

Santa & Christmas Market

at the
North Mayo Heritage Centre
9th, 10th, 16th, 17th
December 2023

Book online only
www.northmayogenealogy.com/events

*We profile the
profession of the Nailor*
As busy as a Nailor!



Cover images from Victorian web.org

Are you interested in

TRACING YOUR MAYO ROOTS?

If you are interested in professional help to research your family history or are curious about your ancestry, why not contact us?

As busy as a Nailor!

If you could have walked around Ballina in the 1880s, not everything you would have seen was held together by nails, but a lot of it was. In a town which was famous for its saw mills, and where all sorts of things came into its quayside on boats, the vital little pieces of metal which held things together were also manufactured in the town, just as they were in towns like Ballina all over Ireland.

No one really knows when the nail was invented. Archaeologists in Egypt have discovered nails, made of bronze and looking remarkably similar to modern nails, dating to about five and half thousand years ago.¹

The person who carried on the trade of nail manufacturing was called a nailor. Nails were hammered into shape in a forge. The 'stock', the rod of metal from which the nail would be fashioned, was made red hot by the coals. Then the point was hammered out on an anvil or similar hard surface. The stock was then placed over an upright piece of metal or the edge of the anvil, and a groove was hammered all around the circumference of the nail, but it remained attached, barely, to the stock. To make the nail head, the metal was placed upright in the 'pritchel hole' a little hole in the anvil. The nail was then separated from the stock, and the top of the nail could then be hammered out to make a flat or slightly rounded surface.

Nails made by hand in a forge had four tapered sides. Mass produced nails, which were stamped from a metal sheet, were flat on two sides and tapered on two.²

Between the mid 1860s and late 1870s, the first fifteen years in which the Government recorded births in Ireland, there were at least nine nailors operating in Ballina. Martin Healy, John Flanagan, Michael Grady and John Smith all operated in the densely populated Hill Street, Mill Street and Bridge Street area of the town.

On Garden Street, equally densely populated back then, Patrick Convey, Pat Doherty and Thomas Burns carried on the trade. William Kilgrew, who came from a line of nailors in Ballina going back to at least the 1840s, operated his trade from the townland of Tullysleva, about three miles south west of the town.

The threat to the nailor's trade came from imports. This was an issue as early as 1889, when the Ballina branch of the Irish National League discussed the crisis. Reported in the Western People under the headline of 'Imported Work - The Cry of the Artisan', the unemployment crisis among various crafts and trades in the town was laid bare. Mr. Gordon, explained 'the ill effects of this imported work on our town ... 'even the nailor has to be disemployed. The nailor that I have employed for the last 18 years can get no work to do.'³ By 1900, the trade was showing the effects of a decade or more of stress from imports. Only two men in Ballina listed their trade as 'nailor' on the 1901 Census of Ireland.

They were Dan Walsh, then aged 65, and who lived on Pawn Office Lane (running from Pearse Street to present day Emmet Street), and 62 year old Thomas Ryder, who lived with his family on Piper Hill.



Above: A 19th century handmade nail (image from countrysideantiques.com)

Right: A nailor photographed in Barnsley, Yorkshire, in the 1800s. (image from the *Barnsley Chronicle*)

A nailor outside his forge (image from the *Barnsley Chronicle*).

Emigration between Ballina and towns in south Yorkshire such as Barnsley was common in the period between 1860 and 1900. The trade of the nailor had declined in Barnsley before it declined in Ballina.

Extract from
Ordnance Survey Letters of 1838

A brief history of **BALLINA**

(Béal an Átha, mouth of the ford)

Located in the south-east of the parish of Kilmoremy. Bounded on the north by the townlands of Ardoughan, Kilmoremy and Belleek; east by Kilmoremy parish (Co. Sligo); south by Mullauns and Commons; and west by Knocklehaugh and Gorteen townlands. It contains 602 acres, 2 roods, 28 perches. The property of Lord Arran. Agent, James Perkins, Esq., Ballybroony. The average rent is £2 per acre yearly. It contains about 4,000 inhabitants. Soil, gravelly clay, producing barley, oats, flax and potatoes. In the north-east of the townland, which is called Upper Belleek, stands Belleek Castle, the residence of Edward Howley, Esq. Part of this townland has been purchased lately by Col. Knox Gore, of Belleek Abbey.

