

John Donohoe looks back at 50 years of the Rathkenny Revels, Meath's best known variety and revue group.

Friday, 3rd October, 2014 - Story by John Donohoe

When a group of young farmers from Meath visited the then President of Ireland, Dr Patrick Hillery, in Aras an Uachtaran in the 1980s, the first question he asked was 'Are the Rathkenny Revels still on the go down there?'. Such was the fame of the Meath-based variety group, that the first citizen of the State was familiar with it. This is one of the stories recalled in a new book being published to mark the 50th anniversary of the rural-based entertainment providers. The Revels were still going then, and still are now, half a century after a new curate got together with the local amateur dramatic society to set up a revue show.

The current members of the group are staging a special 50th anniversary show in their original home, Rathkenny Hall, and are availing of another local venue, the grand surrounds of Tankardstown House, to launch the jubilee publication compiled by Bernie Price.

Larry Mongey, the Revels' longest serving chairman, was there at the start. Indeed, before it. He was a member of the Stackallen Dramatic Society, in existence since 1959. At the founding of the society, he was appointed vice-chairman, and the group produced comedies, as well as hosting a question time.

"We travelled around to other shows, to get ideas and see what others were doing," he says. "One of these trips was to Longwood, a fair trip at the time. But there was nothing much else to do, particularly during Lent. There was no television, nor a drinking culture, and people made their own entertainment."

The trip to the Longwood Capers show took on more significance not long afterwards, when the man behind it, Fr Michael Murchan, was transferred to Rathkenny parish as its new curate. He had been experimenting with the production and direction of the variety shows in Longwood, and was immediately invited along to the 1964 annual meeting of the Stackallen Dramatic Society.

"It was him that came up with the 'Rathkenny Revels' title," Larry says. "He wanted something catchy like the Rathmines and Rathgar Music Society."

The one act plays were set aside and the society eventually became the Stackallen Rathkenny Musical Society. Soon, word was spreading, and membership increased. Not alone were talented artists and musicians joining up, but also highly skilled craftsmen, electricians, electronic experts and script writers were offering their valuable assistance. And of course, Fr Mick Murchan was at the centre of everything, from scriptwriting to gathering props and any kind of sound or lighting equipment he could lay his hands on.

"Tom Joe Ruddy was principal of Heronstown National School and was involved in the Newtown Ramblers players," Larry Mongey explains. "So he brought them along to share their expertise."



The headquarters for rehearsals, committee events and rehearsals was the old national school in Stackallen, and shows were staged in Rathkenny Hall.

"Fr Murchan decided we would stage it on a Friday, Saturday and Sunday night, and we ran the show for three weekends during Lent," Larry recalls.

There were rave reviews in the local press, and year after year, success after success, the local curate as producer and mentor aimed at a higher level for each production, ensuring continued popularity.

"Apart from the performers, it was the set designs, special effects and the orchestra that added to the shows," says Larry.

Their first venture into Navan was putting on a show in St Joseph's Convent of Mercy in the Revels' second year, then transferring it to the 'Young Men's Hall', now St Mary's Community Centre. There were visits to Tullyallen Parish Hall in the late 1970s, as well as the Notre Dame Hall in Churchtown, Dublin, and in 1968, they were invited to take part in an AIMS – Association of Irish Musical Societies – concert in the Olympia Theatre, with a 'Harbour Lights' nautical scene.

High profile names involved early on were Mary Callaghan, Michael O'Brien, Tom Kerrigan, Jimmy Carry, Michael Cullen, Jimmy Fitzsimons, George Coyle, Michael Gray, stage manager John Reilly, set designer, Jack Davis, Jim Culligan, musicians Jim Byrne, Richie Brady and Blaithe Meade.

John Joe Price is the current chairman of the Revels, and like most in the parish, got roped in as a youngster. He says that the strength of the Revels has always been the fact that so many families and local people and organisations were involved over the years, like the local ICA providing the teas, and everyone from front of house to behind the scenes, as well as those on stage, those taking bookings, and on box office.

"And we have plenty from neighbouring areas such as Lobinstown, Syddan and Navan," he says.

Each half of a show consists of an opening and closing chorus, some soloists, instrumentalists, groups, some quickies on front of the curtains, and a sketch. A show could last three hours.

The show became a somewhat victim of its own success in attracting members, and found that with a children's chorus of over 90, they needed a greater performance space, moving from the homely community centre in Navan to the minimalist stage of the Solstice Arts Centre.

"The floor of Rathkenny Hall where we rehearse is almost the same size as the stage in Solstice," John Joe Price explains.

His marriage to Bernie was a Revels match. They were wed between the show being staged in Rathkenny, and 'the shift' to Navan for the following weekend.

Another couple who met through the Revels was Ronan and Yvonne McGuinness, who also got time to marry between the flit.

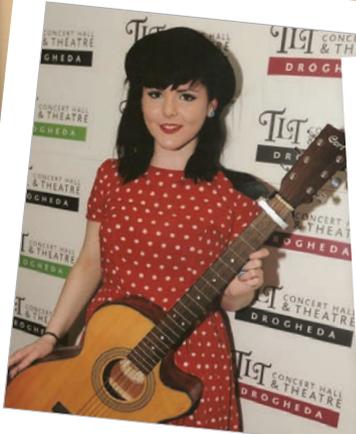
There is a cast and crew of around 150 currently involved in the Rathkenny Revels organisation, although there's a gap in between the 20-35 age group.

John Joe Price explains: "We have a great cast of young people, and plenty over 35. I suppose once people go off to college and work, they have other things on their mind."





At the Revels book launch in Tankardstown House, Gerry Mc Donnell, Olive Sheehy, Audrey Norris, Maree White, John Joe Price, Ann Crilly, Bernie Price and Mary Crilly.



The move to the Solstice means a much slicker production, as once the curtain opens, the show doesn't break until the interval, and there's less emphasis on props and set.

But a 'back to basics' commemorative cabaret show to be staged in October has seen young and old members attending rehearsals in recent weeks for what's promised to be fantastic family entertainment with live music and lots of comedy.

And in keeping with the traditions of the Revels, the younger generation is just as involved in the show as the previous ones, such as Mary Callaghan's grandnieces, Michelle and Siobhan Beggy, and it looks like the future of the Revels is ensured for at least another half century.

50th anniversary book and shows:

'Rathkenny Revels - A History of Stackallen-Rathkenny Musical Society', researched and edited by Bernie Price, is a limited edition book of over 400 pages which will be launched on Sunday 12th October in Tankardstown House.

It contains over 100 different stories including personal memories from the pens of those who have spent from one, to 30, to even 50 years with the society. There are also contributions from the families of those no longer with us.

An account of 'the gathering' of the Stackallen Dramatic Class, over 50 years on, is featured in the book which also includes newspaper cuttings from the '60s, '70s, '80s, '90s and '00s as well as programmes for each year's show. A history of the Society's two 'homes' is outlined and there are fascinating photographs from all of the five decades.

Chairman, John Joe Price, said: "As a society, we felt it was important to record milestones and document the stories of not only those people still with us but also those who are no longer with us, either because they have gone to their eternal rest or are no longer members. They gave so much because of their sense of community, love of music and of the stage. They built and sustained Rathkenny Revels to the high level of popularity enjoyed today which, we're confident, will continue for future generations."

Already, more than 100 copies have been pre-sold. You can pre-buy by contacting any member of the committee or Mary Crilly on (087) 618 9148, between 5pm-8pm.

The society's Commemorative Cabaret Weekend is to be staged in Rathkenny Hall on 3rd, 4th and 5th October at 8pm each night. Tickets, at €10, will be available at the door on the night or for pre-booking, from Larry and Carmel Mongey on (046) 902 4176, between 12 noon and 2pm, and after 6pm.

* This article first appeared in the Meath Chronicle Inspire magazine, October 2014.

- See more at: <http://www.meathchronicle.ie/news/roundup/articles/2014/10/03/4032912-rathkenny-revels-celebrating-50-years-with-concerts-and-book-/#sthash.64DBf76b.dpuf>