

Train Pilgrimage to Knock

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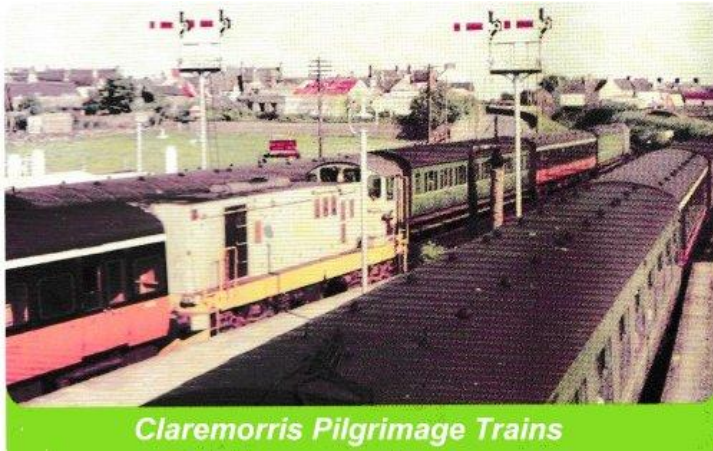
Knock, a small village in East Mayo, became a place of pilgrimage back in 1879. Initially it was pilgrims walking – some taking two days in each direction while others used horse cars. In the first quarter of the 20th Century pilgrims began taking scheduled trains and the railways added additional carriages to trains to cope with demand.

On the Sunday nearest the 50th anniversary of the first apparition, 18th August 1929, a major event was planned. The first special train was organised by St. Michael's Conference of the St. Vincent de Paul Society, Cabra, from Dublin (Broadstone) to Claremorris. Due to about 1,200 passengers offering on the day two trains ran but only to Ballyhaunis from where Great Southern Railways buses, brought in from all over Connaught, transferred the pilgrims to Knock. Stops were made at Mullingar, Athlone & Roscommon for water for the steam engine. St. James's Brass & Reed Band were on the first special and rendered sacred music on the platforms at Broadstone, Mullingar & Athlone while those on board sung hymns. At 4pm a procession was formed, headed by a statue of the Blessed Virgin. A feature was the rendering of the hymns in plain chant by the Dublin section. The St. James's Band also played at intervals. The newspapers of the day commented Dublin girls in short skirts and silk stockings contrasted with the homely attire of the West. The return specials were delayed departing due to the high volumes travelling. Tickets cost 6/- Third Class with no child fare or superior class.

The following year, 1930, the pilgrimage was repeated on Sunday 17th August with two specials conveying 860 passengers. During the 1930's other organisations started pilgrimages by train and in 1939, 170,000 attended during the season with 30,000 on Diamond Jubilee Sunday. Every effort was made to continue pilgrimage trains in 1940, the first year of World War II, with the season ending on 29th September when a train from each of Cork, Dublin, Dun Laoghaire and Athlone conveyed 1,628 pilgrims for a Children's Peace event. With fuel shortages, particularly in 1947, it was not until 6th June 1948 that the next Knock Special operated when almost 800 pilgrims travelled from Ennis and Gort in two Specials. The longest pilgrimage journeys timewise were from Bantry and Baltimore. The first pilgrimage from West Cork was organised by the West Cork Curia of the Legion of Mary who continued to organise such trips until the closure of the local railway system on 31st March 1961. On Sunday 27th June 1948 the train departed from Bantry at 1am for Cork (Albert Quay) from where passengers walked to St. Patrick's Church for Mass to ensure they had a Mass starting before 12 noon – a Catholic Church requirement in those days, after which they took a train from Cork (Glanmire Road) to Claremorris. On the return journey they arrived at Bantry at 3.25am - 26½ hours after departure! After the introduction of diesel trains in 1956, the pilgrimage reduced by two hours.

High Mass at 12noon on Sundays became the principal weekly event at Knock and Athlone Radio, part of Radio Eireann, opened transmission each Sunday with a live broadcast of the Mass. On the Diamond Jubilee, the event was broadcast live from Knock from 2.30pm to 5pm. For a period in the 1950s, afternoon 'Devotions from Knock' were broadcast unless

there was a GAA match with commentator Michael O’Hehir at 3.25pm, then the ‘Devotions’ were deferred. Both the religious and GAA broadcasts were good publicity for both and helped develop both traffics on the railway.



From the mid-1950s till 1970 there were about 200 Knock Specials each season. Each of the major religious orders had their own day at Knock; the Dominicans attracting the greatest number with over 20 trains and as many as 10 branch line connections on the second Sunday in October. Another example was on 6th June 1954 when the Vincentian Order had four specials departing Westland Row every 20 minutes

from 6.20am taking a total of 1,700 pilgrims, with a Clogher Road Solidarity Special following with 640 pilgrims. The rail and bus fare from Dublin was 25/-.

The Radio train, which had nothing to do with Marconi’s invention, was a train with a small studio and wired with speakers throughout to give a commentary and play music as the train travelled. Initially developed for the 1949 Cork Railway Centenary, it became popular on Knock Specials where it allowed a train of pilgrims to pray in synchronisation. Clergy could give sermons and music & hymns could be played. On the annual pilgrimage from Cabra, children from the local Deaf & Dumb School would travel and trained personnel would stand in their carriage and interpret the transmissions using sign language. The railway created extra train sets for Radio Trains and four such trains could operate on any Sunday.

There were few staff difficulties operating Knock Specials. Wages were low and staff were eager for overtime. Double booking was very popular whereby a staff member could ‘Book ON’, work seven hours, take seven hours rest, and work a second seven hours with double time on Sundays. Rosslare men for example could work an empty train to a pickup location and then to Limerick or Mullingar, take rest and work ‘home’ that night. Locomotives and carriages were not a problem until the mid-1960s when Sunday services were introduced on most main lines and there was increased support for GAA specials. However, Knock Specials declined from mid-1970s and since 2000 there have been only one annually.

Throughout most of their existence Knock Specials had a catering vehicle as there were limited refreshments at Knock though there were Refreshment Rooms at Claremorris station. Alcohol was never sold on the Specials. The railway also had Ambulance vehicles for conveying invalids. These were simple compartment stock with brackets on which stretchers rested. Volunteer doctors and nurses cared for the invalids en route. At Claremorris and Knock the Order of Malta transferred the invalids to/from a specially adapted bus based in Ballina.

The last Knock pilgrimage train was on 7th May 2017 for the Diocese of Waterford & Lismore departing Waterford and stopping at Carrick-on-Suir, Clonmel and Cahir having a total of 126 pilgrims – far from the thousands who travelled in the 1950/60s. The return train arrived Waterford at 10.10pm ending almost 88 years of Knock Specials.