

INNISCARRA COMMUNITY CENTRE

A History

by Emma Dineen

INTRODUCTION

Since its inception in 1977 the Inniscarra Community Centre in Ballyanly has been both a sporting and a social base for the people of Inniscarra and surrounding parishes. Early on, clubs such as the Social Club endeavoured through 'socials', set-dancing and talent shows to provide a calendar of social events. Later on, the Dramatic Society provided opportunities for both light entertainment and serious drama. Berrings Macra na Feirme won national titles with amateur dramatists from the area.

The women of the area were catered for as well with the founding of the Berrings branch of the Irish Countrywomen's Association in 1985. For many years, parents of First Communicants enjoyed a social breakfast at the Centre, with up to 600 people catered for by the ICA. Patty Hickey, founder member of Berrings ICA and a community activist, said "It was a great occasion for all the family".

Pastoral care also had its place in Ballyanly with St Vincent de Paul, the PTAA and the St Joseph's Young Priests Society meeting there regularly. For many years, the highlight of the Senior Citizen's Year was the Christmas Dinner provided at the Centre, where there was also a European dimension, having been utilised on many occasions by the Inniscarra-Plougouven Twinning Association when hosting visitors from Brittany. In turn, many parishioners have visited Brittany over the years.

Few winters pass without keep-fit activities being available at the Centre. If music or art is your pleasure, you will find classes in both provided regularly at the Centre.

In challenging times, every community needs an anchor – and the Community Centre continues to be that anchor for the people of Inniscarra. Long may it continue!

A sincere thanks to all those who supplied information for this article

THE EARLY DAYS – 1970's

The need to make facilities available for the parish of Inniscarra was first mooted in the early 1970s at a meeting of Berrings Macra na Feirme, then as now a very vibrant club.

As a result a meeting was called which in due course was held in February 1972 at the old Berrings Hall and a committee was elected. Eamonn Hegarty was elected chairman and John Cronin was elected as secretary.

Several meetings followed as the members discussed what form the centre might take and where to locate a suitable site. Another important issue was whether the project should be undertaken either as co-operative venture or as a limited company.

One of the proposed locations was on land owned by Dan Hennessy in Cloghroe Village.

At that time, another local farmer named Bill Ellis was willing to sell land in Ballyanly that the committee eventually deemed to have the advantage of being in a relatively central location within the parish as a whole.

Approximately ten and a half acres were purchased from Bill at a cost of £13,000 (don't forget that that the Irish Pound was linked with Sterling in those days!). To obtain ownership, the deeds to the land were required --- and so it was decided to buy the land outright.

Now all they needed was money! Numerous fund-raising activities followed, including door-to-door collections, with people donating whatever they could afford. Life Membership initially was £1, though it was later raised to £5. That approach was intended to give the people of Inniscarra a sense of ownership over the project. Great credit is due to the many men and women who walked from door to door throughout the parish raising the funds that turned their vision of a Community Centre into a reality.

Various sporting clubs enthusiastically supported the concept because they badly needed grounds for training and a hall for indoor activities.

Eventually, sufficient funds were raised and in 1974 the contract was signed for purchase of the land.

Barretts of Ballintemple was awarded the contract for the grading of the land on two pitches – “Number One” and “Number Two”. The building of the centre began in February 1974 and was completed by July 1977. Michael O’Mahony of Berrings was the contractor. During those years the people involved with the centre became volunteer labourers as they picked stones, harrowed the ground, erected paling and wiring around the designated areas etc. etc. Volunteers also built the perimeter walls, with ANCO Training Centre providing local apprentices to do the plastering. One of the plasterers was female, proving that equality was live and well in the area!

John P Hickey, one of the founder members, said that pressure was put on as to who would put up the most blocks per day. When work came to a halt because the cement mixer ‘broke down’, the bold John P secretly fixed the plug during the night, with the result that no-one could figure out how that mixer magically came to life the following morning!

By now, clubs were developing around the new Centre. As an example, the Inniscarra Badminton Club, formed in 1977, soon became one of the most successful in the county, with teams competing at Division One level and providing officers at national level.

During 1977 and 78, pitches were provided for Soccer enthusiasts in the parish. Soccer clubs in Tower, Leemount, Dripsey and Matehy (Strand United) all trained at and used the facilities at Ballyanly. So too did a group centred around Healy’s Pub (now Blair’s Inn) called the Cloghroe All-Stars, that initially played both soccer and rugby.

One notable ‘happening’ in 1978 was when Donal Healy and Con O’Sullivan organised a meeting at Healy’s Pub at which the Muskerry Rugby Club was founded. The new club made Ballyanly its base, renting a pitch from the ICC. A measure of the success of the club is that they eventually purchased their own grounds adjoining the centre from Bill Ellis, where in 2004-5 they built their own club-house.

Festivals were prominent

social occasions in most parishes throughout Ireland from the 1950s on – and Inniscarra had its own version in the Lee Festival. The initial festival took place in 1974 on the banks of the River Lee just behind the Cycle Rest (aka The Inniscarra Bar). Unfortunately for the organisers, the event took place on one of the rainiest Septembers on record and a marquee tent that had been erected was flooded. The final events had to be hastily transferred to the newly-acquired – but still largely under-developed – land in Ballyanly. In subsequent years the Lee Festival was located at Ballyanly and over the years became both one of the staple fund-raisers for Centre AND, as Johnny O’Sullivan said, “It was a great source of enjoyment every summer for young and old alike”.

The ICC Treasurer at the time was Eamonn Ambrose, a man who was very adept at raising funds. In 1977 he negotiated a loan from the Allied Irish Bank in South Mall of approximately £40,000. A second parish collection brought in a further £10,000.

The very first structure on the site, a pump-house erected by John P Hickey, has since been re-located to make way for other building works. The original hall measured 100 feet in length and 60 feet in width. It included two dressing rooms and a kitchen. It was a conventional structure of its time, built with blocks, although a new concept by Galway Concrete was utilised in the trusses to support the span involved. The roof was of asbestos.

In 1978 a weekend Harvest Festival was initiated at the Centre, finishing on the Sunday night with a well-attended concert in the hall. Macra na Feirme clubs such as Berrings and Muskerry were instrumental in its success. Over time this event evolved into the Agricultural Show and Old Time Threshing which, under the guidance of the late Joan O’Riordan, has grown to become synonymous with the Inniscarra Community Centre. This show continues to provide a great day out in late August every year, while keeping alive a dying tradition and also raising much-needed funds for the centre.

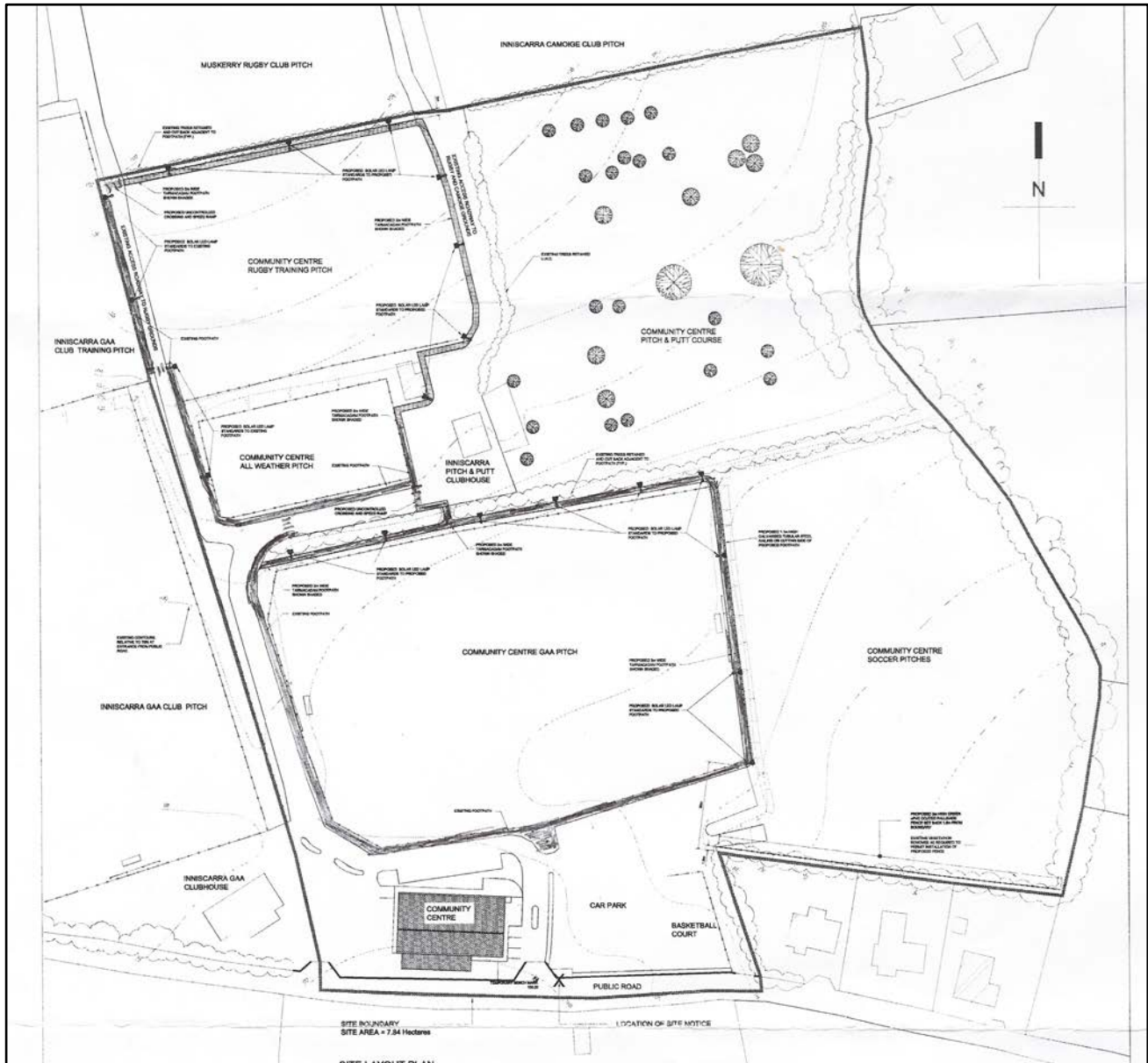


Eamonn Ambrose

THE 1980's

By 1981 a new extension was required to accommodate the clubs & activities at the centre. Once again, local voluntary work built the new meeting rooms, one of which, incidentally, was named the Ellis Room. Christy McCormack, a local builder, did the block work on that phase. A £5 (punts) per month draw to

entry to a dance, every roadside farm gate on a road leading to Ballyanly disappeared overnight! On another occasion a "Black Maria" van was called to take some trouble-makers to Blarney Garda Station. On the following morning one of the culprits, when asked where he had spent the night, quipped, "In a hotel that wasn't to our liking!"



fund the extension was well supported. About this time (i.e. the early 1980s) dancing became very popular at the centre on Sunday nights. Top names such as Dermot O'Brien, The Swarbriggs, The Dixies, Linda Martin, Foster and Allen, all entertained those attending. "We weren't at home at all" said Barry Murray of those dances that ran until the early hours. Barry was one of the many local men who volunteered their services as 'bouncers' on those Sunday nights, which were not without drama! The story goes that on one occasion when a well-known group of trouble-makers were refused

Nevertheless, incidents like those were a rarity and so, thanks to strict control on entry & exit, Inniscarra Community Centre became a popular destination for the dancing public. In 1982 and 1983 two tarmac tennis courts were provided inside the main gate at a cost of £4,000 punts, a relatively modest sum – but only thanks to the voluntary labour on offer. While this enterprise was under way, a souterrain was discovered. The Archaeology Department at UCC were contacted and examined this significant find. Initially a 'corpse' – which in fact may well have been a farm animal – was found

in the souterrain. However, when the archaeologists arrived on the scene the 'corpse' had disappeared! It transpired that Mick Desmond, a local farmer, had in the meantime taken the bones and was attempting to re-assemble them on a table at his farmhouse! The team from UCC took the 'corpse' and later informed the committee that the bones were 2000 years old!

In 1985 the officers of the centre approached Bill Ellis once again for additional land to enable them to provide yet another pitch – and once again a deal was agreed. At that time the GAA was developing its own identity within the complex and required road frontage. ICC therefore swapped land with the GAA and so began the current GAA pitch, per se...

The possibility of a Pitch & Putt Course came on

the agenda around this time. An adjoining extra strip of land was purchased and, by combining it with part of the existing grounds, the dream became a reality. The greens were laid in 1987 and the club "The Three Oaks" was formed in 1988. Just like the GAA, this club "grew wings and flew", so to speak. By 1991, a new club-house was built for the members – once again by voluntary labour. The building cost approximately £7,500 punts and a Race Night, run as a fund-raiser, brought in £8500. A cheque for £1,000 was handed back to the Centre! When other bills were paid, a sum of £50 was left, from which the volunteer workers got a few well-deserved drinks!

Muskerry Rugby Club (MRC) was also involved in the fund-raising for the P&P club as they too used the club-house facilities.

THE 1990's

By 1989 a total of £200,000 had been spent (or, to be pedantically precise, had been well-spent!) on the development of sporting and recreational amenities at the Inniscarra Community Centre for the parish of Inniscarra and its hinterland.

Most volunteer workers would have sat back at this stage – but not the people of Inniscarra! Demand was growing for an All-Weather facility at the Centre. Costing an estimated £84,000, this was a very ambitious undertaking from a financial perspective. Undaunted, the ICC committee under the chairmanship of Dan Maher negotiated Lotto Funding of £40,000 and a new bank loan for the balance. A synthetic grass carpet with sand infill was laid. Costs escalated to £120,000 when lighting for the new facility was also erected, on the basis that the additional income from clubs training there during winter months would gradually cover that additional amount. Since it opened in 1996, the All-Weather Pitch has been a wonderful addition to the complex.

The GAA opened its own club-house within the complex in 1994/5. At this stage we had the very unusual – and indeed laudable – scenario where the GAA, Soccer, Rugby, Pitch & Putt, and Tennis clubs all called Ballyanly their home. In addition, sports such as Karate and Athletics were gaining

a very high profile as well.

By 1995, approximately £300,000 punts had been raised and spent on the purchase of around 20 acres of land, the building of a hall, extensions and further development such as the tennis courts, the 18-hole Pitch & Putt course and drainage of soccer pitches.

However, in the dawning Celtic-Tiger era of the 1990s it became apparent that overall costs were rising, volunteerism was declining, workers were tiring and money was becoming scarcer. At a time when some of the clubs were gaining independence from the Centre – e.g. GAA, Rugby, Pitch & Putt – other clubs, notably the Badminton and Tennis clubs, were finding the going tough and income to the centre itself began to decline as a result.

By 1998 the debt on the Centre was £110,587 punts. Activities on the scale witnessed heretofore were no longer sustainable. At this time of unprecedented crisis several individuals and businesses within the parish responded magnificently when approached confidentially for an interest-free five-year loan of £500 punt (i.e. € 639 euro!). Much of this money was later paid back, while more was written off by members, something for which the Centre was extremely grateful.

THE MILLENNIUM

As we made our way into the 21st century the then committee felt that upgrading of meeting rooms, showers etc., despite the costs involved, was essential to encourage both use of facilities and attendance at meetings. Approximately €20,000 was spent on this upgrade. The Ellis Room was

completely refurbished. What must be borne in mind is that a Community Centre has significant day-to-day running costs such as insurance, heating, lighting, minor repairs, etc. etc. Just like any commercial enterprise, a community centre has to, in a sense, tout for business by attracting 'customers' to pay for all those ongoing expenses. After all, the annual running costs

during the period from 2000 to 2004 came to €40,000. However, despite the aura of financial doom-and-gloom that pervaded the Centre at the time, significant developments still continued to take place.

The Inniscarra Camogie Club was founded in 1967 and had its "home" at rented grounds in Ballyanly. In 2001 the club decided to look into the purchase of land adjacent to the Centre with the aim of developing it into a full-sized playing pitch. Land was purchased from Pat Cronin and, with the dedicated work of a strong field and fence committee, the Inniscarra Camogie Club became the first club in Cork County to own its own grounds, all under the umbrella of Inniscarra Community Centre. Páirc Mhaire Uí Cheallacháin was opened in the summer of 2004. At about this time also the Rugby Club had enhanced their grounds and completed the construction of their club-house. Each club was granted a right of

way through the centre. They contribute to its maintenance and are responsible for its upkeep. So, by now the Complex was extended to an area of about 45 acres.

Back to finances! During 2003 and 2004, with Pat Healy as Chairman, a series of meetings was held to put a strategy into place to offset the debt and move forward. Once more, feet and footwear galore were worn out in the course of a massive fundraising draw which brought in a staggering total of €80,000. Throats weren't spared either because the next major fundraiser was a novel pub song contest entitled "The Voice of Inniscarra" which brought in another €15,000. Celebrity status was attached to the singer from each of the various public houses and the contest drew great support from the public as they cheered on their representative! Community is all about creating a bond and many of the events that support the Centre down through the years have created a great bond amongst the people of Inniscarra. Additional events such as the "Fun Days", the Discos, the Road Races, the Bonfire Nights, the Card Drives, the 'Santa Concerts, the plays and musicals, the American Tea Parties, the Fashion Shows – to name but a few! – have all

contributed greatly to the life of Inniscarra Community Centre...

In 2005, work on refurbishment took on a new impetus. Both the Community & Soccer pitches were re-drained. Re-sanding of the All-Weather pitch followed. To improve security on the grounds, a sophisticated camera surveillance system was put in place, with clubs contributing to the overall costs. Whilst spear-heading these improvements, the then chairman Con O'Leary suggested the possibility of tarmacadamming the entire complex. In due course a grant was acquired from Cork County Council and so the 'Great Tarmac Project' began in earnest.

Slogans

In 2009, a slogan competition was held. The winners' slogans can be seen on various walls in the centre. The principles underpinning the slogans are a lesson to us all:

We own it, we use it, let's not abuse it.

Respect and Protect.

Let's all work together for the good of the community.

Respect, Care and Love the heart of our community.

Inniscarra community centre- the heartbeat of our parish.

When standing on this ground remember the hands that laboured.

Once again, the amount of voluntary work that was undertaken to make the tarmac project a reality was unbelievable! A huge debt of gratitude is due to all those volunteers, too numerous to mention, who gave up every spare moment of their time to the project – all under the eagle eye of Barry Murray! Pathways, pedestrian crossings, lining & signage followed. The complex also became very 'Special-Needs-Friendly' due in no small part to the perseverance of Pat Burton, founder of a branch of the Special Olympics in the parish. Con, Pat and Barry practically took up residence in Ballyanly at this time. Public lighting was installed on the roadways throughout the grounds. New fencing and railings were put in place throughout. In total, € 600,000 was spent on the above projects from 2003 to 2007.

The principal source of income for works carried out at this time included a Parish Draw (€80,000) plus County Council grants, Lottery funding, contributions from the various clubs (€78,000), a Golf Classic, the Voice of Inniscarra Contest, and of course the Threshing / Agricultural Show / Vintage Car Rally. At long last the committee found itself debt-free in 2007 – a remarkable achievement after many years of hard work. In

the words of Dinny Buckley, himself a great community activist, "The committee put its shoulder to the wheel and drove on"....

In May 2008 a new lobby area was created at the Centre, a replacement stairway built and a new lift installed to facilitate the elderly and those with special needs. New state-of-the-art toilet facilities were also put in place. The total cost of work carried out in 2008 was €160,000. The project was grant-aided by Cork County Council to the tune of € 40,000. One of the most successful Threshing/Agricultural/Vintage shows ever brought in €15,000 towards the

cause. As per usual, a small team of people took to the roads and in a few short weeks a total of €38,000 was collected for the December 2008 fund-raiser. During 2008 a sum of €50,000 was also secured for the next big project – eventual replacement of the asbestos-based roof on the hall which would cost €100,000. Additional work on the interior of the hall followed on from the re-roofing. New windows and a new heating system were installed, partially funded by Avondhu/Blackwater Partnership.

In passing, here's a thought for you to ponder: Just how long do you reckon it would it take for the ICC committee to sort out our country's financial crises? Not long, to judge from their achievements locally over the years. On the other hand though, the ethos of self-help and dauntless optimism to be found in Inniscarra might not be quite so abundant elsewhere – so perhaps that's not such a good idea after all!

To mark the 40th birthday of the Centre, a loop-walk was developed on the grounds. The cost, at €99,520 was grant-aided by Avondhu/Blackwater Partnership to the tune of €62,479 and a local draw ensured the walk was fully paid for. A lighted tarmac path, in two sections was created, to link with existing paths and provides a safe off-road walk for young and old to enjoy.

You will have walked three miles by doing five loops or if feeling more energetic you can do eight loops to complete five miles.

In the year 2015/16 the All-Weather pitch was re-done with a new all-weather mat surface at a cost of €73,128. Lottery funding came in at €47,000. New fencing, gates and nets required €29,345 of funding, but Cork County Council and the Community Centre grant-aided these extras to the tune of €14,672. Recently the outside toilets have been refurbished at a cost of €12,000 again some of which was grant aided The recent administrative load attached to grant



In 1988, Festival Chairman Con O'Leary (right) celebrates the Lee Festival with Jackie Murray, watched by John and Betty O'Riordan.

applications was eased considerably by the help of Brendan Walsh, the current Chairman. ICC also appreciates the donations and local sponsorships, over many years.

Considerable research and time have been committed to providing a new playground for Ballyanly. Three years of Bingo nights will help to defray costs but the bulk of the funding has to come from other sources so it is hoped to get the playground up and running in 2017/18.

A debt of gratitude needs to be acknowledged by our Parish Community to the small number of trojan workers who give of their time voluntarily to constantly improve our facilities in Ballyanly.

Ní bheidh a leithéid ann arís.