

WHENEVER AND WHEREVER - an Irish international team plays chances are that among the crowd will be card-carrying members of the London branch of the Republic of Ireland Soccer Supporters Club (RISSC).

Whether it is the under 16 team playing a friendly in Holland, the under 19 squad involved a qualifying tournament in Malta or the Senior inside in action at a major finals, the boys and girls, men and women from London will be there. This week hundreds of their members will descend on Dublin by plane and ferry to cheer on Ireland in the crucial World Cup qualifier against France at Lansdowne Road and they'll be on the road again next month for the away trip to Cyprus quickly followed by the home game against Switzerland.

Many of the club's 580 members were born and bred in Ireland and moved to England in search of work or to study at college. But a growing number are first and second generation Irish whose lifelong devotion to the boys in green has been fuelled by their parents and relations. They may have English accents but their blood is emerald green.

"It is about 90 per cent male, 10 per cent female and we have people who were registered at birth as members while others are well into their seventies," reports secretary Declan Finnegan.

"We have got first generation, second generation, people who are Irish by marriage and even one or two with spurious Irish connections. It is a non-sectarian club and as long as they are supporters of Irish football they are welcome irrespective of their background or nationality." Club chairman Stephen Harte says that the club also provides a very important social function for the Irish community in London and south-east England.

"Members have different reasons for being in the club but the hardcore of the people here in London, the people who attend our meetings, will average from 60 to over 100. They would see our meetings as a social function, an opportunity to go out and meet, chat and have a drink with like-minded people."

Last October saw the club celebrate its 20th anniversary with a gala dinner in the London Irish Centre in Camden Town at which Ireland team manager Brian Kerr was the guest of honour and he made presentations to those members who have 20 years of unbroken service.

Kerr is Honorary President of the club following a line that has included his assistant manager Chris Hughton and the current Ireland skipper Kenny Cunningham. Up until Kerr's appointment the policy had been to have an Irish player based in London as Honorary President, but following Cunningham's transfer from Wimbledon to Birmingham City it was decided to change this and Kerr is the first non-London based person to hold this position.

Meetings are held every month and after spending the previous 20 years gathering in corners of pubs like the Prince of Wales in Harrow and McGovern's of Kilburn the club moved earlier this year to the new Crown Moran's Hotel in Cricklewood where they have the use of a proper meeting room to conduct their business.

It's all a far cry from 1984 when a young Irishman living in London wrote to the *Irish Post* announcing he was holding a meeting to start up a supporters club for Irish fans living in the English capital.

Lappin, a native of Sligo who lived in Scotstown, Co Monaghan, for a while and went to boarding school in St Mel's College, Longford, was only 22 years-old but he had been in London since 1973 and was an avid Arsenal fan. A member of their travel club he followed the Gunners everywhere.

"I also followed Ireland home and away and used to meet other supporters at King's Cross Station when we would heading to Dublin, Holland,



LONDON CALLING

Last October Republic of Ireland manager Brian Kerr was the guest of honour at the 20th anniversary celebrations of the London Branch of the Republic of Ireland Soccer Supporters Club. Tomorrow hundreds of the members will be in Lansdowne Road for the crucial World Cup qualifier against France. Many may have English accents but their blood is emerald green. **Gerry McDermott** reports

ised three coaches to take their members to Germany and ferry them up and down the autobahns to Stuttgart, Hanover and Gelsenkirchen. According to Lappin, they had such a good time that they had to persuade the hotels they were staying in to make breakfast available until mid-day.

"Being part of a major finals for the first time ever was a fantastic experience and I will never forget it," says Lappin. "I remember something Con Houlihan wrote at the time and I think it summed up that tournament perfectly. He wrote: 'When a man comes thirsty out of the desert it is unlikely he will

GALA NIGHT: Gerry Lappin, founder and first Chairman of the London branch of the RISSC, Brian Kerr, Chris Hughton and Stephen Harte, the current Chairman at the 20th anniversary dinner. Photo by Malcolm McNally

'MANY OF THE CLUB'S 580 MEMBERS WERE BORN AND BRED IN IRELAND AND MOVED TO ENGLAND IN SEARCH OF WORK OR TO STUDY AT COLLEGE'

France or Belgium to support the team."

Over 70 people turned up at the meeting which was held in the upstairs room of a pub near Warren St tube station and the London branch of the Republic of Ireland Soccer Supporters Club was born.

"Susan Dunne who was living in Potters Barn became the first secretary and Tom Gately was treasurer," recalled Lappin who also has fond memories of a future chairman, Tony Booth, from that first meeting.

"Tony Booth was at the first meeting. He was a schoolteacher in Bethnal Green and was extremely eloquent. I remember Nigel Doherty saying to me 'that big bloke seems to be over-educated.' "We were so fortunate that we had a really strong core of football supporters and good games to go to. We were also fortunate that we had a good organisation and people who were prepared to work hard for the club and go on the various committees."

They started coach trips to international games and as word spread the membership grew until it peaked at 650 at the time of the 1994 World Cup finals in America. Such was their organisational ability that they were once called upon to ferry FAI officials to Portsmouth for an under 21 game against England.

"We had a 52 seater coach going to Portsmouth and we took Peader O'Driscoll, Charlie Walsh and other FAI officials with us to the game. Somebody asked who were they and I replied that they were new members. They didn't pay for their seats but Peader O'Driscoll never forgot it which was handy when I went to him looking for tickets for our members," recalled Lappin. For Euro '88 the club organ-

officialled at a game between two London based supporters' clubs, one of which was Glasgow Rangers. One Rangers' player questioned a decision, calling him 'an Irish catholic' to which Tony promptly retorted: 'Irish yes, but I'm a Protestant like you, so just get on with the bloody game!'

It was while in Cyprus for the 1998 under 18 European Championship that Tony first became ill. Initially a kidney problem was suspected before eventually myeloma was diagnosed. Even while undergoing treatment and despite feeling easily exhausted, Booth continued to play an active role in the affairs of the Supporters Club and still followed Ireland.

During the 2002 World Cup qualification campaign, he attended every under 21 and senior international, home and away, and despite being clearly unwell, he was at Lansdowne Road to see the first leg of the play-off against Iran. When he returned to London he was admitted to hospital, but incredibly, two days later he discharged himself five hours before flying out to Tehran with his colleagues from the London Supporters Club.

Despite being in immense pain, he courageously took his place in the Azadi Stadium to see Ireland qualify for the World Cup finals. On his return to London, he was readmitted to hospital for the last time and died the following January.

His successor as chairman was Stephen Harte and he has nothing but praise for the work which Booth did for the club.

"In organisations like this, which are voluntary organisations, it usually falls, and certainly 15 to 20 years ago this was the case, to one individual who is brave enough and prepared to get his hands dirty. Tony Booth was the man who was prepared to do that. He took it on board and did a tremendous amount of work for the club.

"He kept the club going and probably worked too hard. It may not have helped his health, to be honest, he may have put too much into it. His passing obviously had an impact because every one in the club knew and respected Tony. Certainly on a personal level his departure was a loss."

Harte who was born in Drumcliffe, Co Sligo, under the shadow of Ben Bulbin, grew up supporting Sligo Rovers and was travelling to soccer matches from an early age. At 10 he was taken by boat from Derry to Glasgow to see an Old Firm derby between Celtic and Rangers and in 1966 he went to every one of the World Cup games staged in London including the final between England and West Germany. His family eventually emigrated to

complain about the first drink he is offered."

Tony Booth became chairman in 1985, the year after the club was founded, and held that post until January 2002 when he died, at the age of 48, after a long illness. While Lappin provided the inspiration, it was Booth who helped to grow the club and firmly establish it as a focus for Irish football fans in London and south-east England.

Born in London of an Anglo-Irish background (his mother was from Kerry, his father was born in India of Irish parents), Booth was the engine at the heart of the Supporters Club, having been chairman since 1985. His tenure helped it become the focus for Irish soccer fans in London and south-east England. A former teacher, his leadership, patience and charm forged the club's stature amongst the London Irish community and his warm personality help build strong links with the FAI in Dublin.

He was also the face and voice of the club on television and radio and took every opportunity to promote the club. Members still recall the evening he famously engaged in a heated debate about the 'granny rule' with the former MP, David Mellor, on BBC Radio 5.

He was also a Sunday League referee and once



NEW MEMBER: Brian Kerr gets a RISSC Life Membership award from Gerry Lappin

London and although he was an avid Ireland fan he moved out of the city around the time the Supporters Club was founded.

"It was a number of years later, through reading about it in the *Irish Post*, that I decided to attend a meeting and I came up to a meeting about ten years ago and joined the club.

"My second meeting was the AGM and I asked one or two searching questions which caused the AGM to be postponed with good grounds.

"There were difficulties in the club, which were subsequently resolved in a correct fashion and very shortly after that I was invited to join the committee of the club." A professional administrator, working in Human Resources, Harte became a valuable acquisition particularly towards the end of Tony Booth's tenure.

"Tony pretty much ran the club himself but he became ill and needed some help so I became the honorary secretary and tried to introduce some disciplines. I changed the newsletters and formalised things a little bit more by introducing minutes. It was a professional approach to what had been more ad hoc up until then."

The current secretary is Declan Finnegan, a native of Wicklow Town. Declan joined the club after meeting some of its members following Italia '90 and has also served as chairman and treasurer.

A devoted Irish fan he has only missed a couple of home Ireland games since the late 1980s and says the attraction of getting involved in the club, apart from the football, was the opportunity to meet people once a month outside of the matches.

As secretary his workload includes editing the club's comprehensive newsletter which is either emailed or posted to members depending on their preference. The newsletter includes information on forthcoming games and trips, reports of meetings and a comprehensive digest of all that is happening in Irish soccer from international match reports to the latest stories emerging from Merriem Square.

There are also regular updates on the fortunes of two other football teams close to the hearts of the London members. The first is their own soccer team who play in a league made up of supporters club while the other one is one of the under-age teams of St Kevin's Schoolboys Club in Dublin. The London RISSC have sponsored the team for five years and members are regularly updated on their results.

"Those kids have been tremendously successfully and we are hoping that one or two of them will emerge as international players in the coming years," says Stephen Harte. The club have also sponsored the Irish Deaf Olympics football team and raised funds for Temple Street Children's Hospital in Dublin and St Luke's Cancer Hospice in Kenton where Tony Booth spent his last few months.

The St Kevin's sponsorship was organised through a former member who returned to Dublin and Harte reveals that many people keep up their membership even after leaving London.

"We have members in America, Australia and Ireland as well as one chap who now living somewhere in the wilds of Finland. Vinny Butler, the under 16 manager, is also a member as he worked for some time in London and has kept up his membership."

The club also have a website, www.rissc.org which is run by former Treasurer Damien Byrne and Harte expects the club to keep growing in the years ahead and become an even stronger focal point for the Irish in London and surrounding counties.

Over 21 years the London fans has shown in no small way their loyalty and devotion to the Irish cause and this week they'll be in Lansdowne Road singing and shouting in support of Brian Kerr's team.

After all, Germany is calling and the opportunity for another memorable trip with the Green Army awaits.

ON THE ROAD...

TRIPS HAVE BEEN TOP of the agenda for the London's RISSC ever since Gerry Lappin hired their first coach.

Since then the London fans have followed Ireland around the world often as a organised group "We organise trips for most of the games although some people prefer to go independently," says secretary Declan Finnegan.

"And it's in places like Poland, where people don't normally go, that you get to know everybody who follows the team."

According to Finnegan the biggest trips he has been involved in organising were to the 2002 World Cup Finals in Japan and Korea and the Euro 2004 double header away to Georgia and Albania.

"They were both very much into the unknown but the more difficult trips have been when visa are required like the World Cup play-off against Iran.

"We organised a trip for over 30 people and used a travel agency in London to book the flights and hotels. But the part that caused us the most angst was getting the visas from the Iranian Embassy in London. It was very laid back and 'manana, manana'. We ended up collecting some of the visas on the morning that we actually left but it was a great trip."

The passports of most members are a colourful collection of stamps from around the world which cause great curiosity among passport officials at airports around the world.

"You often get asked when they look at your passport what have you were doing in this country

"It is a great way of seeing different places and I have brought my own kids, particularly the younger ones, along to some of them and they've been to several places they would never have been to."

Chairman Stephen Harte says that they organise the trips for the benefit of club members and even though internet booking and cheap flights have made it easier to travel independently there is still a big demand for organised trips to places like Macedonia and Albania which are still off the beaten track.

"We organise these trips purely for benefit of club members. There is no commercial element to it so clearly we are in a position to undercut agents. People have come from Dublin to join up with us rather than be ripped off by agents at home. I recognise it is a commercial world and people have got profits to make but sometimes the profits don't need to be as big as they are."

Some of the trips can be quite hairy, like the one to Macedonia in 1991 when there was still conflict in the Balkans. "Skopje was full of UN personnel. The change in atmosphere with the people from the friendly atmosphere of two years previous was very perceptible," recalled Harte. "That was an interesting trip because we didn't know what we were going into. The local arrangements were a little iffy and the bus

'One guy had no sense of the culture of Istanbul. He thought that the Blue Mosque was a nightclub!'



looked as though it had been through the war zone. It was a real old fashioned battered bus.

"On the flight home we were left sitting on the runway for hours but the Irish spirit was still there. We were relaxed and somebody dug a guitar up from somewhere to start a sing-song."

While the London club has a permanent block booking of 200 tickets for home games at Lansdowne Road it had great difficulty until recently in securing tickets for away matches. Matters came to a head, according to Finnegan, after the October 2003 European Championship qualifier against Switzerland in Basel at which there were over 7,000 Irish fans.

"We had brought 34 people to Georgia and Albania on an eight-day trip and we formed more than 15 per cent of the Irish fans in Georgia. But we then got let down badly on the allocation for the game in Basel where we received 17 tickets". That proved to be the catalyst for a major public relations drive which involved lobbying of senior FAI officials as well as letting people in Ireland know of their existence.

"We got a bit of high profile after that and we now have got a better relationship with the FAI. We lobbied Fran Rooney and since then we have had a full allocation of tickets for every away game than we have asked for.

"I also have good relationship with Liz Fitzmaurice and her staff in the Ticket Office. We have got a ticket allocation policy in the club and it is a thing you have got to get right. I have got a system for doing it but it still takes three to four hours to distribute 200 tickets."

According to Finnegan, football has given him and other the opportunity to travel to countries they would never otherwise see and he recalls several members using the trip to Georgia as an opportunity to travel outside of Tbilisi to see the birthplace of Josef Stalin.

"My favourite country was Japan, purely because it was so different. I don't think it is a place I would have gone to if it wasn't for the football. My memories are of the people and the easy access through the country with our rail passes.

"The highlight for me, apart from the football, was actually going to Hiroshima, a place I would never have got to otherwise. It was a very humbling experience and the number of Irish people that actually went down to it was amazing."

Finnegan says he is always amused by the difference in priorities of those going on the trips and remembers over-hearing a conversation on a plane returning from a game in Turkey.

"One young lad asked the other did he go to the Blue Mosque and the other guy thought the Blue Mosque was a nightclub. He had no sense of the culture of Istanbul.

"I don't know if it is a sign of maturity or what but personally I like going to churches and buildings. It is just a way of seeing different things, visiting different countries and meeting different people.

"But, at the end of the day, no matter what we go to see, we always seem to end up in a bar!"



'Smile'



'olé, olé, olé, olé'