

NEWS FOCUS THE GEEVAGH MEN'S SHED PROJECT

Boat building... and much more

LAST NOVEMBER, SLIGO SAW THE LAUNCH OF THE MEN'S SHEDS PROJECT, A WORLDWIDE INITIATIVE WHICH AIMS TO PROVIDE MEN WITH A PLACE TO MEET AND TALK. NOW, FIVE MONTHS LATER, HARRY KEANEY VISITS THE PROJECT IN GEEVAGH TO SEE HOW THINGS ARE PROGRESSING THERE.

THE RURAL quietness, like the low-lying clouds, loomed over Geevagh on a Thursday morning.

From inside the recently-renovated roadside hall came the intermittent tapping of a hammer, the whirr of a drill, and then a grunt of effort as someone gave the last twist to turn a stubborn screw just below the surface of a piece of timber. But this was about more than woodwork; rather, it's the continuation of the area's ancient tradition of boatbuilding that has rippled out over the ages from around nearby Lough Arrow, the island-strewn lake nestling in the heart of east Sligo.

And what better man to lead the way in this noble endeavour than Finian Dodd, a boat-builder whose family has been synonymous with the lake for generations. He also comes from a family of teachers, himself having been a woodwork teacher for 39 years in Coola Post Primary School before retiring in September 2010.

Now, although Finian might be in retirement, he still remains the teacher, a boat-lover living on the shore of Lough Arrow, with an array of skills and passions that dovetail perfectly as he plays his part in keeping the boat-building tradition alive by imparting his knowledge and craftsmanship to a group of local men in Geevagh Community Hall.

This is just one of the projects being undertaken by the Geevagh Men's Shed, which is operated by the much-lauded local group known as CLASP (Community of Lough Arrow Social Project) with support from the International Fund for Ireland.

Said Eamon Haran, coordinator of the CLASP Programme: "The first thing we had to do was to do up the hall, and we started doing that last November with a FAS Scheme and the Rural Social Scheme. It was a great start for us to get the hall. Having our own place was a big advantage."

The boat that Finian and about 15 other men are now working on is a 5.2 metre long rowboat. Although it will have place for an outboard motor, it can also be used with a sail.

"What we are trying to do is get the skills levels up so that we can start on a clinker-built traditional Lough Arrow style boat. We are here every Wednesday night at it and interest in it is growing," said Finian.

The thinking behind the Men's Shed idea, which originated in Australia, is to enable men to come together and "talk face to face rather than shoulder to shoulder." And in the Geevagh Men's Shed, the shared interests of about 40 men is not just the boatbuilding but also gardening and woodwork - all activities that hopefully could, in time, become self-sustaining businesses.

"It allows men to socialise without any pressure," explained Niall Culklin, community development worker based in Geevagh. He told how some people call him "the boss," but he insisted that is not the situation. "The men tell me what they want to do and I will try and organise it," he said.

He explained that because of the recession and unemployment, rural and social isolation were now a lot worse. "Work was a social outlet for men. They would go to work and socialise and chat. But if you do not have that work circle, it deepens the sense of isolation and exclusion. During the day, there are lads who come in here just for a cup of tea and a chat and it's good for sanity. There is no pressure to be here at a certain time nor to stay for a certain time."

For others, such as John Kerins, who works as a home-help with CLASP, it's the preparation of a new organic vegetable garden that's the attraction. "I love the gardening. It's a chance to meet people and there's no pressure," he said.

"The frame for our polytunnel is up and now we are waiting for the weather to put up the plastic," said Niall, adding that most of the produce is for those who grow it but "we might look at selling at farmers' markets."

And for those not interested in the boatbuilding or the new vegetable garden, there's the making of garden furniture such as flower boxes, seats, benches and picnic tables. Recently, the Men's Shed presented flower boxes to Geevagh Local Area Development (GLAD) for village enhancement purposes.

According to Eamon Haran, the "grand plan" would be to have the men trained in boatbuilding, with an "ideal scenario" being "the men themselves taking it over as a business." There are similar hopes for the making of the garden furniture.

Meanwhile, men who wish to obtain training on computers may benefit from informal, one-on-one tuition on Tuesdays in the Geevagh Shed from Transition Year students from Coola Secondary School. As Niall explained, many men might be embarrassed to go into a classroom setting, hence the value of these one-on-one sessions.

A cross-Border element to the Geevagh Men's Shed is that a group in Lisnaskea, Co. Fermanagh, is also building a boat, and there are hopes that both the Geevagh and Lisnaskea boats might be launched together. Geevagh Shed members also hope to visit the Wise Men of the East Group in Belfast as part of a cultural exchange.

With all these activities, there is certainly much opportunity for men around the Lough Arrow area to come together and talk, which is, after all, the very essence of the Men's Shed idea.



Involved in building a boat at the Men's Shed in Geevagh are (from left): Joe Cullen, Eoin Cullen, Eamon Haran, Finian Dodd, Niall Culklin, Joe Laing, Declan Mullaney, Martin Clerkin, Jimmy Cullen and John Kerins.



Declan Mullaney and John Kerins plant flowers in one of the wooden boxes made at the Men's Shed.



Finian Dodd working on the frame of the boat.



Matt Reihan and Thomas Joseph Furey having a cuppa and a chat.



LEFT: Members of the CLASP Men's Shed hand over a flower box they made to the Geevagh Local Area Development Group. Back, from left: Jimmy Cullen, Tadgh Mulvey, Tom O'Rourke, Gerry Breheny, Joe Cullen, Declan Mullaney, Eamon Bruen, Maura Cullen and Paddy Joe Conlon. Front: Aaron Mulvey, Eoin Conlon, Eoin Cullen.

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