

FOREWORD TO THE VISITOR'S BOOK (1957-1982)

for

THE PEATLAND EXPERIMENTAL STATION GLENAMOY CO. MAYO

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How the idea of Glenamoy developed

General M.J. Costello was appointed M.D. of the Irish Sugar Company in 1946 by Mr. Séan Lemass, Minister for Industry and Commerce in the Irish Government. At that time there were four Sugar Factories in Ireland, viz. Carlow, Mallow, Thurles and Tuam. The Tuam factory handled the beet from approximately 8,000 acres but General Costello argued that 10,000 acres would be required to make the factory viable. The first initiative was an effort to rent the 2,000 acres from farmers in Connaught, but this ended in failure. General Costello then decided that the only way to reach the target of the extra 2,000 acres was to reclaim a large area of high bog at Gowla, near Ahascragh, Co. Galway. Using techniques developed by Bord na Mona for the drainage of bogs, preparatory work began at Gowla in the late 1940's. The two Agricultural Graduates in charge were Gerry Fitzsimmons and Tom Keane.

Though the ground conditions were quite soft, and the peat up to 20 feet in depth, it was comparatively easy to establish a good grass sward of Tall Fescue provided lime and the required major and minor elements were supplied. Tall Fescue (*Festuca arundinacea*) had already been shown experimentally to be a grass suitable for intensive forage production on peat. All of this development required the modification of existing farm machinery to operate on the very soft bog surface. The machine workshop at Tuam Sugar Factory provided essential back-up to the development and adaptation of tractors and machines for use on the bog surface.

With the establishment of the grass sward as a preliminary step to the amelioration of the peat as a medium for sugar beet, utilization of the grass posed greater problems. Sheep were considered suitable

because of their light weight, but the losses in open drains were excessive and grazing had to be abandoned around 1951.

At this time, however, there was a good market for grassmeal for inclusion in pig and poultry rations and a decision was taken to erect a grass-drying plant at Gowla. Special harvesting machines and modified trailers were developed to bring the grass to the drying plant and the plant opened in 1952. Mr. Lemass performed the opening ceremony and was obviously very interested in what was a remarkable transformation of the quaking bog. He enquired from those of us on duty, could a scheme such as this be established on the shallow blanket bogs of North Mayo where Bord na Mona considered many areas too shallow for the extraction of peat as fuel? Already General Costello had organised the laying down of small pots of grass at Dooleeg near Crossmolina and these gave considerable encouragement to the possibility of establishing a large Grassmeal Factory in North Mayo. I understand that Mr. Lemass initially asked the Department of Agriculture to take responsibility for the grassmeal project but their scientific officers felt enough basic information was not yet available to justify State investment in the project. It was felt considerable research would be required into the nutrition and maintenance of a grass sward, intensively farmed on peat, before a large scheme could be undertaken.

Mr. Lemass, however, was very concerned at the unemployment position in North Mayo at that time and was determined that the new grassmeal project should go ahead even with what information was then available. I understand he then approached the Directors of the Grass Drying Association in Ireland with a proposal to fund the initial capital development of the project. The firms involved in grass drying at that time did not think there was a market for the expected increased output of the new grassmeal plant and were therefore not interested in the development proposed. Mr Lemass was not to be thwarted in proceeding with his plans for North Mayo. In 1953 he set up, by legislation, Min Fheir Teo (The Grassmeal Company) with a capital of £163,000 to acquire and develop 2,000 acres of blanket bog in North Mayo for the establishment of a grass drying plant. A Board of six Directors was appointed and a Manager, Mr. Con Murphy M Sc. And P.J. O'Hare B. Agr, Sc. Assistant Manager appointed. A survey of suitable areas in North Mayo was undertaken starting on 1st September 1953 and Glenamoy was selected by the end of November 1953. A physical survey of bog depths and floor contours began on 4th December 1953 to enable a drainage plan to be developed. The first of the drains at 100 ft. apart were opened in early April 1954 and later intensified to

50 ft. apart. In the early months of 1954, a technical group were considering the most suitable grass drying equipment to purchase and install and visited grass drying plants in the U.K. and Germany. A decision was taken to place an order for a Buttner drying plant and a deposit was paid by Min Fheir Teo.

However, the Fianna Fail government was defeated in the Spring election of 1954 and John A. Costello, Fine Gael, became Taoiseach. Mr. William Norton took over from Mr. Lemass as Minister for Industry and Commerce and on the 12th June 1954 instructed the dissolution of Min Fheir Teo and a halt to all development at Glenamoy. Min Fheir lost the deposit they had paid on the new grass drying plant.

There followed a year of discussions at Government level – what to do with 2,000 acres acquired at Glenamoy. In August 1955 a decision was taken that 1,100 acres would be taken over by the Forestry Section of the Department of Lands for commercial tree-planting. The remaining 900 acres was taken over by the Department of Agriculture for the development of a 100 acre experimental farm and a research programme to meet the technical requirements of plant and animal nutrition on Peatland. This on-going research and experimental programme was taken over by An Foras Taluntais (The Agricultural Institute) in 1959 and continued until the Station was closed in 1982.

In 1977 Dr. Tom Walsh, Director of An Foras Taluntais, set up a Review Group to 'review and advise on the scientific contribution the Peatland Experimental Station has made and can continue to make to the corpus of scientific knowledge on peatland'. I was a member of the seven man Review Group under the leadership of Professor Pat Fottrell U.C.G. See summary recommendations page 4.

The review was intended to provide information to assist in determining what future scientific role the Station might have and what steps might be taken toward realizing this role. The Report of the Review Group was an internal report of An Foras Taluntais ref: 63 (417.3) and published in December 1978. The report contained a list of some of the publications on Studies at Glenamoy 1954 – 1975 and this list with additions is appended to this note for reference. In addition, the Annual Research Reports of An Foras Taluntais over the period when the Station was operating contain summarized accounts of all on-going research. Much of the research had great relevance to the overall research programme of An Foras Taluntais. It was an honour for the Staff at Glenamoy that the fundamental on-going research was chosen as Ireland's contribution to the International Biological Programme in 1966.

Report of the Glenamoy Review Group December 1978

Summary Recommendations


1. The Glenamoy Experimental Station should be maintained and operated as a national scientific research centre.
2. The blanket peat resource in its natural and developed states should form the prime activity focus
3. The main programme themes should relate to:-
 - a) The production of biomass from blanket peat.
 - b) The development of a field study centre.
 - c) Research on fascioliasis, and
 - d) Environmental monitoring and meteorological recording.The aforementioned activities should be complemented by revenue – generating farm activities.
4. Emphasis within themes should be placed on the more fundamental longer-term aspects
5. Programme activities should be structured to attract international interested collaboration;
6. Collaborative research with commercial interests should be encouraged where such activities can be fitted into the programme and resources.
7. The Station should be administered as an independent or autonomous centre, either within AFT or under a special board of trustees. As a first step a suitably qualified station director should be appointed
8. There should be an immediate 3-pronged approach to funding:
 - i. Intensify commercial activities at the station.
 - ii. Establish a sponsoring agency to organise the funding of different sections of the programme, and
 - iii. Approach external (i.e. extra national) agencies to promote possibilities for contract research

Because of the severe financial pressures imposed on An Foras Taluntais in the late 1970's and early 1980's, the recommendation in this excellent Report did not receive adequate study to merit decision on the future of the Glenamoy Research Facility. The harsh financial environment demanded investment of available research funds in projects with an 'immediate' economic response in national terms. The Centre closed in 1982.

Comment

I am indebted to Mary Ruane, the wife of the last Officer in Charge, Michael Ruane, of the Peatland Experimental Station, Glenamoy, who allowed me to look over the Visitor's Book in the Spring of 2005. It brought back many memories of the sense of 'mission' of all the staff at Glenamoy who brought the work of the Centre and their scientific achievements to a worldwide audience. I counted the names of scientists in the Visitors Book from no less than 34 countries outside Ireland and Great Britain, extending from Chile to China and from Iceland to the Falklands. Many of these scientists, from countries with famine problems, took great encouragement from the methodology developed in the production of food in an environmentally harsh area of Ireland. But perhaps, of even greater importance was the sociological impact of the local employment of some 40 workers from the Glenamoy area to service research officers in carrying out their programmes. Many of these men had worked not only in Great Britain and America but as far away as New Zealand and Australia. They were a highly intelligent work force with a great love for the county of their birth. The status of the Research Centre owed much to their loyalty and commitment and to their sense of 'mission'.

North Mayo is blessed with some of the most beautiful land and seascapes in the country. I sincerely hope that the recent developments relating to the Corrib Gas Terminal on the perimeter of what was formerly the Peatland Experimental Station; will not damage this unique and very special environment.


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