
THE HISTORY OF CANNOCK'S



In September 1896, David Tidmarsh was elected chairman of Cannock's, and the name Clery, which had dominated the affairs of the company for so long, rapidly faded from the scene. Robert Clery was not very interested in the world of business and, besides, had more than a handful in the Dublin Company, where William Martin Murphy (later involved in the 1913 Dublin Lockout) was trying (unsuccessfully) to buy out the Clery shares. Relations between Clery's and Cannock's stores more or less ceased at this juncture as irreconcilable differences between Murphy and Tidmarsh made

by Finbarr Crowe Part Two

further co-operation impossible. This was particularly noticeable later on in their attitudes to the trade unions. Whereas Murphy was obstinately opposed to unions, Tidmarsh was nearly always willing to compromise for the sake of industrial peace. Whatever tenuous links might have existed between the two stores, these were finally severed in 1900 by the death of Robert Clery, who eventually succumbed to the scourge of tuberculosis which had plagued his family.

David Tidmarsh continued to plan for

the further expansion of the company. In 1900, he bought additional property in Brunswick Street, as he wanted to have the furniture and carpets side by side. His plans did not come to immediate fruition but in 1902 he succeeded in buying another building off Brunswick Street, and immediately set about restructuring this part of the store. The design of the building was once more entrusted to the Fogerty family, this time to Robert.

Robert was a cousin of William Fogerty, who had designed the front of



O'Connell Street in the early years of the century.

Cannock's in 1858 and a son of Joseph, who had been responsible for the design of the Theatre Royal and Leamy's School.

This new building was opened in 1903 with an impressive display of carpets and furniture. An added bonus for Cannock's was the fact that the main store could now be entered from Sarsfield Street. (It was at this time that the names of some streets in the main commercial centre were changed. Brunswick Street became Sarsfield Street and George's Street was renamed O'Connell Street).

An interesting offshoot of the story of Cannock's concerns the origin of O'Mahony's Bookshop in O'Connell Street. John P. O'Mahony, who had worked at Clery's in Dublin, came to Limerick on promotion in 1896. He was a buyer in the stationery and fancy-goods department, but after Robert Clery's death, his expectations of further promotion did not materialise, so he resigned in 1902. He bought the key of 120 O'Connell Street, and opened a bookshop there. Subsequently, he married Marguerite Clery, a niece of Michael Clery's and thus the house 'Fort Mary', came into the possession of the O'Mahony family. It remained in the family's keeping until recent times, when it was sold. Unfortunately, it has since been vandalised and the fine Georgian residence that Michael Clery had once lavished £3,000 on for improvements alone, is now an empty, dilapidated shell.

The coming of the 20th century heralded for Cannock's the spread of trade unionism. Michael O'Lehane, had worked for Cannock's and was fully aware of the grievances felt by the workers, when he founded the Drapers' Association in Dublin, in 1901. At that time, the apprentices, in particular, were greatly dissatisfied with the 'living in' system. As they were obliged to be 'in' by 10 p.m., they felt that it greatly curtailed their social activities. (In 1905, there were 105 apprentices 'living in'). Apprenticeships could last from 5 to 6 years, during which time the apprentices received no salary but were paid an allowance of 5/6 (27p) per week. They did, however, receive food and lodgings free on the premises and, while the food was generally nutritious, it was unimaginatively prepared and served. Menus also tended to be repeated and, at one stage when there was a glut of salmon on the market, the apprentices had to prevail upon their employer not to serve them this dish on more than 3 occasions in the week! However, it is difficult to imagine that this complaint was repeated too often.

There were also fines imposed for misbehaviour in the canteen and sleeping quarters and the money could be stopped from their allowances. Their supervisors were very often the

departmental managers who 'slept in' on a rotation basis. Having completed their apprenticeships, they could, as assistants, expect to earn between £45 and £50 per year. However, during the following years they would have little expectation of an increase in salary, as this was most uncommon. It must be remembered, though, that at this time inflation was almost unknown and prices tended to remain static.

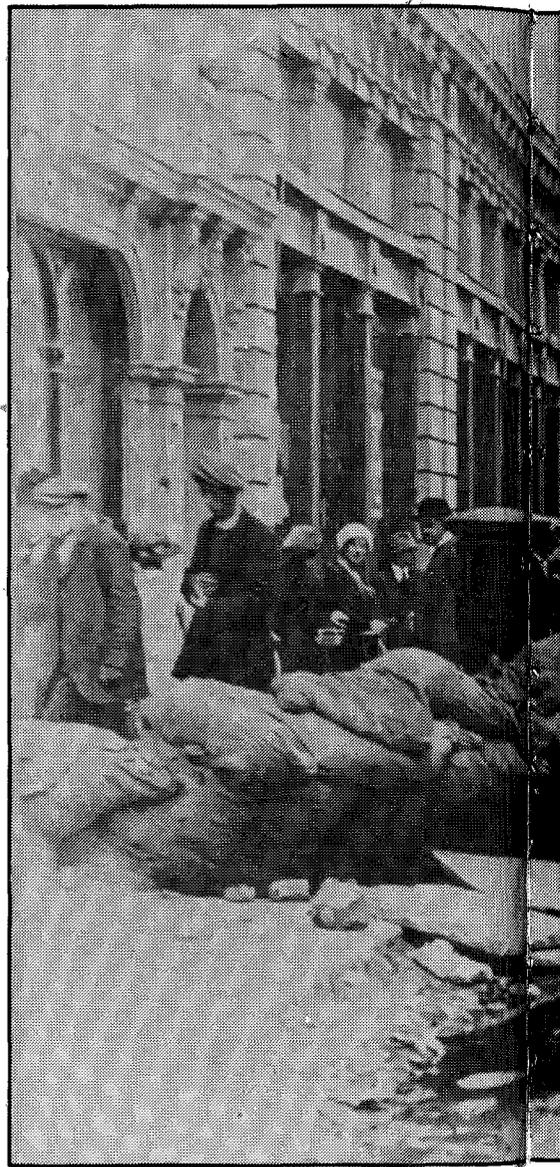
The Drapers' Association continued to fight the 'living in' system and eventually their demands were acceded to. From 1912 onwards, the numbers 'living in' were gradually reduced and the system was finally abolished in 1920. The Association was also successful in negotiating a half-day for the workers. The Shop Hours Act was passed by parliament in 1904, and, in 1905, Cannock's staff were given a half-day on Thursdays. The workers' hours were then reduced from 54 to 50 per week. These advances helped to establish the Drapers' Association on a firm base.

Cannock's continued with their policy of supporting Irish industry and both Philip Toppin and David Tidmarsh were prominently identified with the Irish industrial revival. In the Great Munster and Connaught Trade Exhibition of 1906, they fully availed of the opportunities offered and Cannock's had one of the largest stands in the main hall, in the markets building near St. John's Cathedral. Among the items on the Cannock's stand were solid mahogany diningroom suites (carved in its Sarsfield Street premises) and Limerick lace, made by the staff. The exhibits were widely acclaimed, and for several years afterwards the company continued to display Irish manufactured goods in all its windows. As a result of this promotion trade increased enormously.

During the 1914-1918 War, Cannock's profits rose considerably due to the abnormal trading conditions then prevailing. There were great shortages of various commodities in England and the resultant tendency to 'panic-buy' soon spread to Ireland. Cannock's was fortunate in having previously bought in huge stocks at very competitive prices. Consequently, they now found that, with the increased demand, the profit margins could also be increased. In fact, so great was their 'windfall' that they were obliged to pay Excess Profits Tax between 1915 and 1921. The shareholders, ever anxious to protect their own corner, quickly seized the opportunity offered. As a result of an Extraordinary General Meeting, called in 1915, they received their due share of this new prosperity.

For the staff, however, things were different. Their wages had remained static, while prices had risen, and none of the wealth which their labour had generated found its way into their pockets. This was also the era of industrial

militancy, as the great Dublin Lock-out of 1913 had focused attention on the strike weapon. Although this particular 'battle' had been lost, the 'war was yet to be won', and the simmering discontent of many workers threatened the uneasy peace. In Limerick, in 1917, some of that discontent came to the boil and the docks, gas works, the building trade and the vintners all experienced industrial disputes.



In 1918, Cannock's cabinet-makers went on strike and the furniture department was closed. They wanted 1/- (5p) per hour for the foreman and 10½d (4½p) per hour for the workers. They also sought a reduction from 52 to 50 hours per week. (The craftworkers and the assistants had different agreements). To add to Cannock's troubles, the warehouse staff were also threatening to strike, as they demanded 11 days annual holidays. However, both disputes were quickly and amicably settled. The staffs of many other smaller drapery shops in the city used these disputes to advance

their own demands and, though strikes in these smaller premises were generally more prolonged, the Cannock's agreements usually set a trend in settlement negotiations. During this period, membership of the Drapers' Association soared, rising from 927 in 1916 to 3,670 in 1919. This increase gave added impetus to the ascending star of the Association and greatly enhanced its bargaining position.

(vi) Married men were entitled to receive full pay for one month during illness. (This section was still in force until 1977, when the Anti-Discrimination Pay Act was introduced).

The agreement also specified that the assistants no longer had to 'dust' the shop in the morning before it opened and the 'putting up' of the blinds in the evening was to be taken in rotation by

the First World War and, up to then, wages and prices had remained more or less the same. Nevertheless, the 1920 agreement advanced the position of the assistants considerably.

The dusting duties were then assigned to the apprentices who arrived at 8 o'clock and were allowed home between 9 a.m. and 10 a.m. for breakfast. They often had to remain on the premises until 7 p.m., tidying up after the day's work. Their apprenticeship lasted for 4 years, during which time they received the meagre sum of 15/- (75p) per week. However, for winding the clock, an apprentice would receive an extra payment of 4/6 per week and, needless to say, it was one duty for which there was no lack of volunteers!

The employers had also sought to abolish the premiums and commission payable to buyers but the union refused to agree to this and these "fringe benefits" remained in force up to the closure of the firm. It is worth mentioning that premiums and commission were often considerable and added significantly to the earnings of buyers. At Christmas time, too, a buyer was further rewarded with numerous gifts of whiskey, hams, cigarettes etc., from the firms where he had placed his orders during the year. In later years, a story was told of a particular buyer who was in the habit of hiding these Christmas bottles of whiskey on the premises and drawing on this 'hidden' stock during the year, according as the need arose in his home. However, it so happened that one of these bottles had been discovered by other staff members and with that ingenuity peculiar to the imbiber in pursuit of drink, the whiskey was extracted and replaced by coloured water without the seal of the bottle, apparently, being broken. (I have only lately learned how it was done).

Shortly afterwards, the buyer was entertaining a parish priest in his home and, after dining sumptuously, they both repaired to the sitting-room for their after-dinner 'malt'. The parish priest, having eased himself into an armchair in front of the blazing fire, was first to quaff a mouthful of the golden liquid. His face reddened as, sitting bolt upright, he quaffed again to confirm his worst suspicions. For a man who believed implicitly in the miracle at the Wedding Feast of Cana, this diabolical reversal seemed, at best, in poor taste; at worst, a form of sacrilege. Fearing that he was the butt of a sick joke, the priest stormed out in high dudgeon and it was some weeks before his friendship with the buyer was renewed. The hapless buyer, having at first considered the taking of a lawsuit against the distillery, finally directed his suspicions to the proper quarters but the 'miracle workers' were never discovered. The code of silence rules in



Cannock's, during the Civil War, 1922.

In 1920, an historic agreement was signed between Cannock's, Todd's and McBirney's on one side and the Drapers Association on the other. Part of that agreement was as follows:

- (i) All assistants got a 25% rise.
- (ii) The rates of pay for assistants were from £39 per annum for the first year at business to £208 after 10 years.
- (iii) No apprenticeships could last longer than 4 years.
- (iv) The 'living in' system was abolished.
- (v) All employees were to be given 12 working days annual leave.

junior staff. From then on, the assistants merely had to present themselves at 9 a.m. ready for work. 'Ready' implied being dressed in a uniform which in those days consisted of hats and gloves for the ladies, and long-tailed coats and striped ties for the superintendents.

This agreement was quite revolutionary in the Irish drapery trade and marked a new departure for assistants, many of whom earned between £30 and £40 per year and had not received an increase since 1885! In fairness, however, one must bear in mind that the ogre of inflation did not arise until

more places than Sicily!

Philip Toppin died at 'Willmount', North Circular Road, in 1918, and was succeeded as managing director by Philip Gleeson. Toppin's loss was a severe blow to the firm, as he was trusted and respected by the staff, and left Gleeson with the unenviable task of facing into one of the most turbulent political periods in the history of the country. During the War of Independence (1919-21), trading continued amid tension and uncertainty. Cannock's found it difficult to service its rural customers, and the depressed agricultural economy reflected itself in the decreased profits of the store. To add to Cannock's woes, David Tidmarsh died unexpectedly, at 'Lota', North Circular Road (now the Redeptorist Retreat House), in 1920. His commercial expertise and conciliatory approach to industrial relations had steered Cannock's on a course that was mutually beneficial to both management and staff. In those difficult times, his loss was incalculable. His son David (Jnr.) succeeded him on the board.

In July and August 1922, during the Civil War, business in Cannock's was completely suspended. The city had become a battleground for the opposing factions and houses and business premises everywhere were commandeered. Much of William Street and O'Connell Street was occupied by the Republican forces while the Free State troops seized Cannock's and Cruise's Hotel. Shooting and sniping continued in the City, as the hostilities between both groups intensified. During this period, Cannock's was extensively damaged and two of the dials on the clock were destroyed. (Cannock's clock had stopped at 6.30, and some local wags spread the story that the clock was fired on because it never put its hands up during the battle!). Eventually, the Republicans withdrew from the City, leaving the terrified citizens to count the cost of the battle.

When the Civil War ended in 1922, people hoped that under self-government Ireland would experience a significant economic recovery. They were sadly disillusioned: a change of government did not change the economy. Stagnation and depression remained, while in the agricultural sector, prices fell, adding to the prevailing economic difficulties. The government, for its part, made the collection of taxes a priority in order to run the emerging new state and this exacerbated an already bad situation. Cannock's, in common with many other businesses, felt the cold draught of these barren times, and profits dropped from £11,000 in 1920 to £5,800 in 1927. As a result of this decline, the management of Cannock's sought to reduce wages by 12½% and the newly titled Distributive Workers' Union responded by serving strike notice on behalf of the

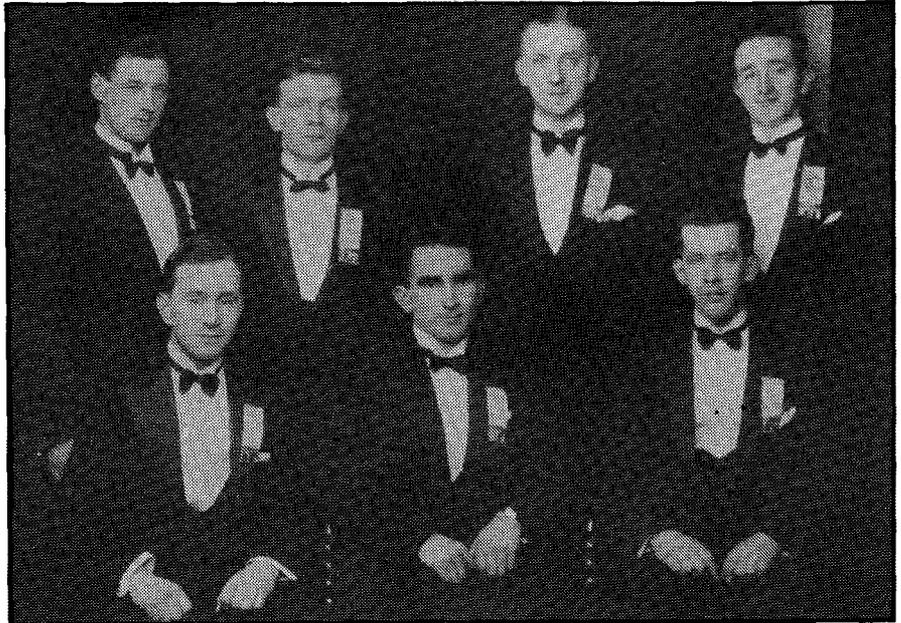
300 staff. A compromise was eventually reached whereby the staff had to accept a 2½% reduction in their salaries.

The 1930s were also to prove economically bleak and, except for a brief period after the Second World War, this trend continued into the 40s and 50s. However, prudent economic management helped Cannock's to weather these long periods in the commercial doldrums and, in spite of the unfavourable circumstances, the company always managed to make a profit.

To add to the gloom of that period,

self?' A formidable lady was Kitty Bredin! However, it must be said that during Mr. Fitzgerald's term as manager the store returned to increased profitability, a process which began in the late 50s and continued on up to his departure in 1963.

At this juncture in Cannock's story, it is fitting to mention a man without whom no history of the store would be complete. Jack Gleazer, the renowned oarsman, worked in Cannock's for 68 years, and his amiable and jocular manner made him a favourite with both his fellow workers and customers



Limerick City Harrier Club Dinner Dance, 1931 Back Row: Jimmy Crowe (Cannock's), Gerry Judge, Michael Houlihan (Cannock's), Dan Reddan (Todd's). Front Row: Ned Keane, Willie Crowe (Cannock's, the author's father), Michael Ryan (McBirney's).

Cannock's lost the services of David Tidmarsh (Jnr.), who died of cancer, in 1944. Though he was only 43 years of age, he had been on the board of directors since 1920 and his experience was sadly missed. However, the Tidmarsh connection with Cannock's continued through other members of the family.

Prior to this, Philip Gleeson had been succeeded as managing director in 1942, by Jack Fitzgerald. He had previously been a buyer in the millinery department and, though his business integrity and judgement were never in doubt, he seemed, at times, to be excessively preoccupied with staff discipline. Indeed, the story is told how on one occasion he accosted Miss Kitty Bredin (the well known theatrical figure, who worked in Cannock's shoe department) as she emerged from the ladies' room a nicotine-laden cloud slowly dispersing in her wake. 'Miss Bredin', he said solemnly, as three or four adjacent customers gave ear to the proceedings, 'It seems to me that you spend nearly half your day in there!' The onlookers waited apprehensively in the uneasy silence. 'Tell me, Mr. Fitzgerald' replied Kitty rather breezily, 'did you ever get the diarrhoea your-

alike. He lived on the premises for most of his life, having his own quarters upstairs, and continued to do so even after his retirement. It was also his task, in later years, to wind the clock and this responsibility he undertook with his usual diligence. In fact, Jack had often to depart from social functions before midnight to muffle the chimes in order to ensure a peaceful night's rest for the guests in Cruise's Hotel. He died, in 1972, and was buried in St. Mary's Cathedral churchyard, overlooking the River Shannon on which he had spent so many of his youthful hours perfecting his rowing skills. It was said of him that 'Jack Gleazer was Cannock's'. This was certainly a fitting epitaph to a devoted worker.

While on the topic of workers, it is also appropriate to mention the fact that many of Cannock's staff were renowned long-distance walkers in their younger days and, though walking as a pastime seems to have gone out of fashion, there was a time when every road and by-road out of Limerick echoed, on Sundays, to the tramp of marching feet. People then believed implicitly in the therapeutic value of walking and who is to say they were

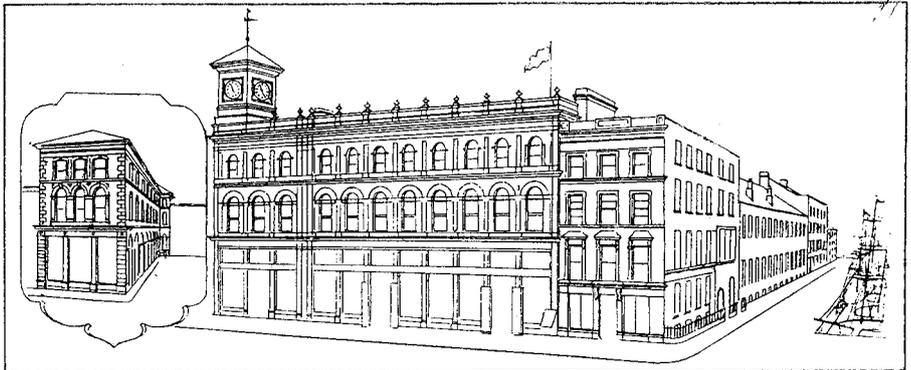
wrong? In those days, some of Cannock's assistants 'Bulger' Ryan, Dan Gleeson etc.) would meet after Mass on Sunday mornings and set out for Flannery's Pub, beyond Gallow's Hill. There they would have an ample dinner of bacon and cabbage (or perhaps a goose) which would have been ordered when the proprietor had visited the store on the Saturday. Then, having suitably refreshed themselves with copious drinks (and in some cases having replenished their well-drained hip-flasks!) they would return to Limerick via Sixmilebridge, greatly satisfied with their well-spent day. Some of the more junior members of the staff, who tried to emulate them were often frowned upon for returning home via Cratloe, as the use of this 'short-cut' was almost akin to cheating! I don't suppose any of these assistants, senior or junior, were ever troubled by weight problems.

Many of these 'athletic' assistants were also associated with the now defunct Limerick City Harrier Club. The 'Harriers', as they were known, drew their membership mainly from Cannock's, McBirney's and other stores and were to the forefront in many cross-country races. Tim Smythe, from Clare, who crowned an illustrious career by winning the International Cross-Country Championship in 1931, ran with the 'Harriers', at one stage. I have often been regaled with stories of how they stripped by the side of a ditch on frosty mornings, ran for miles through field and bog, and returned to 'shower' under a way-side pump! Is it any wonder that Jimmy Crowe, Paddy Galligan, Michael Ryan or Willie Walsh (some of the few remaining Harriers) often refer to the youth of today as being 'soft'?

But I digress, so let us return to the main story. The year 1963, as well as being the date of Mr. Fitzgerald's departure, was also the year in which the whole frontage of Cannock's was completely rebuilt. The new facade, however, was architecturally disappointing and seemed totally misplaced in its Georgian surroundings. The clock was also refurbished, the bells being removed and replaced by an electrical chiming device, which to the trained ear, lacked the rich, authentic tone of its predecessor. (The five bells, which weighed a total of 33 cwt., were donated for use on the mission fields in Africa). Although the costs of these renovations dug deeply into the firm's reserves, it would be fair to say that this big outlay did not significantly increase the commercial viability of the store. Indeed, subsequently, there were those who said that the whole Philistine exercise had been a harbinger of things to come!

Cannock's was now entering one of the most turbulent periods in its history and, under the management of Michael

Harkin, a number of take-over bids were successfully resisted by the board; these included bids by Castle Hosiery, Dunne's Stores, Budget Property Company and Stephens Green Property Company. It had been tentatively proposed, at this stage, too, that the furniture department in Sarsfield Street be turned into a shopping arcade. Unfortunately, however, this bold and imaginative plan never came to fruition.



But it was, perhaps, the bid by Brown Thomas & Co., that proved most divisive for the board. The original offer in 1968 was withdrawn and, in 1969, a new and revised offer was rejected. Subsequently, an attempt by the chairman, Group Captain Thunder, (who controlled the Tidmarsh shares) to have a director of Brown Thomas & Co, elected onto the board of Cannock's, was met with strenuous opposition from Jack Fitzgerald (Jnr.), a son of the former managing director. At a stormy annual general meeting, in June 1970, amid charges and counter-charges, terms such as 'slick deals' and 'turning a fast buck' punctuated the acrimonious exchanges. A letter was read from the company's auditor which expressed the view that the management team needed to be strengthened and that there was a lack of control in vital areas. Michael Harkin, in rebutting this charge, pointed out that the pre-tax profits for the past year had risen from £12,000 to £41,000.

However, it was now obvious that the directors were seriously split and many felt that a board - no less than a house - divided could not stand. As well as affecting the morale of the staff, this public manifestation of boardroom disunity increased the firm's vulnerability to further take-over bids. Eventually, in 1972, the firm of Winston's succeeded in gaining a controlling share in the Company and, in that year, the furniture premises in Sarsfield Street were sold to Roche's Stores for £275,000 (subsequently, this area was turned into a car park). Cannock's had now lost its valuable outlet into Sarsfield Street, and the furniture department, which had been transferred to a premises in Caherdavin, failed to prosper in its new location.

The firm continued to trade under the new Winston management but the

general air of unease, in the aftermath of the boardroom upheavals, allied to the sale of the furniture premises, led many to believe that the store was now only marking time. Further speculative deals seemed probable in the prevailing unstable atmosphere. To add to this air of despondency, the Tidmarsh Shares, held by Sister Fidelius, her sister Lillian (daughters of David Tidmarsh, Snr.) and their nephew, Group Captain Thunder, were finally disposed of in

1975, thus severing a connection of over 100 years with the firm.

As part of the Winston group of companies, it was now felt that Cannock's, although making a profit, was not achieving its full potential. Consequently, it came as no great surprise when the O'Connell Street store was eventually sold to Penney's in 1980 for £950,000.

Cannock's continued to trade in Winston's premises in William Street but the change was psychologically and commercially unpalatable to many of its old customers. It eventually ceased trading before finally going into liquidation in 1984. The Great House of Cannock's, which had contributed so much to the economic and commercial life of Limerick, employing hundreds and serving thousands, was now no more. The ghosts of George Cannock, Peter Tait, Michael Clery and David Tidmarsh might have stirred uneasily but their ethereal protests would bear little fruit. The rapacious juggernaut of modern economics pays little heed to sentiment.

For many citizens, it was not just the end of a great store but the end of an historic era. It was as if part of the heart of Limerick had ceased to beat. Life has gone on, of course, as life must, and many view the new Penney's, its bright lights and efficient management, as being a worthy successor to Cannock's Store. But, for me and for many more, the centre of Limerick will never be quite the same again.

Acknowledgement:

I wish to express my sincere gratitude to Ms. Frances Twomey, whose scholarly and detailed research into Cannock's history made this article possible. I also wish to thank the members of Cannock's staff who so kindly assisted me with additional details.