

LOVING OUR CITY



Christchurch Cathedral, pictured with its new neighbourly representations of Strongbow and Aoife.

ATTEMPTING to view a place you know intimately through a stranger's eye is, from time to time, a useful exercise.

Attempting to sideline years of history, self-education and general knowledge of a location well-known to one's self isn't easy, but I gave it a go last Saturday week. My destination: Waterford city.

After a pleasant hour 'on air' in the company of Eamon Keane and Teresa Graham at WLRfm's Broadcast Centre, rather than high-tail it back to the splendid isolation of my lodgings, I made for the city centre. During the average working week, I don't get around the city as much as I'd like to.

The ebb and flow of news and sports writing nowadays is predominated by the need to check emails as much as it is with checking facts.

Therefore, on any average week in the newsroom, I don't really get the chance to enjoy the city, but on Saturday week last I did just that.

Taking on board a useful practical suggestion made recently by Councillor Adam Wyse, I handed some currency over the Argos counter and bought something I could just as easily have bought online. But guess what, I look at my computer far too much as it is to spend time shopping on it too.

There's a great deal to be said for human interaction, in seeing the shop staffer whose job you're doing just a little to sustain by buying something in their workplace, and the lady in question couldn't have been more pleasant to deal with.

Subsequently, I did what I generally always do when frequenting John Roberts Square when paying a visit to The Book Centre, and, conscious of my morning experiment, really took in the beauty of the building.

What was once the city's 'picture house' truly is a book shop unlike any other in the country, with its many levels, ambient atmosphere and the scent of ground coffee augmenting the experience of passing through its doors.

While there, I had a conversation with a theatrical acquaintance of mine about World War I, thus saving him a visit to 37, The Quay the following week (more about WWI in this centenary year will follow in future editions. Being an avid reader and fan of literature in its bounded and published form, needless to say I bought a newspaper before leaving the store, but I also picked up an audiobook by Stephen Fry, ideal for those hours I spend in the car during GAA Championship season. But I did it all at my leisure.

After all, it was a Saturday morning; the day ahead of me was a rarity indeed as it didn't require my breaking open the laptop and lashing out a few hundred words on politics, the economy or the fitness of our senior hurling panel.

So, a little like that roast that always tastes better having been given enough time to un-raw itself within its own juices whilst in an oven where the temperature's been tempered by a patient chef, I took my time. And do you know what? It all proved most agreeable.

From there, I sauntered down Michael Street, noting a new café that had opened only 10 days previously, and took in the splendour of New Street Gardens - what a beautiful addition to our city.

As I walked past the NAMA site, which we've been led to believe shall soon be subject to a redevelopment, a chat with a photographer from a Sunday title from a week previously returned to me.

"Where are the derelict buildings," he asked, to which I replied: "Well, apart from what the City Council are redeveloping on Cathedral Square, there aren't any."

Gerry, a friendly snapper from Dublin, to whom I acted as an impromptu tour guide around the city centre, seemed genuinely surprised.

Not only were there no strikes going on in our city (nor has there been for the better part of 15 years), but Waterford was not, despite what exterior perception might otherwise suggest, crumbling into the earth.

Yes, there were many vacant commercial units around the city, only a fool would fail to acknowledge this, but I was able to tell Gerry what businesses were going to set up shop in at least five of those empty units.

And, on reflection, I felt quite pleased in reminding myself, never mind informing Gerry about the small signs of new life emerging in our commercial beleaguered city centre.

Fast forward a week and half, and with my Argos and Book Centre purchases in tow, I make for New Street Car Park, but decide to pop into the Bishop's Palace Café for my lunch.

The railings around the Bishop's Palace are festooned in art (the brainchild of Oren Little), the sun is shining, and the new Aoife and Strongbow seats around the corner have made for a great tourist photo addition.

Visitors are drifting in and out of the House of Waterford Crystal across The Mall while I'm served up a delicious plate of fish cakes and salad, and once again, I find myself struck by the friendly service and the glorious setting.

I've rarely been more content in the city I'm proud to have been born in. I'm a born optimist, even if journalism brings out the cynic in me from time to time.

But that lovely Saturday in my city is one that will stay with me.

Let's recognise what we have in Waterford, let's champion it and let's be grateful for it.

Port Láirge abú!