

# We could learn a lot from tiny Churchtown



## WHILE I HAVE YOU ...

I had been decided well in advance that lunch and dinner would merge and would be served at about 5pm in a hostelry with good television reception and an attractive menu. It would have been possible to go there much earlier, of course, and see the other two matches, but we wanted to make the most of the Cardiff decider and for that purpose we were determined to have maximum concentration to savour every moment when the time came.

But nobody had actually planned what to do for the four hours between 1 and 5 pm. We could have watched the other games at home, of course, but it was fairly obvious that the French would make mincemeat of the Italians and that the Calcutta Cup would also be one-sided. So we'd go somewhere to use up the time.

However, four hours is an awkward span of time to "go somewhere". The sun was shining and we could have gone to Ballybunion - for an hour. But even with sunshine, there was very little warmth outside, and an hour anywhere is hardly worth the effort, so Ballybunion was off.

So we headed vaguely south and found ourselves past Dromcollogher and in the vicinity of Liscarroll; that charming little village which is overwhelmed by its gigantic limestone Norman castle, said to be the third biggest of its genre in the country. It seems that the castle was a fortress to defend the main road from Limerick to Cork before Buttevant was founded and the road through Charleville was created. Tick, tock, three hours to go.

So we moseyed on towards Buttevant but a thought struck me that it would be worth seeing Churchtown again. I first knew Churchtown as one of the many obscurely located villages at which my bus stopped on its eccentric daily meander to Cork. All those years ago, Churchtown, being mainly a triangular space defined by limestone and largely derelict buildings, had an air of faded importance, somewhere which had seen bet-

ter days. It wasn't even on the road to anywhere, at least not in the eyes of the bus company, because the bus turned off the Liscarroll to Buttevant road, drove the mile to Churchtown, check that there was nobody waiting, turn around and go back out the way it had come in. During my four years occasionally taking that bus, I do not recall a solitary passenger ever either boarding or alighting.

I was recounting this tale of bleakness and of a village which was a sad monument to hard times when we reached there. And what a transformation!

Churchtown is now an absolute gem. It is still built around its estate-created core, but all the buildings are renovated and splendid new houses, individual and estate, radiate in every direction. Flowers proliferate and every nook and cranny is landscaped to perfection. Tasteful signage aids the eye-even equine statuary embellishes the place (it was the early home of Vincent O'Brien, I was told). It is not at all surprising to find that so tranquil and well-kept a place has attracted

nursing homes and retirement chalets.

By the time we had finished our walkabout and seen what was to be seen, and visited a shop or two, it was time to head north again for our appointment with our friends and that much anticipated last supper before Ireland would know its fate.

The meal was grand, thanks for asking, even if I had difficulty keeping it down at various moments of tension as the game went on.

With the excitement of the match and the euphoria of the afters, it was easy for me to forget about the miraculous transformation and regeneration of the village of Churchtown, just across the county boundary in north Cork.

But it persistently returned to mind that if a community like Churchtown, with a local civic trust as well as a community council, could do so much for itself and also tap into EU funds via Ballyhoura, national funds through a very agency imaginable, including national lottery cash, as well as commissioning subsidised work through FAS, and other schemes done in co-operation with the county council, even the economic downturn should not deter other places from seeking to do likewise.

I could recite the names of a dozen or more comparable villages here in County Limerick which would benefit from such an approach as has been adopted by Churchtown. That said, many of our heritage towns and villages have already done a lot to improve themselves and the various public bodies have played their part, sometimes without even being asked.

But village regeneration will probably not take high priority as long as we are cutting nurses' wages and cancelling entire motorways.

In the meantime, however, I urge the community leaders to take an afternoon off and drive to see what can be achieved. I feel sure that the good people of Churchtown would be only too happy to tender helpful advice to those who but ask.

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