

# Honouring the Women of the Knee

• An Bhean Ghlúin exhibition recounts the history of midwifery in Galway



**A**LMOST 40 years after the late broadcaster Jim Fahy brought the story of rural midwives to a national audience, a historian in Skehana has curated a wider exhibition in honour of those who helped birth generations of Galway people over the past 100 years.

Emma Laffey is a health care assistant in Portiuncula Hospital and has a long love of history and heritage. As a member of Skehana and District Heritage Group, she has spent the past year gathering interviews, photographs, documentation and video that has culminated in the An Bhean Ghlúin - Woman of the Knee project.

The exhibition will be launched in Portiuncula Hospital as part of Heritage Week and Emma is thrilled to be able to share her research with a wider audience.

"I've always loved heritage and history and my children's great-great-grandmother was a nurse who served during the War of Independence; so, I've always been keen to know more," she said.



**MARY Kate Jennings (née Connell) from Ahascragh.**

**THE bag of midwife Mary Kate Jennings, née Connell from Ahascragh, who worked in London and Ballinasloe.**  
PHOTOS: RAY RYAN.



"I suppose, given where I work, I'd also been interested in the history of midwifery and had heard stories of the Handywomen who weren't qualified in midwifery but would have helped women deliver their babies at home.

"The Midwives Act was introduced in 1918 which meant midwives were supposed to have qualifications to carry out their duties but many of these Handywomen would have carried on."

Emma put out a call on social media for anyone with information on the Handywomen or community midwives down through the years and she was contacted by several people, including the Jennings family, whose mother Mary Kate, née Connell from Ahascragh, was a community midwife in Ballinasloe for over 20 years.

"Mary Kate was orphaned at 17 and travelled to London to train as a nurse and midwife, where she survived a bombing in the war that left her in hospital for two months with shrapnel injuries to her shoulder," said

Emma.

"She drove an ambulance over there and worked across several hospitals before returning to Ireland in the 1950s when Community Midwifery posts were advertised. When I contacted her family they were delighted to share her midwife's bag, which has all her equipment and uniform as well as her documentation and photographs from her time in England.

"Her children agreed to be interviewed where they shared the stories Mary Kate had shared with them as children, although they never knew what was in her bag until after she passed away in 2013 as they were warned not to go near it when they were younger."

Emma had another bit of good fortune when a niece of Bina Kelly, a midwife of over 70 years, contacted her to say she had a recording of an interview given to the late RTE broadcaster Jim Fahy dating back to 1983.

Jim had interviewed Bina for a documentary, '80 years of home births in rural Galway', where the 81-year-old recalled her time

caring for expectant mothers and of the many miles she covered on her bicycle visiting her patients.

"Bina's niece Kate Noone was so generous in giving me a copy of the interview and it was incredible to hear Bina's account of what life was like," she said.

"The local children used to believe that Bina had the babies in her bag and at one stage it went missing with the Gardaí called to track it down."

Speaking to Jim Fahy, Bina described her life as a vocation and said she enjoyed it immensely.

"I was responsible for the women's safety and their lives and it was heavenly to witness that joy that a new life brings to a home," she said.

Emma has gathered interviews with patients of Bina as well as Ma Kilcommmins, a Handywoman, whose grandnephew Gerry Lally from Kilbeg also shared his memories.

"The Handywomen were more trusted than the midwives as they were local women in the community, despite their lack of official qualifications. Back then,