

Blessing of New Footbridge at Cloonlumney, Swinford

Old Bridge, a Bridge to the World

On Saturday 5th August, on a glorious summer afternoon, Mass was celebrated at the new footbridge over the River Moy at Cloonlumney, near Swinford. This was in memory of the many thousands of people who had used the old bridge at this spot during the last century.

The occasion also saw the blessing of the new footbridge, which had replaced the old time worn bridge in the summer of 2005. The work was carried out by the Office of Public Works, with the new structure, as did the historic one that it replaced, linking the County Mayo parishes of Killasser/Callow and Swinford.

The day had started moist and overcast, with the prevailing drizzly weather conditions justifying the characterisation of the day that was in it as a “soft day”. It posed the question, would the day clear up, and would the sun break through to ensure a dry warm backdrop to the symbolic events which were to take place later in the day?

Prayers were answered, the sun did indeed shine, and the weather conditions were perfect for the coming together of the communities from both sides of the bridge, and beyond, for this historic occasion, with the turnout appreciably exceeding the numbers which had been anticipated by the organisers of the event.

Firstly, however, let us go back in time, to the origins of the crossing of the River Moy at this location.

At some time, in the “dim and distant”, stepping stones were placed here across the Moy, linking the river bank of the townland of Carrowmore-Moy on the Killasser side, with that of the village of Cloonlumney near Swinford. It appears that these were used for the fording of the river up to the close of the 19th century. Around that time a family in the village acquired a small ferry boat, conveying passengers across the river for the modest sum of one penny.

Later, in 1902, and at the instigation of “the legendary” Canon McDonnell, parish priest of Killasser, the “Congested Districts Board” commenced the construction of a footbridge. Most of the sand and gravel used in the construction of the bridge was drawn, by horse and cart, from sandpits in nearby Logcurragh, Swinford. Local women were paid sixpence each to fill two pits either side of the location for the bridge with broken stone, to facilitate the construction of the original pillars for the bridge. The total cost for the erection of the bridge was £406.

The bridge measured 110 feet in length by 5 feet in width, with five pairs of supporting pillars connected by iron guard rails, and a floor consisting of wooden planks on “tram irons”. A revolving gate, a notable feature of the bridge, was placed at the Carrowmore-Moy end in 1939.

All growing up in the environs of the bridge would have memories of happy days spent at the bridge, a place for social gathering. Many summer Sundays were happily spent paddling in the cooling shallow waters downstream from the bridge, perhaps

searching for freshwater mussels containing much sought after pearls. The revolving gate was a veritable “merry go round” with children jostling with each other for “their turn”. Here also, older children learned how to fly fish for trout and salmon, and to catch eels. Upstream were pools for perch and pike. Salmon spawning beds are still visible upstream from the bridge. The 1960’s and 70’s saw the bridge become a focal point for the youth of nearby Swinford. Murphy’s field on the Carrowmore-Moy bank was the venue for many a game of football.

The “forbidden” apples in Murray’s garden were an enticement in the Autumn, as were the hazelnuts in the *coillin*. The latter was also the source of hazel rods for thatching and stronger poles for the making of handles for spades and forks. Nearby, Tobar a’ tSagairt provided spring water for the whole neighbourhood. Even if this dried up in the summer months (which it has this year) then the “far well” was the reliable stand-by.

When the old bridge was first erected it was the focal point for summertime *ceilis* and dances. Then, certain local families were the providers of the music, indeed, music still runs today in these families, maintaining the tradition.

The old bridge, indeed the stepping stones before it, lay on what was the main walking route from many of the townlands of Killasser across the Moy to the nearby town of Swinford, where Killasser people would shop, and conduct “their business”. These were the lesser-paced days long before the advent of 4-wheel drive vehicles, cars with tinted windows, and the earth-shaking boom of car stereos, and the taken-for-granted ease of travel of the present times.

The footbridge bridge was one of only two crossing points on the Moy near Swinford at the time, the other being the bridge at Cloongullen on the Foxford/Swinford road. The road bridge over the Moy at Cloonacanna on the Swinford/Aclare road, in the east of Killasser parish was not built until later.

Whilst it hosted the regular footfall of travellers going over and back the bridge on their journeys to and from Swinford, sadly, it also felt the tread of those who, of economic necessity, left Killasser on a one way trip, never to return, with shouldered stick and bundle, to the wider world outside Ireland, in that harder, austere, and less happy era in Irish history many in the prosperous times of today would find difficult to contemplate, heading for Swinford station, a change at Claremorris for Dublin, and a new life beyond, be it in England, America or elsewhere.

Indeed, it could be said, this was not just a humble footbridge joining two parishes, but a bridge to the world.

My own paternal grandfather and my father used the old footbridge regularly in their time, journeying from their village of Tiernenny in Killasser to Swinford, by way of “Conlons” near the parish church of Killasser in the townland of Listernan, and back. Their lot was a little different from that of many others. They, at least, did return from England.

We move forward now to the events of Saturday 5th August at the new footbridge. Concelebrated Mass was celebrated, led by Fr Anthony Conlon, assisted by priests

from the two parishes and other priests with an affinity with the areas linked by the bridge. Following the Mass, and blessing of the bridge, refreshments were served, and there was musical entertainment of the Irish traditional and “country ‘n Irish” genres. Dancing took place on a wooden floor laid near the bridge, including a few “sets”.

A very special guest at the celebrations was Sr Mary McGloin, no stranger to the old footbridge in her youth. Although past the age when others have retired, Sr Mary continues to toil with the AIDS stricken people of sub-Saharan Africa. The AIDS virus has affected one in four of the population of this area, orphaning millions of children and leaving ill-resourced family elders to try to care for them. All taking part in the afternoon’s celebrations were invited to make monetary contributions to facilitate Sr McGloin’s invaluable work and a cheque for a total of €2,100 was presented to Sr McGloin.

The events of the afternoon included the unveiling of a commemorative plaque affixed to the bridge at the Cloonlumney end, and a group photograph on the bridge. All together a very enjoyable and worthwhile event and all credit must be given to those who gave freely of their time in the organising and promoting of the occasion, participating in the special Mass, and ensuring that an enjoyable and memorable time was had by all.

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