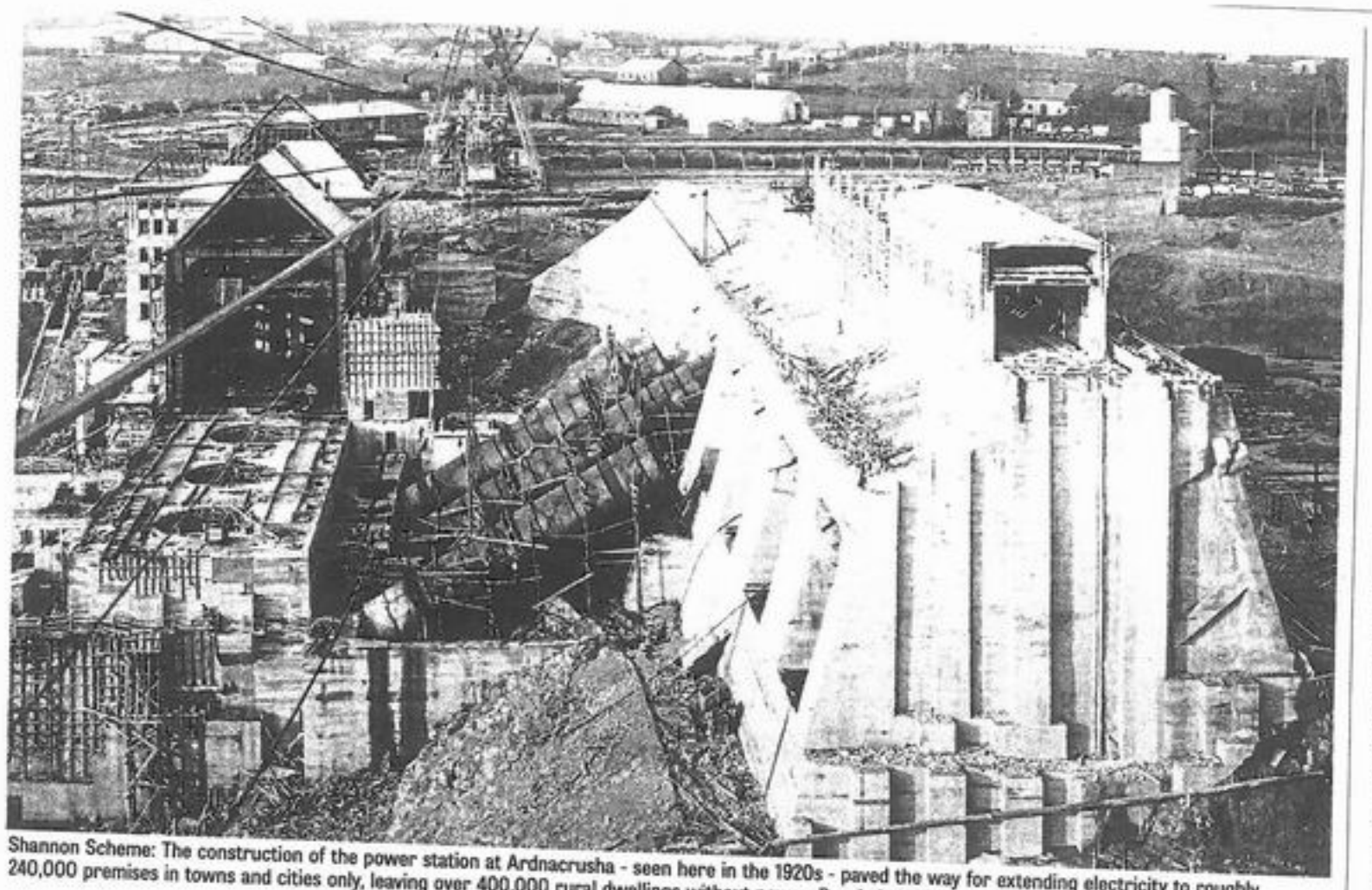

Shannon Scheme: The construction of the power station at Ardnacrusha - seen here in the 1920s - paved the way for extending electricity to roughly 240,000 premises in towns and cities only, leaving over 400,000 rural dwellings without power. Rural electrification began in earnest after WWII

Flicking the switch on rural electrification

■ Scheme which began 70 years ago has been described as 'greatest social revolution'

Then&Now

with Tom Aherne

THE RURAL ELECTRIFICATION scheme which began in Ireland over 70 years ago, has been described as the greatest social revolution since the Land Reforms of the 1880s and 1890s.

The arrival of electricity to rural Ireland brought about major changes in the lives of people and created unlimited opportunities for rural development. The electrification of rural Ireland had been spoken about since work first began on the Shannon Scheme in 1925.

Dr Thomas McLaughlin, the founding father of ESB, believed that rural electrification represented the application of modern science, and engineering to raise the standard of rural living, and to get to the root of the social evil of the flight from the land.

We are going to put into the homes of our people in rural areas a light which will light up their minds as well as their homes, are lines credited to Deputy James Larkin Junior, in March 7 1945.

The financial resources were not available to extend electricity to rural Ireland in the first days of the newly formed Irish Free State in the 1920s and 1930s. Electricity from the Shannon Scheme was supplied to roughly 240,000 premises in towns and cities only, leaving over 400,000 rural dwellings without power.

In the late 1930s and early 1940s, ESB and the government began working on broad plans for rural electrification, and the state agreed to subsidise its roll out. However, the outbreak of World War 2 in 1939 delayed the process, and work could not start on the scheme until after its end in 1945.

The Rural Electrification Office (REO) was established to oversee the roll out of the scheme, and it was based at 42 Merrion Square, Dublin. The first phase of rural electrification ran from 1946-1965, bringing electricity to 81% of rural Ireland. After 1965, work continued to connect the last remaining areas to the national grid, with 99% connection by 1975. The last area to receive electricity was the remote Black Valley, in Co. Kerry in 1978.

At the start there was a lot of resistance to the scheme mainly from the older generation, who feared it could cause fires, and even deaths. The more progressive people saw the advantages and welcomed its arrival, as it would lead to improvements in working and living conditions. The women of Ireland welcomed its arrival with open arms, as it reduced their heavy workload and they gradually got the menfolk around to their way of thinking.

The ESB staff in charge of promoting its advantages, always tried to get the parish priest on their side, as they moved around the country. The power of the pulpit was a great decision maker, even between feuding neighbours, slow to facilitate by allowing poles to cross their land to assist the other party. Without getting access to certain fields, major detours of poles would cause the ESB serious money problems.

A major stumbling block was the payment of ground rent, now known as a fixed charge. The larger your house, and outbuildings the more you had to pay. And you had to pay this whether you used any electricity or not.

This was a charge too much for some people at the time, although most people had changed their minds, by the time they got a second chance later on.

The present day population may find it hard to imagine how difficult life was in rural Ireland before electricity supply was widely available. The activity on the farm and in rural households was dictated by the availability of daylight. After dark, limited lighting was provided by oil lamps or candles.

The spring water had to be drawn from a well, and carried home in an enamel bucket on foot or by cart. The clothes had to be washed by hand, or with a hand-powered wringer washer.

Heating and cooking depended on solid fuel, such as timber and turf, often cut and harvested by the family. Cooking was confined to an open hearth or range.

Food safety was difficult to ensure without any form of refrigeration, a particular difficulty on the farm and in the dairy. Ireland's Industrial development was not possible without a supply of electricity.

The first pole was erected in North County Dublin on Saturday November 5, 1946. The highways and byways saw constant activity for the next three decades, until the final houses in the Black Valley was eventuality connected to the national grid in 1978.

A massive 165,000 kilometres of cable, was connected between the million poles.

The poles had been erected by the toil of men doing back breaking work, mainly with picks, spades, shovels, and their bare hands. Townland by townland district by district the ESB crews, quenched the, candles, Tilley and oil lamps, and introduced a new era of light and power, with a flick of a switch.

The roll out of the scheme required the transport of over a million poles all over the island of Ireland. Due to material shortages in the wake of World War 2, the vast majority of these were sourced from Finland.

Rural electrification continued and rows of poles sprung up across the countryside, and burly men pulled miles of wire through hedges and ditches, by placing a bar through the centre of the reel, which was placed in a frame.

Their colleagues wore special adapted footwear, that attached them to the poles, that allowed them to climb up and down to attach on the wires. The men wore large leather belts, for support to do this work. The smell of creosote from the new poles filled the air with its strong aroma, and the sticky smelly substance was hard to get off clothes, as well as knees, and hands.

The immediate impact of electricity was apparent, greatly reducing the drudgery associated with many home and farm tasks. The rural homes now enjoyed light at the turn of a switch, as well as a range of modern conveniences – electric kettles, irons, heaters and corn grinders.

The Electric water pumps brought running water on tap, eliminating the chore of drawing water from the well, and enabling the development of group water schemes from the 1950s.

The farmers could now use modern farm technology, such as infrared heaters for rearing Bonham's, and chickens, outdoor lighting to enable them to work past dusk, feed grinders, and electric welders for repairs, The sky was the limit, and rural Ireland was now a viable location for new industries, providing employment, reducing emigration, and boosting local economies.

In Limerick, Patrickswell was the third rural area in Ireland out of 792 to receive electricity under the scheme. They started in December 1947 and finished in April 1948. The line was 134 km long with 1825 poles and 490 consumers were signed up. Glenbaun, Ballyhahill was the 744th district in Ireland and the last in Limerick to be wired up commencing in July 1961 and finishing in October of the same year. A total of 857 poles were used along the 70km route to connect 476 consumers.

The roll out of electricity offered rural Ireland the opportunities for a quality of life available in the towns and city's appropriate for the twentieth century. Now seventy years later we could do with a similar roll out of broadband to bring rural Ireland in line with the major towns and cities. It should be a lot easier now to emulate the ESB deeds and to make the big switch on.

Ex: Limerick Leader 11th February 2012

Two-timing comes betw our old frie

JohnB.Kea

OUT IN THE OPEN

THAT GREAT partnership of Willie Finucane and Jack McElligott of Lisaniska and Trien, respectively, who excelled themselves on the Late Late Show some weeks ago, had its first and last setback recently.

In fact, they had the father and mother of a row which grew so serious that it warranted intervention by onlookers. When I met the pair last week they were the best of friends once more.

"It was a good thing it happened," said Willie Finucane. "It was simmering for a good bit and it came to the boil at last. I can tell you the cover was rightly blown off the pot."

What happened was this. A certain widow from the west of Abbeyfeale was two-timing the pair of them. She would make a date with Jack for Tuesday night and with Willie for Wednesday night.

Inevitably things became fouled up when Willie turned up on Jack's night to collect his gloves. Instead of the gloves he found Jack. Hot words followed while the widow stood smiling triumphantly with her hands folded.

Old sores were opened and one word borrowed another. The result was that the two friends went their separate ways.

It wasn't until they met accidentally a week later in Browne's pub of Athea that they made it up again.

Now they are the best of friends, as always, and they have made a solemn covenant that nothing will come between them again.

The Abbeyfeale widow was the only one who gained out of the ruction. At the present time she is going around the country boasting that two television stars fought over her.

"Her value is gone up," said Jack McElligott.

"When people hear we fought over her," said Willie thoughtfully, "they'll think she's another Cleopatra."

To date, Willie has received three positive offers of marriage and Jack McElligott two. They are so busy signing autographs, according to Willie, that they have pains in their hands worse than ever they got futting turf.

"I know now," said Willie, "what George Best feels like."

Paul Singer for the Presidency? The idea has been mooted recently in certain quarters. And why not? Didn't the man discover millions where it was believed there wasn't a brown penny. The bother would be a commemorative stamp after his term of office had expired.

Matchmaking

OUR FRIEND P. Barrett of Ardagh writes.

"Dear John B.,

When I went to school to Clounleharde in the early years of the century, Ruckard Drury worked with farmers in Clounleharde.

In the spring of 19 self and three othe employed spreadin seed and farmyard in drills. They were their dinner at th time. When they go table was in the m the kitchen and the coarse meal sack over it.

The woman of th then took a middle-s of potatoes and thre up. She then took a that was roasting by and put it on a plate

She added some n water for to make gr herring wasn't so between so many.

When Ruckard D down he imm started to pick out t ring's eyes with hi and fork. The woma house who was s close by grew curic asked him what he to.

"Missus," said Ruc don't want the cratu the crowd that's goir tack him.

"I was talking la some leading female district of Carra about matrimony ar

They are s busy signir autograph that they ha pains in the hands wor than ever th got futting t

told me that any mat the locality would b matches.

"Matchmaking the was for grandmothers told me they woul marry a man from Ki nure, Duagh, or eve Lotts without knowin for at least a year.

"I spoke to them c laugh men and their a was a definite no. The they knew every bach Ballaugh and while were ok, others had m who would cut you t marrow of the bone now where are we? - I rett, The Waterfall, Arc

Smiling server

LOUIS HEAPHY, genial Ballylongford pr server, has been inun with requests to appe television.

Frank Hall himself the long journey from trose to Ballylongford terview Louis but summons king was not able.

When I spoke to Loui Saturday and asked hin he refused to appear h quick to answer.

"I'm too modest," he It was an honest an from the man who s close on a thousand monses every year.