The Rural Electrification Scheme in Kiltyclogher & Glenfarne

Padraig McGinn

THE BRINGING of electricity to the rural area around Manorhamilton, which included Kiltyclogher and Glenfarne, was begun at the end of February 1952. The area comprised over thirty-six square miles of hilly country and the projected cost was over three thousand six hundred pounds for labour and thirteen thousand pounds for materials, sixteen and a half thousand pounds in all, to supply 268 consumers. There were 566 premises in the area, so the acceptance rate was less than 50 %. When the area was connected, only 259 houses had taken the supply and the net cost, excluding overheads, was nearly £21,000.

The 'will I, won't I' dithering of some consumers during construction had contributed to the increase in actual costs. There was also a problem with one or two who decided not to let the lines cross their lands to supply their neighbours, so that expensive, alternative ways had to be found. Over sixty-six kilometres of line, fifty-eight transformers and eight hundred poles were used. Letters on behalf of constituents were received from Mrs. Mary Reynolds TD, Mr John Roddy TD, Mr Ben Maguire TD and General Sean Mc Eoin TD.

Pat McRory, from Omagh, Co Tyrone, was the engineer in charge of the operation, and Pat Cavanagh, from Sligo, was the supervisor in charge of the gang. Then there was a core of skilled workers, linesmen, a lorry driver, Gussie Kivlehan, a mapping assistant, Andy Carr, who was then on the Donegal football team, and a stores labourer, Mick Mc Nulty. Some of the key men in charge of the actual field work were Tim Slevin, Mick Stapleton, Jimmy McAndrews, Paddy Best, Patsy Herron, Mickey Herron, Tony Carney and Hubert Murray. Most of these have since passed on.

I was the clerk with the gang. My responsibilities were to pay the men, check all supplies of poles, conductor, crossarms, insulators, meters and other material as it arrived, calculate the fixed charge for all houses, based on their measurements, whether supply was taken or not, and record the serial number of the meter allocated to each house.
I lodged in Rooneys', on the Castle Hill, with fellow lodgers Bill Fleming and Paddy Hughes. Some others lodged in Farrell's and in other houses in the town or nearby.

The construction work was split up between squads of men, many of them recruited locally for the duration of the work in the area, under the direction of the regular staff. An engineer named Frank Mooney designed the scheme and mapped out the places where the poles were to go, before the gang arrived in the area. All the holes for the poles were dug by men with picks and shovels. Where the holes had to be dug through rock, gelignite was used to blast the rock. There was no subversive activity then and half a ton of gelignite might be stored in our stores, together with a metal case full of detonators. We often used a stick of gelignite to light the office fire. This all changed a few years later when explosives had to be kept in a quarry magazine and every stick accounted for.

The poles were dragged across fields by a local man and his horse, and another group erected them. Steel or wooden crossarms were fixed on top of each pole with porcelain insulator cups at each end of the crossarms. Then came the stringers, with rolls of cable on drums. The cable was pulled out for miles, along the tops of the poles. Like the digging, this was heavy work. Then skilled climbers fixed the cable to the insulators with aluminium tie wire.

A much sought after job was the 'servicers'. His task was to fix an insulator to the gable of the houses and clip the insulated service wire from there to the meter board, which he usually erected inside the door of the house. This work was much lighter and cleaner than digging holes or dragging out cable, but it had the other important advantage of always being beside a house and you might be asked in for a cup of tea, something very much appreciated on a winter's morning. The diggers, stringers and oth-

Dromahair County Scór Winners

All are members of Killargue and Manorhamilton Ceoltas Class which takes place every Saturday in Killargue with a variety of instruments taught by Seamus Sweeney. The class was started up seven years ago by Anne Flanagan.

Adrian Fowley, Denis O' Rourke, Niamh Fowley, Seán McCabe, Eithne Flanagan & Orlaith Dolan

ers had to ask some householder to boil a kettle for them during a half-hour dinner break while they ate sandwiches. A 'good digs' was very important, for the work was tough, especially if the belly was empty and one lodgings was christened 'Marmalade Lodge' because of the sandwiches provided.

The Rural Area Organiser was Bertie McGowan, from Sligo. He went around the householders who had agreed to take the supply when the area was first canvassed, to confirm that they were still willing to take 'the light'. Unfortunately there was a good number of 'backsliders' in the area, though some others who had not signed up decided to get connected. Some had signed up under pressure from neighbours and now refused to take the supply, either because they were afraid of getting electrocuted or afraid they wouldn't be able to pay for it. This was not unreasonable, as many were small farmers or casual labourers, and there was no 'Brussels cheques' in those days.

One evening Bertie came into the office in a very depressed state. He had been re-canvassing in a valley where all the original householders had now backed out of taking the supply. He went to the last house on that spur, just out of politeness, as there was now no chance of the house being connected, even if the householder wanted it. It was a clean, neat cottage, and the old lady who lived there on her own welcomed him, gave him tea and freshly baked soda bread, and told him how much she was looking forward to getting in the light, as she loved to read. Bertie hadn't the heart to tell her that there was now no chance at all that she'd get connected, as it would be uneconomic to supply that one house on its own and he was quite distressed by the incident. I often thought about that lady and the disappointment she must have suffered.

Local men were glad to get work on the scheme, at little over five pounds a week. A pint of Guinness was then a shilling and a brew called 'Guinness singles', which cost less, was popular locally. One local man who worked with us got married on a Saturday, went to Bundoran for the day, and was back digging holes on Monday morning at eight. Different times. Nowadays the couple would be heading for two weeks in the Seychelles, while Granny minded the children. There were very few jobs in the area and emigration was very high in the fifties. Some girls from the area travelled on the Sligo– Leitrim and Northern Counties Railway, to work in Enniskillen, in Wellworths or other shops, and I saw them a few years later in 'The Garryowen', 'The Erin's Isle' or some of the dancehalls in London.

We rented a premises on the Main Street for offices and stores from 'Foley' Mc Sherry, an elderly bachelor, who lived on the second floor. He professed to know everything about every woman who passed up or down the street and imparted such gems of knowledge as 'the Glangevlin women have hair on their chests'. I suspected that he knew as little about them as I did.

Paddy Best, who had played for Sligo and Connaught, and I played football with the local team, and we were unbeaten that summer. Sometimes I played handball in the Bee Park with a local teacher named Prendergast or Joe Lee, who worked in a local bank and there was always the cinema, if it was wet. The weather was usually fine. The fishing, the football and the handball kept me busy and time passed all too quickly. By late June, the job was finished, the light being switched on in the ballroom in Glenfarne on 18th June, 1952. Then it was time to move on.

What would the scheme cost today? £21,000 would buy 420,000 pints of Guinness in 1952, so perhaps a figure of one and a half to two million euros, not including overheads.

Margaret Connolly's last day at School at St Clare's NS, Manorhamilton!

Photo: James Molloy