



An Chomhairle Oidhreachta
The Heritage Council



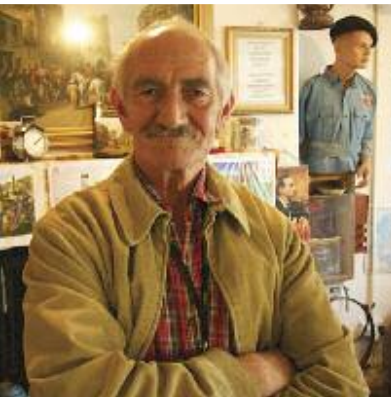
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Up the Town

An introduction to some of our cultural jewels





Many Irish towns have unique features - significant historical monuments, beautiful riverside walks and fine architectural heritage. This publication aims to celebrate these individual attributes that add so much distinctive character to our towns for locals and visitors to enjoy.

Irish towns characteristically emerged and developed in a sequence of historical stages between the thirteenth century and the present. Today the survival of these historic stages is generally recognisable and plays an important part in the visual and historic heritage of most towns. And although most of these towns share a common history of development, they vary considerably in form and scale from one another. In effect, each town is unique in its own way, and each has its own story to tell.

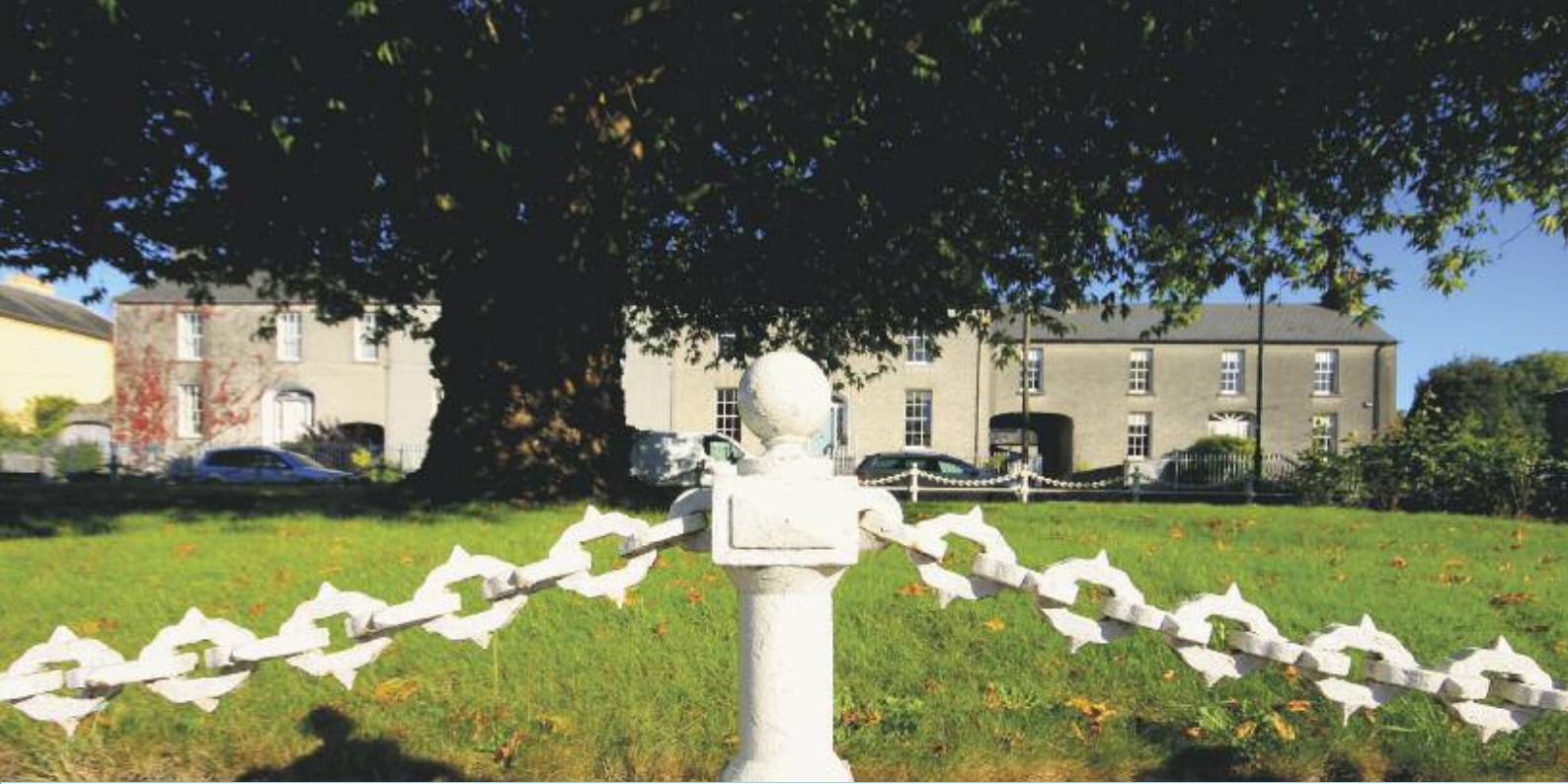
Despite the uniqueness of many individual Irish towns, they still manage to share a range of common components that include: a formal street layout, public spaces, street scapes, and landscaping. It is, however, the manner in which these components are arranged that the uniqueness of individual towns emerges. Consequently, in order to fully appreciate the selected towns, it is worth looking at these common components in a little detail.



Street Layout

The street layout of most Irish towns fall into three types: linear, axial or crossroads. The linear street is by far the simplest and consists of a long main street lined on both sides with buildings that acts as the nucleus of the town. The axial street is similar, except that the street terminates at a specific feature such as an important building at one end. The crossroads arrangement consist of two streets that cross one another at right angles, or a sequence of cross streets laid out on a grid or chequerboard fashion.





Public Spaces

Most towns were given at least one public open space or square. This could be a market or garden type of square. The market square, as its name suggests, took the form of a large open area, usually paved, where the town market was traditionally held. It could be square, rectangular, triangular, or wedge-shaped in plan. The garden square, on the other hand, tended to have a more environmental aspect with a central landscaped garden.

Street Scape

Today the street architecture of most Irish towns is uniform in character. The reason for this is that, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the architecture of the earlier phases was swept away and was replaced mainly by terraced Georgian or Victorian styled houses with vertically proportioned windows and slated roofs. During the late nineteenth century in particular many of the houses were converted to retail by the insertion of framed shop fronts at street level. In these cases the openings of the ground level windows were widened and the wider openings were framed by a wooden box frame. This included slim uprights at the edges, with an overhead fascia that extended across the shop front and held the traders name: in effect producing the standard Victorian type shop front.

In addition to housing and shops, most towns were given public buildings such as churches or administrative buildings. These were generally built in either a Georgian or Gothic Revival style. The architectural features of the former usually included Greek style porticos with columns, triangular pediments and vertically proportioned doors and windows. The Gothic Revival style was an attempt to repeat the Gothic architecture of the middle ages. The principal features were exposed stonework, pointed doors and windows, pointed gables, towers, and spires. In reality, the initial street pattern of many Irish towns was laid in place during the medieval period, although very little of the pre-eighteenth century streetscape survives. Despite this, occasional examples of early building work survive such as the remains of castles, churches, and town defences. However, these are often hidden away - although searching them out can be rewarding.





Landscape

The landscape of most Irish town operates on three levels: the natural landscape of the surrounding hinterland, the formal landscaping of the public spaces within the town and the private landscaping of individual gardeners. When successfully combined together the three levels of landscaping have a visually significant impact on the environment of any town scape.



Fethard

A Tipperary town with a rich medieval heritage





Sometimes, the lack of development can be a good thing as in the case of the South Tipperary town of Fethard. Situated between the larger and better known towns of Cashel, Cahir and Clonmel, Fethard has an attractive streetscape and a wealth of medieval treasures in excellent condition.



Located in rich farmland and horse-breeding countryside with Sliabh-na-mBan to the South, Fethard takes its name from Fiodh Aird, which means “high wood”. The River Clashawley, a tributary of the River Suir forms a natural boundary to the South.

To fully appreciate the charms of Fethard, visitors must take a guided or self-guided walking tour through the town, starting from the Augustinian Abbey to the East or indeed from Madam’s Bridge over the River Clashawley to the West.

The medieval town wall has been restored from Madam’s Bridge right along the river side almost to the next bridge where the late 15th Century Edmond’s Castle stands proudly within the town wall. It’s a magnificent restoration job that the townsfolk are rightly proud of with signage directing visitors to the various points of interest – including a Sheela na Gig next to the former Water Gate entrance to the town.

During a walking tour of the remaining medieval town walls – including the North Gate, visitors can start to re-imagine the town fully encircled by walls with five gate towers as points of entry. The excellent model of the medieval town on the gallery of the Holy Trinity Church will help fill out the picture with its miniature tower houses, castles, bridges and cottages placed along the original medieval street.





Holy Trinity Church itself is spectacularly situated down a short lane from the main street, with the medieval town walls as the boundary wall of its graveyard. The Holy Trinity Church is one of the oldest and finest medieval churches still in use today. And locals are thrilled to hear the recently restored church bells ring out for Sunday worship once again.

Fethard is rightly proud of its medieval heritage and plans are afoot to mount an exhibition to the local history of the area – including its links to the equine industry in the newly restored Town Hall. Deemed to be one of the largest early 17th Century civic buildings in Ireland, the good burghers of Fethard are very keen for this grant-aided tourism enterprise to bring local





and international tourists to their town.

Visitors will also be interested to tour the Augustinian Abbey to the East of the town. Also still functioning as a church, it dates back to 1305 with chapels added in the 15th Century and a new façade added in 1835 when the medieval tower was demolished.

Although the town was further developed by the Anglo-Norman Lord, William de Braose, it didn't grow like the nearby towns of Cashel and Clonmel. It's for this reason that its medieval heritage remains its trump card. The main street does however have a modern pleasant feel to it with some stylish shops and cafes and the well known McCarthy's Hotel with its traditional pub interior. And here's a perfect place to enjoy some refreshments after seeing how this South Tipperary town has managed to merge its rich historic past with modern day living.



The Tholsel reborn: Until very recently the 16th century town hall or Tholsel was both underused and in a state of disrepair. Kick started by a Heritage Council funded feasibility study the local community supported by the County Council, Leader and Fáilte Ireland are transforming the impressive building into a vibrant reception space and museum for visitors.



Kilmallock

Significant Ecclesiastical Ruins lie behind the town





Known as the crossroads of Munster, Kilmallock in County Limerick was an important Norman town which remained at the centre of Ireland's political developments from the 13th Century right through to the 17th Century. And, its rich ecclesiastical ruins are a testimony to this vibrant period of time. As with many Norman towns, there was an earlier settlement. And Kilmallock takes its name from the 7th Century monastery dedicated to St Mocheallog - Kilmallock being the anglicized version of Cill Mocheallog.



The town has several national monuments, the most important of which are the 13th Century Dominican Abbey and the nearby Collegiate Church of St Peter and Paul, which also dates to the 13th Century.

The Dominican Abbey is a short walk from Sarsfield St in the centre of the town. Founded in 1291, it still has superb architectural detail on its windows, making one realise what fine craftsmanship was carried out in these times. Similarly, the Collegiate Church of St Peter and Paul has sculpted archways and richly carved tombstones encasing the local aristocracy. Each ruin would however benefit hugely from larger maps of the original ecclesiastical complexes to help visitors understand the central role these sites played in the life of the town.

Visitors can also see remnants of the town walls and in particular two remaining gates. King's Castle in the centre of the town was built in the 15th Century and is occasionally open to the public. Blossom Gate also dates back to the 15th Century and traffic – albeit of a more modern kind – still flows through it.

A small museum on the route down to the Dominican Abbey offers visitors a medieval model to re-imagine the walled town with its tower houses, castellated gateways and abbeys. It's here that you'll discover the town was a significant Anglo-Norman town, second only to Limerick in the region and the chief stronghold of the Desmond family.

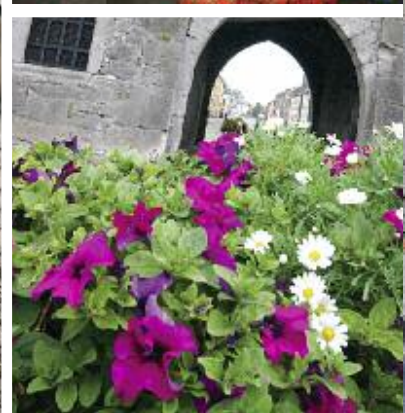




Back on Sarsfield St, a late 16th Century stone mansion stands as one of the most complete remaining examples of the town's stone houses. It would have been a typical merchant's town with a shop on the ground floor and living accommodation upstairs. In the 19th Century, a building of similar proportions was added to the back wall. It is currently pipped for redevelopment with shops, an interpretative centre and a courtyard café to the rear.

The modern town has expanded significantly and there's quite a buzz on the main street. However, there are quite a number of dilapidated buildings that could be re-developed for commercial and residential use.





Like many towns in Ireland Kilmallock suffers from poor traffic management, particularly at school times. This aspect of our towns need greater attention if we are to encourage businesses and residents back into the town centres.

In recent times, Kilmallock has a proud tradition of hurling and it's also one of the hubs for the Ballyhoura region. The Ballyhoura mountains lie to the South while the archaeological site of Lough Gur lies to the North. Cyclists can enjoy a selection of looped routes taking between one to five hours to complete.

Sarsfield House, Sarsfield Street:

This former late medieval merchant's house is the single survivor of what may have been thirty houses of similar design lining the main street of Kilmallock.





Cappoquin

A town on a bend of the River Blackwater





Cappoquin in west Waterford has plenty of quiet pleasures to offer both the resident and the visitor alike despite perhaps being overlooked by Lismore, its better known neighbouring village.



Firstly, one must walk beyond the town to the North-West to take in the incredible setting on which the town is built. There are few such awe-inspiring river bends as the one on the River Blackwater ten minutes walk outside Cappoquin. Its geological formation dates back 70 million years and there is evidence of Mesolithic settlements of hunters and fisher folk dating back to 4,000 B.C. It's no surprise that angling and walking remain the most popular activities here.

Due to its strategic location on the River Blackwater, Cappoquin became an important river port in the 17th Century. It was an important centre for timber, grain and munitions during the 30 year war in Europe between 1618-1648. For instance, many of the guns for Cromwell's siege of Clonmel were brought up river from here.

When the Earl of Cork, Robert Boyle was granted the lands around Cappoquin in the 17th Century, he transformed the settlement into a town. He built ironworks and a wooden bridge on the bend of the River Blackwater. He also built the market square and leased the rights to hold fairs and markets there from the 1620s. The Market House still stands in the same spot, a testimony to historical events – including court cases from the 1600s to the 1970s. And in the centre of Market Square is a bust of the dapper, Michael Cavanagh (1822-1900). The poet, writer, historian and Young Irelander remains the village's most celebrated historical resident.





However, activities within the Market House have ceased. Its central position in the town makes it a perfect future venue for a small historic exhibition and/or civic and tourist information centre to complement the work of the nearby Free Carnegie Library.

The principle streetscape of Cappoquin is now made up of neat terraces of red brick and rendered townhouses with interspersed shops and a church in the centre. The Georgian streetscape was undoubtedly built by the Keane family, owners of Capoquinn House. This Georgian country house has a strategically elevated position overlooking the village with its entrance up a long avenue from the centre of the village.



Barrons Bakery, overlooking the Market Square is certainly still drawing in customers. One of Ireland's oldest commercial bakeries, it's a perfect place to sit and ponder the past, present and future of this charming town on that awe-inspiring river bend.





The Keane family also founded the Cappoquin Bacon Factory which employed over 200 people at the height of its business, making it West Waterford's most important industry. Earlier, the Keane family managed the building of the Avonmore and Dromana bridges as famine relief work.

Cappoquin House itself has had mixed fortunes. The 18th Century Georgian house was built on the site of an Elizabethan house. It was burned during the Civil War of the 1920s and re-built with the entrance facing the courtyard. The house is open during the summer months and the beautiful formal and informal gardens are open year round and by appointment.

Cappoquin's main street looks like it has enjoyed more prosperous times but with its many unique historic shop fronts still in place and its rich architectural legacy it has enormous potential to benefit into the future from this inheritance. Well targeted incentives and supports that take full account of this legacy would help ensure a viable future for this fascinating town.







Graiguenamanagh

A quiet picturesque town in a valley of the River Barrow



Nestled in a valley with Mount Brandon rising up in the South East and the Blackstairs Mountains to the East, Graiguenamanagh has a misty mood to it, not unlike that of a mountainous Alpine village. On a visit to the County Kilkenny town in the 1940s, the writer, Sean O'Faolain said *"the whole valley swoons in the air so delicately moist that it seems too heavy to move so that on still wet days even the clouds lie asleep across the distant mountains"*.



It must have been the fertile land along the River Barrow that drew the Cistercian monks to Graiguenamanagh in the 13th Century. In fact, the name of the town celebrates their arrival – “Graig na Managh” in Irish translates as “village of the monks”.

Under the patronage of William Marshall, the Earl of Pembroke, the Cistercians built what was the largest and perhaps the finest Cistercian Abbey in Ireland in 1204. Although Duiske Abbey was suppressed by Henry VIII in 1536, some monks stayed on until 1686. And while much of the elaborate complex of ecclesiastical Gothic buildings no longer remains, visitors can see a model of the monastery in the restored abbey church in the centre of Graigenamangh. Well worth a visit, the interior of the abbey church – now a fully functioning Catholic Church and concert venue – has a palpable sense of history with its tall white washed stone walls and restored oak roof structure, morticed and dowelled in the medieval style. There are also some very fine Celtic crosses in the adjoining graveyard.

Much of the charm of the town itself is derived from its undulating streetscape with its lanes, rising and falling from the main street, encouraging visitors to meander further and discover more. One of the most exquisite architectural features are the Widows alms houses, a terrace of ornate stone cottages, built by Lady Clifden in the 1850's. And, just around the corner, there's a beautifully maintained community garden open for all to enjoy.

Nearby a Graiguenamanagh Historical Society plaque on a fine Georgian country house reminds us that Thomas Cloney (1774-1850), United Irishman and rebel leader lived here. History enthusiasts can find out more about the local history in the Abbey Centre's reference library and museum on Convent Road.





And, then there's the river itself: Graiguenamanagh was the main base for commercial barges operating on the River Barrow until barge traffic ceased in 1959. The river continues to be used for barges and pleasure crafts, many of which are moored all year round.

Nature is never very far away in Graiguenamanagh as the town lies almost midway along the South Leinster Way, the 100km walk which connects Kildavin in County Carlow with Carrick-on-Suir in County Tipperary. The Waterside restaurant and guesthouse in the converted granite cornstore on the River Barrow is a popular base camp for walkers, cyclists, anglers, cruisers and rowers visiting the region.





Walkers will also know that the surrounding area is dotted with pre-historic hill forts, early Christian monastic settlements and medieval castles including the 6th Century church of Ullard with its Romanesque doorway and 10th Century High Cross. And the neighbouring village of Tinnahinch in County Carlow, - which is just over the 18th Century stone bridge of the Barrow - has its own 17th Century castle.

Meanwhile Silaire Wood is a community owned woodland, north of the village which had a boardwalk put in place in 2011 to enhance the riverside walks there. And, there are beautiful mapped circular walks from St Mullins on the Tinnahinch side of the river.

Graiguemanagh itself faces similar difficulties to many other towns across Ireland, namely the need for greater investment in the town to breathe new life into it. Maybe, in the next few years, the organisers of the popular Graiguemanagh Town of Books festival will find ways to bring vibrancy back to this charming town with its misty mood and delicately moist air.





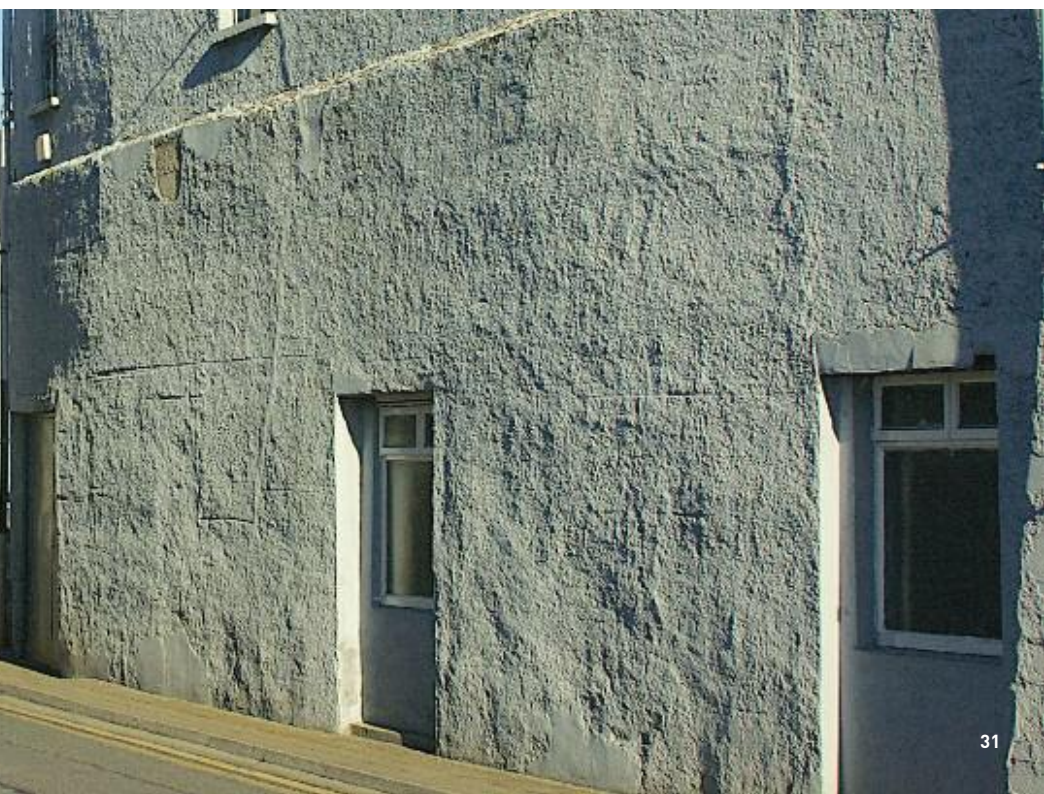


Birr | A hidden georgian gem





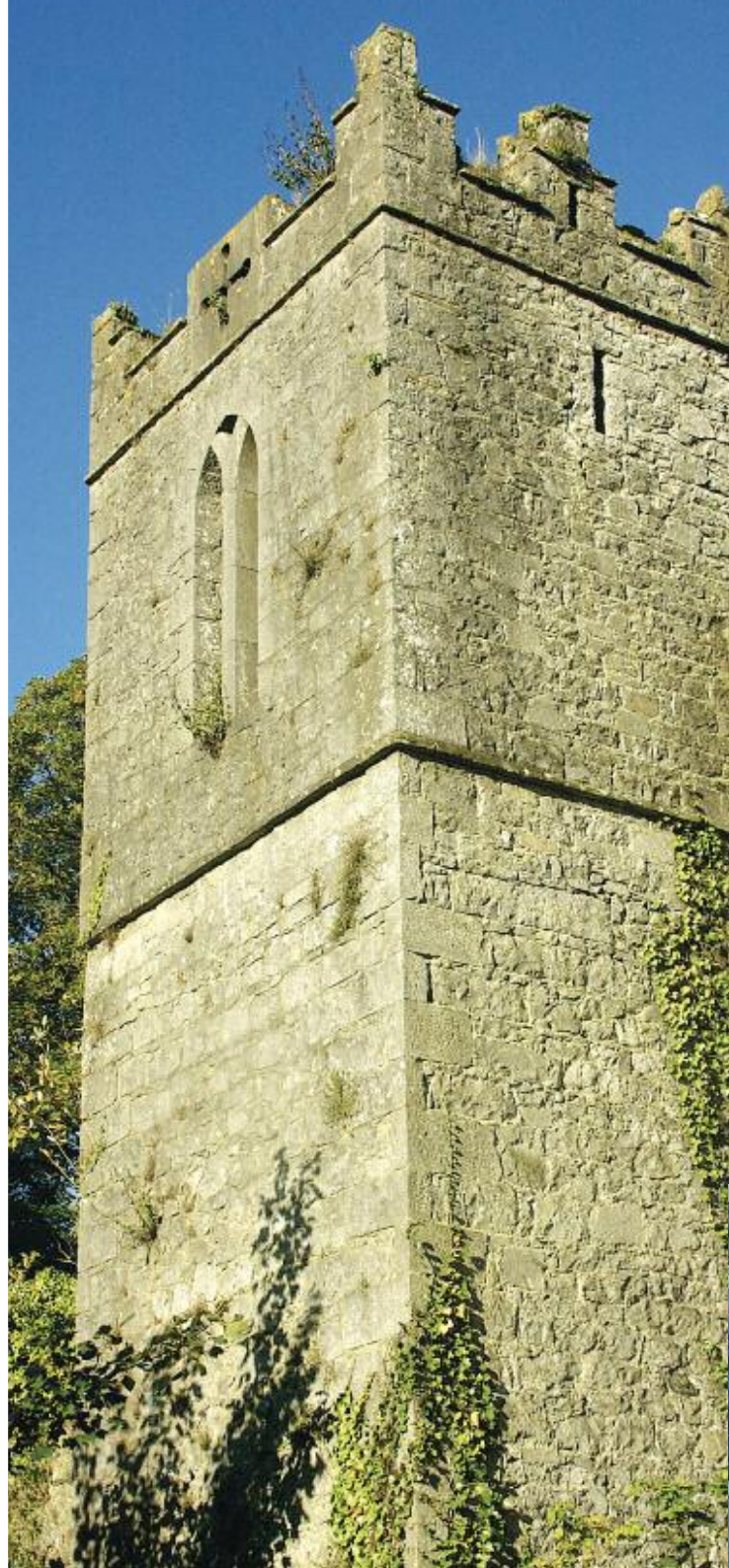
Birr, County Offaly is probably best known for its medieval style castle with extensive gardens and world famous 19th Century telescope. However, the midlands town also has some very impressive Georgian townhouses and other architectural gems well worth discovering.



The town's origins can be traced back to a 6th century monastery, founded by St Brendan. Now almost completely built over, the monastery was oval in shape and situated on the south bank of the River Camcor.

The Normans took over the town in the early 13th Century. They build a castle on the bend in the river and laid out the medieval streetscape with a market square, parish church and street leading up to the castle. This castle later came under the control of the native O'Carroll family and then in the early 17th Century, the town and castle were granted to the Parsons family. The Parsons, later known as the Earls of Rosse, abandoned the medieval castle and built a new castle around the gatehouse. It is this castle with later additional towers and battlements that draws tourists to the town.

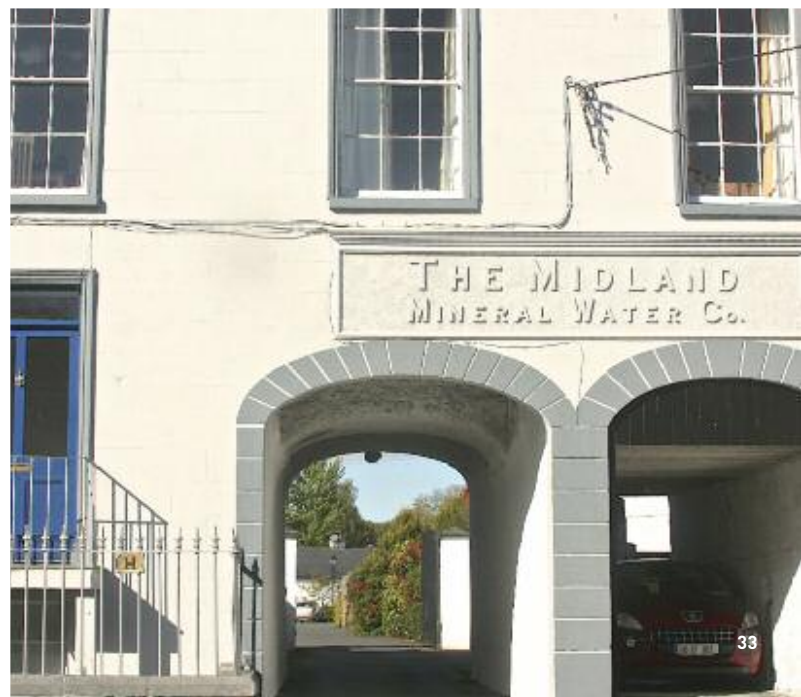
However, visitors with an interest in Georgian architecture are well advised to take one of the town trails or river walks to discover the full riches of Birr. For example, Oxmantown Mall would merit a trip to the town in itself. The street was constructed with a central carraigeway, a tree lined lawn on one side and on the other side - a terrace of mainly two storey terraced Georgian houses with elegant doorways and front gardens. The entrance gates to Birr Castle are at the eastern end of Oxmantown Mall and St Brendan's Church of Ireland is at the west. Mid-way along is Oxsmantown Hall, an Elizabethan style concert



hall and theatre built in 1888 which is now home to the vibrant Birr Theatre and Arts Centre. The centre hosts many events in Birr Vintage Week and Arts Festival, the town's most popular summer event.

Enthusiasts of Georgian townhouses will also be impressed by a terrace of Georgian houses on John's Mall, next to another architectural gem, John's Hall. This beautiful Doric temple was built by the 2nd Earl of Rosse as a mechanics institute to commemorate the death of his 26 year old son, John Clere Parsons. It is still in good condition but seems not to have a current use which is a pity. Outside St John's Hall is a statue of the 3rd Earl of Rosse (1800-1867) standing proudly with a globe by his side, reminding us of his great expertise in astronomy. The 3rd Earl of Rosse built a 72 inch telescope in 1845 which remained the world's largest telescope until the 20th Century. It is one of the major attractions in Birr Castle Demense alongside a photographic exhibition by the 3rd Earl of Rosse's wife, Countess Mary Rosse who was a pioneering photographer.

In the middle of the 19th Century, Birr was a thriving town with a distillery, a brewery and a flour mill. Several churches were also built during this period including the Wesley Chapel on Emmet St, a Presbyterian church on John's Mall, St Brendan's Roman Catholic Church and Crotty's Church in Castle St, a controversial reformed church set up by Father Michael Crotty.





Birr's main shopping streets lie between Emmet Square and Market Square. Unlike many Irish towns, these streets still have a vibrant atmosphere with a mix of cafes, bookshops, newsagents and a supermarket. Some historic shop fronts remain in place.

Also worth a visit are Birr civic offices and public library which have been tastefully accommodated in the mid 19th Century Gothic Revival building. This building was originally designed in 1840 as a convent for the Sisters of Mercy. It is situated on Wilmer Road in between St Brendan's Roman Catholic Church and the town park with children's play equipment. It's noteworthy that Birr Castle has also installed a magnificent tree house recently, which has the acclaim of being Ireland's largest tree house.

Those more interested in nature can follow a route through the town up John's Mall, along the Camcor Park walk, over Oxmantown stone bridge, following a smaller riverside walkway onto and off Mill Island, right back around to Birr Castle Demense. There are also pleasant cycle and walk ways along the exit of the town towards the N52.





BIRR
CASTLE

There's something about living in a town that appeals to the human sense of scale and community. Towns encourage us to be civil to each other and make the best of what we've got, rather than yearn for bigger, busier places or indeed quieter rural retreats. In fact, at their best, towns encourage us to live harmoniously with each other, understanding the historic layers that surround us while keeping our eyes firmly on the future.

As we approach the centenary of celebrations, we need to breathe life back into many of our towns. We need to celebrate the rich and sometimes complex historical events that have allowed some Irish towns to thrive and others to stagnate. In particular, we need to find ways to re-imagine the centres of our towns and bring life back into them.

There are many ways in which we can approach these issues. But, firstly, the people who live in towns all over Ireland need to be given opportunities to know and understand the history of their towns. There is a certain joy that comes from knowing when the buildings on your street were built, who lived in them before you and what business took place there.

Without these wonderful buildings and monuments Ireland's towns and villages become anywhere places. Medieval town walls, Georgian terraces, architectural details, traditional shop fronts and tower houses add distinctiveness to an urban landscape and reflect the layers of history and people who lived there.

The Heritage Council profoundly believes that the people who live in towns must be actively mobilised, and intimately involved, in developing a blueprint for their future. We want more and more people to come to an appreciation of the hidden potential of their towns and villages. Their regeneration is based on appreciating the richness of their natural and built heritage.

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