



*Uachtaráin: Willy O'Connor (RIP) & Diarmuid Ó Cathasaigh (RIP)
Saoithe: Paddy Daly, Niamh Parsons, Ann Riordan*

The Sweet Nightingale

New Series, no 37, March 2026

Cúig Bliana Is Fiche Ag Fás

Howth Singing Circle commences its twenty-fifth year. We have had some memorable nights, concerts, occasions, fund raisers, Fiddle Buses and Burns Nichts. We have been graced by great guests from near and far, enjoyed great company and friendships, and maintained a traditional singing tradition in Howth. We have, inevitably, lost many stalwarts but they live in our collective memory, their favourite songs and stories still alive for us all.

So, thank you to everyone who has participated in and supported Howth Singing Circle over the last quarter of a century. We have honoured the talent and voice of Brendan 'Bull' Moore well. Below, a regular visitor from England, John Bentham reflects on what the HSC has meant to him. Other memories from any readers would be welcome



Mamáí agus Dadaí na Nollaig and Eileen Clancy and Máire Ní Bhaoill enjoy our Christmas night

Howth Memories From John Bentham

It was at a singing weekend in the north of England where we first met singers from Howth. Apart from the singing, one of my abiding memories is of a conversation on the Saturday evening about Roy Keane who was then manager of Sunderland. So if football was involved, you'll know who I was chatting with! Consequently, an invitation was extended to a group of us to visit Howth and have a weekend sing ...

We flew in to Dublin about 8pm and were met at the airport by Anne O'Reilly who informed me that I was to be Fear a Tí with Jerry, whatever that meant, and that the theme for the evening was 'Shamrock, Rose and

Thistle'. We arrived at the Sea Angling Club to be met with a profusion of welcomes, hugs, and a bit of back slapping with dear old Willy O'Connor being in the thick of it with his big beaming smile lighting up his face. It was a night of sheer joy. At least Jerry O'Reilly was familiar with our English names and he introduced the visitors whilst I struggled a bit (to say the least) with some of the names of the local singers. My contribution to the session was 'The Banks of Red Roses' reasoning that it was a Scottish song sung in Ireland by an Englishman and so ticked all the boxes. Subsequently, Francy adapted this version and sang it on his first CD *My Father Told Me*. What followed was a fascinating weekend of discovery, hospitality, generosity and burgeoning friendships that have endured. Some weeks later I was chatting with one of our party and asked him if he still thought about the weekend and his answer was 'All the time'. And I had to agree with Jack Crawford, for it is vivid still after all these years later.

But that, of course, was just the start of this long association that Sheila and I have been privileged to have with Francy, Ann and everyone involved with the Howth Singing Circle. The annual pilgrimage for Burns' Nicht which has been one of our highlights for many's the year with its mighty raffle prize hampers, flagging up the Abbey Tavern, the wealth of Scottish guests, haggis, wee drams, the mighty singing sessions, playing Oliver Cromwell with the Fingal Mummies and all. There have also been the singing weekends with folks coming over from the East Midlands to support the Singathon and the walking tours of Dublin not to mention the visits to Bray, Drogheda, the Góilín, Naul and many more.

There are so many memories that come flooding back as I sit here but, as is the way of things, some of the most poignant are those who are no longer with us – Anne O'Reilly, Diarmid Ó Cathasaigh, Willy O'Connor et al. Thank you everyone for your commitment to Howth Singing Circle, long may you continue to enjoy fellowship that the love of singing brings for it is singing that first brought us over to Howth and it is singing that blesses us all.

John Bentham, Loughborough



Tom Finn, Dave McCracken doing unspeakable things to a haggis and Tommy Lehane

Howth Burns Nicht 2026

The night began with the Howth Singing Circle Choir rousing the room with the 'Greenland Whale Fishery', led by Tony Fitzpatrick, and 'Will Ye Go, Lassie, Go', guided by Brian Doyle. They sounded great and created a warm, welcoming atmosphere in the room. Niamh Parsons and Graham Dunne then performed a classy Three in a Row. They began with the Scots' miners' song 'Bonnie Woodhall' and a version of the Hebridean classic 'Fear a' Bhàta'. They concluded with a traditional Burns Nicht highlight, their wonderfully jazzy version of Robert Burns's 'The Slave's Lament'. Three HSC stalwarts then followed: Eddie Phillips with 'The Banks of Claudy'; Mary Doyle reading Francis Devine's tribute to Paul Anderson, 'Scottish Fiddle Player'; and Helen Lahert with a moving version of 'Jimmy Mo Mile Stór' ('Jimmy, My Thousand Treasure', originally from Munster and documented by P.W. Joyce in *Old Irish Folk Music and Songs (1909)*). In the second half, three more regulars sang: Michael King with 'I'm A Man You Don't Meet Every Day', a song much associated with

the late Howth resident Barney McKenna; Ann Riordan reading Theo Dorgan's 'Statement of the Political Exiles'; and our excellent Fear a' Tí for the night Laurence Bond delivered a superb version of the Ulster song 'I'll Reap & Mow The Hay', a song first recorded by Paddy and Jimmy Halpin McGrath's Bar, Brookeborough, Fermanagh in 1977.



Siobhán Miller getting her cholesterol fix intravenously and Leen Marouf

Our tradition of piping in the haggis was maintained by Noel Kelly, Wayne Clancy and Eoin Donovan of St Lawrence Howth Pipe Band. The haggis, made by Shane from Higgins' Family Butchers, Sutton Cross, was nobly borne in by Burns Night regular Pauric Travers. With Morag Dunbar unable to travel from Balerno, Edinburgh, the 'Address' was delivered by Northumbrian visitor Dave McCracken. His delivery was excellent, dramatic and it captivated the audience. The 'Selkirk Grace' was the given by the Reverend Philip Heak, St Mary's Church of Ireland and newly-appointed Rural Dean of Fingal. After the haggis and sandwiches were consumed, Noel Kelly played the lament 'Tommy Tully's Air' as we remembered friends and family who had passed since last we assembled.



Ann Riordan and Michael King

The theme of the night was 'Ye're Welcome Hame Tae Me ...' and we thought of those who were victims of a violently troubled world. To express our solidarity with the beleaguered people of Gaza and the West Bank, our first guest was the Cork-based Palestinian singer Leen Marouf. She sang three songs in Arabic, her voice clear and haunting, her beautiful costume and manner engaging everyone, the pain of her life of exile apparent in her music. She was, in every way, a wonderful guest. As, of course, were our main guests, Siobhán Miller, Charlie Stewart, fiddle, and Innes White, guitar. Siobhán began her set with 'I'm a Rover, Seldom Sober' and the Planxty favourite 'Cold Blow and the Rainy Night'. A tender version of 'The May Morning Dew'

followed and then a composition by Siobhán herself 'All Is Not Forgotten', a song in memory of the wee notes her granny left on packets of garden seeds. Charlie and Innes played two sets of storming reels before Siobhán performed Ewan MacColl's 'Move Along Song' written for the celebrated Radio Ballad 'The Traveling People'. She concluded things with the Orcadian song 'The Great Selkie of Sule Skerry'.



Howth Choristers, l-r, Walter Kennedy, Ronni King, Sèonaid Ó Murchadha, Anne Parsons Dunne, Tony Fitzpatrick, Feargus McDonnell, Brian Dunne & Niamh Parsons – photograph Colm Keating

For her second set, Siobhán began at full gallop with a version of 'Tranent Wedding' or 'Up They Gae A-Gallopin'. At its conclusion, the audience was out of breath, never mind Siobhán. Just to emphasise her peak physical condition, she then took the front of the stage to give an acoustic version of a crowd favourite 'Cholesterol'. Written by the recently deceased Adam McNaghten, the audience belted out the chorus: 'Cholesterol, Cholesterol / Oh my chance of survival is small / All the cream I consume, it may lead to my doom / But I love my cholesterol'. This was followed by Burns's classic 'Green Graw the Rashes, O', 'Secrets and Lies' and the old favourite 'Loving Hannah'. This was Siobhán's fourth visit to Howth and she repaid our faith in her in spades. It was a quality night – indeed all the performers contributed to a class event.



Feeding our guests – Ann Riordan, Sophie and Laurence Bond, Dace McCracken, Siobhán Miller, Charlie Stewart & Innes White; and our photographer, the excellent Colm Keating

The night concluded with Leen Marouf rocking the room with ‘Óró, Sé Do Bheatha Abhaile’; Siobhán leading ‘Auld Lang Syne’; and Laurence Bond winding things up with ‘The Parting Glass’. The night was a sell out but does not happen without a lot of hard work. Our thanks go to Paul Mulligan and Abbey Tavern staff; Fingal County Council for grant-aiding the event; Eoghan Fitzmaurice on sound; Colm Keating, photographs; Michael King, Eddie Phillips and Dave McCracken for erecting flags and carrying out other tasks; our pipes Noel and Wayne; and all those who contributed various things to the night. Our special thanks to our guests Niamh, Graham and Leen and, especially to Siobhán, Charlie and Innes. Siobhán was extraordinarily busy between touring Australia and being a key figure in Celtic Connections in Glasgow but made time to come to Howth to renew old acquaintances and for that we were blessed. Finally, the main burden of organisation – ticket sales, booking guests, venue and travel, applying to Fingal for a grant and much else besides – fell on Ann Riordan and we recognize her contribution.

Douglas McIntyre

‘Come Lift Up Your Voices’, March 2026

‘Come Lift Up Your Voices In Chorus With Mine’, a session of chorus songs, was the idea of Laurence Bond, Fear a Tí for the night, assisted by Eddie Phillips. It started with a good rouser to warm up the vocal chords, a medley from Eddie: ‘Pack Up Your Troubles’; ‘It’s A Long Way To Tipperary’; ‘She’ll Be Coming Round The Mountain’ and ‘Michael Row The Boat Ashore’. Úna Kane lamented that ‘Bold Reilly Has Gone Away’ and Feargus McDonnell completed our first three with ‘The Plains of Waterloo’. That brilliant Woody Guthrie song ‘Roll on Columbia’ was Helen Lahert’s first and Brian Doyle’s ‘The Grey Funnel Line’ brought us all in as we chorused ‘Here’s one more day...’. Erfan Shams recited ‘The Caged Bird’, Dave Johnson and Seán Ó Cinnéide sang ‘She Moved Through The Fair’ and ‘Oró Sé do Bheatha Bhaile’. Mick King did a Fergus Russell with ‘The Bonnie Light Horseman’ followed by Paddy Daly, Laurence and Eddie leading ‘Nancy Spain’, ‘My Father Was a Hedger and Ditcher’ and ‘The Whistling Gypsy’. Úna, Fergus and Helen inspired a satisfied response with ‘Pleasant and Delightful’, ‘McAlpine’s Crew’ and ‘The Manchester Rambler’. Brian, Erfan and Dave responding spiritedly with ‘Sammy’s Bar’, ‘Bendemeer’s Stream’ and ‘The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face’. Seán, Paddy and Mick provide ‘The Wild Rover’, ‘Here’s To You’ and ‘The Rocky Road To Dublin’. Our break followed with the he Abbey Tavern’s excellent sambos and a bit of a mingle.



Eddie Phillips and Laurence Bond with Helen Lahert, Amy Kate Stewart on whistle and Niamh Parsons

Anne Parsons-Dunne opened the second half with ‘The Last Trip Home’ followed by Amy Kate Stewart and Ronnie King gracing us with ‘Red Is the Rose’ and ‘It’s a Working Man I Am’. Eddie, Úna and Niamh kept the chorus singers busy with ‘Phil the Flutter’s Ball’, ‘The Dutchman’ and ‘Annan Waters’. Fergus, Helen and Brian added to the night’s enjoyment with ‘The Ragman’s Wake’, ‘Follow the Heron Home’ and ‘The Spanish Lady’. Erfan this time had a song in the Persian language titled ‘Khayam’ that he learned from his grandad. Dave and Seán followed with ‘Casadh an tSúgáin’ and ‘Brennan On the Moor’. Mick, Anne and Amy, ever resourceful, had ‘Working On the Railway’, ‘The Men That God Made Mad’ and Brendan Begley’s Polka on

tin whistle making Amy the only musician of the night. Three good ones then came our way: 'Now I'm Easy', 'Bound For South Australia' and 'Sweet Daffodil Mulligan' from Ronnie, Laurence and Niamh.

Our last three songs of the night were from Brian with 'Whack Fol The Diddle' (noisily received), Helen with 'The Hills of Isle Au Haut' and from Mick who had a last go at bringing the roof down with 'The Hot Asphalt'. Then to finish the night of forty-two renditions from fifteen attendees with a nice bonding of cross-armed handshakes we sang 'The Parting Glass'. Finally, to say many thanks to the management and staff of the Abbey Tavern for looking after us so well.

Eddie Phillips



Howth Burns Night 2026, l-r, Laurence Bond, Charlie Stewart, Dave McCracken, Leen Marouf, Graham Dunne, Siobhán Miller, Niamh Parsons and Innes White with Ann Riordan looking on – photograph Colm Keating



The Parting Glass concludes Howth Burns Night 2026 – photograph Colm Keating



A farewell to Burns Nicht 2026

Buíochas Mór

We thank those who have contributed to this *Sweet Nightingale*: John Bentham; Colm Keating, Michael King, Helen Lahert, Niamh Parsons and Ann Riordan (photographs); Douglas McIntyre; and the Howth Singing Circle Committee – Laurence Bond, Paddy Daly, Francy Devine, Brian Doyle, Michael King, Helen Lahert, Niamh Parsons, Eddie Phillips and Ann Riordan.

Forthcoming Programme

Thursday, 2 April – Máire Ní Bhaoill with Special Guest Caoilfhionn Ní Mhadagáin

Thursday, 6 May – Helen Lahert with Special Guest Fionnuala Maxwell

Thursday, 4 June – Brian Doyle Celebrating 100 Years of Irish Radio

Saturday, 18 July – Singing The Fishing, 3-6, proceeds to St Francis Hospice



Dave McCracken and an exhausted John Bentham make up the hampers; remembering Willy O'Connor and Walter Kemmedy and Brian Doyle when first capped for Howth



Graham Dunne and Mary Doyle, photograph Colm Keating



Laurence Bond and Charlie Stewart, Siobhán Miller and Innes White, photographs Colm Keating

