

Mhic Airt Naí-Scoil

HALLA PHOBAL MHC AIRT, TRA GEARR, BEALFEIRSTE . 5.

Mac Airt Naí-Scoil has been based at Mac Airt Community Centre in the Short Strand area of Belfast since May 1980. The new centre was opened earlier that same year, built under the Belfast Areas of Need (BAN) Programme in the late 1970s, for St. Matthews tenants' association.

LOCATION

Mac Airt Naí-Scoil is situated in a tiny nationalist area of greater East Belfast, with a population of 2,700 people.

A ghetto in the truest sense of the word. The surrounding area is undergoing redevelopment and will require a further 6 to 8 years before completion.

The area suffers from almost every deprivation imaginable from chronic unemployment, currently at 55 per cent, to poor housing, with a large percentage qualifying for supplementary benefits.

An Naí-Scoil came about when a group of women (parents of young children) approached the management committee of the new centre to make provision for their idea. This was an Irish speaking nursery school, whose aims would be to promote the Irish language, culture, music, dance and sports, naturally to their children of pre-school age, through the medium of Irish and prepare them ultimately for Bun-Scoil Ghaelach (Irish Primary School) at Shaws Road, Belfast, resulting in bi-lingual school children.

The Naí-Scoil started with seven children in May 1980, and within 3 months had 15 children attending.



INSIDE THE NAÍ-SCOIL

The teacher was a voluntary worker during the first year and was assisted by a number of the mothers on a rota basis, each day Monday to Friday. Each daily session lasted for 2 hours then from 10.00am to 12 noon.

Today we have also an afternoon session and 16 children have graduated to Bun-Scoil Ghaelach at Shaws Road Belfast, with new additions to both schools after each summer recess.

COMMITMENT

The development of An Naí-Scoil Programme demands a high commitment from the parents of the children.

Enrolment is very strict as parents at interview are required to give an undertaking that they will learn the Irish language and promote it in the home.

Parents must also give a firm commitment to be fully involved in their children's education. And there is a rota duty for parents in daily school business and for the mini-bus duties.

Parents are also required to attend

TEACHER AND NAÍ-SCOIL
CHILDREN BESIDE MINI-BUS

meetings, participate in all fund raising activities and to participate in the annual summer play scheme.

Currently 16 children attend An Naí-Scoil daily and current enrolment will ensure full capacity until 1988.

FINANCE

Unfortunately grant aiding has not been available from statutory sources so An Naí-Scoil has to generate its own cash.

Parents pay a weekly subscription to cover play equipment, refreshments, etc.

A £3 weekly charge covers transport costs per family (regardless of numbers of children) to Bun-Scoil, Shaws Road, Belfast.

10 per cent of the two teachers salaries must be met annually by Naí-Scoil committee.

Purchase and upkeep of a 15 seater mini-bus alone has cost over £3,000 since September 1985.

All monies are raised by voluntary means by the Committee, by, for example, sponsored runs, ballots, Ceilís, social evenings, Pippa Dee parties, and private donations.

Our task to make ends meet financially is enormous since we have no steady means of raising funds, but we feel our efforts to date are no mean achievement, and should we become more financially secure in the future then we could afford to expand our programme further to include more frequent visits to the Donegal Ghaeltacht (Northern region of County Donegal, where Irish is spoken as the first language.) Continued on Col 1 P. 2.



Mac Art - P

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We have succeeded in our main aim though. We have produced Gaelge speaking school children, 16 of whom are now being educated through Irish at Shaws Road Belfast.

Prepared in Mac Airt Nái-Scoil our children hold their own on merit with the best in their class rooms.

This progress has had a tremendous-ly positive effect on both the pride of the parents, and the morale of the people of the Parish district.

They have seen now that it is possible in the Short Strand to rear and educate children to be bi-lingual, and for those children to attend on merit a school which boasts a consistently high success rate in 11+ examination results.

HOPES FOR THE FUTURE

Our hopes for the future are so ambitious as to seem at times unattainable. The Committee of All Nái-Scoil in Belfast, under the guidance of Bun-Scoil Ghaelach endeavour to acquire and construct a second purpose built Bun-Scoil — Primary School.

Costs for land and building would be enormous and further major difficulties include planning, staffing, recognition and grant aiding by the appropriate authorities and administration.

I am a parent of a little girl and boy who both attend Mac Airt Nái-Scoil. My older son also passed through this unique nursery school. Unique as it is all Irish language used in it.

This nursery started 4 years ago, with absolutely nothing. But a few parents with determination that their children would start their young lives with a knowledge of their native tongue.

But as anyone knows nothing happens without money. So we started a think tank of ideas of how this could be done. Well we ran ballots asking shops or clubs to donate something for us to ballot. And we also had teas and party plan clothes parties.

But we got the commission instead of clothes. We sponsored some runners of the Belfast Marathon.

We got our families to also sponsor these people. Although the Government didn't want to help us money-wise. We had to abide by their rules.

We had to register with the pre-school playgroups and insure ourselves against all mishaps. Even when we buy books we have to pay for the Irish translation to be put into them.

We have to buy sand paints, paper, crayons, toys, books and puzzles, bikes, slides, prams — and all the other things that make a nursery successful.

ELENOR KEENAN



MAC AIRT NAI SCOIL CHILDREN

Náiscóil Mhic Airt first opened in May 1980. The aim of the Náiscóil was to promote the Irish language. One other Irish nursery school was already operating in West Belfast at that time, and had been a great success.

Náiscóil Mhic Airt opened its doors for the young children of the Short Strand area in East Belfast.

Then, as now, Náiscóil Mhic Airt finds it very hard to function financially. It is one of the few nursery schools that is not grant-aided.

The nursery school is situated in one of the most deprived areas of Belfast, which makes it impossible to fund raise in the area for the Náiscóil.



JIGSAWS AND PAPERWORK

Bunscoil

BY P. CARMICHAEL

The ages of the children who attend the Náiscóil range from 2 year old to 5 year old. Once the children reach five, they will leave the Irish nursery school to attend the only Irish speaking Primary School (Bunscoil Ghaelach) in Belfast.

This school is situated in West Belfast, some five miles away.

There are now 10 children from the Short Strand area attending the Bunscoil Ghaelach. This also has put a great financial strain on the parents.

Parents Views



The children who attended the Naíscoil at first were mostly children from families where one or other of the parents were either fluent, or learning the language. But such was the influence that these first children had on both adults and children alike, in the Short Strand area, that the Naíscoil has grown from one class of seven children to two classes of sixteen children.

The parents can now leave their children at the Naíscoil and go and attend an Irish class in the same building. There are two Irish classes every day now taking place in the area.

BY MRS. P. CARMICHAEL.

Ghaelach

Bunscoil Ghaelach is attended by both Protestant and Catholic children alike, and we would hope one day that Naíscoil Mhic Airt will be attended by Protestant children.

Lately children from other districts have started to attend the Naíscoil, they mostly come from the Markets and Ormeau Road areas.

The people involved in Naíscoil Mhic Airt have great hopes for it and for the Short Strand area. We now know that only through these young children will we revive our language. They have given the Short Strand area new hope for the future.

My wife and I have a 4 year old son, Fergal, attending Mac Airt Naí-Scoil for over a year now. Our great regret is that all of our school-going children were not exposed to and educated through Ghaelige at an early age.

I began to learn Irish in the mid '70s, there was a big upsurge then in learning Irish all over Belfast.

A sudden awareness of identity among the young is how I would describe it. All brought about as a direct result of the troubles.

Almost every new baby born in our small district was given an Irish name at baptism, this trend was obviously spontaneous rather than planned as it continued all over nationalist areas of the city.

Many of the names were 'new' to me, in fact I had never heard of them until I began to learn my native tongue, and to my surprise found they were ancient Irish names as old as Ireland herself.

A new pride was all around us, born out of 'trouble' political unrest, repression.

Our first two children attend the local primary school and their teaching was, and still is in English, our third child's education has started at Mac Airt Centre in Ghaelige and when he turns 5 years old he will go to Bun-Scoil Ghaelach (Irish Primary School), Shaws Road, Belfast.

This is something we are both very proud of, and it has made an enormous change in our family's life and way of thinking.

When my wife and I first started our family we just didn't know that it was 'possible' to rear our children as Gaelic speakers.

Now a complete transfiguration has come over us, our second two children listen in awe to stories of Cú Chulainn and the Red Branch Knights, Clann Lír, Oisín i dtír na nóg, etc.

While the two oldest children enjoy stories like Liam na Sopóige (Will-O-The-Wisp). This great change has meant lots of extra work for us, yet I must admit work is not a fitting word for it, it's more a labour of love.

Because of our child attending the Naí-Scoil my wife is learning Irish, and when baby Liam is three years old, he too will attend Naí-Scoil, and we both use what Irish we have as much as possible at home with 'all' the children.

We find the extra study we have to do to teach and sometimes to keep up with our children has involved us greatly, like we had never imagined, in directing their education, and Sunday is a special day every week, as a trip across town to attend Mass in Ghaelige is now a family tradition.



BUNSCOIL CHILDREN IN MINI-BUS



Mac Art Nursery School

24A, BEECHFIELD STREET, BELFAST . 5.

SPIN OFF BENEFITS

The spin off benefits from the Irish speaking nursery school are most evident in our district perhaps because we are a very small area with well defined boundary lines, often referred to as a postage stamp on a very large envelope (East Belfast.)

Irish awareness is growing daily among the population with well attended classes in Mac Airt Centre three mornings per week to cater for the unemployed and parents of Naí-Scoil.

Children's classes continue four nights each week for all others interested in learning the language.

Two years ago our Naí-Scoil teacher succeeded in encouraging the local primary school to reinstate Irish language back onto the school curriculum after a number of generations of absence. So far we have not achieved a similar type of break through in secondary schools.

The recently formed Mac Airt Gaelic Football Club carried off their first trophy in just their second year of existence



MAC AIRT GAELIC FOOTBALL TEAM

in the South Antrim Bórd na n-Óg Football tournament, beating many of the oldest established clubs in West Belfast on the way.

The Coogan school of traditional Irish dancing (Short Strand Class) enjoys great success displaying their talents giving regular dancing exhibitions throughout Belfast and surrounding area.

The dancers ages range from 5 – 15 years and many are past pupils of the Naí-Scoil.

Tin Whistles classes have proved very popular among both boys and girls with some graduating onto learn to play the concert flute.



COOGAN SCHOOL OF TRADITIONAL IRISH DANCING

A series of lectures is currently underway locally, delivered by an historian from the Ulster Museum. The most popular topics covered so far are : Navan Fort (County Armagh) an ancient Celtic Fort , perhaps one of the most important sites in Europe, not to mention Ireland, presently under threat from quarrying and in need of national and international support.

A lecture on Mac Airts Fort stimulated great interest among young and old alike as it referred directly to the ancient townland of the O'Neill's of Ulster, where we presently live in County Down.

History came alive that night in Mac Airt Centre, the people began to realise the importance of the cultural committee's earlier decision to take advantage of the redevelopment programme to re-name new areas of our district after the traditional townland names of our ancient past, for example Mac Airt, Lough Lea, Clandeboyne and Cinal Owen.

Social evenings through our area are more often Céilí Mór nights now, much to the delight of a certain section of the old residents.

Céilí dancing as well as being most enjoyable reminds us of days gone by – take us back to our roots. The dynamo which has generated the interest for this revival and new awareness came from a tiny embryo named Mac Airt Naí-Scoil (Mac Airt Nursery School), born some five years ago and which is developing well an identity and culture re-discovered.

MAC AIRT NAI-SCHOIL
IS A REGISTERED CHAR-
ITY No. X0266.

Donations can be sent to:

The Treasurer,

Mac Airt Nai-Scoil,

24A, Beechfield Street, Bt. 5.