

• Thatcher, Jim Halpin at work. Jim, from Ballysimon Road, is also a very talented artist who sold 23 paintings at his first exhibition in the Georgian House, in November

• Pictures: Michael Cowhey



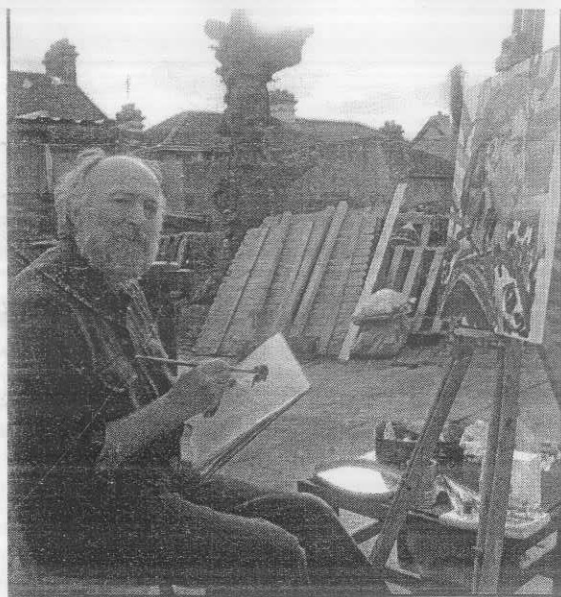
LEISURE II
Edited by PATRICIA FEEHILY



The thatcher who is also a gifted artist

SKILLED his works snapped up. Limerick and went to art Donegal, Monaghan, thatchers are "Brian MacMahon, the artist organised Mayo, Galway and it"





Jim Halpin, artist and thatcher

also a gifted artist

SKILLED thatchers are scarce enough on the ground these days. But finding one who is also a very talented artist is a rare discovery indeed.

Limerick's Jim Halpin is both a thatcher and an artist, and his work in both disciplines is widely admired. Although he only took up painting seriously in the past three years, his first exhibition at the Georgian House in Pery Square last November, saw 23 of

his works snapped up. "Brian MacMahon, the artist encouraged me to take up painting again and I'm glad I did. People seem to like my style," he said.

His work is stunningly individual and sometimes stark and awesome. But he is very modest.

"I paint what I see. I suppose there is a touch of the abstract in it." He has painted some arresting portraits and likes an interesting face. "It helps when there's a hat and a beard," he laughs.

He and his wife Patricia, and their three children, Tom 13, Sadhbh 11, and Eibhlin 8, live on the Ballysimon Road. A city man, born and bred close to where he now lives, he says he's a bit of a countryman at heart.

"When you're out there thatching an old farmhouse in the middle of rural Limerick, in a place you never even knew before, it kind of soaks into you," he says. Anyhow, he points out, his father came from Ballyneety and he loved the countryside.

Jim himself travelled a lot in his younger days. When he left school, he went to Kevin Street College of Technology and studied Electrical Engineering for two years. Then he came back to

Limerick and went to art school and then got a job in the office of builder, Sean Cox.

He travelled in England, France and Germany. "I wasn't exactly an emigrant worker. It was more of a holiday," he admits. When he came back, he worked as a painter and decorator.

And the thatching? "Oh, that happened by accident," he says.

A friend in Galway, named Gussie Quinn, had signed up for some

Donegal, Monaghan, Mayo, Galway and the Aran Islands.

Thatched houses are not as scarce as we think in Limerick either.

"There were 300 thatched houses in the county when I started. That might be nearly halved by now, but Limerick still has the highest number, higher even than Clare, and the old thatched houses now have preservation orders on them."

The reason why the thatched roof survived in

AT HOME . . .
with Jim Halpin,
Ballysimon Rd,
Limerick

course and sent him on an application form.

"One course was on thatching and I signed up for that and started in Donegal in 1981. I learned everything about thatching from the late Jack Meaney, who came originally from Ashford in Limerick."

He has worked as a thatcher all over the country, in

Limerick may have been due, he said, to the fact that the material used was Shannon reed and this was always readily available.

"I got to know a lot of the fishermen in Limerick who made a living out of fishing in the summer and cutting reeds in the winter for the thatchers. A lot of them are gone but some are still there."

He is amazed at the fact

that we have to import reed now, from places like Turkey and Poland, and says that there was an indigenous industry in reed harvesting that should have been better supported.

Some of his paintings are also inspired by a rural world that he thought had disappeared.

"But it's out there yet in parts of County Limerick, absolutely untouched

and unspoilt by so called progress." He likes to paint remnants of the old city of Limerick too and talks of several houses with galvanise roofs, where "the thatch is still there under the galvanise".

"When I started thatching," he tells you, "there were eight houses in Lower Park alone that were still thatched. They're all gone now."

He says that he paints for pleasure and he is amazed at the great reaction to his works. Encouraged by Brian MacMahon, he joined the Hilary Cunningham class and has become quite a prolific painter.

It may sound like a strange combination, painting and thatching, but for Jim, it all encompasses the same artistic condition.

• Above: time to relax, Jim and Patricia with their children Sadhbh, Tom and Eibhlin

• Right: At the kitchen table



• Jim and Patricia in their living room. The painting behind Patricia is Jim's vision of the sea

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Limerick County Council Comhairle Chontae Luimnigh



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