

Cushendun



R. Emmet GAC

Cushendun Emmets
1984-2001

A Personal Recollection

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1984 was the Centenary Year of the GAA and the Association held events and tournaments throughout the country. It was a year when the GAA could look at its achievements in promoting our traditional and national games with great pride and realise the importance of the Association's contribution to Irish society.

It also saw the start of a journey for Robert Emmet's, Cushendun. The club was faced with the prospect of folding due to the declining numbers of available players for the Senior team. However, the community was determined that the club should continue despite the difficulties it was experiencing. Once the decision to continue was made, little did the community know that the Emmet's would within a few years, rise from the bottom of Division 2 to become one of the best teams playing in Division 1. A major turning point was the appointment of Dan Kinney. Dan had previously managed the Cushendall Senior hurling team and had moulded many of the players that would go on to dominate the Antrim Senior Hurling scene. He came to Cushendun, agreeing to manage the Senior team as well as the U-12 and U-14 teams.

In 1984 the U-12 and U-14 teams won the North Antrim Division 2 league. Significantly, during that same year it was decided to enter the Centenary Year Competition for U-10. This was a competition that was open to all North Antrim teams but Cushendun were the only small club with a Division 2 background. Teams like Ballycastle, Loughgiel, Cushendall, and Dunloy were involved. In a very exciting day of hurling the Cushendun players were outstanding and won the competition. It was clear to "Big Dan" that he was dealing with a talented group of young players. It was equally as clear to the rest of us, that Dan was a great coach even if his mathematical awareness was somewhat flawed. It is worth noting that among those involved in that team were Paul Graham, young Dan Kinney, Brendan McSparran, Emmet O' Hara, Barry O'Hara, Aidan Mort, Robert Paul Lavery and Conleth Magee.

In 1985 the Cushendun U-12 and U-14 teams won Division 2 very easily. Dan Kinney felt that it was worthwhile entering the U-12 and U-14 teams into Division 1 for the 1986 season. With numbers always great at training, the players were coached the skills of the game and were put under pressure to perform them faster. Instructions in backs v forwards such as: "this is the last ball in" then again, "this is the last ball in" and after the twentieth time, "this is definitely the last ball in" were commonplace, as did "you timed your run so you wouldn't get the ball" and "take the man, ball and all"!

The coaching was great and 1986 saw the U-12s winning the Division 1 League with the U-14s winning all their games except for Loughgiel, finishing in 2nd place. It is worth noting that during 1986, three players from the club represented the Antrim U-14 team that won the 'B' section of the Tony Forrestal Tournament in Co. Waterford; Eamon Graham, Conleth Magee and Paul Mc Sparran. A lot of interest was shown in Dominic Magee, but Dan's maths was not completely faulty when he told the Antrim selector he wasn't interested in playing. Among the memories of great performances, super results and the classical one-liners from Dan, one particularly stands out. Alexander Whites introduction during an "Under 12" match versus Loughgiel, when Cushendun were winning by 2 points. With only a couple of minutes left Alexander was sent in with one simple instruction, "hit the ball on the ground". No sooner had Alexander come on into midfield when the ball landed at his feet. He swung his hurley, connecting sweetly on the ball and sent it flying. The only problem; he sent it the wrong way, straight onto the hurley of PJ O'Mullan who buried the ball in the net. That was the last poc of the ball, game over. If only iPhones were available then, Dan's reaction would soon have gone viral!

At the end of the 1986 season Dan reviewed things and decided that we should remain in Division 1 at underage. The problem was that we didn't have enough players at "Under 16" without having to field 12-year olds, which wouldn't have been sensible. After some discussions with Seamus Graham and the committee, Dan decided to approach Glenariffe to see if they were willing

to amalgamate at "Under 16" to give these players Division 1 experience too. Glenariffe agreed to this and under the management of Seamus Graham and Artie Harvey of Glenariffe, St Patrick's was established. The new St Patrick's combination of Cushendun and Glenariffe entered the North Antrim U-16 League and McMullan Cup, which is the N.A. Championship competition. Cushendun and Glenariffe would enter their own U-12 and U-14 teams into the North Antrim competitions.

Despite their new "designer" team kit, St Patrick's suffered many heavy defeats. Nevertheless, the team was getting Division One hurling and this was helping the players develop into future senior hurlers. The U-12 and U-14 teams remained among the strongest teams in North Antrim, but missed out on silverware. The club was represented by many players on the various underage County hurling teams. Eamon Graham played on the Antrim U-16 team that won the All-Ireland 'B' U-16 title (James McMullan from Glenariffe also played). Conleth Magee and Brendan McSparran played for the Antrim U-14 team in the Tony Forrestal tournament.

The 1988 season proved a very successful one for St Patrick's. They won the Mc Mullan Cup after some tremendous displays against a "Ronan Donnelly powered" Ballycastle, competition favourites Loughgiel led by Owen McCloskey and Dunloy who were spearheaded by Paul Molloy. This victorious Mc Mullan Cup campaign was followed by winning the North Antrim U-16 League. This U-16 team would become the nucleus of future Cushendun senior hurling teams. Paul Mc Sparran at full-back, Dan Kinney at corner-back, Brendan McSparran at right-half-back, Eamon Graham at centre-half-back, Conor Mc Neill at midfield, Conleth Magee at right-half-forward, Robert Paul Laverty at centre-half-forward, Emmet O'Hara at left-half-forward, Danny Murphy at right-full-forward and Paul Graham at left-full-forward. Eamon Graham and Emmet O'Hara played on the Antrim U-16 team that season.

The U- 14 team did not win any silverware but had a great season. Danny Murphy, Dan Kinney, Robert Paul Laverty, Paul Graham, Aidan Mort, Barry O' Hara and Ruari McQuillan all played on this team. All would go on to play pivotal roles on future Cushendun senior teams. Dan Kinney, Paul Graham and Robert Paul Laverty all represented Antrim at U-14 level. The U-12 team with Aidan Mort, Barry O'Hara and Rory McQuillan holding the fort, found it tough as playing numbers were in decline.

The growing ambitions and the rising expectations of the underage players in Cushendun ensured that the 1989 season would be interesting. It turned into an amazing year for the young players. Fielding a Minor team for the first time and under the management of Seamus Graham and Randal McDonnell, St Patrick's created history by winning the All County Minor Hurling title in front of a huge crowd at Casement Park, Belfast. They defeated a tough St. John's team in the final. However, their quarter final victory over Dunloy, a team that had dominated the Minor scene for nearly a decade which included Alastair Elliot and Gregory O'Kane, proved to be the highlight in terms of performance.

The U-16s, also under the management of Seamus Graham, were involved in a series of tremendous hurling matches against Loughgiel and Ballycastle (draws and replays) to decide the League. The standard of hurling produced by these teams was superb, with St Patrick's emerging the winners of the competition. A wave of excitement, confidence, ambition and camaraderie was taking hold of hurling people in Cushendun, not least the players on all the teams.

The Senior team had been hit with emigration and retirements. Despite the small numbers to pick from, the team recorded some very notable victories. They won the Countess of Antrim Cup beating the Dunloy 'B' team. This was a North Antrim knock-out championship competition for Division 2 and Intermediate teams. Winning this competition gave great confidence and raised hopes for the rest of the season. This confidence was evident against recently crowned Intermediate champions and Division 2 league leaders GortnaMona. A one-point victory in an end to end game demonstrated that hurling was on the up throughout the whole club and the community was fully engaged in this rising tide.

There was a lot of optimism as the 1990 season began. The Senior team was confident of building upon its improving results from the previous season. As St Patrick's, we were the reigning Minor hurling champions and it was felt that we had an even better team for 1990. The U-16s had

a very strong team and were in the mix for titles. It was clear that there was a dip in the number of boys in the parish at U-14 and U-12, yet there were some very good players among that group in Damian Mort and Michael Hamilton. The whole community was showing tremendous support for the teams with large crowds of supporters coming to games to support the teams at all levels and age groups. Indeed, the community also contributed generously to fundraising campaigns. There was a lot of positive energy surrounding the hurling club.

1990 proved a very good year for the senior team. They reached the Intermediate Final which was a massive, yet fully deserved achievement. Considering that some felt that the club should fold in the mid-80s, the decision to continue was fully rewarded. The Senior team was managed by Seamus Graham and assisted by Gerry Scally (who was still playing). A lot of work went into improving the skill and fitness levels of the team, with one to one coaching becoming a stand out feature. League results were improving and confidence was high as the team approached the championship. Ballycastle 'B' were the opponents for the first-round game in Cushendun. The home team were always in control of the game and ran out winners. Rossa 'B' followed at Shaw's Road. The Belfast men had a very strong senior panel at the time with many good hurlers involved in their 'B' team. In an exciting encounter, Cushendun edged out Rossa to put them into the semi-final against Dunloy 'B'. In a competitive game, Cushendun again emerged the victors. The Emmets had reached their first Intermediate Final since they had won it in 1973. Established players like Gerry Scally, the Magee brothers (Brendan, Laurence and Alastair), Denis McHenry, Dominic and Seamus McQuillan, Barney McKay, Soddy (famously pronounced Saudi on the video of the game) whose line ball expertise set him up for a fine golf career, John McSparran, Liam Woodburn, and Dan McKillen were now lining out alongside the younger generation coming through such as minor players Eamon Graham, Paul McSparran, and Emmet O'Hara.

The Intermediate Final against neighbours Carey Faughs, played at Loughgiel, proved a bitter-sweet experience. In a wonderful game, full of excitement, the team performed brilliantly. Carey also played some great hurling, with the late Danny McKinley giving an exhibition. The defining moment however was when county senior panellist Michael Denis went on a solo run towards goal in the dying moments. Cushendun were a point up. As Michael Denis was bouncing the ball on his hurley, centre-half-back Eamon Graham flicked the ball away. The referee, Seamus O'Hare blew his whistle for a foul. The resulting free was tapped over the bar by Michael Dennis in what proved to be the last poc, the game ending in a draw. A wonderful game with excellent performances all round but it ended in deep disappointment. Carey were the resounding favourites coming into the game. They had been one of the most dominant teams in Division 2 and Intermediate for a number of years. Had Cushendun missed the boat?

The replay was played at Loughgiel's second pitch. While the drawn game was played on a beautifully sunny day in perfect conditions, the replay was played in a dull, wet and windy day with slippery underfoot conditions. It was the same for both teams though and Carey adapted better and quickly took control of the game. Cushendun battled hard throughout but Carey were the better team on the day and emerged deserving victors.

The Minor team, St Patrick's were very ambitious coming into the 1990 season and were determined to retain their Minor title. As the season got under way the team seemed to be continuing their winning form. As the championship approached, a defeat to Loughgiel exposed a few areas that needed improving. A quarter-final tie versus St John's at home was the opening fixture. In a tight and tense battle, with some scenes that were to become a feature of our games with the Johnnies throughout the 1990s, the Belfast team squeezed a victory and avenged the result of the final the previous year. It was a hugely disappointing result for St Patrick's but it was just one that they had to take on the chin. A separate North Antrim Minor Championship was in place during this era. In reaching the final against Ballycastle it was hoped to put the all-county minor result behind us. The game ended in a draw. The replay was held in Ballycastle but again the team failed to get over the line even though some great hurling was played. It was clear that there was a levelling out of standards across the teams.

In 1991 the Minor team again reached the All-County Minor Championship Final. This time however we were defeated by Belfast's O'Donovan Rossa. Throughout the underage grade St Paul's

had proven to be the team to beat. St Patrick's, with Paul Graham on fire in the forward line, Dan Kinney a powerhouse at midfield, and Conleth Magee majestic at centre-half-back, produced a powerful performance to achieve an overwhelming victory over the championship favourites from Belfast. Unfortunately, it was not meant to be in the final. In a very even game, with both teams playing good hurling, Rossa pulled away in the end with points from the speedy Vincent Carabine. Despite the disappointment of this defeat, the Minor Hurlers produced some great hurling throughout the championship and league campaign of that season.

The Senior team hoped to go one step further from the previous season and win the Intermediate title. Many felt that they left it behind them in the drawn final in 1990, so hopes were high for a successful season. Division 2 and the Intermediate Championship were very competitive as many teams were of a similar level. It really came down to form on the day. Results in the league were varied, winning most but losing some. In the championship, we were fixed to play Glenariffe in the quarter final. There was a wedding in the Parish the day before this game. Players were told to behave themselves and take it easy. When the team had gathered in the changing room before the game, it was clear that there were a few sore heads knocking about and not all of it was to do with the drink! As the game progressed and despite the hangovers, Cushendun showed they were up for battle. Glenariffe were a top Intermediate team at this stage, with the McDonnell's, Randal Snr, his sons Conrad, Raymond, and Randal Jnr leading the charge. The game was end to end drama throughout. It was played on a hot summers day in Glenariffe, the pitch was immaculate, the crowd was large and very vocal. The atmosphere was electric. In the end, Glenariffe edged it by the smallest of margins. For Cushendun the championship was over for 1991.

The 1992 season started like most seasons, with optimism. Pre-season training saw renowned physical trainer Peter Finn taking some fitness sessions from January. The Senior team panel had nearly trebled in size. The established Senior team was now joined by many of the younger players who had come up through the successful underage structures. Dan Kinney, who was instrumental from the outset, was back again as the Senior team manager. He was assisted by the now retired Gerry Scally, one of Cushendun's finest players. As pre-season training progressed it was clear that there was competition for a starting place. We were invited to participate in Armoys pre-season tournament, the McFetridge Cup. A Division 2/Intermediate tournament, the McFetridge Cup offered players the opportunity to nail down a place on the team. There was a mix of some established players and younger players. We reached the final which was to be played on Easter Sunday at Armoys against the home team. As the curtain raiser to the Senior tournament there was a very large crowd in attendance. We were up against a team that had in its ranks one of Antrim's finest ever players, the great Olcan 'Clood' McFetridge. Armoys had the upper hand on Cushendun over the previous number of seasons. Indeed, Armoys were one of the stronger Division 2/Intermediate teams. During the McFetridge Cup final, it is fair to say that the new look Cushendun team dominated the exchanges from start to finish, with great performances from Brendan McSparran in his best position of wing-half-back. Conleth Magee was also outstanding in his half-back role. Aidan Mort and Paul Graham, the two corner-forwards, demonstrated their talent in the scoring stakes and before a ball was thrown-in for the league and championship, Cushendun were already being talked about as strong contenders.

Training sessions, given the large panel, allowed for 15 versus 15 games. Players were keen for a place on the team and these games were often as competitive as any official game. A very significant development arose in the early stages of the season. The McDonnell's of Glenariffe were experiencing difficulties that couldn't be resolved with their club and were keen to join the ranks of Cushendun. A close relationship had developed between a few Cushendun coaches and Randal McDonnell, who along with Seamus Graham managed successful St Patrick's minor teams. Conrad, Raymond, and Randal junior were outstanding players. In welcoming the McDonnell's, we became an even stronger outfit and we also gained great lads who were deeply committed to the Cushendun cause.

The team sailed through the league. However, the championship did not go as smoothly as planned. We had a very difficult game against Intermediate minnows Ardoyne in Corrigan Park. We also just scraped past Ballycastle 'B' at Carey. Our next challenge in the championship was Armoys,

who were experienced and they had 'Clout'. The quarter final game against Armoyle was to be played in Armoyle. Expectations were high, but they were given an added boost when it emerged that Clout would not start through injury. For the third time in the Championship we couldn't replicate our league form. With roughly 10 minutes left and 9 points up, it looked like we had done enough to secure a victory. As we all know, 10 minutes is a long time in hurling and anything can happen and it did! Armoyle introduced Clout and within those 10 minutes he had bagged 3 goals. Cushendun were shell-shocked after his introduction and couldn't respond. The game would have to be replayed. Our championship form and our demise in those final 10 minutes pointed to some soul-searching, with some changes inevitable.

Conleth Magee, who had played the drawn game at midfield dropped back to centre-half-back. Eamon Graham, who was in his best position of midfield earlier in the season played at centre half back in the drawn game. He was now commissioned to the role of marking Clout and would line out at full-back. Paul McSparran would move from full-back to left-half-back. The replay was played in front of a very large crowd in Cushendun. Again, Clout did not start but Armoyle came out of the blocks and threw the kitchen sink at Cushendun. In a very exciting, extremely competitive, physical battle, the game was in the mix. With about 25 minutes left in the game Clout was introduced but this time it was not him who would produce the magic. Instead it was Paul Graham who produced a wonder goal. He collected the ball on the 21-meter line on the left corner sideline, he turned and drilled a low hard shot that went like a bullet into the bottom left corner of Armoyle net. This outstanding score galvanised the rest of the team and with Eamon Graham not giving Clout a sniff of the ball the team did not repeat their mistake of the previous game and drove on to win. It was a massive boost to the confidence of the team to emerge as victors.

Our opponents in the semi-final were our close neighbours Carey. Only two years previously Carey had defeated Cushendun in the Intermediate Final. That was 1990 but this was 1992 and the young stars that were playing for Cushendun made the Emmet's odds-on-favourites. In a game that saw an exhibition of free taking from Conrad McDonnell, Cushendun dominated without hitting their best form. Nevertheless, we won and we were in an Intermediate Final. We were undefeated all season in any competition, so naturally confidence was high.

We met Rossa 'B' in the Final at Casement Park. Dan Kinney arranged for us to have a pre-match poc-around at Corrigan Park. This helped settle the nerves of the young team. The age profile of the players with a few exceptions, fell into a range of 17-20 years old. The Rossa reserve team had a panel of players who were generally an experienced lot. Cushendun started well, and goals from Paul Graham at full-forward, and Gary McNeill at wing-forward set the tone. An early incident saw Rossa's Joe O'Neill deservedly get a red card and shortly after another Rossa player was dismissed. It was now a case of keeping our heads and seeing out the game. Cushendun did so in style. One move resulted in a goal which video commentator John McSparran described as something "that would grace any pitch in Ireland". (It was his commentating debut, although he is still waiting for Michael Lyster to sign him up for the Sunday Game.) The ball was played low to Paul Graham who controlled it and without catching the ball hand-passed with his right hand out to the in-rushing Conrad McDonnell. He caught the ball and on the run finished to the net with a glorious strike. The exhibition of forward play was a joy to watch, with Brendan McSparran and Emmett O'Hara cleaning up in defence. The result was a resounding victory for Cushendun. When 20-year-old Captain Eamon Graham lifted the Cup, it was the first time Cushendun had won the competition in 19 years. Interestingly, the fathers of some of those players had themselves played on the successful 1973 Intermediate Championship winning team.

The young Senior team pressed on, winning all their remaining league games in Division 2 with ease. The County Executive had decided that promotion into Division 1 would not be an automatic route for the winners of Division 2. In fairness, there was a pattern emerging that a team promoted from Division 2 into the top flight was often "out of their league". Consequently, we were fixed to play the team at the bottom of Division 1. On this occasion, it was Sarsfield's of Belfast. A team with former Antrim players in Jim McKernan, the Pickering's and Vinty Denny it was not going to be an easy challenge. It was made harder for both teams by the fact that the game was scheduled for Boxing Day! It transpired into a very one-sided victory for Cushendun. The Emmet's were too skilful,

too fast and too hungry for the experienced but jaded Sarsfield's team. It was clearly established that Cushendun deserved their chance to play a Division 1 hurling. The challenge would now be to stay in Division 1 and to adapt to a faster, better standard of hurling. We entered a reserve team into various competitions. Both our Senior team and our Senior Reserve team were undefeated the whole season, winning every competition they entered.

With the 1993 season approaching, there was a lot of excitement as our Senior team was to be competing in the Senior Championship for the first time since 1974. We were also preparing to play in Division 1. Our goal for that season was to stay in this division and avoid relegation. Early into the league we met Ballycastle. 'The Town' were kingpins throughout the '80s and while they were a team past their best it was a game that we felt we could compete in. In a close and exciting match, Ballycastle edged out winners by a few points. Playing against the Donnellys, Paul McKillen, Stephen Boyle and other highly established players proved a step-up from what we had previously experienced in Division 2. Although we were beat, we were happy that we were improving. However, shortly after that game we were fixed to play the new kingpins, Dunloy. This Dunloy team went on to become one of the best club teams in Ireland throughout the course of the 1990's, with great players such as Alastair Elliot, Gregory O'Kane, Gary O'Kane, Seamus McMullan and the brilliant Tony McGrath. The match was played in Dunloy and we were walloped by a staggering 26 points. Dunloy proved that the gap in standard was massive. This result could have knocked a lot of confidence from us but it didn't. In the next match, we were fixed to play Loughgiel, another 'big gun' team. They still had many players from their Senior Championship winning team of 1989 and were rightly regarded as one of the top teams with numerous county players. Coming off the back of the previous weeks drubbing by Dunloy, it looked as if we were in for a rough ride. Cushendun produced a wonderful performance throughout this game. We beat the Shamrocks by 13 points in what for Loughgiel, must have seemed a shock result.

Importantly we had earned some points in the league and these would prove invaluable by the end of the season when relegation was being decided. The rest of the season followed a similar pattern. The main thing was that we were learning to play Division 1 hurling. Given that the Antrim Senior team were competitive in the top tier nationally during this period, it demonstrated that we were playing a very good standard of hurling by holding our own in Division 1. While the game versus Loughgiel stood out as a great result, our best performance that year was in the last game of the year against Ballycran. The Ards peninsula team had won the Ulster Club championship, defeating Cushendun the previous week. Their confidence was high and with great players in Noel Keith, Gary Savage, Dermot Woods, Dermot O'Prey and Danny Hughes (all Down stars), they were a very formidable team. Cushendun proved in this game that they were worth their place in Division 1 and were a team with great promise. Paul Graham produced a performance that day that brought a lot of accolades from Ballycran. His goal scoring and point taking were so skilfully executed that the great Down goal-keeper Noel Keith stated that "Paul was among the best he had encountered in his career". The game ended in a draw and while a very valuable league point was secured, Cushendun had laid down a marker that they had a team that could not only compete in Division 1 but a team that could potentially rank among the better teams soon. As the 1993 season closed we had achieved our goal of staying in Division 1. Our championship experience of 1993 was a bitter sweet one. We were drawn against Rossa at Loughgiel. Our preparations were hampered by the fact that we had very few competitive matches in the lead up to the game, as the County Senior team were involved in an All-Ireland semi-final when club activity was essentially "on-hold". That said, it was the same for Rossa but with their greater experience they coped better. Rossa had qualified for the All Ireland Club Final in 1989 and were beaten Antrim senior finalists in 1990. We felt though, that if we played to our potential we could trouble them. While we did play well in parts, Rossa always had the edge in the game and ran out winners. We were a young team, many still teenagers or in their early twenties and we realised we had a lot to learn. We defeated Rossa a few weeks later in the League reinforcing our belief that on our good day we could beat the big guns.

The 1994 season reflected the '93 season in that we achieved some good results and were on the receiving end of some close and some not so close defeats. As a young team and a club from a small parish, we were finding it hard to get consistent winning performances. When we had our

full team out, we were a good team with strong players throughout the pitch. However, if we had players out with injuries or exam-tied, we were an average Division 1 team. Our Championship season looked on paper like it was going to be very short lived as we were drawn to play Dunloy. We travelled to the game in Loughgiel determined to cause an upset. We got in to the game early and with a Paul Graham goal we stood up to the challenge producing a brilliant first half performance. We had matched Dunloy all over the field in the first half and it looked promising at half time. The second half saw Dunloy step up a gear with Tony McGrath outstanding. Dunloy won the game and while the shoreline showed a comfortable enough victory in the end, this was not a true reflection of the game. Cushendun had shown great ability and demonstrated that they had the talent to push on. Unfortunately, it became a case of "next season" to do so. 1994 wrapped up with survival in Division 1 and an improvement in our Championship performance. Roll on 1995.

In 1995 two games stand out. Both were against our neighbours, Cushendall. We beat the Ruairi O'g's in the league for the first time at home and then repeated this later in the season in Cushendall. Quite a rivalry was developing between the neighbouring villages, even though in truth it was a David v Goliath type scenario. Cushendall were right up there with Dunloy. To beat them twice in the league in the same season was quite an achievement and showed the potential in the team. However, relegation was a cloud that hung over every club outside the top three. To make matters worse, the Antrim County Board decided to reduce the number of teams in the league for 1996. Despite some great performances, we found ourselves in a relegation shoot out with St John's. This game would be played in early 1996, and it gave us all winter to train and prepare. St John's absolutely destroyed us in the Championship at Casement in 1995. It was a game that we just never turned up for. We were short a few players. The Graham's were injured and Robert Paul Laverty was away. Managers Seamus Graham and Randal Mc Donnell put the team through their paces throughout the winter. The Cushendun players had not up to that point ever trained as hard physically. The hard slog through the wind, the rain, the mud, the beach, with car lights acting as spotlights on those winter night training sessions all proved worth it. We had a few pre-season games against Ballycastle. We played very well in those games. The team was sharp, and with some positional changes, confidence was high. We were also very determined to win the relegation play-off against St John's. Randal Mc Donnell was in goals. Rory McQuillan was posted to right-corner-back, Conor Mc Neill was moved from corner-back to full-back and Emmet O'Hara played in the other corner-back position. Brendan McSparran, Dan Kinney and Conleth Magee made up the half-back line. Eamon Graham moved out to mid-field alongside Aidan Mort. Paul McSparran who played all his underage hurling at full-back, was placed at centre-half-forward with Gary McNeill and Robert Paul Laverty flanking him. In a very skilful full-forward line Conrad and Raymond McDonnell played in the corners with Paul Graham playing full forward. On a very wet day in Casement Park, the team took up their challenge with great determination. Superior fitness, skill, teamwork and a new-found confidence ensured a Cushendun victory. This result not only secured our Division 1 status for 1996 but set us on a path that saw us initially dominate Division 1 for the incoming season.

The very next Sunday, we were scheduled to play Loughgiel at home. Loughgiel have always been a very skilful team with probably the largest pool of players in the county. Cushendun dominated the game though, with Dan Kinney outplaying their county star Aidan McCloskey. Paul Graham got three goals against Aidan's older brother Owen, also a county player. The team dominated on every line of the pitch and secured a resounding victory over the Shamrocks. This pattern continued as the league progressed. One game stands out and that was against Dunloy. They had been dominating both the League and Championship since 1990 and would continue to do so until 2004. In our home fixture against Dunloy we recorded a resounding victory. Having achieved such a stunning result, confidence was high as we approached the championship. We were fixed to play Glenariffe in the Championship. We won the game easily, demonstrating the development of our team since we last met in the Championship 5 years previously. Next, we were drawn to play local neighbours Cushendall in the semi-final of the championship. Cushendun found themselves in a unique position of being placed by many as favourites for this match. This was based on current form and the fact that we were undefeated in Division 1 by August. Cushendall had so many county

stalwarts in Sambo McNaughton, Leonard Mc Keegan, Aidan McAteer, Gaza Mc Cambridge, John Carson, Conor Mc Cambridge, Skinner Mc Allister and Aidan Delargy in their starting line-up. They had also won quite a few County titles since they made their breakthrough in 1981. While we were playing well, we had not achieved anything like the Ruairi Og hurlers had in recent years. There was a lot of interest throughout North Antrim shown in the fixture. We were a young and up-coming team, Cushendall were a proven outfit.

We trained on Tuesday and Friday that week. Both evenings were sunny and warm. Cushendall trained Monday and Thursday evening, both evenings were rainy and dull. The game was fixed for Sunday at Loughgiel. It was pouring rain, advantage Cushendall! In a very competitive game with tough but fair exchanges, Cushendun were matching Cushendall in terms of possession. Scores were hard to come by given the wet conditions and slippery ball. As the game came into the closing stages Cushendall got a couple of valuable points through Aidan Delargy and Conor Mc Cambridge. Paul McSparran almost equalised with a rasping ground-shot that unfortunately shaved the outside of the post. Ruairi Og goalkeeper and sadly recently deceased Kieran McNaughton, subsequently admitted he never saw that shot but was delighted to see an empty net when play stopped. Cushendall closed out the game, winning with a couple of points to spare. It was a game that we could have won but their greater experience won out in the end. They went on to win the final easily against Ballycastle. We had played Ballycastle numerous times that season, winning comfortably each time. We were left to wonder "if only"! Back to the old mantra of "Next Season"!

Despite losing our championship semi-final we still had plenty to play for. We were the league leaders and from April when the league commenced, we were undefeated. We got back onto the saddle and played Rossa, winning comfortably and producing the type of performance that had earned our league-leading status. We then played Cushendall, again producing a great team performance and winning a very competitive game. The league was nearing an end but Rossa had only played a couple of league games during the season. Every club except Cushendall had stopped training; they were out of the championship. It was now October and the evenings were dark. Rossa played out their league campaign essentially from September to November, against teams that had no incentive and were not training. We played Rossa at home and all we had to do was draw the game and numerically we had won the league. We underperformed and despite a chance to equalise at the end we lost the game. It was our first defeat in the league. Rossa were gathering league points and were training hard. We played Cushendall again in the League away and by now they had just won the Ulster Club Championship and were in good form. We were defeated and we seemed a tired team. We had been training flat out for a year. Numbers were starting to wane at training as the appetite for winter training just was not there. The nights were dark, so hurling skills training was impossible as there were no floodlights in those days. We were fixed to play Dunloy away. It was a game scheduled to be played on Dunloy's training pitch as their main pitch was water logged. It had a serious slope with long grass and on a stormy day, we were heavily beaten. Our league campaign was over. Whether we would be crowned winners or not was now out of our hands. As it turned out Rossa continued to win their league fixtures. On their last outing in November against Dunloy on that same training pitch, Rossa grabbed a late winning goal. They won the 1996 Division 1 Hurling League by one point. It would have been remembered amongst our club members as an amazing achievement had we won that league. Nevertheless, it was an outstanding season for us, particularly given that we started that season with a relegation play-off.

1997 and 1998 were similar seasons. We could not gain the same levels of consistency in our performances as in the '96 season. We were safe in our league position but we finished mid-table. In 1997, we were beaten by Rossa in the Championship and in 1998 Ballycastle beat us. This was quite disappointing as we would have been winning most of our league games against Ballycastle. The management of Seamus Graham and Randal Mc Donnell decided to take a step back and make way for a new voice in the changing room. 1999 saw the late Jim Nelson, former Antrim Senior Team manager take over the team. Some players were unavailable that season due to work commitments etc. Eamon Graham was living in Dublin and playing for Kilmacud Croke's, Conrad and Raymond were carrying long term injuries and were unable to play. It was a season that just did not take off.

In 2000 Dr John Mc Sparran, who would have played with some of the current squad took over the team. John was a stalwart of the club. Following in the footsteps of his father Malachy, he was one of those people that were the backbone of the club. John had been about the county team as the doctor and as such would have been exposed to the various coaching strategies that were being employed on the county scene. We were scheduled to play Rossa at home in the Championship. Rossa would have been strong favourites and initially Cushendun seemed nervous and unsettled. By half-time Rossa were 9 points up and the result seemed a foregone conclusion. However, Cushendun came out in the second half, full of fight and defiance. They quickly got themselves back into the game. Eamon Graham at centre-half-back went on to play a great second half. Conor Mc Neill was resolute, Brendan Mc Sparran cleared ball after ball, and Rory McQuillan and Conleth Magee at wing back dominated their space. Emmet O'Hara at centre forward carried the game, time and time again to the Rossa defence. John McCaughan was on free taking duty and was slotting over points from the dead ball. Just as Cushendun were hauling themselves back in to the game, Paul Graham got red carded. Cushendun were down to 14 men. Our reaction was to dig deeper and fight harder. Rossa stopped scoring and with two brilliant goals from Alastair Magee and his cousin Dominic, Cushendun were right back in contention. We were two points down as the game was closing. Time was running out when Rossa conceded a '65'. Normally Eamon Graham would have taken it but John McCaughan stood over it and sent in a ball that looked like it was going to drop over the bar. As the ball hung in the air, the Rossa defence and their goalkeeper got their communication lines mixed up. Their goalkeeper left the ball to the defence, a defender called that it was going wide and this hesitation cost them dearly. The ball did not go wide, instead landing in the top corner of the net. The Rossa management were dumfounded, as were their players. The ball was pucked out, the final whistle blew and Cushendun had won the game by a solitary point. Going from such a dismal first half performance and being 9 points down at half-time, to a brilliant second half performance and winning by one point, was some turn around.

We were then scheduled to play St John's in the semi-final at Casement Park. St John's were very confident of victory. We had played twice in the league and both occasions we were only beaten by 1 point. They would have been aware that Paul Graham was missing the game through suspension. From the outset Cushendun stamped their authority on proceedings. Captain of the team Ruairi McQuillan, was tasked with marking county star Brian Mc Fall. Over the course of the game Ruairi out-hurled his opponent time and time again. When Eamon Graham buried a penalty in the first half, Cushendun were in the driving seat and were determined to remain there. St John's had no answer to the momentum Cushendun had built up and in the end their challenge fell apart. Cushendun had reached the County Senior Hurling Final. What an achievement! Our opponents would be Dunloy, then considered to be one of the best teams in Ireland.

Preparations went well for the final. We were only too aware of the magnitude of the challenge that faced us. Dunloy had beaten us by over 20 points earlier in the season. In the very early stages of the game it was clear that Dunloy were keen to kill off our challenge early. They broke through for goal on two occasions but uncharacteristically Gregory O'Kane blazed the ball wide. We settled and got ourselves into the game. Conor Mc Neill was proving a very difficult man to get around and Gregory O'Kane was showing signs of frustration. Team Captain Ruairi McQuillan was steady at wing-back, Eamon Graham was having a great game at centre-half-back, Dan Kinney was using his strength well at midfield and Gary Mc Neill was covering a lot of ground also at midfield. Emmet O'Hara was playing tremendously well on no less a player than Gary O'Kane and Paul Graham was scoring great points, as was John McCaughan. Cushendun had matched their more illustrious opponents throughout the first half. The score read 9 points a piece at half time. The second half started as competitively as the first and it was score for score. By about the midway stage of the second half though, Dunloy started to peg two points to Cushendun's one. With just under 10 minutes remaining Dunloy were 5 points up when they pounced on a half chance and put the ball in the Cushendun net. After a few more insurance points were secured and referee Frankie Quinn blew the final whistle, Dunloy were champions again. They were deserving winners but Cushendun had put up a gallant challenge and gave a performance that they could be proud of.

The rest of the season saw the familiar scramble for points to ensure we avoided relegation. This was achieved and the season ended in a much healthier way than we thought that it would. It is worth mentioning that later in that season, Cushendun had two representatives on the Ulster team that played Leinster in the Railway Cup in Kilkenny. Eamon Graham was selected at left-half-back and Emmet O'Hara was selected at left-half-forward. Emmet was marking Brian Whelehan, who had just been selected on the 'Millennium Team' of the best hurlers ever to play the game. Both our players played very well. John Mc Sparran the team doctor, was clearly very proud of his club members when afterwards he loudly praised both. A rare thing indeed!

The 2001 season brought the same 'peaks and troughs' experience that characterised our hurling careers. As the league entered the mid-way stage and with the championship only around the corner, we were fixed to play Loughgiel one evening in Cushendun. It was a disaster. We were badly beaten by around 20 points. Things were not looking good. We were drawn to play this Loughgiel team in the Championship and they looked miles ahead of us. To make matters worse, we were due to play Cushendun a few evenings later. Not for the first time, Cushendun pulled out a top-drawer performance. We played well against our neighbours, and recorded a much-needed victory against them.

Then we played Loughgiel at Dunloy in the Championship. We knew we had to raise our game considerably just to even compete with this Loughgiel team. They had some exciting new players coming through with Liam Watson, Jonny Campbell and Martin Scullion the pick of them. With Aiden McCloskey and Chopper McGarry in attack and Owen McCloskey at centre-half-back, they were a formidable outfit. It was score for score but towards the end of the game Loughgiel picked off a few points to give them a cushion. Then Paul Graham and Aidan Mort switched positions. Paul went out to midfield with Aidan going in full-forward. As the game was ending and Loughgiel 3 points ahead, Paul Graham picked up a ball in midfield and lobbed a perfectly weighted ball into the hands of Aidan Mort who caught brilliantly, turned and buried it into the net for the equalising score. It was a great goal, and brilliantly taken by Aidan who was surrounded by Loughgiel players as he struck the ball.

The replay was the following week, this time in Glenravel. In another brilliant game, Loughgiel just seemed to have the edge throughout. Cushendun put up a brilliant challenge and had some fine performances throughout the team. However, Loughgiel just had that wee bit extra in terms of scoring that evening and won the game by a couple of points. Paul and Eamon Graham were selected for Ulster that season who played against Connaught in the Railway Cup. Aidan Mort would be selected for Ulster in 2002.

The 25-year period between 1984-2001 marked a tremendous rejuvenation of hurling within the parish. There were many people involved in this process. The architects of the hurling revival were Dan Kinney and Seamus Graham and subsequently assisted by Gerry Scally. They were later joined by Randal McDonnell who coached the players in some of the "fundamentals" of the game. It is a testament to the standard of coaching that every player in Cushendun who went through the underage ranks to the senior team played with the correct grip, lifted the ball properly and could strike with both sides. 12 players went on to play for the Antrim Senior County hurling team and 4 would represent Ulster.

The club's committees gave the teams tremendous support and made their participation possible. People like Malachy McSparran invested so much of their own time to ensure the club kept going. Malachy's son John would later become the first person from the North Antrim area to become County Chairman. Other families such as the McQuillan's ran functions in the Bay Hotel for the club. There were and still are many people who give up their time to help the club. The community shows great support by still coming out in large numbers to support the teams on match day.

1984-2001 was a great period for the club with many great memories. Indeed "those were the best days of our lives"!

1992 Junior League

Final: Loughgiel v Cushendun

Venue: Loughgiel

11/10/1992

Referee: James McLean (Dunloy)

Final Score: Loughgiel 2-6 Cushendun 2-9



Substitutes: Gerry Scally, Brendan Magee, Barry O'Hara, Oliver Magee, Willie McNeill, Paddy McSparran, Mick O'Neill, Noel McQuaid, Daniel O'Hara, Eamon McKeegan, Aidan McHugh, John Blaney, Raymond McKeegan, Paul McKeegan

Other players used in earlier matches but were then graded by County Committee:
Alastair Magee, Emmet O'Hara, Gary McNeill, Brendan McSparran

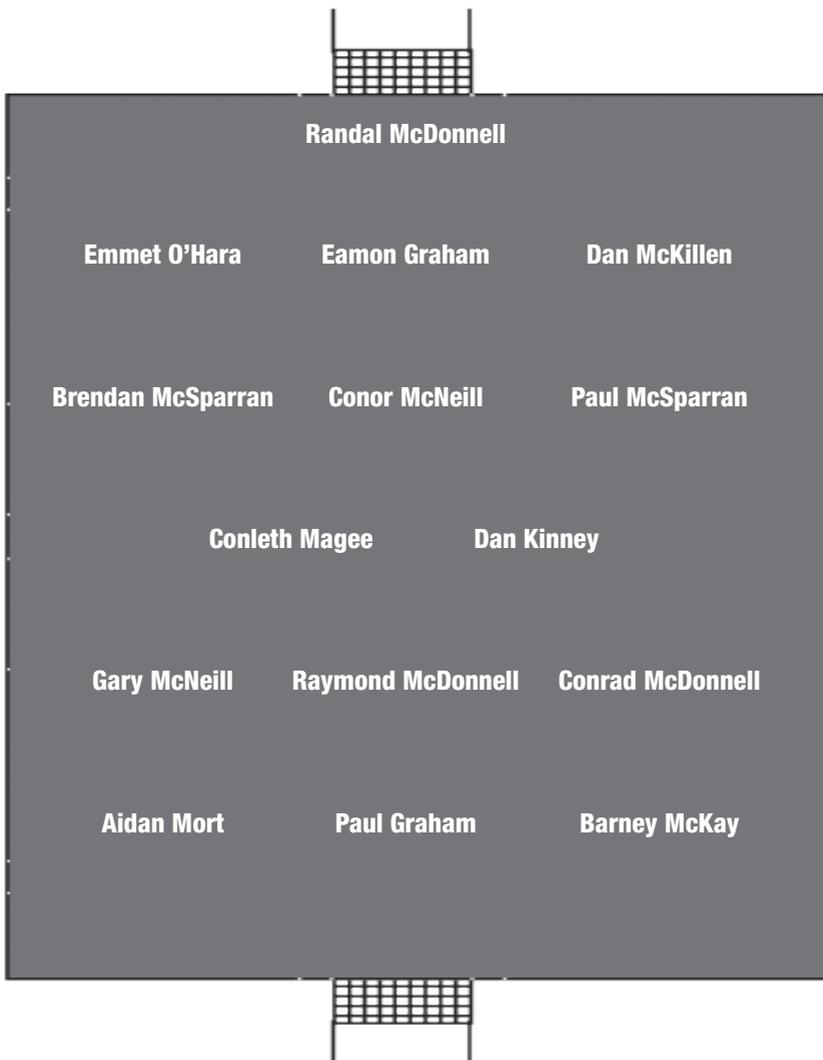
Intermediate Championship Final 1992

Casement Park: Cushendun v O'Donovan Rossa

01/11/1992

Referee: Vincent Traynor (Armoy)

Final Score: Cushendun 4-12 O'Donovan Rossa 0-7



Substitutes: Laurence Magee, Robert Paul Lavery, Brendan Magee, Barry O'Hara, Alastair Magee, Dominic McQuillan, Danny Murphy, Denis McHenry, Patrick O'Hara, Seamus McQuillan, Benny Doherty, Dominic Magee

Joe McFetridge Memorial Cup 1992

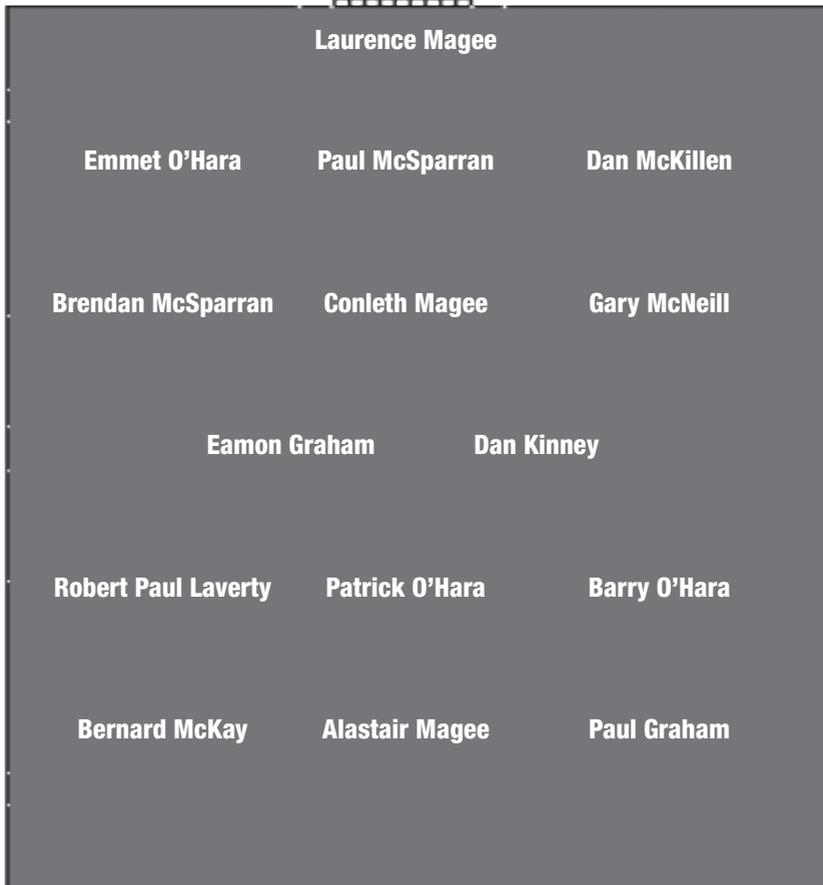
Final: Cushendun v Armoy

Venue: Armoy

19/04/1992

Referee: John Hegarty (Glenarm)

Final Score: Cushendun 6-8 Armoy 1-3



Substitutes: Brendan Magee, Aidan Mort, Denis McHenry, John McSparran, Dominic McQuillan, Dominic Magee, Francis Magee, Seamus McQuillan

Junior Feis Cup 1992

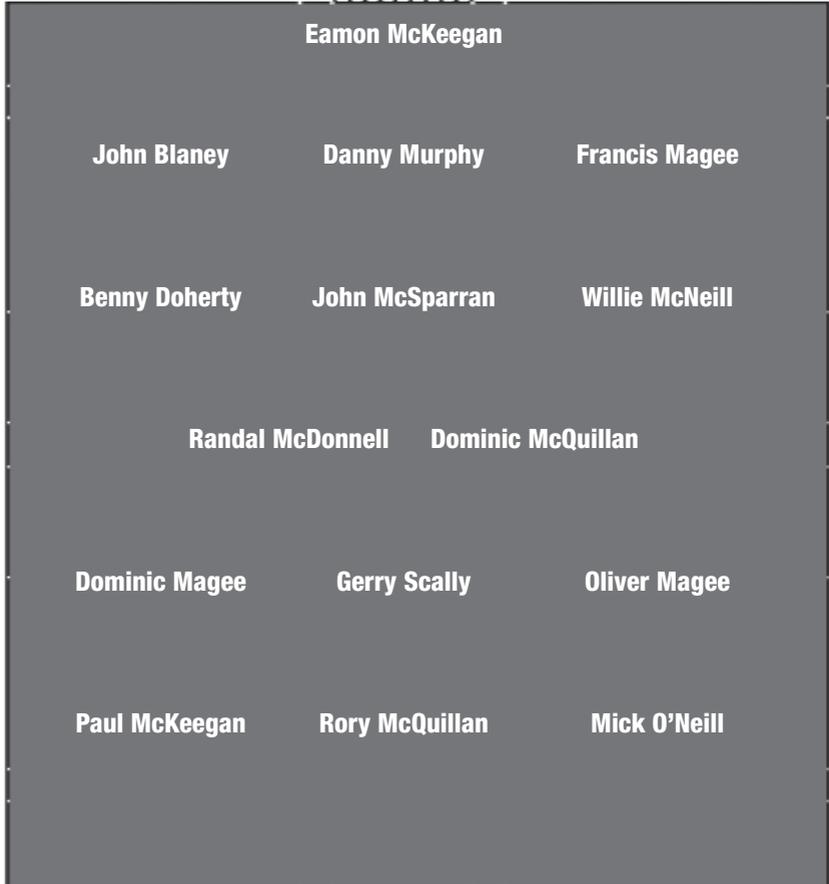
Final: Cushendun v Glenariffe

Venue: Carey

27/06/1992

Referee: Vincent Traynor (Armoy)

Final Score: Cushendun 6-10 Glenariffe 5-2



Substitutes: Paddy McKeegan, Conor McNeill, Paddy McSparran, Robert Paul Laverty, Joe Hamilton, Noel McQuaid, Seamus McQuillan, Daniel O'Hara

The following players played in earlier rounds but became ineligible after playing Countess of Antrim Cup:

Denis McHenry, Brendan Magee, Laurence Magee, Barry O'Hara, Barney McKay, Aidan McHugh

