

Limerick: A city tarnished by the few...

Four murders in 16 days have reinforced Limerick's violent reputation and left local people in a state of shock and bewilderment. WILLIE DILLON reports

Mention Limerick to an outsider and there is a good chance that they will utter the words Stab City. It is usually said as a joke. Nobody really expects to come to Limerick and get stabbed. Visitors are not constantly looking over their shoulders. Muggers are not lurking in every alleyway.

But even words said in jest can sometimes leave their mark. And deeply ingrained images can be extremely hard to shift.

The people of Limerick could easily be forgiven for thinking that its notorious nickname was finally being consigned to the past; that the joke had just about run its course. They have worked hard over many years to shake off the old image of a place which was deeply conservative and inward-looking, with outdated industries and run-down buildings and streets.

Today's Limerick is a modern, vibrant place with an expanding population, a sophisticated and varied social life and a passionate love of sport.

But the people of Limerick are currently in a state of shock and bewilderment. Four murders in the space of just 16 days have savagely reinforced the city's reputation for violence. Three of the victims were stabbed to death.

Six people have been murdered in Limerick this year. The most commonly used weapon was the knife. The deaths have badly shaken the city's confidence. Visitors are now openly asking if they are safe on the streets.

In reality, visitors are as safe as they would be in any other city or town. And the vast majority of people living in

Limerick are not personally affected. Most of the violent incidents are confined to a relatively small number of people who have taken part in often vicious feuding between rival gangs and families over a long number of years. The last two decades have been marked by sporadic outbreaks of appalling violence and tit-for-tat murders.

An example was the killing of local criminal Eddie Ryan who was gunned down by two men who burst into a Limerick city bar last November. Two innocent customers, a mother and daughter, were seriously injured. To date, one man has been charged. Since the killing, there has been a series of gun and petrol bomb attacks on the homes of members of two rival families.

The gardai say that, contrary to the general belief, the latest wave of killings is not related to any ongoing feuds. Investigators say they are actually a series of spontaneous incidents that are not in any way linked. A freak blip on the local crime radar screen. They believe that some of the deaths may have resulted from initially trivial incidents that escalated.

Most of the very serious violence in Limerick is said to involve no more than a handful of families who live in some of the most socially deprived areas of the city. Some are alleged to be involved in drugs trafficking. The number of individual hard-core troublemakers is estimated at no more than about 20 or 30. The names of the families are widely known in the city.

The attacks are almost exclusively due to personal animosities or deep-seated



Alderman Michael Kelly: 'The only way you can have peace is for everyone to put out their hand instead of the sword.' Picture by James Horan/Press 22

hatreds which, in some cases, have been passed on from generation to generation.

"You take half a dozen families out of Limerick and it would be the quietest city in the world," says independent city councillor John Gilligan. "Two families are responsible for the vast majority of the crime in our city."

"There's no compunction about killing people. They'd kill people like you'd order a pint. They would put the same thought process into it."

Michael Kelly says he would now be dead if he had stuck with his life of violent crime. He says somebody would surely have killed him. "Not that it would be easy to kill me," he smiles, as if recalling his former image as one of Limerick's hardest men. "I wouldn't have made it easy for them, but that was the road I was heading."

His crimes included burglary, common assault, causing grievous bodily harm and shooting with intent to endanger life. In the early 1980s, he was charged with murdering a local man and was acquitted.

Once, during a feud with another family, he was set upon in the city centre and was viciously and repeatedly stabbed and left for dead.

Despite sustaining horrific injuries, he made no complaint to the gardai. Asked why, he replies: "Because that was the way I was. It was the law of the land at

that time that you didn't go to the guards. You sorted your own problems."

When Michael Kelly left jail in 1985, he became involved with local curate Fr Joe Young in trying to save youngsters in his native Southill — one of the city's most deprived areas — from becoming involved in crime. Two years ago, he stood as a candidate in the local elections on an anti-crime ticket. He topped the poll in his area, getting nearly a quarter of the total first-preference votes. He is now an independent alderman in Limerick Corporation.

He says that since last year he has successfully brokered two separate peace deals between different warring families in the locality. Part of the deals was that the families agreed to drop charges which were pending against each other.

The gardai have privately criticised the arrangement, saying that it has prevented serious charges being brought against people in the courts. They claim that Alderman Kelly's intervention has actually hindered the prosecution of very serious offences which will now go unpunished. He disagrees: "The only way you can have peace is for everyone to put out their hand instead of the sword."

He says some of the former bitter enemies are now on friendly terms. The gardai admit that there is now a lot less feuding in the Southill area.

Asked about Limerick's Stab City image, Alderman Kelly says: "These are just spur of the moment incidents. Ninety per cent of it is not premeditated. A lot of young people in Limerick carry weapons because they are affiliated to one family or another. They feel that by carrying weapons they can protect themselves."

"Anybody who carries a weapon is capable of killing and maiming. They don't necessarily carry them to do it, but if a situation arises, it turns into tragedy."

In a bizarre twist, he found himself back in jail for two nights this week. He was remanded in custody accused of assaulting his wife, Majella. But when the case came before the court on Wednesday, she dropped the charge, saying she had also assaulted him. On local radio the following morning, he admitted he "gave her a slap" to bring her to her senses after she became hysterical over a fire which extensively damaged the family home some days previously. He said his marriage is now over.

Alderman Kelly, who runs a successful security business in Limerick with his brother Anthony, says his next political step will be to run for the Dail. He believes it is the only place where he can do anything for the youth, the elderly and the homeless of his native city.

THE VICTIMS

March 5: Anthony O'Donoghue (23), died two weeks after being found unconscious outside an apartment complex at Dublin Road. Man charged in connection with the death.

June 28: James Kelly (42) was stabbed at Kennedy Park. Man questioned and file sent to the DPP.

August 12: Anthony Casey (45) died two days after being found with head injuries in an alleyway off Parnell Street. Two men and two women questioned and file being sent to the DPP.

August 13: John O'Sullivan (24) died from multiple stab wounds at Moyross. Man (29) charged with murder.

August 26: Brian Hanley (20) died after being stabbed outside a pub in Kileely. The victim was on bail on charges relating to a £1 million ecstasy haul last June. But Gardai do not believe his death was drug-related. No arrests.

August 28: Eric Leamy (19) died from a single stab wound in a row at Lee Estate. No arrests.

Faced with the fact of recent weeks, local political representatives have sought refuge in statistics to show that Limerick is not as dangerous a place as the headlines would suggest. But it depends on which statistics you care to quote. The grim reality is that the only place with more murders this year is Dublin. Nine people have died there, but it has 20 times the population. Regrettably, Limerick tops the 2001 league by a mile.

City Mayor Dick Sadlier quotes EU serious crime figures for 1999. The EU average was 63.14 indictable offences per thousand people. The figure for Dublin was 38.63, Cork 26.2, Waterford 21 and Limerick 20.2. "I feel I'm compelled to quote statistics in order to put the relative position of Limerick in context. In no way am I trying to justify what has happened. One crime is one too many."

He says the media view of Limerick means that violent incidents there get a totally disproportionate amount of coverage. Similar crimes elsewhere don't get the same level of attention.

He says there is no point in denying the ugliness of recent events. It is also very important, he says, to remember the heartbreak and devastation which has been caused to all those people directly affected.

Limerick is a city in pain this week. Six people are dead. The city's image has been badly tarnished. Garda resources are seriously overstretched. The prayer on everybody's lips now is that there will be no more killing.