

# Leader2

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# 100 not out for JJ O'Toole's

Packaging company marks 100 years in business this year. Vicki O'Toole tells **Alan Owens** about the challenges it has faced

**V**ICKI O'Toole sits at her desk as three generations of men gaze down at her from the wall behind. The MD of JJ O'Toole's Paper and Plastic Packaging company, celebrating 100 years in business this year, shows little sign of being fazed.

"Lots of men," she smiles, turning to look at pictures of her husband Fergus, his father Jack and grandfather JJ, founder of the business in 1914, now all sadly deceased.

"It is really hard for me that none of these are around any more. I find it quite emotional that none of these people are around. There are two staff members that are here going back over 30 years - but not 100 years obviously, so it is really hard to get all the stories, to talk to somebody who knows exactly what it was like."

Founded in Catherine Street in 1914, the business, now based in the Raheen Industrial Estate, is one of the country's foremost packaging distributors.

While the company is 100 years old, they are in a process of

revamping their image.

"We have changed our website, have a new logo, have changed our catalogues and our business presence," explains Vicki.

"It is a revamp. Even though we are 100 years old, we are still

**"I would love to think that the name will always be around"**

Vicki O'Toole  
MD, JJ O'Toole's

modernising ourselves. It is exciting.

"I love that, staying traditional, but yet trying to modernise ourselves, changing. Can you believe it? 100 years in we are now changing, putting down our business process, outlining them again, and documenting them."

The Limerick woman, mother to five children, shows off invoices from the 1920s, 1930s - pride clear in her voice as she speaks

about the accomplishments of JJ O'Toole's.

The company, which supplies packaging to the food, retail and industrial sectors, has a staff of 20, with a customer base of around 3,000 at any one time.

"We actually are a distributor of packaging. I think an awful lot of people think we are manufacturers, we are not," smiles Vicki, clearly asked the question all the time.

The lifeblood of the business has always been paper, despite the rise in use of polythene in the late 70s - up until the plastic bag tax was introduced in 2002, which threatened JJ O'Toole's survival.

"It is an incredible story, because when the company started it was 80% paper and 20% polythene, in those days there was hardly any of the latter," she says.

"It was plain packaging, there was little design, print was miniscule. In the 70s and 80s polythene really took off, it was much cheaper and (as a result) completely changed the dynamic of the company."

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Vicki surrounded by some of the bags the company produces for high-end retail clients around Ireland the UK in the Raheen factory.

Pictures: Michael Cowhey





# Surviving war, recession and tax

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"I remember in those days, I was married at the time and having my children and would have dropped into the office. I used to do relief work for the secretaries and loved it.

"I would see them working on the artwork - they used out house graphic designers - one colour, pretty basic. The weird thing about that was that polythene was much cheaper, and because of its volume, you could fit five or six times the amount of polythene bags into a container than you would paper.

"Then the bag tax came in so we really had to re-invent ourselves, and we actually went back to where we started, 80% paper, 20% polythene."

Vicki, who took over as MD in 2005, says that the tax wiped out 40% of the company's business "overnight". She wrote a letter, which went ignored, to the Department of Environment, arguing that the carbon footprint of paper containers was larger than that gleaned from a reduction in use of plastic.

The company was forced to be "proactive", and now ranks Brown Thomas, Avoca, Newbridge Silverware, Selfridges and more among its clients.

"We ended up winning accounts that we wouldn't have before because we were very proactive," she says. "I think we were ahead of the posse with that. The high end retailers are probably the biggest part of the business, but within the luxury packaging, there is lots of other



'An incredible story': Vicki O'Toole, MD of JJ O'Toole's Paper and Plastic Packaging company, based in the Raheen Industrial Estate

entities - we sell them tissues and suit covers, add-ons.

"It is not all print - as somebody said this is all the 'sexy packaging' - but we do the toilet rolls, bubble wrap. We supply industrial packaging and packaging for the food sector. We also supply coffee cups, we design 'bags for life'.

"The business is constantly evolving, that is the name of the game."

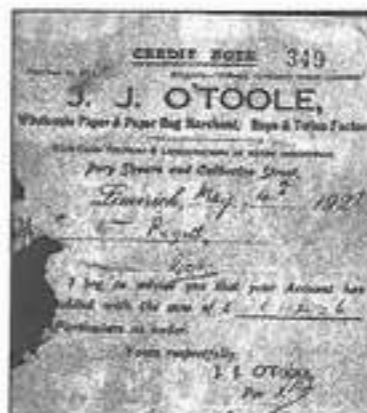
When Vicki first started working in her husband's family business, it was to allow him to go home to spend time with their five children. He would later pass away in 2010.

"I remember the very first day I officially came in here, I didn't know what I was doing," she says. "I came in to help Fergus, because he wasn't well, and just to support him.

"I knew I was good at colour

and design and was able to see things, and it went from there. I started to love it. I am still very frustrated at things that need to be changed. I am very impatient, that is probably one of my biggest faults, but I love the company. I love packaging. And I bought into that very quickly."

It is unlikely that JJ, Jack or Fergus would have foreseen the business lasting 100 years, and Vicki won't predict the future.



Family history: a credit note dating back to 1928



Pery Square and Catherine Street: an invoice from 1924

"I am proud and I think it is nice to have that story, an old family business that has lasted so long. Survived wars, recessions, the bag tax.

"I would love to think that the name will always be around. I would like to think that I had as much involvement in it being around for the next 100 years as much as the three generations before me, that I would have had an impact."

## Gingergirl all about food

### Sweet treat for dear old mom

HELLO and welcome to all about food. This week I say let them eat cake! Enjoy every mouthful.

#### Ask gingergirl

##### Hello gingergirl,

I have fond memories of my mother serving a slice of cake with tea - usually a ginger cake or fruit cake. I would like to start this tradition again and would really like a good quality recipe to get things going! Can you help me please!

Many thanks,  
Michelle, Newport

##### Hello Michelle,

I know I am going to sound like someone from the 1950's but I have to say, I would love to see every home with a cake tin complete with a freshly baked cake that is replenished every week - well, I did warn you I might sound a little out dated! Of course we are of a different time and life has changed so much but if the opportunity does arrive I do highly recommend that you seize the moment and get baking! As I have mentioned before, I have a deep love for cake, by cake I mean plain, simple cake - no dollops of cream, no mounds of icing - I prefer a moist, elegant, cut-and-come-again-cake like those championed by my mother and my mother's mother - lemon pound cake, madeira cake, orange and poppyseed cake and, a personal favourite, sticky ginger cake...

##### Dark and sticky ginger cake

250g of butter  
250g dark brown muscovado sugar  
250g black treacle  
300ml of milk

2 medium eggs  
100g of stem ginger in syrup, finely chopped  
375g plain flour  
2 teaspoons of bicarbonate of soda  
1 teaspoon of allspice  
2 teaspoons of ground ginger

Butter and line a 23cm square baking tin. Heat your oven to 160°C or 140°C for fan oven. Put the butter, sugar and treacle into a saucepan and heat gently for about five minutes until the butter and sugar have melted.

Stir in the milk, allow to cool so that the mix is just warm to the touch, then beat in the eggs. Mix the chopped ginger and dry ingredients together in a large bowl and make a well in the centre. Pour the melted mix into the well, then gradually draw the dry ingredients into the wet with a wooden spoon, until you have a thick, smooth batter. Pour the batter into the prepared tin and bake for one hour until risen and firm to the touch. Do not give into the temptation of having a peek at the cake as it bakes; the cake will sink if the oven temperature drops too quickly before it's cooked through. Poke a skewer into the centre to check that it's cooked - it should come out clean. If not, give it ten minutes more and check again. Leave the cake to cool in the tin. Once completely cool, turn out of the tin, wrap well in cling film and keep in a cool, dry place for up to a week... if it lasts that long.

##### Contact gingergirl

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