

# Exploring The Boyne Valley

For golf lovers there are a number of first class courses in the area including Laytown and Bettystown a formidable links challenge

The Francis Ledwidge Museum just outside Slane is dedicated to the 1st World War POET (1887-1917) who died in the conflict

**Synonymous with the UNESCO World Heritage site at Newgrange and The Battle of the Boyne Heritage Centre this region, embracing Counties Meath and Louth, has numerous lesser known attractions as George Keegan discovered**

Throughout my younger years Slane village and the town of Drogheda were places I passed through on my way to Dublin and where I rarely stopped, so I knew very little about the Boyne Valley and what it has to offer. A few months ago however I had the opportunity to spend a couple of days touring around the area to discover the many attractions there.

The local tourist board *Discover the Boyne Valley* points out that the Valley, which is part of *Ireland's Ancient East*, is the perfect place to get out of your comfort zone and experience something new and make some fantastic memories. The Valley for families, solo travellers or couples offers a wide range of activities, fantastic heritage, beautiful landscapes and excellent food - all the components of a wonderful holiday adventure. The area covers Meath and parts of Louth.

Among the activities on offer are strolling around the many historic gardens, taking in a round of golf (with 11 courses to choose from), going on a self-guided historic trail, travelling along the Boyne Valley Drive exploring the 33 heritage sites and of course not forgetting the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Newgrange, Knowth and Dowth, where advance booking is essential.

## Attractions not to be missed

**Hill Of Slane:** At the top of the hill which is 153 meters above sea level (but a gentle climb up) are several important monuments - a very well preserved tall Gothic tower, the ruins of a Franciscan Monastery (1512), and the site where in AD433 Saint Patrick lit a Pascal Fire in defiance of orders by the pagan High King so introducing Christianity to Ireland. On a clear day the view from here is spectacular.

**The Ledwidge Museum:** I was particularly impressed with this small museum

dedicated to the World War 1 poet Francis Ledwidge (1887-1917) which is located at Janeville just outside Slane. It was in this cottage he was raised and thanks to a great voluntary team it has been restored and preserved in his memory. Inside are many artifacts and memorabilia of his life and work. Opening times are daily 10am-1pm & 1.30pm - 5pm.

**Arts and Crafts:** For something completely different try to book the workshop about felting run by the very talented textile artist and felt maker Caoimhe Tuthill at her studio home at Cashell, Slane. Caoimhe points out that she uses the ancient craft of wet felting to make a distinctive style heavily influenced by her love of the Irish landscape, the natural world and her Neolithic surroundings. She runs workshops and studio visits by appointment only. After a couple of hours 'hard work'!! (complete with lots of banter and coffee served with delicious homemade cake). I left with my very own 'masterpiece'.

**Slane Distillery:** Taking a guided tour of this distillery on the grounds of Slane Castle is well worth considering even if you

are not a whiskey drinker. The distillery was originally Slane Castle Irish Whiskey founded by Henry Conyngham with his son Alex in 2009. It was later bought by American distillers Brown-Forman Corporation who produce the Jack Daniel whiskey. The tour consists of the brand story and production details finishing with a tasting. There is a delightful room complete with bar used for wedding receptions, containing lots of memorabilia regarding the many famous rock concerts held on the castle grounds since 1981, when Thin Lizzy were the headline act. Castle tours are also available to book with opening times between 11am and 5pm.

**The Boyne Valley Camino:** starting at St. Peter's R.C Church on West Street Drogheda. The Camino brings pilgrims on a journey through history. The route consists of a mix of riverside, greenway, paths through woods, quiet country roads and a path along a canal. This is part of the Celtic Camino and those who walk the 25km can then use this journey added to the 75km from Coruña to Santiago de Compostela and receive their special stamped passport.

*The Whiskey Museum at Slane Castle offers an interesting diversion and includes a tour of the distillery, sampling and a talk on the distilling process*







*Trim Castle is always worth a visit*

## Drogheda

This busy commercial town built on the banks of the river today acts as the gateway to the Boyne Valley. Among its many other attractions it has the distinction of featuring three historic churches:

**St. Peter's Roman Catholic Church:** The impressive building was constructed in 1884 and has a very tall west gable and several fine windows. Here you will also discover the shrine to St. Oliver Plunkett where his relics form the centrepiece. Oliver Plunkett was born in nearby Oldcastle and spent a great deal of his time in Drogheda, where he is credited with opening several schools. He was executed in England in 1684 and canonised in 1975.

**St. Peter's Church of Ireland:** Built on a site which has been the centre of worship at least since the founding of the town itself. It's thought the first church may have been constructed around the same period as Mellifont Abbey. In 2002 a celebration was held to commemorate the original dedication of St. Peters and also marked the end of a 3 - year programme of restoration, following an arson attack in 1999. Worth seeing inside is the font, the only surviving relic of the medieval church still in use and the organ dating from 1771.

**St Anne's Catholic Church:** Situated along Shop Street it was built between 1859 and 1866. The St. Augustines have had a presence in Drogheda since 1295. The design was in a Victorian Gothic Style. Inside be sure to view the beautiful Harry Clarke window depicting St. Augustine and St. Monica over the North aisle. If you are seeking a quiet spot away from the town noise then allow some time to reflect in the Memory and Meditation Garden at the rear of the church, complete with a small fountain and name plaques of parishioners down the years.

## Taking a guided walk

I went on a most enjoyable and interesting walk with Failte Ireland National Tour Guide Dusty Flanagan also a founding member of the Boyne Valley Camino. On the way we met the Mayor of Drogheda, Independent Councillor Paddy McQuillan, who invited us to take a tour of the really impressive Civic Offices which were officially opened last year. This followed a major re-development of two unoccupied listed buildings. He filled me in on many aspects of the town and its history.

Places of particular interest on our walk included viewing some of the Urban Art Trail consisting of 8 large murals with the theme of mythology, the St. Laurence Gate from the 13th century built to protect from invaders and finally the Arts Centre in Stockwell Street established in 1989. This is a multi-disciplinary Centre providing extensive curated arts and cultural programmes from film and theatre to family/children events. It has a 169 - seater theatre.

*The nave of the splendid gothic revival church of St Peters, Drogheda. The church contains the relic of St Oliver Plunkett*



## Food and drink

The Boyne Valley has a large selection of hotels, bed and breakfast and specialist accommodation plus self-catering and for younger visitors, hostels, glamping and camping. During my trip I stayed overnight in The Marcy Hotel on West Street Drogheda, a comfortable modern boutique hotel recently re-furnished.

Over the couple of days I enjoyed some excellent meals. Firstly at ILForno opposite my hotel with a continental ambiance, serving wood fired pizza and pasta dishes. Lunch stops were in the Conyngham Arms Hotel Slane, which has been awarded an AA Rosette for culinary excellence and the very impressive and elegant Scholars Townhouse Hotel in Drogheda. This building was once a school and one of its pupils was John Philip Holland, inventor of the submarine (whom I wrote an article about in a previous *Senior Times* column.)

A network of local food and drink producers known as Boyne Valley Flavours was set up many years ago. During 2013 a Boyne Valley Food series was born to organise a calendar of events throughout the year. It has continued to expand ever since.

My overall impression of the visit was one of surprise and then delight that so much is on offer for visitors to this region. I look forward to returning before too long.

## Useful websites

[www.discoverboynevalley.ie](http://www.discoverboynevalley.ie)  
[www.heritageireland.ie](http://www.heritageireland.ie)  
[www.boynevalleytrails.ie](http://www.boynevalleytrails.ie)  
[www.boynevalleygardentrail.com](http://www.boynevalleygardentrail.com)  
[www.boann.ie](http://www.boann.ie) (felting)  
[www.francisledwidge.com](http://www.francisledwidge.com)  
[www.boynevalleyflavours.ie](http://www.boynevalleyflavours.ie)