



WIRELESS FOR THE BLIND

Listen to an audio version of this
article on our youtube channel



A Scheme to provide every blind person in the state with a wireless radio

(Image: The British Wireless for the Blind Fund)

Are you interested in

TRACING YOUR MAYO ROOTS?

If you are interested in professional help to research your family history or are curious about your ancestry, why not contact us?



The
North Mayo
Heritage
Centre



Riailtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland



pobal
government supporting communities

This project is supported by the Department of Rural and Community Development and Pobal through the Community Services Programme



WIRELESS FOR THE BLIND

'Only the blind could realise what a great boon a wireless set was to a blind person'
Dr. T.G. Moorehead, Honorary Secretary of the National Council for the Blind in Ireland, speaking in 1948.

The National Council for the Welfare of the Blind of Ireland was founded on March 10th, 1931, in the Standard Hotel, Harcourt Street, Dublin.¹ In 1934, the newly renamed National Council for the Blind of Ireland (NCBI) appealed to the Irish public for subscriptions to be used to supply radios (wireless sets) to blind people in Ireland. The idea was one which had been in operation in Britain already. There were believed to be about 4,000 blind people in the Irish Free State at the time. Many *'lived very isolated lives.'*²

The hope was to supply every blind person in the country with a wireless *'through which they might hear what was going on in the world, and enjoy music and lectures.'*³ In its first year, the appeal raised enough to give sets to 145 people. Mr. Crawford Johnson, himself a board member of the NCBI, made a large donation to get the fund moving.⁴ Demand quickly outpaced supply, and by July of 1936, the waiting list extended to 200 people *'who were anxiously looking forward to receiving a wireless set.'*⁵

The scheme saw the NCBI purchase the sets, and then loan them to people. The Government of the day allowed the sets to be imported free of duties, so that *'a good valve set, with inbuilt loud speaker'* could be purchased for about £4.⁶ In the 1930s, the majority of blind people lived in houses without electricity.

Therefore, *'wet battery'* wireless sets were essential, and the upkeep of these batteries was costly. Indeed, *'a great many people were obliged to refuse the offer of a set owing to this cost'* which was about £3 per year.⁷

A wireless set had been developed in Britain which had Braille dials, but it was a crystal set, with a limited range, and therefore of little use in remoter parts of Ireland. Another issue was the broadcast content itself: *'the Irish broadcasting stations do not send out programmes during the daytime to any great extent, so for blind persons to get value, it is necessary to have a set with a longer range.'*⁸ The impact of these sets stretched far beyond the actual recipients. If a radio set cost a minimum of £4 or £5 in 1930s Ireland, and £3 per year to run, plus a license fee, a great swathe of the population couldn't afford one.

The appearance of one of the NCBI's radios in the home of blind neighbour could instantly make the household a meeting point where *'the wireless'* could be heard. Neighbours could gather, company could be shared. It allowed people to hear a wireless broadcast, perhaps for their first time ever. It helped to expand horizons, indeed it is not far-fetched to say it may have marked a kind of historic milestone in some townlands. Although the scheme required tireless fundraising and a network of local branches, it became a huge success.



1930s radio set (Image: ebay.ie)

The Emergency did not deter these efforts, although the importation of the wireless sets themselves must have been difficult. Appeals were made for funds by way of a short programme broadcast on Radio Eireann. By the end of the War, with the scheme into its eleventh year, 1,342 sets had been distributed.⁹ In its 40th year, the fund had distributed over 17,000 sets, and that Christmas Day, 1974, Terry Wogan broadcast the appeal for the Wireless for the Blind fund just before the 6.30p.m. news.¹⁰

For many years, the scheme was administered by Patricia McLoughlin. Patricia's voice was a familiar one on the airwaves, every Sunday, at 6.30p.m for 16 years:

*'Think of the blind. Think of their courage in a world of darkness. Think of what radio means to them. Thank God for your sight. And send your donation to Patrick McLoughlin, Wireless for the Blind....'*¹¹

The NCBI, and its successful **'Wireless for the Blind'** scheme, is nowadays known as Vision Ireland. The charity offers a range of technological aids to assist those who need support, as well as an online 24-hour radio station for blind or vision impaired listeners. But its idea, which began in 1934, brought more than broadcast voices into the homes of the blind. It opened a window on the wider world for many villages around Ireland.

Sources:

- ¹ From vi.ie
- ² The Irish Independent the 2nd of July 1936
- ³ The Irish Press, the 12th of June 1936
- ⁴ The Evening Herald, the 13th of July 1936
- ⁵ The Irish Independent the 2nd of July 1936
- ⁶ The Irish Independent the 2nd of July 1936
- ⁷ The Evening Herald, the 13th of July 1936
- ⁸ The Evening Echo, the 20th of July 1936
- ⁹ The Irish Independent, the 10th of December 1945
- ¹⁰ The Evening Herald, the 24th of December 1974
- ¹¹ The Kilkenny People, the 5th of March 2004



The type of battery used to power the wireless sets of the 1930s and 1940s



A family listening intently to the wireless (Image: the swlingpost blog)