



*Sancta Caitriona*



# Killybegs Heritage Trail

An Chomhairle Oidhreachta  
The Heritage Council



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## Killybegs Heritage Trail

A warm welcome awaits you in Killybegs, a unique experience for visitors who venture to this picturesque town situated on Donegal Bay. We want to bring you back in time, and take you on a memorable tour of our local heritage, to areas that have made such an impact on this beautiful and timeless shoreline.



## Historical Background

**A**s the largest fishing port in Ireland, Killybegs developed around its splendid natural harbour. Christianity arrived in the region in the 6th century with the arrival of St Colmcille.

In the early Christian era the people of Killybegs embraced St. Catherine of Alexandria as their Patron Saint and dedicated a well in her honour. The local ruling family, McSwynes, named the old Franciscan church after her.

In 1355, Bishop McMonagle built the tower of 'Kit's Castle' on the hill above the well. This building later became the residence of many Bishops of Raphoe.

By 14th century the Irish/Scottish McSwyne clan became established in Killybegs.

O'Malley raiders attacked Killybegs in 1513 but the day was saved by the divine intervention of St Catherine whose town they had tried to plunder.

In 1588 the Spanish Armada ship, Girona, came into the harbour and was repaired, but was later wrecked on the Antrim coast.

In 1615, Killybegs was established as a borough town by King James VI at the Plantation of Ulster.

Apart from what is outlined above, most of the town buildings date from 19th and 20th centuries.

**Directions:** from the Diamond in the centre of the town, proceed out the Donegal Road for about half a mile to begin the Trail.

## 01 The Coastguard Station

**T**he large cut stone military-style building looking out over the harbour is the former Coastguard Station. E. Trevor Jones designed this building and it was erected in 1875 as modern accommodation block and look-out for the Coastguards. The landlord, H.G. Murray Stewart, provided the site to the Admiral Commissioners.



below the Station. It is now a private dwelling which has been preserved intact. The Coastguards left Killybegs in 1922 at Independence.



*Proceed, walking back towards the town, and immediately past the Vocational School on your right you will come to the Murray School.*

Killybegs was the head of a Coastguard District from Donegal Town to the Gweebarra River. The Station and the Tower House accommodated the chief boatman and ordinary coastguards. In addition to their normal duties of chasing smugglers, the Coastguards often came to the rescue of local fishermen and seafarers in bad weather.

The Coastguards kept their boat at the ready in a special boathouse which stands on the water's edge

## 02 The Murray School

This building was erected in 1860 as Male and Female schools to replace the earlier Lady Anne Murray's Charity School for girls built in 1842.



Lady Ann was the wife of Alexander Murray, then landlord of Killybegs. It was erected at a cost of £1,500 at the expense of Horatio Granville Murray Stewart, the main landlord of Killybegs at that time.

The Murray school was the main school in Killybegs town until the Niall Mor National School was



established in 1879 by Monsignor Stephens, P.P. The coming of Independence in 1922 marked the end of the Murray schools.

*Continue back towards the town until you come to the Tara Hotel. Turn right immediately opposite the Tara Hotel and continue up the hill – where you will shortly come to St. Mary's of the Visitation Catholic Church.*

## 03 St Mary's Church (Catholic)

The foundation stone of this church was laid on 2nd February 1842. The first Mass was celebrated on Christmas Day 1843. The church was not finally complete until 1854.

The formal dedication by His Grace the Most Rev Dr Cullen, Archbishop of Dublin, was postponed until 6th August 1854 on account of the Great Famine. Alexander Murray, landlord of that



part of Killybegs, had St Mary's designed by his architect John Buonarotti Papworth. Murray also

provided the site, and gave the single largest donation of £100. The church was built by the Very Rev William Drummond, P.P. As a Catholic church it is unique in Ireland and still retains some of its original simplicity of design and character.

The present bell in the tower was hung in 1950, being donated by the late Charles McIntyre of New Row.

*To the left of the church you will see the McSweeney Grave Slab.*

## 04 The McSweeney Grave Slab

This carved stone was brought from the Friary at Ballysaggart, St John's Point. Monsignor Stephens PP transported it to Killybegs in 1868 and set it against an interior wall. It was erected in its present position in 1953 when the church was plastered.

The Slab is connected to the McSweeney clan, whose ruined castle stands at Rahan Near on the west side of St John's Point. The figure in the upper left-hand panel is said to represent Niall Mor McSweeney, Chieftain of his clan who died in his castle at Rahan on 14th December 1524.



The figure at the top right-hand panel is the representation of a gallowglass warrior in chain mail, holding a sword, possibly an image of



Niall Mor or his father Owen who founded the Ballysaggart Friary.

The descendants of this clan are now usually called Sweeney. The slab is of 16th century character.

*When you leave St Mary's church, turn right and continue up the hill, go straight across the junction towards St John's church on right-hand side of road.*

## 05 St John's Church (C of I)

The building of St John's church commenced in 1825, and it was consecrated and dedicated to St John on 6th June 1828 by William, Bishop of Raphoe. The design of the church is described as 'plain, two bay rendered hall, Y tracery timber windows, west porch supports a bellcote spire'.



The building was a straightforward rectangular church until 1860 when the polygonal chancel, designed by Welland and Gillespie, was added. When this was complete the church held 200 persons.



*Leaving St John's church, facing the town, turn back towards the junction and turn right, past the New Niall Mor School on the left and past the Old Niall Mor school on the right (built in 1879), around the bend and you will come to the Foresters' Hall.*

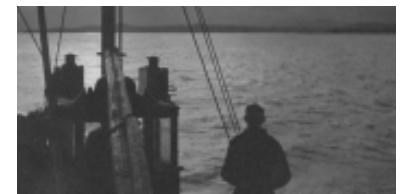
## 06 The Foresters' Hall

The Foresters were founded in England in post-medieval times and were known as the Ancient Order of Foresters. The word 'Foresters' conjures up visions of Robin Hood the poor man's friend, the protector of the oppressed, and that is precisely the reason the Foresters came into being.



It was, and still is a mutual aid society, helping fellow Foresters in times of distress or death – very important when there were no State or welfare benefits. This started a world-wide Foresters' Organisation, spreading to America, Canada, Australia and Ireland.

When the Order came to Ireland, it became the Irish National Foresters and their motto is the same as the parent organisation – 'Unity,



Nationality and Benevolence'. It is non-political, nonsectarian, and does not support, encourage or discriminate against any creed or class.

The Killybegs branch was formed on Sunday 19th August 1906, and was called the Niall Mor Branch. At that time there was no hall, and the branch rented rooms on Bridge Street. The present site was purchased in 1909 for £11.00 and the hall opened for the first time on Monday 1st August 1910. The entertainment for the evening was by J. Dowds's band and the charge was 5 shillings.

From that time it became the centre of entertainment for the area. Today it still runs as a community centre and a meeting place for many organisations.

*Leaving the Foresters' Hall, proceed down the hill and along the road, and you will come to a pub named Faulty's on the corner of Main Street. This building was originally the Corn Store.*

## 07 The Corn Store



The old bridge behind the Corn Store was built in 1757, after which the street was named (at the cost of £9 pounds!). The store was used by the Government Commissariat to hold Indian meal for distribution during the Great Famine.

Up until 1933 it was in the ownership of the Spillers & Bakers firm who stored flour to supply the main bakers in the town. The building was originally a storey higher.

**T**his building was originally a corn and grain store, dating from late 18th century. It was possibly erected by the Nesbitt family, prominent Killybegs planters, and was in the ownership of the merchant Blain family for most of the 19th century.

It fronted onto a small river dividing Killybegs town, and ships delivered cargoes of grain directly to the store at high tide. This happened before the present Main Street bridge was built.

*Leaving the Corn Store, turn right up the Main Street and proceed up the street until you come to a 5-road junction. Before you cross the road, the last house on the left corner is where the Ballyshannon poet William Allingham (1824-1889) wrote the famous poem "The Fairies" while staying with relatives. Carefully cross over, and follow the street between Spar Store on the left and AIB Bank on the right, and walk towards Robertson School House on right-hand side.*

## 08 Robertson School House

**T**his former schoolhouse is located on St Catherine's Road, and is one of the few 19th century buildings in Killybegs which has retained its original

appearance. It was erected in 1819 as the first formal school in Killybegs, and served as the only school for that part of the town until 1842.



It was established by the Church of Ireland authorities with grant aid from Bible Societies and the Robertson Fund.

The school is to a standard design, having the schoolroom on the first floor which is accessed by a stone staircase on the gable, and living accommodation below for the teacher and family. The garden surrounding the school provided vegetables for the table. It was later used as Methodist Meeting House. Today it is in private ownership.

*Leaving the schoolhouse, proceed along the road until you come to Bruach Na Mara (Sea Bank Cottage) on left-hand side.*

## 09 Bruach Na Mara



Bernard MacGinley of Killybegs. He was a son of Thomas Colin MacGinley, schoolteacher and author, whose wife's family, the Sinnotts, had erected Bruach Na Mara in the early 1900's

*Continue along St Catherine's Road until you meet the junction onto the Shore Road. Turn right, and proceed approx 200 yards until you see the Killybegs Tourism College on the right.*

**T**he much altered Philadelphia town house is the headquarters of Killybegs Fishermen's Organisation (KFO), one of the most powerful grouping of fishermen in the country.

The building was once the retirement home of bishop John



## 10 Killybegs Tourism College



This educational establishment is a training college for the tourism and catering industry.

The building was erected in 1896 as a Marine Industrial School from where the boat building industry began a few years later.

During World War II the building served as a barracks for the Irish Army, and was later used a refuge for 88 displaced German children. From 1950 it operated as a Tuberculosis Sanatorium, and prior to its present function served for a time as Killybegs Hotel and Catering College.

*Proceed towards the roundabout, take the first left before it and go towards the new pier direction; take the first right to St. Catherine's car park, go through the metal gate to St. Catherine's Well.*

## 11 St Catherine's Old Church & Burial Ground



From here, you will see on the right the ruined church which was founded in the 15th century as a Friary for the Franciscan Third Order (Regular). (built over an older 12th century

church]. It was used by the Planters up until 1828.

*(Warning: it is dangerous to enter the ruined church).*

*Continue through the second gate, up the concrete pathway to St. Catherine's Well on the hillside.*

## 12 St Catherine's Well



Tradition states that a party delivered safe from a raging sea dedicated the well to St Catherine of Alexandria. November 25th each year is dedicated to St Catherine's Day, and pilgrims come here, some from great distances, to 'make the station'.

There is a strong belief in the curative properties of the water, and the well retains its special air of prayerful solitude for all who visit and respect the setting.

## 13 Kit's Castle



On the hill above St Catherine's well is the Tower of 'Kit's Castle'. The manor house built by bishop Patrick McMonagle around 1355. Several bishops of the Raphoe

diocese lived there.

*Exiting through the car park again, and back to the roundabout, go anti-clockwise, past by the Fire Station, follow the footpath on Roshine Road approx 300 metres to the Fintra Road junction where you will find the Killybegs Maritime & Heritage Visitor Centre on the right with car park. Whether the weather is sunny or wet it is always worth a visit. It is the original location of the famous Donegal Carpets and where the longest hand-knotted loom in the world is on display.*

## 14 Maritime & Heritage Centre



There is an audio-visual display narrating the history of fishing and the world famous Killybegs carpets. Come and see the longest loom in the world, and partake in live demonstrations of hand-knotted carpet making. Enjoy hands-on experience in a fishing trawler wheelhouse. Browse through a display of works by local artists. There is a craft and coffee shop on the premises.

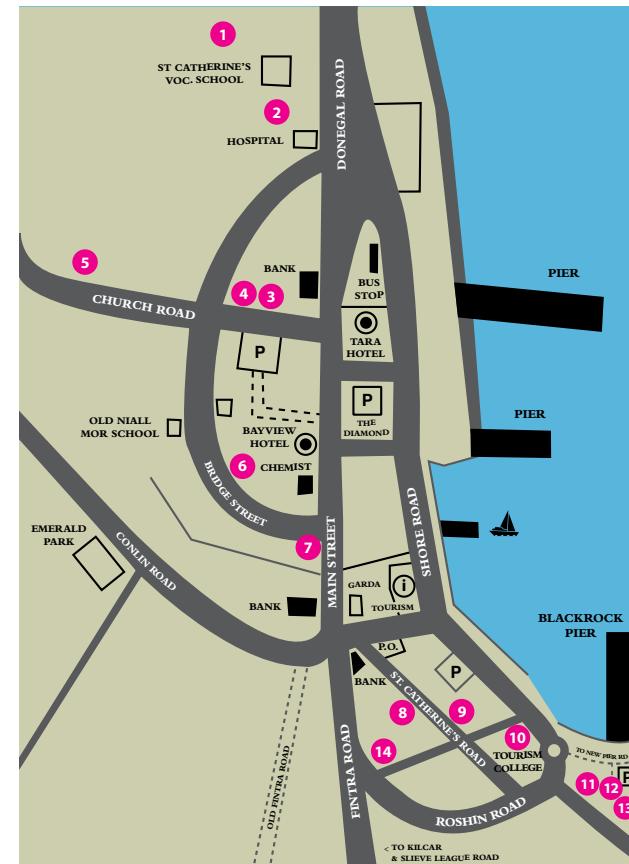
The Maritime & Heritage Centre is located here in the Carpet Factory building, where the world famous Donegal Carpets are made. These luxurious carpets are hand knotted in the highest quality material, and go back to 1898 when Alexander Morton introduced them to Killybegs. The carpets grace some of the most prestigious buildings and homes around the world, including Aras an Uachtarain, The White House and Buckingham Palace. A fine example can be seen in Glenveagh Castle, which is open to the public.



### Maritime & Heritage Centre,

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## Map Of Heritage Walk



- 1 St Catherine's Voc. School
- 2 Hospital
- 3 St Mary's Church
- 4 McSweeney Grave Slab
- 5 Old Niall Mor School
- 6 Coastguard Station
- 7 The Corn Store
- 8 Robertson School House
- 9 Bruach na Mara
- 10 St John's Church
- 11 St Catherine's Old Church & Burial Ground
- 12 St Catherine's Well
- 13 Kit's Castle
- 14 Killybegs Maritime & Heritage Centre



## Front & Back Cover:

**‘Arms of Killybegs’** designed by the late Charlie Conaghan. It depicts the monastic cells (Cealla Beaga) from which the town takes its Irish name. The McSweeney (or McSwyne) castle which stood within the harbour is also represented. The fishing and maritime trade are highlighted in the upper panels.

The motto **‘Sancta Caitriona’** acknowledges the patronage of St Catherine who is also the patron saint of seafarers and scholars. (Permission received re copyright).

We would like to acknowledge the following for their valuable contributions to content: Local Historian, Pat Conaghan; Members of Maritime & Heritage Committee; Members of Cruise Committee

### **Arms of Killybegs**



*Sancta Caitriona*

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