Arney School and its former pupils. Memories and stories of a community and landscape.

Arney Village c.1950s

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On a hot Sunday afternoon in early September 2014 the brick field on the Old Coach Road, Arney is buzzing with activity; the kiln is firing; master brick-maker Tony Mugridge is overseeing the process and there is an endless supply of tea, sandwiches, scones and conversation. Local people have been taking shifts throughout the night to keep the kiln lit as it bakes the bricks, handmade from the local clay, by young and old alike. As I walk into the field I am met by a sea of friendly faces; there's Maurice Owens, and John Owens with his daughter and his sister home from England. John Owens and Sean Cox are busy with the kiln, but all have time for a chat and a catch-up as I greet old friends and meet some new ones. The brick-making is just one thread of a local heritage, history and culture project entitled Battles, Bricks and Bridges that drew in various other strands of community activity in relation to the history and community in this area. One of those strands centered on an excavation[1] at the site of an old National School (opened in the mid-19th century) just beside the historic 17th century Arney Bridge and a row of brick-makers cottages just a few yards away. The area round the bridge was said to be the original site of Arney village and the centre of a small-scale brick-making industry during the 19th and early 20th century. Leaving the brick field that day I continued down the road to Arney Bridge, which was recently listed as part of the community project. Closed to traffic as repairs are carried out, I picked my way past the barriers and came upon Myles Keogh, home on a visit from Galway with his young grandson. As we watched the river and talked about the wildlife and the bridge Myles also talked about the Battles, Bricks and Bridges project, the strength of the local community and how everyone had been involved and worked together over the months. A true cross-community effort.

My final call that afternoon was to Ellen and Eddie Brogan who live just over the bridge and

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[1] The excavation was carried out by members of the Centre for Archaeological Fieldwork, Queen's University Belfast (CAF), the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) and Cleenish/Killesher Community groups. It also involved a huge cross-community engagement and involved not just the archaeologists but an enthusiastic team of local volunteers.

close to the excavations of the old school site and the brick-makers cottages. It was in this quaint Edwardian house a few months earlier that I had my first introduction to the Arney community and the people who had attended Arney Primary School (known locally as Mullinaveigh School); built in the early 1900s to replace the original 19th century school.

That original schoolhouse, the site of which was excavated as part of the project, is shown south-east of the bridge on 1st edition 6-inch Ordnance Survey (OS) map dating to 1835 (Sloan 2014). Archives held in the Public Records Office NI (PRONI) of grant applications through the National Schools System over the years provide important information about the school, its construction, pupils and teachers, and give us a wonderful insight into the lives of those early pupils. The records include the original grant application and indicate that the then-present school was 'established in September 1847'. A grant for a teacher was applied for in September 1849 (ED/1/22/13), and further information on the form confirms that the building had been in use for some time before, because it states that an earlier application in 1847 was refused as the building was in poor repair. The 1849 application also details that the existing school was built of brick and lime mortar and had a thatched roof. The school room measured 19ft by 14ft 3ins by 6ft 10ins and overall the school measured 37ft by 15ft by 7ft as the 'teacher occupies two rooms attached which communicate with the school room' (ED/1/22/13). At that time a James Dolan, who was 22 years old, was the schoolmaster and there were 40 boys and 20 girls on the register. Out of the 60 children on the roll 20 were admitted free of charge and the rest paid £3 per year; the application stated that religion was to be taught on a Saturday. School hours in general were from 9am until 3pm, which changed during winter to allow for safe journeys in the colder, darker mornings, from 10am until 3pm. Furnishings consisted of three desks, four stools and three forms; the school was ‘sufficiently ventilated and warmed’ and in a ‘tolerable’ state of repair (ED/1/22/13). The application also noted that the Sponsor was the Parish Priest, Father Francis Mason, and the District Inspector signed a declaration on the form that he had consulted with the clergymen of all denominations in district,

none of whom objected to the school.

By 1851, the school had 102 children on the roll; 52 boys and 50 girls. A second grant application dated at this time is for a work mistress to teach the girls sewing (ED/1/22/59). This form also states that the school now had two rooms, 'the smaller one' for the work mistress measuring 17 ft 5 ins by 14 ft 3 ins by 6 ft 10 ins. The sewing teacher was Mrs. Anne Murray, who would teach needlework every day from 12 to 3 o'clock, except Saturday. Extra furnishings for this class included a 'convenient work table', a chest and drawers (ED/1/22/59). By the time of publication of the 3rd edition OS map of the area (dated 1905-7), the schoolhouse was no longer present (Sloan 2014), which suggests that by 1907 it had been demolished. This confirms information from local residents that it was replaced in the early 20th century by the more modern building a short distance away, Arney Primary School, which many of them had attended until it too was replaced in 1963 by a new

Figure 1: Former pupils of Arney Primary School (l to r: Jennifer Coryn, Glover Little, Eamon Drygan, John Cullen, Sean Cox, Maurice Owens, Tommy McGovern, Ellen Brogan.)

school in present-day Arney village (Fig.1).

And it is the memories and stories of those pupils of the new Arney Primary School that provide us with a wealth of contemporary accounts of life in Arney, the round of the day, and the places and people that still connect and resonate with the communities. As Myles Keogh had emphasised, the project at Arney involved a considerable investment in time and commitment by the communities of Cleenish and Killesher. The work that was undertaken by everyone was underpinned by a pride in their place and landscape and in the history of the families who had lived and worked there over the generations. That sense of place and co-operation was evident in the stories and narratives that people shared with me of their early lives, their school-days and their memories of the people who lived in the brick-makers cottages. Ellen Brogan had arranged for a number of former pupils to gather at her home over Easter and her warm and cosy kitchen was soon filled with stories and memories of school-days, teachers and local characters.

While local people don't remember the original thatched school at Arney Bridge they have a wealth of memories about Mullinaveigh. This school finally closed in 1963 and many of the pupils moved to the new school a couple of miles away. Ellen's mother, Mrs. Theresa Owens, was the last principal of Arney P.S. and is remembered with fondness by all her charges. Ellen recalls how, as her mother was the Principal, she would be taken to school in the car: 'It was a treat anytime we were allowed to walk home because we always had great fun on the way back. You could take your time and stop and play and talk to people.'

Glover Little remembers calling for friends on his way to school and others recall how many pupils would walk through fields to the school, using gaps in the hedges. The journey to and from school was an animated topic of conversation and people remembered what houses they passed, the fields they walked, and the 'dilly-dallying' on the way home to play and explore. One particular treat was on the first day of May when everyone was allowed to come in their bare feet. 'You couldn't wait for it,' said Jennifer Coryn. 'I remember walking on the road, it was great, such freedom.'

Tommy McGovern, who is now in his 80s, was the youngest child in his house to attend the school. He remembers how the milk was brought down to school each morning, 'It was brought down in churns by cart and left outside the school.' Each pupil was given a little bottle of milk and, in later years, orange juice was also supplied. The milk was warmed up on a stove that sat at the senior end of the schoolroom. The school had one large room where half of the benches faced one way, and half the other. Pupils entered at the junior end of the building where there were hooks on a wall to hang coats. The benches were long with desks attached and on each one were copy books, fountain pens and bottles of ink.

Jennifer Coryn, who left the school in 1962, remembers her teacher, Mrs. McKenna, who immediately pre-dated Mrs. Owens. 'Mrs. McKenna prepared a couple of us for the Eleven Plus, but other pupils stayed on at school until they were 14 or 16 and then went on to the local technical college or training. There was no secondary school in the area at the time.' Jennifer attended the school along with her sister and brother and talks of how Mrs. McKenna would make the exam pupils study throughout the summer. 'We only got one week off when she went on holiday. The rest of the summer we used to cycle three miles back and forth to her home every day for class, up hills and lane ways.'

Mrs. McKenna had a strong reputation for results and many local families were anxious to send their children to the school. Eamon said he was sent to Arney school because it got better results than some other schools. He remembers with a chuckle: 'My mother realised I wasn't doing very much at my old school, so she changed me to Arney!'

The reasons of choosing a particular school were often practical but also tied to family tradition and history. Sean Cox explained: ‘More often than not you went to a school that was the nearest to your home. But it could also be because your parents or grandparents went there, so there was a sense of

family history. But also, as Eamon said, it was the reputation of the teacher that was the deciding factor.' Like many of the National Schools in Northern Ireland Arney School was interdenominational and all the former pupils expressed regret that that had changed over the years.

They had all gone to school together, lived near each other, and knew each other's families.
The ties to locality, family and history are evident in how people talk about who attended the school and the stories these former pupils remember of their local townlands and their inhabitants. Their memories are peppered with references to neighbours and friends, how they made a living and the continuing family connections. The narratives of the journey to school encompass landmarks in the landscape and the various exploits and adventures on the way home.
Each person remembers their route, the names of the families whose land they crossed, and houses they passed. They talk of the friends they called for on the way to school; the minor transgressions of schoolmates; whose family supplied the coal for the fire; the boys who had the job of cleaning out the toilets, and the going home with delays along the way to play or explore.

Myles Keogh, TP Owens and Reggie Cunningham in the "Brick Field"

The memories and narratives also encompass stories about those who lived in the row of cottages opposite Ellen Brogan's house. Myles Keogh whose family came from the area, remembers being sent on holidays to two uncles who lived in that row (Fig. 2). 'It was brilliant. I used to travel up on my own on the train and I had such freedom when I got here. Two bachelor uncles who let me roam free! I had the best times. I could be out all day and do whatever I wanted.!'

Figure 2: The remains of Myles Keogh's uncles' home where he visited as a boy

Tommy McGovern's family still own one of the cottages that proudly boasts its painted blue door. Although the row has been empty for many years people still remember who lived in which house. Eileen Drum was born in the house with the blue door and was the last person to live in the house. The cottages, like the school, are 'living' heritage for they tell the stories of the community, of how people lived and their descendants. Just one example of the local importance of the cottages, and of

how people in the area in general tend their landscape, is evidence by the care that Eddie Brogan has taken to plant poppies and nasturtiums in the ruins of the old house where Myles Keogh's uncles lived (Fig. 3).

The old garden is bursting with colour and the hearth glows again with colourful nasturtiums that come tumbling out of the brickwork. All along the verges in front of and beside the cottages, and at the end of Arney Bridge, Eddie's 'plants and flowers creep out of cracks and tumble over walls and ditches. The built landscape and flora are entwined just as the buildings, fields and lane-ways, are interwoven with people and events, past and present.

Figure 3: The old hearth of the cottage brought back to life with nasturtiums planed by Eddie Brogan.

Arney Primary School is now a private dwelling, like many former National Schools throughout the country. Others have been refurbished into local museums or heritage centers and some are left derelict in the landscape. Yet, regardless of what uses they may now have these schools continue to have a resonance in local memory and are inextricably connected to a sense of identity and place. They are fixed in their landscape and act to also fix people in time and space with connecting kin

and community. Forty years ago, the American anthropologist Henry Glassie lived and worked with the community in Arney. He found a people enmeshed in their locality, with a pride and endurance that manifested itself in reliance and co-operation, community and kinship ties and a drive and willingness to look after both people and landscape.

Figure 4. Prof Henry Glassie with Eddie Brogan outside the last remaining cottage in Arney Village. The cottage is owned by Tommy McGovern. July 2014

Those qualities of community, civic duty and pride, and a welcoming ethos, are still to be found in Arney today. The stories that weave around the old school buildings and cottages spill out into fondness of people and places and allow us to glimpse a culture and way of life that is modern and forward thinking while rooted in that history and sense of place. In investigating buildings and the people connected to them we can perhaps agree with Henry Glassie who argued: 'Buildings, like poems and rituals, realise culture.' (2000:17).

References

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We would like to thank everyone who gave of their time to talk to us and to share their memories, family histories and stories. Without their generosity, and that of many other members of the local community, none of this would have been possible. This article is presented to all those people, and the communities involved in the Battles, Bricks and Bridges project, in the hope that it captures some of their heritage for them, and for future generations.

The next generation: Cain and Cade Kempson, Orla Gilheaney and Naoimh Lamb making bricks with the Battles, Bricks and Bridges project 2014