

The Belfast Agreement 25 years on

BUILDING FRIENDSHIP ACROSS THE DIVIDE

The former IRA man, the UVF ex-prisoner and the retired British soldier who became friends and are now taking part in a reconciliation project



Reconciliation



Seanín Graham

Thirty years ago, Jim Potts wouldn't have spoken to a Catholic.

"It was just the way I was brought up," the loyalist ex-prisoner, from the Shankill Road in Belfast, admits.

"But now, my phone is half full of contacts of people from the Catholic community who I consider to be friends."

Today, his face beams as he spots two men in the car park of a republican museum beside Conway Mill off the Falls Road.

Ex-IRA prisoner Michael Culbert and former British Army soldier Lee Lavis are joining him to give a talk to a group of visiting English students as part of a long-running reconciliation project.

It's been months since Potts last met the pair and he strolls over to greet them before sharing his news. "I'm getting married... you're both invited," he says.

Under the shadow of the beautifully restored 19th-century linen mill which houses artists' studios and small businesses – funded in part by "peace monies" – Culbert breaks into a broad smile and congratulates him.

"Delighted for you, mate," Lavis, hugging a beaker of tea, adds.

Ushering them up the stairs of the Eileen Hickey Irish Republican History Museum to the Tar Anall offices for republican ex-prisoners, Culbert puts the kettle on and piles plates high with chocolate digestives.

As the 25th anniversary of the Belfast Agreement approaches, the 73-year-old has become one of the strongest advocates for the North's peace process.

"Life has changed so dramatically here, so dramatically that sometimes you just have to stop and think of what it was like," Culbert says.

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Over that weekend, I mixed amongst people from a community that I had all these stereotypes about, and for the first time ever I knew what it was to be like on the other side. Essentially, they became human

"I am only giving it to you from my perspective, but we no longer have British military in the streets... and there's a broad, general acceptance of the absolute necessity for a policing service."

Culbert joined the IRA in the early 1970s when, after Bloody Sunday in Derry, he "concluded that civil rights reform probably wouldn't come".

A former social worker – he also worked as a

taxman for the Inland Revenue – he served 16 years of a life sentence.

Yet his family background, he says, was "pro-British".

"My granny had two husbands and they were both former British soldiers. One of them – who I'm named after – never came back from the first World War.

"She was burnt out of Pope's Row in Cupar Street in 1922, she was burnt out of Bombay Street in '69 and then an IRA bomb went off on the Springfield Road and blew her out of her third house."

He quips she had "no luck" but that she lived until she was 108 and was the oldest woman in Clonard. "I hope I live as long."

Released from prison on a Friday in 1993, Culbert began a master's degree in peace studies the following Monday and returned to coaching St Gall's Gaelic Athletic Club in west Belfast a week later.

"I was relatively intelligent, relatively well-off economically, my wife was a school teacher and I was out fighting the British."

"I'm still the guy I was but I'm much more confident I'm going to get what I want, but only nowadays through the electoral process."

"It's written into the Good Friday agreement the right to call a referendum [on a united Ireland] but the right lies with a British minister."

"As an Irish republican, I don't see the referendum being held as the issue. To me, it's the process before that's the issue. What's the health system going to be? What's the education system going to be? What are the customs issues? What's the rates of taxation, what's VAT going to be?"

"Every time I talk to a visiting group about this and Jim is there, I'm secretly talking to him and he knows it. Jim's worked with us very closely and I would never insult him. I don't want to be spooking him. I don't want him to think negatively about it."

Instrumental

Culbert is director of Coiste na nIarlach, a group set up in 1998 to provide support to republican ex-prisoners and their families, and has been instrumental in driving the cross-community talks project for more than a decade.

It is delivered to local youth clubs as well as international visitors, who often engage and ask questions.

"It started with us doing tours. We quite literally saw tourists walking about west Belfast not knowing where to go," he says.

"The tours took off and out of that people wanted talks so we started doing talks. But after a while we thought that other stories should be getting told, so I approached a good friend of mine who heads up a loyalist ex-prisoner group.

"When we give the talks there's always that implicit acknowledgment that the other person's view is their view. You don't correct it."

Over the next two hours – against the backdrop of a hand-stitched quilt commemorating the 10 republican hunger strikers who died in 1981 – the men give an account of their experience in the conflict and why they chose to embrace peace.

Despite their differences, there is humour in the exchanges and references to their friendship. Lavis even drinks in a local GAA club on the Falls Road.

"I'll go and have a pint in St Gall's on my own. I love Gaelic," he says. "If anyone says, 'Who's the English fella?' You'll hear them say, 'Oh, that's Mickey Culbert's mate'. So that's kinda how I'm known."

"But I don't walk into any bar on the Falls Road as there's people there who may have been hurt and are not ready to meet someone from my background. So I'm respectful."

Last year Culbert, a former Antrim GAA senior football manager, went to Stormont to watch his first cricket match, when Ireland played New Zealand.

"I liked the social side of it but, Jesus Christ, it was boring," Culbert jokes.

"I went because Lee asked me." Potts describes himself as someone who became a "hate figure for Catholics" during the Holy Cross School dispute in 2001, when hundreds of loyalists tried to block children as they walked to school, in a violent sectarian protest that made international headlines.

He became a spokesman for the loyalist community during the three-month dispute that led to riot police and British soldiers escorting schoolgirls and their families to class in the interface area.

"It was a bit of a baptismal fire," he recalls, "and led to many death threats along the way."

While welcoming the "enormous change" over the past 25 years, he's also quick to highlight that "large parts of both sides are still happy to live within their own communities".

"You're never going to arrive at a utopia," Potts adds.

"I'm talking about working-class communities, the conflict was about them. The Malone Road [one of Belfast's most affluent areas], people didn't care who lived next door to them."

"In some ways, I see Michael differently; he came from a middle-class background and sits outside what I perceive as an IRA man."

"I've become very good friends with Michael; it's a genuine friendship. We have different views but we need to make that work."

"I respect the fact he's an Irish republican and that's the future he's seeking but I'm also a British subject and proud to be so and wish to remain."

"So how do we resolve this? He wants one thing and I want another."

"People got annoyed a number of years ago when Peter Robinson [former DUP leader] said we've got to talk about the possibility of a united Ireland. I'm kinda in that category now. I'm not saying you're going to buy me and win me over, I need to be convinced. But I'm willing to engage. I'm not going to dig my heels in."

Potts joined loyalist paramilitary group the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) in 1981 shortly after his 18th birthday.

"It was just a daily diet of death that we became accustomed to, thinking it was normal. But it was anything but normal when you look back."

He served three years in prison for UVF-related offences.

Following the Holy Cross controversy, he became involved in cross-community dialogue work – "at that time it was difficult, not a lot of people agreed with it but we carried on" – and got a degree in youth work.

Landmark

All three men voted in favour of the landmark 1998 agreement which brought an end to the North's Troubles.

For Lavis, Belfast became his adopted home, having quit the British Army in 1996 after a life-changing weekend made him question "everything he believed in".

A Saturday lad in a butcher's shop, he grew up in an English coal mining area and volunteered to join the British Army at 17 after leaving school in 1988 with no qualifications (he

now has a Masters) and doing a job he hated.

"I was essentially an economic recruit, like many of my friends. I had also watched too many John Wayne films and had this very heroic view of conflict," Lavis says.

He served two tours of Northern Ireland, mainly along Border areas in south Armagh, Newry and Fermanagh.

"In terms of our mindset, we had almost no knowledge of Northern Ireland or its conflict. The army didn't encourage us to learn much about the area we were being sent to beyond 'we're fighting the good fight and they're bad people'."

"And because we could only think in black and white terms, for us it became a simple equation: the IRA was almost exclusively drawn from the Irish nationalist community ergo the Irish nationalist community are the IRA – all of them."

"This means that you're logically thinking of them all as murderers, terrorists, psychopaths, criminals, uncivilised and anti-democratic."

Ceasefires

In 1995, a year after the IRA and loyalist ceasefires, a Newry youth club invited Lavis's regiment to send two soldiers on its yearly trip away to watch Celtic FC as a goodwill gesture.

He was chosen to go.

"Over that weekend, I mixed amongst people from a community that I had all these stereotypes about, and for the first time ever, I knew what it was [like] to be on the other side."

"Essentially, they became human. I couldn't dehumanise them any more – and that was crucial to being a soldier, the dehumanisation of another."

Within three days of his return, he handed in his notice to the army.

"That weekend had a profound impact and wouldn't have happened without the ceasefire. It was the beginning of my journey to me being here today and beginning of my journey to voting Yes in the Good Friday agreement."

His decision to engage in reconciliation work with "former enemies" has created difficulties.

"I've been accused of 'going native'," he says. "By choosing the course I've chosen, I've become ostracised from a lot of veterans."

"But, by the same token, there is a long tradition of veterans who do dissent, who start asking questions about the conflict and the rhetoric they were given."

On the Monday afternoon we meet, an announcement on a new deal between the UK government and the European Union on the Northern Ireland protocol is expected.

Mid-interview, there is a ping on Potts's phone: "A deal's been done," he says.

The North has had no functioning government for more than a year due to the DUP's refusal to enter the power-sharing Executive until its concerns about post-Brexit trading arrangements are dealt with.

"My gut feeling is that they'll go back in," Potts says.

"My gut feeling is that they won't," adds Culbert.

Amid the political deadlock, the recent shooting of a senior police officer by dissident republicans and threats of loyalist attacks, the two men insist there is no support within their communities for a return to violence.

"The military conflict is over, it's well over," Culbert says, noting that the attack on detective chief inspector John Caldwell in Omagh in February was the first shooting of a police officer in over a decade.

Potts agrees: "I'll tell you why it won't hap-

■ Michael Culbert (centre), head of the republican ex-prisoners group Coiste na nIarlach, with former British soldier Lee Lavis (right) and loyalist ex-prisoner Jim Potts at the entrance to a former British army barracks off the Falls Road, Belfast.

PHOTOGRAPH: ARTHUR ALLISON/PADEMAKER PRESS

pen: there's no political support, there's no community support, people don't want it."

But are the views of their generation supported by younger people with more hardline beliefs?

Potts responds by recalling the words of his father when he discovered he had joined the UVF.

"He said to me: 'Well, son, you're either going to end up in prison or you're going to end up dead'."

"Like many others at that time, I was prepared to accept that as a consequence of my actions. But I don't think you'll get the same commitment from young people nowadays to say, 'Well, I'll go to jail for 15 years for what I believe'."

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My daughter is 26 and part of the ceasefire generation, born at the end of the conflict with no memory of it. She is very much a child of the Good Friday Agreement where you can take either identity

"I just don't believe that's present at the moment."

The three men all have grown-up children. Culbert says his two sons "haven't inherited conflict" while Potts and Lavis agree that social and economic concerns are the priority for the next generation – as opposed to the constitutional question.

"My daughter is 26 and part of the ceasefire generation, born at the end of the conflict with no memory of it," says Lavis.

"She is very much a child of the Good Friday agreement where you can take either identity; that's one of the things that's respected in the agreement."

"But if you were to ask her about a united Ireland or remaining in the UK, she's more interested in what a healthcare system is going to look like or what the economic plan is, what her rights are going to be like with regards to sexuality, vis-a-vis a united Ireland or remaining in the union."

Potts also has two grown-up sons, who he says have no interest in loyalism or paramilitarism.

"They have a lot of Catholic friends. They keep me aware and we'll sit over dinner and have debates – they have their own opinion of how life should be here."

"They're not going to be led by the nose."

"It used to be you could have thrown the Union Jack flag over a donkey, walked it up the Shankill Road and it would have got a load of votes because people were just blinded."

"But now we're in a different place, young people are more healthy in their thoughts and they want what's good for everyone. That's progress."

'Had it not been for Dad, the agreement wouldn't have happened'



Seanín Graham

David Trimble's wife Daphne and son Nicholas reflect on role he played in Belfast Agreement

Nicholas Trimble is wearing his late father's shoes and sitting opposite the armchair where he always sat.

Surrounded by hundreds of alphabetically ordered LPs – mainly classical, the Dolly Parton and Garth Brooks CDs are in the drawers, he says with a grin – Nicholas and his mother, Daphne, joke that the carpet I'm standing on is older than the house.

"Dad brought it here from their last house over 40 years ago, it's older than me," he says.

Daphne Trimble adds, roaring with laughter: "He would never let me do anything to change the carpet. He said there's 'nothing wrong with it', it's a 'good Ulster Carpet Mills carpet'. The fact it was threadbare, it didn't matter."

The Irish Times has been invited to the family's Lisburn home, and to the room that became David Trimble's retreat during the fraught negotiations that led to the 1998 Belfast Agreement; where he put his records on, turned up an amplifier and listened to Bach, Vaughan Williams and Bruce Springsteen blasting out from two enormous free-standing speakers.

Today, the pillar-like Linn speakers stand erect at either side of the fireplace.

The former Ulster Unionist Party leader, who became the first person to serve in the role of first minister in Stormont's new powersharing government, died last July.

"Music was his thing. These are only some of his records and you'll notice there's no TV in this room. This space would have been Dad's unwinding space," Nicholas tells us. "He would come home here and turn up his music. You could hear it outside."

Daphne says: "The great thing about this house is that it's split level with the bedrooms on the other level. So he could play the music louder here and not wake the children. In those final weeks before the agreement he would come home with the documents and we would go through them together, line by line, in this room. I was a solicitor by background and I think the fresh eyes helped."

Fr Alec Reid, the Belfast priest who played a crucial role in the peace process acting as a secret conduit between the IRA and British and Irish governments, was among those who visited the house to meet the UUP leader privately.

"There were other people who David didn't want our neighbours to see that he was meeting, the more sensitive, Sinn Féin basically. There was another house put at his disposal where he met them," she says.

Nicholas was 11 years old when the



historic peace deal was signed on Good Friday in 1998. His most vivid memory is the day after it. "Dad came home and the only words he said were: 'If anyone phones, I'm not in.'"

"He sat on his armchair, and of course the phone was going crazy. Me and my two older siblings – we deliberately had no answer machine so the kids operated the telephone answering service – were picking up the phone and just lying to everybody – no, he's not in, no he's not in."

"And the one that I remember that caused me a crisis of faith, because you do what your dad says, was when I answered and an American voice said, 'Hello, I'm looking to speak to David Trimble, it's the White House here.'"

"And I thought, can I lie here again? I told them to hold on one second and came

into this room and said, 'Dad, it's the White House on the phone.' He sighed and turned and said, 'Tell them to phone back in 15 minutes.'

"So I came back, and said, 'Can you phone back in 15 minutes, thank you.'"

Perched in the corner of the room is the bound Nobel Peace Prize certificate jointly awarded to David Trimble and former SDLP leader, John Hume, for their instrumental role in securing the accord that ended the Troubles.

At a recent tribute event honouring the two men on the 25th anniversary of the agreement, former US president Bill Clinton told a packed Guildhall in Derry – Nicholas, his mother and sister Vicky were in the front row – that the pair had "put their careers and lives on the line" for peace. Former Sinn Féin president Gerry

Adams has since credited the "courage" of Trimble for "going against the grain of unionist thinking at the time".

The UUP leader famously only ever spoke two words to him during the negotiations. "Grow up" in the gents toilets when Adams asked "How are you doing David?"

Within two years of the deal, Trimble the Traitor graffiti was daubed in large capital letters at the bottom of the street where the family lived, as anti-agreement unionists led a backlash that ultimately cost him his Westminster seat and party leadership.

In school corridors, insults were hurled at Nicholas Trimble (a UUP councillor since 2016) and protesters draped in Union Jack flags regularly gathered on the pavement outside their home.

Daphne Trimble would tell her four children to "close the curtains" as crowds held placards and shouted abuse at them.

"I grew up with everyone knowing who my dad was. He was the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, then there was the agreement and then he was the first minister," says Trimble.

"The jokes went from, 'Does your da own a Ferrari?' to 'Tell your da he needs to do this.' When I started secondary school, people would have shouted to me in the corridor, '1, 2, 3 DUP, no traitors here.'"

"Our school was very good but from about 2000 on when I was a teenager, the jibes became nastier and more politically charged. That's when I realised, there's a shift happening in unionism."

Shift

"It's now that I think, and this is my own view, that Dad was actually the shift. I think that traditionally, unionism has never been the party of wanting to take great steps. It's the party with the political ideology of status quo. Dad took unionism to a place it had never been before; then there was that kickback in those 2002-2005 years."

"For other parties, getting the deal over the line was it. They were done and exited stage left; whereas Dad almost had a harder job post-agreement."

"But he never reacted to the graffiti or the protesters; with a wave of the hand it was dismissed, it wasn't worth his while to focus on it. We followed suit."

Sitting alongside her son and listening to him speak about the abuse he received in school, Daphne looks emotional: "I didn't know about that, Nicholas. This is the first time I've heard this."

She also became a target and was physically attacked by protesters outside an election count centre in 2001. "A mob had gathered outside by the time we were leaving," she recalls. "It was quite unpleasant. I would have been kicked to the ground if they [UUP colleagues] hadn't been holding me up. I did have blood trickling down my legs and bruised shins."

"But the thing that I feel worse about was when I got a warning from police that protesters were planning to picket outside our house on a Saturday morning."

"Sarah, who was our youngest, did swimming lessons. Back then you had to physically go down to the pool to sign your child on. She needed to have her swimming lesson so I went down."

"For some reason, David wasn't there and I was leaving the children on their own. I thought I can't leave them to face the protesters, but I assumed they wouldn't come early in the morning."

"Well, I was wrong. I went into Lisburn early to sign her. When I came back, at the end of our street I saw a person wrapped in a Union Jack. I rushed home and my eldest, Richard, said to me: 'Calm down mother, they've been and they're gone.'"

With the first anniversary of her husband's death approaching following a series of major events marking the agreement's milestone anniversary, Daphne says she has found it too difficult to watch the media coverage. "I've watched a bit but it's still pretty raw with David not being here," she says.

Negotiations

Her son booked tickets to watch the sell-out play, Agreement, based on the knife-edge talks in the days before its signing, in Belfast's Lyric theatre.

"I wouldn't have been brave enough to go on my own; I went with the children," she says.

"The actor who played him had got a lot of his mannerisms. The tugging of the shirt cuffs, I'd forgotten that David used to do that. It was eerie but testament to his qualities as an actor."

On the coffee table beside a striking bronze sculpture of a pregnant woman on one side and newborn on the other – entitled Bearing the Burden of Peace, it was gifted to the Nobel Laureates by St Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota in 2000 – lies a bundle of David Trimble's personal correspondence from the negotiations.

The family are giving the papers to Queen's University Belfast – a 12-box consignment has already been sent and six empty boxes are in the hall waiting to be filled – where he lectured in law in the 1970s before entering politics.

"We've been going through a lot of Dad's old papers and we want Queen's to have them. They'll be accessible for academic study which I think Dad will be quite pleased with," says Nicholas.

Among them is a letter he sent to former UK prime minister Tony Blair on April 7th, 1998 – three days before Good Friday – in which he criticises the Irish government and insists he has "negotiated in good faith", adding "it's now apparent others have not".

The time written on it is 12.30pm. "If you received this letter, you'd think, well, this ain't happening – and that's just days before the deadline," he adds.

His mother credits Bertie Ahern for "getting the whole thing back on track": "When David wrote that letter, Bertie had gone to Dublin at this stage after his mother died. He came back from the funeral and that, in many ways, is testament to Bertie's impact on David. They actually got on very well. Bertie is still phoning me up to see if I'm okay."

Was the agreement worth sacrificing his political career?

"It was after the agreement that things

got really ugly because of the lack of decommissioning," says Daphne. "Our party was a very divided place for those years. We felt Tony Blair did throw David under the bus as the decommissioning didn't happen in the way he promised it would. But yes, the peace was worth it, I feel very proud."

For Nicholas Trimble, the landmark deal would never have brokered without his father: "If he was here today, he would dance around the issue, but yes, I think in his heart, he believed it was worth it too. He would definitely make that sacrifice again."

"That's us looking with hindsight back over it. He knew it would be difficult, there was always the enemy at the gates as it were, he always had the hardliner anti-agreement lobby who were snapping at his heels. Events overtook him."

Television pictures of Trimble triumphantly joining hands with Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) leader Ian Paisley as he led an Orange Order parade along the nationalist Garvaghy Road during the Drumcree dispute in 1995 had characterised him as a hardliner before his transformation into a more moderate statesman and key architect of the peace deal.

Moral victory
During his tribute speech to the Nobel Laureates in Derry, Bill Clinton remembered Trimble for being "so modest", adding, "I felt he never quite got the credit he deserved".

Paisley led the anti-agreement charge against the UUP leader before taking the first minister seat alongside Sinn Féin's Martin McGuinness as deputy first minister in 2007. "So I think it was bittersweet for him," adds Nicholas.

"The UUP were surpassed by the DUP in 2005, the fact that Paisley then, basically by his actions, acquiesced what Dad had been advocating for there was a moral victory there certainly. I think Dad would have taken some solace from that."

He expresses sadness, however, at Stormont's collapse after "mountains were moved" 25 years ago.

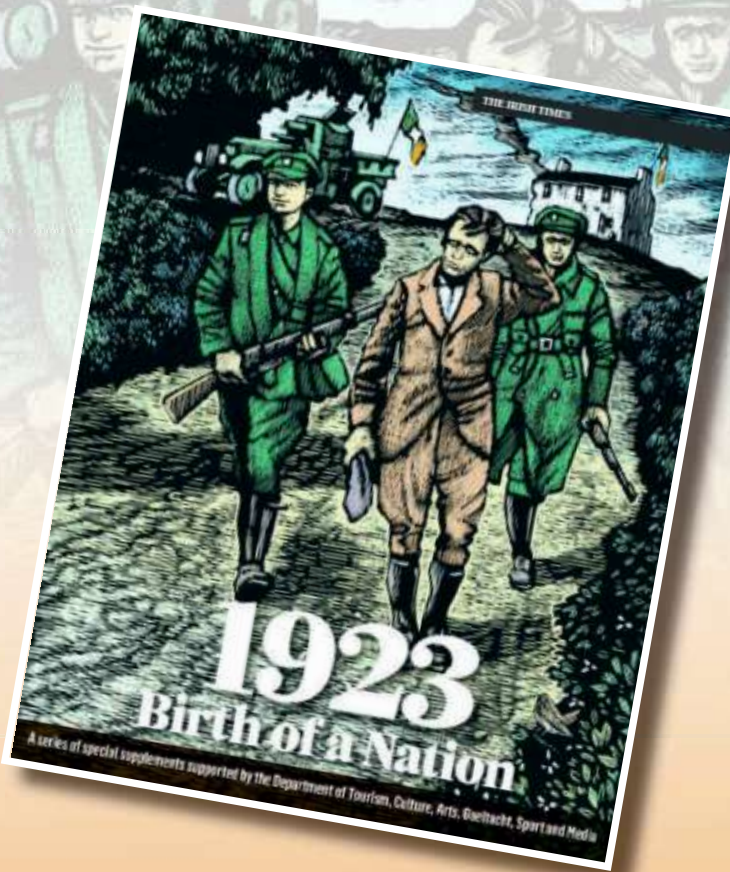
"I'm relatively new in the Ulster Unionist Party but I can see how difficult it would have been for him at the time."

"Dad was going up and down the country going into wee pokey halls to meet branches and associations to convince 10 here and 20 there. I do genuinely think, had it not been for him, and the real energy and determination to do it, it wouldn't have happened."

"I'm not sure that anyone else would have put in the hours – or taken the risk."

PHOTOGRAPH: STEPHEN DAVISON

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'Bandit country': the stigma lives on for Crossmaglen



Seanín Graham
Northern Correspondent

Historian Úna Walsh and former Armagh footballer Oisín McConville show there is more to the town than its post-conflict reputation

Úna Walsh is dwarfed by the towering steel-clad walls of Crossmaglen police station. The south Armagh historian looks impatient waiting for us outside Northern Ireland's most fortified police building and darts across the Cullaville Road when we pull up.

"I was wary of standing too long in case I'd be asked why I was loitering," Walsh says with a throaty laugh.

The Irish Times' photographer, who covered the area during the Troubles, nods in agreement while snapping away.

"In the aul days, by this stage they'd been out asking me what I was doing," he tells Walsh.

It is a town that became synonymous with the North's 30-year conflict.

In the months before the 1994 IRA ceasefire, the British Army rebuilt its base at the police station – known as Operation Rectify, it was the largest British military airborne operation since D-Day – to withstand attacks by the Provisional IRA's South Armagh Brigade.

Every road in Crossmaglen had a checkpoint on it for the duration of the rebuild.

"In places like Fermagh you always got the sense that something might happen – in Crossmaglen, you always got the sense that something would happen," an ex-British soldier tells The Irish Times.

"I was down there for 'Op Rect'. They weren't expanding the station, they were mortar hardening it. They were making it so it could take more punishment from the IRA without collapsing."

Republican stronghold

With a population of fewer than 1,200 people during that period, there between 2,000 and 3,000 British troops in and around the republican stronghold. Today, there are none. "Back then, there was more of us than them," says the former soldier who revisited the area a decade ago. "It must have been a torment for them. Everywhere they went there was one of us. I never actually noticed the beauty of the place when I was on foot patrol, but when I was on air mobile patrol, I could see it.

"We did 'top cover' over a stationary road patrol to suppress the threat of a sniper. When you did that you were flying over Slieve Gullion and Camlough mountain. Then you'd go, 'Jesus, this place is stunning'."

"I can't say I wasn't scared, but the idea of being killed by the sniper was kinda all right with me – because I would never hear the bang. I'd just hit the floor and be dead. It was the idea of being burned alive. That's just terrifying, isn't it?"

Much has changed in "Cross" in the 25 years since the Belfast Agreement – but the scars of the conflict run deep.

The British Army sangar (or "lookout post" as locals called it) that loomed over the small town's market square for decades was demolished as part of the so-called "normalisation" plan in 2007.

As the last of the British military watchtowers in south Armagh, its removal was regarded as hugely symbolic.

"Sniper at Work" road signs with silhouettes of gunmen are gone and an occasional police car patrols a town where soldiers and police only ever travelled by helicopter for fear of being blown up by covert bombs.

On a rainy Friday lunchtime, the main activity in the square – named after Cardinal Tomás Ó Fiaich – is the steady trickle of customers buying fish from the back of a visiting fishmonger's white van. Outside Keenan's Bar, an official Northern Ireland tourist information sign hangs which serves as the "centre point" for Walsh's walking tours. She is approaching her 70th birthday and has been a guide for the last 10 years.

"I am a south Armagh ambassador and lover of the oral tradition," Walsh says. "There certainly was a feeling here in 1921 that this area should have been in the South. There was a sense of abandonment, of how the South had let you go. And in this area, and it's only my view, I think there is an 'island mentality'. The people here work to improve things for themselves because they accept they're not going to get anything from anybody else."

Voluntary ambassadors

A descendant of poet and rapparee Séamus Mór Mac Murchaidh (who was hanged in Armagh Jail in 1750), Walsh is among a growing legion of voluntary ambassadors promoting the area's geology and archaeology as well as its myths and legends, poets and scribes – often through music and poetry.

"My dad would have shown people around if they'd asked to see the place years ago so I'm only paying back the generations before," Walsh says.

"The walks cover a unique borderland with 6,000 years of cultural heritage – that's what south Armagh is. Even if you take the history out of it, this area is outstanding in its beauty. But it got little coverage by the tourist board compared to other places. Slieve Gullion – many people still don't come and visit it.

"A lot of my stuff would be around the culture and heritage of this whole area. Places like Creggan (a village beside Crossmaglen where the 'lost' O'Neill clan vault was accidentally discovered in a graveyard in 1973) are unique."

Yet the presence of Crossmaglen's sprawling high-fenced police station with its reinforced concrete walls and cameras – PSNI Chief Constable Simon Byrne likened it to a "relic from the Cold War" – is a constant reminder of the past amid peace-time progress.

The branding of south Armagh as "bandit country" by former Northern Ireland secretary Merlyn Rees in 1974 is a tag that persists; it was reinforced by a photograph Byrne tweeted on Christmas Day three years ago, showing him posing at the station gates beside officers armed with machine guns. The post sparked a backlash and led to him ordering a report that found the station was "no longer fit for purpose". For the residents who lived through the

Troubles, how do they feel about their town's "lawless" reputation post-conflict? And will it remain a "place apart" for the next generation?

"You think we would have got there by now, 25 years on," says Oisín McConville, a former Crossmaglen and Armagh footballer. I suppose the stigma lives on. Simon Byrne's tweet was just another knock for those who are trying to make sure things move on. What did he think that was going to do for tourism in the area? It really didn't help.

"People have this image of what goes on in Cross and obviously certain aspects have fed into that over the years with criminality. But at the same time that's not the day-to-day experience of people living here. There's a general feel-good factor that wasn't there when I was growing up."

The 47-year-old All-Ireland winner was raised in a house on the Cullaville Road close to the army barracks. From an early age, he was told if a bomb exploded to "get down low" in the closest place he could find.

"A bomb went off one day, my sister walked into the house and she was stung from head to toe by hedge nettles. She didn't even know she was stung, she was in that much shock," McConville recalls. "It's a very vivid image for me."

Off the pitch, McConville struggled with a gambling addiction that led to him entering a residential rehab programme at the height of his club and county glory days in the noughties. He is now a trained mental health counsellor and also manages the Wicklow GAA senior football team.

He recalls a conversation with the late Paddy Short who ran Short's pub in the town: "Any time anything went on, journalists always went in there because Paddy was brilliant for a soundbite and a great talker."

"I remember we started to be successful at the football and going into him one day, and he says, 'this is brilliant, we'll no longer be known as bandit country, we'll be



known for the football we play'.

"I think that did change things, it changed perceptions. But I do think it's almost come full circle again in that obviously because of some of the headlines we're still getting, that people think that we're outlaws here. Whereas that's not the case."

As a teenager, McConville cut through a field to get into St Oliver Plunkett Park, the home ground of Crossmaglen Rangers GAC, to avoid "getting hassle" from soldiers in the town.

In 1971, the British Army requisitioned part of the ground – "We stole it, let's be honest and then gave it back," the ex-soldier says – and used it to land helicopters, often during training sessions.

"We just sort of got on with things because if you're living under that sort of oppression, and it was oppression, it's something that you carry with you. They treated us with disdain," says McConville, standing in the middle of Crossmaglen Rangers' pitch.

"As a young fella, you'd kick the ball over the bar and if it went into the barracks they'd stick a knife in it and then throw it back over. It might sound trivial, but at that time we didn't have a lot of footballs.

"That might be your football for the evening and all of a sudden you had to go beg, borrow or steal to try and get a new one to continue on the training session."

"I know oppression might sound like a strong word, but it definitely felt like that. It felt like everything you tried to do had

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some sort of block – that maybe wasn't going on elsewhere."

McConville leads us through the main entrance and surveys the ground where his children now train. The British Army helipad has disappeared and a windowless army bunker that backed on to the police station has been replaced with a bread-making factory.

"The pitch was squeezed, it wasn't as big as it is now," McConville says. "But the walkway is still the same from where I would have come. If you walked down through the town you'd be guaranteed your bag would be taken off you by the soldiers or you'd be chased."

Paratroopers

"As you went along, you got to know who was who. The paratroopers were obviously the ones with the red hats. So if they were in town you were afraid to go outside the door because they were the worst. They would literally batter you if they got you on your own."

"It was just constant to be honest. "You go through your life and think, 'ah that's not really having any effect on me', and then I had my own issues obviously," McConville says.

"For a good part of my life, from [when] I was 16 to probably 29-30, you think, was that something I should have addressed earlier? And it was. "But you don't go running about Cross, going, 'this is affecting my emotional condition', you'd have been laughed out of the town at the time."

"But now, I think people realise the profound effect it did have on everyone."

Between 1971 and 1997, there were 123 British soldiers killed in south Armagh – about a fifth of British military Trouble-related deaths in the North – along with 41 Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) police officers and 75 civilians.

Alan Mains was posted to the area after patrolling the leafy suburbs of the Lisburn Road in Belfast as a young RUC sergeant in 1986.

"I suddenly got a promotion and was going to work in a helicopter. I thought, 'will I die here?'" the retired senior police officer recalls.

Mains was stationed at Forkhill, but regularly went to Crossmaglen where he and

his colleagues were flanked by 15 soldiers when they went out on foot patrol. "It was completely and utterly, and I mean utterly, alien to me; I hadn't the first clue. "Crossmaglen was flat and always open to attack. When the weather closed in, that meant helicopters couldn't fly and you were left very vulnerable. "The South Armagh Brigade considered themselves to be the elite of the IRA – and the sniper was very much part of the psych. "Mains became deputy head of the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) and was involved in many high-profile cases, giving evidence to the Smithwick tribunal about claims of IRA/Garda collusion relating to the murders of two senior RUC colleagues.

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