

## Reenascreena Group Water Scheme -- 30 years on

Contributed by Ted Coakley  
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At first glance, it would appear that the area around Reenascreena is ideal for all kinds and methods of water supply. The Argideen River rises here with sources from three different points; a strong tributary, called the Glashagloragh, comes from the northern side and the Rowry river has a source nearby, too. We have two lovely lakes: Corran and Lough Atariffe. There is a share of wet land like cut-away bogs, marshes and many streams; our rainfall levels are considerably high. But when efforts were made to sink or bore for water, the aforementioned facts hold little relevance towards having success due to the fact that the rock formation locally is not conducive to the retention of water in most wells and boreholes. The hardship that this visited on the local population is hard to calculate and now, many years later, it seems difficult to understand. Buckets, barrels, churns and the famous sweet-tins, were used to transport and store water that was drawn from a well for domestic and personal use. The problems for livestock management were huge: nearly every farm had some pigs and most householders kept a cow or two.

The arrival of Summer was a period of much difficulty especially for those involved in making a living from dairying as many fields were now no more than a route to the nearest water point; indeed some fields were called "passage fields" and pig farming had its own shortcomings. It was common for domestic wells to be "raided" by livestock in a desperate search to quench a thirst thereby adding to problems for personal water usage. Over the years some attempts were made by public representatives and would-be politicians to initiate some form of a public water supply- all such plans failed; Lisavaid Co-op collected names, at one stage, but did not take the matter any further. After all, we were now full members of the Common Market but none of the expected improvements were appearing on the horizon. Talk followed talk with nothing serious in the making until the arrival of Fr. Bertie O'Mahony to St. Peter's, Carrigfafa in the mid 1970s. His outlook on the area and its requirements, brought a fresh, progressive and practical approach- in other words, he meant business. A meeting was called in the Presbytery to discuss local needs and a water supply was deemed the first requirement; an overview of the district was described by one attendant as: "a place where depression is hanging off the bushes" - and few could disagree. A co-op was formed, made up of twelve members. Officers: chairman, Michael O'Sullivan; secretary, Michael Tobin; treasurers, Fr. O'Mahony and Ted Coakley- we also became the trustees. Our solicitor: Michael Pattwell, Clonakilty. A visit was made to Comhar Chumann Forbartha Chorca Dhuibhne- the West Kerry Co-operative, to see operations and get some ideas. In a short spell, negotiations were under way with Cork Co. Council and the local government department dealing with a private group water supply. Local people were asked for £10 pounds as a deposit for joining a survey to determine interest and quotations were sought from prospective contractors, and other suppliers, to carry out the project. It was estimated that fifty to eighty members would join the scheme and Lough Atariffe would be the source of water.

**A CHANGE OF PLAN** The number of clients who wished to join the scheme soon surprised everybody; 200 had paid a deposit in a short time and the Cork Co. Council now indicated that they favoured the Reenascreena area becoming part of the Clonakilty Regional Water scheme with supply being piped from just west of the town all the way back to our area. As one can imagine, this caused much discussion for the organisers as it seemed that this was likely to become a big operation with a lot of added responsibility not to mention the time and effort factors. Such concerns turned out to be fully justified. Many unexpected events took place: we were officially told one day that no grants would be paid to householders and farms who had already drawn a grant for a water supply and we had only 2 members who had not got a grant, already. So we had an impasse and the whole operation was stopped- but we could not tell anyone. After long and hard talking in which our newly appointed chairman was deeply involved, the government department changed their minds and decided to pay grants again in

respect of all .During this time the numbers grew further and eventually settled around 525. But one of the facets that caused much disappointment for the organisers was that many other areas that wished to join the scheme could not be facilitated . In Knockmore , the basic fee of £10 was gathered and similar happened in Madarana and Dungannon. The main problem was, however, to get committed people who were prepared to take on the organising in these local areas , be responsible for it and, of course, complete the job. The work already in progress was very demanding-to put it mildly. The meetings with officials from the County Council, Local Government and others were too numerous to mention - how we managed to hold onto the jobs we had already seems difficult to believe looking at it now and the hardship and stress that this caused was never addressed. But there was one coincident that we benefited from: our chairman, Michael O`Sullivan was based in Cork at the time and the head official of the Local Government department dealing with water schemes was living nearby; his name was Jerry O`Mahony . He and Michael did not know each other but that soon changed and many meetings were held in both private residences -usually late at night! Jerry was one official who treated us with courtesy and respect at all times in doing his duty. At local level, Michael Anthony Harte from Clonakilty Council office , was a pleasure to deal with and a great professional. One must remember, that it was normal for the officers to meet on 8 to 10 times during the week so co-operation was welcome from any quarter. This routine continued for almost 2 years and mobile phones were not in use.

**WORK BEGUN BUT NOT HALF DONE** When work got underway,Reenascreena had never seen the likes of this before with the possible exception of the Rural Electrification Scheme which was done mostly overland anyway : this water scheme dug up the roadways, delayed traffic, provided some employment but, most of all, we had a topic for discussion in which nearly everyone was an expert but with different standards. CMS Construction Dunmanway were awarded the main part of the project, Avonmore Electrical were the electricians and Buttevent Concrete erected the water tank in Denis O`Sullivan`s farm in Maularane for which I believe he was paid £10 but planning permission did not arise . To facilitate the design of the scheme, another tank of 10000 gallons was built on Denis O`Donovan`s farm in Foxhall; concrete blocks were used with local labour in an effort to reduce costs! The big share of this work fell Fr. O`Mahony, Mick O`Sullivan, Michael Tobin and myself and all of the dissatisfaction was ours to handle. Most importantly we were the trustees and the significance of this was to be realised later as well as the mistake of not making all the 12 original co-op board members trustees also- this would have shared the burden and may have focused minds.

Problems soon arose, due in the most part to our inexperience and an urgent need to get water running right now and not later. This was added to by much impatience on the part of the locals; in fact one committee member declared: " if they had shown the same urgency over all the years, they would have got a supply decades ago". Obviously, they were learning fast! The departure of Fr. O`Mahony to missionary work in Peru - right in the middle of operations-added to our hardship but no one questioned his major and outstanding contribution. It became clear, that we must learn as we go along. Most council officials kept well away at this time and did not even supply an overseer for the job. It was quite clear, that the committee must attempt to now take on that extra task as planners as well as collecting outstanding money, directing contractors, attending to legal requirements and a many of other items.

#### A FEW LAUGHS

Despite all the pressure, or maybe because of it, there were a few

good laughs along the way. On one particular night, there was a group out collecting money for the scheme and they had a number of good exchanges. It was pouring rain when they approached one local to ask him if he would be interested in joining the scheme. He was using a big container at the gable of the dwelling house to collect rain water with a down-pipe from the roof and it was overflowing in the downpour. He gave a sound answer: "I won't join the scheme at all; haven't I the barrel filling!" Later on that night, the men approached a woman about her account and for some time the supply in that townland was interrupted. She expressed her anger as she waved a vice grip which she happened to be using at the time to turn the stopcock just in case the water might be flowing again. She is reputed to have inquired: "Which wan of ye turned off my water on me?" She did not get an answer and her account was not updated that night, it seems; the collectors beat a hasty retreat - probably to the nearest pub. There was also the case of the committee member who had the task of ordering some plastic piping to be used on the scheme: he caused disbelief at Lisavaird Co-op headquarters when they could not believe his query to Tom Hayes: "Tom, how much for 5 miles of ¾ inch piping?". The official opening of the scheme was on the main evening national news complete with video clip, it was described as the biggest private group water in Ireland- a title it probably holds to this day. One newspaper correspondent, on entering the hall asked about facilities for the press- he was directed to the window-sill near the stage where he could not use a chair as the sill was too high! But there is no fun like local fun: there was a gang returning home from a night out and the driver of the car knew that one particular passenger could become easily annoyed with any further bad news about the water scheme; he soon realised that the big concrete panels for the main tank, up in Maularane were laying flat but placed in a circle and ready for erection on the next day when a special machine would arrive to do the job. On arrival at the site, they all came out of the car and the driver "explained" what had really happened- the tank had collapsed! The aforementioned passenger got very upset- as expected - and wanted to meet some member of the organising committee at once and get his money back. Not alone that, but the news that the tank had "fallen", spread like wild fire but before many came to inspect this "calamity", the tank was built and has held many millions of gallons since then.

## NEGATIVES

A negative aspect, permeated through many of our operations especially when the going got tough and that was quite often! These were some of the popular refrains: "some fellas paid nothing to join the scheme", "I heard a smart man saying that the water will never flow into that big tank", "There is so much stuff like salt in it, that not even a cow will drink it-sure I tried it on one of `em"- this referred to the air bubbles in the water especially when it is newly turned on and the pressure high. It seemed that many were, indeed, anticipating failure and they wished to express an advanced degree of knowledge and prediction! However, not all negatives were entirely local. When we, the organising committee were in difficult consultations with the council about funding, one senior official commented: "If ye want more money, can't ye run a few dances". At a meeting of the Co. Council our scheme came up for debate - again and again. When expressing his view Cllr. Joe Walsh, was reported to have said that our scheme was a "hames" and this did not look like a compliment! But a week, not to mention a month, is a long time in politics and this public representative became one of our greatest supporters.

## GOD`S HELP IS NEARER THAN THE DOOR, SOMETIMES.

When Western Plant Hire from Durras were given the stage 2 contract of the installation it was a breath of fresh air and they had a daily

schedule that was hectic - they wanted the job completed as soon as possible. Pat O'Neill and Timmy O'Donovan told us that we will "do all the organising work in Bealad" and that was music to our ears. Men like these two were rare as they took on responsibility for their local area and indeed helped in other places too. It seems hard to believe that so very few locals were willing to offer help of any description, perhaps they did not want to be associated with a sinking ship? When one contractor summonsed us to the High Court, Kieran Calnan of Rosscarbery volunteered to mediate and he negotiated a settlement-one meeting in the hall was a very heated affair and lasted for six and a half hours without a break. Denis Murphy of Cashel described the meeting as "one you could never forget". When our bank, A.I.B, were getting worried, and for good reason, we managed to get some guarantors to ease some of the burden on the trustees- the bank demanded this. Some people refused us but most people asked were willing to sign the dotted line. Jim O'Keeffe was the bank's official dealing with the scheme even though his task was unenviable he was polite at all times. He told one of our meetings that the bank "did not wish to be forced into a situation where they would have to sell part of Ted Coakley's farm". Yes, we owed the bank £80,000 and did not know where the next pound might come from! It must be noted too that in most cases people gave rights-of-way with little hesitation and we did not have to use one set of traffic lights on any road. There was not one serious accident throughout the whole operation which was remarkable when one realises that the main "digging" was going on for about 2 years but the officers of the scheme held their responsibilities for a total 7 years as different tasks came up for completion. The Council took over the scheme in November 1982 and this also marked the end of the Reenascreena Co-Operative.

**STRANGERS IN REENASCREENA**At short notice, we got a request from Cork Co. Council to be available to meet a group of forty-four engineers, from several African countries, India, Arabia and Japan who, for some strange reason, wished to visit our scheme! They were attending the Institute of Local Government Studies at the University of Birmingham. Fr. O'Mahony and I went to Clonakilty to meet them- they were travelling by bus. Along with some staff of the council, we drove towards Reenascreena and stopped at the pump house in Castleventry. Communication between the council and the visitors must have been poor as the visitors though this was an irrigation scheme- yes, for Reenascreena! Then we moved to the village and passing through was a donkey and cart with churns of milk en route to the creamery. The visitors had their cameras out and reckoned that it was unusual to use a donkey to draw water in this way; we did not "correct" their impressions.

At the meeting in the hall, they were surprised that Fr. O'Mahony was not a politician but I added that his work was of more benefit to the community in his present role. After a full chat about our operations, the bus-load left the village and the courtesy of a card expressing thanks followed later. I do not know if any of those people ever visited here again but in July 1977 they made up the most international audience to ever attend locally.

Taking the opposite situation, I can tell you that on numerous occasions, we were invited and attended meetings in other localities to relate our experiences as the officers of a group water scheme: Ballygarvan, Kealkil, Adrigole near Skibbereen and Castlehaven are the ones that spring to mind but we were not able to give such projects as much attention as we would have liked. The extent of the big changes, now taking place, were highlighted to me when my neighbour, John Collins, who was a ganger with the County Council, referred to the day a passer-by stopped to chat during roadworks near Deasy's Bridge. The man said so many strange things were taking place now, that one day we might see the same river water flowing back

west the other way ! John thought that this was such a silly remark that the man must have been drinking all morning; however, years later he said to me, personally : "Would you believe, that I have now seen that water going back west in the opposite direction?"

#### WHAT IF IT HAD NOT HAPPENED OR FAILED?

What if the scheme had not been implemented or failed ? I do not fear contradiction when I say: had it been left to the State bodies , the scheme would not have happened. Our quality of life would have been seriously comprised and this place would not be as affluent as it is today. Just look at dairying: there is no doubt but that the milk supply from local farms would be severely curtailed only for the supply of water- the famous milk quota problems would be of an entirely different nature. The average fee paid by farmers in 1978 to join the scheme , was the price of one calf. Sites for building houses would be of little value and this would reduce population levels even more not to mention the worth to the lucky sellers. But most of all, the scheme was a very cheap job for Cork Co. Council when they were able to have local people implementing a programme which the Council itself should be putting in place and had ignored for decades. In retrospect, it looks extraordinary that it was often a "privilege" to get a meeting with the same Council officials and that the voluntary workers were shabbily treated in many respects. Please note, that the beneficiaries of the scheme and Cork Co. Council did not pay anything whatsoever to the private costs of these local voluntary workers. The public representatives on the Council found it hard to understand these people from Reenascreena - at the outset. I think it was the speed at which we got things done that was unbelievable but after our first meeting with them , they were "on our side". It must be noted here that our district was not even listed for any such works when we began and suddenly much was being achieved. I take this opportunity to relate an item related to me by Cllr. John L.O`Sullivan, who became was a great supporter: "Do you realise that some time ago, a supply of water was put in for holiday homes outside of Clonakilty and as far as I can see, they got it for nothing and did no voluntary work at all for it?" So, was there was a different law and rule for people around Reenascreena ? Other Councillors who championed our cause were: Vivian O`Callaghan, Michael Pat Murphy and John Cal McCarthy. At any rate, the water supply scheme today, and for many years to come, stands as a monument to local effort, to the public officials who backed it but most of all to the few individuals who had the foresight, stamina and determination to complete it - sometimes against great odds. I have written most of this article from personal recollections and I can say here that work was not done to gain gratitude and little gratitude was returned.

It is my belief that the Reenascreena Group Water Scheme surpassed all expectations and stands as a monument to community endeavour.

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