



TURN ON THE LIGHTS

ELECTRIFICATION COMES TO RURAL IRELAND

In the “electricity at the flick of a switch” world of today, we often forget that some of our rural ancestors made do with candle light, paraffin lamps, and hauling water from the pump, until well into the mid 1950s. Bringing electricity to rural Ireland was quite a challenge, and many obstacles were faced both practically and culturally. The following piece, largely derived from Michael Shiel’s book *The Quiet Revolution—the electrification of rural Ireland* (O’Brien Press; 1984) gives an idea of the magnitude of the task and how it was carried out.

“The place was Oldtown in North County Dublin. The date was 15th January 1947, a cold, windy evening with patches of snow. The body of the small village hall was packed with local people, while up on the stage sat a group of leading citizens, the parish priest and senior ESB officials. The occasion was the switching on for the first time of electricity under the new Rural Electrification Scheme. There was, however, a snag of which the audience was unaware. Severe winter storms had caused a last-minute fault in the supply line and even now, as the speeches commenced, a line crew was working frantically in the pitch darkness over a mile away to put things right.

At the back of the stage was mounted a large switch, which, when operated, should illuminate the hall and village with the new light. The hands of the clock now showed eight, the scheduled time for the “switch on”. As the Engineer-in-Charge, W.F. Roe, commenced his speech he kept one eye on a small table at the side. There sat a gramophone turntable, connected to the still inanimate supply line. Anxiety sharpened as talk time was running out. Suddenly and unobtrusively the turntable started to rotate; the pick-up dropped onto the record, and legend has it that a very relieved Bill Roe concluded his speech to the strains of “Cockles and Mussels, Alive, Alive - O!”

A blessing was invoked. The switch was thrown. The hall burst into light and Oldtown passed into the history books as the first village in Ireland to be electrified under the Rural Electrification Scheme.”¹

In 1880, Thomas Edison invented the electric filament lamp in the US. In the same year, the Dublin Electric Light Company was established and, soon after, an experimental public light was erected outside the offices of the Freeman’s Journal in Prince’s St. Dublin, followed by seventeen public lights in the vicinity of Kildare St., Dawson St. and St. Stephen’s Green. In 1889, Carlow became the first provincial town in Ireland to get public electric lighting, supplied from a generator in a flour mill some four miles away. Apparently, Charles Stewart Parnell used the light as a symbol of a new and free Ireland in his address to a large crowd. Slowly at first, but then more rapidly, electricity spread to all the principal towns in Ireland, supplied, in some cases, by the local authority and, in others, by privately owned supply companies.

¹ Michael Shiel (1984) *The Quiet Revolution*; p. 13

By the mid 1920's, 161 separate electricity undertakings were operating throughout the country. This type of development, beneficial as it was to the cities, could not form any basis for the general extension of electricity to the widely spread rural community. This required the development of a national alternating current electricity grid with adequate generating supply.

In 1925, the Shannon Scheme, which was to involve the harnessing of the fall of the Shannon river at Ardnacrusha to generate cheap electricity for the country, was sanctioned and funded by the Cosgrave government and built within three and a half years by the German company Siemens Schuckert. According to Tim Pat Coogan,² *"this ambitious development had been too large and costly to tempt any private capital in Ireland to invest in it, so in a move quite unusual at this time, it was built with public funding. It is not too much to say that this scheme was an important factor in aiding the economic recovery from the disaster of Civil War, both in the immediate employment it offered and in the subsequent availability of cheaper electric power throughout the Free State."* It is still in operation today.

In 1927, the Electricity Supply Board (ESB) was established as the country's first state-sponsored body, with the aim of operating, managing and maintaining the Shannon Scheme and distributing and selling its output on a national scale. It also got the task, which the government regarded as being of key importance, of promoting and encouraging the purchase and use of electricity and of controlling, co-ordinating and improving its supply, distribution and sale.

By the outbreak of World War 2, 170,000 consumers, mainly in the cities and towns, had been connected and were using almost double the output of the Shannon Scheme. The remainder was being generated by the Dublin coal-fired power station at the Pigeon House. At this stage, the 400,000 rural dwellings had been virtually untouched.

However, the government was under increasing pressure to do something for the farmers. In May 1939, Seán Lemass, Minister for Industry and Commerce, requested the ESB to prepare plans to supply rural areas and to make financial proposals. Despite the onset of the War and the difficulties this brought, the ESB delivered a comprehensive report to the Department at the end of 1942.

In November 1944, the Rural Electrification Scheme was launched.

In his introduction of the 1945 Electricity Bill in the Dail, Seán Lemass stressed that a job of the magnitude of the proposed Scheme has never before been undertaken. It was estimated that providing supply to 69% of the 400,000 rural households, 280,000 in all, would be a realistic target. It was felt that 14% of rural homes (about 56,000) were so remote as to be outside the scope of any practical electrification scheme, and the rest would not be interested in being connected. Lemass assured the Dail that this would be carried out within the next 10 years. Quite a task, especially considering that the world had just been at war and materials were in short supply.

Initially, the government of the day recognised the need to provide a subsidy to the ESB to implement the scheme, but this was withdrawn in 1955. Throughout the 30 odd years of the project, the question of the amount of the subsidy required and who would provide it remained a constant issue between the ESB and the government. As a result, a scheme which started out in 1946 to supply 69% of the rural premises in the State over a ten-year period, aided only by a government subsidy, finished 30 years later with 98% of all premises connected, but with the help of a large cross-subsidy from electricity consumers, who were charged both fixed and per unit rates.

In all, the Scheme used over 1 million poles and involved the construction of 75,000 miles of new line (as against the total of about 2,000 miles which then existed) and the erection of 100,000 extra distribution transformers (as against the current 1,200). At the peak of the project there were forty separate working units, each having between 50 and 100 people of various disciplines involved.

² Tim Pat Coogan (1998) *The Irish Civil War*; p. 265

According to Shiel, the team of engineers *“tackled the job with enthusiasm, and with their equally highly motivated crews, achieved a rate of progress in rural electrification unparalleled in any country in Western Europe, at a cost which justified the trust placed in them. That they and their crews also earned the respect and confidence of the community among which they worked is demonstrated by the fact that although over one million poles were erected, mostly on private land, the number of disputes and way-leave objections which were not settled on the spot but which rose to boardroom level could be counted on the fingers of two hands.”* By the end of 1964, supply had been extended to all 792 areas, 296,000 consumers had been connected.³

Looking back from an Ireland that takes electricity and its benefits for granted, it is hard to imagine the transformation it brought to rural areas, and to understand the initial ambivalence and opposition the potential change provoked in some people.

In the 1951 census, 73% of the country's 199,000 male farmers were over 45 years old, almost a quarter were unmarried. Many of the farmers, particularly those outside of the dairying areas with small acreages and uncertain incomes remained to be convinced that rural electrification could ease their lot. Not all could see the promised release from the many time-consuming tasks and the consequent opportunities to devote extra time to more productive activities. People were suspicious of the new technology, and the possible motives of the innovators. Others were understandably worried about the risk of electrocution. The Evening Herald of 7th Feb 1953, carried a story from the Annes district of Scotshouse near Clones where an old man paid his customary weekly visit to his sister who had just been connected up. *“He watched with fascination as she operated the new electric iron and boiled water in the new electric kettle, but stubbornly refused to drink the tea made from the latter, as he believed that the water was electrified. Willy, nilly she had to make fresh tea from water boiled in a traditional kettle on the turf fire.”*⁴

To many, electricity first appeared merely as an expensive, if admittedly a greatly superior, alternative to the traditional oil lamp or candle. Their forebears had successfully survived without it and they could see no great advantage in hurrying to involve themselves in this new expense.

As well as paying a fixed rent (reminiscent of the hated Ground Rents), and per unit rates, householders also had to pay for the wiring of their premises and the installation of sockets and light fixtures, in advance of the connection, so the cost was substantial.

Many housewives felt that bright illumination mercilessly revealed dirt, dust and cob-webs and defects in furniture, putting undue pressure on them. And not all husbands could see the necessity of easing the traditional drudgery of the farm housewife!

Therefore, a large part of the Scheme's work was to encourage the rural dwellers to accept and embrace the change. The structure was decentralised - with work focusing on local areas, based on traditional parish boundaries, similar to the GAA. A temporary office was set up in each parish as work commenced. Each construction crew was headed by a Rural Area Engineer - there was a strong element of crusade in the job. Rural Area Organisers were also employed as the advance guard of the scheme, helping to form local committees for the preliminary canvass and carrying out subsequent official canvasses on which the order of selection was based. As well as persuading potential consumers of the benefits of electricity, this officer had to measure the house and assess the fixed charges, get application forms signed, serve way-leaves and deal with objections in the first instance, organise demonstrations of the equipment, advise on the selection and installation of electrical appliances and generally act as liaison officer between the ESB and the consumer. They also had to persuade householders who were having second thoughts not to backslide.

Usually members of the ESB staff stayed with local families. *“A former Area Clerk recalled how on returning to his farm digs at night, when the family had gone early to bed, he would find his supper laid out on the kitchen table. His first duty, however, was to take a feeding bottle of milk to a piglet - the delicate runt of the litter - which was cosily ensconced in a canvass bag hammock beside the fire. Only when the bonhamh had been fed up and tucked in for the night did he commence his own supper.”*⁵

³ Michael Shiel (1984) *The Quiet Revolution*; p.63

⁴ *Ibid*; p. 125

⁵ *Ibid*; p.128

The people of Blackwater, Co. Wexford, must have felt that their Area Organiser was one of their own as they saw him leading the parish priest's donkey and cart down the village street laden with a table and press to equip the newly opened area office.⁶

The Development Division of the Scheme was hugely important, its task being to awaken interest and motivate the householders. The Publicity Officer travelled all over the country, rapidly developing effective relations with the numerous voluntary and statutory bodies concerned with rural development. He was assisted by a very professional corps of demonstrators and lecturers, who attended agricultural shows, area demonstrations and local functions

The promotion of the Scheme included the following activities:

- Area organisers visited consumers with sales vans fully equipped to demonstrate larger items of equipment such as pumps, grain grinders, cookers and refrigerators.
- Free light bulbs for the kitchen were distributed - initially 100W bulbs, but these proved too bright after the dimness of the old oil lamp, so 40 or 60 watt bulbs were substituted.
- A small showroom or window display was set up near the area office, where prospective consumers could view appliances.
- High profile "Switch-On" ceremonies were organised.
- A Demonstration week was held in the local hall, with an exhibition open in the afternoons. In the evenings there was a comprehensive programme of events, including films of domestic and farmyard appliances, practical electrical cooking by demonstrators (the food was then distributed to the audience), use of the washing machine and drier (people were invited to bring their soiled clothes), and use of a meter to show how much units each appliance used.
- Demonstration vans, equipped so that they could be used for indoor events, or open-air demonstrations at country shows and outside creameries, toured the country.
- Special visits were made by the demonstration team to individual customers who had specific needs.
- The ESB actively sold appliances, but they also facilitated and supported local retailers of electrical goods.
- Exhibitions were mounted at the annual RDS Spring Show and other agricultural shows around the country. In 1957, a full-size model farmyard was built in the Show, with working models of useful electrical aids to farming, and the first version of the ESB model kitchen went on display, staffed by members of the ICA and ESB. In 1960, a carefully designed prototype farmhouse was exhibited, complete with kitchen, boot-room with shower, wash-basin, toilet and utility room. The freezer also appeared that year. In 1961, a wash-hand basin was included in the main bedroom, indicating the rise in standards.
- Competitions, including a National Wholemeal Bread-making competition, where bread had to be baked in an electric oven, (the finals were held at the National Ploughing Championships), the Home Improvement Award, and Know Your Area Citizenship competition.
- Events with Muintir na Tire, Macra na Feirme, Macra na Tuaithe and the Irish Countrywomen's Association. In 1958, the ESB/ICA Mobile Farm Kitchen took to the road and worked its way up and down the country for many years, turning up at local events and strategic locations

In its approval of the Scheme, the government had stressed that priority should be given to the most remunerative areas, with the stipulation that initially one area must be developed in each county. Therefore, to ensure early selection, it was important that the maximum amount of householders in the region would agree to take supply. To encourage this, it was decided that each parish area should have its own Rural Electrification Committee. The make-up of these groups varied. Sometimes, they evolved from local organisations or from an ad-hoc group of enthusiasts. Every effort was made to avoid identifying the committee with any political party.

⁶ *Michael Shiel (1984) The Quiet Revolution; p. 128*

It was estimated that about 80% of the total target population were farmers. The remaining 20% was made up of rural workers not in agriculture, town workers living in the country, government officials, shopkeepers, publicans, pensioners, clergy and schoolteachers. To this non-farming group the coming of electricity meant an opportunity, not so much to increase productivity, as to improve their amenities and standard of living. It was from the ranks of these non-farming rural dwellers, as well as from the more progressive farmers, that the instigators and organisers of the local rural electrification committees often emerged.

The main function of the Committee was to carry out the preliminary assessment of demand for electricity in the area and to submit householders signatures to the ESB, and later to help re-enthuse "backsliders" - householders who had signed application forms but who, when the crew arrived in the area, had changed their minds. In some areas, as many as one third backed out.

In many areas, the local clergy or schoolteachers were very involved in the local committees. Often, local businesses helped by paying for newspaper advertisements.

Staff motivation was important. From small beginnings in 1947, the internal newsletter, the REO News, developed into a sizeable publication of about 20 pages, which was produced monthly until 1961. During its life, it played an important part in informing, educating and motivating the widely dispersed staff, in countering their sense of isolation and in building up a team spirit. Its columns were open to both staff and management which allowed for the airing of suggestions, criticisms and feedback. Crews who achieved a certain average work rate, or above, were listed each month, and each year the Top Ten crews with the highest output were announced, which proved popular and motivational.

As the Rural Electrification Scheme progressed, no opportunity was missed to promote the importance and convenience of having running water in the home and on the farm. The Minister for Agriculture, James Dillon, appealed, particularly, to the wives and wives-to-be of farmers to *"employ the maximum diplomatic pressure, which connubial propriety, or the privilege of betrothal may properly allow, to persuade the head of the household to provide this indispensable amenity of a piped water supply."*

But, despite this, and the availability of Departmental grants for the installation of private schemes, progress was painfully slow. In the year 1951/2, only 150 water pumps and pumping systems were sold to rural consumers. Two years later, the total sales had increased by about 800, a pitifully small figure in view of the strong promotional effort. However, interestingly a big breakthrough happened when the first group water scheme was developed in Co. Wicklow in 1957. Costs, being shared were lower and the sense of doing something for the community's benefit was a strong motivator. With the Department's support, the concept of group water supplies quickly took root in the rural community. Nevertheless, by 1960, while almost a quarter of a million homes had electricity, only about 50,000 of these had yet installed piped water supplies. The ICA was not at all satisfied with progress, so, in 1960, they initiated a Campaign for Rural Water Supplies, which over the next few years, in addition to widely publicising the need for water on tap, did much to co-ordinate the efforts of all parties concerned.

In 1959, an ESB survey showed that about 106,000 or 46% of rural homes supplied with electricity had water on tap. By 1980, a similar survey showed that of 425,000 rural electricity consumers, 336,000 or 79% had water on tap available through individual schemes, group schemes or the large regional schemes.

Modern Ireland had arrived.....