

Rural Electrification in the Parish of Lorrha

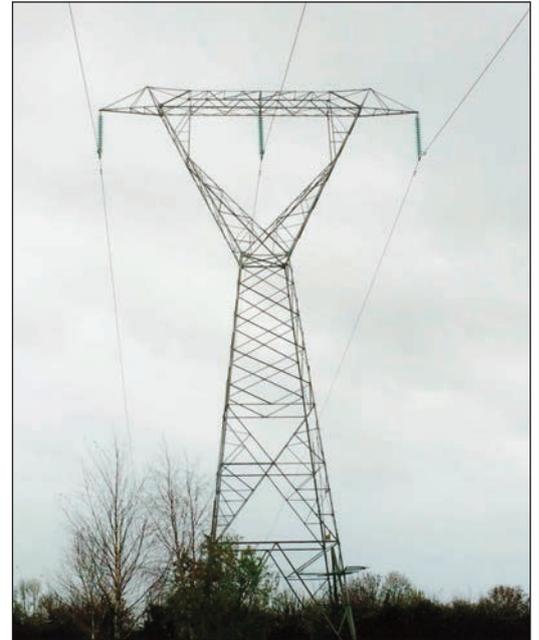
by Seamus J. King

The Parish of Lorrha was selected for Rural Electrification on February 1, 1950. Construction work commenced on February 13 and the Area was completed by May 6, 1950.

This short sentence fails to do justice to the enormous change the coming of electricity brought about in the lives of the people of the parish. The event took place without the kind of fanfare that such change deserved. It has been described as the QUIET Revolution, and quiet it may have been but a revolution in the lives of the people it definitely was, the greatest social revolution since the Land Reforms of the 1880s and 1890s introduced a peasant proprietorship of the land.

For generations the way of life in rural Ireland had changed but little. Activity on the farm was carried out by human and animal power. Farming was at a subsistence level, Life in the home was an unchanging round of time-consuming drudgery.

'Then came rural electrification bringing power into the homes and on to the farms, lessening the burden on the housewife, shortening the time of many chores, providing light and heat at the turn of a simple switch. On the farm it provided the means for much greater efficiency in many operations and a base for the application of modern technology. Again at the turn of a switch the time for such activities as milking, grinding, milling and cleaning could be more than halved, apart from creating greater basic efficiency.'



Electricity for All

The ultimate object of the Shannon Scheme in the late 'twenties was the supply of electricity to rural as well as urban areas, on a nationwide basis. Much thought was given to the matter over the following years but it wasn't until 1946 that rural electrification became a meaningful prospect.

The first step towards the realisation of the dream was the introduction of the 1945 Electricity Bill by Sean Lemass in the Dail on January 24. In his speech the Minister stated that a job of the magnitude of the Rural Electrification Scheme had never before been undertaken. It would use over one million poles and involve the construction of 75,000 miles of new line (as against the total of about 2,000 miles which then existed), the erection of 100,000 extra distribution transformers (as against the existing 1,200) and the connection of 280,000 new customers, as against the approximately 250,000 existing urban customers.

Because of post war shortages and the difficulty of sourcing supplies for such a monumental task, the actual work of construction couldn't commence until the second half of 1946. By that stage the ESB had divided the country into twelve districts. These in turn were divided into Areas, each of which was roughly coterminous with a parish. In all the country was divided into 792 Areas, each of which was served by an Engineer, an Organiser, a Clerk and a Supervisor. The first two of these officials were important in selling the scheme to the people and ensuring that they kept their promise, once they had signed up to be connected.

The policy of the ESB in the early days was to roll out the scheme in every county as early as possible. In this way the benefits of electricity would be publicised across the country. Initially priority was given to the most remunerative Areas in the country. The most remunerative referred to the ratio between the capital costs of supplying the customers and the yield from the annual fixed charge revenue. In the early days another factor contributing to the priority of an Area was the proximity to existing electricity networks.

Had to be Paid For

The Rural Electrification Scheme had to be paid for and the ESB did this through a two-part electricity tariff system, as well as Government subsidy. One part was a fixed charge, which came to be known as the 'ground rent' and this was based on the floor area of the house and out-offices. This was used to pay for the provision of the supply and appeared as an unreasonable imposition to many consumers. The second part was the unit charge for the electricity actually consumed. In 1946 this was as follows: For first 80 units (per two-monthly period): 2.5d per unit; For next 280 units: 1.0d per unit; All units over 360: 0.75d per unit. This price structure was adopted in 1946 and remained in operation until June 1951 when an increase in the price of coal led to 0.3d per unit to be added to all unit charges.

The first pole to be erected in the Rural Electrification Scheme was at Kilsallaghan, Co. Dublin on November 5, 1946. Oldtown, Co. Dublin was the first village to be switched on in January 1947.

By 1962 280,000 houses in 775 Areas were connected, leaving 100,000 not connected. Also, 17 Areas with 6,000 premises had not been developed because of low return.

By 1976 420,000 houses, representing 98-99% of all rural houses, had been connected to the rural electricity networks at a total cost of £80 million, of which some £28 million represented State subsidy.

By March 31, 1980, 468,000 houses were connected at a cost of £109,355,000 of which £27,900,000 was provided by Government subsidy.

First in Tipperary

Bansha was the first Area in Tipperary to be developed and the twelfth in the country. In fact there was a 'row' between Bansha and Cahir as to which would be the first to be developed. Although Cahir had the better sign-up of customers after the canvass, Bansha was selected on the basis of a better economic return and was switched on on May 24, 1948,

There may have been another reason why Bansha got the nod. The Parish Priest of Bansha was Fr. John Hayes, who had founded Muintir na Tire in 1931. The man appointed to head the Rural Electrification Organisation within the ESB was W. F. Roe, who had been a prominent member of Muintir na Tire from 1938 and was dedicated to the ideals of its founder. Both men saw in rural electrification one of the most effective means of providing the stimulus required to overcome rural stagnation.

Bansha was followed by Ballingarry (32nd), Emly (33rd), Cahir Rural (35th), Moyne (42nd), Silvermines (86th), Templetuohy (97th) and Lorrha (103rd).

Preliminary Work

As each area was canvassed the line crews moved in, surveying and pegging out the routes for the main lines, erecting poles, stringing cables and installing transformers. At the same time people had to have their houses, farms and shops wired.

Lorrha was defined to be an area of 39 sq. miles in North Tipperary, hemmed in by the River Shannon and the River Brosna.

An initial survey in August 1949 estimated the cost of implementing the scheme in Lorrha at approximately £13,100.

The surveyors identified that there was a total of 406 houses. Of these 262 were identified as opting for supply with 152 economic acceptances and 110 uneconomic acceptances. There were 79 refusals, 48 termed as doubtfuls, 17 houses were vacant or could not be seen.

The work began in earnest in February 1950 and was completed in May and the final cost was £13,350.. Post development work in Lorrha continued throughout the 1950s, 60s until the late 70s with additional work being done to connect new customers and to improve and upgrade the network infrastructure to accommodate the increased usage of electricity from both existing and new consumers over time.

REO News

W. F. Roe was keenly aware of the importance of good communications with staff. If a high standard of performance was to be achieved, the staff needed not alone to be well briefed and motivated at the start, but to be constantly refreshed with information on the progress of the scheme, advised of developments in all aspects of the work, sustained when difficulties arose and motivated to give of their best at all times. One day in December 1947 he called a typist and, in his own words, 'dictated the first issue of REO News (Rural Electrification News) from cover to cover', three foolscap pages which were issued in stencilled form. The publication evolved into a fully-fledged monthly and continued in existence until November 1961, playing an important management role in informing, educating and motivating the widely dispersed staff and providing a vehicle for the exchange of views, for criticism of performance of management and field worker alike.

Today, the file, which can be consulted in the ESB Archive, provides a good research area for the writer and historian.

The February 1950 issue tells us that Timothy D. Murphy, Clerical Officer, formerly at Athlone, had been appointed to Lorrha. In the same issue we are informed that 'Mr. T. P. Haugh has returned to his home in Lorrha to do the preliminary design of the rural area shortly to be commenced in that vicinity.'

There are two entries in the March issue. Patrick J. Healy, Rural Area Engineer, has been transferred from the Grange Area to the Lorrha Area. Also, Patrick J. King, Engineer, Tyrrellspass Area to Lorrha Area to Rural Head Office.

As stated above construction work commenced in the Lorrha Area on February 13. The March issue informs us that 59 poles had been erected to date and 1 kilometre (sic) of line. In the same issue other Areas are requested to take note of the rapid progress in the Lorrha Area: 'In Lorrha Area, which was selected on 1st February, construction work started on 13th February.'

Further progress was reported in the April issue. Here we learn that 333 poles had now been erected and 22 kms of line.

In the May issue we are told that Patrick J. Healy, Rural Area Engineer had been transferred to the Monkstown Area. By now 473 poles had been erected and 42 kms of line. There is a further vital piece of information: 17 customers had been connected to date! Unfortunately we are not informed where or who they were.

And then, so quickly, in the June issue we are informed that the Lorrha Area has been completed with 481 poles erected, 45 kms of line, and 145 customers connected.

The same issue includes a note on the completion of the Lorrha Area as if it were special in some way. It states: 'During the past month we received the final report on Lorrha Area from the Rural Area Engineer, Mr. Healy. From his report we learn that although there were 21 'backsliders', he obtained 27 additional consumers to show a 'plus' of 6 consumers. Capital expenditure exceeded the Authorisation by £71, but as against this Revenue increased by £43.

'The report notes that transport was abnormally high, partly due to the scattered nature of the Area, and also due to the excessive rock met with during construction. In the early stages of the construction, proper rock drilling tools were not available, which made it necessary to go back and clean up certain spurs, although at this time construction was proceeding at the opposite end of the Area.

'Readers will be interested to learn that Lorrha was selected on 1/2/1950. Construction commenced on 13/2/1950 and the Area was completed on 6/5,1950. An excellent record, and one that reflects great credit on the Rural Electrification Engineer, Mr. Healy, and his construction crew, not forgetting Mr. T. P. Haugh, who did the preliminary design and pegging in this, his home Area.'

The May issue of the REO News has the news that Timothy D. Murphy, Rural Area Clerk, Lorrha Area, was transferred to the Delvin Area. Finally the January 1952 issue apologises for failing to mention in the Christmas number that authorisations for a number of public lighting installations were issued. They included one for Lorrha.

The Canvass

The Rural Area Organiser was a key person in each area under construction. His responsibility lay in the areas of relationships between the Board and the people it was serving. As well as persuading potential consumers of the benefits of electricity, the officer had to measure houses and assess the fixed charges, get application forms signed, serve wayleaves, deal with objections and organise demonstrations of electrical equipment.

In order to facilitate his work, the RAO sought help from local committees for the preliminary canvas and in carrying out the subsequent official canvas. Tom Lambe recalls a meeting held in Redwood School, when the Rural Electrification plan was announced. It was called by Fr. Paddy O'Meara, C.C., apparently to inform the people and to drum up support. This wasn't unusual as priests, teachers, shopkeepers, public employees, etc. were more aware of the benefits of electricity. It was from this group that the initial pressure for electricity came and they were used to persuade some of their more reluctant neighbours to sign up.

Tom Lambe and Mikey Sullivan of the Castle were detailed to go around Redwood and contact potential customers. According to Tom they didn't try to persuade the people because 'when farmers get a thing into their heads they can't be persuaded.'

Some pressure was applied, however. People anxious to get the electricity to their area, used their persuasive powers to get people to sign up since priority wouldn't be given to a place until so much income was guaranteed from the fixed charge.

The fixed charge was one of the stumbling blocks for many potential customers. They could live with the idea of paying so much per unit for the electricity they used, but to have this permanent albatross of a fixed charge round their necks, winter and summer, was more than many could bear. As well as the cost others had strange perceptions of electricity. It was believed by some that it was dangerous and that thatched houses in particular were at risk from it.

Wayleaves

Wayleaves referred to the permission granted to the ESB by landowners to run lines of poles through the land. There was no payment involved and it appears that the Board had absolute power to erect the lines and the owner had few powers of redress. It is accepted that some consultation did take place but in many cases the concerns of the owners were overlooked. One thing that annoyed farmers was the way poles were placed without consideration of farmwork. For instance they were often placed a number of yards from ditches and boundary fences where they interfered with farmwork. It does appear that the powers of the ESB were absolute. There is one story told of a farmer, who had a fine field with a bull in it. The RAO came to inform him that that a line of poles were going right through it. The farmer protested that the Board hadn't power to do this. The official replied: 'We have the power to put the pole up the bull's arse if we feel like it!'

Backsliders

'Backsliders' were the bane of the RAO in every area. They were potential customers who signed up in the initial canvass and later changed their minds. Often they were victims of an over-enthusiastic canvas by a local committee, who had persuaded reluctant householders to sign up in order to improve the numbers and thus increase their chances of getting electricity to their Area at an earlier date. Then when it came to actually signing up as a consumer they had second thoughts and refused to do so, much to the annoyance of the RAO and their neighbours as well. Refusals came about when the householder learned what the fixed charge would be and what the wiring up of the house was going to cost. Some came to believe at that stage that electricity was a luxury they couldn't really afford. We saw above how the Lorrha Area had 21 backsliders, who were balanced out by 27 new consumers who, presumably, were householders who refused to join initially but changed their minds later.

Erecting the Poles

Digging the holes for the electricity poles was a major task in the days before the JCB digger. They had to be dug by hand and workers who took on the task had very different experiences. One could get an easy ride if the soil was sandy or boggy, but rock was also a possibility. The rock seems to have been plentiful in the Lorrha Area, as the report mentioned above stated.

The hole was quite large as the pole had to be dug six feet deep. To get down that far with a pick and shovel a hole, seven feet long and about four feet wide at one end, tapering to a narrower width at the other end, had to be dug. There was a shelf down about four feet, which reduced the amount to be dug in the lower section.

Two workers were involved in the digging in the Ballymacegan-Redwood area. They were Junior Costello of Grange Cross and Willie Russell of Rathcabbin. Another man, Jimmy Dunne of the Ferry, was employed to bring the poles from Grange Cross to Ballymacegan and Redwood. He did this with a horse and tackle, dragging the poles along the road.

The poles came mostly from Finland where they were sourced in 1946 and initially cost about £2 each. A total of 114,000 was shipped in 1947 and, in all, over a 1,000,000 arrived in the following years. They were shipped between May and September into Dublin, Cork and Limerick where cressotting plants were set up to treat them before they could be used.

Rural Geography

Lorrha gets a mention in an anonymous poem, entitled Rural Geography, which appeared in the December 1953 issue of the REO News. It is worth quoting in full.

One thing can be said for Electrification
And that is the names it recalls to the Nation.
It has put rural Ireland back on the map.
Before its inception, who'd heard of Windgap?

Some Ballys you've read of in Irish folklore,
Like -dehob and nacargy, -duff, -noe and -tore;
But unknown until lately was -macelligott,
Even that doesn't finish the whole 'bally' lot.

Outside its own county, I think you'll agree,
Few people had heard of the name Knocknagree,
Not to mention Bohola, Abbeydorney, and Doon,
Oola and Lorrha, Tullaroan and Kilcloone.

The Kills, as expected, are well to the fore,
Represented by -dimo, -awalla and -more,
-adysart, -avullen, -moganny and -car
-macthomas, -inure, and -eentierna afar.

Unless he were quite the most credulous fella,
He wouldn't believe there's a place called Gneeveguilla;
And what of Feohanagh, Kilmuckridge, Corduff,
Moynalty and Emly, Man-o'-War, Schull or Bruff?

Pity the Clerk, you can bet it with joy
That he closes the office in Abbeyknockmoy.
Or in odd Tourmakeady, the writing of which
Will produce writer's cramp, as did Cahirconlish.

What a prospect to face, coming straight from the 'school,'
When ordered 'Go quickly and peg Abbeyschrule!'
Still his lot could be worse, it might be Ballyduff,
And there's Nobber, Cong, Bekan, Bodyke and Cloughduv.

There's Ticknock, and Tinryland, Rahan, Ballymoe,
Ardfert, Burt, Clontibret, Looscaun and Raphoe.
And in case you should doubt it, there's proof here all right
That they really exist – they have all got 'the light.'



October 28th 1846

400 labourers quit work on 'the Banagher line of the road' and marched through the village of Lorrha to Ballyquirke Castle the residence of Colonel Henry Dwyer J.P.

The labourers complained that that their wages had been reduced from 10d to 8d per day and they had come 'to represent their case to him'.

Not satisfied with his reply, they returned to Lorrha and drove seventy two sheep from a field belonging to Richard Hemsworth of Abbeyville House. They warned the local police who attempted to intervene, that 'they would suffer themselves to be shot as they might aswell die there on the road as in their houses'.

Dr. James W. Walsh and Fr. Martin Cleary, CC, persuaded the mob to return the sheep to the field, thereby averting a bloody confrontation with the police.