

Brendan O'Neill

1948 – 2020

Brendan O'Neill passed away unexpectedly at his home in Newcastle West, Co. Limerick on 22nd December 2020.

He was born on 23rd May 1948 at Ballycommane, Durrus in West Cork to John (Jack) and Nora (née McCarthy). His father died suddenly on New Year's Day, 1952. Brendan was then just three years of age and together with his mother Nora, sister Noreen and brother Jerry, he gained an early introduction to the challenges of farming in West Cork and quickly developed a great love of the land.



Brendan received his primary education at Carrigbui National School and his secondary education at St Finbarr's College, Farranferris whence he graduated with honours. He began his forestry career at Kinnitty Castle Forestry College in 1966 and completed his course at Shelton Abbey in 1969, graduating with distinction.

Brendan's first assignment was as an assistant forester at Tinahely Nursery, Co. Wicklow. This was followed shortly by a transfer to Cahersiveen Forest. He became increasingly conscious of the need for strong forester representation in order to improve the forester's working conditions and career opportunities within the Forestry Department. Brendan spent many years as Treasurer of the State Foresters Association (SFA), which at that time was the union for foresters and was affiliated to the Institute of Professional Technical and Civil Servants. One of the SFA's greatest achievements was securing the '1972 Agreement' which introduced a revised grading structure, greater promotional opportunities and improved salaries for foresters. Most importantly, the dreaded "transfer system" was replaced by an application process for newly created and existing vacant posts. Foresters could now begin to purchase or build a house in a location of their choice. Brendan was a shrewd negotiator throughout his time on the SFA's Executive Council and will be remembered for the unselfish contribution he made for the betterment of his colleagues.

From Cahersiveen, Brendan was appointed as Housemaster (1971/1972) at Shelton Abbey Forestry College and afterwards to Avondale Forestry College in 1973. As a Housemaster he was well regarded by the students, to quote one "we hardly knew he was there". Brendan was one of the final Housemasters at Shelton Abbey Forestry College as forestry training moved back to Avondale in 1973. After his term as Housemaster in Avondale, he was assigned to Charleville Nursery.

His next posting was to Barnesmore Forest in Co. Donegal. The forester he replaced was stopped at a Garda checkpoint in Ballyshannon. The Garda on duty inquired about his destination and on hearing the word "Forestry" he responded, "the whole forestry department

must be on the move today” – a telling insight into the hugely unpopular transfer practice in vogue at that time which was often indifferent to the wellbeing of the foresters and their families as they were forced to criss-cross the country, often at short notice.

Brendan’s final posting was to Newcastlewest, Co. Limerick where he held various roles in the Forest Service and Coillte until his retirement in 2013. Here he was regarded as a caring neighbour – always willing to help anybody who was in difficulty or in need. While he lived happily in Newcastlewest and treasured his time there, home was always West Cork and a visit to the majestic Sheep’s Head was an essential part of every trip there.

Brendan was an enthusiastic supporter of the Society of Irish Foresters and he attended many of the Society’s study tours, symposiums and field days. He was a quiet, unassuming gentleman, a much loved and respected colleague blessed with a razor-sharp intellect. His willingness to enlighten those present during discussions at meetings and field days was highly regarded and contributed greatly to our professional knowledge.

He had a fine analytical mind and was a very keen mathematician. It will come as no surprise that he was an accomplished chess player and participated successfully in regional and national chess tournaments. Brendan wrote a most enlightening account of chess in *The Foresters’ Year, No.2, 1986*, where he outlined the history and origin of chess, the evolution of modern play, blindfold chess, chess and computers, and chess in Ireland. As one of his colleagues acknowledged ‘he swept us of the board within minutes’. Despite ill health in his later years, Brendan still regularly played chess with a neighbour in Newcastlewest right up to his death. His dream was to retire and play chess on the streets of Paris. In another article in *The Foresters’ Year, No.1, 1983*, Brendan contributed a most interesting and useful article entitled “Social Welfare: Things we should know”.

Coming from West Cork, Brendan naturally had a great interest in Gaelic football and played on the Forestry College teams and in his youth with Bantry Blues. He had a passionate interest in horse racing and loved nothing better than to set off with friends and colleagues for the Galway and Listowel races for a few days every year. In keeping with his analytical mind Brendan had a keen interest in the stock market and greatly enjoyed analysing developments in the fiscal markets. He was a loyal member of Newcastle Golf Club and played in the Southern Region Forestry Golfing Society. Brendan retired from Coillte in May 2013 after 47 years’ service in the forestry profession.

Brendan was a humble gentleman who preferred to remain in the background. He was blessed with an astute sense of humour and was a true friend to a wide circle of people.

To his brother Jerry, sister Noreen, brother-in-law John, niece Fiona and extended family we offer our sincere sympathy.

Leaba i measc na nAingeal agus na Naomh go raibh aige.

Mike Ward