



Irish Community Services  
in Greenwich, Bexley & Lewisham



## Irish Community Services Oral History Project

# Healing the Wounds



Awarded through the Heritage Lottery Fund,  
this project captures personal stories of  
18 Irish emigrants who came to settle in  
South London from the 1940s onwards

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## An Oral History Project by Irish Community Services 2016

Awarded through the Heritage Lottery Fund this project captures personal stories of 18 Irish Emigrants who came to settle in South London from the 1940s onwards.

During the period that the interviewees lived through, there was a campaign of bombing in London including an incident at the Kings Arms public house in Woolwich, on 7 November 1974.

The period between 1940 to the 1980s forms the backdrop to a far more positive story, one within which Irish men and women have supported each other, helped shape communities and contributed to the development of South London. Their involvement has stretched across professions including the construction industry, commercial business and the health sector.

This booklet, together with an exhibition in Royal Greenwich Heritage Centre from September 2016 until March 2017, is the culmination of a rich oral history project, showcasing people's unique stories, in their own words. Each person in their own right has contributed to the social and economic life of their neighbourhood and they continue to do so today. They have forged strong links across communities and have been ambassadors through good and bad times.

Many Irish people settled in Woolwich and the surrounding area during the 1940s onwards, though an Irish presence in the borough predates this.

## Richard Brady



Richard was born in 1924 in County Mayo. His father was a farmer but Richard spent most of his time with his grandfather. Richard finished school when he was about 14 and worked for local farmers.

Richard was recruited in Ireland in 1943 to work in England. He travelled to Cornwall where he worked on the construction of a runway at RAF Predannack until 1945.

When runway was completed Richard was given the option to join the 'Bevin Boys' as a miner or clear bombsites in London. He chose clear the bombsites in London and was billeted in Orpington barracks. Later he worked as a foreman for Mowlem's construction. When he retired from Mowlem's he continued to work part-time work until he was 85.

Richard met his wife, Mary, who was from Tipperary, in Orpington. They married in Dartford. Mary worked in Queen Mary's Hospital, Sidcup. They had three children. Mary died in 1981.

Richard returned to Cornwall, with his friend Diane Melaugh, to see the memorial that honoured all the nationalities that served there during WW2.

Richard died in 2016



## Patricia Brailsford (nee Keenan)



Pat was born in 1945 in Dublin where her mother and father were shop keepers. Pat had a brother and sister. She completed her education at seventeen, and worked in Dublin for a few years.

In 1967 Pat travelled to London on the mail boat. She lived with her aunt in Highgate and worked for an advertising agency and for The News of the World. Pat was a member of the Saint Vincent De Paul Society, where she met her future husband. They married in 1970 and moved to Bexley and they went on to have two children, Roisin and Owen.

She completed a B.Ed. and taught in primary schools for a number of years. She then retrained and began teaching adults English in 2003. Pat and her husband are now retired.

She is an organist and member of the choir at St John Fisher, Bexley. She is also a member of the local branch of the Rock Choir. She volunteers at Greenwich and Bexley Community Hospice and also does some work with The Passage, a homeless project in Central London.

Pat is also involved in a current affairs group, where they discuss topics in the news and she recently gave a talk on the 1916 Easter Rising in Ireland

Pat keeps up to date with events in Ireland and visits, at least, twice a year.



## Nuala Concannon (nee Cawley)



Nuala was born in 1953 in County Galway. She was brought up on a farm. She had three brothers and five sisters. Her mother died when Nuala was 30 months old and her father raised the family on his own. She had to leave school, aged 15, because her father was ill and he died a year later.

By the time Nuala was born two of her brothers had already left home. Two of her brothers went to England. One brother looked after the farm in Ireland but he eventually came to England. All her sisters went to Chicago USA.

Nuala came to London in 1970. She went to the Irish Centre in Camden and found work in a hostel in Westminster. It was a big culture shock for Nuala, as she had difficulty understanding a variety of accents that were new to her.

Nuala met her husband in the Forum Dance Hall, Kentish Town and they married in St Joseph's in Highgate London. They went on to have a son and a daughter. She moved to Plumstead to be nearer her grandchildren.

Nuala worked in the care sector for a number of years.



## Eddie Coughlan



Eddie was born in 1938 in Dublin. His father worked in London and would go home for two weeks' holiday once a year. The family travelled to London when Eddie was 11, and lived in Shooters Hill, Woolwich.

Eddie's father initially worked as a roofer for Deptford Council and later in a Foundry in Charlton. After Eddie finished his education he got an apprenticeship at the Foundry where he trained to be a moulder.

As Eddie had an apprenticeship his National Service was deferred for three years and so at the age of 21 he was called up. He was in the Royal Ordnance Corp and his postings included Belgium, Germany and Scotland.

On completion of his National service he worked for British Gas and the British Oxygen Company. By that time the family had moved to Vanburgh Hill in Greenwich.

He met his wife Janet in 1964; they have four children and seven grandchildren. They have lived in their current house in Plumstead, London for over 40 years.

His brother, Jim, was an elected member of Greenwich Council for a many years.

Eddie is involved in the British Army Association and attends ceremonies and meetings. He also attends the Carers Group run by Irish Community Services.



## Philomena Dennis (nee Devine)



Philomena was born in Dublin where Philomena's father worked as a labourer and her mother worked in housekeeping for different people including, Lady Mary Corby, for 12 years.

Philomena has four brothers and three sisters. She had to leave school at 12 years of age to look after her younger siblings.

When Philomena was 16 she went into service in Dublin. She met her future husband, Denny Dennis, in Dublin where he was a professional boxer.

They travelled to England in 1951. They lived in the Slade and Griffin Road in Plumstead. They went on to have five children.

She worked in Oliver Pell in Plumstead and Russell Stoneham, Crayford. Philomena then joined the Civil Service as a messenger and worked in the Environment Agency. She worked there for 25 years and was Number One Office Keeper when she retired.

After her husband retired he got a gardening job but he died suddenly in 2000 aged 72.

Philomena plays badminton and enjoys Latin, Ballroom and Line dancing.



## Agnes Forde (nee Henderson)



Agnes was born in 1923 in County Cork. She was the youngest of eight children. Her mother was a widow when she married Agnes's father, who was in a Scottish Regiment based at Charles Fort, Kinsale.

The family owned half an acre of land and grew wheat for their family and sold the surplus. Her father was a postman until he died in 1936 when Agnes was 13 years old. Subsequently, her mother suffered a stroke and Agnes looked after her at home until she passed away a few years later.

Agnes met Sean, who was in the British Army. They married in 1943 before he was sent to India. Sean was demobbed in 1946, came to England and got a job on the trams. He sent money home to Agnes. Their son Terry was born in Ireland in 1944. Agnes joined Sean in Eltham in 1947 and their second child Eugene was born in 1948.

Agnes worked with Sean in the printing industry. They ran the Kinsale and District Overseas Association in London for a number of years and produced a regular newsletter. Later she worked in the Army Reprographics Unit in Woolwich Arsenal.

Sean retired in 1986 and died two years later in April 1988. Sadly, her son Eugene died in 2011.

Today Agnes is president of Irish Community Services and Greenwich Irish Pensioners Association.



## Jo Higgins



Jo was born in 1965 in County Mayo. She has an older brother who lives in London and sister living in Ireland. Father's name was William Higgins and mother's maiden name Annie Clarke. Both are now deceased. Jo went to St Joseph's Secondary school in Foxford and completed her formal education in 1983.

Jo travelled to London in 1986 and lived in various places in North London, including Islington and Finsbury Park, before moving to Plumstead. She has lived in Abbey Wood for the last 16 years. Jo has two sons, Jack and Jesse, and two daughters, Lizzie and Molly.

Jo has had several jobs including a chef at Bishopsgate Police Station and as a classroom assistant at St a Thomas Becket Catholic Primary School, Abbey Wood.

After completing a degree in Childhood Studies 2009 and Post Graduate in 2010 she taught at Newham College in East Ham.

Jo met her husband Robin Pressley in 2010 and they married in April 2012. They recently visited Ireland and toured around the Ring of Kerry. Between them they have five grandchildren. Having spent the last thirty years living in London Jo considers herself to be English/Irish.



## Rose Kane (nee Deery)



Rose was born in 1936 in County Monaghan and was the youngest of four boys and three girls. The family had a 50 acre farm where they all worked. Her father died when she was very young. Rose went to school until she was 14. She looked after her mother until she died in 1955 aged 52 years. She then joined her sisters in Belfast where she worked as a domestic. After a couple of years Rose joined her brothers and sisters in Cricklewood, North London.

While living in Cricklewood they would take turns to go back and help to look after the farm. She would go to the Galtymore to socialise where she met her husband and they married in 1962 and shortly afterwards moved into a flat in Greenwich. They went on to have four children.

Rose's husband suffered a stroke in 1989 and although they were no longer living together she would visit him each week until he died in 1997.

She passed her driving test in 2000 at aged 64.

For her 70th birthday her family arranged for her to visit her sister in Sydney Australia that she had not seen her for 37 years.

Rose is a volunteer at Irish Community Services lunch club in Plumstead and she called the bingo there for 12 years. She is also a regular at 'tea cake club' in Charlton.



## Ann Keane (nee Fitzgerald)



Ann was born in 1936 in County Limerick. Ann's father was a mason and also shod horses for local farmers. He also made clogs from animal skins. There were 14 children in Ann's family, ten boys and four girls. She left school at 14 and got a job, looking after children, in Newport, County Tipperary. She enjoyed going dancing at the Stella Ballroom, Limerick.

When Ann first came to London she worked in a pub in Canning Town. Later she went to the Mayday Hospital in Croydon and worked as an auxiliary nurse.

In 1962 Ann married Vincent Keane and they went on to have three children, Mark, Maria and Nigel. Nigel was diagnosed with cancer when he was three and a half and he died in 1974 aged seven. She has lived in Greenwich since 1965.

Ann did her nurse training in 1976 and went on to become a SEN. She worked at the Dreadnought Seamen's Hospital, Greenwich and later at Lewisham Hospital until she retired 1999.

Ann's husband had an accident in 1999 when he was 64. Ann nursed him back to health but he died a few years later from cancer.

She is a regular visitor to Ireland and on her most recent visit her family arranged a surprise 80th birthday party for her.



## Ann Lucas (nee Lynch)



Ann was born in 1942 in County Limerick. Her mother, Maggie Cronin, and her father, Martin, were in their forties when they married. Her father was a plasterer by trade and her mother had been in service. Ann and her two brothers (Sonny and Pakie) were brought up in a cottage.

Ann remembers the struggle her parents had to pay for her to go to the local convent school. She was recruited in 1958 for pre-nursing in Scotland and two years later transferred to Memorial/Brook Hospital in Woolwich. She met Richard Lucas at a dance in Woolwich and they married in Erith in 1963.

Ann and her brothers were delighted when their half-brother, Gerry Cronin, and his family, made contact in the 1970s. He was born to Ann's mother in 1932 and had been brought up in an orphanage and industrial schools in Ireland.

Ann worked part-time for various local organisations until she joined Civil Service in Woolwich Arsenal in 1981. She worked in Personnel, Training and Development until her retirement in 2002. While working fulltime Ann graduated from Open University with a BA (Hons) History in 1994.

Ann was an elected member of London Borough of Bexley from 1995 to 2006. She was Mayor of Bexley in 2002/3.

She is current Chair of Irish Community Services.



## Richard Lucas



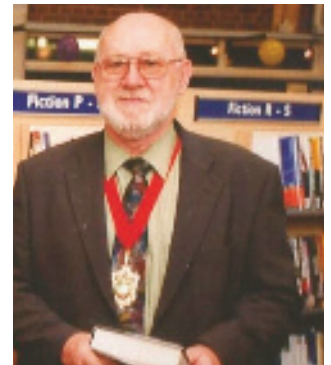
Richard was born in 1940 in Waterford City. He was the youngest of 14 children. He went to Mount Sion Christian Brothers Primary and Secondary schools until he was 14 years old.

Some of his older brothers and sisters had immigrated to England and in 1955 his mother, Richard, his brothers and two sisters went to live with an older sister in Bentley near Doncaster. They all got work in the area, but Richard had to go back to school as the leaving age in England was 15 years.

He had two older brothers already in Kent and work prospects were better in the London area so they bought a house in Erith and his mother, two brothers and two sisters moved south in 1957. He married Mary Ann Lynch in 1963.

He worked as an electrician for a number of years on Power Stations and other major building projects. During this time he was elected as a shop steward in EEPTU and was blacklisted by a number of contractors. He joined Direct Labour Organisation (DLO) in Greenwich council as an electrician in 1970s. He continued with his union activities and was Chairman of the Joint Shop Stewards Committee and he is proud that there was never an industrial dispute in the area of the DLO he represented.

He has always been a keen soccer fan and was player/manager of a local team and a qualified referee. He ran the London Marathon in 1983. He was an elected member of the council for the London Borough of Bexley from 1990 to 2006. During this time he also served on London Fire and Civil Defence Authority and London Regional Flood Defence Committee.



## Joan Mythen (nee Fitzgerald)



Joan was born in 1931 in County Kerry. Her mother came from a farming background and her father's family ran a building firm. Her father was also the local undertaker

They were an Irish speaking family and the Irish government gave a grant of £5.00 to families who spoke Irish to encourage them to continue to use Irish as a first language.

Joan was 18 when she was recruited in Ireland to train as a nurse at St Nicholas Hospital, Plumstead. She travelled to London via Dublin where they were screened by medical staff to assess their state of health, cleanliness, infections and inoculations before they were allowed to travel.

Joan was one of a group of Irish girls going to various hospitals across South East London. They all met up again at Preliminary Training at Brook Hospital. Joan qualified in 1953 and went on to work as a District Nurse until retirement.

Joan's older brother Thomas, was a Senator in Seanad Éireann, one of the houses which forms the Irish National Parliament (Oireachtas) and her younger brother, Paul, was a champion cyclist.

Like most Irish nurses Joan went dancing in Irish Dance Halls including the Harp Club, The Blarney and Ceili in Welling. She met Nick in the Woolwich Catholic Club and they married in 1955.

Joan is a volunteer for Irish Community Services at 'Happy Days' reminiscing group and 'Tea Cake Club'



## Cal OHerlihy



Callaghan St John OHerlihy was born in the city of Cork in 1937. He lived in a house built by the British Army said to have housed Field Marshall Bernard Montgomery.

After completing his secondary school Leaving Certificate, Cal studied Mathematics and Economics at Cork University. During holidays, he worked in England to fund his studies. Later he worked as a researcher for the National Institute of Economic and Social Research in London.

Cal has a Fellowship in Statistics and Econometrics from Trinity Hall Cambridge, a Degree in Anthropology from University College London and a Degree from Southampton University on Irish Famine.

Cal had a business in Blackheath and is part-owner of a restaurant. He eventually sold his house in Blackheath and moved into central London. He has recently moved into his new home in Royal Arsenal, Woolwich.

Cal was the first chair of Irish Community Services working in Greenwich, Bexley and Lewisham. He was instrumental in guiding the organisation to where it is today and continues to serve as Trustee.



## John O'Regan



John was born in 1934 in County Kerry. He had four brothers and three sisters. John's father was a shoe maker and he also repaired shoes. His mum didn't work but would get a job plucking turkeys in December to bring in some more money for Christmas.

John enjoyed school but it was hard, the teachers were very strict and as soon as the school day was finished he would go straight to the local golf course where he worked as a caddy.

John's mother travelled to London in 1949 to work in the Naval College in Greenwich. She would send money home and the family gradually joined her. John joined her in 1951 when he was 17 years old and worked in a soap factory in Deptford where he met his future wife, June.

John was then called for National Service in the army and he married June before he left in 1953. He was in the Ulster Rifles and Royal Irish Fusiliers and served in the Middle East, Far East and Africa.

When he was demobbed in 1955 John worked in the foundry at Stone Manganese in Charlton for 18 years. Later John worked for the Financial Times as a security guard.

John was very proud when June was chosen as one of London Olympic torch bearers in 2012.

He is chair of Irish Community Services Lunch club sub Committee



## Helen Summerfield (nee Costello)



Helen was born in 1934 in Dublin and was one of seven children. Her father worked in a shipyard but died when Helen was three. After her husband's death Helen's mother was given a job by the Land Commission in Dublin.

Helen completed her education at sixteen and then worked in Dublin in the print. Later she joined her sisters in Coventry where she worked in a sewing factory.

Helen met her future husband in Coventry and they married in the 1950's. Helen also lived in Yorkshire for a few years and worked in a shop.

Helen and her husband came to live in Chislehurst, Kent and later moved to Eltham, London where they purchased and ran The Eltham Hotel. They also bought the house next door for the family to live in.

Helen still has family in Ireland and her sister lives in the family home. Helen goes to Ireland regularly where she stays at either the Gresham Hotel or Wynns hotel in Dublin.

Helen enjoys the 'Happy Days' reminiscing group run by Irish Community Services in Blackheath, London.



## Kay Tracey (nee Taylor)



Kay was born in 1933 in Dublin. She was the eldest of nine children. Kay's mother was in poor health and as a result Kay missed a lot of her schooling to look after her mother and other siblings. At school the other children used to call her the 'Inspector' because she didn't attend very often.

At that time, advertisements were placed in Irish newspapers looking for girls to go to England to work. Kay's future husband, Ted, was already working in England so after they got engaged she decided to travel to join him.

Kay first came to live in Crystal Palace, London where she worked as a live-in cook in a pub.

The publican and family then moved from Crystal Palace to Dulwich. Kay went with them but unfortunately they had to give up the public house and Kay was out of a job and a place to live.

Kay and Ted then married and lived in a flat in Peckham, London. They went on to have four children. Kay moved to Crayford in London Borough of Bexley to be nearer her family.

Kay enjoys her weekly visits to her local lunch club. She visits Ireland regularly and always identifies herself as being Irish.



## Mary Twomey (nee Horgan)



Mary was born in 1934 in County Cork. She was raised by her uncle, Tom Murray. Mary saw her mother once when she was two and again when she was seven.

She started school aged seven and finished when she was 14. She got a job in a local knitting factory at Drishane Convent, run by a French order of nuns.

She met her future husband Joe, at a dance in Millstreet, County Cork. Joe came to London and when she was 24 Mary followed him and worked in a dress factory. They married in 1958. They have three children, Julie, Michael and Marian.

Mary was employed as a cook by organisations ranging from the Probation Service to local schools. Joe worked for the Ford Motor Company in Plumstead for 30 years. By the age of 60 Joe had developed dementia and Mary cared for him until his death in 2010.

Mary has been involved with Irish Community Services for many years. She was a cook at the first lunch club in Plumstead. She is still a Trustee of Irish Community Services and a longstanding member of the Lunch Club sub-committee.

She raises funds for a local charity that organises yearly pilgrimages to Lourdes in France, for sick and disabled people.



## Ben Ward



Ben was born in 1936 in Dublin. His mother was from Motherwell in Scotland and his father was born in Dublin. He had an older brother and sister.

Ben was taught by the Christian Brothers in Dublin. He finished his education at 16. His father died in 1947 and his mother in 1952, so Ben came to London aged 16 to live with his aunt in Stockwell.

In London, Ben worked as a tea boy for an engineering firm. In 1954 he was conscripted into the British Army and discharged four years later. Ben married Betty in 1959 and they went on to have two sons, Tony and Graham.

He worked as a lift engineer and attended Wandsworth College for his training. Ben later joined Barclays Bank as a messenger. Due to his background in the forces he was seconded to work for the Company Directors in hospitality. After working for Barclays for three years he was able to get a mortgage and the family came to live in Eltham.

Ben cared for his wife Betty, for a number of years and was a member of the Irish Community Services Carers' group.

Ben died in 2015.



## Thanks

### The Oral History Project team wish to thank:

- Heritage Lottery Fund
- The interviewees and the Irish Community in Greenwich, Bexley and Lewisham
- The staff team at Royal Greenwich Heritage Centre
- Trustees, Director, staff and volunteers of Irish Community Services (ICS)

## What happens next?

After the reception/exhibition at Royal Greenwich Heritage Centre in September 2016 there will be a display at Royal Greenwich Heritage Centre, featuring six interviewees and acknowledging all 18 participants, until March 2017.

Full copies of interviews will be available to academic institutions as well as local and national archives.

A member of the oral history team with presentations, display and information packs will be available to local schools, libraries, community groups.

There will be link via [www.irishcommunityservices.org](http://www.irishcommunityservices.org)



Irish Community Services Telephone 0208 854 4466



@irishcomserve

Fax

0208 854 2992

E-mail: [director@irishcommunityservices.org.uk](mailto:director@irishcommunityservices.org.uk)

# Oral History Project Team



Ann Lucas BA (Hons) History

Career in Personnel, Training and Development  
Served on Local Authority Health panels  
Former Governor of Mental Health Trust

**Responsible for:**

- Planning and organising
- Interviewing, advertising, administration
- Communication archiving
- Exhibition and learning packs

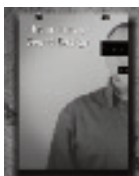


Jo Higgins BA (Hons) PGCE

Further Education College Lecturer  
Volunteer with 'Happy Days' reminiscing group

**Responsible for:**

- Form design, project plan, interviews
- Summaries, photography
- Exhibition and learning packs



Fionn Lucas BA (Hons) Sound Design  
Ravensbourne University  
Music studio composer and producer  
Feature and short film sound designer

**Responsible for:**

- 16 Recordings, storage, editing
- Listening pods, CDs, DVDs, web links
- Technical support, archiving

Thanks also to Michael Keating who interviewed and recorded Kay Tracey and John O'Regan.

Michael was a sixth-former at Bexley Grammar School at the time and he is now an undergraduate at Bristol University.



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