



## **Balla {Balla Alain} – “ A truly Inspiring Place”**

Balla is a great place to live and to visit. Our community spirit and our resilience sets us apart. The following gives an insight into the creativity, cooperation and commitment of our people over the years as well as their eagerness to fight back when challenges arise.

In early times Balla was known as 'Ros Dairbhreach', - 'The Oak Wood' and the importance of the oak to the local community is reflected in the "Dawn Oak 2000" project when 2000 oak trees were planted by the community at the beginning of this millennium, creating a new wood in Balla Town Park. The Balla Town Park which was given in trust to the people of Balla dates back to 1929 and comprises 190 acres of forests, woods and parklands. It is now the home of our local GAA Club and our unique 18-Hole Par 3 Golf Course. Balla Town Parks planted 5000 native trees under the NeighbourWood Scheme in 2018, and this wood now incorporates inspiring forest walks as well as a fairy village and picnic areas.

Farming has always been the backbone of the community in Balla. In the 1960s small scale pig farming was an important enterprise and a Cooperative Pig Fattening Station was developed by the community to provide access to a reliable market for farmers. Western Farming Development Co-Op Society Ltd opened in 1969 in Balla and has recently opened a modern state-of-the-art store catering for farmers, builders and everyone else in the community. Fair Days in Balla can be traced back to 1699 and during the 1800s they were among the largest in the county for cattle and sheep. When it became apparent that Fairs were coming to an end, Balla Cooperative Mart was founded in 1972 by a group of local farmers with the help of shareholders from all over the area. Balla Mart was taken over by NCF Coop in 1990 and currently Aurivo Co-op Mart Balla is one of the top marts in the country.

Balla Secondary School was founded by the Sisters of St. Louis in 1920 and when they decided to leave Balla in 1975 the local community decided to purchase the school and run it as a voluntary secondary school. The local community raised £13000 in two weeks at that time to help purchase the school. Today we have a very successful co-educational school with over 300 students and numbers are growing with very impressive academic achievements each year.

Balla Community Resource Development (CRD) Ltd. is a development company established by the community in 1996 with a vision of “A sustainable community, based on a spirit of trust, where everybody can feel valued and supported”. A development fund of £250,000 was established and the first project was to build a Community Resource Centre with the help of South West Mayo Leader, Mayo County Council and FÁS. It is now used by all sections of the community including Parent & Toddler Group, Active Retired Association, Youth Clubs, and many more groups and organisations in Balla as well as a venue for Community Days. Balla CRD It is now the focal point of our community and initiates and leads many Community Projects. We developed a Statement of Strategy and Business Plan last year which sets out our vision, objectives, goals and plans for the future.

Balla Tidy Towns are very active resulting in an improvement in our performance every year and we have increased our marks in The Tidy Towns Competition by 35 points In the last 3 years and also won a Regional Sustainability Award.

The Rest House and Blessed Well in Balla was an important pilgrimage site up until the 1870s, when over 20,000 pilgrims attended the pattern, but had fallen into serious disrepair over the years. The Local Community Heritage Group decided to have a conservation report completed on the site and in 2015 restoration work began on the Rest House and is now completed. This is an important development from a tourist perspective as it is at the start of The Croagh Patrick Heritage Trail.

Children Play Areas were identified as a critical need in Balla and this was addressed in 2011 when a group of parents in the community decided to source relevant funding and were awarded a grant under the Sports Capital Programme. The committee also initiated a fundraising drive. The result was that Minister for Tourism and Sport Michael Ring officially opened a Multi-Use Games Area in Balla in September 2012. Now we have a MUGA, Tennis Courts and a state of the art Children’s Playground. These facilities are a central resource in the local community and very well used.

A “Community Futures Plan” was developed in 2008 which sets out a vision for Balla and all of the priority projects identified in the plan were achieved. A renewed Plan for the next 5 years was launched in 2019. The process was driven

by a group with representation from almost 30 relevant organisations in the community. This Plan will guide developments within our community over the next 5 years.

Childcare Facilities was identified as a critical need within the community. We have a first-class National School and we also had a small preschool operating in Balla but accommodation was poor and limited to 22 children. The Management Committee of Balla CRD decided that world class childcare facilities should be available and a state of the art 'Early Years Learning Centre' in the Community Resource Centre was formally opened by former Taoiseach Enda Kenny in September 2017 which can accommodate 44 children.

Markets, Festivals, Family Fun Days, and Parades: An energy efficient Christmas Street LED Lighting system was installed and a Christmas Market established in 2014 when it was decided that the community needed to do something to entice families to come visit and shop in the village at Christmas. With the help of Mayo County Council the community came together and raised funds locally in order to complete the task. The market is a huge success and has grown each year and attracts great crowds with the highlight being a very impressive fireworks display. A Community Festival is run each year as well as 'Family Fun Days & Fairy Trails' and our St Patricks Day Parade gets stronger each year.

Organisation and Business Support: The tremendous support of Mayo County Council, MSLETB, SWMDC Leader and all local organisations makes it all possible as well as the backing and financial assistance from local businesses.

Community Engagement and Support: When Balla CRD organised a fundraising Cookery Demonstration and Food Fair recently the community really showed their pride of place. The event attracted 80 local sponsors and also 84 volunteers/stewards helped with organising and running the Demonstration and Fair. Over €10,000 was raised and it was shared with Balla Secondary School. Other Developments: The community in Balla are currently involved with Mayo County Council in developing a 'Greenway' under the Village Renewal Scheme, the Rapid Scheme and Clár programme and when completed will link Balla Village with the Town Park and Forest Walks (A number of groups are making local contributions to the scheme).

With the help of SWMDC & Mayo CoCo under the Rural Towns Scheme we installed 'Interpretive / Information Signage' which highlights all the local areas of interest as well as heritage sites in the area. We are now developing a 'Incubation Kitchen and Food Hub' in the Community Resource Centre to encourage local artisan producers to make the first step.

Balla has also been selected by GIY as one of 10 communities in Ireland to establish a 'Cottage Market' and we organise a 'Meitheal For Mayo Day' in May in our newly established Community Orchard. We hosted the Celtic Camino in Balla in 2018 when over 200 people walked from Balla to Ballintubber. They were offered refreshments in the Community Resource Centre before they left and they had their passports stamped with a 'Balla Celtic Camino' Stamp.

Pride of Place: Balla won the prestigious Pride of Place Award in 2018. The purpose of the competition is to acknowledge the work being done every day by communities all over the island of Ireland and the judges found Balla to be "a truly inspiring place". The adjudicators said: "It is rarely that the judges visit a place where virtually everybody encountered is on cue regarding sustained co-operative effort and what it takes to maintain a sustainable community. Undoubtedly this is one such place. Everyone can and does feel valued and supported. On the day of their visit the judges were extremely impressed that this spirit was backed up by a business like focus in ensuring that all projects were properly managed – a truly inspiring place".

Since the start of the pandemic we had to adapt and become more agile in dealing with the many challenges posed by Covid-19 and the first thing we did, in partnership with Balla CRD and with the cooperation of all the other relevant organisations in the community, was to establish a Local Volunteers Support Group with 63 volunteers. We have been coordinating the Local Volunteers Support Group since 23rd March 2020. This was a very worthwhile initiative and through this work we made contact with a lot of local people, organisations, groups and also with the HSE, Gardai, Mayo Co.Co. and other groups who work with the elderly and vulnerable. There were a lot of calls for assistance and on one day in mid-April 2020 we logged 23 calls to the Centre. Our involvement with this initiative has been very positive and our contribution has been greatly appreciated by members of the community. We also organised a series of Online Trivia Quizzes based on local knowledge which proved very popular.