

AGE EXCHANGE UK

INTERVIEW WITH BATTERSEA IRISH GROUP

Maire Curran

"I was brought up with nuns in a convent, and I finished my education when I was 18. I was teaching the small children until I was 20 at the convent. I was born in Waterford City, and I was living at the convent in Cork when I was a child. When I was 20, I came to England on the Labour Exchange, somebody came from England, interviewed me, along with many other girls from the town. We came to England for seven and six, you had to come for nursing, domestic work or work in a factory, and I came for nursing.

I didn't stay nursing for a long time. I did it for about 2 years, and on the strength of that, I got a job as a nanny, looking after children. When I was teaching in Ireland, I was getting 5 shillings a week, and when I was nursing in England, I was getting £4 a month, and then when I was looking after the children, I was getting £2.10 Shillings a week. Over the years I had many, many different jobs, until I got married. I married a widower, he had four children and we had five, and so you could say that I've had quite a hard life, altogether."

Martin Fahey

"I come from Galway, which is in the west of Ireland. The jobs I did in Ireland, well I had one job all my life, in a shoe shop. I was selling the shoes, mostly, and earned about 4 shillings a week in the beginning, but then it went up, and when I finished I was earning about £3 a week, which wasn't bad. But then I used to see a lot of people coming from England with big pay cheques, and I thought well, what am I doing here? So I applied to come to England, and when I got to England I was very disappointed, because I was earning more money in Ireland than I was in England. I still had to send money home to Ireland, because I was married in at the time, of course I was losing money then, but I survived I managed to get on.

It was beautiful in the shoe shop; well I was my own boss, really. Of course you sold shoes then, really sold them, now I'll try to explain that. If a pair of shoes was marked at twelve and eleven, we would have to start at about nineteen and eleven, and go down to the twelve and eleven. The barter trade, that's what they call it. So we would spend plenty of time with that customer, but then you had plenty of time, and if you didn't sell the shoes, the boss would say, 'What happened to that customer?' And he'd go after that customer to find out why I hadn't sold that pair of shoes. It was hard, but we enjoyed it, we didn't mind it.

Then there was the repair factory at the back of the shop, and I tried to do that, but I could never get on with it, I never liked it at all. I worked long hours, I used to start in the morning at about 9 o'clock and end at about 8 o'clock. That was weekdays, no half day then. That was about 1927. Now of course you've got all holiday. We worked Saturday, we had to go in at 9 o'clock and no dinner, you had a sandwich at about 12 o'clock, and then work until about 10 o'clock at night. I was getting about 4 shillings a week at that time, the boss must have made a fortune out of it. He could afford to go to the Isle of Man every year for his holidays. I never got a holiday, no, when the holiday came, you got a week's holiday, but even then they used to argue about giving you the money for it. They were mean, really, they made a lot of money out of us. But we couldn't do anything about it."

Rose Murray

I am from Armagh. In Ireland I was doing housework. I was in service, and I earned about 5 Shillings a week. My first job was in a farmhouse, and I did the milking and the cleaning and the hay and the corn and everything. Then I moved to Belfast to a job in a nursing home. I was there a good many years, and then I came over here. I was doing several jobs over here, housework, and working in restaurants, and I worked a while in the NAAFI during the war. I got married over here, and there's two daughters over here.

Seamus Kineally

I come from Ring, Co Waterford. I went to school until I was 18, a misspent youth I called it. I went to a National School and then went to a Technical School afterwards. I used to work in a drapery stores and I didn't get anything, as I was supposed to be serving my time, an apprenticeship. I did that for 3 years, not a penny at all, and my parents had to buy me my lunch every day, and I had to cycle 6 miles to town and 6 miles back, in winter and summer.

However I got a bit fed up with this treatment, and at the end of 1944 I came over to England. When my father heard this, he said, 'Boy, no Christian would live in that country'. I was young blooded and wild and I wanted to get away, so I came to Staffordshire. I got a job there on the railroad, and I couldn't believe my eyes that first week, I got £9 wages. That was great money in them days. I used to go home to Ireland every year, on that small pay. In 1953 I got married and I had 3 children. Before that I joined the Police and went out to the Middle East, and spent two and a half years in Palestine. It was beautiful out there, but we were thrown out in 1948.

Mary Griffiths

I'm from Co Kilkenny. I never had a job in Ireland. I went into training when I was 19 and a half, my people had to pay a premium, and provide me with my nurse's uniform, and then it was so difficult to get in, they'd nearly want to know why you were born! When you did go in, you were supposed to be on probation for 3 months, during which time you got no pay at all. After that, you got paid £1 a month, for the first year, that was £12 a year, the second year £18, the third year £24, and you were taking a great deal of responsibility, and the fourth year you got £36. When you finished your training you just had to leave, because there were no jobs. I did my training in a teaching hospital in Dublin. I sat one of my exams in St. Vincent's Hospital. When I finished my training, I did some private work for a time, and you went out to a patient's house and stayed there, and for that I got £2 a week. That was for working 7 days a week and night calls if you were required.

Then when I got a little bit of money, I decided to do midwifery, and had I gone to the Rotunda, one of the Dublin hospitals, I would have had to pay a premium of 30 Guineas, to get the uniform, which would have been an extra expense. Instead of that, I saw an advert for the Glasgow Royal Maternity Hospital, and you could wear what uniform you had, and the premium was 10 Guineas. Of course you worked for nothing, no pay, but I went to Glasgow and got the exam, then I went home to Ireland for a bit, and then I went back to Dundee.

Thomas O'Donnell

I come from a farm at Anascaul in County Kerry. I was reared on a farm, and I went working for a while to a local farmer and I left there and I went to the County Kildare to work for Bord Na Mona, as they say here to 'keep the home fires burning'. At that time there was no coal in Ireland so there was camps put up to develop the bog, thousands of Bord Na Mona workers from different parts all worked there. So I was there from 26th June

to the 20th December 1948. I used to go home at Christmas, of course, and I came here in the April of 1948 and I'm here since.

When I went to Bord Na Mona, you were not paid a hourly, but according to what we done. The work was fairly hard, but the money was fairly good, and I was able to earn as much there as I was when I first came to England working for a building firm. The first pay here, after stoppages, was £5.10, and I was getting that, with my food, in Ireland. At Bord Na Mona, there was 15 camps and roughly 300 people, you know, and there was a recreation room and the grub was not too bad, plenty, there was no food rationing in Ireland, the butter might be a bit slack, but as regards meat and potatoes, there was plenty of that. So I came here in 1948, and I went working with a builder, and I did all right.

William Branklin

I was born in Antrim, but I lived most of my life in Armagh. I started work on a farm even before I left school. I used to work in my summer holidays for the 6 weeks holidays on the farm. It was a case of having to like it. When I left school at 14 years of age, I went to work on the farm for good. I got 4 Shillings a week with food, 6 days a week, and also go over Sunday morning and evening, because you couldn't say, 'I'll feed the cows on Monday'. I stayed there for some time, I left the farm, and then I went into the public house trade, the wine and spirit trade in Ireland... and I served 3 years apprenticeship, I learned the trade from A to Z, right from the bottom to the top, that included stock taking and everything to do with that trade. Then after that I went to Belfast and I worked there in the public house trade for some years. Then I left there and I went to work with the American Forces.