

The story of Kilrush is unique, and uniquely entertaining. Life in Kilrush is about the small town of Kilrush, Ireland. This book is full of humor and sincerity, a true story of a young English boy abandoned in the 1940s and 50s.

# Ireland

## Life in Kilrush

by Joe Riley

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IRELAND



Life In Kilrush  
1940/50s

Joe Riley

# **Ireland**

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Joe Riley



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## Contents

Life in Kilrush .....	v
Dedication.....	vii
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: The Reason for Writing the Book .....	5
Chapter 2: The Dream .....	13
Chapter 3: Gratefully Abandoned .....	21
Chapter 4: My New Home .....	37
Chapter 5: My Adopted Parents .....	43
Chapter 6: Infant School .....	53
Chapter 7: The Number One Son .....	63
Chapter 8: Sean, My Hero .....	75
Chapter 9: Learning from A Wise Man .....	89
Chapter 10: Fishing for Sharks.....	101
Chapter 11: Scout Master Willie .....	107
Chapter 12: Footing the Turf.....	121
Chapter 13: Back to School.....	127
Chapter 14: The Story of St. Senan's Well.....	135
Chapter 15: Paddy Griffin.....	149
Chapter 16: Katie's Wedding .....	161

Chapter 17: King John Brennan - King of Scattery Island “My Beautiful Island” .....	171
Chapter 18: A Tragic Family Death.....	191
Chapter 19: My Mother Comes to Call.....	195
Chapter 20: Land of My Birth .....	207
Chapter 21: My Kind of People.....	231
Chapter 22: Back to The Brothers.....	245
Chapter 23: The Currach Builders .....	251
Chapter 24: Fast Track to Catholicism .....	263
Chapter 25: The Love Boat.....	277
Chapter 26: The Joys of Being Catholic .....	291
Chapter 27: Fair Day in Kilrush .....	307
Chapter 28: The Winds of Change .....	317
Chapter 29: Final Chapter: Life in Kilrush.....	333
Chapter 30: My Visit to Kilrush 2004 (Kilrush - Home Again) .....	343
Chapter 31: How I Commenced My Nursing Years.....	359
Chapter 32: My Older Years.....	369
Chapter 33: My First Job in England.....	375

## **Chapter 3: Gratefully Abandoned**

I know when I came to Kilrush. I know how I came to Kilrush, but I had never been able to discover why I had been abandoned in Kilrush.

According to my birth certificate, I was born on the 9 August 1942, at 27, Skinner Street, in a small town called Thornaby-on-Tees. This is a town located in the northeast of England and situated in the smoke and smog of the industrial heartland of the Cleveland Valley, between Stockton and Middlesbrough, on the river Tees. People from this area are called 'Geordies', easily recognizable by their harsh dialect.

I remember very little of my early childhood in Thornaby-on-Tees, but I can remember the bombs and the noise they made. Thornaby was considered a prime target for the German Luftwaffe, as it was the crossroads to the port of Tees Side and the giant steelworks of the Tees Valley. The Tees Valley was the heart of production for the army, navy and air force of Britain, and the aerodrome at Thornaby-on-Tees was home to the Spitfires, so we were prime targets most nights.

We lived about half a mile from the railway lines and the same distance from the aerodrome. There being no such thing as 'smart bombs' in

those days, so we tended to suffer what the Americans today describe as ‘collateral damage’.

Some mornings, we would come home from the bomb shelters and find that all the windows in the house had been blown out by near misses. However, I do remember I had an older sister named May and a younger brother named David.

I remember it simply because I got into trouble when I washed David’s hands and then dried them by putting them in the old-fashioned wringer. Well, it dried the sheets, didn’t it? So why not hands? Anyway, David was stupid enough to cooperate.

The one occasion that I do remember was the victory party. The tables were put down the center of the street. Flags and bunting were flying everywhere. We kids were given a feast and the whole neighborhood danced and sang in celebration. That street party stuck in my mind all these years. I remember my mother dancing with another lady in the street to the loud music. The loud music was from a gramophone with all the volume that they could get out of it. Everybody was so happy.

That was about all I could remember of my childhood years in Thornaby. I never went back to that street until many years later. I was about 16 when I went there just to revisit where I was born.



My family had then long since moved to 31, Beechwood Rd, which was about a mile away.

My father had been a sergeant in the Royal Engineers and stationed overseas for most of his service career, mainly in Egypt.

Late in 1945 my father was discharged from the British Army. In civilian life, my father was a flourmill engineer. The flourmill where he had worked was not far from home in Thornaby. In fact, he could walk to the flourmill in about in 10 minutes. On his return to civilian life, he applied for a position with a different company in Manchester as a flourmill engineer, a position that would take him overseas. This was the beginning of his travels, and his first assignment was to Kilrush to supervise the installation of machinery in Glynn's Flourmill. Today we would call him the project manager for installations of machinery.

Early in 1946 my father returned on holiday from Kilrush. I was about 4 years of age at the time. He decided to take me with him when he returned to the site in Kilrush. For many years, I could not imagine as to why my mother agreed to such a thing. I was just an infant, at an age when a mother is needed; yet my father was whisking me off to a strange country, with strange people.

When I think of it those days in my later years it's hard to comprehend. I was singled out and separated from my family, the question is why? And the answer will always elude me because it does not make sense. It certainly was a strange

action to allow a child of such a young age to be taken away from his mother, family, and everyone he knew.

My early memories of Kiltrush are not pleasant. My father had lodgings that consisted of one bed in the front parlor of a terrace house of a lady called Mary Shalloe, at No 2; Pella Rd. Mary was a widow and had a large family of her own. The house was a two-bedroom terrace house and very small considering the size of her family.



*No 2 Pella the white door*

Every morning my father would leave for work at the flourmill, leaving me to my own devices. Every evening my father would come home from work, get washed and changed, then go to the local bar owned by his friend, Frank McAuliffe and return at about midnight. In those days, “the bar was always open” and there were no times when the bar was closed, except of course for the Holy

Hour. The Holy Hour was from 2.30 pm to 3:30 pm every day and it was stated that during this time of day you could not get a drink. Many people used to get a few drinks at 2.30 and make sure they lasted until 3.30 when the bar reopened.

My father always drank and showed a great capacity for taking alcohol. In fact, it astonished me the amount of alcohol he could drink. He could drink beer and spirits as though there were no tomorrow.

Perhaps due to the stress of being away from my mother and family, I was a bed wetter. This disturbed my father greatly, especially as he had to share the same bed with me. As soon as he came in and discovered I had wet the bed again, he would drag me from the bed and beat me. It seemed I did it every night, and so took beating after beating with his belt.

One night, when I was about four years old, he returned from the bar with a friend. I was fast asleep but had wet the bed. Perhaps because there was a witness to my demeanor was the reason, he became even angrier than usual.

Not only did he yank me from the bed and apply a terrible beating, but also then he stripped off my clothes and threw me out of the house. I was out in the pitch black of night, cold, hurt, and frightened. Even though somebody must have heard my cries, they were all too frightened of my father's temper to give me assistance and take me

in. The painful memories of those times have never left me.

The strange thing was many people in Kilrush had fond memories of my father. They remember him as a hugely friendly man, a great man to have a drink with, a man who never swore or blasphemed, and a great entertainer at the piano. Yet, this angel in the community became a child beating devil once the door to his room was closed. It has taken many years to come to terms with these memories. I was subject to a lot of pain and anguish that he inflicted upon me.

For such a young boy, it was not a happy time. It was a very lonely time. Although I lived in a house full of other children but when I look back as this small child what friends were there, really, I had no friends there. Children can be very cruel to each other if one is different from them, and I spoke with a Geordie accent, which to them was horrible. Not one of them wanted anything to do with me, so during the day I would wander the streets around the house, occasionally getting up to mischief.

Came 9 August in 1947, my fifth birthday. My father woke me and said he had bought me a donkey for my birthday. I got dressed so fast, for I could see the donkey through the window, and I was outside in a flash. I got a piece of rope and tied it around the donkey's neck. I then went for a walk out of the gate and up the road. Mary Shalloe had to go to the town that morning and get some

shopping. When she returned, I was in the kitchen sitting at the table with my donkey, having my breakfast. I was eating my cornflakes and the donkey beside me was enjoying the carrots I had put on a plate. Mary came through the door, and I can picture her now. Mary was a middle-aged, grey-haired woman of more than ample proportions. When she saw the donkey, Mary let out a cry, “Jesus, Mary and Joseph” and started to laugh. She went out and got the neighbors to come and have a look at what was happening in the kitchen. May O’Donnell from the shop across the road, Sue from next door and Bridie Maloney all came to have a look?

Well, the donkey had to have his breakfast and as far as I was concerned, having a donkey in the kitchen appeared to be the right and normal thing to do.

I believe that Mary disagreed with having a donkey in the kitchen. It became one of the famous tales they used to talk about little Joe Riley, and when you look back, I suppose it was funny and the neighbors saw the funny side.

It was about mid-morning that the Kelly’s came looking for their donkey. It had gone missing, and it now appeared that this was my “birthday present” from my father. Now arose a problem, the Kelly’s wanted their ass back and I would not let it go. I know that I became very upset and was crying. They had to go to work, and they

could not work without the donkey. So, a compromise was reached. I went with the Kelly's to work and spent the day riding on the donkey and cart. So, all in all I had happy birthday despite being the butt of my father's idea of a joke. I ended up happily riding around the whole day with Kelly and his ass.

## **The Railway**

On occasions I would go to the train station to see if my mother would arrive on the train. These were the hopes of a small child, and it was here at the railway station that I made lifelong friends.

Gerry (the engine driver) had seen me many times waiting for the train as it came into the station, this day he decided to find out who this little boy was. As the engine driver he would have noticed me sitting on the bench and in Pella Rd because Gerry also lived there.

I would go to the railway station most days and sit on a bench until the train arrived. Jimmie Custy was the station master and he used to keep a wary eye on this little boy wandering up and down the platform when the train arrived.

Gerry Mahaney was the driver of the train and one day he asked me who I was and why was I waiting at the station. I was sitting on the bench, sad and forlorn when Gerry approached,

Gerry, What's your name young man

Joe Riley, I replied, I'm waiting for my mum'.

*Life in Kilrush*

Gerry, your mum is it you're waiting for?

Gerry, and where is your mum Joe

My Reply, I think she is in England

Gerry, do you miss your mum Joe

My Reply, yes and she will come and get me

Gerry, I'm sure she will and where do you live

Joe

At Mary Shalloe's house with my dad

Gerry, 'with a big smile' so you're the little lad  
I hear about

Gerry continued; well little Joe, I'm going to  
turn the engine around would you like to come on  
the steam engine for a ride.

The engine was unhooked, and it chucked its  
way forward, I sat on the driver's seat, and we  
proceeded across the bridge to Doherty's mill, the  
gates were closed that led to the quay as we  
crossed the bridge to the turntable.

In those days, the railway track went out to  
Cappa Pier. When you walked to Cappa  
Pier, walking the railway line was the shortest  
route. Cappa Pier had its own railway station in  
those days.



*Kilrush Railway station I sat some days and waited for my mum to arrive, but she never came for me.*

Without me knowing it, life was about to change dramatically for the better. It really started with a day trip. Every Sunday, Frank McAuliffe would drive my father and me to Cappagh (in one of the very few cars in town), where they would visit The Galleon Bar and enjoy a few drinks. On this Sunday, there was another man in the car. He was a young man who worked with my father at the flourmill and his name was Sean Deloughery.

Sean told me that he lived just behind us at 3, Pound Street. Throughout the journey both ways, Sean chatted pleasantly to me, and offered to make me a kite.



I was so excited about the thought of owning a kite that the next day found me sitting on a stone opposite the house of Sean's, hoping to see him. I had forgotten that he would be at work.

Every so often, a lady would come to the open door and stare out across at me; I was sitting on a stone next to Mrs. Russell's house. After a while, someone came out of the door and crossed the road and invited me into the house. Here, a kindly woman sat me down, gave me a cup of milk and some biscuits then asked who I was. I told her my name was Joe Riley, and that Sean had promised to make me a kite. She smiled kindly at me, and a feeling of security came over me. It was almost as if a weight had been lifted from me. This was my first encounter with my beautiful Aunty May as she was to become. This kindly lady adopted this young child who was not related to her. Why did this lady take me in, the story unveils in the chapter of the Blessed Well, I believe I took the place of her youngest son who died in unfortunate circumstances two years earlier?

Eventually, Sean came in, smiling. Slowly the place filled up with the rest of the family, and they were all so nice to me. It was not long before I was calling this lady, "Aunty May," and she was to become the angel in my life, may she rest in peace.

The following day, I returned to visit my Aunty May. What a wonderful woman she was. I was made very welcome at the Deloughery household

and every day when I got up the first place, I would go too the Deloughery house and my Aunty May.

Aunty May always sat on a chair in the corner by the fire range. I would arrive and sit on her knee, and she would give me a hug and a kiss. She would stroke my hair and hold me tight, I always felt secure when I was at Aunty May's.

Many years later, I found out the truth as to why I was welcomed into the Deloughery household. Aunty May was a very religious woman; she prayed every day, said the rosary with the family each evening. On Saturday went to confession and Mass every Sunday. She had to go to confession because she swore like a trooper when she was mad, but a more loving person you could never wish to meet. I eventually learned that Aunty May had a son whose name was also Joe. About two years before I arrived in Ireland, Aunty May's son was murdered at St. Senan's Well. He had been beaten to death with a club by an unknown assailant.

The loss of Joseph, to Aunty May was a very hard thing for her to bear. This incident happened on St. Patrick's Day, the 17<sup>th</sup> March 1944. The murderer was never brought to justice and the case remained unsolved. At the time Joseph was only 17 years of age. While every year the town celebrated St. Patrick's Day with parades, concerts and much drinking, the house of Aunty May had the curtains drawn and was totally quiet in remembrance of Joseph. In my early teens I would

sing solo in the annual St. Patrick's Day concert held in Mars Cinema. Despite their deep love of me, neither Aunty May nor any other member of the family witnessed my triumph on these occasions. Such was the depth of the grief of the family regarding their loss, a day of joy had been lost forever. It was the only day in the year where the normally ever open door was firmly closed against visitors, an action that was respected by all.

Then one day, a poor mite of a boy named Joseph, was sat alone on a stone outside the gate, staring at her house. To Aunty May, a very simple and religious woman who believed passionately in God and his Holy Mother, this little boy had been sent by God to replace Joe, the son she had lost. Many times, over the ensuing years she would look at me with a lot of sadness in her eyes.

I was spending more and more time at Aunty May's and was not being beaten by my father anymore, as I would stay with Aunty May all day and night. At first, around 9 p.m. one of her sons, Willie, would take me home to Mary Shalloe's. He would leave me at the front of the house, and I would run out the backdoor down the garden, over the fence, across the field and in the back door of Aunty May's before Willie arrived home. I would hide under the chair and behind Aunty May before Willie could catch me to take me back again. Aunty May would protect me. She would say, "Leave the

poor crater alone, will you?" I was then put to bed, and I used to sleep with Sean.

By now I was secure with Auntie May and happy to be with her and feel safe. One evening I got all messed up playing in the dirt, I wanted to help bring in the turf. As a result, I was covered in dirt and a real mess as five-year-old do, so Auntie May decided to give me a bath. This was the turning point in my salvation.

### **Salvation day**

The tub was prepared in front of the warm range fire with warm water and Katie and Auntie May proceeded to undress me, at this stage they were shocked at the welt marks on my back and buttocks.

Auntie May asked me "who did this"; I told them as any child would, the truth as best I could about the beatings. The marks and welts must have been bad because the rest of the house looked at my back and buttocks in silence and in horror.

I said, Auntie May please don't tell my dad as she put a towel around me, she hugged me tight and gave me a kiss saying, "you poor crater" it's ok no one will hurt you again.

Now my troubles were over, and I stayed with Auntie May from that day on. Auntie May and the family were my protectors.

I was unsure what my father was doing at this time. I don't think he really cared that I stayed

with Aunty May. I presume that I was a bit of a burden to him and in a way, I suppose he was glad that I was somewhere else, and he had a dry bed to sleep in. I saw very little of him from then on. He was far too busy to visit me. Occasionally, someone would come to collect me to take me back to his digs, but Aunty May would always say that I was sick, and they would leave me alone however I was not beaten again.

At Christmas time my father arrived to take me back to England. Aunty May was not happy at the thought of losing Joe again. Before my father arrived, I was put to bed by Aunty May where she told me to be very sick and I played the part very well. My father arrived and I was aware that Aunty May had some strong words of discussion outside of the house with him. What was said I can only guess but my father did not take me back to England, it would be 11 years before I saw him again.

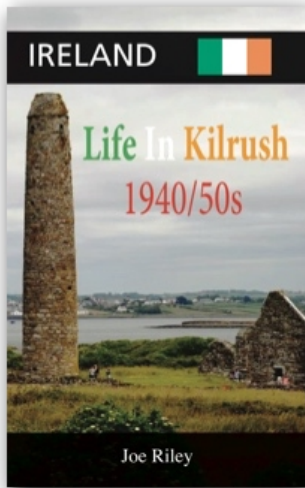
I had found a whole family who loved me. Kilrush was to be my home for many years to come. My bedwetting ceased altogether.

The Deloughery family became a part of me over the next 12 years. They became my parents; my brothers, my sisters and those years were to be the happiest years of my life because I had known no other.

*Joe Riley*



*Joe Riley (aged 5) Katie Deloughery and Lourda Shalloe  
at **number 3 Pound St.***



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