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Papal Concert link to Churchtown

The Relihan Musical Legacy

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Saturday 25th August 2018 was a historic day for the Relihan family, Churchtown, when an accordion owned and played by their father, Dan Relihan (1902–1958), was on stage at the World Meeting of Families Concert attended by Pope Francis in Croke Park. The accordion has a long history. It was carefully selected and ordered by Dan Relihan in 1954 and collected by his son, Noel, from Borrowes of O’Brien Street in Mallow. Although intended for playing by Dan’s sons Noel and his brother, Denis, it was their father, Dan, who would mainly play it. Hard to believe, but the current monetary equivalent of the £40 paid for the instrument in 1954 is now over €1,250.



Funding for the purchase was provided by Dan’s brother-in-law, New York based Donal O’Sullivan. Donal was raised in Churchtown village. There were seven boys and four girls in the O’Sullivan family – Jack, Paddy, Jim, Donal, Denis, Jerry, Billy and Elizabeth (Bess), Ann, Alice and Peggy. The accordion Dan selected was a German-made Hohner Chromatic and was notoriously difficult to play. To achieve optimal sound the accordionist must engage with all three rows. Dan could handle all three rows but Noel and Denis found it difficult to progress beyond one row. Dan played contemporary tunes such as Glenn Miller’s “In the Mood” as well as traditional airs. Local man Richie Flynn - also an expert player, had a similar accordion. The youthful Bill Egan often called to Relihan’s house on his way home from Churchtown Creamery to talk to Dan and play the accordion. On one occasion Bill was so engaged in chatting and playing of the accordion that the donkey hauling the creamery cart fell asleep on the road outside Relihan’s.

So, why was the three-row button accordion on stage at the Papal Concert in Croke Park? It’s because the late Dan’s son Danny - who lives in Malahide - is related through marriage to the famous Begley musical family from Baile na bPoc, Dingle, and James and his brother Brendan Begley were invited to play at the Papal concert. To honour their musical forebears they decided to have a collection of family accordions on stage for the Concert. In total, three of the eight accordions on the stage belonged to members of the Relihan family, and Dan’s accordion was actually played during the concert. The accordion purchased in Borrowes on that fateful day in 1954 has travelled the world. Noel emigrated to the USA in 1962, and in the early 1970s his aunt Alice brought it to him on a visit she was making to America. In later years the accordion returned to Ireland when Noel presented it to his brother, Danny, for the use of his son Niall who is now an accomplished accordionist.

The Relihan family are well known for their musical skills. Dan played with the Michael O'Callaghan Big Band in the 1950s. He also played Hawaiian slide guitar with the Hugh Cahill band and featured with the Regan band in Buttevant. At his original family home at Ballindillanig, Dan began playing on the family accordion. He first learned the banjo on an instrument he received as a wedding present from Mrs Oliver of Stream Hill and on which he became accomplished. Dan also played both instruments by invitation from a Mrs Barrett, Knockardbane, Liscarroll who was herself an accomplished piano player.



Dan Relihan 1902 - 1958

Dan's son, Willie, has released several CDs and his music is well known and very popular with listeners to local radio. Dan's daughter, Margaret O'Keeffe in Charleville, plays piano accordion, keyboard, guitar and the organ in Holy Cross Church in Charleville. Margaret's sister Hannah - who lives in the US - is also an excellent musician having learned the piano in Buttevant Convent while attending secondary school. Hannah also plays the piano accordion and was an award winning step dancer. She practiced her dancing in the family kitchen while her father played on the accordion.

One of Dan's greatest joys in his younger days was to play banjo for his close friend and Godfather to Noel, Bill Murphy of the Leap. It is well known that my Uncle Bill appreciated good music and song, as he and others sang the old and the new to the strains of Dan's banjo. Dan's son, Denis, who also emigrated to the US, died in 2016 in Philadelphia and his ashes were buried in the Kilgrogan grave of his Grandfather and Grandmother. Dan Relihan and his wife Elizabeth (Bess) 1915-1995 are buried in the Abbey in Buttevant. They are surely resting peacefully in the knowledge that Dan's accordion had the singular honour of being played at the Papal Concert 64 years after its purchase. *Apologies if any musical Relihan family members are omitted from this article; there are so many it is not easy to ensure all are included. The author acknowledges the assistance of Noel Relihan in the preparation of this article and Denis J Hickey for proof reading / editing support.*

Picture Caption 1

James and Brendan Begley with the eight family accordions on stage at the World Meeting of Families Concert in Croke Park attended by Pope Francis. The three-row Hohner Chromatic button accordion on the top right that was played at the concert was originally owned and played by Dan Relihan (1902 – 1958) from Churchtown.

Picture Caption 2

Dan Relihan, Churchtown (1902-1958)

