The Story of

BLARNEY
WOOLLEN MILLS

An Irish Family Business
OUR STORY

When you enter Blarney Woollen Mills you may sense that these old stone walls have stories to tell. Today, it is the largest Irish store in the world, but behind this lies a fascinating past which we’d like to share with you.

THE VERY BEGINNING

The story begins over two and a half centuries ago, when Ireland was a very different place and independence was still far into the future. Due to its fine natural harbour, Cork had a highly developed textile trade in the eighteenth century. Its export trade included cloth for the sails of ships, ropes, tents for armies, blankets and clothing of every description. In 1750 Kerry man Timothy Mahony recognised an opportunity and set off to Cork, where he established his first little woollen mill on the banks of the river Glashaboy in Glanmire.

Mahony’s Mill passed down from father to son. When it was time to expand, Timothy Mahony’s grandson Martin, opened a new, larger mill in nearby Blarney in 1823. The mill was set on the banks of the beautiful trout-filled river Martin close to the medieval Blarney castle. It was declared a site as picturesquely beautiful as could ever be found for the location of an industry. Martin Mahony & Brothers, as the woollen mill was named, became known as Carding machines in Blarney Woollen Mills c. 1900; pure, raw wool begins its transformation into yarn for knitting and weaving.

Welcome to Blarney Woollen Mills and I hope you will enjoy reading our story. Blarney has been in the woollen business since 1823 and my father Christy Kelleher bought the mill in 1975. From the humble beginnings of selling knitwear and crafts from a thatched cottage on wheels outside Blarney castle, to owning the famous Blarney Woollen Mills was a dream come true for him. This is his story and his proud legacy.

FREDA HAYES
CEO Blarney Woollen Mills

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Blarney Woollen Mills.
The Mahonys constructed a large dam nearby, creating a mill pond which increased the water pressure driving their huge mill wheel more efficiently. The business became very significant for the community. Local farmers sold the wool from their sheep to the mill and the team dyed and spun it into yarn which was also woven into cloth. By 1835, one hundred and twenty locals worked there, and this rose to two hundred by 1860. The Mahony family took care of the mill team and built Millstream Row, an attractive set of homes for them. These well-built houses can still be seen today.

The years of the Great Famine (1845-1849) and its aftermath were the darkest in Irish history. Unfair land policy, overdependence on poor land and lack of industry left many hopelessly vulnerable. When blight hit the potato crop, which was the staple food, it proved devastating. Mass-starvation ensued, evictions for non-payment of rent forced people onto the roads and over half of the population died or were forced to emigrate. In Blarney, however, the people could depend on their work in the mill. No evictions from a mill house ever took place and there were no recorded deaths resulting from the famine.

Blarney Woollen Mills continued even when other businesses in the surrounding area had declined.

Cork poet, John Fitzgerald observed in 1865,

…with regard to the ancient industries of linen, cotton and paper, the millwheels turn not round with one very important exception, the Blarney Mills, where world-famed Blarney Tweeds are made … This mill flourished and gave employment to very many persons in spinning, weaving and dyeing.

In 1869, disaster struck when local inhabitants were awakened by an outcry ‘Fire, fire, the mill is on fire!’ The mill was a blazing inferno, and six hours later, there was nothing left but a shell and twisted machinery. The villagers combined their resources and energy to clear away the debris and begin reconstruction. The strong old buildings that you see today are the result of their teamwork. They primarily used local sandstone, with brick sides and window surrounds. The interiors were open plan, to fit the mill machinery, and the wooden floors were supported by big iron columns.

The Mahony family and the hardworking Blarney people ensured that despite the huge setback, the mill’s star continued to rise. By the turn of the century, employment was at an all-time high of eight hundred people. Their tweed was particularly popular, selling at the top end of the market in London, Paris and New York. The unique textiles which the weavers innovated won multiple awards in international competitions. Mahony’s mill was extended to incorporate the latest equipment which was driven by a combination of hydropower and diesel. In the early 1900s, it included 113 power looms for weaving all sorts of woollen cloth, and 13,000 spindles to spin the wool into yarns for knitting and weaving. The mill, under the Mahony family, was to play a central role in the life of Blarney for over two hundred years.


In 1914, Michael and Kathleen brought their eldest son into the world and named him John Christopher. The couple and their five children lived just a short walk from Blarney village. Kathleen ran a little grocery shop in the front of the family home and Michael sold and delivered coal throughout the area. Because of the social nature of the family business, Christy, as John Christopher was known, grew up at the centre of his community. He was a bright, inquisitive boy and a quick learner. The house may have been small and cash scarce, but the children were encouraged to appreciate what they had.
At that time in Ireland, only first-level education was free and secondary school fees were beyond the means of the family. So, in 1928, at the age of fourteen years, Christy started his working life as a mill boy.

Christy discovered he had a natural flair for engineering. For five years, after his day’s work, he cycled into Cork city to study mechanics in The Crawford Technical School. He rose in rank to become the mill supervisor, overseeing the day-to-day running and maintenance of the complex heavy industrial machinery. During the years around WWII, machine-parts were not available. Christy innovated and improvised, taking great pride in the fact that ‘his’ machines never stopped working during those challenging times. Over the following years his knowledge and deep appreciation for all aspects of the textile industry grew.

Christy fell in love and married local woman Maureen O’Regan in 1940. While he was the quintessential extravert, who was always excited about his next great plan, Maureen was the careful one, setting aside a little money each week no matter how tough times were. The couple had seven children; Paschal, Frank, Pat, Freda, Marian, Kevin and Bernadette. Freda, the middle of the Kelleher children, remembers:

‘On Saturday evenings we were submerged in the tin bath in front of the fire one after the other by my father. My mother laid out our Sunday clothes for mass the following morning and lined up our shoes and socks along the wall. When they were finished, they would stand back and look at us in admiration, everyone looking as neat as new pins, with damp hair and that shiny scrubbed look. They were very proud of their children and we all felt like perfect angels.’

Younger generations may find it difficult to understand how poor Ireland was during its years of austerity and emigration. Times were particularly tough during the 1940s and 1950s under the leadership of Eamon DeValera. With seven children to support, there was always pressure to increase the family income. Christy took employment in the city with an insurance company. By then he had clocked up two decades working in Blarney Woollen Mills.

Christy was never a man to sit still, he always had a few additional ‘irons in the fire’. A succession of small businesses in the early years supplemented his family income; he transported the local harrier club to their drag hunts around the county, and operated a hackney service to bring the cycling club to their meetings – all for a modest fee! On Saturday mornings, he sold vegetables locally, and every summer the entire family helped harvest an orchard for which he had courageously ‘struck a price’ for the previous winter. He always hoped that the next business venture would be ‘the one’ that would really make it. However shrewd and thrifty as Maureen was, when Christy needed funds for a new venture, she was always persuaded to part with those rainy-day funds.

During what became known as the dancehall era, the hub of the area’s entertainment scene was ‘The Emer Ballroom. Christy bought it in 1961 and turned it into the most popular dancing venue by providing two buses to and from Cork city.
Showbands played hot rock ‘n’ roll hits such as those by Chubby Checker and over four hundred people came from miles around to dance into the early hours. Local historian Brian Gabriel, recounts:

‘Many a young lady or gentleman from the area met their future partners at a film or dance in the Emer, got married and settled in Blarney. It had truly been a "Ballroom of Romance" in its own way.’

The Emer doubled-up as a cinema mid-week screening all the latest films from West Side Story to Breakfast in Tiffany’s. Pat Kelleher recalls,

As usual, all the family were roped in to help run the show! The younger family members rotated from being usherettes to sweeping the floor, while the older boys were responsible for humouring the ever-temperamental film projector which broke down at least twice a night. We were always greatly embarrassed by this, but father remained undaunted. Switching from cinema to dancehall was not easy, it consumed a lot of our time when we were kids, but somehow, we never minded.

For the Kelleher children, daily life provided the broad education in business and people skills that might otherwise take years of formal study to achieve. Home life also encouraged learning. Christy rewarded the children when they spoke as Gaeilge (in the Irish language) or for reading The Cork Examiner newspaper aloud. Keeping up with global events and being proud citizens went hand-in-hand.

Feelings around hurling, Ireland’s traditional sport, run deep. Christy was a member of Blarney GAA (Gaelic Athletic Association). Most of the land in and around Blarney was owned and controlled by Blarney Castle Estate; the club had neither funds nor a playing field. The team had to rent land to play on or make do with playing on the square. When the Castle estate had to sell some assets in the mid-1950s, the Turret Farm was sold to local farmer William Murphy. It included a seven-acre field ideal for a pitch. Christy simply couldn’t let the opportunity pass. He persuaded Murphy to sell and paid the deposit of IR£70 himself. The community rallied and through door-to-door collections they bought the field for £700 pounds. For the first time, the club had a permanent base. It was a collective triumph. Ironically, just a few years later, Blarney Castle Estate bought back The Turret Farm from William Murphy minus one seven acre field.

Christy loved Blarney and was proud of his roots. Over the years, he used whatever influence or resources he could muster to further enhance the prospects of the village. He was a very active member of every community organisation and had a wide-range of interests and knowledge. In many regards, Christy’s leadership abilities marked him as a natural politician, but although he was asked countless times to stand in local elections, he felt that a politician’s life was not for him.
As Peace Commissioner for the area, Christy spent many evenings in Blarney Garda Station debating with Sergeant Reidy on how best to develop Blarney and give it youth options. Reidy was a Kerryman, and while tourism was in its infancy in Ireland generally, Kerry had an edge. It was true that thousands of visitors streamed off the coaches each summer to visit Blarney Castle, but once they had kissed the Blarney stone to gain the ‘gift of the eloquence’ there was little else for them to do. They would simply move on to the next destination. Reidy used to tease Christy saying, ‘if only Blarney was in Killarney, what us Kerrymen wouldn’t do with it!’ It was a eureka moment for Christy; Blarney needed a craft shop.

As usual, funds were low, and the overheads of a premises were prohibitive. But where there is a will, there’s a way; and so there was much amazement when Christy and his brother-in-law Seano Horgan rolled a little replica of a traditional thatch cottage on wheels down the hill to Blarney. The mobile craft shop was just 14 x 10ft (4.2 x 3 mtrs.) and, as it was mobile, it didn’t attract high overheads. It was either mad or genius, no one could be sure. Freda remembers:

‘My three older brothers were all gainfully employed, I was in the middle and the other three were younger. My father couldn’t possibly give up his full-time job and so he asked me to leave school and run the craft shop; I was sixteen. The first day’s takings were £14 pounds … we thought we had struck gold!’

Geraldine Walsh, one of Blarney Woollen Mills long-term staff, started as a teenager in the thatch cottage shop in the late 1960s, she remembers,

‘It was always very busy. We sold lots of Aran sweaters, woollen shawls, crochet goods, and small gifts. Outside the shop we had great value knitting yarns displayed in hanks and we always had special offers. The people came from miles around.’

The Irish music sensation, the Clancy Brothers had taken the American market by storm in the 1960s. Clad in their signature look of Aran sweaters they had generated a huge market. For visitors, authentic Aran sweaters became the souvenir of choice. The Kelleher family delivered yarn to the local women who formed teams of expert knitters creating Aran sweaters. This cottage industry benefited hundreds of families. The báinín (Aran) yarn was purchased from the adjacent Blarney Woollen Mills.

Margaret Madden on the left and Freda, on the right, outside Blarney Hand Crafts, the thatch cottage craft shop in 1969.

Mary Herlihy (nee O’Sullivan) and Ena Casey working with the wool after it has been carded, prior to spinning it into báinín yarn (bán meaning white), the traditional undyed wool which is classic for Aran sweaters.
Meanwhile, the Mahony family’s Blarney Woollen Mills was in deep trouble. The demand for Irish spun wools and woven textiles had declined sharply. Lifting tariffs on low-cost imports and the rise of synthetics sounded the death knell for most woollen mills. Mahony’s offered the Millstream Row houses for sale to the tenants in 1972, and several attempts were made to bolster the company, but all failed. In 1973, the sad day came when the gates were shut and the ‘For Sale’ sign was placed outside the mill. It was heart-breaking for the Mahonys whose two-hundred-year-old family business was gone.

Christy felt it very keenly, understanding only too well how the loss of Blarney Woollen Mills would impact his beloved Blarney. It depressed the whole community. Large machines were dismantled and sold off and an eerie silence fell. For the next two years the ‘For Sale’ sign stood outside the empty old mill.

At that time, knitting machines had been installed in the Emer buildings which had become a knitting factory to supply the craft shop. Things were going well. Kevin recalls the moment he understood their lives were about to change,

‘All of Father’s ventures were started on a shoestring; just when you thought you were getting on top of things he would come up with another idea. We visited the empty mill many times, and slowly, the idea began to take shape in his mind that we should buy it.’

Christy got Maureen to release those ‘rainy-day’ funds yet again. He haggled the price down to IRLE70,000 with the auctioneer and jubilantly placed down his deposit. None of the financial institutions shared his enthusiasm; every expert advised him not to buy the big old mill and the banks turned down his loan applications. It was a dilemma. Christy with a plan was impossible to resist, and his optimism was contagious. The family agreed that drastic steps were necessary. The Emer building was sold, they re-mortgaged their own homes and took out personal loans. Their collective effort succeeded in raising the money to buy the mill. Christy coaxed the reluctant bank manager, who thought it a doomed project, to relent and provide the additional working capital.

The mill boy from the village had come a long way since he started his working life in those same old stone buildings at fourteen years of age. In 1975 at sixty-one years of age, Christy Kelleher became the very proud owner of Blarney Woollen Mills.

CHRISTY’S VISION

When the Mahonys ran the mill, only administrative staff entered via the main entrance through the formal front gates, the ordinary mill workers were consigned to enter through the side and rear of the mill.

In a symbolic gesture, the day after Christy bought the mill, he hired a builder to knock down those large iron gates. Christy loved people, his vision of Blarney Woollen Mills was as an open and welcoming place for all, and he was determined that everyone would now go through the main entrance. For his family, it was a moment both daunting and thrilling. Frank Kelleher explains,

‘Blarney Woollen Mills, as you know it today, was born on that day when father knocked down those gates. Our world had changed. We knew there could be no looking back; absolutely everything we had was on the line.’

Little by little, over the course of the following years the complex began to take shape and it continues to evolve today. As the very first large-scale store dedicated to classic Irish clothing and textiles it was a ground-breaking project. Christy resolved to showcase the very best that the country had to offer. Irish-made clothing, quality knits and authentic tweeds, Blarney Woollen Mills broke the mould for Irish stores, there had never been such an ambitious project. It was risky. Many thought it might fail; instead it became the model for those that followed.
While many succumbed to cheap imports, the company ethos included a strong commitment to supporting genuine Irish craftsmanship. This continues to this day.

Not everyone who visited Blarney loved shopping and on reflection, Christy concluded that there were few better ways for non-shoppers to pass their time than saying _sláinte_ (health) over a creamy pint of Guinness. They needed a bar, but in order to get a license legislation demanded a ten-bedroom hotel. And this was how the Blarney Woollen Mills hotel that is so popular now came to be built within the walls of the old mill.

The original mill buildings are protected by law because of their significance as part of the country’s early industrial heritage. It took a great deal of expertise to work within the old buildings. It was the Kellehers’ priority to preserve the integrity of the building and enshrine the history behind those stone walls. They succeeded in not only preserving many of the original features but highlighted them to celebrate the mill’s past.

Christy’s unfailing energy and absolute belief in what Blarney could become kept things going through the difficult times. And over the decades there were many challenges. The global recession of the late 1980s hit Ireland particularly hard and countless well-established businesses were swept away. But Blarney Woollen Mills continued to grow throughout those years. The fact that the business prospered is acknowledged to be a testament to Christy’s dogged enthusiasm and entrepreneurial spirit. Those who work in Blarney Woollen Mills remember him as someone who always had a kind word to say, who was unfailingly encouraging and positive. He left the running of the business to the family, and he became a very familiar figure around the complex, on first-name basis with everyone, and usually to be found either encouraging the staff or welcoming visitors. Christy used to board the coaches as they entered the complex to offer a personal welcome, Bernadette Kelleher remembers:

> In truth, when he did his meet and greet, most visitors probably had no idea who he was, but they all fell in love with him nevertheless! He opened his heart to whomever he met. He never held a share in the company, never had an office, never used a credit card and because he had never really had much money, he seemed to feel he didn't need any. He didn't drink or smoke, was happy to have enough to be able to buy The Cork Examiner newspaper every day and put petrol in his car … he always did like a nice car though!
THE LIVING LEGACY

Today Blarney Woollen Mills manufactures knitwear and exports worldwide under the Blarney Woollen Mills and Fisherman Out of Ireland brands. Brian McGee, Marketing Director of the Design and Crafts Council of Ireland.

‘Irish Woollen mills have been a central part of our design and craft culture for many years. Blarney Woollen Mills continues this tradition, maintaining the textile and heritage of Ireland while bringing it into the future.’

Blarney Woollen Mills is the largest Irish heritage store in the world. It is proud to offer the very best of Irish goods. It built some of its early reputation on its mail-order business and now with blarney.com it has a truly global profile. Blarney Woollen Mills remains synonymous with quality Irish knitwear, most especially, classic and contemporary Aran sweaters. Knitwear is the most vibrant of Ireland’s textile industries and it has been an integral part of the Blarney story from the outset. In the early days, the family delivered yarn to local knitters and sold their Aran sweaters in the thatch cottage store, and today, designers work on new lines for Blarney that are sold internationally.

Annually over 600,000 visitors are welcomed to Blarney Woollen Mills. A great many of these are returning visitors. The Blarney team includes many long-term staff who become familiar faces for visitors.

Aran Crew Neck Sweaters from Blarney Woollen Mills

Some of Blarney Woollen Mills long term staff

Lorraine Ahern, Vicky Madden, Geraldine Walsh, Oonagh Riordan.
The greatest value of Blarney Woollen Mills cannot be measured in financial terms but in its value as an intrinsic part of the rich tapestry of life and relationships. Blarney Woollen Mills is at the heart of Blarney. The Blarney Woollen Mills staff is over two hundred people and a wider network surrounds them. Many coach drivers and tourist guides have been bringing visitors for decades, and they too are part of this ‘work family’. The entire complex is a vital resource for locals. The hotel’s function rooms, bar and restaurant are alive with business meetings, family occasions, and important get togethers. Some come to see where their grandparents worked and elderly mill workers meet old workmates in the restaurant to reminisce about their years in the mill. At these times the old stone walls really do come to life.

Christy left behind a thriving family company which retains the spirit that made it all possible in the first place. Irrespective of how successful the company is, it’s humble beginnings are honoured. When you visit, take a moment to look at the little thatch cottage which stands on the grounds of Blarney Woollen Mills. It is the very same one that Christy Kelleher built all those years ago. ‘Before he passed away in 1991, he thanked all the great people working within these walls for “helping to turn his dream into a reality”. He was a man with a dream – but more than that, he was a man with the determination and the will to make that dream work … and he did.

CHRISTY KELLEHER (1914 – 1991)

An Appreciation by Kevin Fitzsimons, June 1991

To the thousands of Tourists who visited Ireland and particularly Blarney, the name Christy Kelleher was a legend. To the many who had the privilege of meeting the man, they realised that this man, small in stature was something special. His heart, his mind, his entrepreneurial spirit and his display of what is true patriotism were some of the great qualities that marked Christy out as somebody really special. The saving of jobs for so many of his fellow countrymen and women proved beyond how great an Irishman he truly was.

To visit Blarney weekly, and I have done so for many years and to see him preside over that close-knit family of his, discussing plans and details, his great love of children and his appreciation of what everybody did, marked him out as one of the most loveable and at the same time, most unobtrusive men I ever had the privilege to meet.

Only two short weeks ago, I spoke to him and although he was a very sick man, his greeting and bearing were, as always, that of a true friend. To his widow, children and staff: may I humbly, on behalf of many, offer them our deepest sympathy on their great loss. Rest in peace dear friend Christy.

Ní bheidh do leithéid ann arís
(We won’t see the like of him again)
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