

# A Brief History of Clery's

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The skeletal façade of Clery's after the 1916 Rising. (RIA)

Clery's department store is an iconic Dublin business, famed for having risen from the ashes of 1916, its clock the meeting point for generations of courting couples. This and its stately building give it the impression of permanence and stability, but in fact in its 162-year history Clery's has experienced three changes of name, multiple owners and two previous bankruptcies—one of which also resulted in the store being closed and its staff being fired.

The store opened in 1853 as McSwiney, Delaney & Co., owned by Peter Paul McSwiney, who would go on to be lord mayor of Dublin in the 1860s. One of the very first purpose-built department stores in the world, it was five storeys tall, with six display windows opening onto Sackville Street. Inside there was a 'great centre hall', which was lit by natural light from above, while around it were galleries supported by Corinthian columns and reached by sweeping staircases with elaborate balustrades. Shop assistants lived on site in dormitories until the early twentieth century, and their sleeping quarters, along with a refectory and library for the staff's use, were located on the upper floors of the building.

The store would dominate the retail district around Sackville Street and Henry Street for several decades, but by the 1880s it was failing. It had been considerably expanded in 1878, including the installation of large plate-glass windows, then a new and very expensive invention. The Irish economy collapsed almost immediately after this investment was made, however, and McSwiney, Delaney & Co. began to lose money. After McSwiney's retirement, the shop was briefly renamed the Dublin Drapery Warehouse, but this failed to revive its fortunes and the following year it was put into liquidation. In 1883 the building and its stock were sold by the receiver to a new consortium of owners, including Michael Clery from Limerick, as well as the principal investors, William Martin Murphy and his father-in-law, James Fitzgerald Lombard, a long-time director of Arnott's department store. They renamed it Clery & Co. and were open for business by Christmas 1884. William Martin Murphy was probably the most powerful businessman in Ireland, and over the coming decades Clery's

would be the flagship of his empire, which included Dublin's tram system as well as the Irish Independent newspaper.

Clery's was still under Murphy's control when it was completely destroyed by fire during the 1916 Rising. A barricade on Lower Abbey Street was hit by a British shell, and the subsequent fire spread to Clery's. It took hold and destroyed the entire building except for the skeletal façade. Oscar Traynor, who was an eyewitness, later claimed to have seen Clery's plate-glass windows melting in the heat of the flames. Despite this, only a few weeks later, in June 1916, the store opened temporary premises in the Metropolitan Hall on Lower Abbey Street and began trading again.

Their new building—which still stands today—opened in August 1922 and, like its predecessor, used some of the most advanced building technologies of its day, including a ferro-concrete structure. It cost £400,000, half of which was paid for by government reparations for Rising-related damage. Despite the glamour and modernity of the building, however, Clery's was not financially secure when it reopened in the early 1920s—it was saved only by the business acumen of the flamboyant manager, John McGuire, who in 1930 placed a Gipsy Moth biplane on sale in the store and ran a wildly popular lottery for customers to take a free flight over Dublin. After McGuire left the company (following a very controversial court case) it struggled again, and the Emergency made trading more difficult for a store that stocked many imported goods. In 1940 Clery's went bankrupt. In a remarkable parallel of recent events, a receiver was appointed who closed the shop, fired all of the staff and sought to sell off the firm's assets. It was eventually purchased by Denis Guiney, owner of the store just around the corner on Talbot Street, and this allowed Clery's to reopen and resume trading under its original name—although it is not clear whether the original staff were rehired. Guiney invested in the shop's restaurant and also established its ballroom—which could accommodate 500 visitors and had a full orchestra—as one of Dublin's most glamorous social spaces during the 1950s and 1960s. The Guiney family would continue to own or control the firm until the death of Denis's wife, Mary, in 2004 at the age of 103. By 2012 the shop was in receivership again, and by June 2015 it had been declared bankrupt for the third time in its turbulent history.

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