

If the name Annagassan sounds vaguely familiar, it's likely you've heard of its mythical past and strong links to the Vikings. Folklore decreed that the small village in Co Louth, near Castlebellingham, was the site of Linn Duachail, one of Ireland's first Viking settlements and a rival to Dubh Linn — Dublin — in significance and size.

According to local legend, the Vikings arrived in Ireland around 841AD and set up two bases, one in Dublin and a second that had been lost in the mists of time. But in 2010, a group of archaeologists and local historians, determined to prove its existence, carried out extensive field work and test digs and discovered a huge, fortified settlement up to 150 acres in size, dating back to Viking times.

Not surprisingly, the residents of Annagassan are proud that Linn Duachail exists and is perfectly preserved underneath farmland in the village. For this is a mythical place and not just Annagassan. The Boyne Valley — well-known in the North for its connections to William of Orange and his victory over King James II in 1690 — is a sacred landscape of medieval castles, monuments and monastic sites, high kings and UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

Our Boyne Valley adventure began with a pit-stop for food at the Glyde Inn in Annagassan, a family-run, multi-award-winning restaurant/pub overlooking Dundalk Bay, the Cooley and Mourne Mountains. The restaurant is famed for its seafood and director Conor O'Neill was keen for us to try the seafood platter. What was presented to us was a fresh feast fit for a Viking — razor clams, oysters, mussels, prawns and crab toes, all locally sourced.

The owners of the Glyde Inn have cleverly capitalised on its heritage with a new virtual reality experience, taking visitors back in time to the arrival of the Vikings in Ireland. As we sat at a specially commissioned Viking table, wearing a VR headset, we were transported from longboat to land, with the story of settlement in the area narrated through the eyes of Bjorn the Bear.

In the early days of the settlements in Linn Duachail and Dublin, both competed for supremacy, with the latter prevailing. It's hard to imagine that had Linn Duachail not been abandoned, Dublin might not be Ireland's capital now.

Less than half an hour from Annagassan is the medieval town of Drogheda; an ideal base from which to explore the Boyne Valley. As a frequent visitor to Dublin, Drogheda has long been a place I just passed through en route. My only visit to the town was as a 10-year-old child, when my mum brought us to St Peter's Church to view the decapitated head of Oliver Plunkett. I remember being slightly horrified by the sight of the severed saint's head, enclosed in a shrine in the beautiful church.

Relics are a tangible link to the past and Drogheda — like the rest of the Boyne Valley — is steeped in rich history. But there's so much more to the walled town than its legends, myths and ancient sites. It's also vibrant and welcoming with plenty of shops, restaurants and bars.

Our base for the weekend was Scholars Townhouse, a former Christian Brothers house which has been transformed into a 16-bedroom boutique hotel. Dating back to 1867, the townhouse is modern and comfortable yet retains its bygone charm, with stained glass windows and high coved ceilings. The area's history is depicted in its artwork, with a portrait of King Billy himself taking pride of place on the stairway wall.

The hotel has character and hospitable

A magical history tour

Maureen Coleman visited the Boyne Valley to experience its sacred landscape



Above, Scholars Townhouse and, left, Highlanes Gallery

staff. After a night on the gin (making, that is, not drinking) we returned to find the restaurant had closed but the general manager Mark McGowan rustled us up a gorgeous cheeseboard with pates and freshly baked bread. Breakfast was served in the award-winning restaurant and was spot on. The hotel can be hard to find through a maze of streets but has plenty of parking and is handy to a few lively pubs, including the nearby Peggy Moore's. I really liked this hotel — it has its own unique, unpretentious vibe and a cosy bar which gets fairly busy at night.

That evening we were booked into Listoke Distillery and Gin School at Monasterboice, a family-run business which diversified into producing hand sanitiser at the height of the Covid pandemic. Visitors to the gin school are given a guided tour of the distillery, from the production of Listoke 1777 Gin to the botanicals made and the bottling line in place. It's a hugely popular night out for couples, hen parties, tourists and, not surprisingly, gin lovers, who get the chance to choose their own recipes and distil their own signature gin.

Now I have a confession to make. I'm not a gin drinker. Many years ago, I over-indulged and paid a hefty price. I'd never touched gin before and wasn't aware of its potency, but the evening ended with me dancing in the street around 2am, sing-

ing 'Ooh ah Cantona' and waking up the neighbours. The following day I suffered the hangover from hell. I haven't touched gin since.

I was slightly apprehensive about admitting this to the lovely people at Listoke, but as it turned out, my aversion to gin was cured with that one trip back to school. Who knew? I had a couple of refreshing G&Ts with my fellow distillers during the fully immersive, three-hour lesson and thoroughly enjoyed the experience of crafting my own drink, even if the gin room did resemble a chemistry lab. Studying the properties of solids, liquids and gases was never this much fun though.

Four large glass jars on a table in the centre of the room contained juniper, coriander, angelica root and orris root — the starting base for the gin. It was up to us to then pick from a selection of citrus, floral and spicy ingredients to add to the base. My friend Michelle opted for a spicier concoction, but I went for cornflower, hibiscus and mango, playing it safe with fruitier, floral flavours.

While our gin boiled in large copper stills, we were treated to a tour of the distillery followed by some locally sourced nibbles to accompany our G&Ts. The group included a Cork woman and her American friend, whose long-awaited trip to Listoke had been delayed due to Covid and a cou-

ple on a date night.

Listoke still bottle and label their products by hand and we were asked to suggest a name for our brand. Initially I considered Gemma's Gin as a gift for my eponymous aunt, who enjoys the odd tittle with her friends. Instead, I called it after our family pub which was blown up during the Troubles — Conway's Gin has a nice ring to it. Listoke's trademark owl was then placed on the back of the bottle.

Having learned the hard way that too much gin might not make you sin, but certainly lose all sense of decorum, we took it easy that night and woke up fresh and raring to go the next day. It was just as well as we had booked a guided walking tour of the town following a visit to the Highlanes Gallery. Situated beside Drogheda's Anglo-Norman St Laurence's Gate, Highlanes Municipal Art Gallery is a dedicated visual art space; large, open plan and airy. It was formerly the site of Drogheda's Franciscan Church and part of the friary, gifted to the townsfolk when the Franciscans ended their 760-year association Drogheda in 2000. Like much of the town, it combines character and history with modern design.

The state-of-the-art facility presents a programme of national and international temporary exhibitions, as well as exhibitions drawn from the Drogheda Municipal Art Collection. Curator and CEO of



Scholars Townhouse and, far left, sunrise at Laurence's Gate in Drogheda

the gallery, Aoife Ruane, led us around the building and to the space in the gallery which hosts a special exhibition of work by Drogheda-born artist Nano Reid.

Last year marked the 40th anniversary of the death of Reid, considered one of Ireland's most accomplished artists of the 20th century.

The exhibition presents over 60 of Nano's works, borrowed from major public collections such as the National Gallery of Ireland as well as many private collections.

If you want to know more about the life and works of Nano Reid, who forged her way through the male-dominated artistic landscape, local guide Brendan Matthews is the man to speak to. Not just an expert on all things Nano Reid, Brendan has a wealth of knowledge about Drogheda's origins and colourful past.

His walking tour brought us to the public house premises where Nano was born and to one of her former studios. Along the route, Brendan also talked us through the old medieval industries and trades connected with the markets area and explained how Drogheda was once made up of two towns that united as one in 1412. These days the River Boyne continues to divide the town between the Catholic Church dioceses of Armagh and Meath.

Brendan then brought us to St Peter's Church of Ireland church, built on a site which has been a centre of worship at least since the founding of the town of Drogheda itself. During the Siege of Drogheda in 1649, Oliver Cromwell's Parliamentary forces burned the steeple of the church where about 100 people had taken refuge. Cromwell's army, perhaps driven by guilt, later donated £10,000 for the repairs of St Peter's, as well as St Patrick's in Armagh and St Patrick's in Dublin.

The churchyard is a haven of interesting monuments including two cadavers enclosed in shrouds which are built into the churchyard wall and are believed to date back to the 16th century. The cadavers are partially opened to show the remains of the occupants of the tomb, Sir Edmund Goldyng and his wife Elizabeth — fascinating stuff but fairly macabre.

After lunch at the pretty Lime Kiln gastro pub in Julianstown, a quaint eatery with tasty food and a vast array of craft beers and cocktails, we had been hoping to travel in style down the historic Boyne with Boyne Boats. Unfortunately, due to delays and traffic jams, we missed out on the trip. For families planning a visit to the area, this is a must-do — a paddling tour in handcrafted, traditional Kerry Naomhog currauchs which have featured in the HBO fantasy TV show *Game of Thrones*.

There are plenty of activities to keep the children amused, if you're planning a staycation in the area. Aside from the nature trails and outdoor activities, Port Beach, located near the fishing village of Clogherhead, is a beautiful blue flag cove with wide sandy shores and a wide range of flora and fauna including the Marsh Orchid. For the energetic, why not give kayaking or go-karting a go? If hiking's more your thing, check out the nature trails throughout the valley or trek up the Hill of Slane, the 25km Boyne Valley Camino along the river or the Navan Sculpture Trail, featuring 15 public art features.

That evening we dined in 79 West Street, a bar and restaurant in the heart of Drogheda town. Voted in the top 200 restaurants in Ireland shortly after opening in June 2020, it incorporates four indoor and outdoor spaces within the same building as well as a Mexican meets European menu. The bar is renowned locally for its extensive list of specialised cocktails, which owner Nigel Kerr insisted we try. Well, it would've been rude not to. One can't write about a place without first sampling its produce.

As the gateway to the Boyne Valley region, Drogheda is a good centre from which to visit places like Newgrange, a Neolithic monument and the jewel in the crown of Ireland's Ancient East, the old Mellifont Abbey, the historic towns of Navan, Trim, Slane and Kells and the Battle of the Boyne site at Oldbridge, which holds so much significance for many people in Northern Ireland who commemorate William of Orange's triumph in battle every July 12.

The Boyne Valley is undoubtedly rich in history and legend, with countless throwbacks to bygone times. Monuments, Martello towers, battle sites and museums set the region apart and Drogheda's skyline is dotted with steeples and spires.

But while the past is ever present, the town itself is looking to the future with recent ventures such as 79 West Street adding its name to a growing list of restaurants and pubs. And it's the hospitality that really makes the Boyne Valley worth a visit.

The Vikings certainly recognised its potential when they arrived at Linn Duachail in the mid-19th century, to set up base.

These days expect a warm and friendly welcome in this ancient land of folklore and fairy tales.

Scholars' current special offers are available on the Boyne website, www.discoverboynevalley.ie, and their rack rate is currently €149pp with a freshly cooked breakfast. Afternoon tea is €40pp with prosecco on arrival.