

## Early Years

When the GAA was founded in November 1884 the games of hurling and football had long been in decline. Already in 1857 J.T. Campion, the Kilkenny Young Irelander, had deplored the passing of the old sports. Archbishop Croke did likewise almost thirty years later in his famous letter to the founders of the GAA. Football was certainly the more popular game in Kilkenny at the time the GAA was founded. The first reported matches played in Kilkenny after the founding of the GAA were football matches. And it is generally accepted that the first football matches played under GAA rules anywhere in Ireland took place in county Kilkenny on 15 February 1885 when Callan played Kilkenny on the Fair Green in Callan and St. Patrick's played St. Canice's on the grounds of the latter. Both matches ended scoreless.

Hurling had retained its popularity in places such as Mooncoin, Callan, Tullaroan, Castlecomer and Kilkenny. Bishop Moran of Ossory once protested to Archbishop Croke of Cashel about hurling being played near Callan on the borders of Kilkenny and Tipperary on Sundays. The archbishop penned a diplomatic reply. In the first hurling championship of 1887 only Tullaroan, Mooncoin, Castlecomer and the Workingmen's Club in Kilkenny city fielded teams, but Callan and Crosspatrick were not long in making their presence felt. Football, though, was to maintain its dominant position in the county for quite some time.

This was also the case in the parish of Dunnamaggin and its hinterland. It was 1889 before Kells hosted its first hurling championship match - a game between Callan and Tullaroan in Shirley's lawn. Another two decades would pass before hurling teams from the parish began to compete in championships and tournaments.

## A Football Club in Kells

The first club to be established in the parish was Kells Football Club. It was founded probably in late 1886 or early January 1887. The club was represented at the first county GAA convention held in Kilkenny on 30 January 1887 by Rory O'Gorman of Newtown and James Shirley of Garnaman. This was a Dunnamaggin-Danesfort venture with club members drawn from both sides of the King's River. Kells was in an unusual situation. While its chapel, built about 1800 by a Franciscan friar Patrick Power, is situated in the townland of Garnaman and thus in Danesfort parish, the village, school and most of the shops and public houses are in the parish of Dunnamaggin. The chapel changed hands at least four times over the years. It was in Dunnamaggin in 1813, Danesfort in 1817, Dunnamaggin again around 1837 and finally Danesfort about 1846. Given the position of the chapel and village, Kells was the natural focal point then as it is now for many living north of the King's River.

## The First Championship

Kells Football Club was quickly into its stride and took part in the first county senior football championship, that of 1887. To prepare for the championship Kells played two practice matches against Tullaroan. The first match was played in Tullaroan on Sunday 6 February before an "exceedingly large" attendance". Patrick Geary, "the energetic captain of the Kilkenny G.A.A.", acted as referee, and his "rulings", the Kilkenny Journal noted, "were unanimously approved of". After a well contested game Tullaroan won by three points to nil.

A return match was played two weeks later in the "picturesque grounds" of Kells, "in view of the old castles". Patrick Geary again refereed the game. Kells had the better of the exchanges on this occasion, and at the call of time the score was three points and six forfeits (65s) for Kells, one forfeit for the visitors.

In final preparation for the first championship game against Kilmanagh a practice match was held in Kells with upwards of one hundred present. The captain Rory O'Gorman and vice-captain John Long picked the teams. The game lasted two hours and afterwards the twenty-one man team was chosen for the championship game against Kilmanagh that was to be played in Callan. The report in the Kilkenny Journal of 30 March noted that "The men from neath the shadow of the ancient castles had it all their own way in this match". Kilmanagh could perhaps claim that they were put under undue pressure before the game when Kells objected to three of their players who allegedly were not "bona fide members of the club" and were thus not entitled to compete for the championship. Kells won the game by four goals to nil. The club's first championship run ended in the second round in which they lost to Mooncoin on the scoreline of 1-1 and six forfeit points to a solitary point for Kells.

The team that played for Kells was made up mostly of men from Danesfort parish: Rody Gorman (captain), P Long, Michael Long, John Long, Patrick Nolan, Patrick Murphy, James Murphy, James Hughes, Patrick Watson, John Langton, Patrick Langton, Patrick Holohan, Edmond Neill, James Corcoran, James Keeffe, Richard McBride, Richard Shirley, Pierce Murphy, John Brennan, R.Cody and James Neill.

On the wider front dissension that had for a time wracked the Association culminated in November 1887 in a serious split at a crowded and stormy convention in Thurles. Kells seems to have taken the side of the "physical force party" which held its convention in the Workingmen's Club in Kilkenny. At the convention Mr Cass of Kells was elected treasurer, while Richard Shirley of Garnaman, Patrick Murphy of Kells and James Millea of Kilmoganny were elected to the committee that also included Henry J. Meagher, father of Lowry. Archbishop Croke and many others throughout the country opposed the radical nationalists who had gained control of the Association that had begun its life as a non-political organization. The split was fortunately healed at the "reconstruction" convention held in Thurles in January 1888.

A new parish rule was adopted by the GAA in 1888. This rule stated that "a club may be formed in any parish by persons residing or being employed therein". In an attempt to enforce the rule Kilkenny's county committee decided that prior to playing championship games the captains of the opposing teams were obliged to exchange lists of the names and addresses of their players, these subsequently to be sent to the county secretary. The rule was to have a major bearing on the fortunes of Kells in the football championship that year, for while they survived an objection from Tullaroan whom they had beaten in the first round, they did not survive a similar objection from the

second round opponents, Mooncoin. The problem was that their team was drawn from oth sides of the King's River.

Kells whose colours were navy and cream also took part in a number of tournaments that year, including a "monster tournament" in Kilkenny organized by the Confederation Club for the erection of monuments over the patriots Terence Bellew MacManus and Colonel John O'Mahoney and others. Kells played Maryborough (Portlaoise), each lining out a man short. Four bands were in attendance. The Maryborough team was no mean combination, as it went on to contest the All-Ireland final of the following year, but Kells proved the stronger on this occasion. The team was: Rody Gorman (captain), Ned Corr, James Hughes, Pat Murphy, John Langton, James Murphy, Patrick Langton, Ned Cody, John Brennan, Pierce Murphy, Pat Nolan, Pat Long, James Corcoran, Ned Neill, John Carroll, Michael Long, Ned Long, John Keefe, James McBride and John Mullins, field umpire Patrick Delahunty. James Brennan and John Long were the goal umpires.

#### A Championship won and lost

Kells had its best year in the championship in 1889. It was, alas, to be dogged by controversy. Before the championship began the county committee, at its meeting in March, passed a resolution warning all clubs competing for championship honours that "if any roughness or foul play be practised by members of their team during actual play that we will consider it our duty to enforce our authority so far as to prohibit said teams from further competing". They were determined to have the championship played "in an orderly and Gaelic spirit".

The sporting year began for Kells on an auspicious note with their successful staging on 31 March of three games in the senior football championship. Kells played their first game of the championship on 14 April in Thomastown where they beat Templeorum (John Mandeville's). They met Ballyhale in the second round, but lost by 0-2 to 0-0. Kells objected on the grounds of rough play and the county board ordered a replay. The game had to be refixed owing to the death of one of the Ballyhale players, and a second time owing to the illness! of four Kells players. It was finally fixed for 20 July in Thomastown. Ballyhale did not turn up. Kells lined out and took the game.

Meanwhile Kells had hosted two major fixtures on 19 May in "real summer weather", a football game between two city teams, Thomas Larkins and Commercials, and a hurling game between Callan and Tullaroan. Thousands occupied the lawn in front of Shirley's residence in which the area for playing was marked out. Impromptu platforms were erected at the sides, and these as well as the lines were thronged by an immense number of persons who, the correspondent of the Journal reported, did not obey as well as they might have done the requests of the stewards to give a free field to the combatants. T.J. Shirley refereed both games.

The county football final of 18 August at the Commercial ground on the Dublin road saw Kells facing Thomas Larkins. Kells proved much the stronger combination on the day and ran out easy winners by 3-5 to 0-2. Kells had apparently won their first senior football championship. The team on duty that day was: J. Keefe, E. Corr, J. Murphy, P. Murphy, J. Hughes, J. Hughes, J. Langton, Patrick Langton, P. Long, E. Long, M. Long, J. Bride, E. O' Neill, J. Corcoran, C. Kavanagh, J. Mullins M. Day, E. Cody, P. Nolan, J. Bergin, R. Kenahan.

But Kells were to suffer a grievous disappointment. Ballyhale re-entered the fray, lodging an objection with the county committee against their decision in the second round game and demanding to be allowed to challenge Kells for the championship. The county committee ordered that the final be replayed between Kells and Ballyhale. Kells refused to play and Ballyhale were awarded the championship. The controversy continued in the columns of the Kilkenny Journal and Munster Express. Letters from the secretaries of both clubs appeared in the Journal and poems from two supporters. The controversy rumbled on with both teams claiming to be county champions, and Ballyhale did not play in the Leinster championship that year.

The year 1889 also saw a more severe split in the Association with the IRB once again gaining control. This led to strong criticism from the Catholic hierarchy and the clergy who up to then had been strong supporters of the GAA. Archbishop Croke refrained from any public denunciation and even continued to encourage and assist the Association. In many areas in the country local priests continued to support their clubs. In Kilkenny in May 1890 the police reported clerical involvement in eleven of its forty-eight clubs.

In company with many other counties Kilkenny did not affiliate to the Central Council that year. The county hurling and football championships of 1890 were, however, completed. Both were played in Kells in July of that year, probably because it was a central location for all four teams.

By the end of 1890 the number of clubs in Kilkenny had fallen to eighteen. The bitter split in the ranks of the Home Rule party in early 1891 had severe countrywide repercussions for the GAA. Parnell was one of its original patrons, and received strong support from leading members of the GAA who were also in the IRB. No competitions were held in Kilkenny in 1891 and 1892 but some challenge games were played. As elsewhere the GAA in Kells does not seem to have been very active. While hurling and football were languishing, athletics were thriving and cricket made a comeback on the local scene.

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