

THE BALLAGH CENTRE, ROSSINVER

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MANY OF YOU who travel the R282 between Rossinver and Manorhamilton will be familiar with the old stone church and graveyard just east of Rossinver Village in the townland of Tullyskearney. But did you know its story?

In the 1640s, the first protestants settled in the Ballaghmeehan area. These were planter families from England, Scotland and Wales. It wasn't until 1850/1851, that a church was built to serve the religious needs of this small Church of Ireland community. The church was built by a Belfast company and it's believed that the design and layout is one of only two of its kind in Ireland. The bell was made in Abbey Street in Dublin and rang out to welcome the new millennium. The Church was simply known as Ballagh Church.

Ahead of its time, one of its most unique features was its under-floor heating system. There were two fires lit one in the vestry and the other in the church itself, the heat came up through the gratings in the central isle, and provided much appreciated warmth on cold winter mornings. The first rector appointed to Ballagh Church was a Rev. Fletcher, who was a travelling rector in the sense that he visited many other small Protestant communities in the area.

After Rev. Fletcher, four rectors were appointed full time to Ballagh Church. These were:

- Rev Alexander Smullen (1857-1873)
- Rev William Scott
- Rev Gahagan
- Rev Edward Flower (1903-1926), whose grave is close to the rear door of the centre.

After Rev Flower's death in 1926, the church was served by travelling rectors, the last being Rev Ennis, where services continued until



*Ballagh
Choir of Ages*

the 1960s when, with a dwindling Church of Ireland population, it closed.

The condition of the church deteriorated through time. The bell, gates, doors and windows were the first to go, and in the late 1980s the roof was removed by the church authorities.

By the mid-1990s, the condition of the old church had deteriorated considerably. All that was left were four ivy-clad walls. The brickwork on the arches was beginning to crumble, and the likelihood was that within a few short years the main structure of the building would have collapsed. Rossinver Community Development Company Ltd approached the Church of Ireland Representative Body with a plan to restore the church and use it as a multi-purpose community resource centre. A 999-year lease was obtained at a nominal rent and Rossinver's first modern community centre came into being.

As part of a cross border project under the International Fund for Ireland's Wider Horizons programme, a group of young

people from north (both traditions) and south of the border came together to learn construction skills. Under the direction of renowned stone mason, John Byrne, together they helped replace the floor and the roof.

Perhaps one of the most remarkable aspects of the renovation is the fabulous stained glass windows which were designed and put together by two local women, Maureen and Sharon Byrne, daughters of John. They are unusual in so far as not a single piece of glass has been painted, which means that the full detail can be seen no matter whether the windows are viewed from outside the church or inside. These unique windows each tell a story, whether it's the colourful flora and fauna of Rossinver, or the trades that were once abundant in the area, or the animals from far flung countries where people from Rossinver made their home. All are depicted in beautiful vibrant colours in this old church.

In recent years the old church has taken on a new life, it is still a hub in the community this time as a centre of learning. Each day people of all ages come to the New Ballagh Centre to upskill, so whether you are



Graduates for class of 2018 in Healthcare

looking for a relaxing Art course, embracing smart technologies in a user friendly environment, or wanting to upskill and retrain as a healthcare or childcare professional, improve your IT skills or learn how to make the most of your digital camera we have the course for you!

But that's not all that goes on at the Ballagh Centre, which today is a vibrant space with a special focus for older people. Rossinver Calling and Befriending Service provides the opportunity for social interaction and reassurance to older people and their families. This service is especially aimed at persons over the age of 55, who are socially isolated or lonely, and/or those who are limited in their ability to get out and about.

The service involves a diligent team of volunteers, who telephone users of the service and have a chat about whatever may be on the person's mind, whether it's Brexit, a new grandchild's name or the price of oil on the world market! It is all discussed. The call service can also provide the opportunity to raise awareness of potentially useful services and to signpost people to other organisations as required. Along with the benefit of this service is to the user, it can provide great solace for family members who cannot visit as often as they would like. We also provide a face to face befriending service where volunteers visit people living in the area. So important is this service to older

people that we were recently recognised by the National Lottery "Good Causes Award" as county winners and Regional Winners in the Health and wellbeing category. We are proud to be one of the last 36 projects in the country to have reached the finals. The Thursday Club is a social gathering in the Ballagh Centre where older people come together in a social setting to plan events and outings for themselves from curling or table top gardening, to drama or a trip to the cinema. Sometimes it is just to sit and chat. Alongside this, the Outreach Worker, Sarah, assists four other groups in north Leitrim who cater for the needs of older people.

Sarah also facilitates the Ballagh Choir of Ages. Originally part of David Brophy's RTE series, our Ballagh Choir of Ages meet regularly, sing together and have fun with Choirmaster Dave Flynn. Young and old have a great time finding their voice, listening and learning from each other in a loving and warm environment. Not to mention recording their own CD!

We are very proud to be part of this wonderful project and happy to have seen so many familiar faces from the locality attending and taking part in it. The choir is an absolute success. Both young and old have utterly enjoyed working and singing together. Shortly, we will be linking cross border with a project from Derry, and

everyone is looking forward to this new adventure.

The Ballagh Centre, in partnership with the Leitrim Development Company's Rural Social Scheme, looks after the maintenance and upkeep of the beautiful walk along the Glenaniff River to the renowned Fowley's Falls. As the Glenaniff River travels down from the mountain above, it has eroded the local blue limestone to form a deep river valley. The waterfall cascades in a series of drops over the exposed bedrock to form a spectacular torrent of water rushing through the steep valley towards Lough Melvin. The wonderful thing about this attraction is you don't have to hike over rough terrain to enjoy this natural wonder, it is just a few steps from the public road.

St Molaise's Well is an ancient meditative place of prayer associated with the saint and is also cared for by the Rural Social Scheme who do a marvellous job.

Rossinver Book Club meets at the Ballagh Centre every month where they review whatever they have read in the last month. So if you enjoy a good book why not come along and join in!

We also provide an admin service to the community, so if you need something, printed, copied, laminated or you just want to surf the net, call in to see us.

We are delighted to have been awarded 1st prize for our community work in the Love Where You Live Awards Leitrim, a real tribute to the volunteers and all involved at the Ballagh!

The one thing you can be sure of at the Ballagh Centre is a warm welcome, and if you're lucky a cup of tea too! Come along if you are interested in anything we are doing or indeed with your own ideas too, anything is possible when we work together!

We're in the final in Dublin in November for our work with older people