

Henry Gawley cutting oats the traditional way at Powellsboro, Tubbercurry 1990's.



Bishop Fergus and Canon Kirwan pose for Brian Cahill's first ever photo, taken on Confirmation Day at Curry Church in 1960.



Peter Gallagher thatching his house 1987. This was the last thatched house in south Sligo. PICTURES BY BRIAN CAHILL

labour that has now largely disappeared, particularly life on the bog. Turf cutting was once universal in south Sligo, essential for heating and cooking.

His photographs show men cutting, footing and drawing turf, often transporting it home by bicycle.

"Everyone went to the bog," he says. "Everyone."

One image, taken in 1999, shows a man cutting turf - a neighbour whose photograph later revealed the quiet power of Cahill's archive.

Only recently, a woman browsing Cahill's recently published photobook recognised the man as her first cousin.

"There was no other photograph of him," Cahill says. "She didn't even know one existed. She started to cry."

Stories like that are common. Over the years, Cahill has received

countless calls from people searching for photographs of parents, neighbours or relatives - sometimes the only image ever taken of them.

"That's when you realise what the photographs mean," he says. "You're holding a memory."

Cahill began working exclusively in black and white, moving into colour around 1970 when colour film became available - though it came at a cost.

"It was a different world," he says. "And it was expensive."

One of his earliest colour photographs captured a moment of national significance: Pope John Paul II's visit to Knock in 1979.

With a press pass secured through contacts, Cahill found himself among international photographers as the Pope passed through.

"There was bedlam," he recalls.

"Everyone pushing and shoving to get the photograph."

Despite photographing major moments, Cahill has always been more interested in the everyday.

His archive records changes large and small: bicycles replaced by cars, turf fires replaced by central heating, railways dismantled, shops closed, trades lost.

"I went to secondary school on the train to Swinford," he says of the Sligo-Claremorris line, which closed to passengers in 1963. "It's gone now."

Often, he knew when something was about to disappear. One photograph shows the last thatched house in south Sligo being repaired.

"I knew it was historic," he says. "I had to get it."

Brian's lens also turned towards people who anchored the community:

doctors, vets, shopkeepers, publicans, teachers, farmers, drama groups and sports teams.

One portrait of a local vet prompted an unexpected reaction.

"He told me he'd worked here for 44 years and never had a photograph taken at work," Brian recalls. "He got it copied for all his children."

Only recently did Cahill bring much of this work together in a book, 'A Lifetime of Photographs'.

Spanning 312 pages and drawing on 65 years behind the lens, the book was never intended as a centrepiece, but as a way of sharing the archive with the people it belongs to.

Of the 500 copies printed, nearly all have sold, despite only being released in Halloween of last year, and many have been finding their way to emigrants eager for a connection to home.

"It belongs to the community," Cahill says.

When he looks back now, what surprises him most is how quickly change happened.

"Things you think will always be there are gone before you realise it," he says.

That awareness shapes the advice he gives to younger people interested in photography, particularly those growing up in rural Ireland.

"Slow down," he says. "Look properly. And keep what you take."

In a world of instant images and endless storage, Cahill remains convinced that photographs matter most when they are treated with care.

"They're not just pictures," he says. "They're memory. And once they're gone, they're gone."