



Big plans in Ballon

What happens when you've big plans to improve your village but no money with which to do it with? **Margaret Hawkins** visits Ballon, Co Carlow, to get inspiration

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Up to 8,000 drivers a day pass through the village of Ballon, Co Carlow. While most will acknowledge floral displays and overall tidiness, they may not have a clue about the work that goes on behind the scenes – and the community spirit that drives it.

"It's a way of life here. If you haven't got community, what have you got?" asks Eileen Murphy, treasurer of BIG (Ballon Improvement Group).

I meet the group in the tea room of An Siopa Glas, the innovative commu-

nity shop that now brings in money to fund improvements.

Eco award winners, Tidy Towns' achievers and twice recipients of Carlow's Pride of Place Award, the Ballon Improvement Group (BIG) used to rely on income from advertisements on their website www.ballonvillage.com to bring in money. Now An Siopa Glas is the main source of income. Think charity shop and charity beginning at home and profits being channelled into a variety of projects – new footpaths, extra lighting, landscaping, an orchard, community garden, native tree trails or new software for the village training centre – you name it, they've done it.

The premises was donated by the chairperson of BIG, Maire George and her family, of Cheetah Electronics – the fencer manufacturing company long-established in Ballon.

"We've been blessed in many ways, so it's good to give something back," she says.

All the other members of BIG around the table – Eileen, Bernie Mullins, secretary and deputy principal of Ballon N.S., and Michael Martin (the web master) have no doubt but that Maire George is a driving force.

"Maire keeps her eyes and ears open no matter where she goes and comes back to us with ideas," says Eileen Murphy.

Michael Martin describes her as "a dynamo".

"Maire has so much energy, imagination and persuasive ability – she drags us all in whether we want to or not," he says.

Maire saw the idea of mismatch decor tearooms when she visited Australia in 2012.

"They were trendy places and commercial rather than community spots but I wanted to have that kind of hub here and now we do."

An Siopa Glas won the Innovate Carlow Award four months after opening. As with other villages featured in this series, bringing in people with different talents has been very important for the group's success.

"We've had a lot of help, like from Paul Cutler, the head gardener at Altamont Gardens, who is on our committee, and from Mary Jordan of the Forge restaurant. We put in a free nature walk and picnic area – Sli na Sceach – for people to enjoy behind the Forge too to add to the locality's amenities."

So many in the area are involved in improving it, she continues.

"It's like a web – the middle is here then you've all the strands around. It's fantastic. We don't have too many meetings though – that only frightens people."

The list of activities as well as achievements is long. An Siopa Glas hosts many coffee mornings for local charities, sponsors environmental competitions in the school as well as holding events like plant swaps and music lessons for beginners in the winter.

"To have something going on all the time is our motto," Maire says. "It's about interacting with people and bringing them in. We have a Facebook competition to find the biggest cooking apple in the area at the moment, for example."

The website gets 100 hits a day, according to Michael, and has passed the 500,000 visitor mark.

"People abroad love being able to keep in touch with what's going on," he says.

As well as its tearoom, An Siopa Glas has rooms full of well-organised stock in its large premises – once home to the village's tyre centre.

"There's a lot of things feeding into Ballon," Maire says. "We've big numbers employed in local businesses and we have lots of shops here, including a heritage butcher. The school has also grown to 282 pupils, so it's a busy place."

A walking tour with the group unearths a tourist information centre in another hub – the business training

centre situated in the old school building on the Fenagh road. It is Fetac-registered and provides courses in everything from computer training to horticulture to cookery.

Drivers might be surprised to see a Credit Union building tucked in there too, as well as a crèche and a state-of-the-art sports complex.

"It can host international basketball matches and seat 500 people. The Saturday night bingo attracts 250 people every week and the money raised from that is paying for the new hall," Maire says.

Parking is an issue in the village, especially at school times, she tells me, as she eyes an area of waste ground across the road.

"We're on to the County Council about that," she says.

Child involvement and environment are obviously very important in Ballon.

They learn a lot from the community garden in front of the school with its scarecrow overseer and bug hotel (open all hours, reasonable rates, Maire says) and science doors – pieces of wood that when lifted reveal a hive of activity – a bit like Ballon on the human level, really, if you just take time to pit stop and talk.

The group is particularly proud of the native tree trail that now links the crèche area to the church. Maire stops to pick up some rubbish as we walk – something they all do as a matter of routine.

"Cigarette butts are the biggest problem here as they take 12 years to decompose. We get a lot of straw and chippings blowing off the lorries as they pass, but it's not dirty rubbish."

Ballon Improvement Group can trace its origins back to the late Mick McGrath.

TIPS FOR OTHER VILLAGES

- Sell ads on your website.
- Set up a community shop.
- Don't have too many meetings.
- Create a network of helpers.
- Use Facebook-sponsored ads to get info about upcoming events out to like-minded people.
- Utilise skills in the community, eg design/printing, gardening, knitting, music.
- Work with your County Council.
- Feed news items to local papers to keep your projects to the forefront.

"He was Mr Ballon really," Michael Martin says. "He led by example, keeping the village looking well."

Footpaths and village lighting now stretch out as far as Ballykealey Manor Hotel.

"We've joggers and families out walking now as a result," says Maire. "It's fantastic."

A biodiversity audit, funded by a Heritage Council grant, is currently being carried out in the locality and a reflection garden is also being readied for 2016, with seven stones representing the seven Proclamation signatories.

Bernie Mullins points out a storage shed at the back of the school.

"That was the start of it," she says. "We call it the beggar's shed because everything was begged or borrowed for it. There was great community spirit while everyone worked together to build it."

Their first community hall was built by voluntary labour also, they point out.

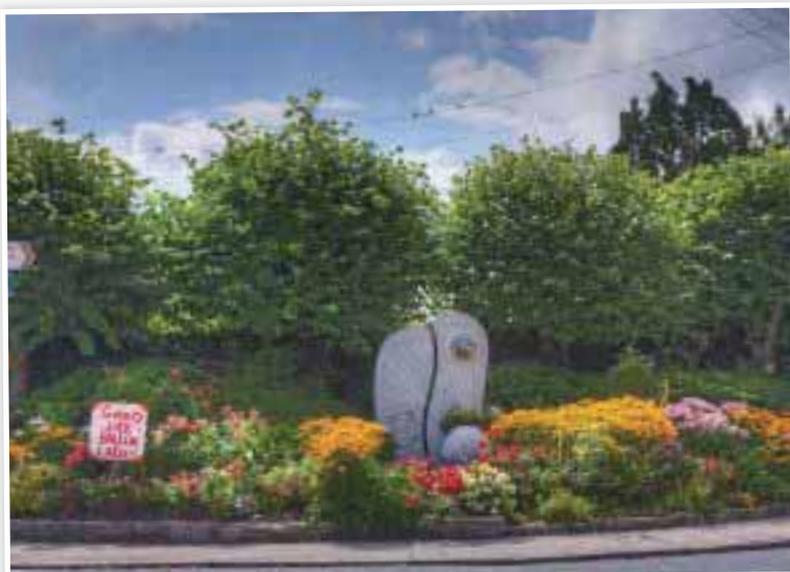
But what keeps them focused? "Seeing the need for things and competitions like the Tidy Towns keep us going," Maire says. "We were up six marks this year to 295, so we're creeping up."

"You get satisfaction out of those things, but there's great camaraderie between us too, as we tackle one thing or another."

"Like we said in our Tidy Towns application, being involved in the likes of that ignites change in the community."

"Making Ballon a better place to live, shop, socialise, do business and drive through – that's what we're working for all the time."

Siofa Glas has reached the final three in the Community Recycling section of the Pakman/Repak awards for 2015. Awards night is 22 October. **CL**



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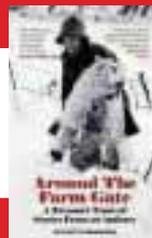
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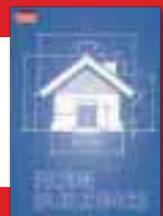
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