Saints on the march: Críostóir Ó Floinn illuminates the lives of three French saints

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 firefighting capability to its utmost and altered - for better or worse - the city's landscape.
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 Fitzgerald

It was as if the heat and the noise and the fear of Dresden had sought a new place, past the Tuesday dash 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 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 shopfront in front..."
The fire spread very quickly. The main building was mostly wooden floors, cast-iron supports and wide open spaces. Materials that would fuel the fire included a tightness speed. Whether through the first partition or the first floor of smoke or the first floor of the building, the flames spread rapidly. The fire was disguised by the burning materials inside, which one employee told the Leader had “virtually split open” with the intense heat.

Vacuum shafts sucked the flames up to the upper levels, where the smoke turned to ash in the air, and other materials inside began to burn. The fire’s violent thought became very clear, very quickly. The panic of the company and its staff was first to kick in. Office staff were ordered by the manager, Mr A Brown, to remove all equipment as possible to they evacuated the building.

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 fast burst of fire to the flames that the tyres of a nearby fire truck melted and the windows of buildings on the opposite side of the street crackled.

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

The fire was eventually brought under control, allowing the process of dampening down the remainder of the building to begin. For three full days firefighters worked to extinguish the flames, which were largely isolated to the William Street side of the building. This was the first time anyone had seen a firefiger in Limerick. The fire drew words of condemnation and acts of charity from the rest of the city, as trays of tea and coffee were delivered from various hotels and restaurants.

The building that was eventually constructed to the place of Todd’s is now, of course, Brown Thomas. The building that was eventually constructed to the place of Todd’s is now, of course, Brown Thomas. This building has been well maintained since, as all fragments of Limerick’s once glorious traditional architecture would survive being cleared in the name of progress. But the destruction of Todd’s would begin the passing of another era, one that remembered a time when fire-fighting was relatively undeveloped.

At the time, Limerick had only one fire truck with an on-board water tank, compared to the standard 1,500 litre-plus tanks on the engines of today. As a result, water had to be drawn from a sluggish hydrant system, which until it was turned to the river at Arthur’s Quay in mid-afternoon. Likewise, firemen 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 it had a hydrant.

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

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prayed it on the awning part of the building. 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 the flames consume 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 fuel the flames through a frightening speed. Although the first pockets of smoke or the first words of panic, the gardaí 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 McMahon, 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 floors, aided by the smoke. The fire spread quickly, and as it did, the wheel and other materials inside began to burn. The fire's swift and violent nature was clear, very quickly.

The panic ensued of the company and its staff were first to kick in. Office staff were ordered by the general manager, Mr. A. Brown, to remove as much equipment as possible as they evacuated the building, with specific instructions given to take all 5,400 automatic calculators. Shelves and household appliances were being used as makeshift doors to block the flames as they spread into the windows of the building. A volunteer at the scene, Paddy Casey, recalled that the heat was so fierce that his draped clothes were blasted dry in seconds.

By three o'clock, the fire had spread into neighboring stores Butler and Lipton's, forcing all staff in both shops to evacuate. The flames and smoke from a nearby fire truck made the view of the street impossible. The firemen were prompted to change their location.

The home of Jack Flanagan, also on Little William Street, was not far to the west on the other side of the street cracked. A volunteer at the scene, Paddy Casey, recalled that the heat was so fierce that his draped clothes were blasted dry in seconds. The flames and smoke from a nearby fire truck made the view of the street impossible. The firemen were prompted to change their location.

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