

News Review

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Swords, in Co Dublin, 10 years ago, there are more than 1,100 secondary-school students in the town, several thriving sports clubs, including the soccer team, which won the Connacht Cup recently, and a "brilliant" youth-activities club that attracts 500 primary-school children. Not to mention the TidyTowns association's proudest achievement: the skate park, multipurpose games area and open-air gym for older people, funded with seed money from TidyTowns cash prizes.

Dunne's 16-year-old daughter, Sadhbh, has just returned from working in an Indian school to which she and her group donated €13,000. She has also found summer work in the town, and was being trained in by a Polish woman at O'Connor's SuperValu this week.

The TidyTowns phenomenon that infiltrates every Westport pore, along with the town's startling 97 voluntary organisations (in a population of just over 6,000), are said to comprise about 50 per cent blow-ins.

Pam Flanagan, a former TidyTowns chair whose name is synonymous in these parts with "force of nature", is a Galway native whose loneliness during her first year here made her aware of the need for community vigilance and support.

She succeeded other strong women, such as Bridie Moran, Lily Cunningham and Elsie Higgins, and now, with a local photographer, Frank Dolan, in the chair, they continue to work hand in hand with the council and other organisations that have shaped a naturally blessed heritage town into a vibrant, glowing, pleasurable, litter-free environment.

"Community spirit" and "partnership" are terms that fail to convey the dynamism of these relationships and 24-hour commitment, but they will have to do. Flanagan is adept at the carrot-and-stick approach. The sticks have included collecting all the litter at the edge of the skate park and threatening to dump it on the skate paths; the problem died. The carrots have included tracking down a graffiti culprit and persuading him to work instead, for €20, alongside an artist in the skate park.

Between them all it means that as much design and pride are put into the social and affordable housing, which is built in small numbers and dotted around the town, as into any other architecture. It means the TidyTowns winnings went not into statues or plaques but into a skate park. It means that something as small, yet as important, as the window boxes are planted and placed by the TidyTowns group but are watered by the council. It means that the virtual 24/7 town-cleaning rota – impossible to sustain for a council that has lost 20 of its 35 staff in 15 years – is maintained by a true alliance of voluntary and council effort.

It's why we came upon Mary Cannon at 8.30pm on Monday, armed with her litter-picker and plastic bag. It's why the town was litter-free well before 9am last Monday after a festival that saw the town almost treble its population.

One of the many triumphs of Pam Flanagan and her colleagues is that they have made it fashionable to be on the TidyTowns team. Strangers arriving in Westport and looking for company are advised to contact the TidyTowns people.

AND YET THE QUESTION keeps presenting itself. What makes Westport different? If there is a key to the town's authentic, unavoidable community spirit and co-operation, "it lies in the long absence of old-fashioned snobbery", Staunton says. "Take the golf club; you'll find all sorts, from social-welfare recipients to professionals and middle-income groups, there. That had to be nurtured over many years."

A public-sector professional living in the town for about 10 years says that in previous postings there has been an occasional "you are my servant" attitude. "Here the people never lost sight of where they came from... There's a real respect for those who come into the town."

One example of mutual support often raised is the period when the town's Catholic church was being refurbished in 2004. It simply moved its Masses to the Church of Ireland for the duration. "The locals are very proud of that," says Fr Charlie McDonnell, the 40-year-old administrator of Westport parish, who moved here from Castlebar a year ago. "It's part of that Westport inclusiveness. They see themselves as above that kind of inward-looking stuff. You find a lot of affirmation here, which I think comes from a confidence, not an arrogance, they have within themselves."

This applies equally to modern relations between the beautiful old Westport House and the town. The council was spiky enough in the 1950s to acquire the magnificent town-centre entrance to the house by compulsory-purchase order and assign the land for social housing. Years later Lord Altamont came across the discarded gates and had to pay to get them back, although the "new" entrance remained a good distance away, at the quay.

His struggle to keep the estate afloat with ideas such as a children's zoo and caravan site is well documented and the struggle continues for his daughter Sheelyn, the 14th great-granddaughter of Grace O'Malley, who now manages the house.

She is acutely aware of past divisions and the dynamics that led to them, and that the estate's survival now involves the whole Westport community working together. "I do worry. You never feel 100 per cent sure whether you're going to be here in six months or not. It's about being able to get there on time. It's now or never."

Last weekend she launched the house and magnificent grounds as a festival venue with a kind of far-west Electric Picnic and 55 acts headlined by Ray Davies and Jools Holland, all with full use of the house as a glorious green room. "That couldn't have happened 20 years ago," she says. "The locals didn't want it. They felt it would be trouble and was too close to town." Last weekend there were no more public-order offences than on any normal weekend, according to the Garda, and the locals loved it, even in Saturday's monsoon rain.

Another milestone was reached when the estate's link to the town's core was re-established with fine new gates installed at Church Lane and opened for the festival. As a few of us stood on the steps of Westport House on Tuesday, Sheelyn quietly handed a key to the gates to Simon Wall. He swallowed hard. The significance was lost on nobody.

Meanwhile, John O'Callaghan, who pitched his native town for the competition, is "still high", according to his wife, Noreen. He is dismayed that on his *Morning Ireland* spot on Monday he forgot to mention the traditional camino walk from Ballintubber to Croagh Patrick today. And this weekend's Folk & Bluegrass Festival. And that he lives in Ennis.

Rain can't dampen the spirit of the people

It lacks the anonymity of a city, the weather could be better and the prices could be lower. Yet everyone in Westport says the town is about the people and the community they form. **Rosita Boland** talks to some of them to extract the essence of the place. Photographs: **Dara Mac Dónaill**



THE RETURNED EMIGRANT
"FROM A LIFESTYLE VIEW, LIVING HERE IS WHAT YOU WOULD WISH FOR. FROM A BUSINESS PERSPECTIVE, IT'S NOT AS GREAT"

Alex Blackwell is 56 and from just outside Westport. In 1989 he emigrated to the US. He returned in 2008 with his American wife, Daria

Alex Blackwell

"Daria and I met in 1995 in New Jersey and married in 1996. We came home here every summer. We both love it here. And we both did not love where we lived before, in the US. We were working all the time. We're making up the time we lost there by living here. And you never get that time back.

"We left the US in 2008. We had built a house back here in the intervening years, so we had prepared a base. We have a boat, the *Aleria*, a 57-footer. We sailed home, north to

Halifax and then straight to Westport. It took 27 days. We anchored pretty much in front of our house. We had no jet lag, and all our possessions had been shipped ahead and were waiting here for us. We were met by a fleet of boats at 7am and had champagne. That's the earliest I've ever had champagne.

"I had a business here before I left Ireland, but it failed. It was an oyster hatchery. I didn't know anyone any more when I came back, but people knew me. Every day I'd walk past people in Westport, and they would say, 'Hello, Alex', and I didn't recognise them. It was quite the disconnect.

"What's not so good about being back is that it is generally very expensive living here. And the infrastructure linking us to the rest of the country by road is challenging. The road to Dublin is so full of lorries it's not pleasant. So to drive to Dublin, we go to Galway and then take the motorway. Broadband connection is

relatively slow. From a lifestyle view, living here is what you would wish for. From a business perspective, it's not as great.

"One thing that strikes me is that people don't recognise we're on the sea. Clew Bay is underused, and is not a big part of Westport."

Daria Blackwell

"When I came here first I thought that Westport was the quintessential town that you would imagine in Ireland. It's a jewel. Having lived here, I know it's all about the people. The views of Croagh Patrick and Clew Bay are magic. The scenery draws you here, but what keeps you here are the people.

"We are developing a startup online business, a medical-knowledge clinic, for people who are diagnosed with chronic conditions. The flights into Knock are great for tourism but not for business travellers, because they're not daily... we have to go to Shannon or to Dublin, which makes it more expensive."



THE SEASONAL WORKER
"IF I HAD A FULL-TIME JOB HERE I'D NEVER WANT TO MOVE AWAY"

Charlene Cronin is 27 and from Rathkeale in Co Limerick. A kayaking instructor at Saoirse na Mara, she lives in Westport from March to October. She also works at Matt Molloy's bar

"I'd love to live here year-round, if there was the work. I'll be going to France in the winter to work in a ski resort. I've lived in Dublin, London, Sydney and Melbourne, and I just love coming back here. I definitely long for Clew Bay when I'm away. It's so clean and so pristine.

"Westport is a small town in Co Mayo yet

has everything. There are always new faces. Once you meet someone out once they'll always say hello to you again. There's always something happening; there are always festivals and gigs.

"The only bad thing about being here is the fact that it ends. Without sounding cheesy about it, the fact that I have to go away for work in the winter is the worst thing. If I had a full-time job here I'd never want to move away.

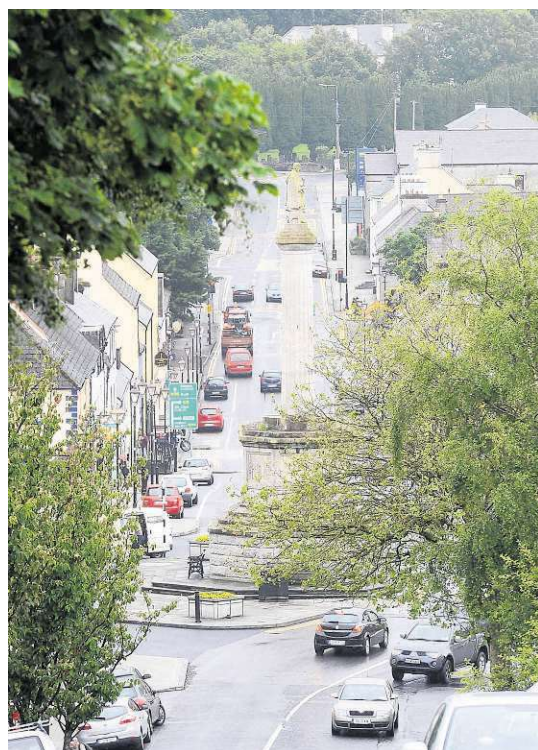
"It's really safe. I lived with four guys last summer and we never locked our door once. You can leave your bike unlocked outside your door at night without worrying about it being robbed. I left my bike locked overnight in Dublin last summer and it was robbed.

"Westport has always been different. It has

always had money. Things weren't as bad here during the Famine. So I'm told, anyway. There are a lot of people here with their heads screwed on. I think the town is all about a lot of people pulling together.

"I work in Matt Molloy's part-time. It's the hub of the town. We have locals there, and every tourist is sent there, because there's music every night of the year. I don't think Irish pubs get any more authentic than Matt Molloy's. It's not a plastic place and, most importantly, local people go there as well as tourists. I teach kayaking, but I've never been in a curragh. I mentioned one night that I'd like to row a curragh, which is a boat only a local would have, and I've had an offer to be taken out in one. It's that kind of place."

Cathair na Mart, Cassels and the Carrowbeg A short history of Westport



The earliest habitation of the Westport area was 5,000 years ago. Its Irish name is Cathair na Mart, or stone fort of the cattle. In the 16th century Cathair na Mart was an important O'Malley stronghold at the head of Clew Bay; it was burned by the governor of Connacht in 1583. During the 17th century Cathair na Mart passed from the O'Malleys to the Browne family.

John Browne settled at Cathair na Mart and built a house on the site of the old O'Malley fortress. In 1730 his grandson, also John Browne, employed the German architect Richard Cassels to design the present Westport House on the same site. The dungeons of the house contain the ruins of the old O'Malley castle.

The village of Cathair na Mart sat where the front lawn of Westport House now is. It consisted of a high street, with alleys leading down to the river. Its 700 inhabitants lived in thatched cabins.

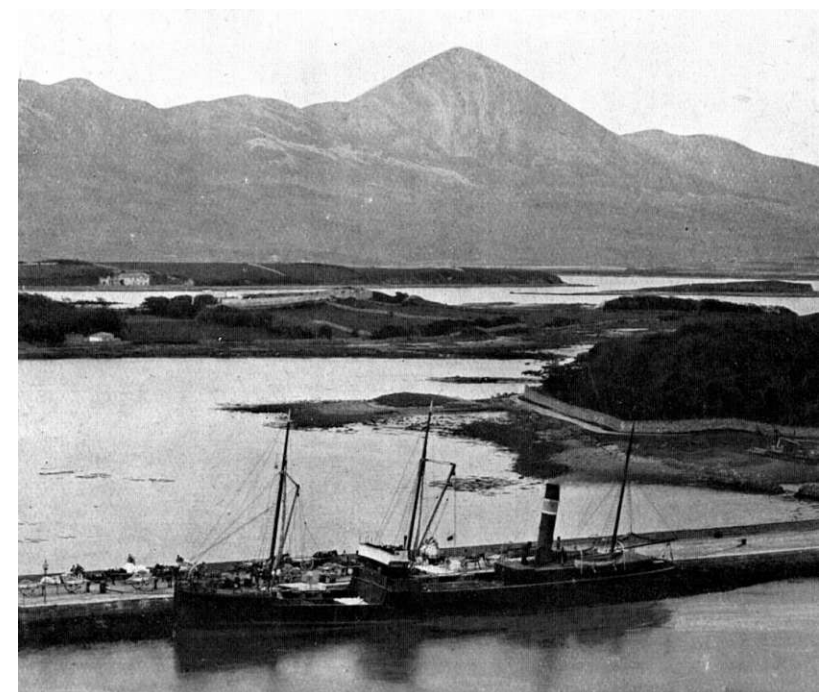
In the mid 18th century John Browne decided to remove the village from in front of his house and build a new town, Westport, 1,500m inland. He employed the architect William Leeson to plan it. An advertisement announcing the proposed new town of Westport appeared in *Faulkner's Dublin Journal* in March 1767.

The earliest developed parts of the town were on the steep High Street, Peter Street and John's Row. Next came the Octagon.

In 1800 John Denis Browne, Lord Sligo, embarked on the ambitious development of the malls. These consist of 400m of tree-lined boulevards, along the banked Carrowbeg River, with two cascades, crossed by three stone-arched bridges. This was flanked by public buildings, town houses and private dwellings, with a Georgian character. At that time the Carrowbeg flowed to the north of its present course and had to be canalised to flow in a straight line.

On the North Mall Lord Sligo built an inn for travellers to the town. It is now the Railway Hotel, one of the oldest hotels in Connaught.

In 1813 the Catholic church was built across the river, on the South Mall. The present church, on the same site, dates from the 1960s. Also on the South Mall, a Methodist church was erected. Between 1868 and 1872 Holy Trinity Church was built on the Newport Road to replace the old Protestant church that stood in the grounds of Westport House.



Then and now: the quay at Westport in 1923; left, a view of the Octagon, in the town centre. Photograph (left): Dara Mac Dónaill

Brónach Joyce
Clew Bay Heritage Centre