

The Well Gathering: Community Memories Shape New Public Artwork

By Anna King

On a warm June afternoon, residents gathered at The Shambles in the town of Ballaghaderreen. Some elderly, some younger, all arrived carrying memories, stories and a deep connection to place. Over cups of tea and bursts of laughter, they spoke about the Plots, a hidden network of gardens and pathways tucked behind the town centre, a place that has shaped the lives of generations of Ballaghaderreen families.

The occasion was *The Well Gathering*, a public workshop convened by artists Dominic Keogh and Anna King to help shape the inscription for a new permanent sculpture destined for the Plots. The sculpture forms part of a wider regeneration project focused on this unique backland landscape.

Traditional stonemason Dominic Keogh brought with him a full-scale template of the sculpture's base. Carved from Irish limestone sourced locally through Michael Carney, the stone itself dates back some 360 million years. Keogh explained how he had drawn inspiration from the heritage of the area and an historic Ordnance Survey map of the town. Studying the map, he was struck by the elegant geometry of the Plots: four pathways radiating outwards and converging at a spring well, dating back to at least the mid-nineteenth century.

"I wanted to make sure it was very much of its place in this town," he explained.

The finished sculpture will feature a shallow pool of water at its base, symbolising the spring well at heart of the Plots. Reflected in its surface will be lines of gold tracing the original pathways. Oak leaves will be carved into its sides, referencing *Bealach an Doirín* - "The Way of the Little Oak" - from which Ballaghaderreen takes its name.

The well itself has been known by many names over the years: Duff's Well, Anne Deane's Well and, more recently, Dolly's Well, named after a local woman whose house once stood nearby. That layering of names reveals how place-memory evolves through the generations, as new memories and associations become woven into the landscape.

It was this living memory, vivid, funny and sometimes surprising, that filled the room throughout the afternoon.

John Gallagher, 83, who was born on Main Street, offered one of the day's most detailed accounts. He described the Plots of his childhood as a vital extension of town life, where families grew their own vegetables from seeds supplied by Paddy Mulligan. Every family fenced their plot and fitted a gate.

"The gangs" of Main Street, New Street, Barrack Street and Pound Street were groups of young boys in short trousers. Growing up before television, they made their own entertainment, fuelled by imagination and a strong sense of adventure. Their battles

took place in Dolly Galvin's Field beside the well, which overflowed perpetually into a wide swamp of "flaggers", tall broad-leaved plants rooted in waterlogged ground.

"Once you stepped into the field, you were up to your knees in mud and water," he recalled.

Armed with flaggers pulled up root and all, mud and water swinging from the ends, the rival gangs waged war until, an hour later, there were "no winners, everyone black from head to foot, everybody making for home, battle weary and tired. But God help the poor mothers that now had to face the biggest battle of all."

Seamus Clarke remembered another well-known local character, Bakkie Fraine, who lived in a small hut in the Plots built for him by monumental sculptor Brian O'Hara.

"My memory of Bakkie is sitting down at the Plots in the sunshine reading his paper and smoking his pipe," he said.

From those same gardens, residents could watch the steam train travelling to and from Ballaghaderreen station, a detail that surfaced more than once during the afternoon's conversation.

Margaret Garvey, who grew up on Station Road, spoke with extraordinary vividness about a childhood lived alongside the railway. She remembered the turntable, the water tank, the first-class and second-class carriages, and the bogey, a hand-operated maintenance vehicle that she and her friends once commandeered for what she described as "an absolutely heavenly evening" travelling up and down the line.

She recalled a Clydesdale horse making its daily journey to the goods store carrying bonded whiskey and cigarettes, while mothers along the street called their children indoors to stop them being "killed stone dead". Naturally, the children ignored the warnings and climbed onto the horse's back instead.

"It was a privilege and the sheer happiness to grow up on Station Road," she reflected.

Alongside sharing stories and memories, residents were invited to consider the words that will be carved into the new sculpture, ensuring that the artwork carries something of the community's voice into the future.

As stories flowed around the room, it became clear that the Plots are far more than a forgotten backway. They remain a living archive of Ballaghaderreen's people, their memories, and their enduring connection to place.

The event forms part of *Enabling the Potential of the Ballaghaderreen Plots*, a project funded through the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund in partnership with Roscommon County Council and Creative Places Ballaghaderreen. The sculpture will become part of the wider Plots Town Park development, helping transform this historic backway landscape into a renewed gathering place for future generations.

To listen to the full recordings of Margaret and John sharing their memories of the Plots, visit: www.annaking.ie/ballagherreen-the-plots/voices-from-the-plots

If you have stories that you would like to share, email anna7king@gmail.com