

## **Big Welcome Home for Emigrants**

### *Group from English Midlands visits Heritage Farm in County Mayo*

A couple of weeks ago I had the pleasure of participating in a “welcome home” event here, hosted by Tom Hennigan and his family at “Hennigan’s Heritage Farm & Centre” in Rubble in the parish of Killasser, near Swinford, County Mayo

This was the occasion of the visit to “Hennigan’s” by a group of Irish emigrants from various centres in Birmingham and the East Midlands, including the Fireside Day Centre in Birmingham which undertakes tremendous work for the less fortunate in the community there.

The group were in County Mayo for a short break, courtesy of the Mayo Emigrant Liason Committee. A prominent member of the Committee, and visiting “Hennigan’s” that day with the group, is Kevin Bourke from near Castlebar, himself a one time emigrant to Birmingham and a stalwart of the Mayo Association in Birmingham in the 1970’s, which was when I first made his acquaintance at the “old” Birmingham Irish Centre in Digbeth.

The Mayo Emigrant Liason Committee is very active in bringing back to the west of Ireland, on an annual basis, groups of people who, perhaps, through financial or other circumstances may not readily have the opportunity or means to pay a return visit to the land of their birth, with some perhaps not having made the trip for many years, if at all, since they first “took the boat” to England.

On arrival at “Hennigan’s”, the group were made comfortable in the visitor centre there, a re-created “stone floor” kitchen housing items such as old “kitchen dressers” and various artefacts from times gone by in rural Ireland. Whilst enjoying tea, coffee and scones, and a few “small ones”, the group were heartily welcomed to Rubble, and “home to Ireland”, by Tom Hennigan, in his own inimitable style. Tom gave a detailed and illuminating account of the history and development of the “Hennigan’s” project, based upon the original Hennigan homestead, and a dedicated labour of love for Tom and his family over the last 12 years or so.

He enlivened his talk to the group with a number of stories and anecdotes, as well as highlighting various events connected with the Centre, one of the most significant being the visit last year by the current American Ambassador to Ireland, and whose own ancestral roots are in Killasser.

Many of the group were noted nodding their heads as Tom struck reminiscent chords within them in describing various customs and practices of the rural Ireland of yesteryear. He also engaged in a few “theatricals” with the group to illuminate his talk.

After the talk members of the group were invited to walk around the Centre and to view the restored thatched cottage complete with “half door” and open fireplace, the original Hennigan family home that is the centrepiece of the project, and other attractions there. These include an impressive collection of old farm machinery, a museum complete with a turf stack (housing within it a mock up of an original poteen

distillery, a throw back to a time when poteen making, then and now an illegal activity, was a significant local “industry”!) and a re-created early 20<sup>th</sup> century rural school classroom.

On returning to the visitor centre, the reassembled group took part in a spirited sing-song, encouraged by yours truly, which lasted an hour or so.

The proceedings then drew to a close, group photographs were taken, farewells were bade with invitations extended to the visitors to “come back and see us again”, as they boarded their coach to return to Castlebar where they were staying for the duration of their break.

Michael Fox  
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