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**Cork Views: A prayer, a feed, a sing-song: 'The Stations' of bygone days.**

When I lived out in the country in the '80s and '90s, The Stations were a big deal, writes TREVOR LAFFAN.

My father used to tell stories of his time growing up in Midleton, Co. Cork, when he was a young lad in the 1930s and '40s.

The family lived in a small, terraced house in cramped conditions with two adults and eight children fighting for space. That was normal then. Large families were common in those days, and money was tight, so parents had to make do with what they had.

In spite of having little, though, many people of that generation have told me over the years they had happy childhoods.

That makes perfect sense because I can remember the 1960s when the magic of television first came to our house, and how central heating changed our lives with instant heat, but I never felt deprived before that because up to then I didn't know any different.

We wore trousers, long-sleeved shirts and leather shoes for every occasion, whether it was for school, playing football in the street, or climbing trees. We didn't have fancy trainers and t-shirts, but we didn't care, we were happy with what we had.

Every house had fireplaces back then and most had them in every room. When I was sick during the winter and confined to bed on a cold day, my mother would light a fire in the bedroom, which was the essence of comfort.

Today's kids will never experience that because you'd struggle to find a fireplace in a modern house these days, never mind in a bedroom. Health and safety regulations would probably outlaw them anyway.

I can't imagine the modern mammy being happy either with dirty buckets of coal being hauled up and down the stairs on the new carpet.

Kids today listening to their grandfathers must be convinced their stories are all made up. Sure, how could anyone survive without electricity, en-suites, the internet or mobile

phones? Grandad is losing his marbles. The Dark Ages, as far as youngsters are concerned, only ended when Taylor Swift arrived on the scene.

Much has changed in a relatively short period of time, and I was reminded of that recently when I heard someone asking what the country Stations were. He wanted to know why a Catholic Mass was held in private houses in rural areas at certain times of the year.

I couldn't believe he wasn't familiar with this tradition. We're not talking about the Ice Age here.

When I lived out in the country in the '80s and '90s, The Stations were a big deal. Even for those who weren't particularly religious, they were enjoyable as a social occasion.

For those of you who have no idea what I'm talking about, let me explain.

At Easter time, offerings in the form of cash payments (the Easter Dues) were paid to the Church to assist with the cost of running the parish. In towns and cities, these offerings were delivered directly to the Church.

At Sunday Mass, the priest would read out from the altar the list of areas who were due to pay their Stations during the coming week. Those residents would put their contributions into an envelope and hand them in to the priest. Their name and address would be on the envelope so the Church could track each payment.

There was a time when those who defaulted had their names read from the altar during Mass, and that was considered to be the ultimate in mortification for the families concerned. It was a case of name and shame to encourage payment, but those days are long gone.

The offerings were collected differently in rural Ireland. Once a year, a neighbour hosted a Mass in their home, and these were called 'The Stations'. People from the locality gathered at the house in the early evening and handed their money to the priest.

One of the bedrooms was designated as a confessional and the priest would hold confessions there before the Mass started. At the end of the Mass, the priest asked for a volunteer host for the following year and that usually led to a bit of ducking and diving. Many tried to avoid it because there was a bit of work involved.

Refreshments followed the formalities, and there was usually a large supply of tea, sandwiches, scones, cakes, and tarts. Something stronger was often available too, and while many would head home early, there were always a few who would stay for a few drinks, which often led to a singsong.

In olden times, The Stations were held in the morning and a breakfast was laid on when the Mass was finished. That changed over the years and the modern Stations tend to take place in the evening and can run late into the night, depending on how well the neighbours get on with each other.

According to the website [Irishcultureandcustoms.com](http://Irishcultureandcustoms.com), the tradition of The Stations dates to the Penal Laws, when it was forbidden for Catholic priests to say Mass in public. To get around the problem, the Mass was celebrated secretly in people's homes. This was often followed by food and a full day of merriment, but only after the priest had finished his breakfast and taken his leave.

Because the public practice of Catholic worship was prohibited, private masses were taking place in secluded wooded areas throughout the country too. Isolated locations were sought to hold religious ceremonies.

Attending a Catholic Mass was extremely dangerous in those days, especially for the priests. 'Priest- hunters' were employed to seek out those who contravened these laws, so their parishioners often hid them for protection.

Like I said, things change quickly. These days, Masses can be said anywhere without fear of retribution from the authorities, but there is shortage of priests to conduct them.

The congregations are dwindling too, which doesn't bode well for the future of The Stations.