

Sharon Slater (SS) and Matthew Potter (MP). Matthew Potter moved to Newtown at the age of 16 in 1974. Six generations of the Potter family lived in the area. He tells of general life in the area in the 1970s.

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SS: Today is the 7 June 2017 and I'm Sharon Slater and I'm interviewing Matthew Potter on life in the Newtown Clarina area and around the Shannon Estuary. So first Matt, when did you move to Newtown?

MP: I moved to Newton in 1974. My father was from Newtown but he had lived in Donegal for forty years, 1934 to 1974 but my mother was also from Limerick, she was from Mungret and they always wanted to return to live in Newtown. So in 1974 they managed to do so. So 1974, 25 September to be precise and I lived in Newton and then for fourteen years until 1988 when I got married and moved into Limerick city.

SS: So your grandparents lived in the Newtown and Mungret area?

MP: Not only my grandparents, the Potters have been living in Newtown since at least 1801 I say at least because the records don't go back any further than 1801 so my grandfather, well my father was born in Newtown John Potter my grandfather lived in Newton though he was born in Donegal. My great grandfather John Potter also was from Newtown and his father before him then, whose name escapes me now, he Garret Potter, sorry Garrett Potter was born in Newton 1807 and his father before him then was, oh his name escapes me. But so that got the number of generations then you're talking about six generations seven you can count them out anyway. Myself my father my grandfather and great grandfather, then you have Garrett and then you have your man so six generations, I'd be the sixth generation of Potter living in Newtown, my brother of course still lives there.

SS: And were their occupations in Newtown?

MP: You mean the Potters are people generally?

SS: Yeah the Potters.

MP: Potters were small farmers. The land owner in Newtown traditionally it was a family called Tuthill. T U T H I L L and they lived in 'Faha' which is in Clarina area as well but in 1859 the last of the Tuthills died out and the estate then past to Taylor's who lived in Palleskenry. So the Taylors were the landlords then of the area of Newtown until the beginning of the twentieth century then when all the tenants bought out their land. So the Potters would have been, as I say, tenants of the Tuthills and then of the Taylors. Their farm was comparatively small I think it was around 13, 15 acres something like that. It wasn't until my uncles inherited from my grandfather 1959 that they began to expand greatly in the sixty's and into the seventy's. But of course this is typical of people in Newton a great many of them would be small farmers or farm labourers.

SS: And that the house that they lived in was what kind of house was that?

MP: Well the Potters lived in a small thatched house until the early 1970s. I can barely remember being in it now around 1971 but so far as I can remember it was one story and it probably had, it definitely had a kitchen and it had a number of bedrooms I would imagine. It would be quite small but then it was in an advanced state of decay in the early seventies and my uncles then, these are my father's two brothers they never married they built a new house then adjoining the old one in the early 1970s. I think it was built around 1973, 74 that period and my two uncles lived there then with my grandmother until 1980 she died then and then my two uncles continued to live there in this particular house until their own deaths in 2013 and 2016 respectively.

SS: And your neighbours when you moved back to Newtown what, what were their names and what were their occupations?

MP: There was one, there was two, two houses adjoining us one was a man called Tommy Clarke and his wife. Tommy Clarke was an electrician he worked with the E.S.B. He was from county Meath but his wife was from Clara and then the adjoining house to him again was a man called Jimmy Collins and he worked in the cement factory which was a major THE major employer in the area that some could expand on in some length because when cement limited opened in 1938 it really transformed the whole area. Up to that you had the two major occupational groups that I already referred to I think briefly you had the farmers and then you had the farm laborers who worked for the bigger farmers. So a lot of the farmers were small farmers they didn't make a lot of money and the laborers were badly paid there was only a minority of large farmers but cement limited provided a lot of well paid employment and it really transformed the area in the forties, fifties, sixties, seventies when I came to live in Newtown and in 1974 a great many of my neighbors were working in the cement factory and they had very good pay and conditions were quite good and I can remember a sort of hearing, it was quite, looking back now it would be sort of quite quaint but one of the signs of this affluence in addition obviously to the fact that they were able to you know refurbish their houses and buy cars for a lot of them caravans Ballybunion and this of course the time was regarded as the height of affluence. So another neighbor of mine then would have been there was a big farmer then called Murphy, Matt Murphy and then I'm just thinking on our particular road there was only, there was actually only my uncles at the very end of the road, Matt Murphy the farmer, myself and my family, the two others I mentioned, Tommy Clarke, Jimmy Collins, then there was a farmer a small farmer called William McGregor. And then you went up the road further consider a distance there were no houses and then you had an elderly female farmer called Delia Purcell. But you see in Newtown there are two roads you probably know from your visits there now. You have the hill road which goes up about the top of the crest of the hill and down the other side and then you have the line road which goes around the side of the hill. That's where I lived, there were very few houses on the line road whereas the hill road had quite a few houses Now when you go to the end of the hill road where it joins on the line road again of course you continue on down and towards the bottom of Newtown you take, if you go on straight you come to Churchfield into which is where a very wealthy farmer called Donie O'Brien, or em Cory O'Brien lived in more recent times he's that relative Donie O'Brien lived there he was a nephew of some description I think. Now I think Donie O'Brien is deceased I think it's son Conor O'Brien is there, whom you interviewed already I think and instead if you then take the left instead of going straight on to Churchfield you took a left

and that brings you down to quite a lot of houses in Newtown and down at the very end of that road then there's a kind of a cluster of houses, this used to be called 'Carrigh clogour', not a separate townland but quite heavily populated down there and again you'd have there was fairly, let me see now again there would have been a couple of well to do farmers down there and there would have been then a number of people working in cement limited so I suppose, agriculture and the cement limited they were the two main employers in Newtown. Long before I came to live there and for afterwards as well. But the cement factory now of course the numbers employed there have declined very very sharply so it's no longer a major employer it employs about at its height and when I came to live in Newton in 1974 it employed five hundred now I understand it employs about forty full time staff and about forty who come in and contracts.

SS: And the houses on both of those roads how many of them were thatched?

MP: Oh in 1974, when I came to live in Newtown I don't think there were any of them at all thatched. There would have been a lot of laborers cottages of course that were built by the, in the nineteenth century they would have been built by the Board of Guardians and then later on they were built by the Board of Health and then from 1942 on wards they were built by the county council. So for example, I, my family and I lived in a labour's cottage from the 1930s. Then Tommy Clarke next door lived in a labour's cottage which was from it was from the time of De Valera's cottage we'd say so it was the 1880s, 1890s and the Jimmy Collins the same so that was three labour's cottages site by site. And then if you the farmer of course Matt Murphy he lived in a fairly large farmhouse. The other farmer then Willie McGregor he lived in a small farmhouse similar to what my uncles lived in. And then Miss Delia Purcell, she built a bungalow at one stage but I think she was the small little house as well. In the hill road then you had a variety of houses there was a few new bungalows of course that stages well in the 1970s but they proliferated then of course in succeeding decades there's a more new houses now in Newtown. I mean I don't know off what the population is now compared to what was in 1974 but there are obviously a lot more people living there now a lot more houses but my uncle's old house that they moved out of in the early seventy's that was thatched as far as I can remember it was I think yeah. And there was a house then in another part of Clarina in Carriag near Carraigunnel Castle that was and still is thatched but thatched houses would have been very very rare in the 1970s in Newtown and in the whole area in fact.

SS: Did you know any of the fishermen in the area when you were growing up?

MP: I did, I knew with people like Liam Coughlan and Peter Byrnes and strangely enough I was very unaware of the fishing industry in Newtown I knew people went fishing but I think my father didn't fish and none of my immediate family did, my uncles didn't so I thought it was more of the sort of a hobby I didn't realise it was actually fairly fairly important part of the economy that farmers, farm labourers well not so much the big farmers but the smaller farmers in particular the farm laborers and of course then later on the farm laborers became factory workers in cement limited they would have fished along with their jobs so it was actually quite an important part of their income. But I understand, I only discover this in recent years, that my granduncle was actually a fisherman his name was Mick Brinn, Michael Brinn he would have been my grandmother's brother because my grandfather obviously was Potter but my grandmother on my father's side my father's mother was Brinn was her surname B R I N N and her brother was Mick Brinn and he, he lived in the house by the way that we subsequently moved into in 1974 and he was his main job I think was he was sort of a

farm labour but he also fished so I said I was a common enough pattern I would imagine farm labour plus fishermen, small farmer plus fisherman, cement factory worker plus fisherman. Fishing as far as I know wasn't, I don't use any such thing as a full time fisherman like you have a place a Killybegs or something it was supplementary to their income but it was important part of their income of course you know.

SS: And was there a small primary school in the area?

MP: Yes. There were two of them actually they've been built by my, by William Monsell of Tervoe and they were still there in the 1970s. One of them was for the boys and one of the girls and they were in close proximity to each other and they were built in the 1850s I think. They were, I didn't go to the myself because I was sixteen when I came to live in Limerick, my brother did briefly though and they were replaced in 1976 by the modern primary school Ballybrown School which adjoins Ballybrown church and that was opened in 1976. So that was a big change from these two little old schools that were you know completely old fashioned and I understand there were quite cold and sanitary facilities weren't particularly good and they were too small so these were replaced then by this new primary school there was another little old primary school up in Lurga up at the other end of the parish. It was replaced as well by this Ballybrown school.

SS: And the same with the church facilities, what were the...

MP: The church is the same one that's still there Ballybrown Church. Newton and Clarina are actually only, Newtown of course is only a townland in Clarina but Clarina is only half a parish. The parish is actually Patrickswell and Ballybrown. Which is ironic from the point of view of the hurling fraternity because of course Ballybrown and Patrickswell are two bitter rivals on the field of hurling but there actually at either end of the one parish. Ballybrown in the north and Patrickswell in the south. So in the parish when I came to live in it you had two churches you had Ballybrown church which cater for the Ballybrown side and then you had a little small church up in Patrickswell called Luriga church and it was replaced then around 1977 or 8, much the same time was the school by a modern church in Patrickswell and those are still two churches in the area. Now there was a significant minority of Protestants in the area Church of Ireland for the most part they did the Church of Ireland church though in the area had closed many many, or at least, I'm not sure when it closed but it was definitely by time I arrived anyway in 1974 I think it closed in the sixty's I could check that. But, in those days course everybody in the area went to mass and not only was mass going important from the religious point of view but was a great social event. Now my parents didn't particularly like Ballybrown church so when I got my first car in 1980 we started going to mass and town and we hardly ever went to Ballybrown afterwards but that's the church that is still there it was built in the 1830s. And as I say the church in Patrickswell then in the 1970s.

SS: And the GAA was an important part of the community?

MP: Oh yes yes it was the major. I'm still remains the major focal point in the whole area. I didn't play myself and had little or no interest in it neither did my brother. My uncles I believe were interested I discovered that more recent years but in general just about everyone in the in Newtown

in the holding area was involved to some extent in Ballybrown GAA which had been established depending on your point of view I think it claims to be established in 1890 but I think it sort of came and went over the years but it was very important in the area and remains very important and I suppose you could say Newtown and Clarina were a typical of rural Irish area of the period and that the main focus of identity would have being the Catholic Church, the GAA and of course politics would be important as well I mean it would have, Newtown and Clarina would generally been considered an area that was very stronghold of the Fiance Fail party and again it was very interesting from a sociological point of view do you, you could actually measure the support for Fiance Gael in many instance by the size the farmer. The big farmers were Fiance Gael and of course other, there was a sprinkling of other people as well whereas the smaller farmers and the labourers stroke factory workers would have been Fiance Fail and so a lot of people would say that was a kind of a triumvirate really the church, the Catholic Church, GAA, Fiance Fail they were kind of, and many many people in the area where members often supporters of all three.

SS: What other amenities were in the area?

MP: Well you would have had a soccer club in the area which again I wasn't involved in it. It's called, it still exists course called 'Breska Rovers'. I think it was established in the 1970s. And the, the Pubs were very important now there was no pub but actually in Newtown at all but the locals who went to pubs they would have gone to two locations there are the two pubs back in the Ferrybridge there's Kerans on the Clarina side of the Ferrybridge and the Bucket on the Kildimo side and those two still exist but strangely enough in Mungret then where the other location for the pubs was for the patronized locally there were two pubs Mungret as well namely the Westward Ho and Shanahan's both of them now are closed which is an interesting comment on the times. And of course then the GAA club of course also had a bar, still has a bar I suspect and I'm not, course I haven't lived here you know for need thirty years but I suspect now that the GAA club has become more important because the two pubs in Mungret have closed down. And then of course there was a Macra na Ferma which I was someone that was heavily involved and that was I suppose you could call it a youth club for people living in rural areas and the name of course Macra na Ferma means sons of course and presumably daughters as well of the farm but in the 1980s Ballybrown Macra Na Ferma had been established in 1949 and it actually folds up in 1999 just after its fiftieth anniversary strangely enough but it was very very popular in the nineteen, in the seventies but I didn't get involved until the eighties and then it went into decline in the 1990s. I liked Macra because I wasn't into sport but it provides a number of other activities such as quizzes and drama and variety shows and debating. And of course then they had dances and discos and all that kind of stuff so it was just great really you know and it was the main means by which I got to know my neighbours then. We'd come to Newtown when I was sixteen and then I got to school in the Crescent, I had gone to school to primary school and then because I wasn't involved in any of the sports in the area I was at a bit of a lost then until I got involved in the Macra na Ferma and then I got to know a load of people with whom I'm still friendly.

SS: What was the main form of transport?

MP: Motor cars. There was and remains a very poor bus service I don't know whether it's worse or better now than it was in when I was living there I imagine is probably worse, it certainly, it was quite poor. Now to be fair I mean it's hard to provide a bus service into every nook and cranny in county Limerick or in rural Ireland in general. So for example when I was going to school I used to have to get a bus at Tervoe which is about a mile and half from where I lived. It's where Hayes shop

is. And then I used to have to get off the bus at Tervoe I think and get another bus in Clarina and that brought me in the town I was going to the Crescent Comprehensive but because the bus service was quite poor everybody had a car. Now a few people didn't have cars, my father never drove a car but without a car it was almost impossible to get anywhere so when I bought my first car in 1980 it was a transformative moment for me and my family. You know we were able to go to all sorts of places then you know in and out of town no bother I was able to get in and out to work. Before I got the car I started work in for Limerick Corporation in 1978 so I used to get lifts, yeah I used to get lifts in and out which was awkward. But when I learned to drive then it transformed situation so the car was and remains to this day that by far the most important mode of transport. There were more people on bicycles of course in the seventy's than there would be now it would be actually very dangerous now it's a bicycle it was dangerous enough then as well of course but I cycled for a period as well I was quite a bad cyclist but I did cycle into town a few times and cycled here and there. But em. Horses and cars were almost gone in the 1970s, was just anyone in Newtown that horse and car, if they did I can't remember them. There was a few locals alright who went to the creamery actually there's something now, there was a creamery of course in Clarina village and oh sorry, near Clarina village, and people went up to creamery and but the vast bulk of them even 1974 were using tractors you know I think the transition from horses to motor transport had occurred by 1974 I'd say probably in the sixty's and seventy's I'd say it had been. I'd say the 1960s was the main period when that transformation occurred.

SS: And the farmers what was their main product?

MP: Oh a lot of them would have been dairy farmers, cows, but some of them had reared cattle for beef as well there was little tillage in the area because of course county Limerick was always traditionally a pastoral. Grazing sort of farming agriculture. And that remains the same to the present but even those people who weren't involved in farming I mean people in Newtown and Clarina would have had a very strong self-identification as being from the countryside a lot of them would not have gone into the city very often at all only when necessary so even though they were only seven miles from Limerick city in many respects they were a world away.

SS: And did you go down to the Shannon often?

MP: Did I go down? No, never actually never of all. I can ever remember being down at the river Shannon and I have, I don't think I've ever, I can't even remember being down there at all in my whole life which I've learnt in more recent years was, is quite unusual but then I had no interest in fishing I don't like water I don't like boats I'm afraid of water everything so. I have actually never been down there. I don't know how common place that would be. But I was speaking to a few people in Newtown in recent years when all of the interest developed over the building of the monument to Newtown to the, you know the sailors, the fisherman's or the sailors haggard and all that and apparently it's not, more people than I had expected were unfamiliar the Shannon but I certainly never have been I've never been on a boat on the Shannon or anything like that.

SS: Is there anything else that you can, that you think is of importance in the Newtown area?

MP: Well I suppose I mean these be things that would be applicable to the whole country I mean when I came to Newtown first and Clarina first I mean a lot of people left school early and start work straight away now everybody virtually everybody goes on now to finish school gets the Leaving Cert and a great many now go to college. I suppose more women are working now as well. At the time I

didn't know any better of course or I didn't notice it but I suppose it was a very, while it was a society in transition it was probably old fashioned by modern day standards you know. There weren't many women working outside the home my mother didn't the woman next door, none of them, I'm just thinking now, no no some of them would have worked before they got, the younger women would've worked before they got married alright but then they stopped after getting married. And I said everybody, everybody went to Mass in those days so I suppose you could say that when I came to Newtown in 1974 it was, it already undergone big changes I mean people sometimes tend to think that when they were growing up like it was still an unchanging going back to the time of, before the famine but of course I mean I already mentioned the transition from animal power to mechanization on the farm everything I mean you know for example. Even in 1974 most people had, virtually everyone had a television they would have had washing machines they would have had electric cookers you know that transition was well underway in the in the seventy's although a lot of people are still using coal fires and open fires and stuff but I would guess myself that the big changes really began to happen I'd say after the Second World War fifty's sixty's and everything you know but from the perspective nowadays I suppose Newtown in the seventy's and eighty's was it was quite old fashioned but at the time of course people thought it was, they were very conscious the fact that they were much more advanced than their parents and their grandparents you know. And em. What a supposed the big changes that occurred since I first came from Newtown is there's been a large population increase a lot more people. A lot more houses have been built larger houses people moved into the area too. That's something now I actually didn't mention. You know up until the 1970s the same families that were there for generations you know as can be verified if you look at the Griffiths valuation of 1851 and you'd be surprised to see so many names are still the same but in the 1970s since the 1970s lots of newcomers have moved in built houses and so on you know so so I suppose there's been a lot changes in Newtown in the last forty odd, forty three years since I first came to live there.

SS: Thank you very much for taking the time to take part in this interview.