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Issue 16
August 1st 2022
€3.50
(NI stg €3)

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REAL EXPERTS

We must continue celebrating the experts in our communities, writes Domhnall O'Donoghue.

“**S**he who shouts loudest gets heard!” — an elderly lady once remarked in a busy butcher before roaring her order so loud, it was a wonder she didn’t awaken the carcasses hanging around us.

I recently recalled this colourful lady’s tactic — but for a different reason. Being loud seems to be an effective approach not only when buying pork chops but also when convincing the world that you’re the ultimate authority on your subject of choice — even when you’re not.

I’m old enough to remember when the word ‘expert’ boasted gravitas and respect — a title reserved for the select few who enjoyed proficient knowledge in their chosen field. But this status has been dramatically diluted — largely thanks to social

media, where a growing number dominate conversations, convinced that their voices alone are worthy of attention. And the consequences are problematic — especially when it comes to our communities.

Many local experts don’t claim the reach of commentators or influencers on social media, so their contributions aren’t always fully recognised. Frustratingly, unless you possess healthy tonsils or a wide platform to amplify your opinions, these people — with their wisdom, insights and experience — risk being side-lined and ignored.



Domhnall O'Donoghue

GO LOCAL

As a journalist, I’ve travelled extensively throughout Ireland and am frequently in the company of dedicated preservers of our vast heritage, crafts and environment. For instance, on a recent trip to Rockfarm — Slane Castle’s glamping

offering — I partook in a kayaking expedition along the Boyne, gamely led by David Buckley of the brilliantly named company Boyne Voyage.

After navigating some tricky weirs, I became mesmerised listening to David discuss the various wildlife activating this historic waterway, such as trout, salmon, dragonflies, swallows and swifts. Growing up in Drogheda, David developed a love of the river early — today, his primary goal is to promote and encourage the responsible use of the Boyne as a diverse amenity.

“There’s nowhere I prefer being than on the river with my son or other outdoor enthusiasts,” he revealed.

Speaking of rivers, a country mile west of the Shannon near Athlone, I once met former welder Charlie Finneran, who, along with his wife, Bridie, and their two sons, Thomas and Jonathan, opened the Derryglad Folk & Heritage Museum in 1998. Beautifully and creatively presented, this museum contains 7,500 artefacts and hand-made exhibitions, allowing visitors to experience 19th Century rural living.



“I’m old enough to remember when the word ‘expert’ boasted gravitas and respect”

“We hope the museum creates memories or introduces the next generation to how we used to live,” Charlie explained, adding that they also welcome visitors living with Alzheimer’s to help bring their childhoods to life.



MIDLANDS MAGIC

This summer, I explored County Laois, and in addition to attractions like the neo-classical Emo Court or early Christian settlement Rock of Dunamase, I discovered more passionate experts – all volunteers – quietly sharing their wealth of knowledge with visitors.

Take Trevor Stanley, a dairy farmer and historian responsible for running Donaghmore Workhouse, which operated in the years following the Great Famine. Over three hours, he provided me with an enlightening tour of the haunting buildings, painting a vivid and tragic picture of what life was like for our ancestors in the mid-1800s.

“Donaghmore Workhouse has proven to be an eye-opening experience for our



visitors,” Trevor told me. “People can’t believe the sheer scale of the various buildings and the harsh conditions inmates faced.”

Nearby in Mountmellick, I met more of Laois’ tireless volunteers in the town’s museum celebrating their Victorian white-on-white embroidery – president Ann Dowling and secretary Marie Walsh, both skilled embroiders. They discussed the efforts of experts who similarly devoted their lives to developing and preserving this beautiful craft.

Along with local Quakers, who supported embroidery teaching in schools, the ladies mentioned stalwarts including Johanna Carter, Margaret Beale, Anne Jellicoe and, more recently, the late Sr Teresa Margaret, who helped rejuvenate the craft with her long-running series of classes.



● This page clockwise from above: Charlie at Derryglad Folk Heritage Museum; Donaghmore Famine Workhouse Museum; Domhnall Kayaking on the River Boyne; Mountmellick Embroidery.

“They were pioneers for empowering women,” Marie praised.

My experience at Mountmellick Embroidery Museum reminded me of another trip to County Monaghan’s Carrickmacross Lace Gallery. This courtyard premises perfectly showcases the iconic tradition which was incorporated into the wedding dresses of Kate

Middleton and the late Princess Diana. But, just as importantly, it pays tribute to the hundreds of lace-makers who create this craft without fuss – or financial reward, given their modest rates.

Elizabeth Daly – a prominent figure in Carrickmacross Lace Co-Op – explained that today’s lace-makers use the same techniques as they did 200 years ago, and their hand-stitched creations “are treasures to be passed on to future generations”.

The importance of Elizabeth’s comment cannot be overstated – without these local experts, our heritage might be lost altogether. Their efforts in our communities should be recognised – especially in a world where “she who shouts loudest gets heard”. WW