

# My Life in a Nutshell

*By Tommy Hourigan*

I was born in July of 1951 to parents John Joe and Peggy Hourigan. I am the oldest of nine children, all of whom are still living.

I penned a number of articles for the Grange Book, including a tribute to my parents on behalf of their children. I will avoid repetition here unless it proves absolutely necessary for clarity. I also co-wrote an article with my life-long friend, Brendan Madden, on 'Growing Up in Grange' - again I will avoid repetition.

I lived the first four years of my life at the lodge house, just inside and to the right of the imposing gates to the Flavin property. This entrance is a short distance from the Camogue River Bridge at the Limerick City side of the bridge. The gated entrance was originally to the Croker Great House and Estate.

In 1955, our family - my parents, with my siblings at the time, Kathleen and Tony, and I relocated to our new local authority cottage in Upper Grange.

Shortly after that, I commenced school at Grange National School - I was taught by Mrs Rita O'Donnell while in junior classes and later on by Mr Tom Lynch, Principal, until my primary education concluded in 1964.

I was a reasonably good student and learning came fairly easily to me. However, I often incurred the wrath of my teachers for bad behaviour; I was a bit of a 'boyo', so to speak. I recall clearly having to stand in a corner for a day in Master Lynch's classroom. I had written something awful on a library book - I deserved my punishment. But my real punishment was not having to stand all day - it was being the only student in the classroom, because everybody else was in the playground watching a huge tree being cut up - a severe storm had felled it - so, I missed all that great fun as chainsaws made short work of turning the huge evergreen into firewood, while the children found ways to amuse themselves in the midst of the cutting activities.

I seemed to get myself into trouble regularly after school and was a frequent participant in fights that took place at the 'top of the boreen', near the school. I recall one such row with Albert Madden, a tough nut to crack.

Much of my growing up is contained in the Grange Book. Of course, hurling was a passion for us all, and while the modern child is seldom without a mobile phone or some similar device, we rarely left home without a hurley each. As we walked the roads and boreens or trudged along fields in our short trousers and wellingtons, our hurleys decapitated daisies and dandelions and sent stones and pebbles in all directions, or they sent frost and snow flying from bushes and trees. There was a lot of pulling on imaginary *sliotars* on the ground and overhead. At times, two fellows sided up to each other and pulled repeatedly on an imaginary ball. No quarter was given or taken and the sturdiness of the hurleys and the participants was severely tested in this 'clash of the ash'. Frequently, there were bruised shins or worse. All of this activity was great for honing eye-hand coordination, hurling skills and toughness.

Tommy O'Connell is some few weeks younger than me. Well, I remember the two of us hurling (with a real ball) on the road outside his home in Lower Grange. The pulling was 'something fierce', if not savage, as we were exhorted by John Harty (The 'Wedger'), sitting on a wall, to give it more! We didn't disappoint him as we 'laid into' each other.

Having left national school, there arose the question as to whether I would go on to a secondary education. I was the oldest of nine and money was scarce. At the time, I had strong feelings towards a life in the priesthood. Consequently, my father, through a local contact, arranged for me to go to the Society of Missionaries to Africa (SMA) boarding school in Ballinafad, near Castlebar, Co Mayo.



While much reduced fees were agreed, they were still a huge imposition on my parents and on my siblings as well. I have since felt a level of guilt for my good fortune and opportunity at the expense of my family. In those times, it wouldn't have been unusual for the oldest in a large working-class family to go into employment immediately after finishing national (primary) school, so as to assist parents by providing additional money for the household budget. No doubt, I was fortunate to have been provided with a secondary level education, and I appreciate this fact.

Anyway, I spent five years in Ballinafad, where I completed my Intermediate and Leaving Certificates with decent results. In my final year, I took my eye off

the ball somewhat, as I was games-captain for the year, the result being that my academic work suffered to some extent.

In those years, 1964 - 1969, transport was primitive by today's standards, and travelling by train from Colbert Station in Limerick to Castlebar was a big deal and expensive. My parents did not have motorised transport, so the journeys from home to the train station and in reverse depended upon the generosity of neighbours. Therefore, visits home from Ballinafad were confined to Easter, Christmas and at the end of the school year.



Sporting activity was of huge importance to us students, as being 'locked up', we had practically no other break from academic pursuits. We had good college football and hurling teams, and we had some success in Connaught College tournaments. I was on various teams that won Connaught College honours.

Alas! - The medals are long lost. There were a good number of students from the Munster Counties which helped the college to field strong hurling teams. Some fine footballers from the top footballing counties ensured that the college teams were always competitive. A number went on to play on senior county teams in the late 1960s and 1970s. In this regard, I recall Seamus Hughes (Balla) who played at corner back for Mayo and Francis Rushe (Mountbellew) who played at centre field for Galway. Paudge Colleran from Clare (Quinn) played hurling for Roscommon. There were others too.



Joe Moran from a neighbouring parish of mine came to Ballinafad sometime after my start there. He was a year or so behind me. Joe was an outstanding and stylish hurler and equally accomplished at football. He was a tremendous addition to the college teams. Joe

lived just a few hundred yard from "The Swans" public house. See the area on Google Earth at:

<https://earth.google.com/web/@52.54056666,-8.52055912,69.59221561a,716.5100352d,35y,-0h,0t,0r/data=CIAaThJICiUweDQ4NWI1NzM5NjlkODQ3YjM6MHhmMjI5OWNjNmJiOGRkMTQ1GWcsIdxPRUpAIe-XfunHCyHAKg1UaGUgU3dhbnMgQmFyGAEGa>

The college had several excellent track and field performers. I will mention Patrick Canavan from Belcarra, not far from Ballinafad, who was a student during my time. Pat worked with me in the Mid-Western Health Board for a number of years. He was a great exponent of discus throwing, javelin throwing, the shot-put and high and long jumping – he was also a pole-vaulter. He was a winner of the *Victor Ludorum* (winner of the games) at our college games and he was successful at regional and Connaught events. I had very little talent for track and field events, but I have a good reason to remember my participation in the long-jump on one occasion, when I fractured a knee cap. I was aged about fourteen at the time, and I was hospitalised at the Mayo County Hospital for a week or so. Having to wear a heavy plaster for a couple of months was a huge nuisance! That injury left me with a weak knee and niggling difficulties for life.

In those times, boarding school in Ballinafad was tough - the regime was demanding and discipline was without mercy. There was a strict structure to every day with somewhat of a more informal regime at weekends and on church/public holidays.

I left Ballinafad in the summer of 1969, having secured my Leaving Certificate. Importantly, I also had gained good training for life ahead. I refer to the strict discipline over five years that left an enduring mark. It must be said that the 'lock up' over five years left a few negatives to be overcome, particularly a deficit in social skills, which took some considerable time to develop. When I left Ballinafad, all thoughts of a clerical life had long disappeared. Some of my classmates went on to become priests, but most didn't. Ballinafad became a day school sometime later and was an agricultural college for some time before shutting its gates. Sadly, these once fine buildings now stand idle and in decaying repair. It is possible to view the complex through the internet. The images above were taken in 2012 – they show the former college in a vacated and derelict state. How sad it is to see such historic and beautiful buildings reduced to such a state. Hopefully, the new owners will have the complex restored in due course.



<https://www.johnmeephoto.com/revisiting-the-past/>

*[Additional Note – added in March 2018*

*I am glad to note that major renovations are underway at the former college – see the following link for some detailed information (Ger Flanagan – The Mayo News - 2017)]:*

<http://www.mayo.ie/features/30669-a-new-lease-of-life-for-ballinafad-house>

After completing my Leaving Certificate, going on to University was never an option. The University of Limerick did not exist at the time. So, it was time for gainful employment. I secured my first job in the autumn of 1969 - I was employed by The Shannon Foundry at Edward St, Limerick, with office duties. The aforementioned Tommy O'Connell was employed there too, as was Joe Corbett (Caherguillamore) and my brother-in-law to be, Ger Hannan RIP. After about a year, I competed for a public service post in The Limerick Health Authority, and I was successful. I took up duty in December of 1970 and remained in the public service until my retirement on health grounds in October of 2009.

A curious event - as part of my examination for the public service job, I had to pass an oral Irish examination. When I attended for the one-to-one examination, how surprised I was to encounter my former national school teacher, Mr Tom Lynch, as my examiner! Anyway, he didn't fail me.

I entered the public service at the Clerical Officer grade, a permanent and pensionable post. I recall that in my first year 1970/1971, my annual salary was £670 per annum, a veritable fortune at the time. I am afraid that much of this was spent on alcohol, a tendency that remained for several years.

The Health Authorities were disbanded in 1971, when the eight Health Boards took over administration of the health services in April of that year. I became an officer of the Mid-Western Health Board on its first day in existence, and I remained an officer until its demise at the end of 2004, when the Health Service Executive (HSE) took over from the Health Boards in January 2005. I transferred to the HSE where I remained up to my retirement.

Success in a career may be attributed to many things, including luck, but I believe that it is largely down to one's self; for the most part, you make your own success through endeavour and hard graft. A little luck is always welcome though, and I am sure that I had my measure of this.

I had a great career in the public service, and I filled many roles over the decades that brought me great satisfaction and financial security. I was fortunate to work with many tremendous colleagues over the decades, some of whom remain good friends today. My further education following the Leaving Certificate had to be undertaken while I held down full-time employment. I studied accountancy, information technology and communications (ICT), management services, organisation and methods, general management and more. Of course, there was much learning on the job.

My career in the Health Board progressed steadily over the years - I filled many posts including Computer Manager, Payroll Manager, Internal Auditor, Financial Accountant, Management Accountant, Management Services Officer (ICT, Organisation & Methods and Internal Audit), General Manager of the Limerick Acute Hospitals and, finally, Assistant Chief Executive Officer. During my latter appointment, I was a member of the national (Dublin based) General Medical Services (Payments) Board for several years.

When I transferred to the HSE, I worked in the National Contracts Office as a Programme Manager, negotiating and developing national general practitioner, dental and other medical services provider contracts.

I was honoured in the early 2000s when the then Minister for Health, Mary Harney T.D., appointed me to the membership of the Irish Dental Council (similar to the Medical Council), the national regulatory body for the dental profession. I served my full term of five years on the Council – this was a rewarding experience.

Of all my roles, my term as General Manager of the Acute Hospitals in Limerick was the most fulfilling, although hugely challenging and demanding. There were three hospitals under my management, i.e. University Hospital Limerick, the Regional Maternity Hospital and the Regional Orthopaedic Hospital, Croom. At that time, the hospitals were expanding, owing to significant injections of funding by Michael Noonan, T.D., when he was Minister for Health. Of course, since my time as manager, there has been massive development of services and facilities.



In March of 2003, while I was the Assistant Chief Executive Officer with responsibility for Community and Mental Health Services in the Mid-West Region (Limerick, Clare and North Tipperary), my life and the lives of my family changed dramatically forever. I suffered a most serious assault - it would force me to retire in 2009, earlier than I had planned. *Links to reports in the Press are provided below.*

Thursday, 13th March 2003 was a normal day - that was up to 8.45pm. Like other colleagues preparing for the Health Board monthly meeting (public representatives and others meeting with the management team) due to take place on the following morning in Nenagh, I worked late in my office at Catherine St. Jim O'Grady (Patrickswell man) and I left the premises together shortly after eight o'clock - we were in good spirits having shared a laugh or two on our way out of the building. I proceeded to the Chicken Hut on O'Connell St and purchased take-away food for my son, Paul, and myself - to be consumed during the second half of a soccer game on television.

At around 8.45 pm, I pulled my motorcar into the driveway at my home in Meadowvale, Raheen. It was a March evening and dark. Two sides of the lawn adjacent to the driveway had a tall hedge.

I gathered the takeaway food from the passenger seat and pulled the door handle at the driver side in order to leave the car. Having opened the door several inches, I couldn't open it further. I looked out and saw a figure in a balaclava - he jammed the door, probably with a foot and I couldn't get out. I swore at him to let me out but to no avail - he did not speak. My memory is of a shortish male in dark clothes. I had the impression of a strong upper body encased in a tight dark jumper - it reminded me of an army or Garda type of garment.

Within seconds he sprayed my hair and upper body and the area around the car dash with a flammable liquid and then set me and the car on fire - he was gone before I could react. I had the sense that he sprayed the liquid from a canister but I can't say how he ignited it. The flames were instant and almost white in colour.

I exited the car in flames. My hair was on fire as was the upper right hand side of my heavy jacket - a yachting jacket, purchased recently at the Woollen Mills in Blarney. No doubt, this strong material prevented worse injuries. I knocked loudly on the window of the living room to alert my son, who was watching television and awaiting my arrival. I tried to put out the fire with my right hand in particular, which sustained serious burns. I repeatedly stuck my head into the evergreen hedge in order to put out the flames - in doing so, damage to my burning skin was exacerbated.

Paul arrived out on the lawn immediately as did Ann. They must have been horrified and terrified. Soon, neighbours arrived. The car was in flames. Joan Scanlan brought wet towels to put on me to put out the fire. I was rolling around on the grass. A neighbour called for an ambulance and the fire brigade. I was afraid that the burning car would explode and I ushered everybody onto the road - I felt in control, as I recall. The fire brigade arrived and dealt with the car - burned out internally. The front of our home sustained minor fire damage. The ambulance arrived promptly and took me to the local hospital in Dooradoyle, just a very short distance from our home.

I have a certain recall of being in the Accident & Emergency Department - my colleague, John O'Brien (Patrickswell man), was there and the A&E Consultant - Stan O'Leary spoke with me. After some emergency treatment, I was placed in an ambulance and taken to Cork University Hospital Cork (CUH). I was sedated on the way and have no more



conscious memories for a period of a couple of weeks. *A number of images of my injuries are reproduced here – I obtained these from my medical record at Cork University Hospital.*

I was in the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) in Cork for a couple of weeks - I was sedated all that time. I have some subconscious 'memories' of my face being scraped. I had a number of operations over those weeks. Ann and Paul were by my bedside for most of that time - apparently I was agitated and hallucinating. My first conscious memories were after being transferred to the Burns Unit - sedation was lifted. My thoughts were a mixture of exact recall of the assault and confusion from the subconscious hallucinations while sedated. It was an awful feeling - recall, fear and confusion mixed. My mind was in a terrible state for a long time. I was heavily bandaged and my burns were treated and re-banded several times daily. At that stage, I was after skin-grafts to my hands, face, neck, right shoulder and right back.

Ann and Paul were constant visitors as were wider family members. Many colleagues from the MWHB and other friends and neighbours also visited. As did Micheál Martin, Minister for Health at the time.

I had further surgery while in the Burns Unit. I remember clearly my first attempt at standing and walking after a number of weeks in bed. I would have collapsed on the floor were I not physically



supported by others - I was very weak. One of my first challenges was the bathroom. My hands were bandaged and skin-grafted and not much use. However, I was not to be deprived the dignity of using the toilet on my own and I did, difficult as it was - improvisation and absence of hurry helped. In those early weeks, I had to succumb to undignified bathing - but the nursing staff were marvellous.

While in the Burns Unit, occupational therapy personnel measured me for appliances - pressure gloves and living aids such as thick-handled cutlery and provided these. Later on, an item of headgear was made to measure for me (not unlike a hurling helmet) – it was designed to keep the grafted skin in my neck area stretched, so as to minimise contractures as the new skin healed. Early physiotherapy commenced for my hands in particular, and

these were a mess after each session - no pain, no gain!

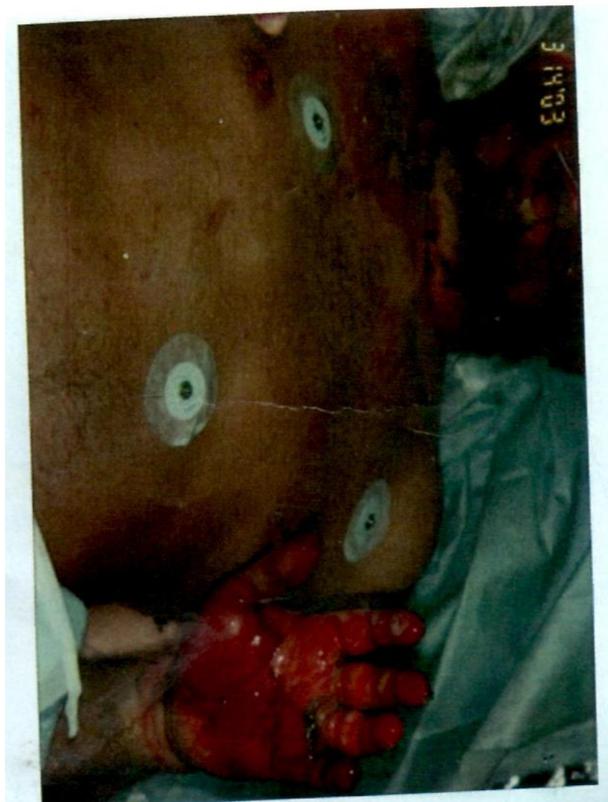
At some stage, maybe a month or so after the assault, I was transferred to St Mary's Hospital in Cork for intensive rehabilitation. Further surgery was performed too. In all, I think I had eleven operations including a couple of later procedures (after initial discharge) to release contractures in my hands and neck/shoulder area.

I recall one operation in particular. I had an infection in my right thumb. After attempts to treat the infection, surgery became necessary. The surgeon prepared me for the worst - he might have to remove the thumb. This was a huge deal for me - I am right-handed and the enormity of the situation hit me hard. My right thumb was needed. I would be lost without it. A funny story - I had explained to Ted McNamara, health board colleague, over the phone that I might have my thumb removed - Ted heard 'tongue' for 'thumb' and couldn't understand why the surgery was necessary. We still laugh at this! Many might say it was a missed opportunity to shut me up!

I went to the operating theatre expecting the worst - Ann prayed hard. As the Anaesthetist brought me out of my sleep, she told me that I still had my thumb - minus the blackened and infected tip –

Despite the effects of osteomyelitis in both hands for the long-term, I had most of my thumb - I won the lottery! I love what remains of that thumb - I can do so much with it.

At St Mary's Hospital, the real rehabilitation work started. Because I had contracted MRSA (Methicillin Resistant Staphylococcus Aureus) which is infectious, I was isolated for some weeks and could not attend the Physiotherapy Unit. The physiotherapists came to my room. The hand physiotherapy was brutal - it had to be in order to be of any benefit. Both hands had full skin grafts - not a pleasant sight during the healing period. Nor now after many years! After a physiotherapy session, there was broken skin, bubbles of fluid under the skin and blood. One day, my friend, Brian Ennis from Dublin was present in my hospital room as Aileen (physiotherapist) put my hands through their paces - I thought that Brian was going to pass out! Brian had arrived with a new radio/cd player, which was most welcome. Brian and his colleague, Orla Jenkinson, a lovely lady (RIP all too early) had gone to a lot of trouble and expense on my behalf. I have never forgotten.



Initially, I was alarmed at the state of my hands during and after a physiotherapy session - observing that Aileen and her colleagues and Plastic Surgeon O'Connor showed no concern, I concluded that the collateral damage was par for the course. When the MRSA was eliminated, I was able to attend the Physiotherapy Unit for my daily treatment - another lottery win!

While in CUH, I had a private room, and my visitors were monitored and I seldom saw the general public. For a time at St Mary's, I was in a large ward, with people coming and going - I could observe people walking the corridor. I was terrified. I scrutinised every male face - in many I saw a potential assailant who had arrived to finish me off - this may sound funny now, but I was genuinely terrified. Even as the weeks went by, I was suspicious and paranoid. I didn't know why I was assaulted or by whom (as remains the position today). The assault case has not been solved, and apart from idle speculation, I really do not know who was responsible.

As I assemble this note, it is an opportunity to remember, to be angry, to be grateful and to see the funny sides. I never got around to adequately thanking my many friends, colleagues, neighbours and family members for support and concern - I have a sack of mail/cards in my attic - mostly unread - probably still too raw in my mind - one day soon, I will read them all.

#### Links to Press Reports on Assault

<https://www.thefreelibrary.com/amp/FIREBALL%20HORROR%3B%20Mental%20health%20chief%20fighting%20for%20life%20after%20masked...-a098788781>

<https://www.google.com/amp/s/www.irishtimes.com/news/attack-not-linked-to-victim-s-health-job-1.352180%3fmode=amp>

<https://www.breakingnews.ie/ireland/coveney-calls-for-action-on-crime-91684.html>

<http://www.irishtimes.com/news/limerick-health-board-official-critical-but-stable-1.466576>

<https://www.google.com/amp/m.rte.ie/amp/36210/>

I should mention my participation in parish sporting activities. I played on under age teams for Bruff (hurling and football) and for Camogue Rovers (football). I was not good enough a soccer player to play regularly for Holy Cross AFC, but I did play on a number of occasions after the club was established. On the hurling front, I have reason to recall 1971 – I was a member of the Bruff U-21 team that won the South Limerick Championship. We drew with Knockainey in the final which was played at Kilmallock. We won the replay at the same venue by a small margin. In the dying minutes of the replay, I sustained a facial injury that required hospitalisation for about a week, as I recall. Anyway, we faced Doon in the county semi-final, played at the Gaelic Grounds in Limerick. We led at half time, but a strong opposition rallied in the second half and won the day. Mind you, the second half might be more memorable for the fighting that broke out! As I recall, Tommy O’Connell and Seoirse Clancy, Grange lads both, were on that Bruff team – there may have been others as well.

I haven't mentioned my own family up to now in any detail, so I will conclude by doing so. My wife is Ann (nee Madden) originally from the South Circular Road, Limerick. Ann’s father, Michael RIP, was a member of the well-known Madden family from Rathkeale in County Limerick. Michael’s father, DJ Madden, was a Fine Gael TD for West Limerick over a number of decades.



Ann’s mother, Mary RIP (nee Hewison) hailed from lovely Waterville in County Kerry. Mary’s father, an Australian engineer, had come to Kerry to work on the trans-Atlantic cable project – he never left and married a local girl. We met through the health board, when Ann worked there during summer holidays from secondary school (a few years younger than me!). I can't be sure at this stage which one of us first ‘took a shine’ to the other - it became mutual anyway - in any event we were

married in 1980 and we have been through the good and bad times together since then. Ann worked in the health services for her working life, and she retired from the University Hospital, Limerick in June of 2016. She is a marvellous gardener, spending every minute that she can working the earth and growing wonderful plants with tremendous shows of colour during the growing and flowering seasons. *A selection of images from Ann’s gardens is reproduced here.* Her other great passion is antique furniture and ornaments. She has a good knowledge of the business and a great eye for a bargain! Of course, her family are of the greatest importance to her - her two boys as she refers to Paul and me. She simply adores her granddaughter, Holly - a sentiment fully reciprocated.



We have one child, our son, Paul, who is about to turn thirty. Paul's pride and joy is his beautiful daughter, five year old Holly. Holly is wonderful and she keeps us all on our toes. We all love County Kerry, and we are regular visitors to lovely Castlegregory.

In bringing my story to a conclusion, it is appropriate to express my eternal gratitude to those who saved my life and provided me with the ability to lead a functional life after the assault. The first responders and the emergency services in Limerick were magnificent; the health care professionals and other hospital personnel in Cork gave me back my life.

Thank you for your patience.

Tommy Hourigan.

January, 2017



**Grange Book Articles authored, co-authored or including a preamble by Tommy Hourigan:**

[Television in the Early Sixties](#)

[We Grew Up in Grange](#)

[In appreciation of The Honda 50](#)

[Moira and Maureen Reminisced](#)

[The Life and Times of Austin Cregan](#)

[John Joe Hourigan](#)

[The Battle of Holycross](#)

[GAA Man Extraordinaire](#)

[History of Lough Gur House](#)

[The Jewel that is Lough Gur](#)

[The Night of The Big Wind](#)

[The Wonders and Dangers of Poteen](#)

[Tragic Deaths](#)

[Grange and the Universe](#)

