

The Forestry Commissions Dublin Bothy in the 1950,s.

The Dublin Bothy was not as the name suggests, situated in the South of Ireland, it was in Ardross Forest the old North Scotland Cons. administered from Inverness with a District Office in Dingwall. Ardross was a forest unit in its own right in the 1950,s complete with Head Forester, Forester, Clerkess and squad of men.

The Dublin Bothy was situated up the Glen beyond the office which was at Mid Ardross and based on an old school and schoolhouse long since closed. The Dublin Bothy was situated near the church and close to Ardross Castle. The name is said to have originated from the fact that it was originally a bothy for the navvies who built Ardross Castle many of whom were from Dublin.

I do not know when it became an F.C. bothy but my experience of it related to when in Jan. 1957 I was posted as a young Assistant Forester from Bush Nursery to Research N.E. Scot. who had an office at Mid Ardross (The usual 8-6ft. Creosoted Shed with forester wood burning stove and Tilley Lamp). I was to make my appearance there on 03-01-1957. I had a car in Edinburgh, at Bush it was so snowy that the A9 was completely blocked. I made the journey by train and was met by the late Geoff Bartlett when I arrived there was no sign of him, it was snowing heavily and blowing horizontally, eventually a Landrover appeared in the blizzard. Geoff said "Getting lodgings in Ardross is difficult so I have booked you into Dublin". I looked at him and wondered where this hotel was situated and why that name. He explained that it was a F.C. Bothy and although it was beyond his house he would drive me there !!!.

We arrived at the bothy after 6pm having been on the train all day. I was introduced to " Wattie" the cook who said. "I kept a bite of dinner for you. I thought you might be hungry after being on the train all day". Dinner amounted to a plate of Broth and some frizzled potato offering on a plate. I wondered when the next course was coming, to which he replied the " lads dinna tak a pudding". You could mak yoursel a mug o tea and if you are still hungry you could mak a slice of toast. I asked what time breakfast was ?." The lads dinna tak a cooked breakfast because it ower dear" I said "I like a cooked breakfast" to which he asked "What day is it" "I said Monday to which he replied" I couldna mak a cooked breakfast till Sunday as the butchers van disna come till Saturday" I enquired about the provision of packed lunch. He said" ye can hae four slices o bread, the same as the rest, put on it what you like, there is either marmalade or jam".

I went to work next day and said as we progressed to the Black Isle "Stop at the first shop you see" That was my opportunity to buy a pound of bacon and a dozen eggs, thinking that it would make good breakfasts for a while. Most of the inmates at the bothy started work at 7-30am, as a non-industrial, my starting time was 8-00am, so

on day two, I was up in the morning looking forward to this cooked breakfast. Here they were munching their way through my bacon and eggs. Wattie emerged and said.

I kept an egg and a puckle bacon back for you". One of the inmates said it was a good idea, breakfast before going out to work on a cold frosty morning, so that changed the eating habits.

The next thing I discovered was that when the butchers van came on Saturday this was another big occasion. He sold Wattie the biggest lump of boiling beef on the van with the amount of string holding it together, equal to the amount of string in the meat!!!, this was the start of its long career.

On Sunday it cooked all day on this Ex Army cooking stove which consumed 1cwt of coal per day. On Monday the meat was carefully hauled out and diced vegetables put in, these carefully gathered with a spoon with holes in it and placed in the plates, a little stock added, so Monday Scotch Broth. On Tuesday a handful of dried peas were added and carefully retrieved with the now famous spoon, so Tuesday Pea soup.

On Wed. the left over tatties were added and stirred in, no need for the famous spoon Wednesday Potato Soup. Thurs. a little water was added The inmates called allsorts soup. On Friday more water was added, they called it Siren Soup as it was all clear, this ended the career of the soup. No soup on Saturday. The Beef itself was Boiled Beef Monday, cold Beef Tuesday, Minced Beef Wednesday to end its career. We once had a variation to this diet, an enterprising Digger driver scooped up a salmon with the bucket of his digger whilst obtaining gravel from the river, on another occasion a deer which had been maimed in a traffic accident ended up in the cooking pot. These were the rare delicacies which appeared on the menu. The long history of the soup was perhaps OK in the depths of winter, but was dubious when warmer temperatures came on a flimsy building with a tin roof, so if it was of dubious vintage by Wednesday, one of the inmates volunteered to go to the kitchen and pour the remnants down the drain. On Sat at lunchtime when the meal was finished the only thing on the pantry shelf was the salt and pepper pots half empty, everything else had been devoured, some liked tomato ketchup sandwiches.

The billing system was very complicated, there was a basic charge of 15/shillings (75p) which entitled you to the shelter of a tin roof a bed with sheets and 2 Ex Army blankets, in fairness, if you got up in time on a Saturday and presented your sheets to Wattie before 9am you were formally presented with a pair of freshly laundered sheets. Wattie paid all the food bills and entered costs in a book, divided the total bill by the number of bothy inmates nights and presented it on a Thursday night after boys had been paid. When Wattie marched in with his books after the meal on a Thursday night, if he was smiling that meant it was cheap, if he was dour it meant costs had gone through the roof. The lowest I remember was 2/7halfpenny per day around 13p in todays money, on one occasion it rose to 5/3d a day and there was nearly a riot. Wattie explained to the regular inmates that he bought more stuff because the road squad were in and on subsistence 15/- or 75p in todays money, but the cost would be much lower the following week after the road squad had departed as he had squirreled away some of the additional purchases. Incidentally 2/7halfpenny was the price of a packet of 10 fags at that time.

There was another charge for newspapers. Alex Mc Leman the H.F. obtained the papers and calculated the charges. I do not know how he arrived at them but remember being accosted in the middle of the High Street on a Saturday morning.

3 Dublin

He was on the way to pay the papers and needed my fee of tuppence to pay the paper bill. Traffic drove merrily past whilst I fumbled in my pocket for the necessary coins. The inmates claimed on one occasion that the papers had been read when they arrived at the bothy, they even claimed there was fingerprint on page 3 of one of the well known tabloids which boosted it sales by the pictures on that page!!!

This opening chapter deals mainly about the food and the accounting side, there will be further chapters, the life and social side of it and a final chapter on the closure of it whilst I was an inmate.

Scroll down for next chapter

The Forestry Commissions Dublin Bothy in the 1950,s

Part II The Basic Bothy Accommodation and way. of Life.

Part I gave details of J.C.Keenleysides arrival there as a young member of the forester grades in January 1957.

Part II describes the accommodation and the way of life in the bothy.

The structure was a wooden building with a corrugated iron roof. The walls rough sawn timber with laths on the outside at the joins of the boards. Creosoted liberally annually to preserve the wood and ensure that in the event of a fire it would burn well. The corrugated iron on the roof used to make noises in summer as it expanded, similar noises in winter on frosty nights as it contracted. A general rattle on windy nights as the wind discovered where the loose sheets were.

Internally there was the following accommodation.

A Kitchen with this huge Ex Army cooking stove which consumed copious amounts of coal, to do minimum amounts of cooking and water heating. The main function seemed to be to keep Wattie the cook warm who wore light clothes Summer and Winter whatever the weather and only ventured out on both days of Summer up there.

There was a Dining room with basic facilities. Folding Ex Army Tables with bare board surfaces occasionally scrubbed. There were long wooden folding forms which assumed that everyone was the same dimensions. When the road squad were in it was tactical not to sit on the same side of the table as the road roller driver as one had great difficulty reaching ones food on the table, it seemed to be a qualification for that job that one must be round and portly to add weight to the roller and fill that position. One comforting thing was a fire extinguisher on the wall, placed prominently and checked regularly. I do not remember any form of heating in the dining room, I do remember ones breath being visible for a yard in front of them at breakfast time on winter mornings.

The dormitory was an open room with bare boards on the floor with 16 beds up each side. The beds were single narrow and uncomfortable of Ex Army origin.

The only private furniture was a small single wardrobe with a shelf at the top. There was a hasp on the door to which one could attach a small padlock, which would deter an honest thief for 2 minutes at least. Suitable padlocks were available price 6d (2:5p) from Woolworths. There were two Ex Army stoves in this room to which the F.C. supplied low grade wet pine firewood. The inmates had to light these stoves after returning from work in the hope that there would be some sign of heat by the time they had eaten their meal, which took a maximum of 10 minutes. They were more likely to return from the dining room to find them out, emitting steam from the wet logs or creosote fumes if someone had added creosote to their recipe for success in lighting the stoves. Often when the road squad were in diesel fumes emitted from the stoves as cotton waste soaked in diesel was part of their recipe for success. Some bright sparks used methylated spirit supplied for lighting the Tilley lamps to get a quick response, others drank the meth. to improve their personal heating system. The authorities rumbled to this one. Wattie was in Charge of the methylated spirit and only issued two little pads soaked in the spirit which clipped on to the vapouriser of the lamp when lit and usually had the desired effect of getting the lamps going. The

two Tilley lamps were the only source of light and had to be carried from dormitory to Dining room, to Wash Room and to Toilets. Some of the inmates preferred to contemplate in the dark.

One of my hobbies at the time was making Marquetry pictures but the level of light was not sufficient to ensure the accuracy required in cutting the veneers to the required standard, sometimes the light was obscured by fumes from the stove and on rare occasions by a heat haze from the tin chimneys. I was usually later than the others in returning from work so they decreed that my chore was to clear the ashes from the stoves which I did religiously before going to work each morning, on one occasion I had been working in the far North all week and arrived "home" ? on Friday night and found that there were so many ashes on the concrete hearths of the two stoves that I had to take a wheelbarrow in to remove them.

The ablution Block was a lean to add on to the main building, made of corrugated iron and not lined or insulated from the cold or the noises which emitted from the toilet cubicles. Kwik Fit would have done a roaring trade here. Three showers were present in this building. To operate them successfully required a degree in plumbing or in patience to achieve and maintain the correct temperature. A person daring to flush a toilet whilst someone was in the shower would scald the person in the shower and result in a five minute delay until the cylinder refilled with cold water.

In Winter icicles hung from the showers in the morning, that did not matter much as the inmates were not up early enough to enjoy the luxury of a shower before a 7-30am start.

There was no Electricity Radio or Television, some of the wealthy farmers in the glen had black and white Television but if one went to view it one was not sure whether you were viewing a Blizzard on Ben Wyvis or a sand storm in Saudi. This was caused by one of two things poor reception, or the source of energy bring a portable generator, some of the inmates enjoyed visiting friends at week ends and watching the quality of picture as portrayed on the test card. I had a portable radio mains battery but of course there was no power so it was on battery most of the time. The inmates used it when I was not in. On my return it always seemed to be warm. I was not sure whether Wattie had put it on his cooking stove or it had not been switched off since I left. They marvelled at the fact that it had a plug and went without electricity, but never acknowledged the fact that I had to pay for the batteries which were concealed inside.

Everything in the bothy was basic. The accommodation, the food, the firewood and the facilities. There was an element of camaraderie but I was the odd Bod, they could not understand why someone in the forester grades stayed there, neither could I, it was the necessity of being near my work and the lack of accommodation in the area that was my problem. The other problem was to say to a prospective land lady I am currently living in Dublin, this was the modern day equivalent of saying I am DHSS the shutters came down immediately.

On closing this issue the rumour is going round that the bothy is about to be wired for electricity, further details in the next issue.

The Dublin Bothy.
Part III. Recreation.

Part II ended with the a rumour that the bothy was about to be wired for electricity. We open by being able to announce that the electricians have arrived with all the prospects of a brighter future. Sadly this occurs at the same time as a rumour which states that the bothy is about to close. I leave you to make your own judgement on what will happen.

Recreation was very limited in those far off days. There was a dart board on the back of the door in the main room. Fortunately no one ever entered when a daft was in full flight. No darts provided. Inmates had their own sets which they carefully squirreled away when not playing. Some sets had feather flights which were carefully groomed before play, others had paper flights, hand made, carefully folded to ensure accuracy of flight.

The main social occasion was on a Friday night when the Forestry Commission Thames Trader lorry with wooden frame on back covered with a hap (tarpaulin) was authorised to take the inmates, the local workers and a few unauthorised hangers on to the pictures in Invergordon. This was the start of the C/D era for entertainment. Cinema / Darts, Dominoes, Drinks. I do not claim that the 3 Ds. are listed in the correct order of priority. Some would reckon that Drinks came first with Darts or Dominoes an optional extra. The launch time was around 7pm and the return around 10-30pm. Some of the worthies preferred to call at a hostelry and spend the evening there. Others preferred the back row in the cinema and were unable to relate many details of the films viewed on return. When they did return the whole lorry load staggered into the bothy to have their own ceilidh, darts match or consume the remnants of any drinks they had on board. Some evenings when visibility was poor due to wet wood on the stove or poor mantles on the Tilley. Darts contestants were allowed to stand a foot nearer the board so that they could see the bulls eye.

Gradually the locals would trickle away around midnight and the inmates would make tracks for bed.

Life was slower to start on a Saturday, Breakfast a moveable feast, with porridge that looked as if it had been poured from a cement mixer, hand made toast curled up at the edges, like charcoal in the middle and impossible to butter if there was any left

This style of toast was not the latest addition to Watties Cuisine but the necessity of slicing the last loaf purchased a week ago thinly, to enable everyone to get a morsel of the burnt offering.

The other highlight of a Saturday Morning was the issue of clean sheets for beds to those that reported with their dirty ones by 9am. These had been professionally laundered and were clean, white, cool in Summer, very cold in Winter

Lunch on a Sat. was the eating up of scraps and the delight of Tomato ketchup sandwiches. At the Saturday Lunch Wattie made a pronouncement on his budgetary skills over the past week. He reckoned that the only thing that should be left on the pantry shelves should be the salt and pepper pots. on which he made a further announcement. The salt is half empty and the pepper is half full. The subtle difference being That salt was cheap and he could afford another packet, pepper was expensive and if half full it would have to last another week. He failed to realise that usage of condiments were beyond his control, it depended on the dexterity or the Dts. of the inmates. Why stick around for Sat. Lunch?. In those days there were several weeks

when we were blocked in by snow, followed by Spring with the mandatory participation in the fire duty roster. In the event of a fire the inmates were a ready made squad for immediate despatch to the scene of the fire. They did not complain about the few extra pennies this would mean in the next weekly pay packet.

When not involved on duty or blocked in by snow, people disappeared on a Sat. to wherever, by Shanks pony, by cycle or a lift from someone. One or two of the more adventurous made it to see Ross County Football team play in Dingwall, others took the opportunity to have a haircut, some went somewhere to view television as it was a great novelty at that time, they arrived back any time from tea time on Sat. to starting time on Monday Morning.

In the meantime Wattie had stocked up with provisions from the butchers van. The soup had started its career on the Ex army stove and Monday was the start of a new working week. Thus life in the hostel had evolved and revolved on a weekly cycle.

The electricians had completed their wiring task but the supply lines were still marching up the glen. The rumour that the hostel would close was confirmed officially a few days after the wiring was completed but before a unit of electricity had passed through the cables. The closure procedure took some time, full details in the final part IV.

The Dublin Bothy.
Part IV. The Closure.

The Notice of closure was conveyed to the inmates by the Head Forester. He claimed that he had no say in this decision. The Assistant Conservator would come out and inspect the premises, meet the inmates, outline the procedures for the dispersal of the bodies concerned.

One live wire in the hostel commandeered the use of my portable typewriter and made out a fictitious menu for the week. It included items such as Steak, Fresh poached Salmon, Strawberries and Cream. These were all items which had never been seen on the premises. When the Assistant Conservator came to inspect the premises. He read the menu on the wall and was so out of touch with the reality of bothy life thought this was a genuine menu and said to Wattie " My word you have been feeding them very well here" There is a vacancy for a cook in the bothy at FortAugustus. I will recommend that you get the job and he did. Thus Wattie moved very quickly to this elevated position.

Fort Augustus was a large forest with men working on the hill, in the forest., in the nursery, making roads and there was a Research Outstation there of long standing thus there was plenty of work there. Some of Wattie's Mates from Dublin followed him to this new location. A Forestry Worker on Ardrass forest was appointed Cook pro temp. so numbers plummeted. This chap who originated from Orkney said he was kept very busy cooking for the few that remained. When I queried further he said " I am very busy cleaning all the pans. Wattie only cleaned one when needed". I showed my disbelief so he showed me the pan storage room. It contained lots of pans on racks, with green mould lifting off the lids. He said "He was getting them cleaned up for the sale"

The bright wit who had concocted the super menu took the law into his own hands again and produced a list of items for sale in humorous fashion. These included the following:-

Ex Army cooking stove suitable for the owner of a small colliery.
The entire stock of pine wood logs to be sold by the gallon.
Extensive Set of Pans with Self Raising lids.
Etc. Etc.

Numbers dropped to three. The local Assistant Forester took pity on me and offered to give me accommodation so that solved my personal problem and I was Happy Ever After. The other two departed to unknown destinations. The cook pro temp. departed to his Native Orkney Island. The building became a store for fencing wire and rabbit netting. To my knowledge it was never again used for human habitation.

On the site now there is a hamlet of Modern Houses between the original Housing and the Church at the side of the main road.

Ardrass Forest has long since ceased to be a forest unit in its own right. All that remains are the trees growing steadily and waiting for the inevitable day when a giant harvesting machine will gobble them up.

Later on I did get some feed back on Watties success at Fort Augustus. He had managed to cut the weekly budget by half and introduced them to the delicacy of his home made scones. Both items had gone down well so that is the end of the story on the Dublin bothy which almost fifty years later is still clear in my mind.