

Upper Mallow Street shoe repairs in business 25 years

Cobblers Tommy and Pat working away to the last



Tommy Kelly at work in his busy shoe repair shop in Upper Mallow Street

Chronicle

STANDING UP FOR
THE CITY

Anne Sheridan

IN BUSINESS a quarter of a century, cobbler Tommy Kelly has seen every shoe and boot imaginable - and facilitated nearly every request. From LK Bennett to Lidl, footwear of every price and make has passed through his hands in his past 25 years in business.

Today, it is one of the few industries that has been hailed as "recession proof", perhaps even "recession booming" with more people than ever operating their own individual austerity plan and recycling their shoes rather than forking out for a new pair. But Tommy doesn't exactly agree.

"Come in to us at 10am," said his son-in-law, Pat O'Carroll, "we're quiet then."

Yet, moments after coming through the door of Mallow Street Shoe Repairs on this "quiet" Friday, it seems a horde of customers had

the same idea. The bell at their small workplace continues to chime every few minutes as they recount their operations.

Behind him there are rows and rows of blue plastic bags, full of shoes, waiting to be collected by the owners. Some never return.

There are kitten heels and vertiginous stilettos, hunting boots, and cowboys boots, worn by people "from every walk of life."

Some, he confides, might be better off putting them in the bin, but they do their best to make their boots "made for walking" again.

Above him are white satchels containing more shoes that remain here one year on.

He pulls out a pair of gentleman's shoes, brought in by a local businessman, that have been lying idle on a shelf for months.

Disbelief is etched on his face as he caresses the leather. "They've hardly ever been worn," he says in dismay. "They're perfect."

Originally from St Mary's parish, Tommy worked in the Limerick Shoe Factory on Mulgrave Street in the 1960s where he learnt his craft, until it closed in the 70s.

The closure of another company in Shannon led him to set up his own business in 1985, and it remains one of the few old-world practices in town, where they specialise in stitching in gents' soles.

Several neighbouring businesses on Upper Mallow Street have closed down recently and Tommy's remains one of the few surviving businesses. "Business is tipping over," he says modestly.

"I wouldn't say it's a recession proof industry. People could come in with shoes that cost €15 and it might cost more to get them fixed. A lot of people are buying cheaper shoes and I wouldn't blame them either.

"It's a great location; it always has been. But the street has gone quiet. People have always supported us well, from the county as well and from Clare, and that's one thing we're grateful for."

Unlike many other business, commercial rates owed to the city council haven't been a hindrance to their success.

They are paid by direct debit every week - the best way to keep their finances in order, he feels.

Not many people would opt to work with their son or daughter in law, but Tommy says he and Pat "get on well together, like a house on fire." They would need to having to work a nine-hour day six days a week with the constant hum of the machines in the background.

Pat hasn't missed a day of work in two years and loves his job, even though he didn't originally intend to stay here this long.

About 20 years ago he was working with a builder and came in to the shop for 15 minutes during his break. "I told Tommy I couldn't stay long, but I never got back outside the door," he joked.

Key-cutting has also been a major sideline to the business, and Elvis keys are their biggest seller, and then there's the Hello Kitty brand, "whoever she is", says Tommy.

"Michael Jackson hasn't arrived yet. They're negotiating with God for him."

Keys, shoes and international popstars aside, there have been other weird and wonderful requests.

"They'd ask you to fix anything. One woman came in one day with a frying pan, looking for us to fix the handle. We had to send her to an electrical store up the road."

The bell chimes again. "How are you kid?" he asks the customer, and jests: "Making a fortune, like us all?"

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