



- MEET A TOWNIE -



THE MAN IN THE BISTRO WINDOW!

Pass by Lily's Bistro on Letterkenny's Upper Main Street on any working day and a familiar figure will close to inevitably be hunched over documentation at the table in the front window or engaged in conversation with other individuals.

His role as a Town Councillor may have ceased almost four years ago with the disbandment of Local Authorities such as Letterkenny Town Council but Victor Fisher is still called upon by members of the public to help them with their respective problems.

And here in his "office" he continues to conduct the business that he so faithfully did as a member of the local Council for well over thirty years.

It didn't begin for him in his adopted Letterkenny. Instead Victor emerged into life's great Council chamber in Ramelton.

"I met Mrs. Montgomery there once and she told me: 'I delivered you!'" Not something he could dispute but he does insist: "I was born in the same house in Church Street where John Diver lives."

Victor's parents were George Fisher and Frances Donnelly, his father from Glenalla, and his mother a native of Ramelton.

"My father worked with Bert Campbell, driving a lorry before getting a job with the Swilly Railway. He was a big strong man," Victor recalls.

The family relocated to Letterkenny – moving into Railway House - when the latter was just four years of age. In all, there were two boys, Carl and Victor, and three girls, Isabel (now sadly deceased), Georgina and Eileen.

"I went to the Robinsons School on the Port Road. R.J. Adamson was the teacher in charge and his son, Tony, got a big job in England as cricket commentator with the B.B.C.," And was also proficient behind the microphone at major golfing and tennis tournaments.

For Victor it was off – by rail bus – to the Raphoe Royal to pursue both his secondary education and the girls who travelled on the same route!

He played hockey for the school, proving a dependable goalkeeper, though B.B.C. commentary teams never made it along! "We used to have big battles against the Prior school in Lifford" – a rivalry that ended when the two establishments subsequently amalgamated.

From school it was out to the working world and for Victor Fisher that world has never extended beyond his home territory.

"I never worked away and was as happy as Larry to remain in Letterkenny." His sister, Isabel, the oldest in the family – "a great girl" – helped secured him an opening with Billy Harris in his store on the Main Street. "Apart from the hardware, he sold toys and gifts. It was always a busy place."

And some well recited anecdotes from those days behind the counter. "This woman came in one day and said she wanted a chamber pot. I said I would get one in the store but only managed to get one with the ear on it broken. But I brought it up and placed it on the counter. "But there's no ear on that one," the woman said to me. And wee Bobby Harris, Billy's brother, piped up: "So it'll not hear what you're dropping into it!. And she just



Victor Fisher.

laughed and I went out and put it on the back seat in the car."

Then there was Mickey Kelly from Lismonaghan who would arrive in the shop, his teeth a pristine white. And how, in those days before television advertisements promoted those tooth pastes that guarantee the whitest of smiles, did he ever manage it?

"He would put his finger up the chimney and clean his teeth with the soot. And he had the nicest set of teeth you ever saw," Victor insists. Perhaps best not to try this at home all the same.

Gleaming white teeth can't, however, prevent you from stumbling down stairs while carrying a basket of fragile cups, the fate of Mickey on one occasion. "And you'd think some of them would have survived but every one of them was smashed."

For Victor the working life was one he savoured. "I enjoyed every day of it. I loved my work and I loved the shop – I never wanted to do anything else."

But there was another pathway away from that working existence – a career in local politics and election to the then Urban District Council. "I finished third behind Laurence Blake and Bernard McGlinchey the first time I stood in the election." It was the first of half a dozen successful bids for the Council.

At a time when Paddy Harte and Neil T. Blaney and their respective Fine Gael and Independent Fianna Fail parties were serious rivals in the political world, Victor, persuaded by councillor McGlinchey who had offered

him a job in the Golden Grill on paybox duty, opted to join Fianna Fail.

Victor recalls his time on the local Council with fondness. "We worked for the good of the town and when you look at it today and the developments that have taken place, you can see just what benefit it was for Letterkenny to have its own Council."

The meetings themselves could often descend into fierce debate but Victor was rarely party to falling out with his Council colleagues. "Jimmy Harte used to be great with the one-liners at those meetings and there was always a great bit of banter."

Victor travelled to Raphoe a few short weeks ago to attend the wake of his good friend, Paddy Harte. "And Rosaleen said to me, Paddy always had a great word for you."

Indeed it was Victor who proposed the naming of the Paddy Harte Road in Letterkenny – and he still considers the Fine Gael T.D. was short-changed during his political career. "He never got the award he deserved at national level. He should have had a full Ministerial role for a lot of his career but somehow he was overlooked and I think that was a disgrace."

But local politics, too, can provide a stinging rebuke and while Victor was a loyal member of the Fianna Fail party for many years, his tone changes when he recalls the parting of the ways.

"It left a bitter taste for me and had I ever decided to run again, I would be doing so an independent and no

argument. The way they treated David was lousy and I won't forget it."

On the positive front, Victor reflects back on the various achievements of his political experience. He it was who proposed the location of the new Courthouse in Letterkenny - "I think Ciaran Brogan seconded it" - and he remembers himself and others organising bingo nights and other fund-raising ventures to help finance the original swimming pool on the High Road.

He confesses that the Main Street has suffered commercially since developments elsewhere in the town. "It definitely did impact but when you look at it, those retail parks could in all probability have been located three miles outside the town and where would that have left us? At least where they are, they are within walking distance of the Main Street.

"I suppose one gripe I would have was the decision by the Chamber of Commerce to move from the centre of the town away from the Main Street area. They had an office on the Port Road and to my mind should still be there or thereabouts."

Away from commerce and local politics, Victor is also highly regarded for his work for local soccer and as this interview is being conducted upstairs in Lily's, his good friend and fellow lotto seller, Dessie Kelly, arrives in for a brief chat.

The pair can regularly be seen trawling the pubs and clubs of the town on weekend nights to raise money for Letterkenny Rovers and its various teams. "There we are going into places like the Voodoo at two o'clock in the morning selling lotto tickets and us sharing about 150 years between us!. And having our hearing damaged by the loud music in these places as well."

Not somewhere he and his wife, Helen (nee Price, a native of Rosemount), would ever contemplate going for a night out. While back in the day Victor was employed in Billy Harris's emporium, Helen worked in the nearby Cleanswell run by the McFaddens.

"I would meet her every morning and then I took to going to the Fiesta to see if she was around but she would be with somebody. But one night I managed to persuade her to go for a snack and if you got that far, it was a good sign."

Their mixed marriage didn't quite meet with full support back in those days when some frowned upon such relationships but thankfully things have changed immeasurably for the better in this respect.

The couple have four of a family, David, Mairead, Kevin and Barry and if Victor isn't on his own in Lily's Bistro on the Main Street or tending to Council business, he will invariably be accompanied by his beloved Helen.

"I still get people approaching me to ask me to help them with a Council problem. We have no Town Council now and potholes are not getting filled and drains are not being cleared and lights are not being fixed. It was the biggest mistake ever disbanding the Town Councils but I believe they will come back, I have no doubt about it.

"People still have problems and they still come to me with them. And I look back at the work of John McCarron, the engineer, who has worked so hard for the good of the town. That's the sort of experience and involvement we need. And why we still need a Town Council."

"My father worked with Bert Campbell, driving a lorry before getting a job with the Swilly Railway. He was a big strong man."

Victor Fisher

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