

Can O’Connell Street get its mojo back?

The historic thoroughfare is ripe for revival after being shunned by bigger stores and blighted by vacant sites, writes *Linda Daly*

In the 50 years that Francis Mumbley has been selling newspapers on O’Connell Street in Dublin, he has seen the Hotel Metropole close its doors (it is now a Penneys) and witnessed the Carlton cinema cease business in 1994. Shop after shop has shuttered.

Mumbley, 75, is one of the last stallholders left on O’Connell Street. He cycles from his home in Stonyabbey to his pitch outside Eason book-sellers on O’Connell Street Lower; nearby are a vape shop, a fast-food outlet, a shuttered restaurant and a convenience Circle K store.

“Take any other European city, you wouldn’t see their main street like this,” he said. “What have we got in this town? Phone shops, fast-food restaurants. On the main streets in Spain you’ll find big shops – Gucci and all that.”

Last year the Dublin City Taskforce, appointed by the government and led by David McRedmond, the An Post chief executive, concluded: “If Dublin is a city centre that needs urgent intervention, O’Connell Street is the emblem of that.”

Paul Gallagher, who opened an Asics store on the corner of O’Connell Street and Abbey Street during the pandemic, said the street was “improving but not where it should be”.

Noel Kelly, who runs the jewellers McDowells at No 3 O’Connell Street Upper, said there had been a marked improvement in the street since Weir & Sons bought the company in 2020.

“I hate when people say to us, ‘Oh, it’s a terrible place to work,’ because I know, I’m there all the time, and it’s not. It has so many characters,” he said.

Bob Geldof, the rock star, used to mock Dubliners’ penchant for comparing O’Connell Street to the Champs-Élysées in Paris. It is a wide boulevard – thought to be about 50 metres wide, with the Spire at the centre as a landmark.

Yet its real beauty is above street level. Many of its buildings were rebuilt after the Easter Rising in 1916. There are porticos and columns and Juliet balconies among an array of architectural flourishes.

In contrast, much of the left-hand side of O’Connell Street Upper is vacant. In the early 2000s, the developer Joe O’Reilly amalgamated a 5.5-acre site that stretches from the upper left-hand side back to Moore Street. His grand plans were scuppered in the recession.

Hammerson, the publicly listed property company, picked up the site in 2016 as part of a deal to buy Dundrum Town Centre, the Ilac on Henry Street, and Pavilions shopping centre in Swords.

Hammerson, under Rita-Rose Gagné as chief executive, lodged three planning applications for a mixed-use office, retail and residential scheme in 2021. An Bord Pleanála approved the plans three years later. Moore Street Preservation Trust, a group involving some relatives of those who took part in the 1916 Rising, lodged a judicial review shortly after.

The case is continuing. From O’Reilly’s first purchase, it is likely to be 30 years before any development takes place.

For traders such as Louis Fitzgerald, the hotelier and publican who owns the

Grand Central pub on the street, it is a sign of official stasis. “There are too many vacant sites around O’Connell Street,” he said.

Hammerson has been criticised for not utilising its buildings as it waits for approval. McRedmond said he would like to see more “meanwhile use”, whether that is from Hammerson or others.

“It’s a big trend in London and we want to see it here,” he said.

Richard Guiney, chief executive of Dublin Town, the business promotion group, would like to see more pop-ups and art galleries in those vacant spaces. “More evening and night-time footfall would uplift the whole area,” he said.

Kelly, the jeweller, would like to see more buskers.

Kevin Sweeney, director of retail at the estate agent Savills, said market stalls and entertainment on O’Connell Street’s median – similar to Las Ramblas in Barcelona – could make a huge difference. (A lack of electricity would be an inhibitor.)

As for Mumbley’s yearning for Gucci or Dior, property agents have failed to entice luxury brands across the Liffey or out of the concessions in Brown Thomas on Grafton Street or Arnotts on Henry Street.

“It’s a wide street, not convenient to pop from one side to another, and has a mix of uses – hotels, a garda station and tourist office,” Sweeney said.

“It just doesn’t have that natural flow where a customer can walk the street and go from shop to shop on the best high streets.”

When Derek McGrath teamed up with the international property developer Europa Capital to develop the Clerys department store, he thought it would be ripe for luxury brands.

Flannels, the high-end fashion department store owned by Mike Ashley’s Frasers Group, came on board but its parent company later exited the deal. It was partly replaced by the discount sports retailer Deathlon, with the Swedish fashion retailer H&M taking up the remaining space. Both stores are trading well, according to McGrath.

“The Irish retail economy is probably



GUVEN OZDEMIR/GETTY IMAGES

8%
Investment yield on O’Connell Street, beating 6 per cent on Grafton Street

“I hate when people say, ‘Oh, it’s a terrible place to work,’ because I’m there all the time, and it’s not

LOWER RIGHT



Clerys is one example of redevelopment on O’Connell Street, after being taken over by Europa Capital in 2018



A private investor is tipped to be buying this impressive protected building at Nos 2-5, left behind by Ulster Bank

UPPER RIGHT



The six-storey building at Nos 1-2 was on the market for €9 million. It has permission for a 38-bedroom hotel



The Savoy, the oldest operational picturehouse in Dublin, is part of Paul Ward’s Irish Multiplex Cinemas group

Mattress Mick franchisee won’t put turf war to bed

Barry J Whyte

The biggest franchisee in the Mattress Mick group has indicated he may appeal against a judge’s decision not to block the company from opening rival stores near him.

Garreth McCarthy, an auctioneer and publican based in Waterford, has been in a dispute with Michael Flynn, the group’s founder.

McCarthy, who operates stores in Waterford and Carlow, claims his relationship with Flynn broke down in September when he heard a new shop was to be opened in Portlaoise by a different franchisee.

He claimed in court that he was under the impression that the area within a 60km radius of his Carlow store was his exclusive territory, based on “draft written agreements” between the two sides. However, Judge



Michael Flynn: founder of the Mattress Mick franchise

Marguerite Bolger ruled in late November that the agreements were “never finalised or signed”.

A fresh agreement was struck in January, with Flynn and a company backed by his new investors, Ronan and Jonathan Stafford, of Staffords Funeral Homes.

That new contract reduced the exclusive territory to 30km and stated that the relationship could be terminated with 30 days’ notice. Bolger noted that

McCarthy “says that he signed it without fully reviewing it and having been assured by [Flynn] that there was no change to the terms”.

In October, Flynn’s company “issued a notice indicating the intention to terminate” his contracts under the terms of the new agreement. McCarthy sought an injunction preventing the opening of the new shop and blocking the termination of his franchise agreements, but the judge ruled that his arguments were “insufficient” and that “a businessperson is bound by what they sign”.

Bolger also said that damages claimed by McCarthy were not “anything close to the catastrophic levels” that he had claimed, including redundancies.

In a costs hearing last week, lawyers for McCarthy indicated that he was considering an appeal.

Fresh look soon for two Co Kildare hotels

Linda Daly

A pair of Co Kildare hotels, Ray Byrne’s the Club at Goffs hotel, northeast of Naas, and the O’Callaghan family’s Keadeen hotel in Newbridge, are set for renovation.

The two companies have applied to Kildare county council for planning permission to build extensions.

The Keadeen wants to add 53 bedrooms to take the total to 122. The O’Callaghan Family Group already owned the Fairways and the Gateway hotels in Dundalk when they bought the Keadeen last year. The Irish-Canadian family are not to be confused with their namesake who own the O’Callaghan Collection hotels.

A planning application to Kildare county council last week said the Keadeen also wanted to add a glazed canopy and entrance portico, and a covered walkway to link

the main entrance to the current bar and lounge.

The company wants to remove an amphitheatre-type ceremony area where many weddings have been held and replace it with a marquee-type structure.

Byrne’s the Club at Goffs, meanwhile, is looking to add bedrooms and a spa – only two years after the venue was opened by Byrne and Eoin Doyle.

It wants to add 25 bedrooms in a two-storey extension with an office and laundry. A single-storey extension will have a spa with pool, steam room, sauna and treatment rooms, while a second single-storey extension will create three meeting rooms. In a letter accompanying the application, Goffs, the landowner and thoroughbred horse auction house, said the hotel had been “a great success for Kildare”.

Rivada boss Ganley faces pressure to up repayment

Barry J Whyte

An investor owed \$22 million by Declan Ganley, the chief executive of Rivada Networks, has asked a court in New York to more than double his monthly repayments, claiming Ganley’s “lavish lifestyle” and expensive litigation show he can afford it.

Ganley pays \$20,000 a month to David Shuman, a New York investor who registered a default debt judgment now estimated to stand at \$22 million.

In legal filings in New York last week, Shuman’s lawyers argued that “the existing \$20,000 monthly instalment payment is no longer adequate or equitable”.

They argue that Ganley’s “lavish lifestyle”, his trips to President Trump’s Mar-a-Lago resort, his ability to pay



Declan Ganley: claims debt was repaid “years ago”

\$36 million in legal fees and his claims that Rivada is worth \$12 billion show he has “ample access to funds”.

They point out that Ganley has said he has “an annual cash salary of \$500,000 from Rivada, as well as payment for expenses, possibly exceeding \$2 million a year”.

He also holds “valuable stock options and indirect financial interests” which could be worth “between \$198 million and \$240 million”.

Ganley has been forced to turn over assets and auction shares in Rivada to pay down a portion of the debt.

He has made “19 monthly payments of \$20,000, in the total amount of \$380,000”, and overall, including other assets he has turned over, “Shuman has collected \$980,000”, which, the plaintiff claims is “less than a year’s worth of interest on the underlying judgment”.

Ganley has repeatedly insisted that the judgment is not valid and has claimed in court it was wrongly secured, a position he has argued unsuccessfully in court in New York.

When contacted by The Sunday Times, Ganley claimed that the debt “was repaid in full, years ago. I have the receipts.” He contends that Shuman’s claims “are meritless”.

Who owns what on Dublin’s most famous old road



The state of O’Connell Street is a source of disappointment for some traders and property owners, who feel it ought to compare with the great avenues of other European capitals

Our guide to the country’s most famous, longest and widest thoroughfare begins on the eastern or right-hand side, all the way up to the top, crosses the road and tracks in horseshoe fashion back to the River Liffey. If the numbering, and upper and lower designations (closest to the Liffey), may confuse, just remember the route. The GPO is obviously on O’Connell Street, but the birthplace of the nation, owned by the Office of Public Works, is not numbered.

O’CONNELL STREET LOWER, RIGHT SIDE

No 1: For years this building was a landmark branch of the now-bust Irish Nationwide. Now its listed owner is the wealth manager Harvest Financial Services, which likely means the building rests in the pension of a wealthy private investor. It now houses a co-working space and currency exchange.

Nos 2-4: A former Ulster Bank branch, with second-storey columns and domed roof, this impressive protected building was surplus to requirements when the financial institution left the Republic of Ireland market. It is being sold to a private investor.

No 5: For nearly a century this building was home to Hamilton Long chemists. It is now owned by Highbury Lane Properties, a property investment company owned by Duncan and John Fox.

Nos 6-7: Once the site of the Dublin Bread Company and the Grand Central cinema, this Bank of Ireland branch is owned by the Tipperary quarry owner Donie Keating’s Dorneyswell.

No 8: Leonardo DiVito, a distant relative of the actor Danny DeVito, owns the upper floors, while the basement and kiosk business are owned by Nina and Tony Cafolla. An Bord Pleanala granted planning permission for a 23-bedroom hotel and one-bedroom apartment on the upper floors, despite objections from the Cafollas.

No 9: Conradh na Gaeilge, an Irish-language promotion

organisation whose first president, Douglas Hyde, was also the country’s first president, was formed at this site in 1893. Today it is a Caffè Nero coffee shop and is owned by Noel and Celeste Kenny. They also own IFC House, an office and showroom rental facility in Fashion City in Ballymount.

Nos 10-11: The publican Louis Fitzgerald bought the former bank here in 2001 and turned it into Grand Central café bar. The Fitzgerald group rents out six apartments on the upper levels to long-term tenants.

Nos 12-13: Built in 1872 and once WG Moody’s Gin Palace, this building is owned by PTSB, which occupies the decorative corner building.

Nos 14-17: This stretch of O’Connell Street is owned by DI Collection, a company ultimately owned by Hong Kong-based Colleen Investment and controlled by Yong (Jack) Wu. It comprises a technology shop, fast-food outlet and convenience store.

Nos 18-27: The now redeveloped Clerys department store is owned by Europa Capital, a European property investment company, part of the Japanese firm Mitsubishi Estate.

No 28: Originally built as an imposing bank branch, this building is a Smiles Dental clinic and owned by a pension investor. It failed to sell when put on the market in 2022.

No 29: Start of a stretch of five buildings rebuilt after the 1916 Rising. Brereton Jewellers owns and occupies the building.

Nos 30-31: Element Pictures, producer of *Normal People* and *The Favourite*, has offices in the upper floors, while the outdoor retailer Mountain Warehouse occupies the ground levels. Aviva Life & Pensions has just sold the property to a French real estate investment fund.

No 32: This building was once home to Dunn & Company, a historic British menswear retailer, and Starbucks recently closed here. The upper-floor office is home to RichardsDee, an international branding company. Owned by the

businessman Ciaran McGrath, the building is part of a large portfolio of city centre properties.

No 33: Occupied by Carrolls Irish Gifts, this was the jewellers Jameson & Co, opened by Fanny and Michael Jacobson in 1916. Great timing. The property still belongs to Jacobson and Jameson family members, who own a number of properties around Dublin, including on Grafton Street.

No 34: Across from the Spire on the corner of North Earl Street, this home to Paddywagon Tours is owned by JG Investments, controlled by the Jacobson-Jameson family.

O’CONNELL STREET UPPER, RIGHT SIDE

Nos 1-2: The six-storey landmark building, currently vacant, is owned by OKR Group, the Burger King franchisee, and has gone sale agreed to a private Irish buyer with plans to redevelop. On the market for €9 million, it has permission for a 38-bedroom hotel.

Nos 3-4: Long known as the Happy Ring House, this building and McDowells jewellers were bought by the southside rival Weir & Sons in 2020.

Nos 5-7: Let to Beshoff, the fish and chips restaurant, it is owned by Michael Ryan, a substantial Dublin property investor and owner of Prosperity Chambers, an office accommodation provider.

No 8: On the corner of O’Connell Street and Cathedral Street, this property, with a Spar on its ground floor, is owned by Daniel Guinan of Birr, Co Offaly.

Nos 9-15: The Office of Public Works owns upper levels and buildings occupied by An Garda Síochána and Fáilte Ireland’s Discover Ireland centre. OKR Group, the Burger King franchisee, owns the lower levels.

Nos 16-18: Opened as a single cinema in 1929, with a monstrous 2,800 seats, the cineplex property is part of the Paul Ward-owned Irish Multiplex Cinema group.

No 19: Once part of the cinema, the rear forms part of the Gresham hotel next door and the front is Madigan’s pub, owned by David Madigan’s Madigan Group.

Nos 20-25: The National Asset Management Agency (Nama) sold the landmark Gresham hotel in 2016 to Riu Hotels, a family-owned Spanish hospitality company. The Riu family started business in the 1950s on the island of Mallorca.

Nos 26-32: The 1970s former Findlater House, once home to Eircom, was bought by the UK-based, Kajani family-owned JMK Group in 2014 and is now a Holiday Inn Express.

Nos 33-36: Telstar Investments, controlled by Noel and Ross Murray, owns these four buildings, including Murray’s Bar & Grill and Thomas Clarke’s. No 36 is occupied by a Subway restaurant. The upper floors are divided into eight flats.

O’CONNELL STREET UPPER, LEFT SIDE

Nos 37-38: AIB put this high-profile property on the corner of Parnell Square on the market for €3.75 million in 2022. The Murray group, which owns Murray’s Bar & Grill, is rumoured to be the buyer of the vacant building.

Nos 40-43: The UK-listed property group Hammerson owns much of this block of O’Connell Street Upper. Acquired from Nama, this plot forms part of its planned €500 million Dublin Central development. Site of the beloved Royal Dublin hotel before it was demolished in 2009. It includes a vacant site.

Nos 44-45: The OPW owns these two buildings, one a former garda station. Vacant since 2018, the properties are earmarked to facilitate the



Element Pictures, the maker of *Normal People*, above, has an office on O’Connell Street. Below, from top, Rosanna Davison, Sunil Shah, Danny DeVito and Hammerson boss Rita-Rose Gagné are linked to properties on the road



delivery of the MetroLink project for Dublin

Nos 46-49: More Hammerson acreage, this stretch has an Asian feel with Fortune Terrace, an Asian-style buffet, and Hei GaGa bubble tea shop.

Nos 50-54: Hammerson again; the old Carlton cinema was built here in 1938 after the first iteration was knocked down in 1936. It includes a vacant site after adjacent buildings collapsed in 1979.

Nos 55-56: Dr Quirkey’s casino – owned by the Quirke family, whose scion Wesley is married to former Miss World Rosanna Davison – occupies this Hammerson-owned site.

Nos 57-58: Hammerson owns this art deco building, which is occupied by Carrolls Irish Gifts.

Nos 59-60: CIE is listed as the owner of this building, which is occupied by Dublin Bus.

No 61: Yet another building owned by Hammerson. Flanagan’s Bar & Restaurant has been here since 1980.

No 62: Hosting a McDonald’s, this Queen Anne-style building is owned by a company linked to the family of the late Sylvester Rabbitte and Anne Senezio. It was built as the Pillar Picture House in 1913. The family also own No 67.

Nos 63-64: Another former bank, the ground floor appears to be owned by Ashglen, part of the symbol retail group BWG. The former Lynam’s hotel, which spans the two buildings, is a homeless family hub. It is held by Graray Ltd, owned by Muriel O’Connor.

Nos 65-66: Once home to Standard Life Assurance Company, this imposing building is owned by a company called Rasco, which is owned by the Dubliners Michael Ryan (owner of Nos 5-7 Upper) and Martin Ryan. Harp & Shear, a tattoo parlour and barbershop, opened here in December last year.

O’CONNELL STREET LOWER, LEFT SIDE

Nos 35-39: Owner-occupied, this is one of the top ten busiest stores globally of Primark, or Penneys in Ireland. Once the site of the ornate Hotel Metropole, it was knocked down in the 1970s to make way for an office and retail block.

Nos 40-42: The books retailer Eason & Son, the street’s longest-surviving tenant, opened in No 40 in 1887, buying adjoining buildings in later years.

LOWER LEFT



No 53-54 was one of the few buildings on O’Connell Street to survive the 1916 Rising unscathed. Now it’s a Burger King



The birthplace of the nation, the General Post Office, lies on O’Connell Street Lower, but it is not numbered

UPPER LEFT



The old Carlton Cinema was built at Nos 50-54 in 1938 after the first iteration was demolished two years previously



The old AIB branch at Nos 37-38 was on the market in 2022 for €3.75 million. Sources say a hospitality group bought it

Ruling out private equity to buy PTSB is cuckoo

Brian Carey Agenda



Simon Harris’s honeymoon as minister for finance will end fairly sharply in the new year. By the end of the first quarter, Goldman Sachs will have drawn up a shortlist, and perhaps recommended a preferred bidder, to take over the state-controlled lender PTSB.

All the early indications are that the runners and riders are tilting heavily towards private equity (PE) rather than an international bank. And this will present the neophyte finance minister with something of a dilemma.

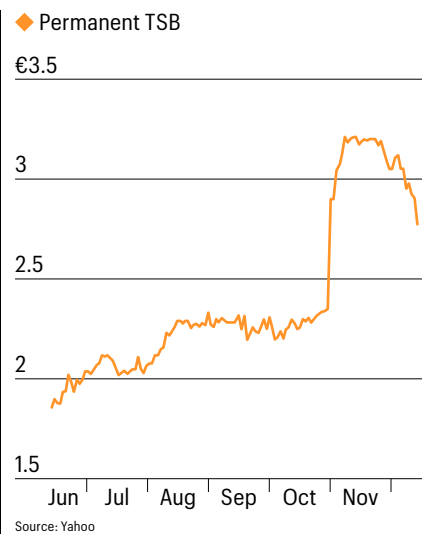
The narrative around private equity, particularly the international variety, is not very kind. If you are not a vulture, then you are a cuckoo fund. The very idea of flinging open the doors of a treasured former building society and savings bank to these plunderers is shocking for many.

The perception is that, once PE is inside the door, there will be pillaging of

reserves and a massacre of the workforce. In certain corners of Dail Éireann, and beyond, Oliver Cromwell would be extended a warmer welcome. Like the Alamo, remember Eircom. Private equity arrived, squeezed every last cent out of the national phone network and left the poor creature for dead in High Court examinations.

There are many examples of Irish businesses that have prospered greatly under PE, grown workforces and expanded overseas. There are banks across Europe that have prospered too under PE ownership. This matters little. Remember the Alamo.

A private equity buyer will, for sure, look at the bank’s cost base: its branch network and workforce. Yet so would any international bank. Denis McGoldrick, a Goodbody analyst, says that there is no great need to trim branches – PTSB’s network is 60 to 90 per cent the size of AIB and Bank of Ireland’s, yet has national coverage. The



network generates income, and branch staff are paid much less than head office.

This is where McGoldrick sees the fat. Through synergies, a handsome and well-endowed international bank suitor could strip out about 700 staff without touching the branch network at all, and save €60 million in costs. The ugly vulturous financial buyer, with no banking head office, would have far less scope. Whisper it, Davy Crockett, but PE may be the worker-friendly option.

For now, Harris is right to keep his counsel. After all, this is a company-run sales process. There are also three regulatory hoops that any buyer must negotiate: the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission, the Central Bank of Ireland and finally the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment, which can block the deal if the bank is considered a strategic national asset, which arguably it is.

At each hurdle, the issue of branch closures will be paramount, and

concessions can be sought. The final approval is from shareholders, though, and that is where Harris’s voice matters.

Analysts at Carraighill, an independent research house, reckon that the biggest hurdle for PTSB reaching a fair price is the country’s “draconian” regulator. Burnt British, Danish and Belgian banks who exited in recent years will no doubt agree. If trade buyers do not materialise, then PE is the only game in town.

It would be a huge call for Harris to reject a PE offer. The PTSB share price, up 20 per cent since the announcement, would crater.

If the process failed because the main shareholder, the Irish government, blocked cost cutting, then it would be absolute carnage.

The pressure will be even greater on Eamonn Crowley, the PTSB chief executive, to address the bank’s cost base aggressively, even more than under a private equity owner.

The formal sales process offers the government at least the prospect of an accelerated exit from the bank at a healthy price. The alternative is a slow retreat at a much lower price. As the saying goes, share prices go down the lift, up the stairs.

The stakes are considerable. Carraighill and Goodbody have fair values of €4.54 and €4.23 per share respectively on the bank. Before the formal sales process announcement, the stock traded around €2.35. If a deal at €4 a share were rejected, and the stock fell to its former levels, the loss to the state would be about €500 million.

It remains to be seen if Harris, the tanaiste, party leader and taoiseach-elect, has the gumption or nous to face down the enemies of profit parties in the Dail and sell the deal to the great Irish public, wary of vultures and cuckoos.

Or will he quietly nix the process, and take the €500 million hit?

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