



Banbridge man Alan McLean (left) at the FC Barcelona event with Rafael Gordillo, former Real Betis, Real Madrid and Spain footballer and former President of Real Betis FC. C1602707.



Alan (pictured left) meeting the President of FC Barcelona, Josep Maria Bartomeu. C1602708.



The Patrick O'Connell mural in West Belfast. C1602711.

# Alan's goal to honour football legend

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**A LEGENDARY figure in the history of Irish, British and Spanish football is belatedly being recognised for his achievements as a player and manager, thanks to the efforts of a Banbridge man.**

Willow Grove resident, Alan McLean, has been instrumental in the campaign to have the 'forgotten Irishman' Patrick O'Connell honoured – 57 years after his death.

O'Connell played as a defender, most notably for Belfast Celtic, Sheffield Wednesday, Hull City and Manchester United.



An iconic photo of Patrick O'Connell as a player with Hull City. He is wearing his first (of six) Ireland International caps. C1602709.

He has the distinction of being the first player from the Republic of Ireland to play for Manchester United and to captain the team.

However, the Irishman is probably best remembered for managing several clubs in Spain's La Liga.

In 1935, he led Real Betis to their one and only league title. The following season, with La Liga suspended due to the Spanish Civil War, O'Connell is credited with saving Barcelona from financial ruin by agreeing to take the club on a tour to Mexico, Cuba and North America, a trip that made them financially viable again.

Despite all his successes as a player and manager, he died destitute in London in 1959.

The Patrick O'Connell Memorial Fund was set up in the summer of 2014, with the aim of raising funds to restore the footballer's unmarked grave and to provide a memorial.

The fund was started by Alan and his friends, Fergus Dowd from Dublin, and Simon Needham from Northumberland, who are all Blyth Spartans FC fans.

For the three football enthusiasts, researching Patrick O'Connell's past has been a labour of love. "I first heard of Patrick O'Connell two or three years ago when a couple of friends and I formed an official supporters' club for Real Betis FC in Seville and it went on from there," Alan recalled.

"In April 2014 the three of us met up with Patrick O'Connell's grandson, Mike O'Connell, who lives in England.

"We discovered more about Patrick and what he had achieved, particularly as a manager in Spain – winning La Liga with Real Betis and saving FC Barcelona from extinction.

"For someone who achieved so much, he sadly died destitute and is buried in an unmarked grave in north London."

Since the launch of the fund, over £5,000 has been raised with Patrick O'Connell's name now being honoured both at home and abroad.

"We have achieved a number of things to date," Alan explained.

"In June of last year, Dublin City Council erected a plaque at Patrick's former home and, in August, we had a mural commissioned at the Falls Road, as the first professional club he played for was Belfast Celtic.

"Barcelona have also come on board, and last week the three of us, as well as Maureen O'Sullivan - TD in the Irish Parliament - and Patrick's grandson and his wife, were invited by the president of



Gerry Armstrong and Mal Donaghy signing the shirt that Gerry wore when he scored the famous goal against Spain in the 1982 World Cup. The shirt was donated to the Patrick O'Connell Memorial Fund. C1602712.

Barcelona to be his special guests at the game against Real Betis.

"We had commissioned a portrait of Patrick in his younger days and that was inducted into their Hall of Fame.

"The president has been following our story closely and we were treated like royalty.

"The next significant event will be the dedication of the memorial at Patrick's grave which will take place on April 28 – exactly 81 years on from the date Real Betis won La Liga for the first and only time.

"We are hoping to have representatives from Barcelona, Real Betis, Manchester United and Sheffield Wednesday in attendance.

"Patrick is buried in Kensal Green in north London, which is about six miles away from Wembley Stadium.

"We have also located the house where Patrick lived when he was in Belfast and we have applied for a Belfast Historical Society plaque."

Alan admitted that their efforts to have the 'forgotten' footballer recognised had gone "way beyond" all expectations.

"Patrick's grandson, Mike, is our main O'Connell family contact, and he is the only grandson that is still alive," Alan continued.

"He is very appreciative of what we are doing. He had been researching Patrick's history for over 20 years, but no media or publishers were interested in his story – until now.

"We have had huge media interest not only in Ireland and the UK, but also in Spain and North America.

"So many people have been supportive, especially in Northern Ireland. We have had great support from former footballer, Gerry Armstrong, who has been an ambassador for our fund from the start.

"The Belfast Celtic Society has given us great support, as have the IFA, the FAI and Dublin City Council.

"Many ex-players have readily helped us to raise funds by giving their time to attend our events or signing shirts for auction.

## 'Forgotten' footballer and manager finally recognised

FOOTBALL fan, Alan, said it was surprising that Patrick O'Connell's feats on the pitch had not been more widely acknowledged in his heyday.

"I think it's probably down to two factors – the timing of things and communication. He started playing for Belfast Celtic in 1907-08 and joined Manchester United in 1914, when the First World War broke out.

"When he later moved to Spain, communications weren't great. He took up his first managerial post in 1922 and, because newspapers didn't come over to the UK from Spain, people didn't really know about him.

"Then, when he began managing Barcelona, it was around the start of the Spanish Civil War.

"After his managerial career finished, he just seems to have disappeared. He had quite a colourful personal life and it caught up with him in the end."

Alan, who has built up a wealth of information on Patrick O'Connell, described the journey of discovery as "incredible".

"It's our passion that drives us on," he revealed. "The three of us have all worked together and our families have been very supportive.

"Hopefully the application for a plaque at Patrick's former house in Albert Street, West Belfast, will be approved.

"Only this week Manchester United have confirmed that they will induct Patrick into their museum at Old Trafford.

"About a month ago we had an inquiry from an Irish film

"Amongst those have been the great Harry Gregg, Martin Buchan, Steve Archibald, Bertie Auld, John Clark, Johan Cruyff, Luis Figo, Paulo Maldini, Gareth Bale, David Beckham, Martin O'Neill and Roy Keane – just to name a few."

He continued: "Patrick O'Connell won the league with Real Betis in 1935 and he's revered over in Seville where Real Betis play.

"In a park next to the Real Betis stadium there is a metal sculpture with the names of all the players who won La Liga and, of course, their manager Patrick O'Connell.

"It's nice that he is being recognised not only in Ireland, where he was born, but also in Northern Ireland, Spain and England, where he played for Sheffield Wednesday and was the first Irish captain of Manchester United."



Patrick in his final year as manager of Real Betis in the 1940s. After leaving FC Barcelona, he returned to Seville to manage Real Betis again. C1602710.

production company who were interested in making a documentary on Patrick's story.

"The film crew came over to Barcelona and followed us around. We had a day of filming and interviews in the Nou Camp.

"All of what we have achieved would not have been possible without the great support of Mike O'Connell and his wife, and Maureen O'Sullivan, who is TD for the district around Croke Park where Patrick was born and raised.

"We have found that it's a story everyone is genuinely interested in."

For more information, or to make a donation to the Memorial Fund, visit the Patrick O'Connell – Irish Footballer Memorial Fund on Facebook or the website: [www.pocfund.com](http://www.pocfund.com)