

Cleen Creamery

Near Dromahair

GARRETH BYRNE

Garreth Byrne is a member of Dromahair Heritage committee and also serves on the committee of Dromahair Development - Tidy Towns.

In 1887 a group of Dromahair residents met to discuss setting up a co-op dairy. George Hewson of The Lodge and John Hosie of Breffni Mills agreed to be joint treasurers. After several more meetings a new committee was elected in 1899 and decided to collect shares from all areas valued at £1. There was an incredible response.

The 'Churning Creamery' was opened in 1904. The business went well for about ten years, and then there was a mysterious fire. A new committee rebuilt the creamery with the insurance money. The enterprise reopened in 1914 as The Breffni Co-operative Creamery.

From 1904 to 1927 between 250 and 300 suppliers brought milk each month to the creamer. Operations expanded and from 1928 to 1980 between 450 and 500 suppliers brought their milk from a wide radius that encompassed



The abandoned churning creamery at Cleen in the 1980s

Ballintogher, Drumkeeran, Corrigecor and Newtownmanor. Suppliers got their milk cheques at the end of each month. They got credit at the store for their purchases and at the end of the month this credit was deducted from the cheque received.

Normal working hours 7 days per week were from 7 a.m. until 7.30 p.m. and sometimes until 9.30 p.m. during peak periods. There were no annual holidays and Christmas Day and St. Stephen's Day were the only two days off

work. Samples of milk were tested for butter fat content. Some samples were better than others. Government inspectors made safety and health checks regularly, so employees (there were about 5 of them) anxiously sterilised the machinery in the churning room and frequently limewashed the interior walls of the building to discourage insects from burrowing their way into the structure.

Martin Clinton was manager of the Cleen Creamery for many years. Parkes tin-walled store stood nearby, as did a couple of other shops. There was a much greater population in nearby Ardvarney up as far as Killargue back then, but emigration gradually took its toll. The closure of the SL&NCR railway in October 1957 was a body blow to the economic fabric of North Leitrim. From the 1960s onwards small creameries amalgamated with larger ones as the industry rationalised. In its last decade the Cleen creamery was affected by relentless new economic circumstances. The Society went into liquidation on 11th, February 1986. It had served the community well during its heyday.

Mr Paddy Torsney had worked at the creamery until his death in 1945 and then his son Josie became an employee. A year before his death in 2018, the late Josie Torsney told this writer that he worked in different capacities at the creamery between 1945 and 1968. Work on Mondays and after holidays was particularly hectic as farmers brought accumulated supplies of milk to the



The late James Travers of Fawn near Dromahair, taken c.1960. He is in charge of a donkey and cart with milk churns. Milk was often delivered in this manner to Breiffne Creamery Co-op at Cleen near Dromahair.

creamery. The cream was skimmed and churns with the residue were taken back to farms and used for domestic and livestock feeding purposes. Butter was supplied to shops in several parts of Sligo and Leitrim. During the war years 1939-1945 some butter was exported by rail and boat to Britain. Mr Torsney declared that the Cleen creamery with its high standards of hygiene encouraged farmers to improve their dairy farming practices.

Josie Torsney grew up in Killenumery, during hard times in the 1930s. He recalled that the old school building was rat-infested. There were four teachers when Josie was a pupil. Many children walked barefoot to school. Their lunch consisted of bread and butter, and bottles of milk stuffed with newspaper. In the autumn parents brought carts of turf to use as winter fuel to keep classrooms warm.

From 1968 Josie thrived in a new career as a car salesman in Carrickon-Shannon. During the 1960s and 1970s he promoted junior Gaelic football in the Scór na nÓg scheme and people of that generation remember his witty conversation as he drove small groups of players to and from away matches. For many years he headed the committee that organised the annual Agricultural Show in Dromahair. On good days in the mid-1980s the shows with gymkana and side attractions were attended by a thousand or more people. Josie was a champion of agriculture and sport and a shrewd salesman.

The old creamery building at Cleen was eventually sold and demolished. A modern building stands on the site where Irish dancing is taught to the younger generation. Founding members of the co-op, Mr Hewson died in the late 1940s while Mr Hosie died in 1950.