



Denis Leonard of Limerick Civic Trust

# Denis steers Civic Trust

LIMERICK'S new look architecture has won much outside admiration for the developers of today.

The preservation of the old Limerick has made Limerick Civic Trust a role model for the rest of the country.

Projects on Georgian Limerick have won national and European environment awards for the trust.

It has an impressive CV of achievement and the man with his hand on the tiller from day one is Denis Leonard, its director.

Denis was in a way provoked into getting a Civic Trust formed in Limerick while in conversation with a Dublin friend.

He told Denis he would not take up any kind of transfer to Limerick as he would see it as a backward career step.

"That remark made me a bit shirty and I decided it was time for action," he recalled.

Denis, then a banking executive in Limerick, was active in Junior Chamber of which he was president.

"We decided in Junior chamber to do a project on community response and I said I would answer the Dubs by pointing out the quality of life and what

we had to offer."

The Limerick Image committee was formed and the chief executive of Shannon Development, Paul Quigley came up with the idea of a Civic Trust for Limerick, having seen one operate in the UK.

"There was not Civic Trust in Ireland at the time, even though they had been in operation in England since 1957. Paul Quigley brought over David Fletcher and he spoke to the Limerick Image group and we thought it was a great idea."

The project developed apace. A public meeting was called at Mary Immaculate on February 17, 1983 as the Image group felt it was time to gather all the hurlers off the ditch and kick into action.

"David Fletcher came over and was the principal speaker and there was a very big attendance. It was chaired by the Mayor Tony Bromell and among those present was the Minister for Justice, Michael Noonan. This proved there was a great desire for a civic trust and we were right in our judgement on the matter," said Denis.

An initial steering committee, chaired by Denis

moved ahead with a project to build a new boundary wall at St Mary's Cathedral. This was followed by the Limerick Memorial near Jury's Hotel and restoration work at the Potato Market which was their first big undertaking.

Initially the projects targeted by the fledgling Civic Trust were low-cost environmental improvements in conjunction with AnCo, the state manpower agency at that time.

Employment grants, funding from the corporation, Shannon Development and private subscriptions from the people of the city kept projects funded.

In those initial days the trust had a turnover of about £4,000 and in the second year this went to over £50,000.

The Trust was employing 47 people on different schemes through AnCO and it was being managed on a voluntary basis with Denis, who was chairman, supervising things from an office in his own home.

"Seamus Gubbins took over as chairman. A decision had then to be made to go one of two ways: reduce it back to a manageable size as a voluntary organisation or employ a fulltime director and move forward."

Denis applied for the advertised position of director and got it.

The work of the Civic Trust was then expanded to include research and to cope with this an additional office was taken in the Tait Centre.

And in 1987 the trust bought the ruined site of the Old Bishops Palace for £1,000.

"It was just a shell of a building and there was a demolition order on it. We rebuilt it with the help of money from the National Lottery and we also took out a bank loan. That was a good decision to rebuild it in situ. It has given us an identity and other organisations use so it is a community/civic building and it looks a stunning building."

Other trusts have followed where Limerick Civic Trust has led and there are now 13 other Civic Trusts in the Republic.

"We have help start up 11 of these, and this is a great achievement to have people from Dublin, Cork, Waterford and major towns approaching us to find out what we have achieved and how we went about it. This something that Limerick can be proud of that the Civic Trust is the role model for the rest of the country."