

DOES HISTORY REPEAT ITSELF?

By John Browne

I suppose for some unknown reason one tends to look back, no, it's not to regret lost opportunities or the 'what might have been' or what if I had done things differently. No, I would not have changed one thing in life but I do wish to recall my first excursion to the big wide world of employment. This life changing introduction to the work force took place in the last week of August 1974 when I was welcomed to Cistercian College, Mount St Joseph Abbey, Roscrea which was a vibrant community and was just about self sufficient in every respect.

The main Guesthouse was a hive of activity everyday where the guest master Fr Thomas O'Leary welcomed guests who had come to get some peace and quiet and join in the daily prayer of the monks. Some came in with the hope of leaving an alcoholic life behind, while the poor came to get fed and comforted at the green door. Of course women were not allowed to stay at the main Guesthouse with the men, they had quite exclusive accommodation at the ladies guesthouse or Clairvaux as it is better known which is located near the front entrance to the Abbey.

Bro Oliver and Bro John are synonymous with the bakery. I can to this day still taste the fresh bread with homemade butter. It was not unusual to see visitors leave with a brown or white loaf under their arm. Those who came to the green door left well fed and also well equipped for the following meal with a brown or white loaf. Even to this day visitors still ask 'do the monks still bake the bread'? Sadly some years ago this lovely tradition ended. For those of my generation who were lucky to have lived and tasted this beautiful bread, might I even suggest to visitors and locals alike 'the Monastery bread was manna from Heaven.'

Across from the bakery was the cobbler's shop which was managed by Mr Mick Mackey. Shoes and boots were heeled, soled or studded as required and rarely did the community need to purchase new footwear. On a visit to the Abbey, Monsignor Montini, who later became Pope Paul VI, had his shoes repaired in the cobbler's shop. Today have we got too well off whereby it is easier to buy a new pair of shoes or boots rather than have an old pair repaired?

The monastery had extensive gardens namely Sharps. The gardens were well tended and maintained by Mr Kieran Cashin and under the watchful eye of Fr Thomas. Kieran was one of the finest gardeners of his time. Every known vegetable was grown and of course all variety of potatoes both early and main crop.

Then there was the slaughterhouse where beef, pigs and sheep were slaughtered for the Guesthouse and College. This task was performed by local butcher Mr Ned Guilfoyle and ably assisted by Bro Conleth. In this article I will refrain from giving any insight into the ritual of the process, perhaps in some future note I will fill you in on this unique event. Then of course there was the piggery in the centre of the courtyard or better known as the farmyard. The pigs which were ready for slaughter had a very short trip to arrive at the slaughterhouse. On one occasion we met Bro Emmanuel who informed us as we were new on the scene that the next time we saw this pig it would be on a dinner plate in the guesthouse.

The Abbey is well served with rich woodlands and one of the biggest enterprises of the time was the Sawmill. It was among the best in the immediate catchment area if not the midlands. All during the winter months many mature trees were felled for use on the farm for fencing and suitable boards which were used in the carpenters shop. Farmers from far and wide came to the Sawmill for their building and

fencing requirements and it was not unusual to see a queue of cars and trailers full of timber lined up the avenue waiting to have fencing stakes and boards cut.

Hundreds of fowl were kept and reared in the specially built prefab buildings situated on the way out to the farm just beyond the bridge of the Brosna river. It was a brilliantly chosen spot for such an enterprise located as it was dug out into a sandpit and sheltered by the wood. Mr Tommy Bannon took care of this enterprise. Two huge plastic buckets were filled to overflowing with fresh eggs for the College and Guesthouse. There were also plenty of eggs for sale in the bead shop located at the Guesthouse where all things religious were sold and is still going strong to this day.

Tommy carried the buckets on the handlebars of his bicycle and he walked as cycling was out of the question. The fresh eggs were in great demand by the college catering staff. Tommy took great pride in his chosen job. He even had a special treat which was two fresh brown eggs which he kept in his coat pocket for the two nuns who worked in the college. Sr Rita Casey worked on the domestic side of things while Sr Anthony Palmer worked as a nurse and also in the catering department. These two nuns had served in France during the war so no task daunted them. It was our obsession everyday when Tommy arrived to run over to greet him slapping him on the side, of course we being young had no consideration for Tommy and did not realize the weight of the two huge buckets of eggs, plus the fact that he had to make many ballerina steps and sixty degree turns to save his two precious eggs from our enthusiastic slaps. However on one occasion our slaps were rewarded with the sound of a smashing shell in his pocket.

We were soon to discover that Tommy had devised a cunning plan and all our efforts at slapping his pockets was to prove a futile exercise. He pretended to have the two eggs in his pockets and he approached us cursing and swearing hell fire on us if we broke the eggs. He protected the pockets of his coat with every manoeuvre only known to the Riverdance group. He had fooled us by leaving the eggs one in each bucket, slightly soiled from the henhouse. So all he had to do when he reached the nun's kitchen was pick the two soiled eggs from the top. Both Tommy and the nuns had a great laugh at how simple he fooled us, he proved we were not as clever as we thought.

Indeed the wheel goes full circle, since the Halloween break four fifth year students in the College have embarked on an enterprise of producing free range eggs. The students Tom McCormack, Seamus McGrath, Jeremy Farrell and James Hayes have built a hen house with a run in the Walled Garden which is situated to the rear of the Grotto and have started with a flock of twelve hens. At 7.30am you will find the students feeding, bedding and giving water. The hens are out all day and during lunch break and after class the students will be busy in the hen run collecting straw from the farm and cleaning the hen house using all the waste material in a compost heap for their vegetable plot which they also started this season.

What a wonderful example these students are, they are not just academically brilliant but are enthusiastic and proud of their new enterprise. I personally get a great sense of satisfaction and indeed nostalgia as the students stride from the garden with eggs carefully cradled in the jumpers of their uniforms. I think in the distance I hear Tommy Bannon shouting "careful lads don't let Browne near or he'll try to slap ye and break the eggs." How proud Tommy would be today if he saw these students carrying on the proud tradition and thinking yes history does repeat itself.