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IT HAS to be said that the people most likely to welcome you to Limerick are more likely than not to be outsiders who have chosen, for whatever reason, to settle there.

"Limerick people don't talk to you," says one longtime observer who prefers to remain anonymous. "They confront you with words. You think these people are antagonistic, but they're not. It's just their way. Part of what they have to learn is how to handle their dealings with outsiders."

"If Limerick people have a problem," says Limerick-born Gerry Stembridge of RTE's Scrap Saturday satire show, "it's that they don't really know how to take people in. They're fairly genial to one another, but they have a problem relating to outsiders. To some extent this accounts for their bad reputation. And, another thing about them is that if you leave they don't tend to have a great deal of time for you either. If a Corkman leaves Cork, he's still a Corkman; but

if a Limerickman leaves Limerick, he's gone. Out of sight out of mind. They don't care much either way."

As Cathal O'Shannon points out, it's the blow-ins, mostly, who are trying hardest to turn the city's poor image inside out. The late Hilda O'Malley, widow of the former education minister, Donogh, used to say that Limerick had all the disadvantages of the small town, and none of the advantages of the city, but many of the younger inhabitants of modern Limerick, some of whom moved there from the capital, now insist that it's the other way about.

"At the moment," says one, "it's just a little on the small side to be anonymous in, but that isn't by any means always a disadvantage." Most people agree that building the university several miles out, on the outskirts of the city, was a major mistake, but nevertheless, the city at night is an alive place. The city centre pubs are thronged, even mid-week, with the workers from the city's offices and factories.

They point to the city's thriving arts scene, the Belltable, the growing counter culture, the improved city centre as evidence that all life is not necessarily elsewhere. The biggest challenge, many agree, is to convince the locals that Limerick, for all its problems, really is as good as anywhere else.

Some, however, while acknowledging the improvements, point to the vast amount of progress to be made in unravelling Limerick's vast tapestry of social despair. If the city's facelift isn't just to be an exercise in window dressing, they say, something urgently needs to be done about problems like the travellers, and the vast welfare ghettos on the fringes of the city.

In general, though, the prognosis is positive. Limerick people talk among themselves about someone — a native son of some renown — by the name of "Dickie Harris." This chap, they aver, has "cleaned up his act and made a comeback" in his own line of work. And his native city is trying hard to follow his example.

ing here." Limerick is also known nationally for the outspokenly conservative public statements of its archbishop, Dr Jeremiah Newman. Jim Kemmy, who has engaged in public controversies with Dr Newman on numerous occasions, says that he continues to have a good personal relationship with the archbishop.

"He has a good mind, he's well-read and is well intentioned. But he likes controversy as well. I wish he'd let the world go by. You can't keep the floods out forever. There's a different attitude now: people have to survive. Our old-fashioned role of being paternal is no use anymore. That concept is outdated: we can't rule people's minds anymore. We need to learn tolerance. The day of Big Brother is over. There's a family planning clinic in Limerick since 1975, and nobody takes a blind bit of notice of it. That power, which bishops once had, has slipped away.

"There's a drift opened up, a nonalignment, between the people and the power structures. There is a great need for alternatives in society, so as to give people the opportunity to express their true selves. We need to involve people more and more in our society. We must all, in Limerick and elsewhere, look at what we have done in the past, and at the problems we have as a result. These are there to haunt us, and all of us must be indicted for it. It's not just a problem for Limerick. It's not just a problem for the government. It's all our problem."

TOMORROW
Women of Limerick