

Cultúrlann gets ready for double celebration

Big year for Gaeilgeoirí/ Presbyterian communities

BY MICHAEL JACKSON

EXCITEMENT is rising among Belfast Gaels ahead of a year of celebrations to mark the 30th anniversary of Cultúrlann McAdam Ó Fiaich – and the 130th anniversary of the founding of Broadway Presbyterian Church.

In September 1991, An Chultúrlann began its life in the former Broadway Presbyterian church on the Falls Road as the home of Meánscoil Feirste. In September 1892, the first Presbyterian service was held in the very same building.

In recognising the 30th anniversary of An Chultúrlann – which occurs

this month – and 130th anniversary of Broadway Presbyterian church in September 2022, Forbairt Feirste will work a range of partners to host a year of celebrations, including lectures, discussions, walks and other events.

The events will celebrate the diverse and rich heritage of the past and present custodians of the iconic church building.

Ahead of the celebrations, Helen McKelvey – daughter of the last Minister at Broadway Presbyterian, the Reverend Wilbur Gillespie – sent congratulations to An Chultúrlann for 30 years of "remarkable community service".

Wilbur Gillespie took up his post on the Falls Road in March 1971, becoming Minister for Broadway Presbyterian and Chaplain for the Royal Victoria Hospital.

Reflecting on those turbulent years, Helen

recalled: "His Ministry sort of coincided with internment.

"The congregation would come to worship on a Sunday morning, but they couldn't have come at any other time. There were no evening meetings or anything like that held there because there were the barriers that would have had to have been opened to let them in. There would have been an army guard on as well.

"Even people living in the local streets surrounding the church, like Fallswater Street, were moving out because of the situation. It was a challenging time."

Helen added: "There were a lot of people who moved from that area who would travel to the church on a Sunday morning – there was a great loyalty to the congregation."

Reverend Gillespie had come to the Falls Road from his previous congregation in Loanends, near Crumlin, with his wife Edna and their children, Helen, Alastair and Alison.

Asked why her father left a quiet townland in rural County Antrim for conflict-torn West Belfast, Helen said: "I think that God that called him.

"He was 13 years in his previous congregation and he was very happy there, we all lived there during our formative years, and I think he just felt that this congregation needed somebody to look after them.

"He also would have been interested in being a chaplain in the hospital."

During his tenure Reverend



MEMORIES: Helen McKelvey and her husband, Reverend Derek McKelvey, with a treasured family portrait of Reverend Wilbur Gillespie and his wife Edna

Gillespie famously refused to allow the British Army to set up a lookout post in the tower of Broadway Presbyterian church.

"He wouldn't have allowed that to happen," Helen recalled.

"It was very important that you were neutral in that situation. There were pressures from different sides, but you had to be friendly with everybody."

Broadway Presbyterian church finally closed its doors in June 1982 when – as Helen's husband, the Reverend Derek McKelvey, recalled – Wilbur Gillespie gave his last sermon, entitled, 'Leave it quietly to God'.

"That was his way of saying, that we might be leaving but God is still in control," said

Derek.

"I think he would have been really thrilled that it didn't end up being a carpet warehouse for too long."

Reverend Wilbur Gillespie passed away in October 1991, just a month after the founding of Cultúrlann McAdam Ó Fiaich.

"I think he would be very proud of the fact that it has become what it is," Helen said.

"We now live over in Dundonald, so some day we'll go on the Glider and go up for our lunch. He'd be delighted with that because we were brought up in the era when Corrymeela was started and our family's outlook would have been about trying to bring both communities together.

"We would send

congratulations on this remarkable achievement – 30 years of very active service within the community."

Forbairt Feirste Director, Jake Mac Siacais, said he is delighted to launch a celebration linking the city's historic Irish language and Presbyterian communities.

"It is an excellent opportunity to celebrate the history and culture of this excellent building in the heart of the Gaeltacht Quarter," he said.

"The year of celebrations will be launched on Friday the 24th of September in the Old Library in St Mary's University College."

Numbers for the launch are limited, however, the event will be broadcast live on www.forbairtfeirste.com

Foster Care Information Event

If you live in the Belfast area, come along to hear about some of the children waiting for foster homes right now.

Wellington Park Hotel, Belfast

Wed 22 September 2021

7.00pm - 8.30pm

If you would like to attend:

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If you have ever considered fostering and live within the Belfast area, come along to our face-to-face foster care information event at the Wellington Park Hotel on Wednesday 22 September 2021 from 7.00pm to 8.30pm to hear about some of the children and young people who are waiting for foster homes

right now. Our fostering team will be available to tell you about the fostering process and answer any questions you may have. One of our local foster carers will also be there to share her own journey as a HSC foster carer.

If you would like to attend this event please Call HSC NI Foster Care on 0800 0720 137 or email your contact details to: info@fostering.hscni.net. Please note: we are complying with Covid regulations. Social distancing will be in operation for everyone's safety with a cap on attendees.

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