■John Dowd with his faithful donkey, pictured outside the Hatchet Field house circa 1959.

LAST FAMILY ON THE HATCHET FIELD

Black Mountain campaigner, Terry Enright, has been talking to Robert and Elizabeth Ireland, the last family to live on the Hatchet Field.

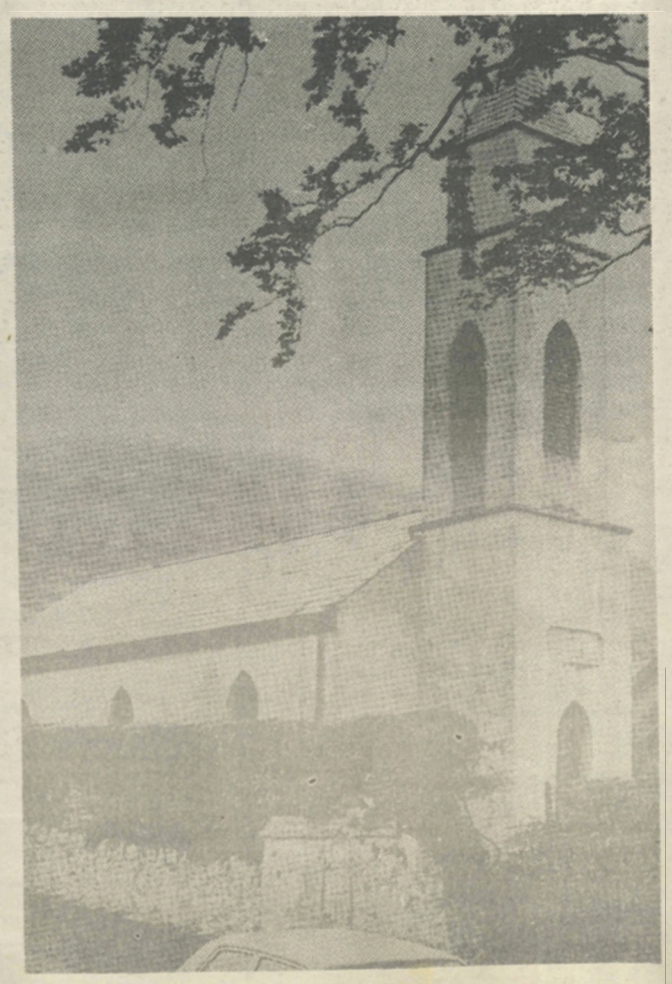
Robert and Elizabeth Ireland now live in Alliance Avenue, Ardoyne - a far cry indeed from the Hatchet field atop the Black Mountain where, between 1952 and 1961, they spent the "most idyllic years of our life".

Robert, now 62, and Elizabeth 61, reared a family of six children in their tiny whitewashed cottage in the Hatchet Field. The pair were married in St Vincent de Paul Church, Ligoniel, in 1950. For a period they lived in England, where their first child was born. But when Elizabeth was expecting their second child they returned to live with Robert's parents in Ardoyne. "The house in Brookfield Street was too overcrowded," recalls Elizabeth, "so we asked Robert's uncle, John Dowds, to look out for a place for us." When John sent word that he had spotted a place, the Ireland's moved swiftly. They followed John's directions and found themselves at the top of the Mountain Loney but, unable to see a "house standing on its own", they called at the Booth's home to ask for help. Billy Booth could hardly believe that anyone was willing to live in the wilderness of the Hatchet Field but he showed Elizabeth up the narrow mountain path which led to the house. "You'll not last two weeks," he warned her. But he was wrong,. The Irelands spent nine years in their new home - which dated back at least to 1832 - and had five more children during that time. In the process they also became great friends with the Booths.

John Dowds moved in with the Irelands and for a nominal rent of eight shillings a month had full use of the land round the wee house. "We were well and truly in the country", said Robert. "Ballymurphy, New Barnsley and Turf Lodge had yet to be built and Highfield was only partly finished." The house was made from stone taken from the mountain and boasted walls a foot and a half thick. All cooking was done on the living room fire. Outside there were byres where John kept poultry while in front of the house there stood a a barn - doubling as a wind brake - which housed up to eight cows and a dry toilet. Coal for the fire was delivered to neighbours at the top of the Loney and then brought on a donkey's back to the cottage. The house was lit by paraffin lamps and occasionally the family burned top sod, taken from the mountain. "It wasn't considered as good as turf," declared Robert, "but when properly dried it gave a great fire." Behind the house the John and Robert grew a variety of vegetables which they sold to local shopkeepers.

Water came from the nearby stream which ran down the gulley but during heavy snowfalls they would melt the snow for cooking and drinking purposes. Adds Robert: "When snow was expected we brought the spade into the house in case we had to dig ourselves out."

Elizabeth would return to Ardoyne to have her children - much to the relief of Robert and John who always feared she would deliver a child in the house. Elizabeth remembers leaving the house at 5am one January morning, fearing she was about to go into labour. The mountain was covered in a foot of snow and when Elizabeth reached Booth's house she sat down on a rock for a breather. Billy Booth, who was about to milk his cows, nearly fainted when he saw her condition. With his wife Lizzie, he escorted Elizabeth down the Ballygomartin Road and from Highfield the local breadserver rushed her to Ardoyne. Baby John was born the same morning at 10am. But despite the gruelling mountain life Elizabeth remained fearless throughout her five pregnancies. "St Anthony always kept me company," she says.

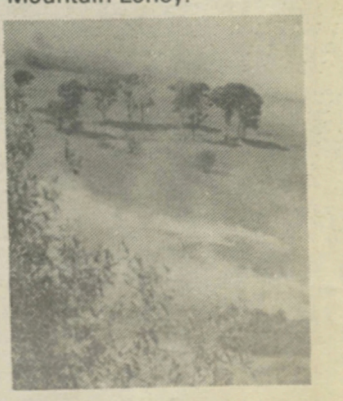


■The Lutheran Chruch which stood on the Mountain Loney until 1969.

The Ireland children went to school in Ardoyne, leaving at 8.15am to arrive at school for 9.30. They made the journey in all weathers and were never late. Indeed their parents still derive a sense of satisfaction from the fact that while the Irelands were always punctual, children living only yards from the school would arrive late. John Ireland recalls how the youngsters regarded the Black Mountain as "our hill". Sliding through the snow in makeshift sledges in winter and tickling trout in the summer are just some of the fond memories from his childhood.

But there were also hardships. Robert received just £5 from the 'boru' to feed and clothe the entire family. Elizabeth still has clear memories of facing one Christmas penniless. "Robert was doing casual work on the docks and so we received no 'boru' money. But the money for the week's work on the docks wasn't to be paid until after Christmas. On Christmas Eve we hadn't a halfpenny between us and we had nothing for the kids Christmas presents. I had been crying all week in desperation and eventually I went over to Ardoyne and Robert's father lent me his last ten shillings. I headed back over to the hill and on the way bought sweets and chocolates for the kids. There was 6d left so I bought six penny balloons. The next morning all our in-laws arrived up at the house with lots of things for the kids. We were really surprised. Later that morning John Dowds called me into the bedroom and pointed to all the presents our relatives had bought lying on the ground. 'Now,' he said, 'take a look outside.' And there, playing about in the Hatchet Field with the penny balloons, were the children.

The Irelands came down off the mountain in 1962 when they were allocated a house in the new Turf Lodge estate but a part of them remains on the mountain, insists Robert. "We have some really lovely memories from those times. They were the happiest days of our lives and I wish to God they were back again." John Dowds continued to work the Hatchet Field until 1962 when he dropped dead outside the Lutheran church which once stood on the Mountain Loney.



■The Black Mountain.

"I can't understand why they're destroying the mountain," adds Robert. "I can remember summer days when the Mountain Loney was black with people. I saw days when Billy Booth and I would stand chatting in the Hatchet Field while a dozen and more groups of people would be enjoying picnics amongst the bluebells. If only they would stop the quarrying and open it up again to the people, I'm sure it would be a black with people again."