Centre Stage -
A History of Performing Arts in Newry and Mourne
A competitor at Newry Musical Feis, 1955
Newry and Mourne Museum Collection
Réamhrá an Chathaoirligh

Seo chugaibh réamhrá an leabhráin seo a théann leis an taispeántsas sealadach in Iarsmalann an Iúir agus Mhúrín, “I Lár an Aonaigh; Stair na dTaibh Ealaíon san Iúr agus Múrna”.

Tá Tionscadal na dTaibh Ealaíon seo san Iarsmalann maoinithe ag Ciste na gCnuasach Esmée Fairbairn. Is é cuspóir an tionscadail dhá bhliain seo ná cur le heolas an phobail faoi Chnuasach na dTaibh Ealaíon san Iarsmalann. Mar chuid den tionscadal, cíorann an taispeantás forbairt na dtaibh ealaíon in Iúr agus Múrna ó 18ú haois go dtí an lá atá inniu ann.

Sa cheantar maguaird, bhí paisean an phobail le feiceáil i gceol, i rince i ndráma agus sna healaíona agus is léir ón mholl mór ghrúpaí amharclainne, cheoldrámaíochta agus chumáinnt córúla a raibh ann thar na blianta. Bunaíodh Feis Cheoil an Iúir sa bhliain 1928 agus i mbliana táthar ag cómoradh 90 bliain ar an tsaoil. I ndeireadh na 1940í thosaigh Cheolchumann an Iúir, Féile Drámaíochta an Iúir aus Compántas Newpoint agus iad ag éirí go h-an mhaith go fóill.

Agus roinnt daoine a lean orthu rath náisiúnta agus idirnáisiúnta a bhaint amach mar gheall ar tiomantas na gcumann amaitéarach agus a ndíograis chun caighdeáin ghairmiúla a bhaint amach go háitiúil.

Thar ceann na hIarsmalainne, ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a ghabháil leo súd a d’fhreastail ar acharair na hIarsmalainne ar deantáin, doiciméid, agus eolas. Is móir againn a gcuid flaithiúlachta.

An Comhairleoir Róisín Uí Mhaolchroibhe
Cathaoirleach Chomhairle Ceantair an Iúir, Mhúrín agus an Dúin

Chairperson’s Foreword

I am delighted to write the foreword to this booklet which accompanies “Centre Stage; A History of Performing Arts in Newry and Mourne”, a temporary exhibition at Newry and Mourne Museum.

The Museum’s Performing Arts Project is funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund. The two year project aims to enhance public knowledge of the Museum’s Performing Arts Collection. As part of the project, the exhibition will examine the development of performing arts in Newry and Mourne from the 18th century to the present day.

The local area has displayed a huge passion for music, dancing, drama and arts, as the large number of theatrical groups, operatic and choral societies attest to. Newry Musical Feis which was formed in 1928 is celebrating its 90th anniversary this year. The late 1940s saw the emergence of Newry Musical Society, Newry Drama Festival and Newpoint Players, which are all still going strong today.

That many local talents go on to achieve national and international success is due to the commitment of these amateur societies and their dedication to achieving professional standards locally.

On behalf of the Museum, I would like to thank all those who responded to the Museum’s appeal for artefacts, documents and information. Their generosity is much appreciated.

Councillor Roisin Mulgrew  Chair of Newry, Mourne and Down District Council
Introduction

By the mid 18th century, Newry had become a prosperous merchant town with an emerging mercantile class who had an interest in the arts, education and culture. Early performances of music and drama in the town were by visiting companies such as the Smock Alley Players from Dublin and troupes from Belfast. The famous composer G.F. Handel reputedly gave a concert in Newry during his trip to Ireland in 1741-1742.

Newry’s first theatre, known as the New Theatre in High Street, opened in 1769. In 1783 a second, purpose built theatre was opened in Hill Street by the actor Thomas Betterton. Both theatres were short lived and had disappeared by the 1830s and were replaced by the Assembly Rooms in Hill Street, which relocated to Bank Parade in the 1860s.

Interest in drama and the arts continued throughout the 19th century. Warrenpoint Town Hall opened in 1884 providing a hall for public entertainment, Percy French was one of the first to perform there. In Newry, the opening of the Town Hall in 1894, provided a larger venue and improved facilities for performers. Adverts in local papers from the time, illustrate a variety of shows. These included travelling theatre companies, opera companies and concerts by artists such as world renowned baritone Andrew Black in 1903 and virtuoso violinist Tavidar Nachéz in 1906. Late trains and trams were often provided to transport patrons to Warrenpoint and Bessbrook after the shows.

Local amateur drama and music groups began to emerge in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, including the Bessbrook Players, Mayobridge Players and Burren Dramatic Club who were active at this time, as were Newry Amateur Operatic Society and Mr. Gilholy’s Choral Society. The influence of the Gaelic League led to the emergence of drama groups such as the Lislea Players, and encouraged the revival of Irish dance.
In 1928, Newry Musical Feis was established, giving many people their first experience of performing music, folk dancing and verse speaking on stage.

In the 1930s Lilian McArdle became a national celebrity after coming third place out of an original 27,000 competitors in a UK wide “Golden Voice” competition. On her return to Newry she was given an honorary parade through the town, and went on to undertake a singing tour of Scottish cities, and a series of radio broadcasts on BBC and RTÉ.

In the 1930s and 1940s pantomimes, under the direction of P.J. McKay, became an annual event. Many societies emerged after the Second World War, including Newry Musical Society, Newpoint Players.
and Kilkeel Dramatic Society. Such was the popularity of amateur drama that a Drama Festival, separate from the Feis, was inaugurated in 1949.

Highly popular variety shows held in Newry Town Hall, under the direction of Pat McKeivitt, provided a platform for local artistes to share the stage with national stars such as James Johnson, a Belfast tenor who sang at Covent Garden. Irish comedians such as Jimmy O’Dea and Jack Cruise also entertained British and American troops in the Town Hall, Newry.
The 1950s saw the emergence of showbands which developed out of dance bands. There were a number of famous showbands in the Newry and Mourne area. The Hilton Showband, originally the Rhythm Aces, which included Mickey Doran who played the guitar and Eleanor Toner, the female vocalist was set up in 1962. Over the next ten years they toured Britain, Ireland and the United States.

Support for local drama and musical societies continued, in spite of the increasing popularity of television in the 1960s. The early years of the Troubles impacted negatively on the local arts scene, but optimism prevailed. This culminated when the first purpose built Arts Centre in Northern Ireland opened in Newry in 1982.

The performing arts in the area continue to flourish. Groups such as Newry Musical Society, Newpoint Players and Newry Drama Festival, all founded in the 1940s continue to entertain local audiences. In its ninetieth year, the programme of Newry Musical Feis has expanded from five to forty days of competition, becoming one of the largest festivals of its type in the world.
**Drama and Theatre in Newry**

Joanne Cummins

From the mid 18th century theatre began to develop in Newry, with visits from travelling troupes from Belfast and Dublin.

Local amateur drama groups such as Newry Dramatic Players began to emerge towards the end of the 19th century. The establishment of Newry Musical Feis in 1928 provided a competitive stage for local groups.

During the Second World War, the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts organised productions of music and drama, and stars of Irish stage such as Micheál Mac Liammóir and Hilton Edwards appeared in productions in the Town Hall.

The growing popularity of drama during the 1940s saw the development of numerous dramatic societies in Newry including Newpoint Players, the Abbey Players, Colmcille Players and the Iveagh Players.

By 1948 the drama section at Newry Feis had become so large that a separate festival was needed. In 1949, under the chairmanship of Mrs M.B. Collins, Newry Drama Festival was inaugurated. The first Festival had 50 entrants and competitors included local schools, dramatic societies, drama schools and youth groups. Plays were performed in both English and Irish.

Formed in 1945, Newpoint Players enjoyed great success at the Festival, winning the Premier Award eleven times. Produced for many years by Patrick Carey, Headmaster of Mourne Grange School, many of their early productions were Shakespearean. Their production of *Arms and the Man*, produced by Mary Andress, won the group their first All-Ireland Drama Festival in 1958. A second title came in 1962 with Seamus Mallon's production of *Our Town*.

The Troubles had a negative impact on drama in the town in the early 1970s. The Town Hall sustained damage in an arson attack in 1972, affecting both the Drama Festival and Newpoint Players. Both returned in 1976; the Drama Festival with the addition of a One Act Festival and Newpoint with Sean Hollywood in the role of artistic director. He would go on to establish a youth group in 1980, giving young people the chance to develop a love of drama. In 1992, Newpoint Players’ production of *Marat-Sade* produced by Sean Hollywood won their third All-Ireland title with one of the youngest ever casts, five of whom would go on to win places at prestigious drama schools.

An early dramatic production, c. 1900
Featuring Mrs Annie Sloan (née Short) and James Canavan, extreme right.
A famous local actor in the early part of the 20th century, the Canavan Room in the Sean Hollywood Arts Centre is named after him.
Newry and Mourne Museum Collection
Newpoint Players remain one of Ireland's top drama groups, performing on the drama festival circuit and running a youth theatre school every summer. Over seven decades later, the Drama Festival continues to offer a platform to many groups from all over Ireland.

Newpoint Players’ production of George Bernard Shaw’s *Arms and the Man*, 1958
Included are Owen Mooney, Liam O’Callaghan, Ann Brady and Charlie Smyth. Produced by Mary Andress, the production won the Premier Award at the All-Ireland Drama Festival in Athlone.
*Courtesy of Charlie Smyth*

Newry Drama Festival Committee, 1998
Included are Anne Boyle, Des Canavan, Violet Durkan, Regina Hanratty, Sean Hollywood, Patricia McCoy, Mary McKeown, Gerry McNulty, Jim McParland, Eileen Mooney, Owen Mooney, Sean Murtagh, Margaret Nolan, Blanaid O’Shea, Charlie Smyth and Jim Smyth.
*Newry and Mourne Museum Collection*

Newpoint Players’ production of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, 2013
*Newry and Mourne Museum Collection*
Irish Dance Revival in the 20th Century

Anna Marie McClelland

After the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922 there was a concerted campaign to show Ireland as a separate, culturally diverse nation through the promotion of Irish culture.

One of the main campaigners was local woman and Irish dancer Nan Quinn. From her memoirs, she recalls around 1914 a céilí dancing class in Corrinshego in Upper Killeavy, run by the Courtney family, who worked to preserve and promote Gaelic culture in south Armagh. It was said that many of those who promoted Irish dancing in other areas “all got their dancing in Corrinshego”.

As part of the Camlough Branch of Cumann na mBan, Nan and her comrades ran a céilí class twice weekly in Camlough Hall in the early 1920s. The Irish word ‘céilí’ originally referred to a gathering of neighbours in a house, enjoying dancing, playing music and storytelling. The céilí can be traced back to pre-famine times, when dancing at crossroads on Sunday evenings was a popular rural pastime.

In 1924, Miceal Mackin organized an Irish language class in River Street Hall, Newry and, at Nan Quinn’s suggestion, included a dancing class. With Nan’s patrons from Corrinshego and Camlough and participants from Newry, the dance was such a success that it eventually became a big céilí in Newry Town Hall.

Céili’s were also run by Gaelic Athletic Association clubs in the area. They established their own competition in 1969, known as the Scór, aiming to promote Ireland’s traditional pastimes and culture while offering members the chance to represent their club during the winter months when sport had ceased.

Nan established her own school of Irish dancing in Bessbrook in January 1933. Arthur Burns was one of her early pupils, going on to win the coveted Madame Markievicz Cup at Sligo Feis on three consecutive occasions.

The folk dancing section of Newry Musical Feis was introduced in April 1929 to promote Irish dance in the area, and took the Town Hall ‘by storm’ in the inaugural competition, with ninety seven entrants. The adjudicator, Mr Richard Smyth, congratulated the Feis on the standard of dancing. His finishing remarks illustrate the perilous state of Irish dancing in Ulster and acknowledge its survival in Newry; “Dancing has not died out in the North, although unfortunately it has done so in many parts. The four handed reel in the competition is better than I have seen in any other part of Ireland”.

Arthur Burns’ School of Irish Dancing performing at Newcastle Feis in the 1960s
Included are Sheila Nolan, Mickey Ruddy, Michael McAlister, Oliver McAteer, Donal Fegan and Josephine Fegan. The group also participated at international folk festivals around Europe.
Courtesy of Oliver McAteer
Thanks to the pioneers of Irish dance and the teachers who ran the local dancing schools including Nan Quinn, Arthur Burns, P.J. McKay, Donal Fegan, Tom Quinn, Margaret Hughes, Sadie Fearon, Sheila Nolan, Lily Fox and Eileen Rooney to name but a few, Irish dancing in the Newry, south Armagh and Down area continues to thrive.

As well as teaching in thirteen centres around south Armagh, Nan Quinn collected and revived traditional dances such as The Three Tunes, Trip to the Cottage and Sweets of May.
Entertainment in the Mournes

Noreen Cunningham

Participation in the performing arts in the Mournes has ranged from schools to bands to drama groups, while various venues throughout the Mournes have been used to stage performances including Kilkeel Courthouse, church halls and cinemas.

In November 1935 St. Louis Convent Public Elementary School staged two nights of entertainment in St. Colman’s Hall. Two of the young performers, Mary Fearon and Alma Nicholson (later Alma Brown), later went on to play important roles in the local performing arts scene.

The 1930s continued to be a vibrant decade for local entertainment. An example of this was a concert and dance in January 1937 in The Hall, Longstone (Lower Mourne). A full programme of events included the McKay School of Dancing, Newry, members of St. Patrick’s Choral and Operatic Society, Newry, and the well-known Banbridge comedians Messrs Donahue and Quail. Other artistes included Mr M. McArdle (brother of Lilian McArdle, Newry’s Golden Voice Singer).

During the war years, attention was focused on entertaining troops stationed in the district and the Vogue Cinema in Kilkeel became an important venue for troops and local people.

The late 1940s and 1950s was a boom time for the performing arts in the Mournes, with a review of the local papers vividly highlighting the volume of productions on offer. February 1950 saw three different drama groups perform in Kilkeel venues. The Gem Concert Party played for two nights in the Courthouse with a programme that included two one-act plays, Henpecked and The Lilac Ribbon with proceeds in aid of Mourne Presbyterian Church funds. Kilkeel Parish Church Guild Players presented over two nights a three-act comedy Too Young to Marry in the Courthouse in aid of the Church Repair and Renovation Fund. St. Colman’s Dramatic Society presented a comedy Paul Twyning in St. Colman’s Hall for two nights. A list of cast members and supporting artistes included John McParland, Newry, billed as ‘the well known tenor’ and Alma Nicholson, pianist.

Other dramatic groups of this period included Mourne Amateur Dramatic Society, Annalong Young Farmer’s Club Dramatic Society and The Ballymartin Players.

In the 1960s Kilkeel Drama Circle performed a range of plays in St. Colman’s Hall and other venues throughout the district. A regular producer of their plays was...
Mary Fearon, who also acted in productions including *Murder at Greenfingers* (1960) and *They Got What They Wanted* (1962).

The performing arts continued to attract young performers, and in the 1970s St. Colman’s Youth Club staged musical reviews and plays in their annual *Candlelight Supper Theatre* in St. Colman’s Hall.

Poster advertising a ‘Grand Dance’ in Kilkeel Courthouse, 1947
The Courthouse was a popular venue for concerts, plays and musicals from the late 19th century to the mid 20th century.
*Courtesy of Catherine Hudson*

St. Colman’s Irish Dancing Group, Kilkeel, 1940s
Back Row: Frankie McCann, Tony Cunningham, Paddy Donnan, Donard McConville, Thomas Murphy, John Henry Doyle and Pat Hudson.
Front Row: Winnie Grant, Helen Fearon, Maureen Herron, Bridie Donnan, Arthur Burns (teacher), Maura Morgan, Alma Nicholson, Teresa Hudson and Kathleen Grant.
*Courtesy of Catherine Hudson*
Musical Life in Newry in the 19th and 20th Centuries

Ken Abraham

During the 19th century and for much of the 20th century, musical entertainment in Newry was provided by visiting musicians and local artists. A wide range of musical tastes were catered for and performances included opera, choral works, orchestral music, military music and popular songs.

As far back as August 1806 the Theatre in Newry re-opened with a performance of the comic opera, Love in a Village. Newry Amateur Musical Society was established in 1830 and another group, Newry Musical Society, gave its first concert on 4th April 1864 in the Assembly Rooms (now The Sean Hollywood Arts Centre).

The late 19th century and early 1900s saw Newry on the circuit of touring opera companies such as the National Opera Company which performed Maritana and La Sonnambula in Newry in October 1873. From 1904 until 1910, Newry was visited on several occasions by the Elster Grime Opera Company which toured widely in Ireland from 1900 until the First World War. Mentioned by James Joyce in Ulysses, this company performed seven different operas during a week-long visit to Newry in October 1910.

Many local people sang in church choirs and these provided the basis for the establishment of Newry Amateur Operatic Society in 1913 and St. Patrick’s Choral and Operatic Society in 1926. These groups specialised in light opera and the works of Gilbert and Sullivan respectively.

The support which these two societies garnered, and the local interest displayed in music provided the context for the foundation of Newry Musical Feis in 1928. The Feis gave many children and young adults first-hand experience of performing publically. A number of local people such as Harry Heather, Alma Brown and Kathleen McNally, who were involved with the Feis either as competitors or administrators, were also closely associated with the variety concerts organised by Pat McKevitt in Newry Town Hall in the late 1940s and early 1950s.
However, it was the foundation of Newry Musical Society in 1945 which set the scene for the pattern of musical life in Newry in the second half of the 20th century. The Society’s first production was *The Mikado* in Newry Town Hall in 1946 and it went on to stage many more Gilbert and Sullivan operettas and musicals in the succeeding decades. It was a successful competitor at the Waterford Festival of Light Opera where it gained many awards including the International Premier Award on two occasions, in 1976 for its production of *The Desert Song* and for *Fiddler on the Roof* in 1979. Newry Musical Society continues the tradition of musical performance in Newry which has been going on for over two centuries.
Performing Arts in Schools
Dympna Tumilty

Schools are often a child’s first introduction to performing for others, playing an important role in the development of their dramatic and musical abilities. Many of us are accustomed to being entertained at school concerts, nativity plays and through participation at feisanna, be it speech and drama, music or dance.

Many local schools have a strong history of drama. After the Second World War Patrick Carey became Headmaster of Mourne Grange School, Kilkeel. He brought with him a wealth of experience, having worked with the famous theatre director Max Reinhardt, and he established Mourne Grange Dramatic Society. For many years he also produced plays for Newpoint Players, who would often rehearse at the school and perform for the pupils. The school competed and were successful at drama festivals in Newry and Portadown and even produced their own drama festival in the school.

In the summer of 1956 they travelled to the Gaiety Theatre, Dublin to enjoy Cyril Cusack’s production of Androcles and the Lion, meeting him after the show. Coincidently, he had been the adjudicator when the school had performed Julius Caesar at Newry Drama Festival in 1950.

Newry Grammar School often performed plays and concerts in Newry Town Hall. In November 1950 their dramatic society performed The Rose and the Ring, a light-hearted Victorian pantomime by W.M. Thackeray. The highly entertaining performance was presented over two nights and was a great success. In 1956 they presented Shakespeare’s Twelfth Night. Various schools were invited to a matinee performance and the Town Hall was filled to capacity. Harry Heather was in charge of the school’s music productions. An accomplished musician and secretary of Newry Musical Feis, he was also involved in productions in Sea View College, Warrenpoint, including Miss Bath’s Dancing Display in 1930.

From its inception in 1928, Newry Musical Feis has given many children their first opportunity to perform on stage. The inaugural Feis also saw schools competing in choral singing, with sections for infant choirs (under 8 years), singing games, sight singing and school choirs for both large and small schools. Over the years classes have also included action songs, fireside singing, hymn singing, plain song (sung in Latin) and songs in Irish.
As well as singing, the range of musical instruments has expanded from piano and violin to encompass brass, strings, woodwind, percussion and various ensembles and orchestras.

Local schools continue to excel in the performing arts, turning out excellent productions throughout the district and beyond.

Pupils from St. Clare's Convent Primary School displaying their trophies won at Newry Musical Feis in 1942
Schools have made a vital contribution to the performing arts in the Newry and Mourne area over the years and have been keen competitors at local competitions and festivals.

Courtesy of Kathleen Harrington


Newry and Mourne Museum Collection

St. Louis Grammar School Girls’ Choir, Kilkeel, prizewinners at Newcastle Feis 1946
Back Row (L-R): Maura McKeown, Maura Mullen, Irene Morgan, Marie Magee, Eileen Miller, Alma Brown (Choirmistress), Joan O’Pray, Marie Brannigan, Ethna Brannigan, Mary Henvey and Bernadette Smith.
Front Row (L-R): Teresa Hudson, Sheila McGovern, Teasie McGovern, Marcella McGrath, Geraldine Sherlock, Rita McGarry, Kay McLister and Ann Fitzsimons

Courtesy of Catherine Hudson
Rural Drama
Joanne Cummins

From the early 1900s drama has formed an important part in social activities in rural communities. Many parishes had a dramatic society which produced an annual play, performing it in small rural halls or schools.

Reflecting the spirit of the Gaelic League, a branch of which had just been formed locally, Lislea Players first took to the stage in 1902, with The Lad from Largymore, presenting plays until 1930. A decade later in 1940, The Lislea Dramatic Players were formed by Cissie Hughes. Within four years the group had presented a total of fifteen plays.

In 1951 they won the Premier Award at Newry Drama Festival, and inspired by their success a Week of Drama was held in Lislea, Christmas 1952, with the presentation of six plays. In 1972 work began to convert Lislea School into a small theatre. The first Lislea Rural Drama Festival opened on 29 January 1982. In his address on the opening night the Chairman of the Drama Committee, Eugene Hannaway said that the “dream is to re-establish rural drama, to give it back the place it once had in the rural community”.

Lislea Drama Festival has grown over the years to attract competitors from all over Ireland. Tomás MacAnna, adjudicator of the 1993 Festival remarked, “Lislea is one of the best festivals it has been my privilege to adjudicate”.

In rural areas churches were also an outlet for social activity. The Glascar Guild under the auspices of Glascar Presbyterian Church staged plays such as Macook’s Corner often as part of a wider range of group activities such as quizzes, debates, film shows and variety nights.
Young Farmers Clubs have also provided an opportunity for rural performers. Formed in 1944, Rathfriland Young Farmers have staged plays in their hall in Newry Street since it first opened in 1950, moving to a new hall in Downpatrick Street in 2015. They competed regularly in Newry Drama Festival in the 1950s.

In the early days of Newry Drama Festival rural players had their own category for full length plays. In the inaugural year the Perpetual Challenge Cup presented by Newry Agricultural Society was won by Jerrettspass Dramatic Society with *The New Gossoon*. Drama societies such as Jerrettspass competed regularly at drama festivals around Northern Ireland and were twice nominated for the All-Ireland Confined Drama Finals with *Home is the Hero* and *The Rugged Path*.

Although the advent of television led to a downturn in rural drama, Lislea has sidestepped the trend. Lislea Dramatic Players have been successful in recent years with productions competing at the All-Ireland Confined Drama Finals, while Lislea Drama Festival continues to draw in crowds.

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Variety Entertainment
Joanne Cummins

During the 1940s and 1950s popular variety shows by the Newry Revue Society were performed to packed audiences in the Town Hall. Shows, including *Bubblin’ Over*, *Rainbeau Belles*, *Sunny Side Up* and *When You’re Smilin*’ were written, devised and produced by Pat McKevitt.

The 1949 show, *The Spice of Life*, described as a “synthesis of song, scena and dance”, contained over sixty artists, including the cream of Irish variety, supported by local favourites, such as Sean Canavan. Ruby Murray, “Ireland’s 13 year old Vera Lynn” appeared as one of the headline acts. As well as musicians, the shows included entertainers such as magicians, impressionists, comedians, harmonica players, puppeteers, dancers, jugglers and telepathists.

The late 1950s and early 1960s saw the arrival of the Top Talent contest in Newry, in which the town was divided into five areas; Ballybot, Canal Street, Chapel Street, High Street and the Meadow. The shows were officially adjudicated and each week a different area would compete for honours in singing, dancing, comedy sketches and music in St. Colman’s Parochial Hall. Acts for the Meadow included the famous accordionist Jackie Hearst and Eleanor Toner, who would go on to sing with The Hilton Showband, and as a solo artist. Such was the popularity of the shows that “tickets were like gold-dust”.

At the same time guest teas and carnivals were becoming very popular in rural areas such as Glenn, Cloghogue, Mayobridge, Saval and Hilltown. The ladies committee of the parish invited people to the guest tea, which was followed by a variety show with local talent such as Sean Canavan, Ethel Fitzpatrick, Charlie Smyth and Margaret Nolan taking part.

In the late 1960s the Ardmore Hotel hosted a variety show known as the Finn McCool Banquet. Produced
by P.J. McKay and compered by Charlie Smyth, the show took place in the hotel’s ballroom. The night consisted of Irish themed food, a cabaret of top class artists and ended with a dance. Contributors included Brendan Carroll, the Brown Sisters, Jeff O’Hare and his accordion and an Irish dance ensemble. In the opening show, the special first night guest was James Young. As a producer of shows at the Empire Theatre in Belfast, P.J. McKay could call on artists such as Frank Carson, Josef Locke, Gloria Hunniford, Bridie Gallagher and Eileen Donaghy, who all performed in Newry.

As the Troubles impacted on the arts scene in Newry, Charlie Smyth introduced variety nights at Dromantine College, near Newry. Shows such as Charley’s Angels, Easter Parade and Christmas Crackers would run for five nights and were performed for a local audience and those travelling out from Newry.

Changing times and the growth of the television were major contributors to the downturn in the demand for variety entertainment.
Entertainment in Warrenpoint

Seamus Laverty

Warrenpoint has long been a venue for entertainment. The Promenade played host to various bands during the summer months in the late 19th century, performing for tourists on holiday, or day-trippers brought by train. These ranged from military bands such as the East Lancashire Regiment Band who performed in 1888, to local bands including Warrenpoint Amateur Brass Band, who played in July 1877. Their entertaining programme included quick marches, valses and gallops.

In 1906, the same year Warrenpoint Municipal Park was established, pierrots were invited to perform around the Promenade, a tradition that continued until the 1920s. A bandstand in the park became a popular venue for musical performances.

Under the influence of the Gaelic Revival, Warrenpoint Feis was first held on the 15 August 1905. The event took place outdoors in the field adjacent to Duke Street and was closely associated with the Catholic Church, with Rev Hugh O’Reilly of St. Colman’s College acting as President and Father Mallon of Warrenpoint distributing prizes. Various contests were held in brass and reed bands, female and male choirs, soloists, recitations in Irish and musical instrument playing. A second Feis occurred on the same day the following year, but due to inclement weather and competing attractions, there was a low turnout.

The Feis was later revived as Warrenpoint Musical Feis and is held annually in Warrenpoint Town Hall, with contests held in Irish dancing, music, singing, verse and drama.

Dramatic productions increased in popularity after the Second World War. Warrenpoint Catholic Social centre in Peter Street erected a stage upon which Warrenpoint Dramatic Society rehearsed and produced variety shows, minstrel shows and one act plays. The Town Hall staged their productions including Peg of My Heart (1949), Daddy Long Legs (1950) and The Next Big Thing (1951). In 1951 it was also the venue for the town’s first pantomime Jack and the Beanstalk which was remarkable for its special effects, which included the giant walking and the beanstalk growing in full view of the audience.

Frank Hanna produced the pantomimes until 1984, after which Liz Boyle took over. Some of the early pantomime cast members included Bobby Reoch, Pamela Halliday, Jean McGuigan and Christy McGuigan, while dancing was usually choreographed by Arthur Burns. The pantomime tradition has continued through the years and is still as popular as ever today.
Dun Eimear Singers c.1950
The Dun Eimear Singers took part in musical productions and variety shows in the local area from the 1940s until the 1960s. Based in Warrenpoint, the choir was trained by Lillian McArdle Trodden (Golden Voice Singer), front row, extreme right.
Newry and Mourne Museum Collection

Poster for Summer Seaside Shows in the Osborne Hotel, Warrenpoint, c. 1964
The cabaret and dancing was presented by Nat Coleman, a musician who played with showbands The Skyrockets and The Clubmen.
Newry and Mourne Museum Collection

Ticket for Warrenpoint Amusements Committee’s Blossom Time Dance, 1949
The Committee which organised dances and other forms of entertainment on a seasonal basis, came into conflict with the Warrenpoint Feis Committee over the staging of two separate music festivals in 1950.
Newry and Mourne Museum Collection
Photograph of a production of Our Ma written by Warrenpoint playwright and actor Patrick (Patch) Connolly, with music by Colum Sands, 2011

The play is a tragi-comedy set in Armagh in 1889, the year of the Armagh rail disaster.

Newry and Mourne Museum Collection
Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to the staff, interns and volunteers of Newry and Mourne Museum for their assistance in this exhibition and accompanying booklet:

Dr Ken Abraham
Paula Bate
Declan Carroll
Pat Fox
Joanne Glymond
Elizabeth Greene
Caroline Hegarty
Seamus Laverty
Hannah Le Good
Anna Marie McClelland
Amanda McKinstry
Noelle Murtagh
Dympna Tumilty
Dr Robert Whan

We would also like to extend a special thanks to those who contributed to the exhibition through donations, loans, expertise or memories including:

Alma Brown
Patrick ‘Patch’ Connolly
John Cookson
Eleanor Darbyshire

Mickey Doran
Donal Fegan
Tommy Fegan
Brian Fitzpatrick
Gaeláras Mhic Ardghail
Dr Mary Goss
Kathleen Harrington
Catherine Hudson
Wesley Livingstone
Oliver McAteer
Ursula Mhic An tSaoir
Susan McCann
Lucy McDonnell
Rae McGonigle
Jim McGuigan
Gerry McNulty
Eileen Mooney
Joe Murphy
Donal O’Hanlon
Poyntzpass and District Local History Society
Tom Quinn
Charlie Smyth
Jacqueline Turley
The exhibition is part of a wider two year Performing Arts Project, funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund. A Project Officer and five volunteers have worked on the Project, which aims to enhance knowledge of the Museum’s Performing Arts collection and make it accessible to the public.

Cataloguing of the Performing Arts Collection formed a major part of the project and will allow it to be used in many different ways from exhibitions to research.

Alongside the temporary exhibition, a series of posts on social media platforms and newspaper articles have helped to tell the story of the performing arts in the area.

Working with local performing arts groups such as Newry Drama Festival, Newry Musical Society, Lislea Drama Festival, Newpoint Players, Newry Musical Feis and Bosco Youth Drama Group, a series of pop-up exhibitions have been created. A range of events and activities have allowed people to reminisce about performances in bygone days and introduced young people to the vibrant history of the performing arts in the area.

Compiled by Joanne Cummins (Esmée Fairbairn Performing Arts Project Officer) and edited by Noreen Cunningham and Ken Abraham.

Every effort has been made to correctly attribute photographs used in this booklet and accompanying exhibition.

Kathleen McNally who won the Junior Violin competition at Newry Musical Feis in April 1940

Newry and Mourne Museum Collection
Newpoint clubrooms, Canal Street, Newry, 1953
Included are John O’Callaghan, Mildred Collins, Nora Wilson, Charlie Smyth, Lloyd Mullan, Nancie Murphy and Owen Mooney.

Courtesy of Charlie Smyth
Photograph of James Canavan’s production of the trial scene from Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* at the drama section of Newry Musical Feis, 1937

The adjudicator, Gabriel Fallon awarded the production 101 marks out of 100.

*Newry and Mourne Museum Collection*