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Leader2

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A mannequin is silhouetted against the inferno that took hold in Todd's on August 25, 1959. The blaze took three days to finally be extinguished
PICTURES: COURTESY SEAN CURTIN COLLECTION

It's 50 years next week since a sudden and devastating fire razed Todd's on O'Connell Street. The blaze stretched the region's fire-fighting capability to its utmost and altered – for better or worse – the city's landscape

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Limerick's unforgettable fire

■ The shockingly swift destruction of Todd's by a blaze on August 25, 1959 took a piece of history out of Limerick's heart

Gerard Fitzgibbon

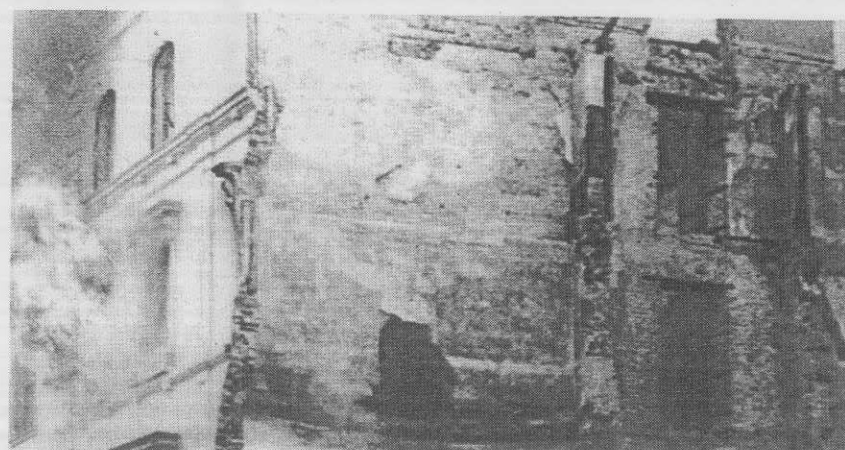
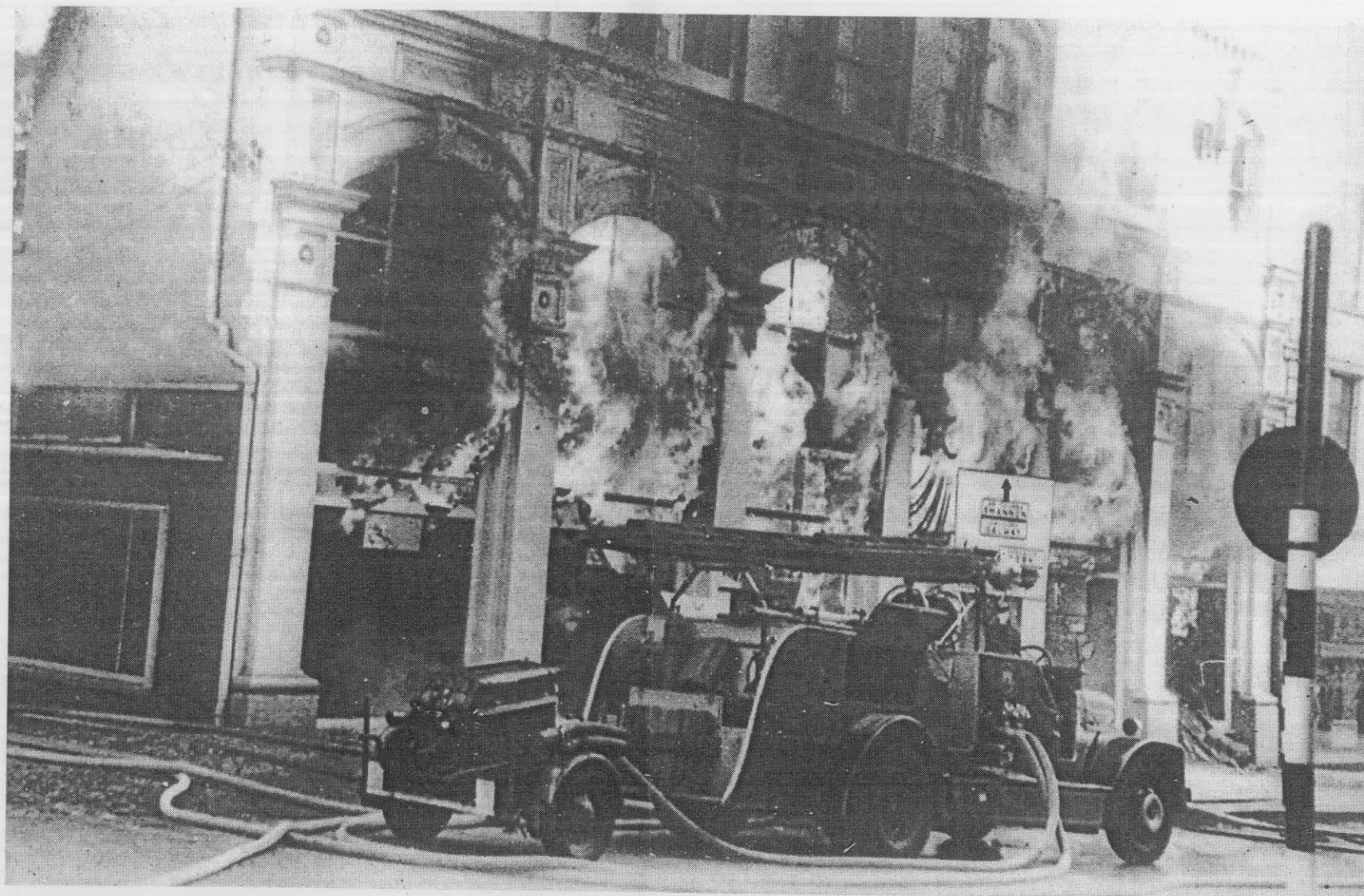
It was as if the heat and the noise and the fear of Dresden had sought a new place, past the Tuesday hush of O'Connell Street and among the lapel suits and cast-iron cookers of a city. The first spark coming from a basement fuse box was spotted by a messenger boy at 11am. The last pieces of smouldering rubble would not be silenced for days. The legacy of a disaster like no other would linger for a generation. Fifty years ago this week, Todd's was burning.

Such was the raw human effort that it took to beat back the flames of August 25, 1959 that the destruction of William Todd & Co. was carved into the minds of all those who lived it.

The aftermath of it would alter, for better or worse, the design and architecture of the city. But for the Limerick that woke that day to the word that Todd's was on fire, there was no way to see beyond the smoke and water. It was an assault on the senses.

The Limerick Leader edition of August 26 sets the tale: "Shortly after 11 o'clock yesterday morning John Monahan, a messenger boy employed by Messrs Todd and Co, heard a noise from a junction fuse box. Glancing around, he saw sparks and smoke coming from it and immediately ran upstairs to raise the alarm.

"Mr John O'Brien, secretary of the firm, grabbed a fire extinguisher and played it on the affected part of the basement. His efforts proved unavailing as the fire spread with lightning rapidity across the floor and immediately got a grip of the foot-square pitchpine supports.



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"Mr John O'Brien, secretary of the firm, grabbed a fire extinguisher and played it on the affected part of the basement. His efforts proved unavailing as the fire spread with lightning rapidity across the floor and immediately got a grip of the foot-square pitchpine supports. 'I have never seen anything like it in my life', Mr O'Brien told the Limerick Leader this morning. 'The fire spread so fast.'"

It would have been impossible to consider at the time, but within three hours those basement workers and the rest of the near two hundred staff of Todd's would be outside behind an Army cordon, watching with stunned crowds as their livelihoods burned with so much metal and brick.

From the initial spark, the fire spread quickly. The main building was mostly wooden floors, cast-iron supports and wide open spaces full of air and materials that would suck the flames through at a frightening speed. Whether through the first pockets of smoke or the first words of panic, the gardai at the nearby William Street barracks immediately alerted the fire brigade, who were then based one block over on Thomas Street.

Within minutes, Limerick's acting chief officer, Thady McInerney, was on site, and the fight to control the fire was underway. The sight that greeted him through the famous facade of Todd's would have held little ambiguity of the task ahead.

The fire had spread directly up through the wooden ground floor, which one employee told the Leader had "virtually split open" with the intense heat.

Vacuum shafts sucked the flames up into the upper levels, with the smoke turning thicker and thicker as rubber goods and other materials inside began to burn. The fire's violent thoughts became very clear, very quickly.

The panic reflexes of the company and its staff were first to kick in. Office staff were ordered by the manager, Mr A Brown, to remove as much equipment as possible as they evacuated the building



and declared an official state of emergency, sealing off the entire block. This action would undoubtedly prevent serious or fatal civilian injuries.

The numbers of firemen gathering at the site was increasing by the minute, with crews from Shannon Airport, Ardnacrusha, Rathkeale, Kilmallock, Charleville, Fermoy, Cork City, Tipperary and Ennis all arriving within the first two hours.

Every available off-duty fireman responded to the call for assistance, including Jim Chamberlain, who heard news of the blaze on the radio while on holiday in Dublin and returned immediately to Limerick to help. The Army were also called in.

However, sheer presence of numbers alone could not guarantee success in an

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era when fire-fighting was relatively underdeveloped.

At the time, Limerick had only one fire truck with an on-board water tank, compared to the standard 1,800 litre-plus tanks on the engines of today. As a result, almost all the water had to be drawn from a sluggish hydrant system - that was until hoses were fed directly into the river at Arthur's Quay in mid-afternoon.

Likewise, firefighters did not have shut-off nozzles on their hoses at the time, and often two or three men were needed to control a hose once a hydrant was tapped. Breathing equipment was not advanced enough to allow firemen to spend prolonged periods of time in the burning building, limiting how aggressive they could be in fighting the blaze.

The conditions grew even tougher as the fire cut through to both the William and Thomas Street facades of the building. A gas main on William Street ruptured, providing such a quick burst of fuel to the flames that the tyres of a nearby fire truck melted and the windows of buildings on the opposite side of the street cracked.

A volunteer at the scene, Paddy Casey, remarked afterward that the heat was so fierce that his drenched clothes were blasted dry in seconds.

By three o'clock, the fire had spread into neigh-



Todd's, which were ready to collapse at any moment. When the first floor finally did give way, it forced the masonry facade of the ground floor to fall forward and spill dangerous blocks of debris onto the street and back inwards on the building. This temporarily blocked the front-on attack on the fire, which had now spread to the roof.

From the rear, on Little William Street, firemen successfully beat the flames back from Gleeson's shop and O'Sullivan's pub on Thomas Street, which were threatened after a section of rear wall collapsed, sending burning debris loose.

The home of Jack Flanagan, also on Little William Street, was not so fortunate - it was demolished by the hot falling materials. Flanagan had left his house at 11.45am only to be

printed dozens of pictures of the blaze, while reporters and photographers from national news outlets gathered in Limerick to cover the story. Radio Eireann's hourly bulletins monitored the firefighters' progress, as did the BBC World Service via a live link-up from the city. The fire was eventually brought under control, allowing the process of damping down the remainder of the building to begin.

For three full days firemen worked their way delicately through the building, extinguishing the numerous smaller outbreaks that would keep burning out and re-emerging. By this stage, the building was partially collapsed, making conditions extremely hazardous.

What little of the building that was left standing

years later that this was the first time anyone had seen a helicopter in Limerick.

The fire drew words of condolence and acts of charity from the rest of the city, with trays of tea ferried up from Cruise's Hotel and sandwiches brought down by Patrick Nardonne from the Roma Cafe on William Street.

The building that was eventually constructed in the place of Todd's (now, of course, Brown Thomas) was welcomed as the first of example of the modern design that would remake Limerick city. But this change has been much lamented since, as only fragments of Limerick's once glorious traditional architecture would survive being cleared in the name of progress.

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The panic reflexes of the company and its staff were first to kick in. Office staff were ordered by the manager, Mr A Brown, to remove as much equipment as possible as they evacuated the building, with specific instructions given to save a £1,400 automatic calculator.

Soon, clothes and home-ware and appliances were being thrown out of windows onto the streets below. Supt J.B. O'Neill arrived shortly afterward



and declared an official state of emergency, sealing off the entire block. This action would undoubtedly prevent serious or fatal civilian injuries.

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By three o'clock, the fire had spread into neighbouring stores Burton's and Lipton's, forcing 27 staff in both shops to flee, and the contents of an upstairs hair salon to stream out onto the road mid-coif, curlers and rollers still in place.

Attention switched to the three upper floors of



Todd's, which were ready to collapse at any moment. When the first floor finally did give way, it forced the masonry facade of the ground floor to fall forward and spill dangerous blocks of debris onto the street and back inwards on the building. This temporarily blocked the front-on attack on the fire, which had now spread to the roof.

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The home of Jack Flanagan, also on Little William Street, was not so fortunate - it was demolished by the hot falling materials. Flanagan had left his house at 11.45am only to be told 100 yards up the road that Todd's was on fire. He rushed back to his house and brought his sister-in-law and daughter to safety. The Flanagan family had lived on Little William Street for 300 years.

The afternoon editions of the Limerick Chronicle

printed dozens of pictures of the blaze, while reporters and photographers from national news outlets gathered in Limerick to cover the story. Radio Eireann's hourly bulletins monitored the firefighters' progress, as did the BBC World Service via a live link-up from the city.

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What little of the building that was left standing in the days after was condemned, and the voyeur spectacle of the Todd's fire received an apt conclusion with the strange sight of a helicopter with a wrecking ball attached levelling the frame of the building.

Retired firefighter Charlie Daly would reckon many

years later that this was the first time anyone had seen a helicopter in Limerick.

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But the destruction of Todd's would begin the passing of another era, one where Johnny McMahon on the violin and Charlie Sciascia on the piano would entice city shoppers into a family-owned department store with an air of rare finery. So much more than mortar and steel was lost that day in August.



Clockwise from main: the fire crews worked for three days before the blaze was finally extinguished. Part of the pictured truck actually melted; Shoppers on a busy William Street seem oblivious to what is happening next to them; one bystander lets out a whoop as a girder comes crashing down; the huge flames come licking out on the Thomas Street side of the building; two firemen stand amid the rubble looking into the charred remains of the building; future fire chief Charlie Daly is seen running across the street to assist colleagues. Mr Daly said the helicopter that arrived to knock over the building frame was the first ever seen in Limerick

PICTURES: COURTESY SEAN CURTIN COLLECTION