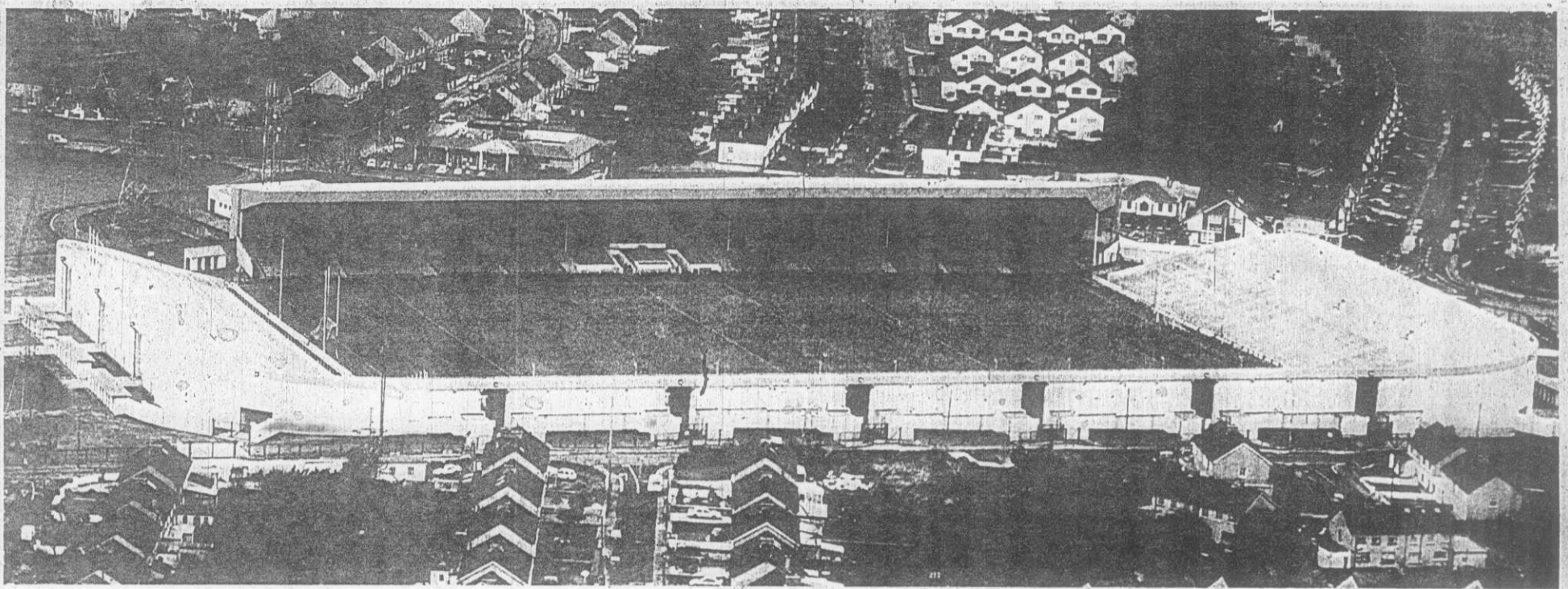


LEADER SPORT



An aerial view of the Gaelic Grounds

New era dawns for Gaelic Grounds

By JEROME O'CONNELL

THE first steps towards creating the Limerick Gaelic Grounds as a GAA stadium of note were taken on October 9, 1926 when a farm containing 12 acres was purchased at Coolrairie on the Ennis Road for development as a sporting grounds.

Two years later the opening of the new grounds was marked with two junior hurling games - South Liberties defeated Young Irelands and Ahane, including Mick Mackey, overcame Fedamore.

On this Bank Holiday Monday, May 3, the Gaelic Grounds officially re-opens after its most recent landmark €12 million redevelopment. While work required the stadium to close for a period, it is certainly not the first time that Paice

na nGael has received a facelift.

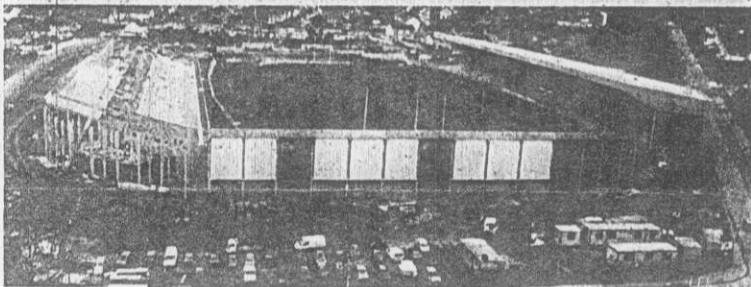
The first big effort to raise funds for the development of the grounds was in 1932, with the establishment of a development committee, whose remit was to level the pitch, providing sideline seating and erect a boundary wall.

In the mid-fifties, the venue attracted over 50,000 spectators, the first time such a figure was exceeded outside of Croke Park.

The stadium was boosted, in 1958, with the addition of the Old Hogan Stand from Croke Park and three years later a record 61,174 witnessed the Munster hurling final between Cork and Tipperary.

Perhaps the greatest step forward was taken in 1979, when it was decided the ailing grounds required an update.

Within three years plans were drawn for a new stand and in December 1986 planning permission was granted by Limerick Corporation for the



The Gaelic Grounds, 2004 style

Mackey Stand.

Work started the following May and was completed over one year later, June 1988.

In the presence of the Artano Boys Band the official opening of the Mackey Stand was performed before the Munster hurling final (Cork v Tipperary) of 1988.

During the opening, the surviving members of the 1934, 1936 and 1940 Limerick All-Ireland winning teams were introduced to the attendance.

Spectators attending the Bank Holiday Monday double-header will enter a new modern stadium, with a capacity of 45,500.

Prior to the latest redevelopment work, the Ennis Road venue could accommodate just 31,000.

The €12 million invested has seen the construction of a 12,000 uncovered stand on the Clareview side and modern terraces on both ends, bringing the official attendance to a figure just short of 50,000.

Barefooted in a pony's trap on way to the GAA's 'New Field'

By HARRY GREENSMYTH

THE decision to allow Croom and Young Irelands to join forces in 1949 had the followers of hurling in Limerick involved in hot debate in the weeks leading up to their first round clash with Ahane at the New Field.

Call it what you like to day - Paice na nGael or the Gaelic Grounds - then it was simply the New Field.

It was in the middle of August when the teams lined out in the New Field with Paddy Clohessey in charge of the whistle. Mike Butler of Tubberquin with his sons, Mickie and James, tackled the pony and trap to see the eagerly-awaited match and I was lucky enough to be included in the party which made it to a match which attracted a record crowd for a domestic hurling game in Limerick in that year. This was my first time going to the famous field.

Three years previously the two Butler sons had played with South Liberties against Castletown in the Junior final at Croom and James captained the winning team.

I remember the team travelling to Croom on a ferocious windy day - I was not aware that I was in the company of two famous Liberties players on the way to Limerick in 1949 and even less aware that Mike the father won a county intermediate hurling medal with the Souths in 1911. It was in fact in 1919 when the issue was decided between South Liberties and Rathkeale.

Back to that famous Sunday in the New Field. Mike Butler's pony made the journey to Limerick every Saturday and was left in Ryan's yard in Gerald Griffin Street. On the way a stop at 'Spellacy's' pub in Ballysheehy was most important and it did not take the pony long to learn of the wishes of his Master.

Going or coming from Limerick he always pulled into the small yard in front of Spellacy's and I was the same when the journey took place on the day of the match. At the time the bona



Willie Cross bringing Cloughaun players to a match in the Gaelic Grounds. Pic courtesy Cloughaun.

fidle rule for pubs was in force.

It was at the start of Autumn and bare footed children was as natural as the fine weather that seemed to be always in vogue in those far off days. Into the trap with weather beaten feet was a wonderful experience and to see the Shannon for the first time was something to talk about when I returned home.

I had learned from Jack Leahy in Knockree school that the Shannon rose in the Shannon Pot in the Cullagh Mountains in County Cavan and to see it flow past Limerick City was awesome.

In fairness I had little interest in the match as the crowd rose to every puck of the match. Ahane were beaten in a bad tempered game. Mick Mackey was playing. I took notice of him as he was a household name in hurling at the time. On the Croom Young Irelands team was John Martin and a Peggy Martin from the barmahill in Keatings in Ballymoety.

We went to the County final at the New Field the same year between St. Patrick's and Geraldines.

The Geraldines were an East Limerick selection which included Mick Clifford, Jimmy Power and Johnny Dooley of South Liberties and to make it that little bit special to hurling followers in the district, Mick Bresnahan of Fedamore was on the team.

At one stage of the match I was dispatched to a gate in front of a blue coloured house in front of the field to see that the pony who was tied to a gate was in no harm. This house and gate was where the Northtown Shopping Centre is built. I think that the house belonged to a man called Kirby.

Coming home a stop was mandatory in Ballysheehy and a bottle of Byrnes lemonade went down nicely.

It may have quenched the thirst, but the pangs of hunger remained until we returned to our homes. And hungry we were. No food had passed our lips since dinner after Mass in Knockree - white cabbage and pandy was the menu, that delicacy known as pandy is now called mashed potatoes and if you were lucky a slice of pigshod would have been on your plate. The escapades of "

'The Phantom' in the Sunday Independent was gripping reading in those happy days. Chirly Wee and Gussie Goose never came near the man on the white horse who defied every obstacle in his war against the wrongdoer.

The next time I was in the New Field I had graduated to a bicycle with broken pedals and no brakes.

The great Cork and Tipperary clashes of this era put hurling at the top of the sporting ladder, these were interrupted by Limerick and Waterford, but the clashes involving Tipperary and Cork was a special day in the hurling calendar of the 1930s.

There was final - I don't know what year - I and a few more from Ballymoety collected our modes of transport from the hundreds of bicycles at the back of the field and in the mass of people was Christy Ring, making his way to some hotel on the Ennis Road where the Cork team lodged out - the maestro from Cloyne was in remarkable mood, after his many incursions into Hells Kitchen in the Tipperary defence.

Great men graced the New Field in those years.

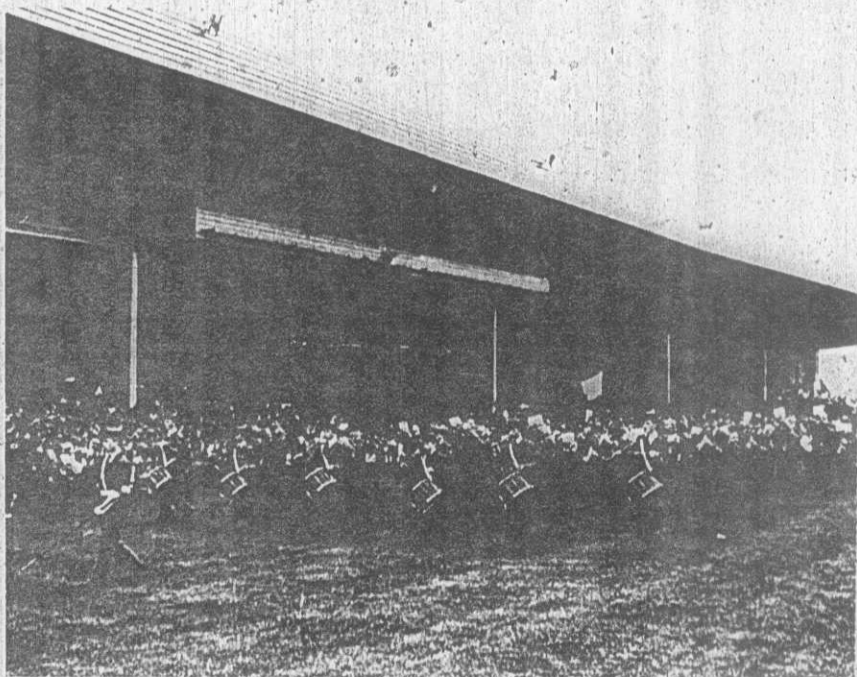
Tony Reddan, Pat Stakelum, John Doyle, Jimmy Doyle, Phil Grimes, Ned Power, Christy Ring, Vincent Twomey, Paddy Barry, Mattie Foubly, Mick Mackey, Jackie Power, Dick Stokes, Seán Duggan, Mick Burke and Joe Sammon are just a few.

I saw them all play at the headquarters of Limerick GAA. Security, walkie-talkies, parking, crowd control, helmets, mouth guards, protection for the goal keeper, hamstrings, were unheard of at a time when Choc Lees and Burgers were not in any dictionary. The first white four was on sale in Limerick since the early days of the World War and in the same year the first Morris Minor went on the market. Emigration was at a figure of about 50,000 a year, still the games continued to reach new heights and Paice na nGael played an important role in this development or would the New Field be the correct name to use at the conclusion of these few words.

Briefly may I go back to 1928 when the New Field was opened. Four club hurling teams, South Liberties, Ahane, Young Irelands and Fedamore played at the opening in September. Munster Council gave a grant of £1,000. The last game to be played at the Markets Field was the 1928 title, Limerick emerging victorious over Clare. This was a Thomond Fels final.

In the world stage in 1928, Alexander Fleming discovered Penicillin, voting age for women in Britain reduced to 21 and Chiang Kai-Shek was President of China. At home, a Irish horse, Tipperary Tur won the Aintree Grand National. James McNeill was the new Governor - General and in Limerick discussions took place with the view of setting up a sugar factory in the City.

Limerick are the holders of two All Ireland football titles and seven in hurling. It would be nice to see the names of these inscribed somewhere within the walls as patrons enter. The revamped Gaelic Grounds would be the ideal setting for these great men.



Taken at the official opening of the Mackey Stand in 1988

Once forgotten but now the jewel in the crown

By JEROME O'CONNELL

THE Gaelic Grounds Development Committee has been the driving force behind the transformation of Ennis Road venue from a rapidly deteriorating and futile stadium to a state of the art 50,000 capacity ground, which is the envy of many.

After setting an attendance record of 61,174 for the Munster hurling final of 1981 (Tipperary v Cork), over the next 15 years the Gaelic Grounds became the forgotten venue in Munster.

The late Noel Drumgoole was the first chairman of the Development Committee and the first

secretary was Paddy Quilligan.

A member of the St. Patrick's club in the City, Quilligan remains as committee secretary.

"I must first pay tribute to the two chairmen, Noel Drumgoole and Dan Hickey. We have always had a very good committee, it is not about one or two people, but a lot of people doing a lot of very good work behind the scenes", he said.

"Originally the committee was set up by Rory Kieley to update the stadium for the Centenary celebrations of 1984", he recalled.

"Initially we were going to build the Mackey Stand on the Clareview side, but with a lot of firms in football stadia across the water, we were told, almost at the last minute, that the old stand, which

was a timber structure, would have to be replaced.

The building of the Mackey Stand commenced in May 1987 at a cost of €1.2 million.

The committee launched the Mackey Stand Draw in 1986, with the objective of providing finance for the stand. In 1993 the Mackey Stand was paid for and the draw then became the Limerick GAA Development Draw.

The ground enjoyed a number of fruitful years, before reports from fire and safety officers meant that the capacity of the ground was on a continuous decline.

"The present job started in 1992 and with planning and finance and everything, it was only last year before it was finished", said Quilligan.

"We had to prove that

the latest works would prove viable and I must say that we have surprised many people along the way. I remember at one meeting a certain county board officer said that he was frightened at the amount of money we were talking about spending - but you have to look to the future and now we have something that everyone can be pleased with.

Secretary of the Development Committee for 25 years, Quilligan now doubles as County Board treasurer and warned that "the next 12 months will be very important. Once it is opened, we can't sit back and admire it, we can't let the debt get out of control and we need all clubs to get behind us and make sure we are not crippled with repayments".