

Desney Cromey's Story

In 1964 Desney began to work at Queen's University as assistant to the Presbyterian Chaplain, Ray Davey. The first thing that was required of her was to attend the meeting of a group of people Ray had gathered together to consider the possibility of forming a community. It was a very mixed group as Ray had the gift of connecting with a wide range of people who, though different, were thinking along similar lines. Desney listened with interest. From the conversation it was clear that all were very committed in the idea of creating some sort of community though what exactly this would look like was not clear. This was radical thinking for that time. Maybe at the time Desney wasn't so aware of the fact that this was not long after the war which was a reality for the older members of the group who had travelled and had had different experiences from the younger students in the group. Many were interested in Ecumenical matters and some like John Morrow and Alec Watson had connections to the Iona Community. There was an awareness of the wider world and things changing.

During Easter 1965 Ray and Desney took a group of students to Guysmere in Castlerock. One day the group drove to Ballycastle which was a favourite spot for Ray who had spent many summer holidays there. For Desney this was a new experience. She loved the place and is still moved every time she sees Fair Head. Driving out of Ballycastle they saw a building on the hill with a for sale sign. The large green building, set in a beautiful cliff top site of 7 acres was called Corrymeela. It seemed perfect as a home place to form the community envisaged by Ray and his committee. At a group meeting shortly afterwards, Ray reported that the building and grounds would cost £7000. There was a gasp as nobody had that kind of money, but it was agreed all would do their utmost to raise the money required to purchase the property which seemed so right for purpose. Members approached friends, family and business people. Desney recalled Dill Henderson, a civil servant, bringing a letter to Ray telling him he would be getting a grant towards the cost. Then followed an anxious time of wondering whether the offer had been accepted. It was!

Desney was among the first group appointed to inspect the building more carefully and establish what would be needed to make the place habitable and prepare for the first work camp. Ray said "Go and see what needs to be done" There were 7 in the group: Desney, Roger Cromey, Agnes Kirkpatrick, Joyce Nice, Billy McAllister, Glen Rowan and Eric Jeffries. Furniture was sparse with only a few chairs and one table with a missing leg. There was a wooden sink, so deep that it was hard to use. In the kitchen there were open shelves with mice running up and down. There was no running water so they had to go with buckets to the Boyle's farmhouse nearby to get water. There were no beds, so they slept on the floor. Billy, who was in his sixties, was optimistic and no problem was too big for him. First of all the water problem was solved and then lists were made of tasks to be done and of things to buy. Billy designed a frame for beds. So, when work camp volunteers arrived, they were invited to make their own beds and were surprised when, instead of receiving bed linen they were given a hammer, nails and boards as Billy showed them how to construct a bed. Robert Carson and John Baird, both architects, got involved and one of their first decisions was to paint the building white. Every weekend groups of students came up to work: they painted, they dug trenches, they carried out major electrical work under expert supervision. It was hard work. When campers fell into bed exhausted, they slept under donated pink blankets. These were of rather poor quality and every morning pink fluff was to be seen in the stubble of many a camper. Desney spent the whole summer of that first year at Corrymeela, welcoming the work campers, planning the programme and cooking for them. The size of the student groups was between 12 and 24 and once the place was habitable groups of adults also began to arrive..

A group was set up to organise events including the first Conference which was addressed by Terence O'Neill, Prime Minister of N. Ireland. This important first event attracted a lot of publicity.

Desney was responsible for sorting out accommodation and organising the food – no easy task for one with limited catering experience. However, she became adept at a few recipes and her shepherd's pie and authentic rock buns became legend. She also involved the students in leading worship morning and evening. The work campers got up at 6am and worked until second breakfast at 9am followed by worship. Then there was more work until lunch. There was time for discussion on a vast variety of issues, for leisure activities and group sing songs in the evening. Part of the afternoon was spent exploring the surrounding area and an unfortunate incident occurred when a group of students set off from Fairhead to walk down the Greyman's path. When it got dark and the group still had not returned, Desney contacted the coastguards who eventually found the group at the foot of Fairhead. Apparently, a girl had frozen with fear halfway down the path and couldn't go up or down. So, they all decided to stay with her. The incident made the news and Desney got a letter from Council, reprimanding her for being irresponsible. She felt that this was a little unfair as the student group had looked after each other so well. Nevertheless, she had a wonderful summer, enjoying the challenges, the friendships, the opportunities and the freedom that Corrymeela presented. As a student Desney had attended WCC Ecumenical work camps abroad and that experience stood her in good stead for her tasks at Corrymeela.

In due course, family groups started to come to Corrymeela during the summer. Families and work campers would share meals together. A full-time cook became necessary. Desney recalled the day that Anna Glass arrived. Desney was standing on a chair stirring mince when Anna walked into the kitchen and with great relief, she handed the ceremonial wooden spoon to the professional. Anna was also small in stature but never resorted to standing on a chair!!

Those early days laid the foundation of community life at Corrymeela as an important rhythm was established ... a rhythm of worship, work, study, discussion, hospitality, food and fun, with worship being the connecting, life giving thread. Gradually, Corrymeela became a magnet for all sorts of people, young and older, and from all sorts of different backgrounds. They came, they stayed, they worked, worshipped and applied their gifts and skills to the many tasks crying out for attention. What a heady time it was to be there at the beginning of such a great joint adventure, together finding our way, discerning His will for the days ahead.

While Desney worked mostly with the students, there was also a committee thinking about church connections and how to encourage and engage with churches to look at issues that affected people's lives, such as reconciliation, ecumenism and politics.

In 1966 Desney decided to organise an event for young people for the days after Christmas. This became known as Corrymeet (the title suggested by her parents) and was run on a regular basis thereafter. Such was its popularity that Eastermeet was created to run in association with the Easter break. There was always a theme with speakers, discussions and worship. Pauline Webb who worked for the World Council of Churches came as well as politicians like Conor Cruise O'Brien and Garret Fitzgerald.

While all this activity was going on at Ballycastle, Desney was still assistant to Ray, the Presbyterian Chaplain at Queen's. He tended to go to Corrymeela most weekends with his car packed full of donated gifts. At that time roads were poor, and it was a long journey through Ballymena and then across to Ballycastle. Desney reflected on the commitment involved by both Ray and Kathleen: Ray giving up his weekend family life; Kathleen often alone with their children.

Desney spent 4 years at the Presbyterian Centre which included 3 months every summer at Corrymeela. In 1966 she went to a work camp in Spain. She arrived so exhausted from her stint at Corrymeela that she slept a lot and was, at the end, awarded the prize for the best sleeper.

In 1968 Desney left the Presbyterian Centre to study at Hartford Seminary in Connecticut. She kept in touch with Corrymeela mainly through visits from friends like Roger Cromey, Donald Watts and Peter Moss, but an important part of her involvement with the Community had come to an end. When she came back, she got married to Roger and taught at Methody for a year before joining the Student Counselling Service at Queen's. So, for 4 years she had little contact with Corrymeela until one day David Stevens turned up at her office and suggested that she get involved again.

In 1974 Roger and Desney organised a conference with Tony Farquhar (now Bishop Farquhar) as the main speaker on the topic of 'The Healthy Community'. She also went to the Centre at weekends and often would spend a week there during the summer, enjoying many a Summerfest with her son Benjamin.

Desney could not recall how and when she became an official member. At the beginning there was a list with the names of members. People became members on invitation and then had to be approved by Council. Everything that happened at the Centre such as conferences, family weeks, youth events was organised and led by members, the main themes being the connection with churches, community, reconciliation and ecumenism.

What had attracted Desney back to Corrymeela? She became aware that she missed going to Corrymeela. It was to become an extension of home providing spiritual sustenance, friendship and an opportunity to meet young people which she didn't get in her church. When Roel Kaptein came to Corrymeela a new dimension was added to Desney's life through an increased understanding of the Gospel, relationships and Corrymeela. It informed her work in counselling, training and family relationships. Desney feels that Corrymeela has had an impact in ways that she cannot articulate. The friendships formed in Corrymeela have lasted. At times of trouble it has been Corrymeela friends who have stood at her door. The Mill Group, a Corrymeela support group, was an important part of Desney's spiritual life and she is missing it now it has come to an end.

Desney's work with Treetops, a programme for bereaved children, grew directly from her Corrymeela membership and connections. During the Troubles, she became concerned about children who had to cope with a sudden bereavement. Along with Joyce Williams and later, Alison Curry, she gathered together a group of Corrymeela members and friends to set up a programme for bereaved children and their families. Although they knew little about the work they quickly learned from others and especially from the children as the project took off. From the beginning the project was supported by Corrymeela, the children came, skills were developed, the programme grew and ran for 10 years. For the Treetops volunteers and the families who came it was a loving expression of Corrymeela teamwork in action. One small example of the many and varied projects developed over the years by Corrymeela members.

Written by Mathilde Stevens and Dot Wilson

2005

THE OLD HOUSE

That weekend in June 1965, we arrived in Ballycastle and approached the old Corrymeela House for the first time. A wooden construction with Dutch-barn architecture, it stood proud and neglected on the site of our present house, surrounded with stunning views of sky, cliff and sea. With a sense of wonder and anticipation we went through the creaking open door. Sure, it was dilapidated, badly in need of repairs, renovation and a lick of paint. The building was sparsely furnished with only 7 kitchen chairs, a 3-legged table and no beds. Yet even then there was a welcome and blessing in the air.

Many tasks called for attention: painting, plumbing, rewiring, carpentry, cooking, housekeeping to name but a few. All of these were undertaken by work-campers ... our very first volunteers at Corrymeela. So began the great adventure that is Corrymeela.

Soon many feet found their way through the open door to join these early volunteers and, before long, the sad green exterior was transformed to gleaming white. Inside, we constructed our own wooden beds, made up with yellow nylon sheets and cheap pink blankets. We may have been sheltered from harsh winds, but the winter nights were so cold that we warmed our feet at the oven in the kitchen and went to bed with our coats on. In the mornings we were awakened by the noisy rattling of saucepan lids or, if lucky, to the sweet sound of singing. Bathroom facilities were antiquated, and the kitchen equipment left much to be desired. There was a collective sigh of relief when Anna came to take charge of the kitchen which quickly became the heart of our home.

The front lounge was the gathering place for meetings, drinking tea, evening sing-songs and worship. Noise, laughter, coming, going, larking about, romance, discussion, stories, fun, pain and tears all found expression. In those days we had nothing and yet we had everything! That space was where we began to encourage each other to engage in friendship, fellowship and faith formation.

The old house was our first Corrymeela home and, like most first homes, it has a special place in our hearts. It may be gone but the memories live on. Just mention the old house to those who loved it and watch eyes light up as the stories spill out!

Desney Cromey

25/10/15

THE EARLY WORK CAMPS

In the beginning were the work camps. When Corrymeela began its journey in 1965 there were many young people, mostly students, who were in search of adventure and Corrymeela was in need of the youthful commitment of many minds, hearts and hands. Both needs came together and were met with enthusiasm in the 'pioneer' work camps.

The first work camp was in June 1965, when seven of us: Joyce Nice, Agnes Kirkpatrick, Billy McAlister, Roger Cromey, Glen Rowan, Eric Jeffries and I moved into a very sad and neglected Corrymeela building. The main buildings and chalets were a rather horrible shade of green. The kitchen was antiquated but lively; a massive wooden sink dominated the scene but the eye was distracted by the racing activities of numerous mice, busy in the open cupboards below.

Sanitary arrangements were primitive as there was no running water for the first few days, and many a bucket of water was transported down the hill by our own Jack and Jill. There was little furniture downstairs and none at all upstairs. Arriving campers were welcomed with cries of: "Come in. You'll have to make your own bed. Here's some wood. Just ask Billy for a hammer and nails."

What times we had, often rising at 6 am for first breakfast, followed by hard physical work, then second breakfast followed by worship and more work until lunchtime. The rest of the day was devoted to exploring the local countryside, solving the world's problems, cooking, washing-up, singing folk songs and generally enjoying the time of our lives. A never-to-be forgotten adventure was a late-night expedition to Fair Head, when the local coast guards were called in to help our weary mountaineers as they made a difficult return from the Gray Man's Path. Close friendships were formed and many a romance, including my own, flourished in the work camp setting. Happy days! In the words of Wordsworth:

"Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive.
But to be young was very heaven!"

1985

WCC Work Camps

In the 1950s the WCC's Youth Programme established international, ecumenical work camps throughout Europe. Each camp lasted about 4 weeks and attracted young people from all over the world. The work projects were many and varied and provided personal development through discussion groups, learning about each other's country and culture and worship sessions which contributed to faith development. During the summers of the late 1950s and early 1960s Desney Kempston, a student at Queen's University and a member of the Student Christian Movement attended four of these camps in England, Switzerland, Sweden and Spain, co-leading the ones in Sweden and England.

This experience of meeting young people from other countries, backgrounds and denominations along with the opportunity to learn about the organisation of work camps stood her in good stead when, at 24, she went to work with Ray Davey as his assistant in 1964 at the Presbyterian Chaplaincy at Queen's.

A year later she was given the task of initiating work camps at the newly opened Corrymeela site at Ballycastle. Billy McAlister, a recently retired, charismatic railway official supervised the work undertaken while Desney looked after other aspects of living and working together. By then, Roger Cromey and some other students had attended WCC camps and contributed to the development of Corrymeela's unique style of engaging with one another and the tasks in hand. The daily rhythm of worship, work, discussion, study fellowship and fun proved very attractive to young

people in search of adventure.

In the summer of 1968 Corrymeela hosted a WCC work camp and so began the tradition of recruiting young people from home and abroad to come, live and breathe Corrymeela

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