

Bid to get local railway station back on track gathers steam

■ Station where de Valera took the train to Dublin for college was closed in 1976

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AFTER what has been described as 41 "years of neglect" calls have been made to reopen the railway station in Kilmallock which has "fallen into an appalling condition".

Local man Peter Hennessy who grew up with the railway station as his "playground", said "the Ballyhoura region needs this link restored and have its name put back up in the train timetable in Heuston Station, Dublin, as it was for 127 years."

"It's terrible to see the station in such condition as it is at the moment. There is lots of history attached to this station. Eamon de Valera arrived here on the train as a two year-old boy and used it to go to college in Dublin as a young man," he said.

"As a young fella I loved watching the trains," said Peter, 55.

The station, which is situated on the Cork to Dublin main line, was closed in March 1976. Today, what remains of the derelict 1849-built station is the main building and water tower. The disused Victorian footbridge remained in situ until 2009. The station remained a block post until 1988, when the signal cabin was finally closed.

Mr Hennessy is calling on Limerick TDs and county councillors to restore the



Above: A train passing through Kilmallock station, and left, Peter Hennessy with memorabilia from the station which is situated beside the Golden Vale mart



"It was opened for the visit of Pope John Paul II to Limerick in 1979 and for hurling matches. It was opened especially for a hurling club All-Ireland semi-final in Thurles in 1994," said Mr Hennessy.

"With Brexit, and a possible Ryder Cup in Adare, Kilmallock railway station could play a part in the town's revival into the future," Mr Hennessy added.

He said "it is only right that young people from Kilmallock and future generations "experience the joy I

from my home station of Kilmallock.

"Anyone over the age of 45 years of age would have used this station in Kilmallock. It is a shame to see this listed building in such an appalling condition. I personally want to be able to take the train from Kilmallock to Dublin, Cork and Killarney for concerts, matches and hospital visits."

Mr Hennessy is hoping that Limerick Tourism Forum 2020 will recommend the future opening of this station "to boost

tourism numbers in County Limerick.

"How can tourism prosper when your station is closed and you are not on the path for business?" he asked.

In a letter sent to Deputy Niall Collins - who made representations on behalf of Mr Hennessy - David Franks, chief executive of Eireann said: "Due to Iarnrod Eireann's financial position we are unfortunately not in a position to self-finance any capital infrastructure works (including new and reopened stations) from our own funds and we are entirely dependent on third party funding via the National Transport Authority or Exchequer for any capital infrastructure works to the railway."

"As a consequence, the delivery of any new rail infrastructure necessarily involves a multi-agency approach in the planning, design, funding and construction of a scheme."

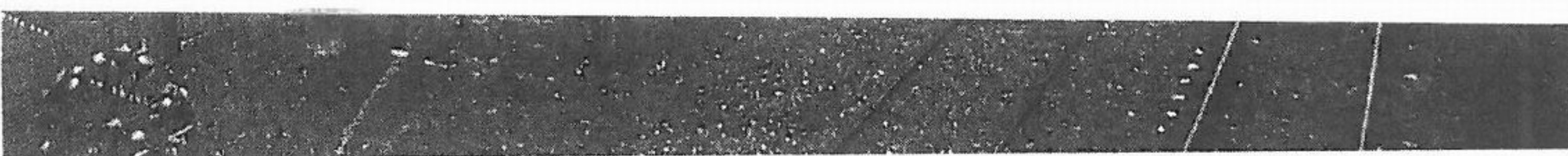
"There are no plans that we are currently aware of presently to reopen the station at Kilmallock and I note that given the population density of the area, the business case will not yield a positive return for the necessary capital and operational investment. However, Iarnrod Eireann will ensure that no action is undertaken which would preclude any future reopening of the station, if funded by third parties and which meets the conditions set out, which apply to all rail infrastructure project proposals."

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Mr Hennessy is calling on Limerick TDs and county councillors to restore the station which was opened on at least two occasions since its closure "for special occasions".



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A personal memoir of a life-long passion for West Limerick's railways and trains

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HE learned his numbers by counting train wagons. He learned to tell the time by the regular passing of trains. And by the time he was nine years old and starting his very own 'train journal', Liam O'Mahony was a committed trainspotter.

Now, as one of a diminishing band of trainspotters in West Limerick, Liam has told his own railway story in a book called Limerick and Kerry Railway, Twilight Years, which will be launched in his native Newcastle West this Friday.

It is not intended as a definitive history of the railway from Limerick to Tralee which was known as the North Kerry Line, Liam insists. The history of Limerick's railway, he is quick to explain, has already been brilliantly told and meticulously recorded by others whom he now calls friends.

But Liam, out of a lifelong passion for railways, wanted to write a more personal memoir and in particular to remember the men who peopled the railway. He also, he explains, wanted to link some railway events with contemporaneous external happenings.

Moreover, he adds: "2017 marks the 150th anniversary of the coming of the railway to Newcastle West and I said to myself, it's now or never."

The book traces Liam's first memories of trains which date back to the first five years of his life when he and his parents, Bill and Annie lived a few miles east of Newcastle West at Garryduff and "a field away" from the railway line." At least four times a day, this line, Liam recalls, came to life as goods or passenger trains passed up to or down from the station at Ardagh.

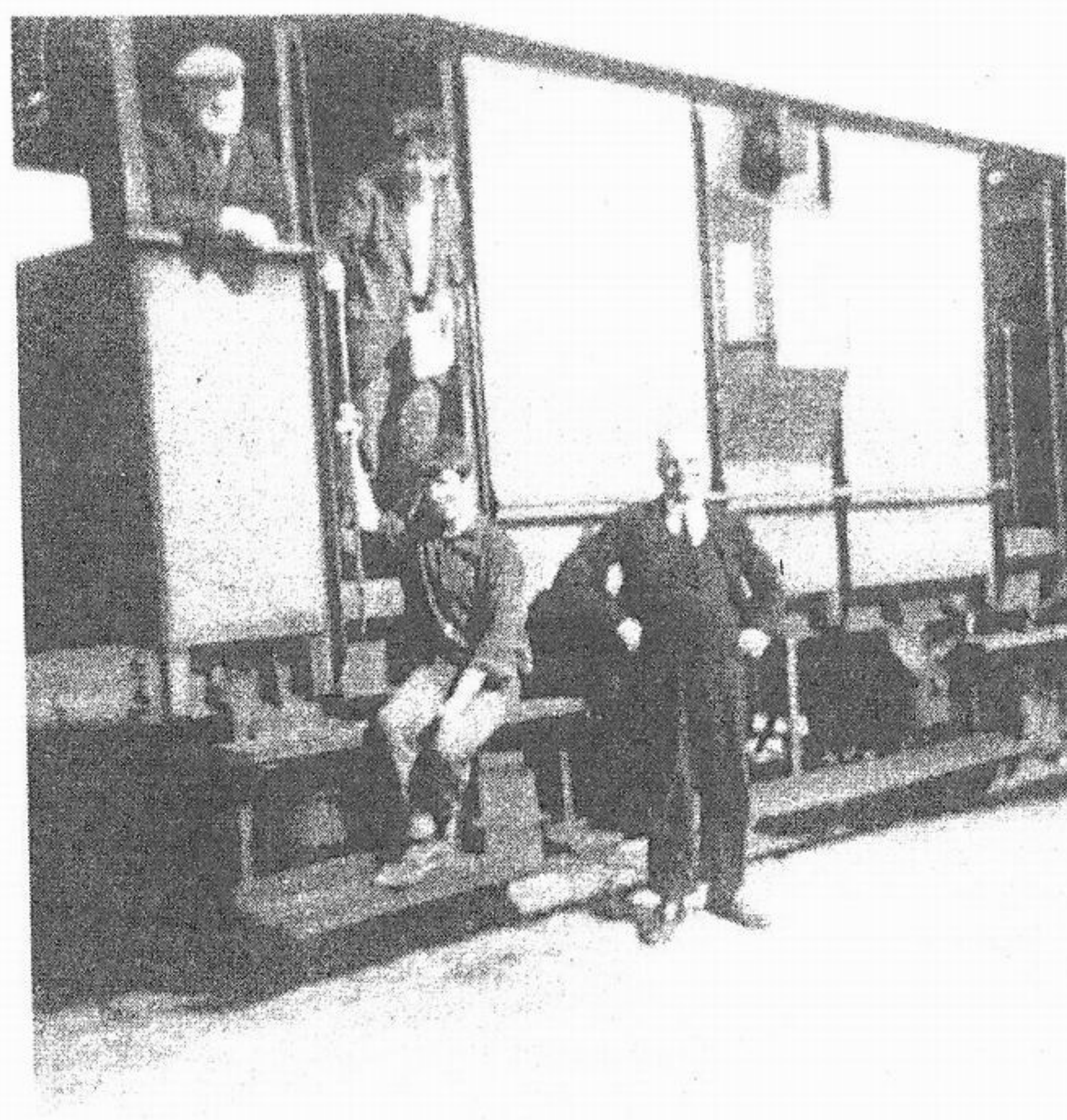
At that time, the early 1950s, goods trains were still pulled by steam engines and sometimes, given the steep gradient to Barnagh, some wagons had to be decoupled and left on the line while the engine continued upwards with the other wagons before returning later for the rest.

Happily for Liam, his connection with the railway continued after the family moved to town. In fact, their home in Bishop St was just yards from the Newcastle West station and Liam took full advantage of this, getting to know the staff at the station and the men who drove the trains. "I was hunted sometimes," he laughs. Other times, especially in the evenings, a blind eye was turned as Liam and other lads jumped on the turntable or tried to push wagons along.

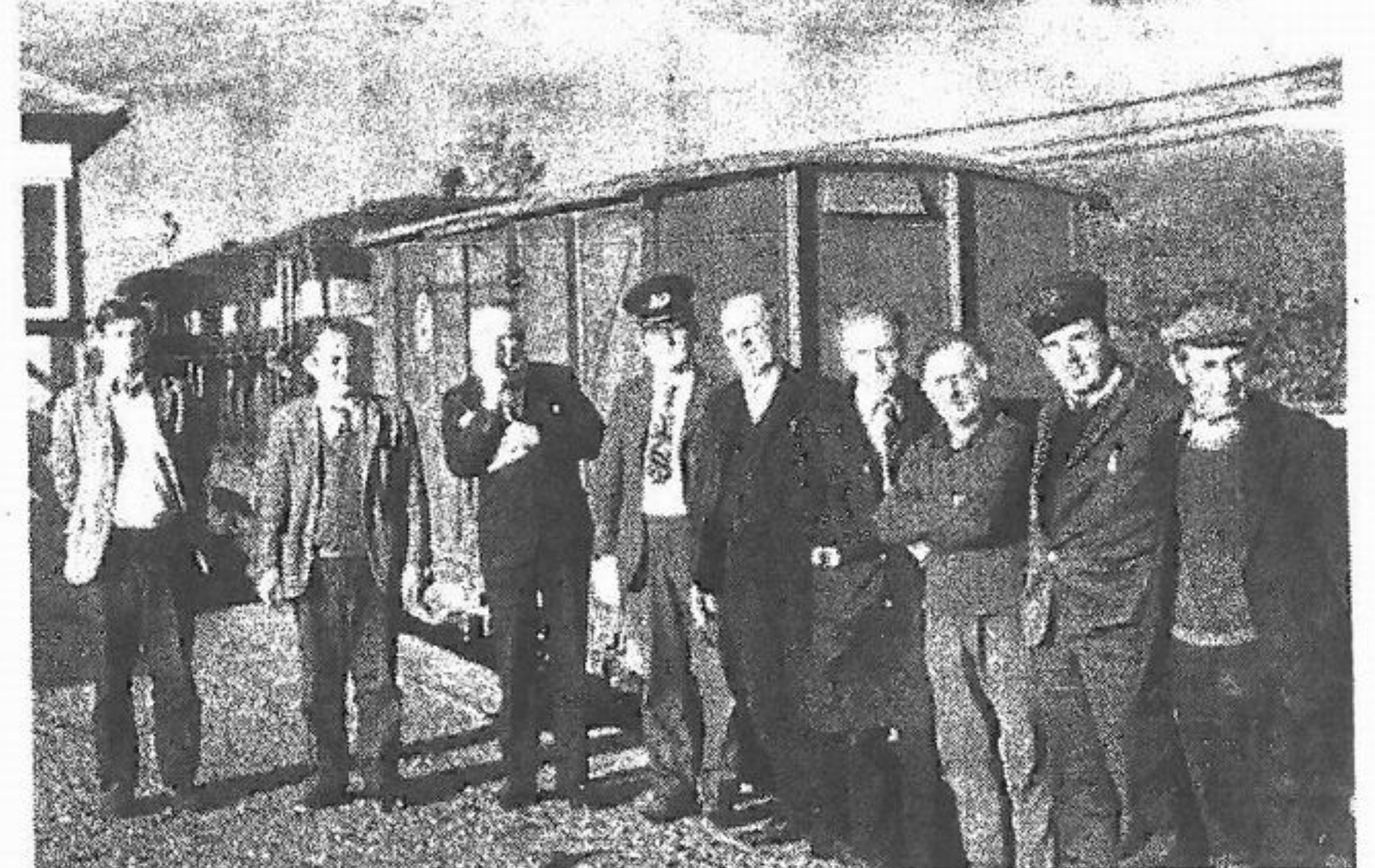
But then came Liam's entry into train heaven. He was allowed into the signal box or on to the trains as



Pictured at Abbeyfeale station on July 1966 were Paddy O'Sullivan, Ned Murphy, Paddy Stack (Listowel)



A young Liam pictured on board one of the engines



Last day at Newcastle West station October 31 1975



Pilgrims on the way to Knock take some time on the platform

the engines shunted over and back in the station and then, with a system of dual controls in place, he was let "drive" the trains while shunting the wagons. Later again, he travelled regularly to Abbeyfeale and on to Listowel in the guard's van and came home in time for his tea. And in time, he says, he became an unofficial member of staff, helping out with the day's tasks.

"All those railway personnel were very kind to me," Liam says. "They indulged my interest."

In his book, Liam returns the favour, remembering many of them by name or by incident.

But his memories also encompass a slice of social life and social history in West Limerick that is now gone. And then there were the days when "special trains" were noted down in Liam's train journal: specials to the Rose of Tralee to the Listowel Races or to Dublin for the All-Ireland.

Liam's train travels also brought him to many of the local stations where he photographed train staff, and many of these are reproduced in the book. But, relying on his

train journal, he is able to pinpoint many stories which would otherwise be forgotten

Liam also chronicles the slow death of the railway, recalling how in 1974, he and the now retired Limerick Leader journalist Martin Byrnes, made a submission to the government on behalf of the Newcastle West Chamber of Commerce, arguing for the retention of the rail link from the town to Ballingrane and the Limerick to Foynes line.

But it was not to be. October 31, 1975 was announced as the death knell of the railway in West Limerick.

On that day, Liam travelled on the last train out of Newcastle West, a goods train driven by John O'Brien with guard Gerry Moore and Inspector George Barry on board. "We were seen off to the sound of the traditional fog signals being detonated under the train wheels."

Dr Pat O'Connor will launch Liam's book at 7pm in Newcastle West Library this Friday and copies of the book, priced at €15, will be available in local shops.