

Blarney Mills founder dies

Report: TIM VAUGHAN and PETER GLEESON

ONE of the country's most successful entrepreneurs, Christy Kelleher, founder of the present Blarney Woollen Mills company, died yesterday evening at his home in Blarney.

Mr. Kelleher (76), whose enterprise and business acumen transformed an idea for a mobile souvenir shop outside Blarney Castle in 1966 into the multi-million pound company run by his daughter Freda today, had been ill for some time.

Local business interests said he would be a huge loss not only to Blarney, where the company is the major employer, but to the whole country.

Christy Kelleher's was the epitome of the rags to riches story. When he was 13 he went to work in the local woollen mills, which at the height of its importance as a tweed and wool producer gave employment to 700 people.

He joined the staff in 1929, just 105 years after it had been established by Martin Mahony. He began his apprenticeship in the twisting and winding departments and worked in various departments for 20 years, making it to the grade of assistant supervisor.

But the Blarney entrepreneur had ambitions of his own. He left the mill in 1951 to sell

insurance as well as doing a vegetable round at weekends. He had a passion for cars and acted as a hackney driver to the local GAA and harrier clubs.

Seeing that big-spending Americans came to Blarney only to kiss the famous stone, Christy decided to set up a mobile thatched souvenir shop outside the gates of Blarney Castle in 1966. It proved a highly successful way of keeping some of those plentiful bucks in the village. On his first day of trading he earned £14.

His entrepreneurial flair was further in evidence when he expanded his interests to set up a small knitwear business in an old dancehall. But the biggest move of his career, and the real test of his mettle, was just about to present itself.

The increasing popularity of synthetics, which caused recession in the woollen trade in the early 70s, resulted in the forced closure by the Mahonys in 1975 of the Blarney Woollen Mills.

Relatively speaking,

Christy's own Blarney Handcraft company was still a small operation. Fired by a never-say-die spirit, he never lost heart when the banks turned him down for finance when he tried to buy the mills.

His wife Maureen, seven children and relations surmounted the obstacle when they took out loans to secure the purchase.

Christy looked after his own. A great family man, he nurtured his seven children in the business. All his family are involved in one way or another to this day.

His dynamic eldest daughter Freda, current chief at the Mills, said the art of commerce was part of her growing up. When her father had his vegetable round he bought an orchard instead of the apples. His children did the harvest when they were ready for picking.

"The whole concept of working was always there," she said.

Christy Kelleher enjoyed a highly successful and fruitful life. Today the company has grown and diversified to employ some 400 people and is



Christy Kelleher renowned the world over

Mr. Kelleher's remains will be removed from O'Connor's Funeral Home, North Gate Bridge, this evening at 8.00pm to the Church of the Immaculate Conception, Blarney. Burial at All Saints Cemetery, Garrycloyne, will take place after 3.00pm Mass on Saturday.

Blarney business giant dies

ONE of this country's most successful businessmen, and the founder of the present Blarney Woollen Mills company, died yesterday at his home in Blarney.

Mr. Christy Kelleher (76), whose vision led to the creation of a multi-million pound industry from a mobile souvenir shop outside Blarney Castle had been ill for some time.

Local business interests said he would be a huge loss not only to Blarney, where the company is the major employer, but to the whole country.

Vegetable Round

From selling insurance to running a vegetable round, Christy Kelleher was the epitome of the rags to riches story.

A great family man, he nurtured his seven children in the business. All his family are involved in one way or another today.

His eldest daughter Freda, current chief at the Mills, said the art of commerce was part of her growing up. When her father had his vegetable round he bought an orchard instead of the apples. His children did the harvest when they were ready for picking.

His early efforts, and those of his family, eventually grew to an business that includes a hotel, knit wear manufacturing section, indoor sports complex, the well known high fashion knitwear label Tricot Marine, a substantial mail order company and eight retail shops in Tralee, Killarney, Dublin

As a mark of respect to our esteemed founder and chairman, the late
JOHN C. (CHRISTY) KELLEHER,
the

Blarney
Woollen Mills

will be CLOSED from 2 p.m. on tomorrow
(Saturday), June 8

KELLEHER (Blarney) — On June 6, 1991, (peacefully), at his residence, 5 Castle Close Road, John C. (Christy), late of Blarney Woollen Mills, beloved husband of Maureen (nee O'Regan). Deeply regretted by his loving wife, sons Paschal, Frank, Pat, Kevin, daughters Freda, Marian and Bernadette, sons-in-law, daughters-in-

at 7.00 p.m.
on tomorrow
at 11 a.m.
at the
cemetery.

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er leading Blarney's 1989 St. Patrick's



ey which Mr. Kelleher bought and
me.

Few Irish entrepreneurs can have emulated the successes of the late Christy Kelleher. DECLAN COLLEY reports on the man behind the phenomenal growth of his Blarney Woollen Mills enterprise which now spans the globe



■Enterprising Blarney...the Blarney Woollen Mills and Christy's Hotel, above. Below: where it all started, the thatched hut preserved as a reminder of the early days.

Putting Blarney on the map

CHRISTY KELLEHER could well be described as a man with an eye for the main chance. Indeed, his eye in this regard was so good that few if any good opportunities passed him by.

Back in the days when such thoughts were neither fashionable nor profitable, Christy was one of the first men to spot and then corner the commercial possibilities available to Irish business from tourism related activities.

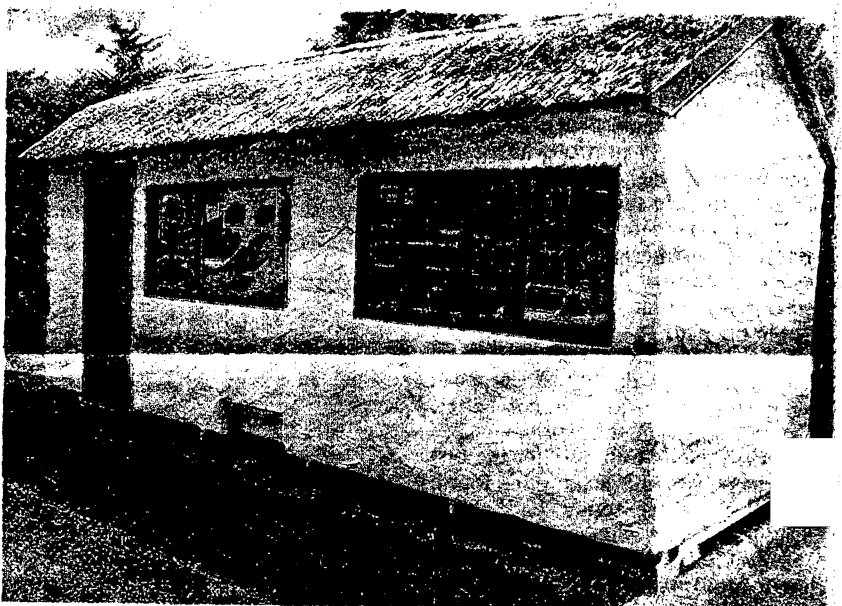
Hard worker

Having left his job in the local woollen mill in Blarney - which was later to

Pictures by Eddie O'Hare

play such a vital part in his business success - at the age of 33, Mr. Kelleher was at all times a doer who worked hard.

On his own initially, he sold insurance, sold vegetables and drove hack-



neys before buying in 1966 a small shop outside the gates of Blarney Castle which he called Blarney Handicrafts.

Even without the support of the banks or other financial institutions, or the guidance of people such as the IDA who were not even established at that stage, he set about building the cornerstones of what would become a substantial empire.

He moved quickly into manufacturing Irish knitwear - backed by the Clancy Brothers fad which saw demand for Aran sweaters race around the world - setting up a manufacturing business in an

old Blarney dancehall.

It was ironic at this stage that the scene was almost set for him to make the move which ultimately would catapult him and his family into the big time financially. That came about when, after over 200 years in operation, the Mahony's owned Blarney Woollen Mill closed its doors in the face to stiff competition from newly marketed synthetics and cheap eastern labour.

Bought mill

Without the support of a bank, Christy Kelleher bought the mill premises and now found his business really on the move. At last he and the family

had space for a decent shop, space to develop the knitwear manufacturing along with ancillary businesses, including what was to become Christy Hotel.

At the time of his death at the age of 76, Christy had become a legend and an example to all aspiring entrepreneurs.

The businesses he set up are now controlled by his seven children. Those businesses stretch through Ireland, Britain, Europe and the USA and will lend credence for many years to come that Christy Kelleher was one of the most far-sighted men of his generation.



City of Cambridge

62.

IN CITY COUNCIL

June 24, 1991

COUNCILLOR SULLIVAN

WHEREAS: This City Council was deeply saddened upon learning of the death of Christy Kelleher, late founder of the Blarney Woollen Mills Company; and

WHEREAS: Christy, known and loved by all who had the opportunity to know him in his beloved Ireland; and

WHEREAS: Christy Kelleher had a good business acumen which transformed his idea of a mobile souvenir shop outside Blarney Castle in 1966 into a multi-million pound company currently run by his daughter; and

WHEREAS: His entrepreneurial flair was further evidenced when he expanded his interests to set up a small knitwear business in an old dance hall; and

WHEREAS: Throughout all his business endeavors Christy never forgot his own maintaining strong family ties he nurtured his seven children into his family business; now therefore be it

RESOLVED: That the Cambridge City Council go on record extending its deepest sympathy to the Kelleher Family at this time of such personal loss; and be it further

RESOLVED: That the City Clerk be and hereby is requested to prepare a suitable resolution for presentation to Mrs. Maureen Kelleher on behalf of the entire City Council.

In City Council June 24, 1991.

Adopted by the affirmative vote of nine members.

Attest:- Joseph E. Connarton, City Clerk.

A true copy;

ATTEST:-

Joseph E. Connarton, City Clerk

Order # 62

S. 808
Councillor Sullivan resolutions on the
death of Christy Kelleher.

In City Council,

June 24, 1991