



The Decline of Rural Pubs in Co. Mayo

Patrick Duffy (best known for playing Bobby Ewing in Dallas) and his partner Linda Purl, pictured outside Duffy's pub, Kilmoevee (last year) as part of their tour of unique Irish pubs. He is understood to be a third cousin of the publican, Brian Duffy. Patrick Duffy, himself a bar owner in the US, discovered that the number of rural pubs in Ireland have declined drastically and that pubs are faced with many challenges in business.

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(Image: Con-telegraph.ie)

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in Co. Mayo

As January settles in after the noise and colour of Christmas, many pubs across Ireland are feeling a sharp change in atmosphere. Only weeks ago, party nights, packed lounges and back-to-back events filled bars in towns and villages where the local pub remains a social hub. Now, as the decorations come down and "Dry January" resolutions take hold, the contrast is stark—and it highlights a deeper, ongoing trend: the steady decline in the number of pubs nationwide, a loss felt most keenly in rural Ireland.

Alarmingly, more than one-quarter of Mayo's pubs have shut their doors in the past two decades, according to a new survey.

The study, commissioned by the Drinks Industry Group of Ireland (DIGI), found that 135 pubs in Mayo had ceased trading between 2005 and 2024, a decline of 28.9%. At present (2026), there are 332 pubs in the county compared to 467 in 2005.

Why are rural pubs closing now?
 Closures are attributed to a perfect storm of high state costs (excise tax, VAT), soaring operational expenses (energy, insurance), increase in minimum wage, changing social habits (health consciousness, apps, less drinking), population shifts away from rural areas, retirement of owner, drink-at-home parties, licence renewal each year, lack of transport (taxis & buses in rural areas), availability of cheap booze in supermarkets and off-licences and the decline of the traditional pub as a community hub, being replaced by community centres, town halls etc.

On the property selling websites myhome.ie and daft.ie the following establishments were among those on the market (for sale or lease) in 2025 – McDonnell's Bar (Belmullet), Una's Bar (Blacksod), The Thatch Inn (Crossmolina), O'Horas (Kiltimagh), Maxwell's Bar (Claremorris), Gilelys (Achill), McLoughlins (Achill), Corleys (Belcarra), The Village Inn (Partry), Campbells (Swinford), O'Hares (Ballinrobe), Hudson Bar & Grill (Charlestown), Bensons (Doocastle), Thornton's Bar (Ballina), Kitty McGreals (Kiltimagh) and Irwins (Ballyvary).



**Tom Beirne and Bill Murphy (musicians),
McCarthy's Pub, Knock 1983**
(©National Folklore Collection, UCD)

The pubs who continue to trade are faced with falling income and many have been forced to adapt in order to survive, diversifying beyond drink alone to providing food and accommodation. However diversification such as this requires considerable capital investment. Without intervention by the government many villages and small towns will soon lose their last remaining pub, dealing a devastating blow to the economic and social fabric of that community. Once closed, such pubs rarely re-open.

We recall how pubs have evolved from when the secular gathering place of the people was the shebeen, a primitive and illegal drinking den where poitín and other homemade spirits were consumed. Wandering performers, bards, musicians and rhymers would entertain the crowd - while on the watch for the authorities.

Over time, as laws softened and communities sought legitimacy rather than secrecy, these informal spaces evolved into licensed pubs, carrying forward the shebeen's essential spirit, now in the open rather than the shadows. The landlords of those rural pubs were often remarkable for their wit and wide interests.

Did you know?

Mellett's Emporium in Swinford is one of the oldest pubs in Mayo. The 228-year-old establishment, has been in the Mellett family for seven generations. Let us know if you know of any older pubs in Mayo?

One such publican was the writer John B. Keane, of Listowel, Co. Kerry, whose plays about rural life like 'The Field' won acclaim both in Ireland and abroad and highlighted the pub's central role in Irish life.

Pubs provided the only social outing for many when times were hard and money was scarce. A shop and sometimes an undertaking business operated alongside the local pub. The publican was regarded as one of the most wealthy in the locality who secured a good living from the pub. In modern times, the uniqueness of the Irish pub has resonated all over the world with a string of "Irish Pubs" open in virtually all of the continents.

What does the future hold?

With changing lifestyles, rising costs, and shifting cultural habits, one can't help but ask: what will the pub tradition look like in 20 years' time? Will these cherished institutions adapt and thrive in new forms, or will future generations know of them only through memory and stories?

Sources:

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