

The Dromcollogher Cinema Disaster

This year marks the eightieth anniversary of one of the worst tragedies in County Limerick or indeed, Irish, history. Forty-eight people lost their lives in a horrific fire during a film show in the local hall in the small, West Limerick village of Dromcollogher on the evening of Sunday 5 September 1926. The sequence of events which led to the tragedy began in August when a local man, William Forde made a crucial and fateful decision. He was a young man, with a physical disability, who lived with his mother in the village and worked as a hackney car driver. During the previous year, films were shown by various outsiders in the local hall and he decided to go into this business for himself. He made contact with a Cork city projectionist, Patrick Downing, who worked at the Assembly Rooms in the city and also showed films in various parts of the country. Downing assisted Forde in the purchase of a projector and agreed to supply the films and initially operate the machine for him in the village.

They arranged a test performance on 27 August and decided to have the first public show on the first Sunday of September. The village hall at that time was on the upper floor of a building whose ground floor was used by the owner for storing hardware. The only access to the first floor was by an external timber ladder, fixed to the wall to form a stairs. The room was 50 feet long by 30 feet wide but a 6 foot high partition ran down the centre making the actual hall only 15 feet wide. This partition stopped 9 feet from the back wall and turned right to meet the side wall, creating a small antechamber in the right hand back corner, which was used as a dressing room when plays were performed. Seating consisted of wooden forms and boards laid across forms.

Forde ignored warnings from the local garda sergeant, James Long, who had observed the previous test run, that a licence was required and that the building was not insured and did not comply with the necessary fire regulations. Forde was not on good terms with the sergeant and as such warnings had not been given to the previous operators he disregarded the advice though Downing later claimed that he had made him aware of the flammable nature of film.

Downing travelled by train from Cork to Charleville station on the Sunday afternoon bringing two films to be shown but without their protective metal casing,

presumably to lighten the weight. He brought electric lamps also, two of which he gave to Forde on arrival in Dromcollogher. As the building had no electricity a dynamo, mounted on a lorry outside the building, was to be used to power the projector and these lamps. On the night, the bulbs in these lamps were broken, Forde later claimed, and he used two candles instead on the table placed inside the door of the hall where the money was collected and where Downing placed the reels of film.

The show did not begin until after 9.00pm [though as Old Time was still the norm, this would have been regarded as 8.00pm locally] so that people could attend benediction in the local church and it appears that a large part of the audience had done so. Estimates of the attendance varied but it appears that at least 150 people crowded into the hall, many of them children. The widely believed notion that the film being shown that night was *The Ten Commandments* is incorrect. The first picture began at about 9.15 and at around 10.00 as the second film was showing, one of the reels, lying unprotected on the table, went on fire. Sergeant Long, who was on duty in the hall along with Garda John Davis, was of the opinion that a lighted cigarette-end or match was responsible but it seems certain that it was the overturning of the lighted candle on the table which caused the film to ignite. One of the candles had earlier been quenched by Long as it was burning low but the other, which was simply stuck to the corner of the table by its own grease, had remained lighting throughout the show. Downing later insisted that he could easily have extinguished the fire had not a man nearby spread the flames to the other reels by hitting it with his cap and the action of the Sergeant in knocking the burning reel off the table had also made the situation worse.

The people immediately rushed to the single narrow door from which the ladder/stairs descended. The initial burning reel that the sergeant had kicked outside set fire to the bottom of the stairs which made escape more difficult. Those seated behind the projector, nearest the door, got out as the flames rapidly took hold of the stairs and the hall. Faced with the difficulty of getting out through the door, many others rushed instead to the rear of the hall where the two windows were located. Some did this through their knowledge of the building and in particular being aware that though iron bars were fixed on the outside of the windows, these had been partially sawn through during the war of independence to facilitate the escape of IRA men who met there in the event of a raid by

the British forces. Others appear to have heeded a call to go in that direction in the mistaken belief presumably that they would be safe there. The result was that most of those who were to die crowded into the small antechamber at the back which measured only 9 by 15½ feet. Had not the window here become quickly blocked by a woman getting trapped in it, many more would have escaped: as it was they appear to have become frozen in panic and did not respond to the urging of Garda Davis, who had returned to the burning building in search of his fiancée, to follow him through the smoke-filled hall to the doorway. Trapped in this small space, they were quickly overcome by smoke and began to suffocate. Within minutes the floor of the building collapsed and they were hurtled to the ground where they died from the combination of burns, asphyxiation and shock. Forty six people were dead within 15 minutes. Two survivors later died from their injuries.

Frantic efforts were made to rescue the trapped people both by the guards and the villagers but the intense heat and smoke and the rapidity with which the entire building burned made the task impossible. The town pump had been out of order for the previous four months, and the long dry summer meant that the two wells and river in the village were almost dry, so little water was available though in the circumstances this hardly mattered. The water that was brought from the river, by individuals and by the guards using donkey and carts with barrels, was used mainly to quench wynds of hay at the rear which had also caught fire.

More than half of the victims were aged under twenty-five, nineteen were less than twenty years old and twelve were children under the age of fourteen. The youngest victim was John Kenny aged seven who perished along with his twelve-year-old brother, James. The oldest to die was sixty-eight-year-old Mary Turner. Jeremiah Buckley, a fifty-four-year-old National Teacher died along with his wife, Ellen (56), daughter Bridie (11), sister-in-law Kate Wall (46) and their maid, Nora Kirwan (18) all perished so that this entire household on the Square was wiped out. His brother Thomas (61) also died. The BUCKLEYS were the only married couple among the victims. Margaret (60) and Kate Collins (59), sisters died along with Kate's daughter (22), and their two nieces, Nora (22) and Myra O'Sullivan (21). There were two sad cases of the death of a young mother and two children. Mary Barrett (34) died along with her two children,

Mollie (10) and Tom (14) as did Anne Fitzgerald (38) with her daughter Margaret (11) and son Daniel (8). Equally poignant was the death of Kate McAuliffe (56), her sixteen-year-old daughter Mary and twelve-year-old son John, leaving Florence McAuliffe (53) without his entire family. Mary B. O'Brien (51) died alongside her daughter, Nellie (18). Patrick O'Donnell, probably stayed in the hall looking for his wife Katie and young daughter Mary unaware that they had escaped through the window. Mary (O'Flynn) now aged 87 is the only living survivor.

Ellen Madden (54) was the woman who died trapped in the window and who is unfortunately remembered more for blocking an escape route than for the circumstances of her own horrific death. Among the other victims was Mary O'Brien (24), the fiancée of Garda John Davis who made frantic but unsuccessful efforts to rescue her. Nora Mary Hannigan (11) was visiting relatives in the village from her home in London, Violet Irwin (15) lived in the nearby village of Feenagh while Edward Stack, a farm labourer was from Duagh, Co. Kerry. All the other victims were from the parish of Dromcollogher, most lived in the village and ten were from Pike St.

One of the victims had not even been at the show, William Savage, a 54 year old local butcher and farmer, who lived across the road, was incorrectly told that his two sons were trapped and he rushed into the burning building from which he never emerged. Robert Aherne, a 31 year old publican, also living in Church St, who had only been married for five months, having escaped with his wife Nora, who was expecting their first child, returned to try to rescue his mother-in-law, Mary Anne O' Callaghan - and perished along with her. Thomas Buckley a 61- year- old retired school teacher and Jim Quaid, a 36- year- old farmer stayed in the building helping others to escape, thereby losing their own lives.

The difficult question of identification and burial was solved when special permission was obtained from the Bishop to allow a communal burial of all the victims in the church grounds. The funeral mass on Tuesday 7 September was attended by William T. Cosgrave, President of the Executive Council, as the head of the government was then styled, and the bishop of Limerick, Most. Rev. Dr David Keane. The parish priest of Dromcollogher, James, Canon Begley, presided while the celebrant of the mass was Rev. Daniel O'Callaghan, son of Mary Anne O'Callaghan (61). The slow, agonising task of

digging the grave and placing the coffins continued into the late afternoon, with John Quaid, local county-councillor and brother of victim James Quaid, directing the men engaged in this grim operation. The traditional procession of funerals around the Square did not take place. The funeral of Edward Stack was held on the following day to allow his relatives to attend while the bodies of Thomas Noonan (7) and Violet Irwin (15) were interred in their family plots in Deliga and Cloncrew cemeteries respectively. The forty-eighth victim, James Kirwan died in Croom hospital on Tuesday of the following week and was also placed in the communal grave.

An inquest was opened in the Courthouse on Monday evening by the coroner, Dr Timothy Hannigan and completed on the 13 September. Evidence was given by Forde, Downing, Sgt Long and a local man, John O'Brien. The latter stated firmly that he had seen the candle fall on the table and ignite the films. The jury, chaired by Martin J. Geary, PC, deliberated for $\frac{3}{4}$ hour and returned the verdict that death was through asphyxiation and burning which was caused by a lighted candle on an exposed film which ignited the hall. They found that Downing was guilty of negligence in leaving the films exposed on the table and that there was carelessness on the part of Forde in leaving a lighted candle on the table.

Immediately after the inquest, Forde and Downing were arrested and charged with manslaughter. Both men, as well as Patrick Brennan, the owner of the hall, were later tried on this charge at the Central Criminal Court in Dublin. Brennan was found not guilty and the jury disagreed in the case of Forde and Downing. The case against them was then abandoned by the State on the basis that the objective had been achieved through the warning to others that failure to take proper precautions would lead to such prosecution. Forde emigrated to Australia in the autumn of 1927 where he died tragically in New South Wales in the Spring of 1929. Brennan died in Dromcollogher in the 1940s while Downing continued to work at his profession in Cork until his death in the 1950s.

A relief fund was set up immediately and generously subscribed to from all over Ireland and abroad. Among the largest donations received were £500 from the Arthur Guinness Co, £250 each from Jameson distillers and from Independent Newspapers, £200 from Tim Healy, the Governor-General of the Irish Free State while a committee in Limerick city raised £645. In all £16,787 was contributed and trustees under the

chairmanship of General Richard Mulcahy administered the fund. Payments were made in varying amounts, some as lump sums, most sent in instalments every quarter to the dependants of the victims, and to some of the injured survivors, until the 1950s. For many the 'burning money' was a much needed and welcome supplement to their incomes. The lump sum payments were made to farmers and better-off families while the poorer relatives had to accept the staged payments. This apparently was insisted upon by the parish priest, Canon Begley, and caused a certain amount of resentment. Various aspects of his handling of the tragedy appears to have caused some alienation between the Canon and his parishioners and his transfer to Kilmallock the following year was believed to be directly related to this.

The site of the tragedy remained derelict until the early 1940s when it was bought by the relatives of the victims and an attractively designed Memorial Library was erected where today there are display cases containing contemporary newspapers and other materials detailing the carnage that was visited on the village of Dromcollogher on that balmy September evening. A large Celtic-style cross marks the communal grave in the nearby churchyard on which are inscribed the names and dates of birth of all forty-eight victims, innocent men, women and children whose lives were so unexpectedly and cruelly ended on that night of horror, eighty years ago.

Liam Irwin.

Names Of The Dead

Ahern	William R.	Long	Nora
Barrett	Mary	McAuliffe	Catherine
Barrett	Mary	McAuliffe	John
Barrett	Thomas	McAuliffe	Mary
Buckley	Bridget	McCarthy	Anthony
Buckley	Ellen	Madden	Ellen
Buckley	Jeremiah	Noonan	Thomas
Buckley	Thomas	Nunan	Mary Ita
Collins	Kate	O'Brien	Ellen
Collins	Kate	O'Brien	Mary
Collins	Margaret	O'Brien	Mary B.
Egan	Mary	O'Callaghan	Mary
Fitzgerald	Anne	O'Donnell	Patrick
Fitzgerald	Daniel	O'Sullivan	Eugene
Fitzgerald	Margaret	O'Sullivan	Mary
Hannigan	Nora Mary	O'Sullivan	Nora
Hartnett	Maurice	Quaid	James
Horan	Daniel	Quirke	William
Irwin	Violet	Savage	William
Kenny	James	Sheehan	Bridget
Kenny	John	Stack	Edward
Kirwan	James	Turner	Mary
Kirwan	Margaret	Wall	Kate
Kirwan	Nora	Walsh	John L