

# NEWSLETTER

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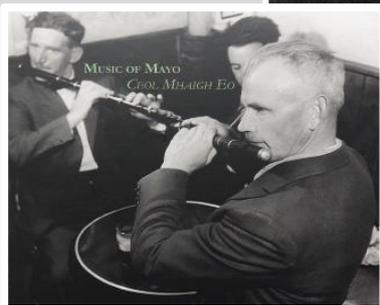
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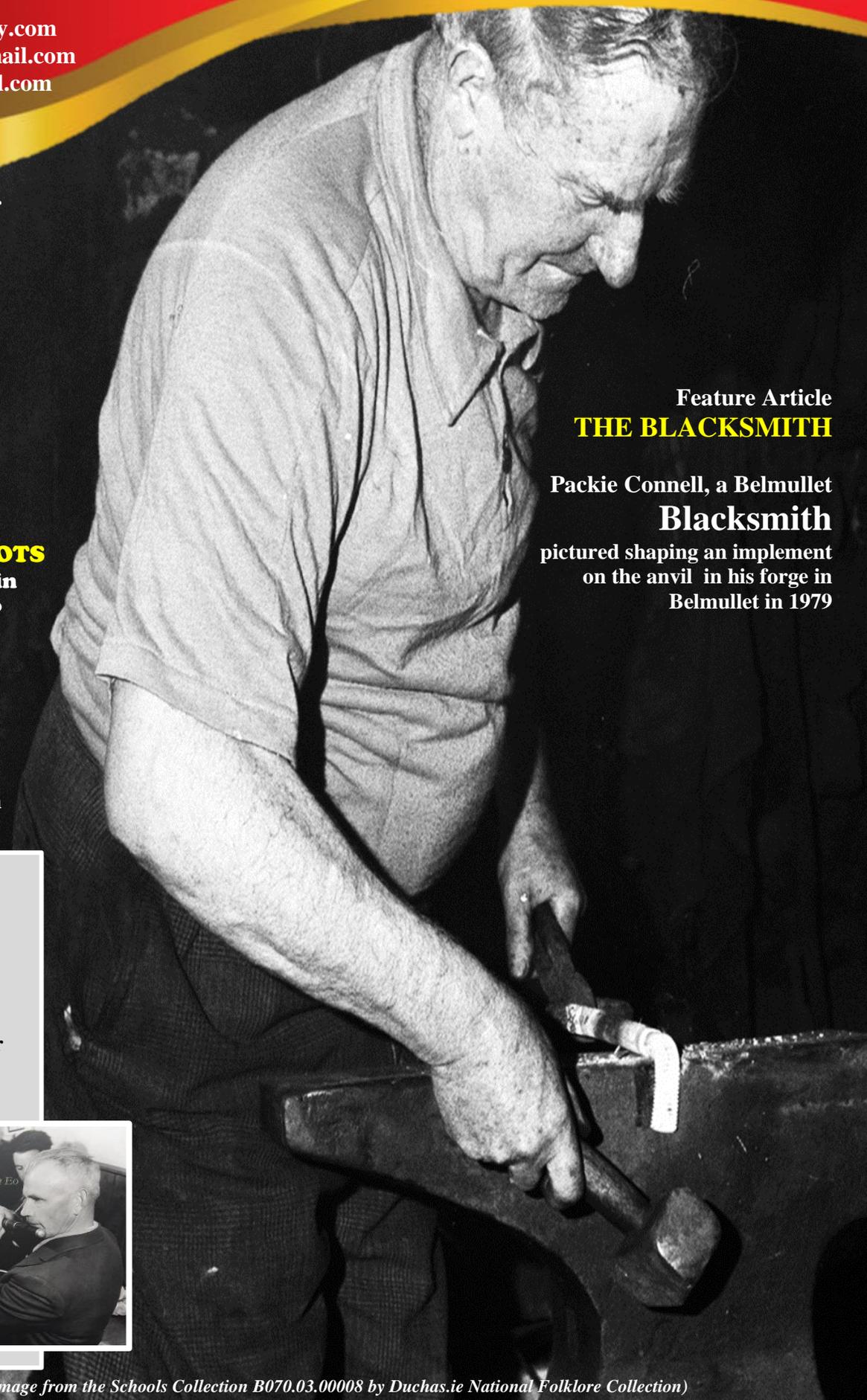
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## Feature Article **THE BLACKSMITH**

Packie Connell, a Belmullet  
**Blacksmith**  
pictured shaping an implement  
on the anvil in his forge in  
Belmullet in 1979

The Irish blacksmith once held a prominent position in the community. His trade was customarily hereditary, being handed down from father to son.

He shod horses, ponies and donkeys as a farrier, and repaired wheel rims, scythes, sickles, and spades. As a highly-skilled craftsman, he could shape iron into ornate gates and railings or effortlessly turn his hand to making more everyday items such as fire tongs, locks, bolts, and nails.

He wore an apron made from buckskin to provide protection against any stray sparks. Sturdy boots were worn to protect his feet and a belt to hold frequently used tools. Gloves were not worn as he preferred direct contact with the metal being worked.<sup>[1]</sup>

The forge (known in Irish as *cartha*) was found in every town or village, commonly located at a crossroads, near a small stream or river. It contained a water-trough (*umar*), to cool his tools. A supply of wood-charcoal called *cual crainn* (meaning “coal of wood”) was kept fuelling the large fire called a furnace.

The blacksmith would place the wrought iron metal into the furnace. Once the iron became red-hot and malleable, he held it in a pinchers or tongs (*tennchair*). It was then placed on the anvil (*inneoin*), this was a large, heavy metal block, had a long projecting snout on the side and was securely positioned on a block (*cepp*)<sup>[2]</sup> to absorb impact.

Next, he manipulated and bent the iron with a hammer, or a weighty sledge (*ord*) into the desired shape. The furnace was kept adequately hot by a large hand-operated bellows (*bullig*) which helped fan the flames. The forge was more than a mere building, it was the central focal point of the district. It was a meeting place for men and boys, where news and politics of the day was discussed.

The blacksmith had a wealth of information on local history and reports from around the country received from passing travellers. He was typically a good storyteller (*seanchaí*).<sup>[3]</sup> Payment was made by money, but in some areas the blacksmith had a standing arrangement with farmers. They could pay for his services with their produce such as oats, potatoes, flour, and vegetables. With the arrival of factories and the demand for mass-produced products, the blacksmith was replaced rather than prized. Demand for their services began to dwindle.

Our cover photo shows Packie Connell, a well-known and highly respected blacksmith in the Belmullet area.

#### Sources:

- [1] [www.libraryireland.com](http://www.libraryireland.com)
- [2] [www.workingtheflame.com](http://www.workingtheflame.com)
- [3] [www.clogherheritage.com](http://www.clogherheritage.com)



A Blacksmith's tongs and hammer

#### Brief history of the surname

### McGOWAN

Variants include MacGamhna, M'Gawna, M'Gawny, M'Gawne, (MacGowan, Magowan, Magowen), Gaffney; 'son of *Gamhain*' (calf); a rare and scattered surname; now generally assimilated to Mac Gabhann.<sup>1</sup>

Mac an Ghobhann: M'Agowne, M'Egowne, M'Igoine, M'Igone, MacGowan, MacGowen, Magowan, Gowen, Gowing, Goan and by translation, Smith, Smyth; 'son of the smith' (Irish '*Gobha*,' gen. '*Gobhann*'); a very common Irish surname. In the South of Ireland, it is now generally translated Smith, but MacGowan and Magowan are common in the North. *Clann an Ghobhann* of Clare and Tipperary were hereditary historians to the O'Loghlins of Burren and to the O'Kennedys of Ormond respectively.<sup>2</sup>

Mag Dhubhain: Magwain, M'Gowane, Maguane, MacGuane, MacGuone, (MacGowan, Magowan); 'son of *Dubhan*' (diminutive of *dubh*, black); the name of an ancient family in Tirconnell, who were chiefs of tir-Enda, in the barony of Raphoe; also found in Clare and Mayo. In the latter county it is always anglicized Magowan or MacGowan, which greatly obscures its origin.<sup>3</sup>

McGowan:, Families who bear this surname descend from the Mac an Ghabhain sept which was located in Co. Cavan near to its border with Co. Leitrim. Many descendants of that sept, however, along with descendants of the Ó Ghabhain sept of Co. Down, bear the English occupational surname Smith, their forebears having thus called themselves, Smith being the Irish translation of *ghabhain*. McGowan was retained and survived mainly in Co. Donegal, Co. Sligo, Co. Leitrim and Co. Cavan.<sup>4</sup>

Mac Gowan, Mac an Ghabhann, Mac Gabhann: In Co. Cavan, the homeland of this sept, the name has been widely changed by translation to Smith (though Smithson would be truer translation); but in outlying areas of Breffny, MacGowan is retained.<sup>5</sup>

Of the 152 McGowan births registered in Ireland in 1890 – including variants – 5 occurred in Leinster, 2 were in Munster, 91 occurred in Ulster, while 54 were in Connacht. The counties in which they were principally found were Donegal, Leitrim and Sligo.

<sup>1</sup> Rev. Patrick Woulfe, '*Irish Names and Surnames*'

<sup>2</sup> Ibid,

<sup>3</sup> Ibid,

<sup>4</sup> Brian De Breffny '*Irish Family Names*'

<sup>5</sup> Edward MacLysaght, '*The Surnames of Ireland*'

#### A brief history of the townland

### BALLINAGIVINAGH

(*Baile na nGaibhne*, town of the smiths).

Located in the east of the parish of Kilfian. Bounded on the north and east by Rathreagh parish; south by Barranarran Lower and Seeaghanbaun; and west by Kinnavally. It contains 109 acres, 2 roods, 26 perches\*. The property of A. Pugh, Esq., who resides upon and occupies the whole townland. Soil, good heavy clay, producing good crops of wheat, barley, oats and potatoes. In the east of the townland is a corn mill, at the side of the Owenmore River, which bounds the townland on the east.

\* There are 40 perches in a rood, and 4 roods in an acre.



A blacksmith at work in our forge at the North Mayo Heritage Centre