



- MEET A TOWNIE -



A MEETING ON THE OLDTOWN BRIDGE – THE BLIND DATE THAT TURNED INTO A WEDDING!

In everyone's life there comes a crossroads. Or, as was the case, in Isobel Collins' life, a bridge. Specifically the Oldtown Bridge in her home town of Letterkenny where she arrived one fine day.

Back in those days there was much less of the town to view but Isobel wasn't there to idle the time away.

She was there on a blind date – organised by John Welsh who was due to get married to Frances O'Donnell and had suggested Isobel might like to meet up with a man from Castlepollard, County Westmeath. A military policeman who was based in Finner Camp and who was coming to Letterkenny for the weekend.

Isobel had originally arranged to wear a white coat so her would-be date could recognise her.

"But I then decided not to put on the white coat in case I didn't like what I saw and I could head off!" she smiles.

But when Fred McCann loomed into view – "he was standing there reading a paper" – and they got chatting, she knew here was someone she might like to get to know better. "I went up to him and said 'I presume you're Fred' and he said 'I presume you're Isobel' and that was that. We went up to O'Donnells Hotel in the Market Square where Frances and John were waiting for us.

"I remember being told that it wasn't lucky to meet over water but there you are." Above the Swilly love indeed had blossomed.

That initial meeting was in the month of March. On December 2nd of the same year they got married!

"And to think, Fred was only coming to Letterkenny for the weekend!"

Born in the Market Square, one of a family of six, to Charlie and Margaret (nee McGrath) Collins, the young Isobel was not the keenest of pupils when it came to school. "I don't think anybody really liked school," she reflects. After her primary education, she spent two years at the Tech.

And while academic pursuits may not have been to the fore, she nevertheless looks back on friendships made during her time in the classrooms. "There was Brid McGeehan, Lizzie Hanlon, Lily Price and Grace McCafferty. And there was Muriel Kelly who was two years further on than me."

Entering the world of employment, Isobel recalls her first job as being that of a baby-sitter for the builder, Con Harvey. "I would take one of the children for a walk."

And a short amble from the family home above Eddie McGlynn's butchers outlet to



Isobel Collins.

her formal introduction to work – in the kitchen at McCarry's Hotel. "Annie McManus and her sister, Rosie, worked there as well and I remember the chef or head waiter was a man called Coffey.

"It was a busy hotel and you had to be up at

six o'clock in the morning. It was hard work – scrubbing stairs and washing pots and the like."

There followed spells of employment in the Hosiery factory and the Bacon factory – she would also work for two years in the Officers

Mess at Rockhill – as Isobel continued to find her feet in the working world. "I also worked with Joan McGranaghan's mother for a while." But beyond Letterkenny and indeed the shores of her native country, there were further opportunities waiting to be explored. And it was to the Isle of Man that she and her sibling, Josie, set off. "We worked in a hospital in Douglas.

"I celebrated my 21st birthday there and got a lot of presents. I think if I'd been at home I wouldn't have got so many!" she laughs.

But the bright illuminations of Blackpool in England beckoned to the two Collins women and off they went working in a number of cafes there before relocating again to another Lancashire city, Manchester, 40 miles away.

But bright lights are one thing – home is another and that attraction was always glimmering in the background. Isobel and Josie did stop off in Belfast and spent just one day at the Hollywood Barracks in Belfast but ran into permit difficulties and consequently ended up where it all began.

"Yes, we came back to Letterkenny and both of us starting working in St. Conal's Hospital, cooking and catering and doing general housekeeping." Isobel only has good memories of her time there. "I worked there for over thirty years but Josie only stayed for three of those years."

Isobel's marriage to Fred was a happy one. "He was a great man, very kind and considerate. There was breakfast in bed – he was just lovely."

But fate was waiting in the wings with the unkindest cut of all. In 1986, at the all too young age of 47, Fred passed away from cancer.

Somehow Isobel, with the help of family and friends, has come through the gloom though there's rarely a day when she doesn't harbour fond memories of her beloved.

Like many of her peers, she also misses the close community she grew up in. "It's a bigger and different town now but it's not the same. You hardly see anyone coming to your door anymore and coming in for a chat."

There are, nevertheless, many memories and indeed the monthly Letterkenny Memories night where locals gather to reminisce.

For Isobel, there was growing up with her siblings, Josie, Jackie, Rosaleen and Charlie (another sister, Vera, died in infancy).

And walks to the old Port Bridge and out the Rockhill Road. And dances in the Devlin Hall, the Fiesta and the Golden Grill. And the occasional night in Nellie McGovern's pub.

"Great days," she relates, looking as far from her 89 years as the Oldtown Bridge is from Blackpool Tower.

"I went up to him and said 'I presume you're Fred' and he said 'I presume you're Isobel' and that was that."

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