

TRAGEDY AT CARRICKMAKEEGAN

Tommy Moran

"Then pray for Prior, Moran and Rowley, Walsh, Dolphin and Seamus Wisley, Who left from their homes that sad evening, Their loved ones no more for to see".

The above lines are from a lament written shortly after the catastrophic events of Sunday, August 23rd 1942, when six young local people lost their lives in a boating tragedy close to Carrickmakeegan Bridge, Ballinamore.

The placid waters of the canal, which is part of the newly restored Shannon-Erne Waterway, became the watery grave of Carmel Prior, Maureen Moran, Maureen Rowley, Minnie Walsh, Sean Dolphin and Seamus Wisley. That six young locals, aged between fifteen and nineteen, should lose their lives so close to home, was something almost beyond comprehension in the town and surrounding areas. The passage of time has meant there

are fewer people in the locality who can recall with clarity the actual events of the day—but it was a day forever etched on the minds of the families involved and also on the minds of the families of the survivors.

A bright sunny Sunday afternoon beckoned and the six victims, together with their friends Betty Bohan, Eamonn Canning, Carmel Conlon, Noel Dolan, Bernadette Wisely and Teresa Martin, all of whom had attended second mass in St Patrick's Church, Ballinamore, decided to cycle out to Carrickmakeegan to while away a few hours. Their families were happy to see them go, content in the knowledge that they were safe in each other's company—they were all close personal friends and had grown up together except for Minnie Walsh who was a recent arrival to the area. Her father had been appointed as a locomotive Superintendent with the Cavan-Leitrim Narrow Gauge Railway just a short time before.

Galway Bay

On arrival at Carrickmakeegan Bridge the group was in jovial spirits and asked Vincent Keegan, a well known local angler, to get his boat, which was moored nearby at Maxwell's shore on Garadice Lake, and to take them for a spin on the lake. Eamonn Canning and Sean Dolphin accompanied Vincent and came back with him in the boat to the bank of the canal, where the rest of their friends were waiting in excited anticipation.

A woman who was at the canal had asked them to sing *Galway Bay* and it appears Maureen Moran was leading the singing of this popular ballad, as they all clambered into the boat, which Vincent Keegan had brought right up close to the bank. All were seated in the boat except for Noel Dolan and Vincent Keegan, who held an oar each and were prising the boat away from the bank. But due to the fact that there were too many seated towards one side of the boat it became unsteady and looked as if it would capsize. In panic, some of the youngsters jumped out of the boat and it then overturned, tumbling everybody into the deep water.

Noel Dolan, who was the only swimmer in the group, pushed Bernadette Wisely to the bank and worked valiantly in saving some of the others with the help of Vincent Keegan, who made heroic efforts despite being a non-swimmer himself. Both Noel and Vincent were later to be highly commended on their bravery at the subsequent inquest and in the investigations into the tragedy.

Survivors of the tragedy pictured beside the monument to the victims: Noel Dolan, Teresa Brady (nee Martin), Bernadette Spollan (nee Wisely) & Eamonn Canning





▲ Tommy Moran, author of this article and a brother of Maureen Moran who died in the tragedy, seen here at the exhibition in Ballinamore to remember the Carrickmakeegan tragedy.

PHOTO: TONY FAHY

Bernadette Wisley, Eamonn Canning, Teresa Martin, Betty Bohan and Carmel Conlon were saved and they, with Noel Dolan and Vincent Keegan were to have life-long, harrowing memories of that fateful day when they lost six of their close friends.

On the 60th anniversary of the tragedy August 23rd, 2002, the Ballinamore Bachelor Club, known as the "BBC" invited members of the families involved to Carrickmakeegan, to make a short documentary for the local "BBSee TV", which had filmed many events at Ballinamore Festivals over the years.

Among the group on that day was Bernadette (Wisley) Spollen and she recalled her memories from sixty years before. She had been wearing a beautiful, pink, flowery dress made for her by her next door neighbour Lizzie Anne Leatham and she recalled her brother Seamus being dressed in his suit, with a new shirt and a green plaid tie—the Wisley family would never wear green after that day as it seemed to evoke bitter memories. Bernadette could clearly recall Noel Dolan pushing her to the bank of the canal, thereby saving her life and

she and Noel and the Dolan and Wisley families have remained very close personal friends ever since. Out of the water she ran to Connolly's house nearby and then all the way into Ballinamore, anxiously searching for her mother. It was a very tearful reunion when she did find her as the news of the tragedy had already reached the town and Mrs Wisley knew that her son had been lost.

Wrapped up in Grief

Bernadette found that Sunday in August 1942 and the following days to hold bitter, cruel

heart-breaking memories. She knew that John James Maxwell had brought the six bodies to the Catholic Hall on his truck, but had wisely avoided coming through the town and took a circuitous route to avoid adding further trauma to the townspeople who had gathered on the streets in shock and despair. Memories of the complete bedlam in Ballinamore, of the removal and funerals still bring Bernadette to tears. She had seen many tears shed in her home after the tragedy—especially anytime her parents heard the song *Galway Bay* on the radio.

Bernadette's brother, Brendan Wisley, was also present at the making of the documentary. He was quite young at the time of the tragedy and his mother had brought him up to Mrs. McCormack to be minded while his parents joined the other families at Carrickmakeegan. He can remember seeing the guards driving up the road past McCormack's with long poles with hooks at the end—he did not know at the time, but these were to be used to drag the river for the bodies.

Bernadette Dolphin (Dolan) could remember walking the Willowfield Road with her mother that day in 1942 when her brother Tommy came dashing on his bicycle to break



the news. Then came the shock of seeing the bodies lined up in the Catholic Hall, the six funerals — and her brother Sean's clothes being brought to the house some days afterwards. Like all the families, the Dolphins had received bundles and bundles of Mass cards and letters from people throughout Ireland and these were kept in a special drawer in the house.

Marian Burns, daughter of Eamonn Canning, one of the survivors, said that her father became very emotional when anyone spoke of the tragedy and she and her sisters never liked to question him about it as they realised how painful the memories were, even long years afterwards. For the BBS documentary, Marian had composed a new air for the *Garadice Lament* and sang it on tape — the musical and vocal skills of the Canning family had passed to the next generation.

William Keegan, nephew of Vincent, recalled his uncle telling him that, in the week following the tragedy, he had gone back to Carrickmakeegan, pulled the boat from the water and burned it on the bank. He could never have brought himself to use it again and he never wanted to discuss the events — like all the others he had been severely traumatised. Mary Farrelly, niece of Carmel Prior, who was born long years after the event, also realised the effect it had on her mother Patti and all the Prior family and it was an issue that was always too emotional to discuss.

Eileen Dolan, sister of Noel, had been visiting her uncle, Monsignor Dolan PP in Kinlough at the time of the tragedy, as her parents were away on holiday, but has vivid memories of her family and the whole town being wrapped up in grief. While the Dolans were happy that Noel had been spared, and proud that he had saved some of the survivors, they were united in sorrow with the families who had lost a son or daughter.

In conducting the interview that day for the video, I was struck by how there was still such a bond between the families involved

and that in the years since 1942 that same sense of sadness still prevailed. How could this have happened?

I was just over a year old in 1942 so have no memory of any of the events. Like the others, my parents seemed reluctant to discuss it, except that my mother told me Maureen was minding me that day but she asked if she could go to Carrickmakeegan with the others. How my mother had wished she had refused permission — but Maureen was a great girl and she couldn't say "No" to her. My mother lived for 52 years after the tragedy and I'd say not a day passed in all those years that she didn't say a quiet prayer for Maureen. She could never bring herself to go back to the Catholic Hall since 1942; she became very sad at hearing *Galway Bay* and cried silently when news of any drowning tragedy elsewhere became known, it brought it all back so vividly. She warned us all of the dangers of water, with the result that when I'd go to Poll an Easa with my friends I never had the courage to jump into the pool like the others.

I was glad to have my own daughter Maureen present for the documentary, she held the cross that had been made for our family by John Joe McGirl and his fellow Republican prisoners at the time. Each family had been given a cross — expertly constructed completely from matchsticks. It is a very important treasure in our family and will be passed on to my daughter Maureen. Incidentally, the BBS TV video "The Carrickmakeegan Story" is available to view at the County Library in Ballinamore, where Sean O Suilleabhain and his staff have preserved so much of our heritage, history and folklore.

On the evening of the tragedy in August 1942, word quickly reached neighbouring houses at Carrickmakeegan and local farmers Hugh Baxter, John James Maxwell, John Gallagher, and others, were quickly on the scene. Hugh Baxter managed to take Carmel Prior from the water and his frantic attempts to revive

her by artificial respiration failed. The second body to be recovered was that of Sean Dolphin, the third Seamus Wisely, the fourth Maureen Moran, the fifth Maureen Rowley, and the last was Minnie Walsh.

Dr PJ Moroney, who was acting locum for Dr Dolan attended the bodies at the scene but was unable to revive anyone. The Ballinamore curate, Fr Brady, administered the last Rites as the bodies were recovered. Sergeant Gillespie from Ballinamore Garda Station was in charge of the Garda operations at the scene and arranged with John James Maxwell for the bodies to be taken to the Catholic Hall. Huge crowds had gathered at Carrickmakeegan, heart broken at what had occurred and feeling so helpless, other than offering sympathy and support to the bereaved families. The area had never before witnessed such scenes of grief as six bodies were laid out together.

On the Monday, Dr JJ Walsh, Coroner for South Leitrim, swore in the jury for the holding of an inquest — Thomas Roddy, Kiltymooden (Foreman); Thomas Connolly, Tully; James Creamer, Castleroggy; Bertie Moroney, Church Street; Thomas Sheridan and Jonathan Price, Main Street. Inspector Carthy conducted the proceedings on behalf of the Gardai and also present were Sergeant Gillespie, Detective Officer O'Connor, Dr. Moloney, locum for Dr Dolan, Rev. Fr Carey, and Patrick Carey BL.

Among the witnesses called were Guard Teehan who had attended the scene, Noel Dolan, Eamonn Canning, Vincent Keegan and some of the fathers of the drowned who gave evidence of identification made at the scene. One of the most poignant moments of the inquest was when Patrick Moran, High Street, father of Maureen Moran, spoke on behalf of all the parents, commending Noel Dolan and Vincent Keegan for their heroic efforts; thanking all who helped at Carrickmakeegan; expressing appreciation for the sympathy and support being shown the families and assuring the community that neither he nor any of the parents were holding anyone to blame. It had



Mr Noel Dolan unveiling the monument to the victims of the Carrickmakeegan boating tragedy Sept 1990. Pictured are: Joey Smith of Smith Monumentals, Ballinamore who manufactured and erected the monument, Canon Terence McManus, Ballinamore, Alan Prior, Richard O'Rourke and Mr Dolan, Teresa Bray (nee Martin), Bernadette Spollan (nee Wisely), Eamonn Canning, all survivors; Glen Harvey, Thomas McWeeney and Fr Dan Gallogly.

and surrounding counties, took place at half hourly intervals, commencing at 2.30 pm. Carmel Prior, Sean Dolphin and Seamus Wisely were brought to Oughteragh Cemetery for burial; Maureen Moran and Minnie Walsh to Aughnasheelin and Maureen Rowley to Fenagh Abbey Cemetery. At each funeral the LDF formed a Guard of Honour to the outskirts of the town, while Red Cross members marched behind each coffin.

Permanent Memorial

It took the people of Ballinamore a long time to recover from this tragedy. For the families involved there could be no closure, they had lost their children in the prime of their lives. For many years a simple wooden cross at Carrickmakeegan recalled the names of the victims. During the restoration work at the Shannon-Erne waterway, the families decided to erect a more permanent memorial and this was incorporated into the design of the new bridge. There it stands overlooking the spot on this peaceful waterway that somehow brought such tragedy to six families and tearful memories to the survivors and to the whole community.

"Then pray for Prior, Moran and Rowley, Walsh, Dolphin and Seamus Wisely, Who left from their homes that sad evening, Their loved ones no more for to see."

been a tragic, tragic accident. Through his tears he informed the Jury that the last time he had seen his daughter was when she was in the church choir on the Sunday morning, she had smiled at him on her way back from Communion.

The jury returned a verdict in accordance with the medical evidence that the six victims had died by drowning. Following the inquest, hundreds and hundreds of people filed past the bodies in the Catholic Hall and business houses were closed for the removal of the remains on Monday evening, when the six coffins were placed before the High Altar in the Church in St Brigid's Street.

It was originally intended that there would be a communal burial, but some of the families

wished to have their child buried in their family plots, so separate funerals took place after the High Mass, which was celebrated by Rev John O'Reilly PPVF. The Chanters were Rev Fr Reynolds PP Fenagh and J O'Rourke CC, Carrigallen. MCs were Fr J Brady CC Ballinamore and Fr Gaffney CC Aughnasheelin. Other clergy present were PJ Ryan PP, Drumreilly; Rev Fr. Meehan, Newtowngore; Rev Sean Carey, Fenagh; Rev Fr Maguire, Aughnasheelin and Fr O'Brien CC, Fenagh.

The funerals, which were attended by hundreds of mourners, including members of the legal and medical professions, members of GAA clubs and County Board, protestant and catholic clergymen and the general public from Leitrim