

Siege Mentality, Gerrymander and the Troubles

To understand the evolution of modern Creggan we need firstly to examine the history, key events and developments in Derry which led to the development of the modern estate. In truth the recent past can only be understood by such reflection.

It has been said that when visitors come to Derry they would be well advised to put their watches back 400 years, a reasonable observation in light of events since the plantation. The walled city survived two major sieges but it is the siege of 1688-89 which has left the most enduring mark on its inhabitants. The Great Siege of 1688-89 was a test of the resolve of the Protestant settler population and nurtured what has become known as the 'Siege Mentality', described by AT Q Stewart as "the founding myth of Ulster Unionism". He adds that "the defence of Derry provides the paradigm for the entire history of the siege of the plantation".

Adherence to the imagery of the siege myth explains the decision to adopt a system designed to maintain control of Derry, the spiritual homeland of Unionism, by the minority unionist population in the city. The means chosen was the adoption of a gerrymandered voting system which constructed electoral boundaries designed to return a majority of unionist representatives, despite there being a substantial nationalist majority in the city.

Given the origins of the recent Troubles, which were in large measure a response to injustices caused by the construction of gerrymandered boundaries and the measures taken to retain minority unionist control, the observations of one man over 60 years ago were to prove prophetic. Archie Halliday, a unionist, attended the 1936 inquiry into the re-drawing of the City electoral boundaries. When asked for his opinion on the proceedings his reply revealed his misgivings:

"You know perfectly well that if you put justice underground, if you take a course that is unjust, disguise it as you may, it will come out and arise sometime – maybe not immediately, but sometime or other – and will wreak havoc which you probably did not see and should have foreseen when you planted that injustice."

The forebodings of Archie Halliday were soon to be realised.

A rational outcome of the 1936 Gerrymander was the decision to build a housing estate in the South Ward,

namely Creggan, which would, by housing mainly Catholics there, leave the balance of power undisturbed in the unionist controlled mecca of unionism. The movement for reform, which began with the agitation for civil rights in the sixties, arose out of circumstances related to this Gerrymander. Indeed the very existence of Creggan Estate and the troubled events of the last thirty years can be seen to have been a consequence of the events of over 300 years ago which still had relevance for the planners of the estate in the mid twentieth century.



Above: The BSR was a major employer in Creggan.

"The Troubles" and the events of Bloody Sunday, which had a particular resonance for Creggan, were outcomes hinted at by Halliday. The vast number of events which occurred in Creggan during the Troubles demand a fuller and deeper treatment than is possible in this pamphlet. What is possible, however, is an examination of how the estate grew as a community, and survived the trials and tribulations of its convoluted past.

The Modern Estate

Despite the political circumstances surrounding the birth of the Creggan housing estate, tenancies were eagerly sought. There were reports of aspiring "settlers" planting miraculous medals in gardens in the hope that divine intervention would ensure success. Many came from overcrowded conditions, with some experiencing the luxury of having their own bathrooms for the first time. Despite the improvement in social conditions inequalities still existed, and high rates of unemployment continued to be a scourge. With no purpose built community centres or public provision for advice on social issues, it was left to the new community to find or develop such amenities from within.

The early days were to see the emergence of organisations and individuals who would help stabilise and develop the community. Foremost among these organisations were the schools, which were inevitably Catholic, and up to the present have provided recognised quality education. Alongside these schools were the youth clubs and the St. Vincent De Paul Society, also initiated by the church. The society continues to lend assistance to those whose circumstances escape the attention of formal social services. St. Mary's Youth Club also looms large in the early years of the estate. Its premises, the former site office of the estate's builders, hosted a wide variety of activities including concerts.

It would be impossible to list all the individuals who gave sterling service to their community. Among these would be Mickey Durey, Bridget Bond and Paddy McKeever, whose dedication saw their homes serving as informal community advice centres. Unpaid, they guided neighbours through the difficulties of accessing various government entitlements.

The Creggan Estate Tenants Association and Foyle Hill Tenants Association are other examples of voluntary bodies who campaigned on issues affecting the estate.

On the employment front great hopes were raised by the opening of an existing factory building at Bligh's Lane as a subsidiary of Birmingham Sound Reproducers (BSR) in 1951. The factory, originally built to manufacture airplane parts and later office equipment, gave a major boost to Derry's economy in the years up to 1967, when the BSR closed down. In the intervening years it had competed successfully in the world market, manufacturing high quality record players and tape recorders. At its peak it employed 2,050 workers at Bligh's Lane and two local subsidiary factories, producing up to 35,000 record changers and 12,000 tape decks per week.

The Bligh's Lane site was to host other industrial endeavours including United Technologies Automotive and Essex International, which both served the motor car industry, and the Coates Viyella shirt factory. Nevertheless, the involvement of multinationals in Creggan was unable to provide a long term solution to the estate's unemployment problem.

The Social Economy

Hopes for a better future are held out by the current emphasis on social economy projects, which see the future best served by an ethos of self help. A prime mover is Creggan Enterprises Limited, whose presence is most evident in the Ráth Mór Centre on Eastway.

Their interpretation of the problems affecting Creggan, their philosophy and commitment to the solution is summarised in their literature:

"Creggan Enterprises Limited aims to be a catalyst for positive change within Creggan and the surrounding area. As a Social Economy enterprise, any surplus profit will be used to assist other projects, which benefit the community".....

"Economic development has traditionally been seen as being best left to industry and government agencies- not the affair of local people or communities. The developments at Ráth Mór give the local community the chance to become involved and play a major role in the economic and social affairs of their community"

Below: Creggan Enterprises helped kick-start regeneration in Creggan.

The impressive Ráth Mór Centre plays host to an impressive range of projects and facilities:

£3.2m Ráth Mór Shopping Centre
300K Community Service Units
£700K Ráth Mór Business park
£575K Micro Enterprise Units
£640K Ráth Mór Business Centre

There are thirty three businesses and community initiatives located at Ráth Mór, including 100,000 sq. ft of retail, workspace and community facilities. Two hundred jobs have been created, with a major reactivation of statutory, private and community interest in the Creggan area. £100,000 of surplus profits have been distributed to local groups and charities, whilst C.E.L. was also an 'Enterprising Solutions Award' Winner in 2003, Arts and Business (NI) Award Winner 2007 and a Northern Ireland Arts Council Award Winner 2008.

C.E.L. has also been cited as 'an exemplar of best practice regarding community renewal' by the European Commission.

Partnerships/ Sport

Other groups have preceded C.E.L. and in many cases are currently in partnerships with the C.E.L. and each other. Indeed partnership is a key factor in the economic and social development of modern Creggan. A prime example is Creggan Neighbourhood Partnership, who act as an umbrella body for almost 30 voluntary groups. It is committed to "working in partnership with all organisations in Creggan, within the Triax area and further afield" and "welcomes the recognition that residents need to be at the heart of any regeneration strategy". The partnership in turn acknowledges its evolution from the Ring Community Association, NICDA, the Derry Unemployed Workers Group and Creggan Community Initiative.

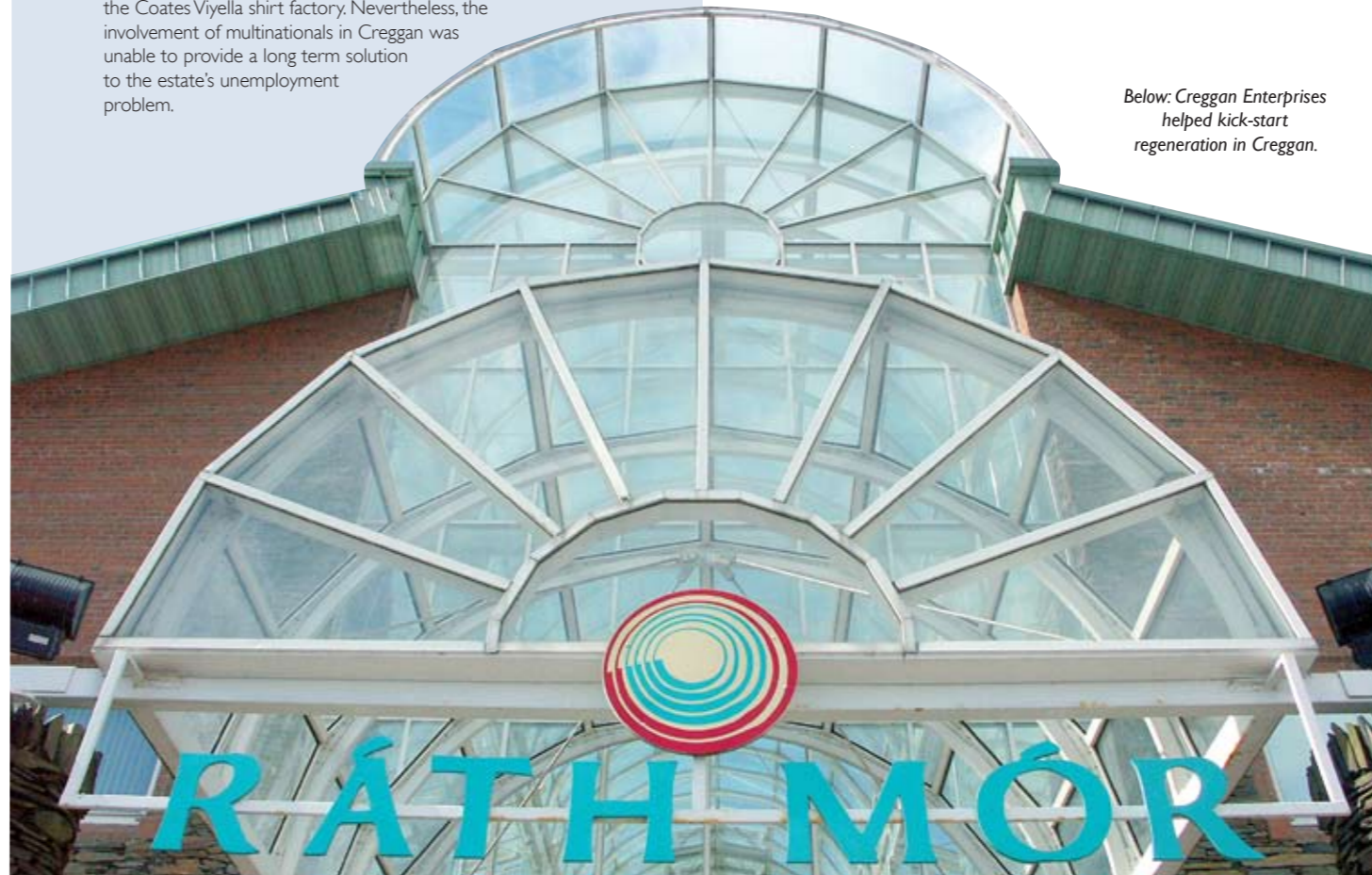
Another important recent contribution to the encouragement of social interaction is the development of the community based Café Creggan.

Cafe Creggan



Above: Gerrymandering was rampant in Derry in the 30s, 40s & 50s.

Below: Paddy McKeever, unpaid community worker.





Sean Dolans GAC – YAX youth project.

Sport has always contributed to the wellbeing and welfare of Creggan residents. At least two sports clubs have proactively attempted to initiate projects to attract members of the local population who would not necessarily be interested in sport.

Trojans Football Club was formed in the 1940's, and provides quality coaching and training to numerous youth teams. The club identified a segment of the younger population not fully engaged in soccer and alienated from the positive benefits of sport. Evident problems amongst this grouping included drug, alcohol and solvent abuse, joy riding and general anti-social behaviour. A public meeting in April 2000 led to the establishment of Trojans Youth and Development Group. The group have secured the Oakland Park site, which incorporates a new multi-purpose building with sporting and educational facilities, including a soccer pitch and training ground.

Facilities include:

- Drop in centre/cafeteria/kitchen
- Education/training facilities
- Community facilities for youth/elderly/disabled/women
- Soccer pitch/training area for community use
- Multi-gym

Demonstrating that sports bodies can see the bigger picture, Sean Dolans GAC have introduced the innovative and impressive YAX youth project. The mandatory courses available at the facility include:

- Drugs and Alcohol Awareness Programmes
- Sexuality Courses
- Computer Courses
- Capacity Building courses.



The Old Library Trust – Healthy Living Centre

Less formal but nonetheless stimulating activities are also available from the Old Library Trust, including cookery and drama classes and pool. What sets the project apart is that the youth members decide the activities to be pursued and the direction of the project, with adult members maintaining a presence as facilitators.

The Old Library Trust have moved into magnificent new premises on Central Drive from its former premises at the old library buildings, from which the trust gets its name. Its 'Healthy Living Centre' offers a number of programmes and services which include healthy lifestyles, stress reduction, confidence building and self-esteem, health and physical activity, skills development, parenting support, special therapy, smoking cessation, drug and alcohol awareness, youth support and health care for older people. In so doing it follows the philosophy that, despite its luxurious premises, healthy living is not about buildings but about tackling the causes of ill health and improving the quality of life in the community.



A Healthy Living Centre youth scheme



The seeds of the Creggan Country Park, based at the old city reservoir, were sown with the establishment of the Glenowen Fisheries Co-op in 1992. In 1997 Creggan Country Park Enterprises was launched, including directors from Glenowen Fisheries, Derry City Council and others from the community and private sectors. What has emerged from their efforts is a wide ranging facility with provision for sport, leisure, education and particularly for the study of environmental issues. Practical approaches to environmental education has seen the introduction of a wind generator and hydro turbine and an environmentally sympathetic roof design which incorporates a turf covering.

Fishing is still a feature with water sports also a major area of activity. Much effort is also put into the study and the management of the natural environment. The park has become an important venue for school studies and environmental projects, and has recently introduced the 'Step Back in Time' Heritage Lottery funded programme. This aims to deliver historical tours and exhibitions for groups and individuals exploring the diverse history of the country park and wider Creggan area from the stone age to the present.

The Future?

A short summary, such as this, cannot expect to do justice to the many individuals and organisations who have contributed to the growth of Creggan's infrastructure and self-confidence over the years.

In summary however, several things are apparent. Partnerships are considered all important, innovation is welcomed and the social economy is working at various levels. The energy and imagination of workers and residents combined with the mutual support of the many organisations auger well for Creggan's emergence from a troubled past into a brighter future.



This pamphlet has been produced as part of the Creggan Country Park's 'Step Back in Time' Heritage Lottery funded project examining the history of the Creggan Country Park site and the wider Creggan area. A number of pamphlets covering subjects linked to the Creggan Country Park heritage are available including:

- The siege of Derry
- Industrial heritage
- Land ownership
- Natural Heritage
- Early History
- Living Landscapes/the Rath
- Talking History

Creggan Country Park can also arrange Walking Tours of its site exploring all these subject matters in detail as well as offering field trips to other sites associated with these topics. Tours can also be tailored to suit groups focusing on specific academic fields. For example the Industrial Heritage module can be expanded to suit groups studying science/geography whilst the siege module can be tailored for modern history groups.

Tours are organised in association with Creggan Country Park's partner organisation derrybluebadgeguide (www.derrybluebadgeguide.com). For details on organising these tours contact Creggan Country Park on (028) 71363133 or info@creggancountrypark.com.



Creggan Country Park Modern Creggan – Emergence from a Troubled Past

By Mickey McGuinness

