

HISTORY OF CARLOW FIRE SERVICE

skeleton of the building was captured on camera, along with crowds watching on, as the fire service battled to douse the flames.

The local fire service was not without its troubles, however. In 1916, mutiny was avoided only when local business man Mr Governey gave the brigade his full financial support. The members had been unhappy over their heavy workload, a depletion in volunteers, their equipment being damaged by members of the public when they had attended a fire and uncertainty about whether or not they could get enough horses to pull the engines.

As times moved on, the fire service needed to move with them, so they set about a fundraising drive in 1936 to buy a new motorised fire engine.

Willie O'Neill of 55 Tullow Street was tasked with making the new engine and in August 1936 he travelled to London to place an order for a heavy-duty water pump from a firm in Wembley, while the engine's Ford V8 engine and chassis were bought in Cork. After putting these together, local coach builders William Purcell & Sons of 86 Tullow Street were given the job of carrying out the carpentry work, in essence, making the frame for the engine, while John Kelly painted the new creation.

The Carlow men's work of art was captured in a panoramic shot from June 1937, when the keys were handed over to the fire service.

Luckily for the men of today's fire service, Carlow Fire Brigade's work has been well documented, with hundreds of pictures in existence, giving us a brief snapshot of their working life.

Former assistant chief fire officer Fintan O'Neill, known to many as a mine of very useful information, addressed the historical society lecture on Carlow Fire Service from 1940 right

seen flickering in the sky ten miles outside of town. The blaze initially began at the rear of O'Dwyer's Chemists and quickly spread through the roofs of the old buildings.

Reports in *The Nationalist* from May 1984 show pages of breathtaking images by local photographers such as Karl McDonough, while reporters Charlie Keegan and Jim Humphries watched proceedings from the ground. Meanwhile, local optician Bernard Jennings was photographed

standing in the doorway of his badly damaged shop which was next to Haddens on the front page of the 4 May 1984 edition.

Millions of euro worth of damage was caused to the department store as burning debris rained down on 50 firemen from Carlow, Baginbstown, Tullow, Athy and Kilkenny. Some of those men were forced to rush from a fire they were fighting on Mount Leinster and they fought for 21 hours to get the Haddens fire under control.

Firemen were called to the scene



fought fires across Carlow using what was called a Merryweather Paxton, which needed 22 men to work it and two horses to pull it – not quite on a par with the equipment used today.

Fires in days gone by would have been cause for a huge spectacle and this was precisely the case in October of 1899. *The Nationalist* reported that flames broke out at a "cow house" on the northern side of Carlow College, which led to huge crowds gathering to watch a hose line leading out of the cathedral gates to the flames.

In 1906, hundreds convened to watch the smouldering remains of Boake's Drapery in the centre of town which was destroyed, nearly killing four people who slept in the building. The charred

up to the present day. Fintan spoke extensively about the rapid changes in the fire service and its national modernisation with the *Fire Services Act, 1981*. He also recounted tales of other major fires like that of the Royal Hotel, the tannery at Milford, Connolly's Bakery, Carlow Rugby Club, Thermo Air and Thompsons.

And, of course, he spoke of the night the sky above Carlow town turned red. The devastation of the infamous Haddens fire of 1984 still burns brightly in people's memory when flames could be



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