



# - MEET A TOWNIE -



## Lance and Judy set their watches to go

It's Saturday afternoon and there are only a few hours to go in the 150 year existence of one of Letterkenny's commercial jewels. And the ever-friendly proprietors of C.T. Ball & Son jewellers take a break from their final working day and the frequent influx of best wishers to reflect on their own and the shop's long history.

For Lance and Judy Ball and the staff of the popular outlet, it's an emotional day and one tinged with many an abiding memory. And as they talk of times gone by, their eyes shine like the remaining items of jewellery that occupy the glass cabinets within the premises where tradition and trend mattered.

Born in the family home at Port Road in 1933 – “in those days you were born in a house” – Lance's proud parents were Cecil T. Ball, a native of Cornwall in England, and Kathleen Fleming of much more local stock at Windyhall.

They also raised four other children, Dorothy, George, Edith and David, the latter setting up an optician's shop in the same building as the jewellers, it having closed some time ago.

The young Lance attended Robertson's National School – “it's no longer there”, Lance reflects with some degree of poignancy – before pursuing his secondary education at Raphoe Royal and Sligo Grammar school.

The link with home was, temporarily broken, when he went to Manchester to train with the renowned retailers, Oliphant & Botsford, spending three and a half years there.

“It was the first time I was away from home. And I thought, this is brilliant. I could do more of this!” Long before that his great-grandfather, Robert McCullagh – listed in the census of that era as a “Master Jeweller” – had opened a watchmaker's shop at 52 Upper Main Street, Letterkenny in 1869.

### No jewellery

At the outset, it had involved itself in the repair and maintenance of pocket watches and clocks. “There was no jewellery in the early years but there was everything from sewing machines and bikes which were kept in a loft above the stables. “It was more like a store in the old Wild West,” laughs Lance.

Robert McCullagh had passed away in 1910 and his daughter, Jenny, and husband, William Ball, took over the premises. Cecil T. Ball's younger brother, Robert, would eventually take over the running of the shop the family opened in 1967 further down the Main Street and trading under the name, R. McCullagh.

For Judy Ball, meanwhile, life began in 1941 in



Lance and Judy Ball.

the coastal town of Bridlington in East Yorkshire and it was there she would, literally, bump into the man who would become her spouse. “She was a big fan of the dodgem cars and we kept bumping into each other!” And subsequently started meeting in a local coffee bar and listening to the top twenty on the jukebox.

Judy was employed in a family bakery and chocolate house and remembers a group of friends including Lance arriving in and purchasing strawberry flan.

“They'd take it down to the beach and have it for breakfast,” she laughs.

The couple had initially met in 1956 and the following year she accompanied him to Letterkenny to “meet my future in-laws.”

Judy recalls her mother asking her what it was like in Ireland and recoiling when learning that they didn't have a cooked breakfast on a Sunday! No mention on whether or not they had a strawberry flan for the first meal of the day!

### Marriage

In 1959, Lance and Judy tied the knot and subsequently parented three children in close proximity in the early sixties, Helen, Janette and Fiona.

Acting on advice, the newly married couple had

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Lance Ball reflects

settled in Strabane just across the border. “We came over to look at property and saw a house there and moved in.”

They remained in the County Tyrone town for a period of eight years before purchasing a bungalow in Letterkenny.

For Judy it was a significant move, irrespective of the lack of a cooked breakfast on a Sunday morning.

“What really helped me to settle in was joining the committee of the Letterkenny International Folk Festival. That was a really big event at the time and the crowds that used to come to it were huge.”

Lance also joined the committee and the couple's enthusiasm for the festival was obvious to anyone who came in contact with them at the time and indeed since.

“We met so many people and made a lot of friends through it.”

But it's the jewellers shop at Upper Main Street for which this affable couple will remain synonymous.

And will they miss it? “Oh yeah, definitely,” Lance responds. “After the weekend, I would say, thank God, it's Monday, I can go back to work. Back to the shop for a bit of craic.”

Lance and Judy are eternally grateful to the staff who have worked tirelessly in the shop over the years including the current employees, Keith Stevenson, who had been there for seventeen of those years, Rebecca Coyle, Donna Robinson, and Holly Kelso. And there on the closing day was another long running member of staff, Norman Spratt, who left some months ago.

“And don't forget another important member of staff Zowie, As in Zowie Ball!,” Judy pipes up and points to the Maltese dog sitting in the basket behind the shop counter where she has occupied many a working day.

Those working days, at least for Lance and Judy and the store itself, drew to a close on Saturday last – a day, and others before it, when numerous well wishers dropped in to make a final purchase and bid farewell to its proprietors.

One of them was local Garda Tina Fowley who spoke for many when she reflected: “It was always a lovely place to come in and say hello even if you weren't buying anything. And Lance and Judy are two outstanding people – friendly and helpful at all times and just such a pleasant couple.”

Gifts and cards galore arrived in the shop in the days preceding the closure of a business that has traded for close to a century and a half on the town's Main Street.

“We are very grateful to all our loyal customers over the years. And we sincerely thank them for their kindness and best wishes over the past few days,” Judy declares.

And the town returns that thanks with interest.

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