

News Feature

Read the notes for your locality in **Community Leader** at the back of our new compact **Leader Sport** section

A HISTORY AS OLD AS TIME

CHANGING LIMERICK

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



NO other community in County Limerick can boast of roots quite as long or quite as enduring as those of Holycross and Lough Gur. Lough Gur was a farming settlement over 5,000 years ago, and to this day, despite every agricultural upheaval, it has maintained those unique farming links.

"This is still very much a farming community," said retired creamery manager, Austin Cregan, who told us that there were 125 milk suppliers at the small local creamery back in the 1950's. The creamery is long gone, but many of its former suppliers are still involved in farming.

Even more important, the sense of community which forced those first Neolithic farmers to band together, continues in the parish still. "It's a great community. Everyone gets involved and everyone plays a part," said Scariff born Maureen Cregan, who came to live at Lough Gur nearly 50 years ago. You can sense it yourself, as Aine Barry and Catherine Reardon talk about preparations for the Summer Solstice Festival starting on June 20, which includes pre-

No 34: LOUGH GUR

Population: approximately 500

Famous for: one of the richest archaeological sites in the country, and for folklore and drama.

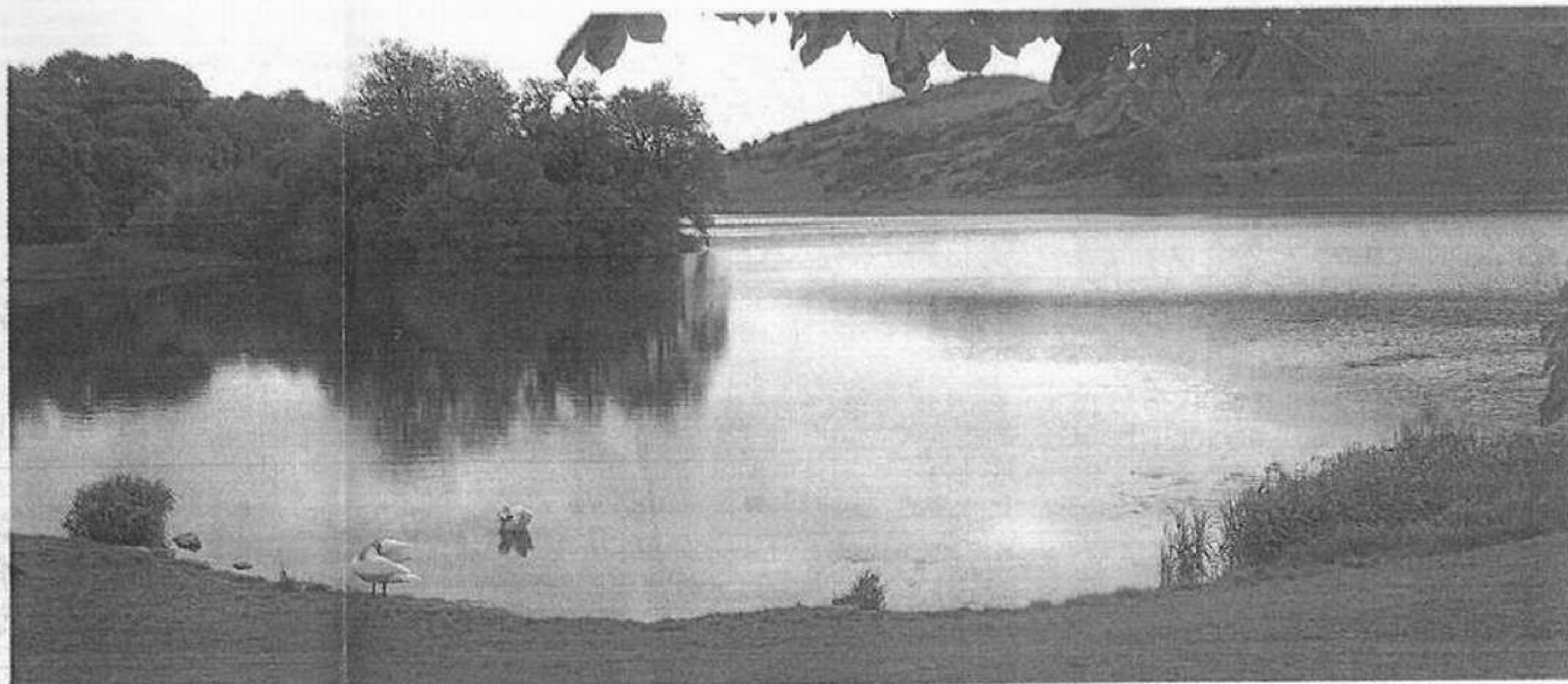
Famous people: The 14th century Earl of Desmond, Gearoid Iarla, "Gerald the Rhymer", guardian of the lake; Tom and Mary Josephine (nee Hannon) Fitzgerald, maternal great-grandparents of assassinated US president, John F Kennedy. Biggest event: The archaeological excavations begun at Knockadoon by Professor Sean P. O Riordan in the late 1930's and the BBC documentary on the Neolithic finds.

front, historical re-enactments, a craft market, a photography exhibition and street theatre, and Brian Merriman's 'Midnight Court'. The festival concludes with the Willie Carroll memorial skittles tournament at Reardon's - a tribute to a long time community stalwart who passed away in recent times.

"The whole parish is involved in one way or another," said Aine.

Involvement is the key word. They have, for instance, the biggest group water scheme in Munster provided in 1973 and now servicing 600 households. They have a fantastic drama group too and Holycross has

to be enraptured by the mysterious enchantment of the lake, or intrigued by the famous archaeological discoveries at Knockadoon Hill, or who stop occasionally on the road to Bruff to contemplate the mystery of the Great Stone Circle at Grange, don't really know Lough Gur at all. You have to go to the poetry sessions every month in Reardon's pub or to the annual Summer Solstice festival or to the Halloween story telling, to experience the essence and continuity of the place. Much of the social life revolves between the local Honey Fitz theatre and Reardon's, where the poetry usually ends in a great sing song.



There has been a settlement on the shores of Lough Gur for the last 5,000 years, every since the beginning, farming has driven the local economy

PICTURES: MIKE COWHEY

assassinated US president, John F Kennedy. Honey Fitz's father, Tom Fitzgerald, emigrated to Boston from Bruff, but his origins were in Lough Gur, Michael Quinlan tells us, while Tom's wife, Mary Josephine Hannon was a native of Lough Gur. When they opened the Honey Fitz in the transformed old schoolhouse, distinguished visitors included JFK's sisters, Jean Kennedy Smith, then the US ambassador here, and Patricia Lawford.

Lough Gur excited a lot of curiosity over 40 years ago when some of the most amazing archaeological discoveries were broadcast to the world via a BBC documentary. But although the County Council and the then Shannonside Tourism built an interpretative centre at the lake, and the Sunday morning guided walking tours by retired local

sense of a lost potential. Over-shadowed by sites like Newgrange, Lough Gur never really received the attention it deserved as a site of immense international significance, highlighted by Professor Sean P O'Riordan and Professor M J O'Kelly. The whole history of Ireland is here, from the megalithic tombs to the ring forts, from prehistoric farming sites to crannog lake dwellings, and from the mysterious stone circle to the Norman Black Castle and the later Bourcher's castle, home of a son of the Earl of Bath. More recent history is prominent too. Maureen Cregan was digging in her garden a few years back and dug up a hand grenade from the War of Independence. The house where she lived had once belonged to an East Limerick Brigade old IRA Commander Martin Conway, and both DeValera and Ernie O'Malley were frequent visitors there

laughed.

But there's a haunting silence now over Lough Gur. The local pub, the famous "Red Cellar" is closed and business is not as brisk as it used to be at the interpretative centre.

"We won't exaggerate," said Mr Quinlan, who holds an MA in Archaeology and Heritage and who has written a trilogy of novels based on the history of the area. "A lot of people visit Lough Gur, but we wouldn't exactly have bus loads arriving here every day." And that may not be a bad thing. Because, whatever about developing tourism potential, the mystique of Lough Gur is authentic and rare. It needs no props whatsoever. Standing by the lake on a cloudy summer day, you almost expect to see the ghost of Gearoid Iarla rising through the waters riding his famous white horse, waiting for the silver horseshoes to wear out and the fortunes of

Lough Gur.

Lough Gur and Holy Cross (where the church, school and Honey Fitz theatre are located) has escaped the worst of development being an area of high amenity, but people are concerned nonetheless that even farmers' children are now finding it difficult to secure planning permission to build a house in the area.

But something is stirring in the place where Neolithic man first built a farmstead in Limerick. The chairman of Lough Gur development co-op, Tom Tierney tells us that €500,000 has been made available, through Bord Failte and the Minister for the Environment for new developments at Lough Gur.

"The council and Shannon Development are preparing a plan which should be due for public consultation within a month," he said. "Everyone will get a chance to discuss it."

tacle' and whatever stagnation there was since the 80's seems about to be halted.

But there is another stagnation worrying the people of Lough Gur - the eutrophication of the lake.

Even Gearoid Iarla, the 'guardian of the lake', has been powerless against the curse of the algae each summer, and everyone is agreed that something needs to be done about it now.

Another thing we never knew about Lough Gur is this. Nearly every house in the parish has a pair of skates in the attic.

"There is a great tradition of skating in Lough Gur," said Michael Quinlan.

"It doesn't happen as much as it did, but when the lake freezes over, everyone gets their skates on. It was very popular during the very cold winters of the 1960's."

"We all learned to skate on

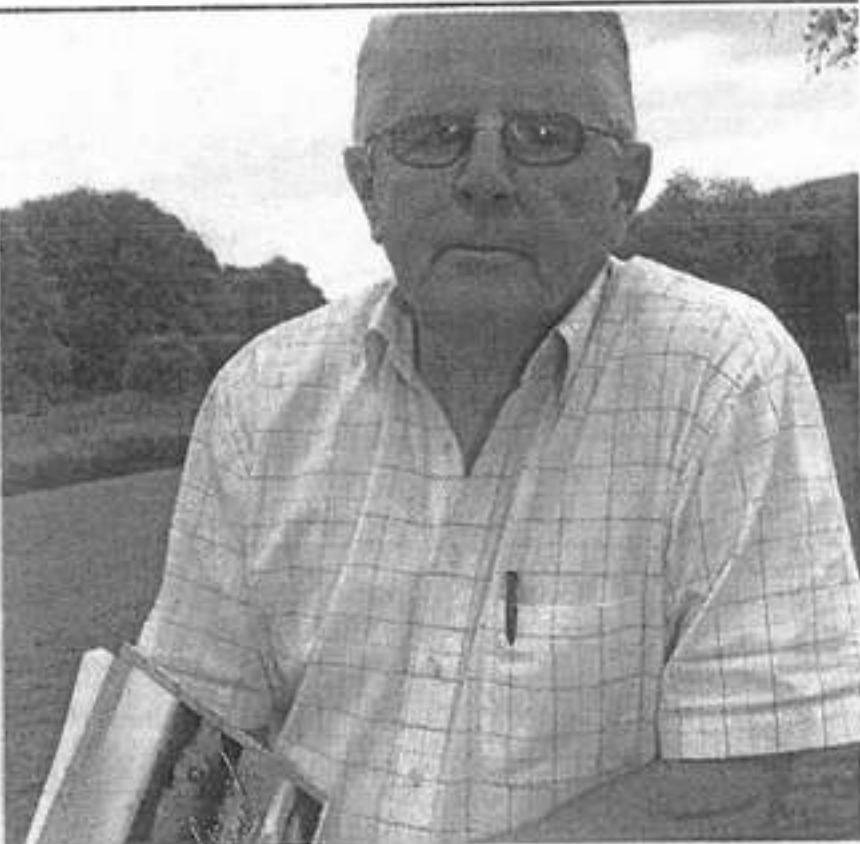
FEW people have played such a prominent role in projecting Lough Gur as has retired school teacher, Michael Quinlan.

He has written three novels based on the fascinating history of the area - A Place of Dreams - the story of the first new stone age farmers at Knockadoon; The Sun Temple the fictionalised story of the building of the Great Stone Circle in the third millennium BC and The Sun Shield of Lough Gur, a story based on the shield recovered from the lake in 1872 and now in the National Museum.

Michael spent 36 years teaching at Lough Gur school. He was born in West Cork but he was educated at Hospital De La Salle school, the home place of his mother.

He qualified as a teacher at St Patrick's Training College in Dublin and taught for three years in James Street before taking up the position at Lough Gur.

THE STORY TELLER'S TALE



Michael Quinlan "It is a wonderful community in every way"

There is practically nothing about Lough Gur and its history that he is not acquainted with, and there is little about the parish that he isn't involved with in some way.

"It is a wonderful community in every way," he said.

The story teller in him thrives on the legends and folklore that surround Lough Gur.

"The greatest legend in Limerick is the story of Gearoid Iarla," he tells you.

Michael conducts walking tours of Lough Gur every Sunday morning.

Drama is strong in the area, he said, and plays have been staged in Lough Gur for over 40 years by a dramatic society which was first formed by Macra na Feirme.

The historical society, under the chairmanship of Michael O'Sullivan has been going strong for 25 years.

"It has 80 members," said Mr Quinlan, and we have six lectures and 80 field trips every year."

FORMER creamery manager, Austin Cregan, comes originally from Manister, but he worked in Clare for some years with the famous travelling creamery that operated out of Scariff. His wife, Maureen is a Scariff woman, but they have lived in Lough Gur for nearly 50 years, reared their family there and have long become synonymous with the community.

Austin was creamery manager at Lough Gur until it closed and he then transferred to Greybridge where he was co-op store manager until his retirement in 1996. But his heart was always with the farmers of Lough Gur. "When I took over there, we had 125 suppliers, but by the time I left there were only 57," he said. But that can be explained, he said, by the fact that many smaller suppliers - some people might have only a couple of cows - got out of milk when rules and regulations made it unprofitable for them to con-

FEELING RIGHT AT HOME



Austin Cregan "We do have something of interest to people"

tinue. But Lough Gur, he said, is still very much an agricultural community.

As a tourist attraction, he believes that there is plenty of scope for improvement in Lough Gur, and he is now looking forward to the plan due to be published for consultation in a couple of weeks. "We're a bit off the beaten track but we do have something of great interest to people," he said.

As a community, it's a place where he and Maureen always felt at home, he said. "It's a really good community and every one is made to feel part of it and its history." They both attend the monthly poetry sessions and sing songs in Rear-dons and they learned to skate on Lough Gur back in the 1960's when the lake froze over regularly. "Every house in the parish has a pair of skates," said Austin. For Maureen, who once made headlines when she dug up a hand grenade from the War of Independence in her garden, the lake itself has never ceased to be a magical place.

GET YOUR SEAT AT SEMPLE STADIUM THURLES 5 YEAR TICKET SCHEME 2008 - 2012

Semple Stadium has just completed an 18 million refurbishment featuring, upgraded spectator facilities, new seating, new concourse area, enhanced restroom facilities, floodlit pitch and Semple Stadium Club Lounge for Corporate Entertainment.

Two Ticket classes are offered

PREMIUM GOLD

- Pre-booked ticket in Ardan O Riain for 5 years
- All Munster Championship games
- All Tipperary County games
- All Mid-Tipperary games
- VIP & Corporate facilities for inter-county senior championship games in new Semple Stadium Club Lounge
- One free parking pass for every 2 tickets purchased
- Complimentary match programme

PRICE 2,000

PREMIUM SILVER

- Pre-booked ticket in Ardan O Riain for 5 years
- All Munster Championship games
- All Tipperary County games
- All Mid-Tipperary games

PRICE 1,000

Tickets can be purchased by single payment or by standing order over 2 or 4 years.

To apply call Siobhan at 0504 22702 or e-mail tippgaa@eircom.net or download application form from www.tipperary.gaa.ie

Tickets will be allocated on a first come, first served basis.

LeaderSPORT

Full coverage of Desmond League's historic win in the Oscar Traynor Trophy



*Fastway Couriers
justg off aster...*

Fastway Couriers (South West), the award winning courier franchise will be launching it's same day business to business delivery service in Limerick city on 6th May

Consider these benefits

- Send your parcel anywhere in the local area from as little as €3.95*
- Full track and trace available online on www.fastway.ie



Airtricity invites you to visit our

Tournafulla Wind Farm...
for European Wind Day

Activities at The Devon Inn Hotel include:

- Wind Farm Site Tours
- BBQ/Refreshments
- Bouncy Castle • Magician
- Face Painters
- Balloon Modellers
- and much more