



- MEET A TOWNIE -



FROM BALLYMACCOOL TO LISMONAGHAN - AND A PICTURE OF HAPPINESS

There are picture postcard views from Jimmy Sweeney's home in the scenic surroundings of Lismonaghan. And pictures are something he knows all about.

For over the years he has gathered together a huge portfolio of photographs depicting decades of events and people from his native town. A gallery of memories and images collected faithfully by a man who is so passionate about the place of his birth and upbringing.

But you don't necessarily have to delve through those old photographs to get a glimpse into the past – spend some time with him and he conjures up so many images of old, and not so old, Letterkenny. And particularly his beloved Ballymacool where he grew up.

His father, Barney, was a native of Lower Main Street, while his mother, Mary (Tunney) hailed from Ballyshannon. There were five boys and two girls in the family, his siblings including Benny, Corney, Michael, Patrick, Anna and Pauline.

Schooling was at the Christian Brothers where he recalls teachers such as Brother Philip – “strict but straight” - and Hugh Ferry.

“I left school at 14 and went to work in Lymax and then went to London. And sure at that time half of Letterkenny was in London. It wasn't a lonely place,” Jimmy remembers.

And as was the case for so many of his fellow townies, the building sites provided the work. But the lure of home was always there and he returned to take up a position with the famous Oatfield sweet factory. “I was driving a lorry all over the country. It was a great place to work - they were all very friendly. The McKinney family were great to work for – you couldn't get better.”

But while he exchanged further spells in London and with Oatfield, Jimmy would ultimately spend the bulk of his working career with the ambulance service.

“Joe Peake was the head ambulance driver at the time I started. A real gentleman but he eventually went to Dublin to work with the Easter Health Board. Patsy Molloy took over from him, another gentleman.”

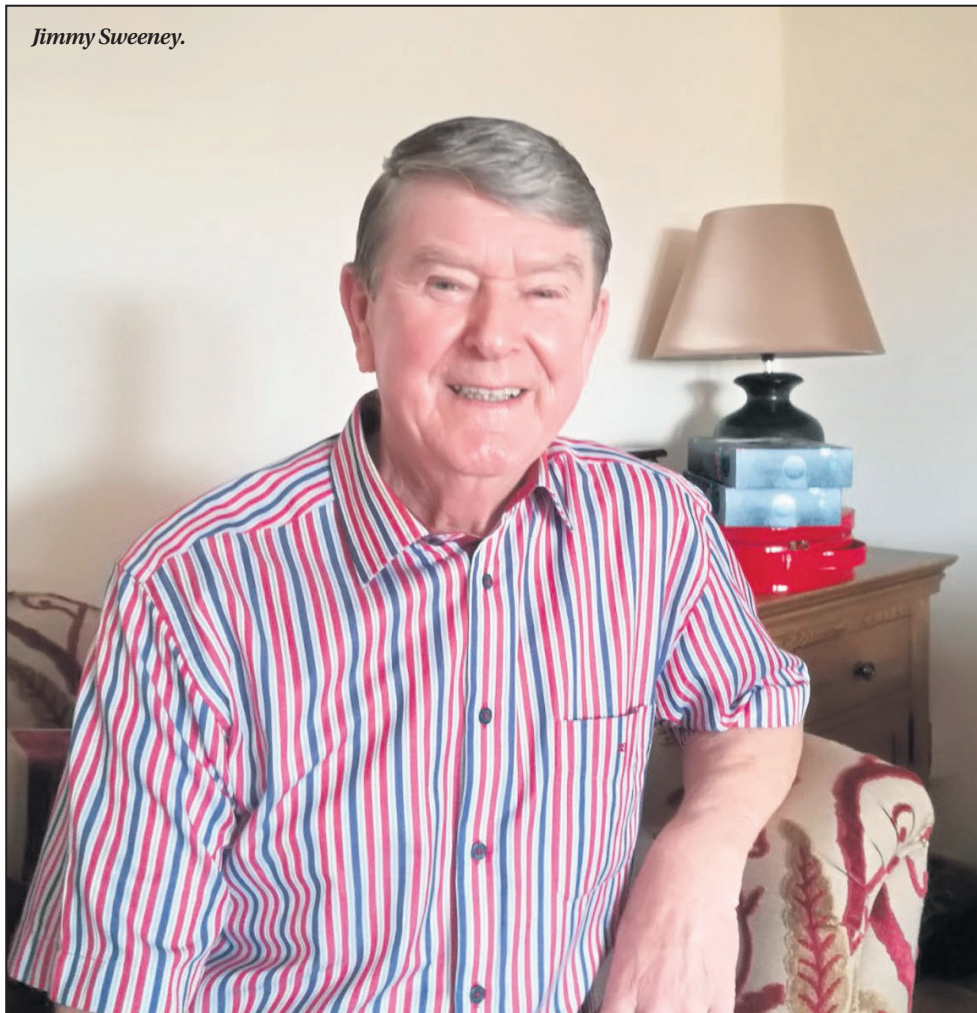
Jimmy worked alongside Dominic Doherty and Paddy Curran and spent thirty-years in total in the ambulance service.

A demanding job, it brought him not just to the far corners of his native county but also ambulance runs to Dublin and Sligo. “And you could get calls at three or four in the morning to go to Dublin in an emergency. And sometimes you'd get more than one call in the middle of the night.

“We had nurses who travelled with us, Josie Treacy and Ann Stevenson. And there was also Jackie Houston and Barbara Connolly. They were excellent and all so good to the patients.”

And fittingly at a time when the country is recovering from heavy snow falls and the hazards it

Jimmy Sweeney.



brought, Jimmy recollects the Big Snow of 1982 when the ambulance and crew got stuck near Slane – for three days!

“Hardly anything was moving and the fire brigade from Drogheda brought us there where we put up at the health service's expense.”

And the memories drift from snow to the sandbeds in his home town and summer evenings at the O'Donnell Park. “We would play until it was dark.”

And remembering the footballing heroes of the day, John Hannigan, Joe Carroll, Michael Ronaghan, James ‘Gouldie’ McGettigan, Peadar McGeehin, and Seamus Hoare. “I watched them play - great players all of them.

“And we were allowed to train with them and

you'd have Seamus Hoare in goals and you'd be trying to beat him. And sometimes he'd let you score against him!”

Hurling was a popular game, too, under the influence and inspiration of Corkman Finbar Staunton. “He did so much to encourage hurling and the effort that he put in was nothing short of brilliant.” Titles won impressively by the local club until emigration took its toll and the local team was dismantled.

Heroes also in local soccer, Jimmy reflecting on the contribution of personalities such as Barney Doherty and Dick Duffy and “brilliant players like ‘Busty’ Blake and Charlie Collins.”

And the close community of Ballymacool where

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Jimmy grew up and forged friendships and fun.

“Those were great times in that end of the town.” And Jimmy recalls a comment from another local, Fr. Tommy Curran who some time ago pointed out that once upon a time they had everything at the foot of the town, including bakeries and shops.

“The only reason you went up past the Square was to go to the cinema,” he said.

“And now we have a cinema but very little else. We lost the bakeries and all of those old shops.”

And then another journey into former days. “When I was young I used to see these old First World War soldiers standing in doorways along the Row and sitting on window sills. And them with their memories and the hardships and trauma they had experienced.”

He remembers Willie Birney, Willie Doherty, whose brother perished in the War, Danny Murray, the three Drain brothers, Charlie, Jimmy and John (the latter a casualty of the War), the blacksmith Paddy McCollum, whose expertise was invaluable for the horse cavalry unit, the Bonner brothers, Hughie and John, and Charlie Collins, who fought against the Turks.

“It was ironic that so many from the Ballymacool, Daly Terrace and Swilly View areas went to fight in the First World War in France and Belgium and then we had Belgian families coming to live here,” Jimmy points out.

This year the Letterkenny Reunion will draw emigrants from all over the world to their native town – it was thanks to Jimmy Sweeney, Johnny McCollum and the late Johnny Gallagher that the event came into being in the early 1990's.

“It continues to be a great success and a chance for so many people to meet up. I don't think there's another town in Ireland that has anything like it.” And if they have, they got the idea from Letterkenny!

“I think so much credit is owed to all the Reunion committees who have organised it over the years. It's not easy and it's hard work to keep it going but they have managed it and I'm looking forward to the 2018 Reunion. You get such a buzz from it seeing all those people coming back for it from all corners of the world.”

As always the stories are endless – in some way like the café in the Courtyard Shopping Centre, Number 6, where Jimmy often meets up with a group of friends and fellow townies including Tony Diver, Johnny Joe McCollum, Jim Lynch, Mary Hegarty, P.J. Sweeney and Colm Doogan. Remembering those still here and those not with them anymore.

And when he's not bantering with his pals, Jimmy can often be found enjoying a swim in the Radisson Hotel along with his good friend, Josie Gallagher from Ard O'Donnell. “Barney McDaid still goes there and it was him who taught me how to swim.”

Still pooling their weight in the town of their birth.

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