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The history of
Handball
in Ireland

Cover image: The ball court, Swinford
Source: Milton series post card by Woolstone
Bros, London



Sketches of the handball alley
in Swinford, in 1905. Source:
Jack Butler Years Collection of Papers

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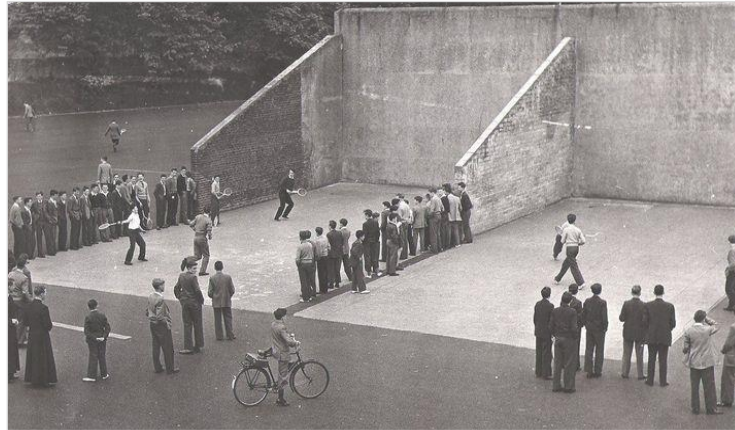
The History of Handball in Ireland

Handball is an ancient Irish game with the earliest written records appearing in the Statutes of Galway in 1527 forbidding locals from playing the game against walls in the town.

By the 1800s handball had grown in popularity and was played in almost every town and village in Ireland.

The handball alley consisted of two short side walls on either side of the playing wall, early examples signalled the introduction of side-wall play into what was previously a one-wall game, a practice credited to the playing of handball on royal tennis courts in London throughout the 1700s. In later versions of the alley these walls were lengthened and the height of the playing wall was raised, leading to the familiar three-walled alley which became standard by the early twentieth century. These alleys were to be found in rural and urban settings where they were to endure for a further 50 years.

With advances in concrete construction the inclusion of a fourth wall became popular which allowed for a viewing terrace, changing rooms or a void space. A small proportion were later internalised with the addition of a roof.



Blackrock college Handball Alley
(image courtesy of Blackrock College Archives)

Throughout its history handball was associated with large, often day-long gatherings, these included people waiting for a game, the spectators and those engaged in betting and match-making activities.

With the introduction of the high enclosing walls gatherings became more formalised and the alley's use changed to include Sunday dances, card playing, the hiring of casual and seasonal labour and also as a meeting place during the 1798 Rebellion and the Civil War.

From the 1880s to the 1970s handball was a popular sport and many religious and military institutions, as well as most secondary schools contained multiple handball alleys. These tended to be built side by side, back to back or in rows. Handball was a popular pastime in the area around Charlestown with three-walled alleys in the villages of Bushfield, Hagfield, and Kilgarriff to name a few.

By 1927 a handball club was formed and the committee organised the building of a full standard handball court.

The ballcourt backwall, distinct from the open three-wall handball alleys, necessitated the erection of a galley and at a packed gathering the ballcourt was opened in 1931 by Rev. Dr. Morrisroe, Bishop of Achonry. During the 1930s and 40s Charlestown was renowned for its first-class handballers. In 1947 a new handball club was formed with its members achieving great success.

Over time attitudes have changed towards the sport of handball resulting in its decline. It no longer plays a part in the focus of rural communities with many alleys being demolished or their purpose changed. Today, handball is mainly an indoor sport with the relics of the old handball alleys still visible in local communities.

Sources:
yourirish.com
historyireland.com
mayo-ireland.ie



Extract of the Ordnance Survey Letters of 1838

A brief history of
ATTYMACHUGH
(*Áit Tighe Mhic Aodha*,
meaning site of MacHugh's house).

Located in the north of the parish of Killasser. It contains 542 acres, 2 roods, 33 perches, including 3 acres, 2 roods, 38 perches of water. The property of Mathew Gallagher.

It is let in farms to 8 tenants at will at £8 per farm yearly. Co. Cess, 2 shillings 6d per acre annually. Soil, poor and rocky, producing oats and potatoes. Bog plenty. Tenants, all Catholics.



Old Handball alley, Attymachugh, Co. Mayo (image Dick Heraty)