

2019 Report from the Westmeath Heritage Officer

The Westmeath Heritage Forum met three times during the year and at the July meeting we welcomed Cllr Louise Heavin as our new Chair. Cllr Andrew Duncan stepped down as Chair but is still a member of the Heritage Forum. We would like to formally thank Former Cllr Una D'Arcy for her hard work and commitment during her term on the Forum.

The following is a brief report on the main projects and activities carried out in 2019.

Arrivals and Departures - Launch of County Westmeath Swift Survey

This project, funded by Creative Ireland, was a collaboration between Westmeath Heritage, Arts and Libraries to celebrate and raise awareness of Swifts, birds which migrate from Africa every year but whose numbers are in decline.

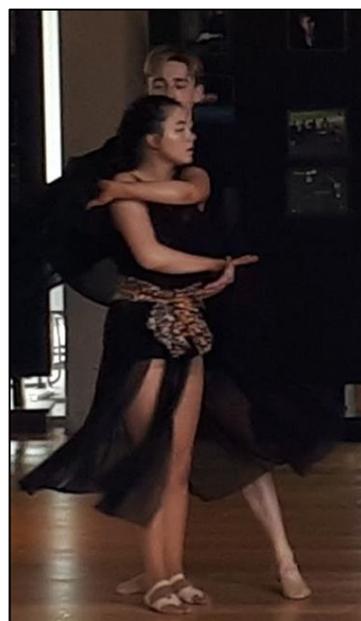


Plate 1: Anton Krastev (BWI), Melanie McQuade, Carol Hayden, Cllr Bill Collentine, Ricky Whelan (BWI) and Tom O'Callaghan (BWI) at the launch of the Westmeath Swift survey Report. Plate 2: Dancers from Dionysus School of Dance performing 'Arrivals and Departures'.

In May 2019 performances by WCC Choir and Dionysus School of Dance narrated and celebrated the lifecycle of Swifts at the official launch of the Report on the County Swift Survey carried out in 2018. The report was launched Mayor of Mullingar Cllr Bill Collentine who also officiated at the prize giving for winners of the Schools' Poetry Competition. The children's poetry was inspired by the life of the Swift. Ricky Whelan from Birdwatch Ireland delivered a talk on Swifts and Richella Duggan from Westmeath Branch of Birdwatch Ireland led a walk spotting Swifts at some of their nest sites around County Buildings.

In the Autumn Schools were invited to take part in another competition to design a logo to celebrate the Swift. Prizes include Swift nest boxes for the winning schools.

Heritage Projects

In 2019 three Heritage Projects were co-funded by the Heritage Council and Westmeath County Council; Westmeath Field names Recording Pilot Project, Recording the Industrial Heritage of Westmeath and County Westmeath Wetland Survey.

Westmeath Field names Recording Pilot Project

In 2018 a pilot project commenced under Action 2.4 of the County Westmeath Heritage Plan 2018-2023 'Initiate and develop a project to record field names in partnership with local communities'. The project was expanded to several more parishes in 2019, with support from the Heritage Council, Westmeath County Council and Creative Ireland. A booklet outlining the scope and methodology of the project was produced and distributed (it is also available on line <http://aengusfinnegan.ie/field-names/>). Project coordinator Dr Aengus Finnegan maintained a project website fieldnames@aengusfinnegan.ie and twitter account <https://twitter.com/NamesField>.

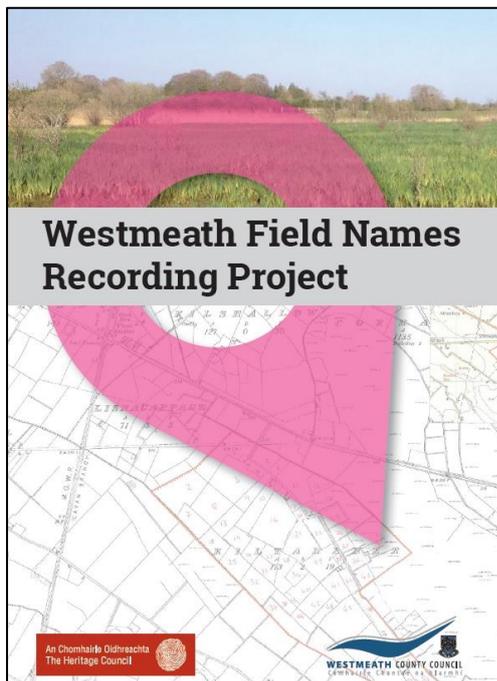


Plate 3: Project Booklet.



Plate 4: Collinstown group at a meeting of Westmeath Field Names Recording Project

In 2019 approximately 700 field names were collected to from 55 townlands in the parishes of Collinstown, Fore, Kinnegad, Ballymore, Mount Temple and Tang. The names of the fields collected were uploaded to Meitheal Logainm.ie and can be viewed here: <https://meitheal.logainm.ie/westmeath-field-names/> Interest in the project extended beyond the County and it featured on *Nuacht*, RTE news website, *Midlands Arts Magazine* and on the line publication *AgriLand.ie*.

Recording the Industrial Heritage of Westmeath

A project to record the Industrial Heritage of Westmeath (Phase 1) was carried out under Action 2.1 of Westmeath Heritage Plan 2018-2023 '...address gaps in existing datasets' (few industrial heritage sites are recorded in National Inventory of Architectural Heritage (NIAH) or the Sites and Monuments Record (SMR) for Westmeath). Recording the Industrial Heritage was also an objective of the County Development Plan 2014-2020.

Archaeologist Antoine Giacometti was contracted to carry out desk-based research on the Industrial Heritage of Westmeath. This involved referring to relevant historic maps and documentary sources, as well as meeting with Local Historical Societies.



Plate 5: Archaeologist Antoine Giacometti presenting at a Heritage Week Event in Kilbeggan

A total of 4,855 industrial heritage sites were identified within the following categories: Transport, Manufacturing, Mills, Extractive, Complexes and Utilities.

Seven industrial heritage sites were selected for further examination, namely: Athlone Woollen Mills, Athlone Workhouse, Gneevebane Limestone Quarry, Locke's Distillery, Moate Textile Mills, Mullingar Railway Station, and Multyfarnham Corn Mills. The inventory and details of the above sites are outlined in the project report, which is available in the Local Studies Section of the Library and online <http://www.westmeathcoco.ie/en/ourservices/planning/conservationheritage/heritageresources/>.

County Westmeath Wetland Survey

This survey was carried out under the Westmeath Heritage Plan 2018-2023; Action 2.1 'Address knowledge gap in existing survey of heritage by implementing a programme of research and surveys...' and the Westmeath Biodiversity Action Plan 2014-2020 Priority Actions: 1. 'Identify core Nature Conservation Sites', 2. 'Identify Nature Development Areas where opportunity for habitat improvement exists' and 39. 'Establish a site inventory of important geological and natural heritage sites outside of designated areas in Westmeath'.

This project also received funding from the Department of Culture Heritage and the Gaeltacht under their National Biodiversity Action Plan Grant Scheme.

Ecologist George Smith was contracted to carry out this desk-based survey to map wetland sites in the county (lakes, watercourses, springs, bogs, fens, bog woodland, riparian and wet woodland etc.). The survey was based on cartographic and aerial photographic sources, as well as the Map of Irish

Wetlands (MIW) (Wetland Surveys Ireland, 2019), the Westmeath Fen Survey (2007) and Peatland survey (2001).

The survey, which has been made available to the Planning Department, provides up to date primary data on 456 wetland sites in the County. Approximately 23% of the land area of Westmeath is wetland and the county has been noted as a national hotspot for fens, with good potential for the discovery of new fens. The survey identified 51 sites of county-scale value for biodiversity conservation. Good examples of wetland habitat types include the transition mire (7140) at Scragh Bog, hard water lake - Lough Owel (3140), and some of the largest areas of active raised bog at Garriskil Bog (7110).

The survey indicated the threats to wetland sites in Westmeath, which include drainage and reclamation for agriculture; peat extraction, drainage and burning, water pollution and invasive species. Acknowledging the threats, the report has outlined several practical recommendations for the conservation of wetlands and priorities for future research. The report will be made available on Westmeath County Council website and in the Local Studies Section of the Library in due course.

In addition to the County Westmeath Wetland Survey, three other projects received funding through the National Biodiversity Action Plan Grant Scheme, funded by Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht and Westmeath County Council; a Habitat Management Plan for Council owned lands around Lough Ennell (SAC) (SPA), a series of Pollinator infomercials on Midlands Radio 103FM, and a Crayfish Plague Awareness and Biosecurity Training event.

Habitat Management Plan for Council owned lands around Lough Ennell (SAC) (SPA)

This project was carried out under Westmeath Biodiversity Action Plan 2014-2020 Actions: 27. 'Enhance publicly owned lands for biodiversity' and 42. 'Conduct an audit of the nature conservation value of Local Authority owned and managed land; identify opportunities for protecting and enhancing biodiversity at these sites'.



Plate 6: Dr Alan Lauder and some of the participants on the Nature Walk at Ladestown 16th November, 2019

Dr Alan Lauder was engaged as Project Ecologist to prepare a Habitat Management Plan for Council owned lands around Lough Ennell (SAC, SPC). These lands are located at Ladestown, Butler's Bridge, Belvedere House, Gardens and Park, Tudenham and Lilliput.

While preparing the Plan Dr Lauder consulted with management at Belvedere House, Gardens and Park. He also met with staff across relevant sections in Westmeath County Council and with LAWCO (Local Area Water and Communities Office).

In order to enhance biodiversity awareness at local level, and to get the views of the local community on their concerns for future management of the sites, Ecologist Dr Lauder led a Biodiversity Walk on 16th November at Ladestown Amenity Area. In December Dr Lauder led the senior classes of St Michael's Primary School, Castletown Geoghegan on a Biodiversity Walk at Lilliput.

The Management Plan highlights issues of concern and prioritises practical actions that should be taken to improve each of the five areas and all sites in general.

Pollinator infomercials on Midlands Radio 103FM

Working in collaboration with Laois and Offaly Heritage Offices, a series of seasonally appropriate pieces Infomercials were scripted by Ecologist Juanita Browne. The scripted pieces were recorded as radio infomercials and broadcasts on Midlands 103 promoting positive pollinator tips and messages on what we can do to help pollinators. They have been and will be aired as appropriate to season in 2019/2020.

These infomercials were organised under Westmeath Biodiversity Action Plan 2014-2020 Actions: 30. 'Promote the use of native plants or horticultural nectar-rich varieties in planting schemes...', 71. 'Organise biodiversity training/information events for community groups' and Westmeath Heritage Plan 2018-2023 Action: 1.6 'Promote and support the implementation of the All-Ireland Pollinator Plan 2015 - 2020'.

Crayfish Plague Awareness and Biosecurity Training Event at Lough Owel

This event was carried out under Westmeath Biodiversity Action Plan 2014-2020 Actions: 71. 'Organise biodiversity training/information events for community groups'; 80. 'Promote Westmeath natural heritage through social media and local media'; 85. 'Promote biodiversity events for the public ...' and Westmeath Heritage Plan 2018-2023 Action: 1.2 'Support and organise conferences, talks, seminars and events on heritage themes relevant to the conservation and promotion of Westmeath's heritage'.

As well as being a popular fishing and amenity site Lough Owel holds the largest population of White Clawed Crayfish in the country. It is one of the most (if not the most) important site for this species remaining in the world. But White Clawed Crayfish populations are threatened by Crayfish Plague, which is spread by non-native species. This project engaged Consultant Ecologists to prepare and host an information session and Biosecurity Training for anglers, other lake users, council staff and interested members of the public.

The training began with a presentation on crayfish and crayfish plague. It then focused on biosecurity measures people should take with a demonstration of same. Each participant took a test and all were successful in attaining their Biosecurity Certificate. There was a visit to the lake shore with an opportunity to see crayfish and identify their features. The event was also supported by Inland Fisheries Ireland (IFI), who provided the venue and Local Areas Water and Communities Office (LAWCO) who provided lunch.

Heritage Week

Over 70 events were held around the County and good attendance was noted across these events, despite some unpleasant weather during the week. A County Guide, Social media and local printed

press featured events around the County. Advertisements ran across the week on *Midlands 103 FM* sponsored by the Heritage Council.



Decade of Centenaries events funded by DCHG

€10,000 funding was received from the Commemorations Unit, Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht in 2019 and this went towards a full programme of events organised by Local Historical Societies, Athlone Castle and Westmeath Libraries.

Built Heritage Investment Scheme

The Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht provided funding of €70,975 for the County in 2019, under the Built Heritage Investment Scheme. Westmeath County Council oversaw the administration of this funding for conservation works to six Protected Structures in the County. The grants awarded ranged from €3,397 - €15,000 and funded building stabilisation works, lime rendering and window repairs.

Historic Structures Fund – Grant Assistance Scheme

The Council also administered a further grant of €25,000 under the Historic Structures Fund, to assist with works to Kilbixy Leper Hospital. The project involved extensive vegetation removal, structural stabilisation and wall repairs.

All-Ireland Pollinator Action Plan

The Heritage Office contributed to the prize fund for the annual Local Authority Pollinator Plan Awards in the National Tidy Towns Competition.

Archaeology Ireland Heritage Guide

The Heritage Offices in Westmeath and Meath supported the publication of a Heritage Guide to ***The route of the Táin Bó Cúailgne in Counties Westmeath and Meath***. Copies of the Guide are available from the Heritage Office.

Candlelit Tales

On 29th November, with support from Creative Ireland, Ballymore Community Centre hosted storytelling company *Candlelit Tales*. The group performed 'Woman King', based on the life and adventures of Queen Maedbh and her role in the Táin Bó Cúailgne.



Plate 8: Candlelit Tales performing in Ballymore

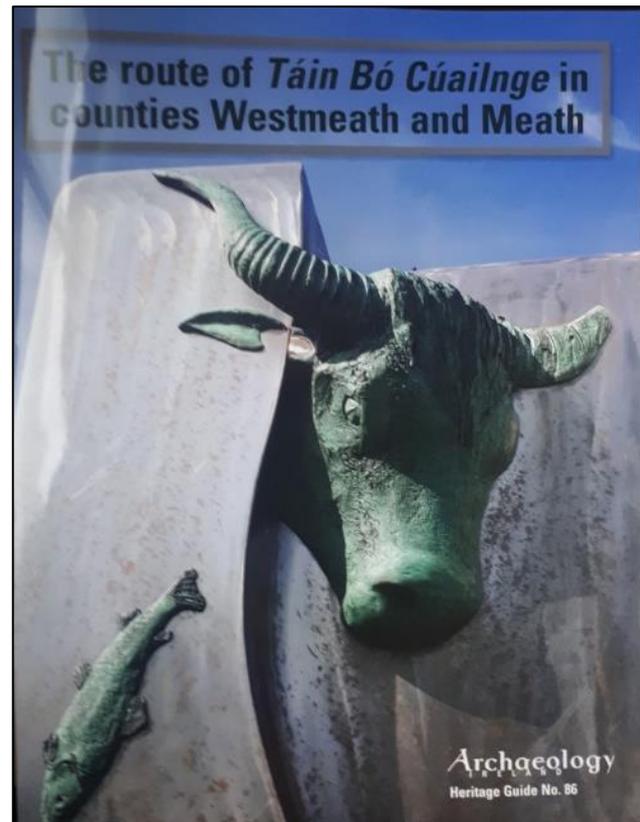


Plate 9: Cover of the Heritage Guide

Melanie McQuade, Heritage Officer January 2020

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