

Hurling in Gort.

Paddy Cooke

The present Gort Hurling Club was founded at the turn of the 20th century shortly after the diocesan reorganisation, which brought into existence the present parish of Gort by amalgamating Kilmacduagh, Kiltartan and portion of Gort Town and surrounds, which then were included in the parish of Beagh. This brought the number of Clubs in the new parish to three, the others being Kilmacduagh and Kiltartan. Gort adopted colours of Blue and White, while Kiltartan had a red strip with white cuffs and Kilmacduagh wore blue with gold cuffs and collars

The Club has been in continuous existence since then and is the oldest sporting Club in the parish. That is however not to say that the game of hurling was not played in Gort prior to the early 1900's. Seamus J King in his History of Hurling quotes an extract from the 18th century newspaper Pue's Occurrences describing a match played in Gort on 16 October 1759 between two teams representing Galway and Clare for a purse of 100 guineas.

John Gormally of Gort, who was Secretary of Galway Co Board in the early part of the 20th century, recorded also that "The men of Gort went on horseback to play the men of Offaly in Athlone on 15th August 1854. The team comprised of 21 players and Gort won by 2 goals to 1 goal" Likewise, the late Athair Padraic O Laoi in his annals of the G.A.A. in Galway Vol. 1. makes repeated references to teams and individuals from Gort, Kilmacduagh and Kiltartan participating in championships, tournaments and athletic contests held in the County from the 1880's onwards.

Michael Cusack, a founder member of the G.A.A. in 1884, had been a teacher in Lough Cutra School for some years beforehand. In 1885 shortly after the establishment of the G.A.A., Cusack invited Dan Burke of Georges Street (grandfather of Gerard Burke, presently trading in Georges Street) who was then Gort Captain to select a team from South Galway to play North Tipperary. The Team which was drawn from Kilmacduagh, Kilbeacanty, Peterswell, Kiltartan, included Edward (Ned) Treston from Crowe Street, Thomas Keehan, The Square and Michael McCarthy Georges Street. Indeed prior to the game, which was played on 16th February 1886 in the 15 Acres in the Phoenix Park Dublin, there was a discussion between the captains of both teams as to the size of the sliothar as the sliothars used by both teams varied in size and weight. Arising from this, Ned Treston who was a saddler by trade, made a sliothar at a saddlery near Dublin Castle, and this was used during the game. This sliothar became the prototype for the modern one used universally nowadays. For the record North Tipperary won by 1 goal to no score.

As the Association strengthened through the 1890/1900's, so also did the fortunes of Gort Hurling Club and 1914 saw the Club winning the Senior County title for the first time. Beaten in the 1915 final by Craughwell, Gort regained the title again in 1916. Members of those teams included Jim and Joe Stanford, Pat, Michael and John Hayes

Jack and Josie ('Crab') Fahey, Eddie and Matt Nestor, Matt Halvey, B.(Babby) and S Stack, Pat Cooke, Tom Mack, Pat Roche, Jim Morris, Josie Kelly D. Reynolds and B. Gibbs. P. J. Cooney, John Quinn, John Spelman, Martin Farrell and Colman Quinn. Many of these also played with Galway Co Senior Team.

The political upheavals from 1916 onwards pushed hurling into the background, and it was not until 1923 Senior Hurling All Ireland Final, that the Club again came to the forefront when club members Jimmy Morris, Ned Gilmartin and Bernie Gibbs were on Galway's first All Ireland winning team. The Galway team were also trained by Jack Berry of Gort.

At local level the establishment of the South Board in 1913, saw teams from Gort, Kilmacduagh and Kiltartan compete at different levels in both South Board and County Championships with varying degrees of success. Indeed there are many stories concerning the legion of matches by these teams with South Board teams from Ardahan, Kilbeacanty, Beagh, Ballindereen, Kinvara, Clarinbridge Kilchreest and Craughwell, which were fought with fierce intensity 'for the honour of the parish' and which occasionally demanded a visit to either Doctors Marlborough or Fallon. Kilmacduagh in the 1920's had a formidable team and won 5 South Junior titles between 1919 and 1927 and beat Gort in the Senior South final of 1930. Gort recorded South Senior title victories in 1914, 1916, 1919, 1920 1922 1923 , 1929 and 1931 and also won South Junior titles in 1924 and 1926. Kiltartan won the South Senior Title in 1913, but success eluded them until 1935 when they annexed the South Junior Title and again did so in 1936.

Despite much effort and enthusiasm, honours at County level were slow in coming, but 1934 saw a welcome Senior County Title coming again to Gort. Members of that team included Mick Keating, Paddy Rock, Mattie Brennan, Martin Hayes, Jack Hardiman, Pete Howard, Stephen Carty, Paddy Icklam, Colie Cooney, Jack Deely, Paddy and Mick Linnane, Gerry Heenan, Joe Glynn, Tom Vaughan Michael Cahill, Patrick O'Connor, Johnny Gillane and Tom Staunton

In 1939 Galway won the All Ireland Junior title for the first time, and Gort were represented on this team, by Wally O'Connor of Crowe St and Brendan Moloney George's St.

The 1930/40/50's saw some wonderful hurlers play for Gort, but all too often economic circumstances forced many to emigrate. This effected teams at all levels so honours at Club level were sparse for the effort put in. Despite this however players of outstanding quality continued to emerge. Josie Gallagher, regarded by many countrywide as one of the greatest hurlers never to win an All Ireland, together with brother Stephen, Tadgh Kelly, Cyril Piggott, Tom Lambert, Algie and Willie O'Connor, Bobby Dooley, Jack McNeill, Tomas (Putsch) Howard, Paddy (Pud) Piggott, Micko and Jerome O'Shaughnessy, Vincent Moloney , Kevin Burke, Joe Pete Hehir (current Club President), Joe Cooney, Jack O'Connor Joe Keane Dick O'Connor and many others continued ploughing Gort's cause and while garnishing South Senior Titles in the 1942 and 1943 were unsuccessful at County level. Gort did reach a County Senior Final in 1948 but went down to Castlegar.

In 1947, an all Galway Team representing Connaught won the Railway Cup for the first time beating Munster in the final on the score 2-5 to 1-1. Josie and Stephen Gallagher together with Tadgh Kelly were on the winning team.

In the 1950/51 National League Final, Galway having defeated Wexford in the Home Final, travelled to New York and beat a New York team in the final proper on the score of 2-11 to 2-8 to win the title for

the first time. Gort had Josie Gallagher and Tadgh Kelly on the Galway team while Stephen Gallagher (Josie's brother) who had emigrated to the U.S. in 1949 was on the New York team.

The 1950's saw new developments, a major one of which was the establishment of Our Lady's College in Gort in 1956, under the Presidency of Fr. Christopher Burke, who was an enthusiastic hurling follower and coach. Another was the introduction of the one club per parish rule, which meant that the clubs in the parish became integrated by the early 1960's. About this time also the colours green and gold were adopted as club colours.

Gort Club won the Senior South Board championships in 1951,1953,1956, 1958, 1959 and 1961 and went on to win the 1958 Intermediate County title and 1964 County Junior and South Board titles. Stalwarts in those teams included Josie Gallagher Tadgh Kelly Paddy Fahy, Ronnie Burke, Gerry and Padraic Cahill Tom Crehan, Cyril Piggott, Cyril Glynn Tommy Walsh, James Murray, Johnny Spleman, Sean Cooke, Eric O Shaughnessy, Paddy Kelly, Tom Nolan, Paddy Killeen, Flan Considine, Con Randles, Paddy Mullins, Evan Heenan, John Commins, and Joe Gillane

Gort won the Juvenile South Board championships in 1953 with the Minor team also taking the South Board title, thus starting a seven year run which saw the club win the South Minor title each year up to 1959. Success at County level followed in 1957 when Gort Minors won the County Championship for the first time and again won in 1958 and 1959 becoming the first club to win the County Championship for three in a row. Noel Mullins was captain in 1957, Sean Devlin in 1958 and Joe Stanford in 1959- other team members included Hubert Courtenay, John Quinn, Gerry Burke, Ray Canning, Paddy Quinn, Paddy Cooke, Jack Hayes, Gerry Loughnane, P.J. Gillespie, Pat Coen, Billy Mc Neill, Marty McGrath, Lal Forde, Michael Regan, Tom Diskin, Brian Gilmartin, John Forde, Liam Gillane, Joe Cunniffe, Murty Kelly Martin Roche, Anthony Gillespie, Christy Glynn Brian Neilan and Gus Kelly.

Sean Devlin also captained the Galway Minor Team in 1958 in the All Ireland final against Limerick.

With the successes at Minor, Intermediate and Junior County level, the 1960's looked promising but unfortunately having reaching the Senior Co Semi Final in 1962 and going under to Turloughmore, and despite many spirited displays, success eluded Gort at all levels on the County stage apart from the 1964 Junior title already referred to. At county level Sean Devlin, James Murray, Gerry Cahill represented the Club with Devlin winning a Munster Intermediate Medal in 1962 during Galway's sojourn in that province.

The 1970's opened as the 60's had closed, being so near and yet so far with defeats at Co Senior Semi Final stages by Killimordaly in 1970 and Turloughmore in 1972. 1973 saw a change of luck with the club again taking the South Board senior title after a lapse of 12 years This was followed in 1974 when the Minors won the County and South Board Titles and with the emergence of younger players such as G.P. Fahy, Sylvie Linnane, John Nolan and Kevin Fahy, Gort reached the final stages of the County Senior League in 1977/78 and 1978/79, and lost out to Kinvara in the Senior Co semi Final of 1979.

The dissolution of the South Board and reorganisation of County structures in the mid 1970's meant a refocusing at County and Club level. The growing impetus and success at County level from the mid 70's onwards saw club players again coming to the fore. The Senior All Ireland triumph in 1980 saw Sylvie

Linnane win the first of his 3 Senior All Ireland medals. Gerry P. Fahy had been a regular on the Galway Senior team in the 78/79 League campaign, but had sustained a serious injury, which cut short his career, while Gerry Linnane had featured on the under 21 team and Pearse Piggott, Derek Fahy, Frank Shaw and Colie Roche played with the minors.

At club level the early 1980's proved to be one of the most successful eras. 1980 saw the club win the County Under 21 Championship for the first time beating Meelick- Eyrecourt at Tynagh. This gave a tremendous boost to Club confidence at all levels and set the stage for 1981 when the Club, captained by Sylvie Linnane, went on to beat Kiltormer in the County Final and win the Senior County Title for the fourth time thus closing a 47 year gap since the last Senior Title. To add to supporters' joy, the Under 21 team went on to retain the title, which they had won the previous year, again in 1981. In March 1982 the senior team beat Toureen in the Connacht Final, and went on to beat St Gabriel's London in Ballinasloe, in the All Ireland Quarter final before going down to James Stephens of Kilkenny in the All Ireland Club semi Final on April 25 on a score of 1-13 to 1-8.

The exertions in the All Ireland Championships showed in the displays of 1982 and the Senior Team exited the County Championship at the semi final stage. However the team, captained by Joe Harte, regrouped and regained the County Title in 1983 beating Castlegar in the County Final for a fifth Senior County title on a scoreline of 2-12 to 3-6. Further success followed when in September the Club's side won the All Ireland 7-a-side Tournament at Glenalbyn grounds Dublin on the eve of the Senior All Ireland.

In November Gort gained their second Connacht title by defeating Toureen on a score of 3-13 to 1-5. After a short break for training over the Christmas, Gort met the Cork and Munster Champions, Midleton in the All Ireland Semi Final at Limerick on April 14th 1984 and giving a tremendous display beat the Corkmen by 4 points on a scoreline of 1-11 to 2-4. The final was fixed for the following day in Birr, where Ballyhale Shamrocks of Kilkenny were the opposition and a hard and tensely fought game ended in a draw on 1-10 to each team. The replay in Thurles on June 3rd proved a major disappointment, as the Kilkenny team were victorious by 1-10 to 0-7.

The successes at both Senior and under 21 levels during the period 1980/84 brought together probably the strongest combination of players ever to represent Gort, and included Sylvie, Gerry and Martin Linnane, Matt Murphy, John Nolan, Tony and Christy Monaghan, Michael and Brian Brennan, Joe Harte, John John Commins, Michael Cahill, Joe Regan, Kevin Fahy, John Crehan, Gerry and John Lally, Colie Rock, Patsy Hehir, Pearse and Gabriel Piggott, Pat Neilan, Frank Shaw, Martin and Des Kerins, Gerry P. and Derek Fahy, Dermot Duffy, Kevin Nolan, Colie Roche, Patrick and Michael Helebert, Michael Mulcair, Gabriel Cloonan and Michael Mullins.

Gort's resurgence in the late 1970's/early 80's coincided with Galway's rise and players from the club featured prominently on many county teams both at that time and later in the decade. John John Commins won All Ireland honours at Minor level in 1983, Under 21 in 1986 and Senior in 1987 and 1988. Sylvie Linnane added Senior All Ireland medals in 1987 and 88, thus becoming one of a handful on Galway players to hold 3 Senior medals. Michael Flaherty and Michael Helebert won medals with the Under 21 All Ireland winning team of 1986. Pearse Piggott holds an All Ireland senior

medal. Others to represent the County included Kevin Fahy, Gerry Lally and Gerry Linnane. The club also had members on the Railway Cup, National League and Oireachtas winning teams of that era

Despite the disappointment of losing the 1983/84 All Ireland Club Final and the retirement of some of that team, Gort continued in the top ranks in the county but unfortunately no further success came their way, even though the senior team came out of the groups to the quarter and semi final qualifying stages for several years up to the 90's

The early 90's saw a new generation of players with county success coming at under 14 level in 1991. The under 14s also qualified for the County Final in 1993 but were unsuccessful. Success came at Minor level in 1992 with the club also taking a Junior B title in 1998. The Senior teams of the decade had mixed fortunes, qualifying to the quarter final stages on several occasions but not progressing beyond that, while on one or two occasions avoiding relegation. However the current crop of young players have been consistent over the past two seasons and with Ollie Fahy, Peter Cummin, Niall Linnane, Andy Coen, all of whom have inter county experience to the fore, hopes are that success at senior level may not be too far distant.

Over the years, from the time when there were 3 separate teams in the parish, various locations had been used as pitches. Ballynamanton House lawn was Kiltartan's pitch, whereas Kilmacduagh trained in Kerins field. Gort had a variety of locations including Carty's Field on the Ennis Road, Hardiman's field on the Loughrea Road, Rindifin where the present St Colman's Terrace is situated, Barry's field beside the river, Lahiffe's field where Topform is presently situated and St Colman's Park which has been home to the Club since the 1940's and which is still used to a lesser degree since the Club purchased the old Golf Club 27 acre grounds and premises at Ballybane in 1995. Currently these grounds are being developed and have been laid out into a regulation full sized enclosed pitch, an adult practise pitch and a smaller under age/camogie pitch. A stand with seated accommodation for 1000 persons, 4 dressing rooms/showers, a medical room and room for referee/officials, together with ladies and gents toilets are being developed alongside the enclosed pitch. Car parking spaces for up to 350 cars are also being set down, while the dressing rooms/showers in the club premises have been extended. Funding from the National Lottery has been received, which together with a FAS scheme and the Club weekly lotto have been the mainstay of the development so far.

While new and better facilities are necessary and very welcome for both players and spectators alike, success on the playing field is the life blood of any club. With that in mind, 2003 brings a new and yet recurring challenge, namely the winning of a County Championship. Hopefully we will not have to wait too long for that.