

Happy memories of life at Roches

■ **Gráinne Keays** continues our nostalgic series by talking to former employees of Roches Stores about their time there

Two weeks ago we looked at the origins of Roches Stores in O'Connell Street and I now turn my attention to some former employees of the store who kindly agreed to share their memories.

Firstly, I spoke to Kay O'Connell (nee O'Gorman, pictured below, top). Kay is the eldest of 13 and grew up in Kishikirk, Ballysimon. She began work in Roches at the age of fifteen on May 1, 1966 and stayed until she married in 1970.

Kay's first wage was five shillings per week but this lowly sum was increased annually and she felt that she had a good wage and a great job. Everyone was treated right. There was also a handsome annual bonus, and her half day was on Thursday.

Kay worked at the meat counter in the supermarket which was located in the basement and her boss was Paddy O'Grady (not to be confused with the other Paddy O'Grady, also on the management team at the time). Rightly or wrongly, Kay feels that supermarket staff members were not as highly regarded as the staff upstairs in the fashion and cosmetics departments.

Her colleagues included Mary Walsh (RIP), Teresa Kerins, Una Clifford, Eileen McCarthy, Pauline Nolan, Helen Stewart, Marie Kirby (supervisor), Phyllis Hourigan, Bernie Dundon, Bridget Quane and Helen Cregan. She apologises if she has forgotten anyone.

"We had great fun", Kay says. It was, she recalls, like being part of a family. Practical jokes and pranks were the order of the day and according to Kay they did things you "just wouldn't get away with at work today". These were the days before health and safety regulations were invented. Being locked in the cold room was not an unusual occurrence. On one occasion, Kay recalls another member of staff playing some trick on her (she has forgotten what it was) and she thought

and had to cycle into the city every day on an old pushbike. Peggy was based upstairs in the work room of the ladies department and her supervisor was Hannah O'Sullivan. She worked with Peggy Houlihan, Bernie Power, Bridie McMahon, Sue Corry, May Neville, Eileen Ryan, Marita Troy, Maureen Greene, Nuala Doherty and Eileen Hamrogue.

I asked Peggy what was good about working at Roches Stores and she immediately answered, "The discount!" Hannah, the supervisor, was also a buyer and sometimes she brought in samples and, if they fitted correctly, her staff got first refusal on them. The girls could pay for them in weekly instalments from their wages.

Peggy tells me that Roches Stores was the first store to carry Mary Quant products in Ireland. In fact, they carried most of the major designers at the time too. Peggy recalls that the ladies department was very exclusive back then, even stocking Chanel.

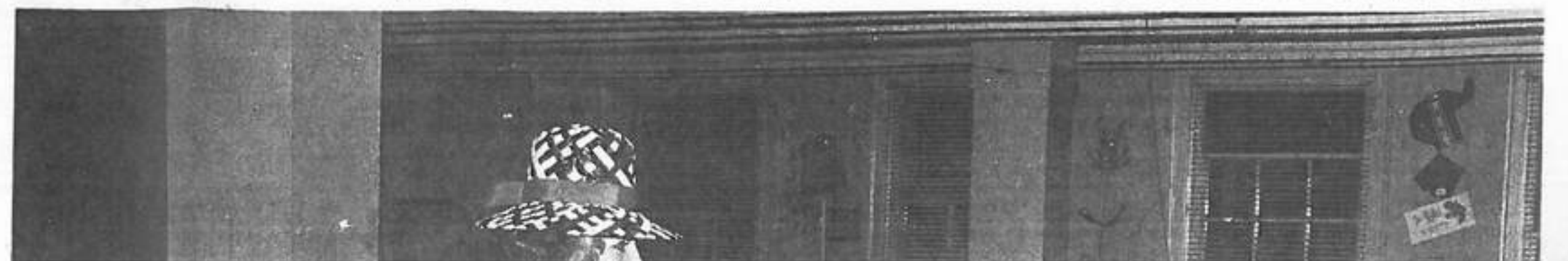
Peggy says the only bad thing about working at Roches was there was a lot of discipline but "we still had a lot of fun". With regard to discipline, I remember my mother, Peggy Houlihan, telling me that staff was expected to be immaculately turned out and poor hygiene and grooming were sacking offences. She used to tell the story of one poor girl, new to Roches, who lived on a farm and was totally unused to these exacting standards. She used to arrive to work in a dishevelled state with muddy shoes and unbrushed hair (complete with the feathers that

had escaped her pillow the previous night). My mother told her to buy a pair of shoes to be worn only at work and used to take her into a back room and brush out her hair for her before her slovenliness drew the attention of the supervisor. Thankfully, she had the sense to adopt my mother's regime and avoided dismissal.

Height of fashion: Store was popular with well dressed ladies



Above and below: All eyes were on this strikingly elegant outfit s modelled at Roches Stores, Limerick on March 25, 1969. No doubt some faces in the audience will be recognised!



to get what it was and thought to herself, "Right! I'll fix you!"

There was a long corridor behind the meat section, running parallel to the counter. At that time, cracked eggs were removed from display and placed in a basket out of sight. Kay armed herself with an egg and hid around a corner off this corridor, waiting for her colleague to come along. Once she heard her coming, she "up with the egg and let fly" only to discover the instant that the egg left her hand that it was Mr O'Grady who was walking along the corridor and it struck him full square on the jaw. Kay was duly marched off to the office to explain herself and Mr. O'Grady reprimanded her for her behaviour but he couldn't help but see the funny side too and he let her off with a "don't do it again". Other bosses might not have been so forgiving.

There was a sweetshop located in the window on the turn of the main stairs at Roches and working there was one of Kay's favourite tasks. The downside of this job was that in summer "you would be baked alive" from the sun streaming in through the glass.

Kay met her husband Tommy at Roches on November 18, 1966. Some time previously, she had agreed to meet another young man on her half day to go to the pictures but when Tommy asked her out on the appointed day she forgot all about the other lad and ended up going to the cinema with Tommy instead. Hopefully, her other suitor's disappointment was short-lived. For Kay and Tommy it was the start of great things.

Kay now lives in Caherconlish and is very active at home and in the community. She is involved with the Millennium Centre in Caherconlish and the ICA. She's also a gifted craftswoman and her hobbies include making beautiful greeting cards. She's still full of chat, fun and devilment.

I traced Peggy Gallagher (see O'Connell, pictured above) all the way to Texas. Peggy worked in Roches from March 1959 until June 1963. She starting wage was £1/10s per week. She lived at Ballyguy, Murroe, at the time



avoided dismissal. Mischief was not confined to the meat counter staff. Peggy Gallagher says that if the store was busy they wouldn't always get an afternoon break but they'd always manage to slip off to make tea. One day she was in the back making tea and Hannah came walking in. Peggy had to get rid of the teapot in a hurry so she threw it in a wicker waste basket. Tea went everywhere and created a dreadful mess. Later, Hannah asked how the teapot got hot and Bride McMahon said it was from being in front of the window.

On another occasion, a customer was in the shop buying a hat and had with her a box of cakes from the Danes bakery, which she left behind. After a couple of hours, the temptation became too much for the girls and they were helping themselves to

the cakes when they spotted the lady coming back. They had the decency to turn red in the face and look guilty. Through a mouthful of cream, Bernie Power had to tell the unfortunate woman that, no, they hadn't seen her cakes at all.

I asked Peggy if she had any interaction with the Roche family and she said that in her last year there she worked in the furniture department and was sent out to Ray Roche's house with Jerry to lay carpet in their living room. Peggy thinks that most staff had dealings with Ray Roche because at Christmas everyone was interviewed about how they felt after the year and got their bonus from him. He was very nice and always greeted his staff when walking through the store.

When Peggy left Roches Stores, she moved to Singers, also in Limerick. She got married in 1966 and moved with her husband, Niall, and family to Texas in 1993 where she worked for Walmart until 2010. Now, she says, she is "a senile old lady" but I don't believe that. She looks great and there's certainly nothing wrong with her memory.

Next time, I will be talking to some more ex-employees.



Showing off some trend-setting hats at the Roches Stores fashion show in March 1969



These local models were photographed by the Leader at Roches on March 4, 1968



On the right is Mrs E. Crowe, winner of Golden Amber tea competition in Roches Stores, on October 12, 1968. Also pictured beside Mrs Crowe is Paddy O'Grady, supermarket manager of Roches. The other gentlemen were representatives of Halpins Tea

Roches Stores was the winner of the Buy Irish exhibit in the St Patrick's Day parade of 1969. Photographed here to celebrate the win were Marie O'Neill, Ann Bourke, Celia Holman, Cllr Jack Bourke, Mayor of Limerick, Majella O'Halloran, Christine Ryan and Marie Keating. Roches Stores was the largest stockist of Irish-made goods in Limerick at the time