

Introduction

To coincide with the 60th Anniversary of the Creggan Estate, the editor of these pamphlets (or in one case Belfast Telegraph reporter, Eileen Walsh) interviewed a number of past and present residents of the Creggan area.

Margaret Gallagher



Margaret Gallagher:

"I was born in Gweedore in 1907 whilst my parents were holidaying there. My mother and father actually lived in Cuthbert Street before moving up the hill to 4 Strabane Old Road. I got married and moved to Number 1 Brandywell Road. My husband died very young; I was left with five children and expecting my sixth when he passed away. I was left with no choice but to move back to my mother's house until eventually we got a house in Creggan in 1948-number 34 Dunmore Gardens".

Mrs Gallagher's son John, daughter Anne and Annes husband Matt Doherty (of Derry City F.C. fame) also sat in on our interview. Indeed Anne remembers looking across to the Creggan from her granny's house in Strabane Old Road and being told "That's where you're going". As well as the large numbers of Strabane Old Road residents being moved to the Creggan Anne remembers that many ended up in Irish Street which would have been more convenient for the family. Nevertheless, they felt that their new home was a big improvement on the cramped conditions they had lived in beforehand – "Dunmore was considered by some to be the snobbiest street in Creggan-some people called it 'shiny white Dunmore!" laughs Mrs Gallagher.

Between them the group have numerous memories of the Creggan, both happy and sad. One of the most tragic incidents they remember was the collapse of a wall on top of two young children in the early 1960's where both youngsters died. They also recalled the tragic drowning of some children in the old reservoir at the site of the present Ráth Mór centre and the deaths of three children in the Creggan reservoir in 1976. On a lighter note John remembered that the night watchman at the Creggan reservoir was a 'wee crabbit man'. For Anne the reservoir was usually out of bounds as it was for most of the female population of the Creggan area, considered to be too dangerous to play at.

One of the local industries was the Mirrorflex, which was replaced by the BSR. Mrs Gallagher remembers one benefit about the Mirrorflex: "There used to be small round counters thrown out as waste by the Mirrorflex every so often. They could be used instead of coins in the gas meter. If you knew the gasman he would turn a blind eye as long as you paid him the difference. Then he'd send you back the counters to re-use!".

The BSR which replaced the Mirrorflex was described as a 'like a prison' by John who worked there for ten years. "It was good craic but very hard work with some hard task masters. You needed a sick line even if you wanted a half day off. One day we took the day off for St Paddy's Day and when we returned to work a group of us were asked where we were. The rest all made up excuses whilst I just admitted that I went for a few drinks for St Patrick's Day. I was let off because I told the truth and the rest of them were hauled over the coals!".

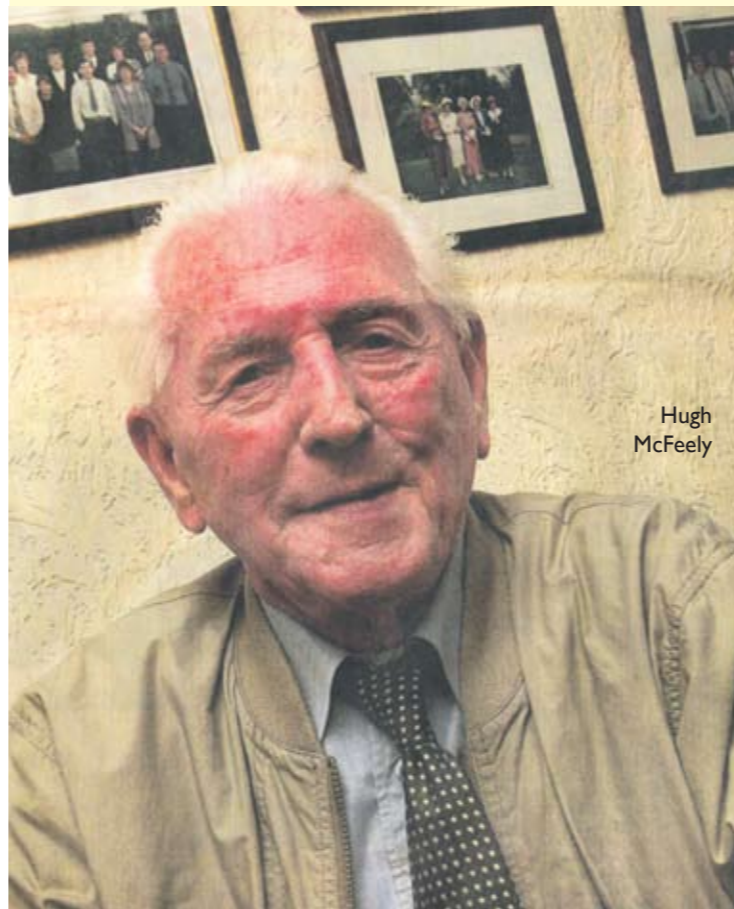
Any characters in the area? "I remember Matthew Hollinger from Westway" recalls Mrs Gallagher. "He had a parrot which could talk. You would be walking past the window and all you would hear would be 'F*** Off'. You would turn round intending to reprimand whoever it was only to see this parrot staring back at you!. There was also a brock man called Tommy Gallagher who kept pig's in Thompson's field where St Joseph's school now stands. He got the nickname 'Tommy One Pig'. There were also vegetable plots in the same spot like allotments" recalls Anne. "Another name which most Creggan residents should remember was Nurse Thomas. She lived in Dunmore and for years she delivered all the babies in the Creggan in people's houses. You have to remember that at that time it was difficult to get to hospital with no money and no taxis". In fact the only taxi man who operated in the area was a man called Staunton who lived where the Senior Citizens Homes now stand in Beechwood Crescent. Nearby was the Creggan Boys Club which later became the HQ of St Vincent de Paul's.

Another interesting north west connection concerned the houses in the upper Creggan area. Matt, who played for Derry City in his time remembers that the Coleraine FC chairman Jack Doherty was a subcontractor on the houses in the upper Creggan area. He got work on the site for a number of Coleraine FC players including the legendary Faye Coyle.

Any memories of the Troubles? Mrs Gallagher remembers that a soldier was shot and slightly injured across the street from their house and he fell into a front garden. "We asked him did he want any help but his response was quite blunt- he told us to F*** Off so we didn't pursue the conversation!".

Matt was arrested one day whilst driving to his work at the 'Yankee Base' on the Clooney Road. "I was taken to Victoria Barracks and was being asked all these questions. It took a while to catch on that I wasn't the man they were looking for. Apparently they thought I was Ducksy Doherty, a well known local republican. He was in the news a few years ago as the only person imprisoned by the Saville Inquiry into Bloody Sunday because he wouldn't give evidence. I didn't know him then and still haven't met him but even better than that, apparently I don't even look like him!".

Mrs Gallagher is still going strong at 100, with the family holding celebrations in October to mark her centenary. She can proudly claim to be Creggan's oldest resident- no mean feat for an area that houses 15,000 people!



Hugh McFeely

Hugh McFeely:

Few people can claim that they helped to build the very estate that they ended up living in for almost forty years but for 95-year-old Derry man Hugh McFeely this is a reality. In 1946 he worked as a ganger and charge hand on the construction of the Creggan Housing Estate and within three years he would end up moving into Leenan Gardens and raising his family there. Today, in a wide-ranging discussion Hugh recalls his employment and residence in the Creggan area.

Hugh began by recalling the construction work on the first Creggan homes. "I helped to build the four block houses on the left hand side of Broadway as you walk up. These became Dawros Gardens, Dunaff Gardens and Eastway Gardens/Fanad Drive. After these were completed we moved across the street to work on Melmore Gardens, Dunree Gardens and the homes at the far side of Central Drive finishing at the Cropic. There was talk at the time that the Cropic would be cleared away to build more houses".

The homes which Hugh helped to build were known as no-fine houses. The stone used included material from beaches around Inishowen including Buncrana and Malin. Ironically, many of the place names in the estate are Inishowen based (think Malin Gardens, Leenan Gardens, Dunaff Gardens etc). Apparently a man named Taylor who worked closely on the plans for the estate for the local corporation was fond of hill walking in Donegal, hence the connection. Hugh recalls that there were no tipper lorries at the time so all material had to be carried on flat bed lorries which were then manually unloaded. The lorries were owned by a man named Hegarty and the Colhoun Brothers who worked in hand with Farren construction who built the first section of the estate. Following the construction of the Creggan Farren's would cross the river to build the Irish Street estate.

Hugh worked on the four block houses whilst a man named Mullan worked on the two blocks. "We were always under pressure to keep deadlines because if you didn't complete the block on time you were only entitled to one day's overtime whilst those who were on schedule got four days overtime so we had a big incentive to keep busy. All our materials were kept in a field at the top of Broadway which became the site of St Mary's chapel. I can honestly say that although the workforce was mixed there was no sectarianism and I was treated like a lord. Looking back it was the best job that I ever had I was able to lose the two stone I'd put on in the navy!"

Hugh ended up moving into one of the new red brick homes in Leenan Gardens around 1949. Until this point he lived in the Bleach Green area of Ardmore. A lady called Mrs McCullough was in charge of the housing allocation and luckily for Hugh he was successful in his application. Things didn't go exactly to plan however: "I moved into the new house but my wife wasn't keen to move from Ardmore. It took five weeks to persuade her to move

over with the children but when she did we settled in well. In those days the estate was mixed with one half of Leenan catholic and the other half Protestant. The usual RUC patrol would have been one policeman although the RUC was used to bring up our wages in their big tenders when we were doing our construction work. We were also the only house in Creggan which had a range in the kitchen which definitely came in handy!"

So did Hugh have any specific memories of those early years? "I remember that there was a stream which ran down Broadway which was culverted by 3 feet water pipes when the estate was built. At one point the pipe got blocked and a man called McKeever had to go in to unblock it. He had to tie a rope around his waist and crawl his way in so he could be dragged out by the other men if he got into trouble. I wouldn't have fancied it!"

Hugh also recalls that in the early days there were still old Irish cottages running from the site of St Mary's chapel right down past Bligh's Gardens onto Eastway. One resident was called Smith and another called Willie Doherty. Nowadays this area is covered by the Ráth Mór centre, which also housed a reservoir at one stage. He remembers a tragic event at this site in the 1950's. "Two children drowned at that reservoir which was the site of the old brickworks. A man called Campbell who worked at the local baths went in to try and save them but he ended up coming out with two bodies which was very sad. On a separate occasion, I remember a man who worked for Colhoun and Rowe was driving a dumper truck which fell into the reservoir. Thankfully he was helped out to safety but I can vividly remember him shouting 'Get me out of here' except with a lot more colourful language! The reservoir was closed up not long after".

Hugh also remembers the greyhound track in the heart of the Creggan where a famous local resident called Boodin Doherty held court. He vividly remembers losing £1 in one night (an amount not to be sniffed at in today's money), at the 'Flappin track' as it was known locally.

By the 1960's Hugh was able to buy a car for the family which one of his son's took a loan of one evening. Unfortunately he drove it into the back of an Austin Mini parked at the Cropic belonging to an RAF man from Ballykelly base who was courting with his girlfriend! In a panic he drove round for half the night until he finally gave himself up and got a £30 fine at the courthouse. It is notable however that an RAF man felt comfortable to be parked in the middle of the Creggan in the 1960's yet within a few years this became impossible.

22 years ago Hugh moved from Leenan down to Marlborough Road to a neat bungalow where he still resides today. Many people would consider Marlborough Road to be part of the wider Creggan catchment. As such Hugh can now claim to be a Creggan resident for the last 60 years.



Kay Carlin

They were happy times. "It was lovely. Everybody's front door was open. Whoever's house you were in at dinner-time, you got your dinner in. If you were in someone's house and you did something wrong, they slapped you," she says. "And if you went home and told your Mammy, she would say that you deserved it!" she laughs.

Things were very different then. Though toys were scarce, there were lots of green areas for children to play in. Makeshift swings were made from rope and bits of wood. Girls played with dolls and prams until they were 14, and according to Kay, everyone had three pairs of socks.

"One was being washed, one was drying and the other was being worn," she grins.

With few facilities in those times, Kay and her pals were kept very fit, walking to school in Pump Street, and going to church at St Eugene's Cathedral, before Creggan got its own chapel.

Kay's mother first set eyes on Kay's father, Francis Capstick, when he was at a dance in Derry. Originally born in Burma, Francis moved to Lancaster as a child and came to Derry with the Navy in 1947.

"My mother was married before, but her husband was killed in Normandy. She was the first war widow in Derry. When my daddy saw her, he told her that he was really thirsty. He was dying for a cup of tea. At the end of the evening, my mother asked him if he had managed to get a cup of tea. He hadn't. So she offered to make him one," she laughs.

And the rest is history. "Tea is very important in our family!" she grins.

Soon the happy couple got married and moved to Creggan. Francis got a job as a chef in the old City Hotel, and loved it.

Born in 1951, Kay lived in Eastway Gardens with her sister Bernadette and her brother John Reed from her mother's first marriage. Kay's father was an award-winning gardener, and obviously passed on his love of plants to Kay, who had a florist's shop in Pennyburn in the city for many years. But things were soon going to change.

"When The Troubles started, people moved out and new people started moving in, and the Housing Executive built houses facing us, and after that the landscape completely changed," she says.

"When the army moved into a place at the bottom of our street, the area became one of the main focuses of conflict," she adds sadly. This was very difficult for her parents.

"The bread man would give us shutters for our windows. We lived there for many years with the windows all wired up with wardrobes in front of them. We often had to sleep on the landing," she says. "It was terrifying."

And with the frequent raids on houses in the area, Kay's mother was very worried indeed.

"She always made us keep our rooms tidy, saying 'you never know who'll be in your room tonight!'"

Her mother's biggest fear was that the house wouldn't be clean when the soldiers came in!

During the darkest period of the Troubles, Kay's mother was very sad. Being a war widow herself she understood the terrible grief that engulfed people's homes when someone died, no matter who it was and death visited Kay's house at an early age.

"My little brother was born in 1955, but he only lived for 10 months. I remember being in the garden and watching this wee white box getting carried down the steps and into the cemetery. I would only have been about four years old," she says sadly.

"But there were more happy times than there were sad," says Kay.

When I asked her what her happiest time in Creggan was, her husband Michael interjected laughing: "When she met me!" And in case I hadn't heard him, her daughter Angela cried out to her mother: "When you met Daddy!"

Kay and Michael have been married 34 years and have three children, John, Angela and Michelle, who lives in the original house in Eastway Garden.

Kay's sister Bernadette lives nearby, and her brother John who was picked to play for West Ham when he was just 18, has now moved back to Ireland and lives in Gleneely in Inishowen, County Donegal.

Many changes have occurred in the Creggan Kay knew as a child. The Ráth Mór Centre provides shopping facilities for its inhabitants, as well as various youth and community activities. Kay goes to the over 50s club there every Tuesday, where she meets up with a group of women for cups of tea and plenty of chat.

There is an all-weather football pitch, and also an outdoor activity centre in Creggan Country Park, which also has a lovely restaurant, according to Kay. Things are looking up.

"The community spirit is coming back to what it was," she smiles. "You can feel it all the time."



The Ráth Mór Centre, Creggan

This pamphlet has been produced as part of the Creggan Country Park's 'Step Back in Time' Heritage Lottery funded project examining the history of the Creggan Country Park site and the wider Creggan area. A number of pamphlets covering subjects linked to the Creggan Country Park heritage are available including:

- The siege of Derry
- Industrial heritage
- Land ownership
- Natural Heritage
- Early History
- Living Landscapes/the Rath
- Talking History

Creggan Country Park can also arrange Walking Tours of its site exploring all these subject matters in detail as well as offering field trips to other sites associated with these topics. Tours can also be tailored to suit groups focusing on specific academic fields. For example the Industrial Heritage module can be expanded to suit groups studying science/geography whilst the siege module can be tailored for modern history groups. Tours are delivered by Creggan Country Park's partner organisation derrybluebadgeguide (www.derrybluebadgeguide.com) who specialise in walking and coach tours of Derry.

For further details contact us on (028) 71363133 or info@creggancountrypark.com



Creggan Country Park

Talking History I

Featuring Interviews with past and present Creggan residents

Margaret Gallagher – Hugh McFeely – Kay Carlin

