

ST JOHN'S CHURCH- CULTURAL CENTRE

KNOCKAINEY, CO. LIMERICK CASE STUDY



Introduction

In 2006 Ballyhoura Development Ltd took part in a transnational project entitled “The Villages of Tradition”. In practical terms this looked at trying to establish the unique selling point of rural villages across Europe and marketing this to a wider audience. Key linkages were made with the Westerkwartier region of the Netherlands and its learning’s were transferred to the Ballyhoura and Blackwater area regions.

One of the rural villages that took part from an early stage was Knockainey in County Limerick. A village that like many others had a small population, no main stay retail or business and served mainly by its local town of Hospital, Co. Limerick.

What Knockainey possessed however was a core group of committed people with an interest in preserving local heritage and in particular a deconsecrated Church of Ireland Church- St. John’s. A building that commandeered a focal position in the community which was out of use for almost 10 years due to a declining congregation population. This building was identified as a resource very early on by the group, its story and heritage spanning hundreds of years and its potential to represent a new story for the village, a new beginning.

Activities

Pre- development

There were a number of crucial steps taken by the group and Ballyhoura Development Ltd prior to any capital work being undertaken. Throughout all stages a lead role was invested by Ballyhoura Development to ensure that all steps were taken correctly and all relevant contacts were made.

- a) Linking with the wider Villages of Tradition network
- b) Working with facilitator of the network to identify “Knockainey’s project”
- c) Establishing voluntary group for St. John’s- Knockainey Historical & Conservation Society.
- d) The group undertook the task of securing a lease on St. John’s Church from the Representative Church Body and this was secured in 2006.
- e) The use of the Church always revolved around a musical venue, an arts centre, a venue for performers of standard that would give justice to a unique setting with superb acoustics. On this basis and for this use the lease was secured.
- f) Key contacts were identified and made very early on, County Council Heritage Officer and Limerick County Council Conservation Officer, these 2 contacts were crucial as the Church is a listed building, but also from a professional stand point, the 2 contacts to this day are still involved and invested in St. John’s.
- g) Support from both Ballyhoura Development and Limerick County Council, the refurbishment of St. John’s occurred throughout 2007. Specialist painting works, pews, doors, windows, flooring

were replaced and renovated to a high standard and in accordance with the Listed Buildings Act under constant supervision by the Conservation Officer.

- h) The steps achieved throughout 2006 and 2007 led to the foundations of the Cultural Centre as it stands today

2007- 2011

- Once the renovations were complete the group appointed a sub section of the Voluntary group to actively seek performers and to develop a concert line up throughout the year. A key contact established at this point was Arts Officer for Limerick County Council who to this day has appointed and used this venue as an outsource for performers in County Limerick
- The group with support from Ballyhoura Development undertook another project in the refurbishment of the Sextons House at the front of St. Johns as an area for community space, toilets and changing area for performers. Much preparatory work including planning, plans and business plan were all supported through Ballyhoura Development Ltd and the Ballyhoura Development mentor programme and done in anticipation of the RDP programme in 2009 meaning that the group were ready to make an application for the project when it began to roll out in the beginning of 2009.

Lessons Learned

1. This group is formed of members of various but key skill sets. Three core members identified people in the community who had relevant skills including electrician, builders, solicitors, accountants....The group of 2011 still has the core members identified as of 2007
2. Key contacts were established from the beginning and this proved invaluable as the project progressed
3. The progression of the initial project in Knockainey created the catalyst for many other groups to form including a Community Council and Tidy Towns. These areas would not have happened without the success of the St John's project.
4. The project has become a model for other communities within the Ballyhoura area who have a derelict Church of Ireland Church space, and who are examining an alternative use of space for communities.

Success and Conclusion

- St. John's has just completed its heating upgrade and is now focusing on planning its concerts for winter 2011 and spring 2012. The focus of the group is to create a wider profile within the region with high profile acts to draw attention to a very unique venue
- The graveyard has also been surveyed and a sign erected for people conducting genealogy research
- Sextons house is now being used as a community office on a part time basis for the start of a new project linking in with Ireland Reaching Out (a pilot initiative whereby parishes undertake tracing the Diaspora of their place and inviting the Diaspora home for a week of welcomes)
- Again, as above, the success of the re use of this building has proved fundamental in creating more projects and more volunteerism in a small rural location and over the duration of the process has given the community groups in Knockainey more capacity to help themselves and plan their future in giving their members a better quality of life.