



Bold venture fell foul of changing times

■ Shamrock Ballroom now a church and still drawing a decent crowd, but there's not so much rock 'n' roll

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WHEN the showband era was in its heyday, hundreds and, in many cases, thousands of young people flocked to the country's ballrooms in search of entertainment and, with a little luck, romance.

Sadly for rural Ireland, the ballrooms' supremacy eventually waned and nowadays abandoned dance halls serve as lonesome reminders of those halcyon days.

For a time, in the Sixties, the Shamrock Ballroom, Caherconlish, seemed to be the centre of the dancing universe.

Just recently we discovered these pictures taken in advance of the Shamrock's opening in 1961.

Unusually, the building of the Shamrock was a community-based effort, a cooperative of all the clubs in the parish, and not a commercial enterprise in the usual sense. It was the "achievement of many years of planning and cooperation" and was due in no small part to the efforts of the relentless Fr. Tom Hayes, C.C.

The ballroom was of a unique design and cost a staggering (at the time) £14,000 to build. Special attention was paid to the quality of the acoustics while the dancefloor was made from "triple-spring maple." Skilful use of colour and subdued lighting were noted and added to the ambiance but the stand-out feature for many was the "deck-of-a-liner" effect of the balcony.

The driveway up to the ballroom was described rather loftily as exhibiting "sweeping beauty" and as being "flanked by two old gas lamp standards - giving a dramatic merging of the old and the new."

The Shamrock opened its doors for the first time on Wednesday, April 26, 1961, when almost 1,000 people gathered to dance to the Donie Collins Orchestra.

The subsequent report in the Limerick Leader predicted that "It will remain a monument to his [Fr Hayes's] greatness, foresight and bigness of heart in doing good for his fellow men - his sole aim in life."



Left: Shamrock Ballroom committee and others in Caherconlish, April 1961. Front row (l to r): Michael McCarthy, T. Ryan, Fr. Hayes, Tom Kelly, Jackie Clifford and Hugh Kelly. Second Row: Tony Connolly, Anne Bourke, Peg Casey, Nancy Connolly, Mrs Madden, Mrs O'Neill, Art Kavanagh, Paddy McCarthy, John O'Brien, Willie Walsh (treasurer). Third Row: Sean Ryan, Michael Nelligan, John McNamara, Dick Laffan, Patsy Bateman, Michael O'Kelly and Paddy Browne. Fourth Row: Michael Murnane, Mick Laffan and John Browne. Fifth Row: Pat Halvey and Joe Goonan

Below left: The Shamrock Ballroom just before the finishing touches were put to the landscaping



Other attractions that came to the Shamrock in 1961 were: the Earl Gill Band with appearances by Bert Weedon and Roly Daniels; Des Fretwell and his Orchestra (at the Caherconlish Lawn Tennis Tournament Dance); Brose Walsh and his Orchestra; Mandrake the Magician (supported by calypso heartthrob Othmar Remy Arthur and A. Gordon Spicer); the Jack Ruane Orchestra; the Red Shadows Showband, Mike Preston; "teenage singing sensa-

tion, Clodagh Rogers," and Billy Lloyd and his showband.

Alas, a multiplicity of factors meant that the ballroom's lifespan was very short, including the transfer of Fr Hayes to another parish and competition from the nearby Oyster Ballroom at Dromkeen. Within approximately two years the Shamrock's dancing days were over. It struggled on as a community hall for about another two years and finally closed its doors in the mid-sixties.

Rather ironically, the Shamrock, as predicted, still stands today as a monument to the greatness of Fr Hayes but in a way neither he nor his committee could ever have foreseen; the building is now Caherconlish parish church and while it still draws a good crowd, there is a little less rock and roll.

Also ironic is that Caherconlish today boasts one of the finest, if not the finest, community-run centres of social interaction in the country, the

magnificent Millennium Centre, where among many other activities to take place there on a weekly basis, ballroom dancing is still thriving.

Caherconlish man, Pat Hourigan will give a full account of the rise and fall of the Shamrock in his forthcoming book on the history of Caherconlish, which is now at the editing stage. We would like to thank Pat for his input to this article and for providing us with the names of those in our photograph.