

DRUMSHANBO SHOWS ITS 'GUNPOWDER SPIRIT'

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LAST MONTH I went on a world tour of Sligo, South Donegal across the Arigna mountains, and ended up in Drumshanbo in Co Leitrim. I booked into the Lough Allen Hotel resort for one night but ended up staying three nights.

Drumshanbo has bittersweet memories for me. My father used to go to the fair there to buy cows and I used to go with him. I bought my first calf there when I was 12. I paid £3 for him and six months later sold him for £7, a profit of £4 after EU levies, taxes and other charges that didn't exist at the time.

Six years later I went to my first dance, in the Mayflower Ballroom in Drumshanbo, looking for a bit of romance. I met a friendly girl who came from a place called 'The Mountain'. After a few dances and things going well we arranged to meet the following week. It never happened; she didn't appear for our date. I was told by her later that her mother scuttled her plans and mine.

The Mayflower Ballroom was a posh place that held over 2,000 patrons. On the night the Clancy Brothers played there in 1961 there was 3,000 there—2,000 inside and 1,000 outside. On my three-day tour of Drumshanbo, I met up with a lot of positive people who were very proud of their own place and what they had achieved. I met up with Noel McPartland, who along with Sean Nolan, were the men behind the

sale and production of Bo Beep jams, which was synonymous with Drumshanbo.

I first met Noel when he called to Quinnswoth in Stillorgan where I worked many years ago. Despite his low stature, he was no pushover when it came to selling jam. In those years, Drumshanbo prospered thanks to Lairds Jam factory, Arigna Mines and the ESB Power Station, but within a few years all had closed and the Lairds factory was empty. The people took advantage of their predicament, got up off their bellies, and opened up a new mining experience in Arigna that attracts thousands of visitors every week.

The local community, under the stewardship of Noel and a good working group, who got on well, worked as a team. They got a small amount of funding in 1997, to redevelop the Jam factory and open a Food Hub. Today the Hub employs nearly 100 people, housing the Drumshanbo Gunpowder Gin Distillery, whose sales have trebled in the past four years. There is also McNiffes Boxy, which has seen their range of boxy being sold in many supermarkets around Ireland and more staff coming on stream. There also is 'The Chef in a Box', which sells quality readymade meals.

Noel McPartland's Fresh Food Exports still produce Bo Beep jams at the Hub. A new state-of-the-art visitor centre is under construction by Pat Rigney of

Drumshanbo Gunpowder Gin. Alongside the Hub are six other manufacturing units as well as a chef school within the Hub. The Hub is managed by Fergal McPartland, and from my tour, they look as if they are running out of space because of the interest of others in becoming part of its success.

I left Noel to do a walkabout in Drumshanbo, and my usual surveys of businesses that have closed in rural towns. Out of fifty-nine businesses in Drumshanbo, eight are closed, three of them for over 40 years, one bank closed, and one is being renovated. So, effectively there are three closed businesses in Drumshanbo, which is only bettered by Adare in Limerick, which has no businesses closed out of a total of 62.

So, the people of Drumshanbo—after losing their three main employers—didn't throw in the coal shovel or bury their heads in the Arigna coal dust. They took a lead that many rural towns could use to reignite their fortunes—I call it the 'Gunpowder Spirit Approach'.

Drumshanbo and the surrounding area, has been the stomping ground for many successful business families who made their mark and not just in Leitrim. The legendary J P McManus's Limerick based, successful family came from Drumshanbo as did the Musgrave Bros who left Drumshanbo in the 1800s and set up various businesses in Cork.

Today, Musgraves operate the SuperValu/Centra businesses in Ireland, England and Spain. The Musgraves were related through marriage to the Laird family of Bo Beep Jams. About ten miles up the road from Drumshanbo, is Cloone which was the birthplace of Pat Quinn, who opened the first supermarket in Dublin's first shopping centre in Stillorgan.

In 1959, George Tutthill moved from Mohill to Co Galway and opened the first self service supermarket in Shop Street in Galway City called GTM. In the same year, Cecil Clarke, who came as a shop boy to Mohill, later moved and opened the first self-service supermarket in Navan in 1960. They took a lead and many in Drumshanbo had the guts and determination to get things done and make them happen.

Eamon Daly has been one of the leading lights of Drumshanbo in the world of music and drama. He has played music with Charlie McGettigan. Charlie, who lives and works in Drumshanbo, famously won the Eurovision in 1994 with Paul Harrington with the 'Rock 'n' Roll Kids'. In the world of country music, most of you who are my vintage will know of Pascal Mooney, another Drumshanbo man, who played all our country favourites on RTÉ 1 for many years.

On any of my tours of County Leitrim, I'm always told good stories. One of them, which Eamon Daly remembered, was when Noel McPartland went on a trade mission to the Middle East in 1965 selling Bo Peep Jam. He called to a client in Saudi Arabia. For some reason, they didn't make jam in Saudi Arabia back then.

Noel met this sheik contact to sell him some Leitrim jam. Before he left Drumshanbo, Noel was told by Raymond Laird that there would be a price increase on jam three months down the road, which Noel informed the sheik about. The sheik told him to just look at the order he was going to give him and then get a price. He then proceeded to order eight 40-foot containers that comprised two million pots of jam.

Obviously, Noel had to phone the head office the next day to get the best price. He rang Drumshanbo 3 from his hotel room. The operator said: "No such place." Eventually, he got through from Saudi to London, to Dublin, to Mullingar, to Carrick-on-Shannon to the exchange in Drumshanbo, where eight hours later Maud Donoghue, the telephonist, answered the phone, and Noel asked Maud to put him through to Drumshanbo 3, which was Laird's Factory.

As she was putting him through to Laird's, Maud asked Noel: "Where are you?" Noel said: "I'm in Saudi Arabia." "You are in your arse," said Maud, and banged down the phone.

It goes to show the strange things that happen in Leitrim, but they still got the order for two million pots of jam, so a new factory had to be built. Obviously, jams and sugar related products have taken a battering over the years, as have many other food products, but it still didn't stop enterprising people going on to start things outside the jam pot, so to speak.

Today, Drumshanbo has two swimming pools, one outdoor pool that was built along Acres Lake 60 years ago with top-class,

well-maintained, outdoor facilities, as the 100-year-old canal plays host to many cruisers that travel along the Shannon waterways. Across the town is a pool and leisure centre with outdoor boating, canoeing and fishing marina at Lough Allen Hotel on the shores of the lake. There are four children's playgrounds, which is unusual nowadays with the exorbitant cost of insurance cover for them.

While I was visiting, one of five festivals was in progress. An Toastal, which has been running for years, was the highlight. In the town centre, new restaurants have opened as has Jinny's American style diner, at Maguires Cottages on the Carrick Road, overlooking the lakes and cruisers.

In the town centre, a returned Yank, Joe Gunning, runs Conway's old-style pub, and ferries customers home in his taxis and minibuses, an idea I presumed he picked up in his time in New York. Across the street, the globetrotting Henry Sorohan, who I'm told was in more places than Donald Trump, has set up his bar and restaurant. For a town that should have died, it refused to do so because the Rock 'n' Roll Kids of Drumshanbo had the guts and determination to get things done and make them happen at all costs, without having to listen to whingers. I admire them for that and give them my award for their inspiration, drive and their desire to look after the great natural resource that cost nothing to put there, but needs brains to keep there and make it all work for everyone.

*Long live Drumshanbo's
Gunpowder Spirit!*