

From the Hill of Slane, where legend has it, St Patrick lit a fire to illuminate his Christian beliefs, **JIMMY GEOGHEGAN** blazed his own trail through the Boyne Valley to the home of poet Francis Ledwidge, local artist Caoimhe Tuthill and the iconic home of Slane Whiskey

On a sunny, pleasant weekday morning recently a group of people were transported by mini bus from their base in Drogheda to various tourist locations around Slane. They were on a mission.

The group, made up of travel writers from various Ireland-based media outlets, both north and south, were brought around to get a sense of some of the attractions available for tourist to be unearthed in the Boyne Valley region.

This was about spreading the word - and not only about the locations that were visited but about the wide range of tourist attractions available in the area - the fishing, the walking tours, the opportunities to step back into history, the food, the gardens, sporting outings such as horse racing, the beaches.

It was a part of a two-day tour the writers were taken on with the first day focusing on the Slane area, the second day on various venues in the Drogheda region such as the famous St Laurence's Gate.

Your Ireland joined the group for the first day's itinerary that included a fascinating tour of the whiskey-making distillery at Slane Castle and a visit to the home of the poet Francis Ledwidge. Included also was a trip to the Hill of Slane, where legend has it, St Patrick lit a fire to illuminate his Christian beliefs.

The first port of call, however, was to the home of an artist outside Slane, involved in a craft that goes back thousands of years.

CAOIMHE TUTHILL

Located in the townland of Cashel, on the Drogheda road just outside Slane, Coaimhe Tuthill's home includes a studio out the back where she works on making handcrafted items made from felt. It's an ancient, ageless tradition.

The products she uses in her distinctive craft include merino wool and Irish carded wool. She also uses plant-based fibres like bamboo, soybean and recycled fabrics which certainly gives her work a very colourful and distinctive look. She also creates vibrantly-coloured pictures and brooches among other products. She loves the fact that every piece she does is unique and everything is done in an environmentally sustainable way as possible, from collecting her own rainwater to using natural soap and plant-based wools.

Tourists who call into her studio can experience, first-hand just what is involved in her creation process. In fact they are actively encouraged to do so.

Martina O'Dwyer, tourism officer for the Boyne Valley, who was among those who visited Caoimhe's studio, described how "an experience development programme" has recently been started up by the folk involved with promoting local tourism. The aim is to "encourage craft workers to share that craft



with visitors to the area."

And so with that approach in mind the journalists/travel writers who visited Caoimhe Tuthill's workshop were invited to demonstrate their artistic side. They were given the chance to create a picture or brooch using merino wool, bamboo and recycled sari silk - all under Caoimhe's expert guidance.

The whole process, which can take up to about 2.5 hours, was certainly relaxing and gave an insight into the imaginative, painstaking work involved in the craft. The final products produced by the writers might not end up in the National Gallery any time soon or be displayed alongside work by Jack B Yeats or Louis le Brocq, but it was a fun-filled and useful creative process nonetheless. For a time at least you could forget about the troubles of the world.

One of the most fascinating aspects of Caoimhe Tuthill's life is the fact that she became a craft artist after a spells as a ballet

dancer, a stilts-walker in "an all-human circus group". She also worked as an archaeologist. She has been involved with the arts, in one way or another, all her life.

Originally from Dublin she has lived in the north east for close on 25 years. "I would have a deep love for the Boyne Valley, the history and mythology. I feel very connected to this land," she added and you knew she meant it too. Caoimhe operates under the tradename, Boann Irish Felt Designs. She can be contacted at info@boann.ie.

FRANCIS LEDWIDGE COTTAGE

And so it was, for most of the members of the media group, back onto the mini bus driven by the highly-knowledgeable tour guide Derek Smith of Custom Irish Tours. A schedule needed to be kept and the next stop-off point for the journalists/tourists - apart from delicious lunch in the Conyngham Arms - was Francis Ledwidge's cottage also on the very busy Slane to Drogheda road. Your Ireland followed by car.



This is craft artist Caoimhe Tuthill at her studio outside Slane. LEFT: Artist Caoimhe Tuthill with a work in progress.

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At the cottage of the famous poet were four people who are members of the Francis Ledwidge Museum Committee – Rosemary Yore, Colm Yore and Terry Wogan, chairman of the said Committee.

The poet's cottage and garden is maintained because of the dedicated efforts of a group of local people such as the named above – and others - who give their time and energy, spurred on by the heart-felt belief that the poet's home should be sustained because it is an invaluable part of the local heritage.

All the work around the cottage is done by volunteers but three guides, who also work at the museum on a part-time basis, are paid by the stage-agency SOLAS. That helps. Rosemary points also to the invaluable assistance provided by local gardener Rosie Maye.

In highly informative talks, Rosemary and tour guide Eimear Lynn-King outlined various aspects of the poet's life. For instance not many people might know that Francis, born in 1887, was one of nine children. The family lived in a cottage made up of three small rooms and a kitchen.

Visitors might not be aware of just how much he loved Slane and the surrounding countryside with a passion. How he was inspired by nature or by how fired up he was by any injustice shown towards workers. He organised his first strike when he was just 16 when working in terrible conditions at the nearby copper mines at Beauparc. He organised the strike but was the only one who showed up for the strike and was duly sacked.

Some people might not be aware (like this



Members of the Francis Ledwidge Museum Committee (from left) Rosemary Yore, Colm Yore and Terry Wogan in the garden of Francis Ledwidge's cottage in Slane.

writer) that Francis suffered greatly from rheumatism when he was serving in Serbia during the war or was extremely ill in Cairo with an inflamed gall bladder.

The family kitchen looks today like it did when Francis was around: a table for meals, a few sturdy wooden chairs, a dresser of the period and a settle bed, which served as a seat by day and a bed at night.

Francis wrote three books, two of them published posthumously. He died all too soon

and tragically, at the Battle of Ypres in 1917 when he was the victim of a bomb.

The young Slaneman was a hero who clearly had tremendous courage and a rare literary ability. Sustaining his home is one way of reminding the world of his rare qualities.

HIGH SPIRITS AT SLANE CASTLE

And so it was onto Slane Castle, one of the most famous locations in the Ireland's historical and musical landscape. There to greet the group of journalists was highly personable, knowledgeable guide Barry Farrell who brilliantly outlined the fascinating process involved in transforming raw grain, much of which is grown on the estate farm, into Slane whiskey.

Barry, in his talk, outlined the background to Slane's evolution as a world-renowned musical venue. How Lord Henry Mountcharles took over the estate as a young man and started the series of famous concerts that have been staged at the venue down the decades. He saw the concerts as a way of moving the estate into the future.

The guide pointed to one large photo on the wall in the distillery bar taken by Lord Mountcharles from the first concert in 1981. The photo is of a little-known singer, who had his back to the camera, with castle looming up on the horizon. These

days millions of people would be able to immediately recognise profile of the one and only Bono. The U2 front man and Slane were to become considerably more famous in the years to follow.

Tourists who visit the Slane Whiskey distillery today can also embark on a journey that gives an insight into what is involved into making this particular 'water of life.' How it is a delicate combination of engineering ingenuity and human expertise. Nothing is left to chance. For example only special, oak barrels are used to allow the whiskey to age. It's, apparently, a crucial part of the entire, intriguing process.

Those who take part in the Slane Whiskey tour are also, at the end, given an opportunity to taste the various kinds of whiskies produced. The distillery which has a production capacity of 1.1 million litres of whiskey a year – although, we should quickly add, the Your Ireland representative did not succumb to the temptation! The car had to be driven home.

Barry Farrell, who is from Crossakiel, outlined how a close business partnership has been forged between Slane Whiskey enterprise and the US-based Brown Forman company, producers of the famous Jack Daniels drink. It's another interesting aspect of the remarkable Slane Whiskey story. All

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Guide Barry Farrell outlines the process involved in distilling whiskey at Slane Castle.

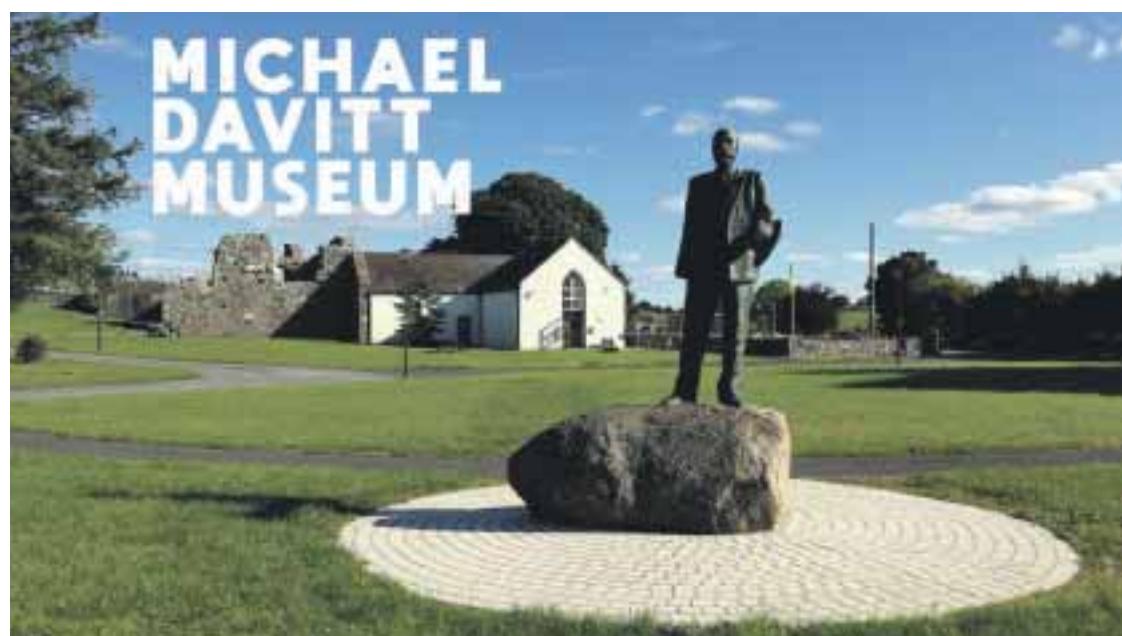
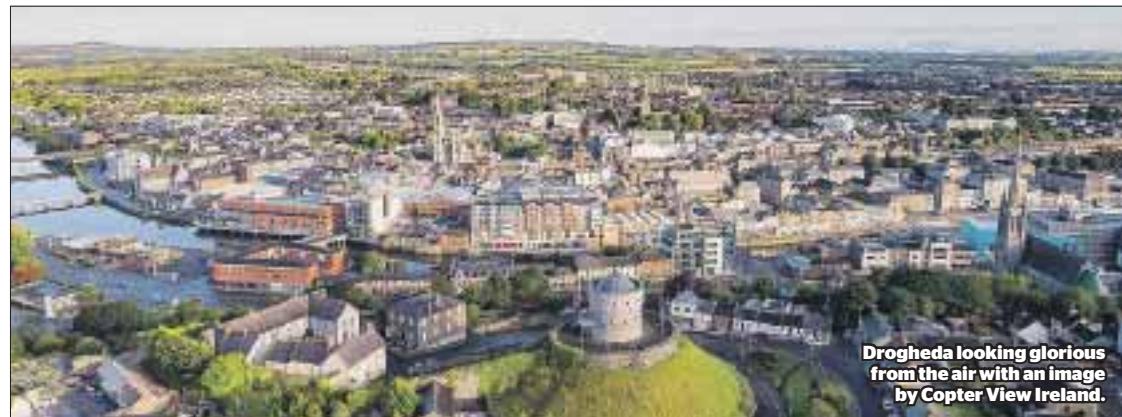
THE BOYNE VALLEY - DID YOU KNOW?

The Boyne Valley Food Series, an award winning celebration of local food culture, runs throughout the year and offers a diverse array of events from long table suppers and vibrant festivals to foraging walks, cookery demonstrations and farm tours. This series showcases the very best of the regions culinary heritage. Every year, for example, the Samhain Festival of Food & Culture is held featuring a series of events including the Sheridan Irish Food Fair.

The large motte found on the Hill of Slane is located outside the main enclosure and graveyard on private land. The location of the motte underlines the strategic importance of the hill from where there is a panoramic view of the surrounding countryside. The motte is believed to have been attacked and ransacked during the early phase of the Anglo-Norman invasion of Ireland. The Song of Dermot and Earl includes a reference to a motte castle at Slane that was destroyed by the forces of Irish chieftain Maol Sheachlainn O Lochlainn in 1176. All those based in the garrison, the song tells, us were massacred.

The river Boyne and its tributaries are recognised among Ireland's best wild brown fisheries. Some of the best fishing in the Boyne Valley can be found on the River Boyne at Slane, Navan, Trim and Longwood. There is also wild brown trout fishing on the Kells Blackwater, Stoneyford, Athboy, Enfield Blackwater and Deel rivers.

The Newgrange monument is world renowned but lesser known are Knowth and Dowth. The large mound at Knowth covers two passage tombs placed back to back which is surrounded by 127 massive kerbstones. Outside the large passage tomb are 18 small tombs. Dowth is the least known of the three monuments although it matches the other two in size. The mound is surrounded by a kerb of 115 stones and has two tombs facing westwards.



Explore the incredible story of Michael Davitt Irish Patriot, International Activist and Patron of Celtic Football Club

Award Winning Museum Building | Guided Tours | Medieval Sculpture | 13th Century Friary
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Michael Davitt Museum

Located in the small rural village of Straide in County Mayo, just 10 minutes' drive from the bustling county town of Castlebar lies the Michael Davitt Museum. Michael Davitt was a Land Agitator, a Fenian, an Author, a Journalist, a patron of the GAA and Celtic Football Club, and an International Humanitarian. The collection reflects his diverse range of national and international achievements in an awe-inspiring tale of triumph over adversity. Housed in the magnificently restored pre-penal church in which Davitt was baptised, the museum is adjacent to the 13th century Straide Friary. Davitt is now buried within the shadow of the church walls in his beloved Straide.

The Michael Davitt Museum offers a fascinating insight into one of Ireland's legendary historical figures. A guided tour includes a visit to the Dominican Friary, a Norman structure which contains some of the finest medieval sculpture on the island of Ireland, including 15th century carvings and beautifully preserved windows. Whether you're a dedicated history buff, culturally curious, a GAA or Celtic Supporter, or just keen to learn more. The Michael Davitt Museum is a hidden gem that will leave your visit to Mayo forever etched in your mind.

All visitors receive a free pass to the Céide Fields Visitor Centre and a 10% discount card for Foxford Woollen Mills.

Opening Hours

Monday to Saturday 10am to 5pm

Admission

€8 Adults

€3 Children

€20.00 Family (2 Adults and 3 Children)

Address

Michael Davitt Museum

Straide, Co Mayo

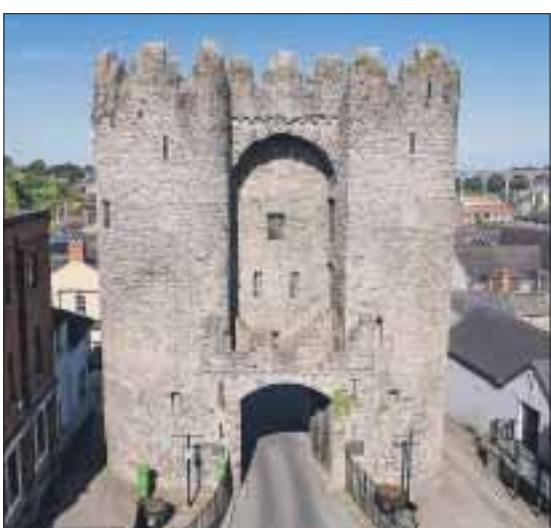
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Tel 00353 94 9031942

info@michaeldavittmuseum.ie



St Laurence's Gate. PHOTO: COPTER VIEW IRELAND.



www.michaeldavittmuseum.ie