

Tomorrow A very personal memoir

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LifeFeatures



A fresh spin for a ballroom of romance



The Ierne ballroom in Dublin is reopening tonight after a 15-year interlude. Dancers from its heyday talk to Róisín Ingle

Facing the Garden of Remembrance on Dublin's Parnell Square East, the Ierne Ballroom has been something of a wallflower since the doors closed on its dancing days. Now the iconic venue is being given a new lease of life by James Cafferty, who is reopening it as Caffertys @ the Ierne, a thoroughly modern dancehall pitched at revellers in their late 20s to 50s. The Co Sligo businessman used to shake a leg himself at the Ierne in the ballroom's heyday, a time when Parnell Square was the dance mecca of Ireland, and if you had the price of admission and a mineral for any potential lady friends, you were, says Cafferty, "on the pig's back".

Two mirror balls have just been hung up, there's a smell of fresh varnish from the newly laid ballroom floor, and for many who danced there in the good old days, stepping into the new Ierne will be like stepping back in time.

True, it has been smartened up considerably since the 1960s, when the showbands selected by proprietor Christy Gunn attracted heaving, sweating crowds of up to 2,000. The peeling paisley wallpaper is long gone, there are new showers and toilets for the artists - a luxury unheard of back in those days - and three bars to service the crowds. But the ballroom still has an old world feel that will please those people who like to dance in the old-fashioned way.

Cafferty, who promotes music festivals and artists including Joe Dolan, believes he has spotted a major gap in the nightclub market. "There are bands playing outside Dublin to great audiences in places like Lucan and Celbridge but not in Dublin itself. There are big draws such as Jimmy Buckley, Mike Denver and Mick Flavin. The age group I want to cater for are out dancing on Wednesday through to Sunday but they are not out in Dublin," he says. "Of all the projects I've been involved with, this is causing the biggest interest, there are people on the phone to us every day asking when we are opening."

The venture is something of a labour of love for Cafferty, who spent more nights than he cares to remember dancing at the Ierne during the late 1960s and 1970s. "My favourite memory is seeing Joe Dolan being pulled off the stage by adoring fans," he says. "I'd be here every weekend. There was no drink at all... the girls would be on one side and the fellas on the other."

"When a song was introduced by the band there would be a crush and the girls would be mauled... I always aimed for the best girl in the hall. In those days there was a scarcity of women so they had their pick of the men."

Like most of the ballrooms at that time, the Ierne closed for Lent and it was one of the last "minerals only" venues in the city. Dymphna O'Gorman, originally from Co Monaghan, was typi-

cal of the regular crowd who joined the queue outside the Ierne, a queue that sometimes snaked as far as Chalk's restaurant on the corner of the square. "Myself and my friends would sometimes go dancing seven nights a week," she says, listing the National and the Irish Club, also in Parnell Square, among their favourites. She remembers the tea room on the left, the long corridor on the way into the venue, and the high stage in the ballroom, which had them standing on chairs to get a good look at performers such as Frankie McBride. "We used to adore him when he'd sing *Five Little Fingers*, a song about a father and a baby," she says.

It was a time when with a week's wages from the Civil Service she could buy a transistor radio and a new dress and she'd still have money for her keep to hand over to the aunt she was living with.

The nights followed a familiar pattern. "We'd meet up with the girls, put our coats in the cloakroom, touch up our make-up and then head in," she recalls. "All the fellas would be on one side and the girls were on the other. They'd come over and ask you to dance and if you didn't like them, you'd refuse."

They were innocent days. "You knew if a fella fancied you because he'd ask to buy you a mineral so you could have a chat," she laughs. There wasn't much talk between the couples on the dancefloor. "We were too busy jiving and waltzing. The dancing at that time was closer than what it is today, more romantic. The youngsters today are missing out, just standing there apart from each other shaking themselves. There's not much contact any more."

JOHN FLEMING, A DUBLINER who was a regular in the latter days of the Ierne, remembers how it was a favourite with

Magic moment: James Cafferty dances with Angela Hanley in Caffertys @ the Ierne, in Parnell Square, Dublin. In the 1960s Hanley used to dance at the Ierne ballroom, which Cafferty will reopen tonight. Photograph: Kate Geraghty

long-distance lorry drivers. "There was no parking restrictions in those days and you'd see all the articulated lorries lined up all around the square. There was never any trouble, everyone was just having the craic."

Originally a church, the Ierne ballroom was opened in the 1960s by Christy Gunn, helped by his wife Betty. Ask anyone in the business about the venue during those days and they mention the Gunns. "All the other ballroom owners or band managers would make their way to the lane at the back of the Ierne, kick the back door and Christy would open it, and Betty would be there with the kettle and sandwiches," remembers showband veteran Hugh Hardy, former manager of Larry Cunningham and the Mighty Avons.

It wasn't the most glamorous of places, he remembers, but attracted huge crowds of people who were from outside Dublin, living in the capital. "You didn't come to the Ierne for the decor, it was basic to say the least. Thursday night was the big night for country people, the Dublin jacks and jockettes didn't go as much to what they called 'culchie night'. There would be bands like Big Tom and Butch Moore and the Capitol. Christy got all the top names."

Dickie Rock, a regular performer at the Ierne, met his wife there. And another one of those top names, Sean Dunphy, who is recovering from a quadruple heart bypass, says it was "a magic place". Sitting in the sun-drenched lane behind the venue, he remembers the night he was pulled off the Ierne stage by crazed fans. It was the week after he'd returned from representing Ireland in the Eurovision song contest in 1967. "I was never one of those showmen who got the females excited but I'd just come back from the Eurovision so there was a bit more of a buzz," he says. "The stage used to slope and I had reached down to shake hands

with some of the crowd when I got pulled down. I remember I was wearing a beautiful suit but by the time they'd finished with me I only had the trousers left. I was mortified. I had to borrow some clothes to finish the rest of the set."

They say the advent of disco and licensed bars killed off the Ierne, which was taken over by the Dublin Fire Brigade as its social club when it closed. It's also been used in the past as an exam hall for local schools and has hosted various community events. "The Ierne was like a national shrine at the weekends," says Liam Ryan, the former proprietor of the Olympic Ballroom in Dublin. "It was a pilgrimage for country people where they could enjoy the country music they loved so deeply."

And now it's back, a wallflower no more. Form an orderly queue.

♦ Caffertys @ the Ierne opens at 8pm tonight, with Jimmy Buckley and guests

'The dancing at that time was closer than what it is today, more romantic. There's not much contact any more'

Making the grade at the debs

In the midst of the Leaving Cert, many students will be looking forward to their debs. But, with a cost of up to €3,000, parents will be dreading the event, writes Kate Holmquist

FOR many of the 52,000 teenagers sitting their Leaving Cert, the exam is but a necessary hurdle before engaging in a social season of pre-debs and holidays abroad, leading up to the debs that will have parents saying in October, "thank God for free university education".

The Irish debs - our unique way of celebrating graduation - has become such an important milestone in students' lives that already limousine companies report being nearly booked out as far ahead as next October, and some girls have been on the hunt for the perfect dress since January. A new magazine, *Irish Debs*, launched recently, offers girls everything they need to know about preparing for the big night - including a cover story on hair extensions and ads for WeightWatchers.

The debs business is worth an estimated €30 million annually, considering that each graduating teen will easily spend €600 - less for the boys and a lot more for the girls.

For some there will also be an overnight stay in a hotel, a stretch Hummer, a reception at home before the debs, and a make-up artist and hairdresser visiting the home. MTV's over-the-top reality show, *My Super Sweet 16*, in which spoiled rich girls twist Daddy around their little fingers to buy them thousands of dollars worth of clothes and jewellery, is another inspiration.

The average cost of a debs, conservatively speaking, is about €1,000 per girl when the dress, hair, make-up, tan, nails, photographer, limo, tickets, jewellery, shoes and accessories are all paid for, estimates Annmarie Wade of the website *Schooldays.ie*.

She came up with this as a guideline for parents after assessing the expense involved. Having launched the debs section of *Schooldays.ie* eight weeks ago, she's been "quite surprised" at the huge amount of debs-related searching, especially in relation to *The Dress*.

What do girls want? "Everything, God love them. They're all watching *My Super Sweet 16* and they want it all," says Emma Lawless, owner of *Perfection*, a dress shop in Crumlin, that specialises in American prom-style ballgowns encrusted in diamante and other confections retailing at €250-750 each.

She says that many parents are spending €2,000-3,000 on the debs when they include luxuries such as €500 hair extensions, €250 for hair and make-up, €50 for nails, €50 for tanning, €250 for the limo, and €250 for the corset to wear beneath the dress, even though a debs can be done "on the cheap" for €600.

The mothers can be as demanding as the girls who come into her Dublin shop. "I had a girl in who was a size 12, an ideal, perfectly proportioned healthy figure and her mother was saying "that dress wouldn't be flattering on you". I've had other girls in whose mothers insist they're a size zero. The smallest I carry is a European size eight, which is a US size two, but the mother wanted a smaller dress. The mothers are 10 times worse than the girls. It's unbelievable and they have a lot to answer for," says Lawless.

The competition to find a show-stopping dress that no one else at the debs will be wearing is frantic. So much so that Lawless has had girls coming in for dresses since last autumn for debs in 2007. One girl arrived in the shop last March with her mother and when there was nothing in the shop she stamped her little foot and moaned, "I told you we were leaving it too late."

Lawless, who had her own debs dress made by a neighbour for €90, thinks that some parents have lost perspective: "People think the more they have, the more they are obligated to spend. They have the aunts and the neighbours in to see the girl before she goes out and that's an event in itself. I think it's bad to use a 17-year-old child as property; to say 'look how much money I have'. And it puts an awful lot of pressure on people who don't have the money."

Wade, who made her own debs dress with her mother's help, thinks that parents should be firm about sticking to an agreed budget, then let their daughter decide how to spend it.

"She could buy a more expensive dress and do her own hair and make-up, or pay for hair and make-up and buy a less expensive dress," she says.

The boys have much less expense - €75-120 for tuxedo rental, €100 each for tickets to the Debs (unless it's a girls' school debs and the girls are paying), the photographs (about €150), a corsage for the girl (€20) and his own or the couple's share of the limo, which can cost anything up to €1,200 for a stretch white Hummer that seats eight.

That price includes picking up each of the four couples and dropping them off at the ball "fashionably late", says Jason Hutch of *Carry Anybody Limos*. But revellers will have to find their own way home. As for staying out all night - you have to let them, is the consensus of parents on *Schooldays.ie*, if you don't want to come across as a fossil.

And you thought paying for it was the worst of your worries.

So long, school, and thanks for all the memories



TeenTimes
Barbara Feeney

The sleeves on my school jumper are beginning to fray and there is a rather large hole in the elbow. The soles on my shoes are worn down and the covers on my books are dilapidated. These are signs: it is now finally time for me to leave. My time in school is done and, with only a few days before I bid farewell to this familiar place where I have spent most of my life, I have begun to reminisce on my school days.

Back in September 1992, I was a sweet (I say this in the kindest sense of the word) two-year-old, dressed in a pressed pink smock and black patent shoes. I had looked forward to Montessori school so much, it was an exciting day in my young life. However, little did I know I would have to part from my mum. Having been

walked hand-in-hand to my classroom, I smiled and thought what fun the place looked. Ten minutes later, tears stained my face and my optimistic view of school life had vanished from my mind, after being rendered free from my mum's clutches and left desolate in a classroom of other children, each dressed the same as I was.

Day by day I adjusted to my new lifestyle, making little friends, and sharing my feelings of loneliness and abandonment with them. At lunch we drank milk and ate Marietta biscuits, discussing the problems of the world: what cartoon we would watch on TV that afternoon or comparing our brightly coloured leggings and LA Gear runners, and other issues of importance. In between hours

spent in the mud in red wellington boots, I managed to fit in some education. In my early days it was mainly learning sums, adding and subtracting, tracing sand-paper letters and drawing insects.

However, my education has progressed since the days of adding and subtracting and I have acquired great knowledge during my school years, learning many things. Often I wonder how important these things will be in the future, but what is the harm in acquiring such knowledge? The working principle of a small motor appliance, the battles of Alexander the Great, and even the life-cycle of metamorphic rocks.

My school days have flashed before my eyes. It seems only yesterday that I was an innocent, young first-year, searching

dementedly for classroom 305 - I never found it - but now there is the stark reality of the Leaving Cert, which signals the end of my days in school. Soon I will swap my turquoise ensemble for a more trendy attire and perhaps I will wear a coloured hair-bobbin or even let my shirt hang out. My freedom is unfolding before me. No longer will I have to stand in a line of military precision, adhering to the orders of teachers; I will be my own boss.

In saying all of this, I am going to miss the place, no matter how much I dislike learning Irish, poetry and maths formulae on sunny Friday afternoons. I know that next year I will be longing to return to school for just one more day; after all, it has been my second home for 15 years. School

has taught me manners, subjects of an academic nature and imposed rules upon me, but I have learned so much more. I have learned things that will stand to me throughout my life and I have had the chance to do, see and experience great things - not to mention all the amazing people I have met.

Now it is time for me to move on, it is time to enter the real world. So, farewell school.

♦ Barbara Feeney, aged 17, is a sixth-year student at Mount Arville Secondary School, Goatstown, Dublin 14

♦ Articles of 500 words are welcome from teenagers. E-mail teentimes@irish-times.ie and include a phone number