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OF THE WELCOMES

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Everything you need to know about
Ireland's biggest party



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Limerick Greenway *plus* we
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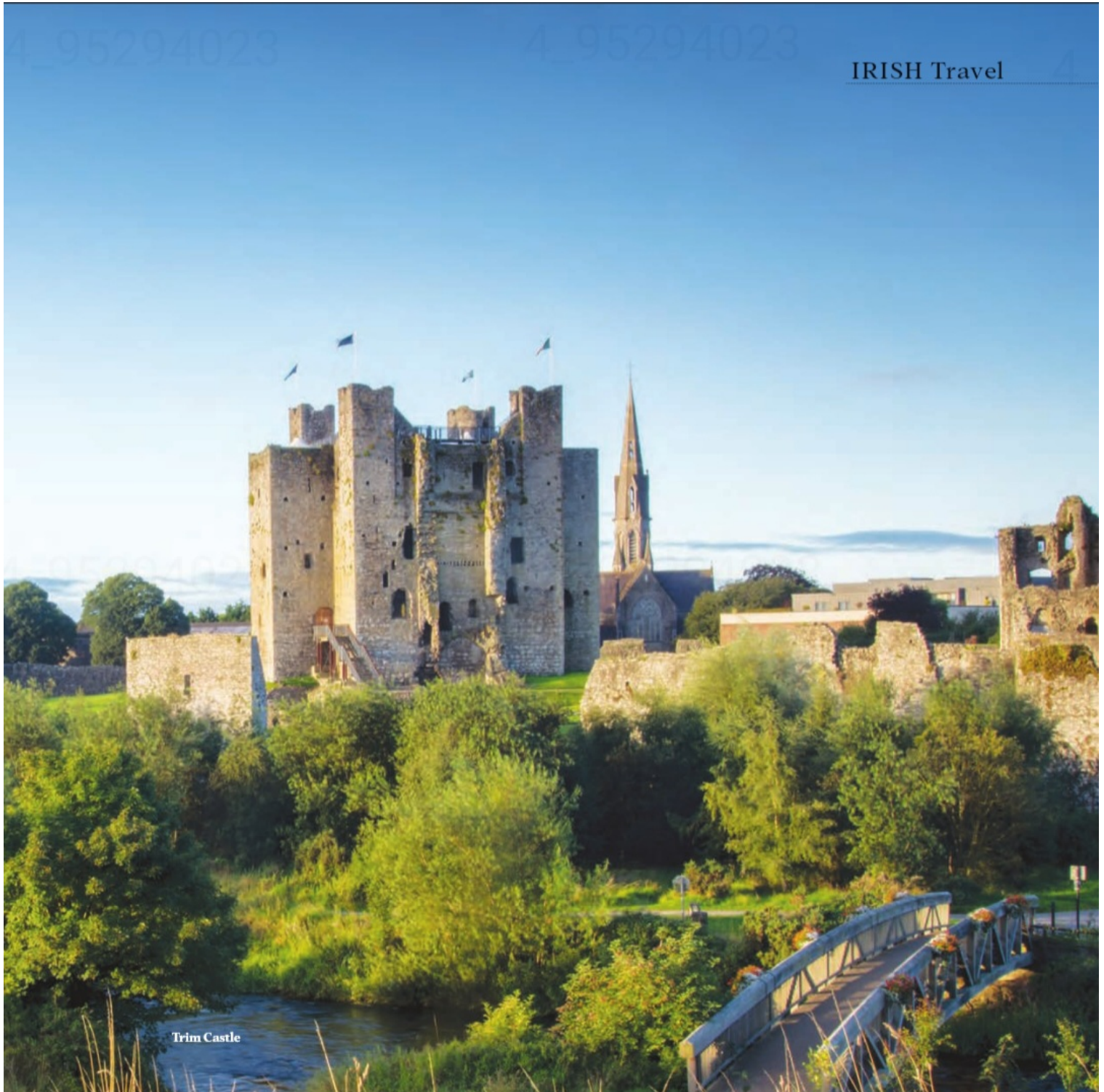
A Royal Jewel



Trim is known as one of County Meath's crown jewels — and deservedly so, writes **Domhnall O'Donoghue**

“Any plans for today?” I recently asked my mother, knowing exactly her response. On any given Sunday, my parents travel the short distance from our home in Navan to Trim. In addition to being the perfect base to explore the Boyne Valley - which includes celebrated sites like Newgrange and the Hill of Tara - this picture-perfect heritage town offers first-time or seasoned visitors an eclectic itinerary.

In my parents' case, they browse the independent stores dotted across the centre or ramble along the Boyne River, overlooked by Trim's most recognisable landmark - the majestic castle. When I call upon the town this winter, it is, of course, my first stop.



Trim Castle

“Trim Castle truly is a formidable structure,” my guide Susan Brennan tells me as we explore the three storeys - navigating winding stairs and passageways. “It was built in 1172, shortly after the Anglo-Normans arrived in Ireland. It remains Ireland’s largest stone castle.”

Susan, also originally from Navan, explains that King Henry II granted his baron, Hugh de Lacy, the Kingdom of Meath - along with custody of Dublin.

“The king wanted to keep an eye on another of his barons, Richard de Clare, better known as Strongbow, who he feared would set up a rival Anglo-Norman kingdom elsewhere in Ireland.

So, the king gave Meath to de Lacy to counterbalance Strongbow’s power base in the south of Leinster.”

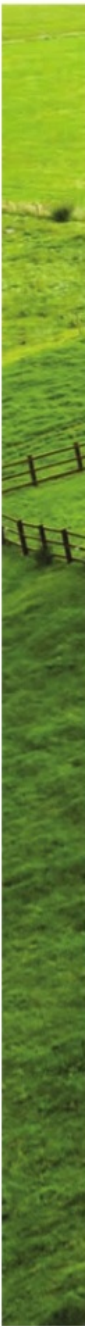
Susan also mentions that the Boyne was key to building the castle here, allowing for transport and trade.

De Lacy’s first attempts were made of wood but were easily attacked by the last High King of Ireland, Rory O’Connor. The replacement was, wisely, made of locally sourced stone. When de Lacy died in 1186, his son, Walter, continued with the construction, which was finally completed by 1220 - and included a 25-metre keep, moat and curtain walls.

“Looking at the castle today, you don’t realise that it was originally



Newtown
Cathedral (c)
Perfect Stills
Photography



white, thanks to the plaster, and had terracotta tiles - it looked terrifying," Susan remarks. "It became a showpiece for the English Crown and the ultimate symbol of Anglo-Norman glory?"

The shape resembles a Greek cross - probably a religious homage to the crusades. Susan notes that the structure is often called King John's Castle - although he stayed in his tent when he visited the town. In 1399, Richard II visited Trim, leaving behind Prince Hal - later Henry V - as a prisoner in the castle.

Trim Castle eventually passed from the de Lacy family to Geoffrey de Geneville - an important French knight and crusader. Subsequent residents include the Mortimers, the Duke of York and the final custodians, the Dunsany Plunketts.

As we visit the former chapel and examine an early example of an en-suite toilet (thanks to the permeating ammonium, this facility had the added benefit of ridding clothes of pesky moths!), Susan mentions that the castle eventually fell into disrepair. There was even an unsuccessful push to demolish it in the 1950s, as many viewed it as a reminder of our oppression. It was returned to the State in 1992 before opening to the public in 2000.

Interestingly, Susan notes that they experience repeat business from Eastern European tourists who feel this is what an authentic castle looks like - and not what is seen in Disney films. Speaking of Hollywood, the castle was utilised in the multi-Oscar-winning epic Braveheart.



Castle Arch
Hotel



Úna Kavanagh on the
Braveheart set with
Mel Gibson



Ireland's oldest
Bridge, Trim



Bective Abbey
c. Perfect Stills
Photography



"The town benefited hugely from *Braveheart* - and continues to do so to this day," Susan reveals. "While most of what was seen on screen was a cardboard set, later destroyed, film fans love visiting. The surrounding areas also doubled as medieval streetscapes of York and London."

I speak to my friend, acclaimed actor and sculptor Úna Kavanagh, whose first experience in the industry was in *Braveheart* as the stand-in and double for the two lead actresses. She also played a small part.

"I had to watch and replicate every move, twitch and line the actress did. I hadn't done anything like it before."

Úna confesses it took her three days to speak to Mel, who eventually broke the ice by saying: "I hear you're a sculptor, Úna - what are you making?"

"I had an absolute ball," she tells me. "It was a staggering

production to be part of. I saw nothing but kindness, joy and artistic prowess in all departments. *Braveheart* was a massive turning point for the Irish film industry - and I have wonderful memories of it."

THE FORD OF THE ELDER TREES

I receive a Hollywood welcome in the Castle Arch Hotel, where I enjoy delicious lunch in a building that was once the Royal Irish Constabulary Barracks - parts of the original structure still exist.

Refuelled, I meet local guide Cynthia Simonet in front of an original Russian cannon captured during the Crimean War. Her tour is, thankfully, more peaceful! Strolling along the newly developed Porchfield - a trail linking the castle with Newtown - Cynthia mentions that her husband and grandson are currently picking up litter in the town.



Tomb of the Jealous Man and Woman



Kayaking Trim
(c) Islander Visual Media



Knightsbrook Roof Terrace - Afternoon Tea

"We recently won the prestigious Tidy Towns award," she proudly reveals. "Everyone is committed to keeping Trim as beautiful as possible."

Cynthia enlightens me on the surrounding vegetation - wild mint, mallow, yarrow and yew and willow trees. It's appropriate that nature should dominate our conversation, as Trim derives from the Gaelic term, 'Ford of the Elder Trees'.

Some of the medieval highlights along the banks include the ruins of the Yellow Steeple, once a part of St Mary's Abbey. Cynthia explains that following a 13th-century fire, the abbey erected a statue of the Virgin Mary that became famous for its healing miracles.

"The statue received national recognition - pilgrims flocked to visit it," she adds, much to my amazement. "Subsequent British monarchs even granted protection to pilgrims."

Despite its celestial powers, the statue fell victim to the religious shifts in Britain under the reign of Henry VIII and was publicly burned in 1538. The abbey didn't survive much longer.

Nearby is Talbot's Castle, which became a diocesan school in the 18th and 19th centuries. There, a young William Rowan Hamilton would begin his educational journey to become a leading mathematician, astronomer and physicist - and a founder of modern linear algebra.

I mightn't command Hamilton's grasp of numbers, but I've made a career from words, so it's surprising to discover that our destination, Newtown, is anything but! It's an atmospheric collection of medieval ruins, including a cathedral, church and two monasteries.

Cynthia brings me to the tomb of Sir Lucas Dillon and his wife, Lady Jane Bathe. Carved into the stone are two figures, a sword lying between them.

"It's known locally as the Tomb of the Jealous Man and Woman," Cynthia says. "They don't touch each other, and the sword separates them."

Cynthia explains that theirs was a complicated marriage - hindered by the presence of another woman. A tale as old as time! While the tomb mightn't celebrate love, it has won the admiration of those suffering from warts.

"Prick your wart with a pin and leave it on the tomb - your wart will fade away as the pin rusts," Cynthia promises with a wink.

DOWN BY THE RIVER

In the luxurious Knightsbrook Hotel, I don't hear of any superstitions; instead, I'm joined by my parents, who are, unsurprisingly, in Trim for the day, and we're treated to beautiful afternoon tea consisting of sandwiches, scones and pastries - washed down by tea and prosecco. My hard-to-please father claims it's the best spread he's eaten in years!

The flute of bubbles and warm welcome we received in Knightsbrook perfectly set me up for my next activity - exploring the town on the river. Ten years ago, James Murray, a local mechanic, launched the Boyne Valley Activities, which offers lessons, guided tours and facilities for experienced kayakers.

"We're in the heart of the Boyne Valley - I was keen to provide visitors with more activities," James tells me when we meet at his premises, etched into the riverbanks. "We're delighted with our success so far."

James mentions the popular 8.5-kilometre route between Trim and Bective, home to the beautifully preserved abbey; today, however, I sample his offering by joining him on a raft. Passing Ireland's oldest unaltered bridge and heading toward the castle, I spy Mother Nature's beautiful creatures cutting fine figures amongst the rushes - cranes, herons, kingfishers and, if my sight isn't betraying me, otters. Below us, James reveals there are lamprey, brown trout and salmon.

"The river is popular with fishing enthusiasts - it's free to use, and there's a catch-and-release system in place."

I ask whether he stands by his decision to launch the business.

"I'm living the dream!" he says - his smile is so broad, I fear we might capsiz. "My wife looks after our café. Being outdoors, you're never bored. We're blessed."

ALL ABOARD!

It seems it's me who's blessed by the greeting I receive from the Slattery family, owners of the award-winning Station House - a magical boutique hotel in the nearby village of Kilmessan. This property's history spans 160 years when it served as a rail junction connecting Counties Dublin and Meath.

The effervescent Thelma Slattery and her husband, Chris, have welcomed guests here since the 1980s, and it has since become a popular wedding venue and a cosy country escape. Recently refurbished, the property consists of 19 bedrooms - including suites in the junction cabin and former station master's living quarters.

I chat to Thelma and Chris' affable daughter Suzanne, who likens her childhood here to that of the Famous Five - constantly larking about the surrounding woods, rivers and fields, picking wild berries or spying on frogs.

"For us, it's important that our guests feel the warmth of a family home," says Suzanne, who now manages the hotel with her sister, Denise.

Across the property, photographs of the original station in its heyday or following a Black and Tan attack stand alongside personal mementoes - including a framed Ottoman cloak purchased by Thelma on a visit to Istanbul. Suzanne loves upcycling antiques and furniture and expertly marries the site's eclectic past with its exciting present. Outside, historic buildings and structures like the original platform, former carriage house and turntable are perfectly



Annual Púca Festival



The Station House

complemented by the recent addition of a garden terrace.

For lunch, Thelma and the chefs treat me to scrumptious smokies in the Platform Bar and Lounge and, for dinner, a steak in their fine-dining Signal Restaurant. When I check out, she gifts me a hamper of her homemade chutneys and jams, made from her own produce with recipes passed on by her late mother - "everyone made their condiments back then".

These kind presents perfectly sum up my visit to the Station House: an experience that fuses the past and present, with family traditions at its core. Oh, and also very sweet!

For more information, visit discoverboynevalley.ie and stationhousehotel.ie.



