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Corrymeela House, Belfast – A tribute

Corrymeela House in Belfast has been sold and closed its doors at the end of September 2014 as the Belfast Corrymeela office transferred 'down the road'. Here **Rob Fairmichael** looks at the story of Corrymeela House –

8 Upper Crescent in south Belfast was part of an early Victorian development in Regency style, built for the wealthy in 1846 around the same time as the Lanyon Building at Queen's College just up the road was about to be erected ("Queen's" was founded in the same year, 1846, and had its first students in 1849) – so this was originally an up and coming area in a city that was relatively small, under a hundred thousand people, but growing fast. However this article is not primarily about the bricks and mortar of 8 Upper Crescent but rather what went on there in the forty-three or so years that the Corrymeela Community either rented or owned it and it was known as 'Corrymeela House'.

This article is about Corrymeela House rather than Corrymeela in total, which is well documented, though some context is obviously necessary, not least in stating that Corrymeela is the only Northern Ireland peace and reconciliation group to pre-date the Troubles – and it is still around when others have bitten the dust for a variety of reasons. The role of Corrymeela House in the Corrymeela story, and in the work of a myriad of other groups, is worth recording – hence this article. It is also intended as a tribute to the place and the people, as the title suggests, and not a critical assessment of Corrymeela in general or Corrymeela House in particular.

Corrymeela's current self description is as "a dispersed community of people of all ages and Christian traditions who individually and together are committed to the healing of social, religious and political divisions in Northern Ireland and throughout the world."

Corrymeela was founded in 1965 but initially Corrymeela staff numbers were small, and 8 Upper Crescent was rented from Queen's in 1971 as a Belfast centre and a base for Ray Davey who was then part-time leader of Corrymeela. This was just before the very worst of the Troubles and the context was very different to today. There were peace and reconciliation groups around in 1971, like Women Together, but resources were scarce and associated buildings were few and far between. 'Cross-community' work in Northern Ireland was in its infancy.

However by 1972-3 the top floor in Corrymeela House (later used as offices) was being used as a cross-community youth drop in centre, often for young people in between residential at the Ballycastle centre. On one occasion a group there had to make a hasty exit when they were threatened by a Tartan gang outside – the group managed to exit while the gang were going to get reinforcements. Corrymeela continued to facilitate the meeting of young people across the divide right through the height of the Troubles.

Corrymeela House was a base for all five leaders of the Community before the recent restructuring: Ray Davey, John Morrow, Trevor Williams, David Stevens and Inderjit Bhogal. Kate Pettis was interim leader after David Stevens' death in 2010 and before the appointment of Inderjit Bhogal. In the early days the only full-time Corrymeela staff would have been Anna Glass as cook in Ballycastle, Billy McAllister as warden there, and then Ray Davey as leader, and most of the rest of the work was done by volunteers.

Prior to Corrymeela House coming on the scene in 1971 any administration in Belfast was done out of the Queen's Presbyterian (Chaplaincy) Centre where Ray Davey was chaplain. Craig Cameron explained the early period thus: "The Community was run by an Executive Council with Ray Davey as Director, an Hon Secretary, Hon Treasurer and approx 7 others. One of these was Desney Kempston who was Associate Dean of Residence and Work Camp organiser. All were volunteers. They

undertook all the legal, financial and administrative responsibilities of establishing and running the new Community. The move of the administrative base to No 8 in 1971 was a natural evolutionary step as the Community grew.”

Mathilde Stevens recalls coming to work at Corrymeela House as secretary to Ray Davey, the founding leader, in January 1973, partly getting the job on the strength of her language abilities. Mathilde remembers trying to answer the growing pile of letters on Ray Davey’s desk and Ray feeling that he should be answering them himself but not having the time to do it.

At this stage there would have been just Ray and Mathilde based in the building and the only office used would have been the front downstairs one; throughout the period of Corrymeela House the front first floor room was used as a meeting room. Coming from Switzerland, Mathilde Stevens recalls being somewhat shocked to meet ‘Protestants’ who did not believe in God! In this case they were loyalists from Sandy Row, a nearby working class Protestant area, who were in Corrymeela House. There were constant comings and goings, many being students from Queen’s. At this stage all the bookings for the Ballycastle centre were done through the Belfast office. For a long period Corrymeela House had an ‘open door’ policy in office hours (literally, you walked in through an unlocked door) and although that encouraged people to drop by this included occasional people on the make or the take – and it certainly restricted the amount of office work that staff could do.

Angela Loudon, who succeeded Mathilde Stevens as secretary, bridged the period between Ray Davey and John Morrow as leader. She has said “being a secretary to Ray and John was not like being a secretary to anyone else. It could and did include driving a bus load of pensioners to Ballycastle when the driver failed to appear; driving a group of women from East Belfast to West Belfast via some of the more refined areas of Belfast and them being frightened as they had “never been out of their own area before”. “

Belfast programme became established quite speedily, much of it then organised by students and young members of Corrymeela. This included a summer scheme in the Markets (a nearby working class Catholic area), mixed youth work (including both the Markets and Sandy Row), and trips abroad. Eastermeet in 1973 (Corrymeela’s Easter time conference at Ballycastle) included Garret FitzGerald and Conor Cruise O’Brien as speakers and, while they were up North, a meeting was set up for them with Sandy Row UDA members and this took place in Corrymeela House. Garret FitzGerald subsequently spent a whole weekend at the Corrymeela Centre, without minders, talking to loyalist paramilitaries, and Derick Wilson says the effect was that certain acts of violence which could have happened did not take place.

As a ‘neutral’ meeting place many such secret (as in not being publicised) and sensitive meetings happened at Corrymeela House (as well as in Ballycastle), especially in the leadership time of John Morrow. On occasions the great and the good also visited Corrymeela House, e.g. Lady Mayhew, wife of the Secretary of State in the period 1992-97.

Mathilde Stevens moved on to become family worker for Corrymeela, continuing to be based in Corrymeela House, organising groups and preparing programme for them in Ballycastle. During the Ulster Workers’ Council strike in 1974 she recalls painting walls in the house to try to brighten things up at a time when the electric was off and other work was impossible. Around the same time she also made her way through barricades to ensure that people from Suffolk and Lenadoon were coming up to Ballycastle for a planned family week – they did come. At this stage many people were transported to Ballycastle from Corrymeela House which would often fill up on a Friday afternoon for a weekend event in Ballycastle.

In 1981 Corrymeela co-organised, with Glenree Reconciliation Centre in Co Wicklow, a major conference on ‘Models of Political Co-operation’ with the conference material also providing the basis of a book with the same title. This was forward thinking and pointing the way to the kind of arrangements and agreements which eventually formed the Good Friday Agreement. The Corrymeela end of the conference would have been organised out of Corrymeela House.

Desney Cromey (nee Kempston) remembers organising daytime seminars in the upstairs meeting room in the early 1980s along with Valery Kohner and Liz Browne. These focused on a variety of topics from managing anger through to the use of money, and Roel Kaptein (a Dutch man involved in

the Dutch Northern Irish Advisory Committee who had a close relationship with Corrymeela) facilitated some sessions on relationships. Using Corrymeela House as a base, Desney Cromey, Alison Curry and Joyce Williams jointly co-ordinated the Treetops programme for bereaved children. This was a Corrymeela project delivered by a team of Corrymeela members and friends. During the period of Treetops' operation from 1993 until 2005 many workshops were held in the House providing education and awareness raising on bereavement for a wide range of professional and voluntary agencies. During this time No. 8 also hosted monthly meetings of the Bereavement Education Network. Treetops closed in 2005 just at the time when Cruse N.I. developed a service for bereaved children and teenagers. Now (2014), Cruse and Corrymeela are working together in partnership to develop a major 5 year programme to address the needs of families facing trauma and loss.

Shelagh Livingstone was Family and Community Worker in the period 1985-90 and recalls a lot of work with women's groups from Belfast and elsewhere and also with prisoners' families. Typically work went on separately on both sides of the divide before having a joint residential at the Corrymeela centre. On one occasion there was a trip for a mixed women's group to Germany, as an exchange, the first time most of those involved had been out of the country. Shelagh recalls excellent support for the work from John Morrow, the then leader, and Angus Macpherson, as financial officer, at a time when it was more difficult to get funding for family and women's work.

Trevor Williams, who was leader of Corrymeela from 1993 to 2003, remembers Corrymeela House as a good place to be, with excellent working together. However he felt there was a contrast between the level of financial accountability required at the beginning of his period there and the end. He remembers Angus Macpherson, Corrymeela's finance person, coming to his office waving a cheque for £10,000 (possibly nearly double that amount today) and saying it needed spent before the end of the financial year.....whereas by the end of his term in office the minutiae of reporting included breaking down the proportion of a subsidised fee for someone staying at the Centre which was for electricity, food or programme.

Trevor Williams remembers one highlight of his period as leader being the award of the Niwano Peace Prize in 1997 to Corrymeela by RKK, a Japanese lay Buddhist organisation. But he also remembers, without any warning, being videoed and asked the question "What is your message to the Japanese people?!"

The story is told of Peter Tennant, later a prominent member, coming to find Corrymeela House for the first time and asking its whereabouts to a man up a ladder cleaning the windows. He got directed inside. When inside he asked to speak to the leader of the Community – to be told he had just passed him, John Morrow, the man up the ladder. It is reported Peter Tennant joined on the spot.

Gradually schools and cross-community programme, and other staff, became based in Corrymeela House and programmes which had been run informally became more formal projects. Corrymeela bought the building from Queen's in 1974. Adequate accommodation by the standards of the time, as the 21st century was dawning and both expectations and regulations grew, it was obvious that Corrymeela was unlikely to have the money to do the work that would be needed. Although a listed building it was only the facade that could not be changed but it was not the flexible space that might be wished for, and Corrymeela was unlikely to ever have the money to do the major work needed. A decision was made to sell but with the recent recession it took some years before it was actually sold.

Corrymeela House's role in grounding overall Corrymeela work has been important, providing a base for the ongoing detailed administration, planning and cross-community or project work, especially in the Belfast area but elsewhere as well, while Ballycastle had groups coming and going by the week and weekend. Now the centre of gravity has switched more to Ballycastle with more of the programme and other staff based there.

In 2000 TIDES Training was formed by Mary Montague, who had been based in Corrymeela House as a cross-community worker, and Colin Craig, former centre director and now chief executive. Mary Montague had been community and family worker and the story is told of her refusing to tell two immediately-across-the-divide women's groups about each other. She did say to them however that if they had questions to ask, she would pass them on. Eventually the groups decided to meet and realised the commonality of their desire for a safe place for their children. Their identification with

each other became so substantial that, in making a grant application, they said either would refuse to accept a grant if the other did not get one.

Mary Montague's account of some of her interface work for Corrymeela, and its effect on herself, is told in the "UP Standing – Stories of courage from Northern Ireland" video and booklet. The 'UP Standing' project recorded and transmitted to film and paper some stories of courage in resisting violence and sectarianism in Northern Ireland; there is also a teaching guide. The project was based in Corrymeela House.

The Christian Education Programme, later called Faith and Life, was in the hands of Doug Baker in the period 1979-1997, the last five years of which were based at Corrymeela House, the move from Ballycastle taking place to try to interact with groups more in their own environment. He organised a variety of programme, including Summerfest at the Ballycastle Centre and there were 8 of these large scale events in the period 1981 – 1996. But the amount of work required for a large event of even a couple of days was enormous and unsustainable without a full time person and funding for it. Doug was involved in a wide variety of other work with a Christian education dimension involving young people, schools and churches, as well as with worship at the Ballycastle Centre.

The Corrymeela schools programme started in 1984; Carmel Heaney, now Stockman, was appointed as a full time staff person in that year and continued until 1990. It worked with both primary and post-primary schools and this was almost invariably on a cross-community basis, including four-day residentials at Ballycastle. Carmel Heaney reports that there were 42 cross-community mid-week residentials a year. In 1989 the Kohl International Peace Prize was shared by two Corrymeela members, Norman Richardson and Carmel Heaney, for their peace education work.

On a schools residential, after the initial cooperative games and warm ups, some work was done in small groups. In one small group of eight 16-year old Catholic and Protestant girls, the sharing began with someone talking about her father having been killed by the IRA, and telling what it meant to them as a family. It turned out that six of the eight members of that small group had lost someone significant in their lives – a brother, father, neighbour or close relation, in the Troubles. When they had all shared together, they fell into each others' arms and were inseparable for the rest of the time at Corrymeela, and continued to be in touch. Their common loss, and humanity, had brought them together. For a period Corrymeela had a second schools worker, one working in secondary and the other in primary schools. Seminars and trainings for teachers also took place in Corrymeela House.

A youth programme, for a number of years (1977-1989) in the hands of Billy Kane, operated an extensive programme out of Corrymeela House. Billy remembers: "During those times working across divides was not easy but it drove us because it meant a lot to us even though it was dangerous at times. I myself lost 7 young people that I worked with. Professor Tom Lovett carried out a lot of cross community work, and he had a radio programme on BBC NI called "Them and Us" and it was on air on a Tuesday night at 7 pm. I had been working with young people from many of the housing estates around Belfast, Rathcoole, Twinbrook, Shankill, Falls, Ballymurphy, Turf Lodge, East Belfast, Clonduff, The Village, to name a few. So every Tuesday two minibuses went around all these estates collecting young people to come to No.8 to listen to the radio programmes and discuss them in small groups. Every week there was more and more wanted to come. I discovered that no one cared about the programmes, it was the minibus trip and seeing where everyone lived and meeting together was important. Without knowing, I had broken down barriers for them and allowed them the chance to meet across the divide."

He continued: "I remember when Bobby Sands was dying I asked Frank Cahill if we could take some of these young people to Ballycastle away from the trouble so they were able to bring the young people to No.8 from Ballymurphy and Turf Lodge as it was not possible for us to take our buses to them. Soon I got a room built at the back of No.8 as the youth room with its own entrance from the entry. We had cushions and a stereo - many called in after school or if they were out of work, so it was a meeting place for all."

The Corrymeela Singers were founded in 1973-4 as a means of promoting the message of reconciliation through music. There were six musical directors: Norman Richardson 1974-85, founder; Jill McLachlan (Kewshaw) 1985-88; Barbara Jennings 1988-90; John Chilvers 1990-95; Rowena Eames 1996-2000, Mary Braithwaite 2000-2004.

The Corrymeela Singers sang in community halls, churches, prisons and a sports stadium in places from Convoy to Coleraine, from Edinburgh to Coventry, and from Vienna to Graz, sharing Corrymeela's message of reconciliation through words, visuals and music in peace presentations, concerts, church services and radio and TV broadcasts. Singers came from all over Ireland and from many other parts of the globe. There were five recordings, the first entitled "The Pollen of Peace" and the last "A World for All". The final celebration concert took place in October 2004 in an event with music spanning the three decades of the choir's varied musical life.

A retired, well known Quaker of English origin grabbed me by the scarf late in 1976 as I was entering Corrymeela House – "Did I teach you??" Eh, no, and please don't throttle me. My scarf was the same as that of, but not from, the school he had taught in. He was coming from the Peace People office upstairs. The Peace People were just one of a plethora of groups who were hosted or provided meeting space by Corrymeela House. NIMMA (NI Mixed Marriage Association), Amnesty International (the first Amnesty meeting in Northern Ireland was held there), the Cross group (associated with Maura Kiely and perhaps the first victims/survivors group of the Troubles which met regularly there, including its first meeting), the NI Peace Forum, Peacepoint, Women Together, the Dutch Northern Irish Advisory Committee, the Faith and Politics Group, Oasis, the Gay Christian Fellowship, INNATE and many others held meetings or had other facilities there. Corrymeela was generous with offering space when they could.

Apart from being based in Betty Williams' house for the first few weeks, the Peace People had their first office in Corrymeela House on the top floor from September 1976 to May 1977; there was a constant stream of people and journalists up and down the stairs as, at this stage, the Peace People were constantly in the media. The Peace People then used their Norwegian People's Peace Prize money to buy a former manse as an office on the Lisburn Road.

The NI Peace Forum (1974 – 1988), which I was secretary of for a couple of years at the start of the 1980s, met upstairs in Corrymeela House on a monthly basis. This brought together up to twenty different groups of diverse natures to thrash out the issues of the day in Northern Ireland – and at that stage some of them were dire enough – and possible responses. I well remember a senior member of the Forum (not a member associated with Corrymeela I might add) speaking about a meeting he had not been at as if he was there. At this time various civil society and peace groups engaged in meetings with what were, perhaps euphemistically, called 'the smaller political parties' – believe it or not at that stage Sinn Féin counted as a 'smaller' political party – i.e. those with associated paramilitary organisations. The gentleman in question had not been at the Peace Forum meeting with the smaller political party concerned but he had been at a different meeting with the same party, which was what he was talking about as if it were the Peace Forum one, to everyone's confusion.

The Faith and Politics Group was composed of individuals from a variety of different organisational backgrounds grappling with the ethical, social, moral and theological aspects of the contemporary situation in Northern Ireland, or aspects of it. It issued detailed reports on its thinking which were unique at the time. The Treetops group has already been mentioned as a Corrymeela project; it was based in Corrymeela House for two days a week as well as evening sessions and Desney Cromey has said how it simply could not have done its work without Corrymeela hosting and promoting it. The Oasis project operated a weekly drop in hosted by Sylvia Sands. There were substantial discussions with members of the LGBT community in the 1980s, a timely action for a group like Corrymeela with a Christian basis.

Roger Courtney, who was very involved with Corrymeela (and wrote the song which for a period was almost a Corrymeela anthem, 'The Pollen of Peace'), was the key mover in setting up the Crescent Youth Resource Centre in the unoccupied building formerly used by Victoria College. Today it is the thriving Crescent Arts Centre, in a restored and extended building, just across the square from what was Corrymeela House.

It is sad to have said farewell to a building which saw so much activity by both Corrymeela and other groups, and a house which was such a well known, and affectionately regarded, entity in Belfast and beyond. Corrymeela House was the first point of contact with Corrymeela itself for many people. The administrative staff at Corrymeela House, now as then, have always been considered the backbone of Corrymeela in Belfast.

Times move on. Corrymeela's Ballycastle base is unaffected by the move, and Corrymeela administration in Belfast is now just down the road from where it was. The old Ballycastle slogan of 'Corrymeela begins when you leave' indicates that more chapters in that story may still be written. There could yet be another 'Corrymeela House' or centre in Belfast in a few years and while its bricks and mortar will doubtless have stories to tell, the hope would be that the times it would live through would not be as traumatic as the ones seen by its predecessor at 8 Upper Crescent.

It may not be fame and fortune, however I am told that Corrymeela House (8 Upper Crescent) appears as a backdrop in the 2011 film comedy 'Killing Bono' so you can check that out for yourself.

Corrymeela is going fifty years in 2015. Whatever the local context in the future, it will still be needed in another fifty years but the hope must be that times will be more tranquil and yet that it will still be helping people to deal with the important and difficult issues of the day.

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- The Corrymeela office in Belfast has a variety of publications about the history of Corrymeela and Ray Davey's story, as well as other resources. There is no online shop as yet but you can enquire about what is available, or drop in. To become a Friend of Corrymeela, and receive publications, costs £26 waged and £13 unwaged on an annual basis. The Corrymeela Belfast office is now at 129 Ormeau Road, Belfast BT7 1SH, phone 028 9050 8080 and e-mail belfast@corrymeela.org The Corrymeela website is at <http://www.corrymeela.org>

- Material from INNATE's predecessor *Dawn* magazine is available on request to innate@ntlworld.com as PDFs;

- 1) From 1980, a 4-page interview with Ray Davey and John Morrow as the latter took up the leadership of Corrymeela (*Dawn* 54).

- 2) From 1984-5, an 8-page feature on both Glenree and Corrymeela, 'Glenree 10, Corrymeela 20' which includes an interview with John Morrow (*Dawn* 106-7)

- Those who contributed to the preparation of this article in various ways – from an e-mail response through to a sizeable interview - include Angela Loudon, Billy Kane, Carmel Heaney, Craig Cameron, Derick Wilson, Desney Cromey, Doug Baker, Jacinth Hamill, Jenny Meegan, Mathilde Stevens, Richard Naylor, Shelagh Livingstone, and Trevor Williams. The usual disclaimer pertains that the selection of facts, and interpretations, are the responsibility of the author.