

Profile: DENIS LEONARD

By MARY HEENAN

'A LATE vocation', is how Denis Leonard describes his involvement with Limerick Civic Trust.

But much of the credit for the success of the Trust must surely go to Denis, who last August was appointed its first full-time director.

"I certainly have no regrets but I would have if I had missed out on the chance to become involved," said Denis, who, prior to August last, was involved in industrial banking and finance for over 20 years.

And though the Trust is still only in its infancy, it already has a number of fine projects to its credit, and many more are now in the pipeline.

Following two years of research, Limerick Civic Trust was formed in February 1983 — prior to this a Limerick Image project committee was in existence. Denis was chairman of this committee and he went on to become the inaugural chairman of the Trust.

"And never in our wildest dreams did we imagine that we would come this far in three years — our idea at the start was to grow slowly and select a few projects and do these well."

"This principle has remained and we have succeeded in building up our credibility," said Denis, who is looking forward this month to the opening of the first 1,000 sq. metres of the Potato Market — the Trust's first major venture.

"It was easy to identify the projects—looking around the city many of our well known landmarks were in need of immediate attention," he claimed.

The Trust's first project was the boundary wall at St. Mary's Cathedral—"this was certainly a challenge for us and it cost in the region of £12,000. While working on this project we noticed the

dereliction across the way at the Potato Market.

Key area in city

"A key area in the city, the Potato Market is reputed to be the site where the Danes landed and settled in Ireland. But all that greeted the visitor to St. Mary's Cathedral was an unauthorised caravan park and lines of washing. Many of the sheds from the original market had been pulled down and the capping stones were pushed into the river."

Denis believes that this was certainly an ambitious project for the Trust, but he is now happy to say that they are well on their way to achieving their objective.

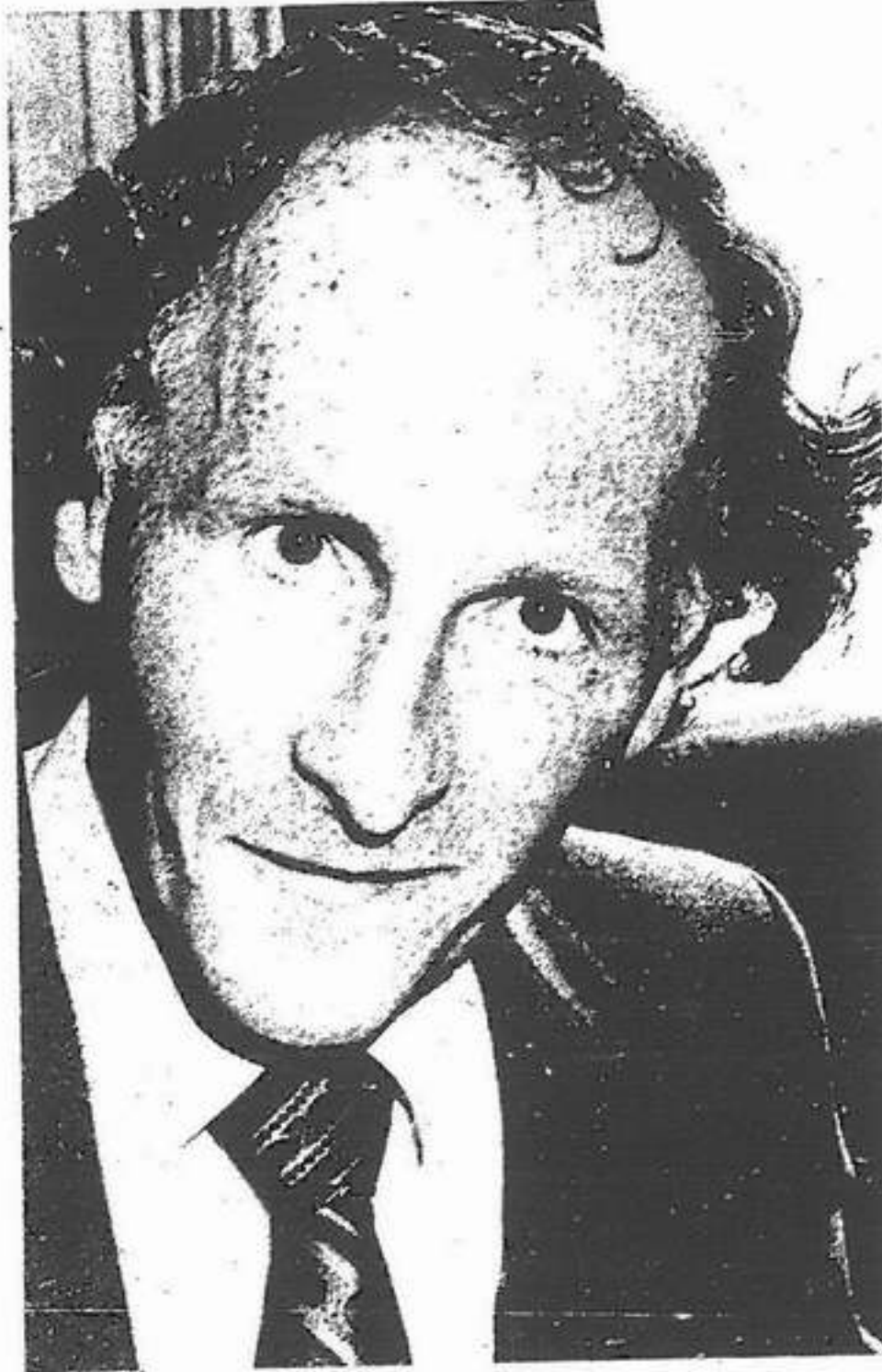
"When we began the Potato Market project, we certainly didn't visualise that the recession would continue for so long, but we have been very lucky with the substantial grants we received from the Government and we hope to have most of the work completed this year."

Many people, he said, had complained that this had been a slow project and he is critical of what he described as unfair criticism.

"Sufficient people looked at this site for the past 60 years. Now we are doing something about it and we are getting more criticism than was ever levelled at our predecessors."

And in revamping the old market they are hoping to create a focal point and an amenity area which will be second to none in the country — they have already received many interested enquiries regarding the renting of stalls which is a great vote of confidence for them and augurs well for its success.

Denis expresses the hope that the market will be com-



plementary to existing commercial life in the city.

Young people involved

Returning to the criticism that the project is receiving Denis pointed out that the project was not being done

much of this work is slow—the laying of cobbles and stone work is tedious."

And now as their first major enterprise is nearing completion, the Trust, in keeping with their policy of always having one on-going major project, have another earmarked for development.

Their next is the development of the Bishop's Palace, Church Street.

"We are very anxious to get our own independence and to do this we must get our own headquarters."

The palace is the oldest domestic building standing in the city. "All that remains are the four walls but we hope not alone to use it for our headquarters, but also to make it available to other voluntary civic organisations in the city."

Limerick-born Denis sees this as the Trust's contribution in revamping the island for the tercentennial of the Williamite Sieges.

The history of the palace, together with details for its development has currently been entered for the 'Support for Projects to Conserve the Communities Architectural Heritage' — this is currently being adjudicated and Denis is confident of winning an award.

Full time base of benefit

"Having a full-time base will not alone be a major benefit to ourselves and the voluntary organisations but it will also be of benefit to the city.

"A new sense of awareness is now evident in the city and we would like to feel that we are part of this new found pride."

King's Island, if developed, could become a huge tourist attraction, maintains the director.

"Outsiders now realise that we are now trying to do something and it is very encouraging that Limerick people abroad have expressed their encouragement," said Denis as he produced the many letters he has already received from people wishing to become patrons of the Trust.

Other projects which the Trust, the only one of its kind in Ireland, have been involved with, include St. Michael's Graveyard, Walls in Limerick in St. John's Hospital, the Jewish Graveyard, Commemorative Plaques, and the Limerick Street Antiquities booklet.

The former president of Junior Chamber, Limerick, and the 1983 Citizen of the Year, he now has plans to bring out a second booklet.

"A new sense of awareness and pride has developed among our citizens but it is essential to ensure that this continues — therefore emphasis must be placed on young people.

"This booklet will be geared towards the 12-13 year olds and will give a simplified version of the history of Limerick — we must teach our schoolchildren about their terrific heritage.

"And we intend to support this booklet with a slide show."

Not alone has Denis plans for the development of the city but he also intends to make inroads into Europe. "I would like to identify with the E.E.C., and I can see no reason why we can't receive some funding from Europe."

Denis has also made a special appeal for more members and patrons. "If Limerick looks better then it will be more attractive to potential business sources."

commercially. AnCO and Teamwork training schemes have provided job opportunities for local young people. To date over 150 young people have been involved—"look at the income that this has generated and also look at the valuable experience that these young people have gained under the watchful eye of their foreman, Mr. Noel Malone.

"One must also realise that