



## GIVING BACK IN BALLYDEHOB

**T**he creative village of Ballydehob rests on the knuckle of Ireland's most south westerly toe. It's an extremity famed for its clean air, lush leafiness, and quaint village life, and leads to Ireland's official end-point, Mizen Head.

But while Ballydehob may be over an hour's drive from the county's gravitational centre, the dynamic city of Cork, it's not quite the step back in time you may suspect.

"Our customer base is totally cosmopolitan," said Ivan Camier, owner of the town's only grocery shop and forecourt.

"We have many French and German residents, and it's quite a modern village. Yes, it's rural, but not with respect to its vibrant culture."

Camier's Gala is Ireland's most southerly convenience store and forecourt, serving a population of around 300 to 400.

It's proud Top Oil and Gala fascias are a stand out feature in what is, on the surface at least, a traditional Irish village. Its winding main street is beset by craft stores and bustling bars, which include the Irish Whip, named after the famous wrestling

Ivan Camier's Gala is Ireland's most southern convenience store and forecourt. It may be a rural setting, but it's very much a modern existence...

move invented by former inhabitant, Danno O'Mahony.

The 11,000 sq ft Gala store has become a hub for the local population since 1985, with its first petrol pumps added in 2004.

Ivan described the business as a "total community store", which has been part of the Gala network for many years.

Much of village life revolves around the business, with Ivan taking a lead in many of the cultural events that take place in the town.

And Ballydehob is quite the cultural centre. Once a hippy retreat, today it swarms with writers, artists, actors, and crafts people, and features no less than five music festivals each year.

"I've been actively involved in one of the festivals for some time," Ivan said, explaining that he has been instrumental (pun intended) in nurturing Ballydehob's traditional music event, and even plays a bit of percussion himself.

His outreach efforts don't end there, with his business sponsoring the local football

team, Gabriel Rangers, who won the recent Junior Championship in the county.

"When in business, you have to be actively involved with the community, and show your support to the village," he said.

According to Ivan, the store is "everything to everybody", serving everyone from pensioners to kids.

The store itself employs four full-time and eight part-time staff, and opens seven days a week from 7am to 9pm.

And one of its key attractions is the range of popular local products stocked by Ivan, from home-baked breads to organic yoghurts.

Ivan's ability to stock such an array is down to Gala's unique partnership with retailers, giving them the freedom to tailor their offering to the local area.

It's benefits like these that have given Ivan an advantage, and allowed the shop to survive the economic ravages of the previous decade which saw the closure of the six other stores that once stood in Ballydehob.



"Everything I need, I can get from Gala," he said. "It just really works for me."

The consistency of Gala's quality offer is among the things that stand out for Ivan, who explains that while Ballydehob is a big hit with tourists, he still has to make hay whether the sun shines or not.

"There is a big tourist drive ongoing in the village at present," he said. "There are lots of holiday homes, with plenty of beaches nearby, so we have a big summer trade."

"But I have a very steady trade right through the year, including the winter. I could almost tell you what my tax return will be a year ahead. We have great consistency over the year."

And among that steady trade are many of the creatives that fill the village of Ballydehob, including one or two famous faces.

"The actor Jeremy Irons comes in regularly," Ivan reveals. "He lives up the road in the nearby Kilcoe Castle. Graham Norton also comes in occasionally."

When not serving his popular ice-cream to famous stars, Ivan is planning for the future.

"I'm hoping to expand the forecourt side of the business, and keep developing the instore offer," he said. "I'm currently working with Gala on plans to incorporate an off-licence. Currently the store has a wine licence but we're seeing enough demand to expand that offering."

"I'm also starting to run a home delivery service. We have a number of pensioners in the area, and it's lovely to offer something back to them for their loyalty over the years." **IFCR**



"The level of closures is indicative of what was happening in small village throughout the west of Ireland," Ivan said. "There are many craft shops and such left, but mine is the only remaining grocery store."

For Ivan, working with Gala is "a pleasure", as he describes the team at the popular symbol as "very personable".

"There's a personal touch to their service," he said. "There is a high level of interaction from them and I've received a lot of encouragement, especially from the Gala Retail Operations Executive Colin

McTaggart, as well as support from our local wholesalers, M & P O'Sullivan."

Ivan also praised Gala's promotions cycle, which take place every three weeks.

"The in-house promotions are a great draw for the store and very popular among customers. They also have an excellent chilled distribution service which arrives three days each week – that really gives us a major advantage."

Gala's fresh food management and IT support were also highlighted for praise by Ivan.