

# Oyster Ballroom may be gone, but memories will last forever

■ 'People still talk about when they put it up - I never thought I would see it come down'

DONAL O'REGAN

THE EMBERS of the destroyed former Oyster Ballroom were still warm when dozens began to descend on Dromkeen on Sunday to see for themselves that it was gone.

The fire at the Furniture Man store had burnt throughout the night and all that was left was a smouldering ruin.

Men and women got out of their cars, gathered in groups and reminisced about the days when the Oyster was the largest ballroom in the south.

"Sure, half of County Limerick wouldn't be here but for the Oyster," said one man wistfully. Packie Hayes, proprietor, opened the dance hall on Wednesday, November 19, 1958 and the flames can't take away his and its legacy.

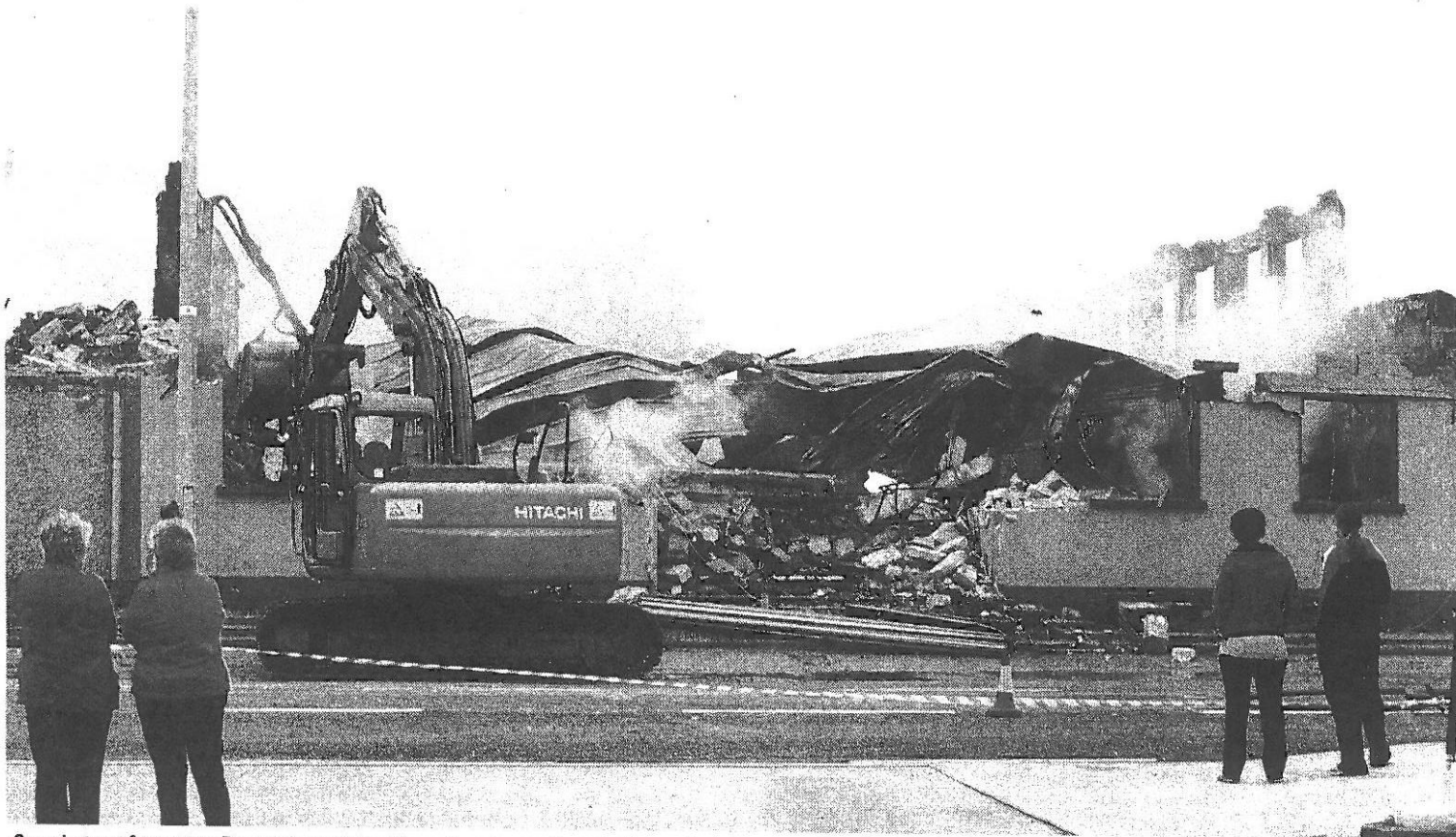
The great Brendan Bowyer played to crowds of upto 3,000 on Sunday nights in the sixties.

"Even though it is gone it will always be there in folklore. My gosh, it was a unique experience. The building might be gone but the memories live on. It is a great testament to Packie's vision to build it in what we all thought was the middle of nowhere.

"I meet people even in Las Vegas for God's sake and they say we met in Dromkeen. It was just amazing - the bus loads that came out from Limerick and everywhere that filled the car-park... Then afterwards the run for the buses and whatever else was going on!

"There was a great mixture of city and rural. I don't know whether the city boys were trying for the rural girls or it was the other way around!" said Brendan, who in a very strange coincidence is playing a concert on Sunday, August 30 in Cappamore called Rolling Back the Dromkeen Years.

"I thought it might be cancelled



Gone but not forgotten: Dozens have visited Dromkeen to see the wreckage of what was once the largest ballroom in the south

Picture: Press 22

but maybe in a strange way it is the ideal time for it," said the man synonymous with the Oyster.

Margaret Hayes, proprietor of the Maxol filling station across the road, has to face seeing the destruction of what her father built every day.

"It is very upsetting. Everyone has been great, thanks to everyone," said Margaret.

She may not know but she started James Blackwell, Dromkeen, on a journey that meant he stayed until 6am watching the Oyster Ballroom burn to the ground because it meant so much to him.

James worked in the furniture store for five years and one of the jobs he was asked to do one day was clean Margaret's attic.

"I came across cloakroom tickets that made me think about the Oyster Ballroom. It was always there in Dromkeen but it was before my time as I am 23," said James. It closed in 1982, well before the teacher was even born.

This interest resulted in a 70,000 word final year project called The Oyster Ballroom - an Oral History under the stewardship of Dr Maura Cronin in Mary I. These interviews with people like Mike London,

who worked in the ballroom, and Packie's daughter Christina have taken on a new significance since the fire broke out shortly after 3am.

"My sister Clare was actually the one who called the fire brigade. She was on her way to collect me and saw the smoke billowing. She collected me and then I was there from around 3.30am until 6am.

"It was terrifying. The flames were so high and there was quite a lot of heat there. It was just unfortunate that they couldn't control it. A lot of history has gone up in flames," said James.

While an employee in the

furniture store he met many who came back to relive their youth for a few minutes.

"I was down in the shop this morning and a lady in her fifties was saying she had her first dance there on a St Stephen's night when she was 15-years-old. Her aunt brought her down. There are a lot of stories around like that at the moment.

"It was very moving, unfortunately, to be there to see it come down. A lot of people still talk about when they put it up - I never thought I would be there when it came down," said James.

## 'One of the biggest fires ever in County Limerick'

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FORENSIC analysis has confirmed that an electrical fault was behind one of the biggest ever fires in County Limerick.

The owner of Furniture Man and the building that was the Oyster Ballroom, Bernard Keogh, said it occurred in a store room full of flat pack wardrobes and chests of drawers.

The station officer in Cappamore, John Mulready got the phone call at 3.19am in the early hours of Sunday morning. Eight minutes later crews were on site in Dromkeen.

"When we arrived we were met with a fully developed fire in the left section of it. We were trying to protect it from spreading to the main building but then during the fire we had to pull crews back because the building collapsed out on to the road.

"The front of the building fell out, basically into the centre of the main road but we had the main road closed. It was an extremely dangerous fire especially for the crews because it was so huge," said Mr Mulready.



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"We had to do a count of crews to ensure that nobody had been hurt or caught up in it to ensure everybody was in the safe zone when it collapsed. It was all fought from a safe zone," explained Mr Mulready.

If that wasn't enough the fire service had to attend to road accidents as well. At 10am on Sunday they began to close down the operation and send crews back to their respective fire stations.

Mr Mulready and his team were the last to return back to base at 1pm - 10 hours after they left the station.

"We had to monitor the building during the night just to make sure there was no danger to anything else because it would still be smouldering," he said.

Mr Mulready, an experienced station master, said it was one of the biggest fires that he has been involved in putting out.

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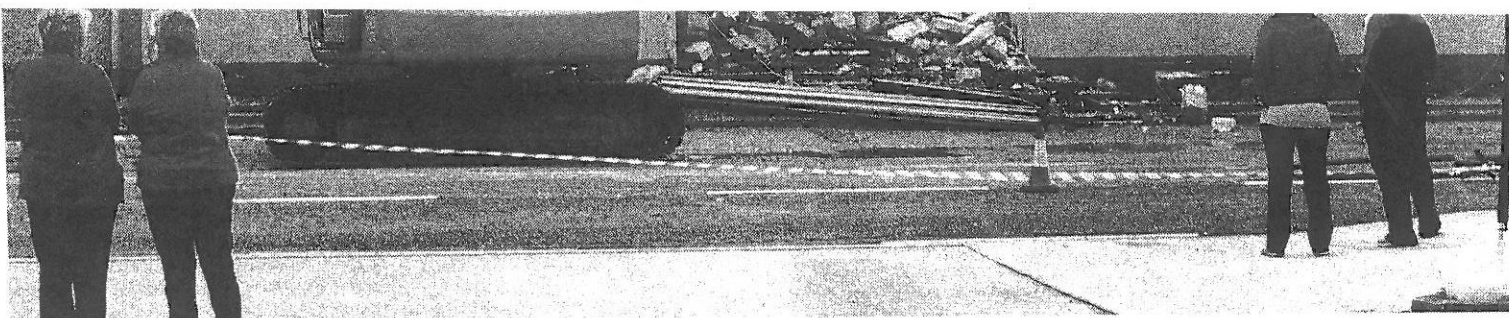
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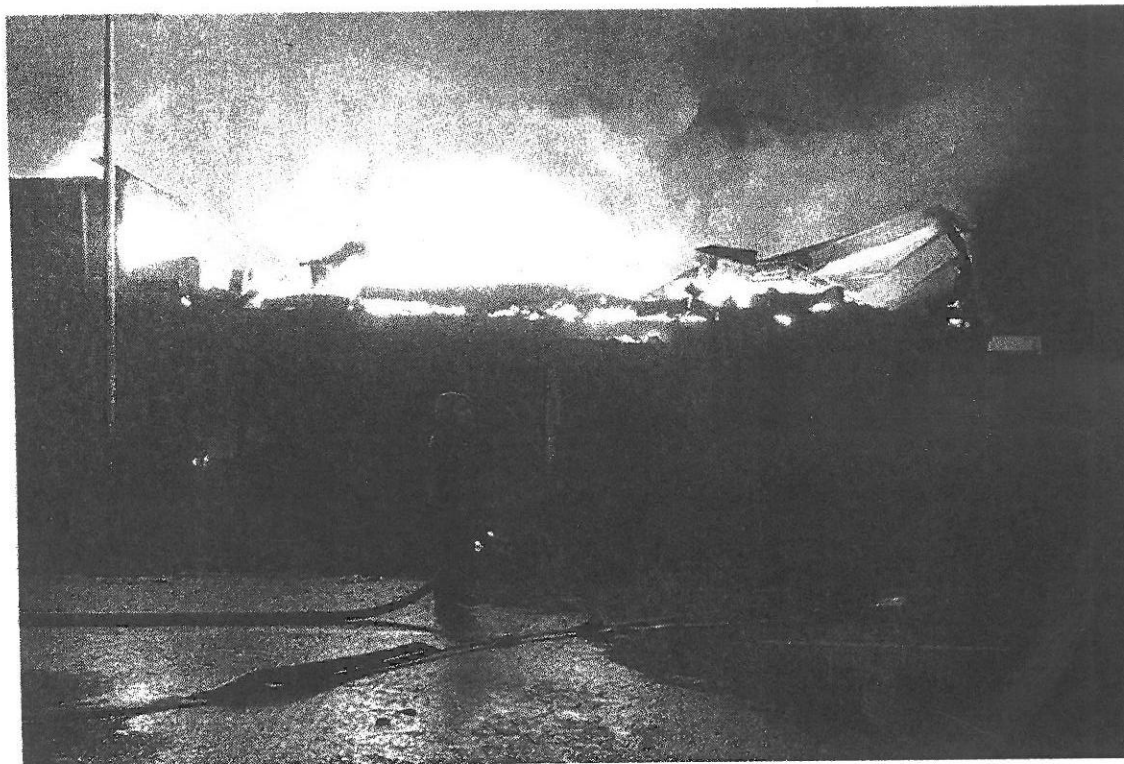
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Three units from Cappamore were first to arrive then the station officer mobilised units from Limerick city, Kilmallock, Rathkeale, Newport and Tipperary



Firefighters attended the blaze of the fire at the former Oyster Ballroom in Dromkeen for 10 hours

Picture: James Blackwell

Town. "We had five appliances, four tankers, two table ladders, four fire jeeps so there was about 15 vehicles there in total," said Mulready.

The heat was ferocious as flames rose dozens of feet into the night sky. Taps gurgled in nearby homes due to the amount of water being

pumped from the system.

"When we spotted signs of collapse and did our risk assessment we ensured crews were

in a safe position when the building did collapse.

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Mr Mulready, an experienced station master, said it was one of the biggest fires that he has been involved in putting out.

"Most of the big fires we get would be on the outskirts of the city, industrial units for example. In our area it would be one of the biggest ever in rural areas. Most rural areas wouldn't have buildings as big as that," said Mulready, who stressed the most important thing of all - nobody was hurt.

## Love stories began on a Canadian maple dancefloor

GRAINNE KEAYS

AS many of us were last weekend, I was saddened to hear that the former Oyster Ballroom premises in Dromkeen had been gutted by fire. In the wake of the inferno, I mentioned on Facebook that "I would not be here but for the Oyster" and was met with a barrage of similar sentiments from my friends. It seems that an extraordinary number of us would not be here but for the Oyster, as it was there our parents met. My parents, Billy Keays and Peggy Houlihan, met in the famous dancehall in 1959.

My father's relationship with the Oyster went back, quite literally, to its beginning. He lived near Ballinahinch, Co Tipperary, at the time, but happened to be in Dromkeen with his uncle, James Keays, on the day in 1957 when Pakie Hayes began laying out the foundations for his new ballroom.

Pakie already had a successful pub and petrol station in Dromkeen. They stopped for a chat, as they normally did, and Pakie asked my father to take hold



Back when it all began: a picture from our archive of Patrick J (Pakie) Hayes, proprietor, and Donie Collins, band leader, on the opening night of the Oyster Ballroom, Dromkeen, on November 19, 1958

of one end of a tape measure he was carrying and start walking away from him. He walked what he thought was a reasonable distance and Pakie called out to him to "keep going". He walked on another good stretch

and again Pakie shouted "keep going". This happened a good few times. It was evident that this was going to be no ordinary dancehall. Eventually, James enquired if Pakie was feeling alright. "Who's going to come

dancing out here in the middle of nowhere?" The answer, as it turned out, was nearly everyone.

As the Limerick Leader stated in its article celebrating the opening of the new dancehall in

1958, Pakie Hayes was "a dynamic businessman with a flair, making a success of everything he [did]" and the Oyster turned out to be his greatest success of all. Crowds of up to 3,000 regularly thronged the venue. They came on foot, by bicycle, in cars and buses and one or two even came by tractor!

Some say Pakie recouped his investment on the first night.

The building was completed by Parkes & Sons, building contractors of Elm Park, Limerick, and the magnificent 6,000 sq ft dance floor, made of Canadian strip maple, was supplied by local firm James McMahon Ltd.

On the momentous day - August 15, 1959 - my father was at a loose end. In those days, everyone went out on August 15 but his usual haunt, the dancehall in the Silvermines, was closed for renovations; he recalls a new bandstand was being installed. His brother suggested they try the Oyster. In the meantime, my mother had not been out socialising for the previous six months, following the death of her grandmother,

Elizabeth O'Connor. Fate, it seems, was taking a hand.

Dad, never much of a dancer, went up to the balcony to observe the dancers below while Mam stood at the bottom of the stairs talking to a friend. He didn't spot her until he was coming back down the stairs but it was love at first sight. He told his brother he was going to dance with the tall girl and he should ask the friend. And that, as they say, was that. A nine-year courtship and a 39-year marriage followed with "never a cross word spoken".

My father made a sad pilgrimage out to Dromkeen on Monday afternoon, 56 years almost to the day since he first met my mother there, to survey the wreckage of what had been the scene of probably the most significant moment of his life and the scene of so much happiness and uncomplicated fun for a whole generation of young people.

He was not alone. Hundreds of former patrons have made their way to Dromkeen to take photographs of the desolation and to take one last look at their beloved Oyster, the place where it all began.

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