n September 1896, David Tidmarsh was elected chairman of Cannock's, and the name Clery, which had dominated the affairs of the company for so long, rapidly faded from the scene. Robert Clery was not very interested in the world of business and, besides, had more than a handful in the Dublin Company, where William Martin Murphy (later involved in the 1913 Dublin Lockout) was trying (unsuccessfully) to buy out the Clery shares. Relations between Clery's and Cannock's stores more or less ceased at this juncture as irreconcilable differences between Murphy and Tidmarsh made further co-operation impossible. This was particularly noticeable later on in their attitudes to the trade unions. Whereas Murphy was obstinately opposed to unions, Tidmarsh was nearly always willing to compromise for the sake of industrial peace. Whatever tenuous links might have existed between the two stores, these were finally severed in 1900 by the death of Robert Clery, who eventually succumbed to the scourge of tuberculosis which had plagued his family.

David Tidmarsh continued to plan for the further expansion of the company. In 1900, he bought additional property in Brunswick Street, as he wanted to have the furniture and carpets side by side. His plans did not come to immediate fruition but in 1902 he succeeded in buying another building off Brunswick Street, and immediately set about restructuring this part of the store. The design of the building was once more entrusted to the Fogerty family, this time to Robert.

Robert was a cousin of William Fogerty, who had designed the front of the further expansion of the company.
Cannock's in 1858 and a son of Joseph, who had been responsible for the design of the Theatre Royal and Leamy's School. This new building was opened in 1903 with an impressive display of carpets and furniture. An added bonus for Cannock's was the fact that the main store could now be entered from Sarsfield Street. (It was at this time that the names of some streets in the main commercial centre were changed. Brunswick Street became Sarsfield Street and George's Street was renamed O'Connell Street).

An interesting offshoot of the story of Cannock's concerns the origin of O'Mahony's Bookshop in O'Connell Street. John P. O'Mahony, who had worked at Clery's in Dublin, came to Limerick on promotion in 1886. He was a buyer in the stationery and fancy-goods department, but after Robert Clery's death, his expectations of further promotion did not materialise, so he resigned in 1892. He bought the key of '12 O'Connell Street' and opened a bookshop there. Subsequently, he married Margaret Clery, a niece of Michael Clery's and thus the house 'Fort Mary', came into the possession of the O'Mahony family. It remained in the family's keeping until recent times, when it was sold. Unfortunately, it has since been vandalised and the fine Georgian residence that Michael Clery had once lavished £3,000 on for improvements alone, is now an empty, dilapidated shell.

The coming of the 20th century heralded for Cannock's the spread of trade unionism. Michael O'Lehane, who had worked for Cannock's and was fully aware of the grievances felt by the workers, when he founded the Drapers' Association in Dublin, in 1901. At that time, the apprentices, in particular, were greatly dissatisfied with the 'living in' system. As they were obliged to be 'in' from 9 a.m. onwards, they felt that it greatly curtailed their social activities.

(In 1905, there were 105 apprentices 'living in'). Apprenticeships could last from 5 to 6 years, during which time the apprentices received no salary but were paid an allowance of 5s/6d (27p) per week. They did, however, receive food and lodgings free on the premises and, while the food was generally nutritious, it was unimaginatively prepared and served. Menus also tended to be repeated and, at one stage when there was a glut of salmon on the market, the apprentices had to prevail upon their employer not to serve them this dish on more than 3 occasions in the week! However, it is difficult to imagine that this complaint was repeated too often.

There were also fines imposed for misbehaviour in the canteen and sleeping quarters and the money could be stopped from their allowances. Their supervisors were very often the departmental managers who 'slept in' on a rotation basis. Having completed their apprenticeships, they could, as assistants, expect to earn between £45 and £50 per year. However, during the following years they would have little expectation of an increase in salary, as this was most uncommon. It must be remembered, though, that at this time inflation was almost unknown and prices tended to remain static.

The Drapers' Association continued to fight the 'living in' system and eventually their demands were acceded to. From 1912 onwards, the numbers 'living in' were gradually reduced and the system was finally abolished in 1920. The Association was also successful in negotiating a half-day for the workers. The Shop Hours Act was passed by parliament in 1904, and, in 1905, Cannock's staff were given a half-day on Thursdays. The workers' hours were then reduced from 54 to 50 per week. These advances helped to establish the Drapers' Association on a firm basis.

Cannock's continued with their policy of supporting Irish Industry and both Philip Toppin and David Tidmarsh were prominently identified with the Irish industrial revival. In the Great Munster and Connaught Trade Exhibitions of 1906, they fully availed of the opportunities offered and Cannock's had one of the largest stands in the main hall, in the markets building near St. John's Cathedral. Among the items on the Cannock's stand were solid mahogany dining room suites (carved in its Sarsfield Street premises) and Limerick lace, made by the staff. The exhibits were widely acclaimed, and for several years afterwards the company continued to display Irish manufactured goods in all its windows. As a result of this promotion trade increased enormously.

During the 1914-1918 War, Cannock's profits rose considerably due to the abnormal trading conditions then prevailing. There were great shortages of various commodities in England and the resultant tendency to 'panic-buy' soon spread to Ireland. Cannock's was fortunate in having previously bought in huge stocks at very competitive prices. Consequently, they now found that, with the increased demand, the profit margins could also be increased. In fact, so great was their 'windfall' that they were obliged to pay Excess Profits Tax between 1915 and 1921. The shareholders, ever anxious to protect their own corner, quickly seized the opportunity offered. As a result of an Extraordinary General Meeting, called in 1915, they received their due share of this new prosperity.

For the staff, however, things were different. Their wages had remained static, while prices had risen, and none of the wealth which their labour had generated found its way into their pockets. This was also the era of industrial militancy, as the great Dublin Lock-out of 1913 had focused attention on the strike weapon. Although this particular 'battle' had been lost, the 'war was yet to be won', and the simmering discontent of many workers threatened the uneasy peace. In Limerick, in 1917, some of that discontent came to the boil and the docks, gas works, the building trade and the vinters all experienced industrial disputes.
their own demands and, though strikes in these smaller premises were generally more prolonged, the Cannock's agreements usually set a trend in settlement negotiations. During this period, membership of the Drapers' Association soared, rising from 927 in 1916 to 3,670 in 1919. This increase gave added impetus to the ascending star of the Association and greatly enhanced its bargaining position.

(vi) Married men were entitled to receive full pay for one month during illness. (This section was still in force until 1977, when the Anti-Discrimination Pay Act was introduced).

The agreement also specified that the assistants no longer had to ‘dust’ the shop in the morning before it opened and the ‘putting up’ of the blinds in the evening was to be taken in rotation by junior staff. From then on, the assistants merely had to present themselves at 9 a.m. ready for work. ‘Ready’ implied being dressed in a uniform which in those days consisted of hats and gloves for the ladies, and long-tailed coats and striped ties for the superintendents.

This agreement was quite revolutionary in the Irish drapery trade and marked a new departure for assistants, many of whom earned between £30 and £40 per year and had not received an increase since 1885! In fairness, however, one must bear in mind that the ogre of inflation did not arise until the First World War and, up to then, wages and prices had remained more or less the same. Nevertheless, the 1920 agreement advanced the position of the assistants considerably.

The dusting duties were then assigned to the apprentices who arrived at 8 o’clock and were allowed home between 9 a.m. and 10 a.m. for breakfast. They often had to remain on the premises until 7 p.m., tidying up after the day’s work. Their apprenticeship lasted for 4 years,’ during which time they received the meagre sum of 15/- (75p) per week. However, for winding the clock, an apprentice would receive an extra payment of 4/6 per week and, needless to say, it was one duty for which there was no lack of volunteers!

The employers had also sought to abolish the premiums and commission payable to buyers but the union refused to agree to this and these “fringe benefits” remained in force up to the closure of the firm. It is worth mentioning that premiums and commission were often considerable and added significantly to the earnings of buyers. At Christmas time, too, a buyer was further rewarded with numerous gifts of whiskey, hams, cigarettes etc., from the firms where he had placed his orders during the year. In later years, a story was told of a particular buyer who was in the habit of hiding these Christmas bottles of whiskey on the premises and drawing on this ‘hidden’ stock during the year, according as the need arose in his home. However, it so happened that one of these bottles had been discovered by other staff members and with that ingenuity peculiar to the imbibers in pursuit of drink, the whiskey was extracted and replaced by coloured water without the seal of the bottle, apparently, being broken. (I have only lately learned how it was done).

Shortly afterwards, the buyer was entertaining a parish priest in his home and, after dining sumptuously, they both repaired to the sitting-room for their after-dinner ‘malt’. The parish priest, having eased himself into an armchair in front of the blazing fire, was first to quaff a mouthful of the golden liquid. His face reddened as, sitting bolt upright, he guaffed again to confirm his worst suspicions. For a man who believed implicitly in the miracle at the Wedding Feast of Cana, this diabolical reversal seemed, at best, in poor taste; at worst, a form of sacrilege. Fearing that he was the butt of a sick joke, the priest stormed out in high dudgeon and it was some weeks before his friendship with the buyer was renewed. The hapless buyer, having at first considered the taking of a lawsuit against the distillery, finally directed his suspicions to the proper quarters but the ‘miracle workers’ were never discovered. The code of silence rules in
more places than Sicily!

Philip Toppin, Toppin's loss was a severe blow to the firm, as he was trusted and respected by the staff, and left Gleeson with the unenviable task of facing into one of the most turbulent political periods in the history of the country. During the War of Independence (1919-21), trading continued amid tension and uncertainty. Cannock's found it difficult to service its rural customers, and the depressed agricultural economy reflected itself in the decreased profits of the store. To add to Cannock's woes, David Tidmarsh died unexpectedly, at 'Lota', North Circular Road, in 1918, and was buried in St. Mary's Churchyard, overlooking the River Shannon on which he had spent many of his youthful hours and 50s. However, prudent economic management helped Cannock's to weather these long periods in the commercial doldrums and, in spite of the unfavourable circumstances, the company always managed to make a profit.

To add to the gloom of that period, the onlookers waited apprehensively in the uneasy silence. 'Tell me, Mr. Fitzgerald' replied Kitty rather breezily, 'What do you mean?' A formidable lady was Kitty Bredin! However, it must be said that during Mr. Fitzgerald's term as manager the store returned to increased profitability, a process which began in the late 50s and continued up to his departure in 1983.

At this juncture in Cannock's story, it is fitting to mention a man without whom no history of the store would be complete. Jack Gleazer, the renowned oarsman, worked in Cannock's for 68 years, and his amiable and jocular manner made him a favourite with both his fellow workers and customers.

Cannock's lost the services of David Tidmarsh (Jnr.), who died of cancer, in 1944. Though he was only 43 years of age, he had been on the board of directors since 1920 and his experience was sadly missed. However, the Tidmarsh connection with Cannock's continued through other members of the family.

Prior to this, Philip Gleeson had been succeeded as managing director in 1942, by Jack Fitzgerald. He had previously been a buyer in the millinery department and, though his business integrity and judgement were never in doubt, he seemed, at times, to be excessively preoccupied with staff discipline. Indeed, the story is told how on one occasion he accosted Miss Kitty Bredin (the well known theatrical figure, who worked in Cannock's shoe department) as she emerged from the ladies' room a nicotine-laden cloud slowly dispersing in her wake. 'Miss Bredin,' he said solemnly, as three or four adjacent customers gave ear to the proceedings, 'It seems to me that you spend nearly half your day in there!' The onlookers waited apprehensively in the uneasy silence. 'Tell me, Mr. Fitzgerald' replied Kitty rather breezily, 'did you ever get the diarrhoea your-
the most turbulent periods in its history had been a harbinger of the board; these included bids by Castle Hosiery, Dunne’s Stores, Budget Property Company and Stephens Green Property Company. It had been tentatively proposed, at this stage, too, that the furniture department in Sarsfield Street be turned into a shopping arcade. Unfortunately, however, this bold and imaginative plan never came to fruition.

But it was, perhaps, the bid by Brown Thomas & Co., that proved most divisive for the board. The original offer in 1968 was withdrawn and, in 1969, a new and revised offer was rejected. Subsequently, an attempt by the chairman, Group Captain Thunder, (who controlled the Tidmarsh shares), to have a director of Brown Thomas & Co. elected onto the board of Cannock’s, was met with strenuous opposition from Jack Fitzgerald (Jnr.), a son of the former managing director. At a stormy annual general meeting, in June 1970, amid charges and counter-charges, terms such as ‘slick deals’ and ‘turning a fast buck’ punctuated the acrimonious exchanges. A letter was read from the company’s auditor which expressed the view that the management team needed to be strengthened and that there was a lack of control in vital areas. Michael Harkin, in rebutting this charge, pointed out that the pre-tax profits for the past year had risen from £12,000 to £41,000.

However, it was now obvious that the directors were seriously split and many felt that a board - no less than a house - divided could not stand. As well as affecting the morale of the staff, this public manifestation of boardroom disunity increased the firm’s vulnerability to further take-over bids. Eventually, in 1972, the firm of Winston’s succeeded in gaining a controlling share in the Company and, in that year, the furniture premises in Sarsfield Street were sold to Roche’s Stores for £275,000 (subsequently, this area was turned into a car park). Cannock’s had now lost its valuable outlet into Sarsfield Street, and the furniture department, which had been transferred to a premises in Cadaverna, failed to prosper in its new location.

The firm continued to trade under the new Winston management but the general air of unease, in the aftermath of the boardroom upheavals, allied to the sale of the furniture premises, led many to believe that the store was now only marking time. Further speculative deals seemed probable in the prevailing unstable atmosphere. To add to this air of despondency, the Tidmarsh Shares, held by Sister Fidelius, her sister Lilian (daughters of David Tidmarsh, Snr.) and their nephew, Group Captain Thunder, were finally disposed of in