

THE LONDON IRISH

WOMENS
CENTRE

ANNUAL

REPORT

LONDON IRISH WOMEN'S CENTRE

Contents

Introduction	2
A History & general background	2
Childcare report	3
Media resources	4
Classes & courses	6
Access	6
3rd London Irish Women's Conference	7
Some speeches from the Conference	7
Carraig agus and Fharrage	9
Welfare	10
Accounts — 31 March 1986	11

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Introduction

Tá an t-ionad do mhná Éireannach i Londain ar oscailt anois le nach mór dhá bhlian agus is é seo ár ndara tuairisc bhliantúil. Seo a leanas cur síos ar ranganna, imeachtaí éagsula, an fhéile agus an comhdháil maille lenár gcuntaisí iniúchta don bhlian dár críoch Márta 1987. Tá súil againn go dtabharfaidh sé tuairim éigin den réimse oibre a rinneach anseo le blian anuas cé áfach go bhfuil se do-dhéanta gach gné de reachtáil an ionaid ar bhun laethúil a lua; na cruinnithe, an riarachán, na glaochanna gutháin, i bhfocail eile na rudaí do-fheicthe a bhaineann le reachtáil laethúil an ionaid. Ba mhaith leis an gcoiste bainistíochta buíochas a ghabháil leis an bhfoireann agus na hoibrithe deontacha as ucht a gcuid oibre i rith na bliana.

Baineann deacrachtaí ar leith gan dabht le bainistíocht in ionad den chimeál seo. Bhí sé deacair an pháirt a ba cheart dúinn glacadh a aithní agus na struchtúir a bhunú d'fhonn go mbeimid freagarthach dóibh siúd a d'úsáidfeadh an t-ionad agus don fhoireann oibríthe chomh maith. Táimid anois dóchasach agus dearfa faoi thodhchaí an ionaid agus an pháirt a bheith aige mar fhocas do chomhlúadar na mban Éireannach toisc na struchtúir seo a bheith bunaithe. Is é fuinneamh, díogras oilteacht agus tuairimí na ndaoine a bhaineann úsáid as aon aionad is mó a chintíonn go n-éireoidh leis agus tá se mar aidhm againn gach áis a thabhairt don phróiseas seo.

Ta súil againn go dtaitheoidh an tuarascáil seo libh agus beidh fáilte roimh aon tuairimí, léirmheas nó iarratais ar eolas breise.

**An Coiste Bainistíochta
Deire Fomhar 1987**

The London Irish Women's Centre has now been open for nearly two years and this is our second annual report. In the following pages we have reports of classes and activities, the festival and conference and our audited accounts up to March 1987. We hope that it will give some idea of the range of work done in the past year, although it is impossible to detail much of the time and effort involved in running a centre on a daily basis. The meetings, the administration, the phonecalls, in other words the almost invisible and on-going daily routine which keeps the centre running. The management committee would like to thank workers and volunteers for all their work throughout the year.

Managing a centre such as this has not been without problems. It has been a slow process to identify our role and set up structures which make us accountable to the users and workers of the centre. Having finally established these structures we feel optimistic and positive about the centre's future and its role as a focus for the Irish women's community. To a great extent it is the energy, enthusiasm, skills and ideas of the users of any centre which make it successful and our aim is to facilitate this process.

We hope you enjoy our report and we welcome any suggestions, criticisms or requests for further information.

**Management Committee
1987**

**Madeline Griffin
Eileen McNulty
Mary Jennings
Fran Clayton
Caroline Butler**

A history & general background

The formation of a group in 1981, with the single aim of establishing a centre for Irish women in Greater London, came from a deeply-felt awareness that the needs of Irish women were being ignored, both inside and outside the Irish community. It was evident to Irish women that our interests would *not* be dealt with as an integral part of the needs of the Irish community as a whole. This was despite the fact that Irish women constitute up to half a million of London's population, and 52 per cent of the Irish community here: that down through the years we have made a most vital contribution to the economic and social life of the capital, providing the essential services, e.g. nursing, teaching, cleaning, catering, childcare. But our specific needs and problems have never been identified or met. It was clear to us that what was needed was a secure social, political and cultural base in order to work on identifying and meeting these needs. The need for the London Irish Women's Centre came from the necessity to counteract the erosion and marginalisation of our experiences as Irish women.

The cultural differences between Ireland and England are immense. Many Irish women are forced to emigrate because of the lack of employment, the political situation, particularly in the North of Ireland, the social position of women in Ireland which makes life difficult, for example for single women, lesbians, and single mothers. When they arrive in London they are faced with culture shock, alienation and anti-Irish racism: many have no knowledge of the English legal, health and welfare systems (this is often not understood by many advice workers), so they cannot exercise their full rights.

Like other ethnic minorities in London, the Irish tend to live in the inner urban areas of worst housing conditions, and have the lowest paid jobs that are hardest hit by unemployment. Research shows that in proportion to their numbers in the population, the Irish are overrepresented in the numbers of people with social problems and under represented

in the numbers of staff employed to deal with these problems in the various statutory and voluntary organisations. Women make up the larger proportion of all the most vulnerable groups with social problems, single parents, single immigrant workers, alcoholics, mentally ill. The London Irish Women's Centre is the only organisation in the Greater London area that specifically caters for the needs of Irish women in this area.

The existing Irish community organisations are dominated by men. Not only are Irish women's needs not adequately met, many needs are not met at all, e.g. advice on abortion, contraception, employment opportunities for women, the needs of lesbians, and support for Irish women's groups to organise autonomously.

The group considers Irish lesbians as a particularly disadvantaged section of the Irish community, forced to hide their identity and discriminated against, e.g. in employment, legislation. Many have come here to escape repressive attitudes and legislation in Ireland, hoping to live in a more free or at worst more anonymous way. Because of the lack of recognition in the wider Irish community, many have in the past been forced to shed their Irish identity and assimilate into English society to find support in the English Feminist Movement. Since the establishment of The London Irish Women's Centre, this is no longer necessary. As part of our general aim to counter discrimination against Irish women, we are, and will continue to be, campaigning in particular for the existence of Irish lesbians to be recognised and for an end to discrimination against Irish lesbians both within the Irish community and in the wider London community.

We also recognise that disabled women are another disadvantaged group who face discrimination especially in employment and educational opportunities and we are committed to campaigning against this discrimination and attempting to open up

opportunities in these fields for disabled women ourselves, e.g. by ensuring that they are not excluded from events, classes etc. organised by the centre.

A large proportion of the Irish women's population in London are elderly (more than 30,000 are over the age of 60). They are vulnerable because they are often poor, housebound, infirm and isolated. We want the centre to serve the needs of elderly Irish women. We will continue to encourage Irish pensioners to make full use of the centre and our mini-bus is regularly used by pensioners groups. We hope the involvement of Irish women pensioners in the centre will continue to grow.

We recognise the discrimination Black and other ethnic minority women face and support them in their struggles. We have developed links with these groups in the past and will continue to do so in the future. We are encouraging Irish women to confront their own internalised anti-Irish racism and racism towards Black and other ethnic minority groups by supporting the formation of groups to explore issues such as these and by stressing the importance of forming alliances.

When the London Irish Women's Centre group formed, there were already some Irish women's groups in existence, namely the London Armagh Group and The Irish Women's Abortion Support Group, both working on specific issues. The centre took its impetus from these groups but was hinged on the idea that without a central co-ordinating body it was very difficult for Irish women to take political power. In addition to this it would serve as a local women's centre for the area of London in which it would be based.

The work of attaining this end led the group into ground not previously covered in the political history of Irish women in this country — in formulating policies, writing papers and most of all in campaigning for funds to establish a centre. In June 1983 one worker was appointed to establish the centre. In February 1986 the centre — a freehold building purchased and refurbished by the group — was finally opened. By then the centre was employing three full-time workers and had obtained grants to establish within the building a video project, a radio project, a darkroom, a sound recording project with a PA system and a music project. An arts worker was

appointed to set up these projects and fees to hire an engineer/technician for a number of hours a week, were obtained.

The opening of the centre launched a new phase in our work — that of running not only a women's centre on a day to day basis but the development of a major arts and media resource project as well. The past 16 months since the centre opened has given us ample opportunity to test the reality of that need. From the moment the centre opened it was clear that the service it provided was attempting to fill a huge gap in resources for Irish women, and that the need was even greater than had been imagined. On one hand this meant that activities organised at the centre were very successful, e.g. Baby and Toddler Group, Girls Group, classes and courses etc. On the other hand the demand has shown up huge gaps in staffing at the centre and part of the process in the past year has been an attempt to tailor the labour resources available to that demand. The help during the year from numerous volunteers has been immense in that respect. Despite this it is clear that the centre is understaffed by half. It is our assessment that we need four more workers: a Finance Worker, an Administrator, a Drop-in Worker, and a Housing Worker. As publicity about the centre becomes more widespread the need continues to grow — this in the face of threatened cutbacks. It has also become apparent that there is a vital need for more locally based funded Irish Women's groups, especially in South and West London, and we would urge Local Authorities in these areas to take up these issues.

Despite the difficulties that were involved in the process of adapting to being a local women's centre and a major arts resource project, the centre succeeded this year in co-ordinating two major London wide events for Irish women. One was the first ever Festival of Irish Women in the Arts — a three week long series of events in Oct/Nov 1986. The other was the co-ordination of the 3rd Irish Women's Conference in London, held at The Albany Centre, Deptford. The conference served to bring together all the existing Irish women's groups here, the majority of which had formed in the past few years and some during the past year. Twenty one groups addressed the conference and five groups came from Ireland. The need for the

conference was the measure of the need to have a central co-ordinating body for Irish women in London. It was a huge success and a report has been published by the centre to be distributed to libraries and bookshops throughout London.

There is no doubt but that the profile of Irish women in London is higher now than ever before. The work of the past few years and the past 12 months means that there is now a strong Irish Women's Movement here, but the work is only beginning. The quest for equal status and equal rights is a slow and arduous process. Although issues to do with Irish women can no longer be easily ignored, there is still the reality of widespread discrimination. Research

continues to overlook the particular problems women face, e.g. reports on housing, employment etc. The centre has now become involved in The Irish Women's Working Party based at The London Strategic Policy Unit, to carry out research in these areas. The centre's commitment to equal rights for women including abortion rights and the rights of lesbians still evokes hostility from the wider Irish community, e.g. the refusal of the Irish Post newspaper to publicise Irish Lesbian Group meetings or events (unless it's a paid advertisement).

The need for the centre will continue as long as Irish women face the double discrimination of racism and sexism.

Childcare report

Childcare provision is one of the most central and important principles of the London Irish Women's Centre. The centre has always acknowledged that its identity as an Irish women's centre has necessarily included recognising and providing for the close links between women and childcare.

A crucial aspect of childcare provision at the Centre is the upkeep of creche equipment and facilities and the maintaining of a high standard of creche care. Without either of these, women with children would simply not

use the centre. The creche equipment at the moment has just been replenished and there is now available a small grant enabling us to purchase, following the necessary research, some special equipment for children with disabilities. We also feel confident in asserting that the centre has now established a reputation for having a very high standard of creche care. These two essential requirements having always been maintained, the centre has confidently offered a back up service of creche facilities to all women with



Baby and Toddler group outing

children who wish to attend any of the centre's functions, from its classes and benefits to its conferences and festivals. The childcare facilities are extremely well used. The number of children in a creche is always a good indication of the success of a venture. The Third London Irish Women's Conference held earlier this year was serviced by a marathon creche lasting over 12 hours and catering to over 60 children throughout the day.

The new childcare worker has now been in post since last September. A lot has happened during this exciting new period. The baby and toddler group has swelled in numbers and expanded its activities. The new session on Wednesday morning is a voluntary session. The group organises these sessions between them. They arrange transport and a creche and attend swimming lessons for women only, run by the Irish Women in Islington group.

We see these voluntary sessions as one of the major developments to occur since last year, because we feel that in order for the centre to develop and grow and to continue to play a central role in Irish women's lives, self help groups and voluntary sessions are the necessary building blocks the centre needs, to ensure that it continues to play a major cultural role for Irish women in London. Therefore we see the facilitating of this development as an important part of the childcare worker's role.

The other two weekly baby and toddler sessions on Tuesday and Thursday mornings are now being run by a sessional worker. All the sessions are drop in and are open to all Irish women and their children. Since last year we have organised many celebrations, parties and outings for the baby and toddler group, the young girls group and all the users of the centre, for example a Halloween party, a Xmas party and a St Patrick's Day party. These celebrations have all focused on exploring Irish culture through play. The children have a wealth of talent ranging from Irish language, music, singing and dancing through to Irish poetry and cooking. As another step towards strengthening Irish children's identity, we run weekly children's Irish language classes.

Another vitally important aspect of childcare at the centre is the provision of a service for adolescent children. It is only in the last few years that any

research has been undertaken into the needs of the Irish community in London, none of which has addressed itself to the needs of Irish women, especially the needs of young Irish women. We felt we needed to make available some sort of provision to facilitate the needs of growing numbers of young Irish women arriving in London each year and the needs of second generation young women feeling unsure about where their identity lies, being born in England and coming from an Irish background.

We decided that this should take the form of a girls' group and we would lay aside several months to spend developing our ideas, talking with Irish youth workers, meeting young women and publicising the group. The Girls' Group began on a regular basis in November 1986. So far, we have attracted second generation young women in the under 16 age range. Numbers are still quite low but the energy, enthusiasm and willingness to try new and different activities displayed by the young women has already proven the need for such a group.

Over the past months they have enjoyed all the centre's celebrations, the Halloween, Xmas and St Patrick's Day parties. They have been to the theatre, cooked together, gone to the cinema, tried some video and sound recording, played games, sung songs and talked and talked and talked. Earlier this year the girls wrote their own speeches and addressed the Third London Irish Women's Conference. Plans for the future include Irish dancing, ice-skating, horseriding, radio course, drama and photography.

The past months have taught us much about the personal commitment such a group requires. It has been hard work but well worth the effort. At present the group seems to be moving in the direction of becoming a second generation group. We therefore see the development of this as being our main immediate focus, however looking to the future we would hope to develop the facilities, either within this group or another group, to meet the needs of first generation young Irish women.

In the future we see several goals.

- To continue to maintain the high standard of creche facilities and creche care, in order to service all the benefits, classes and functions offered by the centre.

- To continue the work with the baby and toddler group and to work towards encouraging even more women with children to come along and use the centre.

- To facilitate the development of more self help and voluntary sessions, to ensure the full participation of women with children in all aspects of the centre. Closely connected to this is the development of more daytime

classes.

- To continue the work with the Irish girls' group and to develop a group to meet the needs of first generation Irish girls.

- To continue to maintain the very successful children's Irish language class.

- To develop more extensive use of the centre by women with children with disabilities and to do this mainly by extensive outreach work.

Media resources



The Hairy Marys performing at an International Women's Day celebration organised by the L.I.W.C. in Chats Palace

Introduction

This year marks the first time we have been able to have a Media Resources section in our report. In addition to the very successful London-wide and local services and facilities offered by the centre, we have exploded above and beyond the traditional role of a Women's Centre.

Pioneering and innovative are two good catchwords to describe the developments in the Media Resources section in the last year. Two projects, Video and Photography, have been established from scratch, from research, design and building through to operational capacity to train.

Throughout the last twelve months, women, some of whom had never before used technical equipment, have been training to use Video, Radio, PA, Photography and Sound Recording equipment. The professional quality of the media

resources at the centre mean that not only can Irish women learn in a non-threatening and safe environment, but that the standard of training is very high.

Becoming skilled in the use of such equipment offers a definite political advantage.

Demystification of the media means that we can take control of, and effectively formulate and present our own image to the outside world. We need no longer depend on those agencies which have consistently misrepresented us in the past. Women have taken advantage of the resources at the centre not only in relation to becoming skilled in their technical use but also by forming production groups where their skills can be used creatively and effectively for the benefit of Irish women in London.

Radio project

Though the expected community radio licences were effectively

shelved by the government, our radio project has continued to expand. The building of a sound studio at the centre, where radio programmes can be put together, has proven to be a lengthy process, but continues with Glor Gael, the Irish radio group, and other community radio organisations. However, though there remains some still to do, much of the negotiation and research necessary to ensure that the final layout and equipment in the studio will offer many possibilities to Irish women interested in radio production, has taken place.

The radio equipment at the centre has been used throughout the year to train women in the skills of community radio and it continues to be used by the Irish Women's Radio Group which emerged from the courses, see under 'Classes and Courses' elsewhere in this report.

Although programmes of very high quality have already been made by women using the radio equipment at the centre, when our radio production studio is operational it will provide an area where technical skills can be put into practice, where programmes of interest to Irish women can be made by Irish women, from initial interviews, recording, editing, to final product, in a purpose built space. Until we are able to broadcast ourselves, from the London Irish Women's Centre, we will continue to endeavour to get local stations interested in our project.

Music project

During the year much groundwork has been done on the establishment of a music project at the centre. The aim of the project is to make traditional Irish instruments available to Irish women to enable them to explore their rich musical heritage in a non-threatening and encouraging environment.

The centre now has fiddles, tin whistles, bodhrans, and a harp. We are currently investigating ways of developing the music project to ensure it is used to its fullest capacity.

Already there have been musical classes at the centre; for details of these see under 'Classes and courses' elsewhere in this report.

The past year has been one of continuous development within the Arts Section of the centre. A vast amount of work has been achieved and is continuing to ensure that the various resources at the centre are put to their

fullest use by, and for, Irish women in London.

Audio visual: recording our history

In our first report we stated that the London Irish Women's Centre group has, since its earliest days, actively pursued its policy of recording Irish women's history. The development of the media resources at the centre during the last twelve months has meant that many more Irish women become involved in the process of recording our own history.

The demystification of audio and visual recording techniques through courses run at the centre has meant that many Irish women's events, political and

women in London towards reclaiming a cultural heritage which has long been male dominated.

Irish women making a video tape of Irish lesbians, whose existence has in the past been denied, set dancing to the music of the Sheelas, is a multiple triumph. It is far more than a record of women's social activity, it is a testament for us, and for the future, that Irish women in London, including Irish lesbians, are reclaiming Irish culture and our right to partake of and enjoy our rich heritage.

All of the varied cultural events which were organised as part of Carraig agus an Fharrage were recorded. The first Irish women's gaelic football league sponsored by the London Irish Women's Centre is on video tape as are

women in London took place and its record is a reflection of the success and achievement of Irish women here. Again, the value of recording our activity not only serves to enhance our collective sense of achievement, but provides a source from which future Irish women in London can draw confidence, strength and a sense of identity.

Irish children, at their numerous events of celebration and play organised by the London Irish Women's Centre, have been recorded extensively by video and audio techniques and with photographs. Their celebrations while lacking no festive atmosphere displayed a uniquely Irish flavour, the recording of which is an obvious source of encouragement to these and other Irish children to take pride in their Irish heritage. This is of vital importance given the lack of recognition of Irish culture in the state education of Irish children here.

The Third London Irish Women's Conference took place last February and was a milestone in the organisation of Irish women in London. Beginnings were made into the exploration of our identity as Irish women. Visual, audio and written records have been made of this conference where so much information was shared and discussed and which consolidated the progress to date of Irish women in London.

The struggle to end the stripsearching of Irish women in British jails continued with a demonstration at Durham prison in June. Recording such demonstrations not only highlights the political injustice meted out to the Irish community here, but also shows that the Irish community, especially the Irish women's community, will continue the struggle to ensure that such blatant disregard for human rights is ended.

The process of recording our history continues. What we have recorded can never be denied, never related to rumour, never distorted to fit the mainstream account of our history. Keeping a record of our activities ensures that what we do now and what we will do in the future cannot be ignored.

In reclaiming our past, we have recognised the difficulties of having little or no record to count on. From here on, as far as the London Irish Women's Centre is concerned, that won't be a problem, we are taking control of our own history, an incredible challenge.



An afternoon at Ridley Road market for the video class

social, have been and will be recorded to form the foundations for the future progress of Irish women in London. Our activities here need no longer be invisible as Irish women's history has long been.

Culturally, too, we have traditionally been relegated to the position of spectator and misrepresented subject. As Brid Boland of the Sheelas, the all-women Irish ceili band, pointed out at our recent conference, "women who seek to continue in the tradition of Irish music and song find that the traditionally given images of women in our culture are negative and unrepresentative." The establishment of the Sheelas as an all-women Irish ceili band is a progressive step for all Irish

various workshops, such as bodhran, painting and sculpture, which were part of the festival. The memorable opening of the festival by Nuala O'Faolain has been recorded as has the opening of Prism I and Prism II, the first exhibition of the work of Irish women artists in London organised by the Irish Women Artists Group and the London Irish Women's Centre. Readings of the work of the Irish Women Writers Group were recorded, as were readings from other Irish women writers.

The festival itself was a major coming together of Irish women to celebrate and explore the culture we share and our diversity within that culture. It was the first time a festival of such historical importance to Irish



Bodhran classes at the centre

Classes and courses

In the last twelve months many women have become enthusiastically involved in the centre through classes and courses. We had a tremendous response to our initial programme of classes in September 1986 and after Christmas we offered women the opportunity to continue their training and advance their new skills to a higher level, in Video, Community Radio and Photography. In addition to these, we ran Life Drawing, Healing/Massage, Fiddle and Multitrack Recording classes, an Irish language class for children and an Irish language class for adults. These classes were organised in response to the demand for such which became apparent from the response to workshops organised as part of Carraig agus an Fharrage.

A free creche is, as a matter of policy, always offered to women attending the classes and if possible the classes will be held on the ground floor to make them accessible to women with mobility disability who may wish to attend.

The classes run at the centre provide a unique opportunity for Irish women to come together in a friendly environment, to enjoy the company of other Irish women with similar interests, to learn new skills in a supportive atmosphere, and to gain confidence from the high standard of training that is offered to women who participate in classes and courses at the centre. In deciding which subjects to

concentrate on during the year, the needs and demands of Irish women in London were our main considerations.

Already the technical training which women availed of during the year has been put to effective use. For instance, the centre now has the only all Irish women PA crew in London whose skills have been put to use not only through the centre's activities — the PA and crew have also been used for socials, benefits and conferences organised by other bodies. Training in the operation of the PA is open to all Irish women in London.

An Irish Women's Radio Group has been formed by the women who took part in the Introduction of Community Radio classes at the centre. Since the shelving of the Community Radio Bill, many community radio groups have had to re-assess their activities and short-term aims. Taking this problem in hand at the outset, the Irish Women's Radio Group focused their attention on the production of a pilot programme which through liaising with the HHC they hope to have broadcast on local radio. A report from the group is included in this section.

Women from the video courses, too, formed a production group, not only to put their newly developed skills to use, but to develop these skills further and to learn new ones by exploring both the documentary and drama mediums. Irish women who have long been involved in video have also become involved with this

new group.

The establishment of the PA crew, Irish Women's Radio Group and the Irish Women's Video Production Group at the centre are truly exciting developments and reflect the dynamic process under way within the Irish women's community. The enthusiasm of the women in these groups is

evidence of the need for such groups as a means of taking control of our own history, identity and image.

Through classes using the media resources at the centre, Irish women are actively asserting a new, strong, capable and confident image to the Irish community in London and to the community at large.

Access

The building

When looking for a building in which to establish the London Irish Women's Centre, every effort was made to ensure that it would be fully accessible to disabled women, in keeping with the aims and policy of the London Irish Women's Centre group. Ideally a centre with everything on the ground floor was preferred but because of funding restrictions and difficulties with planning permission, compromises had to be made. Having acquired the building in Church Street, the possibility of installing a lift was examined at length. Following the consultation with various funding authorities and with our architects, we were advised that the installation of a lift was totally impractical.

The building has three floors, with the library and office on the first, and the video, radio and darkroom on the second floor. The ground floor is on street level and includes the reception area, accessible toilet, washing machine and creche. We are committed to continuing our research in order to make every aspect of the centre fully accessible to all Irish women and children with disabilities.

The library

The book and record library is situated on the first floor. Work is in progress to establish this resource, and when completed, the catalogue will be available at reception where women can select their choices. When the music library is opened, a stereo system will be available whereby records and tapes can be listened to in groups, or individually using headphones.

Equipment and classes

Most of our equipment is portable so that classes and workshops can

take place on the fully accessible ground floor. In the case of the darkroom and video resource room, help is available if needed, however as both these rooms are on the second floor of the building, we liaise with other women's resource projects who have ground floor accessible facilities and work areas.

Conferences and events

We stage conferences and major events in fully accessible venues, e.g. Caxton House, Albany Centre. We also hire in and set up induction loops at the venues which do not have their own, as well as providing signers to facilitate the participation of deaf and partially hearing women at these events.

Minibus

The London Irish Women's Centre minibus has a wheelchair lift and is available for transport to our events. It is regularly booked out by pensioners and older women's groups, girls' groups, and the baby and toddler group among others.

Parking: Single yellow line outside entrance.

Public transport: Buses: 73 (100yds from entrance), 67, 76, 106, 149, 243 (¼ mile)

BR: Stoke Newington (¼ mile)
Nearest tube: Angel, then 73 bus

Entrance: Level access. Main door to reception 33" wide — opens inwards.

Toilet: Wheelchair accessible toilet, ground floor. Door: 31" wide. Horizontal hand rails (2) 39" long, 36" from ground.

Vertical hand rail (1) 39" long, 7" from ground.

Lift: NONE.

Stairs: 18 steps to first floor.

Floor surfaces: Carpet and tile.

Non-slippery.

Seating: Hard and soft.

Moveable.

Lighting: Quite bright, well lit.

Emergency lighting on stairs.
Heating: Warm and variable.
Guide dogs welcome.
Induction loops: Available at events if pre-booked.
Creche: On premises (ground floor). Wheelchair accessible.
Run by women. Available at all

functions organised by LIWC. Must be booked in advance. Mixed. All ages up to 12 years.
Food & Drink: Tea and coffee available. Help available for making/carrying.
Smoking: Allowed *only* in reception area.

3rd London Irish Women's Conference



Our lives... Our identity — a workshop at the conference

Our lives, our identity

Many Irish women had looked forward to the day for a long time; for some this was the second or third time around to attend an Irish women's conference in London: but for many newly arrived immigrants, it was the first. For all it was a rare opportunity to meet together in such numbers to share common and uncommon struggles, successes and achievements, and to gain renewed strength and encouragement from meeting 300 other Irish women present during the day.

Jean Cross from The London Irish Women's Centre introduced the conference. "By Identity, we mean" she said "that image with which one identifies and which is validated by personal and historical experience". She went on to say that the Irish Identity has been shaped by many factors including cultural, economic and political imperialism, the Catholic and Protestant churches, and that even though the Irish community had existed in this country for hundreds of years, the anti-Irish racism and hostility meted out here had interfered

with a separate Irish Identity evolving for the Irish in Britain. The dominant Irish Identity is that of the native born Irish — that is those born in Ireland.

Going on to explore how Irish women fitted in to this "dominant Irish Identity" Jean outlined how, because of the lack of historical documentation Irish women's Identity had been submerged under a patriarchal male dominated ideology, and how Irish women had already begun the search for an Irish Identity "that would reflect our reality, and give validation to our aspirations and our experiences".

Twenty five groups addressed the conference, the majority being Irish women's groups based in London. Women heard about the struggles and aspirations of various groups — from The Strip Searches Campaign and The Irish Prisoners Appeal to The Irish Women's Abortion Support Group and The Irish Lesbian Group. Several locally based groups spoke such as Irish Women in Greenwich and Brent Pensioners Link. Some too were cultural groups like the Irish Women's Artists Group and The

London Camogie Club. One of the exciting aspects of the conference was the linking of struggles with women's organisations in Ireland. Five groups came over for the conference: Dunnes Stores Strikers, Defend The Clinics and Women's Community Press from Dublin, and Falls Road Women's Centre and The Rape Crisis

Centre from Belfast.

Following the afternoon discussion groups in which women discussed issues around the theme of Irish women and Irish Identity, two resolutions were passed by the conference — one calling for an end to strip searching and the other a vote of solidarity for The Defend The Clinics Campaign.

Some speeches from the Conference

Irish Lesbian Group

This Conference is about identity. I am an Irish woman and I am a lesbian. Or perhaps I should say I am a lesbian and I am an Irish woman. It doesn't really matter to me which I say first, as both facts are equally important to me — and together they make up my identity.

However, these two words 'Irish' and 'lesbian' are generally thought of within the Irish community to be complete opposites, to cancel each other out. There is no such acknowledged identity. If an Irish woman calls herself a lesbian this is somehow taken as a denial of her Irishness, when in fact she is not denying any part of herself at all but inevitably it is she who is denied and rejected by the Irish community.

There is no such thing as an Irish lesbian — so the Irish community has insisted and still tries to insist. But I am here today to tell you that unlike leprechauns, Irish lesbians do exist and I am an Irish lesbian. The Irish Women's Movement in London and in Ireland is full of Irish lesbians; this hall is full of Irish lesbians (don't presume the woman sitting beside you is heterosexual), and what's more there have always been Irish lesbians. We have of course been denied, ignored, silenced, written out of history and cast out by our Irish communities both at home and in London but we have always existed. The only thing that is new is that we have begun to demand our own rights. In addition to fighting for the rights of all Irish women we demand recognition and respect from other Irish women and from the Irish community here and at home for both our Irish identity and our lesbian identity. We will

not have them separated any longer.

It has already been pointed out today what a narrow and restrictive range of identities there are for all of us as Irish women — and these images of Irish womanhood presented to us from birth are exclusively and compulsorily heterosexual. As women we can perhaps have a life devoted to God or a life devoted to husband, children and other dependants. There is not much left after that except perhaps a life devoted to sin and debauchery. There is no image here of Irish lesbians although I am sure that we would be put in the 'sin and debauchery' category if it were not for the pretence that we don't exist.

Irish lesbians have rejected the heterosexual identity which is forced on all Irish women. But this is often only achieved after much pain and nearly always at great cost, which for some women amounts to complete rejection by our friends, family and community. The courage and strength of Irish lesbians to acknowledge the truth of their own experience and feeling and to reject the dominant heterosexual identity should be applauded by all Irish women.

A London Irish Lesbian Network has been in existence now in one form or another for 12 years. Over this time it has given practical and emotional support to Irish lesbians living in London. It has also been an important link between Irish lesbians in London and Irish lesbians in the north and south of Ireland. More and more it has been exploring the particular pressures and discrimination facing Irish lesbians in London and how the Irish community itself participates in that oppression.

The network also campaigns for our existence to be recognised and for our needs to be met. New members are always welcome — women wishing to join or simply to find out more about the Irish lesbian group and its activities can write to the Group c/o the Centre.

In the not too distant past, Irish lesbians involved in political campaigns have often been asked by our brothers and sometimes, unfortunately, by our sisters also, to hide our sexual identity or keep it in the background because it might (1) embarrass a group; (2) damage a cause or (3) because it was simply thought to be irrelevant or certainly not as important as the campaign, whichever one it was — whether equal pay and job opportunities, issues connected to the war in the North, abortion, or right-on sexism and anti-Irish racism in schools. Irish lesbians have a strong history of involvement in these and many other campaigns. Many of us have devoted long years of work to these causes and to initiating and sustaining many others.

But now we are fighting for these issues as Irish lesbians and not anonymously. We will not deny our identity. It is as valid as any other Irish woman's. We have a splendid history of rebellion, courage and commitment to be proud of and we demand that this conference recognise all our efforts and massive contribution to the Irish women's movement and to the Irish community generally.

Our right to our sexuality is a political issue just as important as any other political issue. As we have become more visible and vocal within the Irish community we are now facing blatant and overt discrimination — one example of which is the Irish Post's refusal to print the words 'Irish lesbian'. The Irish Post has refused point blank to publicise any of the activities of the Irish Lesbian Group, or the fact of its existence, or even its name. No doubt the word 'lesbian' would burn through the paper! This is blatant discrimination against Irish lesbians — censorship of our thoughts, beliefs and feelings, and a total and blanket denial of our identity, of our very existence. The Irish Lesbian Group wants every woman here today to support us in our protest against this discrimination. We are asking for your support now. Please write to the editor of the Irish Post protesting against their refusal to publicise the Irish Lesbian Group and its activities,

and please send a copy of your letter to the Group c/o the London Irish Women's Centre. In particular we ask our heterosexual sisters to support us in this. This is one small but very practical way you can show your support for us, your lesbian sisters. An injury to one group of women is an injury to all of us. As Irish women we can never achieve true equality unless our fight for our rights in all areas of our lives includes a woman's right to her own sexual identity, whether that be heterosexual or lesbian.

As Irish lesbians we have supported and do support all Irish women in their individual and collective attempts to improve the confront alone. And remember your silence is betrayal of us. But



Members of the girls group speaking at the conference

quality of life for Irish women in London and in Ireland. We give this support freely and willingly, recognising the necessity to acknowledge and accept our differences, and to support each other's right to our own identities. And we ask our heterosexual sisters to show the same support for us in practical ways, like writing to the Irish Post but also and perhaps more importantly, by first learning to identify and then by challenging anti-lesbianism and homophobia in all its forms wherever you may find it — which may be within yourself, and which will certainly be within the Irish community both here and at home. Don't leave it for Irish lesbians to

if we stand united nothing can stop us from winning our fight for true equality, which must include our right to our own identities.

Rae Dowds

Irish Girls' Group

Hello, we are the Irish Girls' Group and we are going to talk a little about what we do in the group. My name is Siobhan Hendricks. The Girls' Group is a group for Irish girls aged eleven upwards. The Group started after Hallowe'en with only two girls; but now there are four. We come together on Monday evenings. The van comes and picks us up. I go because I enjoy it. I learn things and discuss topics. As the weeks pass, everyone knows each

play school and got more involved with the things that go on. After the Hallowe'en party, the Girls' Group started.

It started off with two girls and now there are four. We do different topics each week. Both workers, Mary and Eilish, are very keen about the Girls' Group. They would like to see more girls involved and hope that different things will happen in the future.

* * *

On behalf of Sheena, who can't be here this afternoon, I'm going to read her speech. "My name is Sheena Phelan and I belong to the Girls' Group at the London Irish Women's Centre. I recently became a member. Our Girls' Group takes place on Monday evenings between 7 and 9. We are picked up from our houses and dropped off at our doors afterwards. We look forward to Monday nights because we meet Irish friends. It's such a change to meet people of my nationality, because at school I mix with such a variety of nationalities. We do a lot of activities at the Girls' Group, including video and radio. I like going to the Irish Girls' Group because it's funny and interesting and because you find out how to play unusual games."

* * *

Hello, my name is Karen Hendricks. The Girls' Group is very good. We don't always do the same thing every week. The Girls' Group started after the Hallowe'en party at the London Irish Women's Centre in 1986. Both my parents are Irish and my mum's involved with the mother and toddler group, and my dad plays traditional Irish music. We have had one Hallowe'en party and a Christmas party. The Girls' Group has had two outings, one to the theatre, which I didn't go to because I was only ten, and the Girls' Group is aged from eleven and up. The second outing was to the pictures, which was very good.

We do games, radio and video and lots of other things. We play very unusual games, and Mary and Eilish usually join us. The best part of the Girls' Group is that the workers who are there with us, become the age of us and like us. After every Girls' Group we write a diary of what we've done. Thank you for letting us speak.

**Sheena Phelan
Siobhan Hendricks
Sonia Clayton
Karen Hendricks**

other a little better.

I'm not Irish, but my parents are, but I feel more Irish than English, mainly because of the things I do which are Irish. I learn Irish music and the language. At the Centre we play games, learn to use the video and the radio, cook and many things. So far we've been on two outings. The workers, Mary and Eilish, take part in everything and have excellent funny ideas. For the future, I'd hope to see it still going.

* * *

My name is Sonia Clayton... I've been going to the London Irish Women's Centre since summer '86. I started going to the summer

Defend the Clinics Campaign

December 1986 saw yet another blow to women in the Republic of Ireland. The High Court judgement in the case taken by the Society for the Protection of the Unborn Child (SPUC) against the Dublin Well Woman Centres and Open Line Counselling, bans non-directive pregnancy counselling. It is now a civil wrong to discuss the option of abortion with another person, or to give any information which may facilitate her to obtain an abortion.

The consequences of this ruling are manifold. Open Line Counselling has closed down and the Well Woman no longer provides a pregnancy counselling service. While Irish women will continue to seek termination of unwanted pregnancies, they must now do so in a situation of fear, without support, help or information. SPUC has ensured that women who go to England for abortion are now more isolated and at risk than before, and that many other women are denied that choice.

This is the situation the Defend the Clinics Campaign is fighting against. The campaign mobilised over a year before the actual judgement and has seen an upsurge of support since then. We have been successful in creating a strong reaction to the judgement. We have received public support, in the Republic and Six Counties, from women's organisations, trades unions and youth organisations, and in England, from the London Irish Women's Conference, (representing a very wide range of groups) Article 19, Labour Women on Ireland. The campaign continues to build on this support both at home and at international level.

The campaign is opposed to any restriction on non-directive pregnancy counselling, specifically the ban on abortion information and referral. Our fundamental aim is to re-establish, with public support, the facility of non-directive pregnancy counselling and, in the meantime, undermine the ruling through a national network of information on abortion; and through activities and publicity, highlight its implications for women and for issues of civil rights and censorship. Our slogans are: 'Access, Information, Choice', 'A Woman's Right to Information on Abortion', and 'Stop SPUC Now'.

In an effort to offset the effects of the lack of information on abortion, the campaign has produced its Fact Pack which deals comprehensively with one's rights and options if faced with an unwanted pregnancy, as well as contact addresses of relevant support groups and abortion clinics. 2,000 copies were produced so far and distributed around the country.

The telephone counselling service, Helpline, based in Dublin, is also bridging the gap left by the forced closure of the Open Line and Well Woman counselling services. It consists of a network of women, all experienced in non-directive pregnancy counselling, working voluntarily on the Helpline.

The Defend the Clinics Campaign has groups in Cork, Galway, Dublin and Wexford and this network will continue to grow. We have established strong links with supportive organisations in the Six Counties (including the Northern Ireland Abortion Law Reform Association (NIALRA), Belfast Women's Aid, Rape Crisis Centre and Sinn Fein Women's Department); and in England, particularly the London Irish Women's Centre, Irish Women's Abortion Support Group and the Reproductive Rights Information Centre.

A National Activist Conference was held in March, to re-establish the goals of the campaign and to clarify strategy. It was decided to work towards the setting up of action groups throughout the country, in towns, colleges, trades unions and wherever possible. A national co-ordinating committee was established and is responsible for liaising with the action groups and co-ordination of the campaign. In early April, an open public meeting was held in Belfast.

For the rest of 1987, our primary aims are to develop the national network to ensure that all women who want information get it; and through activities and publicity build the campaign and reverse the recent High Court ruling.

Fundraising is, of course, an ongoing part of the work and we are severely short of funds. If you wish to make a contribution to the campaign, or indeed contact us, our address is:

Defend the Clinics Campaign
6 Crow Street
DUBLIN 2
Ireland

Any support is welcomed.

Mary Flanagan

Carraig agus an Fharrage



The opening night of the art exhibition at the centre

Carraig agus an Fharrage, the first festival of its kind, was a three week celebration of Irish women's creativity and achievement through music, dance, drama, literature, crafts, film, video, PA and visual arts and every effort was made to ensure that it represented as many aspects of our culture as possible.

The wide ranging programme of events was designed to reflect the variety of Irish women's work, not to define it. Time and again throughout the three week span of the festival one was delightfully reminded of the expansive scope of Irish women's expression and activity.

The London Irish Women's Centre was very pleased that Nuala O'Faolain came from Ireland to open the festival with a screening from Plain Tales, her award-winning series of six twenty-minute interviews with women in Ireland. During the festival there were many opportunities for Irish women to attend the various screening

venues around London and to discuss the numerous issues arising from Plain Tales. As a direct result of these screenings Cinema of Women has now taken on the distribution of Plain Tales in this country, and other Irish groups have shown interest in screening the series.

The films Maeve, Ann Devlin and The Country Girls were shown at the Ritzy cinema in Brixton, while Ann Devlin and In Whose Footsteps (a short film by Annie Farnham, an Irish film maker) was shown at the Rio cinema in Dalston, in conjunction with the Women's Media Resource Project. All screenings included some Plain Tales and were followed by discussion.

Prism I and Prism II, a major exhibition of Irish women's art was held at two venues for the duration of the festival. Organised by the Irish Women's Artists Group in conjunction with the London Irish Women's Centre, it marked significant progress in the recognition and

representation of the imagination and the achievements of Irish women artists in London which for too long has been unrecognised and uncelebrated. Since the success of Prism I and Prism II, another exhibition of Irish women's art has been planned by the Irish Women's Artists Group.

The various workshops which took place throughout Carraig agus an Fharrage were aimed to introduce Irish women to the possibilities of developing new skills and realising their potential for achievement particularly in areas which have traditionally been closed to women. Workshops were held at various locations in London on subjects ranging from traditional Irish dance, Irish language, Fiddle, Boudhran, Sean Nos Singing, Flute/Whistle to Writing, Healing/Massage, Screen Printing, Life Drawing, Sculpture, Painting, Mixed Media and Drama to PA, Video, Radio, Photography and Computer. As a result of the response to these workshops, many classes have since been organised at the London Irish Women's Centre.

The festival was also a time of great social activity. Two benefit socials were organised during the festival. One for the Dunnes Stores strikers at which the Dolly Shamrocks provided the music and one for the Irish Prisoners Appeal group. The Irish Lesbian Group also held a social at the centre during the festival. The Irish Women Writers Group treated women to readings from their various works in prose and

poetry, while the Taras and the Wembley Gales, two of the numerous Irish Women's Gaelic Football teams in London, provided the sporting entertainment in a match arranged especially as part of Carraig agus an Fharrage. The whole festival ended with a highly successful Grand Ceili with live music provided by the Sheelas, an all women Irish ceili band which emerged from Sheelana Gig, a seventeen piece women's ceili band set up with support from the Centre.

Much time, energy and hard work went into recording the entire festival by video, audio and photographic techniques. Carraig agus an Fharrage was a milestone in the progress of Irish women in London and provided a valuable opportunity for Irish women to come together, to discuss and debate, to share and learn skills or to enjoy an evening's entertainment in a friendly and safe environment. But it was also a political statement of lasting significance. It acknowledged and celebrated the contributions Irish women have been making not only to the Irish community here, but to the community at large, it gave due recognition to the artistic creativity, to the technical ability and to the political and cultural activity of Irish women here which has for so long been ignored. It also provided a firm foundation which Irish women in the future can build on and expand and from which they can draw confidence and pride.

efficient and accessible retrieval system which is essential to our aim of providing an effective service.

It has always been the policy of the centre to not only provide information as a service in itself, but, by producing publications and conducting research, to act as a body that highlights the particular welfare needs of Irish women for the benefit of statutory bodies, welfare agencies and London's wider community.

To this end, the centre has, during the year produced a policy/research report on the Irish community in Hackney. This report will be pushed through the various council committees in the

winter of 1987/88.

Since June 1987 the centre has been part of the Irish women's Advisory Group, based at and funded through the London Strategic Policy Unit's Irish Section, and which is engaged in a review and survey of the position of Irish women in London. This work will result in the publication and distribution of the findings by March '88.

It is hoped that such work will facilitate a deeper understanding and a greater awareness of, firstly, the type of discrimination faced by Irish women, and secondly, that it will illicit a more positive approach in the response to the welfare of Irish women.



Welfare

In the midst of ever-changing welfare and housing legislation, grinding cutbacks to services and a massive housing stock shortage in London, providing an effective and up-to-date advice and referral service is both the most urgent and challenging areas of work for the centre to provide. This past year, housing and homelessness has again been the largest single welfare problem for Irish women in London, making up approximately 50% of all enquiries to the centre and presenting itself as a major problem amongst younger women and those who rely on a

shrinking private sector and decreasing security. Whilst availability of accommodation remains the most common enquiry, all aspects of welfare advice are drawn on — housing transfer, local authority policies, accommodation agencies, housing law, domestic violence disputes, private rented sector, supplementary benefit, job and training opportunities, housing associations and co-ops.

This year the centre began the installation of an Amstrad PC 1512 computer with a view to keeping a continuous update on information and to introduce an

Accounts — 31 March 1986

BALANCE SHEET — as at 31 March 1987

	£	£	1986 £
CURRENT ASSETS			
Debtors		33,621	2,076
Building Society Account		313	3
Cash at bank and in hand		460	23,107
		<u>34,394</u>	<u>25,186</u>
CURRENT LIABILITIES			
Creditors	28,080		19,045
Bank overdraft	<u>4,040</u>		—
		<u>32,120</u>	<u>19,045</u>
		<u>2,274</u>	<u>6,141</u>
Represented by:			
ACCUMULATED FUNDS			
Revenue		2,274	5,106
Capital		—	1,035
		<u>2,274</u>	<u>6,141</u>

Approved on behalf of the Management Committee on 2nd July 1987

CAPITAL FUND — year end 31 March 1987

	£	1986 £
INCOME		
Grants received — Greater London Council	—	60,007
Interest received	312	1,731
	<u>312</u>	<u>61,738</u>
EXPENDITURE		
Refurbishment and redecoration	—	35,899
Equipment	2,473	68,256
Professional costs	—	4,475
	<u>2,473</u>	<u>108,630</u>
DEFICIT FOR YEAR	(2,161)	(46,892)
Balance brought forward	1,035	47,927
	<u>(1,126)</u>	<u>1,035</u>
Transfer from Revenue Fund	1,126	—
SURPLUS CARRIED FORWARD	<u>—</u>	<u>1,035</u>

REVENUE FUND — year end 31 March 1987

	£	£	1986 £
INCOME			
Grants received:			
London Boroughs Grants Unit		110,811	—
Greater London Council		—	73,549
London Borough of Hackney		2,640	—
Inner London Education Authority		1,500	—
Greater London Arts		1,523	—
Donations		316	541
		<u>116,790</u>	<u>74,000</u>
EXPENDITURE			
Salaries and related costs	49,413		41,757
Rent, rates and services	3,779		2,124
Repairs and maintenance	1,824		1,831
Stationery and office supplies	3,967		1,185
Publicity and reports	14,164		7,846
Hire of halls	1,207		1,121
Telephone	2,096		1,837
Library & creche	1,973		3,007
Travel and motor expenses	2,420		2,380
Postage and delivery	1,807		1,706
Audit and accountancy	840		483
Insurances	5,093		509
Miscellaneous	1,375		594
Tutors fees and training course consumables	24,059		—
Equipment hire	1,066		238
Events	3,299		3,270
Bank charges	114		145
	<u>118,496</u>		<u>69,933</u>
(DEFICIT)/SURPLUS FOR YEAR		(1,706)	4,067
Transfer to Capital Fund		<u>(1,126)</u>	—
		<u>(2,832)</u>	<u>4,067</u>
Balance brought forward		5,106	1,039
SURPLUS CARRIED FORWARD		<u>2,274</u>	<u>5,106</u>

NOTES TO THE ACCOUNTS — for the year ended 31 March 1987

1. ACCOUNTING CONVENTION

The Accounts are prepared under the Historical Cost Accounting Convention.

2. CAPITAL FUND

The Centre has received grants totalling £168,273 from the Greater London Council and the London Borough of Hackney for the purchase, refurbishment and equipping of premises.

