

Midleton Community Centre

reg. as Midleton Community and Recreational Centre Development Company (CLG)

A short history as remembered by Michael Woulfe from personal involvement since 1988 and information supplied by others who were there from the start.

The idea of providing a Community for the Town was the brainchild of Rev. Fr Liam Kelleher who was Parish Curate during the sixties and deeply involved with the Athletic Club. His plan also included an indoor running track. Along with a Committee they canvassed support locally. House collections of agreed weekly amounts were organised and the regular contributions were lodged in a bank account. The collections continued for a number of years during which the site was procured from the local Council and planning permission etc. was obtained. Regular meetings were held by those involved and over the years there were many who put their shoulder to the wheel at various stages.

By the late seventies it was considered prudent to start building based on the funding which had accumulated and the hope of a continuation of subscriptions. In tandem with various contractors, a lot of work was contributed generously on a voluntary basis and it continued until the early eighties by which time the main building and running track were built. The doors were opened for limited use of the facilities in the upstairs small dance hall, a small number of rooms and the main hall which at the time had but a concrete floor. Meanwhile fund-raising energy waned understandably and earning capacity fell short of expectations. Not alone had the original fund been spent on the building but a bank overdraft of 54,000 punts was incurred due in part to the very high interest rate applying at the time, and pressure to get the Centre completed to some acceptable degree. As expected, the Directors, whose number at the time had reduced to dangerously low numbers, came under pressure to pay off the overdraft. Despite their best efforts to generate funds and increase usage they found it difficult to do so while at the same time having to make provision for running costs such as heat, light, insurance and repairs due to vandalism etc.

Eventually the bank Representatives decided that the prospects of the overdraft being paid were bleak and they issued a letter to the Centre Directors indicating their intention to take possession of the premises to satisfy the debt. This communication of course caused alarm within the small group of surviving Directors and they asked for a short stay to give them an opportunity to formulate some plan of action to save the project for the Community. They discussed their problem with Representatives of Business and Industry within the Parish and assembled a strong delegation who agreed to augment their number in negotiations with the Bank. At the request of the Directors a date for the meeting was arranged and having spent half a day engaged in hard bargaining, a deal was struck by which the Lender agreed to accept twenty-five thousand punts as full payment provided it was paid within three months. Throughout all this difficult and traumatic period there were two people mainly whose loyalty and commitment to the Centre never waned namely John Hurley and Jimmy Walsh Snr. B. E. both since deceased R.I.P. Having organised the negotiating group to meet the Bank Representatives, they now took the lead in trying to put together the amount of money

required to seal the deal. They decided that the best option was to canvass as many sympathetic people in the private, professional and business sectors in the area, explain the situation and ask them for free loans to be repaid later. This involved traversing the Town, Parish and beyond within a limited period, knocking on doors and relating their story. To their credit they got a commitment to fifteen thousand and, backed by Personal guarantees, borrowed ten thousand from another institution to reach the target of twenty-five thousand which cleared the original Debt and saved the Centre for the time being. Over subsequent years the free loans were repaid to all but a few whose contribution was as high as 1,000 punts each of whom generously offered theirs as a gift to the centre which was much appreciated. The wherewithal to repay was provided through the loyalty and dedication by the same small group who, with some willing Helpers organised various fundraising events to augment insufficient revenue generated from the Centre renting facilities. Over the years several editions of the Midleton Local Telephone Directory were launched. These proved very popular and were well supported by the Business Community who readily booked and paid for Advertising space therein. Their preparation was tedious and very time consuming but were an excellent source of much needed revenue. Simultaneously the main hall attracted much more interest from the athletic and sporting community with the provision of a maple floor. Half, which was of good quality was bought second hand from the Top Hat ballroom in Fermoy and the remainder was new material. It was installed by the late Paddy Healy and Phil Glavin and supervised by the late Jimmy Walsh B. E. and was a large improvement on the concrete over which it was laid.

At the invitation of Jimmy and John, I joined as a Committee member in 1988 and in the early nineties was appointed a Director. With them and others at different stages until Autumn 2018 I was actively involved with management and development of the Centre. Activities at the time consisted of classes in art, drama, music, dancing (both modern and traditional), karate, basketball, indoor football and kick boxing. Opening and closing of the venue was done by the aforementioned Phil Glavin. During that period a manhole cover was lifted by trespassers on the pathway fronting the building and within days there were two separate incidents involving youths who ran into the unprotected holes and damaged their legs, followed by two successful compensation claims. As a result, our Public Liability insurance premium jumped to over 10,000 euro per annum. When it fell due for payment, the required amount was not available in full from the funds and two Directors, between them, took out a personal loan from the local Credit Union to augment what was available. During the following year running costs accounted for practically all revenue generated from activities and very little was paid off the Credit Union loan. As the next renewal date approached, it became clear that sufficient funding was not available to renew it and, with closure imminent, advice to Users commenced.

However, the possibility of salvation and reversal of fortune arrived unexpectedly in the form of an offer from the local Council to purchase an area of the site for the purpose of building houses. Unfortunately, it included a tennis court which had been developed some years previously by the Centre Directors at considerable cost. As the years went by interest waned, vandalism of the perimeter fence made tennis playing difficult and the site degenerated to a state of almost dereliction. The offer secured the future for a further period of time, enabled repayment of debt, payment of

Insurance premiums and provided the finance to replace the asbestos roof of the main hall with insulated cladding. The old one was leaky and had already generated a compensation claim for an accident on a wet patch of the floor. The downside for all concerned was that the land sale understandably caused bitter opposition from many local residents remembered to the present day. However, from the Directors' point of view, being well aware of the serious financial state of the Centre and the serious risk of a total shut down, the offer of €32,000 represented a welcome lifeline that secured the future and enabled some expensive maintenance to be carried out.

Parallel funding was always required to bolster earnings from the Centre itself and they included Expo and Modern Homes Exhibitions. One resulted in a successful Personal Injuries Claim from a Visitor who fell on the stairs. In 1994 what will probably be the final edition of the popular Local Telephone Directory was launched and the possibility of running a Lotto was explored. A few people travelled to Tipperary Town where friends were engaged in one to get the lowdown on its operation and accounting. Having decided to go ahead, a fresh group of helpers was recruited. This group was headed by Mr. Paddy Kelly who supervised the accounting procedures and the Collectors. A deep debt of gratitude is due to them and the subscribers who for the next five years on a weekly basis helped to make the venture a tremendous success. It marked a turning point in the fortunes of the Centre as it provided a regular stream of funds during its life time. When a decision was reached to call it a day, by a happy coincidence the prospect of a continuation of funding over subsequent years materialised with an enquiry from an interested group of Parents who were interested in setting up a Gael Scoil as to whether they could be accommodated within the building.

There were but two rooms as such in the Centre which were occupied. However, a small dance hall upstairs, inspected by them and on our undertaking to divide it into three rooms, was acceptable to give them a start. Alterations commenced immediately. The annual rent which we agreed to take in arrears was negotiated and the school got under way in 1999 with 17 pupils. A full time Caretaker was already in place which fitted well with the new undertaking. Naturally, Management at both Primary schools in the Town were concerned at the prospect of possibly losing pupils to the new school and an invite was issued to Mr. John Hurley and myself to visit the Principal in the Presentation National School to explain her case. This we did but while we understood her concerns, we explained that we had already committed to providing the accommodation and felt honour bound to abide by our decision. The Principal in the C.B. S. National School was equally concerned, to whom we conveyed a similar response. No further opposition was voiced.

The first school principal was Mr. Donal Ó Murchú and he was followed in year four by Máiréad Bean Uí Fhloinn. Under their guidance it went from strength to strength and the Directors were under constant pressure to stay ahead of extra space requirement. In all it involved four separate Building Contracts. The first was a conversion of the single storey section of the front of the building to double which had been undertaken in 2002 thus making provision for a fourth-class room, linking corridor, male and female toilets and wash rooms. Further accommodation with linking corridor at second floor level to the previous extension consisted of four class rooms, stairway, toilets, wash rooms and store room formed the next contract. These were built in a heretofore unused section of the main hall at the western end. In course of the construct it was

discovered that the original gable wall foundation required unforeseen expensive underpinning to make it safe to withstand the extra load. At that point it was necessary to borrow €160,000 from the Bank to help pay for this extension. In the course of the work a problem was observed with the old sewer line which required expensive alterations.

This latest contract provided breathing space for a few more years but the Directors realised that because of the unprecedented development of the school, due in no small part to the stewardship of the Principal and a growing team of dedicated Staff, that it was only a matter of time until further accommodation would be required. In consultation with our Engineer Mr. Jimmy Walsh B. E., a reconstruction of a ground floor area at the eastern end comprised of a small meeting room, large toilet area, showers and a store room was decided on. When the plans were completed the job was put out to tender, a Contractor appointed in due course and work got under way. The old toilet area and store room was demolished and the rubble removed leaving an area clear for the new building which included a Staff room, classroom, male and female toilets, showers, linking corridor and central heating. With the passage of time the Gael Scoil continued to grow and in 2010 the Directors decided to use the last available area suitable for final expansion within the building.

This was where the old stage and some limited overhead small rooms and side entrance double door at the front was located at the eastern end of the building. Jimmy Walsh as usual examined the site, completed all the ancillary details after which a Contractor was appointed. The extension which was two storey comprised of one large and one small room at the bottom level, stair case, large room, store room and linking corridor to the old building at the top. Toilet facilities were provided on both levels and heating throughout, with an independent entrance at ground level leading to a wide and rising hall way to the first-floor landing. On clearing the site, not alone was the foundation under the gable end wall found to be inadequate but a parallel one fourteen feet inside with an opening in the middle to provide stage access was similarly afflicted. Both were removed completely and rebuilt as part of the new extension, all problems which of course were not anticipated. All the building and extension projects that were completed and paid for between 1992 and 2012 were facilitated mostly by the rent from Ghael Scoil Mainistir na Corann. All of this rent was invested in the Centre.

As the extra accommodation was occupied in each extension, in consultation with the school Principal, the rent was increased. However, a point was reached where the Centre building could not provide fully for the needs of ever-expanding Pupil numbers. With permission, extra accommodation in the form of prefabricated classrooms, procured by the school and erected on rented Centre ground at the western side of the site, were added as required.

In the Summer of 2010 the front carpark was surfaced with tarmac. This proved very expensive and the final cost, almost double the original quotation, was due to difficult ground conditions requiring the removal of rock and other unforeseen costs.

The deteriorating condition of the floor of the main hall over recent years was a constant concern for the Directors. The maple boards were breaking and regular repairs were necessary in the course of which it was observed that the concrete floor on which supporting timbers rested was wet in some areas mostly near the back wall. This of course caused rot and sinking of the floor. When a decision

was taken to replace it with a state-of-the-art sports floor it was decided firstly to investigate the source of the wet problem. A Contractor was engaged and under the supervision of Engineer Jimmy Walsh a trench was excavated to expose the foundation the full length of the back wall. Where necessary it was underpinned and sealed. Drainage pipe work was positioned underground and continued to a soakaway opened between the building and the roadway at the western end to take the roof water which was considerable and heretofore deposited to soak into the ground. The back wall had already been plastered a short while before. Having completed the examination, suppliers were asked to submit prices for the job. An experienced Applicant was appointed and over a period of four weeks during early Summer of 2018 the floor was put down and lined for football, basketball and badminton. A grant of €60,000 was secured from the Sports Capital Programme of the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport towards the overall cost. Apart from that grant the only other was from Lottery funds which was secured in 1992 amounting to €40,000 against the cost of the first extension.

The flat roof section of the front of the building leaked on a regular basis and needed constant temporary work in different areas to correct. In 2018 a decision was taken to cover it completely with fibreglass. A contractor was appointed to do the work and hopefully that will solve that problem for many years to come. The Centre had a total of six personal accident injury claims lodged against it which accounted for the inordinate increase in the cost of Insurance cover. The two involving the open manhole were followed by the fall on the stairs during the Expo Exhibition, followed by a claim from a Fas worker who was covered by Centre insurance, who fell from a ladder. These were all settled out of court. The fifth resulted from an accident to a football player who sustained a dislocated knee cap when he tripped on a damaged floor board. Because the record of the level of accident and claims was so high at the time the Directors feared that another might risk outright refusal of insurance cover. Furthermore, they gambled that the cost would not be too high and decided to cover it from own resources. Their assessment of the situation proved to be correct. The last claim was in 1998 and came from the Parents of a youth who was a Spectator at a basketball game and fell on a wet patch on the floor and broke his elbow. The Insurance policy at the time, which in addition to being expensive, stipulated that the Centre was liable for the first €7,000 of any claim. Following protracted negotiations the Insurance Company decided to settle with the claimant and so informed the Directors. In view of their liability and having given the whole situation due consideration the Directors refused and indicated their intention to defend the case in court if necessary. One way or the other they would be liable for €7,000. In due course a date was set and it was listed for hearing at a session in Midleton Courthouse. On the day the Basketball Coach gave a clear account of events leading up to the accident in so far as it related to the activities of the Claimant. The Director's representative was called next and he explained that, even though the roof was intact, at some points the nail holes through which the sheets were secured had become enlarged through friction and wear and tear over the years thus allowing some leakage onto the floor. The wet patch had been covered by the Caretaker before games commenced but probably moved because of Player activity. Having considered the evidence the Judge decided that the Complainant was 90% responsible for his fall and awarded €1,000 compensation. Thankfully there has been no claim since

and as a result of a much-improved claims record the premium has reduced to more manageable proportions.

There were two incidents of deliberately set fires, one resulted in the complete destruction of the running track down to the bare walls. In the interest of safety these were removed and the site completely cleared during subsequent years. This fire took place in the early nineties and the other around the same period at Christmas time set against the gable end door at the top of the ramp leading to the second floor at the eastern end. This could have had much more serious consequences were it not for the vigilance of patrolling members of An Garda Síochána who noticed it and succeeded in putting it out before it got a serious hold. Had the door caught fire it would have spread to the timber floor immediately inside exposing the complete second floor to serious fire damage.

When I joined in 1988 the finances were managed and records kept by the late Jimmy Walsh. This continued until the mid-nineties when a gradual hand over took place mainly to myself, ably assisted by Paddy Kelly. The Caretaker managed the main hall, collected and recorded fees paid by players. Invoices were issued to those who wished to pay on a monthly or longer basis and all transactions were recorded and receipted. Every Monday night all payments for the previous week were assembled and prepared for banking on the following day. A decision was taken to hold no petty cash and to pay accounts by cheque only. With the welcome arrival of the Gael Scoil, the Principal was presented with an invoice to cover an agreed period and rent was paid promptly by the Dept. of Education. Having them as Tenants of all available accommodation from 1999 until 2017 was a tremendous benefit to the Directors from an accounting point of view. During those final years the school Board of Management was pressurising the Dept. for a new school which eventually proved successful. Management at the Centre endeavoured to cater for the School growth without success. They were sorely missed but their Tenancy transformed the premises.

The accounts are prepared annually and submitted to Accountants Wm. Cuddy HC, FCA, for verification. He submits a copy of the verified accounts with the appropriate fee to the Companies Office for registration purposes. It had lapsed during the lean years in the early eighties and restored in 1994. We are well aware of the recent attempted character assassination of the small group of hardworking Volunteers by some people on social media. Wild and unsupported statements alleging that certain individuals derived personal gain from their involvement in the Centre were used. Speaking as somebody who was deeply involved during the years when major revenue was earned, accounted for and spent on extensions and improvements which enhanced the structure for future generations, I can guarantee the community that such statements are totally false and without foundation.

Early in 2018 an agreement was reached between the Directors of the Community Centre and the Directors of My Place, Mill Road to explore the possibility of a merger. It would provide the opportunity to obtain a contribution from Pobal towards the cost of managing both. A joint application was made which proved successful resulting in an offer of an annual contribution towards the cost of a manager and two full-time employees. It was very welcome to both Parties. Having been involved for so long it offered me the opportunity to take a back seat as it did to the other Directors buoyed by the prospect of handing over to a responsible group of Individuals. Final

details were completed in the Autumn of 2018 at which point there was a surplus of €157,000 in the accounts of the Community Centre with all bills paid. The rent earning capacity of the Centre stood at c. €63,000 per annum. These funds will be ploughed into the further development of the Centre as an amenity that continues to be of service to the community. In doing so it will be a fitting tribute to the aspirations and efforts of the founders and all who have supported it over the past 45 years.

I could not possibly list the names of those involved from the beginning of the Project, and there were many, without risking omitting some. However, there were some whose contribution certainly deserve mention. Firstly, there was Fr. Liam Kelleher and his group who promoted it from the start. Also, Jimmy Walsh B. E. and John Hurley whose efforts rescued it from possession by Lenders in the early eighties. The late Paddy O' Shea of P. J. O. Shea and Co., Solicitors followed by his daughter Linda, Accountants Bill Cuddy and Co., Jimmy Walsh Jnr. B. E. who planned and supervised all the extensions and renovations undertaken, Mairead Uí Fhloinn, Gaelscoil Principal and her staff whose rent was the major contributor to the cost of all the improvements. The various Committees who responded generously to appeals for help in organising fundraising along the way, the Contractors, tradesmen and Caretakers. Last but by no means least Directors Mimi Cashman, Joe Cronin, Jim Ronayne, John Joe Joyce, Michael Woulfe, Louis Doyle, Mary Buckley (R.I.P.) and faithful Committee man Paddy Kelly.

Michael Woulfe

1st February 2019