

End of an era as Griffin's Funeral Home is demolished

GRIFFIN'S Funeral Home, which has traded from Lower Gerald Griffin Street for over a 100 years was dramatically toppled to the ground last week to make way for a new development in the historic street. But it was a poignant farewell for owner Gerry Griffin, who has had to leave the premises his family have been synonymous with since 1850.



by Mary Earls

ONE of Limerick's oldest family businesses, Gerry Griffin is a fourth generation undertaker and when he passes the business on to his children, they will be the fifth generation to carry on the Griffin name.

However, a number of buildings around him are being completely rebuilt in the next few years, between his old premises and the corner of Little Gerald Griffin Street.

And Mr Griffin decided it was time to find a new home - as otherwise they "would be living in a virtual building site for the next five years".

Apartment blocks with shops on the ground floor and a car park are to replace the funeral home.

The main contract work is being carried out by Spicefield Developments and WISE Construction Limerick Ltd, who employed O'Kelly Bros, Ballingarry as their demolitions

subcontractor. The structural demolitions were carried out over two and a half days, from June 21 to 23.

Griffin's Funeral Directors will continue to serve bereaved families from its temporary premises on 17 Davis Street, while their new permanent location in Johnsgate in Pennywell is being built.

"I've been on a rollercoaster over the past month - up and down between both premises. It was emotional seeing it knocked. It was knocked in stages. And one day I just arrived there and it was gone. I didn't actually see the final piece being knocked. There is a lot of history there. But we wanted to improve the services to our client families. And we wanted to take Griffins into a new era. I believe we have achieved that with our new purpose build, state of the art premises in Johnsgate," said Mr Griffin.

Gerry Griffin is married to Liz and they have three sons John, Dave and Dan and daughter Hazel.

The three sons help out in the funeral home while in college.

The Griffin family have been responsible over the generations for many noted and famous 'Limerick Funerals'. Notably the last five Bishop's of Limerick, Alderman Jim Kemmy, Mayor Frances Condell, Hurler Mick Mackey, actor Richard Harris and Ted Russell to name but a few.

Reflecting on the history of the business, Mr Griffin said that it was founded in 1850 by his great grandfather, John Griffin and it originally operated from Church Street.

"We moved to our Gerald Griffin Street premises in 1890 and it burned to the ground in 1912, killing my great grandfather, John, who founded the business, his wife Catherine and three other people - two visitors and staff. But it was

rebuilt on the same site. We were an undertakers then. But we opened the first funeral home in Limerick in 1974," said Mr Griffin.

Explaining the difference between the two, Mr Griffin said that before 1974 in Limerick, you would be removed from the local hospital or if you died at home, from your own house to the church.

But they were the first funeral directors in the city to lay somebody out in the funeral home and to carry the coffin from the funeral home to the church.

"Undertakers still supplied coffins, hearses and prepared remains in the same way. It just changed in the way people came to pay their respects," he said.

Mr Griffin added that the funeral home was built on the original site of the house where poet, John Francis O'Donnell lived.

"He was reared on this site and in the 1940s a plaque was

put up to honour this. With my colleagues in the Limerick Civic Trust, I helped to carefully remove this plaque and it is now in storage and will be included on the wall of the new building."

Mr Griffin said that a lot of thought has gone into the plans for the new purpose-built premises in Johnsgate, as regards the comfort of the families and people visiting.

"There is more space and it's a more modern fresh approach. We are moving away from the whole idea of a sitting room with flowery curtains and carpet. And we are trying to get an open reception look, with modern tiles and timber. We will also have private family rooms, away from the chapels, where a family can go to have some time out. And we have coffee and tea making facilities in this room.

"Our new premises will also have a purpose built embalming suite, with two fully qualified embalmers on the staff. Families expect their loved ones to look as natural as possible and we feel this is very important aspect of what we do. The new premises also has a courtyard entrance, semi covered for outdoor standing and inclement weather, three funeral chapels, an administration block and staff rooms," he said.

Pondering the many changes that have occurred in Gerald Griffin Street over the years, Mr Griffin said that there used to be a specialised potato shop that sold nothing but potatoes on the street and another one that just sold salt.

"There was also a brilliant basket weaver called Jack Delaney who used to weave

baskets and chairs on the floor of his shop on Gerald Griffin Street. But now there's probably no need for such a skill when you can buy them from Taiwan for 2.99 euro each. There was also Mr Ryan the locksmith and O'Callaghan's Tannery, where the leather for every shoe in Limerick came from. That tannery burned down as well in the past and is now a new apartment block.

"The city dispensary was also located in Gerald Griffin Street. Back in those days, as a precursor to the medical cards, there was one building in the city where you could get free medical care and medicines. It was in the red brick Jehovah Witnesses building.

"You'd go to Gerald Griffin Street for most of your supplies and services in Limerick at that time. But now it is going to be a mix of residential and retail again, as it was before all the shops were opened on the street. In the past people would have gone out to the new housing estates in the suburbs. But now people want to live in the city centre again," he said.

Another fourth generation business that is not moving out of Gerald Griffin Street is Breda Clancy's pub - up near the AIB. The traditional pub, which is located on the same side of the street as Griffins, has a market licence and has traded in the street for generations. Hayes grocer and spirits is another traditional pub that is staying put on the street. In traditional Irish style, Hayes has a high counter shop in the front and a pub at the back.

The other two funeral homes in Limerick are Cross's and Thompsons.



Gerry Griffin remembers the many businesses that once occupied the historic street.