

South Antrim *Living Memories* Doagh Toome Whitehead



Farms and Farmers

Farming experienced huge changes in the middle decades of the twentieth century and this was reflected in the contributions of many of those interviewed. One of the biggest developments in farming over the lifetime of those interviewed has been the advance of mechanisation. While tractors were used on some farms in the 1930s there was a dramatic increase in the numbers acquired during the Second World War.



Isaac Lindsay working with horses at The Longshot, Doagh

Livestock

One of the most significant innovations in dairy farming in the 1940s was the introduction of automated milking machines, while purpose-built milking parlours began to be erected from the 1950s. Around the same time the Friesian became the principal dairy cow, replacing the Shorthorn. The 1950s witnessed a revolution in the pig industry with the introduction of new breeds.

Crops

Prior to the 1950s the main cereal crop was oats. In some places a little wheat was grown, while barley did not become popular until the late 1950s. Other crops grown included turnips, cabbages and kale. Around Toome the growing of grass for its seed was important. Hay was the main fodder crop, but in the 1950s silage became increasingly important.

Farm workers

The owners of the larger farms employed workmen and labourers. Some of these men specialised in particular tasks, such as working with horses. Farm labouring, according to Robert McConnell, was ‘*hard work, sore work, and nae money*’.



William Mawhinney using a seed fiddle on his farm near Doagh

Every farm had a few pigs and actually in nearly every cottage house in the country the man would have had a sow or maybe two sows and sold the small pigs off.

Billy Robson, Kilbride, Doagh

We started to milk and had a lot of heifers of our own to get started. We put in a milking parlour – we started right off with a milking parlour ... everybody thought we were mad. ... The milking parlour was a great success. They came from miles to see it.

Willie Stevenson, Doagh,
on moving into dairying around 1950

The worry of saving hay long ago shortened people's lives cause you could lose your hay, and if you lost your hay, where were you? ... People don't understand the pressure the farmers were under ... the pressure was intense.

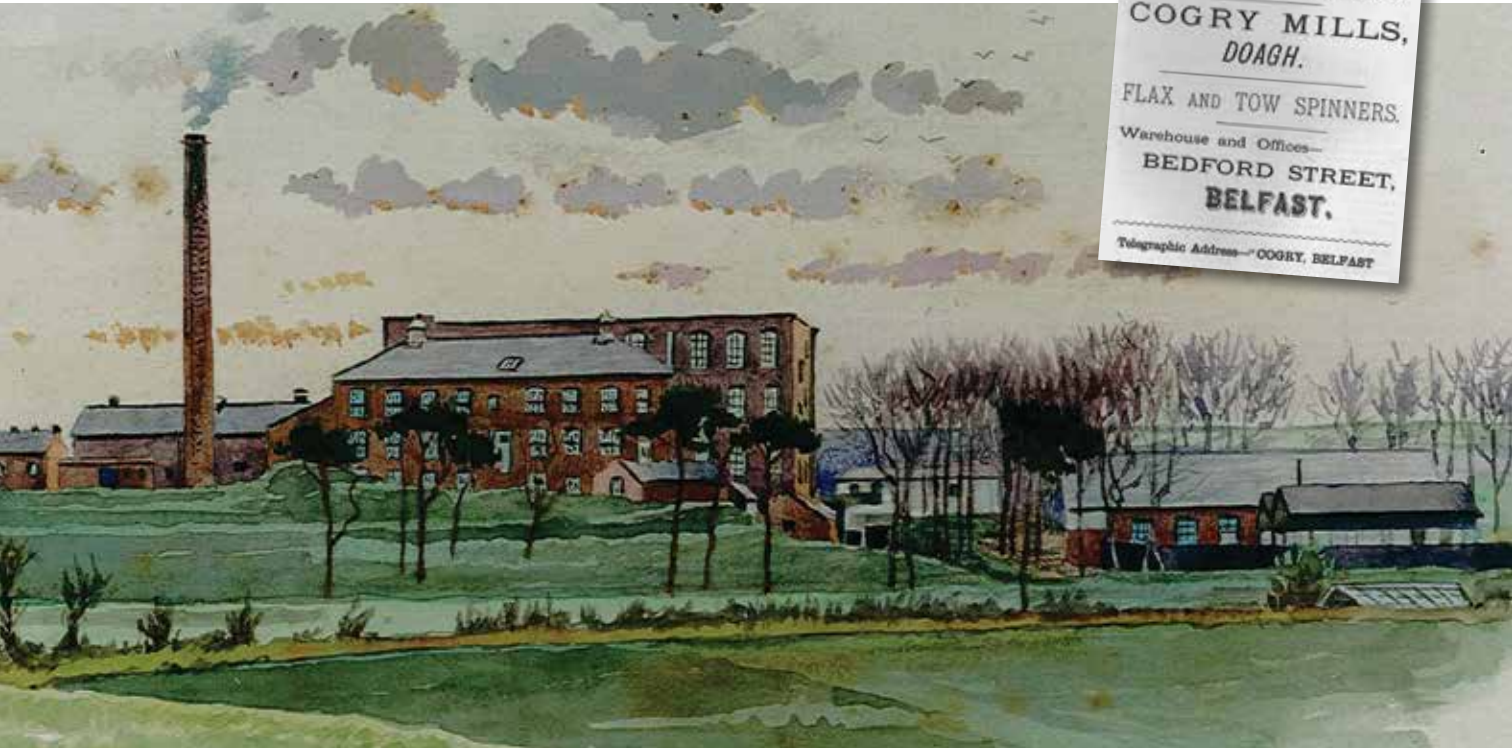
Frankie Dale, Ballydugan, Toome

Well, he had 18 shillings in the week, that's 90 pence ... and you had the old house which wasn't up to much, but was a roof. ... And you got a pint of milk or a taste of milk every day free ... and we got spuds in with theirs in the field, but you had to work them yourself, what done you a year, and you got as many sticks as you wanted to keep the fire going.

Robert McConnell, Doagh
on his father's pay and conditions as a farm labourer at Fourmileburn in the 1930s

Mill Workers and Mills

For people of a certain age, when they think of Doagh they think of the mill – Doagh Flax Spinning Mill. The mill was founded in the mid nineteenth century on the site that had been occupied by John Rowan's foundry. A large new mill, four storeys high, was built on this site c. 1920. In the 1940s synthetic fibres were introduced to the production process. The mill closed in the early 1990s. 'You can't picture it now not being there' reflects Sarah McTrusty who began work in Doagh Mill around 1930.



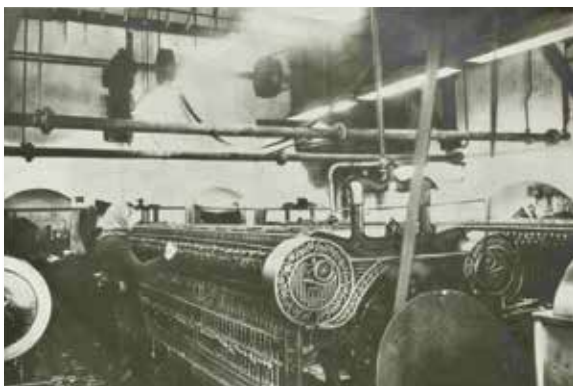
Painting of Doagh Mill

A mile from Doagh stood Cogry Flax Spinning Mill which was established in 1845 and was particularly associated with the McMeekin family. Many of the workers lived in the now demolished Cogry Square. Though Cogry Mill was one of the most progressive mills of its day – its early use of electricity was particularly innovative – it too was the victim of changing markets and closed in the late 1950s. Another local business was the bleachworks at Springvale, just north of Burnside.

These establishments provided considerable employment, especially for women. The experiences of those who worked in these mills varied considerably. For some it was very good, for others less so. In one family Doagh Mill was referred to as the 'old prison'. On the other hand, Sarah McTrusty enjoyed her time in Doagh Mill. She still remembers her first pay: '£1 16s 3d. I had for a fortnight ... and I got keeping the thrupence out of it for my sweets.'

William Andrew Turkington was born in Cogry Square in 1919. He began working in Cogry Mill at the age of 14. He thoroughly enjoyed his time in the mill: '*It definitely was a great place – Cogry Mill and Cogry ... there's no doubt.*' He remembers that this mill was an excellent place to learn various skills, pointing out that if you showed the right aptitude you were taught well. He later worked as a preparing master in Doagh Mill.

Wilma McVittie started working in Cogry Mill in her mid teens. She remembers finishing school on a Friday and started in the mill on the following Monday. Wilma described Cogry Mill as '*homely*'. After briefly working in Cogry Mill, Isabell Cooper started in Springvale in August 1949 when she was 17½, spending most of her working life there. She calls it '*a great place*' where there was a very good relationship between the bosses and employees.



Wet spinning in Cogry Mill c. 1929



Coronation celebration at Doagh Mill
with W. A. Turkington on the far right

Shops and Shopkeepers

Local shops provided most of the necessities that could not be produced by the household itself. As the largest of the three settlements, Whitehead had the biggest range of shops. Dr John Wilson remembered the ‘*great grocery shops*’ in Whitehead, where the service was excellent.



A. Fleming & Co., Whitehead

Grocery shops often offered a delivery service and many of those interviewed indicated that a high proportion of their groceries were delivered to their home. Andersons in Doagh supplied much of the surrounding district with groceries. Robert McConnell remembered the groceries from Andersons being delivered to his home at the Fourmileburn on a ‘*horse and four-wheeler*’.

Gerry McCann’s grocery shop is the oldest business in Toome, having been founded by his father James in 1917. He recalls people arriving in a pony and trap at their shop in Toome for their weekly shopping. In the days before pre-packed food, items such as loose tea and sugar were weighed out, while cheese was cut with a knife by the shopkeeper to whatever size was wanted. He points out that it was frequently the case that groceries were paid for with eggs.

In 1950, Robert Lamont purchased a general store in the centre of Ballycarry. His customers included some families in Whitehead. His son James remembered the care with which his father ran his business and the pride he took in making sure his customers were satisfied. Drawing attention to the reconstructed shops in the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, James comments, ‘*I can identify with those completely because my Dad’s shop was exactly the same.*’

When I used to go and do the grocery shopping Mummy gave me a list and I went to Dan Gillen and you brought a certain amount home. But then on a Saturday you went down and you left your order in and the young boy came up on a bicycle and delivered it to you. I can remember Dan Gillen weighing out tea and sugar and the different smells in the shop. ... Dan Gillen had everything in the shop.

Kathleen McKenna, Whitehead

The grocery van came here once a week and delivered the goods. The shop sent round a man to take your order and you got it in a couple or three days’ time. And then we had two butchers in the week – a butcher would have called on a Wednesday and another on a Friday evening. And then there would have been three bakers in the week – so we were well supplied with foodstuffs.

Derek Lorimer, Holestone, Doagh



Lough Neagh Fishermen

When most people think of Toome they think of the eel fishery. Until the twentieth century, however, fishing in Lough Neagh was primarily focused on pollan, a freshwater whitefish unique to Ireland. By the 1930s fishermen were concentrating more on eels for which they were receiving better prices. Today Lough Neagh is home to the largest commercial eel fishery in Europe.



Mending the nets near Toome

Matt Quinn was born into a family that has fished in Lough Neagh for generations. He grew up in Moortown, Ardboe, on the west side of Lough Neagh, home to the largest community of fishermen around the lough. ‘*We were all brought up on the lough*’, reflects Matt, pointing out that he was one of five sons, all of whom fished. In the early 1940s, when Matt was eleven, his family moved to the northern shore of the lough to an area known as The Three Islands.

Having been out on the water for nearly three-quarters of a century, Matt has an immense knowledge of Lough Neagh and its fish. Despite his experience he is far from complacent about the potential dangers of working on the water.

Eels were caught using lines that were set in the evenings and lifted again early the next morning. After the eels were landed they were collected in a lorry and taken to the fishery in Toome. Ultimately, they were exported to the famous fish market in Billingsgate, London. Today, most of the eels are sent to the Continent. Despite the many changes he has witnessed, Matt remains optimistic for the future of fishing on the lough.

You have to respect the lough.

I had a good interest in it and if any boat along the area was a man short I would have pulled in.

It's a hard life, the fishing, but it's enjoyable too. ... Whenever you got a good catch you were on top of the world.

Matt Quinn, The Three Islands, Toome

The lough was beautiful at that time.

Frankie Dale, Ballydougan, Toome,
on learning to swim in Lough Neagh when he was a boy



Toome Eel Fishery c. 1959

Flax

For hundreds of years flax was one of the main crops grown across much of Ulster and provided the basic ingredient of the province's linen industry. The flax harvest was one of the high points of the summer. Roisin McLernon remembers that 20 or more men could be on their farm to help with harvest. *'It was always a great day for us'*, she recalls.



Removing flax from the lint dam (National Museums Northern Ireland)

Flax was pulled, not cut, and this was a laborious job. There was *'mair work with it than enough'* remembers Mary Moore, while Frankie Dale called it *'backbreaking'*. The pulled flax then had to be tied up into sheaves ready to go into a dam. The water supply to the dam had to be cut off and then the flax was placed in the dam and covered with stones. The dam was then flooded with water to cover the flax. This process was known as retting and what everyone who experienced it remembered was the pungent smell of the retted flax.

The flax remained in the dam for a week to a fortnight. Then it had to be thrown out – this was *'a stinking enough job'*, remembers Graham Andrew. The retted flax was then carted to a field and spread out to dry. Afterwards it was lifted and taken to a scutch mill where the fibre was separated from the woody stems.

In the early to mid twentieth century there were still significant numbers of scutch mills in the County Antrim countryside. Robert McConnell vividly remembered the scutch mill at Fourmileburn and the men who worked in it. He pointed out that scutching was a dangerous job and the scutchers' hands could easily be hurt:

If you looked into a scutch mill, in through the door, there were two of them in there – yin of them roughing and the other finishing the flax. You couldnae have seen them. You talk about health and safety. You couldnae have seen them for stour! Nae masks or nothing. Whenever they came oot that was all clinging on to their beards, their clothes, their eyelashes and everything.



Scutch mill, near Toome (National Museums Northern Ireland)

Horses and Blacksmiths

Horses continued to be used widely for farm work until the 1950s and a man good at working with horses was highly valued. Ploughing was one of the most important activities for which they were used. Horses also pulled carts and farm machinery, such as the ‘tumbling paddy’ which was used in haymaking. Understandably, many horse-men were resistant to the increase in mechanisation on farms in the mid twentieth century.



Isaac Lindsay working with horses at The Longshot

A blacksmith's forge was once a familiar sight in the countryside. Blacksmiths engaged in a range of activities, from making and fitting horseshoes to repairing and adapting farm machinery. Around Doagh the best known was Robert Reid whose blacksmith's shop was near the Methodist church hall.

In the Toome area the McKees were acknowledged as outstanding blacksmiths. ‘*There was only one place to go*’, observed Frankie Dale, who noted that there was hardly a farmer in that country for whom the McKees had not done some work.



They were very intelligent animals, horses. The neighbour next to us ... Andy Greer ... Andy was a bachelor, but he employed an old lady to look after him and he employed a horse-man. The horse-man maybe could have been two field lengths away from the house at lunchtime at 12 o'clock and this lady had a powerful calling voice. She called them and the men never heard her, but the horse snickered, the horse heard her so they knew immediately that it was 12 o'clock. ... The horse was just as keen as them to get in for a feed!

John Cushinan, Derryhollagh, Toome

In our case we were ploughing ground with horses right up until 1945–46 because we happened to have a horse-man at that time who wouldn't drive a tractor, would hardly sit on a tractor and he was an excellent horseman ... He was in the stable every morning at the busy time at 6.30am.

Robert Chesney, Ballynaloney, Toome

Some of them you'd maybe get out again in half an hour and some of them it would be an hour ... and if you got a rough one it maybe took you far longer.

Jim McKee on his father shoeing horses in Toome

He just threw you up on the horse's back and away you went down to the blacksmith, and he lifted you off it, shod the horse and threw you on again, and away you went home.

Graham Andrew, Ballybracken, Doagh, on being sent by his father to the blacksmith in Burnside

Schools and Teachers

If anything divided opinion among the interviewees it was their experience of school. Many indicated their absolute loathing of school, while others recalled their school years as an enjoyable time. For Mary Moore, *'They were happy days, the best days of your life.'* Many of those interviewed, especially the older people, finished their formal education at the age of 14 or 15 and did not go on to further education. A number, however, went on to secondary schools, for a few years at least, while some attended technical colleges and universities.



Pupils at Parkgate School in 1937 with Mr Hall and Mrs Lorimer on either side.

Teachers

Opinions on teachers varied considerably. What usually coloured an interviewee's view of a particular teacher was their use of corporal punishment. *'Sadistic', 'cruel', 'psychopaths', 'severe', 'an auld tinker'* and *'as crabbit as a bag of monkeys'* were some of the words used to describe teachers. On the other hand, some teachers were remembered as *'brilliant', 'great', 'caring'* and *'clever'*.

Cahal Boyd's school days

Cahal Boyd started attending Gortgill School in 1930 when he was 5½. When asked how far he travelled to school he replied, *'About 3½ miles and I walked in my bare feet'*. There was no school uniform – *'you were very lucky if you had a coat'* remembered Cahal. There were 25 children in each classroom. His first teacher was Miss McCarney. *'She was great'*, he recalls. His next teacher, however, was so fearsome that Cahal was the only one from the parish who attended her funeral. Another of his teachers was Master Murray who introduced lessons in dancing. The playground games included tig, skipping and hopscotch, though Cahal also recalled that *'a wheen of the bigger boys played what they called wrestling, but it was pure murder'*. He left school at the age of 14 and then served his time as a joiner. Thinking back on this time, he reflected, *'I got half a crown every Christmas – and I was six years there!'*

Florence Mary McDowell

A teacher who left an indelible impression on the children she taught was Mrs McDowell. Born in Doagh in 1888, Florence Mary McDowell began a long teaching career as a monitor in Cogry School. She later taught in this school and when it closed she transferred to the new school at Kilbride which opened in 1937. In her later years she wrote two books, *Other Days Around Me* and *Roses And Rainbows*, which vividly recaptured everyday life in late Victorian and Edwardian Doagh. She died on 11 March 1976 aged 87. Mrs McDowell was Leith Burgess' first teacher. He remembers her as *'a Miss Marple character'* who was strict, but fair, while Mary Moore said she was *'a lovely old lady and was very kind with the youngsters'*.



Doagh National
School Medal



The former Gortgill School

Childhood fun and leisure

What came across strongly from the interviews is that the children of yesteryear spent far more time outdoors than youngsters today. ‘*It was an outdoor life when you were young*’, recalls Edmund McLarnon. Sport provided a relatively straightforward means of enjoyment. The simplicity of the sporting equipment was reflected in the fact that Cahal Boyd and the Gribbin brothers remembered playing football using a pig’s bladder as a ball.



Painting of Whitehead in the early 1900s

The leisure activities engaged in by the interviewees varied considerably and depended a great deal on where they lived. Residents of Whitehead, for instance, had many more leisure options than those in Toome and Doagh. Home entertainment was simple, but enjoyable with music featuring strongly. Bessie Quinn’s grandfather taught the fiddle and she recalls that ‘*the house was always full of music*’.

In recalling his childhood in Whitehead, Trevor Monteith commented, ‘*The town was buzzing for young people.*’ Hugely popular was the outdoor swimming pond or pool which was opened in 1931. ‘*We all learned to swim in the pool ... everybody went to the swimming pool*’, remembers P. J. O’Donnell.

In the middle decades of the twentieth century there was a flourishing tourism industry in Whitehead. It had long been seen as an attractive place for visitors, but in the 1930s tourism began to take off and in the post-war years it was, according to P. J. O’Donnell, ‘*really booming*’. The major figure in Whitehead’s tourism industry was W. T. Devenny who established Devenny’s Irish Tours.

We were mad about football. Many’s the time we would have gathered up in some field along here, a lot of us. ... What we used to do was to get a bundle of cloth and tie it all up together and play football with it – we hadn’t a ball, but anyhow enjoyed it.

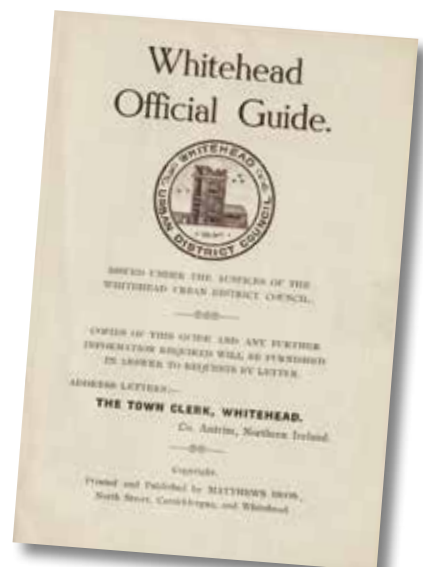
Matt Quinn, The Three Islands, Toome

Any time we went in for a swim in the pool we never went straight into the pool – you ... went up on to the diving boards and dived into the sea outside, swam there for five minutes or so and then came in ... the pool always seemed a lot warmer than the Belfast Lough! It was terrific.

Trevor Monteith on the outdoor swimming pool in Whitehead

Devenny’s Irish Tours started up and brought people from the north of England ... They came over to Larne in the boat, were picked up in a bus – there were up to ten buses every week in the summertime. They stayed for a week, about £15 full board – travelling and everything. ... They were fed well, looked after well, and they really enjoyed themselves. They’d have gone in the buses during the day around the north of Ireland – Giant’s Causeway, Belfast, even went on the train to Dublin. A dance every night in the hotel. I remember going to sleep with the noise of the ‘okey, okey pokey’ every night.

Brian McKenna, Whitehead



The War Years

The Second World War impacted upon the lives of everyone who lived through it, whether directly or indirectly.



Sergeant William Bell (in the middle)

Active service

William Andrew Turkington joined the RAF not long after the war began, serving as a Ground Gunner (later the RAF Regiment) defending airfields in England from enemy attack. Later in the war he was sent abroad, serving in India, Burma and Java (where he was when the war ended). His brother-in-law, Sergeant William Bell of Doagh, was killed on the night of 6 September 1940 when his bomber was shot down returning from an operation over Germany.

Belfast Blitz

Memories of the Belfast Blitz of 1941 remain strong among the interviewees. Cahal Boyd was in the Ulster Hall on the evening of one of the air raids and experienced it first hand. Others watched from a safer distance, though still felt terrified. Trevor Monteith was taken by his father to the 'Bla Hole' at Whitehead on the night of one of the raids from where they had a clear view of Belfast: '*I can clearly remember sitting up there and just watching the dockland ablaze*'.

Bombs over Doagh

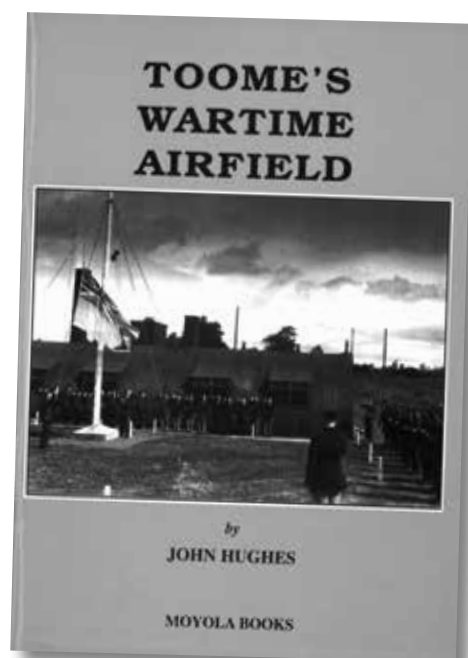
One particular incident during the Blitz had a direct impact on Doagh. In all, four bombs were dropped on the townland of Holystone, two of them on the Lorimer farm. Derek Lorimer vividly remembers what they experienced:

I remember waking up in below the table with the Labrador dog and it was sitting beside me and was terrified. ... It wasn't to the next morning that we realised what had happened. ... We knew it was bombs, but we didn't know they were so near. ... They said the shock went out over us. There were houses about a mile away and their ceilings came down with the shock. ...

Toome aerodrome

In 1943 an aerodrome was opened at Toome by the RAF. This was soon taken over by the United States Army Air Force (USAAF). As a boy Frankie Dale was fascinated by it:

I was just starting to go round the yard and the sky was full of aeroplanes, this was great ... I used to go down to the aerodrome and see them taking off and landing – this was magic. I didn't realise a lot of those young boys would never come back.



Community spirit and neighbourliness

Those who took part in this project emphasised that there was a strong sense of community in each of places where they grew up. This could be reflected in various different ways.



Moneyglass church bell 1925

In Whitehead several interviewees emphasised that there were good relationships across the various religious denominations. P. J. O'Donnell commented that if there was a bazaar or a Christmas fair it did not matter which church it was in because everyone would have supported it. John Milliken believed that when he was growing up in the 1950s he would have known half of the people of Whitehead by name and would have recognised nearly everyone.

Mary Moore, who has lived in The Plains, near Doagh since 1945, felt that she had '*The best of neighbours ... helpful neighbours*'. Many of the interviewees commented on the fact that they could have left their house without having to lock their doors.

At busy times, such as during the harvest, farmers would have helped each other out. '*There was what they called neighbouring*', explained Cahal Boyd, '*You helped the man next door and then he helped you.*'



Staff from Doagh Mill 1937

If there was a death the whole townland knew about it ... If anybody died the whole townland stopped working for a day at least. ... it was like an extended family.

Frankie Dale, Ballydugan, Toome

A lovely place to grow up in. Very friendly and you knew everybody. ... You didn't seem to have any worries about anything. ... The traders were ... very helpful. People had time for one another and you helped everybody. ... You would have known everybody.

Kathleen McKenna, Whitehead

There was far more neighbourliness. At night folk would have gone to each others' houses. You never knew who opened the door and came in, just for a yarn.

Mary Moore, The Plains, near Doagh

On the thresher there had to be a couple of boys forking, two men feeding the thresher, a man taking away the grain and maybe a couple of men taking away the straw and building it – so it had to be a neighbourly thing.

Owen Gribbin, Anahorish, Toome



Farmers gathered for the hunt