

Island men put touchstones of their community on the record

■ Hunt Museum-supported project produces Island Life Heritage Trail pamphlet

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A HERITAGE pamphlet entitled *Island Life Heritage Trail* produced by the St Mary's Parish Men's Shed was launched at King's Island Youth and Community Centre last week. The project forms part of the ongoing Communities of Culture initiative, developed by the Hunt Museum.

The work was funded by Limerick Regeneration and by the Friends of the Hunt Museum. The launch featured passionate speeches, video clips and local musicians.

The St Mary's Men's Shed members include Tom Williams, Ger Ryan, Ger Mason, Andrew Duhig, Tony Daly, Brian Moloney, Christy Flanagan, Tom Copues, Paul O'Driscoll, J.J. (Emmanuel) Jackson, Kieran Barrett, John Lawless, John Ryan, Noel Ryan, Gus Quinn, Damien Sheehan and Joe Wallace.

Before the proceedings began, I spoke with Sorcha O'Brien, access officer with the Hunt Museum. Sorcha told me that when she initially began working with the Men's Shed group, the members took her on a walking tour of St Mary's Parish and pointed out all the historical sites and areas of interest to them when they were growing up.

Many of the men have connections with the city's famous Abbey fishermen and Sorcha was treated to a boat ride around the island and along the Shannon as far as Ardnacrusha.

Once the men had established the sites, the people and the events they wished to highlight in their pamphlet, the work began in earnest. Some of the men starred in videos, talking about their experiences and memories of island life in Limerick City.

Users of the pamphlet will be able to view the videos which are downloadable using QR codes. The resulting pamphlet gives a fascinating insight into life in Limerick's oldest parish and is produced to the highest possible standard.

I spoke with Dinny Keogh, one of the musicians for the occasion, and a native of the parish. Dinny has written a song called *Tell Me a Story*, Maggie about island life. Maggie refers to his grandmother, Maggie Walsh, who lived in Columcille Street. Maggie was a former bacon factory worker, and like many of her time "she hadn't it easy".

Her house was built of mass concrete: freezing cold and damp. She suffered



Tom Copues, Kieran Barrett, Paul O'Driscoll, Tom William, Ger Ryan, John Lawless, Christy Flanagan, Ger Mason with Hugh Maguire, Director of the Hunt Museum and Cllr John Gilligan, at the launch of the Island Life Heritage Trail at the King's Island Community Centre

Pictures: Brendan Gleeson



Sean O'Driscoll and John Lawless, looking at their biographies on the Island Life Heritage Trail



Brian Moloney and Dinny Keogh entertaining the crowd at the launch of the Island Life Heritage Trail

the loss of two children in childhood but Maggie's heart was a big as her house and she never seemed downcast.

She reared her grandson and from what I could see, he adored her. Born in 1894, she was a great teller of stories, her style a throwback to the oral tradition. Her stories were often terrifying. The headless coachman who was reputed to travel near Thomond Bridge, for example, gave young Dinny many an uneasy night.

Maggie was also musical and Dinny recalls buying a mouth organ for her at Georgie Sullivan's shop on Nicholas Street. Dinny says his song is not just about his grandmother, but about her generation, the kind of people he knew growing up, resilient, good-humoured, and who contributed to the cultural landscape we inherit today.

Proceedings began with Hugh Maguire, director of the Hunt Museum, outlining the thinking behind the Communities of Culture initiative. He said that the museum must be more than just a building with artefacts on show behind glass. It must reach out to the various communities in the city, particularly to its neighbours in St Mary's Parish, engage with them and become relevant to them. The success of the initiative to date means that there is "no going back" and the museum is now committed to similar projects in the future.

Former Mayor of Limerick, John Gilligan, spoke passionately about his native place and about the Island Life Heritage Trail project. He said traditionally museums are elitist, the reserve of a small and closed clientele.

This is not a criticism that can be levelled at the Hunt. This project impressed him because it was not a case where the museum told the people of the island what to do but about people-directed learning and creativity. It is, he said, a fantastic way to record ourselves and our people.

St Mary's is old Limerick; it is where the city began. Cllr Gilligan was particularly passionate in his view that social history, the story of ordinary people, is just as important, if not more important, than the issues usually recorded by historians: politics, wars and economics.

Cllr Gilligan is of the view that for far too long other people's impression of St Mary's parishioners has been recorded rather than the people of the parish using their own voice to

define "who we are". It is vital to record the areas about to be redeveloped as they will soon be changed forever and the experiences of a whole generation could be lost.

The Men's Shed group has played a huge part in kick starting the process. The group is interested in everything and anything that is of interest to the parish and to the development of the community and therein lays its merit. The Men's Shed represents the community in all its diversity.

Finally, Cllr Gilligan urged the people of his area never to settle for second-best. "If you settle for second best, you will be second-best", he declared.

After the speeches, those assembled were treated to a viewing of the videos made by the men of the Men's Shed group. These videos have their roots in the oral

tradition of handing on cultural information and establishing identity.

Unsurprisingly, the Shannon and Abbey rivers figured prominently in their thoughts: boat making, paddling, rowing and poling on the rivers, swimming at Corbally baths, were all spoken of while the depletion of the fish stocks was very much regretted. Tom Williams spoke of his family's military connections while Tom Copues exhibited and spoke about a casket made by his aunt, Kathleen O'Farrell when she was a TB patient in St Camillus's Sanatorium.

These videos give a short but vivid description of the housing conditions, the food that was eaten (bacon offal, skirts and kidneys were particular cuts) the health of the people and the lives that were lived on the island over the past 70 years or so. In short, the pamphlet gives an insight into the cultural pursuits that enriched and brought joy to the lives of the people in what were often difficult and challenging times.

A copy of this culturally and historically significant pamphlet can be obtained from Limerick City CPD (St. Mary's office, 5 Verdant Crescent, King's Island) and also in PDF format from the Hunt Museum.