

All hands on deck in Kilmac

Heartened by the success of the Waterford Greenway, locals in Kilmacthomas are making a concerted effort to bid for Tidy Towns glory

IT'S OFTEN said that a rising tide lifts all boats and there is perhaps no better example of this than the transformation which is taking place in the picturesque village of Kilmacthomas. Since the official opening of the Waterford Greenway in March 2017, the village has welcomed visitors from throughout Ireland, Europe and beyond and has become one of County Waterford's tourism hotspots. Dungarvan may be claiming the title of 'Home of the Greenway', but Kilmacthomas is proudly proclaiming itself as the 'Heart of the Greenway' as attractive large signs which have been erected on approach roads into the village clearly indicate.

While the Greenway may have acted as a catalyst, the transformation of Kilmacthomas has been happening in gradual steps for many years.



Members of Kilmacthomas Tidy Towns: Michael Faulkner (Committee Member), Pierce Casey (Chairperson), Margaret Whelan (Liaison Officer), Cathy Mannix (Committee Member), Susan Veale (Treasurer), Alice McCarthy (Secretary) and Laura Kirwan (PRO).

A core group of people have been working quietly and diligently in promoting and preserving the village. Now, thanks to the feel-good factor generated by the success of the Greenway, it's hoped that this groundwork can be built on in order to take Kilmacthomas to the next level. The Kilmacthomas Tidy Towns group are making a concerted effort to achieve substantial gains in this year's competition – and their efforts perfectly encapsulate the overall ethos of the Tidy Towns movement. There is a vast array of experience amongst the group, with everyone contributing their own unique skills and abilities. The group is comprised of a mixture of natives of the area as well as those who have made Kilmacthomas their home.

Chairperson Pierce Casey has been an active member of the committee since its formation and takes great pride in seeing how the village has progressed.

He has been a common sight around the village for many years as he embarks on a variety of jobs.

Another stalwart is Margaret Whelan who currently serves as Liaison Officer. "We started out with a small group of locals meeting every Monday night, taking pride in our village, tidying up and planting flowers and shrubs," she explained. "The committee is a much larger group today. Kilmac is progressing, the work we do is ongoing, and we take pride in presenting our village to residents and visitors alike to enjoy." Treasurer Susan Veale, who joined the committee this year, says she got involved as she passionately believes in "community and the importance of a sense of belonging". Local librarian Laura Kirwan, who was born in Belfast and reared in Dublin, is the PRO with Kilmacthomas Tidy Towns and is also excited to be part of the team.



Students from St Declan's Community College Kyra Reilly, Kelvin Kiely, Casey Mullhearn and Heather Ridgard pictured planting apple trees with Acting Principal Elaine Murray and Pierce Casey and Margaret Whelan of Kilmacthomas Tidy Towns.

"Since joining, I have a greater appreciation of all the hard work they've done and continue to do," she says.

Secretary Alice McCarthy believes everyone in the community can play a part. "We have all seen the huge changes for the better in our village due to the opening of the Waterford Greenway," she said.

"We believe that together we can all play our own part and take advantage of these changes."

The members have placed a keen emphasis on supporting sustainability and biodiversity and two major projects relating to these themes have been undertaken within the past 12 months. A community orchard has been planted with involvement from students at St Declan's Community College which is located directly opposite the orchard across the River Mahon.

The orchard is situated in a prominent location near the village's popular River Walk and is clearly visible to all enjoying a stroll along this impressive route. Alice describes the orchard as a great addition to the village and she hopes to see continued involvement from the school. "It's a community orchard and the apples are there for the community," she says. "We think it's a nice feature and there is a sense of longevity about it."

Another welcome addition has been the installation of polytunnels and raised beds at the Kilmacthomas Tidy Towns Grow HQ which is located at a site that was previously used by the Council for water treatment.

Steel fencing was due to be removed and the site was set to be cleared. However, Margaret quickly sprang into action to secure the site for Kilmacthomas Tidy Towns.

Well-known for her 'waste not, want not' approach, she also sourced abandoned trampolines and came up with the idea of incorporating their frames into the polytunnels. The mesh doors of the tunnels use recycled netting from the same trampolines. One disused polytunnel was removed from a local estate and rebuilt in the compound. The committee members say they were fortunate to receive donations from the local community which has significantly helped in creating such an impressive facility. Meanwhile, a horticulture course with 12 participants is currently being run by the Further Education and Training Authority SOLAS at the site every Wednesday morning. Margaret is overseeing an impressive array of vegetable beds at the Grow HQ and explained that there are plans to perhaps sell some of this produce at the popular market which is held in the village.

The committee have worked very successfully with both the local primary and secondary school in the areas of sustainability,

litter reduction and biodiversity, and it's hoped that this involvement can continue through the orchard and Grow HQ. St Declan's, which received its sixth Green Flag last year, enjoys a close association with Kilmacthomas Tidy Towns in many different aspects. Transition Year students have spent time working with the committee, while woodwork students have created bird boxes and bug hotels. Guidance Counsellor at St Declan's Community College, and Kilmacthomas Tidy Towns committee member, Cathy Mannix says this involvement is fostering a sense of community and pride of place.

She believes students are keenly attuned to green issues such as global warming, climate change, and biodiversity. "Teenagers need to think beyond themselves and this is a way of giving back to the community," she said. Members of Kilmacthomas Tidy Towns are also enjoying support from local businesses.

The businesspeople of the village are backing the group, with many sprucing up their premises with simple measures such as window boxes. The committee members are also deeply appreciative of the various donations which have been received. They are delighted to see so many new businesses now operating in the area along with seeing well-established businesses enjoying continued success.

At a wider level, members have noticed a significant increase in the sense of community and community pride in Kilmacthomas and the surrounding areas. Building on this feel good factor, they would like to see more volunteers from the community getting involved with their activities. The village has numerous approach roads, a lengthy Main Street and many footpaths, which means there is plenty of ground to cover. While Kilmacthomas is fortunate to have such amenities as the Park and River Walk, this means more maintenance work is required and, subsequently, more volunteers. Currently, a hard-working team of volunteers can be seen out and about two evenings per week. "It's only for half an hour at a time and it's not very labour intensive," explains Alice. Community employment scheme workers assist with more laborious tasks during the daytime.

Alice says the committee members are open to new ideas and points out that there is also a social side to their activities.

Although they have plenty of chores to keep them busy, all say that their activities are a labour of love.

Examples of other recently completed projects by Kilmacthomas Tidy Towns include the creation of a biodiversity garden; the installation of new dog litter boxes; the erection of a new 'Welcome to Kilmacthomas' stone on the approach road from Carrick; and the construction of wheelchair access to the 1916 memorial garden. In advance of the arrival of the Tidy Towns adjudicators, members of Kilmacthomas Tidy Towns have embarked on their 'Spruce Up Kilmac' campaign. "A lot of work has been carried out in getting the village ready for the judges," explained Alice.

"We've spent a lot this year in progressing the Grow HQ area, planting trees, the welcome to Kilmac signs etc. We feel we've a lot done but we still have more to do." Members of Kilmacthomas Tidy Towns are certainly taking their duties seriously as some have even undertaken various training courses including a composting course; a biodiversity training course; and a CPR course run by the local Cardiac First Responders.

They are also delighted to have the support of well-known local photographer Michael Faulkner who is a passionate advocate of the village. Michael can be seen around Kilmacthomas on a regular basis as he documents the changes taking place in the area through his camera lens.

The Waterford Greenway has had obvious positive spin-off benefits for Kilmacthomas - however the popularity of the amenity also presents some challenges. More footfall has brought more litter which remains one of the biggest challenges for the group. Regular litter patrols of the street and public areas are carried out and, on Easter Monday, a successful community clean-up was staged. The area is now under more scrutiny, so members say there is extra responsibility on Kilmacthomas Tidy Towns to ensure that the village lives up to expectations. "It's a work in progress. Kilmac is really on the map so it's made us up our game," says Cathy.

While aiming for Tidy Towns glory, Kilmacthomas has already achieved other accolades.

In November 2015, Kilmacthomas Tidy Towns won the Pride of Place section at the annual Waterford Public Participation Network (PPN) Community & Voluntary Awards.

This resulted in Kilmacthomas Tidy Towns representing Waterford at the overall IBP Pride of Place Awards which is an All-Ireland competition that celebrates community group contributions to local society and the creation of civic pride. Members attended a ceremony in Belfast which provided great acknowledgement of their work and further boosted their profile. Kilmacthomas also enjoyed success in the 2018 Bank of Ireland National Enterprise Town Awards last year, finishing runner-up in its category in Munster. This was a major boost to community pride and a national acknowledgment of how far Kilmacthomas has progressed in recent years. The Tidy Towns group worked closely with the Kilmacthomas Social Enterprise Group as part of this bid.

Some members of the Tidy Towns groups are also members of the Kilmacthomas Social Enterprise Group and there is regular interaction between both groups.

“We are all working towards a common goal,” explains Alice. This year saw the establishment of a new Tidy Towns committee in neighbouring Newtown. The members of the Kilmacthomas group were delighted to be able to assist the new committee with their first clean-up operation over the Easter weekend. Kilmacthomas Tidy Towns also enjoy a good relationship with Waterford City & County Council and say the local authority has been very supportive of their activities. The group’s annual major fundraiser will take place this Friday June 28th at Centra Kilmacthomas where volunteers will be present throughout the day. Phelan’s Centra have been keen supporters of the group and recently donated a set of hi-vis vests to the group as well as safety signs which can be used when volunteers are out and about. All funds raised on Friday will certainly be put to good use and help this hardworking and dedicated team to continue their admirable work. Thanks to the commitment of all involved, and with such impressive community support, Kilmacthomas will surely perform very strongly in this year’s Tidy Towns competition.