

In 1964, Tony became club captain. He told his fiancée the wedding was off ...until the rowing season was over

€100,000 bid to restore roof to 1855 original

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ON A SUNNY Friday afternoon, Tony Tynne looks across the Shannon from Sarsfield Bridge and down onto a club celebrating its birthday. Exactly 147 years to the day since it began, we are walking down the steps to the Limerick Boat Club, which has been a part of Limerick life since February 3, 1870.

Tony, the club President who is now in his 80th year, is joined by club Captain Hannah Fitch and Honorary Secretary Brian Sheppard.

Mr. Tynne is currently working on a history of the club that he anticipates will be published before the club's 150th anniversary, and his knowledge of the club is encyclopaedic. It is no wonder that he is also an esteemed quizmaster, planning an upcoming fundraising quiz for Limerick Boat Club at the nearby Shannon Rowing Club on February 16.

From its earliest days, the club was a success: "We have trophies that we won in O'Brien's Bridge in 1870," said Tony. "Our first small boat win was Robert Gibson in a canoe at Castleconnell Regatta in 1872," added Brian Sheppard.

However, transportation in the late 19th and early 20th century was quite different to how it is now: "Boats had to be carried to the station and go by rail to Cork and Galway. At the other side, there were people paid by the club who would lift the boat and bring it down to the regatta enclosure. When the boat came back to Colbert Station, the members collected the boats and brought them back to the

club."

Tony's own history with the club goes back almost 60 years, and he can recall that there were several key members of the club at the time.

"Dick Roche introduced me to rowing at the Boat Club. There was Jim O'Neill, Paddy Moroney from the Limerick Leader, Brendan Hanrahan, Charlie O'Connor, Jim Sheehan. I joined in 1958 and in the first year, I was co-opted onto the committee and I've never left it since. But they were the guys who had been here in the 1930s, 40s, right up until the 80s. They had done their 50 years."

Back in 1964, Tony was made captain of the club. He was also due to get married the same year but informed his wife Bernie that the wedding would have to wait, as he had club responsibilities. They got married in August, once the rowing season was over.

Limerick Boat Club has not been as prominent in recent years, and three years ago this month, the roof of its landmark boathouse suffered irreparable damage during Storm Darwin. The club has now embarked on a fundraising drive to raise the €100,000 needed for a new roof.

Displaying a picture on his phone, Brian notes that "long-term, the ambition is to restore it to how it looked in 1885."

Tony clearly recalls February 12 2014: "I get a phone call from one of our rowing girls in Amsterdam, and she knew before I did. It seems there was a guy over in the Strand and he took a video of 8 seconds, and it went all over the world."

However, it was not the first time a storm had wreaked havoc on Limerick Boat Club. Months after its initial construction in 1872, part of the new roof was blown off during a storm. "The committee brought the builder to court for poor workmanship and he had to replace the part



that was blown off," noted Tony.

As I get a tour of the boat house, Tony points to older timber boats in the corner, which were predominantly used up until the late 1960s. Nowadays, it is carbon fibre boats that we see rowers going up and down the Shannon on.

"We actually started in the wooden boats, and learned on them," recalls Hannah Fitch. Hannah initially joined the club as a junior member in 1988, when Tony was her coach. "We were the first women; it was a male-only club up until then."

As Club Captain, Ms. Fitch is one



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of the driving forces in reigniting the club, with an increased emphasis on recreational rowing. "Recreational rowing is a new philosophy here in Ireland because it's been very competitive until now. The Rowing Union identified that there was a need there to keep people in the sport because

usually people were leaving once they got to 18 or 19, because they found it too difficult to go to college."

"I felt that it would be a viable thing to do here to help rebuild the club, and a few of us got together in November 2015, and we've been here every weekend, and it's just grown," she added.

The response has seen people of all ages who never set foot in a boat embrace the sport: "One lady who is 63 took it up and she absolutely loves it and she comes once a week. Our youngest is 13. We all sit in a boat together - different ages, different gender - and we have a laugh and move the boat," Hannah said.

Brian Sheppard has been involved in the club for over 30 years, but only in the past year has he learnt to row from Hannah. His progress has seen him help on the coaching side as well. "There's five of us on coaching courses currently. There are a lot of older members who rowed coming back and coaching," Brian told Limerick Life.

As we look around the clubhouse, which was built in 1885, boats are stacked around a room that was once used to hold functions. It is the hope of members that they can go back to using that facility for meetings and as a training facility with rowing machines. That will come when a new roof is in place, which Tony Tynne hopes to see happen in time for the club's 150th birthday celebrations in 2020.

"I still enjoy going down the river; I hope to be on the river tomorrow. When you go out on the river, there's a tranquillity you get nowhere else," he says, while standing proudly in his Limerick Boat Club jumper.

For more information on Limerick Boat Club, go to [facebook.com/limerickboatclub](https://www.facebook.com/limerickboatclub) or visit their fundraising page at www.gofundme.com/limerick-boat-club-raise-the-roof




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