



- MEET A TOWNIE -



Robert enjoys a reunion with his memories

Robert Johnston's eyes are dancing. He's recalling former times in his home town and warmly anticipating an event on the near horizon, the Letterkenny Reunion where, not just his eyes, but his feet will move with the music.

Those feet have played football in their time and could have done so at a professional level. And they, and the body with them, were also highly proficient at ballroom dancing. And still are.

A mine of stories and recollections, Robert rarely takes his foot off the pedal as he reverses into the past and the town he grew up in.

His father, also Robert, hailed from Glenmaquin while his mother, Ruby (Moore) was born and brought up in Letterleague.

"My father always said he was a cousin of former President Johnston in America!"

While Robert senior lived until the grand old age of 92, Ruby was taken suddenly in her mid-seventies following an ecumenical service in St. Eunan's Cathedral. "She was walking down the Church Lane along with Mrs. Boal and Mrs. Cowan and they turned around and saw that she had fallen. It was reckoned she had a heart attack. She was taken into McVeigh's house."

Robert had been alerted and recalls arriving in his Mini-Minor but his beloved mother had passed away. "She was taken away by ambulance to the hospital for a post mortem."

Ruby had run a fish and chip shop and a boarding house at 39 Lower Main Street just beside Clarke's paper shop.

His father worked as a plumber, carpenter and plasterer. "He could turn his hand to anything," Robert insisted. And his father's body strength meant he could do things such as balancing a cartwheel on his chin, Robert recalls.

He was employed with his brother, James's business on the Port Road before branching out on his own.

Robert junior had three half-sisters, Stella, Phyllis and Isabel, all of them now gone to their reward. His eldest sister, Olive worked as a nurse in London and will celebrate her 90th birthday at her home in Wimbledon on July 12th. Two other sisters, Pearl and Marling reside in Coventry.

One acquaintance there was Alice Carberry, formerly from Upper Main Street, who would frequent the Irish Centre in the city.

Meanwhile, his brothers, Terence and James live in Letterkenny.

At this point in the interview, Robert pauses to remember his nephew, Sammy, and grand-niece, Tory, who were the recent subjects of a memorial coffee morning in the Church of Ireland hall at Conwal Parish Church.

Robert himself arrived into the world at 39 Lower Main Street and he will celebrate his next birthday on the 18th of this month.

He attended Barkhall Primary School and remembers the likes of classmates, Ronnie Harrison, Bert Fleming, Billy Ramsay and Jordie



Robert Johnston.

Bates. I didn't go to secondary school but instead went to work with my father for five shillings or two half crowns. I got a fever after the first year! I served a seven years apprenticeship as a plasterer – now they're out in a week!"

Eventually, Robert broadened his horizons and headed to the bright lights of Dundee on the north bank of the Firth of Tay in Scotland. "I took on any job I could get including working in a factory."

The city wasn't quite populated by Irish people but one person he did meet was John Duffy from the Oldown who was employed down the mines. "It was a great place. There were thirteen women for every man!" Robert declares with more than a twinkle in the eye.

On his time off, he would go to Dens Park to watch Dundee in the Scottish League – but might have been more than merely watching. "I could have turned professional but I decided to stay amateur."

Professional Football?

Later he took his plastering skills to Walsall in the English West Midlands – and again could have taken up the option of playing professionally for the local club. George Cowie wanted me to sign. I played wing-half and I suppose I could have made it in the game. "Imagine if I was playing today what I might be worth," he laughs.

He remained in England for up to close to a decade before returning home. "One of the reasons was that my father wasn't well, but I always had it in mind to come back anyway at some stage."

Twinkle toes he may have been on the football pitch but he was to prove equally adept as a

ballroom dancer which became a passion. "Latin or the cha cha, I loved it and it kept me fit and active."

He recalls Jim Tinneney from Strabane giving classes in the Loreto Convent. "He's celebrating his 90th birthday and I'll take this opportunity to wish him all the best." Sammy Osborne from Belfast, who had the distinction of coming second in the world in a ballroom dancing competition, also came to the Letterkenny venue to pass on his expertise.

And then there was Sister Constance. "A lovely nun, just a lovely person. One day, she was there, and I reached for her and started to dance with her and who comes in but the Mother Superior!" A true nun event....!

For many years, Robert was a member of the Ulster Board of Ballroom Dancing. "He holds thirteen Ulster titles and finished second in the All-Irelands. "I remember I danced in Mosney before it closed."

Robert teaches ballroom dancing in the Community Centre and has as his dance partner, Rosaleen Carolan from Strabane.

Meanwhile, away from the dance floors, he continued to trip the light fantastic as a quality plasterer until his retirement. "I exercise every morning before my breakfast to relieve the muscles," he remarks.

The characters of Letterkenny gone by remain etched in his memory – people like Bump Coyle, Handbone Hannigan, - a mouth organ specialist - and Sticks Donegan.

Robert and brother, James, once purchased a greyhound from the latter. "We took possession of it at Larkin's Lane and put a rope around it and didn't this red racing car come on the scene and the hound took a fit and off it bolted and beat the car going up the road!" They eventually recaptured it at the Mountain Top where George Boal was feeding it. "Then this van pulled up and the three boys in it got out and enquired about the hound and asked were we going to sell it. They agreed to give us seven pounds for it and we had paid two for it! And they brought the hound to the van and didn't it take another fit and run after us and then we never saw him again."

Robert can remember a group of his peers, including Brendan Peoples, John and Pat Duffy, Michael Duffy, and both Robert and James reciting ghost stories. "And we'd jump at every noise after that!" That's the spirit!

Swimming at the Sandbeds at Conwal represented another past-time in those distant days and Robert's presence in the vicinity helped save more than one life. "There were two Scots women staying in Duffy's and one of them caught her foot in the bushes in the water and I got her out."

On another occasion, Robert was involved in rescuing E.S.B. electrician, Seamus McCann, who had been swimming in what was locally called the Dipping Hole near the O'Donnell Park. "Bobby Murray and John Devine lived there and Bobby shouted to John: 'Seamus McCann's drowning' and I jumped in. He

was going up and down in the water and I managed to get him out. He was blue and I had to pump the water from him."

Ten years later, Seamus passed away and Robert attended his wake. "And the family were saying that they had got ten more years of their father's life as a result."

Back in the day, Robert both smoked and drank. "It could have been bad for me but I copped on and found out I didn't need either. If I'd kept up smoking and drinking, I was on the wrong road. And I just gave it all up and that was forty years ago." Was it difficult to turn away from the cigarettes and alcohol? "It was hard if you didn't want to do it. I remember Fr. Willie McMenamin saying to me, if you have God's willpower you can do it. And I did."

The popular cleric was another accomplished footballer of that era and Robert also remembers playing with the likes of Teddy and Harry Blaney, Eunan 'Busty' Blake, Phonsie Gallagher and Brian Burns with Rathmullan Celtic and matches involving Letterkenny Rovers and Lifford Celtic.

Robert is quick to heap praise on John and Dan McLaughlin for teaching him to hit the ball with both feet. "I see players now and they can only kick with the one foot – it's important to be able to use both." Robert's favourite player from the world of football? "George Best would have to be one of them. I met him and Pat Crerand in Gallagher's Hotel one time – they were on their way to the 'Mary from Dungloe' Festival." Robert admits to being "partial to Liverpool and Spurs" where favourite teams are concerned.

And then another recollection. Heading up to Windsor Park in Belfast for a match between Northern Ireland and England in the company of Leo Sharkey, 'Bovril' Collins, 'Coot' Price and their driver, Paackie Kelly. "We had never seen a double-decker bus before we got to Belfast that day and when we got on, 'Bovril' ran up the stairs and shouted 'there's no driver up here!' And we were all put off the bus."

Prior to the game, Robert became ill and a wheelchair was found for him and he watched the international from the touchline with a quilt around him. "I even got a cup of tea and some sandwiches – I never had a better seat in my life at a game." And even better – every player on both teams shook his hand on route to the pitch including renowned internationals such as Tom Finney, Billy Wright, and Duncan Edwards who was winning a debut cap and would perish as a result of injuries sustained in the Munich air disaster with seven of his Manchester United team-mates in 1958.

For now, Robert Johnston is keenly anticipating the Letterkenny Reunion where'll he meet up with old friends and, with that lively personality on tow, make new ones. "It's always a great few days," he says, before adding: "I once judged a waltzing competition during it."

No better man to adjudicate the moves on a dance floor. Look out for him showing a few of his own during the Reunion which runs from August 5th to 10th.



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