

MAYNOOTH LOCAL HISTORY GROUP



**THE MAYNOOTH TRADITIONAL 3-WALL HANDBALL ALLEY**

Tucked away near Logic House at St. Patrick's College, Maynooth are two perfect surviving examples of an Irish Architectural Institution namely the 3-Wall Handball Alley and constructed in about the 1920's from mass concrete. They are back-to-back measuring 60ft x 30ft with a 30ft high back wall. This type of Handball Alley was once a regular feature of the Irish Landscape. Attitudes towards Handball Alleys have changed in recent years with the decline in the status of the sport as a focal point of Rural Community life resulting, in many instances, in their demolition; elsewhere Handball Alleys have been adapted as animal pens, garages or dumping grounds. Handball is now primarily an indoor sport. Nevertheless, the Handball Alley continues to be regarded as an important vernacular building form unique to Ireland and being described by one commentator as follows: *"the handball alley has an inherent architectural, sculptural, and aesthetic beauty, possessing a striking form unarticulated or adorned in any architectural sense."* As stated, it was significant in the cultural and political life of the surrounding Community and for the most part it was built by voluntary local labour on Community land. Throughout its history playing Handball was associated with large, often day-long gatherings; people waiting for a game, spectators, the holding of hiring fairs, traditional bonfires and as a social setting for young people, well removed from the local Parish Hall. Political discussion activity and drilling had been associated with Handball Alleys from pre 1978 onwards.

The Maynooth examples have been described as follows: *"This pair of Ball Alleys, which is now disused, is an attractive feature in the grounds of St. Patrick's College. It is one of a pair of handball alleys in the grounds, with another example to the northwest. Once a common sight across the country many of these structures have subsequently been demolished, which means that the example at Maynooth is an important and increasingly rare survival. Of considerable social and cultural importance, having been promoted as part of the cultural nation - building of the early Irish Republic, the handball alley is also of vernacular interest, being a building type that is indigenous to the country. The construction of the building using mass-concrete is also of some technical/engineering merit."*

From the 1880's to the 1970's handball remained a popular sport in military and religious institutions with most Barracks, Fire Stations, Garda Siochana Stations, Hospitals, Schools and Seminaries typically boasting multiple Alleys. These tended to be built back-to-back, side-by-side or in rows.

The first GAA Handball Championships were held in 1923 that coincided with the construction of purpose-built handball alleys across the country during the preceding 30 years.

Examples such as Maynooth are unique to Ireland and as iconic as the Irish Round Tower and the Irish Spirit-Store.