooth all have taller cathedrals.

A survey commissioned by the diocese came on foot of representations from Billy Wallace, 81, from Dooradoyle, who was clerk of works for renovations on the cathedral ordered by Bishop Newman in the 1980s.

He objected to a reference in historian Liam Irwin's recent history of the diocese that the tower and spire of St John's stood at 308 feet, when original 1878 drawings in his possession specified 258 feet.

Dan Clery from South Circular Road also took up the case resulting in a new survey by the diocese which found the height to be 265 feet, including a three-foot cross.

The trailer for the Limerick episode of Building Ireland has also in recent weeks stated the height of St John's to be 94 metres (or 308 feet) but the episode was already in the can before the programme makers had an opportunity to speak to Mr Clery.

But they promise that - even at 258 feet - how the spire was built is an "intriguing tale of engineering and design as its height makes it a challenge even now to service".

"So just how did they cap off a spire of such scale and height in the late 19th century with only rudimentary scaffolding? The programme has specially commissioned animations that explain exactly how they did it."

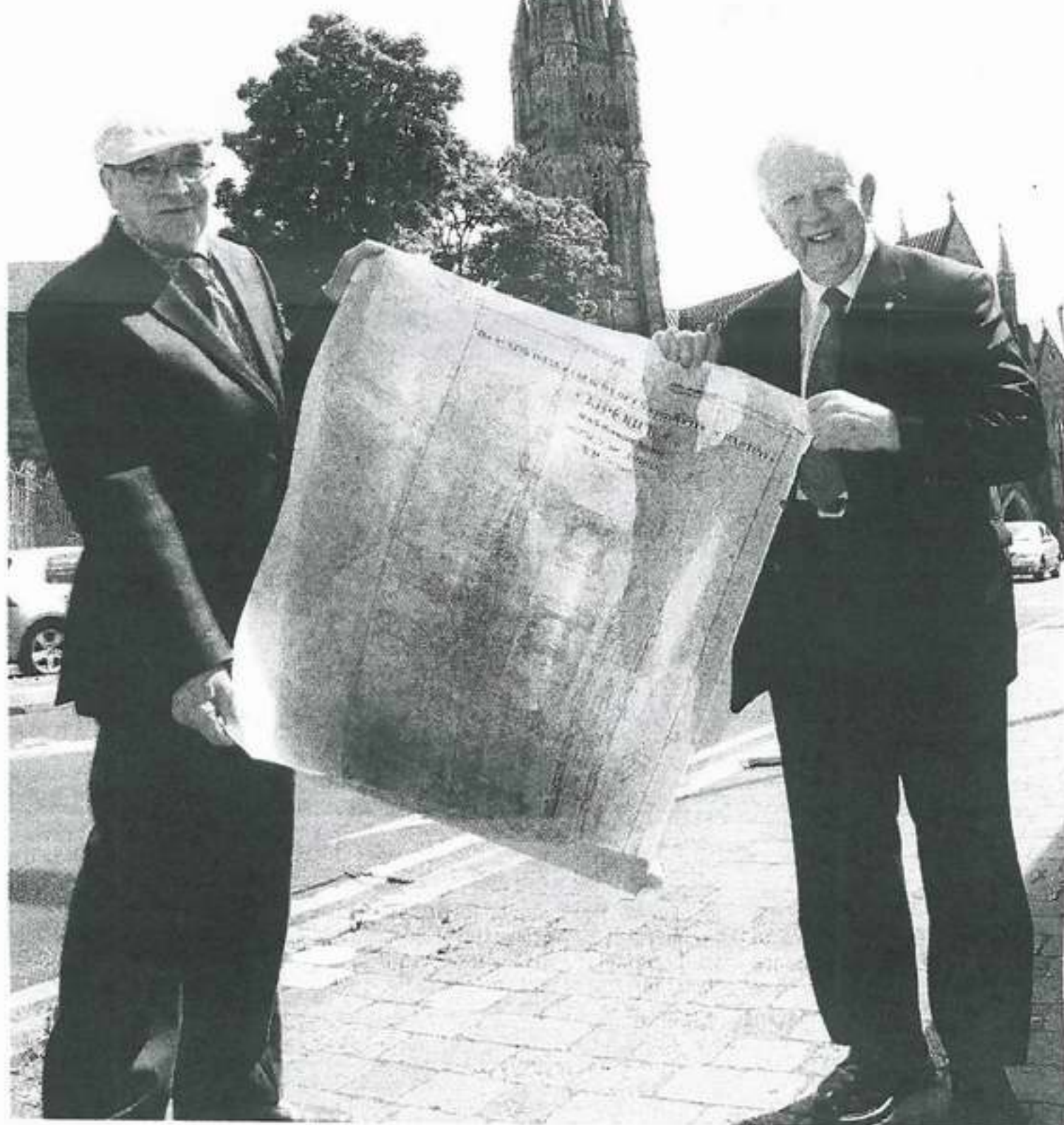
Ms Murphy goes on to explore the development of Newtown Pery one of the finest Georgian developments proposed anywhere in Europe and the skills and traditions still being carried on in Limerick by visiting Randal Hodgkinson, an ecclesiastical decorator whose great great grandfather worked out the same studios, designing and painting St John's Cathedral when it was originally built.

Ms Murphy says "Limerick is very much a city of the nineteenth century".

"From the 1830s onwards, bridges, docks and churches were constructed as a response to economic stagnation and the hunger of the Great Famine. And its a legacy that we can see everyday in the very fabric and atmosphere of this city."

**"Every detail was made to emphasise height"**

Orla Murphy  
Building Ireland



Dan Clery and Billy Wallace at St John's Cathedral and, inset, architect and presenter of Building Ireland Orla Murphy gets a closer look at the spire

## 'Photography exhibition has kept me alive' - Gerry

ANNE SHERIDAN

AFTER a year-long battle with a rare blood cancer, acclaimed photographer Gerry Andrews will be opening his exhibition of Limerick street photography in Dublin in a fortnight.

Gerry, 61, who in recent years

## Sadness at death of Richard Boyce

COLM WARD

THE communities of Loughill, Foynes and Ballyhahill were saddened this week to learn of the death of Richard Boyce, who passed away on Monday following a short illness.

Mr Boyce, who was better known as Dick, was married to Limerick Leader gardening columnist Phyl Boyce. They have two children Brendan and Fildelma.

A science teacher by profession, Mr Boyce taught for most of his



Sadness: The late Dick Boyce who died on Monday, aged 69

little bit off-the-wall," she added.

Dick's passion for gardening was evident in the award-winning gardens developed by himself and Phyl at Mountrenchard.

Starting in 1982, they transformed the one-acre site around their home into one of the most varied, interesting and beautiful gardens in Munster. Visitors came from all over Ireland and overseas to see their stunning collection of plants, flowers and vegetables.

Dick and Phyl later shared their knowledge of and love for garden-

The Late Late Show with Gay Byrne. Indeed, his skills as a craftsman extended beyond furniture - he once built a boat and he also restored old clocks.

A native of Rockhill, near Bruree, Dick grew up in a farming family before going to college to study chemistry. He lectured in the subject for a time prior to taking up the job in Tarbert Comprehensive soon after it was established in 1973.

His death, aged 69, followed a short illness and treatment in Blackrock Clinic. He is survived by his wife and two children as