

The Leeds Irish Centre is one of the nation's most iconic and successful community clubs



What is the Club Champions Campaign?

For our Club Champions campaign at Club Insure, we learn more about the hardworking people behind the clubs, their stories, and their connected communities. The Club Champions campaign aims to showcase the longstanding efforts of managers, club secretaries and staff.

We sat down with Rena Cosgrove and Tommy McLoughlin MBE from [The Leeds Irish Centre](#) to discuss the history and services of the centre, as well as their views for the direction of the club.



Club Insure visits The Leeds Irish Centre

The club is a Leeds landmark, situated proudly on York Road, visible to all day-trippers, comparable to an Irish Angel of the North. We arrived on a rainy day in May, but were greeted with warm smiles by Secretary Rena Cosgrove and Manager Tommy McLoughlin MBE. We were given exclusive access to the club's secret and historic rooms, with Tommy and Rena guiding us through every facet of the fascinating building and its premises. Tommy provided us with detailed descriptions of every picture, every portrait and every feature of this historic club.

"Here's where Noel and Liam Gallagher showered," he'd say casually – "This is where Jools Holland stood on stage", – "Here's the room where the first televised Crucible of Darts was held." – "This is when honorary member Jack Charlton visited." – "That's a picture of Gabby Logan being made Leeds "Rose of Tralee here in 1991." The tales and name-drops were endless.



The Leeds Irish Centre – History, Legacy and The Troubles

The Leeds Irish centre was the first purposely built Irish centre in England. It's a special social community club connected by country, culture, religion and heritage. Indeed, Leeds has historically always been a popular home for Irish migrants, with 80% of mid-19th century Irish migrants to England making Cross Green their home. Mines, mills, railways, canals, ports, factories, and then later, NHS hospitals, schools, motorways, power stations – this is the legacy of the Irish working class.

Much of the vast history of Irish migration and life in Yorkshire is recorded in the Leeds Irish Centre's archive. Here they host Irish literature, memorabilia, photographs, drawings, war records, census records, maps, and numerous extractions from Irish-born citizens – each of which has been collected and preserved. The archive has been added to throughout the club's lifespan, which stretches back to its opening day on 23rd January 1970. The archive is now used by researchers and schoolteachers, with their collection used for displays at events across the city and country.



Tommy McLoughlin MBE, manager since 1975, has written on his experience over his 45 years managership in the club's new 50 year anniversary book: "When the conflict in Northern Ireland dominated headlines, we all felt it. At times, being Irish was demonised by warring factions. We had quite a few hoax bomb scares."

"It has not always been easy, though, and there have been many tough times. Sadly, other Irish Centres in large cities have closed in recent times, but we are secure for the future. We were free of debt by our 25th anniversary – [having] paid off our loans for our land and mortgage."

"Leeds Irish Centre is now firmly entrenched in the city's history and culture, having opened its doors to people of all religions and backgrounds. I am proud to have been a part of it."

The club now has a membership north of 1150 people, with many more families associating the club with a wedding, birthday party, anniversary or society.



The Leeds Irish Centre's Heyday

Perhaps what the Leeds Irish Centre is most famous for is its concert nights as a local music and performance venue. Many-a Leeds local will tell you that they were there the night Oasis played at the Leeds Irish Centre – 10th August 1994. Famous faces were mixed in with Irish-born national stars, showbands and traditional dancing to achieve a truly wealthy year of events. Nathan Carter, Ocean Colour Scene, Jools Holland, DJ Chris Moyles, The Beautiful South, Curtis Mayfield and many, many more.

One [story](#) goes: *John Cooper Clarke recited his poem 'Evidently Chickentown' which largely utilises the f-word, and one of the senior committee members rushed out to the reception and said "We can't have language like that on stage, it's where the priest has done mass!"*

Indeed, up-and-coming and world-famous acts have both performed on the Leeds Irish Centre's stage. Tommy and Christy (Power) have promoted countless artists in their 45-year tenure and became widely regarded as very good talent-spotters. Sellout nights used to be a

common occurrence in the 90s, with long queues stretching beyond the main entrance car park.

The Irish centre became a very popular place for wedding receptions and commemorative parties. Tommy describes; “It [The Leeds Irish Centre] is a place to come where you can meet your own folk – family and friends.”

Though music was a big part of the club’s appeal, the management never lost sight of the true purpose of the Irish Centre – as an outlet and beacon for the local community. Throughout their time and still to this day, the club’s leadership team have pushed charity work and initiatives. It’s estimated that the centre has raised £5 million for charity since its formation. Initiatives such as school lunch boxes, fundraiser walks, community housing for the elderly, and The Tuesday Lunch Club charity raffle have been commonplace at the club for decades – and still are to this day, alongside recent initiatives including aid sent to Ukraine and NHS fundraisers.



The Leeds Irish Resurgence Post-COVID

The pandemic hit The Leeds Irish Centre hard. The club were forced to cancel their 50 year anniversary celebrations, having invited dignitaries from Ireland and special guests and acts to perform. This was a major blow for the club, who plan to revive the celebration for their upcoming 55th anniversary. The management used the time through COVID to redecorate and reevaluate.

“We saw more popular clubs than ours, such as the local working men’s clubs, being forced to close because of the pandemic and recent economic struggles,” mentioned Tommy. Rena continued – “We’re lucky to have fantastic management. They are hardworking and honest, and they employ their staff. It’s a fantastic advantage we have.”

“This past year, we’ve been using more tribute bands; we’ve found they’re excellent at bringing in new people who may not have visited our Irish Centre before.” Said Rena. And Tommy added, “We started putting on shows at Sunday afternoons, putting on carveries and dancing, moving the finish forward to 5 o’clock. This meant older people were more interested

in coming as they are not keen on a late night, and also site-workers could have an early night after a drink.” So, by changing their usual schedule to suit the needs of their regulars and visitors, the Irish Centre had a very successful year.



The Leeds Irish Centre’s Recent Refurbishment

The Leeds Irish Centre is home to many societies and clubs. Services include darts, dominoes, walking football, ladies and men’s golf, rugby, boxing, horseshoe pitchers, tug-of-war, Gaelic games, and many more. With each of these societies and then a packed schedule of weddings and parties, it was a canny investment from management to conduct a full refurbishment.

The club have refurbished each of their suites and rooms. Two function rooms have seen a full makeover; they’ve added a foldable partition, able to split rooms to cater to separate events; the bathrooms and showers have been modernised; and the team have worked hard to keep the bar and venue hire prices affordable. The club have received a raft of positive testimonials since their reopening, each commenting on the tasteful decorations.

“You have always got to look forward. We don’t get too many Irish artists as we did in yesteryear – we still do on St. Patrick’s weekend of course – but it’s a big premises, and we’ve started doing things differently.” Tommy continues – “You’ve got to move with the times, and don’t be afraid. My advice for club owners is, have a place of your own by all means, but always try to accommodate the people’s needs.”



Upcoming 55 year anniversary and the future of the club

When asked about long-term plans, both Rena and Tommy gave the impression that it's better to take each day as it comes. "The majority of what we've seen from our members, is that their young families have started to move away, perhaps to the outer reaches of Yorkshire, for better housing and better schools. The Irish always want to better themselves. We are losing the local community, but you can't blame them," says Tommy. "Instead it's better to focus on how we can attract new members and visitors."

Rena details; "We have people come from all over, from the likes of Manchester and such, because they've lost their club. Modern Irish centres are now too small for the services they hope to provide." It's clear that The Leeds Irish Centre is quickly becoming even more unique and important.



What can clubs stand to learn from the Leeds Irish Centre?

“We tried to give people what they wanted and I think we’ve always managed to just stay ahead of the posse.” writes Tommy in the Club’s 50th anniversary book – *Leeds Irish Centre – 50 Years in the Making*.

With loneliness on the rise and post-pandemic concerns in mind, community centres are now perhaps more important than ever. Though the influx of Irish migrants has slowed, The Leeds Irish Centre is finding new ways to attract members and visitors.

“You have to keep a standard,” says Tommy in a [recent interview](#) – “If you keep a standard, people will come. That’s what The Irish Centre is known for.”

And as Irish centres and community centres are closing down due to reduced financial support and profits, more and more people are travelling further afield to recapture that sense of nostalgia and comfort that only a place like the Leeds Irish Centre can provide.

Before leaving, Rena reminds us: “The management see this not as a place to work, not just a weekly wage, but as satisfaction – satisfaction which they gain through the success of the club. For many of us, this club is our life’s work.”



Thank you to the Leeds Irish Centre for the opportunity to view your premises and archive. Thank you to Rena and Tommy for the guided tour and honest words. At Club Insure its our mission to protect and support local clubs which help our community thrive, and its visiting clubs and listening to clients that helps us love what we do.

<https://www.club-insure.co.uk/club-champions-the-leeds-irish-centre/>