

Fleadh People

The man with the Fleadh plan: Mícheál Ó Riabhaigh

The idea to bring the Fleadh to Ennis was formed six years ago over a cup of coffee in the Old Ground. Chairman Mícheál Ó Riabhaigh talks to Stuart Holly about how it came to fruition and what's in store for the town this August.

MUSICIAN Mícheál Ó Riabhaigh was in the Old Ground in Ennis drinking a cup of coffee with a group of friends when the lightbulb first switched on — 'let's bring the Fleadh to Ennis'.

Fleadh Cheoil Na hÉireann makes its long-anticipated return to Ennis this summer for a third time after a 39-year wait. It's a homecoming of sorts, as Ennis is the town which put the world-renowned festival on the map in 1956. Its humble beginnings in Mullingar in '51 saw 300 people attend. When the music came to Ennis, Mícheál explains, it was a 'watershed' for the festival with thousands following.

However bringing the festival — along with 400,000 people — to Clare this August has proved no simple task. The Fleadh committee made four failed bids before the dream became a reality.

Now in his position of Fleadh Chairperson, Mícheál Ó Riabhaigh tells *The Clare People* about the six years of blood, sweat and tears it took to bring the Fleadh home.

"I remember the morning very distinctly — it was the Sunday morning of Fleadh Nua 2010," says Mícheál who has been involved in organising Ennis's Fleadh Nua since 2007.

"There was Rory Casey, Frank Whelan, myself, Pat Liddy. We went over the Old Ground for a cup of coffee and this is really where the question first was asked — that's where the lightbulb switched on and we said, 'yeah we should give this consideration'.

Mícheál met with local politicians and the Clare County Council in the coming months before sending a formal notification to Comhaltas that September. The group travelled to Cavan to attend that year's Fleadh before planning began in earnest.

"We put together a proposal and really set out our case for Ennis to host the Fleadh," explains Mícheál.

"We were totally committed to it — we had the tradition in Clare. We had the last Fleadh in 1977 and we wanted to be part of it now again and we felt that we could offer a very, very good cultural experience and traditional

experience to anyone who came to a Fleadh in Ennis."

It was something that Mícheál knew all too well having attended the Fleadh in Ennis as a younger man in 1977. Having grown up in Cork, his first trip to the Banner was made with his Uilleann pipes under his arm and a tent on his back.

"I came up for the Fleadh myself from Cork and the town was absolutely jammed. Back then there were no regulations relating to festivals — health and safety, the term was never used."

Having enjoyed his experiences in Clare so much that year, Mícheál kept returning for the Fleadh Nua every year until 1980 and he made the permanent move with his wife Marie in 1991 where they raised two children.

Fast forward to today, he's getting all the preparations in order in co-operation with 20-plus sub-committees. To get to this point, however, the committee faced four failed bids before Ennis was finally awarded the Fleadh by Comhaltas.

"There was almost this sort of feeling that the Fleadh was coming home to Clare, that we were almost entitled to it because Clare is such a significant county in traditional music terms but the reality was it took a lot of work and a lot of effort to bring it back to Clare.

"We only got it on our fifth attempt and the failed bids were disappointing for people ... when you come back without it it's very difficult to go into Clare FM and explain that you don't have it.

Looking ahead to August 14 when the throngs of revellers will assemble with their bodhrans, fiddles and flute, Mícheál says the people of Clare can look forward to 'planned mayhem' and an incredible family event — while locals can all expect to benefit from the €38m windfall in some small way.

"The streets will be very busy — we hope to have lots of people on the streets, we'll have a gig rig in Abbey Street Car Park which is free entry. We'll have a second gig rig in the market area," said Mícheál, adding with a smile, "it will be planned mayhem".



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Chairman of Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann Inis 2016, Mícheál Ó Riabhaigh, second from left, at the announcement of Shannon Airport as principal sponsors of the event last week. David Grimmins