

Tracing Limerick's Fire Services

It is said, three best friends and three worst enemies are fire, wind, and rain.

Before 872, and long before the days of King Alfred's Fire Prevention Curfew, (Anglo-French 'Couvrez Feu' meaning 'Cover Fire'), to the growth of the wollen industry, from the use of bricks in building to the invention of the hose, and from the laying down of hydrants to the risk of the lighted match, fire has been a force to be reckoned with.

Right through history man's contact with fire has been a constant battle to control it. Making fire was among man's earliest achievements.

It is highly likely, that Stone Age people, shaping stone tools, observed that rubbing them together caused sparks which simulated the flashing fire from the sky whose lightning potential they knew only too well.

Archaeological findings prove that ancient peoples rubbed hardwood against softwood and used friction to ignite the fallen shavings. Fire could now be called on to supply heat and comfort and could be directed to destroy one's enemies. Since those early days, fire has commanded the attention on man's ingenuity, whereas history has taught him to ignore it at his peril.

Great Fire

Not until the great fire of London in 1666, which destroyed over thirteen thousand houses, eighty-nine parishes, and four city gates, did serious thought go into organised fire-fighting. In 1684 the London Fire Insurance Company promised that watermen shall be available to quench fires, and so gave rise to an industry which purchased its own fire engines, trained its own firemen, and identified insured buildings with the company logo, called a 'fire-mark', so responding brigades could identify the buildings as insured by their company. This practice spread to Ireland and Limerick and examples of these firemarks can still be seen today on some buildings in Pery Square.

Sprinkler systems, fire escapes, fire engines and fire-proofing compounds began to be patented in the early part of the 18th. century and continue to the present day in the battle to protect life and property from fire.

Limerick City has had its major fires of some comparable magnitude to the great fire of London. In 1618 a fire broke out in a thatched house in Creagh Lane, spread, and destroyed all the houses in that area as well as those in Quay Lane taking in a church also in its raging path.

A conflagration of the Irish Town two weeks later consumed every house in the region of John's Gate and beyond it for some distance. St. Francis' Abbey was later the scene of two major outbreaks of fire which, on one occasion, destroyed eighty thatched houses in two hours.

There is evidence that in 1776 fire engines were handed over to St. John's, St. Mary's and St. Munchin's parishes by the Rt. Hon. E. Sexton Pery, Charles Smyth, and Thomas Smyth Esqrs.

The new fire engine purchased by the inhabitants of St. Mary's Parish in 1814 was the first ever made in Limerick. It cost £40 and accounts of the time suggest it was also made from the materials of an older engine purchased in London in 1768. The change from steam fire engines, drawn by horses, with a fireman responsible for raising steam on the way, to improved motor-driven fire appliances, meant greater

speed, efficiency, and reliability. It wasn't unknown for horses to drop dead when driven too hard by excited, inexperienced hands. However, it must have been a thrilling sight to see pairs of galloping horses pulling a glistening steam fire engine at full speed through the city streets, spurred on by the sights of a red glow over the distant rooftops.

Merryweather

On arrival the horses would stand quietly, often at close proximity to raging fires with sparks and embers falling around them, as if they knew it was their job to keep calm. In January 1930 the first motor fire appliance, a Merryweather/Albion, was handed over by the Rt. Worshipful M. J. Keyes, Mayor of Limerick, to Captain Daniel Hogan of Limerick Fire Brigade. This open-top vehicle was still operational and in the proud possession of the brigade up to 1972 and could be seen up to very recently at the station until it was taken away for refurbishment. Some time after the original handing over of the appliance a brass plaque was placed in front of the windscreen and read;

The Right Worshipful M. J. Keyes, Mayor; William M. Nolan, R. C. Town Hall; Joseph A. Peacocke B. A. B. E. City Surveyor; Daniel Hogan, Captain, Limerick Fire Brigade. Jan. 1930.

Except for one or two years, the climbing national statistics for fire calls is mirrored exactly by increased turnouts by the Limerick City Fire Brigade with an undisturbed rising trend for the past ten years. There are few professions which require a wide knowledge of such a variety of subjects such as hydraulics, pumps, extinguishing media, driving, ladders, first-aid, heating apparatus, building construction, electricity, chemistry, alarms, as well as a host of modern-day equipment needed to deal with the various forms of emergency reported as 'special services' in the annual returns.

Regionally speaking, Limerick City makes up about 25% of the total mid-west population of just over 300,000 and handles an average of 35% of the total calls for the region. Located centrally between the three adjoining counties of Limerick, Clare and Tipperary N.R.

Limerick City is the only full-time fire brigade in the region, and one of only four in the Republic, the others being retained. Dublin, Cork and Dun Laoghaire are the other whole-time brigades. In the area of telecommunications, the fire service in Ireland has been slow to adopt available technology in this field. During the mid-sixties, a radio-telephone system was introduced by the Limerick Health Authority for the ambulance service for the city and county. At the time the fire service operated not only the clinic ambulance service but also the accident service which meant manning three ambulances as well as firefighting duties. The ambulance service was eventually phased out in 1982 when the Mid-Western Health Board reorganisation saw removal of the last ambulance from the Thomas Street fire station.

The national report on the fire service (1975) made important recommendations in relation to a communications network for the whole mid-west region. The working party set up to examine its potential prepared its report in 1980 recommending the setting up of a telecommunications network on a regional basis and the participating groups agreed in principle to operate a central fire control

system to be located in Limerick City adjacent to the Fire Station. The detailed implication of this work are currently under consideration.

Yet, despite its obligation to protect life and property in Limerick, the brigade still manages to respond to calls for help outside the city limits. A total of 226 such calls were responded to in 1894 and over 100 already this year. This the brigade has always done while cautiously maintaining a watchful eye over the city to which it belongs since 1878.

'Notable' fires

- Roches Stores — 1948 (then called McBirneys).
- The Tannery Fire — 1951.
- Todds Fire — 1959.
- Goodbody's, Ennis Road — 1961.
- IAWS (Mount Kennet) — 1961.
- Limerick Clothing Factory — 1963.
- Cruise's Hotel — 1968.
- Shoe Factory, c. 1968.
- Advance Tyre Co. (Cathedral Place — 1972).
- The William Street Fire — 1974. (McCarthy's Furniture, Newsoms, McGovern, Ryans).
- Irish Paper Merchants (Cornmarker) — 1975.
- The Model School — 1977.
- William Street Mall — 1985.

A major number of fire calls involve burning rubbish, whether controlled burning or fires started through careless disposal of rubbish in and around buildings. Many of these calls would be unnecessary if the brigade were notified in advance when fires were burning under supervision.

New Station

Prior to the Thomas Street Location, Limerick Fire Brigade was located in Roches Street from where it moved in May 1942 to what was then described as "The New Fire Station" in Thomas Street.

Roches Street was the era of the horse-drawn steam fire engines. Although little recorded fact has been found, it is hoped this occasion will unearth, among readers, any knowledge of the period so a more complete history may be known. (Contact the writer at the Fire Station).

The fire station in Thomas Street was a single storey building used originally as a joinery shop with a Georgian type house, adjoining a yard space of 560 sq. ft., according to a 1962 report. Actual floor area of the premises totalled about 6,650 sq. ft. On grounds of ease of access alone, this building was totally unsuitable even then, and a new station estimated at £33,000 — exclusive of a suitable site — was proposed. Repairs in the meantime to Thomas Street cost £3,800. In 1974 following representations made, the city architect visited Thomas Street and proposed converting the derelict store, adjoining the main building, into a much needed lecture room. This work was carried out but, due to other building defects forcing fire crews to vacate various parts of the station on occasions, this project had to be utilised as a dormitory area. The City Manager of the day, the late Mr. T. P. McDiarmada, adopted a 15-point plan of renovation and £20,000 was provided for over a 3-4 year period.

However, repair work was extensive and time-consuming and conditions were deteriorating rapidly.

Between 1976 and 1978, rain penetrated the dormitory and communications room (the Watchroom or Control room) and a portion of the ceiling collapsed. One of the large opening sashes fell onto the pavement caus-



Cllr. Frank Prendergast, Mayor of Limerick, pictured opening the new fire station in Mulgrave Street.

ing damage to an ambulance and narrowly missing a pedestrian.

A meeting of the Cultural and Environment Committee in October 1978 heard that a survey and inspection had been completed and the City Solicitor would now prepare a draft C.P.O. for the proposed compulsory acquisition of the markets property in Mulgrave Street.

The rest, as they say, is history.

However, and from whatever premises, and whatever the standard of equipment made available to it down the years, the Limerick Fire Brigade has faced the challenges with never less than full commitment. The city's new Fire Station in Mulgrave Street, with its up-to-date training facilities, will no doubt help to ensure the safety of citizens and property by making available the opportunity for its Fire Brigade to maintain an edge on the ravages of fire which, as history has shown, strikes at the least gap in the city's fire prevention defences.

Mulgrave Street

The new Fire Station was constructed on a 1.8 acre site, acquired from the Limerick Market Trustees under the Mulgrave Street/Cathedral Place area compulsory purchase order. It is constructed in reinforced concrete framed-faced in Irish clay brick. Roof construction is of the in situ reinforced concrete inverted type with polystyrene insulation with an asphalt and aggregate topping.

The internal walls are of fair faced block-work finished with amalux in the operational areas. The floors are comprised of quarry tiles in the operational sectors with carpet and PVC tiling elsewhere. The appliance room doors are of the double skin insulated door type with automatic control.

The external paved areas are of in situ concrete in the drill yard and cobblelock in

the forecourt. The accommodation provided in the design includes an eight-bay appliance room. Other facilities include a most modern communications network, control room, breathing apparatus training building, muster bay, dormitories, lecture room, recreational room drill tower, vehicle maintenance bay, auxiliary fire service accommodation, office and technical facilities. The total building area amounts to 2,200 sq. metres; of which the appliance room and control room account for 320 sq. metres. The building is designed to serve as the headquarters for fire-fighting services in Limerick City and surrounding areas and incorporates the essential fire training facilities of a modern fire-fighting complex. The cost of the project, including site acquisition and development, was approximately 2 million pounds.

The Auxiliary fire service, which always used the Thomas Street Fire Station as their base for weekly lectures and as an assembly point prior to their departure on Civil Defence exercises. National Competitions etc., have since moved their recently acquired fire appliance into this vacated fire station while their originally proposed site at the new fire station is being used to store the 1952 Dennis WT which is under the caring renovation by members of a local vintage car group.

Personnel

Chief Fire Officer: Denis O'Mahony.
Asst. CFO (F. Prevention): O. O'Loughlin.
Asst. CFO (Operations): C. Daly.
Asst. Fire Prev. Officer: J. Ring.
Station Officers: J. Connors, P. McMahon, M. McNamara, J. Woods.
Station Sub-Officers: D. Carroll, P. Creagh, S. Griffin, D. McCarthy, B. McNamara, A. O'Regan, P. Roche, B. J.

Slattery (author of this article).

Firefighters: P. Begg, A. Brennan, G. Buckley, G. Carroll, P. Collins, P. Connolly, J. Cosgrove, T. Costelloe, A. Cronin, M. Crowe, J. Cusack, C. Dowling, V. Fitzgerald, D. Flood, P. Flood, P. Fogarty, P. Hastings, K. Hayes, R. Hickey, T. Hickey, G. Hilton, K. Hogan, R. Judge, J. Kearns, R. Leahy, T. Lynch, P. Madigan, E. McCarthy, F. Moore, W. Morrissey, M. McNamara, J. O'Carroll, P. O'Donovan, J. O'Dwyer, M. O'Grady, B. O'Halloran, C. O'Neill, J. O'Shea, J. Reddan, T. Reddan, G. Reynolds, G. Richardson, G. Ryan, P. Ryan, D. Tracey, J. Wallace, N. Woods.

Office staff: Mrs. M. Hanly, Ms. N. O'Connor.

Retired members: J. Chamberlain, A. Elmes, J. Griffin, M. Griffin, T. Hanrahan, J. Horrigan, C. Kavanagh, T. McInerney, J. Moloney.

Remembrance

Lord hear our prayers for all the departed firemen who have gone to their rest....

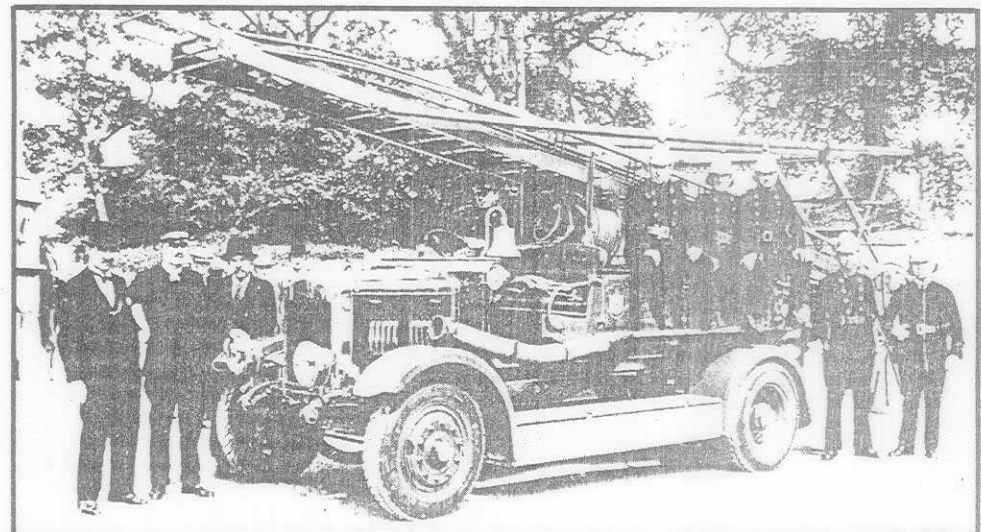
Capt. Fry, J. Sheehan, Capt. D. Hogan, CFO G. O'Reilly, CFO P. J. Diskin, CFO P. J. O'Sullivan; 2nd CFO T. Gough, SO J. Flynn, SO M. Reddan, SSO T. Meade, L/Fm. J. McMahon.

FIREMEN: Bruce Murray, Thomas Battle, William Brown, Harry Sterling, James Goodwin, Edward Wickham, Robert Switzer, Robert Guy, Carlos Sciascia, Dave Barry, Sonny Matson, John Hogan, Pat Boland, William Sheehan, Mick O'Connell, Andrew Kelly, Joseph McNamara, Timothy Moran, Patrick Flanagan, Eddie Moore, Paddy Brennan, William Noonan.

May they live forever in the company of Jesus and Mary.

(List kindly contributed by T. McInerney — A/CFO (Retired))

— B. J. Slattery



The old Merryweather engine pictured after its purchase in 1930 with some of its crew members.