



# The End of an Era

“Email the interview questions and we’ll go through them over a cup of tea next week”

*replied a buoyant Peter O'Brien Snr in response to my interview request for the winter issue. Sadly, we never did get time for that cuppa. Peter passed on October 26th last, peacefully and surrounded by his loving family.*

By Barry Lupton

For those of you who didn't know him, Peter was founder of Peter O'Brien and Sons Landscaping LTD, Ireland's longest established, family-owned landscaping company. Those who knew him, know the enormous contribution he made to the professional development of the commercial landscape sector in Ireland over the last 60 years. Personally, I have known Peter for a number of years and the privilege of working for him for the last three.

While I didn't get the chance to conduct a formal interview with Peter, I have had opportunities in the past to discuss and record his comments and stories about his early days, his business and his commitment to the sector. I share some of these here with words from a number of leading industry figures who worked and knew him well over the years.

“My father spent his formative years farming the land and was renowned in the area for his ploughing skills,” explained, Peter when I first asked him how he got started. “When we missed out on an opportunity to extend the family farm, I knew I would have to broaden my horizons. Despite my parent's protests, I decided to pack my bags and create a new life for myself.” Like many of his generation in the 1950s, he found his way to England, working in whatever capacity he could. Before long he secured work on the buses and spent several years happily navigating the streets of Birmingham. “I worked hard and made a home in England, but Ireland was always calling,” he said.

In 1963, he decided it was time to head back to Ireland, and with his wife Kitty, he set up home and a fledgling landscape company in Artane in North County Dublin. “Ireland was in the midst of a house boom and the new homeowners in Raheny needed lawns. I was able to put the ploughing skills my father thought me to good use preparing and seeding gardens. Kitty worked from home answering calls, doing the accounts and chasing down new business”.

From these modest beginnings Peter and Kitty grew the business, taking on staff, buying machinery and expanding the range of services. As the business grew, so did the family. As soon as they were able, the children - Dermot, Karen, Helen, Mary and Ciaran - all found themselves involved in day to day operations. “We were all expected to work, no exceptions. Dad was a tough operator with high expectations of us

all,” explains Ciaran, who has been a company director and primary shareholder for many years.

With his commitment to quality and integrity, Peter quickly built respect, knowledge and reputation for getting the job done and done well. This allowed him to diversify into other areas and develop new services. From his first small gardens, he went on to do work for local councils, larger gardens, parks and sports pitches. The company grew rapidly with men in the field and administration in the company offices. While initially run from the family home, the company quickly outgrew it and the decision was taken to invest in a permanent base in Malahide, where the company is still largely based.

“My dad was first and foremost a family man,” says Ciaran O'Brien. “He had a sincere belief in the importance of traditional family values and in many ways, built his business around them; Truth, honesty, respect, morality and ethics run at our core. He was also a man of faith and charity, and often combined the two with donations and support. He pursued both with no expectation of return and out of a genuine sense of duty and responsibility. He would never see anyone stuck or wanting”.

“There are few people that have had a greater impact on my life,” explains, Peter O'Toole. “I studied with Ciaran in the bots and then went off to Kew. Not long after, Ciaran asked me to come back to work with himself and Peter. That was thirty years ago,” he added.

Peter has been instrumental in the development of the company over the years working shoulder to shoulder with Ciaran and his father. “I have learned so many lessons about life and work from Peter over the years” he continued. “He was committed to people and to operating with integrity. He knew the difference between cost, price and value. He understood that some of the most important things in business aren't reflected on the balance sheet. He'd often pay more for things from someone he knew, knowing he could get it cheaper elsewhere. He understood the value of relationships and how much more important they are for the long-term health and success of a business; and a family. That will always stay with me.”

Peter O'Brien Snr had a motto: From little acorns, mighty oaks grow. And grow they did. From a one-man show, rotovating back gardens in north Dublin, Peter built a thriving, multi-award winning, full-service landscape company instilled with traditional family values. Through his



commercial activities, involvement with industry associations and commitment to professional development he made an immeasurable contribution to the landscape sector. He will be dearly missed.

### A WONDERFUL ROLE MODEL

I first met Peter on a Landscape Horticulture class fieldtrip from UCD in 1983. We were visiting the award winning, Artane Park scheme that Peter O'Brien and Sons had just completed. Peter's easy way with a group of young students, his professionalism and his enthusiasm for the landscape profession impressed this young student to the point that I immediately applied for a Practical Year placement with O'Brien's and was lucky enough to be accepted. I enjoyed the experience so much that I returned after qualifying to work professionally with the company.

Peter's enthusiasm for the landscape profession was infectious. While it is obvious, he was a consummate businessman, he was much more than that. Peter understood that the young fledgling Landscape industry needed to be fostered, promoted and professionally developed. He brought this vision through in his own company, but also in the industry generally by being a founding father and constant supporter of ALCI. Peter understood that a rising tide would lift all boats.

Apart from being inspirational in the landscape sphere, Peter inspired as a person. He had incredible balance in his life; he was dedicated to his family, made time to enjoy his golf, raised money for charities, and supported many in a quiet understated way. Generous to a fault, I like many others got nothing but support and guidance when the time came to move on and 'plough our own furrow'.

Peter was a true gentleman and a wonderful role model.  
*Brian Whyte, Director Radharc Landscaping & Co. LTD*

### A LANDSCAPE PIONEER

It was 1975 when I first met Peter. I had completed my studies in the USA and returned to join the Parks Department of Dublin Corporation as a Parks Superintendent. Most landscape works were done in-house by staff in the department and Peter had discussions with the then department head Barney

O'Reilly, whom he persuaded to allow some work to be done by landscape contractors. It was a period when significant social housing projects were underway and after completion, the grounds would be maintained by the Parks Department. Therefore, the Housing Architects Department asked the Parks Department to provide the landscape design and construction element of their programmes and that became my brief. I think it helped that Barney O'Reilly, like Peter, was a Meath man and with that in common, they formed a good relationship. At Peter's invitation, Barney went to see some of the work he was doing and was quite pleased with the standard of workmanship. It was on that basis that he asked

me to include the firm on the tender circulation list.

When I met Peter, I found him a friendly person, who put great emphasis on delivering a good standard of work and on time. He was well supported by his brother Tom and Ciaran O'Dea and the other loyal workers with whom I became familiar over the years. One of the first schemes that Peter did for Dublin Corporation was the Poppintree Housing Scheme beside Ballymun. It comprised about 600 houses set out in courtyards of 12 and the intention was to have communal gardens in the courtyards. The idea was grand until each resident put up fences around their garden a few years later. Peter's team did an excellent job of landscaping these areas and the open spaces surrounding the scheme and followed through in the winter with tree and shrub planting. From my perspective, I came to rely a great deal on their work and never found fault with the standard achieved and from recollection no project had to be revisited. Contracts with Peter extended to landscape refurbishment of old inner city flat schemes where the challenge was much greater.

Before the era of health and safety regulations, it was not uncommon to find hordes of young children in and around his team making it very difficult for them to do their work. It was an intimidating situation, but by maintaining cool heads they succeeded. On one memorable occasion in St. Therese's Gardens, near the Coombe, several tools went missing and Peter went straight to the local pawn shop and retrieved them without confrontation. It was a mark of his *modus operandi* that he worked with the crew at every opportunity. That was his way of knowing the ins and outs of each job and it contributed significantly to the high level of respect with which he was held by the staff. Another example of his work is the very successful planting scheme on the 40 acres of the Chapelizod By-Pass, completed in 1991. I also experienced his generosity to another landscape contractor who didn't have sufficient funds to buy materials and was unable to deliver on the project. Instead of letting the other contractor fail, Peter supplied him with the necessary materials and helped him complete the contract. I am also aware that in other projects Peter undertook additional work such as drainage for which he was not paid, to ensure that his work would not be impacted.

As the years progressed, Peter diversified the company by taking on golf courses, drainage works and hard landscaping.



As an adjudicator for the ALCI awards in the early years of the organisation and about a decade ago, I was able to view the work of Peter's team on other projects and not surprisingly, many awards were achieved. It is great to see the next generation moving the company even further. While he always kept a close eye on the company, he was very proud of what was achieved and how the success was continuing under the family's management.

On a personal level, I always found it a pleasure to work with Peter and his team and on social occasions with Kitty whom I know was the glue that helped keep the enterprise going. I was pleased to attend both their 70th birthday celebrations and in recent years to meet occasionally to discuss events of the past. When Peter became ill last year and came home to Ireland, John McCullen and I visited him in February at home in Swords. We all expected that he had just weeks to live, but he recovered to everyone's surprise and delight and when I spoke with him in September, he seemed fine but was worried about his brother Tom who died shortly afterwards. Peter was an excellent person in so many ways; he pioneered improving the landscape contracting business through his own enterprise and through ALCI of which he was a founding member and President. It was a privilege to have known him. Kitty and family are coming to grips with his loss and I wish them the very best for the future.

*Dr Christy Boylan (Jury Chair for for Entente Florale Europe and Adjudicator for the Tidy Towns Competitions (Ireland); Lecturer, Technological University Dublin)*

### A LIFE WELL LIVED - SAM FEENEY

Landscaping in Ireland owes a big debt to Peter. He was one of the founding members of the ALCI in 1974, and without

doubt its most respected and active promoter. He struck up a close and long-lasting relationship with his co-founders from the North, including Ronnie Cameron, Jack Duff, Peter Woods and Joe Prunty. Peter's natural, calm, outgoing and inclusive personality was ideally suited to making long friendships and his commitment and integrity were crucial to fostering the organisation as an all-Ireland body.

My first meeting with Peter was in the late 1970s, when I was working for a nursery group of Northern Ireland Growers in Belfast. In that troubled time, when not that many people were venturing north of the border, Peter was more than happy to do so; doing business with ourselves, Thompsons of Garvagh and machinery dealers in Coleraine. He was by that time known to all the landscapers in the north and held in high regard by all who knew him.

My first impression of him was his courtesy and encouraging nature. He was a businessman to his fingertips, but work didn't weigh heavily on him and his sociable, affability and inclusiveness were to the fore at any gathering. To quote Michael Good, who knew him well from the early days of the ALCI, "What I loved most about him was his great sense of fun and devilment." Though a teetotaler, he was the life and soul of association weekends away, as often not, the last man standing at the end of the night.

He made the Grand Hotel in Malahide, the Mecca for landscape Awards, which, as chairman, he instigated, organised and presided over in 1983, when he presented the overall award to his friend and fellow Meath man, John Culleton. The expression, 'ni bheidh a leitheid aris ann' was never as apt. A true gentleman, he will be missed, but he has left a legacy of a life well lived. **Sam Feeney (Owner and operator of Sam Feeney Landscaping LTD) \***

