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Irish-Argentiniains trace their roots to the midlands

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Long before the rest of Ireland began to talk about a multi-cultural society, the midlands already had one that dated from the last century.

A high proportion of the 400,000 members of the Irish-Argentinian Society have their roots in Longford and Westmeath. Around 30,000 people from these two counties and Wexford made their way to Argentina during the 1800s, mainly to work on the land.

In the late 1820s the largest single wave of emigration to Argentina began. Then people left from an area bounded by Athlone in the south, Mullingar in the east, Edgesworthtown to the north, and Kilbeggan.

They were joined by other ethnic Irish from Spain, France, Britain and from the Irish community in the United States and Canada.

There were even "Russian Irish", according to Dr Guillermo MacLoughlin, an Argentinian-Irish genealogist, who is regarded as the foremost expert on the links between the two countries.

The Spanish-Irish, according to Dr MacLoughlin, consisted of Irish-born people or their descendants, who went to the colonial territory of the River Plate, which later became the Argentine Republic, in the 1880s.

Many of them held important positions in the military and civil administration during the colonial years and other were wealthy merchants.

According to a report in the Longford Leader, Dr MacLoughlin said there were also Irish Catholic priests who integrated into the local clergy - and some of the Irish are mentioned as founders of different cities in the 16th century.

Recently an Ardagh schoolteacher whose grandfather was born in Argentina, Una Byrne, was elected the new public relations officer of the Longford/Westmeath Argentina Society.

Una's grandfather, Bernard Gannon, was born in Suipacha, in the Buenos Aires province in 1881. His Irish-born parents had gone to that country to join a wealthy relative, Gen Meleady.

Bernard was the only one of the family of seven to return to Ireland.

Last weekend the society, which was set up in 1989 to foster relations and create a greater awareness of the links between the two countries, held its annual barbecue.

It also holds lectures, social events and outings, as well as offering a point of contact for Argentine visitors to Ireland and advice and contacts for local people making the trip to Argentina.

The committee, which is chaired by Mary Egan of Ferbane, usually holds its meetings in the Greville Arms Hotel, Mullingar.