



History of the Irish Railway Record Society

“How we began” by Kevin A Murray

In those early years when the railway was a wonderful new invention, there were, we may be sure, many observers who took note of what they saw of the material equipment and the daily operations of the novel and improving transport mode, and who may even have recorded their information for exchange with friends of like thinking. As railway lines became more commonly to be seen, so also would increase the number of observers, and these must have been privileged to see some things well worthy of being noted.

In the years before World War I, a small group in Ireland began circulating a notebook to contain some record of what the members saw. The booklet was sent about by post according to a set list - the idea was like what has been done by many such small sets of friends. But in 1914 War scattered the group, and the notebooks (by now two) ceased to circulate. In the *Railway Magazine* a few of us, barely known to each other, from time to time provided items of Irish interest, and when the late **Robin Clements**, having come across the original notebooks, he was able to use the *Railway Magazine* as a medium to suggest to the others the circulating of a similar record of what they might see.



Kevin A Murray (1906 - 1999), founding IRRS member and former editor for the Old Dublin Society.

By vigorous work, **Robin Clements got things going in 1938**, and we put together a quite fair selection of notes on railway happenings in Ireland. Then, I offered to give each member of the group a permanent copy of our observations, by receiving at my home their letters of observations, editing and typing the matter, and by a duplicator producing copies which I posted to every member. They were exciting times, just after the great Great Southern Railway amalgamation in 1925 - and we put together a good deal of information, despite the sad quality of my typewriter and my typing, and the state of the ancient duplicating machine available.

But, as often happens, it soon became left to a few to supply most of what I printed, and we were forced to suspend our Bulletins. But **Harold Fayle**, a name well-known to railway historians, thought the loss was a pity, and began another form of bulletin - typed by him, and a few copies made and circulated, the copies being preserved by certain members for future use if required. Then came World War II, and Fayle's good work had to cease its passing from his Bournemouth home to Ireland - wartime censorship would not tolerate the movement of such information! It was a strange situation - information about Irish railway doings and history, confined solely to outside-Ireland readers!

At this point, when the War at length ended, I came more fully into the story. Among the most

important of the Irish historical societies is the **Old Dublin Society**, set up in 1934. I joined it in 1937, and soon found myself a member of Committee and Honorary Editor of its publication, the **Dublin Historical Record**. My part in the management of the Old Dublin Society gave me insight to the business of running a society whose members met regularly to hear historical papers read, and discussed, and were thereby maintained in contact with like-minded friends. So, I thought, what about such a society for the study of Irish railway matters? But I could not see my way towards forming such a group - one historical society was enough to be concerned with so actively.

Only around the corner was the right man - **John Macartney Robbins**. Recently retired, he was now living in Dublin, and called on me to renew our former acquaintance. In our chat, I mentioned my dream of a railway society, and JMR took up the idea at once, even offering to be its first Honorary Secretary. So, when we had told our friends in Dublin of what we proposed to form, we called a meeting and set ourselves as a Committee to establish the Irish Railway Record Society. That was on **24 October 1946, in Hynes's Restaurant in Dame Street in Dublin City**.

Our first regular public meeting was a great success. Thanks to advance publicity in the newspapers (where we had good friends) many turned up whom we had never met before, and who like us were delighted to meet those who thought our railways worthy of attention by outside amateurs.

Some notions we set up as principles to be adhered to. Most of us had already good store of material for composing papers to be read, so that for some time we had no need to pay much attention to British and foreign lines. In those early years we met at monthly intervals, but were able later to have two meetings per month. This was better for all, and established that cohesion which means much to any such group. Hynes' soon became too small for our assemblies, and our Honorary Secretary used his friendship with sundry railway officers to obtain the use of the large tea-rooms of the **CIÉ**

Club, just off O'Connell Street - an excellent location, and with refreshment facilities.



Hynes's Restaurant on Dame Street, Dublin, where the IRRS's first meeting took place in October 1946.

There is no need to set out the subjects of the papers we wrote, read, and discussed; these are all recorded in our Journal, which brings me to the matter of our first and principal publication. Papers read at such a society as ours have a bad way of passing into oblivion, if not at once gathered and preserved. To be truly a Record Society, we would have to get into some form of print. The Committee included as Honorary Editor, Robin Clements, although at first we had little notion of publishing anything until we were able to finance such a necessary function. But in **June 1947 we put forth No. 1 of our Journal** - just a typescript, duplicated, but a valuable collection of information, such as railway events and changes, changes to locomotives, names of new members, and so forth. A fair start, and a credit to our Honorary Editor. But after No. 9 had appeared, our membership had so developed that we could afford something better, and from No. 10 we were in print, and are still.

Not to be omitted is the important fact that our activity and our membership is particularly shown in **Cork (for Munster) and in London, in which cities we have branch Areas**, who hold monthly meetings which are well-attended. Irish people often go far in search of occupation, and quite a number of



An IRRS party pictured on an outing by special CIÉ railcar to the old Waterford 'South' Station on Saturday 4 March 1966.

these have joined the Society; although they may not manage to attend our home functions, they all receive our Journal, and thus maintain a touch with Irish railway events in current times.

During the 1950s, the CIÉ Club was comfortable and handy, but we had no real address; letters from various sources of a variety of railway interest, had to be addressed to and dealt with by various of the Committee. We needed some sort of permanent place for our activities. A fund was set up, and warmly aided, to provide a small building in which we would meet, and store our growing stock of railway material. In **1960**, we rented a basement in **32 Upper Blessington Street**, which after a deal of good and hard work by many members, was transformed into a quite respectable meeting-place, which served us well for some years. Then in **1966**, we crossed the city to **Lower Baggot Street**, another but larger basement, and with facilities much improved, and there we stayed until we moved to the old station at **Drumcondra in Dublin's northern inner-city in 1969**.

We were given, after goodwill negotiations, the use of what was left of the station buildings at Drumcondra. With some work by an outside contractor, the place was given a new roof, and our own labour quickly added more, to provide us with a good meeting place, and room to store most of our archival possessions and our growing library. Here we stayed until, with the re-awakening of the Dublin rail enterprises, there began talk of a re-use of Drumcondra Station. But our railway friends did not wish merely to evict us from Drumcondra, and as freight traffic of the old historic type had ceased, the **Goods Office adjoining Heuston Station** on the west of Dublin was no longer required. An excellent use for the premises was at once found, when we were given possession of the stone building, to make what good use we might of it.

So in 1983, we moved to Heuston Station with gladness, and began transforming the place, on quite satisfactory terms. A removal of partitions gave us a fine meeting room upstairs, with a kitchen, store and separate library. Below, we have shelved and arranged a very big set of rooms for our Archive.

The few who began to meet and hear of our subject were soon much added to, and we discovered what a love of railways was there to be tapped. But we could not have done so much without the aid of professional railway personnel, of all ranks and degrees. Truth to tell, there was not in former times any great eagerness to discuss railway matters with the outsider - and a drawing office was somewhat in the nature of a cloister, for all that the amateur could learn of the doings therein. Lucky was the young fan who had some sort of access. But thanks in the main to **John Macartney Robbins**, we made progress in the regard and liking of professionals, for he was able to speak of what we were about - not intrusion or mischief, but a good regard and appreciation of the railway's usefulness and achievements. We became friends, and the result has been that we have evolved a mutual goodwill which has done very much to assist the parties in many ways.

In recent times, with the making of many changes in the mode of operation of the railway, a vast accumulation of information, gathered during so many years, became ripe for abandonment, and perhaps ritual destruction. Much of great value had already disappeared, but we were able to save a great deal of material of the highest historical value. Drawings, letters, books etc., were gladly handed over to our care, and our Archive is now a regular source of information to a number of



The Society's HQ, past & present; (top) The old Drumcondra Station, where the IRRS was based between 1969 - 1983 and (below) the current premises housing our Library and Archive in the Old Goods Offices, Heuston Station, Dublin.

writers, who wisely pay due attention to the transport aspect of the several places of which they treat. On our **Library Nights** it is pleasant to see various authors, old or young, studying to compose such literary aids to knowledge of our country.

The vast changes which have been taking place in recent years in the railway business have had the natural result of depriving many very old documents and books of any hope of current value, or necessity. But such things have their value as the materials of history, and we have been handed many such objects which, well examined by our members and arranged in due order, are made useful, not only as records of past times and methods, but as serving to clear up many small but irritating problems. Here is another department in which we are glad to be of use to our professional friends. From company sources, then, and also from our membership and other well-wishers, we have now accumulated a very large treasure of literature on our favourite subject, and these comprise the two most important sections of our activities, **our Library and our Archive**.

But we were also, as said, the recipients of many items of manuscript, books and documents, and these required another form of assembling and cataloguing. Many volunteer members have given great labour to the proper arranging of our many manuscript treasures, which also are still continuing to grow in number. It is pleasant to record that our Library and Archive are regularly used by enquirers, and that many of the local histories which have appeared during recent years owe much of their material to our care of manuscript sources. But no Journal, and no Society, can continue to grow and prosper without the goodwill and assistance of its members, as individuals and as a body. These good qualities we have been fortunate to receive for over fifty years.

Thus since 1946, we have brought together as many Irish railfans as care to join us, given them a definite intention, and a means of pursuing it. Railway history in Ireland has come to hold a proper place in the historical range of national knowledge, and we are recognised as the fit custodians of the materials of that subject for study of the past in this country. Our members who have cared to compile the papers we have printed have no doubt enjoyed their labour, and they well serve to encourage others in the happy tasks before them.



IRRS visiting Iarnród Éireann's traincare depot, Portlaoise, 9 May 2014