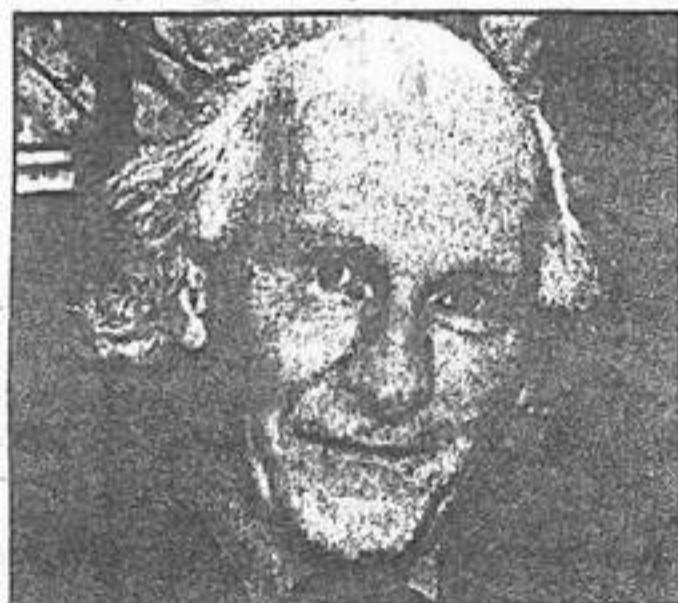


# Civic Trust's work based on thrust



Limerick Civic Trust director Denis Leonard: my proudest moment is when we restored the Bishop's Palace (LL)

By MAIRÉAD NÍ CHAOIMH

AN organisation that has led the way forward in the restoration of Limerick's heritage celebrates its 20th birthday next week.

Back in 1983, Limerick welcomed with open arms a new organisation that was going to spruce up the city and make it seem like it was wearing its best suit. A small group of people took a gamble in launching an organisation that had never existed in Ireland before - a civic trust.

Twenty years later, 106 projects later, 24 presti-

gious awards later and six books later, Limerick people need only open their eyes walking around the city to see the Trojan work that has been done by Limerick Civic Trust in sprucing up the city and restoring long forgotten historical and architectural gems.

Denis Leonard, one of the founders and current director, suggested that because there was no civic trust in Ireland before it could have been to their advantage. They had no role model to follow. They had to make it up as they went along.

Mr Leonard said that he met someone whose perception of a civic trust in England was "a lone woman sitting at a typewriter writing letters to the local council".

Mr Leonard saw a different vision entirely for Limerick. First of all he did not want to be a negative organisation objecting to various developments. He wanted to do things.

"From the start we were action based. And at the time Limerick needed something to grab it by its neck. The philosophy of the time was to develop green fields. We had lost a lot of our heritage in the previous decades," he said.

Limerick Civic Trust, a registered charity, has carried out so many projects around the city in the past two decades, including the restoration of St Michael's graveyard, St John's Church and the Irishtown City Wall, the floodlighting of The Crescent and its Georgian features and the cleaning up of the cannon outside the Hunt Museum.

Other artefacts, sites and dormant areas have been generally cleaned up and enhanced such as the repair of the drinking fountain in St John's Square, the old gas lamps at Barringtons Hospital, removing graffiti, improving the city walls at Island Road, cleaning up the pathway to Shannon Rowing Club, erecting the Sylvester O'Halloran footbridge over the Abbey River and general landscaping of the grounds in St Mary's Cathedral.

The Trust has published six books, including a book on Limerick's Georgian heritage, its mayoral history and many maps and booklets, some useful to tourists. The Trust has erected 66 green historical

plaques around the city, has recorded information on headstones at burial grounds and carried out a photographic survey of the facades of Georgian buildings.

The impressive list goes on and on.

Limerick Civic Trust is now the biggest conservation society in the country. And Limerick has led the way in helping out the now 19 civic trusts in Ireland be set up.

"Limerick would have helped set up 13 of those. People would have come to us over the years to see what we do and how we do it," said Mr Leonard.

He said that there were four factors that made the civic trust as successful as it became.

"The media have been very supportive in what we do. I have 12 scrapbooks of news clippings. It is important that we let the people of Limerick know what we are spending their money on.

"We have built up a fantastic membership base and our fundraising events get huge support. Limerick City Council has also been supportive both financially and otherwise. Another factor is FAS. We have around 80 people working on projects with 96 at one stage.

"There is an awful lot more to the trust than bricks and mortar. We give unemployed people a chance. We are the employers and FAS give funding. FAS are happy if one in four who come on the scheme get a job. Some go on to work as general operatives, secretarial or they even resume studies. We even had a 30-year-old woman who went back to do the Leaving Cert.

"We are lucky to have many good and loyal people on board. People who have worked on our projects can bring their kids along to the projects with pride and say to them I fixed that bridge, or I helped fix up that graveyard.

"My proudest moment is when we restored the Bishop's Palace. We bought it for £1,000 back in 1986 and were told we were robbed. There was a demolition order on the building. We spent £200,000 restoring it.

"I was also proud of the restoration of the Georgian House in Pery Square. The Council gave us a civic reception in recognition of what we did," he said. Mr Leonard also speaks



Georgian Limerick: 2, Pery Square which depicts life in Georgian times in the city (LL)

about a low point in the history of the Trust, and that was around 1987 during the restoration of the Potato Market. He admitted it was his lowest point, and that the trust incurred "huge debts".

"The Potato Market went very wrong for us. I started asking myself questions, especially considering I had left my job in industrial banking and my pension. But somehow things worked out. One day two men walked in off the street to the office and gave us unsolicited money. Someone had recognised the work we were doing. Those men were Pat Mortell and Rory Liddy, a former mayor. It turned out to be very lucky money.

"And shortly afterwards we got a Government grant of £100,000.

We have never looked back since," said Mr Leonard.

When asked what could be improved about the trust he admitted, "some of the speed of our projects have been deemed to be too slow. However, the reason for that is they are partly training projects for people. But everything gets done and done to a high standard eventually.

"The other criticism I would make is that the vast majority of Limerick people have not even heard of the Trust. If you were to do a survey on O'Connell Street and asked people had they heard of it most of them would say they had not. And that is something we need to work on."

The Trust plans a repeat of the inaugural

launch that was held on February 17, 1983.

The Trust was hailed back then as "an imaginative advance for the North Munster capital" and "a sure sign that at long last we have rediscovered our 'civic pride' in a Limerick Leader editorial.

Deputy Michael Noonan and David Fletcher, an authority on civic trusts, who were present

20 years ago will attend. The meeting is a celebration of the Trust's 20th birthday and the theme will be Limerick 1983 to 2003.

Mr Leonard extends an open invitation to all Limerick's citizens to attend the meeting at 7.30pm next Monday in the Ceann Cora room at Mary Immaculate College.

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