

Learned his trade at Glin Industrial School

# Tommy, Limerick's last shoe stitcher, cobbles on after 21 years

By Rebekah Commans

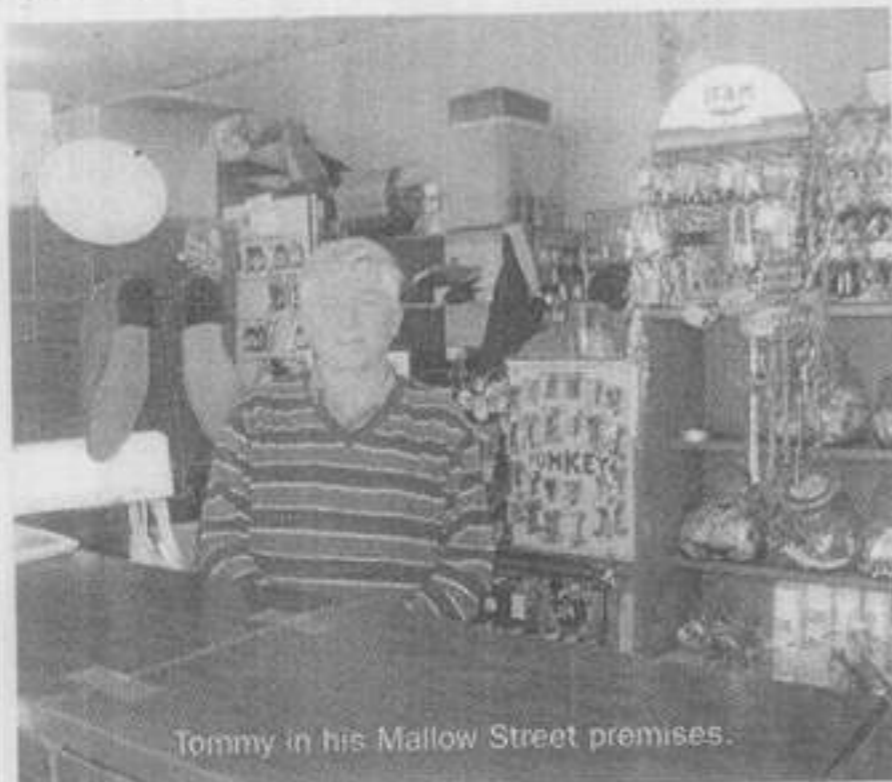
YOU would think the clear sign outside "Mallow Street Shoe Repairs" would be self-explanatory, but it hasn't prevented the many strange requests that have been made of the long established cobbler there, including a lady's plea to reattach the handle to an ancient frying pan.

Mind you, there are not many things Tommy Kelly, believed to be Limerick's last shoe stitcher, can't turn his hand to, so it is certainly worth asking.

During his 21 years working on the premises, the view from the cobbler's window has changed significantly.

When he opened in 1988, The Bank, across the road, actually gave out money, and not pints. But business at Tommy's is continues to thrive.

Having been told at St. Joseph's Industrial School for boys in Glin, that as a Ciotóg, or left-handed person, he would never make a tailor, Tommy trained in shoe stitching



Tommy in his Mallow Street premises.

as a renowned cobbler.

Leaving school, Tommy's skills initially led to a job in the former Limerick Shoe Factory on Muirgrave Street, where, he says: "There were 400 employees; 120 men and the remainder women. People came and went from the factory and I stayed 10 years, before the place closed. I was offered 90 pounds redundancy".

The Gouldavoher resident then took a detour from the shoe industry and worked for one year on the construction of the Ferenka factory in Annacotty, before joining Lana Knit in Shannon, where he spent 18 years.

In 1988, Tommy returned to the cobbler trade when he took over from Mr. O'Connell, who was retiring from the "While U Wait" shoe repair shop on O'Connell Street.

"I bought Mr. O'Connell's stitching machines from him when the business closed", says Tommy. "I wanted to build my own business in the same premises, but the lease was too short and the rent was due to sky rocket when the lease was up".

It was then that he acquired his current premises on Mallow Street, and 21 years later, is still going strong, although he has grown

disheartened with the industry.

"Shoes aren't made like they used to be," he tells me, "and there are no shoes made in Ireland. In fact, most of the accessories in my shop has to be imported.

"We have an abundance of cattle in supply but no tanneries, and all the leather is shipped out to countries like Italy, when we could have a thriving industry on our own doorstep".

Married to Marie, with four children, it is Tommy's son-in-law Patrick O'Connell, who joined him in the business.

"None of my children wanted to work with me, but Patrick has been with me now for 20 years. We have definitely felt the impact of the recession, like everyone else. We really felt the loss when the county council offices moved out to Dooradoyle and took their business with them, but things are still going well and we have no intention of closing".

Despite all the urgent requests made of him over the years, Tommy currently has three sackfuls of shoes which have failed to be collected, though he gives them away to charity if their owners fail to show after about a year.

'Shoes aren't made like they used to be...and there are no shoes made in Ireland'

and repairs and became adept at the skill.

"We were taught to stitch everything from shoes to slottars and footballs", Mr. Kelly told me.

Although his time at the school seems to have been an experience, he is keen to forget, as he progressed in life the St. Mary's parish man went on to use the skills learned there in his career

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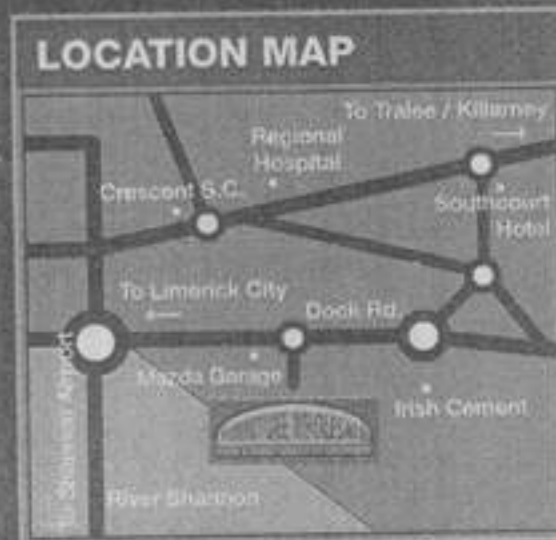
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