

BRENT IRISH ADVISORY SERVICE

SCÉALTA OUR STORIES

Remembering the journeys of Irish
people who came to Brent in the
1950s, 1960s and 1970s



OUR COMMUNITY

Today, the Brent Irish Advisory Service's Active Ageing Clubs continue to bring people together each week.

The faces you'll see throughout this book are members of these clubs, representing the vibrant Irish community that continues to thrive in Brent. The stories shared within these pages have been gathered from across our community, preserving memories for generations to come.

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Our thanks





AN INTRODUCTION

Scéalta, ‘Our Stories’, is an oral-history project created by the Brent Irish Advisory Service (BIAS) to preserve the voices of Brent’s Irish community – a community that has shaped the borough into the vibrant and welcoming place it is today.

For decades, London has been home to the largest Irish-born population outside of Ireland, and at the heart of this story is the Irish community in Brent, affectionately dubbed Ireland’s 33rd county.

Scéalta focuses on collecting and preserving stories from across that community, exploring rich, complex and layered experiences of migration, work, housing, family and social life. With the community now spanning many decades and generations, our aim was to capture personal stories, memories and cultural artefacts before they are lost.

With the support of a dedicated group of volunteers, we sat down with Irish people who have made Brent their home. Together, we explored stories that have often been overlooked or under-represented.

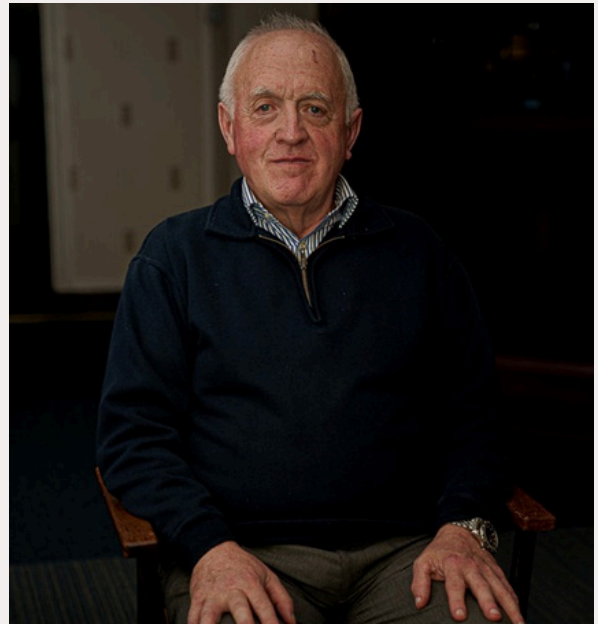
The project emerged from Becoming Brent, a borough-wide initiative responding to the legacy and impact of the 1924–1925 British Empire Exhibition. By sharing these stories, we hope to challenge colonial narratives, foreground the extraordinary voices of ‘ordinary’ people, and offer a more personal perspective on the experience of migration.

Interviewing people about their lives and experiences is a deeply personal process. It asks them to revisit intimate moments of their lives and reflect on the complicated realities of what it meant to be Irish in London decades ago – and how those experiences continue to shape lives and identities today.

These conversations were approached with great care and sensitivity, in a true spirit of collaboration between participants and volunteers. We extend our deepest gratitude to everyone who has given their time, trust and honesty to this project, and helped to create a lasting record of an important part of London's Irish story.

One hundred years on from the British Empire Exhibition in Brent, the experience of being Irish in London continues to evolve. New patterns of migration are emerging in an increasingly globalised world, reshaping what home, identity and belonging can mean.

This book offers a window into the migrant experience: the courage of leaving home, the challenge of building a new life, and the beauty – and at times pain – that can accompany that journey.







FROM IRISH ROOTS

There is no single way to characterise life in Ireland for our Scéalta participants throughout the 1940s and beyond.

No one story can capture everyone's experience. Yet despite the diversity of backgrounds and circumstances, common themes emerged across many of the interviews.

Like those of most places we call home, memories of Ireland often contained both affection and contradiction. Participants spoke warmly about their childhoods, while also reflecting on the hardships and inequalities that shaped daily life.

Many of our participants grew up in rural Ireland. Even those raised in cities such as Dublin or Cork were rarely far from the countryside and its endless emerald fields. Interviewees spoke fondly of nature and the simplicity of rural life. For many children, having acres of land as their playground brought a sense of adventure and freedom.

One participant, who grew up near Loughrea in County Galway, described living on a “small farm way out in the country”, where everyone worked together. His parents, grandmother and six children all contributed to the running of the family farm. Similarly, another participant, raised in the north-west corner of County Cork near the Kerry border, recalled being the eldest of seven children, all helping with the farm from an early age.



Scéalta archives, chapter 01

A strong connection to the land emerged throughout many of the interviews. Participants often spoke of growing up in communities where generations of the same families had lived side by side for decades. In some parts of Ireland, family roots stretched back so far that the boundaries between personal history and community history became almost indistinguishable.

One participant from County Leitrim remembered walking two-and-a-half miles to school each day, occasionally getting a lift from her teacher and the school's driver. Years earlier, that same driver had taken her mother to school. Stories such as these illustrate the close-knit nature of many Irish communities and the strong bonds that connected people across generations. Yet these memories of community and belonging existed alongside significant hardship.

Life in Ireland during the 1940s, 1950s and beyond was shaped by economic challenges, social constraints and political tensions. As one participant born in Dublin in the 1940s reflected, “there were a lot of issues in Ireland which were not good”.



One of the most significant influences on Irish society was the relationship between the Irish state and the Catholic Church. For decades, responsibility for key areas of public life – including education, welfare and social services – was largely entrusted to the Church.

Several participants reflected on the power the Church held within Irish society and the impact this had on everyday life. In recent decades, Ireland has increasingly confronted difficult aspects of its past, including the legacy of Mother and Baby Homes, industrial schools and other Church-run institutions. This is not to offer a blanket condemnation of the Catholic Church or its followers. Rather, it is to recognise that understanding life in Ireland during much of the twentieth century requires an understanding of the influence the Church exercised politically, socially and culturally, and the ways in which conformity was often expected of Irish citizens.

Questions of religion and identity took on a different and often more acute form in the North of Ireland. For the Scéalta project, we interviewed two participants from the North – one from Derry and one from Belfast.



Both described how difficult it was to remain untouched by the conflict. As they explained, everyone was caught up in the Troubles “one way or another”. Neither had any direct involvement, yet both recalled how common it was to encounter the aftermath of bombings, shootings and arrests. One participant remembered being “lifted by the RUC as it was in those days”.

Both men carried vivid memories of the period. One spoke of Bloody Sunday, recalling how, as a child, he was outside playing on a cold January afternoon in 1972 when people began returning from town saying that protesters had been shot. He ran home to tell his father, later discovering that one of the victims was a close family friend.

The long-term effects of the conflict were evident in these interviews. One participant described his early life in the North of Ireland as “traumatising” and suggested that it may have contributed to later struggles with depression. Their stories serve as a reminder of the profound impact political conflict can have on individuals, families and communities long after the violence itself has ended.



Beyond the politics of the North and the influence of the Church in the South, many participants also reflected on economic hardship and limited opportunities. While farming families often had easy access to food, this did not shield them from poverty. One participant, whose mother grew up in rural Longford during the 1930s and 1940s, recalled a home without electricity or running water, where water had to be collected daily from a well.

Lack of employment opportunities was another recurring theme. A participant who trained as a teacher remembered the high levels of unemployment in Dublin during the mid-to-late 1980s and the low wages available even to those fortunate enough to find work. For many Irish people, emigration often seemed like the only route to opportunity.

Taken together, these interviews reveal a layered and complex picture of Ireland. For some, the land, community and culture provided a deep sense of belonging. For others, economic hardship, social restrictions and political conflict made life challenging. Most often, both realities existed side by side. It is within these tensions and contradictions that the richness of Ireland's social history can be found.





THE JOURNEY BEGINS

As explored in the first chapter of this book, life in Ireland was not always easy. Faced with economic hardship, limited opportunities and social constraints, many of our participants looked across the Irish Sea and saw London as a place of possibility, opportunity and adventure.



Scéalta archives, chapter 02

Remarkably, every participant we interviewed shared a similar story. Few arrived entirely alone. Almost all had an uncle, aunt, cousin, older sibling, neighbour, friend or acquaintance who had already made the journey before them. Migration often followed well-worn family and community pathways, with one person's move opening the door for another.

One participant who grew up in Connemara was one of nine children. As each sibling reached adulthood, they each eventually made their way to London, staying for different lengths of time and at different stages of their lives. She recalled how an aunt and uncle were already living in London and how each child followed in turn, finding work and accommodation through family connections. Another participant left Galway in her twenties, travelling over with a young chaplain who offered her a lift. After crossing by ferry and driving for miles in the wrong direction, unsure of which way London lay, she eventually arrived at a friend's sister's flat in Hounslow at 7 am. Exhausted from the journey, she slept on the floor. It was a modest beginning, but it marked the start of a new life.

These stories reflect a much wider historical experience. It is estimated that over 500,000 people left the South of Ireland between 1945 and 1960. From the 1940s onwards, roughly three out of every four Irish emigrants were destined for Britain. Migration, and particularly migration to Britain, has profoundly shaped modern Irish identity.

The stories shared by our participants also remind us that emigration is not simply an individual experience but a deeply collective one. For generations, leaving Ireland was so common that it became woven into the national story. There is perhaps no Irish family untouched by migration.

Across the country, family trees stretch far beyond Ireland's shores, with relatives scattered across Britain, America, Australia and almost everywhere in between. Ireland has often been described as a nation of emigrants, and the memories gathered in this book speak powerfully to that legacy.

Behind almost every journey to London was another journey that had come before it: a brother who left first, an aunt who offered a spare room, a cousin who helped find work, or a friend who provided reassurance that a life could be built elsewhere. Migration was rarely undertaken alone.

It was sustained by the networks of family, friendship and community that linked people across borders and generations. These connections often provided a vital safety net for new arrivals, helping them navigate the challenges of finding work, securing accommodation and building a sense of belonging.

In time, churches, Irish organisations and local community groups would become an important extension of these networks, offering support, companionship and a connection to home in an unfamiliar city.

It would be impossible to discuss this migration without mentioning the infamous journey across the Irish Sea to Holyhead. For many, the ferry crossing became a defining memory, marking the emotional transition between the familiar world they were leaving behind and the unknown future ahead.

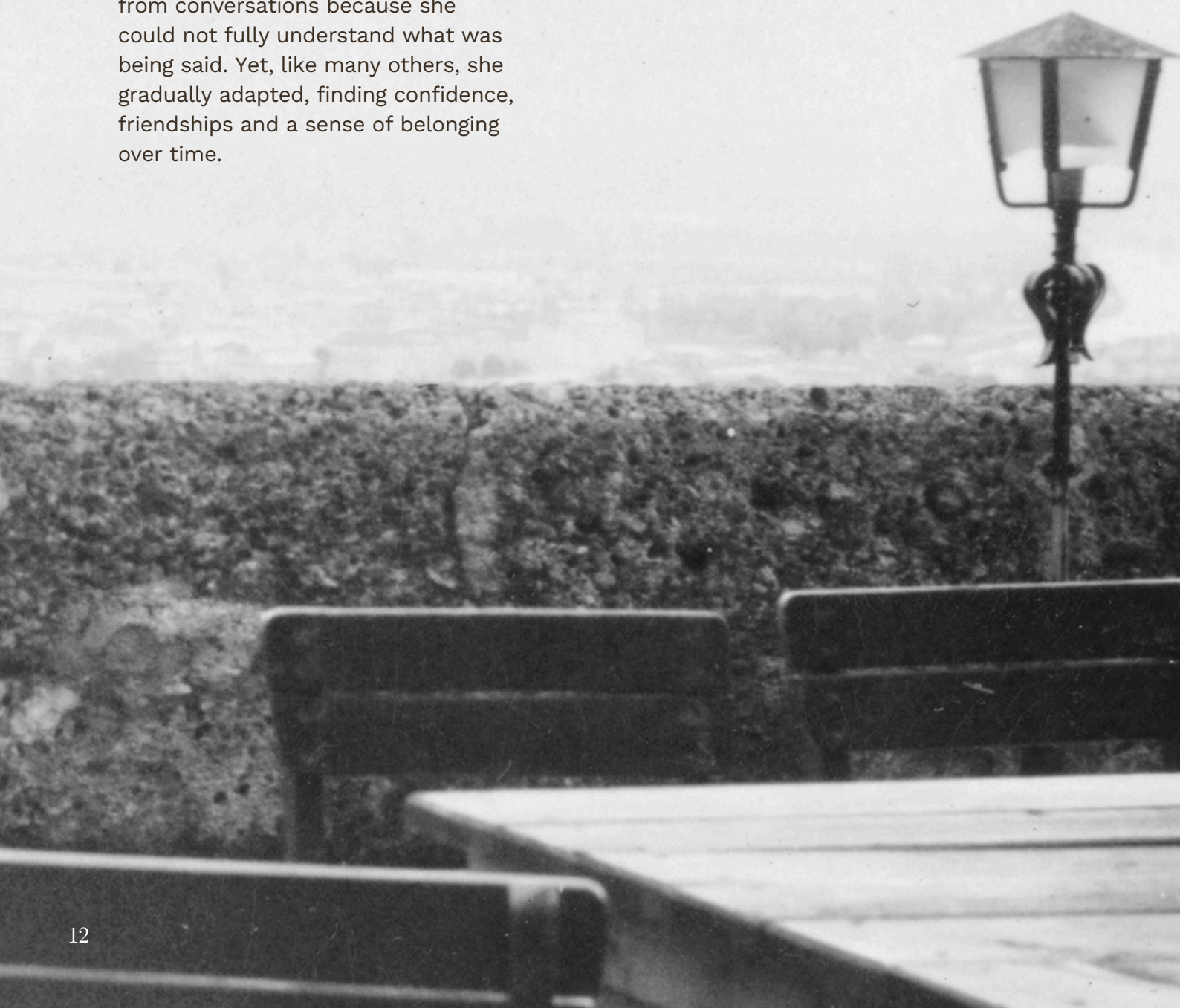
The journey itself perhaps foreshadowed the complicated and layered experiences that Irish migrants would encounter in Britain and, more specifically, in Brent. One participant recalled leaving Derry on a cold February day in 1982. At just nineteen years old, he travelled first by boat and then by train to London. Reflecting on the experience, he remembered:

“The train, it was absolutely awful, really because it was just so bleak. And then I got on the train and I was trying to make conversation, but nobody wanted to talk to me, you know. And I felt so alone. All I saw was these houses with all the little lights on. And I was imagining that was my home. It was really bleak and isolating.”



Another participant who left Cork in 1966 described the dread associated with the ferry crossing, recalling overcrowded boats, rough seas and passengers becoming seasick throughout the journey. For many emigrants, these difficult crossings became symbolic of the sacrifices involved in leaving home.

The move was sometimes made even more challenging for those whose first language was Irish. One participant from Connemara arrived in London at seventeen speaking very little English. She recalled having to learn the language after arriving and often finding herself standing back from conversations because she could not fully understand what was being said. Yet, like many others, she gradually adapted, finding confidence, friendships and a sense of belonging over time.







For many participants, the excitement of new opportunities sat alongside feelings of loneliness, uncertainty and homesickness. Leaving home meant leaving behind family, neighbours, familiar landscapes and the everyday rhythms of life. The reality of migration was often far more complex than the promise of opportunity that had first drawn people to London. When asked how her parents felt about watching each of their nine children leave for London, one participant replied:

“Well, of course they didn't want to let any of us go, but they had no choice really because we just didn't have the money and stuff.”



Her words capture a reality shared by countless Irish families throughout the twentieth century. Migration was often less a matter of choice than of necessity.

Yet despite the hardships, what emerges most strongly from these stories is not simply a narrative of loss, but one of resilience, determination and collective support. The Irish men and women who arrived in London carried with them more than suitcases and hopes for work. They brought family ties, friendships, faith and a strong sense of community. These connections helped transform an unfamiliar city into a place where people could build homes, raise families and create new lives, while maintaining deep bonds with the places and people they had left behind.

For many, London was never simply a destination. It became another chapter in a much longer story of Irish migration, one shaped by courage, sacrifice and the enduring strength of community. The networks that welcomed new arrivals, whether through family, friendship, parish life or local organisations, helped ensure that even in a city as vast as London, few truly faced the journey alone.





Scéalta archives, chapter 03

A PLACE TO LAND

Where and how Irish people have made their home in London was a big topic of conversation for our participants. Many moves that started in Ireland and ended in Brent started off with an informal housing arrangement, whether in hostels, house-shares or with friends of friends, before folks or their parents ended up with more secure, often social, housing.

But even this was rarely such a clear progression as it sounds. The theme that emerged most often from participants in the project who had moved to Britain in the 1970s and 1980s was that housing wasn't just about bricks and mortar. It was a story of the complex webs of social relations that got you a roof over your head.

The term 'housing' itself can be a bit of a misnomer. At least two people we spoke to started off in London sleeping rough in parks, following the work. Hostels, bedsits, squats and multiple occupancy houses ('HMOs') were often the follow-ons that these mostly working-class jobs could afford them. Rats, overcrowding and leaky homes feature heavily in people's early impressions of London. For many, this was made worse by discriminatory letting practices or just plain lack of money, taking better options off the table.

However, it was an oft-repeated fact that this sub-standard housing was often let out by other, more established Irish immigrants. Whilst so many of the stories people told were about the informal connections that brought about meaningful change to their housing situation, it's important to note that the picture around housing is and was complex, and that the Irish community in Brent did not move as a monolith against purely external housing discrimination.

In spite of this, our participants laid much emphasis on the neighbourliness and kindness that characterised their early experiences of housing in London. Shared accommodation wasn't always a problem. There could be an awful lot of freedom in moving away from extended family in more rural parts of Ireland, especially as a young person, with a more independent life in a big, anonymous city opening the door to parties, partners and social space.

And even when people moved on from arrangements like these to settle into more established homes in the borough, what stand out remain the stories of human connection and support. Whether talking about efforts to turn around a sink estate or how a kind landlady pulled strings to keep an Irish family in their home – described as feeling “like a miracle” – participants told us about the almost countless number of ways faceless bureaucratic housing procedures were circumvented and made human through community.

You might have formed a tenants’ association to sort repairs for your housing block, or chased Ken Livingstone down the street to secure proper heating for an elderly neighbour in sub-standard housing. The prevailing story is that of Irish immigrants to Brent taking the solidarity offered within their own networks when they first arrived in London, and extending it across the whole local community to help make the borough a little easier to live in.

The Irish community in Brent were active participants in making housing provision better. They made their own possibilities.

Amongst those we interviewed are people who fought local government and housing associations to make the homes they lived in safer, warmer, more pleasant. And in the case of the housing support work that BIAS itself started, which blossomed into Innisfree Housing Association, they literally made their own homes as part of a practical, diligent approach to fixing housing provision in the borough.

It's these relationships – big cross-community struggles or friendly favours – that helped people build a home in Brent.







NAVIGATING THE WORLD OF WORK

As explored in earlier chapters, the majority of Irish people came to London as economic migrants. They arrived in search of employment, opportunity and prosperity.

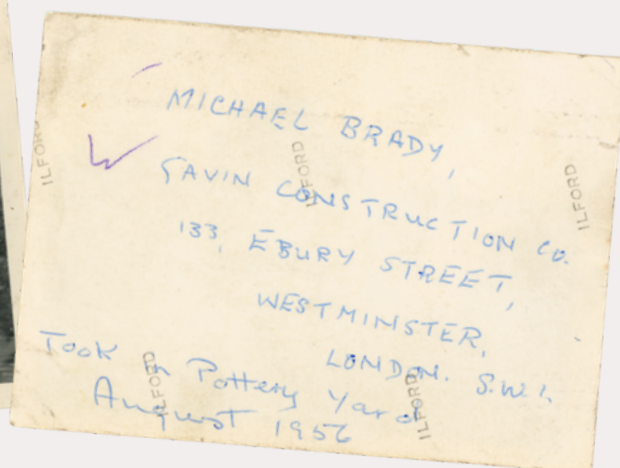
Much of this migration formed part of the wider post-war reconstruction period, when people from former British colonial nations – including Ireland, Jamaica, India and Nigeria – travelled to England in search of work. Within this broader pattern, Irish migrants became one of the most significant and visible communities in London's labour force.

For many Irish men, employment was concentrated in construction, railway work and the pub trade. These sectors provided immediate access to work but were often physically demanding, insecure and characterised by long hours. In Brent and across London, Irish workers became a familiar presence on building sites, contributing to the construction of housing estates, schools and infrastructure that transformed the post-war city. However, work life was often relentless.

One participant recalled the intensity of the 1960s, describing finishing late-night shifts in pubs and then continuing into other jobs such as cab driving, sometimes arriving home at 4 am before starting all over again later that same day. The participant went on to explain that Sunday shifts were particularly valued because they often paid nearly double, reflecting the financial pressures many migrants faced.



Scéalta archives, chapter 04



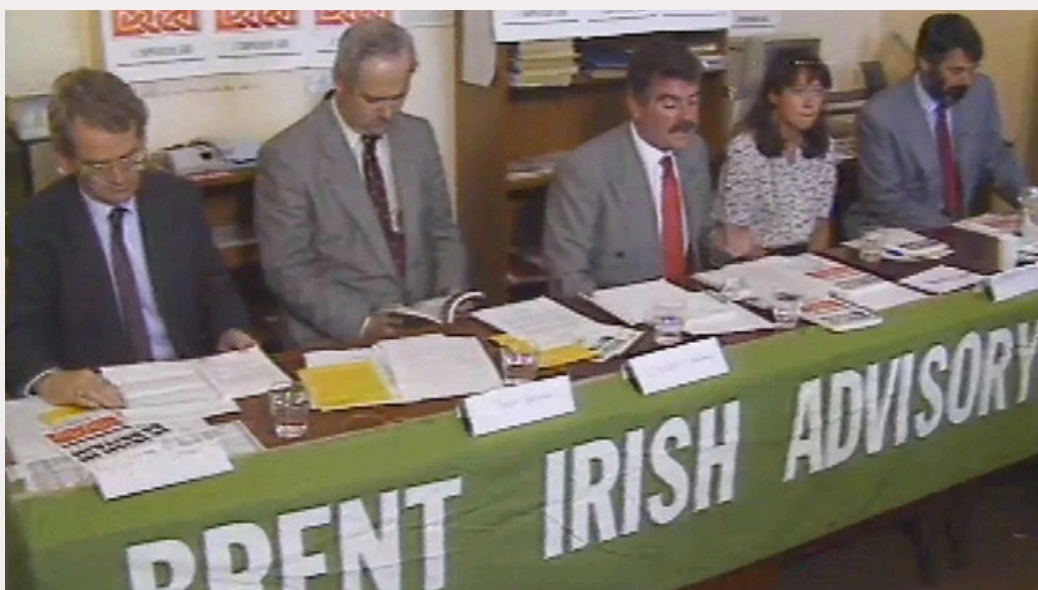
Women's employment followed different but equally important pathways. Many Irish women worked in domestic service, cleaning, catering and waitressing, while a significant number entered the NHS as nurses and healthcare workers. These roles placed Irish women at the centre of Britain's care economy, sustaining hospitals, homes and public services across London.



Brent itself became a major hub of industrial and manufacturing employment. Large factories such as McVitie's and other major employers provided work for many Irish migrants, particularly women, alongside other migrant communities. These workplaces were often spaces where diverse working-class populations came into contact, shaping everyday multicultural life in the borough long before it was formally recognised as such.

Alongside paid employment, a number of our participants also became involved in community activism and trade-union organising. Some went on to play key roles in establishing organisations such as the Brent Irish Advisory Service, which emerged to support Irish migrants navigating housing, welfare and employment challenges. Others became involved in wider labour struggles, including the Grunwick Industrial Dispute, with one participant later going on to become a prominent local councillor. These experiences reflect how Irish migrants were not only workers within London's economy, but also active participants in shaping its political and civic life.

Ultimately, the story of Irish work in London is a story of contribution. Through construction, care, industry and public service, Irish migrants helped build and sustain the city they came to call home, leaving a lasting imprint on its neighbourhoods, institutions and communities.





CONFRONTING PREJUDICE

Given the sheer scale of Irish migration to London, it is unsurprising that many Irish migrants found pockets of community, familiarity and a sense of home, particularly in places such as Brent, as discussed in an earlier chapter of this book.

Through family networks, churches, Irish organisations, social clubs and friendships, many migrants were able to recreate elements of the life they had left behind. These spaces offered comfort, connection and a sense of belonging in a city that could otherwise feel unfamiliar. Despite this, living in London as an Irish person was not always easy.

On an individual level, particularly for those arriving from rural villages and small towns where everyone knew each other, London could feel overwhelming, anonymous and lonely. The transition from a close-knit small community to a vast city of strangers was a significant adjustment.

Scéalta archives, chapter 05

One participant shared a story that has stayed with her throughout her life. Returning home from work one day, she met a young Irish man on the street who had recently arrived in London. He was stopping people and asking if they knew where “Mrs So-and-So” lived.

Reflecting on the encounter, she described how sad it felt; the young man had arrived expecting the familiarity and closeness of home, unaware that London worked very differently. He did not yet understand the scale of the city or the fact that people would not necessarily know his neighbours, his family connections or the person he was searching for. This feeling was described by another participant when reflecting on young Irish people arriving in London during the 1970s and 1980s. He recalled seeing newcomers who “hadn’t a clue, they were like lambs at the slaughter”.

The phrase captures the vulnerability many young migrants experienced as they navigated a new city, often with limited knowledge of what awaited them.

Beyond the everyday challenges of being away from home, what became abundantly clear from the experiences shared by participants was that many Irish people living in London between the 1960s and 1990s also faced discrimination, prejudice and racism.

Many people are familiar with the phrase “No Blacks, No Dogs, No Irish” – a slogan that reflected the exclusion faced by Irish people in areas such as housing, employment and social spaces. However, the stories gathered through these interviews reveal the deeper and more personal ways in which anti-Irish prejudice operated. It affected not only where people lived and worked, but also how they saw themselves and how comfortable they felt expressing their identity.

One participant recalled the experience of a close friend and neighbour who was attempting to buy a home in Uxbridge. During the process, she overheard the English owners remark, “oh, she’s Irish, she’s dirty”. Other participants spoke of being told to “piss off home”, reminders that despite living, working and building futures for their families in Britain, they were still sometimes treated as outsiders.

The political context of the time also shaped the experiences of many Irish migrants. In light of the Troubles, being Irish in London could carry additional suspicion and fear, with some people experiencing assumptions that their nationality, background or identity was connected to terrorism.



One participant from Belfast described having “a few run-ins with the Special Branch”. While working in the civil service in Harlesden, his employer contacted the authorities after becoming suspicious of his supposed involvement in ‘terrorist activity’. The participant was told that some of his days off coincided with IRA activities and that because he played Irish music and wore Irish jerseys, he was considered “suspicious”. When questioned, he was told:

“Well, if you don’t cooperate with us, we can send you straight back over to Ireland... We can have you locked away.”

His experience highlights how wider political tensions filtered into the everyday lives of ordinary Irish people, creating an atmosphere where identity itself could become something that was questioned or monitored.

As a result, many participants spoke about the pressure to minimise or hide aspects of their Irish identity. Some described softening their accents, speaking more quietly or avoiding drawing attention to where they came from. For some, adapting to life in Britain meant learning when and where it felt safe to openly express who they were.

One participant reflected on her experience at university in the UK during the 1990s. When she began applying for jobs, a friend advised her to “play down” her Irishness. The comment reflected a wider understanding that being openly Irish could sometimes be perceived as a disadvantage, even decades after migration had become such a central part of British and Irish social history.

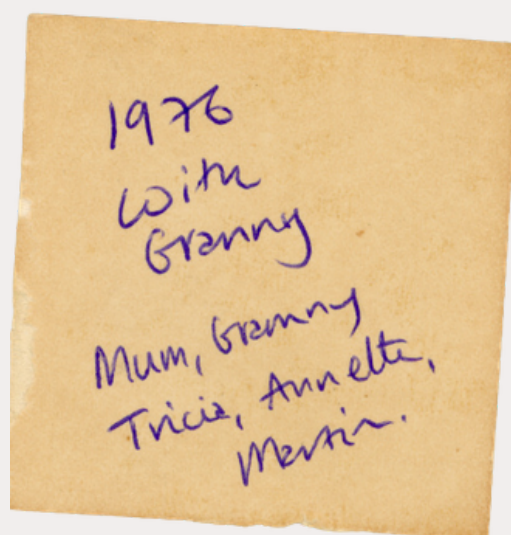


For Irish Travellers, these experiences of discrimination have been particularly severe. Anti-Traveller racism and prejudice have remained deeply embedded, with many describing it as one of the most persistent and socially accepted forms of racism.

While many participants spoke about the warmth and support they found within Irish communities, it is important to recognise that belonging was not always straightforward. Irish migrants built homes, families and communities in London, yet many also had to negotiate feelings of exclusion and the experience of being seen as different.

The legacy of this prejudice has not disappeared entirely. One participant reflected that after the Brexit referendum, he experienced something he had not heard for decades: “why don’t you go home to your own country?” The comment was a reminder that questions of identity, belonging and migration remain deeply connected.

The experiences shared in this chapter reveal the complexity of what it meant to build a life in London as an Irish person. Migration created new opportunities and new communities, but it also required resilience in the face of misunderstanding and exclusion. Irish people in London were simultaneously newcomers and long-standing contributors, outsiders and neighbours, migrants and community-builders.







Scéalta archives, chapter 06

CREATING A NEW COMMUNITY

In her book *An Unconsidered People: The Irish in London*, Catherine Dunne notes that “four out of every five children born in Ireland between 1931 and 1941 [were] destined for Britain”.



In the 1950s the Irish economy was stagnating and there were very few employment opportunities. By contrast, work was abundant in England, especially in the big cities. Jobs were plentiful in construction and factories, driven by the post-World War II need for reconstruction. Nurses were also needed for England's newly formed National Health Service.

Many of those who emigrated to England came to the London Borough of Brent, leading to its affectionate nickname of ‘Ireland’s 33rd county’. In particular, two areas on the edge of Brent, Cricklewood and Kilburn, became populated with Irish-owned pubs, dance halls and shops.

Accommodation in lodging houses was plentiful and Kilburn’s Catholic Church of the Sacred Heart on Quex Road provided a home away from home. So it followed naturally that within London’s Irish diaspora, for many decades ‘County Kilburn’ was the unofficial capital.

Quex Road has had a long history of welcoming immigrants. At the peak of Irish emigration to Brent during the 1950s and 1960s, tens of thousands attended Sunday mass there. The parish church was twice extended to cope with the growing Irish congregation. The parish was possibly the largest in the country, with up to 18 masses every Sunday. Mass was held on the hour and when they could no longer cope with the number of congregants, they started running extra masses on the half hour in the adjoining hall.

The Irish from neighbouring areas in Brent travelled to Quex Road for Sunday mass and it became an important meeting place for the Irish diaspora. Churchgoers could also buy Irish national and regional newspapers at a kiosk outside the church. For many of the Irish in Brent, buying the weekly regional newspaper was essential to keep them connected to the news from ‘home’.

After the days of the newspaper hut at Quex Road, Mandy's Irish Shop on Willesden High Road became the most popular venue for Brent's Irish diaspora to buy Irish newspapers. Mandy's was an institution from the 1960s until the 2010s, also keeping people stocked up on Irish food products, music and gifts.

The Catholic Church was important for many of the Irish in Brent, with Irish people forming the majority of Brent's congregations for many decades. As well as providing religious services, sacraments and spiritual support, many churches therefore offered social clubs and activities like Irish-dancing lessons for children. There were also Irish céilí and set-dancing classes and lessons on traditional Irish music. This helped the Irish in Brent to preserve their heritage and celebrate their identity.

The clubs were welcoming to families and provided the opportunity for many second-generation Irish children to experience live Irish music with their parents. This is where many children of Irish emigrants learned how to waltz and jive and picked up the steps of the most popular of Irish céilí dances, 'The Siege of Ennis'.

Being a tight-knit community, the Irish diaspora looked out for one another, helping each other find employment and accommodation. One of the ways they did this was through benefit dances. If there was a family facing hardship, perhaps due to bereavement or illness, the community would pull together to provide support and financial assistance.

A benefit dance would quickly be organised, with tickets printed and sold in Irish pubs and clubs. Many who could not attend the event would buy tickets simply to support the cause. Benefit dances were a significant part of the social life of the Irish diaspora in Brent from the 1960s to the 2000s, taking place in church social clubs and dance halls. They were usually family-friendly events, again providing an opportunity to immerse the whole family in Irish culture.

In the last twenty years, many church social clubs have closed, killed off by changing demographics, rising costs and expensive building maintenance. Some clubs do continue to thrive, however, including the Mazenod Centre (Quex Road). They remain important community assets for both the Irish diaspora and the wider community in Brent.





Irish dance halls were another significant part of the London-Irish culture across the decades, with many scattered all across London in their heyday. These included the Gresham, the Blarney Club, the Hibernian and the Garryowen, to mention just a few. Closer to Brent, on Kilburn High Road, the Banba was a popular Irish dance hall from 1951 until 1968. The venue was demolished in 1971, when it became a Sainsbury's. Also on Kilburn High Road, the National was a legendary gig and Irish club venue from the 1970s to the 1990s.



In nearby Cricklewood, the Galtymore was arguably the most iconic Irish dance hall in London. Fondly known as 'the Galty', it opened in 1952 and hosted the biggest Irish showbands and singers until its closure in 2008. For over fifty years, the Galtymore was the social focal point for many of the Irish in London, with many Irish emigrants even meeting their future spouses there. The venue adapted over the decades and in turn became a popular nightspot for the next generation.

There were numerous Irish pubs in Brent that were part of the fabric of the Irish emigrant's social life. Kilburn High Road hosted several, including The Black Lion, The Old Bell and Biddy Mulligan's, where Irish emigrants would meet, socialise and share news from home. In more recent years, Irish pubs also became a venue for GAA (Gaelic Athletic Association) fans to watch televised Irish sport.



The Crown pub in Cricklewood, a landmark Victorian establishment which is still going strong, was an important hub for the Irish in Brent. The Crown was so well known that it was immortalised in Dominic Behan's folk song 'McAlpine's Fusiliers', made famous by The Dubliners:

"The craic was good in Cricklewood and they wouldn't leave the Crown."

Pubs like The Crown became important social hubs providing connection and kinship. This is where newly arrived emigrants could make connections and find work and lodgings. For years, Irish tradesmen and labourers would gather on The Crown's forecourt in the early morning, to be picked up by local building contractors for a day's work. The Crown and other Irish pubs also served as a financial facility, where construction workers could cash their weekly pay check.

After the heyday of the Irish dance hall, newer Irish social venues popped up in Brent, providing entertainment for further waves of Irish emigrants and for the second-generation Irish. Among these are perhaps most notably The Mean Fiddler in Harlesden (1980s-2002) and Dicey Reilly's in Neasden (1980s-1990s). In the mid-1980s there was also Áras na Gael, an Irish cultural centre in Queen's Park. It later became the Corrib Rest, with an Irish bar, function room and Irish cultural classes, before closing in 2015.



Another significant way in which the Irish diaspora socialised and preserved their culture was through supporting and participating in GAA sports, including Gaelic football, hurling and camogie. Brent's own Gaelic football club, Parnells GAA, dates back as far as 1951.

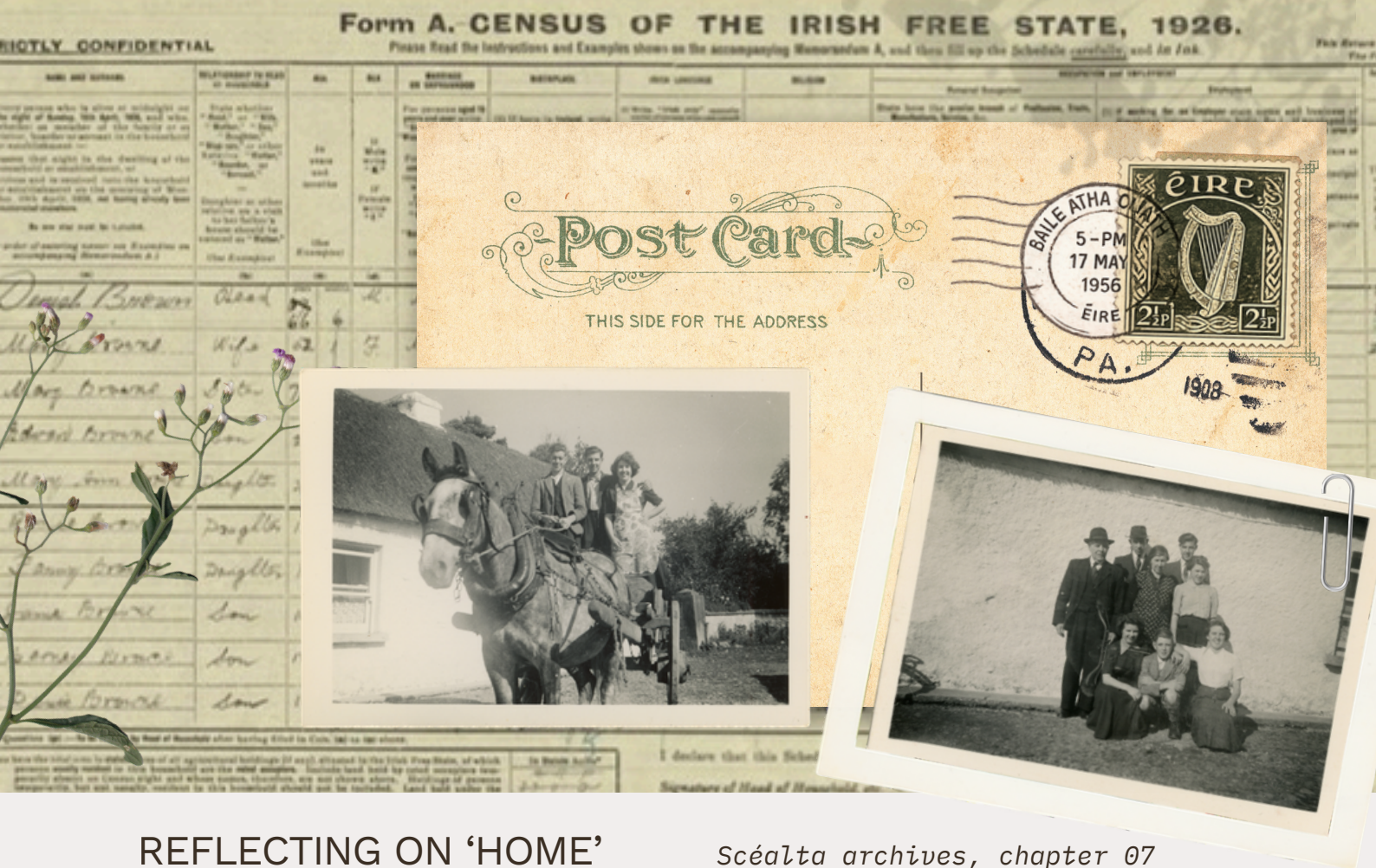
No journey into the history of Irish social life in Brent would be complete without mentioning the annual London Irish Festival. The Irish Festival took place on a July Sunday at Roundwood Park in the Willesden/Harlesden area. Starting in the 1970s, the festival ran for over two decades. This was a highlight in the social calendar for Irish families and tens of thousands flocked to Roundwood Park. The festival featured all things Irish: traditional Irish music, Irish dancing displays, céilí dancing, showbands, GAA sports and representation from Irish county associations.

Having left their homeland, sometimes because that was the only choice available, many Irish emigrants across the decades faced difficulties. Some experienced homesickness or a sense of loss or displacement as they navigated a foreign city and settled in Brent. Some faced discrimination. In this way, with a feeling that they were away from home, they shared a common experience with other migrant groups arriving in Brent.

The London Borough of Brent is one of the most ethnically diverse areas in England. As for other ethnic groups who have settled there, it has been and remains very important to Irish emigrants to preserve and celebrate their cultural identity.







REFLECTING ON 'HOME'

Scéalta archives, chapter 07

For many participants in Scéalta, 'home' is not tied to a particular place. While Brent may have become the place where lives were built, families were raised and communities were formed, there is undoubtedly a deep and lasting emotional connection to Ireland.

One participant described this duality simply, stating "it's where I am now, but it's also very deeply rooted in Ireland and always will be". Another described feeling torn between Brent and Belfast, reflecting "it's still my home in many ways... [though] I've lived over in London now more than half my life". One participant, who had lived and worked in Brent for more than fifty years, joked "my home is in Ireland... I'm just here on business!"

This sense of identity could feel even more layered for second-generation participants. One reflected on growing up as the child of Irish migrants that "you're not quite one or the other", comparing the experience to a "third culture where you've got a real mix of everything going on". They recognised that this experience is shared by many Londoners, describing the city as a "melting pot of different cultures" where people from many backgrounds and ethnicities have built new lives.

Leaving home could be difficult, particularly at a time when staying connected to family was far more challenging than it is today. The second-generation participants explained that their parents never intended to remain in England permanently. For many, migration was driven by necessity in the hopes of finding employment and new opportunities, rather than adventure. However, instead of returning to Ireland, these migrants set down roots in the UK, driven by careers, friendships and family life. As one participant reflected, their parents "had their own little version of Ireland over here in some ways", while still considering Ireland home.

One participant reflected on communication with those at home:

*“We didn't make phone calls, we were writing letters...
We couldn't wait for the letters to come back.”*

Another spoke of the loneliness that could accompany migration, recalling their time in London alone before gradually building friendships and a sense of belonging. Despite the initial loneliness, many participants described finding opportunities that transformed their lives. One reflected that they had been “treated very well” in London and had been given opportunities that might not have been available to them in Ireland at the time. Others spoke about gradually integrating into life in Brent while maintaining strong ties to Ireland.

Participants spoke warmly of the strong sense of community that helped migrants establish themselves in London. Having a support network was often essential, particularly during difficult times. One participant recalled that helping others was simply a part of life:

“If somebody was in trouble, you helped them out.”

Whether it was lending money to someone needing to travel home for a funeral or gathering together to celebrate important milestones, these connections helped sustain a sense of Irishness.

Throughout the interviews, participants highlighted not only a connection to Ireland itself, but also to the customs, traditions and values that have travelled across generations, allowing them to maintain ties. Participants remembered family gatherings filled with music, storytelling and food.



One participant recalled how “there'd always be music, there'd always be singing”, while another remembered receiving shamrocks wrapped in cling film in the post from Ireland for St Patrick's Day. These customs created continuity between generations and helped preserve connections to home, even as life in London became firmly established.

The Irish language and accent emerged as powerful markers of identity. Some participants spoke about having to adapt their accents during their time in London, particularly in workplaces where strong regional accents could be difficult for others to understand.



One participant explained, “there was a time where you [would] hide your accent”. Others reflected on the complexity of being visibly or invisibly Irish in another country.

Growing up with an English accent, one participant noted that people would often assume they were English, making it difficult to explain the importance of their Irish heritage.

For others, language remained a vital connection to home. One participant, who arrived in London as an Irish speaker, recalled having to learn English in their first few years after migrating and spoke proudly of retaining their first language:

“I love being Irish, I love being able to speak Irish... I'm proud of that, that I never lost my language.”

Pride in Irish identity was expressed in different ways. One participant stated, “I wouldn't say I ever kept a low profile as an Irish person; I was always very proud of Ireland, and very, very proud of our Irish culture”. Another reflected on the joy of celebrating Irish identity openly:

“To celebrate being Irish is a wonderful thing, really.”

Participants also observed how migration patterns have changed over the years. As one noted, “London isn't the first stop like it would have been”. Younger Irish migrants today are opting to move further afield to destinations such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Advances in technology and affordable travel have transformed the migrant experience, making it easier than ever to remain connected to family and friends back home. Yet despite these changing routes, questions of identity, belonging and home remain central.



Together, these stories reveal that Irishness is not left behind through migration. It is sustained and evolves through memories, new experiences and community.

In Brent, the Irish identity continues to thrive through the relationships and traditions that connect people to one another. Home is not a single location, but rather a connection between Ireland and London that continues to persist across generations.

These stories demonstrate that the meaning of home may evolve, but its importance endures. As the seanfhocal reminds us:

‘Níl aon tinteán mar do thinteán féin’; there is no hearth like your own hearth.

OUR THANKS

The whole BIAS team would like to extend our warmest thanks to those members of our community who so generously entrusted us with their stories to help make the Scéalta project a reality. The memories they shared with us were imbued with such honesty, humour and heart, and it is a joy to know that they will be preserved for future generations to appreciate.

We are deeply grateful for the investment, passion and creativity of our wonderful volunteers, who have dedicated so much of their time and energy to bringing these beautiful stories to life.

Brent would not be the vibrant, welcoming place it is today without the invaluable contributions made by the Irish community over many decades - as we all know, ní neart go cur le chéile. The stories of Ireland and Brent are so deeply intertwined, and the tapestry of our borough is all the richer for it.

Here's to many more happy years in Ireland's 33rd county!

WITH THANKS TO:





Bias

Brent Irish Advisory Service

BIAS is a local charity created by the Irish community for the Irish community. For almost fifty years, it has been dedicated to supporting, protecting and uplifting Irish people in Brent and beyond.

BIAS offers free welfare and housing advice, active ageing social clubs, a volunteer project and a befriending scheme, raising over £2 million in extra income every year for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged members of our community, and making sure that no-one is left behind.

EVERY PHOTOGRAPH
HOLDS A MEMORY.
EVERY MEMORY TELLS A STORY.
TOGETHER, THEY BECOME PART
OF BRENT'S HISTORY.

Scéalta – Our Stories celebrates the lives, memories and experiences of Irish people who made Brent their home in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, preserving their stories for future generations.

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Brent Irish Advisory Service
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