Disastrous City Fire

Fireman Joseph Crofton was injured when falling slates at Roches Stores cut right through his steel helmet. After being treated at Barringtons' Hospital he returned to take up light duty at the Fire Station.

On Wednesday, January 28, 1948 a disastrous fire broke out in the city centre which at one stage threatened the entire block. Fire brigades from far away at Galway and Cork were mobilised to come to the aid of their counterparts when fire broke out at Roches Stores at 1.30 a.m. that morning. The damage estimated was over half a million pounds. This is the Limerick Leader's description of the events as they unfolded that day. As such it is reprinted as it appeared that Wednesday, 62 years ago.

As a result of a disastrous fire, which was detected at 1.30 this morning, the great drapery premises of Roches Stores at the corner of Sarsfield Street and O'Connell Street, had been reduced to a smouldering ruin. The damage is estimated at £180,000.

In consequence of the disaster between eighty and ninety people have been rendered unemployed. The citizens express the hope that the company will secure temporary accommodation pending the restoration of the destroyed building.

While the citizens smouldered last night, one of the biggest fires ever to take place in the city was being fought by firemen who displayed dogged tenacity in their battle against the flames. The premises engulfed were those of Roches Stores Ltd., retail and wholesale drapers, O'Connell Street and Sarsfield Street. Though the building was completely gutted it was extremely fortunate that adjoining premises were not endangered by the flames. As it was, Roches Stores was the only building confined to Roches Stores.

As a result of the fire between 50 and 90 employees of the firm are registered unemployed.

About 1.30 a.m. the fire was detected by Mr. George O'Brien (Limerick Hotel) and Detective Still the flames spread. Terrifying shafts of fire illuminated the city and myriad of sparks as big as stars formed a sort of dome over the doomed building.

Lookers-on shivered at the scene of destruction and anxiety grew as tongues of flame could be seen shooting upwards in the front of the building in O'Connell Street. Roofs and chimneys began to crash, creating an eerie effect in the monotonous silence. It was now obvious that the building, or any part of it, could not be saved. In these circumstances the firefighters decided to concentrate all their energies on confining the conflagration and prevent it spreading to the premises of Mr. J. J. Foley and the premises of Messrs. Cannocks, O'Connell St. The Shannon Airport Brigade entered the fray and their allied help had an appreciable effect on the work on hands. By 3.30 the flames were being held in check and a half an hour later the Brigade Chief, Mr. Rough, estimated that the situation was well in hand.

Visiting Brigades

It was then decided to countermand the summonses issued to the Ennis and Galway brigades, but the former was already on its way to the city. The Galway Brigade was intercepted at Corfr. The Cork Brigade reached the city at 5.30, having been delayed on route. Their engine was not put into action, but reinforcements, together with the personnel, were sent to assist the City Brigade. The Ennis Brigade gave the signal a few moments before the Cork Brigade arrived, and the latter was given to understand that the main building was not yet under control.

Before and after

Though this picture is of McKinley's, taken around 1900, Roches Stores purchased the shop and premises a few years before the disastrous fire in 1948. As the reader can see, this was a magnificent building but credit to the company when they rebuilt the premises after the fire. They did a very fine job, as the Christmas 1958 shot of the new building shows. The same can hardly be said for the Toddy building across the road, gutted in 1959.
Before and after

Though this picture is of Mclnroy's, taken around 1906, Roches Stores purchased the shop and premises a few years before the disastrous fire in 1948. As the reader can see, this was a magnificent building but credit to the company when they rebuilt the premises after the fire. They did a very fine job, as the Christmas 1958 shot of the new building shows. The same can hardly be said for the Todds building across the road, gutted in 1959.

Officer Sherry who were covering on the corner of O'Connell Street and Harold Street. Observing what appeared to be either a smoke or fog coming from the premises of Roches Stores in Harold Street, they proceeded to investigate. It seemed that the basement, just inside the hall door, was in flames. The Fire Brigade was summoned with all possible speed but in the space of a few minutes tongues of flames shot skyward.

FIRE ENGINES AT WORK

The Brigade, under the command of Superintendent of the force, got to work with characteristic alacrity and without delay.

In the basement, four hoses were set up and the flames were soon brought under control.

One of the number, Fireman Joseph Crosthwaite, an engineer who worked in the building, was knocked unconscious by the smoke and flames. He was brought to the Marian Hospital, where he was treated and later returned to his work.

SALE OF GOODS

During the conflagration, a number of goods were salvaged. The goods were brought to the premises of Roches Stores and later sold in the shop.

MILITARY CALL OUT

The military answered the Brigade's call in the space of time and threw themselves into the battle of the flames. They were instructed to remain on duty until the fire was extinguished.