



- MEET A TOWNIE -



CHARLIE TAKES A RUN HOME

London's calling. Or at any rate a small part of that great metropolis is calling. A part of Letterkenny that lives in Hackney and comes home every so often to visit family, friends and the town he was born in – "on Boxing Day in 1952" – and reared in.

By Paddy Walsh

London's calling and the clash of the old and the new – his birthplace and those early years and the current ultra-modern city he resides in, provides Charlie Fox with plenty of talking points and reflections on life then and now.

His early schooling brought him initially to Scoil Mhuire gan Smal at Sentry Hill at the age of four - "I remember Miss Gallagher who taught there." There followed a period at the Presentation Brothers school nearby where he recalls teachers such as Brother Mel, Brother Basil ("he was big into the hurling"), and Brother Columba.

From national school, it was but a short skip and jump to St. Eunan's College and memories surface of some of those he shared his secondary education with including Gerry McGeehan, Sean McFadden, Francis Harvey, the McArt brothers, Hughie and Pat, and the late Barry Lynch.

At the top end of the classroom, the likes of Fr. Peter McMahon, College President, and Fr Dinny McGettigan, Dean at the time.

His prowess as an athlete of some note was acknowledged when he captained the school's cross-country team that claimed the county championship in 1971.

Exiting through the school gates for the last time as a student didn't bring his distance running career to an end.

A few lines, penned by John B.

Doherty, as part of an article in the Letterkenny Athletic Club's 25th anniversary booklet, confirmed Charlie's progress as a runner of distinction: "Undoubtedly, Charlie Fox raised some eyebrows with his fine 2.47 in the National Marathon but he proved it was no fluke by following with 2.51 in the Dublin City Marathon a few months later."

And not the only athletic talent in the family. "My brother, Seamus, was as good as anyone in Ulster at the time."

During his time in Dublin, Charlie ran with another Letterkenny native and athletic standard bearer, Noel McCarron as respective members of Liffey Valley A.C.

And it was, perhaps, appropriate that Letterkenny Athletic Club was set up following an "exploratory meeting" in Fox's Bar at Upper Main Street – which would, in later years, become McClafferty's Bar.

Meanwhile on the educational front, Charlie repeated his Leaving Certificate and a third level stint arrived on his portfolio when he started a law degree at U.C.D. He also undertook an apprenticeship with Manus Regan, solicitor, in his home town.

He recalls attending the then Regional College in Letterkenny. "I got a job in Tom Furlong's office as a trainee law clerk. "He also secured a position with the then partnership of O'Gorman Cunningham, solicitors. "But it was obvious I was not going to be a lawyer," he laughs.

The potential career avenue took him to Dublin where he worked with Jim and Neil McGettigan and to London where he was employed by Barclay's Bank in the early to mid seventies. "I remember coming home for Christmas for my 21st birthday." London was to subsequently play a more permanent role in his future directions.

Pub Trade

The family's connections with the pub trade in Letterkenny, meanwhile,



Charlie Fox outside where the Fox's family pub used to be.

had originated when Charlie's father, James (Jim) took over Peadar McGeehin's pub on Lower Main Street where Fox's Bar attracted a loyal clientele.

"We had a black and white T.V. in the corner of the small lounge and people would come in to watch the football results and the 'Lone Ranger'."

Charlie recalls Billy McCollum

working in the premises as a "bottle and pots man" – a famous portrait of the latter sketched by local artist, Dolores Dunleavy, hanging in McGinley's bar for many years.

Eventually, the pub relocated to the site previously occupied by McCay's on Upper Main Street.

But death was to claim Jim Fox at the comparatively young age of 59 years and Charlie's mother, Bridie Josephine Breslin, whose family roots are traced to the vicinity of Ar dara, took over the running of the popular pub.

Charlie's grandfather, Johnny Denis, had been involved in the sheep trade. "He drove the livestock from Ar dara to Larne like John Wayne with five or six other me. It was the only way to do it to get the sheep to Manchester."

Some fifteen years ago, Charlie met the late Raphoe born entrepreneur Hugh Green, a man who also knew

his livestock. "I met him in Milford and he told me: 'I remember your grandfather coming to Letterkenny.'" Bridie Breslin's career, meanwhile, had taken her in a different direction. She qualified as a nurse and was a member of the nursing corps with the British Army, based in India for a period. "She was in a place called Savgor" – a city in the state of Madyya Pradesh – "and our house in Beechwood was called after it," Charlie relates.

It was in India that Bridie, he reveals, once shook the hand of Mahatma Gandhi, the leader for the movement of independence against British rule. Charlie's parents met, he says, at a dance in the former Literary Institute and went on to have four offspring that also included Rosemary, Siobhan and Seamus.

For Charlie, there was a time of forward and reversal – flitting between here and there (at one stage he returned to help his mother run the family business).

But the brighter lights of the English capital continued to attract and it was there in and around 1990 that a friend, Joe Clarke from Letterkenny, contacted him to inform him that a position was open with the Royal Mail. After completing a six months training course, he worked in the sorting office in Whitechapel for twenty years. "I was an expert sorter."

He bought a flat in the Borough of Hackney and there he remains – except on those occasions he returns to native soil. "I love it in London but I also love coming home."

His latest venture back to the town of his birth coincided with the Mini Heritage Weekend where he enjoying not just the stories but the meeting up with old friends and acquaintances. And a sizeable portion of banter and counter jibing laced with that broad beam of a smile of his.

In London, his interests vary. He has undertaken a couple of horticultural courses, is a member of the Quiz League of London (and many another quiz addict outfoxed in the process), and follows Leyton Orient F.C. for his troubles - obviously many seeing as the O's were relegated from the Football League in the season just ended!

But pretty soon, London's calling again for this affable son of Letterkenny and while it's debatable – and he does enjoy a good debate – that his beloved Orient will be back anytime soon, he definitely will.

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John B. Doherty, Letterkenny Athletic Club's 25th Anniversary Booklet

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Jim and Bridie Fox with their four children, from left, Siobhan, Charlie, Rosemary and Seamus.