

GRANGE GUILD — IRISH COUNTRYWOMEN'S ASSOCIATION

By Gretta Purcell, Secretary and PRO

The Irish Countrywomen's Association (ICA) was originally called the "United Irishwomen" and was founded in May 1910 by Anita Lett at Bree, Co Wexford.

Some of the aims and activities of the United Irishwomen in its early years included the training of village nurses, promoting the awareness of clean milk, the provision of libraries and the revival of cottage industries such as basket making, embroidery, dressmaking, spinning and weaving.

A branch of the United Irishwomen was set up in Bruff in 1911, and Miss Hunt and Miss Bennett are mentioned as members of the Bruff Branch in *Irish Homestead*, the Journal of the *Irish Agricultural Organisation Society* (November 1915).

In 1912, the United Irishwomen sponsored the training and payment of two rural district nurses appointed to Co Limerick, one nurse came to Bruff and the other to Shanagolden. On 15th February 1915, Miss Higgins, Bruff, was presented with a First Edition of Moore's Melodies which was signed by Sybil Baring, Rockbarton House, Grange, who was then President of the Bruff Branch of the United Irishwomen.

Nationally, the United Irishwomen were not active during the War of Independence and the Irish Civil War periods. By 1935, there were only eight active branches and as the name United Irishwomen was considered unsuitable going forward, the organisation was renamed the Irish Countrywomen's Association (ICA).

Today, the ICA is the largest women's association in Ireland with more than 10,000 members and over 500 guilds throughout the country. Its members cook, craft, socialise and travel, and, for the vast majority of women in Ireland, there is an ICA Guild within a short distance of their home.

In April 1965, Sheila Dillon, (now Mrs Sheila Fitzgerald) was appointed assistant teacher at Grange National School. She had previously worked in Clogherhead, Co Louth and, during her time there, she joined Termonfeckin ICA. After arriving in Grange, she was encouraged by Mrs Fraher to join Bruff ICA Guild. After the



ICA group with ICA National President Liz Wall.

closure of Grange School in 1967, she was asked by Sarah Walsh (a cousin of Annie O’Keeffe, Grange), Doon ICA Guild, if she would consider forming a guild in Grange. In 1968, permission was obtained from young Count John de Salis for a proposed Grange ICA Guild to use the schoolhouse at Grange to conduct its affairs and the ICA has used the building extensively over the intervening years.

In June 1968, following a local advertising campaign, a group of women from Grange met in the old schoolhouse and discussed the formation of a guild in Grange. Grange ICA Guild was formally registered at national level on 18th September 1968 and its aim was to enhance the lives of the women of Grange and surrounding areas. A total of forty ladies were enrolled on the opening night.

The first officers of Grange Guild were the following: President – Sheila Fitzgerald, Secretary – Peg Madden and Treasurer – Katherine Casey.

From the outset, members were active and entered a number of competitions at local shows. During the guild’s first year, Sheila Fitzgerald won first prize in the “Make and Model” at Cappamore Show and Eileen Hogan came second. Five members, Kathleen Carmody, Sheila Fitzgerald, Mai Harty, Eileen Hogan and Maura O’Shea won “Brannra” (now “Duais”) awards, achieved for calf rearing and crafts. Eileen Hogan also won numerous prizes for “Make and Model” competitions at Cappamore Show over the years.

In recent years, Marie O’Reilly and Nuala Fitzgerald won prizes on a number of occasions at Cappamore and Limerick Shows. Maura O’Shea won first prize in the Federation “Make and Model” for the best machine-knitted garment. As recently as 2014, Anne Moloney represented Grange Guild at the national final at An Grianan for the Gempack Baking Competition. Marie, Nuala and Joan O’Donoghue regularly knit for the Neonatal Unit at the Regional Maternity Hospital, Limerick.

The guild meets monthly and invites guest speakers to give presentations on a variety of topics including healthy living – exercising, jewellery making and flower arranging. It organises workshops during the winter months on topics such as creative writing, knitting, embroidery, crochet as well as art and craft. Previous workshops included leather handbags, upholstery, cookery and cake decoration.

During the month of November, workshop nights include the covering and filling of boxes for a Christmas shoebox appeal. Boxes and contents are sent abroad

to children in poverty-stricken areas.

The guild has strived, through its activities, to make life pleasant for those living in Grange and has welcomed and worked in harmony with any group using the old schoolhouse. It was instrumental in having electricity, running water and toilet facilities installed in the building and participated in fundraising for the refurbishment of Grange Church and helped to procure some road lighting in the greater Grange area.

The guild's annual "Sale of Work", usually held on the second last Sunday in November, is a very popular traditional event where old and young meet at the old schoolhouse. The older folks reminisce about their school days and all that happened in this building, steeped in history. Together with Grange Church, the old school house is the glue that binds the Grange Community together.

To date, proceeds from "Sale of Work" fund the guild's activities for the year and help to pay for the grass cutting/general maintenance at the old school. Proceeds



ICA Grange Guild at their twenty-first birthday celebration in 1989 with Fr Frank O'Dea CC Bruff.

also permit the guild to contribute to local charities.

Over the years, many members attended courses during "Limerick Week" at the ICA College, "An Grianan", in Termonfeckin, Co Louth. These courses included cookery, art and craft, sewing/knitting as well as other subject matters. In June 2004, Gretta Purcell represented the Grange Guild at An Grianan, where the fiftieth anniversary of its opening took place. The then President of Ireland, Mrs Mary McAleese and other dignitaries were in attendance for the occasion.

In 2015, Marie Garvey, Vera O'Mahony and Gretta Purcell attended "Limerick Week" from the 6th to the 10th July and enjoyed the courses and the hospitality there.

With the passage of time, a number of former Grange Guild members have gone to their eternal reward, some of whom were officers and contributed significantly to the guild and the community of Grange. These include Kitty Shinnors, Kathleen Carmody, Katherine Casey, Mary B Doherty, Margaret Lombard, Nora Brosnan, Mary Clancy, Breda Clancy, Kitty Madden, Annie O'Keeffe, Margaret O'Keeffe, Mary and Josie Hartigan and their sister-in-law – who was also Josie Hartigan, Mai Harty, Dolly O'Connell, Kitty O'Brien, Eileen Hogan, Peggy Byrne

and Nora Hourigan. May their gentle souls rest in peace.

The guild is privileged to have three founding members still participating in its activities. They are Sheila Fitzgerald, Maura O'Shea and Mena Higgins.

Grange Guild organised many trips over the years and has visited nearly every corner of Ireland. Some members have also joined the Limerick Federation annual outings and have gone to Yorkshire, Scotland and lately to Derry. In the past few years, we opted for weekends away and we stayed in Killarney, Kenmare, Galway, Athlone, Tullamore, Clonakilty and the Aran Islands, to name some destinations. Such breaks are enjoyed immensely by the group members who have developed many great and lasting friendships over the years.

On the very first weekend away, members travelled to Donegal and stayed at the Abbey Hotel in Donegal Town. They visited Kincasslagh to have afternoon tea at the Viking House Hotel, where they were lucky to meet Daniel O'Donnell, renowned singer, who at that time owned the hotel. During our visit to the Blarney Golf Club, we met George Hook's (well-known TV and media personality) son who was the manager there. We met the late Joe Dolan (renowned entertainer) in Killarney in 2013 and visited the Park Hotel in Kenmare where we had afternoon tea with Francis Brennan from the RTÉ series *At Your Service*. Francis and his brother own the said hotel and in the TV series they provide professional advice and encouragement to proprietors of similar enterprises to their own.

Marie Garvey is currently preparing a "Memoir" of Grange ICA, which will include a compilation of places visited including photographs.

Every outing or evening ends with a "sing-song" and, over the years, our dear friend and fellow member, Bridie O'Riordan raised spirits with a Kerry air, most notably "Killarney". Bridie loved attending ICA meetings and catching up with her neighbours. She always looked forward to the weekend away. Bridie is now a resident of Árd na Rí Nursing Home and every member dearly misses her company and her sweet singing voice.

The officers of Grange ICA Guild for the period 2015-2018 are: President: Maura O'Shea; Secretary and PRO: Gretta Purcell; Treasurer: Marie Garvey and Competition Coordinator: Anne Sheahan.

The current members are Sheila Fitzgerald, Cala Putt, Mena Higgins, Vera O'Mahony, Nuala Fitzgerald, Joan O'Donoghue, Marie O'Reilly, Anne Moloney, Bernadette Daly and Bridget Duhig.

Although the guild doesn't have as many members as they had back in 1968, it is still very active in the community of Grange and new members who wish to join will be warmly welcomed.