

# Still standing proud after a life fully lived

He turns 80 on Sunday, he's been in business over 50 years and after fighting back from two traumatic ordeals he's a true survivor. But the city jeweller has also seen the retail landscape change dramatically over the years

Aine Fitzgerald



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"Oh that's them at work in the workshop," explains the popular Limerick jeweller, who celebrates his 80th birthday this Sunday.

Phew. Good to know that all's well upstairs at 45 Wickham Street.

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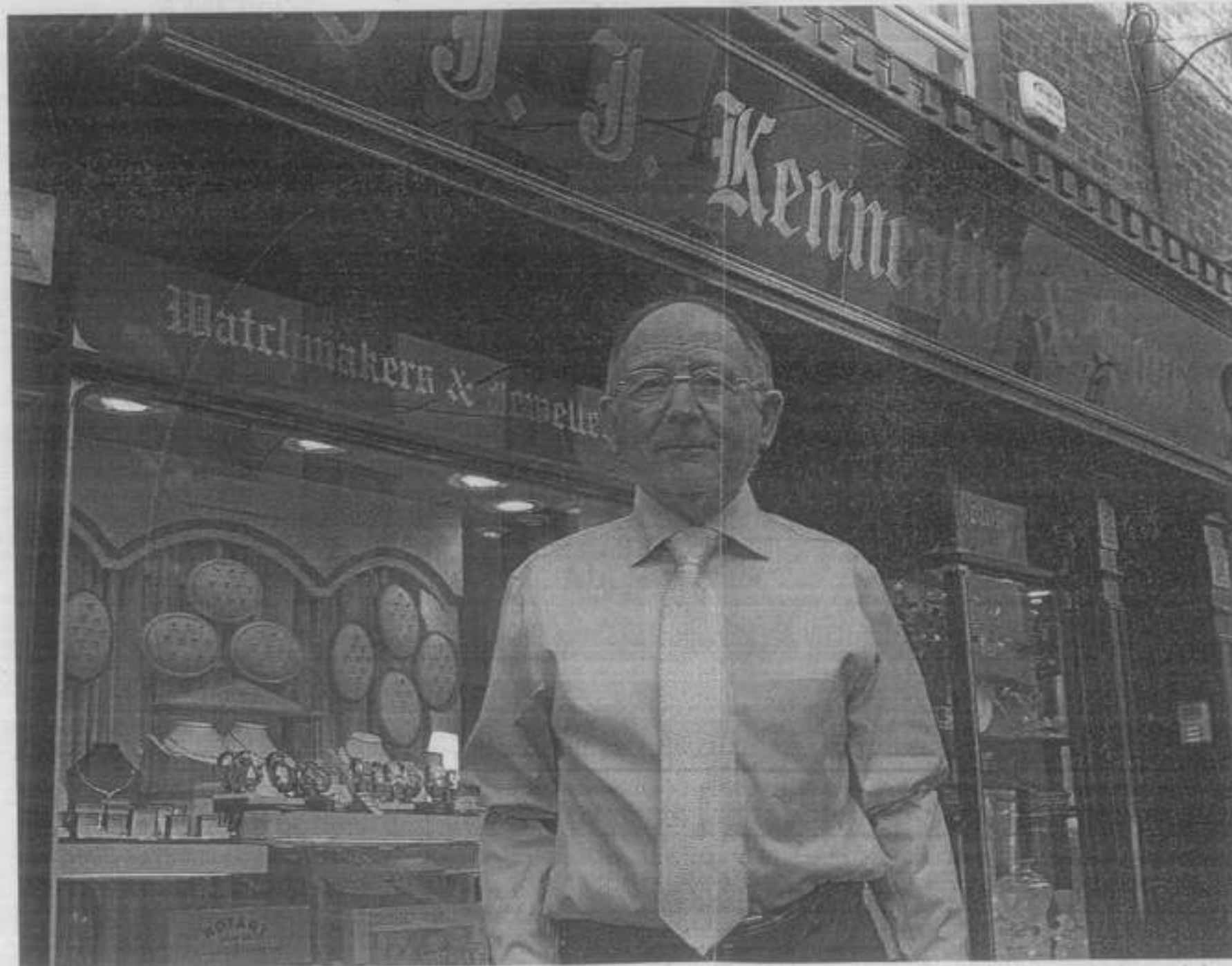
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At the other end of the scale there have been tough days too inside these walls.

As a young boy growing up in Parteen, JJ, the son of a gardener, was never to know the twists and turns his life would take. He wasn't to know that he would hitch-hike to Spain in 1952, take his first flight at the age of 70 or be shot twice in 1986.

Four bullet holes remain at his city premises - two in the walls and two in the showcases - a constant reminder of how lucky he is to still be above ground.

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## PERSONAL FILE

**Favourite book** - War books

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**Favourite TV show** - anything

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So what was going through his head as the minutes turned into hours? "If you had a double-barreled sawn-off shotgun under your chin, what you would be saying is, 'Are we going to make it?'"

Street in April in 1959. "From the word go I made a success of it - I was very lucky. I was 29. I always felt that I wanted to do something of my own. I had the bare minimum at that stage," says JJ rising off his seat to fetch a photograph from the hallway.

The black and white photograph was taken during his first Christmas in the shop and it depicts the outside of the building, which is really very much the same as it is now, complete with the bonnet of an old car just inside the frame.

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Stella Ballroom, romance blossomed, they were wed around two years later. Today they have four children, Olive, Fergus, Clive ...

"That's C-L-I-V-E," I spell out to him ... "Gosh you're getting good," he laughs. "And Robbie."

"Names are funny," he continues. "I couldn't care less, myself, but engravements are terribly dodgy. We get them now to write down what they want on it."

As if the two incidents where JJ was held at gun-point wasn't enough drama for one man in his life, JJ's family home on Corbally Road, across from St Munchin's College went on fire in the early 1980s. While it was never established what exactly happened, it's thought an electrical fault led to the disaster. Three of the children were in the house at the time.

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His broad sporting interest has meant that his jewellers is the first stop for many sporting organisations in search of trophies or medals for various functions. He is the current president of St Patrick's GAA Club and a regular sponsor of the Corbally Swim.

As a participant in - and spectator of - the retail industry in Limerick city for over half a century, he offers his own assessment of the current situation.

"It's bad all over," he says. "But then a lot of people expect to do business and they spend most of their time walking around, having coffee and playing golf. I am here 51 years this year and I have never left the premises for a cup of coffee

## Residents object to four families taking entire field

**T**HERE was uproar at a special meeting of the residents of St. Patrick's Road and Pennywell on Wednesday night. The meeting was called to protest against the proposal of the Corporation to establish a site for itinerants at the Old Pump House near St. Patrick's Field.

All present, who represented about 300 houses in the vicinity, objected in the strongest possible manner against the establishment of a site there for itinerants.

Cllr. Patrick Kiely, who attended, informed the meeting that he would put down a notice of motion for the next meeting of the City Council that the proposal for the site at the Old Pump House which is owned by the Corporation, be not proceeded with.

## UPROAR over new itinerant proposal

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### Alarm

Several residents whose livelihood is bound up with market gardening also protested and are very alarmed at the proposal.

They complain that their gardens will be in danger of being damaged as has occurred in other areas where itinerants camped.

Mr. Brian Kelly, chairman of the Itinerant



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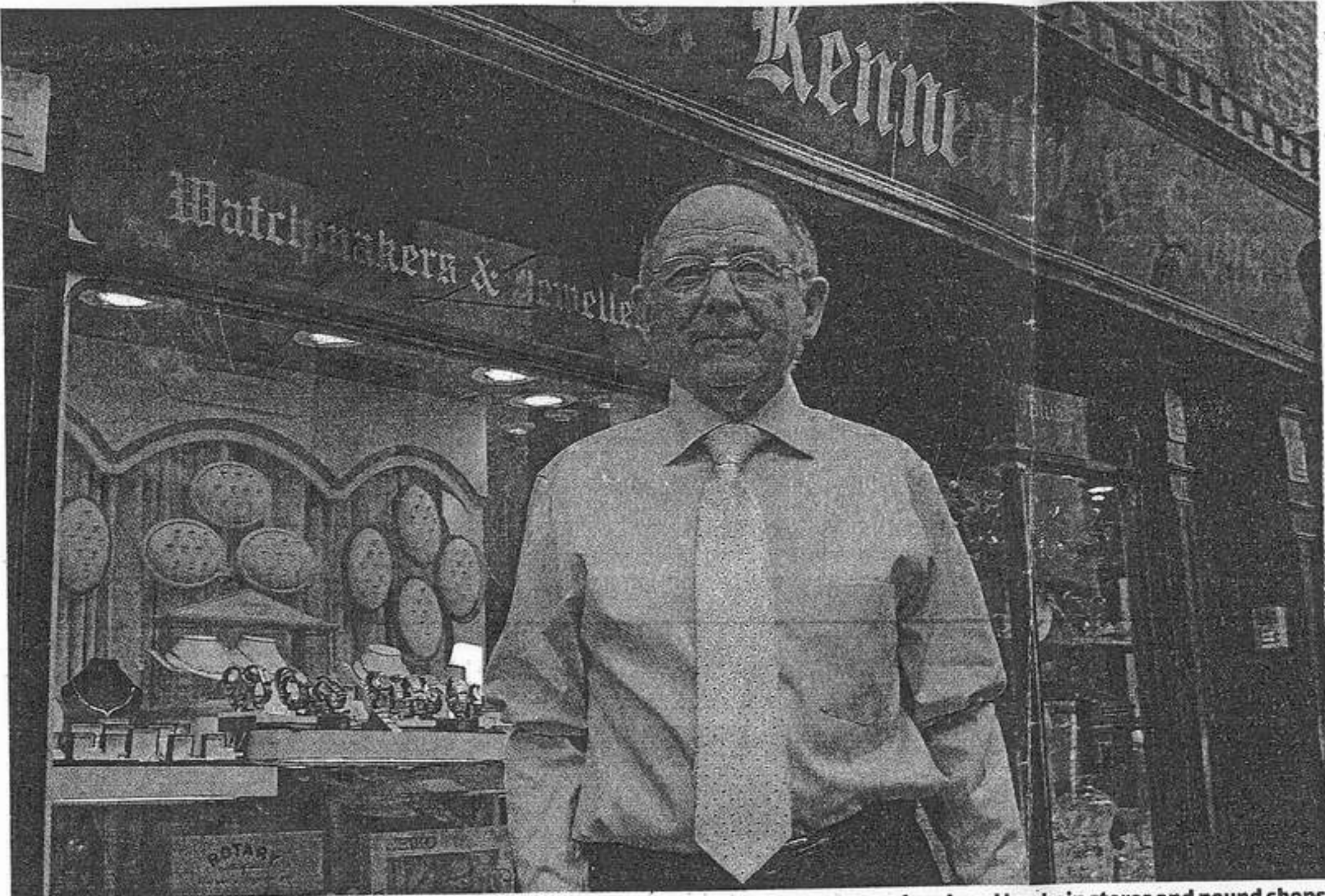
For as long as he can remember, JJ Kenneally has cycled to work, but when the doors of the store swung open at nine o'clock one morning in 1986, there was no way he would ride his bike home that evening. The two early morning visitors were men armed with revolvers, their faces covered with balaclavas.

"They burst in the front door. They wanted the diamond rings which they got eventually because I was on the floor bleeding," JJ explains. "They put two bullets in me," he continues pointing to his right side and left leg where the bullets pierced. A total of seven shots were fired during the incident which lasted around six minutes. JJ's sister Imelda was in the shop at the time as were two of the assistants. There were others upstairs in the workshop.

"They took the diamond rings, I think they were worth £100,000 and rushed out.

"I was attacked because I was bitter over the previous incident [of which, read on]. If you want to go out - go out with a bullet. I didn't even know I was hit. I didn't know I was hit until I saw the blood. I suppose you are suffering from shock straight away. But it's a grand way to go. I'd recommend it," he says with a wry smile.

The serious, scary truth is that JJ was badly shaken by the incident and spent time in intensive care. He was in the hospital for the most of a month and had to recuperate at home for nearly two months. "That was fairly traumatic, I can tell you," he recalls of the experience. "As bad as that was, the night at home was



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PERSONAL FILE

- Favourite book** - War books and I get the National Geographic every month. I don't read fiction - it must be the real thing!
- Favourite TV show** - anything on the History Channel or the Discovery Channel
- Favourite holiday destination** - Any part of Europe
- Life motto** - Plain and simple!

worse," he continues.

A year prior to this, JJ arrived home to an unimaginable horror, or, in his own words - "the worst night of my life". This is "the previous incident". It was half past ten and as he entered his home on the Mill Road, JJ was grabbed and a bag thrown over his head. For the next seven hours the businessman and his family, who were in another room, were held hostage by an armed gang of five.

"I walked into it. I arrived home and they had all the family tied up, hands behind their backs, gags in their mouths". JJ didn't know this at the time as he had been told that his wife Carmel and their children had been taken away.

"It was the worst night of my life because it went on from half past ten to five o'clock in the morning. I had the bag over my head the whole time. They were trying to break me down. They were looking for the keys of the shop and the keys

of the safe but the safe was on a time lock so they knew it couldn't be open until the following morning, which would be too late for them to be walking around with balaclavas on.

"They took the keys of Carmel's car and drove off. They took every bit of silver I had and I had a good lot of silver pieces. They cleared out the house."

So what was going through his head as the minutes turned into hours? "If you had a double-barreled sawn-off shotgun under your chin, what you would be saying is, 'Are we going to make it?'"

Fortunately the family did make it. But the ordeal took its toll.

"It affected one of the lads very badly but they [the family] got counselling." Like the careers of many of his peers, JJ's began by chance through an acquaintance.

It was 1944, the 14-year-old JJ had finished primary school. His father Maurice, from back near Ardagh, was the gardener for one Mr Evans, who owned Cromers Jewellers on O'Connell Street. With no experience - "none whatsoever" - JJ entered the glistening world of jewellery.

"I was able to read the time on a watch, that was it," laughs JJ thinking back to how young and inexperienced he was. Today he wears a watch given to him by his family for his 65th birthday, a gold signet ring and his wedding ring. He began his career running messages before graduating to becoming a watchmaker, as did his brother Paddy, who worked as a watchmaker for 30 years. Their sisters, Imelda and Agnes, also were involved in the business.

"I spent seven years serving my time to become a watchmaker," says JJ. Paddy Griffin was his mentor: "He was one of the best watchmakers in town."

The wages were a half crown a week for the first year - two and six. JJ continued working in Cromers until 1959. He started his business on Wickham

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The black and white photograph was taken during his first Christmas in the shop and it depicts the outside of the building, which is really very much the same as it is now, complete with the bonnet of an old car just inside the frame.

"I started out repairing and selling," he says JJ. Business was good, but the past was another city.

"It was much different then, people weren't so self-centred. There was quite a lot of traffic around because you had Keane's - a big bakery up the street which always did a great business. Then you had the clothing factory up the street, you had Dawans and then you had Tait's Factory."

Not sure of the correct spelling of Tait's, I ask for JJ's assistance.

"Listen I left school at 14," he chirps. "There was a piece on the radio lately about the exam and spellings were one of the things!" he smiles.

"You had O'Meara's factory down the road here," he continues, "you had Materson's bacon factory up the road, you had the CIE station and all those people used to come into me because they would be passing up and down to work. But all those factories are long since gone." He says it like he means it: a lament.

In 1964 JJ said goodbye to the single life when he married his wife Carmel "a very good wife and a great cook". He first laid eyes on her one morning on William Street. She was on her way to work at the Fair Green service station where she worked in the office.

"I didn't know her at all but, as the fella says, I watched and waited."

He later bumped into Carmel in the

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As a participant in - and spectator of - the retail industry in Limerick city for over half a century, he offers his own assessment of the current situation.

"It's bad all over," he says. "But then a lot of people expect to do business and they spend most of their time walking around, having coffee and playing golf. I am here 51 years this year and I have never left the premises for a cup of coffee or anything like that. I might have to go for a message or something like that. But once you are in, you are in."

"Business now is much different. There is no loyalty now like there was in the old days. People will go wherever is handy. People nowadays want to slide out of their car and into the shop."

The parking situation he labels as "crazy". "There should be free parking during the weekends. They won't come in if there is going to be a fine of €40 on their car after doing half an hour shopping."

And he says there are "too many of those pound shops".

"William Street was a powerful street when I was younger. A lot of the shops now are honky-tonky, if you'll pardon the expression. There are cafes everywhere and you will notice the names aren't Tom O'Brien or Pat Fitzgerald - they are all chain names, whizz names. It does sadden me."

But if there is one thing that brings a smile back to his face, it's the mention of Mrs K's home cooking, or the garden. "I dislike intensely going out for food - I get such great food at home. I grow all my own veg. I would live in my garden - cabbage, turnip, carrots, parsnips - there is none of your burgers there. I love good, plain, honest-to-God Irish food cooked by Mrs K."

Just what the jeweller ordered ...

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RELIVING THE NEWS

with Sean C

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From the Limerick Leader  
Saturday, October 18

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