



We are an organisation that exists on disaster

For the Last 28 years Mullingar native Brian Gillen has been the head of Civil Defence in Westmeath

A DAY IN THE LIFE... BRIAN GILLEN

— In conversation with Rodney Farry

AM in the Civil Defence officially since December 31, 1975, when I was 17. I came in an unusual way. A neighbour of mine, Paddy O'Reilly, was an instructor and he got me and another neighbour, Eddie Hynes, interested. He was a rescue instructor. We used to go over to him in the evenings and he'd teach us how to make knots. He showed us all the knots we needed to know and when we got proficient at them he'd make us do them behind our backs. Then when we got good at that he'd turn out the light and get us to do them in front of us and behind us in the dark. Both of us became rescue instructors after.

What I started off doing is completely different to what we do today. We went to a course for rescue instructors that was built on the old British systems from World War II - they were brilliant systems.

A lot of the work we would have done then was done with backpacks, a canvas thing you could roll out that would do as a stretcher if you were struck. They had all sorts of tools in them. We used to be able take people out of buildings or lift them out of basements with them.

There was a three-storey building over here in Pettitswood, which we called The Wood. It was the health board stores at the time. Back nearly 40 years ago we would take fellas out of the windows when we were training up. There was no such thing as formal health and safety but we had a great health and safety culture. It was taught to us from the day we joined.

We used to take them out on ropes and a stretcher. We would bring them down on guy ropes with fellas feeding it from the top. You did everything meticulously, because I'd be on it this time and some other person would be on it the next time. It was in everyone's interest to do it right. It worked flying until health and safety got going. They stopped us doing that sort of training with humans, we were issued with dummies.

Today if an organisation wants us

to give them a dig out, whether it is a charity event or a public event, they have to fill out an application form. The first page of the form gives the details of the job, the contact details of the organisers, the gist of what we are expected to do, how they are going to feed our people, have they contacted the gardai, have they a doctor on site, do they need an ambulance.

That forms the first page of the job. People are not going out blind to a job. You can brief people then and everyone is on a better footing.

What we do falls under five headings: casualty, rescue, communications, welfare and auxiliary fire service, but out of that can shoot anything really.

We do some unusual stuff, such as John Joe Nevin's homecoming after the London Olympics.

That was a very interesting job. If you are there on a crowd safety issue, you don't look at the event, you look at the people. We also had to escort him and his family off the bus into Cusack Park. Patrick's Day is always a big thing. If we weren't doing it, something would be wrong. We've been doing that since I joined the Civil Defence. It was one of the only events of that type we did back then because we were largely a wartime organisation until the end of the Cold War. That was the focus: if the bomb dropped, how to look after people and measure things.

When the Cold War ended, the Department of Defence brought in a new plan and it changed our focus from war time to peace time.

One of our busiest times in recent years was during the bad winters of 2009 and 2010. We did a lot of work. We are an organisation that exists on disaster of one form or another. Where people are inconvenienced through flood water, ice or snow and can't get around, that's the type of stuff that is our bread and butter.

You wouldn't be wishing it, but you'd be amazed the amount of good that would come to an organisation like us from events like that. We spent six weeks in Athlone during the floods of 2009.

We patrolled the streets, checked

water levels, liaised with the military, got the military in where sandbagging was necessary, we brought around information to houses, we did medical checks on some people and brought them to clinics if needed. There were a world of things we did.

The biggest logistical problem is having the people and having them when you need them. You have to tailor the amount of work you take on with the amount of people you have.

Then we went almost seamlessly from floods into the snow and ice. One of the first things we did was drive the HSE public nurses around to visit their clients. We did that for six weeks. That was an interesting exercise. Our drivers and vehicles had to be spot on because we were driving in difficult conditions.

I am the only full-time member of the Civil Defence in Westmeath. The other members have to take time off, take holidays, they might come on their days off. When we are looking for people, I tell them to look after their families, look after their jobs and look after the Civil Defence after that. That strategy has worked well. You have to be straight with people - they are coming and giving their time.

At the minute we have about 125 on the books. Not all would be active at once, but on training nights we would have around 50 people ranging from 18 to 70. Joe Gavin is our longest serving member, he has 47 years service.

They are a great batch of people. The Civil Defence seems to bring the best out of people.



Brian Gillen, Westmeath Civil Defence officer (right), with **Minister of State** at the Departments of An Taoiseach and Defence, **Paul Kehoe**. Last year Mr Gillen received a medal in recognition of 30 years of service to the Civil Defence.