



**BYRNES
ON TUESDAY**

A Call

WAY back in 1978, one of the first pirate radio stations in Limerick was RLWE, a short-lived but exciting adventure in which I myself was involved.

Paddy Halton from Shannon built the gadgetry, keeping the cost of everything to a minimum because the "offeshals" from the Department of Posts and Telegraphs (I swear, that's what the ministry was called at the time) could raid us at any time and confiscate our equipment. As indeed they did, but we had a second cat's whisker transmitter under wraps out and were back on the air in no time.

To keep costs even lower, much of our general programming was anchored by lads who were already disco deejays in the hotels around the city.

Our station manager was a very bright young chap called Paul Linnell. He was unique among us because of his background. He was from Silverstone in England, where the formula one racing takes place, and he was quick to inform us that the locals (and people really in the know) pronounce it as "sils'n". His dad had been a tobacco farmer in Zimbabwe, then known as Rhodesia, and the family had later moved to Ballydehob in west Cork, as a result of all of which experiences the young Plassey student had a world view which was enviable in the gloomy and introspective Limerick of the late 1970s.

The radio station didn't last very long, as I said, and we closed ostensibly so as to be well-positioned legally to apply for the official license which, we were assured, was just around the corner. In fact, many years were to elapse before a licence for local radio in Limerick would be granted, and by then our little team was well scattered.

Paul Linnell finished his studies and graduated in 1980, joined giant Westinghouse and was absorbed into its multinational labyrinth.

And so things remained until last Saturday when my phone rang shortly after Ireland's brave but ultimately unsuccessful joust against New Zealand in Hamilton. It was Paul, a voice unheard by me for over a quarter of a century. He was in Adare, en route to Kerry. His present job is as a high-powered business consultant, currently based in, of all places, New Zealand.

As we chatted, it struck me that nothing at all had happened in the intervening decades, and we spoke as though we had last conversed only the day before. He was just as I had remembered him, ever happy and cheerful, knowledgeable and articulate, and with a chirpiness which time had not faded in the least.

Not many today will remember Paul's time in Limerick. But, for me, it was nice to have those heady impetuous days brought back in their full colour by a simple unexpected phone call.

The Cup

NOW, pay attention. You'll have to learn the line-up of our team.

It is: Boruc, Baszczyński, Bak, Jop, Zewiakow, Smolarek, Sobolewski, Jacek Krzynowek, Szymkowiak, Zurawski and Rasiak.

Not a Keane to be seen, but our new Polish workmates are the cheerleaders in this neck of the woods as the World Cup progresses in Germany. So, for this month at least, Poland is "us".

Okay, "we" went down to Ecuador in Gelsenkirchen last Friday night, and I don't much fancy our chances against Michael Ballack's Germany in Dortmund tomorrow, but the Costa Rica game on the 20th should see us scrape through. Once Germany has qualified, the second slot should be wide open, and I won't give up until the whole procedure has been exhausted.

In fairness, not being Polish myself, I can afford to be a bit more philosophical than the group of young 'flaws' with whom I watched Friday's game at the Dog and Mallet. There they were, Tukasz, Retof, Szirepom, Czarek, Tobiasz and Rafal, with the broad red stripe down the front of their shirts bearing POLSKA in large and unmistakable letters. They were proud of their Polishness, and vocally urged their side to ever greater efforts, even though their team was being thoroughly hammered by a team from an inhospitable volcanic nation more renowned for giant tortoises and taking its name from the Equator. Poles are a stoical race, as their history would indicate, but, as the game went on, those six lads displayed every emotion from elation to despair and back again. The rest of us genuinely felt sorry for them as the game receded past hope. When it was all over, they finished their bottles of Okocim, Tyskie or Lech, thanked us for our solidarity (how appropriately for Poles) and departed into the still bright evening, their silence made all the more poignant by the shrill careless tumble of swifts overhead.

I'll probably meet the lads again tomorrow, when the Dog and Mallet will once more become a little bit of Warsaw or Krakow.

Off the rails

HOW very interesting. They are to re-open the Limerick to Sligo line at a cost of about €2 million per kilometre.

And that's only the start.

There are well over 300 level crossings on the route. What would it cost per year to man them? On the other hand, if the crossings were all to be automated, each set would cost something like €200,000. That's €60 million for crossings alone, and before anyone uses the dreaded word "maintenance".

In all, tracks, crossings, stations and rolling stock, we're talking about €365 million, with something like a €5 million-plus annual running cost subvention from the taxpayers.

Pointless, isn't it? Maybe. But that €365 million is what just eight kilometres of the Luas in Dublin has cost.

The economics of transport do not follow the profit and loss accountancy rules applicable to ordinary business. Transport is first and foremost a service which we decide to provide ourselves with and for which we are prepared to pay it, with water, sewerage, telephones, broadband and post, forms part of the national infrastructure which allows the greater economy to exist and flourish. Decisions about the provision of infrastructure, whether publicly or privately funded, are generally prompted by political considerations, such as regional policy and the like.

It is a political decision that we are again to have a continuous western passenger rail link from Rosslare to Waterford, Clonmel, Limerick, Ennis and into Galway Mayo and Sligo. Despite the fact that the roads along the same corridor are to be upgraded, this single-line rail connection is deemed by government to be an imperative for the economic regeneration of the whole west of the country. Government believes that two strips of iron, just 1.6 metres apart, will make a huge impact to the whole western seaboard.

Neither of the two major studies into this project, however, has found evidence that the rail corridor will have any but the slenderest effect, especially in the Mayo and Sligo areas, which already have rail services radiating into them from Dublin and where economic decline has continued despite that fact. One of the studies suggests that the whole route be preserved for possible use at some time in the indeterminate future, but that a better idea would be the development of commuter services in the hinterlands of major centres, such as Galway and, of course, Limerick.

Here, the re-opening of the Limerick to Ennis line and its being equipped more recently with a frequent shuttle



service is deemed to have been a relative success. A spur to Shannon would be the next logical step, possibly with re-opened stations at Longpavement, Cratloe and Sixmilebridge.

On the line to Limerick Junction, creating park-and-ride commuter stops at Oola, Pallasgreen and Dromkeen might also be worth looking at, and a shuttle on the Nenagh line could also be worthwhile.

But is that as far as thinking has gone?

I'm about to tell you something which you doubtless already know, but may not have paid much attention to.

As one drives the splendid new motorway-standard dual carriageway from Limerick to Adare, one cannot but notice the fact that a railway line parallels the road just to the north. The elegant overpasses along the new roadway each even have an extra eye to facilitate the railway track. Constructing these new bridges over the railway as well as the road cannot have come cheaply.

But when did you last see a train use that line?

That line once carried passenger and goods traffic from Limerick all the way to Tralee. In recent decades the line west of Ballingrane near Rathkeale has been taken up, leaving a track which connects Limerick with

the port of Foynes only.

But even at that, there is no port traffic. As far as Iarnród Éireann is concerned, the line is closed, and no attempt has been made to promote it for any purpose since the last revenue-earning train, carrying fertiliser pallets, used it high on a decade ago. In fact even inspection cars and weed-spraying trains aren't allowed to run the full length what there is of it because a bridge over tidal Robertstown Creek, beside Aughinish Alumina, is deemed unsafe, and there are no plans to fix it. So the line to Patrickswell, Adare, Askeaton and Foynes is just sitting there, rusting, even though Iarnród Éireann has bizarrely chosen to replace most of the level crossing gates and has painted up the surroundings. The services of the level crossing keepers have been long dispensed with.

However, the State is to underwrite expenditure of many millions to re-open the line from Cork to Middleton, with the rest of that line onward to Youghal as a real possibility later on. New commuter stations are to be provided on the main Cork-Mallow line too.

Here, a tiny bit of imagination, and a lot of political pressure, could see a rail link re-established with commuter services between Limerick and the

county's principal town, Newcastle West, which now has a population well in excess of 7,000 and growing exponentially. The bed of the track exists all the way, except for a small gap in Rathkeale town, but that gap could easily be closed by simply keeping to the north of that town's bypass.

Such a service, with simple stations at Rathkeale, Adare and Patrickswell, as well as a convenient new platform at Raheen industrial estate, could link into a Shannon-Ennis commuter system and provide Limerick with what it once had—a rail hub the envy of the country, and focusing on an already existing commuter radius. As house prices in the city's own area continue to escalate, people are more and more willing to move to live in towns and villages, where good schools and convenient shops exist. In terms of second level schools, County Limerick is surely the best served in the whole country, and third level admission figures would seem to support that contention.

I would hold that a comprehensive commuter service on routes which already exist would be far more valuable than providing inter-city style trains all the way to Sligo which very few would use.

—MARTIN BYRNES