

# Legacy of bitterness

NEWS of the difficulties being experienced by Liverpool Irish Centre have almost inevitably evoked memories of the Glasgow Irish Centre which folded with substantial debts — and much acrimony — nearly ten years ago.

Based in Copelaw Street, in Glasgow's Southside, it seemed well placed to cater for Glasgow's large Irish community and it was close enough to the city centre. At the outset the future looked bright.

organisation behind its setting-up and, importantly, it had some money in the bank to set plans in motion.

Brid Dougan, of the RA, admits that "there were extravagances". One example which she thought illustrated the well-intentioned impracticality of the founding members was the carpet that they picked for the centre.

"The carpet was specially designed, with a lovely Celtic pattern, by a company in Dublin and made to order by a Glasgow firm.

Within a short time of opening the carpet was burnt with stubbed out cigarettes and stained with spilled drinks". Now she feels that "something much simpler and sturdy would have been appropriate".

The building itself was a problem, the dance floor was too small. Furthermore the building was not purchased, but rented, therefore a vital source of emergency finance, through remortgaging, was unavailable to the committee.

Initially, however, the centre had plenty of patrons and all the Irish societies, including Conradh na Gaelige and the GAA, supported the centre by using it as a venue. Despite this, income was rapidly outstripped by expenditure — the exact nature of which still causes accusations to fly in various directions.

At the same time that the centre was in existence there was a huge upsurge in interest among a new generation of Irish Glaswegians in their other homeland and their heritage. Much of that interest was



CONTINUAL CONFLICT: The former Glasgow Irish Centre, now the Flagship Health Studio.

News of the difficulties currently being experienced by the Liverpool Irish Centre has prompted PHIL MacGIOLLABHAIN to recall the demise nearly a decade ago of the Glasgow Irish Centre and to draw the lessons that might be learned from it.

This week I spoke with several people who were involved in the centre at various stages of its existence.

Some still feel bitter at the way in which it finally failed and did not want to be named. Others were happy to go on the record with their account of events.

The centre seems to have had its origins in a Donegal society — The Rosses Association — which is now defunct. The RA was the main

politically aware. This was the basis of a series of fundamental disagreements within the committee and between the founding members and many of the patrons.

Early on a cleavage emerged on fundamental images and perceptions of Ireland — West Belfast versus Bord Failte. Pat McAleer, a former member, stated that rebel songs were banned and that he was brought before the committee for singing such a song — Amhran na bhFiann!

This decision was defended in a letter dated November 23, 1982, from the secretary of the centre, in that it was introduced to discourage "the hooligan element".

After a petition and much heated debate on the committee, a compromise was reached whereby a tape recording of Amhran na bhFiann was played by a member of the bar staff and people were expected to stand quietly to attention and not sing along!

A former committee member who corroborates Pat McAleer's recollections is Eamonn MacGuire.

"The committee was split into two distinct camps early on," he says.

There were constant arguments about which songs were allowed and which weren't.

The minutes of a committee meeting held on Tuesday, February 15, 1983, were typical. There were four resolutions on the agenda about the songs dispute. One calling for "rebel songs" to be recognised as an acceptable part of Irish culture was defeated. Another calling on the committee to assure the membership that Amhran na bhFiann would never again be banned was passed. This resolution seemed to contradict the decision of a previous one, proposed by Tommy Main, which stated "there should be the lifting of the ban on songs of Irish history and freedom".

An eventual compromise was reached when a clause was inserted into the constitution that allowed "historical song" but banned any songs dealing with current affairs in Ireland. Some committee members felt that this was a musical juggling

act that apologised for being Irish.

"What it seemed to myself and others on the committee was that they were effectively partitioning Irish history and that patriotism and national feeling had a sell-by date," says Eamonn MacGuire, who also remembers the continual bickering and the petty restriction on what could be sung and what could be worn: at the time fashion berets, very popular with young women, were banned and MacGuire himself was told to remove a ski jacket because it was green!

Apart from the cultural/political cleavage on the committee, there were continual questions about how such a busy club, with volunteer bar staff and therefore no staff costs, could collapse with debts.

Another former committee member says that a patron from Coatbridge was persuaded to invest "several thousand pounds two weeks before the centre ceased operating. No one outside of a small group in the committee was privy to this. What was said to this man about the safety of his investment leaves a dirty taste in the mouth..."

These questions remain unanswered.

Those it would appear, who felt most alienated and let down by the whole experience were in the main young, second-generation Irish Glaswegians who felt that their needs were ignored. This was especially so, many felt, after the departure of the centre's original chairman Fr. Shields, a Derryman with a keen sense of Irish nationhood and its importance to the second generation in Glasgow. For example many remember his plans to have on permanent display an exhibition of Glasgow Irish nationalist memorabilia in the centre.

Among such memorabilia already in place was a copy of the 1916 Proclamation. I am told by several ex-committee members that this was taken down after Fr. Shields left Glasgow to return to Derry. There is a clear consensus that the conflict became particularly crippling when Fr. Shield was off the scene.

The continual conflict took its toll and in its last year of business the centre was very quiet, in stark contrast to the beginning of its short existence. That conflict was in evidence even now when I ask former committee members if they can ever envisage an Irish centre again in Glasgow.

## A pipedream?

Those who could reasonably be termed "the establishment" — those who, in the main controlled most of the votes on the committee — think such a possibility a pipedream. On the other hand, those who could be styled "the opposition" on the committee feel that Glasgow's Irish community not only could support a centre but desperately needs one if the community is to survive!

For many in the Irish community who were not directly involved in running the centre it beggars belief that any Irish venue could not commercially succeed in Glasgow. Perhaps the lesson of the Glasgow experience is that the whole Glasgow Irish community could support a centre, but not part of it. The centre, now The Flagship Health Studio, is a sad indicator of the lack of vigour and vision of a section of our community a decade ago.

Let us hope that the Liverpool community has steadier hands on the tiller.

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