

Having won that battle, the farmer purchased the new shearing machine the following year that meant five days work was finished in two.

The two lads retained their position as chief shearers until the farmer passed on six years later. During that time and for many years after that, my two new friends had to suck up the fact that they were the butt of many a joke for being outwitted by the old man.

Tony McCormack is from Delvin, Co Westmeath. Married with two children, he is a development officer with Westmeath Community Development and enjoys writing as a hobby.

Power To The Islands

Mick Grealish

I WAS involved in the electrification on the Aran Islands, Omev Island and Inishboffin in the 1970s. I worked for the ESB as a charge hand linesman and engineering officer for over 40 years.

One day in 1973 I was called into the office at work and was told I was needed out in Inis Oir to build networks. There was a crew of six from Galway (including Jimmy Glynn and Jack Forde RIP) and we were told it involved 'one day's work'.

I headed off with one shirt and one pair of jeans. We spent three and a half hours on a small trawler and landed on the island. The following day we got the job done but no boat arrived back for two weeks. There were no planes on the island at the time. So I arrived back home into the Docks in Galway after doing one day's work in a fortnight because of the island weather.

Ruairi Siopa (Conneely) was the man who provided us with clothes, food and money. Ruairi would always say to us: "Don't be short." The money ran out but we were never short... for a pint of Guinness. We would go for our pint at night and on occasions there was the odd fall on the way home because of the dark. That was my first experience on Inis Oir and I spent over 30 years working out there.

Other people that looked after us so well were Mr and Mrs Poill (RIP), Maggie Willie and Padraic Cait (RIP) who I stayed with during my time working on the island.

I worked on Inis Mor in 1975. There were a crew of 6-7 lads sent out on a Wednesday and I was going the following Saturday. I was meeting a lad in Taaffe's Bar in Galway who was taking me out on the trawler from the docks. When I went to meet him in the pub he said: "What are you having?" That was at 7am.

I spent about four months working on Inis Mor with Brid and Colie Connolly looking after me for years. It was a home from home and

they turned out to be great friends. Brid did all the cleaning and washing and fed me well. In later years I stayed with Penny Mahon in Tigh Fitz who also looked after me very well. I started work on the Sunday after mass and worked for about four months, getting home one weekend every month. During this time we employed a number of the islanders who were some characters.

We would have a pint at night with the locals. I recall being in the pub and Paddy Quinn coming in after fishing and throwing a salmon on the floor, one that had been nipped by otters and couldn't be sold. We cooked it for our dinner the following day.

One Saturday night we walked into the pub and there sitting in the middle of it were two Honda 50s. The lads didn't want them to go missing!

I had little or no Irish going to the islands and some of our work involved erecting pole struts. These were poles mounted on rock, which the islanders called cossai fada.

I worked for a short period in Inis Mean, staying in various places on the island. There was one pub – 'Pádraic's'. The islanders had very little English so it was a good way of having to pick up the Irish language.

The roads on the island were very narrow so if you met an oncoming vehicle, someone had to reverse. One day we were coming along the road and we met an ass and cart. Peadar Mor got off the cart, lifted the cart into the ditch and gave the ass a kick in the backside and he jumped into the ditch so the ESB van could pass.

I also did a stint on Omey Island. There were four houses there at that time and it became cut off from the mainland at high tide. You had to watch for the tide coming in or else you would be stranded there for the night as was often the case.

Inishbofin was another island I spent time working on. When we arrived on the island we started to unload Paddy Halloran's boat with the help of the islanders. They had lined up looking for work. One of the lads with me said: 'We should take on the old man with the cap'. When I showed reluctance and asked why, he explained: "It's because he looks like he could keep manners on the young lads". We took him on and he did just that.

However there was one young lad and we were hiring him whether we liked it or not. He was a young child from the island and every morning when we'd come out he would be sitting in the van with the blue hard hat on waiting to start work. He spent many a day with us, happily watching us work.

There were not many cars on the island and there were three elderly local men who would walk down for their pint at night. I'd say to one of the lads: "You wouldn't go over and pick up the three lads." One of them was a real character and when he was asked how did he get to the pub, he'd proudly respond: "Sure didn't I get a lift in the BBC van."

I made many friends on Innisboffin and still visit the island each year with my wife and children.

My years working on the islands were very special to me and I developed such a bond with the islands and islanders. While some of those islanders are now deceased, it is lovely to see their children and families still living there and keeping the traditions alive.

I smile whenever I see na cossai fada still holding erect ESB poles against the might of Atlantic gales.

Mick Grealish is a native of Galway with a wealth of memories from a lifetime of working on the islands for the ESB. He is a former rugby coach who was president of Connacht rugby in 2008-9.

"My mother filled it with pink paraffin oil and I watched the wick curl down into the glass orb and just lie there soaking up the oil. Everything about it was blue and delicate."

Rita Kelly – 'Then It Happened'

'Then It Happened...'

Rita Kelly

IT was velvet black; I couldn't even see my mother as we walked to Lucy Bourke's house, so I linked her. We could see a car lights miles away in the sky, it was so far away, we might never see it, it might never pass us.

Lucy had offered my mother the loan of an oil lamp, which we could have until the electricity arrived. We were going to collect it. It was a beautiful object. My mother filled it with pink paraffin oil and I watched the wick curl down into the glass orb and just lie there soaking up the oil. Everything about it was blue and delicate. There was blue work on the stand that was sturdy, my mother adjusted the two turning handles to increase the light or decrease it. Then she placed the glass tube ever so gently over that flame and into a set of brass teeth which held it firmly in place.

We had a Tilley lamp too, used mostly to keep the foxes away from the newborn lambs. It was a really strong light; there was a mantel, there was a brass pump and there was a clip thing with two blocks of absorbent material which was soaked in purple methylated spirits before setting it under the mantel and lighting it. The Tilley hissed all the time; unlike Lucy's lamp, which made light and made shadows in the quiet of the kitchen.

After months and months, it happened. They were coming, the men with the electricity. My father and mother were delighted, something from the modern life and no more messing with paraffin and mantels. My father visited old relations at night, grey-haired men and women who sat around an open fire listening to the crickets – a sign of rain, most things were a sign of rain – sometimes in candlelight, sometimes in lamp light, a little tin thing which needed constant filling; or they just sat in the firelight.

Sometimes my father took me on those visits.

"Well, Peter, I'm not sure at all about this electric yoke. I heard there was a house near Eyrecourt and the electric cooker was dancing around the floor when they came home."

"Might have been lightening."

"Jay, you couldn't have a yoke like that in the house, jumping and spitting sparks and pulling itself out of the wall."

So it went on, the fears and the misgivings; the cost, the inconvenience. But I couldn't hide my excitement. It was autumn, I rushed home from school in the quiet, gentle air of September wondering had they come yet?

Then they came, lots of them, men and machines. They dug deep holes and threw up beautiful black clay. They dug a hole near the yard wall, close to the house and the sheds. There were long black poles, treated to preserve them. They were raised in place.

That was a big operation, long before the wires came, the poles had to be steadied and firmed in the ground. There was a great deal of heaving and discussing and pulling things this way and that way. Further up the field they put a big wire at an angle to the pole to steady it. My father wasn't too mad about that, as it was in the way when cutting hay. It turned out that their engineer was a cousin of my father's from Clara, in Co Offaly. He was Owen Clyne, young and very nice. So there was a lot of talk, stories and laughter. Vast amounts of tea were drunk and all these men filled our kitchen with shadows and talk. They couldn't get enough of my mother's brown and white bread.

"Soon you'll have the electric oven."

"No time for it. I will still bake in my Stanley range, easier to regulate," my mother said.

Owen asked my father if they could store the equipment in our barn.

"Absolutely," said my father.

They were all delighted, lots more talk. Big men brought all kinds of equipment into the barn. The huge spools with cable they brought off with them as it had its own trailer. The letters ESB were burned into everything, all the wooden ladders and other wooden items. My father told me that they used wooden ladders because it didn't conduct electricity like metal did, so if there were a problem the person

wouldn't get electrocuted. That certainly frightened me. Electrocution. You could get that from lightening as well.

You would get all black and burned if the lightening hit you. You had to lie down if you got caught in it. I got soaked lying in the pouring rain, in our field away from the house. The thunder was so loud. My father said electricity and lightening were the same things, all energy.

I was totally fascinated by the big metal shoes with teetted hooks the men used to climb up the poles. It was like magic. You didn't need a ladder at all. You just walked up the pole and walked down again.

So after much planning in my head and a thorough sense that I could succeed and the result would be marvellous, I took the climbing shoes, one at a time, because of their weight, and dragged them to the nearest pole. I knew I had a clear run; my mother and my father were either gone somewhere or fully occupied.

Very carefully I put a foot into the big metal frame. It was of course miles too big for me. It felt like a huge trap that hung under the thatch in what was known as 'the coach house.' I then bent down to fit my left foot in. God, they were heavy and awkward when I tried to move. I almost fell forward with the weight of them and then I almost fell backwards when I tried to right myself. I was determined now.

I grabbed the pole and tried to lift up my right foot. It was such an effort and then the climbing shoe just slid down the pole. Again and again that happened, even when I tried my left foot, the same thing. I was almost in tears now with the effort and the frustration. I could see the teeth on the curved hook of the climbing shoe, but they just slid down the pole. I thought that there had to be a knack. Something missing, something I am not doing...then just by accident the hook gripped. What had happened? Yes, something had. I discovered that I had flicked my foot in a certain way and the teeth dug into the timber.

I could almost hear it, I could certainly feel it. It was great, it took away all the awkward weight and I was standing solidly on one foot and on one climbing shoe. I got the other one up. And then took the next step. They were short steps, but I was progressing, I was succeeding. I was looking down on the shiny galvanized roof of the cow shed. I could only look in certain directions. There was too much to concentrate on, the shoes, the weight, the next step, holding on with my arms. The

ground and the grass under me were getting further away. I didn't know the word 'exhilarating' then, but that's what it was, definitely.

I was doing something magical, I was going above the yard, the sheds and the fields. I could see a tuft of grass growing in the eaves, I was alone. I might die, but I didn't think so. I might get caught, then I certainly would be killed, but I would have that feeling of exhilaration forever. I threw back my head and looked up to the top of the pole. How far could I go, I wondered? There were two shiny galvanized footrests up there. If I got that far I would have to get out of the climbing shoes to stand on them. A lot of flustering, it could be awkward, could be dangerous. Just when my head was near the footrests and I could see around me over the hedges, across the fields, over the walls, but not behind me, too difficult, I became a little tired and said to myself, time to get down now. I was way above our garden wall; I could see the pattern of the uneven stones on the top.

No matter how hard I tried to flick my foot to get the climbing shoe off the pole, it just wouldn't move. I tried for ages; at first one foot, then the other, then back to the first. It wouldn't budge.

The teeth were well embedded in the pole. I was tired now and afraid. If they come back and find me... if they come back and don't find me... all over I was tired. And I knew that when you're in trouble and not succeeding you get even more tired.

I decided there was only one solution. It had to work, though I never did it before. If I stayed calm but did it quickly it would work. No going back. I couldn't change my mind once I had started.

So I undid the straps across my shoes. When both were undone, I stepped off, got my legs around the pole, took a deep breath and shimmied down to earth.

Oh the relief. Oh the terror looking up at the climbing shoes. Now the world would know. I was on the ground but I would be killed.

Strangely no one ever mentioned the pole or the climbing shoes.

Never. And the electric light lit up everywhere within. Like magic, it was a warm light, as the winter set in.

Rita Kelly is an award-winning poet from East Galway who now lives in Tramore, Co Waterford.

Saboteurs Who Kept Us In The Dark

Eamon Ginnane

RURAL electrification came to the townlands of Moyarta and Rahona and the village of Carrigaholt in County Clare in 1951. I was a teenager at the time and remember quite distinctly when the man was sent out from the ESB to determine how many lights each household wanted.

Most asked for only one light with the odd prosperous home opting for multiple lights. I remember seeing my neighbour Paddy Hedderman out in the field discussing at length with the ESB man how many he should get before finally agreeing on one.

The good news in a countryside bereft of much employment was that holes needed to be dug for the electricity poles. Work was available to the unemployed and small farmers once they were willing to swing a pick axe and dig holes with shovels.

My older brother Thomas was one such lucky person to find employment in this way. They paid a set amount per pole and plenty got opportunities to make money because it was a very labour-intensive process.

His supervisors were helpful and provided wellingtons for the mucky, swampy ground. Working hours lasted from 8am-4pm.

It changed my brother's life. Thomas continued working with the ESB until he had earned sufficient money for his passage to London and eventually to New York.

You could say he went from digging holes at home to working for Chase Manhattan Bank in New York, where he remained until his retirement. It was indeed a long, long way from Clare to there.

The ESB was astute as they offered those who were hard workers

further employment in other parishes after their own area was finished.

The official switch on for the village was arranged for St. Mary's Parish Hall in Carrigaholl. Everybody was in great humour and waiting anxiously for the big moment. It was organised so that the oldest person available would symbolically quench a candle and the youngest child would turn on the light switch.

The Parish Priest of Carrigaholt, Fr. John Cleary, was the oldest man in the hall that night, so it fell on him to quench the candle. Then the youngest child hit the switch and...nothing happened. A big 'aw' emanated from the crowd followed by fits of nervous laughter.

Fr. Cleary called out for a volunteer to check with the Garda Station next door to see if they had any power. When the volunteer returned he replied: "No power there either. Let's go back to the old reliable candle."

It took 90 minutes before the light finally came on. Fr. Cleary apologised for the delay but immediately assured residents that despite the fault on the first night, electricity would create a bright future for them.

It took two days for the news to break as to what caused the power failure. Some people threw a separate wire cable across the main ESB wires leading to the village from the Kilkee direction. The wire was earthed to a piece of steel driven into the ground in a field parallel to the Moyarta graveyard.

After this came to light, the ESB issued a statement warning the perpetrators that they could have been electrocuted. The culprits were never arrested despite the best efforts of the Gardai. In fact the saboteurs, whoever they were, took their secret with them to the next world.

Eamon Ginnane is a native of Carrigaholt, County Clare and an avid supporter of Banner teams. Retired after over 40 years service in the Post Office in Athlone and Longford, he is married with two daughters.

Spreading The Hurling Message To The West

Seán Mac Fearghail

TIM SLEVIN was born on the 14 July 1929 in Kilregane in the parish of Lorrha in Tipperary into a family of 16 children. He learned and honed his hurling skills on the GAA pitches of the parish at 'Blakefield' and 'The Pike'. Timmy hurled for Lorrha at under 14, 16 and minor level in the 1940s.

He was greatly inspired by the great clubman and Tipperary star goalkeeper Tony Reddan, who won three All Ireland medals with Tipp and was later selected on the 'Team of the Century' in 1984 and on the 'Team of the Millennium' in 2000.

In 1950, Rural Electrification Scheme came to the parish of Lorrha. Tim joined an installation crew. When the local scheme was completed he moved to the Cork District and worked in parishes around Carrigaline.

From there he moved to the Sligo district - a big geographical sweep taking in counties Mayo, Sligo, North Roscommon, Leitrim and Donegal.

After that, his next stop on the scheme was Mountcharles in Co. Donegal. The ESB crews erected over 2000 poles between Mountcharles and Teelin Bay in 1951 and 1952 during two of the toughest winters ever experienced. By 1952 over 450 houses had been wired up to the National Grid.

The following year Tim was on the move again, this time to Charlestown. One of his colleagues suggested Mrs Fitzgerald's Guest House there for his digs but when they called she was away and her

daughter Tina was in charge. After much persuading and cajoling by his friend and the charm of the good-looking young stranger, Tina agreed to take in the 'ESB lodger'. There must have been a great ESB spark that day as the young Tipp man married Mrs Fitzgerald's daughter, Tina, in Knock in 1959.

Tim brought another great love with him when he moved from Tipperary – hurling. He won a Mayo county hurling medal playing for Belmullet in 1956. Barry Ormond from Waterford, who was an esteemed ESB colleague of Tim's, also played a starring role in winning that first championship for Belmullet.

With so many parishes in the country to be hooked up to the new electricity scheme, the ESB men and their wives were always on the move.

Tim and Tina's next location was Ballinamore in Co. Leitrim in September 1959 and Barry also moved there. Almost immediately the pair started to coach the locals on the basic skills of hurling. There wasn't a lot of interest initially. Ballinamore was the leading football club in Leitrim and had no tradition of hurling.

The two lads continued to manage the erection of poles, hanging copper wires and the installation of transformers during the day. In the evenings they coached and trained the locals.

Before long well-known footballers like Paddy Dolan, Sean Kavanagh, Dermot Gannon and Michael McCarthy had started to swing a camán. They were also joined in practice games by Gerry Mahon, (future Hurling Board Chairman), Pat Cull, Paddy Friel, and Galway native Seán Flaherty. Hurling took hold in the area.

Tim and Barry spent hours in Pairc Seán Ó Heslin coaching, mentoring and encouraging young lads from the area to take up the game.

Tim spent from September 1959 until September 1963 rolling out electricity to the parishes surrounding Ballinamore. The names of some of these parishes like Corraleeahan, Aughawillan, Fenagh, Carrigallen, and Mohill would become household names a few years later through the writings of the author John McGahern.

However, it was not all about poles, copper wires and hurling, there was also time for romance. This was the era of the great dancing boom

in the early 1960s when the original 'Ballroom of Romance' in Glenfarne was in its heyday. Dance halls like the 'Wonderland' in Bawnboy, 'The Star' in Ballyconnell, 'The Mayflower' in Drumshambo, and the first ballroom that Albert Reynolds built, 'The Cloudland' in Rooskey were rocking every Sunday night to bands like Brendan Bowyer and Larry Cunningham and the Mighty Avons.

The single lads from the ESB were a great hit with the young girls and were not shy in showing their dancing skills. There were romances and even marriages.

Barry, the dashing young wing-half from Waterford, did not escape. He met and married the lovely Ann Brady from Ballinamore in the early sixties. Barry was a great exponent of the 'Huckle Buck' and when he popped the question, how could she refuse? Barry and Ann are now retired and living in South Dublin.

In September of 1963 Tim, Tina and their young family moved to Mohill on the next phase of rural electrification in adjoining parishes. He also moved on to the next phase of his hurling career.

In the spring of 1964 the hurling championship in the county was close to collapsing and would have done so only for the intervention of a group of hurling enthusiasts from Ballinamore, Cloone, Fenagh, and Mohill – the St Finbarr's Hurling club was born.

Later that year Tim pulled on the No 3 jersey for St Finbarr's and won his first Leitrim Senior Hurling championship medal.

They won their second title the following year, with Tim as captain and Barry wearing the No 10 jersey and in '66 completed the three-in-a-row.

St Finbarr's won their fourth title in '68 and in 1969 Leitrim won the Connacht Junior Hurling championship for the first time ever in a team backboned by players from St Finbarr's.

They also won another Leitrim championship that year – a fifth medal for Tim.

By 1979 St Finbarr's and Timmy had won their eighth Leitrim senior medal. That year it was all of 36 years since he first pulled on a hurling jersey to play for his native Lorrha at U-14 level.

Tim gave the ESB 45 years of wonderful service and by working

on the rural electrification roll out, helped to transplant hurling into an area of Leitrim that until his arrival, had little regard for hurling.

You could say the Mohill resident had put the small ball on the map in this area between the poles he also helped to erect as part of the scheme.

Seán Mac Fearghail is a passionate Leitrim man and a former Gaelic footballer. He had the unique distinction of never missing a day's work during almost 44 years as an Aer Lingus employee. He is an avid follower of national and international sports.

The Bere Facts Of The Case

John Finbarr O'Sullivan

I WAS born, grew up on Bere Island and in 1949 I got a motor apprenticeship in Peter Murphy Senior's garage in Castletownbere. That was a few years before the Rural Electrification Scheme came to the Beara Peninsula.

Bill Sheehan (RIP) was one of the mechanics working in the garage who was also a brilliant electrician. Mr. Murphy sent Bill out wiring houses and sent me along as his helper. We wired houses in Castletownbere, Eyeries, Urhan and Allihies and the people treated us royally.

I learned a lot from Bill. I usually went up into the attic laying out the cables. We had to bore holes in the joists with a carpenter's brace and bit. There were no battery operated drills in those days. That was hard work especially in some houses where the joists were 3" x 4" or 4" x 4" oak or pitch pine which was usually wreckage from a ship. In one of the houses when we tried to run a cable down on the internal partition, we discovered that it was packed with turf.

In the mid-1950s I was back in Bere Island when some people petitioned the ESB to bring electricity to the Island. The company couldn't spare a gang so they made up a special small unit to do Bere Island.

Paddy Moynihan was the supervisor, Jim Lavers was one of the electricians and they had a few local workers to help with the hard work. The underwater cable was laid by the late Brendan Murphy of Rerrin from his barge. To avail of the scheme people needed to have their houses wired. As I had all the necessary skills required from my time with Bill Sheehan, I put everything I had learned to good use.

I loaded up my bicycle, two bags of cables and fittings hanging from the handlebars, a box with tools on the carrier and a few lengths of wooden conduit tied to the crossbar. I wasn't the only one doing this work but personally I wired 65 houses and gave back change out of a £10 note in 63 of them. That price included labour and all materials except the bulbs.

I got my dinner in every house. As a thank you, I wired and fitted a red sacred heart bulb free of charge. They all said they would say a prayer for me.

Some of the houses in Rerrin village had 110 volt electricity from the British Army until 1938 and then from the Irish Army. When I was rewiring one of those houses, I found bare copper wires... the mice had eaten the rubber insulation.

In another house, when I'd finished the wiring, I asked the elderly man of the house to switch on the light in the kitchen. He switched it on and off a few times and said: "Glory be to God! When I was young the only light we had was seal blubber melted in a scallop shell and a dried rush for a wick".

Here was a man born in the early 1880s who survived long enough to witness the extraordinary times that the Rural Electrification brought to the islanders of Bere.

John Finbarr O'Sullivan is a writer, folklorist and native of Bere Island, Co Cork.

Lighting The First Christmas Tree In Ballivor

Maureen McGearty

MY father was alive when the first canvass for the electricity came to Ballivor in 1951 but by the time the work began and lights were installed two years later he was dead.

My mother had eight of us to rear. We had two cows, two calves and nine or 10 acres of land. My father died without making a will – it took 16 years before we got his affairs in order – but my mother, bless her forward thinking, decided that we'd get the electricity in like most other houses in the place.

However we didn't use the services of the local electrician because we couldn't afford to. Instead my brother, who was only 18 at the time, wired the house from top to bottom with a little help from other members of the family.

It is testament to his standards of understanding what was required that not only was the work passed by the ESB people at the time but quite recently when I got the same house rewired over 60 years later, the electrician said he had seldom come across such perfect installation.

We lived next door in Ballivor to the Catholic Church and it was decided that after getting the electricity installed in 1953 that we would use the power from our house to light up a Christmas tree on the street that holiday season. The reason we made that decision was because the street lights weren't operational in the town until the following year and we took the responsibility on ourselves to light the way.