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FESTIVAL
ST PATRICK'S DAY 2026

Your guide to St Patrick's Day in London

GOING GREEN
SAINTLY CELEBRATIONS ACROSS THE GLOBE

EMMA DABIRI
IRISH AUTHOR LEADS ST PATRICK'S PARADE

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Civil case against Gerry Adams over IRA bombings opens

Three men injured in IRA bomb attacks seek symbolic damages of £1 in High Court action as the former Sinn Féin leader denies any involvement



Gerry Adams
Picture: Leah Farrell for RollingNews.ie

BY MAL ROGERS

A HIGH Court case brought by three men injured in IRA bombings in Britain has opened in London, with former Sinn Féin leader Gerry Adams named as the defendant.

The claimants are seeking a ruling that Adams, former MP for West Belfast and TD for Louth, bears personal responsibility for decisions which they allege led to bomb attacks in London and Manchester in 1973 and 1996.

They are seeking nominal damages of £1, describing the case as a “vindictory” action intended to establish liability rather than secure financial compensation.

Adams, 77, has consistently denied any involvement in the attacks and has repeatedly rejected claims that he was a member of the IRA.

Proceedings are taking place before Mr Justice Swift at the Royal Courts of Justice and are expected to run for around seven days.

The legal action has been brought by John Clark, who was injured in the IRA bomb outside the Old Bailey in 1973, along with Jonathan Ganesh and Barry Laycock, both of whom were wounded in bomb attacks carried out in Britain in 1996.

The Docklands bombing in London in February 1996 killed two people and injured dozens when a lorry bomb exploded in the Canary Wharf area, ending the IRA's ceasefire at the time.

Later the same year, a large bomb detonated near the Arndale shopping centre in Manchester city centre, injuring more than 200 people and causing extensive damage across the surrounding commercial district.

More than two decades earlier, a car bomb outside the Old Bailey courthouse in London injured more than 200 people. The device had been transported to Britain by ferry from Belfast.

Lawyers acting for the claimants say they will call a number of witnesses during the case, including former republican activists as well as retired members of the security forces.

Two witnesses are expected to give evidence anonymously and will not be

visible in court while testifying.

Adams is expected to appear in court to give evidence later in the trial.

Writing in the Andersonstown News ahead of the hearing, he said he anticipated that witnesses would attempt to link him to the bombings on the basis of his prominence within the republican movement during the conflict.

“I had no direct or indirect involvement in these explosions,” he wrote. “I will robustly challenge the unsubstantiated hearsay statements that are the mainstay of the claimants’ case.”

Lawyers representing the claimants bringing the case have said the proceedings will be the first occasion on which Adams is cross-examined in an English court over allegations concerning his role within the IRA.

The court will decide the case on the civil standard of proof — the balance of probabilities.

The claim was filed in 2022 shortly before legislation known as the Northern Ireland Legacy Act prevented new civil actions connected to the Troubles, although the legislation is currently the subject of proposed changes.

The claimants say more than £100,000 has been raised through public crowdfunding to finance the case.

Under a pre-trial ruling, Adams would not be able to recover his legal costs from the claimants if he successfully defends the action.

During the Troubles, the IRA carried out a bombing campaign in Britain as well as Northern Ireland.

Adams was charged with IRA membership in 1978, but the prosecution was dropped due to insufficient evidence.

His only convictions relating to the conflict — for attempting to escape custody while interned without trial in the mid-1970s — were overturned by a court in 2020.

He has previously faced questioning in court about allegations regarding his IRA past, including during the Ballymurphy inquest in Belfast in 2019 and in a libel action against the BBC in Dublin. Last year, he was awarded €100,000 in damages over a BBC Northern Ireland programme which alleged that he had sanctioned the murder of former Sinn Féin official Denis Donaldson.

Ferry disruption hits Dublin–Holyhead route after Six Nations weekend

Technical problems and unexplained “extraordinary reasons” delayed sailings, leaving rugby fans returning from Ireland–Wales match facing diversions and cancellations



Irish Ferries ship at Dublin Port

Picture: Leah Farrell at RollingNews.ie

FERRY services between Dublin and Holyhead were cancelled or delayed earlier this week, disrupting travel for passengers — including Welsh rugby supporters returning home after Wales’ Six Nations defeat to Ireland.

Ferry operator Stena Line apologised to passengers and said the disruption was caused by technical problems affecting one of its vessels at Holyhead port in Anglesey.

Irish Ferries said its Ulysses sailing scheduled to arrive at Holyhead at

11:00 GMT on Sunday was unable to berth due to what the company described as “extraordinary reasons”. The company did not elaborate on the cause, but later sailings were also affected.

Stena Line said one of its vessels, the Stena Adventurer, had developed a technical fault while at Holyhead which required repairs before it could depart.

As a result, the company diverted its 10:15 sailing from Dublin to Birkenhead, near Liverpool, with coach

transport arranged to carry passengers onward to Holyhead.

Passengers travelling on the affected routes were advised to check sailing updates before travelling.

Several other sailings were later cancelled or altered as the disruption continued. The scheduled 10:00 Monday departure of the Stena Adventurer from Holyhead was cancelled, along with a 04:00 sailing by the Stena Estrid.

Passengers booked on the cancelled morning sailing were offered the

option of transferring to an Irish Ferries service expected to depart at around 11:00, although the company said the transfer was not available to customers who had booked cabins or lounge access.

A further sailing of the Stena Adventurer scheduled to depart Dublin for Holyhead at 16:30 on Monday was also cancelled while the technical issues were being addressed.

Brent Irish Advisory Service gears up for St Patrick’s celebrations

Community group invites Irish diaspora to music, dancing and festivities in

Tottenham Hale and Hornsey Vale as busy year of services and events continues

EVERY year the Brent Irish Advisory Service (BIAS) looks forward to a spectacular week of St Patrick’s Day festivities. Members will be celebrating in style at all of BIAS’s social clubs in Brent and Haringey, enjoying live music, dancing and traditional Irish stew amidst a sea of green.

Everyone is welcome to come along and join in some good old-fashioned craic at BIAS’s parties on Wednesday, March 18 at the Engine Room in

Tottenham Hale with live music from Declan Gaynor, and on Friday, March 20 at the Hornsey Vale Community Centre with live music from Kieran White.

St Patrick’s Day will be the culmination of a busy start to the year for BIAS. January saw the launch of a new active ageing club and advice drop-in at the Engine Room in Tottenham Hale (every Wednesday), to make Irish services even more accessible to the community across Haringey borough.

BIAS’s welfare and housing advisers can help navigate the complex benefits system, providing support with Universal Credit, Housing Benefit, pensions and disability benefits like PIP and Attendance Allowance, as well as helping to secure safe and affordable housing. BIAS generates over £2 million per year for its clients in benefits and entitlements, ensuring that nobody in the Irish community is left behind.

This year also ushered in monthly

coffee morning get-togethers for BIAS’s dedicated team of volunteers, along with a slew of special events across the clubs, including Valentine’s Day celebrations, creative sessions learning how to make St Brigid’s Crosses, and spotlights on the Irish language to mark Seachtain na Gaeilge, the international Irish-language festival which runs until St Patrick’s Day.

THE WEEK in quotes

“The establishment of a Defence Attaché Network will enhance Ireland’s strategic partnerships, improve military cooperation with key partners and ensure Ireland’s defence expertise and perspectives are represented within important strategic forums.”

Minister for Defence **Helen McEntee**, speaking about the establishment of a Defence Attaché network planned for Ireland’s embassies in Paris, London and Washington DC.

“Brent is a place where the values of solidarity, creativity, and care — so deeply rooted in Irish life — continue to thrive. This St Patrick’s Day, the borough celebrates not only its heritage but also the shared future being built together.”

Councillor **Ryan Hack**, Mayor of Brent

“We’re sad to share the news that our two remaining Barbary lionesses at Belfast Zoo, Thheiba and Fidda, have passed peacefully.”

A statement from **Belfast Zoo** about their two Barbary lionesses, both 22, who were euthanised.

“A number of arrests have already been made, and Police Scotland will now work with both clubs and the Scottish Football Association to carry out a robust investigation following the scenes on the pitch at the conclusion of the match.”

Chief Superintendent **Kate Stephen** of Police Scotland after a pitch invasion at the Celtic v Rangers match.

“I will always do the right thing for the GAA and the first right thing I will do is to thank two great friends. And when I say friends, they have been really true, honest friends, both Ger and John. They are both gentlemen who have the GAA at heart and know the real meaning of the GAA.”

GAA President-elect **Derek Kent**. He was referring to his two fellow candidates Ger Ryan and John Murphy.

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Belfast Zoo mourns two rare Barbary lionesses euthanised

Thheiba and Fidda, both aged 22, were euthanised after veterinary concerns, bringing to an end a long chapter in the zoo's Barbary lion conservation programme

BY GERARD DONAGHY

BELFAST ZOO has said two rare lions who were recently put to sleep will be "fondly remembered by the staff who cared for them and the thousands of visitors who loved them".

Barbary lioness Thheiba was euthanised to end her suffering following a veterinary assessment, having experienced mobility issues and weight loss in recent weeks.

Given that lions are highly social pride animals that rely on companionship, Thheiba's sister Fidda was also euthanised to avoid stress and welfare challenges if left alone.

The two lionesses produced offspring for a conservation programme, with Barbary lions extinct in the wild for more than 80 years.

"We're sad to share the news that our two remaining Barbary lionesses at Belfast Zoo, Thheiba and Fidda, have passed peacefully," read a statement from the zoo on Friday.

"Both were 22 years old — much older than the average life expectancy

for lions, either in the wild or in captivity.

"During their lives, the sisters received exceptional care and became key contributors to conservation as part of the EAZA Ex-Situ Programme (EEP), producing multiple offspring and helping secure the future of Barbary lions, a lion sub-species now extinct in the wild."

The statement added: "Thheiba and Fidda's longevity, their strong bond and their vital role in conservation are testament to our long-standing commitment to the care and conservation of this iconic species.

"Both lionesses will be fondly remembered by the staff who cared for them and the thousands of visitors who loved them."

Belfast Zoo has had an association with lions for many decades, with Barbary lions first arriving at the zoo in the 1960s.

Once native to North Africa, the animals are now extinct in the wild, with the last recorded Barbary lion shot in Morocco in 1942.

The only Barbary lions left in the



Thheiba and Fidda the Barbary Lionesses

Picture: Belfast Council/Belfast Zoo

world are found in zoos and are part of a global and collaborative breeding programme to ensure their future survival.

Barbary lions are recorded

throughout history, with the Romans using them in the Colosseum to battle gladiators.

They were also kept in the menagerie at the Tower of London

and were offered as gifts to royal families of Morocco and Ethiopia.

It is believed that Barbary lions in captivity today are directly descended from these "royal lions".

Police and fans injured after pitch invasion at Old Firm clash

Arrests made after Celtic and Rangers supporters clashed on the pitch at Ibrox following a dramatic Scottish Cup quarter-final

POLICE officers and football supporters were injured last weekend after rival fans clashed on the pitch following an Old Firm match in Glasgow.

Disorder broke out at Ibrox after Celtic defeated Rangers 4-2 on penalties in a Scottish Cup quarter-final. Celtic supporters initially entered the pitch in celebration before groups of Rangers fans also moved onto the field.

Police Scotland said a number of arrests were made during what officers described as "despicable" and "shameful" scenes.

Flares were thrown as police and stadium stewards attempted to separate opposing groups of supporters by forming a barrier across the pitch.

Chief Superintendent Kate Stephen condemned the behaviour of those involved, saying it should be denounced by everyone connected with the game.

"A number of arrests have already been made, and Police Scotland will now work with both clubs and the Scottish Football Association to carry out a robust investigation following the scenes on the pitch at the conclusion of the match," the BBC reports.

"Officers and stewards were faced with extreme hostility and violence over a sustained period, with many individuals having armed themselves with items clearly intended to cause harm.

"Officers and members of the public have been injured in this despicable display and I want to express my thanks to all officers and staff deployed."

The situation was eventually brought under control as stewards and police kept rival groups apart and supporters returned to the stands.

The match had seen Celtic supporters allocated the full Broomloan Road Stand at Ibrox for the first time in several years. The number of away tickets had been significantly reduced in 2018 and has fluctuated since, amid ongoing tensions between the clubs over supporter allocations. Irish tricolours and Palestinian flags were flown by many of the Celtic supporters.

Green smoke was seen rising from the Celtic section of the stadium during the disturbances.

The Scottish Football Association condemned the pitch invasion and confirmed that an investigation would begin immediately.

Scotland's victims and community safety minister Siobhan Brown also criticised the scenes, describing them as "unacceptable".

She said the use of pyrotechnics was particularly concerning and warned that such behaviour could have caused serious injury.

The Scottish government recently consulted on strengthening powers to impose Football Banning Orders, which can prevent individuals involved in violence or disorder from attending matches anywhere in the UK for up to 10 years.

Both clubs declined to comment immediately after the game.

Speaking in a post-match interview, Celtic manager Martin O'Neill said: "You're asking me a lot of political questions in this moment when I'm in a euphoric state.

"The fans have spilled over, big scenes at the end, all over the place. I'm not diminishing it at all, I will have a think about it and speak to you in due course."

Rangers head coach Danny Röhl said he had not seen the incidents as they unfolded.

"I'm not sure what happened at the end," he told Premier Sports. "I was in the tunnel."

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Who speaks for the 'community'?

From paramilitary intermediaries to identity politics, the word carries more danger than comfort

MALACHIO'DOHERTY



I DON'T like the word 'community', at least not in political debate.

It plays a powerful role in Northern Irish politics.

Here are a couple of examples. The police will often say that they are seeking to defuse a tricky situation by speaking to 'community representatives'. In a normal political environment that would refer to elected representatives in parliament, a devolved assembly or local councils.

But the phrase is used here to mean people who are none of these things.

In blunt terms, 'community representatives' who might be capable of influencing armed groups and criminal gangs are people who are so intimately involved in those gangs that the gangs trust them. They are often members.

The starkest example of this in recent years was Winston Irvine. He was a respected peacemaker, a community representative who

could mediate with the paramilitary Ulster Volunteer Force.

And he could do that because he was a member, a senior officer. This all came out last year when he was arrested with guns in the boot of his car and sentenced and imprisoned.

I knew Irvine. He had participated in workshops I held for community workers to help them develop their media skills.

A lot of people knew him and he was a frequent guest on radio shows as a mild-mannered explainer of the difficulty in persuading the UVF to disarm.

And maybe he was indeed well-intentioned and aspired to achieving that glorious moment in which armed men who had organised during the Troubles to kill random Catholics in back alleys would put their guns away and go and work on their allotments.

But that day never seemed to come any nearer, despite the endeavours of academics, politicians, community funding bodies and mediators, the

people who came forward with character references for Irvine when he appeared in court.

An example of a 'community' often spoken of in this way is west Belfast.

I grew up there myself. I cannot speak honestly of the housing estate I lived on as somewhere homogeneous, where all my neighbours held the same political viewpoints or suffered the same degrees of poverty or oppression. It wasn't like that.

The Provisional IRA was busy there, especially on our corner. But people living up the street knew little about that.

One neighbour might have been passing his day bringing in and storing rifles and gelignite while another might have been kissing his wife goodbye on the doorstep and setting off for the bus to Dundonald to do a day's work in the Civil Service.

Some left to join the police or the army knowing they would be targeted for murder if some of the neighbours knew. But when one, Ranger Best, was murdered in 1972

by the Official IRA, people of the Bogside rose up in anger to insist that he had been one of their own.

Yet we hear this so often,

'my community' as if having lived on a certain street gave one the right to claim victimhood and identification with others similarly oppressed and an insight into a culture and machinations below the surface.

During the Troubles I often wondered if the identity being

cluster of parishes merging into the larger polity.

Similarly, working-class unionists or loyalists would speak of experience honed on the streets around the Shankill Road in Belfast as something that people beyond that neighbourhood could not empathise with. And they were doing this while at the same time insisting that they were British.

Each was more inclined to identify with neighbourhood than state while insisting that the neighbourhood was characterised primarily by its identification with the British or Irish state.

The problem for people who insist that their community has a coherent character is that it doesn't.

The problem for the rest of us is that this claim to identification with community is extraordinarily potent.

And the worst expression of it these days is in the rejection of outsiders, the demand for 'local housing for local people', the sense that retaining the character and coherence of a Protestant or Catholic community is an inherent right that — mostly in the case of Protestant communities — rejects the right of people of other cultures to be housed there.

Community can be a toxic word.

Malachi O'Doherty's biography of Gerry Adams, Gerry Adams: An Unauthorised Life is published by Faber & Faber

His novel on the Northern Irish Troubles, Terry Brankin Has A Gun, is published by Merrion and How To Fix Northern Ireland is published by Atlantic Books



The other thing I don't like about the word 'community' is that it is used as a marker of identity. Politicians and artists and journalists will talk of their community as if referring to the people they grew up among gives them some kind of authority to speak in general terms, say about a sense of historic grievance, sometimes to justify the carnage wrought by paramilitaries or terrorists from that neighbourhood

asserted by many was more with the neighbourhood they grew up in than with the sovereign state they were asserting their right to belong to.

When republicans talked of their community I would joke that they were fighting for the independent 32-county socialist republic of west Belfast. Their vision of a future united Ireland did not seem to include any sense of that small and spreading



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A mural in Belfast

Picture: Rossographer, Wikimedia, CC BY-SA 2.0

Ireland to establish defence attaché network in key embassies

Cabinet approves pilot programme placing military representatives in Paris, London and Washington



Taoiseach Micheál Martin inspects the troops. His government have approved the posting of defence attachés in selected destinations abroad

Picture: Irish Defence Forces

BY GERARD CASSINI

MINISTER for Defence Helen McEntee has welcomed Cabinet approval for the establishment of a Defence Attaché network on a pilot basis, with postings planned for Ireland's embassies in Paris, London and Washington DC.

The Department of Defence said the locations were selected because of their strategic importance to Ireland and its international partnerships.

The move marks a significant development in Ireland's defence diplomacy and comes amid what the government described as an increasingly uncertain and contested international security environment.

Announcing the decision, Minister McEntee said the new network would strengthen Ireland's strategic partnerships and improve military cooperation with key allies.

"The establishment of a Defence Attaché Network will enhance Ireland's strategic partnerships, improve military cooperation with key partners and ensure Ireland's

defence expertise and perspectives are represented within important strategic forums," she said.

"These postings will enable us to exchange information, support shared security objectives and continue to contribute to global peace and stability while advancing Ireland's interests abroad."

The Chief of Staff of the Defence Forces, Rossa Mulcahy, said the attachés would act as an important bridge between military and diplomatic channels.

He said the role would involve diplomatic representation as well as developing defence and security cooperation with partner nations.

Attachés will serve as the Defence Forces' representatives in bilateral relationships and help strengthen links between Ireland's military and those of partner countries.

The proposal follows recommendations in the 2022 Report of the Commission on the Defence Forces, which called for stronger international liaison and cooperation between the Defence Forces and foreign armed forces, including the creation of a defence attaché network.

The commission concluded that placing personnel in strategically important locations would allow Ireland to gain timely insights on defence and security matters through both official and informal contacts.

The initiative will also support the government's wider strategy to expand Ireland's diplomatic presence overseas and strengthen coordination between the Defence Forces, the Department of Defence and the Department of Foreign Affairs.

Under the pilot programme, the attaché roles will initially be filled by Defence Forces officers. However, the government said civilian personnel from the Department of Defence could also be considered for future postings where relevant to specific policy priorities.

Following Cabinet approval, Minister McEntee will ask the Chief of Staff to begin the selection process for the new roles. Candidates are expected to be appointed at the rank of colonel for the three priority locations.

Irish-founded Primark names Eoin Tonge as new chief executive

Retail chain founded as Penney's in Dublin confirms leadership appointment as part of wider strategy to strengthen global operations

BY GRAINNE CONROY

FASHION retailer Primark has confirmed the appointment of Eoin Tonge as its new chief executive, while also creating a new senior commercial role as the company looks to strengthen its international retail strategy.

Parent company Associated British Foods (ABF) announced the move on March 5, confirming that Tonge will take up the role with immediate effect after serving as interim chief executive since March 31, 2025.

Tonge brings extensive financial and retail experience to the position. He joined ABF as a director in February 2023 and became the group's finance director in April of that year. Before joining ABF, he held senior roles at Marks & Spencer, where he served as chief financial officer and chief strategy officer.

Earlier in his career he worked at Greencore Group, holding several senior positions including chief financial officer, managing director of its grocery division and chief strategy officer.

During his time as interim chief executive, Tonge has begun implementing a strategy aimed at strengthening Primark's core offering. This includes improvements to the product range, efforts to sharpen the brand's value proposition and investment in digital engagement and marketing capabilities.

He will remain a director on the board of Associated British Foods.

ABF chief executive George Weston said Tonge had already demonstrated the

leadership needed to guide the retailer through a challenging global retail environment.

"Over the past year he has shown the judgement and consumer insight needed to enable Primark to capture the opportunities ahead," Weston said, adding that the company's strategic changes were already delivering early benefits.

As part of a broader restructuring, Primark has also created a new role of chief commercial officer, designed to bring together its product, retail, digital and customer teams under a single leadership structure.

Filip Ekvall will take up the role on September 1, 2026, reporting directly to Tonge. Ekvall has nearly two decades of experience in international clothing retail, most notably with the H&M Group, where he held leadership roles across Europe, South Korea and the UK. He later served as global director of sales with responsibility for around 4,000 stores worldwide.

Since January 2025 he has been chief executive of the outdoor retailer BRAV.

Primark traces its roots to Ireland, where it was founded under the name Penney's. The first store opened on Mary Street in Dublin in 1969 by the late Arthur Ryan. Because of trademark issues, the retailer operates as Primark outside Ireland.

Today the chain is one of the largest clothing retailers in Europe and a major subsidiary of Associated British Foods, which is controlled by the Canadian-Irish Weston family.



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10 minutes with...

JOHN O'Donoghue is an author across several disciplines – poetry, short stories, novels. His latest collection *The Servants and Other Strange Stories* is published next week on March 19. John has a PhD in Creative Writing from Bath Spa and lives in Brighton.

JOHN O'DONOGHUE



John O'Donoghue

What are you up to?

I'm publicising my collection of short stories and novellas, *The Servants* – ten linked stories at the heart of the book - are heavily influenced by Asimov's robot stories, with a large dollop of Flann O'Brien thrown in to the gubbins.

What are you reading at the minute?

I've just finished reading Manchan Magan's *Thirty-Two Words for Field*. It's a book about the Irish language. My father was a native

speaker from the Kerry Gaeltacht, but only left me bainne agus siúcra, his way of telling me we'd come to a land of milk and sugar

Which piece of music always sends a shiver down your spine?

Sinéad O'Connor singing *He Moved Through the Fair*. Her voice is ethereal here. It seems to come from another world, another time.

When did you take up writing?

I was given 'headlines' by my mother to copy aged four. She told me stories when I was very small about a family of cats. Later when I was seven I used to retell stories from the English comics I'd read to my six cousins in Ballinode, Co. Monaghan. But it was poetry I turned to after my father died when I was 14, setting out to deliberately apprentice myself like Dylan Thomas.

How would you describe your work?

The Servants is mainly a series of humorous stories, although a few have serious subtexts. Basically, I write simply, with the odd poetic grace note, and have only one thought in my mind as a writer – to move the reader. If I can

persuade them to actually buy a book, or borrow it from the library, I'm very happy. Who will you thank when you're awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature? My mother and that family of cats that I loved so much as a small child. My aunt and uncle for hosting us every summer when I was a boy. And my cousins for letting me tell them a few old yarns.

Who would narrate a film of your life? Graham Norton or David Attenborough – or is there someone else?

My life has been quite surreal – I think Professor Stanley Unwin, the inventor of Unwinese, would make a great job of this. Younger readers who may have never heard of Professor Unwin might want to check out a brilliantly funny film on You Tube of the good professor talking to the man who did the Bill and Ben voices. Deep joy!

What are your Irish roots?

My father was from Killorglin, Co. Kerry, and my mother from Ballinode, Co. Monaghan. Coming from opposite ends of Ireland they could only have met in Camden Town.

Opera or pantomime?

I like operamime.

Has any book influenced you greatly?

All of 'em to some extent, but Frank O'Connor's stories and his study of the form, *The Lonely Voice*, essentially a series of

lectures, shaped my work greatly. Which living person do you most admire?

My wife, Bernadette. We've been married for 35 years. I don't know how she's stood it!

Which person from the past do you most admire?

Jesus Christ. A great teller of stories Himself! I often wonder whether they were drawn from first-hand experience or did He actually make them up. Such great characters – The Prodigal son, The Good Samaritan, The Wise and the Foolish Virgins...

What would be your motto?

The O'Donoghue Family Motto: Numquam Non Paratus. Never Unprepared.

Why has Ireland produced so many great writers?

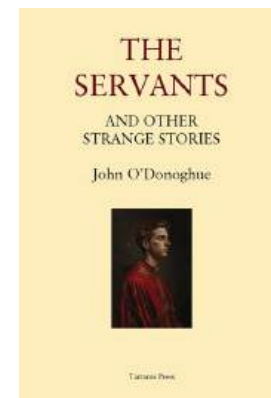
Irish people are brought up to relish conversation, repartee, the craic. The love of story, of song, of getting together, is very much the Irish way of life. Often it beats the TV!

What do you believe in?

The holiness of the heart's affections.

Who (or what) is the greatest love of your life?

Mrs O'Donoghue – she has given me four wonderful children, and a whole host of very happy memories. I expect we have a few more adventures to come!



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Mayor of Brent honours Gerry Rochford for 40 years in business

Brent mayor Ryan Hack recognises London-based Irish builder's four decades of entrepreneurship, community support and contribution to the capital's Irish diaspora

GERRY Rochford has been presented with a special award by the Mayor of the London Borough of Brent, Cllr Ryan Hack, in recognition of his 40 years in business with Rochford Construction Ltd.

The presentation took place at Kerry House in Wembley Park, a landmark building owned by the Rochford family, where friends, family and members of the company's workforce gathered to mark the milestone.

Mayor Hack paid tribute to Mr Rochford's contribution to the borough, thanking him for his "enormous contribution to London and for showcasing the very best of Irish entrepreneurship in Brent".

Founded in 1986, Rochford Construction Ltd (RCL) is a family-run business which has built a strong reputation in the groundworks and external works sector. The company has developed a track record for delivering projects on time, within budget and to exacting specifications.

Over the past 15 years the firm has expanded and diversified its services, adding reinforced concrete frames, civil engineering services and plant hire. The company's continued growth reflects both its adaptability and its commitment to maintaining high professional standards.

The anniversary has also drawn recognition from Ireland's most senior leaders. Taoiseach Micheál Martin sent a message to Mr Rochford praising his achievements and saying he personified "both the resilience of the Irish abroad". He

also acknowledged Mr Rochford's involvement with London's St Patrick's Day parade.

A message of congratulations was also sent on behalf of President Catherine Connolly. Writing as Secretariat for the President, Sandra Coleman conveyed the President's "warmest congratulations" to Mr Rochford on the 40th anniversary of the founding of his construction business. The letter noted that he has played an important role in the valued contribution made by the Irish community to life and enterprise in Britain.

Beyond business, the Rochford family have long been active supporters of London GAA and have helped sustain the Kerry Association in the capital, strengthening cultural links within London's Irish community.

Four decades after its founding, Rochford Construction Ltd stands not only as a successful enterprise but also as a testament to family values, community commitment and the enduring contribution of the Irish diaspora to London's economic and civic life.



The presentation

THE DÙGHLAS-CONNOLLY DISPATCHES

From Britain with a heart somewhere in the West – by Maeve Dùghlas-Connolly

A medieval warning about idle talk

NOT long ago I found myself in the quiet Norfolk countryside, wandering into a small parish church in the village of Little Melton, just outside Norwich. All Saints' is the sort of place you might easily pass without noticing — a modest medieval building sitting peacefully among fields and hedgerows.

But inside, on the north wall of the nave, there is something rather unexpected.

Painted there is a curious and slightly unsettling medieval image. A cluster of figures stand surrounded by three grotesque devils, while above them presides an even stranger character: Titivallus, a creature sometimes described as the “demon of gossip”.

Titivallus turns up from time to time in medieval folklore and church art. His supposed occupation was a wonderfully specific one — collecting the idle chatter of

churchgoers. In particular he was said to gather up the whispered conversations that drifted through churches during Mass and carry them off as evidence of human folly.

It sounds almost comic, but the message was serious. Medieval Christians believed careless speech could do real harm, and Titivallus became a visual reminder of that danger. In illuminated manuscripts and church paintings he often appears lurking behind worshippers, listening carefully to every murmur and aside.

The devils seem positively delighted by the gossip swirling around them, while the humans appear blissfully unaware of the trouble they are causing.

And yet gossip, if we are honest, is one of the most human things we do.

The historian Yuval Noah Harare has suggested that gossip may even have helped make us who we are. According to his argument, the

linguistic abilities that Homo sapiens developed tens of thousands of years ago allowed early humans to share information about other people — who could be trusted, who might cheat, who was reliable in a crisis. That kind of knowledge helped small groups expand into larger communities, because people could cooperate with those whose reputations they understood.

The idea may sound a little mischievous, but there is something persuasive about it. Much of our daily conversation — over coffee, on the phone, even in emails — still revolves around the small dramas of human behaviour.

Even academics are not immune. As Harare says, historians meeting for lunch do not spend the entire time discussing the causes of the First World War. Scientists attending conferences do not talk exclusively about molecular titrations. More often they are exchanging stories



The Gossip Mural with Gossips at All Saints Church
Picture: Evelyn Simak, Wikimedia CC BY-SA 2.0

about colleagues, quarrels and rumours.

In that sense gossip has a curious social function. It keeps track of wrongdoing. Rumours, passed from person to person, can act as a kind of informal warning system within communities.

But the medieval painters of Titivallus clearly believed there was a line that should not be crossed.

Perhaps that is why the image remains so striking. In a quiet Norfolk church, painted centuries ago, a demon still listens patiently for the next careless whisper.

A quiet faith that never quite left us

I SOMETIMES think people talk about religion in Ireland as if it had vanished entirely, like an old shop that closed down and left nothing but dust behind the window. Yet every so often something happens that suggests the lights were never completely turned off — merely dimmed.

A new piece of research commissioned by the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference, drawing on data from the European Social Survey alongside studies by the Central Statistics Office, Amárach Research, Barna and academic researchers, suggests that Irish Catholics remain among the more practising in Europe.

According to the report, about 31 per cent of Irish Catholics say they attend Mass at least once a week. That places Ireland fourth among European countries surveyed — roughly alongside Italy, although well behind Poland and Slovakia, where weekly attendance remains strikingly high.

For anyone who grew up in Ireland of a certain vintage, that figure may still feel surprisingly small. In the Ireland of my childhood, Sunday Mass was simply part of the architecture of life. You went because everyone went.

But the numbers show how dramatically things have shifted. Among young adults the drop-off has been stark. Weekly religious attendance among Irish people aged 16 to 29 fell sharply between 2002 and 2022 — from around a third to under one in ten.

Yet the latest survey suggests something interesting may be happening. Between 2022 and 2024 there was a noticeable increase among young Catholics attending Mass weekly — attendance rose from 9 to 14 per cent.

No one is claiming a great religious revival. Even the report's authors are cautious about reading too much into what could be a statistical wobble rather than a generational shift. But the

pattern is intriguing.

Prayer shows a similar story. Around a third of Irish Catholic adults say they pray daily, placing Ireland towards the more religious end of Western Europe, second only to Portugal in that category. Younger people, as in most countries, are less likely to pray regularly. Still, Irish young adults rank relatively high by European standards.

And there is another factor reshaping Irish Catholicism: immigration.

Twenty years ago only around 6 per cent of Catholics in Ireland had been born outside the country. Today that figure is closer to 18 per cent. Walk into many Irish churches now and you will meet people from Poland, Nigeria, Brazil or the Philippines.

In other words, Irish Catholicism is no longer simply Irish.

The report also highlights the distinctive picture in Northern Ireland, which remains the most religious region of the United Kingdom, which probably doesn't come as any surprise.

Around a third of adults there identify as Catholic and a similar proportion as other Christian denominations, while weekly attendance at religious services is roughly three times the average in Britain.

All of this sits alongside another undeniable reality: younger generations are also more likely to describe themselves as non-religious, and many who still identify as Christian openly disagree with church teaching on issues such as sexuality.

In other words, the old certainties have dissolved, but belief has not vanished entirely.

Perhaps that is the real story here. Faith in Ireland may no longer command the public square as it once did. But quietly — in prayer, in private belief, in the odd young person wandering back into a church — it seems the tide has not quite gone out after all.



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TLICN launches 2026 programme with Sisk event

ALL IMAGES BY MALCOLM MCNALLY PHOTOGRAPHY

A FULL house gathered for TLICN's (The London Irish Construction Network) first event of 2026 at the offices of Arbutnot Latham in Finsbury Circus, London.

An Evening With Sisk featured Steven McGee and John Dennehy of John Sisk & Sons, who described the many sectors the company is involved with, along with its history and culture.

Sisk Group is a fifth-generation family business founded in Cork in 1859 by John Sisk. Since its beginnings over 160 years ago, it has branched out, completing numerous prestigious contracts across the globe.



Phil Cusack (Cusack Tool Supplies) and Brendon Shanahan (Lloyds Bank)



Sean Rahilly, Anthony Davitt, Jack Connors and Conor McGonigle (all Powerday).



John Dennehy (John Sisk & Son), Vivienne Duggan, Robert Jeffers (AJ Gallagher Insurance) and Laura Bowler (Fenwick Elliott Solicitors)



Catherine Orpen-Galis (Orpen Design Solutions), Martin Mockler (Evans Mockler) and Leah Graham (KGN Pillinger)



Steven McGee and John Dennehy from John Sisk & Son are pictured 2nd and 3rd left with TLICN Directors Niall O'Dowd, Mary Pottinger, Con O'Sullivan, Sean Daly and Frank O'Hare



TLICN Director Sean Daly and Larry O'Leary (Fr Murphys Camogie and Ladies Football Club)

Irish-founded Laing O'Rourke joins alliance for NHS hospital building programme

Construction giant appointed to Hospital 2.0 Alliance tasked with delivering what ministers describe as the largest hospital building programme in a generation across England

BY FIONA AUDLEY

LAING O'ROURKE is one of ten construction firms that have been appointed to a New Hospital Programme (NHP) launched by the NHS this month.

The Irish-founded firm, which has long-term experience of building hospitals in Britain, has been appointed to the Hospital 2.0 Alliance (H2A).

The H2A is tasked with working together to deliver the NHP – which is described as the “largest hospital building programme in a generation”.

“We will bring our 15 years of experience delivering healthcare facilities in the UK to the alliance to help deliver the largest hospital programme in a generation,” Laing O'Rourke's Managing Director, Peter

Lyons, said this week.

“These new hospitals will provide state-of-the-art care for millions of patients, and we are proud to be a part of that journey,” he added.

“By backing a standardised approach to hospital building, we are giving the construction sector the certainty it needs to invest in skills, capacity and innovation.

“This is about partnering with industry to deliver better hospitals faster, while driving productivity and value for the NHS and adding to the economic growth of the entire country.”

Britain's Minister of State for Health, Karin Smyth, said the Government is “making the long-term investment required to rebuild and modernise our NHS, and the Hospital

2.0 Alliance is central to that commitment”.

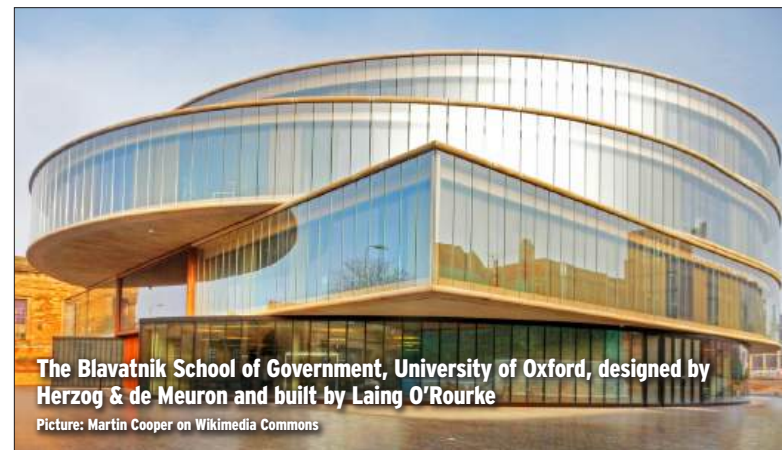
Natalie Forrest is Chief Programme Officer at the NHP.

She said the announcement of the firms who will make up the H2A is a “defining moment for the NHP and for healthcare construction in England”.

“The Hospital 2.0 Alliance is about more than building hospitals – it is about transforming how we deliver them,” Ms Forrest said.

“By bringing together DHSC, NHS England, Trusts, and industry partners under a true alliance model, we are creating the conditions for faster delivery, better value, and consistent quality at scale,” she explained.

“The appointment of these construction partners is critical to



The Blavatnik School of Government, University of Oxford, designed by Herzog & de Meuron and built by Laing O'Rourke

Picture: Martin Cooper on Wikimedia Commons

our capacity and capability, and reflects a shared commitment to collaboration, innovation and long-term investment in skills and

social value.

“Together, we are building a sustainable model that will support the NHS for decades to come.”

Extra flights announced connecting Ireland and Britain this summer

BY FIONA AUDLEY

AER LINGUS has announced extra flights on its existing routes which will better connect Ireland and Britain this summer.

The Irish airline has confirmed an increase in capacity on its popular service from Cork to Glasgow.

The Aer Lingus Regional route,

which is operated by Emerald Airlines, will increase from four to six weekly services from May 25.

“Summer is the ideal time to visit Glasgow, as the city's vibrant music scene, historic buildings, and outdoor events highlight the best of Scottish hospitality,” an Aer Lingus spokesperson explained.

“We are delighted to be enhancing

our services from Cork Airport with an increase in capacity on our popular Glasgow route,” Ian Lough, Head of Commercial at Emerald Airlines, said.

“The addition of two extra weekly flights for summer 2026 reflects the strong demand we continue to see and reinforces our commitment to offering greater choice, flexibility

and convenience for passengers travelling from Cork.”

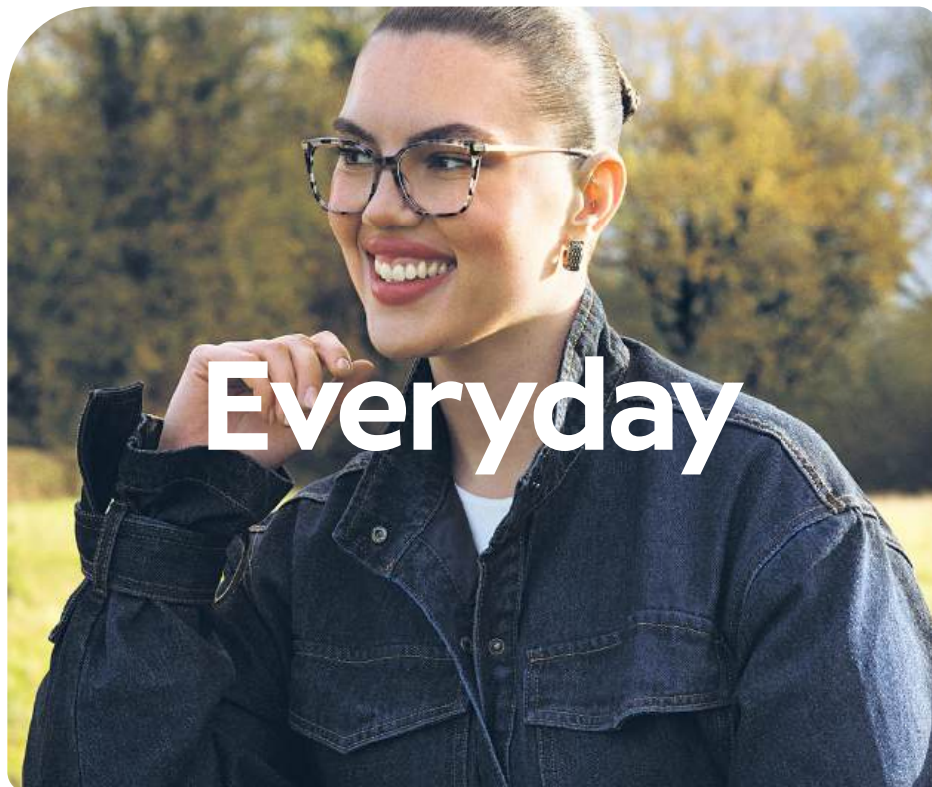
The airline has also announced two brand new routes from its Cork base, with flights to Nice on the French Riviera and Santiago de Compostela in Spain taking off from May 2 and June 1 respectively.

Elsewhere over the summer Emerald Airlines' existing Cork to Prague route will be expanded to make it a year-round service.

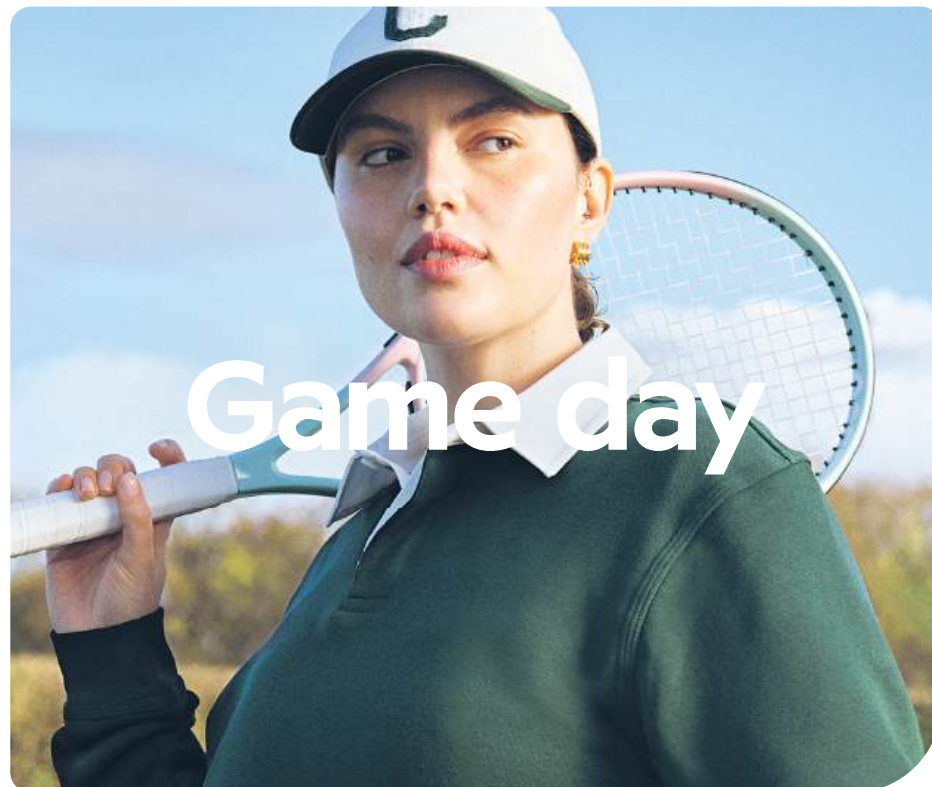
“We are delighted to see Aer Lingus

Regional increase its capacity from Cork to Glasgow for our 2026 summer schedule as well as the addition of new Aer Lingus routes to Santiago de Compostela, Nice and the extension of Prague year-round,” Tara Finn, Head of Aviation Business Development and Communications at Cork Airport, said.

“With these additions, passengers will have even more choice for travel from Cork Airport this coming Summer.”



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PAPERCLIPS Stories from Ireland's papers

Wexford watchmaker jailed over money laundering

A WEXFORD watchmaker has been sentenced to six months in prison after pleading guilty to money laundering offences linked to misappropriated funds belonging to a German national.

WEXFORD

The Wexford People reports that Frank Hynes (60), of The Field, Bregorteen, Barntown, was convicted at the Circuit Court on money laundering charges relating to transactions carried out over a number of years up to 2020.

The court heard that the offences involved money belonging to German businessman Lars Leckebusch, who had been planning to move to Ireland and purchase property.

Detective Garda Ivor Scully told the court that Mr Leckebusch was advised to place €350,000 into a company called Wexpack International Trading Company Limited. Although he held all the shares and was described as the firm's manager, Hynes and another individual were listed as directors.

When Mr Leckebusch later attempted to withdraw funds using an ATM card issued to him, he was unable to do so. It later emerged that €320,000 had been transferred in July 2018 to another company over which he had no control.

Hynes's signature appeared on the bank draft authorising the transfer. Evidence showed he later received €33,400 from the

misappropriated funds through a cheque made payable to a company of which he was the beneficial owner. About €8,000 was also spent on a BMW, while further cheques covered personal expenses including household bills and golf club membership.

The court heard that Hynes had no previous convictions and had brought €25,000 in compensation to court. However, Judge Cormac Quinn said a custodial sentence was unavoidable.

Mr Leckebusch said in a victim impact statement that the financial loss and stress had affected his health.

Judge Quinn described the case as "a sad and sorry tale" before imposing a six-month prison sentence.

Stormy the pine marten spotted in Stormont

BECAUSE of legislation, woodland regeneration and conservation monitoring, the pine marten has made a notable comeback across Ireland.

BELFAST

Research over the past decade has shown that pine martens have recolonised many areas where they were previously scarce, including parts of the midlands and east. They were historically more confined to the west.

One widely reported effect has been the decline of invasive grey squirrel numbers in areas where pine martens have recovered, which has indirectly helped the native red squirrel return.

In the North, conservation surveys in the last 10-15 years indicate that pine martens are spreading from strongholds in counties

like Fermanagh and Tyrone into other woodland areas.

And now one (at least) has taken up residence in Stormont, according to BBC Northern Ireland. The animal has been spotted living within the grounds of the Stormont Estate in Belfast, home to the Northern Ireland Assembly.

The elusive mammal was captured on camera as part of a conservation monitoring project which uses night-vision cameras placed around the estate to track wildlife activity.

Pine martens can be identified individually by the distinctive markings on their fur. Each animal carries a unique patch of pale fur on its throat and chest, often referred to as a "bib".

The particular animal recorded in woodland behind Parliament Buildings has been given the nickname Stormy.



Pine marten

Picture: Mike Pennington, Wikimedia, CC BY-SA 2.0

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Hop to it!

GALWAY County Council's Biodiversity Office is urging the public to help record sightings of the common frog across Co. Galway as part of a citizen science project tracking the health of the species.

GALWAY

Working with the Irish Peatland Conservation Council (IPCC), the council hopes public observations will help build a clearer picture of how frogs are faring in the county.

Rosina Joyce, Biodiversity Officer with Galway County Council, said many people have vivid childhood memories of frogs,

from collecting frogspawn to hearing ponds filled with croaking during the breeding season.

She added that while such encounters may seem incidental, individual observations can contribute to important scientific knowledge.

Since 1997, the IPCC has coordinated Ireland's longest-running frog survey, the 'Hop To It' frog survey, which invites members of the public to record sightings of frogspawn, tadpoles, froglets and adult frogs.

The common frog (*Rana temporaria*) — Ireland's only native frog species, is listed as vulnerable across Europe and is protected under the EU Habitats Directive and Irish wildlife laws.

Last year only five frog records were submitted from Galway, prompting renewed calls for the public to take part in the 2026 survey.

People who spot frogs or frogspawn can submit their observations through the IPCC website.

Tralee hall refurbishment begins

Parts of Kerry County Museum in Tralee are to close temporarily as refurbishment works begin on the Ashe Memorial Hall building.

KERRY

The Kerryman reports that the works form part of a €7 million redevelopment project funded under the Town Centre First Heritage Revival Scheme (THRIVE). During the renovation, a section of the museum will shut while artefacts and exhibition pieces are relocated or placed in storage.

Some items will be returned temporarily to the National Museum of Ireland while the

work is under way.

Ashe Memorial Hall is regarded as one of Tralee's most significant historic buildings and among the town's earliest major construction projects following Irish independence. The building is due to mark the centenary of its opening in 2028.

Plans for the refurbishment were approved by councillors at Tralee Municipal District in July 2025 following a period of public consultation.

The THRIVE scheme, co-funded by the Irish Government and the European Union, aims to help local authorities revitalise heritage buildings and adapt them for modern cultural and community use.

Irish stars the Oscars somehow forgot

From Technicolor legends to modern Hollywood heavyweights, these Irish actors delivered performances worthy of Oscar gold – yet somehow the Academy never quite saw fit to reward them. With the Oscars coming up this weekend, **JASON O'TOOLE** reports on those omissions

1. Maureen O'Hara

Amazingly, the actress hailed as “The Queen of Technicolor” was never even nominated for an Oscar despite starring in some of the most iconic films of all time, including Rio Grande, How Green Was My Valley, The Hunchback of Notre Dame, Jamaica Inn, Big Jake, Miracle on 34th Street, The Rare Breed and McLintock! She surely deserved recognition for The Quiet Man, which won two Oscars at the 25th Academy Awards. Hollywood eventually honoured the Dubliner with an honorary Oscar in 1994.

2. Richard Harris

Younger audiences may remember him as Albus Dumbledore in the first two Harry Potter films, but the Limerick actor was one of the great screen presences of his era. Harris was nominated twice for Best Actor for This Sporting Life and The Field, performances many still believe should have won. He also merited a Best Supporting Actor nomination for his turn in Clint Eastwood's Unforgiven. Instead the Oscar went to his co-star Gene Hackman.

3. Maureen O'Sullivan

Often remembered as the mother of Mia Farrow, the Roscommon actress was a major box-office draw as Jane in the Tarzan films of the 1930s and 1940s. She also appeared in the Marx Brothers' A Day at the Races and starred opposite the future US President Ronald Reagan in Bonzo Goes to College. O'Sullivan also appeared in the 1934 classic The Thin Man, which received four Oscar nominations. Film critic Roger Ebert later included the film in his list of the greatest movies ever made.

4. Peter O'Toole

O'Toole was nominated for an astonishing eight Oscars — more than any actor without ever winning. It was a case of always the best man and never the groom. Lawrence of Arabia alone should surely have secured him the statuette, while many would argue he was overlooked on several other occasions. The Academy eventually presented him

with an honorary Oscar in 2002, which he initially hesitated to accept.

5. Saoirse Ronan

Still only 31, Ronan already has four Oscar nominations to her name. It seems inevitable she will win one eventually, but there is a strong case that she should already have one on the mantelpiece. Her breakthrough performance in Atonement made her a star overnight, while her wonderfully nuanced turn in Lady Bird was widely regarded as Oscar-worthy.

6. Brendan Gleeson

One of the finest actors of his generation, the Dubliner has received just a single Oscar nomination — for The Banshees of Inisherin. Yet his career is full of award-worthy performances, including Calvary, In Bruges and John Boorman's The General, which won major honours at Cannes.

7. Jonathan Rhys Meyers

It remains surprising that the Cork actor was never nominated for his chilling performance in Woody Allen's Match Point. His portrayal of a calculating murderer was widely praised and helped anchor one of Allen's most acclaimed films of the 2000s. Two decades on, Meyers' career has largely moved toward smaller productions, but that performance remains a standout.

8. Ciarán Hinds

Many assumed it would finally be Hinds's year when he received a Best Supporting Actor nomination for Kenneth Branagh's Belfast. Instead the award went elsewhere. The Northern Irish actor has delivered memorable performances for decades and might well have been nominated earlier, particularly for his role in Steven Spielberg's Munich, which itself received five Oscar nominations.

9. Geraldine Fitzgerald

The Dublin-born actress did receive one Oscar nomination, for Best Supporting Actress in Wuthering Heights (1939). But many felt she deserved further recognition for her performances in films such as Dark Victory alongside Bette

Davis and Humphrey Bogart, and the critically acclaimed The Pawnbroker (1964). Fitzgerald later earned a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

10. Kenneth Branagh

The Belfast-born actor has received eight Oscar nominations across writing, directing and acting, and finally won for his screenplay for Belfast. Yet as a performer he has only been nominated twice — for Henry V and My Week with Marilyn. His transformation into Laurence Olivier in the latter film was widely praised and ran Christopher Plummer very close in the 2012 race.

11. Gabriel Byrne

Remarkably, Byrne has never received an Oscar nomination despite appearing in major films including Miller's Crossing, The Usual Suspects and Enemy of the State. His performance as the coolly menacing Irish gangster in the Coen brothers' Miller's Crossing remains one of the most memorable of the 1990s. Byrne once said he relished the chance to play a Hollywood leading role using his natural Dublin accent.

12. Ruth Negga

Negga came heartbreakingly close to Oscar glory for her luminous performance in the 2016 drama Loving, losing out to Emma Stone for La La Land. She later earned another Golden Globe nomination for Passing, a film many felt was unfairly overlooked at the Oscars. Still only in her mid-forties, Negga may yet claim Hollywood's highest honour.

13. Michael Fassbender

The Irish-German actor, raised in Kerry, has received Oscar nominations for 12 Years a Slave and Steve Jobs. Yet many critics believe he also deserved recognition for his fearless performances in Hunger and Shame. Fassbender himself has said he prefers to focus on the work rather than campaigning for awards.

14. Colin Farrell

Farrell finally received his first Oscar nomination for The Banshees of Inisherin. But the Dubliner might reasonably feel he should have been

nominated earlier for films such as The Killing of a Sacred Deer, The Lobster and Saving Mr Banks. With acclaimed performances continuing to arrive — including in the forthcoming Netflix film Ballad of a Small Player — there is every chance an Oscar will eventually follow.

15. Liam Neeson

Neeson's towering performance in Steven Spielberg's Schindler's List brought him his only Oscar nomination. Any other year he might well have won, but the award instead went to Tom Hanks for Philadelphia. Given the range of Neeson's career — including acclaimed performances in Michael Collins and Les Misérables — many feel the Antrim actor deserved further recognition.



Ruth Negga
Picture: Donall Farmer / RollingNews.ie

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A sensible step in uncertain times

THE Irish government's Cabinet approval for the establishment of an Irish Defence Attaché network is a measured and sensible development in the evolution of Ireland's defence and foreign policy. In an increasingly uncertain international environment, strengthening the links between diplomacy and defence is not a sign of militarisation but of maturity.

Ireland has long played a respected role in international peacekeeping and multilateral cooperation. Yet the world in which that reputation was built has changed markedly. Strategic competition between major powers, hybrid threats and evolving security challenges mean that countries must be better connected and better informed than ever before.

Posting Defence Forces officers to key embassies in Paris, London and Washington DC is therefore a logical step. These are capitals where major security decisions are discussed and alliances shaped. Having experienced officers on the ground ensures that Ireland is present in those conversations and able to represent its interests clearly.

Defence attachés also provide a practical bridge between diplomacy and military cooperation. They facilitate information exchange, deepen professional relationships between armed forces and help ensure Ireland is aware of emerging security trends.

Importantly, this move follows recommendations from the Commission on the Defence Forces, reflecting a considered approach rather than a sudden policy shift.

For a country committed to peacekeeping, neutrality and international partnership, understanding the global security landscape is essential.

The quiet passing of Belfast's lionesses

THE passing of the Barbary lionesses Thheiba and Fidda at Belfast Zoo is a moment tinged with sadness, not only for the keepers who cared for them but also for the thousands of visitors who paused at their enclosure over the years.

At 22 years of age, the sisters had already lived well beyond the typical life expectancy for lions. Their final chapter was handled with the kind of dignity and care that modern zoological practice demands. When Thheiba's health declined, veterinary advice concluded that euthanasia was the most humane course. Given the deeply social nature of lions — animals that live and depend upon the companionship of a pride — the difficult decision was also taken to prevent Fidda from being left alone and distressed.

While the news is inevitably sombre, it should also remind us of the quiet but vital conservation work carried out behind the scenes at Belfast Zoo. The lionesses were not simply residents of a city attraction; they were part of the European Endangered Species Programme, helping to safeguard the future of a remarkable animal now extinct in the wild.

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Much ado about passports

THE recent fuss over Aer Lingus requiring passengers to carry passports on flights between Britain and Ireland strikes me as a fine example of how quickly a minor rule change by an airline can be mistaken for a constitutional crisis.

For years, travel between the two islands has been governed by the Common Travel Area, which has existed since the 1920s. Under this, Irish and British citizens can travel freely between the two countries without visas or immigration controls. So in strict legal terms, you are not required to carry a passport when travelling between the two countries.

That principle remains unchanged. There's no variation on

that at all.

What has changed is simply an airline policy. Aer Lingus, like any commercial carrier, is entitled to decide what identification it will accept before allowing a passenger to board one of its aircraft. Airlines across the world routinely impose documentation requirements that go beyond what immigration law strictly demands. That's because if they get it wrong they can be fined (quite substantially) for getting it wrong. Gate check-in staff are not — and shouldn't be expected to be — as well-versed in what ID documentation is required as, say, a border or immigration officer. So the easiest thing for an airline to do is to take a very broad approach. Nothing can trump a passport, so

get the check-in staff to insist on that.

In this case Aer Lingus has gone that route: decided that a passport or passport card provides the clearest and most reliable form of identification.

That may be inconvenient for some travellers (although even then, I'm not sure how), but in any case it hardly amounts to an assault on the Common Travel Area or on Irish-British relations. It is, rather, a reminder that air travel today operates in a far more security-conscious environment, a far more ID-driven world, than it did even a generation ago.

In truth, most travellers already carry a passport when flying, if only because it remains the most universally recognised form of identification. The real legal position — that Irish and British citizens may move freely between the two islands — remains intact and is unlikely to change any time soon.

So while the debate has generated plenty of noise on social media and in the comment pages, the underlying reality is rather more mundane. The Common Travel Area still exists, Irish and British citizens can still travel freely between the two countries, and the only real difference is that one airline has chosen to be a little stricter about the paperwork at the check-in desk.

Hardly the constitutional drama some would have us believe.



An Aer Lingus A320

B. McIlwain
London

Sorry state of domestic football

IN last week's Irish Post (March 7) Joseph McGoldrick wrote that if we only had a united soccer senior men's international team, that is, one drawn from all 32 counties we might begin to enjoy the same sort of success that the rugby squad has.

I admire Mr McGoldrick's views, but would suggest that he is wildly optimistic if he thinks that's all that's stopping Ireland from being a first-class soccer team.

It's fairly simple: Ireland's football team is destined to languish as a third-rate side no matter if it's drawn from both sides of the border.

I say that with a heavy heart, but unfortunately, as far as I can see, that is the truth.

Most of the current squads (that is, the Republic and Northern Ireland) ply their trade in the second-tier of English football, or in the Scottish league, and this simply isn't a requisite level to achieve sustained success on the international stage.

It is completely different from the Ireland rugby team where a huge support system has been built up to produce a world-beating team (or nearly a world-beating team, if we ever get past the World Cup quarter-finals!)

But domestic soccer in Ireland has no real power-base, and so the international side are always going to struggle no matter who is in charge. Perhaps the GAA has always leached away all the great sporting talent to the detriment of soccer. And now of course rugby is probably doing the same thing. With the result that there's not much left over to have a really formidable or competitive domestic game.

I'm afraid that's the situation. Unfortunately.

Liamy Fitzgibbon
Leeds

Literary lines of the week

"We never died a winter yet."
— John B. Keane, *The Bodhrán Makers*

The book

Published in 1986, *The Bodhrán Makers* is one of John B. Keane's most vivid explorations of rural Irish life, set in the fictional village of Dirrabeg on the Dingle Peninsula during the harsh years of the 1950s. The novel centres on a close-knit farming community struggling against poverty, emigration and the slow erosion of traditional customs. At the heart of the story lies the annual wren dancing celebrations, where music, drink and the beat of the bodhrán bring warmth to the long winter nights. These festivities represent more than entertainment: they are a stubborn expression of identity and resilience in a place where the land is poor and opportunities scarce. But they also provoke the anger

of Canon Tett, a rigid and authoritarian priest determined to stamp out what he sees as pagan excess and restore strict moral discipline.

Keane uses this conflict between tradition and authority to paint a larger portrait of mid-20th century Ireland. Beneath the comedy and colourful dialogue lies a serious meditation on freedom, conformity and the pressures exerted by church and community. The villagers of Dirrabeg may quarrel, gossip and drink with enthusiasm, yet they also display a stubborn dignity and humour in the face of hardship. As in much of Keane's work, tragedy and laughter sit side by side. *The Bodhrán Makers* captures a disappearing world with affection, wit and a deep understanding of the rhythms of Irish rural life.

The writer: John B. Keane

John B. Keane (1928–2002) was one of Ireland's most distinctive literary voices — a playwright,

novelist and essayist whose work chronicled the tensions and humanity of small-town life. Born in Listowel, County Kerry, the son of a national schoolteacher, Keane grew up surrounded by the storytelling traditions that would later shape his writing. After leaving school he worked in a variety of jobs and spent several years in England before returning to Listowel, where he opened the famous John B. Keane's pub. The bar became a gathering place for conversation, gossip and observation; in fact the raw material from which many of his characters were drawn. Keane first achieved national prominence with the play *Sive* in 1959, followed by a remarkable run of stage successes including *The Field*, *Big Maggie* and *The Matchmaker*. His work often explored the darker pressures of rural society: land hunger, authority, sexuality and the moral power of the Catholic Church. Yet Keane balanced these themes with sharp

humour and compassion for ordinary people. Across more than forty books and plays, Keane established himself as a chronicler of Ireland's changing countryside. Today he remains a central figure in modern Irish writing, remembered for his ear for dialogue, his fearless social insight and his enduring belief in the storytelling power of the Irish parish.



John B. Keane
Picture: Public domain

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Society's myths endure despite the facts

New ESRI research shows many people in Ireland dramatically overestimate immigration levels and hold negative assumptions contrary to any evidence

THE ESRI, the Economic and Social Research Institute, recently revealed some very interesting facts about immigration in Ireland.

Indeed, some of what they concluded was really quite startling and shows the level of misunderstanding and misinformation under which Irish society labours.

Let's start with the fact that people think the population of immigrants in Ireland from outside the EU, the UK, or



There is a sadness when the Ireland we all knew changes. But a lot of that is simply life and the passing of time. And if Irish society wants the benefits of the world, and it clearly does, then it has to realise that with the world comes the world

North America is 14%.

Let us be blunt about this and say that we are talking here about people who have black or brown skin. Those immigrants who are most noticeable to the Irish eye.

The actual figure is 8%. So, most of Irish society thinks there are almost double.

That's quite telling isn't it? Quite telling about the alertness of prejudice. Quite telling, I would also suggest, about the power of social media and misinformation.

People also think that 28% of people on this island were born outside of Ireland. The actual figure is 22%. Now don't forget that this figure actually includes Irish people like me, born and reared Irish in the UK. It includes the many, many Irish who were born abroad but reared here. It includes Paul McGrath, David O'Leary and Rónán O'Gara.

I'm guessing though that people are not thinking of people like that when they guess that figure. They are thinking of 'obvious' foreigners, 'obvious' immigrants, they are thinking of the visible not the invisible.

In that way the 28% perception is quite something. Across the board people also underestimate the amount of

JOEHORGAN



immigrants in work, overestimate the amount in prison, and underestimate what levels of education they have attained. In short, Irish society's general assumptions about immigrants are negative and factually incorrect.

The bigger point behind this, as the ESRI, report states is that 'people who hold more inaccurate beliefs are also more significantly likely to feel negatively about immigration and to cite it as a major national issue.' In short people have prejudices and either the prejudices are blinding them or the misinformation they're accessing is informing their prejudice.

Bigots, in short, are factually

incorrect.

Now if Covid taught us nothing else it taught us how impervious some people are to the actual, to the truth. There was little point in telling that Bill Gates conspiracy theorist you worked with that pandemics occur on average every one hundred years and virologists have long been warning we were well overdue one.

That's just facts, and facts get in the way. Likewise, there's no point in telling some people that, the country isn't full, that foreigners aren't taking over, that immigrants are not intrinsically bad.

Of course, there are pressures when immigration

happens, especially in a society that has not traditionally had immigration, that has not really experienced it.

There are pressures from globalisation. There is a sadness when the Ireland we all knew changes. But a lot of that is simply life and the passing of time. And if Irish society wants the benefits of the world, and it clearly does, then it has to realise that with the world comes the world.

I can walk through parts of Cork city where I remember fields of cows, my grandmother in the snug of the local pub, and myself and my cousins kicking ball across the GA park and where there's now flyovers, flats, and all

night garages.

Of course that leaves a sense of loss, a taste of sadness. But I don't understand how it's the fault of the black and brown people trying to make a living and a life here.

If we could counteract peoples wrongly held beliefs with the facts wouldn't that be great. We have to be aware, though, that are great doubts as to whether that is the case. Telling people that there aren't as many immigrants in prison as you think, that they actually have good levels of education, that most of them work for a living, might not work. Facts might not matter. The truth might not matter. Quite simply people will believe what they want to believe whether it is true or not. That doesn't matter to them. And that's what is so frightening.

Joe Horgan posts on X @ JoeHorganwriter



A Load of Turf, Connemara (1888) by Aloysius O'Kelly
Picture: public domain

The Arm of St Patrick

A silver-gilt shrine in Belfast contains a fragment linked to Ireland's patron saint – while the only surviving copies of his own writings lie in museums in Dublin and London

BY COLM MCCRORY

AMONG the more unusual objects associated with Ireland's patron saint is a medieval reliquary shaped like a human arm. Known as the Arm Shrine of St Patrick, it is a silver-gilt forearm and hand, slightly smaller than life-size, with the fingers raised in a gesture of blessing. A ring set with purple glass sits on the middle finger.

Inside the hollow metal arm lies a small relic believed to be a fragment of bone connected with St Patrick. The relic itself is tiny – a sliver of yellowish bone preserved in a



Today the shrine to the patron saint is closely associated with St Patrick's Church on Donegall Street in Belfast, but for most of the year it can be seen at the Ulster Museum, where it forms part of the Belfast museum's displays on medieval Ireland. Among the galleries of early Christian artefacts and metalwork, the arm shrine stands out as one of the most striking survivals of Ireland's medieval devotional culture

protective case – but for centuries such fragments carried enormous spiritual significance.

In medieval Christianity relics were regarded as physical links to holy figures. They were believed to

make the saint present in a particular place and capable of interceding for those who prayed before them.

Churches that possessed important relics often became centres of pilgrimage, drawing visitors who came to pray, seek healing or simply to be near an object associated with a revered saint.

The practice was widespread across Europe. The shrine of Thomas Becket at Canterbury Cathedral drew thousands of pilgrims each year in the Middle Ages, generating huge income for the cathedral. In 1239 King Louis IX of France famously paid an enormous sum for the Crown of Thorns and built the Sainte-Chapelle in Paris to house it. The desire to possess some fragment of a saint's remains could be intense: relics were divided, moved and sometimes stolen as churches and rulers competed for spiritual prestige.

Ireland developed its own distinctive tradition of reliquaries during the medieval period. Many were elaborate metal shrines created to house objects associated with saints – bells, croziers, manuscripts or bones. They were not merely containers but devotional works of art, crafted from precious metals and decorated with intricate ornament.

The Arm Shrine of St Patrick probably dates from the 14th or 15th century and is believed to have been made for Down Cathedral, traditionally regarded as the burial place of St Patrick. Like many medieval reliquaries, it is both symbolic and practical: the form of the arm reflects the idea of blessing, while the interior chamber protects the relic it contains.

Today the shrine is closely associated with St Patrick's Church on Donegall Street in Belfast, but for most of the year it can be seen at the Ulster Museum, where it forms part of the museum's displays on medieval

Ireland. Among the galleries of early Christian artefacts and metalwork, the arm shrine stands out as one of the most striking survivals of Ireland's medieval devotional culture.

Relics such as this reveal how powerfully Patrick's memory shaped the religious life of medieval Ireland. Yet the historical Patrick himself left almost no physical trace.

Remarkably, the only writings believed to come from Patrick's own hand survive not as relics but as texts. His short autobiographical work, the *Confessio*, together with his *Letter to the Soldiers of Coroticus*, are among the earliest surviving documents connected with Ireland.

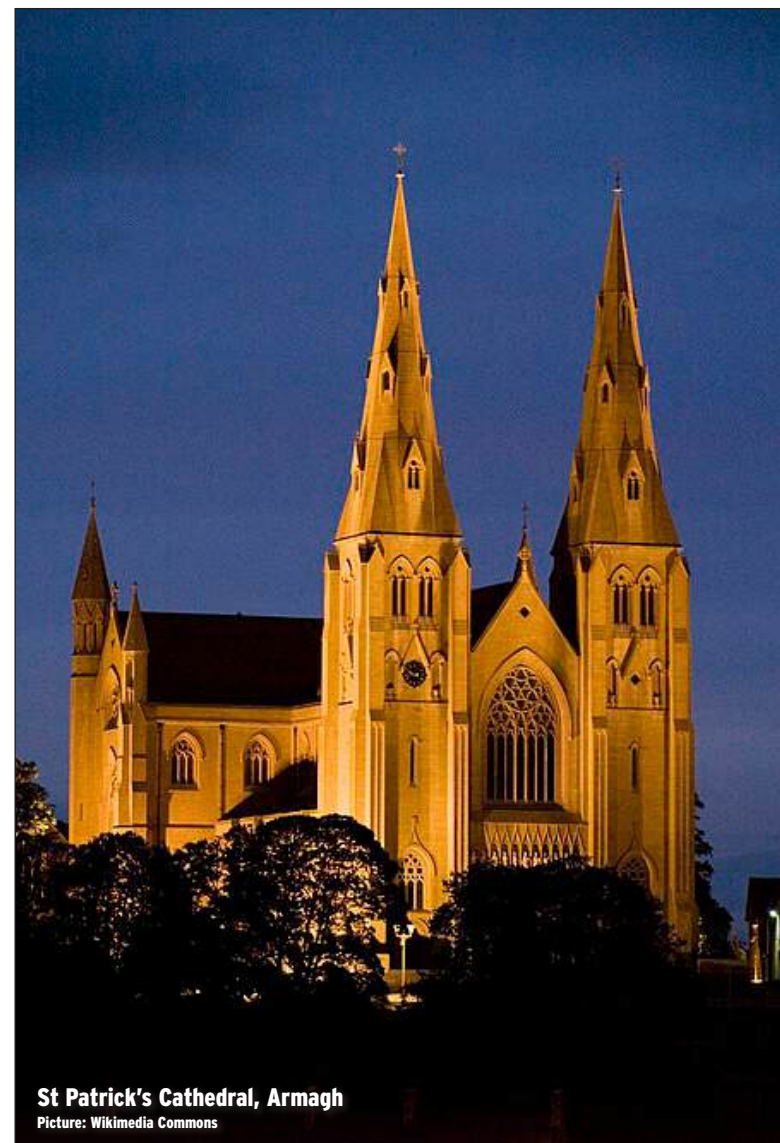
Patrick wrote the *Confessio* as a defence of his mission. In it he recounts how he was born in Roman Britain and kidnapped as a teenager by raiders who brought him to Ireland, where he was enslaved as a shepherd. During those years in the hills he turned intensely to prayer. Later he escaped, returned home, and eventually came back to Ireland as a missionary.

Although the original manuscript has long been lost, early copies of Patrick's writings survive in medieval manuscripts. The most famous is the *Book of Armagh*, compiled in the early ninth century and now preserved at the Trinity College Library in Dublin. Visitors to the library's exhibition galleries can see the manuscript that contains the earliest surviving copy of Patrick's *Confessio*.

Another important medieval manuscript containing Patrick's writings is held at the British Library in London.

Taken together, these manuscripts preserve what historians believe to be the closest thing we have to Patrick's own voice.

There is a curious contrast in all this. Patrick himself left only two



St Patrick's Cathedral, Armagh
Picture: Wikimedia Commons

short texts copied centuries later, yet medieval Ireland surrounded his memory with magnificent shrines and relics fashioned in precious metal. The historical missionary may remain elusive, but the devotion he inspired produced some of the most remarkable religious objects in Irish history.

Seen today in a museum case, the silver arm shrine offers a tangible connection to that long story of belief, craftsmanship and tradition – a reminder that the legacy of St Patrick was shaped not only by the words he wrote, but also by the centuries of faith that followed.

A date with history

What happened on this day...

March 14:

1660 - Charles II is proclaimed king in Dublin, six days after London, signalling the end of the Commonwealth period following the Cromwellian regime.

1784 - The Irish Post Office, distinct from English and Scottish services, is established by statute.

March 15:

1852 - Birth of Lady Isabella

Augusta Gregory, writer, folklorist and co-founder of the Abbey Theatre.

March 16:

1904 - James Joyce is awarded a bronze medal in a Dublin singing contest and reportedly throws it into the River Liffey.

1955 - Ruby Murray scores five simultaneous hits in the British charts.

March 17:

1903 - St Patrick's Day becomes a public holiday under the Bank Holiday (Ireland) Act 1903, an Act of the British Parliament.

1917 - Birth in Derry of tenor Josef Locke (born Joseph McLaughlin).

March 18:

1768 - Death of Laurence Sterne, Clonmel-born author of *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*.

1932 - Death in Monte Carlo of Chauncey Olcott, born in New York, composer and performer associated with songs including *When Irish Eyes Are Smiling*, *Mother Machree* and *My Wild*

Irish Rose.

1964 - Introduction of the driving test in the Republic.

March 19:

1928 - Birth of actor Patrick McGoohan. Born in New York to Irish emigrants Thomas McGoohan and Rose Fitzpatrick, he was raised in Ireland and later in Sheffield, England.

March 20:

1920 - Tomás MacCurtain, Lord Mayor of Cork and commandant of the Irish Volunteers in the city, is murdered at his home by men widely identified as members of the Royal Irish Constabulary.

1964 - Death of Brendan Behan.



The coronation of King Charles II in Dublin painting by John Michael Wright
Royal Collection
Picture: public domain



St Patrick's Day at the Wigmore Hall

Irish tenor Gavan Ring and Wicklow pianist Fiachra Garvey to perform St Patrick's Day recital at Wigmore Hall



Fiachra Garvey
Picture: Marshall Light Studio



Gavan Ring
Picture: Frances Marshall

CO. KERRY tenor Gavan Ring will perform a special St Patrick's Day recital at Wigmore Hall in London this year, presenting a programme that reflects on themes of home, migration and belonging.

Ring, who hails from County Kerry, will appear alongside Wicklow pianist Fiachra Garvey at the renowned concert venue on March 17 at 1pm. The recital, titled *Evocations of Home and Exile*, will feature a programme of British

and Irish art song exploring the emotional landscape of displacement and identity.

At the heart of the concert is the UK premiere of *Ballads of a Bogman* by Irish composer Stephen McNeff. The work sets poems by the late Sigerson Clifford, the Cahersiveen-born writer whose work often drew on Ireland's landscapes, folklore and history.

McNeff's setting brings Clifford's poetry to life through music that evokes the physical and

psychological terrain of Ireland — from boglands and buried histories to the lingering echoes of past voices.

The programme will also include Ralph Vaughan Williams' celebrated song cycle *Songs of Travel*. The work, based on poems by Robert Louis Stevenson, traces the reflections of a wandering traveller and has long been considered one of the central works of the English art-song repertoire.

For Ring, the pairing of these two

works creates a dialogue between Irish and British musical traditions while exploring universal questions of identity, memory and belonging.

The themes of migration and home carry particular resonance within the Irish experience in Britain, where generations have balanced memory, heritage and adaptation.

Wigmore Hall, widely regarded as one of the world's leading venues for song recitals and chamber music, provides an appropriate setting for the

programme.

***The Evocations of Home and Exile* recital takes place at 1pm on St Patrick's Day, March 17, at Wigmore Hall in London. Limerick man John Gilhooly CBE is Executive and Artistic Director, Wigmore Hall**

Tickets and further information are available via the Wigmore Hall website.

Ronan Keating explores Ireland's coast in new BBC travel series

RONAN Keating's Wild Atlantic is a new Irish travelogue that will take audiences on a journey along the spectacular Wild Atlantic Way.

The series sees the singer travel the length of Ireland's Atlantic coastline, offering viewers an insight into his childhood and family life as he visits Cork, Kerry, Mayo, Sligo, Donegal and Derry.

In the opening episode, Keating begins his Wild Atlantic adventure in County Cork, Ireland's southernmost and largest county. Joined by his

nephew Ruairí, the pair quickly reveal their competitive streak when they go head-to-head in the traditional Irish sport of road bowling, taking to the winding back roads around the port town of Castletownbere.

During the programme Keating also visits a large-scale rewilding project, where he learns how to forage for wild edible plants.

His journey then takes him to the Beara Peninsula, where he visits Ireland's first Tibetan Buddhist temple and retreat centre.

Ronan Keating's *Wild Atlantic* is a co-commission from BBC Northern Ireland and BBC Daytime, developed as part of the Hot House initiative with support from Northern Ireland Screen. The series is produced by Alleycats TV.

**Ronan Keating's Wild Atlantic episode 1/5
BBC ONE Northern Ireland and on the iPlayer
Monday, March 16 at 8pm**



Ronan Keating
Picture: BBC/Alley Cats

Irish radio in your area...



BEDFORDSHIRE

■ Jim Carway presents Luton Irish Live on Diverse 102.8fm from 7pm-9pm every Tuesday evening. Visit www.diversefm.com to follow online.

BRADFORD

■ Joe Sheeran presents Echoes of Ireland on Bradford Community Broadcasting 106.6FM every Sunday at noon. The programme is repeated on Mondays at 9am and is available online at www.bcbradio.co.uk.

COVENTRY

■ Hands Across the Waters on Hillz FM. Broadcasting live every Sunday and Monday from 1pm-2pm from Coventry. Peter Fitzgerald plays a selection of Irish and country music. You can tune in locally on 98.6FM or catch the show online at www.hillzfm.co.uk

■ Join the Four Country Road Show with Colm Nugent and Michael Gallagher every Sunday afternoon from 4pm-6pm. Broadcasting live in Coventry from the studios of Radio Plus 101.5fm and online around the world on www.radioplus.org.uk, the popular hosts play the very best in Irish and Country music, news, guests and more.

GLASGOW

■ Celtic Music Radio on 95fm and online www.celticmusicradio.net features Paddy Callaghan's Trad with Pad every Thursday from 6pm-8pm. During the show, Callaghan showcases the best Traditional music around, shares info on upcoming events, classes and welcomes a special guest here and there too.

MANCHESTER

■ Out and About in Manchester with Martin and Annette Logan, every Wednesday from 7pm-9pm on All FM 96.9fm. The pair bring you news and views from the Irish community across Manchester and beyond. As well as Irish music, special guests, competitions and much more. Follow online at www.allfm.org

■ The Irish Connection with John Lowry broadcasts live every Saturday from 10am to 12noon on Wythenshawe 97.2fm. The show plays all types of Irish music, from traditional to mainstream, and features interviews with well-known artists as well as new bands and singers. Follow the show online at www.wfmradio.org.

LONDON

■ RTÉ 2XM's show The London Ear goes out live every Saturday from 12noon to 2pm. Described as 'the radio show for Irish people outside Ireland focusing on music, art, and culture', it is presented by Vanessa 'Nessy' Monaghan features interviews with musicians, community groups, actors, and more, all with an Irish in London slant. You can listen live or catch up with past episodes at www.rte.ie/radio/2xm/the-london-ear

MIDLANDS

■ Bob Brolly's Irish Show, Sundays 4-6pm on BRMB Radio 89.1fm and DAB radio.

ONLINE

■ Gerry Byrne's Irish Radio list broadcasts live from Monday to Friday from 1pm-3pm and on Saturdays and Sundays from 11am-1pm on www.irishradio.org. This site offers 24/7 non-stop Irish music. Podcasts from each show are uploaded to the website immediately after broadcast. Requests welcome to gerry@irishradio.org

■ The Irish Cultural Centre in Hammersmith hosts monthly radio show Bright Side Of The Road championing the best of the Irish arts scene on Portobello Radio. Listen along live at www.portbelloradio.com and catch previous episodes at www.mixcloud.com/ICCHammersmith

■ Mid West Radio, the home of Irish music, chat, news, culture and gossip 24 hours a day! www.midwestradio.ie

■ RTÉ Radio operates four primary national stations – RTÉ Radio 1, RTÉ 2fm, RTÉ Lyric fm and RTÉ Raidió na Gaeltachta – and six exclusively digital stations – RTÉ Radio 1 Xtra, RTÉ Pulse, RTÉ Chill, RTÉ Gold, RTÉ 2XM and RTÉ Junior, available online.

■ Irish Country Music Radio broadcasts live and recorded programmes 24 hours a day covering a broad spectrum of Irish music. Listen online at www.irishcountrymusicradio.com

■ Irish Pulse focuses on the Irish diaspora in the northwest. Follow the show on AllFM Radio on 96.9FM, DAB, and online at www.allfm.org. Listen Live or Listen Again. Alternate Wednesdays at 12noon - 1pm, next broadcast Wednesday 25 February

PODCASTS

■ Jarlath Regan's An Irishman Abroad podcast continues to deliver great episodes after more than 10 years going strong. Catch the comedian's weekly chat with a special Irish guest at www.anirishmanabroad.podbean.com

■ The 'Nuacht Mhall (Slow News)' podcast from Conradh na Gaeilge i Londain releases a new episode each week. This podcast is intended as free listening practice for learners of Irish who might not feel ready for Raidió na Gaeltachta yet, they explain. Listen in at www.anchor.fm/cnag-ldn/

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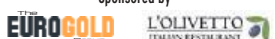
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Boyzone announce major Emirates Stadium shows

Irish pop icons return for their only live performances of 2026



Boyzone

IRISH pop legends Boyzone will return to the stage this summer for two huge shows at Emirates Stadium – marking their only live performances of 2026.

Formed in Dublin in 1993 by manager Louis Walsh, Boyzone became one of the defining pop acts of the 1990s. The group – now consisting of Ronan Keating, Keith Duffy, Shane Lynch and Mikey Graham – achieved enormous success on both sides of the Irish Sea, scoring a remarkable run of 17 consecutive UK Top 10 singles and selling millions of records worldwide.

Their upcoming concerts in London – titled *Two For The Road* – will also serve as a tribute to their

late bandmate Stephen Gately, who died in 2009.

The shows will take place on Friday, June 5 and Saturday, June 6, 2026. Demand has already proved extraordinary, with the Saturday night concert selling out months in advance. Limited tickets remain available for the opening night.

The stadium events will be Boyzone's first performances together since their farewell shows at the London Palladium in 2019. The reunion follows renewed interest in the group after the release of the documentary *Boyzone: No Matter What*, which introduced their story to a new generation of viewers while

rekindling the affection of long-time fans.

Adding to the nostalgia, the concerts will feature a strong supporting line-up from the golden age of late-1990s pop. On Friday night, the band will be joined by S Club, whose catalogue of hits includes *Bring It All Back*, *Never Had A Dream Come True* and *Don't Stop Movin'*. The group – Jo O'Meara, Rachel Stevens, Tina Barrett, Bradley McIntosh and Jon Lee – sold more than ten million albums during their chart-topping career and recently reunited for a successful arena tour.

Saturday's sold-out show will feature fellow Irish pop favourites B*Witched. The group, which includes sisters Edele and Keavy Lynch – siblings of Boyzone's Shane Lynch – rose to fame with a remarkable run of four consecutive UK number-one singles, including *C'est La Vie*, *Rollercoaster* and *Blame It On The Weatherman*. Their appearance at the Emirates creates something of a family reunion on stage.

Both evenings will also feature DJ sets from Scott Mills, who currently hosts the BBC Radio 2 Breakfast Show and promises plenty of sing-along hits and 1990s nostalgia to warm up the crowds.

For Boyzone themselves, the concerts promise to be the biggest headline shows of their entire career. With more than 88,000 fans expected across two nights, the events will celebrate a band whose music defined a generation of Irish and British pop fans.

As the group put it in a statement announcing the concerts: the overwhelming response from fans to their recent documentary inspired them to reunite for "the ultimate experience" – two nights celebrating the songs, memories and friendships that made Boyzone one of Ireland's most successful musical exports.

Living bridge of music and dance links Limerick and Britain

THE Irish World Academy of Music and Dance at the University of Limerick is connected physically to the wider campus by the Living Bridge – but culturally it also represents a "living bridge" between Ireland and Britain.

Traditional dance programmes at UL have long attracted students from Britain. Dancers from Glasgow, Stratford-upon-Avon and other centres of Irish culture have travelled to Limerick to complete undergraduate and postgraduate courses in Irish dance performance and ethnochoreology. The academy has also worked closely with prominent figures in the dance world, including Marie Duffy Pask, President of An Coimisiún le Rincí Gaelacha, and respected dance educator Maire

Clerkin.

Practitioners from Britain regularly contribute to the academy's artistic life. Among them is Colin Dunne, the Birmingham-born dancer and choreographer whose visits help strengthen the cultural links between Limerick and the wider diaspora. Academic connections with London also run deep. The academy notes the importance of Catherine Foley, who completed the first PhD in Irish dance at Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance, helping to establish Irish dance as a recognised field of scholarly study.

The academy's music programmes are equally shaped by this cross-channel exchange. A key figure in this shared heritage was the late Brendan Mulker of Co. Clare, whose teaching in

Britain influenced generations of musicians. His legacy continues through academy staff including Niall Keegan and John Carty.

Students from Britain continue to arrive in Limerick each year. Among the newest is Caitlin Donnelly from Manchester, whose musical heritage includes her grandfather, the Antrim-born fiddle player Des Donnelly, and her uncle Dezi Donnelly.

With programmes ranging from BA degrees in Irish Music and Irish Dance to specialised master's courses and doctoral research, the academy continues to strengthen a cultural bridge that has long linked Ireland and Britain through the shared traditions of music and dance.

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- SAT02 MAY LIVERPOOL Philharmonic Hall
- SUN 03 MAY MANCHESTER Bridgewater Hall
- THU 07 MAY BIRMINGHAM Symphony Hall
- SUN 10 MAY LONDON Theatre Royal Drury Lane



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How the céilí band shaped modern Irish music

With the Tulla Céilí band celebrating 80th anniversary, **MAL ROGERS** investigates the rise, decline and survival of the céilí band, and the part it plays in the story of Irish traditional music in the modern era

IRISH music as we know it today began to emerge in the 19th century. This was the century that saw the fiddle, accordion, piano and uilleann pipes shaping and driving Irish music along. Later came the flute, tin whistle, banjo and a variety of other fretted instruments.

The main tranche of what we regard as 'Irish traditional music' is no more than a couple of centuries old.

It is extremely difficult to know what music our ancestors played as Irish music, as there is no unbroken umbilical cord running back to pagan Celtic times. There are undoubtedly remnants of, for example, the great harping tradition of the early Christian times, but traditional music wasn't written down until the 17th century. Nonetheless it's a fair bet the music played by those ancient Celts bore little resemblance to the digitally enhanced music of Enya or the knockabout céilí-billy of The Pogues.

So where did our current iteration of Irish music come from? Many sources, as it happens, involving a mixture of influences and traditions.

But one of the most significant to happen was revolutionary: the 20th century saw the first time

when groups of Irish musicians playing different instruments formed ensembles. Until then, Irish music was a solo tradition. Musicologists and social anthropologists have more or less nailed this one down.

So in the 20th century, first came the céilí bands. Their existence was largely due to the activities of Conradh na Gaeilge in London towards the end of the 19th century, the first ever examples of any organised ensemble playing in Irish music.

According to Armagh historian and musicologist Fintan Vallely, the 1897 Gaelic League céilí in Bloomsbury Hall in London may have been the first céilí dance with the music provided by an ad hoc group of musicians.

Within a few years céilí bands soon began forming in both Ireland and Britain. They spread from London to Ireland first and enjoyed huge popularity.

In their earliest incarnations, céilí dances were accompanied by whatever musicians were available: a fiddler, a flute player, perhaps uilleann pipes. But as dances moved to ever larger halls, volume and rhythmic drive became more important.

A standard line-up gradually took shape: multiple fiddles car-

rying the melody in tight unison; flutes or whistles adding brightness; uilleann pipes for tonal richness; piano for harmonic backbone; and a drum kit or bass drum to keep the beat.

The establishment of Raidió Éireann in 1926 (later RTÉ) proved transformative. Radio required disciplined ensembles capable of consistent tempo and tight arrangements, and so commercialism led to professionalism in the bands. Competitive platforms such as the All-Ireland Fleadh (founded in 1951 by Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann) further codified the céilí band format, rewarding precision, blend and adherence to dance rhythm.

In Ireland, by the 1950s and into the 1960s, the céilí bands were increasingly replaced with showbands – playing British and American pop music, with some country & Irish thrown in.

Many of the céilí bands disbanded in the face of competition from this more popular dancing form. In England, this was crucial. The immigrant population, the di-

aspora, were now deprived of an important connection with home. Those from rural areas who were used to hearing traditional music now had to find an alternative.

Most of the Irish workers lived in digs or rooming houses – sessions in front of the fire were not an option. So they set up shop in local pubs in London – the first time Irish music was widely played in such establishments. The traditional seisiún was born. And it was born in London.

Another factor was also at work. The very elements that made céilí bands successful also invited criticism – piano-heavy arrangements, relatively loud volume, and the presence (latterly) of drums and guitar. By the 1960s, some traditional musicians felt that large ensemble arrangements risked smoothing out regional nuance and swamping the embellishments and ornamentation

that give Irish music much of its character.

The folk revival and the rise of ballad bands – The Clancy Brothers, The Dubliners – and traditional ensembles spearheaded by The Chieftains shifted attention towards listening audiences rather than dancers. The céilí band, once ubiquitous, began to seem conservative in comparison.

Yet reports of the céilí band's complete demise were premature. Decline certainly, but survival too. Comhaltas competitions ensured continuity, while diaspora communities in Britain and North America maintained strong céilí traditions.

What distinguishes the céilí band from other traditional groupings is its purpose. It exists, first and foremost, to make people dance. The emphasis on strong tempo and ensemble cohesion reflects that social function. In an era of digital playlists and solo virtuosity, the céilí band remains stubbornly communal – a reminder that traditional music was, and is, a participatory art.



The Tulla Céilí band in 2016

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The Tulla Céilí Band

CELEBRATING its 80th anniversary this year, the Tulla Céilí Band has been in continuous existence since 1946 – a remarkable achievement in a tradition where many groups have faded away over time, and supplanted by other styles of music.

But across eight decades the Tulla have kept going, its ranks having featured some of the finest musicians in Irish traditional music.

The band grew out of the Ballinahinch Céilí Band of East Clare. In 1946, a group of local musicians – including Theresa Tubridy, Paddy Canny, P.J. Hayes, Bert McNulty and Mrs Cummins – met to discuss forming a new band. According to local lore, the conversations took place in Minogues Bar in Tulla, Co. Clare. Their first appearance came in March 1946 at a céilí band competition in Limerick City, where they performed under the name the St Patrick's Amateur Band Tulla.

The present line-up of the Tulla has a series of gigs in Britain next month.

Friday, April 10

Set Dancing Céilí (Birmingham) - listeners welcome
 The New Birmingham Irish Centre, 205 Wheelers Lane, King's Heath, Birmingham

Saturday, April 11

The Tulla Céilí Band - 80th Anniversary Celebration Concert
 Camden School for Girls, Sandall Road, London NW5 2DB

Sunday, April 12

Sean Nós Dancing and Steps for Set Dancing Workshop - Mairéad Casey Kennedy Hall at the London Irish Centre, Murray Mews (Near Junction with Murray Street), London NW1 9RE (10.30am-12.30pm)

Sunday, April 12 2026

Set Dancing Céilí (London) - listeners welcome
 London Irish Centre, 52 Camden Square, London NW1 9XB

The line up for the Tulla Céilí Band's 80th Anniversary tour with us this April is as follows:

Drums: Benny O'Connor, Piano: Jim Corry
 Accordion: Michael McKee, Concertina: Brian Donnellan
 Fiddles: Mark Donnellan, Eimear Coughlan
 Flutes: Jennifer Lenihan, David Crowe
 Also appearing: Mairéad Casey (Sean Nós/ Set Dancer)

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ShowBiz WITH KEIRA O'CALLAGHAN



ShowBiz, with suitably raised eyebrows, delves into her bran tub of insight and gossip and pulls out the very latest news on Irish artists

PIERCE BROSNAN says his latest film role as legendary Sheffield boxing coach Brendan Ingle in *Giant*, a new biopic about flamboyant 1990s world champion Prince Naseem Hamed, has reminded him of his early acting days. Ingle, who died in 2018, guided Hamed from childhood to global stardom, before their once-close relationship fractured under the pressures of fame and money. Usual story I suppose. But of course in the open, treacherous waters of showbusiness, nothing is ever plain sailing. Hamed has now disputed how that split is portrayed in the film. He claims much of it is fictional. The Sheffield-born featherweight star said between "80 and 90 per cent" of the film *Giant*, which explores his career and relationship with his trainer, the Dublin-born Brendan Ingle, is "made up". Hamed, who became Britain's youngest world champion when he defeated Steve Robinson in Cardiff in 1995, said he had no involvement in the production and only saw the finished film after it had been completed. He now claims 80 to 90 per cent of the film is "just made up". The film focuses heavily on the breakdown of Hamed's long partnership with Ingle (Pierce Brosnan) who played a central role in developing the flamboyant fighter into one of boxing's most recognisable stars of the 1990s. The boxer also criticised the filmmakers for relying on accounts from people around his former trainer rather than consulting him directly. Despite his criticism, Hamed said the film may ultimately help generate interest in telling his own version of events. The former champion revealed he is in discussions with Hollywood actor Mark Wahlberg about producing a documentary series about his life and career. Still there is some good news about the film. Pierce, who is from Meath, has managed Ingle's Dublin accent to a T, in *ShowBiz*'s opinion. He was from the Ringsend area of the capital, one of 16 children to dock labourer Charlie ('Hoppy') Ingle and Sarah

Ingle (née Lawless). So if the real Brendan Ingle were here to see it all, *ShowBiz* is pretty sure he'd probably just shrug – and tell them all to get back to the gym. **THE WONDERFUL** modern day western *Yellowstone* may be riding off into the sunset – but don't hang up the cowboy hat just yet. One of the most formidable characters in the series looks set to return to our screens, with plans reportedly under way for a spin-off centred on Beth Dutton, played by the shimmeringly beautiful Kelly Reilly. Or Jessica Kelly Siobhán Reilly to give her full name. Alongside her (*Yellowstone*) brother Kayce, Beth is among the characters tipped to lead new chapters in the hugely popular series. According to industry reports, the proposed spin-off would follow Beth and her husband Rip Wheeler (who is only marginally less charismatic than Kelly), played by Cole Hauser, as they attempt to build a life away from the sprawling *Yellowstone* Dutton Ranch. The project has not yet been officially titled, although several entertainment outlets have suggested it may be called *Dutton Ranch*. Nor has a firm plot been confirmed. While the series is widely expected to debut sometime in 2026, no exact release date has yet been announced. But it doesn't really matter what the plot is – if they have Beth and Rip, they've got a show, in this column's opinion. The exact details, it seems, depend on the man behind the entire *Yellowstone* saga – creator Taylor Sheridan. "Taylor can figure out how to absolutely continue if he wants to," Hauser told *The Hollywood Reporter* in November 2024. "But that's just Taylor being a brilliant writer. I'm not telling you that it is continuing, it's just that he's smart enough as a writer to do that if that's something that he is passionate about." Reilly echoed that sentiment, making clear that any continuation of Beth's story would depend on Sheridan's involvement. "It's up to him," she said in the same interview. "We trust him. He's a master storyteller, and we help him tell these characters' stories. It's been such a ride and so electrifying to play and so invigorating. I trust him with wherever he takes her – whether we're leaving her where we've left her or we're going to find her somewhere else." For Reilly, the deciding factor is simple: the writing has to be Sheridan's. So while the *Yellowstone* ranch may be closing one chapter, fans of Beth Dutton (and hey, who isn't?!) should keep their boots by the door. In the wild west of television spin-offs, you never quite know when the next ride is about to begin.

short story of the same name, will feature a cast including Andrew Scott, Ciarán Hinds, Tom Cullen and Emily Blunt. The film will be directed by John Crowley, the filmmaker behind the Oscar-nominated drama *Brooklyn*, which starred Saoirse Ronan. The screenplay has been written by fellow Irishman Conor McPherson. According to Netflix, the story centres on a

bride whose future is thrown into doubt on her wedding day when a love triangle from her past threatens to resurface. Blunt, who leads the cast, previously said she was thrilled to help bring Keegan's work to the screen. Keegan's writing has won huge acclaim for its subtle portrayal of rural Irish life, and the film adaptation will bring her work to a wider international audience. Deffo.



Kelly Reilly
Picture: Georges Biard, Wikimedia, CC BY-SA 3.0



Naseem Hamed and Pierce Brosnan attend the *Giant* UK gala screening at Picturehouse Central in London earlier this month
Picture: Kate Green/Getty Images

Study Irish Traditional Music

at the University of Limerick, Ireland

The Irish World Academy of Music and Dance at the University of Limerick is the primary international centre for the study of Irish traditional music and dance both academically and through performance. The programmes are taught by leading academics in the fields of Irish Music Studies, Ethnomusicology and Cultural Studies as well as notable professional performers. These programmes are marked by the engagement with the professional world of traditional music performance, providing an unparalleled laboratory space for the development of new music and insights.

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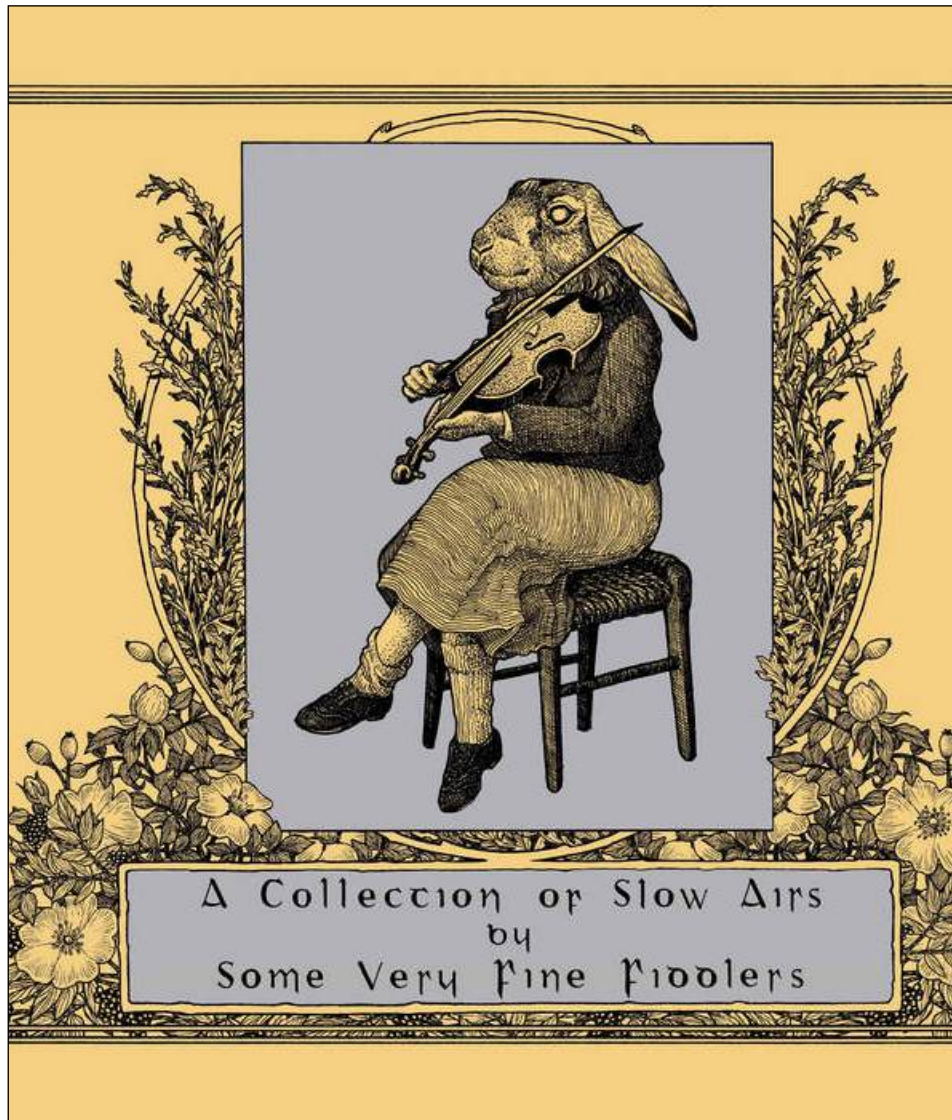
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Slow airs revive the intimate heart of Irish tradition

Nyahh Records gathers ten fiddlers for a raw and evocative collection rooted in sean-nós and regional style. **DAVE MCNALLY** reviews



WALTZES, polkas, reels, jigs; whilst we may mostly only listen to Irish traditional music these days, our tapping feet give away its historical purpose as dance music. Slow airs are the exception; they have an evocative quietness, with the melodies often drawn from sean-nós singing. Nyahh Records, a truly eclectic label whose releases include experimental, Kurdish and Moroccan music, have added a collection of slow airs played on the fiddle to their previous, excellent *A Collection of Songs in the Traditional and Sean-Nós Style*.

Lankum's Cormac Mac Diarmada plays a haunting version of Iníon an Fhaoit' ó'n nGleann, air to a sean-nós song of love and longing, which he learned from both piper Leonard Barry and fiddler Matt Cranitch. As a sean-nós singer, Saileog Ní Cheanabháin brings that influence directly to bear on her evocative rendering of Dark Lochnagar, a tune she learned from the playing of Willie Clancy, her bending and stretching of the notes accumulating as an almost harmonium-like hum. Mossie Martin grew up close to where the blind harper and composer Turlough O'Carolan is buried in Co. Roscommon, and he plays a delightful, majestic version of O'Carolan's air Thomas Burke, sounding more polka-like as the pace increases a little.

Unsurprisingly, there are no shortage of Donegal connections to be found on an album of ten fiddlers. Donegal's Martin McGinley, who played on Dervish's very first album, plays an enchanting version of the popular tune Easter Snow. Legendary Donegal fiddle player John Doherty played the tune and McGinley mentions that Doherty told a collector that the tune was titled Esther

Snow, and that Esther was "a most beautiful lady, with skin as white as the snow". Ingrid Lyons's wistful fiddle graces The Poitín Gathering, a tune composed by 19th-century southwest Donegal fiddle player John Mhósaí McGinley to describe a gathering on a dark night in the depths of winter. The recurrent theme of emigration, and the emotions and contemplations surrounding emigration, is captured in Danny Diamond's composition A Dream of Home, which he wrote in his parents' house in Donegal at a difficult time in his life, before subsequently emigrating to Minnesota where he now lives.

Seán Ó Duibhir A' Ghleanna, played by Ultan O'Brien, is one of the most arresting, elaborate tunes on the album, hinting at the drama of the story told in the song the air comes from. Seán Ó Duibhir from Tipperary was a key figure in the resistance to the invasion of Ireland in the 17th century by Oliver Cromwell; his woodlands were cut down by Cromwell and he was forced to flee and hide. O'Brien plays the tune as an ode to the fiddle playing of Nell Galvin. Born in 1887 in Co. Clare as Ellen (Nell) McCarthy, she was taught by the blind piper Garret Barry, played with other renowned Clare musicians such as the concertina player Mrs Crotty and piper Willie Clancy, and had at least one tune, Mrs Galvin's, named after her.

The airs on the album were recorded by the musicians themselves on phones or digital recorders at home or in cafés, giving a raw, appropriately unvarnished feel to this rich, rewarding collection.

Available from: www.nyahhrecords.bandcamp.com/album/a-collection-of-slow-airs-by-some-very-fine-fiddlers

SUDOKU

						8	4	
	1				5		9	
		2	6		7			
9		7			3			
6				3			7	
		3			6		1	
			1		3	2		
5		4					3	
8	9							

Sudoku requires no calculation or arithmetic skills. It is a game of placing numbers in squares using very simple rules of logic and deduction. It can be played by children and adults. Simply fill in the grid so that every row, every column and every 3x3 box contains the digits 1 through 9. However each number can appear only once on each row, column and 3x3 box. Answer next week.

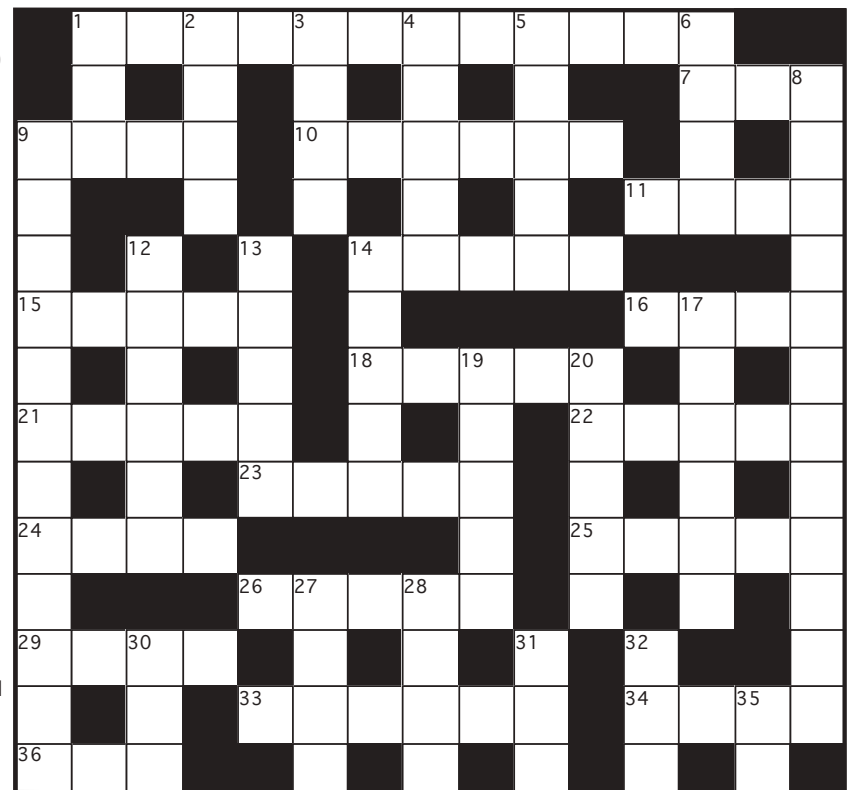
Last week's solution:

6	9	5	3	8	4	1	7	2
2	8	4	9	7	1	3	6	5
3	7	1	2	6	5	8	9	4
7	3	8	1	4	9	2	5	6
9	1	6	8	5	2	4	3	7
4	5	2	7	3	6	9	8	1
8	6	9	4	2	7	5	1	3
1	4	7	5	9	3	6	2	8
5	2	3	6	1	8	7	4	9

CROSSWORD

Clues Across Clues Down

1. Popular takeaway food. (4,3,5)
 7. Cured pig-meat. (3)
 9. Tolerate something grizzly. (4)
 10. Throw the French fortress. (6)
 11. Inform or narrate. (4)
 14. Overheads, necessary outlay. (5)
 15. Criminal. (5)
 16. Help a sailor find someone out of this world. (4)
 18. Cast, fling. (5)
 21. The smell of a southern coin. (5)
 22. Is one's relative in the judiciary or the Garda? (2-3)
 23. Wander off course. (5)
 24. Behind schedule. (4)
 25. Muscular injury. (5)
 26. Exceptional ability. (5)
 29. Encourage one to use the heart of a sturgeon. (4)
 33. Martin is lost in this Northern county. (6)
 34. South East Asian country, capital Vientiane. (4)
 36. Another ending that is not his. (3)
 37. The male's merriment leads to violent death. (12)
1. Professional charge. (3)
 2. Categorise. (4)
 3. A Catholic's curved lines. (4)
 4. The cod is destroyed in a dated dance. (5)
 5. Gustav, English composer of 'The Planets' suite. (5)
 6. Item of footwear. (4)
 8. To grind an urban centre, go by this place in Westmeath. (12)
 9. The Lagan might need a key to get into this inlet, by the sound of it! (7,5)
 12. Most ancient. (6)
 13. Is one tied to such a nautical measure? (5)
 14. Provide food - at an event, for example. (5)
 17. Is this song a commercial for a dance? (6)
 19. Boy! Boy that is so aristocratic! (5)
 20. Flinch. (5)
 27. 19 down books of the Old Testament. (5)
 28. Stage of development exemplified by the caterpillar. (5)
 30. Microbe. (4)
 31. Self-satisfied, having overturned one's gums. (4)
 32. Lift out of order? Go this way. (4)
 35. Paddle. (3)



Last week's answers:

Across

1. Cut 3. Forget-me-not 8. Onrush 9. Sensible 10. Eland 11. Clear 13. Tired 15. Tannery 16. Truffle 20. Boyle 21. Eaves 23. Ratio 24. Heritage 25. Uneven 26. Green cheese 27. Lay

Down

1. Co-operative 2. Tarragon 3. Fused 4. Gesture 5. Music festival 6. Nobber 7. The Rebel County 13. Throb 14. Dirge 18. Hygiene 19. Averse 22. Satin 23. Ranees 24. Hog

Scribble pad

Belfast mourns Hatfield House publican Kevin Cassidy

Family friend **PETER KELLY** attended commemorations to the legacy of the capital city's 'titan of the trade'



Kevin Cassidy's cortege

KEVIN Cassidy, the long-serving Belfast publican who transformed the Hatfield House into one of the city's best-known bars and Irish music hubs, passed away prompting widespread tributes across Northern Ireland.

Mr Cassidy, originally from Draperstown, Co. Derry, ran the historic Ormeau Road pub for 50 years.

The Hatfield gained international attention during the 2020 Covid-19 lockdown when the bar delivered freshly poured pints of

Guinness to customers' homes across Belfast using a van fitted with taps.

Having overcome objections from local police over potential breaches of licensing laws, news stories of the entrepreneurial service and legal victory went

viral, earning the operation the nickname "The Pint Man."

The project even made the American networks.

The pub also featured in the 1998 film Titanic Town, starring Julie Walters and Ciarán Hinds, with Mr Cassidy himself appearing briefly on screen pulling pints behind the bar.

The historic curved horseshoe counter in the architecturally listed 19th-century building was built by craftsmen who worked on the nearby Titanic, launched in 1912. The bar itself originally dates back to 1871.

Tributes have come from customers, fellow publicans and community figures describing Cassidy as a gentleman, a legend and a central figure in Belfast hospitality.

His funeral was held at St Luke's Church in Twinbrook, Belfast, attended by hundreds

including the former local MP and Cassidy family doctor, Alasdair McDonnell, former leader of the SDLP. Mr Cassidy was later buried in rural Co. Derry.

Kevin Cassidy bought the bar in 1976 aged only 27. Over the decades, the Hatfield became a hub for locals, students and visitors, remaining open throughout the Troubles and hosting cultural and community events.

His sons Kieran, Stephen and John now run the business, which serves south Belfast locals and the nearby student community at Queen's University. It also sponsored the ladies' sports teams from St Mary's teacher training college on the city's Falls Road.

Friends from his native Draperstown said he remained deeply connected to his roots. One tribute said: "A large hole is left with Kevin's passing... there will never be another."

Nancy Spains to host St Patrick's street party in Shoreditch

PERMISSION has been granted for Nancy Spains on Rivington Street, Shoreditch, London to host an open-air St Patrick's weekend street party for up to 500 people on Saturday, March 14.

The event will feature live music, Irish dancers, Murphy's stout, street food from DE NADAS Empanadas – including the bespoke O'Nada – cocktails from Callooh Callay, and even appearances from St Patrick and Nancy Spain herself.

The street will be transformed into a celebration centred on music, dancing and community

The street party, starting at 2pm, will be the centrepiece of the celebrations.

"A street party is about who we

are," says COO Nick O'Halloran. "They bring people together, celebrate Irish culture with a Nancy Spains twist and create moments people carry with them."

He added: "As part of the celebrations, De Nadas and Nancy

Spains are launching the O'Nada – an Argentinian empanada with an Irish twist. It features beef braised in Murphy's Irish stout with carrots, onions and thyme, wrapped in DE NADAS' signature pastry."

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Mon 07	Dec	Newcastle	O2 City Hall
Tue 08	Dec	Glasgow	O2 Academy

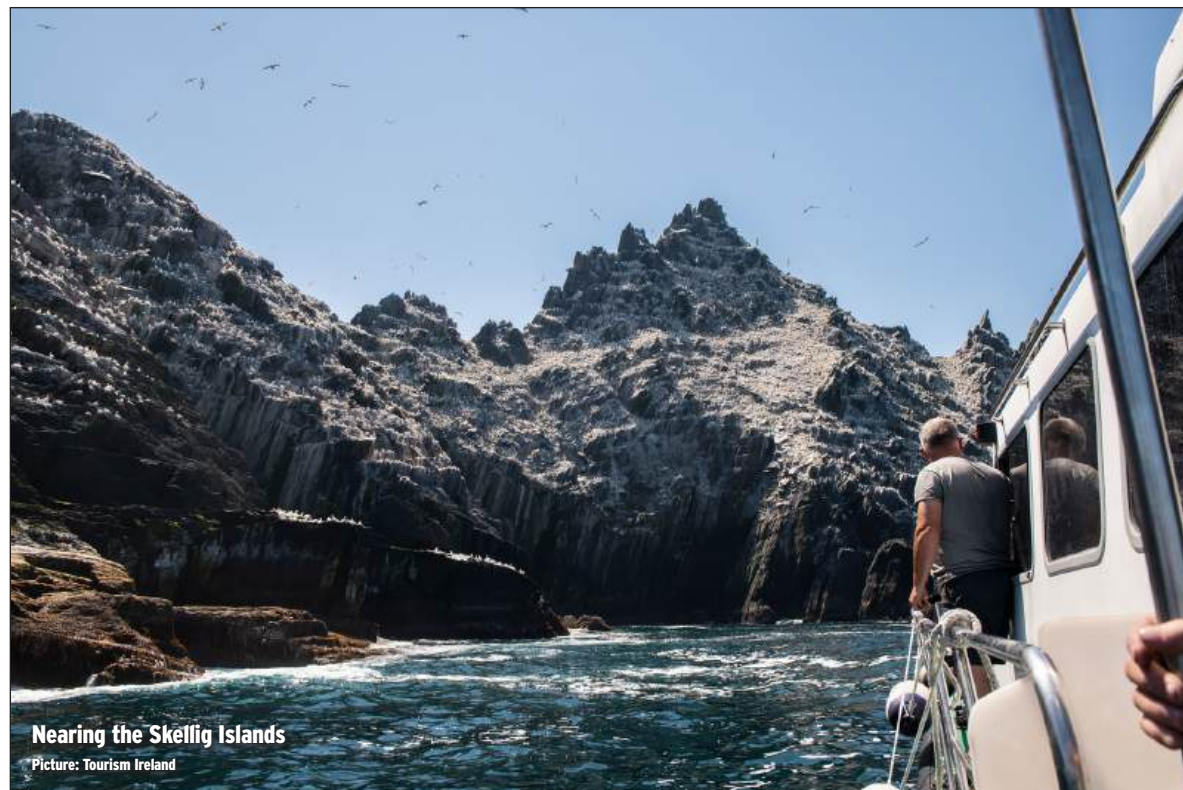
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Edited by Mal Rogers

Thirty-two counties and a thousand stories

From ancient monasteries and lonely mountains to haunted castles and wild coastlines, **MAL ROGERS** takes a tour around Ireland's counties uncovering sights and curiosities



Nearing the Skellig Islands

Picture: Tourism Ireland

Co. Antrim

TOP ATTRACTION:

This part of the country has always had its fair share of myth and legend. St Patrick tended pigs here, on the slopes of Mount Slemish; before him the Wee Folk and the odd giant inhabited the Nine Glens of Antrim. All long gone now (probably), but the atmosphere, and the landscape, remains ethereal and magic.

HIDDEN GEM: The Gobbins on the coast allows you to do a spot of cliff-climbing by means of via ferrata contraptions, in relative safety.

KEY FACT: Islandmagee in the south of the county gained notoriety as a home of witchcraft, particularly in the 18th century.

Co. Armagh

TOP ATTRACTION: The ancient capital of Ulster, Armagh city was once the very centre of Europe with its great teaching monastery founded by St Patrick. Both cathedrals (each named after St Patrick) are steeped in history.

HIDDEN GEM: On the summit ridge of Slieve Gullion is a small lake, Calliagh Berra's Lough. Ultramarine blue in the sun if you choose the right day, as black as the surrounding peat hags if you choose incorrectly. Look out though — lots of legends attached to the lough, not all of them uplifting.

KEY FACT: The Kilnasaggart Pillar Stone in County Armagh is considered the oldest dateable Christian monument in Ireland, dating to approximately AD 700.

Co. Carlow

TOP ATTRACTION: Carlow has the Blackstairs Mountains, long pastoral walks along the River Barrow and the wonderful Altamont Gardens.

HIDDEN GEM: Huntington Castle, in the south of the county, has the ambience of a Moorish palace rather than an Irish fortress and is packed full of peculiarities.

KEY FACT: The town of Leighlinbridge has one of the oldest continuously used bridges in Ireland, its medieval arches still carrying traffic much as they did when pilgrims crossed it en route to St Mullins.

Co. Cavan

TOP ATTRACTION: Cavan proudly calls itself the “county of a thousand lakes”, so, yes, a great deal of water about the place. The Shannon–Erne Waterway passes serenely through on its way to the Atlantic.

HIDDEN GEM: Near Belturbet stands the curious Drumlane Round Tower. According to local legend, the bell from the original church can be heard ringing every few years from the bottom of Drumlane Lough. It's not clear who put this to the test.

KEY FACT: The first Oxford English Dictionary has a Cavan connection. Nobody knows why, but the original slips for ‘Pa’ (‘pabulum’ to ‘pazazz’) went missing and years later turned up in a stable in Co. Cavan. Some had already been used for lighting fires to keep the horses warm.

Co. Clare

TOP ATTRACTION: The Cliffs of Moher are where the Old World crumbles into the sea. This is the rough edge of Europe, a land that has lived hard.

HIDDEN GEM: The Burren, an extravagant limestone wilderness but teeming with wild flowers come springtime.

KEY FACT: The lonely Burren valley known as Gleninagh contains the ruins of a small church built beside a holy well said to cure eye ailments if

visited before sunrise.

Co. Cork

TOP ATTRACTION: The bucolic landscape of West Cork overlooks meadows and woodland, and boreens lined with fuchsia and montbretia. But the Wild Atlantic Way coastline is never far away.

HIDDEN GEM: To get to Dursey Island you need to catch the cable car. Some half-dozen people, a handful of livestock and millions of seabirds call the island home-sweet-home.

KEY FACT: In the hills above Rosscarbery, locals once spoke of a mysterious underground “souterrain road” where cattle were believed to vanish into the earth during storms.

Co. Derry

TOP ATTRACTION: The Walls of Derry are among the finest ramparts in Europe. Derry's history means they have often been pressed into service over the centuries.

HIDDEN GEM: The bonkers folly that is the Bishop's Palace and Mussenden Temple at Downhill overlooks the immense sands of Benone Strand.

KEY FACT: The village of Bellarena stands near the site where shipwreck

survivors from the Spanish Armada reportedly traded silver coins for food before slipping quietly back to sea. A few didn't bother to go back — they scarpered. Wise choice — the Armada foundered shortly after.

Co. Donegal

TOP ATTRACTION: Donegal's most famous religious site, St Patrick's Purgatory on Lough Derg, is traditionally associated with Patrick. According to legend, Christ showed him a cave there revealing the pains of purgatory. It later became a major pilgrimage destination.

HIDDEN GEM: Farming people settled around Gleann Cholm Cille (Glencolumbcille) around five thousand years ago. The court tombs with associated standing stones are presumably an attempt to communicate with we-know-not-what.

KEY FACT: The caves of Maghera, just outside Ardara, are primevally spectacular. One of the larger caves is said to have concealed a hundred people taking refuge from Cromwell's troops in the 17th century.

Co. Down

TOP ATTRACTION: Co. Down lays claim to the last resting place of St Patrick. His grave reputedly lies in the grounds of Down Cathedral in Downpatrick. Nearby is the village of Saul, where tradition holds that the first church associated with Patrick was built.

HIDDEN GEM: Castle Ward overlooking Strangford Lough boasts dual architecture. The entrance side of the building is classical in style, the opposite Gothic. All to do with a marital disagreement. Don't try this one at home, folks!

KEY FACT: The Mourne Mountains, celebrated in Percy French's song, also inspired C.S. Lewis to create Narnia.

Co. Dublin

TOP ATTRACTION: Dublin boasts pubs, Georgian elegance and literary greatness — and also the Guinness Storehouse. Go there.

HIDDEN GEM: St Michan's Church has a collection of mummified bodies stored in the vaults. Limestone in the ground has kept the air dry, helping to preserve the earthly remains of crusaders, 1798

rebels and ordinary Dubliners. Spooky but fascinating.

KEY FACT: Beneath modern College Green, archaeologists have uncovered traces of a medieval fish market where oysters from Dublin Bay were once sold by the cartload.

Co. Fermanagh

TOP ATTRACTION: The Crom Estate is the largest area of natural woodland in Northern Ireland, a haven for pine martens, rare bats and birdlife.

HIDDEN GEM: The Cuilcagh Boardwalk crosses a wide extent of blanket bog, remote and astonishingly beautiful.

KEY FACT: The lonely island monastery on Devenish in Lough Erne kept its round tower and church intact long after the monks had gone.

Co. Galway

TOP ATTRACTION: In Galway city the Spanish Arch and Spanish Parade are among the most distinctive sights in the city. This 16th-century structure recalls the trade formerly carried on with Spain; its main purpose was to protect galleons unloading wine and spirits.

HIDDEN GEM: Christopher Columbus is said to have attended Mass in the Collegiate Church of St Nicholas in Galway. Stopping off here on his way to find America, he sought divine guidance — and who amongst us hasn't gone to Galway to seek divine guidance? Or a good seisiún at any rate.

KEY FACT: The tiny harbour of Kinvara was once a lively export point for seaweed ash, shipped to Britain in the 18th century for use in glassmaking.

Co. Kerry

TOP ATTRACTION: The Skelligs — sometimes described as the Machu Picchu of Ireland — rise dramatically from the Atlantic, their monastic beehive huts clinging improbably to the rock.

HIDDEN GEM: The Daniel O'Connell Memorial Church in Cahirsiveen is dedicated to one of the towering figures of European history. It is the only church in Ireland named after a lay person.

KEY FACT: High on the slopes above Kenmare, the prehistoric stone



The Rock of Cashel

Picture: Tourism Ireland

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TRAVEL

circle known as Uragh overlooks a lake so still it was once thought bottomless.

Co. Kildare

TOP ATTRACTION: Kildare, officially Ireland's flattest county, has put its modest topography to good use. The world's finest racing horses are bred here on the lush green plains of the Curragh and beyond.

HIDDEN GEM: At Castletown House, Ireland's grandest Palladian mansion, the estate once included an experimental deer park stocked with imported fallow deer.

KEY FACT: Kildare is the home of the only Irishman after whom a British bomber aircraft was named — Ernest Shackleton.

Co. Kilkenny

TOP ATTRACTION: Kilkenny city's hostelries are underpinned by a brewing tradition that stretches back to the 14th century. As ever, the monks were at the centre of the licensed victualling trade, brewing ale along what is now known as the Medieval Mile.

HIDDEN GEM: Woodstock Gardens, near Inistioge on the banks of the River Nore, has magnificent arboreal specimens and beautiful walks.

KEY FACT: Jerpoint Abbey is one of the finest Cistercian monastic ruins in Ireland. Nearby is the reputed grave of St Nicholas (Santa Claus) in the grounds of a ruined church in the deserted village of Newtown Jerpoint — though some doubt is cast on the claim.

Co. Limerick

TOP ATTRACTION: As you stand on Sarsfield Bridge and watch a squadron of swans glide down the Shannon, you'll spot the gaunt contours of King John's Castle. Nearby stands St Mary's Cathedral, probably built around 1190. It's a fine vista.

HIDDEN GEM: The Foynes Flying Boat and Maritime Museum records Ireland's long aviation history, including the origins of Irish coffee invented here — containing the four main food groups: alcohol, caffeine, sugar and cream.

KEY FACT: The Lough Gur complex contains one of Ireland's most important prehistoric landscapes. The Grange Stone Circle there is the largest in Ireland, aligned with the sunrise at the summer solstice.

Co. Laois

TOP ATTRACTION: The Rock of Dunamase stands 150 feet (46m) high and affords impressive views across the Midlands towards the Slieve Bloom Mountains.

HIDDEN GEM: The Round Tower at Timahoe is one of the finest in Ireland.

KEY FACT: The boglands near Clonaslee were once combed for "bog butter", waxy lumps of ancient dairy buried centuries ago for preservation.

Co. Leitrim

TOP ATTRACTION: Leitrim is a narrow county, forty-six miles in length, with two miles of Atlantic coastline. The county evidently insisted on a seaside no matter what.

HIDDEN GEM: Lough Melvin has a unique range of plants and fish — including three distinct types of trout.

KEY FACT: A curious stone sweat house near Drumkeeran was used into the 19th century as a rustic cure for rheumatism, with patients sealed inside while turf fires heated the stones.

Co. Longford

TOP ATTRACTION: The Mote of Granard in Longford, standing some 600 feet high, offers a wide-screen view of the Midlands.

HIDDEN GEM: The Old Bog Road at Corlea is a 2,000-year-old trackway of massive oak planks.

KEY FACT: The townland of Abbeyshrule contains the remains of a Cistercian abbey whose stones were quietly repurposed into farm buildings after the Dissolution.

Co. Louth

TOP ATTRACTION: The old Viking town of Carlingford boasts two castles, a Dominican friary and a 17th-century mint — which isn't bad going for a place with a population of around 700.

HIDDEN GEM: Slieve Foy in the Cooley Mountains offers views across about ten counties of Ireland — and two other countries.

KEY FACT: The ruined monastic site at Monasterboice is guarded by two of the tallest high crosses in Ireland.

Co. Mayo

TOP ATTRACTION: According to tradition, St Patrick spent forty days

and forty nights fasting and praying on the summit of Croagh Patrick.

HIDDEN GEM: The Céide Fields preserve a prehistoric farming landscape more than five thousand years old.

KEY FACT: On Achill Island a short-lived Protestant colony was established in the 1830s in the hope of converting the local population.

Co. Meath

TOP ATTRACTION: The Hill of Tara may not be especially high, but it looms large in Irish legend and history as the ancient seat of the High Kings of Ireland.

HIDDEN GEM: The Hill of Ward, or Tlachtga, outside Athboy has claims to being the site of the very first Halloween festival.

KEY FACT: Petronilla de Meath (c.1300–1324) holds the melancholy distinction of being the first known person in Ireland to be burned for heresy.

Co. Monaghan

TOP ATTRACTION: The Patrick Kavanagh Centre in Iniskeen preserves letters, manuscripts and memorabilia of the poet who wrote Raglan Road.

HIDDEN GEM: The Neolithic court tomb at Tiredigan sits quietly in deepest rural Monaghan.

KEY FACT: John Robert Gregg, born in Shantonagh in 1867, devised Gregg shorthand, one of the most influential shorthand systems in the world.

Co. Offaly

TOP ATTRACTION: Leap Castle is reputedly the most haunted castle in Ireland.

HIDDEN GEM: Kinnitty Pyramid, standing ten metres high in a churchyard, is the only pyramid-shaped tomb in Ireland.

KEY FACT: The monastic site of Clonmacnoise attracted pilgrims from across Europe throughout the Middle Ages.

Co. Roscommon

TOP ATTRACTION: Roscommon Castle is one of the most atmospheric Norman castles in Ireland.

HIDDEN GEM: The village of Elphin has been a bishopric for fifteen hundred years.

KEY FACT: The demesne at Strokestown Park preserves one of the most intact famine-era estate landscapes in Ireland.



A Donegal fisherman
Picture: Tourism Ireland

Co. Sligo

TOP ATTRACTION: A couple of miles beyond W.B. Yeats' grave at Drumcliffe, the magnificent Glencar Lough heaves suddenly into view.

HIDDEN GEM: Creevykeel is one of Ireland's most impressive prehistoric tombs.

KEY FACT: The mountain Knocknarea, crowned by Queen Maeve's cairn, has long been associated with legend and folklore.

Co. Tipperary

TOP ATTRACTION: The Rock of Cashel rises dramatically above the plains of Tipperary.

HIDDEN GEM: In Clogheen lies the grave of Samuel Grubb, who insisted on being buried upright so he would be ready for Judgement Day.

KEY FACT: The medieval town of Fethard still retains long stretches of its original defensive walls.

Co. Tyrone

TOP ATTRACTION: The Beaghmore stone circles form one of the most impressive megalithic complexes in Ireland.

HIDDEN GEM: The Burren Heritage Centre at Creggan explains the archaeology of an area with dozens of standing stones nearby.

KEY FACT: Near Ardboe, a finely carved high cross stands beside a ruined abbey on the shore of Lough Neagh.

Co. Waterford

TOP ATTRACTION: Reginald's Tower is probably the oldest urban monument in Ireland.

HIDDEN GEM: The Viking Triangle in Waterford city contains a remarkable cluster of museums.

KEY FACT: The Copper Coast takes

its name from 19th-century mining ventures whose abandoned engine houses still dot the cliffs.

Co. Westmeath

TOP ATTRACTION: The Hill of Uisneach, reputedly the centre of Ireland, has strong associations with St Patrick.

HIDDEN GEM: The Jealous Wall at Belvedere House is a large Gothic folly built in 1760.

KEY FACT: Sean's Bar in Athlone is possibly one of the oldest pubs in the world, with archaeological evidence suggesting a structure on the site dating to around AD 900.

Co. Wexford

TOP ATTRACTION: Hook Lighthouse dates from the early 13th century and may be the longest continuously operating lighthouse in the world.

HIDDEN GEM: New Ross retains a medieval Tholsel — the Norse word for a toll house where merchants once paid for passage.

KEY FACT: The village of Bannow long claimed to be the landing place of the first Norman forces in Ireland.

Co. Wicklow

TOP ATTRACTION: The monastic settlement of Glendalough, founded in the 6th century, is one of the most atmospheric historic sites in Ireland.

HIDDEN GEM: The German Military Cemetery at Glencree holds the graves of German servicemen whose bodies washed ashore in Ireland during the world wars.

KEY FACT: Deep in the Wicklow Mountains, the ruined miners' village in Glendalough's Upper Valley preserves traces of the 19th-century lead mining industry.

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The Gobbins

Picture: Rob Durston, courtesy of Tourism Northern Ireland



Slemish

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PRAYER TO THE BLESSED VIRGIN
(Never known to fail.) O Most beautiful flower of Mount Carmel, fruitful vine in the splendour of Heaven, Blessed Mother of the Son of God, Immaculate Virgin assist me in this my necessity. O Star of the Sea help me and show me herein you are my Mother. O Holy Mary, Mother of God, Queen of Heaven and Earth, I humbly beseech you from the bottom of my heart to succour me in this my necessity. (Make request.) There are none that can withstand your power. O show me my mother. O show me herein you are my Mother. O Mary conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to thee. (Three times.) Sweet Mother, I place this cause in your hands. (Three times.) Say this prayer for three consecutive days and then publish and it will be granted. AB

Prayers

Prayer to the Blessed Virgin (NEVER KNOWN TO FAIL)

O beautiful flower of Mount Carmel, Fruitful Vine, Splendour of Heaven, Blessed mother of the son of God, Immaculate Virgin, assist me in this my necessity. O star of the sea, help me and show me herein you are my mother: I humbly beseech you from the bottom of my heart to succour me in this my necessity (make request) There are none that withstand your power; Mary conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to thee (three times). Holy Mother I place this cause in your hands (three times) Thank you for your mercy to me and mine.

This prayer must be said for three days and after that it will be God's will, the request will be granted and the prayer must be published.

Novena to the Sacred Heart

Dear Heart of Jesus, in the past I have asked for many favours, This time I ask for this special one (mention request). Take it dear heart of Jesus and place it within your own broken heart, where your father sees it, then in His merciful eyes it will become your favour not mine. Amen (Say for three days and promise publication). Never known to fail. **A.B.**

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THE Irish Post

Warwickshire score decisive victory over Monaghan

ALL IMAGES BY CHRIS EGAN

WARWICKSHIRE secure their first win in the Allianz League Roinn 4 with a strong performance at Páirc na hÉireann against Monaghan. Leaving the pitch at half time with a comfortable 1-8 to 0-4 lead, Warwickshire continued to dominate throughout the second half to take the game 3-11 to 0-13. All three Warwickshire's goals came from Jack Grealish.



A struggle for the sliotar



Disputing the sliotar



Warwickshire's Sean Dirran stands over Monaghan's Aaron McGee



Jack Grealish in action



Warwickshire's Luke Hands competes with Monaghan's Cillian Hanratty



All eyes on the sliotar



Monaghan's Ethan Lawless in action against Warwickshire's John Collins



Warwickshire's defence Noel Lenihan and John Collins close down the Monaghan attack

George Best's peers hail him as football's true GOAT

From Pelé and Maradona to Ferguson and Beckham, the Belfast genius was revered as a once-in-a-generation talent



Danny Blanchflower and George Best
Picture: public domain

BY JASON O'TOOLE

FORGET Messi and Ronaldo — George Best's admirers would argue he was the true GOAT. As the saying goes: Maradona, good. Pelé, better. George, best.

And it's not blind patriotism or pub talk — even Pelé once said about the Northern Irish star: “The best I've ever seen.”

The Brazilian icon basically said Best was good enough to play for the South American World Cup-winning side. “The great football critics said that because of his technical skill, he was like a Brazilian athlete who danced the samba with the ball at his feet. George Best, until today, is a footballer without comparison and his technical skills will never be forgotten,” he added.

As the BBC noted, “Best earned his right to be mentioned in the same breath as Pelé, Maradona and other greats. And Pelé certainly had his idea of who the Best man was.” Best himself said Pelé's high praise was the “ultimate salute to my life”.

It's almost 21 years since the greatest player to ever come out of the island of Ireland passed away, far too soon, at just 59. of magic.”

It speaks volumes about George Best's natural brilliance on the ball that, although his glittering career was curtailed far too early — his last appearance for Manchester United coming at just 27 amid a life of alcohol-fuelled excess — he was still selected as the joint fifth greatest player of all time, alongside Johan Cruyff, in a FIFA poll.

There is no doubt that George Best would have been ranked much higher in the FIFA poll if he had continued longer at the top level and had played at the World Cup. According to Franz Beckenbauer, “Best was probably the best footballer who never made it to a major world final.”

The Belfast-born superstar, who

won two First Division titles and the European Cup, was still only 22 when he scooped the prestigious Ballon d'Or after receiving more votes than Bobby Charlton in 1968. Some 50-odd years later, he is still the only Irishman to have won the award. In total, 15 other Irish players have received votes for the Ballon d'Or, but none of them — including Roy Keane and Liam Brady — were even nearly in the same class as Best.

George Best won the Ballon d'Or that year partly for his spectacular goal to put United 2-1 up against Benfica in the 1968 European Cup final, helping Manchester United to become England's first European champions. “I used to dream about taking the ball round the keeper, stopping it on the line and then getting on my hands and knees and heading it into the net. When I scored against Benfica in the 1968 European Cup final I nearly did it. I left the keeper for dead but then I chickened out. I might have given the boss a heart attack!” Best said.

Fearless at the best of times, he probably would have done it too if it hadn't been such an important goal. According to Jimmy Greaves, the little Irishman was “the ultimate showman”. Greaves reckoned Best's attitude was, “Why simply beat a defender when you can torture him and entertain your public too? Why not dump a full-back on his backside when you were capable of dumping Miss World?” The English striker added, “He was brave, too. They kicked lumps out of him but he always got up and beat them again.”

The former West Brom defender Graham Williams summed up George Best's brilliance when he once said to him in the middle of a game: “Will you stand still for a minute so I can look at your face.” When Best asked why, Williams quipped: “Because all I've ever seen of you is your backside disappearing down the touchline.” Best was so fast

and skilful that the Chelsea defender Ron “Chopper” Harris once quipped that he was “one of the best I attempted to kick in 21 years!”

But he could also be frustrating to play alongside, as Manchester United teammate Paddy Crerand observed: “There are times when you want to wring his neck. He hangs on to the ball when players have found better positions. Then out of the blue he wins you the match, and you know you're in the presence of someone special.”

He was still only 22 when he lifted the European Cup, but Best never won another major trophy. After that magnificent season, the only other trophy to his name was the East of Scotland Shield with Hibernian FC in 1979-80. “I represented the future of Manchester United — or should have done,” he later reflected.

Instead of building on the momentum, George Best put all his energies into booze and women. “I just don't understand him,” Bobby Charlton said in 1973. “What do you come into football for? It's your duty to give your best to the people who come to support you, but he didn't seem to see this.”

But even a frustrated Bobby Charlton acknowledged Best was an “unbelievably gifted player” who “had quality and control that was unparalleled”. He continued, “He could control the ball with his left foot, his right foot; it was not a great problem to him. He could turn on a sixpence. He had unbelievable vision, he could tell everything that was happening around him, he knew exactly where people were, and that gave him all the time that he needed to actually express himself.”

As Best himself reflected on his flawed genius: “I was born with a great gift, and sometimes with that comes a destructive streak. Just as I wanted to outdo everyone when I played, I had to outdo everyone when we were out on the town.” He used to

like to quip that he gave up women and alcohol in 1969, but it was the “worst 20 minutes” of his life. Best once said that he believed: “They'll forget all the rubbish when I've gone and they'll remember the football. If only one person thinks I'm the best player in the world, that's good enough for me.”

Unfortunately, the footballer dubbed the fifth Beatle is probably still remembered as much for his antics off the field as for his flawed genius on it, particularly seeing as he succumbed to an alcohol-related illness at such an early age. As he told *The Guardian* newspaper in 2002, “I was ill and everyone could see it but me.”

It was a very brave move indeed when George Best decided to allow the now defunct *News of the World* newspaper to publish a picture of him in his hospital bed with jaundice, along with a warning about the dangers of alcohol with the poignant message: “Don't die like me.”

But rather than focus on how he poured his career down the drain, let's look at how his talent was perceived by his peers and future football stars, as he himself hoped would be the main focus long after he shuffled off this mortal coil. It really sums up his talent when someone like the great Sir Alex Ferguson says: “George was unique, the greatest talent football ever produced — ever.” He was, according to football manager Harry Redknapp, “the best footballer” he'd ever seen. “He was such a special talent. I've never seen anyone with the ability to beat people, to dribble, an amazing footballer,” he added.

Even the younger generation of players looked up to him. After his death, Eric Cantona said he hoped Best would save him a place in his

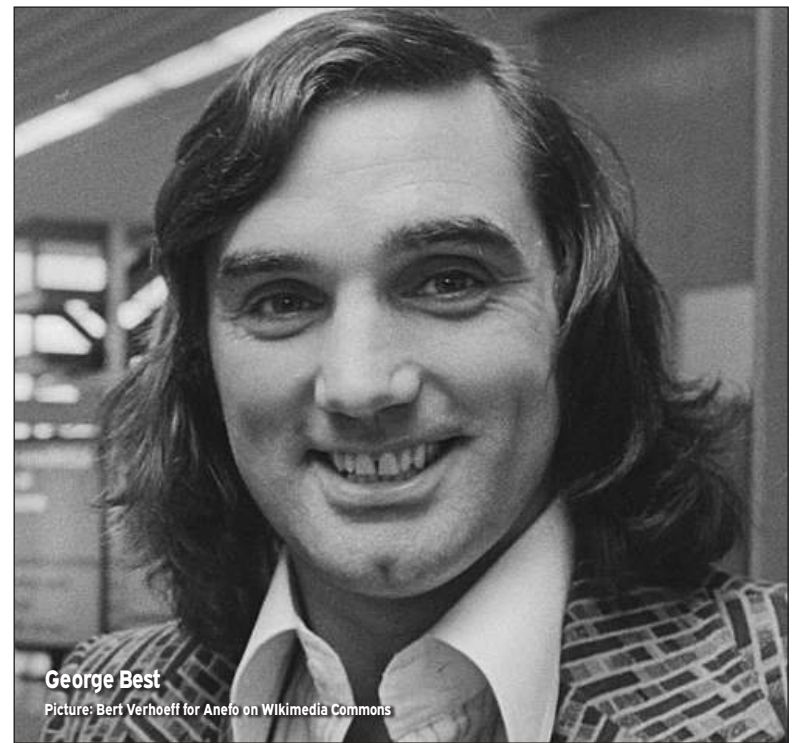
football team in heaven. While David Beckham said it was an honour to follow in George Best's footsteps: “As a Manchester United fan I always saw George Best as a football legend, and it was a proud moment for me when I wore the same number seven shirt as him. He is one of the greatest players to have ever graced the game and a great person as well.”

The late Manchester Evening News sports reporter David Meek, who covered United games for more than 40 years, “thought the criticism levelled at him when he finished at 27 was unfair”. He pointed out: “He played 11 seasons of First Division football with United and paid his dues to the public. He started early and was entitled to finish when he did.” As Denis Law put it, “From 1964 to 1969 he was the best player in the country.”

But there is no getting away from the “what ifs” George Best could have achieved on the pitch if he hadn't become washed up as a footballer at such an early age. Instead of seeing out his career as nothing more than a showman attraction for teams such as Jewish Guild, Cork Celtic, Los Angeles Aztecs, Fort Lauderdale Strikers, San Jose Earthquakes, Brisbane Lions and Hibernian — Best could have easily been playing for a top European side like Real Madrid or Juventus long before Kevin Keegan signed for Hamburger SV in 1977. Even Best once famously said the English international wasn't fit to lace his boots.

Perhaps the late TV presenter Michael Parkinson put it best when he said: “The only tragedy George Best had to confront is that he will never know how good he could have been.”

But for a short period of time, he was simply the best.



George Best
Picture: Bert Verhoeff for Anefo on Wikimedia Commons

SIMPLY THE BEST

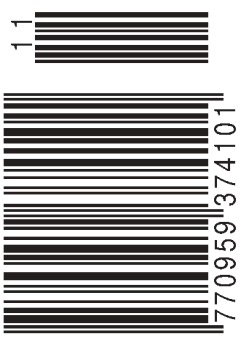
Even Pelé believed George Best was supreme
See Page 27



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Wexford's Derek Kent to be the next GAA president

Taghmon-Camross clubman wins comfortably on first count at 2026 Congress and will succeed Jarlath Burns as the 42nd president of the association in 2027

President-elect of the GAA Derek Kent and Director General of the GAA Tom Ryan

Picture: Piaras Ó Midheach/Sportsfile via Getty Images



BY GRAINNE CONROY

WEXFORD'S Derek Kent has been elected the next president of the Gaelic Athletic Association after delegates voted at the opening session of the 2026 GAA Congress.

Kent secured a decisive victory on the first count, receiving 169 of the 277 votes cast, comfortably surpassing the required quota of 139. His closest challenger, Tipperary's Ger Ryan, polled 76 votes, while Sligo's John Murphy received 32.

The Taghmon-Camross clubman will now serve as uachtarán tofa (president-elect) until the conclusion of the current president's term. He will formally assume office in February 2027 when the tenure of outgoing president Jarlath Burns comes to an end.

Kent brings extensive administrative experience to the role. He served as Wexford county chair between 2017 and 2020, a period during which the county navigated significant organisational and sporting challenges. Since 2023 he has held the position of Leinster GAA chair, placing him at

the centre of decision-making within one of the association's four provincial councils.

Within the national structures of the organisation, Kent has also chaired the GAA's Central Competitions Control Committee (CCCC), the body responsible for overseeing disciplinary matters, fixtures administration and the regulation of competitions across the association's games.

His election marks another milestone in a long involvement with Gaelic games at club, county and provincial level. The Taghmon-Camross club, based in south Wexford, has

been central to Kent's lifelong participation in the GAA.

The presidency of the GAA is one of the most prominent voluntary leadership roles in Irish sport. The president acts as the public representative of the association, both at home and internationally, while also chairing meetings of the GAA's Central Council.

Kent will spend the coming year working alongside Burns as president-elect before formally taking office in early 2027, when he will become the 42nd president of the association.

£9m funding boost announced for Northern Ireland grassroots football

BY FIONA AUDLEY

A FUNDING pot of £9m has been announced for grassroots football facilities in Northern Ireland.

The 56-year-old is expected to remain in place for Northern Ireland's upcoming World Cup play-off semi-final against Italy in

March. Should they progress in Bergamo, they would face either Wales or Bosnia-Herzegovina in a final. O'Neill would also continue in the role should Northern Ireland reach the World Cup finals.

Blackburn, currently 22nd in the Championship and one place from safety on goal difference, have been

without a permanent manager since Valérien Ismaël departed earlier this month. Former Northern Ireland midfielder Damien Johnson has been overseeing first-team affairs on an interim basis and is expected to work alongside O'Neill for the remainder of the campaign.

If terms can be agreed swiftly with

the Irish FA, O'Neill could be in the dugout for Blackburn's weekend fixture against Queens Park Rangers.

This would not be the first time O'Neill has combined club and country duties, having previously taken on a similar arrangement with Stoke City during his first spell in charge of Northern Ireland.

O'Neill returned to the international post in 2022, signing a deal running through the Euro 2028 cycle. Northern Ireland are seeking a first World Cup appearance in 40 years, having last reached a major tournament under O'Neill at Euro 2016.