

# Memory Road

by Pat Conway

March 2009. Cars, people carriers and minibuses converge at Scoil Naisiunta Phadraig Naofa Louisburgh. They carry students from an area stretching from Doughmakeon to Killsallagh. Less than twenty pupils arrive on foot. Most of the parents accompany their children to the door. Opened in June 1996, the splendid building caters for one hundred and thirty nine pupils. Inside there are five teachers and two assistants. The roll book records that there are twelve pupils from Askelane, two from Roonagh and one each from Doughmakeon, Emlagh, Accony and Pulgloss.

1965-1971. The road from Ellie Burke's house in Askelane to Accony School. Winter, potholes and gutter. Summer, gravel and dust. Landmarks and memories. Some of the landmarks are gone. The memories remain forever.

The stream from the blessed well emerged at the road on the second turn.

The well was located in Mc Hale's field. In the far corner of the same field inside the high road was the "Killeen" or children's graveyard. Here in poorly marked graves lie the bodies of children whose lives were cut short. Every family in the surrounding villages has some relative resting here. Early death robbed them of an opportunity to reach full scholarly potential.

At the top of the first brae or "barna whyke" (Gaelic scholars will forgive my spelling liberties), on the left hand side in Farragher's field stands a gable end. It is all that remains of James Gill's house. In schooldays, legends abounded about this man. Did he really have a trained magpie to warn him of visitors and intruders to his garden of exotic berries? Did he foretell of the time that iron carriages would travel in the sky carrying people?

At the top of the second brae, the road joins the high road back through the village. Across the road from Farragher's house stood the first of the four remaining thatched buildings. Kirby's old house was by then used as a store. Thatching it was an annual affair. A group of neighbours were always on hand to assist. The heated debates and arguments that accompanied the work made one wonder if the thatching was the priority!

Probably one of many "contracted" to twist hags of sugans for the job. The equipment consisted of a modified bucket handle and an old red tie, which acted as a belt. The sugans were twisted inside in the old building. Reward came in the form of a two shilling piece. The bonus was a cup of tea and a slice of bread with strawberry jam!

In the hollow of the road outside Pat Joe's field, the scorched patch of the village bonfire. The patch stayed through the year. The bonfire was set alight

on Saint John's night in June. Here young and old gathered, talked, laughed and prayed. Going home, they took some coals for throwing into the potato field in the hope of a good crop yield.

Mary Anne's (O'Malley) RIP, house was one of the first in the village to have a television set. On a Friday night, the young and not so young gathered for compulsive viewing of "The Virginian". Billy Burke would call and we trekked up the dark winding road. On an assortment of chairs, stools and forums, we sat in awe of the men from "Shiloh". The light was switched off. The darkened room added atmosphere and tension as the shots rang out.

Joe Flynn's house was the second thatched building. Joe was still a relatively young man in those days. Once, Patrick Durkan and I slunk up to the back door and let a shout. A complaint was made. The lectures, punishments and recriminations that followed, far outweighed the seriousness of the crime!

The forge was the third thatched building. A constant in everyone's memory. A small building where great skills were performed. Matthew Sammin RIP carried on a family tradition that spanned generations. It was not unusual to see a queue of twelve horses waiting outside while Matthew worked on a horse inside. Getting one of those magnificent animals into the small building required some skilful manoeuvring. The horse was led in and turned around, despite the fact that there was a large bellows and a permanently fixed seat for visitors inside. A younger more spirited horse had to be catered for outside. This involved holding the young animal by means of a "touch", a pinchers-like implement, placed in the animal's nose, which usually required the help of close neighbour Joe Flynn RIP. A new set of shoes cost fourteen shillings and to change a set around cost five shillings. Other skills deployed, were the turning of scythe blades and adjustment of fireside tongs. The turning of a scythe cost half a crown. In the late sixties, the number of horses in the area declined. Matthew Sammin's retirement brought closure to a landmark in the memory of

every pupil. The scent of coal, itself a foreign fuel in those days, inspired warmth, even on a day when there was no activity in the forge.

There were two other thatched buildings. The mare's stable on the other side of the road and a cow barn behind the forge.

A fine mist hovered outside Austin McDonagh's mill door as the meal was crushed inside. Often in an evening after school, a bag of oats had to be taken there in the donkey and cart. It appeared a good transaction, returning home with two bags.

In O'Malley's field, on the right hand side at the top of Kelly's brae, there was a fairy fort. From this vantage point, the land in the surrounding area was visible. In those pre EEC days, every field was a division of hay oats and potatoes. Just about that time the tractor was making an incursion on the craftwork and skill of spade and scythe.

Outside Farragher's field on the right hand side, a flash of water broached the road. In winter, it threatened to flood. In spring, the frogspawn glittered and in summer, a green mass of weeds maintained the site.

From the top of Coyne's brae, it seemed as if Accony School protruded from the butt of the hill. The big building provided protection for its precious cargo from the powerful sea beyond Sicin. The varied performances of the sea, a metaphor for the variety of talent in the school. The school concert provided a showcase for memorable performance. Mary Prendergast's (Emlagh) evocative rendition of "Far away in Australia", Margaret and Nora O'Malley's (Roonagh) classic version of "Our golden wedding", Noreen McDonagh's (Pulgloss) powerful "Boston Burglar" and the showmanship of John Mc Donagh (Askelane), with "Away by the sea".

In very bad weather, an opportunity arose to travel home by different means. One awful day, Tommie Kerrigan (Pulgloss), took home what seemed to be half the school population in the mare and cart. Huddled together behind the front crib of the cart, under shelter of duffle coats, we were thrilled at the lift. The utmost luxury occurred on another rainy day. Our teacher, Mary Tiernan loaded us into her blue mini car. As she decided to drop the Accony and Roonagh pupils first, the long way round was the ultimate trip home!

In July 1971, Pdraig and Bernadette Scott, Roonagh, left their house. Up the road, Mary Christina O Toole (RIP) and her neighbour Martina Duffy (RIP) also prepared their schoolbags. Mary Christina, a girl of vibrant intelligence was killed in a car accident in 1992. She represented one third of my class and was the only female. Martina, a few classes ahead, lost her life to cancer in 2008.

Tony and Bernadette Lyons and twin sisters Margaret and Nora O'Malley made their way over the coast road. From Emlagh Tony, Cathal



Mary & Evelyn Conway



Patrick Conway

(the other member of my class) and Geraldine Prendergast were the only students from their village.

Accony, the largest village on that side of Sickeen Bridge was represented by the Prendergast name as well. Ann and Pat (Lannon) from the crossroads and Raymond (Redmond).

Patrick Durkan, Gerard Gibbons, Leona and Marguerite Touhy, myself, Michael Sammin, Noreen McDonagh, Philomena Gallagher, the entire Kerrigan family, Catherine, Mary, Noreen and John, and John Mc Donagh, lugged our bags up Kelly's brae for the last time. The impending closure of our school did not bother us. Summer holidays waited. Our idea of summer, turf, hay and oats. If we could reclaim the years that have disappeared since that day and replace them with our innermost wishes and dreams we would willingly carry those bags again!

March 2009, a blast of heat as the door opens. The school is now home to Neil Paul and Brid Conroy and their daughter Rusty. The raised floor in the middle room grants the opportunity to look out the magnificent windows at last. The fireplace is still there. Absent are the bottles of tea heating in the hearth. The cosy atmosphere is strengthened by the presence of the large cast-iron radiators. Every morning Rusty walks to the school gate and waits for the school bus.....

# Michael Gibbons, Askelane

Interview with Pat Conway

When Michael started school in Accony, it was a one-roomed building. At the time, there were in excess of over one hundred pupils on the role books. Seán T Morahan was the headmaster and Mary O' Toole, nee O'Reilly was the schoolmistress. Towards the end of Michael's time at the school, a third teacher joined the school's teaching staff. The Irish language was the sole medium of education.

The classroom was not a very comfortable place in those days as the seating arrangements were unable to cope with the huge number of pupils in the one room. This meant that the seating period was "staggered" in order to facilitate those classes who had writing exercises.

Dry summer weather, required no shoes. This ensured maximum value, as footwear was in short supply. Pupils had to bring two sods of turf with them to ensure some heat along with an annual contribution of a cart of turf from each family. Bread and milk were the staples of the lunch diet.

As there was a horse in every



MICHAEL GIBBONS, SUGHAN MAKING IN 1994.

holding, Michael remembers Pat Sammin's forge as being a particularly busy place as he passed on his way to school.

There were twelve members in Michael's family but the same books sufficed for all members. It was compulsory at the time to at-

tend school until the age of fourteen and there was a strict rule on absenteeism. Football was not very well organised in those days. They played mostly back on the hillock near Sickeen and of course, the rival teams were Askelane versus Accony.



CLASS WITH TROPHIES, 1929

# Paddy O'Toole, Roonagh

Interview with Pat Conway

*Prior to publication Paddy passed away. In November 2008, he spoke to me about his life and times. The following is a result of that conversation.*

Paddy O'Toole started school in 1930-31. It was the old one room building, complete with three teachers and leaking roof. Paddy recalls on one particular day there were one hundred and thirty one pupils with one absentee recorded. On very wet days, they rearranged the seating to accommodate the rainfall!

The new three room school was completed in 1938. It was built by Paddy Kelly contractors from Westport, with free labour supplied by the parents. The gravel was procured from Sickeen beach and washed with water from the "Main Dyke".

As Paddy recounted the numbers of children from each house attending school from the villages of Accony, Roonagh, Doughmakeown and Emlagh, we estimated that on a given day in the thirties, it was possible that as many as eighty five pupils carried their bags across Sickeen bridge!

One of the landmarks along the road at Sickeen is an old kelp kiln. Our attention turned to an industry that was thriving at that time. This was the process

of drying seaweed for the production of iodine. After it was collected along the shores, the seaweed was dried. Often it was turned manually three times a day to temper it. After the drying, Chemists would come and test it for it's iodine content. The kilns were a later experimental addition to find an easier way to separate the ashes from the kelp. The kelp was then transported to Roonagh by cart. From there, it was transferred manually to a rowing boat. The boat rowed out to a steamer out in the deep water. Once again, the cargo was transferred. From there it was exported to England and Scotland. Depending on the iodine content, a ton of kelp could fetch up to fifty shillings a ton. In the very

early days of the industry, one family from "Bun Eireen", had to pay Lord Sligo the sum of forty pounds as royalty for the land used in the drying of kelp. The royalty amounted to one fifth of the total price earned during one season. Paddy remembers carts of kelp coming from as far away as Thallabaun to Roonagh.

An idea of the commercial life in the area in those times emerged from our conversation. In the thirties there were four shops in the area. Mc Evilly's, Lyon's and Prendergast's were the shops in Accony and Roonagh, while O' Malley's had the shop in Doughmakeown. As all the shops carried all types of groceries as well as oils for lanterns, this left trips to Louisburgh really unnecessary except for Sunday Mass and fairdays.

Paddy and Maura had four children. Maureen, Sheila and James attended Accony school. By the time, their youngest daughter Nuala was school going age, it had closed. Sheila married Paddy Gibbons from Accony, another former pupil.



MAUREEN, SHEILA AND JAMES O'TOOLE, ROONAGH

# John Lyons, Askelane

## Interview with Pat Conway

**P**addy Lyons from Askelane East often told, his son, that if he thought going to school in America in the mid 20th century, was hard, then he should have gone to Accony School from Askelane in the 1920's and 30's! Back then, going to school meant having to walk three miles. UP HILL, BOTH WAYS!!

Technically, he was correct. John Lyons, Paddy's brother started school in 1941. Accony was then a two-teacher school with approximately 90 pupils. At that time, there was a seventh and eighth class, for it was mandatory to attend school until the age of fourteen.

John's road to school started by crossing and climbing to the top of O'Malley's field and out at the flash at Geoffrey Thomas's. Here, the road descended, until the sharp ascent up Duffy's brae, down Kirby's brae, up Kelly's, a slight descent followed, then up Coyne's, down the school brae. On the return, if you reverse the above, you will find his brother was not exaggerating an awful lot!!!!

On very wet days, two floods appeared, one just beyond Tommie Gibbons's (Geoffrey's) and one at the bottom of Coyne's brae.

Noticeable landmarks along the way, included Durkan's Bull garden, a fairy fort, (in Durkan's field), Killeen graveyard, Sammin's Forge, another fairy fort at the top of Kelly's brae, (in O'Malley's field).

The Football pitch was located on the hillock down near Sicken. Often a game of rounders took place in "Dick Michael's" field. Sometimes a game of handball was against the wall of the school.

The contribution of carts of turf by the parents provided heat for the school. In spring, when turf was getting scarce, pupils had to bring two sods with them to ensure continued heat.

The school lunch consisted of a bottle of tea in the old big blue

Milk of Magnesia bottles and two slices of bread. The bread came with a warning from the parents! "If you lose them or let anything happen to them, you'll follow the crows for them yet".

In the month of February 1947, there was a blizzard of snow, which resulted in two to three weeks of unplanned holidays! The snow remained on the hills until late June.

We did some number crunching. At that time from John's house in East Askelane to Kelly's at

the western end of the village, we estimated there were about eighty-seven children. On a given day, during John's time at school, fifty-eight children from Askelane and Pulgloss would have climbed Kelly's brae on their way to school. The four houses on the south side of the road in Askelane East between the years, 1914 and 1936 witnessed the birth of over thirty-eight children!

John and Brenda Lyons had three children. Accony school had closed by the time they were of school going age.



1948 - BACK, LEFT TO RIGHT: REDMOND, DICK, MIKE. FRONT, LEFT TO RIGHT: MARY (MOTHER), TESS, PADDY, JOHN, TOMMY, DIXIE LYONS.



1954 - LEFT TO RIGHT: PADDY, DIXIE, TOMMY, JOHN, MARY, REDMOND, DICK, MIKE, REEY, BRIDIE GIBBONS, ANNIE, TESS.

# Michael Sammin, Askelane

Interview with Pat Conway

By the end of the sixties, the number of pupils had dwindled to a dangerously low level. Consequently, interest in sport diminished. However, there was still some inspiration about. Michael Sammin remembers how a conversation at McDonagh's mill evolved into a challenge match with the Carrowniskey school team.

Records are scarce now, but Michael remembers some of the team. Michael Gibbons, Gerard Gibbons, Tom McDonagh, Joseph Prendergast, James Prendergast, Michael Sammin, Tony Lyons, Tony Prendergast and Patrick Durkan. It is safe to assume that all nearly all male pupils were eligible, as they were all needed to make up the team!

No great preparations, no coaching, no memorable football strips. All that was required was some basic footballing skills, and a hunger to hammer Carrowniskey! The match took place on the dough in Doughmakeon. Although no records exist, Michael is adamant that Accony was victorious. Carrowniskey may claim that their best players were unavailable through injury or were busy on the farm, the fact remains, they were beaten.

Another fond memory that Michael recalls is of a match organised between Westport and a combined team from Accony and Louisburgh Boys School. It is a sign of those wonderfully laid-back days. Michael had to walk down to the end of the "new" road to wait for the bus. Pat Prendergast (Lannon) RIP, the most amiable of bus drivers, collected Michael and his team-mates. (Pat also acted as umpire for the match!).

This truly was an unusual situation. On the bus, Michael met some of his team-mates from the boys' school for the first time! Today, there is great parental involvement in school sports. Whether it is in coaching, or shouts of encouragement from the sidelines, or wild jubilation on victory. Back then, taking part in football came with a health warning. "Don't come home injured". There was no room on a busy farm for an injured footballer!

Other notable football matches Michael remembers are those played at the time of the "stations". The teams were Askelane East versus Askelane West. There are certainly no record of those matches available, as most of them ended in dispute! An enquiry would probably reveal consumption of too much sweet stuff as the most likely cause for the frayed tempers!

John Gibbons from Accony was a county footballer with Mayo in the late sixties. John did some teacher training in Accony School. Michael cites this as an inspiration for the sporting interest fostered among the dwindling school population at the time.

Michael's interest in football and sport has never waned. He was actively involved in the GAA at all levels as player and trainer until 1997. He is still an ardent supporter and waits for that inevitable September day when the ultimate football prize arrives in his beloved county.



C.1965 - THE SAMMIN FAMILY, ASKELANE - PATRICK, MICHAEL AND MARY.



PAT LANNON WITH HIS MOTHER FAMILY AND FRIENDS