

From pigs' heads to computers and from Limerick to Leinster House

THE OPTIMISM OF LIMERICK'S MERCHANT STATESMAN

By MARTIN BYRNES

TED RUSSELL yesterday began his 25th successive year as chairman of Limerick Harbour Commissioners.

Five times mayor, 37 years in the city council, 29 of them as alderman, former Senator and TD, he is the sprightly doyen of Limerick's public life at 78 years of age.

He has come a long way since selling pigs' heads over the counter at Dan O'Connor's shop in William Street when he first entered business sixty years ago.

But he is still a visionary. He sees the city docks relocating downriver to Corcree, and the present dockland becoming a plush residential marina area, bristling with the masts of luxury yachts and humming to the bustle of discharging fishing trawlers.

The Estuary is poised to become a tourism and industrial hub, he feels, and he doesn't feel that the absence of a single estuarial authority will necessarily stand in the way of progress. Things can move quickly if they are needed, he says.

His opinions on Limerick's architecture are at times scathing, and he wants to see pedestrianised streets restoring life to the city centre.

"Limerick has a country town atmosphere," he smiles. He deeply wants Limerick people to be proud of themselves.

The boy who came back from finishing his education in England had already an impressive civic pedigree. His grandfather, George Russell and granduncle, Dan O'Connor, had each held elective civic office.

The family had a tradition of service to the people of Limerick, and nobody questioned — indeed most expected — his entry to public life in 1942.

He had "a bit of an accent, I suppose", but fitted easily into the cut and thrust of civic politics.

"People asked me how I could go along and sit listening to all that rubbish for three or four hours, but that wasn't how I saw it. There were great characters in the councils then, more so, I think, than now. I enjoyed every moment."

Articulate and dapper, he was told that nobody from a big house would be elected to the Dail from Limerick. His Dail career was indeed short lived, although he is unique in being the only Limerick Independent ever elected. His longer career in the Seanad did not depend on the popular vote.

But the people of Ward One stuck by him for four decades and he accepts that he would not have had difficulty in being re-elected to council in 1979, had he chosen to run.

"I actually enjoyed local politics much more than at

national level," he observes.

As events transpired, his son, George, continued the Russell name in the City Council for five more years.

"The council didn't suit George at all. He is a very able businessman, and that is what he is good at. He was right to pull out after one term, if he wasn't happy there."

Service

There was always a certain 'noblesse oblige' in Ted Russell's makeup. He felt — still feels — that he was continuing a family tradition of service to the city, and that he had an

at Ballysimon are kitted out with the most modern computers and control and accountancy equipment. The whirr of fax machines complement an integrated PABX phone system. The milling and blending machines are also modern.

As an importer of grain for milling, Mr Russell had a direct interest in the port, his principal remaining public interest.

He has presided over convulsive changes in the harbour.

When he first became chairman a quarter of a century ago, the Port of Limerick consisted of Limerick City

In effect, the dockers were unemployed. They were casual, and many were dockers in name only. The system was untenable, and one of Mr Russell's first priorities as chairman was to sort the system out.

Handling

The result was the establishing sixteen years ago of Limerick Cargo Handling, union agreement to the reduction of the labour force to a fifth of its nominal size and the regularisation of the conditions of those remaining, and the investment in modern facilities.

In the meantime, the board was playing its part in the preparation of the Estuary for heavy industry.

"The harbour board is a service industry. It can't claim that it was responsible for bringing in Aughinish or Moneypoint. The Aughinish and ESB people made up their own minds. But the harbour board made certain that all the information which they would require about the Estuary was there for them."

The harbour board had also facilitated the development of Tarbert power station, and was later to joint-venture with Aer Rianta in the construction of the Shannon Airport jetty for the importation of aviation fuel for Aeroflot ('red diesel' to the workers).

The board has today an annual turnover of more than a million pounds, and employs more than sixty people. The cash comes from pilotage fees and cargo dues.

sioners are a forward planning authority too.

"As far as port development is concerned, we are a local authority in that regard."

The Estuary can handle vessels of 175,000 tonnes, and these have actually entered to berth at Moneypoint.

"It's a difficult manoeuvre, and a ship of that size would not have much clearance over the sandbar at the mouth of the Estuary, but they have done it," he said.

"Plans are there for the dredging of the sand bar to 250,000 at a cost of just £5 million, and for a further deepening of the channel to take 400,000 tonnes, although there are not many vessels of that size around. That would cost £12 million.

"The Department (of the Marine) is reluctant to allow us to spend that money now, and they may well be right. The fact is that if any project came on stream which would require that kind of tonnage, we have everything in place to go ahead at once. We have a further advantage also, in that the dredged channel would have a tidal ebb and flow along its length, so there would be very little silting up. It would sweep itself, and maintenance costs would be quite small."

The tidal rush in the Estuary is enormous. The rise is eighteen feet at maximum. The scouring effect of tens of millions of tonnes of water, four times a day, would keep the channel clear.

Bulk

Limerick city's small port has undergone a quiet metamorphosis also. Today, ninety per cent of its throughput is containerised or in bulk. The handling of loose cargo is almost a thing of the past. Grain, fertilizer and coal are handled in bulk, and even the reduced-to figure of sixty dockers in 1975 is now greatly scaled down.

This has all been part of the revolution in transport over the years. The roll-on-roll-off trade at Rosslare and at Cork, and the load-on-load-off container facilities at those ports and at Waterford has changed the face of Irish goods movement.

Drogheda and Dublin, also facing Britain and European markets, have their share.

And Mr Russell has a sombre warning for the future: "In 1992, we in the west of Ireland will be isolated. I see serious problems unless the EC and Government propose to spend a lot of money on infrastructure.

"The road from Rosslare to here is appalling. They're improving bits of it here and there, but it's still terrible. And the EC has plans to build a 'Euro-road' from Dublin to Rosslare; I believe they want to start it in Belfast. Then everything will be along the east coast.

"What hope is there of attracting development to the west of the country if that is deliberate national and European policy?"

"There will always be a need for Limerick City port. The city stands at the head of its estuary, and has good radial connections to a wide hinterland. It will continue to carry some trade into the future."

And he is not over-worried about the neglect of the Estuary through the recent changes in Shannon Development's remit. The company was deprived of its international industrial function, but was given directions to promote the development of the great waterway.

Cleaned

"I believe that the IDA and they will work well together to promote a major industry for the Estuary. And we don't necessarily need what we call 'smokestack' industries. There are other, cleaner, options. If you want to develop the Estuary, you must have an

awareness of the value of industry and also of the dangers to tourism.

"I am absolutely satisfied that the local authorities along the Estuary (Limerick, Clare and Kerry County Councils), who are the statutory planning authorities, would not allow any dirty industry, and would impose very stringent conditions on any proposed development.

"It could take years and years of work to attract another large industry, but I know that the IDA are very anxious to develop the Estuary with a suitable plant."

"We could attract another industry based on our food production, such as Wyeth at Askeaton, which is based on milk. This would have an economic spinoff far greater than just creating manufacturing jobs. And it would be clean."

And moving to his other visions of the future, he had this to say:

"You may call this the dreams of an old man, but I see fishing trawlers coming to Limerick to discharge their catch at our wet dock. That would, I think, be easily developed, and would be a welcome thing. It would bring the sea to us. We often think that we just have a river, but the city is linked to the ocean.

"And I see development at the same dock for a yacht marina. The area is about to become quite desirable through constructions in the designated area. It could be a very good place for people to live. I see it as an integrated development.

"That would mean, by the way, that the ordinary dockland could be moved downstream. It would not be a new enclosed 'floating dock', but we could create a new port by dredging deeply so that vessels could use it at low tide, and put in jetties to serve them.

Mr Russell, at the time of his retirement from the Corporation in 1979, was the last surviving member of the 1942 council.

"I still am," he added, rather surprising himself at the self-evidence of the remark.

"I believe that any city, county or country should treasure its past. Its past is the basis of its present and future.

"I wonder whether we should be so unquestioning of the demolition of Cruises Hotel, for example. Everyone talks about the expenditure of £30 million, but are we losing more than we think? That was a famous coaching inn.

"I accept that we cannot preserve all of Georgian Limerick, but we should certainly preserve the Crescent and as many blocks down from that as possible.

"I cannot accept that some of the companies and banks are not able to preserve rather than stick up ugly boxes. Ours is the only Georgian city outside of Dublin, and that should never be forgotten."

He was critical of Bank House as being totally out of keeping with its setting.

"And the George next door isn't much better.

"A city needs to have people living in it. There should be incentives to do up many of the buildings, and they should have flats overhead the offices.

"Some people say that they don't like working in them, because the ceilings are too high. But ceilings can be lowered. I do not see any problem which cannot be overcome.

Mr Russell said that Limerick has been overtaken by cars.

"Every change in recent times has been to facilitate the car. Now that O'Connell Street is one-way, it is in danger of becoming a speedway. I wonder whether that is what we want.

"We have a country town atmosphere in Limerick. I feel that we could capitalise on that to a far greater extent," he concluded.



Captain courageous! Mr Russell at his early morning desk.

obligation to use his ability to help Limerick.

He has never spoken ill of Limerick, and has publicly and privately defended its interests whenever appropriate.

A successful businessman, head of Dan O'Connor Ltd, producers of the DOC range of animal feeds, at Ballysimon Road, he has also held interests in a number of other businesses, including Silvermines Ltd during that company's years of maximum expansion and diversification.

Now partially retired, the day-to-day running of Dan O'Connor Ltd and of the other family firm, National Rusks at the Dock Road is in the capable hands of son, George.

Mr Russell has never been intimidated by technology, and his modest looking offices

Docks and the necessary lights, buoys and pilotage vessels necessary to allow ships to steer safely from the Atlantic, sixty difficult miles to the west.

There were no marine industries along the Estuary, and the independent ports at Foynes and Kilrush were barely ticking over. Clare was not represented on the Harbour Board.

The city had more than 300 dockers, but work for only a small fraction of them. He recalls with horror the congregation of the men at the harbour gates each morning, rain, snow or ice, waiting for the stevedores to select whatever number were needed for that day.

Cargo handling was largely manual. The goods came in loose form, and the procedure was very labour intensive.

Aughinish and Moneypoint together generate more than half of the port authority's income. The figures are large, but the cost-per-tonne is minuscule because of the huge scale of operation of each plant.

"We are responsible for pilotage and lighting on the Estuary, and for the other facilities," said Mr Russell. "We control from Sarsfield Bridge to the mouth of the Estuary. We have a harbour master and two assistant harbour masters, and I think that we are the only harbour with two assistant masters. Every vessel entering the port is met by one of the three.

"The Estuary has radio, radar and other navigation equipment maintained by us. The same as an airport for ships."

And the Harbour Commis-