

Seven Men in Thurles

At 3pm on Saturday November 1st 1884 seven men met in Mrs. Hayes' Hotel in Thurles, Co. Tipperary with the aim of setting up a new organisation to govern the playing of Irish pastimes. The Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) was born.

For centuries Irish people had been playing Irish games such as gaelic football and hurling. The ancient legends of Ireland tell us how Cú Chulainn, the mighty warrior, excelled at hurling and provide us with evidence for the existence of hurling in the Irish Iron Age. Ancient laws such as the 1366 Statute of Kilkenny forbade *'the games which men call hurling with great clubs of a ball on the ground'* and provide us with evidence for the existence of hurling in early medieval Ireland. However, by the 19th Century there was a decline in the playing of Ireland's ancient games.

The 19th Century was a time of a great revolution in sport. New sporting organisations were formed to organise games into official sports with written rules and administrative bodies. In 1863 the Football Association was founded to regulate soccer in Britain, in 1867 the National Association of Baseball Players was founded in America and in 1871 the Rugby Football Union was founded. As part of the British Empire, English games such as soccer, rugby and cricket were fast becoming popular all over Ireland.

The 19th Century was also characterised by a Gaelic Revival or an interest in all things Irish including language, literature, music, dancing and of course, sports. Many people felt that Ireland was losing its culture and traditional ways of life and were determined to do something about it. One man, Michael Cusack, organised a famous meeting in Thurles and brought about his own revolution in Irish sport.

Cusack was determined to revive the Irish sports of hurling, football and handball and in December 1883 set up the Metropolitan Hurling Club. The success of this club convinced Cusack that hurling could be revived on a nationwide scale and set about getting help for his ideas. In August 1884 Cusack wrote to Maurice Davin suggesting a meeting in Thurles on November 1st. Davin was a world famous athlete and, like Cusack, was anxious to see the revival of both hurling and gaelic football.

On October 11th 1884 Cusack published his famous article *'A word about Irish athletics'* in the United Ireland newspaper calling for the revival of Ireland's national games to be governed by Irish people. Cusack then issued a letter calling on interested people to come to Thurles to attend a meeting to *'take steps for the formation of a Gaelic Association for the preservation and cultivation of our national pastimes'*. The meeting was set for November 1st 1884 at Hayes' Hotel.

At least seven men attended the first meeting of the GAA including Cusack, Davin, P. J. Ryan, John McKay, James Bracken, John Wyse-Power and District Inspector McCarthy. Once this first meeting got underway Davin was elected President while Cusack was chosen as secretary of the newly formed Gaelic Athletic Association. Archbishop Croke, along with Charles Stewart Parnell from the Home Rule Party and Michael Davitt from the Land League were all asked to become patrons of the new Association.

That first meeting was short and to the point, however the foundations were laid for what would become the largest amateur sporting organisation in the world. At a second meeting in Cork on December 27th, Davin was asked to draft the new rules of the Association. Once the rules were drawn up they were published in the national newspapers and also printed in booklet form.

The GAA quickly *'spread throughout the country like wildfire'* and soon every parish in Ireland had a GAA club. Today the GAA is the largest amateur sporting organisation in the world with over 2,600 clubs in Ireland and abroad.

Curriculum Links

History. Strand – Life, Society, Work and Culture in the Past. Strand Unit – Language and Culture in Nineteenth Century Ireland.

History. Strand – Local Studies. Strand Unit – Games and Pastimes in the Past.



Michael Cusack

Michael Cusack

Michael Cusack was born in Carron, Co Clare in 1847. He was a fluent Irish speaker and trained as a school teacher. In 1877 Cusack set up his own school in Dublin which became known as 'Cusack's Academy'. He was a well-known figure around Dublin City, a bearded man who constantly carried a blackthorn stick. Cusack's greatest achievement was in bringing about a revolution in Irish sport.

At the GAA Museum

Read Cusack's letter to Maurice Davin in 1884.

View Maurice Davin's impressive collection of trophies.

Complete the *GAA Museum Activity Trail*.