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## Joe's tailor-made tradition

Having cut his teeth in the art of tailoring aged 14, Joe Clancy continues to extol the virtues of the bespoke suit, writes **Aine Fitzgerald**

**J**OE Clancy hates to see a man with trousers that are about six inches too long. It bugs him. Really gets his goat.

Then there is the crease in the sleeve of a jacket that resembles the line in a pair of slacks that is just after coming out of the dry cleaners. Another pet hate.

Behind the diamond pane front window on the ground floor of Leamy House on Hartstonge Street in the city, the grey-bearded Joe, dressed in a navy wool blazer, leans against a workbench, on this fine mid-May Thursday afternoon.

A tailor's shears, calculator, pins and two pairs of Levi 501s – the ones that lost their way and their street cred with the arrival of the skinny jeans – are strewn across the worktop.

When Joe started out in the tailoring trade Danus Clothing Manufacturers, Limerick Clothing Company, and Crescent Clothing were all in their pomp. There were at least 25 tailors in Limerick.

In recent years, the personal tailor,

**“Often lads come in, elderly lads, to get a suit made for their funeral. They always want to look good – even in the coffin”**

working one-to-one with a client, has become a dying art.

Today, as far as Joe's aware, he is the only practising tailor in Limerick.

“I'm the only one that's doing made-to-measure suits. I'm the only practising tailor who would be self-employed and have a premises in Limerick, there might be one more but I'm not sure if he is doing anything.”

Joe gave up school after his first year in Ardscoil Ris to take up an apprenticeship with the Crescent Clothing Company. He was 14, and the average price of a man's suit at the time was £14.

And for the same suit today?

“It depends on the material,” he says.

“A middle of the road, good quality suit?”

“You would be paying anything from €700 up. The cloth has to come from England, so you would be paying surcharges. A good lining helps.”

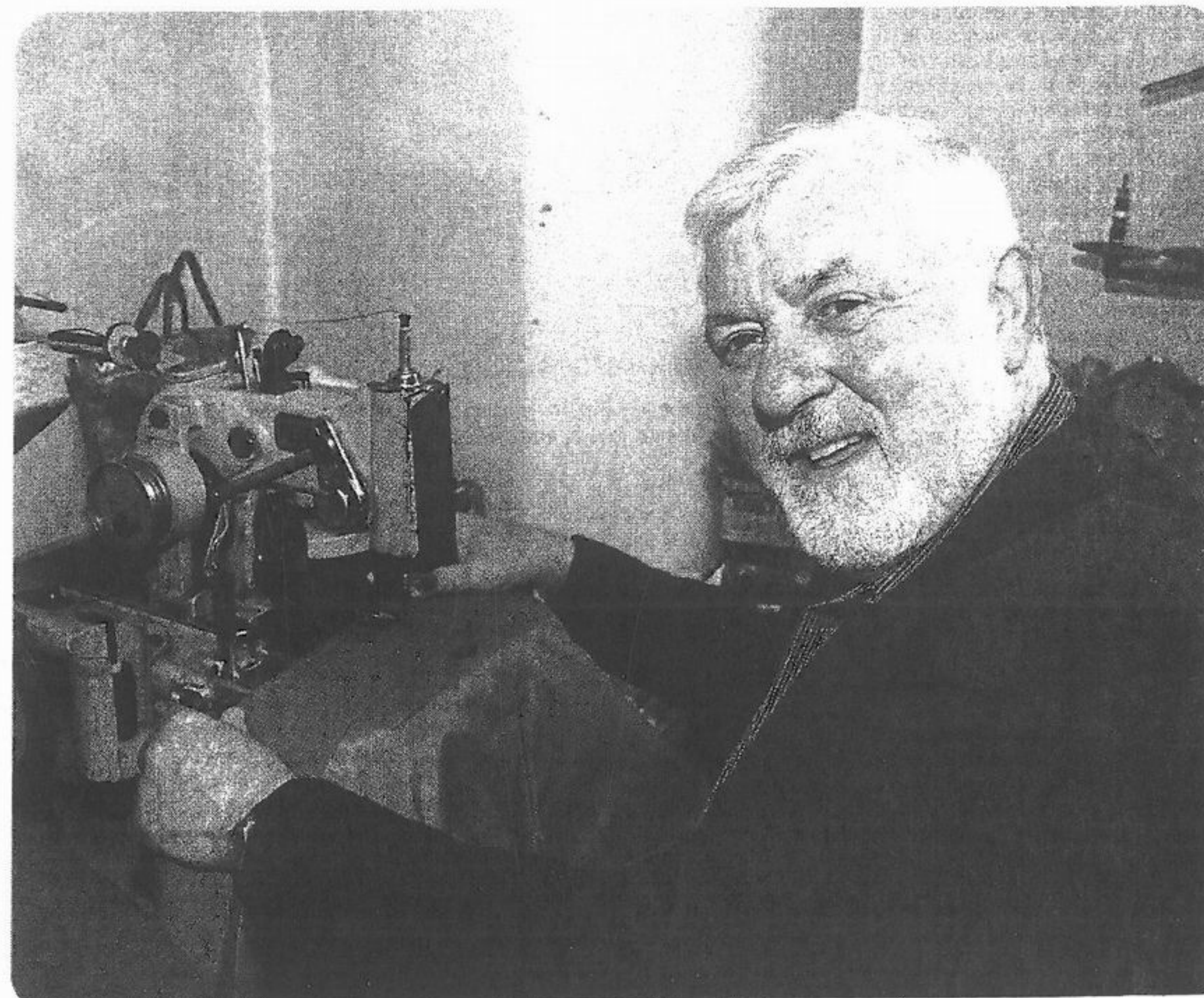
“How can you sell a suit for €150 – it's totally ridiculous. They must be paying the workers a pittance,” he remarks of the suits being made in far away lands and being sold in the department stores.

“I have some material there that you can get from England which is nearly €400 a metre – that would be wool cashmere. Everything we make or do here, I do myself. We source the material from England.”

“This is a suit now we are making for somebody,” he says, reaching high for a hanger by the window. “It's 100% pure wool. The fabrics you get in the shops today are all polyester or viscose and obviously the pure wool which is harder to get, is way, way better – but probably three or four times the cost. It's expensive.”

Compared to buying a suit on the

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Joe Clancy working with his 'baby', the button machine, at his workshop in Leamy House PICTURE: MICHAEL COWHEY



# Hand of history on made-to-measure suit

➔ CONTINUES FROM PAGE 1

spot in a boutique or store, the purchase of a made-to-measure suit is a much more elaborate affair. It takes nearly two weeks for the material to arrive. At a push, Joe will get the suit completed in a month or three weeks but, generally, he tries to give himself more time – six weeks.

The journey of the new bespoke suits begins with the person coming in off the street and picking the fabric and style they like. Joe measures them up, and then gets to work. Working off of patterns, he does every inch of the labour himself, down to sewing in the final button.

"We give them a fitting, a second fitting and then finish it for them," he explains.

"With the men's clothes it's easy enough. It's straightforward. It's either one button, two button, three, plain back, side vents or centre vents. With the ladies it would be a bit more fashion orientated. A tailored suit doesn't date and it will last for a lifetime – as long as you can fit into it," he smiles.

So who are these men who opt for made-to-measure suits? Many of them, Joe explains, aren't too fond of, or don't suit the skinny suit look.

"They just want a comfortable suit," he asserts.

And then there are those who want to splash out and treat themselves for a special occasion – even their own funeral!

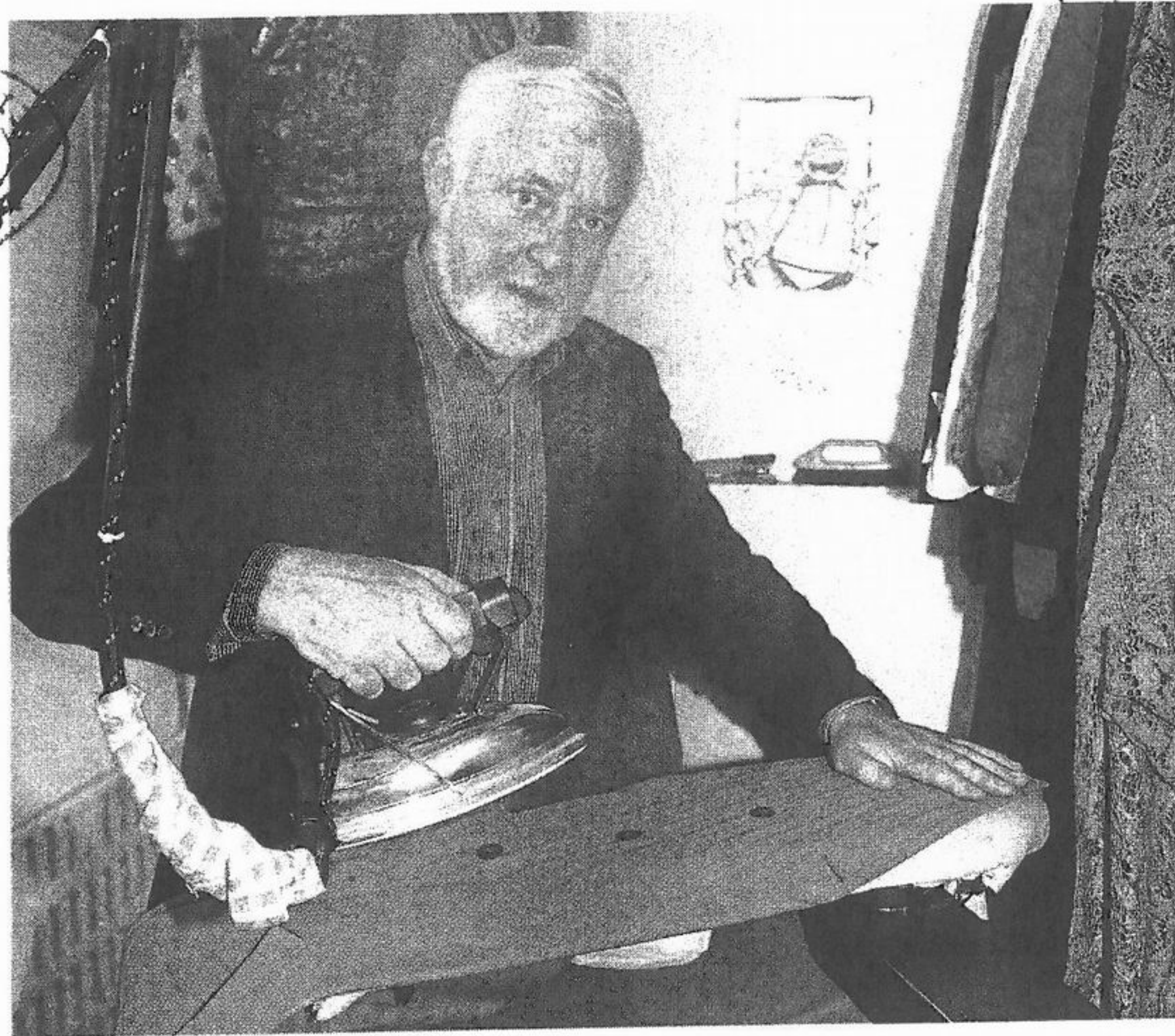
"We often have some lads come in, elderly lads, to get a suit made for their funeral. They always want to look good – even when they are in the coffin!"

He made a banana coloured suit based on the showband era with wide flairs for one of Pat Shortt's sketches and did a lot of tweed suits and skirts for renowned fashion designer Vonnice Reynolds when she was based out in Bunratty.

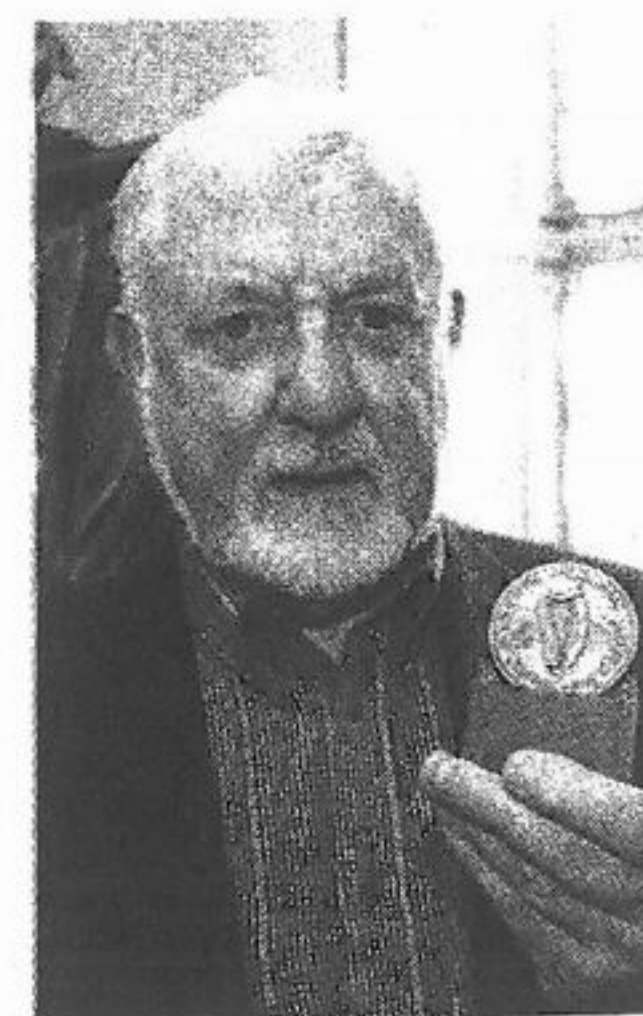
As a young man growing up in Thomondgate in the city, Joe's parents Jack and Mary encouraged his interest in the tailoring business. His grandmother Susan McNamara was a seamstress in the Clothing Factory so it was in the blood.

"It was in the family so I think it was my duty," he says. "Being the eldest of four, at that time you were sent out to work when you were 14. At the time we used to go down to St Anne's School under Niall O'Carroll," he recalls.

Joe started work at 14 at Crescent Clothing which was owned



'If you had one of those at home you wouldn't have any wrinkles on your clothes,' says Joe Clancy of the steam iron in his workshop in Leamy House PICTURES: MICHAEL COWHEY



Joe with the medal which should have taken him to Tokyo in 1970

by Jack Heaton.

"Jack saw a niche for clothing in Limerick and became the third clothing factory and they

kept going up until about 20 years ago.

"I gave up school after first year in Ardscoil and took up the apprenticeship. There is no apprenticeship for tailoring now which is a shame. I've spoken to them in the School of Art and Design about it. There should be some kind of tailoring section down there. They said they have a lot of students coming up looking for tailoring experience but I wouldn't have the time working on my own."

When he started out in the tailoring business were people more into suits?

"Oh God they were. I think everybody had two to three suits. The young people had suits. Then the denims took over. The young people getting suits now are getting them for graduations or office work where you have to have a suit, and hiring them."

The doorbell rings.

It is, Joe later informs me, "a young lassie enquiring about her dance costume".

The brief chat that ensues between the pair, gives this reporter the opportunity to take in the surrounds of Joe's workplace. The ceilings are high, a long fuss-free mirror stands behind the door while a small, charming old black and white photo of a young woman rests on the windowsill.

The woman turns out to be his mum, Mary, who passed away 13 years ago.

Close to the window, an archway leads into another space which is just begging to be explored.

"I've very, very loyal customers. We are in this building now, in this area, 30 years," says Joe on his return.

Joe works from 8.15am to 5pm, Monday to Thursday and 8.15am to 2pm of a Friday.

"I started here and then went over to the Tait Centre where I had a factory with 13 employed but it just became too much so I decided to come back here 30 years ago and be smaller again.

It's a great location. Everybody knows where it is. Coming up O'Connell Street, turn left before the monument, going down O'Connell Street, turn right after the monument. It's as simple as that. John Heaton is the landlord – he is a good guy. His dad started up the clothing factory. My father-in-law Paddy Finucane taught me an awful lot. He was instrumental in helping me out when I came out on my own."

The majority of his customers – about 98% – have been with Joe from the start.

"They are not customers anymore – they are all friends. It's like a confession box at times," he laughs.

"Somebody comes in with problems – they know you don't know who they are talking about and they would tell you the problems they have."

There isn't a laptop or computer in sight, just a copy book which acts as a ledger to jot down measurements, orders

and the like.

"I find that word of mouth is the best recommendation," says Joe, who, in terms of on-line sites, can only be found on Tailors of Limerick.

"That suits me grand – keeps me going."

While more and more people opt for off-the-rack suits in department stores instead of made-to-measure from the tailor, Joe says they still "come back to us to get us to alter them."

"We do a lot of alterations including curtains," he says, pointing to a bag containing drapes on the ground.

He also does a bit of business with the locals in Carrigaholt in West Clare where he goes on holiday.

"I have a lot of customers who come in and say, 'Joe, pick out a cloth for me there, you have my measurements, make me up a pants. They buy two or three a year – they don't even come in for a fitting – typical men who



A seamstress focused on her job at Crescent Clothing in 1961 where Joe Clancy began his trade



Men busy at work in Crescent Clothing Factory in 1961

don't like shopping!"

Joe brings forward a solid silver medal – the same silver medal which should have taken him to Tokyo in 1970.

"I was the first tailor outside Dublin to win the Apprenticeship of the Year in 1970. I was to represent Ireland in Tokyo but, over I being the first winner outside Dublin, they withdrew it."

The union fought his case but without success.

"I was disappointed. At 20-years-of age to be heading off to Tokyo to represent your country would have been a great experience. I got married instead," he smiles.

Joe is married to Joan and they have three children, son Ross and daughters Joanne and Ashleigh; there is also daughter-in-law Laura, and three grandsons, Alex, Ollie and Josh.

A resident of Woodview Park, he is a trustee of Shelbourne FC which he played with for many years.

"I love the rugby as well – Munster Rugby."

He played rugby with Young Munster and senior football with Treaty Sarsfields and won three championship medals in a row, in 1973, '74 and '75.

With the interview coming to a close, I have to find out what's beyond the archway.

"Is it an office?" I enquire.

"It's the workshop," says Joe before walking in and lifting up the steam iron. "If you had one of those at home you wouldn't have any wrinkles on your clothes. It's very, very hot – feel that now," he says, after motioning the iron over the board.

Patterns for skirts, trousers, and capes hang all around the ceiling. "That's the button hole machine over there," he says, walking towards the back wall, "it makes button holes for jackets. That's worth a few bob now, that. That's minded like a baby," he adds, carefully replacing the canvass cover.

In both work spaces, songs and voices in the form of the radio fill the silences.

"Sometimes, in the winter, when it is cold and muggy out and there is nobody coming in, you get a bit down and out. The radio keeps me going. I like Ryan Tubridy and Joe Nash in the mornings," he says as we walk back into the outer workshop.

Among the dresses, jackets and blouses hanging from a dresser is a small boy's Ahane GAA tracksuit top. It's ripped. Another challenge tailor-made for Joe to work his Midas touch.