

Hidden Gems and Forgotten People

LECALE AND DOWNE HISTORICAL SOCIETY



JOE MCGRATH| Country engineer

Joe McGrath was born in Belfast around the turn of the twentieth century and grew up in the Lecale, in Ballykinler and Ballycruttle before inheriting his uncle's farm in Ballywooden where he lived until he retired in 1960.

Joe was an untrained mechanical genius, who figured things out from first principles and who had an amazing capacity to adapt old machinery and bits and pieces to new and innovative uses. He started by building his own bicycle and building crystal set wireless sets that the neighbours shared for important sporting event. He adapted an old 14 hp Rover car to power a mechanical hare for as greyhound track in one of his fields. He later modified the system to drive a circular track that had greyhound owners coming from all over to the 'Ballywooden Trials'. Having seen one of the first tractors in use in the country he further adapted the Rover, using home made tools to modify the chassis. He modified a single furrow horse plough and fitted it to the tractor with a self-made lifting/lowering coupling. He found a way of altering the gear ratio to suit the 'tractor' speed. Later he used lorry engines to power a variety of implements on the tractor.

He invented a mechanism to vaporise paraffin to replace expensive petrol, had it fabricated and sold many kits to farmers. He made his own wind-powered generator and modified it to switch off in high winds. He modified a potato riddler to power a water pump. He learned to divine water and worked out how to estimate the likely depth of the well. He was so successful at this that the Department of Agriculture accepted his findings on farms and his explorations took him all over County Down. When he retired he went to live in Liverpool, where his wife came from.

Joe McGrath is still remembered with affection as a quiet, honest contented man, with a gift for seeing and solving problems, an ability to improvise and a skilful pair of hands to translate his ideas into reality.

Acknowledgement: Willie Crea and Jim Sharvin, Lecale Miscellany No 14, 1996