

# The Irish Handball Alley

## Architectural and Cultural Value of the Irish Handball Alley

The ultimate aim of this research project is to help instill an appreciation of the indigenous handball alley among both the public and professionals, thereby securing a future for the 'big alley' as an important aspect of our heritage.

## Architectural Importance

The handball alley has an inherent architectural, sculptural and aesthetic beauty, possessing a striking form unarticulated or adorned in any decorative sense. In celebrating the handball alley, this project has the potential to instill a greater sensibility towards Ireland's architectural heritage and encourage confidence in our individual and collective potential to shape our surroundings.

The handball alley was built wherever a site was available, on parish or donated private lands, institutional lands, and often attached to lime kilns and religious ruins. The later 60x30 feet alley tended to be free standing and typically unroofed. Referred to as the 'big' alley, this form seems to be indigenous to Ireland and continued to be built until the introduction of the international 40x20 feet standard in 1969.

Construction methods of the 'big alley' paralleled the evolution of construction techniques in Ireland. Early examples were constructed from timber slats, followed by cut stone, rough stone or rubble, with cement, mass concrete, precast concrete and brick used in later examples. It is evident from surviving examples that the handball alley demonstrates the ambitious, non-expert application of these advances in construction technologies; in the making of their long, tall and thin walls, the stepped viewing galleries and changing rooms added in later years and the occasional roofed typology.

*"The setting, too, was simple, with little to distract the eye from 'the stage'. A sloping hillside where spectators sat, a clay or flagged floor, a front wall with or without side walls or wing-walls as they were sometimes called."* (McElligot, *The Story of Handball: the game, the players, the history*, Wolfhound Press, 1984:p.9)

## Cultural Importance

The handball alley was a significant venue in the cultural and political life of the surrounding community. For the most part it was built by voluntary local labour, though alleys were also gifted by landlords and patrons. In the early days, the occasion of a match was a significant local event with matchmakers among the spectators. The alley was often the venue for parish dances and gatherings. Local meetings of the United Irishmen were often held in 'ball alleys', the Irish Volunteers drilled in them, and they were also the scene of interregation and execution.

## The Game

Handball is an ancient game, played in various forms all over the world. In modern terms, the earliest known records of its playing in Ireland date to the Statutes of Galway in 1527 wherein people were ordered to stop playing handball against walls in the town. Castleblaney, a painting from 1786 by John Nixon depicts handball being played against a ruined castle wall. Literature sources mention its playing from the mid 1700s, though the

1800s and into the late 1900s, with rises and falls in popularity along the way. Although now an international sport and keenly supported in many parts of Ireland, its last great era occurred during the 1970s.

Irish emigrants are credited with bringing handball to North America where to this day it thrives as an urban sport. It was included in the G.A.A. charter from its foundation. The first G.A.A. Handball Championships were held in 1923, coinciding with a renewed interest in the game evident by the construction of purpose built handball alleys across the country during the preceding decade.

Interest in the game went through a period of decline in the early decades of the 20th century as people began to move to towns and cities and transportation advances made it easier to assemble teams of people for the increasingly popular hurling and football games. Interest revived when television and other media coverage broadened their focus beyond these two games. Air travel made Ireland accessible for competitors from the USA but while this initially strengthened the popularity of handball, it subsequently contributed to its decline as a 'national pastime'. Now positioned in a world rather than national arena, international rules began to dominate, with the international standard adopted in 1969. This required the changing the ball from the 'Irish hardball' to a soft rubber ball and reducing the court size to 20x40 feet. New, mainly indoor, covered courts were built and use of the 'big alley' declined.

**make use: buildings places situations** is a small architecture, urban design and spatial planning practice with an emphasis on research-based work. In 2007 we received a Heritage Council research grant to help us research the older Irish handball alley - primarily the free standing, typically unroofed structures constructed between the late 19th century and the 1970s. The overriding aim of the research is to encourage awareness and appreciation of these structures and the stories of their construction and use. It undertakes to document the remaining alleys in Ireland through physical survey and written record, and also to discuss and articulate the architectural and cultural value of this particular form of alley.

We invite anyone who has something to share about any 'big alley'- surviving or 'lost', to please get in touch with us. Information such as a picture, a location description, a few facts about the history of a particular alley, or the name of someone who might know more, will all assist this research.

*Please just send an e-mail to:* [irishhandballalley@gmail.com](mailto:irishhandballalley@gmail.com),  
or phone us at **087 7554882** (we will phone you back),  
or upload an image or comment on the research website  
<http://irishhandballalley.blogspot.com>.

Looking forward to learning about the 'big alleys' you know.  
Many thanks,  
Áine Ryan

<http://irishhandballalley.blogspot.com/>