



Kilburn in North London has been dubbed the 33rd county of Ireland because of all the Irish living there. Now more and more young Irish are flocking there to find jobs, only to discover that there is nowhere to live. MARK PIGGOTT and MARTIN McNAMARA report on one house which offers sanctuary. Photographs by JUSTIN LEIGHTON.

During the next 12 months an estimated 20,000 Irish people will be making their way to England. Many will head for London, it being one of the few areas left in the country enjoying relative prosperity and job opportunities. A generation of Irish men and women went over to England in the 1950s and found work and money; now their children are making the same journey. Many who arrive ask for “Adigs”, a term their parents used, not one that exists in London anymore. The property ownership boom of the last few years, the accelerating increase in house prices, the general decrease in rented property and a huge influx of outsiders has created an estimated 240,000 homeless in London.

Kilburn, traditionally the most Irish area of London, is still a place to which new arrivals gravitate. The Conway Hostel off the Kilburn High Road attempts to help young Irish men through their first difficult months of finding work and suitable accommodation. The hostel contains 100 beds and a kitchen, TV lounge and large garden to the rear. Unlike the stereotyped image of urban hostels Conway House is a light and airy building, modernised in the 1970s, and clean. To stay there, guests pay £50 a week plus £9 for a morning and evening meal. Most have their own room. The front and side of the building are monitored by video cameras. The shell of a *telefon* box stands by the entrance, a present from friends in Dublin. Irish street signs have been erected on the outside of the building.

At the reception desk two young Irish men are trying to get accommodation. One has a cut above his left eye. They have been in London a week, staying in rented rooms and have run out of money. Their landlord demanded the rent, beat them up and took their last savings. Having slept rough they made their way to the Conway Hostel. The receptionist hands them a form each and leads them to an interview room.

Father Frank Ryan is a balding, stockily built man in his mid forties. Originally from Portlaoise, he has run the hostel, which is owned by a Catholic housing association, for the last 12 years. He is dressed to match the sunny day in red shorts, white tee-shirt and aviator sunglasses. He chews gum continuously

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as he explains the difficulties of finding a place to live in London. “The problem in London isn’t work, it’s accommodation. Young people don’t realise that coming over. Some have jobs but nowhere to live, they’re sleeping on park benches and at Euston station. Yet when they write home and tell people they’ve got a job, it encourages others to come over too.” The average age of the inhabitants of Conway House is 21. Some come directly from Ireland with a letter from their parish priest; others have been in London for months, sometimes years. Theoretically, people are allowed to stay for six months.



Paul Dunne and Anthony Clarke are 19-year-olds from Dundalk. They heard about the place through friends. They arrived over six weeks ago and both have a job. Damien Carroll from Tipperary has been living in England for a year, but has only been in the hostel for four months. “I had a factory job and got kicked out of my rooms, so I came here because there was nowhere else to live.” Along with many others, he now takes labouring jobs which can earn £20-25 a day. Many building firms come to the hostel in search of workers, but Father Ryan does his best to ensure his guests aren’t exploited as cheap labour. “Five years ago a lad I know was earning £120 a week on the buildings. He’s still earning £120 a week but the cost of living has almost doubled.”

Prices for bed-sits vary, but the minimum a prospective tenant can expect to pay is around £50 per week. Many places demand a few weeks’ deposit and once a bed-sit is advertised it goes almost the same day.

The young men we spoke to described Kilburn as “the 33rd county of Ireland.” This latest influx of Irish males into the area has caused resentment among some of the local youths. Conway House has suffered four attacks in the last 18 months. Father Ryan is cautious in his explanation of the conflict. “Our lads can, in a sense, raise the temperature round here. They’re very active young fellows and that puts pressure on the local girls. This can cause problems. Local people have taken out some of their frustrations on this place here, as a result,” he says.

We talk about recent attacks on the hostel. “The local kids have employment and housing problems themselves and part of the way they express their frustration is by being aggressive towards the Irish. We find this unacceptable and they will be brought to book if they do it again.”

The residents of the hostel are more direct in their description of what happened. “A bunch of skinheads came in and started attacking people and shouting ‘Get out you Paddy bastards’,” they explain. On the last occasion a month ago the Irish youths gave chase and one 17-year old was stabbed. He has since returned to Ireland. The reaction from local police has not pleased Father Ryan. “We have brought it to the attention of the police, the council and the local people. Nobody seems to be interested. The longer a thing like this drags on the worse it will get. Maybe they feel they don’t have the resources to deal with it.”

One measure of protection against the attacks has been the installation of video cameras around the outside of the building. Conway House residents do not take the violence lying down either. “I think the police would take us as fairly confident at holding our own ground,” adds Father Ryan. The local

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chief inspector agrees. “They’re not innocent little choirboys. You go down to Biddy Mulligans and see what they get up to,” says Chief Inspector Norman Barker of West Hampstead CID. He is meeting Father Ryan shortly to discuss the incidents.

Conway House receives far more requests for accommodation than it can handle. But Father Ryan does not believe the answer to the problem is just to build more hostels. “When kids come over from Ireland they are coming to a city which has a lot of problems. I don’t think they ought to expect any preferential treatment. They deserve equal opportunities with everybody.”



* Even the street names are in Irish in Kilburn

He refuses to either condone or condemn this influx of youth. “I don’t give advice. I don’t make decisions for other people. Sometimes when I see some lads that have been living rough, not getting enough to eat, and they come here I say ‘Now maybe things weren’t too bad at home after all. Didn’t you make a mistake coming over?’ And none of them I have ever spoken to, despite their sleeping on park benches and being kicked around have ever said they made a mistake in coming. They would say ‘I never thought it was this bad,’ or they’d say ‘Well, I think it’s going to get better, because I can see other people working. I’m going through a bad patch, I’ll get over it.’ And sometimes they come back a month later and they’ve got accommodation and a job.”

Many arrivals land with £200- 300 in their pockets, and still find themselves in trouble after a couple of weeks. The cost of living is high and in some areas the period between the initial unemployment claim and the first Giro cheque is at least six weeks. Many Irish claims are further complicated because of a lack of proper identification, such as a passport, for instance.

If accommodation in London causes problems for single people, families face even greater difficulties. “I can’t see sense in families coming over. There is no accommodation for them. There was a case recently where the council had to put a family of four into a hotel and it was costing the ratepayer £200 a night. That’s £50 for a three-year-old child, sharing with a six-year-old and the mum and dad. That is a serious burden on any ratepayer. The conditions that they have to live in are appalling. A lot of families are suffering needlessly. I was talking to a doctor recently in Paddington, who was very surprised that these people should find the conditions they are living in more acceptable than they are back home. He could perhaps understand people coming from third world countries like Bangladesh, but not Ireland.”

In the light of the accommodation crisis, Father Ryan is pessimistic about the future for Irish people seeking a decent life in London. Conway House provides comfortable, reasonably priced rooms for young Irish men, but these are the lucky ones. “We don’t need this publicity, we don’t want any more young people. Last year in June we had 60 enquiries for rooms, this June we had 240. We can’t cope with any more.”

Ends