

## 48 ARCHIVE SPECIAL

# Centenary of the 'day of protest'

Sunday, August 4, 1918: Dublin Castle's GAA ban fuels national day of games

Sharon Slater

Email: sharon.slater@limerickleader.ie

**T**HIS Saturday, August 4, marks the centenary of one of the largest protests in Irish history. This act of defiance was named Gaelic Sunday, as it was held on Sunday August 4, 1918.

Just over 100 years ago, the British Authorities informed the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) that no hurling or football games would be allowed unless a permit was obtained from Dublin Castle. The GAA, on July 20, 1918, unanimously agreed that no such permit be applied for under any conditions. Instead, they defiantly organised a series of matches throughout the country for Sunday August 4, 1918.

These matches were openly played throughout the country by almost every club with an estimated 54,000 members taking part. Limerick was no stranger to this protest with thousands of people in the city and county taking part in or watching these matches.

Following the 1916 Rising, many of the young men who were involved with the GAA joined the Irish Volunteers. This along with the intermittent harassment of players by the British military and police forces saw a dramatic decline in matches around the country.

Sinn Féin grew in popularity following the death of Thomas Ashe in September 1917. His funeral was attended by a large number of GAA members carrying hurleys. The following year, Sinn Féin won the general election by a landslide and their MPs vowed not to attend the British parliament.

The British Government set out a number of harsh decrees that year, including a ban on wearing the Volunteer uniform and the public carrying of arms. This was all taking place during the First World War and in April 1918, the British Government decided to extend conscription to Ireland.

The GAA vocally opposed conscription and this caused the leaders to draw the attention of the British military who in May 1918 arrested a number of the GAA leaders as well as members of Sinn Féin after the German Plot.

In July 1918, it was announced that the holding of any public meeting and sports, except with an official permit, was forbidden. The police quickly disbanded sporting matches around the country.

It is worth noting that the Chronicle as a Unionist newspaper carried very little reference to the ban, while the Leader as a Nationalist paper was fully supportive of the GAA's resistance. The Leader of July 17, 1918 called it a "drastic order" that banned all "football and hurling matches, feiseanna and aerid-beachta..." It was an attack on Irish sports, as sports such as rugby were not affected by the ban.

They went on to reprint a comment from the Manchester Guardian on the importance of fitness to young men:-

**"In July 1918, it was announced that the holding of any public meeting and sports, except with an official permit, was forbidden. The police quickly disbanded sporting matches around the country."**

"The value of the time honoured games of hurling and Gaelic football to the young men is obvious, but to-day and until the order requiring police permission - which it is not propose to ask - to wield a hurley or kick a ball is revoked, the youth of Catholic or Nationalist Ireland must not enter the athletic arena. It would be well for the authorities to consider whether absolute freedom to indulge in healthy bodily exercise might not in the end be more innocuous than that the great bulk of young Irishmen determined, and in this very unfor-giving, should have more time to brood over what they regard as the

latest and grossest infringement of their liberty."

In a final article in the same issue of the Leader reported on police harassment during a hurling match in Rathkeale:-

"The hurling march between Newcastle West team and Knockaderry team, which was announced for Rathkeale last Sunday, was prohibited by the police. A force of military were present and took up positions on the field where the match was to be played. A portion of one of the teams got across the river Deel, adjoining the hurling field and commenced to bye-play. They were followed to the bank by the police, and some of the latter when endeavouring to cross the plank over the river, which was neatly arranged, paid the penalty of a plunge into the muddy waters."

The Leader wrote on July 19, 1918, "those who were looking forward to a good day's enjoyment at the Markets Field of Sunday next, when the Limerick County Board Athletic and Cycling Sports were announced to take place... Mr J Ryan, the secretary, has informed us this afternoon that the police authorities notified him on yesterday (Thursday) that the sports could not be held without a permit. As the Board declined to ask for a permit they have decided on postponing the sports for the present."

The Central Council of the GAA was unwilling to accept this ban and issued a proclamation to its members throughout the country. It was first announced in the

Leader on July 26, 1918 as "a protest against the action of the military caste which now rules the country and makes the holding of any GAA fixtures a crime, the governing body of the GAA have decided on holding a Gaelic Sunday, particular of which will be announced in due course".

One of the few mentions of the ban recorded in the Chronicle came on July 30, 1918:-

"A Feis was announced to be held at Ahane, near Lisnagry, on Sunday, but as, it appears, a permit was not applied for by the promoters, a small force of Constabulary and Military proceeded from Limerick to the locality to prevent its taking place, if necessary. The Feis was not held in the circumstances."

The Leader, of Friday August 2, 1918 wrote, "in accordance with the decision of the Central Council of the G.A.A. next Sunday will be one of the greatest days in the history of the GAA as in every part of the country hurling and football matches will take place to the number of 1,802."

They also noted that the celebrating of "a Gaelic Sunday originated at a special meeting of the Central Governing Body as a national protest against the unnecessary ban on our national pastimes, and hence it is the duty of every Irishman to attend the matches to be held throughout the country on Sunday next, and so join in the protest against the ban."

The Leader told of the planned matches for both Limerick city and

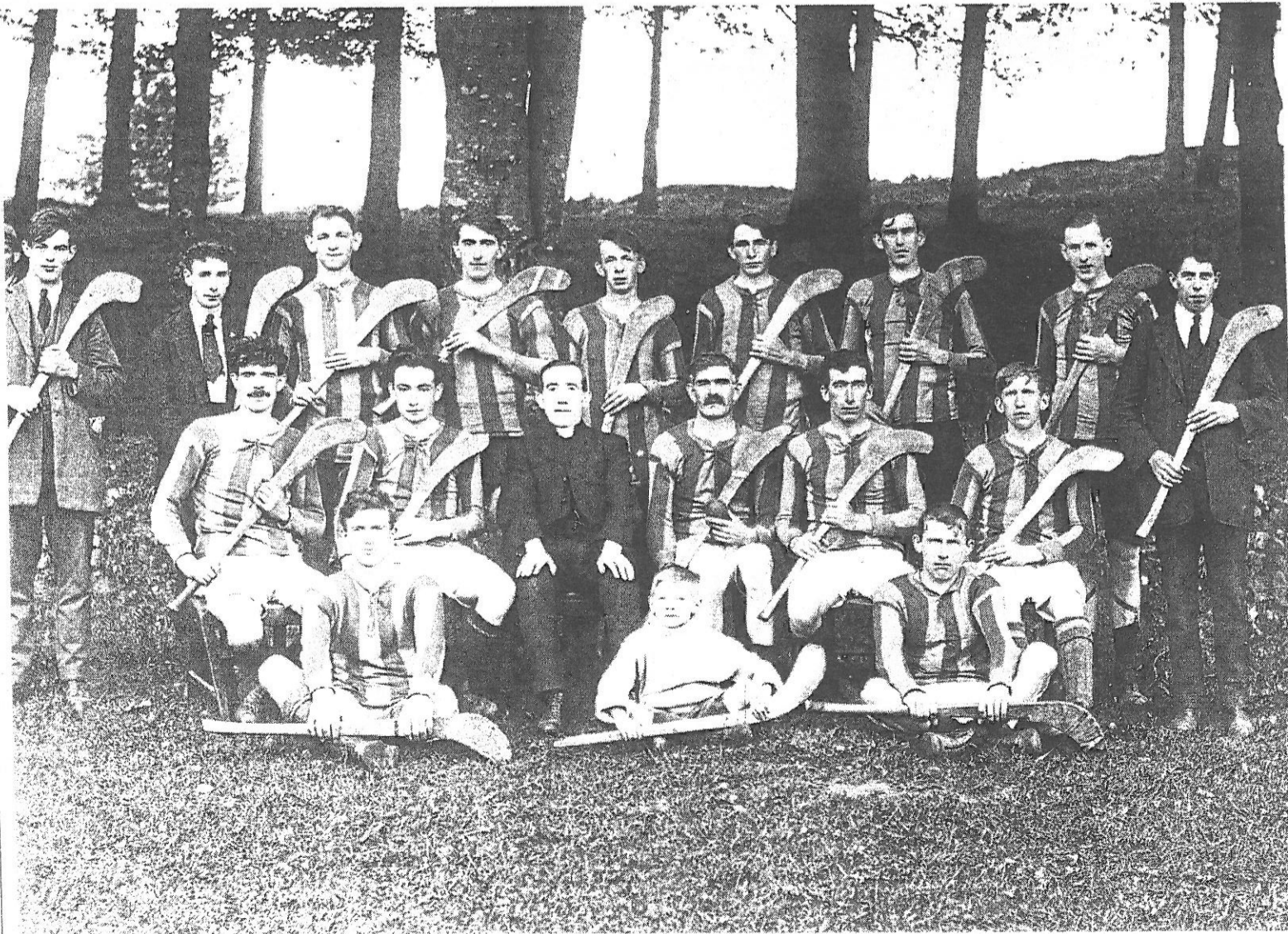
county:-

"The Limerick County Board have arranged for some fourteen matches to be played throughout the county and to give every Gael a chance of participating in Gaelic Sunday. Young Ireland and Cloughaun will meet in the Market's Field at 3 o'clock, when a splendid match should be witnessed, Shamrock and Treaty will also meet at the same venue in junior hurling.

The other local hurling and football fixtures for Sunday are: Castleconnell-Murroe v Clare Glens: Cappamore - Pallas v Cappamore: Abington- Castleconnell v Caherline: Doon- Pallas v Doon juniors: Oola - Gortaralla v Oola (in football): Ballyhahill-Shanagolden v Ballyhahill (football): Athea-Abbeyfeale v Athea (football): Templeglantine-Tournafulla v Templeglantine: Newcastle West-Knockaderry v Newcastle West: Kildimo-Ballybrown v Kildimo: Feenagh-Kilmeeedy v Feenagh: Askeaton-Ballysteen v Askeaton (football): Rathkeale-Croagh v Rathkeale."

A few days later on August 9, 1918, the Leader reported that the Gaelic Sunday was a great success:-

"The Sunday was observed throughout the country with great success, and at three o'clock (old time) over 1,500 matches were commenced in which some 54,000 of the best of Ireland's manhood took and active part. Reports from all parts testify to large numbers being present and in no instance did anything mar the great celebrations."



This old image of a hurling team was copied by the Leader staff for Br Ennis of Doon, in 1956