

## **Sites and Signs of Remembrance interviews**

### **Irish in Greenwich Interviews with older volunteers at Irish lunch clubs June 2007**

**Interviewer Pam Schweitzer**

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#### **Lilly O'Reilly**

My name is Lilly O'Reilly and I came to London in September 1959. My fiancé lived here and I came over to be with him. We were getting married. Well we actually got married the following February. We went back to Ireland and got married in Dublin. I didn't know a soul here. It was just like going to the moon. I just did not know anyone. I couldn't understand what anyone was saying. They couldn't understand what I was saying, you know.

My husband-to-be met me off the boat. He was the only one then. Oh I had a sister and she lived in Cricklewood. She was only here for a short time. She went back before I got married actually, you know. So that's the way it was for me.

I came to Floyd Road in Charlton and it was called digs then. I don't know what they say now. I didn't know the landlady, but she was lovely, I mean first impressions, she was lovely and I shared a room with a girl from Sligo who was also a really lovely girl. We got on very well. I was nineteen. She was about two or three years older than me. And we got on very well as I say, and I still see her and I still see my ex-landlady and we're very good friends. She had a family yes and her husband was a Londoner, you know. I was very lucky, they were lovely people.

The rent was £1.25. It was a lot yeah. Well it was... I had the run of the house really, you know. I mean we cooked for ourselves but she'd ask us down to dinner on a Sunday, you know. She lived downstairs. She showed me round when I first came over. She showed me the church and that, you know. And then you kind of got to know people as you went on, especially through the church. At the time, when I lived down there I used to go the one in Greenwich, St Joseph's in Greenwich because it was nearer. I was near the Lower Road and I could get the bus straight to Greenwich. And now and again we'd go up to Our Lady of Grace but that was a bit of a walk.

I suppose because a lot of the congregation were Irish, you felt at home with them, you know. They thought like you did and this was the way we felt at the time. You know what I mean? I was very young; very green. I really was. The church has always been a very important... It's like a focal point, you know. The church. And it's through the church that the communities are developed. You build up communities through that, you know. And make friends and branch out, you know. But it's really the church that's pivotal.

I walked straight into a job when I came to London. I lasted there for one week. Bottles, they were bottles. And it was beautiful. I know it was really warm but it was some place I didn't want to be. I just didn't want to be there. There was a heat-wave and, of course, a lot of it was out in the open, you know. And then I got clerical work in the city. And it was very easy to get a job. It was very, very easy to get a job. You just applied. There was a lot of agencies, you see. There was lots of agencies and you would apply through an agency and if you didn't like it there you would go back to the agency and say, "I didn't like that", and they'd find you something else.

After work, we'd go to the pictures maybe. The Granada in Woolwich and Greenwich, wasn't it? And there was the Roxy up at the Standard. So lot of people went to the pictures then.

Dancing down in the Harp, New Cross. And we'd go down to the big Irish community as well in New Cross. My husband knew a few people and we'd go in for a drink. I didn't drink at the time, you know, but it was just a social environment. And we'd have a dance and there was live music and you'd listen to ballads and that was lovely.

My husband was an orphan in Ireland before he came here. His parents died when he was a baby and he spent time in "artenne". I don't know if you've ever heard of it. It's famous. It's an institution and it was an industrial school. And it was for children who, we said, "miched" from school, or played truant from school. And also orphans were put in there as well, altogether. He was there till he was sixteen. And when he left there, his brothers got him a job in Dublin, but he was only sixteen and he had to live on his own in a room. They got him a room, you know, in the city. His two brothers lived in Liverpool, and his older brother came over and took him to England to live with him. But he had an aunt over there in Dublin, so he could go backwards and forwards, you know.

He worked on a building site. He worked down a mine in St Helen's. He lived in Liverpool and he had friends in Dublin and they went over and they all moved down to London together and he's been here ever since. That was in about 1958.

I had children quite young, yes. I had two children and I had to give everything up and stay home and look after the children. And then when they were started nursery actually, I was lucky enough, they went to Pond Park Nursery and they were full time, you know children went and they were full time. And I got a job as a barmaid in the Princess of Wales pub in Blackheath. It's still there, by the pond. And I had to be there to leave the children to school and pick them up from school and that was ideal, working lunchtimes, nothing else.

### **Kathy Kilcannon**

My name is Kathy Kilcannon. I came over in 1960 to Hammersmith to my sister. I didn't like London. It was too fast for me.

I was from County Limerick, about ten miles from Limerick City. But I was working in the city. It was nothing like London. It was so busy and I remember trying to get on one of those buses. You know they had the conductors on the buses then and the door was open at the back and I didn't get on it quick enough so they just went off. I just didn't like London so I went up to Coventry to my sister. I've got two sisters; one in Coventry and one in London.

I decided to come because there was two friends of mine coming to live in Cricklewood. I did have a job in Limerick City; in a hotel, but the wages weren't very good and I just wanted see if I could better myself. I didn't like it when I first came over here. Well, I lived in Coventry for nine years and then my younger sister was coming over to London and I came down, back down to London then in 1969. Then I lived in Acton. I got a flat with another girl. I didn't know the girl previously, but she was from Sligo, a lovely girl and I shared the flat with her. And then my sister came down with her friend and they shared the flat next door to us in the same house. I got them the flat next door. I was working in Hammersmith in a savings bank at that time.

My sister who came over from Ireland, she had her friends and I had my circle of friends but we used to all go out together. We would go to the G---- in Hammersmith, that was the Irish dance Hall. The Hibernian in Fulham or the G--- in Cricklewood. But only at weekends because weekdays we were working and we just visited family and friends during the week, something like that. But we always kind of stayed in the Irish community really, you know. My sister; she'd moved to Acton as well from Hammersmith so she just lived down the road. So we'd probably go and have dinner with her on a Sunday, and we'd usually go out to Richmond Park because she had boys and when the conkers were fallen they liked to get the conkers, so we used to go out there and pick the conkers with them in Richmond Park.

I was very, very homesick for a long time when I came over here. And I suppose I was thinking about going back every day, but you never do. I miss my family. There was only two of them over here at the time, you see, and there's ten of us. So all the rest of my family were back in Ireland.

I did marry, but my marriage didn't work out so I moved out here then just to get away. I'd lived in Streatham and got a job in Wandsworth, but then the Wandsworth factory shut down and they built the one out here in south-east London just up the road here. I moved out here with them. In Streatham I only had a, kind of like, a rented flat. If I moved out here they gave us a council flat. And that was twenty-three years ago and I'm still in Abbey Wood now.

I've got quite a few English friends. We don't have a big Irish community in Abbey Wood. I've got my friend round the corner from me. She's from Limerick City. I met her through the church actually and she's a very good friend. There isn't the same out here. There is more of a community now that I've got to know the Irish in Greenwich and things like that. But I spend a lot of time with my sisters. I've got a sister in Surbiton and a sister in Acton. I go backwards and forwards to them. It was strange going from Streatham where there was quite a big Irish community – and Tooting – out here to Abbey Wood where there isn't that much of a community at all. You had to kind of like integrate again I suppose.

I've always been made welcome, I think, in this country. I mean, if you went for a job you always got it. And sometimes you went for a job and you got two jobs. You know? I've never been turned down for a job.

No, I didn't want to go back to Ireland then but since I've retired I would like to go back. But it's a different Ireland now to what we knew. I'm going back the 30<sup>th</sup> December. I'm going back for New Year and I go back a couple of times a year as well, because I've got younger sisters there you see.

### **Carmel Monty**

My name is Carmel Monty and I came to London in 1977. I came over here because I was already married with two children and my marriage broke up and my two sons, one of them was six and the other four. I came to stay with my sister until I found somewhere to live. I got involved with someone from the family housing association and the lady that was running it at that time she was Irish. She was from the North of Ireland and I telephoned her and she immediately said to come and see her and she would give me, you know, somewhere to live. And she made me feel really good. Well, she gave me accommodation which was very good. Very quickly. I think within a week. It was here in Woolwich, in a little house; a little old terraced house. In Turner Street. There's a supermarket built on it now.

Oh it was completely different from anything I'd known at home. Well, I was brought up on a farm. But when I married and was living in Dublin previous to coming over here I got used to living in a city.

My sister too was a great help, and her husband. They helped me a lot. My children were going to St Josephs Catholic School in Greenwich. Before I came over she'd put their names down for school so they immediately got into the school. My youngest son, he was just four at the time, he had to go to a nursery for about three months.

I joined an agency and the first day I went, I went to Standard telephones down in Greenwich just for temping. And the manager there asked me if I would stay. So I explained to him that I had two children going to school so I needed to finish at three o'clock to collect them. Actually the school was just beside where I worked, so it was really good. I just worked the school hours. I could drop them off in the morning and pick them up in the evening. And during holiday time my manager gave me the time off. It was easy to get jobs at the time. Very easy.

I got to know people mostly through the school and St Peters Church because, although I was living here in Woolwich, I took the children to St Joseph's in Greenwich because it was a really good school. They had settled there and I didn't want to take them out and send them to another school at that stage.

I went to live in Eltham then, in Middle Park by the council houses. And the children continued to go to school in Greenwich. I didn't want to take them out. It cost me a lot of money, but I worked there as well and I also went to college at the same time, part-time. I did typing. I did O'level in English and I sat an exam for doing the NNEB which was working as a nursery nurse in schools. And I went to college for two years and after that I got a job here at Greenwich Council, in a nursery school at Woolwich Common. I worked in St Austins School and then I worked for the Westcombe Support Centre in Greenwich - they had what they called a sin-bin. And then I went to work for Lewisham Council. That was what I did up to last year and then I moved onto Southwark and then I worked for Southwark Council at Camberwell. And I've just retired.

I bought my council place there and I moved out. I'm still in Eltham. I live in Well Hall Road near St Bernadette's, a small little church. There was a real community there. A lot of Irish but a lot of English as well. It was very friendly and small so it was very easy to get to know people. And of course my children went to school in Eltham then. Secondary School, St Thomas More. And of course, they knew children and we knew parents.

The church had a community centre. They owned that. And when they sold it I was really sad to leave it and regret it still even today. It's amazing because it's where I spent most of our time there, twenty years living, with my children. We still meet some of the old neighbours at Christmas and keep in touch with each other.

I went to Ireland twice a year with my children. Actually one of my sons moved over to live there because he met an Irish girl over there. One of my sons met a Swedish girl and they got married and they're living in Sweden. I have a granddaughter now so I spend a lot of my time going to Sweden and Dublin, because flights are really cheap. So I think it's actually better for me to be here.

My other son first went over there because he went to university in Glasgow and he was involved in art and he went to Dublin just for a couple of months, but he was offered a job there. He did very well in Dublin and my other son followed him over there because you know, there's great opportunities in the arts over there. But he left them all behind when he met a Swedish girl and went to live over there. But he's doing alright now in Sweden.

### **John O'Regan**

My name is John O'Regan. I left Kerry in 1951. After two weeks over here, I thought I'm going back. I did. It was very hard. When you was in Ireland you had the open spaces and as a kid you could go out and you had no problems and I felt, you know, over here it was very fast, as you said. It was very fast.

When I first came over I lived in Greenwich with my mother. We lived above Greenwich market. My mother worked at the Royal Naval College and there were flats all over that area where the market stalls were, which were College property. I was there for three years. I lived for two years with my mother. Then I got married. I met my wife about a year after I came here. The first job I had was in Deptford in Wheens's soap factory. She was working in the factory and we just happened to meet.

We married in London. What it was is that I was courting and I was due for... Well, an Irishman in England, at that particular time, once you'd come over you had to be in the country two years and once you had been, then you were called up. Well I was called up. I went to work one day and I went home to lunch and that particular morning I'd said to one of the women. "I've just remembered. I've been over here two years today." And I went home and there was a letter there for me telling me that I was called

for National Service. On the absolute day. I had to go to Blackheath over to the building which is now the Concert Hall. That's where people went. They put the recruiting office there. So I went over there and I was asked what regiment I would like to join by the district colonel. And I said I'd like to join the artillery because the artillery was just down the road in Woolwich, isn't it. And I thought if I joined that I'd go home every night. So he said that's fine and put my name down and I got a call of papers to report to Bally---- in an Irish regiment. I was called up in the Ulster Rifles in Bally----. But I arranged to get married before I went into the army because I would have got family allowance while I was in the army. If I hadn't got married I wouldn't have got nothing. And anyway, I just wanted to. I thought well, we'll get married. We got married in the Church of Our Lady Star of the Sea by the side of the college in Crooms Hill, Greenwich. We were married by a priest from Dublin and we were the very first couple he ever married.

My wife is English. Born and bred in Deptford. She wasn't Catholic. She's Catholic now. She is. Well she had to go and have lessons. Which she did and we got married.

And I was away for two years. I had to go to Northern Ireland to do an initial army training and I was there for six months. I got leave a couple of times. Then I was transferred into another Irish regiment called the Royal Irish Fusileirs which were then going to Korea and I shipped out from Liverpool. I had five weeks on a troop ship. I went to Hong Kong. I was there for a couple of months in Hong Kong and then went from there to Japan. I was in Japan for a couple of weeks. I was stationed with the Australians. 1954 this would be now. I was called up in 53, married in 53. And from there, eventually finished up in Korea – six months in Korea and then the regiment was transferred out to Kenya and then I did another year in Kenya and then come out from Kenya.

In actual fact, my wife was pregnant as well. She was in Deptford. She lived with her mother. My son was nine months old before I seen him. It took a while for him to come around. The mother-in-law spoilt him anyway. She lived with her mother. We had to live with the wife and the family for a while until we eventually put into the council for a flat, which they did give us I would think within a year. We went up to Cherry Orchard flats in Charlton. Very nice. Lovely flats they were. Beautiful places.

As soon as I came out of the army I got work. I went down to Stones, the big engineering factory. The propellers were made down the back. I just started off as a labourer and worked my way up. I finished up in the propeller foundry, in the furnaces, making the ship's propellers. Twenty odd years I worked there. I actually melted the metal down for the QE2. The one that's been lost. They was hard... They were hard times then. When you had a family as you said. But you could have walked out of that job and gone down the road and you'd start another job the next day.

The only thing that I found... Being Irish in the early fifties and of course we had the IRA. London wasn't a very comfortable place. On St Patricks Day, you couldn't put a shamrock on because of the IRA and you were an Irishman and you were walking round with a lump of shamrock on you and the IRA are putting bombs in London. It wouldn't matter that you'd just done two years in the British army. It wouldn't matter at all.

Our children went to Our Lady of Grace, the Catholic school. We encouraged the children to go to church and things like this and then when they came of age and could make their own minds up.

We never took the children to Ireland, funnily enough. There's only one been back. He went back to a wedding. But the others have never been to Ireland. They've got no intention. They've got no sense of going. They just don't. I've been back many a time. But, as I say, now I've only got one sister in Ireland. I've got one sister left in Ireland. I had two sisters die over here. Two brothers die over here. They were all taken back to Ireland. I got one sister was buried here. My mum wanted to be buried so we took her back as well.

**Lily**

All the people I know in the Irish centre – sorry to say this – but they're all around the same age and that you know. The people we meet and have all grown up here as it were together, you know. And it's nice to meet up with them. They've scattered and it's nice to meet up with them. And I think they're very helpful, now, if you need any help. They're the experts and it's nice to be able to know that there are people to help you – with pensions and stuff like that. I go back quite a lot to Ireland. My life here has slowed down and Dublin has just ran. And, like Kathy, I always, from day one, I was going back to Ireland. I was over here for the duration and I was going back to Ireland. And this went on and on and on and then I had my children and they all got married and they had grandchildren and I don't think like that any more. I've grown into it. I'm longer here than I have been in Dublin and I've grown into it sort of thing, you know. It's nice when I go to Ireland. It's lovely. I go to Ireland two or three times a year but it's lovely to come back. You know, I love London. I do really love London. There's lovely places here that I love to go to.

### **John**

My daughter went over to Ireland last weekend. She's never been to Ireland before. She works in a doctor's surgery and they had their Christmas party and they were taken to Dublin just for the night. They went on the Saturday afternoon, stayed Saturday night come back on Sunday. She come back and couldn't believe the amount of building. Everywhere is changed. It's not the Dublin I grew up in and if I'm there and I know I'm going in the direction of my home in Dublin. And if I didn't know I was going in that direction, I wouldn't know where I was. It's absolutely and completely changed.

### **Kathy**

Limerick's changed. Limerick city now, well all the English shops are over there now. You've got all the outlets and shopping centres outside it. And then you've got Next, you've got River Island, you've got Mothercare, Evans, Debenhams. And then you've got all the Do-it-Yourself like B&Q and places.

But it does still feel like home. When I go home I stay in the house that I was born in. My brother lives in it now but I was the only one born in that house. My brother and his wife live there now so I suppose maybe that's part of it as well. And I just love my family. I just love my sisters and my brothers back there. And we're a very close family, I suppose so.

I've had support from the Irish in Greenwich. They've been very good to me actually. I suppose the other places I lived in didn't have that. Where I lived probably didn't have the Irish community there. I live in Abbey Wood now and there isn't really an awful lot there. I don't know. The Irish always kind of stick together or something. I love Irish music. I do like the Irish music. It's nice to go other places as well and hear the old songs.

### **John**

About five years ago, through the Irish in Greenwich, in one lunch club there was a flyer come round from an Irish group from Camden Town. Was anyone interested in going back to Ireland, Kerry, for a free week's holiday by coach? And it stated at the bottom if anyone wanted to go back as a volunteer. And that's what I did; I went back as a volunteer. And what it actually is, is a group in Kerry. They're called the Kerry Immigrant Group. They come over every year and they take a coach of fifty-odd people back to Kerry and everything is paid for; it doesn't cost them a penny.

Once they finish this, on the day that they leave Kerry to come here, they start again. They go outside the churches and they get permission from the police to do this. It's specifically for people who haven't been back to Ireland and who couldn't go back to Ireland and they hope that some of them will want to be repatriated back to Ireland. And some of them have been repatriated and I've seen the houses that they've built for them; you would not believe! I would have been tempted, but not now with four children and grandchildren. It is lovely there. Their heating is free, their television licence is free, everything, transport is free.

But this group, they take them for the whole complete week; and everything is done. Me and Peter we go as volunteers and we just look after them. It's only an hour from Tralee, where I was born. I go there for the day. But this group they are absolutely amazing.

They stay in a hostel, a beautiful hostel; beautiful rooms. They share a room but it's no problem. And then during that particular week, there's three big pubs up there, we take them out to each pub and a hotel. Take them out for a big sit down meal and everything. And they clothe them and they can bring back the clothes. They are mostly men but women as well - some alcoholics. I think originally when the scheme was started up, the chap – his brother died as an alcoholic – and he started the thing going.

They bring the social services into the hostel one particular day and they explain to them. I mean they do try to tell them it's not all roses coming back to Ireland, so think about it before you do.

### **Lily O'Reilly**

I think the Irish in Greenwich is doing a lot of good for people. Lots of people sing their praises about helping people with their financial needs and also people who have gone back to Ireland – you've helped them a lot.

I still work part time with an agency – working in schools so I keep in there. I am very much involved in my job still. I visit where I worked and I do voluntary with them. And also the staff; I'm involved with a lot of people I worked with and went to college with so I have a lot of friends. But for people who just give up work and doesn't know that many people I'd say it is good – the Irish in Greenwich.

### **Cathy**

I retired when I was sixty. I got to know the Irish in Greenwich because I was having a problem with the tenant in the flat below me where I live and the council wouldn't do anything about it so I came here to Veronica and she was marvellous to me. That's how I got involved with the Irish in Greenwich. I always knew they were here. And then we were asked if we would do Voluntary work and Lilly and I do voluntary work for them.

### **John**

I never knew that the Irish in Greenwich existed until six or seven years ago. My sister was very ill and one day I went down to see her and she said a lady had been in and made her some sandwiches. I said "what lady are you talking about" and she said "an Irish lady". I said "I don't know". And then she was taken into hospital and I went into the hospital to see her and there was this Irish lady in there talking to her. It was Ann Ryan. I started taking her to the Arsenal in Greenwich and now whenever I see her at the management committee, I'm helping her to run free lunch clubs. I'm retired and I really enjoy it.

### **Mary**

I met a women. I remember there was a woman on the bus coming from Deptford actually. An Irish woman, sat beside me. She was going to Trinity Hospital lunch club. And she said "do you go to this?" and I said "Well, I don't". She said she goes to every one of them, she said her husband died and she said "They've saved my life." She goes to them from Deptford and I thought I'd go along and help out. It's lovely.

### **Eileen Taylor**

Irish in Greenwich itself started as a result of the Woolwich bombings. There was a lot of dialogue in Charlton area where the school had told some parents whose children weren't going to school that they would be in trouble and they had come into the neighbourhood centre in Floyd road for advice. And that started up a dialogue and Patricia and Sean Tobin were involved in that project. We then started talking to other people, people from the churches etc and discovered that across the borough there was this feeling. This was back in the early eighties. But people kept their heads down. A lot of people wouldn't admit they were Irish. They'd say to their children "don't tell anyone at school that you're Irish". So it's different now to what it was then.

So there was all of that going on and also the Irish Pensions. This was the other thing. There was a worker with me at the project who did one pension successfully. Through the grapevine, the news spread – it was incredible. And in the end she was dealing with people not only in this borough but from all over and they were coming in and asking her and she knew how to do it. There was no welfare rights unit but John Hannan worked at the time for Greenwich Council and then there were other meetings through other community workers and social workers meeting together and a lot of them said “What you really need is an Irish project.”

So we approached Ken Livingstone at the old GLC and there was an Irish worker there, Steve Brennan, and he came down and talked to a small group of us and we had a conference at the clockhouse. We actually told the police we were doing this because we were an Irish group. The police refused to be there in any way as a presence because they said the National Front would come and all these groups would come and we would be murdered. And we were not to have this conference. Anyway the conference went ahead and there was no trouble and out of that came this decision that we would set up some sort of project. We got the funding in 85 and it's gone on from there. But to begin with it was education, it was about changing people's attitudes to the Irish community and enabling and encouraging the Irish community to actually stand up and say “Yes, I am Irish but I live here and I am a useful member of the community”. So that's how it all started.

There was a lot of work done in schools around “Where do you come from?” and “Who are you?” etc. So Mickey and Sarah, the original workers, they did a lot of work with the library service, promoting Irish writers, Irish poets. They had book fairs and then the festival started. So it's over 25 years and that's Irish in Greenwich.

Then there was a stage where suddenly, whoever was working at Irish in Greenwich were talking about “You know, we do have a lot of elders now – we should be doing something for them.” Tom Lynham was around and the Greenwich Pensioners were a small affiliated group and they were quite militant. They stood up at an AGM and said “What are you doing about us? You're not doing anything much for us. We should have equal rights.” And so they should. So out of that came the need for an elders' worker and then the lunch clubs and then another elders' worker. It snowballed.