

A look back to the future

Limerick Civic Trust celebrates its 30th anniversary this year. Director Dr James Ring tells the Leader's **Anne Sheridan** where it's going to go from here

JAMES Ring had two choices to make when he became manager of Limerick Civic Trust three years ago - to fine-prune the organisation to withstand an economic storm, or keep spending money and let it die.

The latter was never an option, but that did not make his first option an easier road to take.

"Sometimes I feel I've take over the trust at the wrong time, because you'd love to start when there's loads of money and you can do what you want," he says.

"I can only imagine what I could get done [then]. At the moment we're treading water to ensure that when the recession is over we're still there."

The green shoots the trust wanted to plant in communities across the city certainly weren't mirrored in their financial accounts.



The late Denis Leonard, the Trust's 'inspiration' and founder, marking its 25th anniversary

They were facing a financial spiral, which was threatening to spin faster and deeper.

He also got to grips with tackling the perception of the trust. Few people outside of its immediate circle could

summarily answer what its work involves, who it's for and whether this body is something they too might like to get involved in.

But the economic recession has given them new eyes to view

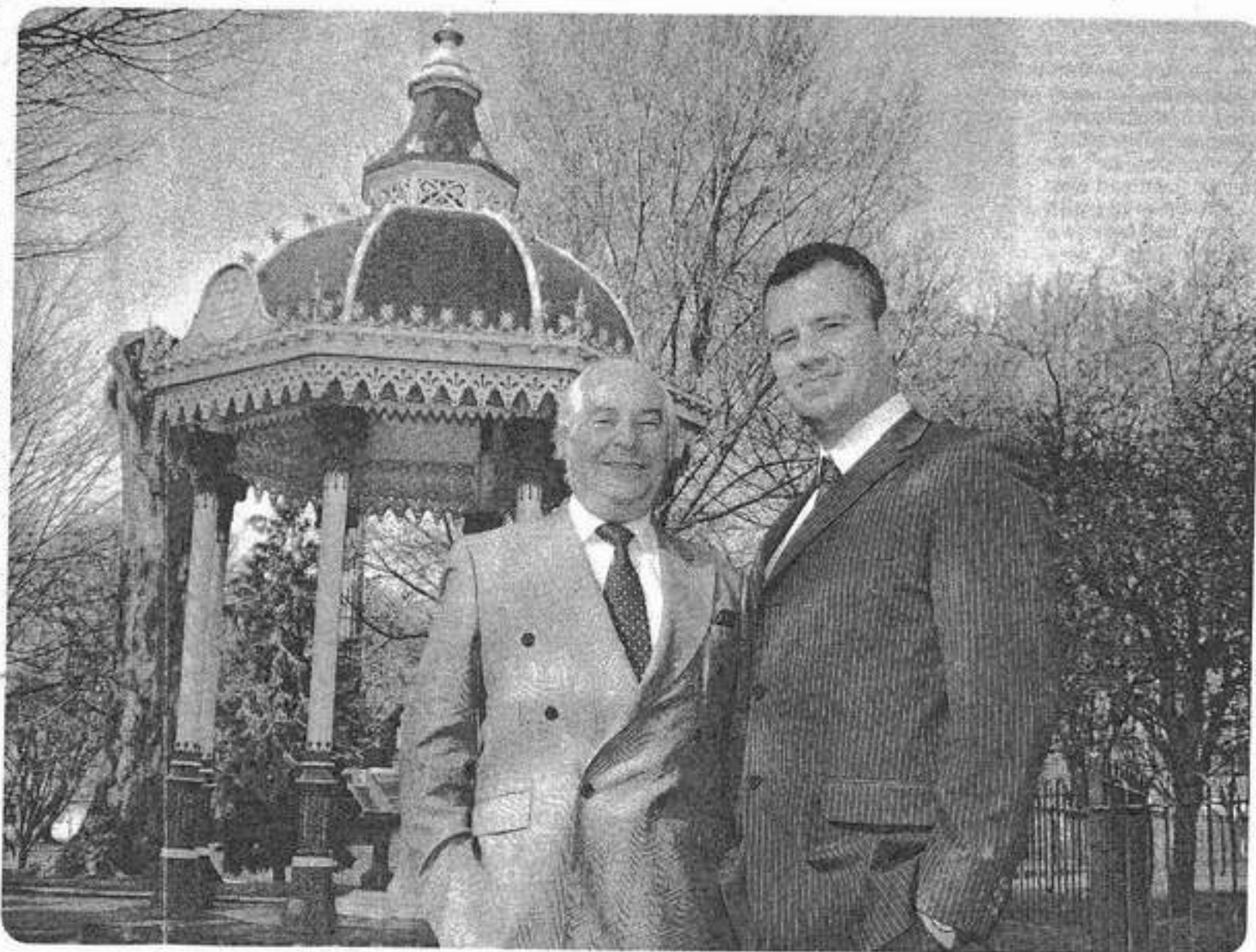
some of the city's age-old problems.

In fact, they have returned to the ethos of the trust's learned founder, Dr Denis Leonard, to pave a new future.

Dr James Ring, 32, from Athlunkard Street in the city, started in the worst possible time, or perhaps it was the best possible time to start afresh, and give a new impetus to one of Limerick's most reputable bodies devoted to the common good.

Largely its focus has been in the areas of conservation, restoration, civic and environmental works, and while that remains its core, its ambitions over time are evolving.

Dr Ring is frank about where the organisation now stands, but clearly frustrated by all the obstacles he and the



Billy Peacocke, one of the longest serving members of Limerick Civic Trust, and Dr James Ring, manager of the trust, by the renovated fountain in the People's Park

► Continues on page 2

'Trust is needed now more than ever'

Continued from page 1

board have had to surmount to return it to some sort of level ground. And the struggle to reclaim lost ground is still not complete.

"When I started the trust was in the midst of a recession and had huge financial problems. Membership had dropped by 50% and Government funding was cut by 50%. We had to stabilise the organisation and are still fighting financially," he explains in No 1 Pery Square, next door to the Georgian House and Gardens, which they have been forced to close.

In the first year he took office, the trust was forced to make seven redundancies, which was "unfortunate" as some of them had over 20 years of service with the trust, and develop a three-year plan to keep it afloat, after corporate sponsorship dropped massively.

"The first year the plan was to keep the cuts in line with our revenues, which was hard."

The Georgian House and Gardens instead of supplementing the trust's finances, after a €1m redevelopment in 1999, was still taking from it. Another hard decision was on the table to make. "We put so much money in to it that it's a shame to see the doors closed. You'd love to see it open, and not even make a profit, but break even and allow people to enjoy what we've done."

Year one, the year he started, saw a €40k loss; year two saw a €10k loss, and then things started to balance out.

"This year, for the first time, we saw a small profit, just a couple of thousand but we had shown that we could stabilise it."

"Now, this year is all about regrowing the organisation and it's timely that it's our 30th anniversary. It's time to take stock - for all our board to take stock and decide how we're going to move forward."



James Ring at the community garden in King's Island, which was formerly waste ground, and is now serving the needs of the community. The trusts wants to become a "trailblazer" in environmental matters, to reduce waste and save people money

Their revenue and expenditure is now "fairly much balanced", he says. "There are no more excuses. We need to get on with it now," he says determinedly.

Billy Peacocke, 69, from the South Circular Road, is the 'new' chairman of the board, though he laughs at the introduction, given that he is the longest serving member, who started digging the roots of the organisation at the same time as Denis Leonard, its legendary founder.

Denis, he says, was the trust's "founder, first director, first chairman and inspiration".

Billy was there with Denis at the very first public meeting in Mary Immaculate College. He was on the first executive and has there since.

"I'm link with the start," he says, with a laugh, with a nod to the 'new blood' sitting next to him.

"People like it as an organisation because it achieves things and it goes out and it does things," he says in explaining its appeal and longevity.

The redevelopment of the Potato Market in 1986 in an innovative design by Murray O'Laoire architects to

replicated the Shannon river with three lakes "nearly broke the trust", he said.

Insurers warned that children could fall in to the "lakes", as as a consequence, the owners, Limerick Market Trustees, paved over it.

"We were totally innocent about costs in those days." The costs mounted to our €350,000, but luckily Minister Michael Noonan "pulled a stroke" in the Budget and "saved our bacon" by way of a larger slice of funding.

"The projects we're involved in now are much smaller, more

community based," said Billy, pointing to their major developments of the Bishop's Palace and the Georgian House. Those glory projects are now a thing of the past.

"There's nothing like that sort of money available now, so we're going back to the communities. Smaller, lower value but probably equally effective."

James interjects: "When we say communities, we're talking about communities across the board, from Monaleen, Moyross, Castletroy..

If you have an idea for your community, we want to engage with

that. We're everywhere. We genuinely have tried hard to reach out to communities. This is where we are, if you want us, come and get us. That has worked - a lot of communities have started to engage with us."

He says they're not going to arrive out in someone's estates with buckets and shovels looking to plant flowerbeds or other associated works if they're not invited.

That's not how it works - they want buy-in from the community - in the form of energy, ideas and manpower.

"We don't go into

Monaleen, and say 'Sit back, we're taking over now'. We won't do anything unless there's a maintenance agreement." Nor will they "walk away" when the work is complete either.

The trust now has 200 members, more than they have had in some years, and their annual membership helps cover the costs of the works the trust carries out. People from Janesboro, for instance, he says have now joined the trust after one community project there.

"It's great to see that someone who was not traditionally involved, can now join the board and influence decision making," says James.

"It's going back to what it originally was. Denis [Leonard] summed it up in his book - it's about a group of activists seeing something that needs to be done, and coming

whole different cohort of people who may have traditionally supported us."

The three year plan might nearly be at a close but "we're still fighting financially, so that's still a big goal. We'll be looking to create new sources of income and different fundraisers."

The trust, in the economic heyday, had outlined a host of new projects that they hoped would see completed by now. They included the €2million restoration of No 4 Patrick Street, the birth place of the famous 19th century opera singer Catherine Hayes, and the erection of a Hannah Parr monument, in memory of the four Norwegian children who died during a stop-over in Limerick while sailing to New York in 1868. Those plans are now on indefinite hold.

In the coming months, there are

community gardens.

They might not sound like projects to excite most young people, but the work has pay-offs for people whether they're working in their own community or helping another. People's sense of pride in themselves, their community and wanting to give something back is drawing more and more people to the trust and other charitable organisations. "The number one answer you'll get from people about why they do this is self worth, and pride of place after that. Money is the last thing on their mind."

Billy explains that upwards of 60 people employed through the trust, mainly on FAS schemes, and some have their social welfare allowance supplemented by €20 a week. But that's not the reason they get involved. "It's about people, not projects," says Billy.

It's about the small things that people might overlook in their daily life - a beautifully restored bridge, or a fountain in the park.

"There's more of a need now [for the trust] than there ever was. You can't keep expecting the Government and the council to work magic now when the money simply isn't there. All these community based organisations are coming to the fore now and they have to pick up the slack where the council can't do the work. I'm not trying to take the council's side, it's the reality."

In its time, the trust has completed over 150 projects, with combined expenditure in excess of €17 million, and won 31 Irish and international awards for work ranging from restoration of historic sites to the publication of a Limerick visitors' guide.

There is plenty of time, and crucially members, to draw up new plans for a new future. One thing is certain, they promise - the first argument on the agenda will be a row about the new

“This year, for the first time, we saw a small profit, just a couple of thousand but we had shown that we could stabilise it

together and doing it. Instead of pestering the council, just get up and do it."

He also wants to demystify the trust and hold fundraising activities to help attract younger members.

"The impression of the civic trust might be one thing, but internally it's all about helping Limerick. No one is in it for any personal gain. They see a city that needs help.

"We want to make sure the civic trust is open to everyone. It's not a closed shop. It's not a secret organisation. Anyone in Limerick can join it. If people can't afford to pay the highest levels of membership there are other ways of getting involved in the trust."

This year they have organised mountain climbs and river cruises - more "fun outdoor pursuits to attract a

plans afoot to unveil a sculpture dedicated to Limerick's past and present sporting heroes. The plans for this "eye-catching" are at an advanced stage, and while it's a "big" project it won't exceed six figures.

As ever, the trust wants to remember people others might easily forget or look over as time marches on.

"It's very easy to spot the modern heroes like Paul O'Connell etc, but the sporting people of the 40s, 50s and 60s could be forgotten - the normal joes soaps who were good in the time they did it, before it turned professional."

Its ongoing programme of works involve the upkeep of graveyards, improvement to the city's parks, environmental initiatives, and