

POYNTZPASS BALL ALLEY

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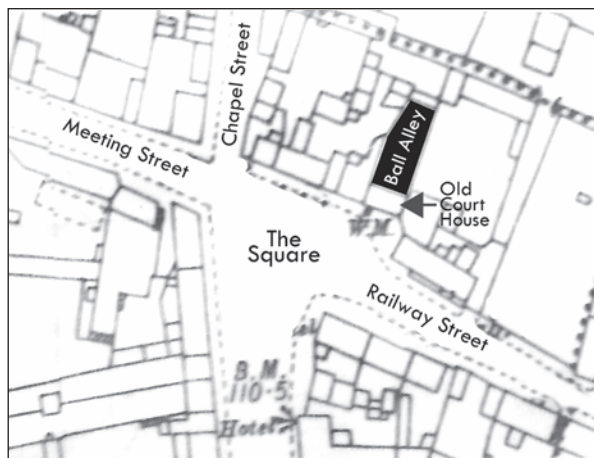
Some years ago Andrew Steven, an enthusiast and acknowledged authority on the subject, visited our Society and gave us a talk entitled *'Traditional Country Games'*.

In *'Race you to the Crossroads'*, his book on the subject, he defined 'traditional country games' as those 'which grew up informally with the rules being agreed locally.' In all cases where equipment was needed, it was either tools borrowed from everyday activities, often farming, or readily made out of wood or iron by a local handy-man or the village blacksmith.

An example of the games which very obviously arose from a farming activity was 'tossing the sheaf'. The basic equipment - a pitchfork and a sheaf - was readily available and, while later a set of posts and a raiseable crossbar were erected, at first it might simply have been the challenge of tossing the sheaf over a high wall, the branch of a tree or onto a high loft.

Other games such as 'horse-shoe throwing' or 'quoits' would use materials made by the blacksmith and 'skittles' could be simple lengths of wood. 'Shoulder stone' was a contest which simply involved throwing a chosen large stone as far as possible. This has developed into the Olympic sport of shot-putt. For 'tug-of-war' you only needed a good strong rope.

One of the games Andrew Steven included in his talk was handball.



Map showing location of the ball alley.

Handball (not to be confused with the Olympic sport which resembles football)

The definition of the handball we're interested in is:

'a sport where players hit a ball with a hand or fist against a wall in such a way as to make a shot the opposition cannot return, and that may be played with two, (singles) or four players (doubles). The sport is similar to American handball (a related and almost identical game), Basque pelota, racquetball and squash.'

Andrew Steven was quite familiar with Poyntzpass because he had visited here several times with groups of like-minded people to inspect and admire the local

handball alley which he described as 'unique'.

Like the other games he talked about, handball required very little equipment - you simply needed a ball and a reasonably smooth wall of decent height. The gable wall of a house is often ideal.

A smooth wall was very tempting to handball enthusiasts and people living in the end-houses of a terrace often got annoyed by young people playing ball-games against their gable-wall.

In one instance in the Newry area the notice on a gable wall was said to have read,

Post no Bills; Play no Ball; Court no girls against this wall!



A basic handball alley is relatively simple to create. In this picture the rear wall of a school building has been used as the front wall of two semi-detached alleys. The brick wall has been plastered and side walls added.

The origin of the game of handball is very ancient.

Handball-like games have originated in several places at different times. Hieroglyphics in ancient Egypt show people playing a game like handball. There are also records of a handball-like game being played in central and South America in early times.

The first recorded game of striking a ball with a hand against a wall was in Scotland in 1427, when it was recorded that King James I ordered a cellar window in his palace courtyard blocked up, as it was interfering with his game. In Ireland, the earliest written record of a similar ball game is contained in the town Statutes of Galway forbidding the playing of

ball games against the walls of the town. The first depiction of an Irish form of handball does not appear till 1785. On the west coast of Ireland, Galway had many trading links with Spain, especially the Basque regions, where the similar game of pelota is played.

Handball, in Ireland, is one of the games under the umbrella of the Gaelic Athletic Association but there are Handball associations in countries all over the world. At the recent World Championships there were competitors from over 40 countries and there is optimism that the game will be given Olympic status in the near future.

Poyntzpass Ball Alley

Older residents always referred to the ball alley as “*the ball court.*”

There is no written evidence as to when, or by whom, Poyntzpass Ball Alley was built, but an oral tradition has it that it “*was built by the military.*” Exactly who or when is not known but we do know that, because of its strategic importance at times of conflict, a garrison has been stationed here at various times down the centuries to oversee movement between Armagh and Down. We know that Charles Poyntz commanded a body of troops here at the end of the 16th century and there were troops stationed here during other times of unrest.

Possibly more likely is the theory that it was members of the Royal Irish Constabulary who were responsible for its erection. It is certainly true that the game was popular with members of the force and they are credited with erecting ball alleys elsewhere.

The village of Poyntzpass dates from around the 1790's but there is some circumstantial evidence to suggest that the Ball Alley may even have been in existence before that date. The Ball Alley is located directly behind the building which was once the Court House as this map shows.

The front wall of the ball alley is actually the back wall of the building which was formerly the Court House and is now the Coffee Shop. This building has no back door or window – apart from a tiny window at the top of the wall.

This supports the theory that the ball alley pre-dates the building for surely, it is argued, had the building come first it would have had windows and a back door.

The ball alley is unique locally in that it is ‘common’ ground on which no rates or ground rent is paid. Griffith’s Valuation of 1864, refers to it as ‘*a ball court*’ and states that it ‘*is held in fee.*’ Access to the Ball Alley is by a path from Chapel Street and a bridge across what is known locally as ‘The Ball-alley River’. This access to the ball alley is a right-of-way.



An artists impress of the Country Games.



Scorer's Alcove.

Unlike the ball alleys in the picture earlier, Poyntzpass Alley is a 'box alley'. That is to say, it is enclosed and has a back wall. The side walls and back wall were built with locally quarried stone but the front wall is constructed of large uniform blocks of possibly sandstone which provide a good even surface from which the ball rebounds.

Poyntzpass Ball Alley is unique also in its shape and dimensions. It does not conform to any standard plan. It appears to have simply evolved over time.

The Game – as played locally.

Locally the game was almost exclusively played by males and could be singles or doubles. The game was played up to 21 points. There were three lines on the floor of the alley, a 'toss' or service line, a 'short' line and a 'long' line.

Having decided who served first, usually by playing a trial point with the winner having first serve, the game commenced with that player serving from the 'toss line'. The ball was bounced on the floor and then struck directly against the front wall. The rebound had to fall between the short and long lines to be a good serve. Three long, or short, serves in succession or a combination of any three foul serves and a 'hand was out'.

The west side wall of Poyntzpass Ball Alley has a unique 'kink' in it while the east wall is straight. This bend in the side wall means that the alley is narrower at the back wall than at the front. The serve could be



Dromantine Ball Alley.

angled in such a way as to come off one of the side walls – after hitting the front wall- and locals used the 'kink' to make returning a ball more difficult to return.

The ball was allowed to bounce once before it had to be returned. The return could hit a side wall and then the front wall but not the floor. The rally continued until one player failed to make a successful return.

Only the server could score a point. If the server lost the particular rally, his 'hand' was out and his opponent was 'in'. A player continued to serve until he lost a rally and his hand was out. In doubles the partners served alternately.

Because of the length of the ball alley, the back wall rarely came into play but provided that the ball had only bounced on the floor once before striking the back wall it could be returned.



Right of way leading to the ball alley.

Poyntzpass ball alley has another unique feature. This is an alcove for a marker to stand in and keep score.

The score was kept in multiples of five by means of traditional tally-marks - four vertical strokes with a diagonal line through them to signify five. However, another local method also based on fives was to draw a four sided box with a diagonal line. Scores were, in earlier times, marked in chalk but later it was more common to use a pencil to keep score on the alcove wall which was often covered with many scores of previous games.

Relations between those using the ball alley and neighbours have sometimes been difficult.

Over the years there have been times when the ball alley has been used a lot and other periods when it has largely been neglected. But there is none-the-less a latent interest there which is readily aroused if there is any threat to its future.

Around 1950 when one neighbour constructed a waste pipe on the inside wall of the ball alley, a committee of locals was formed, led by Alfred Hanna the local shoemaker. When the neighbour refused to remove the pipe, Alfred Hanna, a WW1 veteran, smashed the earthenware pipe with a sledge-hammer.

The proper ball called a 'clew' was used by serious players of the game but they were expensive and more often a good sponge ball was used. The clew ball called 'an elephant clew' because it had the print of an elephant on it. It was made of gutta percha type material and was much livelier than an ordinary sponge ball and so a game played with one was faster and more skilful as a result.



Plaque recording the last major renovation in 1943.

A common problem was that the ball would be sometimes mishit and go over the side wall into the adjoining yards. This was a constant source of annoyance to the players and irritation to the neighbours. This led to confrontations from time to time. In the late 1930's and early 1940's when there was a great deal of enthusiasm for the game, a neighbour called Jemmy Allen, was said to have trained a dog to pick up any ball which came over the wall into his yard.

At that time those playing would probably have been using the expensive 'clew' balls so the loss of balls going over the wall was a serious one. When asked, Jemmy wouldn't give back a ball. Players complained to the local police. When the police approached Jemmy Allen and asked him to hand over the balls, he refused to do so. This led to his being summoned to Tandragee Petty Sessions where he was fined and ordered to hand the balls back. It is said that several dozen balls were involved.

During the 1940's, various repairs and alterations were made, all by voluntary work, financed by public subscriptions. What amounted to a wire fence was erected on top of the side walls to help overcome the problem of lost balls and a viewing 'platform' was erected at the back wall. While the standard of play may have declined during the 1950's the alley was in constant use, not just for handball but for football, tennis, a form of squash, cricket and so on. A group of enthusiasts had a wire-netting roof erected in the 1960's which was again an attempt to solve the lost ball problem. When sewage pipes were laid along the backs of the houses in the mid-sixties part of the ball alley floor was dug up. It was poorly replaced and subsided making the floor partly un-useable.

In the 20 years after that the alley had been largely neglected and frequented by individuals for reasons other than sport. It was only when the late Tommy Morrow returned home in the 1980's that anyone

took an interest in it. Tommy had played handball there in his youth and knew that if used properly it could be a boon to the local community.

Tommy was greatly annoyed to see the dilapidated state of the ball alley and single handedly set about making it playable. He cleared the pathway from Chapel Street and re-surfaced it with gravel. The wooden bridge over the river had collapsed due to a



The Ball Alley today.

combination of age and vandalism so he constructed the current bridge himself. The walls had been covered with offensive graffiti so he had it painted over. Tommy got the alley back to a condition where it was useable for tennis etc. It was used for a while but for the last 20 years it has been derelict.

About ten years ago there was a plan to build a replica of an old ball alley at The Folk Museum at Cultra and one of those considered was our local alley. It seems that the scale of our alley was too big for their site.

So what does the future hold for this unique piece of our local heritage which is currently so run-down and neglected?

Perhaps the future is not as bleak as it seems. The Poyntzpass Development Group, who were responsible for the building of the community centre, have over the past several years been working away methodically with a view to renovating the ball alley and they have an imaginative vision of what it may become. Their efforts have been hampered by an individual who claims ownership of it. Hopefully this will be overcome and this historic structure will once more become a source of wholesome activity for the community.