



■ A ROOM IN THE HOUSE



■ VIEW OVER CREAGABALLA LAKE



■ ENTERTAINERS AT HENNIGANS - Michael 'the Yank' O'Donnell, Margaret Waters and Verona Mc NULTY.



■ HOOLEY AT HENNIGANS

# HOOLEY DOWN IN HENNIGAN'S HOUSE!

Pictures and story by Gerry Molumby



■ HOW TO FIND HENNIGAN'S HOUSE

I am writing to tell you of the wonderful world of Hennigan's Heritage Centre in Co. Mayo.

As I write this feature I am listening to Newsnight and the highlights of the Conservative party conference, you might think that a remote cottage in Co. Mayo and the workings of the Parliament in the UK are worlds apart, but are they? The historic soul of Ireland and especially Co. Mayo is steeped in emigration with many of its people settling in Britain. Ireland as we know is a changed place today where immigration is greatly outstripping emigration and most of those leaving are going to study in universities in the UK and not to build its roads or nurse

in its hospitals.

Therefore we are indebted to people like Tom and Catherine Hennigan for keeping a tangible house, farm, a part of our Irish Diaspora history alive, for us to visit.

Rightly, we are asked to park the diesel or petrol machines in the car park away from the house and then we have the joy of literally walking back in time, down the lane to the house with the view of Creagaballa Lake to our left. When we visited at about 3pm the sun was reflecting on the shimmering lake and if David Lean or John Ford had seen what I saw (I hope my camera reflects it!) this is where they would have set 'Ryan's Daughter' or 'The Quiet Man.'

When we talk of Ireland we hear of 'its unspoiled countryside and villages'. I do hope that in the fullness of time this jewel in the crown of Ireland's heritage does not become spoiled or just another

'Blarney type' stop off place to visit for 20 minutes. For to really appreciate this place you have to sit down and listen to the man of the house Tom Hennigan 'the Bard of Co. Mayo.

Hennigans House is situated in unspoilt countryside overlooking Creagaballa Lake, near Swinford. The actual house or shrine is best entered on your own or with a small group, to smell the turf, the thatch, to savor the history that has lived here, to touch the floor, to feel at home. This house represents every old thatched farm house in Ireland as it is one of the few that are left standing.

When I visited in on September 21st 2007 Tom told me:

*"In 1990 I realised that I no longer had a future in farming ten acres of land, so I decided to open this small plot of land to the public and tell the story of how my family survived here. I decided to maintain the farm and complex as a way of preserving and*

*showing the rich heritage of Mayo and Ireland it represents."*

The great aspect of this living heritage centre is that Tom and Christine endeavour to personally welcome you with the customary cup of tea or something stronger! Tom told us when we visited that it is often while engaging and talking with visitors that he learns more and more of our history and how traditions/customs vary from county to county. I did not know that it was the tradition that when building a cottage people used try to put a head of a horse under the center flag stone, this apparently improved the bounce! /echo for set dancing. Tom could tell us that in renovations of a monastery 'down the country' this head of a horse tradition was found, so the monks dancing did not start with Fr. Ted!

Because the original small cottage of two bedrooms is often not big enough to host their guests, Tom and Catherine entertain people in the cosy new

reception room next to the cottage. Here we had a sing song and great local entertainment when Tom invited his neighbours in to sing, recite and play music for us. Michael 'the Yank' O'Donnell, Margaret Waters and Verona Mc Nulty entertained us well.

We also did a 'turn' and represented the Irish in Britain on tour! But the 'top of the bill' was Tom himself. In between funny stories of local characters and customs, he introduced the history of the cottage, built in the 1870's where the Hennigan family lived until 1970. Tom himself, he told us was born and grew up in the house. He told us how the people farmed the infertile land which as you can imagine resulted in generations of emigration. He told us briefly of the landlord system and its central part in motivating Irish nationalism, he inspired us to study our history. Tom, an ordinary man from the parish of Swinford, was full of passion of his own family's history and wanting to learn from his guests.

Tom told us he had been an emigrant himself in the UK, lived and worked in North London and

*"Knew Holloway Road and its pubs very well!"*

For his family, the house and heritage center holds many memories of years spent living and growing up locally. For local children visiting, the Centre makes a connection to the past more real and understandable. For adults from this area, the Centre is a place to share and revisit, to affirm their heritage and to pass it on for others to learn. Likewise, for emigrants it is an opportunity to literally 'go back in time'.

Tom also showed us another 'room' where in part of the outhouses he has an extended museum on Ireland's farming - tilling - milking- weaving - saving turf - and poteen making!. Here you can experience Ireland's most recent and ancient farming culture with

displays ranging from prehistoric to the 19th century land estates and tenants, through independence and into the present 21st Century. Tom told us

*"The purpose of the Heritage Centre is to preserve and showcase the heritage of life of the Mayo area, from farming, house and home, to jobs and work, to celebration of life."*

I was pleased to hear that Tom is now getting school trips to his home and it is appropriate for children to hear the living history of this house, not from a museum curator, but from the man of the house himself. The children need to hear his accent, to hear his story, the way he tells them!

*"If you ever go across the sea to Ireland Don't wait until the closing of your days But be sure to visit Tom Hennigans house in Mayo and feel how he has preserved the ancient Irish ways."*



**Fear agus Bean anò Tí**  
(man and woman of the house) Catherine and Tom Hennigan