

# New exhibition revisits rural electrification

by Paul O'Malley

Former president Mary Robinson returned to her native Mayo to launch a fascinating new exhibition at the Museum of Country Life in Turlough.

'Kitchen Power — Women's Experiences of Rural Electrification' examines the effect of rural electrification on women in Ireland in the 1950s and 1960s. The exhibition was curated by Dr Sorcha O'Brien of Kingston University and Noel Campbell of the National Museum of Ireland.

Mrs Robinson said the exhibition resonated deeply with her. "I was delighted when I received an invitation to open this exhibition because, in my presidential inauguration address, I

said that I wanted women who were outside history to be written back into history. This exhibition speaks to my own childhood growing up in Mayo, as the only daughter of a doctor from Ballina. I remember him talking passionately about the differences made to his practice as a doctor when rural electrification came," she continued.

The exhibition comprises various artifacts from this era, including a portrait of the Sacred Heart on a laminate backboard, lit with a red electric bulb which replaced the oil lamp previously used to light up the common Catholic household feature.

There is also a range of ESB advertising and objects from the museum's and the ESB's archives as well as objects from

the Irish Agricultural Museum and from private collectors.

A reconstruction of a 1950s ESB model kitchen, which was used to promote rural electrification to women in the 1950s, features prominently in the exhibition. It was constructed by Phillip Carey, a final year Furniture Design and Manufacture student from GMIT-Letterfrack.

The exhibition also has recordings of voices of women who lived through the era, telling their stories in their own words. "We're lucky that we have the generation who lived through that period still with us and still healthy," said Noel Campbell, co-curator of the 'Kitchen Power' exhibition. "We've invited first-hand testimonies from the time and the woman who lived

through this can tell us first-hand the impact that it had on their households. This is important as it's not just two curators telling these stories, it's the women themselves telling their stories."

Mrs Robinson talked about rural electrification in the context of the wider world. "I'm very conscious that a very large portion of our world never switched that switch for electricity. We have a long way to go and it won't be the same, it won't be like the grid that the ESB wheeled out. It will be a much more diverse use of lights and solar panels and all these solutions exist. The only thing we lack is the prioritising of getting these solutions to those who never switched the switch," she continued.

See pages 36/37



Noel Campbell, Curator, the National Museum of Ireland – Country Life and Dr Sorcha O'Brien of Kingston University, who curated the new exhibition are pictured with former president Mary Robinson.  
Picture: Keith Heneghan



## News

## Ireland's 'quiet revolution'

*It was confidence-building, and I think most of us were conscious that if you did it and gave people confidence then they'd tell their friends up the road.*

These are the words of Ciunas Bunworth, one of the many recorded oral histories that feature in the fascinating exhibitino 'Kitchen Power - Women's Experiences of Rural Electrification', which launched by former President Mary Robinson in the National Museum of Ireland - Country Life in Turlough last Friday.

Ms Bunworth was one of many women who helped to promote electricity in rural Ireland at a time when people were still unsure about the then-revolutionary technology.

Interviews with women like Ms Bunworth were carried out by volunteer interviewers who completed more than 60 intergenerational interviews across the country, many organised through the Irish Countrywomen's Association (ICA).

Those interviewed included women who remembered rural electrification and ESB staff who worked on the project. The informal process allowed the interviewees to speak for themselves and to put their own memories into words.

The president of the Castlebar guild

A new exhibition on rural electrification has opened at the Museum of Country Life in Turlough. Paul O'Malley went along to learn about a revolutionary period in Irish history when women were emancipated from the drudgery of everyday chores.

of the ICA, Maura McGuinness, was invited by co-curator Dr Sorcha O'Brien to take part in the interviewing process and reflected on her own memories of rural electrification.

"The whole thing has been a great experience, remembering the past and connecting to the present. I'm a native of Inisheer of the Aran Islands so we would have got electricity a lot later than others," said Maura. "It would have been 1973. I was an adult by the time we got it. We had oil cookers originally, then gaslight and gas iron cookers and when the electricity came, we had

generators."

Brigid O'Brien is the vice-president of ICA Cork and was contacted by the curators to partake in the interviewing process. She interviewed seven people around West Cork as part of the exhibition.

Brigid says women recall rural electrification as a magnificent, revolutionary process that changed their lives for the better. Though they may seem like simple things in the context of the modern world, the small steps of rural electrification were actually massive strides for families in Ireland.

"The light was a huge thing for them, especially in the long winters when they could just turn on a switch instead of relying on a candle and having a kettle and instant hot water instead of lighting up a range or a stove was supper," said Brigid. "The fridges stood out as well. Before that, people used to have these wire mesh safes and there were no preserves whatsoever for keeping food clean, for preserving butter or meat. After killing a pig, they used to keep the meat in a barrel which was incredible when you think about it.

"Having water pumped into the house was brilliant, just turning on the tap to bring water into the house and the bathrooms came later on and had a huge impact on hygiene.

"From my own childhood, from what I recall, the washing machine was the best thing for my mother. It rotated and it squeezed with a mangle on the top of it. It was still hard work but it was better than what we had," she added.

But people were skeptical and somewhat fearful about electricity. In order to promote the new technology throughout rural Ireland, the ESB worked with rural community groups.

The senior archivist with the ESB Archives, Deirdre McParland, talks about the importance of the relationship between the ESB and local voluntary organisations in flicking the switch and electrifying rural Ireland.

"For the purpose of the scheme, the ESB divided Ireland into 792 areas based on the same parish boundaries that exist today. The ESB went into a parish to electrify it based on the amount of positive acceptances by people in the community of electricity," said Deirdre. "This is where we can see the ESB beginning a long-term relationship with voluntary organisations within communities, particularly the ICA, Macra na Feirme and Muintir na Tire.

"These voluntary organisations played a vital role, going into homes on a one-to-one basis to explaining the benefit of rural electrification, answering any questions and allaying any fears they might have of electricity," she continued. Or, in the words of Ciunas Bunworth: "It was confidence-building."

Deirdre notes: "The role of women was vital from early on, as they knew exactly how transformative rural electrification was going to be. The word we see used more often is 'drudgery' and the idea was that 'the light' was going to bring an end to all of this drudgery."

The ESB also designed an ideal farm kitchen in 1956 in collaboration with the ICA, the Department of Agriculture and the Royal Institute of Architects of Ireland for the Royal Dublin Society (RDS) Spring Show. It combined modern appliances and materials with a traditional layout, and after the RDS show finished, the kitchen toured the country in a mobile van for the next five years.

The kitchen was reconstructed for the exhibition by Phillip Carey, a final year Furniture Design and Manufacture student at GMT-Letterfrack, and is also on display at the National Museum in Turlough.



Mary Ann Egan, from Athlone, viewing the new exhibition 'Kitchen Power - Women's Experiences of Rural Electrification' at the National Museum of Ireland - Country Life, Turlough.

Picture: Keith Heneghan



# finds its voice in new exhibition



Former President of Ireland Mary Robinson and her husband Nick chat to Catherine Heaney, chair of the board of the National Museum of Ireland, at the opening of the new exhibition in Turlough House. Picture: Keith Heneghan

The co-curator of the exhibition, Dr Sorcha O'Brien, said that while rural electrification had a huge impact on women's daily lives, it didn't challenge the existing gender roles in society directly.

"This doesn't really challenge the gender roles an awful lot but it sets the groundwork for freeing up women in rural Ireland from this drudgery of everyday life," said Dr O'Brien. "You're talking about women not having to spend an entire Monday washing the family clothes by hand and then all day Tuesday ironing them. These become shorter jobs that could be spread out over the week."

Dr O'Brien said the oral history interviews revealed that the arrival of electricity allowed women to get more involved with textile work, such as knitting, sewing and crocheting.

"On the one hand you have women getting more involved in organisations such as the ICA and community work but what a lot of women were doing was textile work. For some of them that was paid work, particularly things like Aran sweaters in the west of Ireland where people would make the product and get paid by the sweater.

"But a lot of the work was quite practical; for example, you had women who were making and repairing clothing for their families."

The idea behind the textile element of the exhibition, which was created by Sligo-based artist Anna Spearman in collaboration with ICA members in Mayo, was to highlight how these skills are still utilised today in a much more creative way.

"What they've been doing is a creative response to all these materials and all these ideas," explained Dr O'Brien. "They're producing artwork with those amazing craft skills they have, they are expressing themselves through textiles."

Dr O'Brien co-curated the exhibition with Noel Campbell of the National Museum of Ireland - Country Life. Mr Campbell has said this exhibition is a natural next step for what

**“**From my own childhood, from what I recall, the washing machine was the best thing for my mother. It rotated and it squeezed with a mangle on the top of it. It was still hard work but it was better than what we had

the museum has to offer.

"What the museum focuses on in our permanent galleries is pre-electrification and pre-industrialisation and with 'Kitchen

Power' we're looking at the decades after that, which is the first time the countryside really sees widespread electrification," he said.

The 'Kitchen Power - Women's Experiences of Rural Electrification' exhibition at the National Museum of Ireland - Country Life in Turlough takes a unique and personalised look at what was a revolutionary period in Irish history for women.

In the words of former president Mary Robinson who opened the exhibition, instead of rocking the cradle, Irish women rocked the system. Rural electrification was a vital first step down a long road that would lead to greater freedoms for the women of Ireland.



Dr Sorcha O'Brien of Kingston University, Senior Lecturer in Design History and principal investigator for the Electric Irish Homes research project; Lynn Scarff, Director of the National Museum of Ireland and Maura McGuinness, Castlebar viewing the new exhibition 'Kitchen Power - Women's Experiences of Rural Electrification'. Picture: Keith Heneghan