

Nobody looked twice at the three smartly - dressed women as they drove into the Ulster Folk Museum at Cultra.

Like everyone else, the three ladies paid their entrance fee, left their saloon in the car park, and spent a pleasant afternoon wandering around the various houses and exhibits.

They mingled freely with the other visitors, sometimes at close quarters, and on one noticed that they were somehow different...

Their make-up was faultless. Their standard of dress was immaculate. They walked like women. They talked like women. They behaved like women.

**But they were men.**

The incident — which actually happened earlier this year — was not a childish joke or a publicity stunt. To the three men involved, it was much more serious than that.

**Bizarre**

For they were transvestites — men driven by the mysterious yet irresistible inner compulsion to dress in the clothes of women.

And to appear dressed as females in public, as they did that afternoon, was for them the most fulfilling experience imaginable.

No one knows exactly how many transvestites there are in Northern Ireland today. Statistics just aren't available, although some sources claim that the figure could be as high as 5,000.

What is known, though, is that transvestites are probably the most misunderstood group of people in modern society.

Mention the term "transvestite" to most people, and they'll conjure up an image of a drag queen... a bizarre and effeminate homosexual who uses women's clothes in order to heighten his sexual encounters with other men.

**Dressing**

That picture, though a popular one, is far from the truth. The vast majority of transvestites are heterosexual — that is, they enjoy a normal sex life with female partners.

Many are happily married with children, and many others have regular girlfriends. In fact, some transvestites maintain that "dressing" can actually heighten the pleasure of the sex act for both partners.

Of course, there are some homosexual transvestites, just as they are homosexuals in any other social grouping. But they are in the minority — the usual ratio of one in every twenty probably applies.

Other people tend to confuse transvestites with transsexuals — the men and women who are dissatisfied with their own bodies and undergo special operations designed to change their sex.

**Desire**

But transvestites, who are almost exclusively male, value their masculinity. Although they feel compelled to dress as females, they have no desire to become female.

Far from being a drag queen or a sex-change patient, the average Ulster transvestite is much more likely to be someone like Terry...



To look at Terry, you would never guess that he was a transvestite. He's aged around 40, holds down a good job, and lives in a pleasant area of town with his wife and young family.

He likes his work, has plenty of friends, and enjoys a reasonably active social life.

Terry — obviously that is not his real name — used to worry about being a transvestite, but he doesn't any more. His wife knows, and she understands. She accepts it as part of their relationship.



**This is how most people think of transvestites...**

**A Sunday News Special on the twilight world of the men who dress up as women.**

Whenever Terry feels like dressing — transvestites rarely use the formal term "cross-dressing", and never the term "drag" — he'll wait until the end of the evening, when the kids have gone to bed and his wife is watching some interesting programme on television.

**Urge**

Then he'll unpack his collection of female clothing — which his wife has helped him to buy — and slowly dress in front of a mirror. Towards the end of his private ritual, his wife will join him, and they will go to bed together.

Terry likes dressing in full feminine attire, but there are other transvestites who get the same kick out of particular items of female clothing.

But why? What is this strange compulsion known as transvestism, anyway?

**Performance**

Ever since it was first medically accepted back in 1916, there have been a host of weird and wonderful theories to account for it.

Some people maintain that it is a sexual fetish, others that it is a compulsive attraction which has little or nothing to do with sex.

The simple truth is that nobody really knows. The only thing we can say for sure is that certain people are compulsively driven to dress in the clothing of members of the opposite sex, not for homosexual or theatrical purposes and not because they wish to change their own sex.

Among individual transvestites, behaviour varies considerably. While some will dress almost every night, others will repress the urge for weeks until they finally achieve a tremendous sense of mental release by the act of dressing.

And while some prefer to dress in private, others achieve the most satisfaction by involving their wives, girlfriends, or other transvestites in the performance.

To most transvestites, the object of dressing is to adopt a feminine personality — almost to step out of a male role into a female role — without sacrificing their essential masculinity.

And to this end, they'll even adopt a woman's name — known as a "femme name" — for use when dressed.

They will perfect their facial make-up, copy the walk of a woman, develop female gestures and mannerisms... all for that final "grand performance" when they screw up enough courage to go out into the world. If they're undetected, they feel they are accepted as women... and that's the aim of the game.

Incidentally, the recognised master of this art was a famous 18th Century French transvestite, adventurer and

secret agent called Charles d'Eon de Beaumont, who dressed as a woman to avoid detection on his many secret missions and liked it so much that he dressed as a woman when he was off duty as well.

When people began worrying about him, he claimed that he had been a woman all along — whereupon he received a formal command from the King that he should wear only women's clothes.

Needless to say, Charles was delighted to oblige. And it was not until two days after his death in 1810 that doctors shocked French society by announcing that Beaumont was a man, after all.

Nowadays, transvestites rarely achieve such fame. They seldom become a nuisance to society, and most doctors and psychologists now label the phenomenon of transvestism simply as a harmless social eccentricity.

And this atmosphere of increasing tolerance leaves the opportunity open to Ulster transvestites to meet each other socially in small, informal groups.



Every so often, a group of about 40 Ulster transvestites will get together for a social gathering.

But it's a social gathering with a difference. Some of the men will arrive dressed as women. Others will carry their clothes in a travelling bag, and dress during the meeting.

Some will come alone. Some will arrive in the company of other transvestites. A few will even bring along their wives and girlfriends.

"We find that these informal meetings are tremendously successful," said David, a member of the Irish Transvestite Organisation.

"As recently as six months ago, it would have been practically impossible for one transvestite living in Northern Ireland to discover another.

**Plagued**

"But now, with these regular meetings, we find that we are overcoming one of the biggest problems faced by a transvestite — the illusion that he is unique."

Despite the enlightened attitude of the medical profession, he said, transvestites were often plagued by fears and feelings of guilt because they did not fit into the generally accepted mode of behaviour.

Two organisations which were at present trying to better the lot of the transvestite and his family were the London-based Beaumont Society (named after Charles) and, more recently, the ITVO, which operated solely in Northern Ireland.

"So far, we've only been

able to operate in the social field, by enabling transvestites to get together and discuss their problems," he said.

**Difficulty**

"But this is an achievement in itself. Every time our advertisement appears in one of the local papers, we get at least a hundred enquiries — so many, in fact, that we often have difficulty getting enough people to man the telephones."

Of those 100 enquiries, he reckons that only around 20 come to fruition in the sense that the callers are ultimately put in touch with other transvestites.

Already the ITVO has about 50 members, their ages ranging from 19 upwards. However, most of the men are in their late 30s or early 40s.

The meetings are designed to help the individual transvestite to lose his sense of guilt and isolation.

**Awesome**

And according to David, it works. "Sometimes a newcomer to the organisation will tell me: 'I've never dressed in front of anyone before. I couldn't dress in front of anyone,' but they soon get over that when they attend our meetings," he said.

"We've had very good meetings where we invite along a hairdresser or a beautician to give our members hints on hairstyles or make-up."

When appearances, gestures and mannerisms have been perfected, the members then face the giant and awesome step of appearing dressed in public.

"It's very difficult to persuade someone to do this for the first time," said David. "When I suggested it to one man, he said: 'My goodness, I could never do that — the most I've ever done is to drive my car when dressed, and even then I'm scared stiff that I'll be stopped at a road block.'

**Fulfilling**

"But I persuaded him to dress and come out with me to a Belfast cafe, and we sat there at a table drinking coffee like any other couple. No-one even gave us a second look, and that was a tremendously fulfilling experience for this man."

"Transvestites go out in public quite often. Our members have gone shopping in C & A's, and nobody has noticed."

"Sometimes the wives and girlfriends help out here. On one occasion we brought a very lonely transvestite up from Dublin. We persuaded him to dress, and together with another dressed transvestite and his wife, they went out shopping in Belfast as three women."

"When a transvestite can appear in public without detection, he has obviously passed as a woman. This is the whole point — if you can spend an afternoon at the Ulster Folk Museum, as three of our members did recently, they you are clearly dressing to a very high standard."

**Steal**

Sometimes a transvestite will have difficulty obtaining women's clothes, and this can occasionally force him to steal from clotheslines — a practice which every serious transvestite condemns as not only illegal but unnecessary as well.

"I once knew a young transvestite who became very depressed because he couldn't obtain female clothes," said David. "He wasn't ready to go shopping himself, and the obstacle seemed insurmountable."

"I said, for heaven's sake, there's mail order for a start; any of our members will go shopping for you, or even some of their wives. It's easy enough to get clothes — don't worry about that."

"He said he'd never thought of it that way before, and the entire problem just faded away."

David said that anyone who wished to contact the ITVO could write to the organisation c/o Vestry Hall, Ballygowan.

"If we can help any transvestite to feel less guilty or less alone, that is reason enough for our existence as an organisation," he said.