

ARDS CCE

50TH ANNIVERSARY CONCERT

HOST BRANCH OF FLEADH
CHEOIL NA HÉIREANN



03
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2026
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WATERFRONT
HALL

CONTENTS

PAGE 3: A MESSAGE FROM OUR CHAIRMAN

PAGE 4: HISTORY OF ARDS CCÉ

PAGE 10: ENTERTAINMENT GROUP

PAGE 14: MEET THE COMPERE

PAGE 15: MEET THE PERFORMERS

PAGE 22: ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

PAGE 23: STAY CONNECTED WITH ARDS CCÉ

A MESSAGE FROM OUR CHAIRMAN: NIALL MCCLEAN

As Chairman of Ards CCÉ, and on behalf of the branch, it is my great honour and privilege to welcome you all to our 50th Anniversary Concert, taking place during the celebrations of Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann and the 75th anniversary of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann.

Tonight is a truly special occasion for Ards CCÉ as we celebrate 50 years of music, song, friendship and community. It is a chance to reflect on the incredible journey of our branch, to honour those who laid the foundations, and to celebrate the many people who continue to support and strengthen our traditions.

We are delighted to welcome so many outstanding performers this evening, many of whom have played an important role in the story of Ards CCÉ. They are friends of the branch, past supporters and valued contributors who have shared their music, their talent and their passion with us over many years. Their presence tonight is a wonderful reflection of the friendships and connections that have been created through Comhaltas. The artists you will see tonight represent the depth of talent that exists within our tradition — performers of world-class ability who continue to inspire audiences both at home and around the globe.

As we gather during Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann, it is a moment of great pride for everyone involved with Ards CCÉ. To welcome the Fleadh to our community is a tremendous honour and a fitting celebration of the dedication and commitment of generations of members, volunteers, tutors, musicians and supporters who have helped shape our branch over the past 50 years.

We remember with gratitude our founding members, whose vision and love of Irish culture created the foundations on which Ards CCÉ stands today. From those early beginnings, the branch has grown into a thriving community, and their legacy lives on through every tune played, every song sung and every young musician who continues to learn and share our traditions.

This milestone is not only a celebration of our past, but also a celebration of our future. The hosting of Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann in 2026 and 2027 represents an extraordinary chapter in the story of Ards CCÉ, and one that belongs to everyone who has contributed to our journey. Thank you for joining us for this very special evening. We hope you enjoy the performances, celebrate the music and friendship that bring us together, and share in the pride we feel as we mark 50 years of Ards CCÉ during this historic Fleadh.

Go raibh míle maith agaibh, and enjoy the concert.

–Niall McClean



HISTORY OF ARDS CCÉ

Ards Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann (CCÉ) was founded on 1st July 1976, when eight people gathered in the home of Denis Calvert in Ballygrangee to establish what would become a thriving branch dedicated to preserving and promoting Ireland's traditional music, song and culture.

A founder member of the branch, Denis was the driving force behind bringing Comhaltas to the Ards area. More than any other individual, he championed the vision of establishing a branch that would serve the local community and provide opportunities for musicians of all ages to learn, perform and celebrate their shared heritage.



The late Denis Calvert

Through his strong connections with the Ards Peninsula, and in particular his deep affection for Portaferry, Denis helped shape the identity of the branch in its formative years. His enthusiasm, commitment and leadership ensured that Ards Comhaltas developed strong roots across the peninsula, laying the foundations for the vibrant and successful branch that continues to flourish today.

From the very beginning, Denis Calvert devoted himself to the success of Ards Comhaltas. Over more than 35 years, he served the branch with distinction in numerous roles, including Secretary, Chairman, Fleadh Coordinator, chief fundraiser and regular representative at County Board meetings. His tireless commitment, leadership and vision were instrumental in establishing and developing the branch into one of the most active in the province. Throughout this period, Denis was ably supported by the branch's long-serving Secretary, Jean McMullan, and Treasurer, Noel McQuoid. Together, their dedication, hard work and countless voluntary hours provided the strong foundation on which Ards Comhaltas continued to grow and flourish. Beyond Comhaltas, Denis was a stalwart of the Ards Rhymers from their inception, becoming well known for his portrayal of St Patrick and his dedication to preserving the rich folklore and traditions of the Ards Peninsula.

The branch's first Chairman was Joe Mullan, another passionate advocate for traditional Irish music. Joe played a significant role in nurturing the branch during its early years and remained an active and respected member of the traditional music community throughout his life.

The enthusiasm generated by those early pioneers was evident from the outset. By the time of the branch's second Annual General Meeting, membership had grown from the original eight founding members to 30. Today, almost fifty years later, Ards Comhaltas is proud to have a thriving membership of more than 200, with generations of musicians, singers, dancers and volunteers continuing the vision established by its founders in 1976.

The branch hosted its first County Down Fleadh in Portaferry in 1978, marking the beginning of a proud tradition of organising some of the province's most memorable Fleadhanna.

Christmas 1983 marked the beginning of another enduring chapter in the branch's history with the formation of the Ards Rhymers. Their first performance took place in the Tavern Bar, Carrowdore, launching a journey dedicated to preserving and celebrating the rich folklore, customs and storytelling traditions of the Ards Peninsula. Over the years, the Ards Rhymers have become treasured ambassadors for the area's unique cultural heritage, ensuring these traditions continue to be shared with new generations. Their significant contribution was recognised in 2008 with the publication of a book documenting the history and legacy of the Ards Rhymers.

Through challenging times, the branch continued to grow thanks to the commitment of the volunteers, tutors, parents and members who gave so generously of their time and energy. Among those whose contribution deserves special recognition are Noel and Rosemary Dornan. Although neither came from a musical background, their enthusiasm for Comhaltas and its values made an immeasurable impact on the branch. From the mid-1990s through to the early 2000s, they established and ran music classes in Comber, introducing countless young people and adults to traditional Irish music.

Reflecting on their contribution, former Chairman Donard McClean said:

"Over the years there had always been a feeling that we needed to do more to widen and increase our membership. Along came two amazing people, Noel and Rosemary Dornan, not musicians themselves, who commenced classes in Comber from the mid-1990s to the early 2000s.

What a contribution they made. Young and old joined a series of classes, many of them going on to teach future generations themselves. Sometimes, it was hard to know whether it was the classes or Rosemary and Noel's homemade cakes and buns that drew everyone back each week!"

The original Ards Comhaltas group:
Joe Mullan, Davy Simpson, Noel McQuoid, Jackie Boyce, Sean McGratton, Sam McAughey, Dennis Calvert and Johnny Muir.



A NEW GENERATION OF LEADERSHIP

In 2007, Niall McClean claimed the coveted All-Ireland Senior Fiddle Slow-Air Championship, a landmark achievement in his musical career. At the time, he was working as a peripatetic music teacher in local schools, but his success inspired him to broaden his impact. Recognising the growing appetite for traditional Irish music in the North Down area, Niall was determined to use his experience and achievements to nurture the next generation of musicians and further develop the tradition within the local community.

In 2008, Niall, together with Bronagh Donnelly (now McClean)—a former student of the legendary fiddle player Tommy Peoples—took the reins of Ards Comhaltas. United by a shared passion for traditional Irish music and music education, they set about expanding the branch and creating opportunities for young musicians across North Down and the Ards Peninsula.



Regular classes were established on Saturday mornings at St Columbanus' College, Bangor, and on Wednesday evenings at St Mary's Primary School, Comber. In the early days, class sizes were modest, with just twelve young musicians making up the branch's first Under-12 Fleadh group. Despite its small size, the group made an immediate impact, taking first place at the County Down Fleadh in Castlewellan and marking the beginning of a journey of competition success for the next generation of Ards CCÉ musicians.

From these humble beginnings, the branch flourished. As enrolment continued to grow, Ards CCÉ expanded its programme, welcoming specialist tutors across a wide range of instruments to deliver expert tuition and masterclasses. Today, classes are held in Bangor and Belfast, offering tuition in traditional Irish instruments, specialist workshops and Irish language classes, creating a vibrant centre for learning and cultural enrichment.

In 2012 and 2013, Ards CCÉ hosted the County Down Fleadhanna in Bangor, with the competitions taking place in St Columbanus' College. The Fleadh atmosphere extended throughout the town, with traditional music sessions taking place in local venues and helping to showcase the vibrancy of Irish music in the Bangor and Ards area.



This achievement was further surpassed in 2016 and 2017, when Ards CCÉ hosted the Ulster Fleadh in Bangor for the first time in the branch's history. These landmark festivals welcomed thousands of competitors and visitors from across Ulster, featuring a vibrant programme of competitions, concerts, traditional music sessions and cultural events. The success of these celebrations attracted tens of thousands of attendees and earned the title of "Best Tourist Event 2016" from the local Chamber of Commerce.

A particular highlight was the evening concert programme, with Beoga headlining in 2016 and Lúnasa taking centre stage in 2017, bringing two of Ireland's most celebrated traditional acts to Bangor.

The Ulster Fleadh also reflected the branch's vision of inclusivity, with communities from across the local area invited to take part in and enjoy the celebrations. Through music, song and dance, the festivals created a welcoming atmosphere that brought people together and demonstrated the unifying power of traditional Irish culture.



Ards CCÉ established the Columbanus Folk Festival, which has become a popular fixture in the local cultural calendar. Over the years, the festival has welcomed some of the finest names in Irish traditional music, including Sharon Shannon, Frankie Gavin & De Dannan, the Martin O'Connor Trio, and Dervish, alongside many other acclaimed performers.

Ards musicians performing at the Columbanus Folk Festival in 2022.



Under Niall and Bronagh's leadership, Ards Comhaltas has gone from strength to strength, nurturing hundreds of young musicians and fostering a lifelong appreciation of traditional Irish music and culture. The branch has celebrated outstanding success at County, Ulster and All-Ireland level, with its students achieving numerous championship titles and proudly representing Ards CCÉ on stages across Ireland and beyond. Their commitment to excellence has ensured that the branch continues to thrive, inspiring new generations to learn, perform and carry the tradition forward.

Over recent years, Ards CCÉ have enjoyed outstanding success at Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann, earning All-Ireland titles across several generations. In 2007, Niall McClean was crowned Senior All-Ireland Slow Air Fiddle Champion, while Catherine McGinn claimed the 15-18 Slow Air Fiddle title in the same year. In 2015, Jack Pang added to the branch's achievements by winning the 15-18 Bodhrán competition.

The family's tradition of excellence continues with the next generation. In 2024, Cabhan Keag won the All-Ireland Miscellaneous title on the clarinet, while Seamus McClean, Niall's son, enjoyed remarkable success by becoming a three-time All-Ireland Champion, winning titles on both the uilleann pipes and tin whistle. Seamus continued his impressive run in 2025, securing another All-Ireland title on the uilleann pipes, further cementing the McClean family's proud legacy of musical excellence.

A remarkable achievement for Ards CCÉ came on two occasions when all four of the branch's Grúpaí Cheoil — Under-12, 12-15, 15-18 and Senior — successfully qualified to compete at Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann. This outstanding accomplishment reflects the depth of talent within the branch and the dedication of its musicians and tutors.

As Ards CCÉ continued to grow, the branch expanded its reach into Belfast, establishing classes at St Joseph's College on the Ravenhill Road. This has been a tremendous journey, creating new opportunities for musicians in the city and further strengthening the branch's commitment to making traditional Irish music accessible to all.

The growth of the Belfast classes has been reflected in the achievements of our young musicians, with the branch now proudly entering two 12-15 Grúpaí Cheoil. These groups were named in honour of two hugely influential figures in the history of Ards CCÉ — the Crilly Group, recognising Joe Crilly, and the Calvert Group, honouring Denis Calvert.

CHAIRS OF ARDS CCÉ

JOE MULLAN: 1ST JULY-4TH DECEMBER 1985

DENIS CALVERT: 4TH DECEMBER 1985- 12TH NOVEMBER 1987

DONARD MCCLEAN: 12TH NOVEMBER 1987-27TH NOVEMBER 1988

IAN HULL: 27TH NOVEMBER 1988-9TH DECEMBER 1990

DENIS CALVERT: 9TH DECEMBER 1990-15TH NOVEMBER 1992

GEORGE EGGLETON: 15TH NOVEMBER 1992-27TH NOVEMBER 1994

NOEL DORNAN: 27TH NOVEMBER 1994-11TH JANUARY 1999

DONARD MCCLEAN: 11TH JANUARY 1999-5TH DECEMBER 2004

FERGUS THOMPSON: 5TH DECEMBER 2004-12TH OCTOBER 2014

DAVID LENNON: 12TH OCTOBER 2014-17TH NOVEMBER 2019

MARIE BELL: 17TH NOVEMBER 2019-13TH NOVEMBER 2022

NIALL MCCLEAN: 13TH NOVEMBER 2022-PRESENT



In March 2025, Ards CCÉ was honoured to be named the host branch for Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann 2026, in partnership with Belfast City Council. That historic announcement marked the culmination of a successful bid to bring the world's largest celebration of Irish traditional music, song, dance, language and culture to Belfast. Today, we are proud to welcome visitors, competitors, performers and audiences from across Ireland and around the world as that vision becomes a reality. Hosting an All-Ireland Fleadh is a tremendous honour and a landmark achievement for Ards CCÉ, made possible through the dedication of our members, volunteers, partners and supporters.

When Ards Comhaltas was founded in the 1970s, it began with just eight members who shared a simple but powerful belief: that Irish music and culture should be nurtured, celebrated and passed on to future generations. Those founding members laid the foundations of everything that followed. Through their dedication, they created a branch that would grow into a thriving community of musicians, teachers, performers and volunteers.

It is impossible not to wonder what those eight pioneers would think if they could see what their small gathering became. To know that the branch they started would one day welcome thousands of musicians and visitors from across Ireland and beyond for Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann would surely fill them with immense pride. The journey from those early meetings in the 1970s to hosting an All-Ireland event in 2026 is a testament to the strength of community and the enduring power of our traditions. Every tune played, every song sung and every volunteer hour given has helped build this moment.



We accept this honour with gratitude and excitement, mindful of the legacy entrusted to us by those who came before. Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann 2026 and 2027 will be a celebration of our past, a showcase of our present and an inspiration for the generations who will carry our music and culture forward into the future.

Some members of the Ards CCÉ Committee attending the first meeting of the Fleadh Executive Committee (FEC)

ARDS CCÉ ENTERTAINMENT GROUP- CELTIC STORM

In 2012, Niall and Bronagh formed the Ards CCÉ Entertainment Group, also known as Celtic Storm, with the vision of creating a performance group that would showcase the talent and energy of Ards CCÉ on a wider stage. The success and continued development of the group has been greatly supported by Mervyn McCleery, whose organisation and commitment have been instrumental in creating opportunities for young performers to showcase Irish culture on an international stage. Through his tireless work behind the scenes, Mervyn has helped guide the group to some of the world's most prestigious cultural events and festivals.



Mervyn McCleery

Public Relations Officer
(PRO) for Ards CCÉ and
Manager of Celtic Storm

Over the years, Celtic Storm has represented Ireland at major international celebrations, including St Patrick's Day in New York, the Lorient Interceltic Festival in France, the Interceltic Music Festival in Avilés, festivals in Denmark, Rouen in France, Bath Folk Festival, and many other cultural gatherings throughout Europe. A particularly memorable moment for the group was performing in the historic Crypt of St Columbanus in Bobbio, Italy, a place of great significance in Irish and European heritage, honouring the enduring legacy of St Columbanus.

The connection with Italy remains a special part of Celtic Storm's journey. Each year, our 15-18 group travels to Italy, providing young performers with the opportunity to experience its rich history and culture, build international friendships, and share the traditions of Irish music, song, and dance with new audiences.



Ards CCÉ Entertainment Group playing for the Pope's visit to Ireland in 2018.



Celtic Storm performing in Lorient Interceltic Festival in France.





Ards CCE musicians in New York City.

Ards CCE was honoured to perform as the support act for The Priests during their tour, with performances in Letterkenny, Derry, and Belfast.



15-18 musicians at the Briga Novarese Festival in 2022



Ards musicians pictured with Sharon Shannon at the Copenhagen Irish Festival in 2012.



Celtic Storm performing in the Aviles Interceltic Music Festival.



12-15 musicians celebrating their success at the Down Fleadh.



FROM ÁRAS AN UACHTARÁIN TO THE ROYAL STAGE



Throughout its history, Ards Comhaltas has been honoured to represent the rich musical traditions of County Down on some of Ireland's most prestigious stages.

On St Patrick's Day 2015, a delegation of musicians and dancers from Ards CCÉ travelled to Áras an Uachtaráin to perform for President Michael D. Higgins as part of the national St Patrick's Day celebrations. Showcasing the very best of traditional Irish music, the group proudly represented both their branch and the wider Comhaltas movement, celebrating Ireland's musical heritage at the country's official presidential residence.

More than a decade later, in July 2026, Ards CCÉ was once again afforded the privilege of performing for Ireland's Head of State. On this occasion, an intimate ensemble of musicians was invited to perform for President Catherine Connolly, providing the soundtrack to a special reception that celebrated Irish culture, tradition and community.



Ards CCÉ has had the privilege of performing during two royal visits to Northern Ireland by Their Majesties King Charles III and Queen Camilla, first in 2015 when they visited as HRH The Prince of Wales and The Duchess of Cornwall, and again in 2026 as King and Queen.

These two royal engagements are among the many memorable moments in the history of Ards Comhaltas, highlighting the branch's proud tradition of representing the Ards Peninsula and sharing Irish music on prestigious occasions.

MEET THE COMPERE

Liam Perry is a lifelong educationalist and passionate supporter of cultural and community life. His association with Ards CCÉ began in 2004 when he was appointed Principal of St. Columbanus' College, a role through which he developed a close connection with the branch and its work in promoting Irish traditional music and culture among young people.

After more than four decades dedicated to education, Liam is now retired from teaching, yet his commitment to supporting young people, schools, and educational initiatives remains as strong as ever. Throughout his career, he has been a tireless advocate for the importance of education, community, and cultural identity, recognising the vital role that these play in enriching the lives of individuals and strengthening society.

Liam has always understood the value of providing young people with opportunities to discover their talents, develop confidence, and become active participants in their communities. His belief in the power of culture as a means of bringing people together has been reflected throughout his professional and personal life.

With a strong background in Gaelic games and a deep appreciation for our shared traditions, Liam is proud of his association with Ards CCÉ and with Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann 2026. He continues to be a valued friend and supporter of Ards CCÉ, and his encouragement and commitment to community, education, and culture make him a fitting part of this very special celebration.



MEET THE PERFORMERS



BRENDAN MONAGHAN

County Down singer songwriter Brendan Monaghan performs his material at home and in many different countries around the world. Monaghan has shared the same bill as many top international acts and has written material for several recording artists. He has released nine albums "precious time", "no more words", "look no further", "flicker of hope", "never too late to come home" , "lovers always win", "today is a good day" , "unbroken" and the latest release "light from the light that never ends" on Brambus Records in 2022. His latest release is an EP titled "fare thee well Alberta".

www.brendanmonaghan.com

In the spring of 2023, Monaghan toured in Canada, the USA and Europe to promote his latest album. He has received very enthusiastic reviews for his music as he continues to progress in his art form.

DAVID LENNON

David is a musician, singer, award-winning songwriter and collector. He has been involved in traditional music for over 40 years and released a CD in 2020 reflecting his interest in local song, in particular the songs of the early 19th-century schoolteacher Hugh McWilliams, the Bard of Ballysallagh.

He was Chair of Ards CCÉ during the very successful Ulster Fleadhs held in Bangor in 2016 and 2017. He describes his years with Ards CCÉ as "beyond treasure". Having designed the "Columbanus in a Boat" motif in 2012 for Ards CCÉ, he was honoured to later sing his anthem "White Dove" at the Saint's Crypt in Bobbio while on tour with the branch – a personal highlight.

Having completed 10 years of performing the critically acclaimed Folk on a Boat (described by The Irish Times) during the annual Open House Festival, he continues to co-host the weekly "Handed Down" session at the Courthouse, Bangor.



THE PRIESTS

We are especially honoured to welcome The Priests, the internationally acclaimed classical vocal trio whose remarkable career has touched audiences across the world.



Their landmark debut album earned a Guinness World Record as the fastest-selling debut classical album in UK chart history, topped the Irish charts, achieved multi-platinum sales, and went on to sell millions of copies worldwide. Despite performing on some of the world's greatest stages and achieving international acclaim, they remained steadfast in their vocation, always placing their ministry at the heart of their lives. Their humility, faith, and exceptional musicianship have earned them admiration from audiences across the globe and secured their place as one of Ireland's most beloved vocal ensembles.

Renowned for their rich harmonies and inspiring performances, they became one of Ireland's most celebrated musical acts, sharing a repertoire that blends sacred music, classical favourites, traditional Irish songs, and contemporary pieces.

Following their official retirement from touring in 2025, their appearance with us is particularly special and one that we deeply appreciate. Throughout the years, The Priests have been tremendous friends and supporters of Ards CCÉ, generously encouraging and promoting our young performers. We were privileged to join them as their support act at concerts in Belfast, Derry and Letterkenny—opportunities that created unforgettable memories and inspired many of our musicians.

Their kindness, encouragement and unwavering support have meant a great deal to our branch, and their friendship has become an important part of the Ards CCÉ story.

It is a privilege to welcome The Priests as our special guests and to thank them for the lasting contribution they have made—not only to music, but also to the young people of Ards CCÉ. We are delighted to share this special evening with them.

CAP ON THE WALL

Cap on the Wall are a band from Bangor, County Down, with more than 30 years of experience performing across Ireland the UK and Europe.



Known for their distinctive sound and unique twist on traditional Irish and folk music, the band delivers an energetic and varied set with something for everyone. Their performances blend folk and trad with influences ranging from pop and rock to country and contemporary favourites.

The band features All-Ireland Fiddle Champion Niall McClean alongside father-and-son duo Damian and Jason McCoubrey, who provide vocals, guitar and percussion. The newest member of the group is Niall's son, Seamus McClean, a four-time All-Ireland multi-instrument champion whose exceptional musicianship on the uilleann pipes adds a distinctive and authentic sound to the band's performances. Continuing his remarkable success, Seamus has recently been crowned Ulster Champion and will represent the province this weekend at Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann in Belfast.

Together, they combine outstanding musicianship, rich harmonies and decades of live experience to deliver performances that celebrate the very best of Irish traditional music, captivating audiences of all ages with their energy, warmth and unmistakable passion for the tradition.



EALTA

Highly respected across the NI music scene, these musicians have seized this rare opportunity to pull their musical worlds together to celebrate the Fleadh. For this very special performance, Bronagh McClean, Colleen McCleery, Rachel McCarthy, Jackie Rainey and Emma Dornan blend traditional Irish music with contemporary covers, along with an original piece, to bring you this ultimate girl band experience that is ... Ealta!

THE MCCLEAN FAMILY

For three generations, music has been the heartbeat of the McClean family. Rooted in a deep love of both traditional Irish and classical music, the family has made an outstanding contribution to the musical life of the Ards Peninsula and beyond, passing their passion, talent and dedication from one generation to the next.



At the heart of this remarkable musical legacy are Donard and Christine McClean, whose family of seven – Una, Aileen, Niall, Mary, Brian, Kathleen and Fionnuala – have all been immersed in music from an early age. Today, that legacy continues to flourish through their fourteen grandchildren, ensuring that the McClean family's rich musical tradition remains stronger than ever.

A family of exceptional musicians, many are accomplished multi-instrumentalists, performing with skill and versatility across both traditional Irish and classical genres. Their commitment to excellence has been recognised at the highest level, with several family members achieving All-Ireland success. Niall was crowned All-Ireland Fiddle Slow Air Champion in 2007, while Cabhan claimed All-Ireland honours in the Miscellaneous competition with the clarinet in 2024. Seamus has enjoyed outstanding success as a four-time All-Ireland Champion, reflecting the family's enduring tradition of musical excellence.

Joining the family on stage this evening are Niall's wife, Bronagh, and Mary's husband, Ricky, making this a true family celebration of music. From seasoned All-Ireland champions to the youngest generation of talented performers proudly carrying the tradition forward, each musician brings their own unique voice while honouring the values and heritage that have defined the McClean family for generations.

The McClean family are delighted to perform as part of this evening's celebration and are proud to continue sharing the music that has united their family for decades.



THE MCGINN SISTERS

The McGinn Sisters – Catherine (fiddle), Dearbhla (whistle) and Aoife (harp) – are three sisters from Bangor, Co. Down, who have proudly been part of Ards Comhaltas for over 25 years. Growing up immersed in Irish traditional music, they have been inspired by the friendships, mentors and musicians who have shaped the rich musical heritage of the Ards Peninsula.



All three sisters have enjoyed success at every level of Fleadh Cheoil competition, winning County, Ulster and All-Ireland titles. Catherine won the All-Ireland Senior Fiddle Slow Air title in 2008, Aoife is an Ulster Harp Champion, and Dearbhla has represented Ulster at All-Ireland level on numerous occasions, achieving multiple runner-up honours. All three are also classically trained to Grade 8 standard and hold Diplomas in Irish Traditional Music on their respective instruments. Together, they regularly perform at weddings, concerts and special events, with their greatest enjoyment coming from making music as a family.

Today, Catherine works within the Organisation Development and Learning Team at the Education Authority; Dearbhla is completing a Clinical Psychology Doctorate at Queen's University Belfast; and Aoife is a PhD researcher in Public Law and Regulation based in Lausanne, Switzerland.

Their love of music began with the encouragement of their parents, Colum and Bernadette, whose unwavering support made every lesson, practice and Fleadh possible. They were inspired by many outstanding local musicians, particularly Noel and Rosemary Dornan, and all three sisters grew up playing with the Ards Rhymers alongside their father, Colum, in Portaferry.

The McGinn Sisters are honoured to be part of this special 50th Anniversary Concert, celebrating the generations of musicians, teachers, volunteers and families whose dedication has made Ards Comhaltas the vibrant organisation it is today.



THE REILLY SCHOOL OF IRISH DANCERS

The Reilly School of Irish Dancing is delighted and honoured to be part of Ards CCÉ's 50th Anniversary Concert.

For almost 45 years, the school has enjoyed a close and valued connection with Ards CCÉ, and we are truly grateful for the invitation to share in this very special celebration. Throughout the years, the school has been privileged to perform at many Ards CCÉ events, celebrating our shared love of Irish music, dance and culture.

Founded by Liliás Reilly, the school has proudly nurtured generations of dancers and has produced numerous championship performers, including Ulster and Northern Ireland Champions. We are especially proud that some of these accomplished dancers will be entertaining you this evening alongside the next generation of young performers.

Today, the school is led by Donna Reid and Liliás and assisted by Katie and Olivia who remain committed to fostering a love of Irish dance while encouraging each dancer to achieve their full potential in a welcoming and supportive environment.

This evening's performance features dancers of all ages, from our youngest beginners to our most senior performers, showcasing the energy, grace and distinctive style of Festival Irish Dancing. We would like to extend our sincere thanks to our senior dancer, Olivia Reid, whose creativity and dedication in choreographing and organising this evening's routine have been greatly appreciated.

We are also deeply grateful to our parents and dancers for their continued support, enthusiasm and commitment. It is through their encouragement and dedication that we are able to enjoy wonderful opportunities such as this. The Reilly School of Irish Dancing extends its heartfelt congratulations to Ards CCÉ on this remarkable milestone and wishes the branch every success, happiness and continued prosperity for the next 50 years.

Dancers: Olivia Reid, Sophie Campbell, Annie Daring Arianna McCausland, Carys Cassidy Moore, Tallulah Healy, Cashleen Keag, Ciara McCallion, Mary Cait McClean. Rachel Donaghy, Mia Jordan and Sophia McQuillan.



THE SMYTH SISTERS

Hailing from Newtownards, The Smyth Family are synonymous with Irish dancing throughout the Ards area. For decades, the family has been at the heart of the local Irish dancing community, earning a reputation for excellence and a passion for preserving and promoting Irish dance tradition. This extraordinary family has captivated audiences from local theatres to some of the world's most prestigious stages.

The family is led by Lauren Smyth, who made history as the first female principal dancer from the Festival tradition to join and lead Riverdance, performing around the world for almost a decade. Today, Lauren continues to inspire the next generation as the leader of her own Irish dancing school in Newtownards.

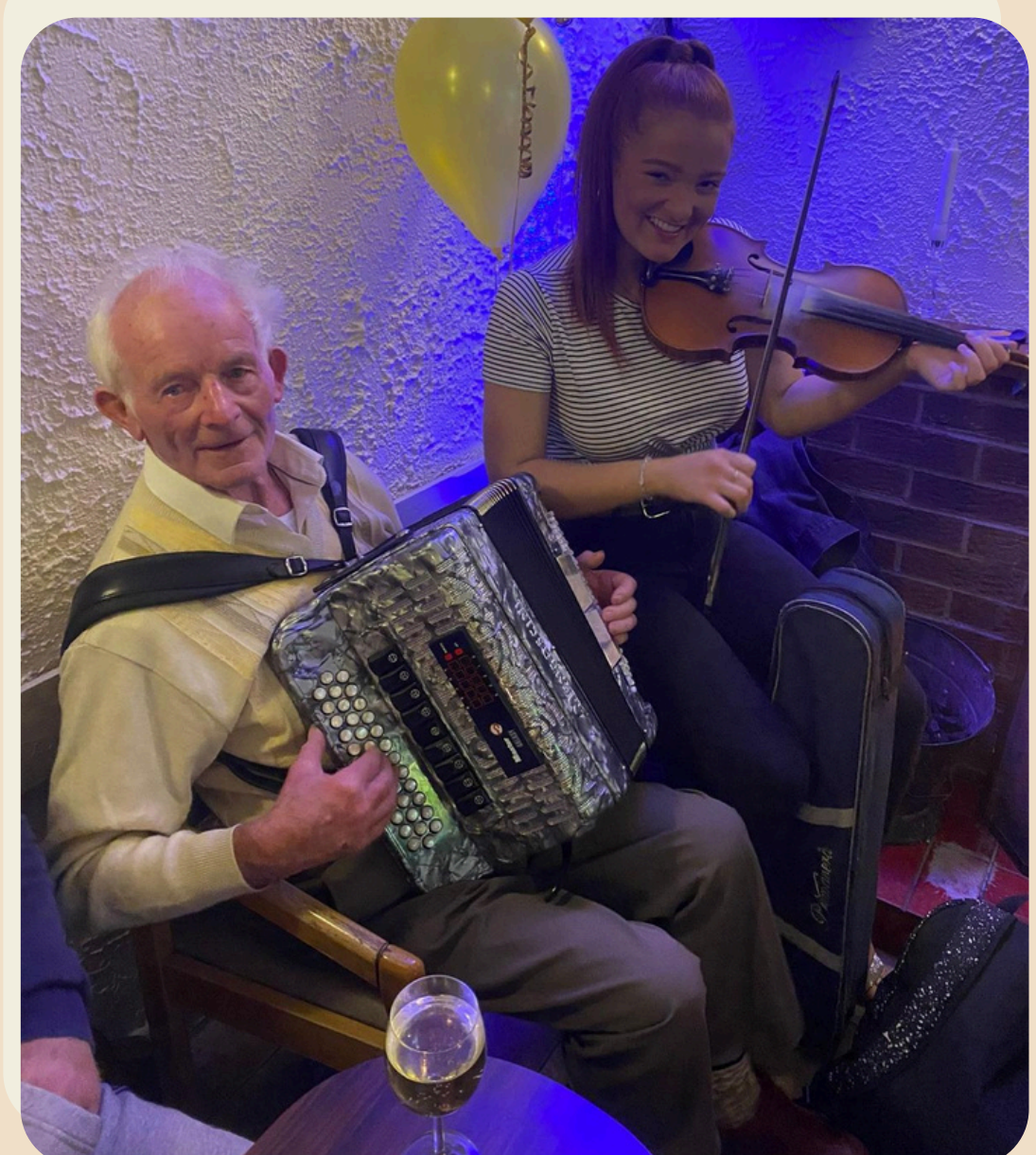
Joining Lauren on stage are her four sisters – Lynsey, Erinne, Kielyn and Karrah – whose exceptional talent and lifelong dedication create a synergy that is truly unique. The sisters are elite performers and former Ulster and Northern Ireland champions who have proudly represented Irish dance on the international stage, including performances at the iconic St Patrick's Day Parade in New York City. Lynsey is a seasoned industry professional who has toured at the very highest level, performing across the globe with Michael Flatley's Lord of the Dance: Feet of Flames. The five Smyth sisters will also be joined on stage by their 11 year old niece, Elle, who is delighted to be dancing here tonight. This family brings an infectious energy that doesn't just entertain – it inspires, motivates and leaves a lasting impression.

The Smyth family would love to thank Ards CCÉ for the opportunity to perform here this evening and Niall for his continuous support. A special thank you extends to everyone who has been a part of their Irish dancing journey, in particular their late Grandfather Joe Crilly, their brother Connor and their Mum, Patsy Crilly, who is proudly sitting in the audience.

The Smyth family's story would not be complete without recognising the lasting influence of their late grandfather, Joe Crilly. An accomplished accordion player, Joe was a member of the renowned Shoresiders Céilí Band and was actively involved in Ards Comhaltas from the branch's formation, playing an instrumental role in fostering traditional Irish music within the local community. His dedication and passion for Irish culture left an enduring mark on Ards CCÉ and inspired countless musicians and dancers over the years.

Joe passed his love of traditional Irish music on to his grandchildren, instilling in them an appreciation not only for Irish dance but also for music. Alongside their achievements as dancers, members of the Smyth family are also accomplished traditional musicians, continuing the rich cultural heritage that Joe so proudly championed.

His legacy lives on through the Crilly Group, named in his honour. This talented group of young musicians, aged 12–15, now proudly represents Ards Comhaltas at Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann in the Grúpa Cheoil competition— a fitting tribute to a man whose vision, musicianship and commitment helped shape the branch from its earliest days.



The late Joe Crilly with his granddaughter, Karrah Smyth.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



A very special word of thanks goes to Belfast City Council, and in particular to Chief Executive, John Walsh, for his outstanding support and encouragement of this event. His commitment to promoting arts, culture, and community has been greatly appreciated.



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Finally, to our students—past and present—thank you for your enthusiasm, commitment, and friendship. You are the heart of our branch, and it is your love of Irish music, song, dance, and culture that continues to inspire all that we do.

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