Callan Electricity Board

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TWENTY YEARS before the national E.S.B. network was established, Callan had its own private electricity Board which was set up by a group of local businessmen with the sanction of the Town Commissioners in 1909.

As far as I can ascertain the business people involved in the establishment of Callan Electricity Board (in that year) were: Michael Shelly, John J. Dunne, Martin Hayden, James Pollard. Pat Pollard, John Phelan, William Keogh, Pierce Fennelly, Patrick Grainger, Bernard Delahunty, Patrick Molloy, Edward Callanan, James Lanigan, Dr. Shee, Clark Lynch, James O'Mahony, Thomas Kerwick and James Lyons.

An Englishman, Albert Laytham, who later married a local girl, was responsible for engineering the scheme at the outset and other electricians involved in the early stages were Harry Beale, John Connolly and James McAdam.

Callan was probably unique for a town of its size in initiating what was considered to be a colossal scheme in those years. Being a rather compact town however, with the main thoroughfares radiating from a central point it was considered suitable and had a comparison with the rather larger town of Loughreagh, Co. Galway, which had just completed a similar scheme.

Premises were acquired from the Lynch family at Mill Lane which accommodated the generating plant. The company was known as "Callan Electricity Board" and the premises, where a section of the Bacon Factory is now positioned, had the title "Callan Power House" proudly embossed on the front.

Two large generators motivated by Japanese engines operated by anthracite coal which produced the gas fuel could be plainly seen by those of us children returning from the Convent School during the late 1920's. The dynamos, as they were then called, emitted a galaxy of colourful sparks as the friction of the mechanism transformed the power into stored electricity.

I remember well that only one engine operated during any period and the idle one was kept serviced by skilled mechanics to ensure that a breakdown would not occur. The engineer in charge was Michael Power whilst

the electricians were: Joe Kennedy, Frank O'Regan and Joseph Carroll, although not all during the same periods.

In my family home in Bridge Street we had not the luxury of electric light in those days. An oil lamp hung on the kitchen wall with a tin shade tacked to the ceiling to prevent "blackening" from the smoke. In the sitting room the table lamp was lit when we had visitors and on "state occasions only." Enamelled candlesticks provided light for the bedrooms and were lit up each night in the kitchen and carried up the stairs.

In those days also, a smaller lamp with a red shade was invariably positioned in every house underneath a picture of the Sacred Heart. Although this lamp was kept constantly lit it was not considered an extravagance as paraffin oil was only a penny a pint — sufficient supply for those little lamps for a month.

Only the bigger shops could afford to have a supply installed. A number of street lights illuminated the main streets. Those lights were positioned not on poles, but on iron wall brackets and the remains of two of them may still be seen, one in West Street, near the Creamery, and the other in Clonmel Road, opposite the Presbytery. Some older residents whom I spoke to years ago thought that those brackets had been improvised from earlier days and were originally made to carry public oil lamps before the Callan Electricity Board was formed. In fact, the town "lamplighter" hwo I remember well as a youngster, when he was engaged on other work by the Town Commissioners was Mr. Jack (Barry Walsh) of West Street.

To revert back to the houses with electricity installed the consumption of current was measured on a meter which contained mercury, for some reason I could never ascertain. The bulbs in those days were somewhat similar to present day ones except that each had a nipple-like deformity at the bottom which was formed when the air was extracted. The bulbs were not filled with the same type of gas as the modern ones which allow the tungsten steel filaments to illuminate more brilliantly. It is worth relating the story of a Callan woman who saw an electric bulb lighting for the first time. "Whatever they tell me" she said, "there must be paraffin oil involved somewhere."