Four-hour blaze on William Street

Matchbox accident at general store leads to collapse of several buildings

By Sharon Slater

On May 30, 1866, a destructive fire broke out at Michael Cusack’s business on William Street. Cusack ran a general merchant store and employed a number of assistants.

The Chronicle the following day reported that at 7 o’clock that evening, one of the assistants “accidentally threw a box of lucifer matches. They ignited near a paraffin tank, which at once burst into a large flame. The entire building was then engulfed in a tremendous conflagration, the flames burning out through the shop windows and doorways, and rushing upstairs with terrific fury.”

Within a very short time, the fire had spread through two large buildings to the lane at the east of the buildings. The fire threatened to take the entire street. The alarm was raised quickly and the constables who were based in William Street barracks rushed to the scene.

A number of public and private fire engines arrived soon after; these included the Corporation engine, the army engine and engines from the Sun and West of England insurance office. At first, individuals could ensure their houses and businesses against fire by opting to pay extra for the use of private fire engines. The engine drivers would distinguish those businesses from a plaque attached to the front of the building. One of these plaques remained today on the Fentire Building, in Percy Square.

Troops from the Artillery Barracks on Mulgrave Street, the New Barracks, on Lord Edward Street and the Castle Barracks, in the Castle were also on the scene.

The Chronicle reported that the fire “had spread with terrific force so that it swept the two houses, compartmented the one establishment, very rapidly in its flames, which extended themselves to the roof and burnt through all the front windows.”

It was realized that Cusack’s building could not be saved so the process began to protect the adjoining premises of the Kilmallie Mills bakery, owned by Charles Walsh, and M. Collins’ confectionary establishment at the corner of Catharine Street.

Panic increased when it was discovered that a large quantity of gunpowder was stored at the rear of the burning building and as the great gunpowder explosion of 1867 was still in living memory it was imperative that this was moved quickly.

A number of Limerick men of note including Ambrose Hall, Joseph Headford, William Peacock and D. Johnson risked their own lives, to remove the cartons of powder and take them to the William Street barracks.

Assistants in the large firms help to remove as much stock and furniture as possible from the burning building as well as that from the confectionary store at the corner of the street. These were taken to yard at the back of the Talbot and Murray store on William Street.

Mr A Murray jun., managed to take hold of one of the engine hoses and reached the top of Mr McDonagh’s house where he and other men plied the area liberally with water.

As Cusack’s building burned water was being sprayed on the shutters of Mr Boyce and Messrs. Boyce’s businesses, which were blistering with extreme heat.

Eventually, the front wall of Cusack’s building collapsed as “the heat caused a number of columns supporting the inner main wall, dividing the two and two houses that formed the one establishment to bend under the extreme weight upon it.”

The interior wall would also fall onto William Street causing a “fearful crash, raising a cloud of dust and smoke through which it was impossible to see.” A number of individuals including Alderman Quinlan were standing on the street when the wall fell, but its crumbling noise gave them enough warning to escape.

After the fire engines stopped and the owners of the damaged businesses could only survey their losses. Luckily, Cusack and McDonagh were insured in the Queen insurance for premises, stock and furniture up to £3,000. While the confectionary store was insured by the Sun insurance, who had an engine at the scene.

Later that year another fire hit the heart of the city; this time on Patrick Street on Tuesday, November 20, 1866. Again, the fire broke out in the evening this time at half past ten.

The fire started in the grocery store of Mr Rihgman and the Chronicle of the following Thursday stated that it “was so rapid in its course as to envelop the entire house within a few minutes after it was discovered. The front, rear and centre of the establishment appeared together to be enveloped in flames when the alarm was given; but from the fury with which it raged in the rear, it would seem as if it had originated in that quarter.”

Once again, the confectionary at the William Street barracks were the first on the scene. Those posted to other police barracks around the city soon followed. The Corporation fire engine arrived first followed by the Sun and the West of England engines. Although the Corporation engine arrived first there was a considerable delay activating their hose so Alderwoman Quinlan sent for the Artillery Barracks engine but this could not be brought down, as it was out of service.

The Corporation also brought along their portable fire escape but when it was put up it collapsed amid the laughter of the crowd, and its fall just missed injuring several people.

As the fire blazed, it threatened the businesses of Messrs Pace and the stores of Messrs Ralpgh, Neill, Scarry and other gentlemen at the rear of the Market Alley. Luckily, a high wall prevented the flames from spreading in that direction.

The captain of the Sun engine, Furnal, had to smash one of the front windows of Ralpgh’s business to get the hose in but this resulted in flames bursting forth when the air got in, and enveloped the entire front. Notwithstanding the copious flood of water on the entire mass, the fire raged with terrific fury till the roof fell at 12 o’clock.

It was two o’clock in the morning when the fire engines stopped spraying the buildings. Undoubtedly, for the building owner Mr O’Halleran of Clanlisea, the building was not insured as it had been recently sold. Mr Rihgman though had his stock and furniture insured with Sun insurance for £2,000.

These two fires may have influenced William Barrington’s fire escape invention that he released the following year.