Past made present



Panorama of Trim. Photo: Tourism Ireland by John Miskelly

Sarah Finnan explores the Boyne Valley, one of Ireland's most visually and culturally striking regions

A place where history and heritage abound, the Boyne Valley in Ireland's Ancient East encapsulates all that the land of saints and scholars has to offer. As scenic as it is culturally significant, the area is a tapestry of ancient sites, medieval castles and early Christian monuments.

Those who live within its boundaries are passionate about protecting it; they're guardians of tradition, but are keen to share its magic with visitors, too. Damian Spain of Frayne Woodcraft in Kildalkey is the surest example of this.

The first stop-off on my two-day tour of the Boyne Valley is a 'From Root to Bowl' experience at Damian's workshop. We begin with a mythology talk on local trees, where I learn more about the Ogham alphabet and what each tree represents.

PRESSING PAUSE

We walk around the patch of land behind his home, examining the different plant life as he shares more about their spirit connections. Oak, for example, symbolises strength; Hawthorn, power; Yew, stability. The terrain is rough and uneven and reminds me of walking the fields with my dad growing up. Small wooden benches invite guests to pause for a moment of meditation.

Over a cup of tea, we talk about his background and what drew him to becoming a traditional Irish woodturner and stick dresser. It is, he tells me, a relatively new passion – he only bought his first lathe (a power tool for woodturning) during the pandemic. Something clicked, and now, a few years later, he's decided to pursue this full time.

Even if you have absolutely no interest in woodturning, I couldn't recommend this experience more. Damian is so knowledgeable and generous with his time that you can't help but be inspired. I'm lucky to have done many fascinating things as part of my job, but this is definitely one of the most unique.

The standout is getting to see him in action – in what feels like mere minutes, he manages to hollow out a hunk of wood into a perfectly formed mortar. The accompanying pestle is tailor-made to my boyfriend's hand measurements. This delights us both, and in the car ride to our hotel, I find myself running my fingers over its smooth surface for comfort.

CULTURAL CELEBRATION

Dinner that evening is a plate of fish and chips at Brogans Bar & Hotel. It's late when we potter in, but the place is full, and I can hear both Spanish and Italian accents on the way to our table. Offering hearty portions at reasonable prices, it's clearly a popular choice with Trim's many tourists.

The next day, it's all systems go. My visit to the Boyne Valley coincides with the start of Heritage Week, an annual all-island initiative celebrating Ireland's built, natural and cultural heritage. There's an abundance of things to do – including over 125 events organised around Co Meath alone – making it a great time to explore.



Ireland's oldest bridge, Trim. Photo courtesy of Gail Connaughton



Kells Printing Works



Knightsbrook Hotel Bar



Knowth Tomb Site Courtesy Tourism Ireland

At the Swift Cultural Centre in Trim, a local craft fair showcases the best of the area's handmade wares. A harpist plays just inside the door, while outside, tables laden with goods tempt passersby to stop and browse. Unfortunately, I'm running late and don't have time to mosey about.

Instead, I make a beeline upstairs for a pottery painting class led by Clodagh Herbert of Darych Designs. A talented ceramic artist, she's provided all of the supplies necessary; all I have to do is come up with an idea and get to work.



Damian Spain, Frayne Woodcraft

Surprisingly, I'm the first of the group to put paintbrush to vase – but having chosen an easy, abstract design, there's really very little skill needed from me. That takes the pressure off hugely. Perfectionism often stops me from trying new things, so there's something incredibly freeing about adopting a sort of *laissez-faire* attitude and just letting my hands work with abandon.

Pottery, especially when there's a kiln involved, requires a certain amount of blind faith. The only way to enjoy it is to surrender to the experience. Clodagh agrees, admitting that even she has had to learn to embrace the joy of wabi-sabi – a Japanese philosophy about finding beauty in imperfection, amongst other things.

Continuing the morning's theme of relaxation, my next stop involves a quick visit to the thermal suite at the nearby Knightsbrook Hotel, Spa & Resort. I had stayed at the hotel the night before, but the facilities are open to the public too (just make sure to book ahead).

Featuring a collection of cool, warm and hot cabins, the experience takes you through varying degrees of heat by way of steam and dry air. Even just 30 minutes proved restorative.

Lunch was a short drive away at Cafe Sabrosa in Athboy. A family-run restaurant, it was quite busy when I arrived during peak lunchtime hours. Around me, old friends caught up, new mums chatted over cups of coffee – their babies wriggling in their arms – and families shared plates of chips. It's only when I sat down that I realised how hungry I was, so a comforting sandwich was exactly what I needed.

HOT OFF THE PRESS

From there, I headed for Kells Printing Works, a newly restored 19th-century printworks and national centre for typography. Only open as of June 2026, the facility preserves a rare collection of Victorian presses, type fonts and local historical posters, previously untouched since the 1980s. At one point, four different newspapers were coming off these presses.

Heritage officer for Meath Co Council, Loreto Guinan, and KPW creative associate/print studio technician, Mark Smith, led a group of us around the building, explaining more about the painstaking conservation work that was involved in getting this project over the line. As someone who writes for a magazine, seeing how the sausage gets made (so to speak) was thrilling.

Mark recounted how the printing presses and old typesets were found in a workshop where a calendar still marked the date of its closure: 6 May 1983. The last print job was there, too – a story about tickets to a GAA dance. Owner Briany Finnegan set up the printing blocks, left for lunch and died suddenly before he could return to finish.

Briany's sister, Annie, was so overcome with grief that she sealed everything up. The printworks remained untouched, with everything exactly as it had been left, until 2015 when Annie's nephew inherited her estate and later donated it to the people of Kells.

The restoration process was very much a community effort, from what I'm told. A team of people, including printing engineer Cyril Lee (who was in his 70s when the project began, and is now 83), set about fixing the machines by hand.

The building itself has also been redeveloped to provide a modern, functional space in which to showcase the machines, with the long-term plan being that it will operate as a fully functioning creative and educational hub, offering workshops, demonstrations, exhibitions and collaborative opportunities. It's amazing to see what a common goal and some determination can achieve.

Suitably inspired by the tenacity of the Meath spirit, I ended my day with a walking tour of the area. Ina Olohan, of the volunteer-led Kells Walk-About Tour, told me more about the town's history – including its ties to the famous Book of Kells.

As one of the most important monastic sites in early medieval Ireland, it's no surprise the area still has remnants of its storied past dotted around the place. The monastic enclosure with the high crosses, St. Colmcille's house and the newly restored round tower are all highlights.

While 48 hours is hardly enough time to truly discover and appreciate all the Boyne Valley has to offer, it was certainly enough to entice me back. A place brimming with patrimony, it's well worth a visit – however brief. **ICM**