



AR SCÁTH A chéile

the history of Wolfe Tones SAC

Stephen McCourt



Foreword

In the 140 years since seven men gathered in a back room of Hayes' Commercial Hotel in Thurles, Co. Tipperary, countless clubs have sprung up across Ireland and around the world.

Some of the clubs we know today are older than the GAA itself, many emerged during the early 20th century, and others are more recent endeavours. Each has its own story, from the Dublin Metropolitans, which inspired Davitt to establish the GAA, to new clubs like Colin Gaels or Aeracha Uladh, forging their own paths.

However, history has not been kind to many hundreds of other clubs. Emigration, financial hardship, or the loss of playing pitches have left them consigned to history. Their memories now linger only in dusty photographs, old jerseys repurposed as cleaning cloths, hurling sticks mending fences or decorating mantelpieces.

Rarer still is the revival of a club beyond the brink of oblivion. Over the past five years, Stephen McCourt has led the resurgence of Wolfe Tones, bringing the club back from non-existence. During this time, he has also painstakingly researched the origins of the club, uncovering the rich history of its predecessors.

In this publication, Stephen outlines the history of Wolfe Tone GA&CC, charting its journey through triumphs and challenges, and chronicling its rebirth after nearly 50 years.

It has been a privilege to work alongside Stephen in rebuilding the club. Now, as I take on the role of Chairperson, following in his footsteps, I know I have big shoes to fill.



Tiarnán Ó Muilleoir
Cathaoirleach Chumann Wolfe Tone
Samhain 2024

Acknowledgements

This history of Wolfe Tones Gaelic Athletic Club is far from complete, but it has been put together with care and as much information as we've been able to gather over the past five years. It's a mix of facts, recollections, and stories shared by those who've been part of the club's journey or have memories of its past.

Special thanks go to Mary Bailie and Angela McIvor for their help in sharing these stories and digging into the history.

While there are undoubtedly gaps and parts of the story still to be uncovered, this is an honest attempt to piece together the history of Wolfe Tones—its highs, lows, and everything in between. This is just the beginning, and we hope it encourages more people to come forward with their memories and knowledge to keep the story alive and growing.

It is perhaps entirely coincidental that four months before 5 months before Wolfe Tones' was founded, Dawson Bates as Minister of Home Affairs banned an annual Theobald Wolfe Tone commemoration on McArts Fort – on the outskirts of the Greencastle Townland.

Ar scáth a chéile a mhaireann na daoine.

Stephen McCourt
Samhain 2024

Formation and Early Development

The Wolfe Tones Gaelic Athletic Club was established in Greencastle, County Antrim, in the early 1930s, with its first Annual General Meeting (AGM) held in 1932. Its first recorded game being a challenge match in January 1931 against the IRA affiliated club – McKelveys GAC. The club was founded with the clear intention of fostering a Gaelic revival in the area, using the platform of a Gaelic Athletic Club to promote and consolidate Irish culture among local people. Beyond sport, this was a deliberate effort to "Gaelicise" Greencastle, aligning with the original aims of the GAA. This coincided with Wolfe Tones joining the Belfast Division of Antrim Camogie in 1931, creating Wolfe Tone GA & CC.

There are some of the club's founding members in the picture below including figures such as Mick Cash, Bobby Bonnar, Gordon Collins, Edward Cleary, Dan Feenan, Johnny O'Hagan among others., among others still being identified in historical records. Together, these individuals laid the groundwork for the first Gaelic games club in Greencastle and a legacy that would continue 90 years later.



Pádraig MacNamee - President of the GAA

The cultural ambitions of the Wolfe Tones were evident early on. A major milestone came in October 1933 with the establishment of a local branch of the Gaelic League, championed by Pádraig MacNamee. Residing in Greencastle at that time, MacNamee's influence was instrumental in shaping the club's cultural projects. His leadership and vision were key to integrating the Wolfe Tones into the broader Gaelic revival movement. MacNamee would later rise to prominence as the first Ulsterman to serve as President of the GAA (1938–1943), overseeing significant developments in the association, including the removal of Douglas Hyde as a GAA Patron.



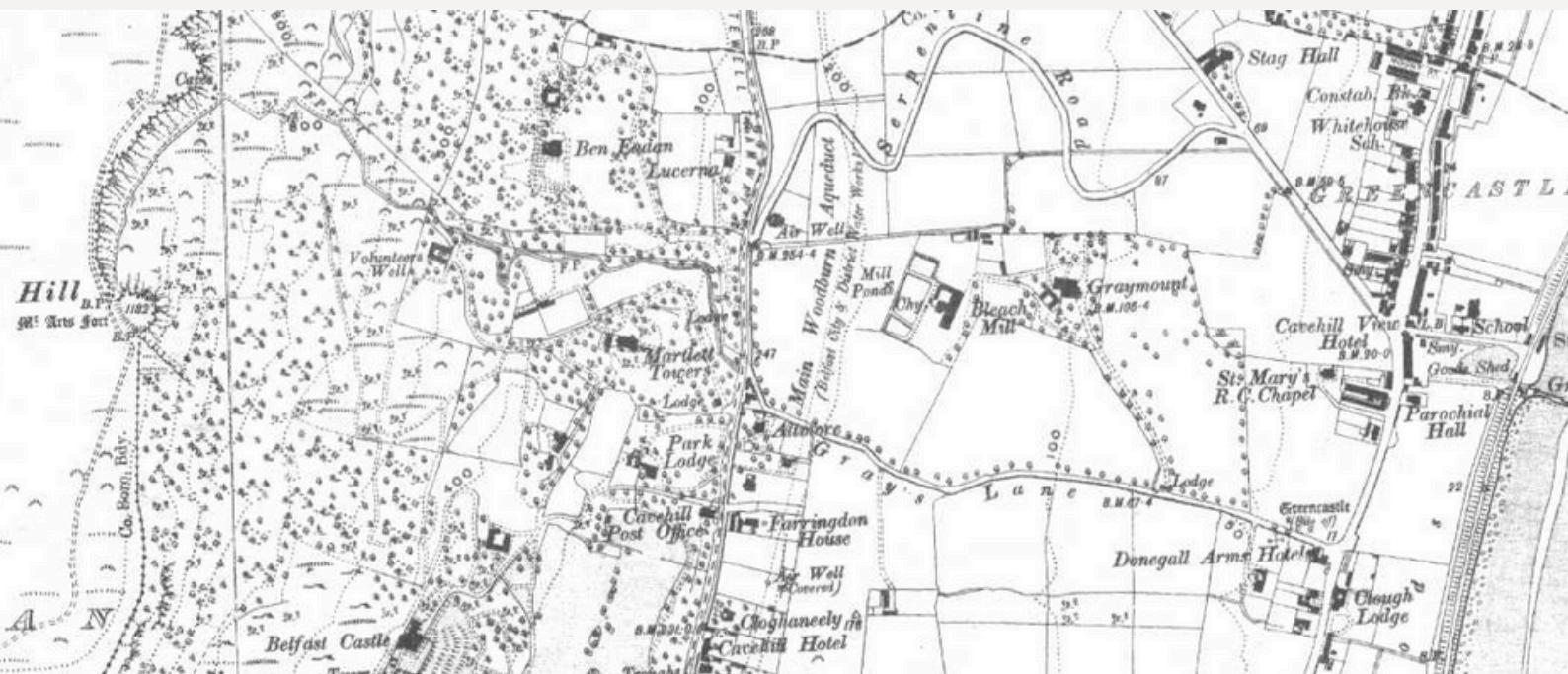
Pádraig MacNamee presents the Liam McCarthy Cup to Limerick Captain Mick Mackey in 1940

Sporting Achievements and Challenges

Originally playing in the Junior ranks of Antrim football, Wolfe Tones joined the Intermediate League in 1936, quickly proving themselves as competitive players in those structures. One of their early successes came with a hard-fought 1-8 to 1-4 victory over Morans. However, the team's fiery spirit also led to moments of controversy.

A December 1934 match against Kickhams Creggan saw a disallowed goal spark a walk-off protest by Wolfe Tones players, resulting in a six-month suspension. This incident underscored both the intensity and passion that characterised the club in its early years.

The team's first significant milestone came in 1937 when they reached the Antrim Junior Football Final. Although they were defeated by Con Magee's (2-3 to 1-1) the match was notable for the outstanding performance of goalkeeper Frank McKeever, who prevented a more lopsided scoreline. The Wolfe Tones men's team ultimately clinched their first Junior Football Cup in 1940, marking a pivotal achievement during a turbulent period.



A Historic Victory for Camogie



On December 10, 1938, the Wolfe Tones Camogie team made history by winning the Antrim Junior Camogie Championship. In a “thrilling final”, they defeated Deirdre to secure the prestigious Lios na bhFiann Cup. The team was captained by Miss G. Quinn, who proudly lifted the trophy on behalf of her teammates. Outstanding performances from I. Tully, S. McQuillan, E. Doran, and J. McNally were instrumental in the victory. This championship marked the club’s first-ever county title and underscored the growing strength of women’s sports within Wolfe Tones. It stands in sharp contrast to a memo circulated in the local papers four years earlier in November 1934 which stated that the women of Greencastle were not interested in Camogie and were being invited to a meeting to take their sporting commitments more seriously.

Political Turmoil and Community Repression

The late 1930s brought political unrest to Greencastle, impacting the Wolfe Tones community. In March 1939, intelligence received prompted a large-scale police operation in the area under the Special Powers Act. Authorities, acting on reports that the IRA had moved significant amounts of arms into the district as part of its newly launched “S-Plan” campaign, raided 30 homes in search of weapons. The Irish Weekly reported that many of the raided houses belonged to members of Wolfe Tones GAC, highlighting the complex relationship between the club’s membership and the broader political tensions of the time.

Despite these challenges, Wolfe Tones achieved remarkable successes on the playing field, with victories in 1938 (Camogie) and 1940 (Football) standing as symbols of resilience. These triumphs came amid a backdrop of repression and the global upheaval of World War II,

cementing the club’s role as a bastion of Gaelic identity and pride in Greencastle.

Around 1941, during the war years, Hugh and Joe Mullan approached Wolfe Tones GAC with the idea of starting an underage team. To identify promising young players, they organised matches among various street teams from the local area. Streets such as Mary’s Place and Maiden’s Row would gather on ‘The Meadow’ to play football and hurling. The Mullan’s carefully observed these matches, taking note of the best players and highest scorers. Using this informal scouting process, they successfully assembled the new Wolfe Tones underage team.



The post-war period heralded a new chapter of achievement and resilience for Wolfe Tones GAC. Amid ongoing social and economic recovery, the club not only revitalised its activities but also cemented its status as a cornerstone of Greencastle life. This era was marked by great successes in both Camogie and Hurling, as well as a renewed commitment to the club's future.

In 1949, Wolfe Tones' Camogie team achieved another major milestone by winning the South Antrim Junior Camogie Championship. Their 3-1 to 2-1 victory over St. Dymphna's Glenavy demonstrated the continuing popularity of Camogie within Greencastle, even as they narrowly missed a double victory by finishing runners-up in the Junior League final to the familiar St Teresa's. Some of those who made up this team include Betty O'Neill, Eilish Reynolds, Molly Mitchell, Sadie Wasson, Shiela Cash, Margaret Matthews, Margaret Mitchell, Tina Cash, Margaret Crangle, Mollie McLarnon, Alice McLarnon and Patricia McKenna.

Post-War Growth and Camogie Success



The momentum carried into 1950 when two Wolfe Tones players, Sadie Wasson and Alice McLarnon, were selected to represent South Antrim in a match against Lancashire during a special Camogie tour. Their participation not only showcased their individual talent but also elevated the club's profile beyond local competition, connecting Wolfe Tones with broader Gaelic traditions across Ireland and Britain.

A Historic Hurling Championship

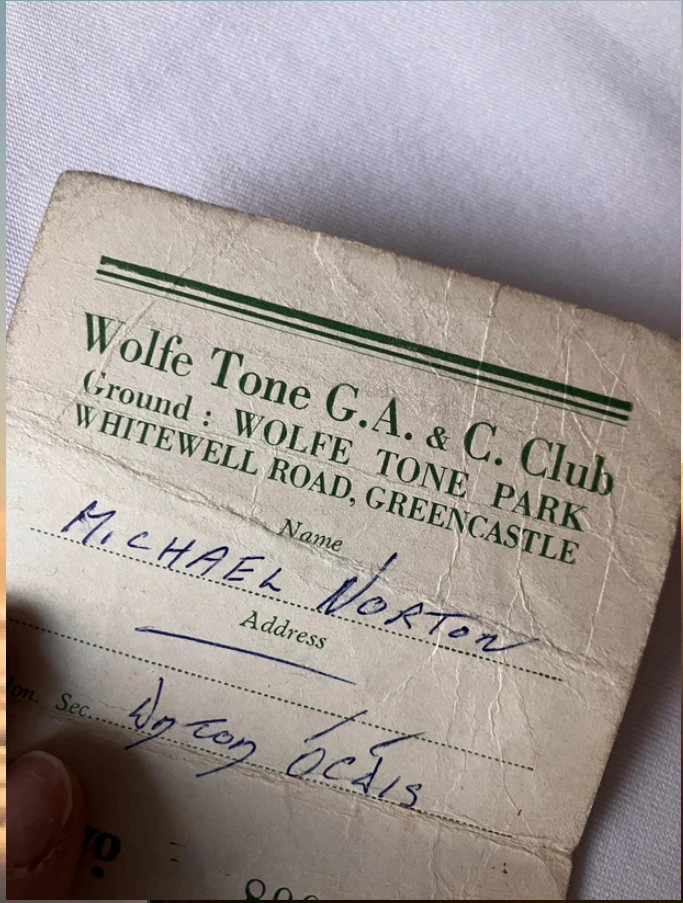
In 1950, the Wolfe Tones Hurling team added another chapter to the club's storied history by winning the Junior Hurling Championship. This achievement marked the first hurling trophy in the club's history. This was spearheaded by characters like Frank McKenna, Frannie Beattie, Joe Bonnar, Austin Donnelly, Paddy O'Neill, John Gillen, Davy Nocher, Thomas O'Hagan, Joe Rafferty, Jack Cash, Richard Mitchell, Christie McIlroy, Stevie Cash, Hugh Gillen, Harry Magill and Danny McLarnon.



Securing the Club's Future

Despite these triumphs, the club faced significant challenges in ensuring its long-term sustainability. On 21st November, 1950, the Wolfe Tones Committee convened an emergency meeting at the club's pavilion to address concerns about the organisation's future wellbeing.

The outcome of this meeting was overwhelmingly positive. By 2nd December, local newspapers reported that the meeting was "highly successful" and that the future of Wolfe Tones was "now definitely assured."



Decline and Turmoil

The 1960s and 1970s marked a challenging chapter for Wolfe Tones GAC, as the club navigated infrastructural losses, dwindling participation, and administrative hurdles amid broader societal tensions. While the competitive teams disbanded during this period, the club persisted as a vital social hub, embodying both a colourful history and a commitment to its community.

A pivotal blow came in the mid-1960s when Wolfe Tones lost its pitch on Whitewell Road. Owned by the Mater Hospital and administered by the local church (or Rev J.McSparran, Whitehouse), the land was sold to facilitate the construction of the M2 motorway, effectively displacing the club from its home ground. Efforts to secure alternative facilities were met with repeated disappointment, as lobbying the local council proved unsuccessful. Consequently, Wolfe Tones relied on away grounds and occasional use of O'Neill Road to host fixtures.



Compounding the difficulties, arson attacks in 1963 resulted in the destruction of the club's goalposts on several occasions.

Despite these challenges, Wolfe Tones continued to seek ways to rejuvenate its sporting sections. The club focused on rebuilding through youth development, but efforts to establish minor teams were hampered by poor training attendance and limited resources. By 1969, with membership and player numbers dwindling, the club considered amalgamating with St. Columba's to preserve Gaelic games in the wider area.

Cultural Highlights Amidst Adversity

Amid its struggles, Wolfe Tones remained committed to promoting Gaelic culture as a Greencastle institution. A standout moment in this period occurred on Saturday, 10 October 1964, when Wolfe Tones youth members, joined by St. Columba's, were welcomed to Government Buildings in Dublin by Taoiseach Seán Lemass. Wolfe Tones captain Maurice Mullan presented the Taoiseach with a gift on behalf of the club. This visit highlighted the club's cultural relevance and its aspiration to remain a beacon of Gaelic identity despite its difficulties.



Junior members of Wolfe Tones and St Columba's visit Leinster House in 1964

Administrative Challenges and Vibrant Internal Life

Committee minutes from the late 1960s reveal both the vibrancy and the obstacles faced by the club's internal administration. These records paint a picture of a group striving to maintain structure and uphold community values:

- 5th January 1967: The committee reviewed an appeal from E. McElroy, who had been indefinitely suspended in 1963 for inappropriate language directed at a committee member. After pledging to amend his behaviour, McElroy was reinstated, reflecting the club's commitment to rehabilitation and community support.
- 13th April 1967: A proposed folk concert sparked debate over whether alcohol should be permitted at the event. Keen to avoid controversy and maintain positive relations with the parish, the committee sought approval from the parish priest.

- 17th October 1967: A dispute arose over the unauthorized purchase of a football pump for £1, with the absence of a receipt and uncertainty over its necessity causing light-hearted consternation. This minor episode underscored the administrative challenges faced by the club during this period.

Despite the decline in competitive fixtures, Wolfe Tones continued to foster a sense of community through cultural events such as Feis competitions, folk concerts and organising bus trips to All-Ireland Finals. These activities kept the spirit of the club alive, even as its games waned.

The Final Competitive Match and Social Club Transition

Wolfe Tones played its last recorded competitive fixture on 11th November 1972, against St. Patrick's Lisburn on Hightown Road in a football match. This marked the end of the club's direct involvement in Gaelic games. However, Wolfe Tones continued in the form of its social club on Catherine Row.



This era saw Wolfe Tones' club at the heart of both community life and historical revolutionary currents. In August 1975, an RUC raid uncovered four pistols, a rifle, a large quantity of ammunition, and two blast bombs at the club, linking the premises to local IRA activities. Tragedy struck just a month later on 25th September 1975, when Michael Boothman was murdered in a drive-by shooting while attending the club. Further tension arose in May 1976, when another raid led to the discovery of 100lb of explosive mixture.



Rebirth and Expansion (2019–Present)

After nearly 50 years without a Gaelic games presence in Greencastle, a snap meeting in the upstairs room of the Fountain Bar in October 2019 marked the beginning of Wolfe Tones GAC's revival. This gathering of local people —Brian Rogers, Aodhan Moloney, Kieran Moloney, Mark Flynn, Mark McCrystal, Fintan Quinn, Taylor McGrann and Stephen McCourt—laid the groundwork for the reformation of the club. Their goal was clear: to fulfil the original aims of the founders of Wolfe Tones GAC by re-establishing a vibrant and sustainable Gaelic games organisation in the area. However, it became apparent that to create a sustainable club, it would need to expand its base. Whiteabbey became a key catchment in the subsequent growth of Wolfe Tones with St. James's' Primary School becoming the club's biggest feeder.



A Revival and a Coincidental Return

In 2020, nearly half a century after its last competitive match, Wolfe Tones GAC returned to Antrim GAA structures, and its first fixture was played against St. Patrick's Lisburn on the Hightown Road—the same team and location as its final match in 1972. This was totally coincidental and unknown to those involved at the time.

Reformation and Early Leadership

Following the initial meeting, a second meeting was held to elect the first committee of the reformed Wolfe Tones GAC. The leadership team included

- Chairperson: Stephen McCourt
- Secretary: Mark McCrystal
- Treasurer: Mark Flynn
- PRO: Fintan Quinn

Additional committee members included Aodhan Moloney, Michael McLarnon, Sean Mclvor and Donal Moloney, with Angela Mclvor joining shortly thereafter.



The club's first foray back into Gaelic games came through its inclusion in the Antrim GAA league structures via the South Antrim League. However, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 delayed their competitive debut. When restrictions eased, Wolfe Tones finally fielded a team in mens football in September 2020, securing a historic victory in their comeback match with a scoreline of 1-10 to 0-10, thanks to a decisive goal by Kieran Moloney.



Growth Despite Challenges

The interrupted 2020 campaign allowed the committee to focus on long-term planning. In June 2021, the club launched its first Senior Ladies team, a milestone achievement driven by the efforts of Bronagh McLaughlin and Blaithin McBride, who had previously joined the club's Gaelic for Mothers and Others programme.



The launch of Wolfe Tones' first Strategic Development Plan in November 2021 provided a structured roadmap for growth. Developed through the dedicated work of Maria McCourt, Martin McCourt, Angela McIvor and Tiarnan Millar, the plan paved the way for the expansion of the club into multiple codes and activities.

5th Anniversary

By the fifth anniversary of its reformation, Wolfe Tones had achieved the remarkable feat of competing across four Gaelic games codes: football, ladies' football, hurling, and rounders. A significant achievement in Antrim Gaelic games and one which shows the potential for further growth in the future.



An Expansive Club

Under the guidance of passionate volunteers, Wolfe Tones rapidly transformed into a multi-code organisation. Notable developments included:

- Underage Section: Spearheaded by Shaun McGowan and Mary Bailie, this initiative ensured a pipeline of young talent for the club's future.
- Rounders Unit: A growing group established to further diversify the club's offerings, spearheaded by Margaret McKenzie and Mary Bailie, then later expanded by Arleen Ramsey.
- Hurling and Camogie: Advanced through the efforts of George Long, Paul Bailie, Mike McMahon and Donal Moloney, these sections revitalised traditional Gaelic games within the club.



This captivating publication by Stephen McCourt delves into the early history of Wolfe Tones GAC, exploring its profound impact on the cultural and social life of the Loughshore parish of Greencastle.

It offers a compelling glimpse into the origins of a club resurrected from obscurity, now forging a renewed legacy for Gaelic games in the community.