



The late Mary O'Flynn was the last survivor of the cinema fire in Dromcollogher in which 48 people died including Mary's father. This picture was taken in 2012

# Dromcollogher disaster still lives in the memory

■ Terrible cinema fire 89 years ago this Saturday claimed 48 lives in county village

DROMCOLLOGHER is still remembered as the village where 48 people lost their lives in a cinema fire on Sunday, September 5, 1926.

It was the same number of people that lost their lives in the Stardust Cinema in Dublin, in February 1981. The tragedy touched every family in the community of fewer than 1,000 people. It was the worst disaster to hit Limerick; one entire household was wiped out, and many families suffered multiple losses. Half of the dead were under 25 years of age, and 15 were children with the youngest victims just under seven.

The story of events on that fateful night, are briefly as follows. Patrick Brennan, owned a hardware store, at the western end of town. It contained a storage area downstairs for timber, and five gallon drums of petrol. Overhead was a spacious loft with a timber floor. The room had been used for showing films, on previous occasions. Access to the loft was by an outside, set of timber steps. The loft measured 60 feet long by 20 feet wide. At the far gable end two small windows barred on the outside, flanked a small narrow room, which was portioned off from the rest of the room. This was used as a dressing room for amateur dramatics.

William Forde, a hackney car owner in Dromcollogher, decided to rent this upstairs room from Patrick Brennan, for a film show. He hired Patrick Downing a projectionist, to bring films and a mobile projector from Cork. The performance was timed to start at 9.15, after Benediction was over in the nearby church. The estimates of the attendance varied, but at least 150 men, women, and children passed through the narrow door into the loft.

Forde was just inside the door collecting the money. He had two candles on the table beside him, which were lit when the first film started. This was to help him with the money and to give change back. The people sat on timber forms, and wooden chairs.

Downing was further up the room, standing at the centre of the table, operating the projector. Around him lay rolls of exposed film reel. It is believed that the



## Then & Now

with Tom Aherne

films to be shown were Baby Be Good and The White Outlaw. The supporting comedy film concluded after 25 minutes and the film reels were left loose nearby.

How the fire started around 10pm as the second film was shown is not clear. It could have been horseplay as some youngsters were throwing their caps at the candles in the hope of quenching them, so that they could make off with the takings.

This story was never confirmed and in all probability the fire was an accident. One of the reels which lay unprotected on the table near the door, went on fire when a candle on the table overturned and set it alight. The reels of film were of a highly inflammable nitrous material and they flared immediately and burned furiously.

The cinema goers rushed to the single narrow door from which the ladder and stairs descended. The people nearest the exit escaped as the fire spread rapidly. More people fled to the rear of the hall where the two windows, were located inside the dressing room area.

John Gleeson, the local parish clerk, by his quick action, saved six people by removing the bars on the windows.

The local IRA members used this room for meetings, during the troubled years. They had cut through the bars to enable them to escape in case of a surprise Black and Tan attack. More people would have got out the window, but unfortunately it got blocked when a woman became trapped in it. Within 10 minutes of the start of the fire the floor collapsed and the stairs and roof fell in. The victims died from a combination of burns, asphyxiation and shock. Forty-six people were dead within 15 minutes, and two others died later from their injuries.

The majority of the victims were from Dromcollogher, mainly the village, and 10 people alone came

from Pike Street. Only 21 of the dead were positively identified. Such was the scale of the tragedy that the army had to deliver the coffins to the town for the burials in the mass grave inside the church gate. Special permission was obtained from Rev Dr David Keane, Bishop of Limerick, to allow a communal burial of all the victims in the church grounds.

The funeral mass on Tuesday September 7, was attended by William T Cosgrave, President of the Executive Council, as the head of the Government. The parish priest of Dromcollogher, John Canon Begley, presided and Rev Daniel O'Callaghan, son of Mary Ann O'Callaghan, RIP celebrated the Requiem Mass along with 45 other priests.

The bodies of Violet Irwin, (15) and Thomas Noonan, (7) were interred in their family plots, in Cloncrew, and Deliga, cemeteries. The 48th victim, James Kirwan, (60) whose daughter Margaret was among the casualties, died in Croom Hospital, and he was also buried in the churchyard grave.

A national relief fund was set up immediately and generously subscribed to from many parts of Ireland and abroad. Arthur Guinness Company donated £500, Jameson Distillers, £250, Tim Healy, Governor General of the Irish Free State, contributed £200. A committee in Limerick city raised £645. Will Rogers, American entertainer, gave a personal donation of £100. Duffy's Circus contributed also, and the proceeds of a special concert in the La Scala Theatre in Dublin, was added to make up the total of £16,787.

General Richard Mulcahy, chairman, and a number of trustees, administered the fund. Payments were made in different amounts, such as lump sums and most were sent in instalments every quarter to the dependents of the victims, and to some of the

injured survivors until the 1950s.

The "burning money" as it was known, was a much needed and welcome supplement to their incomes.

The inquest was held eight days later in Dromcollogher, and the jury returned a verdict, that the victims had died from asphyxiation and burning. Forde was careless in leaving a lighted candle on the table, and Downing was guilty of negligence in leaving the films exposed on the table.

Forde and Downing were arrested and sent forward with Brennan for trial on charges of manslaughter. At the Central Criminal Court in Dublin, five months later, Brennan was acquitted and the jury failed to agree in the other two cases, and Forde and Downing were then discharged.

News on the three became sketchy afterwards, but the following became known. William Forde emigrated to Australia, shortly after the tragedy. He got a job as a cook with a party of rabbit exterminators in the outback. It is said that one day while baking bread he mistook arsenic for baking powder, and he died along with two others.

Patrick Downing was employed again in at least one Cork city cinema as a projectionist. He is said to have died of cancer, in St Luke's Hospital Cork, in the 1950s. Patrick Brennan died in the 1960s.

In the 1940s the site of the hall was bought by the relatives of the victims, and given to Limerick County Council who erected an attractively designed memorial library there. On display there are framed photographs, contemporary newspapers, and other material relating to the tragedy. They are kept in a special glass case in the care of librarian Mary O'Gorman.

Relatives visit the small library around the anniversary each year, and still become emotional. A simple concrete cross is built into a plain stone wall, at the spot where the fire began. A large Celtic style cross marks the communal grave, in the nearby churchyard. On it are inscribed the names and dates of birth of all 48 victims, innocent men, women, and children whose lives were so cruelly ended on that night, 89 years ago this Saturday.

# Wily Banana out for his

## John B. Keane

### OUT IN THE OPEN

"WHAT dogs?" asked an angry Listowel resident after he had read last week's Limerick Leader. "I see no dogs. Go on," he fumed on, "look around you and tell me if you see dogs."

I looked around me and sure enough there were no dogs. The time was 11:15 on Friday, the third of September.

"You wrote," said the angry resident, "that the town was besieged by dogs. I am at this moment prepared to pay you a five pound note for every stray dog you show me in this town." I looked around and still could not see no dog. I walked the streets and back-alleys of the town and not a dog could I see.

Yet only a week ago the town was alive with barking mongrels and slinking curs. I stopped friends and asked them if they had seen any dogs and they assured me that they had not. I was about to give up when I met a local Civic Guard.

I asked him if he had seen any dogs and he said he had.

"I saw Canavan's dog," said he, "about half an hour ago on his way towards the Baby's Wood and he was followed by several others."

The Baby's Wood, by the way, is situated at the bottom of Gurtenard and is so called because it was once fashionable to wheel baby-filled perambulators to this lovely spot.

I might have known Canavan's dog, the famous Banana the Fifth, had something to do with the disappearance of the town's dogs.

A cute mover is Banana the Fifth.

Not a dog was seen all day Friday. The reason, of course, has to be that Banana wanted all the dogs out of the way until indignation after reading the Leader had died away.

While Banana the Fifth may have given up talking there is no doubt that he continues to be an avid reader of newspapers.

Having read the Leader he conveyed the report about cross dogs to his colleagues with the suggestion that they all leave town for a while.

I was proved correct for on Saturday morning, Saturday night and all day Sunday the dogs were back again making a nuisance of themselves.

A Square resident told me that one of these days he is going to purchase a gun and blow every dog in the Square to Kingdom Come. The dogs, therefore, had better conduct themselves.

#### Bill the Baboon

More about animals. Some weeks ago I wrote about a baboon who used to be part of the scene in Church Street, Listowel, at the turn of the century.

A photograph of the monkey at the bottom of Church Street in the year 1906 may be inspected at John O'Shaughnessy's public house in the charming town of Glín.

This very fine blow-up of an old photograph from the

famous Lawrence was one of many during Listowel Week by the artist, Sean O'Shaughnessy.

Sean, who was Behan's best friend, that Behan was pass Joy's pub in when on his way to Kerry.

To get back, Bill the Baboon said that my friend the creature was a mixture of scorn.

People would believe he exists I pointed out, abandoned by a circus called Har.

I saw in last week a letter from Vera Von Zitz is the boss of Ltd., Cottage Ballyheigue and

The Barones course of states regarding Baboon who was her grandmother passing through "It was an ugly, creature, but very He liked fruit a him whatever was It was very interesting read of the morning paper."

After reading from the Barones to visit her in I got a warning and she told n grandmother mentioned the would say that I was one of the I her visit to Ireland.

They stayed in the Square, the Listowel At time she was a every day the p hotel would take children to see t

The creature christened Bill woman who was a handsome young whose name was Bill the Baboon either early in 1909. No one sees for certain.

Johnny Mc Listowel remembered baboon well and that not much taken of him by after the first few

Bill spent most sitting on the wall of a barber's shop centre of the town

Dogs and cats wide berth after skirmishes. Bill just the job for the curs which harass people today.

Nobody seen where he is buried the local graveyard say he was put and dumped in during a flood else he was an spectacle and in an asset to the town

#### Bodhravns

The demand for tambourines or has now exceeded the supply Thursday last I pay twenty pounds for an ancient model

EX: LIMERICK LEADER

5TH SEPTEMBER 1926