ROTARY DISTRICT 1160
EIGHTY-SECOND ANNUAL CONFERENCE ~ SLIGO

The District conference was held in Sligo over the weekend of 25-28 September and was, as usual, a well-attended event.

The Rotary Club of Belfast was represented by fifteen members, led by President Courtenay and Lesley.

Also present were President-Elect Arthur and Ellen, Assistant District Governor Marnette, Past Presidents Albert Baird and Mabel, Maurice Brooks and Hilary, Bryan Johnston, and Rotarians Hilary Gault and Barrie & Anne Houston.

The party was accompanied by our 2008-9 ambassadorial scholar from Minnesota USA, Martha Josephson.

The weekend kicked off with a dinner for the Belfast members in Coach Lane Restaurant in Sligo town where we had an excellent meal and good craic. We also on this occasion had the pleasure of the company of Skye Geerts, an ambassadorial scholar from Alabama USA who is being hosted by the Rotary Club of Belfast West, none of whose members was, unfortunately, present at the conference.

The Club were also pleased to host Group Study Exchange member Angela Harness from Grand Junction, Colorado.

The following morning, Friday, saw the start of the formal proceedings with the conference's first plenary session getting under way at 9.25 am. The first half of the session was taken up by addresses of welcome and introduction of guest speakers, the conference team and so on.

The first of the guest speakers, Niall Mellon, is a remarkable person. He is described as a serial entrepreneur" and has made his mark in the fields of financial services, software, hotels, construction and the media. In 2002, however, at the age of 35, he changed his direction and founded the Niall Mellon Township Trust after a holiday in South Africa where he saw at first hand the awful conditions in which the people in the country's townships lived. His illustrated talk demonstrated how his main thrust has been to build basic homes for the people and how, in four years he has progressed from a few houses built by a few volunteers to chartering four Jumbo jets at a time to take hundreds of volunteers from Dublin to South Africa to build thousands of houses a year. This was a most moving

and inspirational presentation and demonstrated what can be done by a person with drive and determination.

The second speaker of note was Jim Gamble, a native of Bangor Co Down, whose 25-year career in policing has progressed through various posts in NI and GB and who now heads up the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP). He shocked delegates by saying that, statistically, there was a likelihood that the gathering he was addressing would include several people of deviant sexual tendencies. His aim is to improve the co-operation between enforcement agencies world-wide in the fight against online exchange of child pornography and pedophilia. His force has been successful in ensuring that a number of such persons are now enjoying hospitality at Her Majesty's pleasure. To take this post, he had to forgo his ambition to become a chief constable. He doesn't seem too worried: "What is the difference between a chief constable and God?" he asked. Answer: "God knows he is not a chief constable!"

That evening saw us attend the District Governor's masked dinner and ball. You will see from the photographs that it was a happy affair. Your correspondent, however, noted a very pretty woman in a sparkly evening dress and a sparkly mask.

Emboldened by alcoholic sustenance, he approached and asked if he might take her photograph. She acquiesced. He took the photograph and asked for her e-mail address so that he might forward the picture to her.

She replied that she did not have one and he should ask her husband.

Imagine your correspondent's consternation on discovering that her husband was none other than Jim Gamble, the online policeman!

The lady in question is she who is labeled "Bonny Jean".

The next day's proceedings involved addresses by the District chairmen for the various avenues of Service, and in the afternoon a number of tours, walks, golf and other activities.

That evening we joined the Rotary Club of Dublin for dinner – 32 of us in the Sligo Park Hotel, where we were joined by Angela Harkness, member of the Group Study Exchange team from Colorado USA, and Jack Clifford, the GSE leader.

This was a good evening of Rotary fellowship, followed by attendance at the District Governor's concert, which was a performance entitled "Sligo – Land of Heart's Desire". The highlight was the appearance of Niamh Murray, the internationally-renowned soprano. We were also entertained by a lady who was claimed by the MC to be his wife, ready to give birth at any moment. Her condition appeared to have no effect on her violin skills and she delivered a most enjoyable performance.

The Conference ended on Sunday after an ecumenical service in St John's Cathedral and distribution of District Awards. This was a most satisfactory occasion for us, Belfast being awarded both the Mutual Understanding Award presented to the Club considered to have "organised the best mutual understanding event between Clubs" (a reference to the TABU visit to Highland Park Club in Chicago USA) and the District Quiz Trophy, won by Belfast Club under the leadership of Bryan Johnston against stiff opposition in Lisburn in April.

The entire conference (which I am informed is an Irish word meaning "piss-up") was a most enjoyable experience: the only disappointment was that the Belfast participants were all "old hands" and newer members should consider participating in future occasions. They would be made very welcome.

Ambassadorial Scholar Donna Swanson (Antrim)

Colette Delargy (Antrim)

Niamh Murray

Inner Wheelers together