

# North Mayo Heritage Centre Mayo Heritage

Newsletter

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YouTube



National  
Heritage Week  
A Heritage Council programme

12<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> August 2023

North Mayo Heritage Centre

Feature article  
**The Old School Desk**  
Sure to evoke lots of memories!



The  
North Mayo  
Heritage  
Centre

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Cover images from Vanishing Ireland (Dessie Moore) and Forgotten Lives fb

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# The Old School Desk

How many hours of your life did you spend at a school desk?

**S**chool desks evoke many memories, some good, some not so good!

In 1950s and 1960s Ireland wooden school desks were common. Made from oak with a cast iron frame and a hinged wooden seat, the desk could accommodate 2 or even 3 pupils if necessary. The design of desks varied slightly but for the most part, the top of the desk was slightly sloped downwards towards the pupil to facilitate reading and writing. It lifted up to reveal a shelf underneath for lunch, a school bag or anything else which needed to be hidden from the *múinteoir* (teacher).

Located on the top sloped surface were an ink well and pencil holder. With sliding covers, the brass holders for the inkwells could be flicked open and closed ... much to the annoyance of the teacher. Porcelain inkwells were common in some desks. One pupil had the task of filling all the inkwells each morning but ink spillages were unavoidable and despite cleaning them up, the ink could still be seen (and often tasted off the hands).

One could learn more than their lessons at the desk - the numerous engravings or graffiti expertly written or etched into the wood provided a welcome distraction from the boring lessons in the classroom.

We wonder, though, how many times have pupils stared down onto the desk after being humiliated for being a “dunce” or injured by a teacher’s cane or a flying “*glantóir*” (black board wipe)? How many times did it harbour a pupil who would just sit in the desk at break time on their own due to being bullied or ostracised in the playground? Or how often did it have pupils shivering from the cold while the large open fire heated the top of the classroom?

In contrast who remembers trying to hide in their desks to disguise fits of uncontrollable giggles at the most inappropriate time perhaps during a visit from the Bishop or *Cigire* (Inspector).

Then there was the eager anticipation of cocoa at lunchtime when the desk became the dining table when the delicious hot school cocoa was provided to schools in the 1960s.

And not forgetting times, when pupils, with elbows on the desks and head in hands, dreamt of what the future would hold for them. Reading and writing did not come easy to everybody, but many have achieved great success in life, nevertheless!

The older generation recall being lucky to have a desk in a classroom at all, as prior to that school was often held in barns and pupils sat on whatever was available.

Over the years, the school desk went through many different changes. Some desks were very basic consisting of a table and a seat while later variations included having metal storage racks underneath the desk or cubby-hole style storage space in the side.

In the classrooms of today, desks come in many different shapes, sizes and designs with most made of plastic consisting of a table with separate chair for each pupil.

There is more to the old desks than simply being a piece of furniture; they were of cultural significance in rural Ireland and if they could talk, many secrets they would divulge!

Sources:  
*Dúchas.ie*  
*Forgotten Ireland*  
*Vanishing Ireland*



National Heritage Week  
(12<sup>th</sup> – 20<sup>th</sup> August 2023)  
celebrates Ireland’s  
cultural, built and natural  
heritage.

It brings together  
volunteers, community  
groups and heritage  
enthusiasts to share their  
experience, knowledge,  
culture and practices.  
The main aim of the week  
is to promote awareness of  
our heritage, thereby  
encouraging its  
conservation and  
preservation.

To celebrate Heritage  
Week we launched a  
**Photographic  
Competition** and invited  
photos which captured  
“Heritage in Mayo”.

We received a broad range  
of images, submitted from  
people all over the world,  
which each captured  
heritage in Mayo, in their  
own way.

Our guest Judge is now  
deliberating and the winner  
will be announced during  
the coming week ... so stay  
tuned!

**Ever wondered about  
the origin of your  
surname?**

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