

# News Feature

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# WHERE THE RIVER RUNS

## CHANGING LIMERICK

A major series on the transformation of the county  
**Patricia Feehily reports**



IT'S hard enough to capture the changing face of picturesque Castleconnell. Village expansion had already started here when similar sized villages still had creamery cars lining up on their main streets, but there is a timelessness here that still challenges the impact of progress. In some ways, nothing has changed in main street Castleconnell.

But change is definitely in the air, blending almost imperceptibly with a distinctive aura of old respectability. The village with its unparalleled river amenity is every bit as desirable a residential location today as it was in the heyday of the gentry, and nowhere has the 'big house' mentality adapted more admirably to the times and to the upheavals of history.

But there is another mentality affecting the life and future of Castleconnell. Nobody wants to talk about it much, but the planners refer to it euphemistically as the "commuting mentality". It has to be tackled, they say, but so far the tackle isn't proving very effective.

For while new houses and new estates are springing up everywhere, and the ruins of the ancient de Burgh fortress now overlook a modern commercial centre designed for small businesses, most of the units still display 'for sale'

### No 21: CASTLECONNELL

Population: 2,636, a drop of .04 per cent on the 2002 census

Famous for: Fishing and hurling

Famous people: Mick and John Mackey, Paddy Scanlon, Mick Hickey, Jim Close and the other members of the renowned Ahane hurling team of the 1940s; John Enright, who won the world fly casting competition in London in 1896; traditional singer Ann Mulqueen; boxer Andy Lee and adopted son, comedian Pat Shortt

Most memorable event: The world kayak championships in 2005, held for the first time in Ireland; the homecoming of world fly casting champion John Enright in 1896 and the Scouting Melvin trophy competition in 1999, in which 400 scouts and 170 adult leaders took part

ferred with in any future developments. But sadly in the last couple of years we have seen the demolition of houses on the main street to make way for big housing developments just off the street.

Now, we are not against progress, but very often progress can be a poor respecter of heritage and tradition, and this is brought home to us when we see old business houses and landmarks disappearing before the wrecking crews."

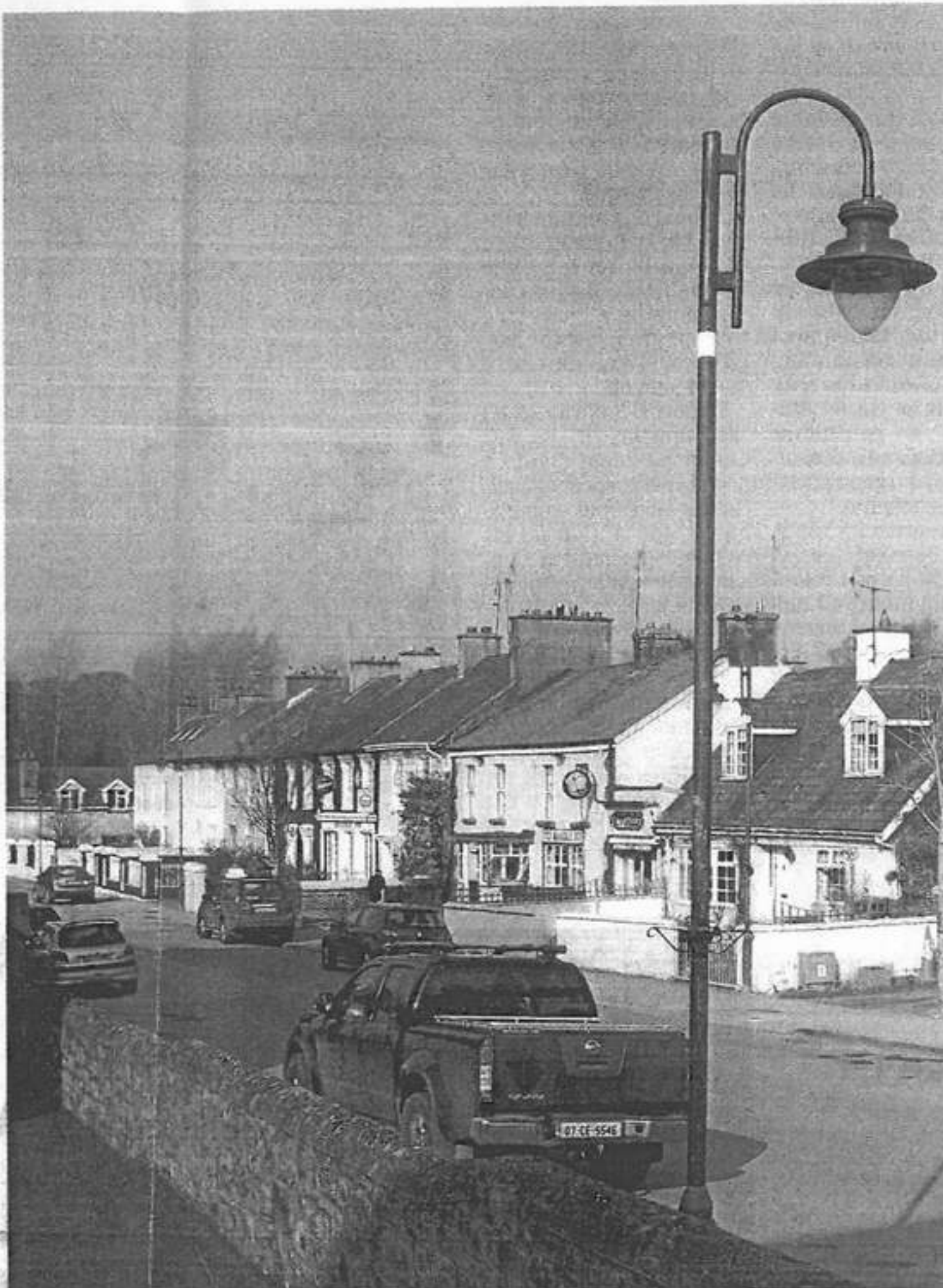
Anyone involved in fishing is involved in the

"We're entering again this year in the Tidy Towns and we'll take it from there. There is no reason why we shouldn't make a big impact. I always felt that this was a nicer place, with more potential, than Adare."

Albie is also on a committee formed to honour the centenary of his famous relative, John Enright, world fly casting champion and inventor of the Enright fishing rod. The event is expected to take place in late October.

But if the character of Castleconnell is perceived to be under threat, the characters are as prominent and unique as ever.

Paddy Guerin, publican and chairman of the Kingfisher Angling club - you find your-



Downtown Castleconnell: the main street in the pretty village retains its Georgian splendour



Booty: George and Paddy Lee with some of their fishing trophies



Strings attached: Malcom Gullis, of the Irish Harp Centre



Martin Duhig, Limerick Youth Service, Albi Enright, Tidy Towns, Michael Moran, FÁS and Joe Carroll, local historian





has to be tackled, they say, but so far the tackle isn't proving very effective.

For while new houses and new estates are springing up everywhere, and the ruins of the ancient de Burgh fortress now overlook a modern commercial centre designed for small businesses, most of the units still display 'for sale' signs. A spokesperson for the auctioneers said that there was a buy-out of the development which delayed progress and this was all sorted just before Christmas. Five of the units are still for sale.

Also, the Pink Cottage, a craft centre opened with great ceremony by former President Mary Robinson over a decade ago, is closed. The village is not as sustainable as it was in the days when it boasted of five local hotels serving an international fishing industry. Apart from the builders and road workers, the main street was more or less empty the day we visited. Everyone seemed to be in Limerick city at work.

Local historian Joe Carroll tells us that the core of the village hasn't changed for centuries - apart from the erection of the parish hall on a piece of waste ground 50 years ago. It could hardly be otherwise, because Castleconnell has more protected buildings than any village or town in the country.

But the recent demolition of two old houses in the main street - one of them the former 'Jackie Mac's' - has dented the faith of older residents in the county council's promise to "protect the unique character of the village".

"We were always led to believe," said Mr Carroll, "that the streetscape of the village would not be inter-

business houses and landmarks disappearing before the wrecking crews."

## Anyone involved in fishing is involved in the environment. At the end of the day, the river is what defines Castleconnell

Mr Carroll says that the character of Castleconnell is definitely changing and locals are wondering where it will all end. "It is time to cry 'stop'," he said, "and it is time for our planning authority to take a look at what is happening here. Castleconnell is one of Ireland's oldest and most historic villages and should be preserved in its traditional state."

It was founded in the 14th century, he said, when the survivors of the Black Death fled from Stradbally and established a settlement around the castle. Albie Enright - the last surviving member of the family famous for the "Enright fishing rod" - said it was a pity to see old landmarks disappear. "The old streetscape should have been preserved," he said.

But Albie is determined to see that Castleconnell, despite all the building works and road works currently in progress, will present its best face to the world. He is chairman of the re-invigorated Tidy Towns committee.

the Enright fishing rod. The event is expected to take place in late October.

But if the character of Castleconnell is perceived to be under threat, the characters are as prominent and unique as ever.

Paddy Guerin, publican and chairman of the Kingfisher Angling club - you find yourself enrolled as a member despite protesting that you've never held a fishing rod in your life - runs what is probably the most atmospheric pub in the country, a virtual life museum. Featured everywhere from the New York Times to the National Geographic Magazine, stepping into Paddy's establishment takes you on a journey into another dimension where time doesn't matter any more - and that's before you've even put a drink to your lips.

He epitomises the welcoming spirit of Castleconnell, and although he has been living there for just 30 years, the place means everything to Paddy and his wife Mary. "If a stranger comes into the pub - I don't care where he comes from or what language he speaks, I can communicate with him. We have a common language when we're welcoming people here. No one ever has to feel left out. You know," he said, "the luckiest people in the world are the people who need other people."

He is deeply involved in environmental interests - salmon conservation and issuing fishing permits for the ESB. "Anyone involved in fishing is involved in the environment," he says. "At the end of the day, the river is what defines Castleconnell."

Pat Dempsey, community council chairman and vice-chairman of ACM, the Castleconnell, Ahane, Montpelier



Welcoming smiles: Elaine Faul of ACM Kiiz and Shauna Carmody Grace

ALL PICTURES: MIKE COWHEY

community project, says that it is a very vibrant and spirited community. He lists about 20 activities currently in progress either under the auspices of ACM or running at the centre and they range from the new after school service to the Evergreen club nights where people gather for story telling, music and song - away from a pub atmosphere.

Pat, a medical scientist at St John's Hospital, who came to live in Castleconnell from Zambia about 30 years ago, was involved in the community from the start. "It is a place where you can be involved. There's never any great dissension, at least nothing that can't be sorted out."

Castleconnell has a big

Supervalu supermarket now, but George Lee's corner shop is still a big attraction. "It was a tackle shop, but my father changed it to a grocery shop in 1946," George says. "The role of the corner shop has changed in every village. It's more of a convenience store now, but the customers keep coming."

George's father Paddy married the famous John Enright's sister, Mary, and Paddy told us of the many celebrities who stayed across the road at the Shannon Inn Hotel and bought their tackle in the shop. Hanging in place of honour in the premises yet is one of the last remaining Enright fishing rods. The Shannon Inn is now a popular pub run by the redoubtable Paddy Hickey.

Among the customers we met in Lees was Malcolm Gullis, who with his wife Dr Janet Harbison established the Irish Harp Centre and music school in Castleconnell which now has 20 teachers, and includes Leaving Cert and Junior Cert music on the curriculum. The pupils range in age from four to 80, he told us.

Up the street at the ACM, Elaine Faul from O'Callaghan's Mills manages the after school child care service, collecting children from the local school and bringing them to the centre for a snack. "They do their homework here and play in the garden if it's fine, under supervision, until their parents collect them after work," she said. The service has just started but they already have



Martin Duhig, Limerick Youth Service, Albi Enright, Tidy Towns, Michael Moran, FÁS and Joe Carroll, local historian



Magnificent vista: wild swans at play in the Shannon river

at least a dozen children each day.

Services for teenagers and young people are booming too at the ACM centre. Martin Duhig of O'Brien's Bridge, a youth worker with the Limerick Youth service runs separate clubs for young men and young women. There are also after school clubs, a club for first and second year students and a local youth club. Michael Moran, Fas supervisor, provides staff for 16 schemes, including caretaking and amenity works.

A living, thriving community then, outshining even the echoes of past glories. And whatever about fears of a commuting mentality, news of a new commuter rail service from Cloughjordan via Birdhill and Castleconnell to Lim-

erick to suit workers due to start in September, has been widely welcomed.

Changing times indeed, but Castleconnell knows better than most places how to adapt to change. Few people now remember the impact the Shannon Scheme had on the once famous fisheries. My colleague Ron Kirwan in the course his history thesis "Letting in the Water", spoke to Patrick, the son of one of Castleconnell's famous boatmen, Shanks Tuohy, who told him that the industry was "destroyed overnight".

But the community adapted and thanks, ironically, to the ESB and the drift net ban, and more pertinently to people like Mick Murtagh, the salmon are plentiful again in Castleconnell.

**W**EXFORD born, Pat Dempsey came back from Zambia in 1976, got a job as a medical scientist at St John's Hospital and built a house near Castleconnell. Ever since he has been one of the best known community activists.

"By and large, it's a place where you can get involved. There is never any great dissension, at least nothing that cannot be easily sorted out," he said.

He started out with the local scouts and that led to involvement in the annual crafts fair, which has been running for 19 years now, and then he joined the community council. He has been

## COMMUNITY ACTIVIST



nity activities in the centre of the village. He's also a member of the Tidy Towns committee.

"The biggest challenge," he said, "is knitting the community together and I think we have managed to do that very well."

The ACM has been of huge benefit to the community, he said. "We have something for everyone. One of the most popular is the Evergreen club, where people can come and enjoy a night of singing and music as well as story telling. We have a couple of fear a' ti who entertain the attendance and everyone enjoys it."

**A**LADDIN'S cave is what they call Guerin's pub in Castleconnell.

"They", by the way, can be writers from the New York Times or the National Geographic Magazine, all enthralled by the atmospheric pub in the heart of Castleconnell. Paddy and Mary Guerin have an international clientele, as well as a very loyal local one.

The pub has won traditional pub of the year four times in a row, and is now listed in Turtle's "40 best pubs". It has a fascinating collection of memorabilia, romantic dimly lit nooks and crannies reminiscent of another age, furniture he made himself and several

## PADDY THE PUBLICAN



atmosphere alone, and then emerge into the modern world a fully fledged member of the Kingfisher club, whose approved guide you're told is Michael O'Doherty.

"It's a small committee," Paddy assures you when you wonder what you've just signed up to. "I have no time for big committees."

Actually it's Paddy himself who makes the pub such an unique experience. He's the ultimate communicator.

It's hard to believe it, but he's actually a native of Limerick city, who came to Castleconnell about 30 years ago and bought Paddy Scanlon's pub. Now Castleconnell means everything to him, especially the river and fish conservation.