

Killybegs Heritage Trail



Heritage
Trail
App



An Chomhairle Oidhreachta
The Heritage Council



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Killybegs Heritage Trail

Fáilte go dtí na Cealla Beaga. Welcome to Killybegs.

This booklet is a pocket guide to some of the interesting and historic places in the town of Killybegs.

When you have had a look at these local landmarks, remember you're only getting started. The town was famously the last port of call for the "Girona", the most ill-fated ship of the Spanish Armada in 1588.

These locations include the registered national monument which incorporates St Catherine's Church and graveyard, St Catherine's Well and the ruin of Kit's Castle.

A short distance away is St John's Church of Ireland, a beautiful building in its own right and a fascinating visit to see the graveyard where there are several WWI burials.

Overlooking the town is the factory built by Scot, Alexander Morton, in 1898 to house his Donegal Carpets enterprise, producing beautiful handcrafted floor coverings which today grace such buildings as Buckingham Palace and the White House in Washington.

It was also attacked by pirates on at least one occasion and later was a convenient haven for the ships of Dutch corsair, Klaas Campaen, as he awaited a royal pardon before retiring to Holland with his ill-gotten gains.

And then, there's the development of the fishing industry, a fascinating story in its own right. Walk about, visit the locations highlighted in this booklet and then look more closely and learn more. There are many stories in Killybegs.

Coastguard Station

1

Killybegs Coastguard Station was built in 1875 to a design by Board of Works architect, E Trevor Owen, and served as district headquarters for the extensive area west of Donegal Town and south of the Gweebarra.

The building features a square, slate-roofed tower on its southern end and has separate storage sheds to the back. The Killybegs station was the administrative centre for stations at Dooran (Mountcharles), Tribane (Dunkineely), Teelin East, Teelin West, Mallinbeg, Dawrus Portnoo, and Neptune Tower with a total force of four officers and 56 men, under the control of a resident inspecting commander.

Among the duties and responsibilities of the Coastguard were the organisation of sea rescue missions, as well as the prevention of smuggling and the maintenance of a coast watch against possible invasion.

When the British Coastguards left the Irish Free State in 1922, their 109 stations passed to the Provisional Government together with the lifesaving and rocket apparatus. Some of the stations were destroyed or badly damaged during the Civil War and others were sold for conversion to residences, including the one at Killybegs.



The Murray School

2

The National Library of Ireland states: “The Murray School was built in 1860 by the main landlord of Killybegs, H G Murray-Stewart. The purpose was to provide education for children of Killybegs. At each end there was a residence for the teachers. In the centre of the building were the schoolrooms proper; the girls on the left and boys on the right. It ceased to be a school c. 1923 when the coastguards, admiralty and other British personnel left Killybegs after Irish independence.

The Irish National Inventory of Architectural Heritage notes that the building retains its original form and character. It adds: “It is robustly built in local rubble stone masonry with extensive cut stone and ashlar masonry throughout, particularly to the openings, bellcote and the canted bays that are clearly the work of skilled masons. This building also retains much of its early fabric, including timber sash windows and natural slate roofs that add to its architectural integrity and visual expression.

This was the main school in Killybegs until the construction of the nearby Niall-Mór National School, which was established in 1879. This fine building is an important element of the built heritage and social history of Killybegs, and represents one of the most attractive examples of its type and date in Donegal.



St. Mary's Church

3

The erection of a new church for Killybegs was undertaken by the Rev William Drummond PP in 1833.

As recorded on the parish website: “He was fortunate that he met the local landlord, Alexander Murray, a benevolent and Christian gentleman, who bequeathed him the site for his church. The architect chosen for this task was the landlord’s friend, John ‘Buonarotti’ Papworth, of Marleybone, London.”

A Rowan, in his “The Buildings of Ireland” (1979) wrote: “What is exciting inside is the volume – one great high hall, 100ft by 46 ft - opening through arcades of three immensely slender arches in the middle of each long side to the airy transept-like extensions of the hall.”

On 6th August, 1854, the church was dedicated to St Mary of the Visitation by the Archbishop of Dublin Dr Paul Cullen. Some 20 years after the dedication, three stained glass windows were placed in the chancel above the main altar. They were designed and constructed by a German firm called Meyer who did much ecclesiastical stained glass work in Ireland at that time. The centre window depicts St Catherine of Siena, on the left is featured the Mother of God and on the right the patroness of Killybegs, St Catherine of Alexandria.

St Mary of the Visitation Church, Killybegs, was added to the Record of Protected Structures by Donegal County Council on 1st December 2003.



Niall Mór Grave Slab

Niall Mór Mac Suibhne (the Great Niall MacSweeney), chief of his clan, died peacefully at his castle at Rahan, on 14 December, 1524, and was buried at the Franciscan Friary at Ballysaggart, St John's Point.

His ornate and unusual gravestone was removed to Killybegs in 1868 and erected inside St. Mary's Church near the rear wall. However, during repairs to the church in 1953 it was moved outside and suffered considerable weathering before being encased. It can be seen against the west wall of the church (in the small gate and down the steps) to the left of the main door. Kinfaela (Thomas C McGinley) in his book of 1867, states that the slab seems to be related to another slab at Doe Castle, North West Donegal, another stronghold of the Mac Sweeney clan.

Niall Mór was an honoured chieftain of Banagh, famed for his hospitality and prowess, and his heroism in battle. His main residence was at Rahan, St John's Point. He had other castles in and around Killybegs and Kilcar. One was on a small headland known as Castle Point, in Killybegs Harbour. This area is now occupied by Mooney Boats; another large castle was at Bavin in Kilcar Parish.



St. John's Church

5

Built 1829 and extended 1859 - 62, St John's is set back from road in its own grounds to the north-east of Killybegs town centre. The graveyard around it has a collection of mainly nineteenth-century grave markers, both recumbent and upstanding, and some surrounded by iron railings.

According to the Irish National Inventory of Architectural Heritage: "This attractive small-scale Church of Ireland church retains its early character and form. The pointed-arched openings lend it a muted Gothic Revival character that is typical of its type and date. The plain elevations are enlivened by the simple ashlar surrounds to the openings and particularly by the retention of early Y-tracery timber windows to the nave and cast-iron windows to the later chancel."

The building is notable for the unusual stepped tower and the diminutive stumpy spire attached to the west end, which is not of the usual type encountered with Church of Ireland churches built by the Board of First Fruits.



Foresters' Hall

6

A hundred years of dances, concerts and parties in the Foresters Hall, Killybegs, were marked in October 2010 with three days of fun, exhibitions and music.

The Hall first opened its doors to the public four years after the formation in 1906 of the Niall Mór Branch of the Irish National Foresters, a non-political, non-sectarian organisation based on the principles of unity, nationality and benevolence.

Down through the decades, it has been the main centre for social activities in the town. From the early years through to the present, it has been the meeting place for all kinds of community groups and it has been the venue both for many local and visiting drama productions.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the Foresters Hall was renowned for attracting the top Irish showbands but this form of entertainment went into decline when the pubs started providing entertainment.

In the mid-1970s a club licence was obtained and the hall was extended to incorporate a lounge bar. This helped to continue the social ethos of the Foresters in the community and today various activities, including snooker, badminton, pool, darts and card playing are on offer to club members. Family celebrations, concerts and dances are still held regularly.



The Corn Store

The exact date of construction of this building is not known but, with its central position in the Plantation town adjacent to the small creek, it undoubtedly was a very important location.

It is known that the building was at least a storey higher than at present, so it was an impressive blockhouse at one time. In early days, there was no bridge at Main Street and the Shore Road was completed only in the 1990s so the location had clear access to the sea which, at high tide, brought sufficient depth alongside for small coastal vessels to discharge their cargo directly into the building.

In his excellent work, “The Great Famine in South-West Donegal 1845-1850”, local historian, Pat Conaghan, notes that grain to relieve distress in the general area was stored in the building. He states: “There is evidence to say that it was the original Custom House of Killybegs and that it was leased on August 1st, 1764, by Richard Nesbitt to the Crown.”

The small houses along both sides of Bridge Street, beside the Corn Store, are among the oldest in Killybegs and are said to be some of the smallest inhabited houses in Ireland. The small bridge which gives the street its name was built by the Hamilton of Fintra in 1757.



Robertson School

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Built in 1819, this building on St Catherine's Road still retains most of its original features, including an external staircase at the north-east gable, giving access to an upstairs schoolroom. The teacher and family lived on the ground floor. From the start of the 20th century, it was used as a Methodist Meeting House and, since the 1950s, it has been a private dwelling. The schoolhouse was located in its own garden, where vegetables were grown for the table.

According to the Irish National Inventory of Architectural Heritage: "This simple but well-proportioned former school building retains much of its early character and form. It retains some of its early fabric, including slate roof and sash windows. Although modest in form, this building is of social interest as the earliest surviving school building in Killybegs."

It was apparently originally constructed in 1819, and was the first formal school built in the area. It was built partially using funds bequeathed in the will of Colonel Robertson (died 1790), who stipulated that £15 be made payable to each parish in Donegal to fund the salary of a schoolmaster to 'instruct children of all denominations.



Bruach Na Mara

This building is unique, having been designed as a Philadelphia town house. It was built in the 1890s, by members of the McGinley family who had emigrated to the United States. As well as its American design, many of the internal fixtures, including the staircase and panelling, were shipped to Killybegs from New Orleans.

A later member of the family, Bishop John Bernard McGinley (1891-1969), lived in the house for many years in retirement from 1932, due to ill health. As a young bishop, he had been instrumental in securing permission for the Carmelite order of nuns to open a convent in California. When he died, in his 99th year, in 1969, he was the oldest Catholic bishop in the world at that time. His remains were taken back to Carmel for burial, in line with an agreement made many decades earlier.

Bruach na Mara (the name means “edge of the sea”) is now the headquarters of the Killybegs Fishermen’s Organisation (KFO), the representative body for most of the fishing vessel owners in this area.



School of Tourism

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This is a building with considerable local history. Built as an industrial school in the 1890s, it was subsequently an Army barracks during WWII, a refugee centre, a TB sanatorium, (briefly) a hotel and now a tourism college.

In its current incarnation, it is part of the Letterkenny Institute of Technology (LYIT). As well as training third-level students in all aspects of tourism service, there is a tower on which engineers are trained for the maintenance of wind turbines.

Opposite the School of Tourism is Mooney Boats Ltd., boatyard and chandlery. This boatyard was originally part of the industrial school where young men were trained in the skills of building and repairing wooden fishing vessels.

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St. Catherine's Church

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Overlooking the harbour, the area incorporating St Catherine's Church & Graveyard, St Catherine's Well and the ruin called locally "Kit's Castle" together form a unified heritage area which is a Registered National Monument.

The church, which dates in part to the 12th century, is the oldest man-made structure in the Killybegs area and has a varied and complex history. An excellent booklet "St Catherine's Church and Graveyard and The Medieval Town of Killybegs" is available to purchase at the Killybegs Information Centre.

The booklet was written following a intensive research project, carried out with the support of FÁS (Foras Áiseanta Saothar), the national training and development authority. In the course of that research, many hitherto undiscovered graves in the churchyard were located and identified.

Some of them date back to the 17th century and include families from the early Plantation period. The most recent burial was that of a British sailor whose remains were recovered from the sea in 1943, during WWII.



St. Catherine's Well

12

The holy well, dedicated to St Catherine of Alexandria (287AD – 305AD), is believed by some to have been established by Coptic monks from Egypt – possibly even before the arrival of St Patrick to Ireland in 432AD.

According to local folklore, the well was dedicated to the Egyptian saint when a boat carrying monks got into difficulty in a storm off the west coast. The holy men prayed to St Catherine of Alexandria for help and were washed ashore safely in Killybegs.

It is known that Coptic monks left Egypt in the 4th century and founded settlements in isolated locations up along the western coast of Europe, with remains found in north-west Spain, in Brittany, Cornwall and Wales.

Their connection with St Catherine dates to earliest times and the remains of the virgin, martyr and doctor of the church are claimed to be in the Coptic monastery which bears her name in the Sinai. The most complete such settlement is on the offshore rock, known as Skellig Michael, off the Kerry coast.



Kit's Castle

13

Kit's Castle, now only a stump, is the remains of a tower house built about the year 1355 by the then Bishop of the Diocese of Raphoe, Pádraig McMonagle, on a height overlooking St Catherine's Well and in a dominant position at the entrance to the harbour.

The details of the structure have been lost in time but it was probably two or three stories high. It is recorded that the entrance was on the west side of the building.

The most famous resident of Kit's Castle was Donald McGonigle who was made bishop in 1562 at Rome and was one of three Irish representatives at the closing sessions of the Council of Trent in northern Italy, which concluded the following year after sitting for 18 years.

The last bishop to live here was Niall O'Boyle, who was educated in Spain and was an implacable opponent of British rule in Ireland. In the year 1596 Bishop O'Boyle hosted Alonso deCobos, an envoy from the King of Spain, to plan an invasion of Ireland.

These plans came to nought, however, and after the defeat of the Irish and Spanish forces at Kinsale in 1601, he left Kit's castle and it was never occupied afterwards.



Heritage Centre

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Occupying part of the factory of the former Donegal Carpets Ltd operation, this visitor centre has artefacts and information on both the hand-knotted carpet enterprise in this area and the local fishing industry.

Among the exhibits are some of the pitch pine looms installed by the Scottish entrepreneur, Alexander Morton, when he built the factory in 1898, including what is believed to be the world's largest carpet loom, a single massive 42ft-long tree trunk.

Carpets were made here for many famous private and public buildings, including the White House in Washington, USA, Buckingham Palace, London, the Vatican in Rome and the official residence of the Presidents of Ireland, Áras an Uachtaráin, in Dublin.

Although no longer operating commercially, the factory has put teams together for special projects. In advance of the visits to Ireland by Queen Elizabeth II and President Obama in 2011, Donegal carpets from Dublin Castle and Áras an Uachtaráin were brought back to Killybegs for repairs.





Killybegs
Information
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killybegs.ie

Donegal

www.govisitdonegal.com



**Comhairle Contae
Dhún na nGall**
Donegal County Council



Heritage
Trail
App

Design by: Dominic Meskys



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