

A HISTORICAL SKETCH OF THE COMING OF ELECTRICITY TO CONNEMARA

Written by Leslie Lyons

As was the case in all houses in the Oughterard area, light was provided by oil lamps some of which hung on the wall and had a round mirror at the back. Of course this light was not very good and in March 1938 my father went to Ballynahinch Castle to see a turbine which was used there to generate electricity for the hotel. When it was discovered that a turbine would cost as much as £200 it was decided to purchase a petrol engine / generator instead. This was ordered in Galway in October 1938 and a small galvanized shed known as "the engine house" was built to accommodate it. When everything was in place Jack Cleggett, the local electrician, came and spent two days wiring and installing light fittings so that there were eight lights working on 7th December, 1938. This engine charged batteries and the direct current was used to light a number of twelve volt bulbs.

During the war years oil lamps and candles were again put to use. It appears that Cleggett installed some kind of wind charger in April 1942 and for a time this provided good light except when there was little or no wind.

My parents had visited Ardnacrusha power station when on their honeymoon in Co Clare in January 1934. The power plant there had been officially opened on 22nd July 1929 and was regarded then as one of the largest engineering projects of its day serving as a model for similar projects in other parts of the world. Having seen that power station, my father had not abandoned the idea of generating electricity by water, and he spent some time constructing a dam with a sluice gate on a small stream near our home. A wooden water wheel was installed in March 1946 but the project was never completed since there was not a sufficient flow of water to keep the wheel turning. The remains of that dam can still be seen, as well as a ratchet and handle for opening and closing the sluice gate. I am told that my father also considered locating the water wheel at the waterfall

on the outflow from Tawnagh Lake but this idea did not meet with the approval of the local fishery inspector as it might interfere with the free passage of fish.

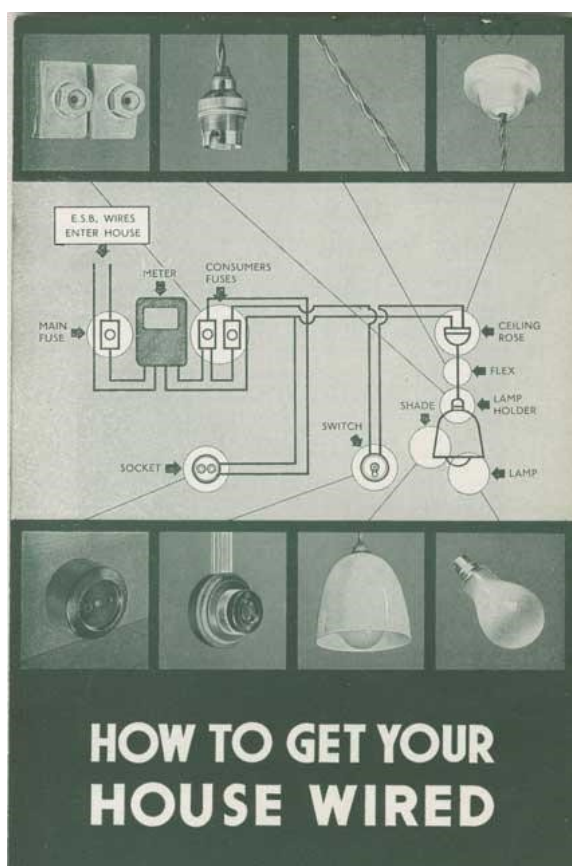
In the early 1950s the ESB undertook a major rural electrification scheme and it was in January 1953 that my father was consulted regarding the erection of poles in Mickilins - a field close to the N59 where Thomas Martin of Ballynahinch once had a school house. The route chosen from Oughterard to Recess followed for the most part that of the Galway/ Clifden railway line. The poles were dropped off at convenient places and a horse was used to drag them to the places where small pegs had been inserted. Groups of men were busy digging holes and where rock was encountered a compressor was brought in so that blasting could be done. The

last pole for the branch to Tullaboy was up on 10th August 1953 and, having had the electric wiring in the house upgraded by Jack Cleggett and Jackie Murray, the supply was eventually connected on 4th September.

Not every household availed of electricity at that time as some believed it would be too expensive or even dangerous, and oil lamps or candles would suffice. Some of those who didn't take it at first eventually changed their minds but were then expected to make a contribution to the cost of erecting the extra poles.

For those who did not think of extending the electricity supply to outhouses, the Tilley storm lantern, which became widely available in Ireland in the 1960s, provided

a very good portable light using a mantle and pressurised paraffin oil. It was particularly useful when cows had to be milked and fed on winter evenings.



Information pamphlets like this were available from the ESB.



Tilley Storm Lantern



Another type of lamp in common use in houses before the arrival of Electricity.

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