

O'Neill Country Historical Society – Annual Report year end December 2024

The hard working 2024 committee organised 9 interesting Historical talks on a variety of subjects. These were held in the Bruce/ Blue room at Benburb Priory on the last Wednesday of each month from March to October. The November talk was rescheduled to this year due to adverse weather conditions. Thankfully due to an excellent publicity policy by the Secretary we were able to achieve regular good audience attendances ranging from 50 to 70 persons.

The audience was served tea and biscuits organised by Caroline Leynagh supported by our Treasurer Carmel Murray.

During 2024 the committee reinstated the society's organised annual field trips to places of historical interest which had been postponed during the Covid pandemic. Our committee members Gabriel Mallon and Martin Jones in particular took on the organisation of these most interesting and pleasurable trips.

The first experimental trip was to the Navan Fort complex just outside Armagh. This enabled Gabriel and other committee members to learn about the complexities of organising field trips. The Navan ring is of course an iconic Ulster tourist destination within Dúiche Néill that is O'Neill Country, on a par with the Giant's Causeway. It predates the Uí Néill colonisation by many centuries and is central to the mythical stories outlined in the Tain. It has close association with the Blackwater river at Port na Rí, now called Benburb. These associations are all outlined in the Annals.

Some 20 of our members went on this trip using our own transport. We enjoyed a light meal within the complex and then enjoyed a interesting and pleasant tour on a Saturday afternoon. All in all a very successful trip, which encouraged the committee to plan a series of other weekend trips.

Lough Neagh, the largest area of inland water in the British Isles, has been integral to the history of Ulster since pre-history so it was logical for our historical society to learn something about this important lake. Our first trip to Ram's island on the Lough just off Crumlin, took place on a beautiful summer Sunday morning in July. A group of 30 set sail from the marina at Oxford Island on the outskirts of Lurgan. The trip took about 1 hour on a calm Lough. They explored the island and learned something of its history including its history as a place of refuge for the repairee Rory O'Hanlon and later some key United Irishmen after the Battle of Antrim. During World War 11 it served as a off-shore base for the the US Army sea planes flying direct from Newfoundland. The only negative aspect of the visit was the sight of the huge amount of green toxic slime then floating on the Lough.

We made a second trip to the Lough, this time to Coney Island or Inish Dabhal, the island of the Blackwater. Again we were very fortunate with good weather. This island just off the coast of Maghera was once the refuge and island fortress of our own Shane The Proud and has plenty of historical artefacts including the ruins of Shane's round tower and the grave of the 7th Viscount Charlemont.

Even though it is approximately 15 minutes from Maghera we had to leave from the marina at Lurgan, a trip of approximately 1 hour across the Lough, as the approach from Maghera is now so silted up that it is not safely accessible for larger boats.

Prior to Covid, the society had made a visit to the Robinson Library and the historic C of I Cathedral in nearby Armagh. However the Society had never before organised a trip to St. Patrick's R.C. Cathedral in Armagh. A group of some 30 members were giving an informative walking tour of the Cathedral by the Cathedral's tour guide and learned a lot about the history of this national church.

Regrettably, the expert historian on the building and author of the book on the Cathedral, Jack O'Haire, a friend and supporter of our society, was recovering from an illness and was not able to be in attendance. Jack rang me to offer his apologies and register his personal disappointment.

Finally on the matter of field trips we decided to go outside our immediate area and visit the Battle of the Boyne centre outside Drogheda. This required us to hire a bus from Dungannon and some

25 members gathered at Moy and set off on the Saturday morning. Again we were favoured with good weather. After lunch in the Boyne cafe we had the official tour on the banks of the famous Boyne. In the afternoon thanks to the efforts of Martin Jones we visited the hugely interesting Mellifont monastic site which was also the home of Sir Garret Moore and the place where the Treaty of Mellifont involving the final surrender of Hugh O'Neill took place. This treaty in 1603 effectively ended the nine years war in Tyrone.

In 2024 we published our 26th journal after a break since 2019, due essentially to the effects and after effects of the Covid pandemic. We launched journal number 26 at our base at Benburb Priory. Our new joint-editor Dr Dónal McAnallen, despite his many other commitments, put in a huge amount of work to ensure that DN26 was up to the standard of previous publications and worthy to take its place on the shelves of most of the universities and major libraries in Ireland, north and south.

The launch on the Saturday was performed by Dr William Roulston a highly respected historian and author and a staunch supporter and friend of this society.

Caroline Leynagh, who has proved herself to be a very effective organiser, had organised the outside catering and other facilities. Our member Simon Chadwick provided accompanying harp music prior to and during the meal. The vox Pop on the food and the overall arrangements was considered to be top class. Caroline and her support team deserve our sincere thanks as does Simon for his contribution.

In August we organised an open day event at Benburb Castle/ Bawn supported by a grant from the MUC.

The Bawn flankers were open for the inspection of the general public and the grade 2 listed cottage with the view of the river some 200 ft directly below was a sight that amazed a steady flow of visitors. We had already transferred the models of the battles of the Yellow Ford 1598 and Benburb 1646 from the basement of the Priory to the cottage. This was quite a difficult task and we were thankful for the physical support of Anthony Fox, Martin Jones and others. They were of great interest to the steady flow of visitors. . On the day, the support of Martin Jones, Anthony, Caroline, Carmel, Vanne and others helped to make the day a success despite the heavy rain. The main attraction of the day was of course the period enactors organised by Tomás OBrogáin who had travelled down from Donegal that morning and who in period costumes performed various pike drills at the castle.

Negotiations are ongoing with Benburb Priory management to convert the Castle cottage into a interpretation centre with appropriate panels and artefacts to outline the history of this area during the period covered by Shane and Turlough Luineach approx 1550 - 1593 and to outline the story of two of Ireland's most famous battles, the Yellow Ford and Benburb.

One of the last events of the year was a visit to Lifford for which we hired a bus. Our associates in Donegal invited the ONCHS to participate in an event to celebrate the birth date of Red Hugh O'Donnell starting at the Bridge outside Lifford overlooking the river. The group from Tyrone met the Donegal group in the middle of the bridge. Two enactors were dressed in period costumes as Hugh Ó Neill and Red Hugh O'Donnell and the combined group proceeded by a piper and with flags unfurled marched into Lifford where at the old courthouse various civic dignitaries gave a number of speeches and lots of PR photos were taken.

The ONCHS has extended an invitation to our Donegal friends to participate in a similar event in August 25 to commemorate the Battle of the Yellow Ford when we plan to meet in the middle of the bridge at Port Mór.

Leaving aside the many events of a very busy year, the executive committee decided on some essential structural changes which will take effect in this current year.

Firstly it was decided to decouple the journal from the membership. As from this year our membership, which will remain at £20 per annum, will no longer provide a free journal. This decision reflects production cost effectiveness and the fact, as was demonstrated by the Covid

period, that there may be some years in this rapidly changing world, when we will not be able, for whatever reasons, to produce a journal. With the old system this would effectively restrict our ability to control our essential membership finances. The entrance fee to talks will remain at £5 for non-members and £3 for members. With an average of 10 talks per year plus other events which will also be favourably priced for members, an active member will be getting value. In addition the journal will be priced at £20 for non-members and £15 for members. We will launch the journal this year in the late Spring or early Summer at a special launch event in Benburb Priory. This decoupling also means that we have now flexibility as to when we launch the journal and are not committed to a date at the beginning of the year which would put us under enormous pressure. Furthermore, memberships will now relate to a specific year from Jan 1 to 31st Dec in line with the society's own financial year.

With the death of Professor John McGurk we lost our illustrious President figurehead. We also lost our Vice-presidents, Mona Wylie and just recently Charles Dillon. The committee therefore decided to nominate our remaining V.P. Rev. John Batchelor, our previous Chair, regular contributor to *Dúiche Néill* and long term member, as the Society's new President. John has graciously accepted this position.

At the same time four other long term members who have served the society well over its 40 year history were nominated as V.P.'s. These were Brendan Duffy, Art P. Daly, Patsy Daly and Mrs Bridget McAnallen. I am delighted to say that all have graciously accepted these roles which are permanent and non-executive positions.

The appointment of these new VP's creates a sense of continuity over the 40 year existence of the society and whilst the appointments are non-executive it is hoped that they will be in a position to advise our committee, some members of which will be relatively new to the previous activities of the ONCHS.

On a more sombre note, we have lost a substantial number of previous members since the onset of the Covid pandemic, to death or ill-health. May those who have passed on, rest in peace. Some of these past members made huge contributions to the development of the ONCHS over the past 40 years.

In 2020 however our membership collapsed and thanks to the efforts of our 2024 committee we made a partially successful effort to rebuild it. We owe particular thanks to our Secretary Anthony Fox and Vanne Campbell for the specific roles they have played in not only promoting the registration of previous members but thankfully and most encouragingly, recruiting a crop of totally new members. I would also mention here the work carried on somewhat behind the scenes by John McGlennan who deals efficiently with Website enquiries and the postal of journals to a variety of different places.

It is essential that the 25 committee makes a membership drive a priority. In past years we have found that the age group 60 plus are the most interested in Irish and local history and this would probably still be the case but I think we should make a determined effort to encourage new members from the age group 40 to 60 and of course we should make a positive effort to encourage more women members.

During the past 10 years we have seen a dramatic shift in the effectiveness of the traditional media which was once our direct contact to our greater audience. Nowadays we increasingly depend on digital marketing techniques which are constantly in transition. This was discussed at a number of committee meetings in 2024 and a suggestion was put forward to create a sub-committee to investigate how we can effectively market the ONCHS. I feel that this is a priority for moving forward in 2025 and I hope that this will be a priority for our new committee. This sub-committee should logically also control of the Website.

2025 is the 40th year of our foundation and the 24 committee has already had preliminary discussions on a programme to celebrate this key date in our history. Plans for events for this year

will be I'm sure, a priority for the coming year. We know that our Treasurer Carmel Murray and Caroline Leynagh are already making applications to The Mid Ulster Council for some financial support in the form of grants for some events.

The application process for grant assistance is nowadays somewhat complicated and must be completed by specific dates. The process is now totally digital and carries a number of specific requirements. The process is also time consuming. Caroline and Carmel deserve great credit for their time and efforts.

We are fortunate that at Benburb Priory we have a superb lecture room facility in the Blue Room/Bruce room. We thank the current management and are most appreciative to Benburb Priory for this magnificent facility. Sometimes I think that the rank and file membership takes this too much for granted. However during 2024 we kept getting criticism of the quality of the old seating used in the lecture room. Unfortunately BP had no room in their overstretched budget for new seating in 2024, so we made a successful application to the COSTA organisation for grant assistance for new seating. I must acknowledge here the active and professional participation of Michael Hartnett in obtaining this grant assistance. We subsequently supplied 50 new high quality seats on permanent loan to the lecture room. There are plans to add a further 25/30 seats this year.

The state of the art recording equipment when it works properly enhances the value of the lecture room and we are indeed fortunate to have on our committee an experienced film maker who during 2024 recorded a number of our talks which were subsequently transferred to U Tube. I refer of course to Cathal Hegarty, a very important member of our society in this digital age. Cathal deserves our sincere thanks for his past efforts. Finally our thanks go again to Caroline Leynagh who is chasing up the problems which have become apparent with the IT system and whom I know is at last making progress to having these rectified.

I would mention the efforts of Dessi and Stephen Gildernew setting up a stall to sell our past journals. This has been a relatively successful operation and has resulted in a small but steady income stream and perhaps even more important, it has been a good publicity exercise for the work of the ONCHS. Our stock of previous journals has also been relocated to a safe room in the library complex and have been catalogued due to the efforts of Martin Jones and Caroline Leynagh.

Finally I would mention the input of Fergus McAnallen. Fergus despite his very busy business workload gives generously of his time to this society. The Bard complex which the ONCHS has used frequently in the past and on whose board Fergus sits, is currently undergoing a major redevelopment. Several important ONCHS artefacts were previously displayed there. With the assistance of Fergus we have now taken possession of these items including a painting featuring Owen Roe and a stainless steel art sculpture relating to the battle of Benburb. Fergus is kindly storing these in his premises until we can find a suitable place to display them.

As you now see a lot of positive work has been carried out this year by members of our 24 committee and I could go on but you get the picture. If I have neglected to mention other individual efforts it is not intentional. I have tried to give an overall picture of the commitment of all members of a dedicated and hard working team, for which as Chair, I extend to you all a very big thank you. It has been indeed a privilege to work with you as part of such an excellent team.