

## Birth of the GAA in Leitrim

Leitrim's first GAA club was founded on 6 January, 1886 in Dromahaire in the north of the county. The existence of a GAA club in Leitrim so early was unusual, as there were only a handful of clubs in Connacht at this time. Initially called the Dromahaire Athletic Club, the name was later changed to **Dromahaire Joe Biggars**. The first officers of the new club were: **Rev Cormac McSharry, PP**, president, **John Flynn**, vice-president, **John McGowan**, secretary and **Patrick Cosgrave**, treasurer.

The forming of the first Gaelic football club in Manorhamilton was considered by the Manorhamilton Shamrock's hurling club committee at a meeting held on 20 May, 1905. The hurling club was in existence since 1903. The Gaelic football club was formed shortly after at a meeting on Sunday 28 May (1905) in the Shamrock Hall and was named the O'Rourke's Gaelic Football Club.

There were over 30 members present at the meeting. **Michael P Wilson** was moved to the chair amidst applause. On the proposition of **J Wilson**, seconded by **P Toner**, **P Mc Keon** was unanimously selected captain with **B Feehily**, vice-captain, **B Rooney**, treasurer and **R Sweeney**, secretary. The committee comprised **T Tiffoney**, **J Mc Morrow**, **William Lee**, **T Rooney**, **John Mc Sharry**, **D Wilson**, **J Curneen** and **J Wilson**. The secretary handed in a receipt from **Mr. O' Neill** Leitrim county secretary with regard to the affiliation of the club. Delegates appointed to attend the North Leitrim Board were:- **William Lee**, **P Mc Keon** (captain), **John Mc Sharry**, **J Wilson**, **J Mc Morrow**. The chairman urged all members to attend the practices every Sunday as the county championship in both hurling and football would be commencing early in September and he hoped that they 'would be able to bring the medals to the town and show that the Gaels of Leitrim are still alive and flourishing.'

A meeting of the 'South Leitrim Gaels' was held on 29 October 1905 in Cloone. Correspondence from **Mr Rooney** Secretary of Manorhamilton Shamrocks hurling club, re. the forming of a North Leitrim Board was read. Although it would appear that a north Leitrim board was already in existence its status was not formally recognised at county level. In any event, it was proposed by **Mr O'Neill** (county board secretary) and seconded by **Mr. Flynn** and passed, 'that a North Leitrim board be formed, subject to the control of the county committee.'

A meeting of the new board was held at St. Clare's Hall on Sunday evening, 29 Oct 1905. Three clubs were represented, all from the Manorhamilton area: Manorhamilton Shamrocks: **J Gilligan**, **P McKenna**, **B Rooney** (vice-captain), **J Murphy**, O'Rourke's Gaelic Football Club: **J Wilson**, **F Gaffney**, **P Ferguson**. Ballyboy Breffnis: **T Tiffoney** (captain) and **B Clancy**.

The chairman, **J Gilligan**, stated that all the members of the north Leitrim teams, including the members of the O'Rourke's Football Club, were earnest and enthusiastic Gaels and for sobriety and general good conduct they were second to none in the county. At a later meeting of the O'Rourke's club **P McTiernan** was named as delegate to the board.

At the next meeting of the board the following week, the setting up of branches of the Gaelic League and the Ancient Order of Hibernians (AOH) was discussed. The meeting was held in St. Clare's Hall, Manorhamilton. **W Lee**, vice president was in the chair. The following delegates attended: Shamrocks Hurling Club: **W Lee**, **R Sweeney**, **P McKenna**, **J Gallagher**, **J Gilligan** and **B Rooney**. Gaelic Football Club: **P Ferguson**, **W Lee**, **T Curneen**, and **J Wilson**. Ballyboy Brefini Hurling Club: **T Tiffoney**, **Gilgunn**.

A long discussion took place regarding support for the Irish language but as the county championship was to take place shortly it was decided not to establish a branch of the Gaelic League immediately but that a special meeting would be held specifically for this purpose in the near future. The chairman urged all members to work like true Gaels and support an organisation that was 'second to none in the history of Ireland's records'. It is interesting to note that the local clubs also advocated the support of Irish manufactures.

The first reported Gaelic football match played by the Manorhamilton Club took place on 19 January 1908. The following account of the game appeared in the *Fermanagh Herald*:

*The Ballintogher Gaelic Football team visited Manorhamilton on Sunday 19<sup>th</sup> January, 1908 and played a friendly match against the Shamrock Club in the Bee Park. This was the first Gaelic Football match played in Manorhamilton for many years, and the Shamrock Club did exceedingly well for a start, the match ending in a drawn game, with such a formidable team as Ballintogher. The ground was in good condition, and the Ballintogher team gave a fine exhibition of Gaelic Football. At the start it looked as if the Ballintogher players were going to have things all their own way. At half-time the score was Ballintogher 4 points Manorhamilton 3 points. Shortly after the interval Manorhamilton Shamrocks scored the only goal in the match, leaving them leading by one point. During the last twenty minutes the play was very exciting. J. Gilmartin, Ballintogher, had very hard luck in striking the cross-bar. When time up was sounded the result was Manorhamilton 1 goal 4 points (7pts), Ballintogher 7 points (7pts)*

*Manorhamilton: C. Carroll (goal), D. Wilson (captain), J. Dillon, J. Monaghan, P. Walsh, J. McSharry, P. Wilson jun., P. Skeffington, J. Wilson, E. Harte, M. Lee, T. McCabe, P. Wilson, senr., J. Clancy, J. Spellman, M. Kivlehen, M. Rooney.*

*Ballintogher: J. Gormley (goal), M. Gilmartin (captain) B. McMorrow, J.M. McMorrow, P. Quigley, P. Conlon, R. O'Boy, M. Brennan, P. Lang, J. Fallon, M. Fallon, J. Gilmartin, M. Mulligan, M. Gormley, B. Gormley, J. Boles, P. Clancy.*

*T. Gilmartin, Ballintogher was an impartial referee.*

The teams were made up of seventeen players each which was the rule then and the game was played against the backdrop of the famous canvass and election of 1908 in which the Sinn Féin candidate, **Charles Dolan** of the newly formed Sinn Féin party was defeated by **Francis Meehan** of the Irish Parliamentary Party.

Manorhamilton Football Club held a very successful dance the following Saint Patrick's night in the Temperance Hotel. Supper was served at 1am and the dancing went on until seven in the morning under bright electric lights. An electricity supply had been installed in the town three years previously. The *Fermanagh Herald* reported the event as follows:

*The members of the Manorhamilton Football Club held a dance in the Temperance Hotel on St. Patrick's night, which proved a great success. In response to invitations sent out by Messrs. John Munday and James McGarry, a large number of guests attended and everyone appeared to enjoy themselves immensely during the night. The ball and supper rooms were decorated, and an extra installation of electricity illuminated the scene. A large number of young ladies graced the ballroom with their presence, and their beauty could not be excelled! Dancing commenced at 10p.m. and continued until 7am. on the following morning. The local orchestra (under Mr. J.J. Kivelan) was requisitioned for the night by the committee, and their rendition of Irish airs and several popular musical pieces gave entire satisfaction.*

*Supper was served at one o'clock by Mr. J.L. McMorrow, proprietor Temperance Hotel, and was indeed a high tribute to the skill to which he has attained in matters culinary. Messrs. H. A. Sweeney and J. McEntee, as master of ceremonies, were simply ubiquitous and to them is due in great measure the success of the dance. They were assisted by Messrs. John White, P. Walsh, J. J. Kivelan, and M. Mathews.*

Consternation and anger was expressed by the members of the Manorhamilton Gaelic clubs and the Manorhamilton Celtic soccer club regarding the content of a letter which was published in the *Fermanagh Herald* in September, 1908. The letter which was signed *Veritas* stated that Mr **J O'Donnell**, Larkfield, president of the North Leitrim Agriculture Show Committee was objecting to the use of the Bee Park for football matches. All clubs publicly disassociated themselves from the letter and its author. In a reply to *Veritas* a **Mary C O'Donnell** objected to the divisive tone of the letter and stated that it would have suited the writer better to have signed himself a "Blatherin Buffoon" in place of "Veritas". The Manorhamilton Shamrocks Hurling and Football Club wrote to Mr **J O'Donnell**, stating

that no member of the Club wrote the letter. A deputation from the local football and hurling club was appointed to attend the North Leitrim Agriculture Committee in the courthouse seeking the use of the Bee Park for games during the season.

Fundraising and social events were features of the early years of the Club. For example, a function was held to honour the secretary, **Patrick Walsh** on his departure to Dublin in September, 1908. In the same year a watch donated by Mr **White**, vice-president of the Club was raffled in the Temperance Hotel. **John Bredin**, Tullyskerney was the winner. Later, in 1912, a play, entitled 'The Eloquent Dempsey' was performed in St Clare's Hall under the direction of **Rev Fr Comey**.

Coverage of club football and hurling games in the early years of the GAA in Leitrim was almost non-existent in the local press. After the 1908 account of the Manorhamilton v Ballintogher match there would appear to be no further coverage until 1912 when a short description of a match in Killargue between Killargue Rovers and Glencar Up to Dates was published in the Leitrim Observer on 30 March of that year.

Football games between local areas and townlands were common in the early twentieth century. Most of them went unrecorded and we are indebted to the late **Pat Mitchell**, Ballyglass, for an account which he heard in his youth of a game between Upper Mullies and Lower Mullies :

*The game was played in June 1912. The teams competing were Upper Mullies, roughly the Lisnabrack area and Lower Mullies which was the Largy area. The chief organiser was Owen Murphy, Killassnet Co- Op Society. Owen procured a GAA rule book and studied it. He then passed it to Thomas Rooney, Largy. Locally known as Thomas Tom, he had been in Belfast for some years and had played soccer there.*

*During the spring of 1912, the two men marshalled their teams to have them ready for the the big game in early summer. There was intense local interest for the Big Match. The Lisnabrack men strengthened their side by enlisting the Brennan brothers from Cloonaquin who had a great reputation. The Largy men countered by bringing the Boylan brothers from Lurganboy who had an equal reputation. After long negotiations, John O'Donnell was agreed upon as referee.*

*The game which was played before a large crowd ended in some confusion. Approaching the final whistle, with the teams almost level, Thomas Tom scored a goal with his head. The Lisnabrack men roared foul and wanted a free out. The Largy men maintained it was a perfectly legitimate goal. The referee could not take a decision on it. The rule book was taken out, but there was no guidance in it either. The game was declared adjourned, inconclusively, until further advice would be sought. The venue for the game was Pat Darbies' park in the townland of Glebe.*

Between 1912 and 1917 practically no organised club football games took place in the Manorhamilton area but it is highly likely that events like the one described by **Pat Mitchell** above, continued to flourish. However, there was a huge change in the fortunes of the GAA all over Ireland in the aftermath of the 1916 Easter Rising. The execution of the leaders, including Seán MacDiarmada, and the subsequent internment of hundreds of others served to turn public opinion towards the ideal of a Gaelic and free Ireland.

1917 saw a huge increase in the number of clubs all over Ireland. In Leitrim twenty seven teams, including Manorhamilton, registered with the county board. A new North Leitrim board was formed with the following officers: **J Keaney**, Glenfarne, chairman, **J Redmond**, Manorhamilton, secretary, **J McGriskin**, Kiltyclogher, vice-chairman and **E Cassidy**, Ballyshannon, treasurer. A game between Kiltyclogher and Manorhamilton on Saturday 12 May was advertised by the Anglo-Celt newspaper. It is perhaps no coincidence that this date was specially chosen, it being the anniversary of MacDiarmada's execution.

In 1918 the GAA was declared a dangerous organisation by the British Government and Gaelic games were banned. However on Sunday August 4<sup>th</sup> over 54,000 members defied the ban and played Gaelic games at 3pm all over Ireland. This became known as Gaelic Sunday. The Kiltyclogher GAA correspondent **JJ O'Rourke** wrote in the *Fermanagh Herald* on 7 May, 1955 about an incident in 1917 or 1918 when teams from Manorhamilton and Kiltyclogher defied the ban:

*Away back in 1917 or 1918 when Mr. J. F. Mulligan, P.O. captained the team, the Gaels of Kiltyclogher defied the ban on Gaelic games, even when a detachment of the Sherwood Forresters came to the village to prevent a game between Kiltyclogher and Manorhamilton.*

*While the troops surrounded the regular playing field at Kilcoo, the game was played at Tullintloy, scarcely a mile away. As well as I can remember the visiting team on that memorable occasion was captained by Manorhamilton's patriot blacksmith, Mr. **Jack O'Connell**. It is hard to believe that the young men of Kiltyclogher and district will permit the old spark to die out.*

Manorhamilton had no team during the very turbulent period of the War of Independence and Civil War but in 1924 there was a resurgence of activity with the establishment of teams in the Brackery-Faughery area, the Mullies Chapel area and the Deerpark area. The Brackery men were organised by the late **James McGurrin**. He brought his team to play the Mullies men, trained by a Galway man by the name of **Naughton**, who worked with the parish priest. This game was played in a field beside the old graveyard. But the big game of course, was the one made famous by the aforementioned **James**

**McGurrin** in his ballad *Rogan's Hill*. The game was played in 1924 between Mullies and a team from the Upper Glenfarne District called *Dubh*.

*On Tara's Hills in days gone by,  
Some noble deeds were done,  
And there were seen some joyous scenes,  
Of sport and harmless fun.  
But here in days more nigh our own,  
The men are with us still,  
Who stood the test and beat the best,  
That day on Rogan's Hill.  
The team that played against our boys,  
Had never known defeat.  
Their movements showed their training,  
Their steps were firm and neat.  
Their style was quick and dashing.  
Their kicks were straight and true,  
And six feet was the average height of every  
man from Dubh.  
As each team stood on Rogan's Hill,  
before a mighty crowd.  
It showed old Erin still had sons,  
of which she might be proud.  
The referee arranged his plans  
and sharp at half past two,  
The Mullies boys did take their place  
against the lads from Dubh.  
The whistle blew, the game commenced,  
We were all filled with delight.  
At the efforts of those stalwarts  
As they strove with main and might.  
The play was fast and stylish,  
And fouls they were but few.  
The referee at half-time called  
three points were scored for Dubh.  
Refreshments next upon the list,  
And many a handsome maid,  
With plate and glass did quickly pass  
the cake and lemonade.  
Each goalie got a bowl of broth,  
The real ould Irish stew.  
And some say it was poteen,  
they gave the lads from Dubh.  
Again they take their places,  
And I think it strange to say.  
A wind that was blowing in their face  
had turned the other way.  
They seemed to favour Mullies,  
And with a pass or two,  
They put the ball between the posts,  
And scored a goal on Dubh.  
You have seen the river Bonnet,  
when maddened with a surge,  
It almost seemed to sweep the trees  
when onwards at a charge.  
Such was the Mullies forwards,  
They forced the ball near through.  
They took the strain, but back again,  
were forced by gallant Dubh.  
Each team did their utmost,  
And as time wore along,  
The Dubh boys seemed to weaken,  
whilst Mullies grew more strong.*

Again we hear the whistle,  
 we hear the referee,  
 The Dubh boys failed to score a goal,  
 While Mullies they scored three.  
 As for the McEvanneys,  
 In them there is no choice.  
 Tommy is furious in a charge;  
 While Paddy is cool and nice.  
 If you want a pair of footballers,  
 to play throughout the year,  
 I firmly recommend to you,  
 Young Jack and Packie Spear.  
 They seldom miss with boot or fist,  
 They're always at their post,  
 They're not stuck into the ground,  
 And seldom can be tossed.  
 As for the McTiernans,  
 I mean young Joe and John,  
 They're a credit to their country,  
 And their father Jamsie Ban.  
 Here's to young Tom Rooney,  
 He's a devilish hardy cub.  
 He kicked a ball some 40 yards,  
 and put it through a tub.  
 His only equal on the field,  
 is gallant Mick Gilroy,  
 And I think the next upon the list,  
 is Fr. Comey's boy.  
 Rough handling for Scanlon,  
 He's always at his best.  
 He surely will break eggs on Fox.  
 If he doesn't be at rest.  
 Here's to Francie Rooney,  
 Mullies pride and joy,  
 He hurled a man off Rogan's Hill,  
 almost to Lurganboy.  
 And when your ship is floundering,  
 And almost on the rocks,  
 The only man to guide her back,  
 is Mr. Peter Fox.  
 He's here, he's there, he's everywhere,  
 And as far as I can see,  
 They have no team complete,  
 Without himself and wee Joe Lee.  
 Young Gallagher from Lurganboy,  
 He is the fastest of them all,  
 And like an eagle and his prey,  
 he pounds on the ball.  
 Here's to Johnnie Sommers,  
 giving every man his due,  
 He's played his part from the very start,  
 And helped to conquer Dubh.

After the turmoil of the War of Independence and the Civil War another attempt was made to organise the GAA at local level. At a meeting in Kiltyclogher on 22 November 1925, a North Leitrim District Board was formed. Teams from Manorhamilton, Garrison, Dromahaire, Glenfarne, Kiltyclogher and Dhu affiliated. This meeting was followed by another in McGloin's Hall, Manorhamilton in early December. The chairman, **J Maguire** and treasurer, **P McAuley**, Belleek resigned after three weeks and were replaced by **John O'Connell**, Manorhamilton and **John Kilkenny**, Dromahaire. The secretary was **W J Patterson**, Kiltyclogher. The meeting called on all teams to affiliate so that they could participate in a League competition. However it is not known if this competition went ahead.

At the end of July 1926, a meeting was held in the Central Hotel, Manorhamilton to arrange matches for the North Leitrim Championship. There were five teams to take part: Manorhamilton, Glenfarne, Kiltyclogher, Dromahaire and Kinlough. **Joseph Rooney**, Manorhamilton acted as secretary at this meeting.

The AGM of Manorhamilton Club was held in P Carty's in December 1926 and some members of the outgoing committee were replaced by new officers.

*In December the adjourned Committee meeting of the Manorhamilton G.A.A. was held in P Cartys and was chaired by Rev J Brady. The members of the Committee present were Rev. J. Brady, C.C. Messrs. Jos. Bredin, H. Dolan, J. McGovern, The Hotel, J. McPolin, G Tracey, C.N., D. A. Leonard and Guard Dolan.*

*The officers elected were-President, Rev. J. Brady C.C. Manorhamilton. Vice-Presidents, Dr. Harry O'Carroll, M.D. Dr. Dolan, and Mr. Joseph Bredin, Secretary, Mr. D.A. Leonard, Assistant Secretary, Mr. John Mullany, Treasurer, Mr. John McGovern, the Hotel. Delegate to attend Co. Board meetings, Mr. J. Mullany.*

Two major decisions were made at this meeting: the senior and junior football teams and also the hurling club to be named the 'St Clare's' and the game of handball to be actively promoted. Tribute was paid to **James McGrath NT** for his work with the junior team most of whom were his pupils in the Boys' national school. Under the name 'St Clares',

*Manorhamilton footballers played Glenfarne in May 1927. Manorhamilton quickly registered 3 points in the first half per Darcy and Fingleton. Before half-time they added two more minors. Glenfarne played a rousing game and had scored one goal and two points before the short whistle blew. Matt Weafer saved Manorhamilton from a crushing defeat. J Keany, of Glenfarne, a former pupil of St Patrick's College, Cavan, and of Blackrock College, was the most outstanding player on the field. For Manorhamilton Weafer and Fingleton were best. Mr. McCabe, Dowra refereed and the final score was: Glenfarne, 1-3: St Clares, 0-5.*

It is generally acknowledged that the GAA played a significant role, at local and national levels, in helping to bring about a reconciliation of the opposing factions in the civil war. This was true both in the membership of committees and among the players themselves. Another group which contributed to this effort was the newly-formed, unarmed civic guards. Apart from becoming involved with local teams they also formed teams comprising their own members. This was the case in 1926 when a guards' team was established in North Leitrim. On 1 August of that year they played their first ever match in the Bee Park against a north Leitrim selection. The game, which ended in a draw, went off without serious incident although the guards were accused of persistent fouling. Best for the north Leitrim clubs were: **Joe McGowan, Larry Meehan, Matt Weafer, Fred Kelly and Paddy Kehoe** while **Sergeant Harrington**, and **Guards McMahon, Donohoe, O'Connor and Jennings** excelled for the guards. **Larry McDermott** from Glenfarne, popularly known as '**Larry Mac**' was referee. The following were the teams:

North Leitrim Civilian Team: **James Rooney** (goals), **Weafer, Skeffington, Joe Rooney, McCormack, Kelly** (Dromahaire), **Harte, Larry Meehan, McGowan** (Dromahaire), **Kehoe, Darcy, Browning, Gilvarry** (Kinlough), **Travers and Edward Dolan**.

Guards: **Burns, O'Connor, Jennings, Harrington, Donohue, Dunleavy, Sheerin, Creighton, Hickey, Gavigan, Byrne, Lang, Mc Mahon, Scott, Dolan**.

Many guards who were stationed in Manorhamilton over the years made a huge contribution to the Sean MacDiarmada and Glencar Manorhamilton Clubs.

In 1927, a football league, involving six teams was organised by a new body, the North Leitrim Districts Board of which **John Kenny, NT** was president and **Guard P Dolan** secretary. The clubs taking part were the eventual winners Glenfarne and also Manorhamilton, Dromahaire, Kiltyclogher, Kinlough and Dowra. The competition was marred by the 'unsportsmanlike action of some players and spectators'. Both Dromahaire and Manorhamilton withdrew from the competition before its completion and the president **John Kenny** resigned later on in the year. It was suggested that the loss of players through emigration had a detrimental effect on the competition.

One of the weaknesses of the organisation of Gaelic games in the north of the county, at this time, was the fact that competitions were not played under official GAA rules. This may account for the apparent non-representation of north Leitrim players on the Leitrim team which defeated Galway in the Connacht final on 7 August 1927. Efforts were made in 1929 to introduce a uniform policy vis-a-vis the rules. In April, a meeting to this end was held in Connolly's Hall, Manorhamilton. The attendance included representatives from Glenfarne,

Dromahaire, Kiltyclogher, Kinlough, Dowra and Killargue. **Charles Flynn**, Mohill, president of the County Board; Mr **Heslin, NT** and **P Murray**, all from South Leitrim were in attendance. **M A Gallagher**, District Court Clerk, Dowra was also present.

It was decided to form a District Board and Mr Flynn was elected president with **JJ O'Rourke**, Manorhamilton, chairman; **John Kenny, NT, Glenfarne**, vice-chairman; **MA Gallagher**, Dowra, secretary; Mr **Gallagher**, Killargue, registrar, and **J Maguire, NT** Kiltyclogher, treasurer.

The president, **Charles Flynn** didn't accept that emigration had depleted the ranks as South Leitrim were in a similar position and continued on. He said if certain people gave up foreign games, they could come into the Gaelic movement. On the question of admitting people who had played foreign games it was suggested by the meeting that the rule should not be too strictly enforced as the district was newly organised. Therefore the rule that players must not have taken part in foreign games for six months previous to admission should be overlooked. The chairman agreed and apparently there was no objection from the clubs.

The 'foreign games' which were played at this time in Manorhamilton were cricket and hockey. A cricket club had been formed at a well attended meeting in May 1928 in McGloin's Hall. Amongst those present were:-Messrs. **T R Armstrong**, who presided, **L Rutherford, Watchorn, Egan, Scully, Rowan, Lowe, McGovern, Macready, Wilson, Pomeroy, and Monahan**. The following officers were elected: secretary, Mr **Lowe**; treasurer, Mr **M. McGovern**. Committee: **Armstrong, Watchorn, Egan, Wilson and Rowan**. Manorhamilton played Sligo Cricket Club in 1930 in the Bee Park and were heavily defeated. The local club was represented by: **M Meehan, J Perry, TR Armstrong, G Egan, H McCormack, E Fitzgerald, D Keaney, J Rutherford, M Noonan, W Fitzgerald and D Boyle**.

Manorhamilton Hockey Club met Bundoran in the Bee Park in 1929; the teams were mixed, ladies and gentlemen, with ladies in the majority.

The following is a newspaper report of the match:

*Just before half-time Mr. Skeffington was slightly injured and retired. His place was taken by Mr. Elliott. Half-time ended without a score on either side. Bundoran players were dominating matters and when Manorhamilton's goal was in danger, Mr. Skeffington resumed play. He immediately got possession and in combination with Mr. Meehan and Mr. Rutherford carried the game to the other end and scored the only goal secured in the match. Mr. Fitzgerald and Mr. Lowe played a good game. The visitors were entertained in the Central Hotel.*