

Doing business in the

■ After 80 years in business, Clancy's Electrical is to close its city-centre shop. Owner Gerry Clancy says many of the problems facing the city centre can be blamed on the policies of Limerick City Council

Alan Owens

FOR almost 80 years Clancy's Electrical have been synonymous with O'Connell Street.

Beginning on the corner of O'Connell Street and Thomas Street when local man Gerry Clancy set up shop in 1930, just six years later the electrician bought 45 O'Connell Street – a derelict, roofless building, formerly a cinema, the only building on the street built in the flat roof style.

From a humble beginning selling radiograms, fuses, lightbulbs and carrying out electrical contract work, Gerry Clancy Senior spawned a business that has seen its tentacles spread out from O'Connell Street into four different areas – the retail, wholesale, contracting and hotel supply businesses.

However, Clancy's grandson, also Gerry, is preparing to close the doors on 45 O'Connell Street this weekend, blaming a "vast decline" in footfall and delivering a withering broadside to the City Council for their perceived ineffectiveness.

Before tackling these issues with the Limerick Chronicle, Clancy keenly remembers his grandmother telling him the tale of the day his grandfather showed her the new premises on O'Connell Street.

"That's right, my grandfather took my grandmother into town. I'll always remember her telling me, he brought her in and she looked up and all she could see was the sky, the building had become derelict. I know she wondered, 'What have we gotten into now'. That was the '30s when Frank McCourt was running around Limerick in short pants – a lifetime ago," laughs Gerry.

Facing a serious decline in business over the last number of years, Gerry Clancy has made the difficult decision to close the O'Connell Street store and "consolidate" his business out to Clancy's store on the Parkway roundabout, a 10,500 square foot premises that opened in November of last year.

It will be emotional turning the key for the final time, he admits.

"I will shed a tear, I suppose. We will be leaving O'Connell Street but it is not the end of an era, it is maybe the closing of one chapter and the opening of another," says Gerry.

"It was an emotional decision that we came to. We have been thinking about this for 12 months or more, maybe about two years at this stage, because we have definitely seen a decline in footfall over the last two or three, four years."

He adds: "It has been exacerbated by the economic situation, but that has brought a bit more focus to the difficulty and the problem. It is a difficult decision but when you break it down, business has to come first. If you don't make a business decision there would be no business left."

Clancy is firmly of the opinion that current economic conditions have been compounded by the "disgraceful" attitude of Limerick City Council, with whom he lays the blame squarely for the declining trade in the city centre.

"The trading conditions imposed by the city council have driven shoppers out of town and it is no longer viable to continue trading in Limerick city," he says.

"There are nine empty ground floor retail units on O'Connell Street at the moment and we will be the tenth come this day week. There is a major difficulty in that there is a City and County Council that seem to be at total loggerheads with each other, playing one off the other. Why do people want to come into town? Where are the rates going to come from? It is a disgrace.



Gerry Clancy: closing the O'Connell Street shop was 'an emotional decision' but a serious decline in business means that it was unavoidable

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"You can't park – traffic wardens are handing out tickets like there is no tomorrow. There are so many ills in the city it is not funny and it, in my opinion, stems from City Council and it is driving people out to the retail parks," adds Gerry.

Gerry says that hikes in disc parking prices, the removal of on-street car parking spaces and poor planning is what has forced the business to leave its home on O'Connell Street, and he completely dismisses the idea floated by Mayor Kevin Kiely that he is playing the "blame game" with the recession.

"I actually cannot believe that he would make that comment," says Gerry.

"Okay the recession means that yes, business is down, but it is not just the recession that is my problem here. Like any person in business where it is down, we have to control cost. But as I say, business and footfall has been falling for years. Hence, if your footfall is falling then business will too and it has been down year on year in town for years – ever before the recession came into being.



O'Connell Street: City traders are concerned about falling numbers of shoppers

"There has to be practicality there. They have this grandiose plan for an orbital route and a plan for a rejuvenated city centre, but as far as I can see both projects seem to be at least five years behind at this stage.

They have removed umpteen on street parking spaces and disc prices are gone up. When you can go to outlying retail parks and shopping centres and park for free, why would you want to come into town?"

As for the idea that the city council have "done all they can to ensure the city survives", again Gerry cannot agree.

"I cannot subscribe to that. How can I sub-

scribe to that when every single peer that I have in the retail trade in the city, they are all complaining that business is down? It is not just recession based – footfall is down."

However, despite the pain of closing the city centre store, a move that has meant five staff be made redundant, Gerry is upbeat, positive about the years ahead.

"It is not the end of an era, it is just the next chapter in our trading history," he says. "We have been serving the people of Limerick since 1930, and we will hopefully knock another 80 years out of it if we can at all."

city: a special report

■ Since opening 59 years ago, Leavy's Shoes on O'Connell Street has survived some hard times - and owner Tom Leavy says he has confidence in the future of the city



Perfect fit: Thirteen-year-old Cian Graham of South Circular Road, a pupil of Ard Scoil Ris, getting fitted for new school shoes by Caroline Chalimoniuk of Leavys

PICTURE: ADRIAN BUTLER

from year to year. As he says, "in business you are only as good as your last season".

As someone who has been at the coalface of Limerick trading over several decades, who better than Tom but to discuss the current recession, and how it compares to the days of yore? Although initially reluctant to say too much, the successful shoe seller quickly warms up to the topic under discussion.

While times are tough, he has seen similar scenes before, but there is a feeling that the 'noughties' version of the recession is the worst yet recorded.

"I have seen similar times, but it wasn't as severe. I think this is harder. It is just more severe, it is quicker, it has all happened so fast. And of course compared to the '80s there is more information coming out to everybody and maybe that makes it happen so quickly."

Asked about how Leavy's has fared recently, Tom is pragmatic.

"Naturally we have suffered like everybody else, but we have tried to cut our cloth to measure and cut back our budgets and do the best we can to get through it," he says.

"The people in Limerick shop with us, which we appreciate tremendously. We have a lot of regular customers across the board, and we try to do the best we can with them. We try to give them a decent product at a reasonable price. We are aware of that right now that you can't be selling stuff that is too expensive, but naturally we still have to make a profit."

He remains confident in his home city. "Of course I'm confident in the city - it is there for the past 1,000

years," says Tom. "It has seen a lot of things - the Siege of Limerick and two world wars, so it's not going to fall to pieces now. It isn't the only city in Ireland that is having a rough time, but it is important that people can get the best out of it - be as positive as you can."

"I've always had confidence in Limerick city. It is very easy to go and look for scapegoats and it is very easy to blame people, but I have no time for that. You'll always find something wrong. It is unfortunate it is so bad at the moment and City Hall is getting an awful lot of flak."

Tom is aware that parking is an issue for customers - he hears it regularly in his business - but is unwilling to attack the City Council for this, rather suggesting they look at some practical solutions and communicate more with local businesses, possibly come up with some new methods to encourage people back into the city.

Tom is confident that, like his father before him, the children of tomorrow will continue to be served by Leavy's, regardless of the tough times.

"All we can do is keep our head down, and keep the blinkers on and look after what we are doing. We will try and go from season to season and be straight and honest with the customers and give them what they are looking for," says Tom.

"We are there for the long haul - we are not moaning and groaning about it. We have a lot of confidence in Limerick - there are a lot of people in Limerick."

"As my father used to say: 'Limerick is big enough to get lost in, yet it is small enough to know people in.'"

Alan Owens

WHILE August will forever be associated for many with the impending doom of having to return to school, for some city centre businesses this time is one of the busiest of the year.

This August Leavy's Shoes on O'Connell Street and William Street will celebrate another year of 'Back to School' sales, 59 years after Brian Leavy started the business on Patrick Street.

Customers have come and gone, much leather and lace has been fitted, bought and discarded, but people will always need shoes, regardless of a recession.

Tom Leavy, who took over from his father in the 1970s, is a practical sort of character, confident in his city and not willing to engage in the sort of anguished debate that has accompanied these straitened times, as scapegoats are sought and vilified. Rather, Tom is merely seeking to take things

Councillors 'do not have a single iota of sympathy for businesses in the city'

Alan Owens

FORMER LIMERICK Chamber of Commerce president Tadhg Kearney has angrily declared that "second-rate elected officials" do not have an "iota of sympathy with businesses in the city".

Mr Kearney, who owns Tadhg Kearney Jewellers on Thomas Street, spoke to the Limerick Chronicle this week as part of a special report into how city centre traders are faring in the face of the recession, and while he praised the efforts of City Manager Tom Mackey, he was scathing in his criticism of city councillors.

"I have great regard for the officials, but I have very limited regard for elected officials," said Mr Kearney when asked to comment on the performance of City Council in encouraging trade in the city.

"I don't think city councillors have a single iota of sympathy with businesses in the city. I think the city manager and his staff do, and they understand how cities work, but the council does not."

"It is a disgrace that there are no bus lanes in



Tadhg Kearney in his Jewellery shop on Thomas Street: Footfall on our street has increased enormously because of pedestrianisation

the city. We are the only urbanised area in the country that doesn't have bus lanes and that is because of political cowardice on behalf of second-rate elected officials," argued Mr Kearney.

However, Mr Kearney does not hold sway with

the argument about the lack of parking in the city, arguing that there is "plenty of car parking" and voicing his strong advocacy for pedestrianisation.

"We don't have a shortage of car parking spaces and there are loads of car parks in the

city centre. If I had a choice between a pedestrianised street and on-street parking, I would pick pedestrianisation, because it makes the city centre attractive to come into. I would like to see more of the city pedestrianised," he said.

While Kearney

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admitted that it had been a difficult year so far, ironically, numbers are up for his business. However, he expects the rest of the year and next year in particular, to be much more difficult.

"We are in the pedestrianised zone and we have refurbished our premises in the last year and I think that has cushioned us," he explained.

"It has been an awfully difficult year and we are obviously down, everyone is down. Each spending category seems to have dropped a notch or two; our custom numbers are up, but we are down in turnover. Footfall on our street has increased enormously because of pedestrianisation."

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