

## 2018 Report from the Westmeath Heritage Officer

The Heritage Officer, Melanie McQuade had a busy year in 2018, which was her first full year in post. The Heritage Forum met five times during the year and assisted with the preparation of a new County Heritage Plan. The following is a brief report on the main projects and activities carried out in 2018.

### Westmeath Heritage Plan 2018 -2023



Consultation on the Heritage Plan commenced in November 2017. Four public meetings were held at locations across the county: Castlepollard, Moate, Mullingar, and Athlone. An outline of the Draft Plan was presented to the Strategic Policy Committee on Planning and Transport in February 2018, prior to the commencement of the second phase of public consultation. A four week period of Public Consultation on the Draft Plan ran until 25th April 2018. Submissions were brought to the Heritage Forum for consideration in May and amendments were made to the Plan, as and where deemed appropriate. The Westmeath Heritage Plan 2018-2023 was adopted by the Elected Members on 23<sup>rd</sup> July 2018. It was published in September and was officially launched by the Cathaoirleach of Westmeath County Council and Michael Starrett of the Heritage Council in Belvedere House, on 14<sup>th</sup> September 2018. The plan is available to download from Westmeath County Council website and hardcopies are available from the Heritage Officer. An Irish language version of the Heritage Plan has been made available (in digital format) and can be viewed here. <http://www.westmeathcoco.ie/en/media/PLEAN%20OIDHREACHTA%20CHONTAE%20na%20hIARMHÍ%2020182023.pdf>

## Heritage Events

### Pollinator Plan Conference, Athlone

The Heritage Office in Westmeath supported the National Biodiversity Data Centre annual Conference, which was held in Athlone in March 2018.

### National Biodiversity Week - Nature Walk Coolure

Westmeath Heritage Office and National Parks and Wildlife Service Ranger Triona Finnen organised a nature walk in Coolure on the Shores of Lough Derravaragh. Many species were spotted during the walk including Marsh Fritillery Butterfly and Hawk Bee Moth.



## Heritage Projects 2018

### Bealin High Cross – digital modelling

A laser survey of the Bealin High Cross, Twyford, near Athlone was carried out by Digital Heritage Age. The survey was an action of the Westmeath Heritage Plan 2010-2015, funded by Westmeath County Council. A new interactive digital model of Bealin High cross is available to view on [Bealin High Cross&nbsp;nbsp;](#)

Digital Heritage Age also did some digital modelling of Sheela-na-gigs (4) in Westmeath. These can be viewed [here](#).



## County Westmeath Swift Survey

A Countywide survey of Swifts, an amber listed species of conservation concern, was carried out, in line with the Westmeath Biodiversity Action Plan: Actions 39\*; 41\*; 42\*. The survey was funded by Westmeath County Council, with support from Local Agenda 21 Environmental Partnership Fund from the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment. The survey was led by Bird Watch Ireland with support from the Westmeath Branch, Tidy Towns groups and other interested volunteers.

- 43 towns surveyed over 34 survey days early May – early August
- 203 nest sites recorded in 15 towns and villages. The highest number of nests was recorded in Mullingar, where 96 nest sites were confirmed.
- This report will be made available on Westmeath County Council website in 2019.



*Volunteers on the Swift Survey in St Loman's, Mullingar*

## Geological Heritage Audit

An audit of Geological Heritage Sites in Westmeath was carried out by Geologists Robert Meehan, Ronan Hennessy, Matthew Parkes and Sarah Gatley, funded by the Heritage Council with support from Westmeath County Council. The initial stage of the project was a desktop study of the County Geological sites (CGS) in Westmeath. This desktop study informed a programme of field work, during which the Geologists visited each CGS across the county. Outcomes:

- The list of Geological Heritage Sites for Westmeath has been revised: 13 sites previously flagged for consideration have either been discounted or combined and three new sites have been included.
- Full Report and survey reports on each site (28)
- Some of these sites are considered to be of national importance as a best representative example of a particular geological feature. Several of the sites surveyed will be provisionally notified to the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) by the GSI for designation as a Natural Heritage Area (NHA).
- The audit of Geological Heritage Sites in Westmeath will inform the County Development Plan and will serve as a working document for use by the Planning

officers of Westmeath County Council. The report includes since it includes recommendations on how to best present and promote the geological heritage of County Westmeath.

- The geological audit report and site descriptions will be uploaded to the Geological Survey of Ireland website: <https://www.gsi.ie> and Westmeath County Council website. The survey data will be added to the heritage maps website: <https://www.heritagecouncil.ie/projects/heritage-maps/>. This will make the information accessible to anyone interested in the Geology of Westmeath.

## Westmeath Field names Recording Pilot Project

A pilot project to record the fieldnames in County Westmeath commenced in 2018, with funding from the Heritage Council and Westmeath County Council. The project was piloted in three parishes, where the field names were recorded by volunteers. Dr Aengus Finnegan, an expert in the Irish language and in place names, co-ordinated the project and was assisted by a lead volunteer in each parish. A project specific record sheet and methodology was designed following discussion with co-ordinators of field name recording projects in other counties. A dedicated website <http://aengusfinnegan.ie/field-names/> and twitter account <https://twitter.com/NamesField> were set up for the project.



Dr Finnegan met regularly with the groups recording field names and more volunteers came forward as the project progressed. Several people from other parishes also submitted records of the names of their own fields and these were added to the data collected. The first records were collected from Taughmon Parish in June and were processed by Justin Ó Glasáin, who created a database to collate all the information gathered. Justin also uploaded the field names to Meitheal Logainm.ie. This website provides a crowdsourcing tool for pooling, storing and sharing data about minor placenames on a national basis.

During Heritage Week Dr Finnegan spoke about the project and the meanings of some of the more interesting names recorded (pictured above). An exhibition displayed maps illustrating some of the field names recorded and people were invited to 'fill in the gaps' if they knew the names of other fields on these maps.

- 43 volunteers collected approximately 725 field names from 64 townlands in three parishes. The majority of names collected are from the parishes of Taughmon in the north of the County and Drumraney in the south.
- Of the names collected c.7% are of Irish-language origin. The recorded field names were uploaded to <https://meitheal.logainm.ie/westmeath-field-names/>

## Historic Graveyards Information and Recording HC and WCC

A project that aimed to update communities on best practice, existing guidelines, and legislation on the care, conservation and recording of historic graveyards was carried out in 2018 with funding from the Heritage Council and Westmeath County Council.

As part of the project an audit was carried out by Antoine Giacometti of 'Archaeology Plan Heritage Solutions' to determine which graveyards have been recorded and to what level of detail. He compiled a list with details of the surveys and where to find them. In July, Antoine Giacometti presented his preliminary findings at the Historic Graveyards Information Day. The report and interactive Google map are now available on the Westmeath County Council Website:

<https://www.westmeathcoco.ie/en/ourservices/planning/conservationheritage/historicgraveyards/> Copies of the Audit Report are available in the local studies sections of Athlone and Mullingar libraries. This report and the interactive map are user friendly references for those interested in finding out about historic graveyard recordings undertaken in Co. Westmeath.

Three Information Events were held at different locations across the County (Mullingar, Ballymore and Athlone) giving local communities the opportunity to attend at least one event in their area. Caimin O'Brien, Archaeologist with the National Monuments Service, DCHG and Ecologist Donna Mullen of *Wildlife Surveys* presented at the information events in June and November. Caimin O'Brien's talks focused on legislative requirements and best practice for the care and conservation of historic graveyards. Donna Mullen spoke about how best to conserve and enhance biodiversity in our graveyards. The information day in June included a field trip to two historic graveyards, to look at issues on the ground. These Information events, and the publicity around them, helped raise awareness of historic graveyards and their value in terms of history, archaeology, biodiversity, genealogy and heritage tourism.

Methods of recording historic headstones were discussed at each of the information events and were the focus of the event in July, when John Tierney of *Historic Graves* gave a demonstration of the methodology he uses (pictured below). In September a dedicated training workshop led by John Tierney in St Owen's Graveyard, Ballymore gave the local community, and several other interested people from around the County, hands on experience in how to record historic graveyards. Those who attended the workshop now have the skills needed to record their local graveyards. The Ballymore Survey has been made available on line <http://historicgraves.com/graveyard/st-owen-s-ballymore/wm-bmre>



**John Tierney and the group in St Owen's Graveyard, Ballymore**

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## **Greenway Biodiversity Project**

A project to raise public awareness of and record the biodiversity along the Old Rail Trail Greenway was initiated with funding from the National Biodiversity Action Plan Fund, NPWS, Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, Local Agenda 21 Environmental Partnership Fund from the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment and Westmeath County Council. During the summer (July – August) Ecologist Goska Wilkowska of Nature's Patch Network, carried out a general habitat survey along the entire route (40 km), with more detailed surveys at several points of interest. On foot of the project an Action Plan will be written outlining how to enhance the biodiversity along the Old Rail Trail and setting out actions on how to work towards making it a pollinator friendly corridor.

All schools in the County were notified of the project and Expressions of interest (EOIs) were sought from those interested in getting involved. Eighteen EOIs were received: 13 from national schools and 5 from secondary schools. Nature walks were arranged with seven local primary schools. Transition Year students in four schools located near the greenway (in Moate, Athlone and Mullingar) were given workshops on identification of species and were brought on walks along the route to identify flora and fauna and discuss biodiversity issues. One of these schools will carry out a more detailed project in the spring.

Walks and talks were arranged with four local community groups: Mullingar Tidy Towns, Athlone Tidy Towns, Rosemount Tidy Village and Streamstown Tidy Village.

A follow up survey in spring 2019 will help to inform a Biodiversity Plan for the greenway - outlining a series of Actions to enhance biodiversity along the route.



***Biodiversity Walk along the Old Rail Trail, Streamstown***

## Creative Ireland – European Year of Cultural Heritage 2018

To celebrate European Year of Cultural Heritage two projects were carried out in conjunction with Creative Ireland. Primary schools in the County were invited to take part in a **children's art competition**. Children were asked to create a poster celebrating our European heritage. Lots of creative entries were received and a selection of these was displayed in exhibitions held in Branch Libraries in Mullingar, Athlone and Castlepollard during Heritage Week. In connection with European Year of Cultural Heritage Celebrations during Heritage Week 'The Big Dig' (a simulated archaeological excavation that gives children an opportunity to experience what it is like to be an archaeologist) took place in Athlone and in Mullingar.

The overall winner of the art competition was Rian Williams from St. Tola's National School, Killulagh, who won for his school a visit from 'The Big Dig'. (Rian's poster is pictured below). Class winners were: Odhran McDermott, Junior Infants, Scoil Eoin Naofa, Ballymore; Annabelle Durkin, Senior Infants, St Fintan's, Lismacaffrey; Joey Dunne, First Class, St Paul's National School, Athlone; Fionn Leslie St Second Class, Fintan's, Lismacaffrey; Aoife O'Connor, Third Class, St Mary's, Raharney; Sarah Holland, Fourth Class, St Feichin's National School, Fore; Leon Doyle, Fifth Class, Castlepollard Parochial School, and Niamh Corcoran, Sixth Class, St Fintan's, Lismacaffrey. They have received prizes including family passes to the Hill of Uisneach, Belvedere, Athlone Castle, Dún na Sí Heritage and Amenity Park, Fore and a trip on the Viking Boat. The Heritage Officer would like to thank the venues for sponsoring these great prizes.



The second event to celebrate European Year of Cultural Heritage was a collaborative project between Westmeath County Council, Meath County Council, Kildare County Council, the Irish Peatland Preservation Council (IPCC) and the Dutch Federation for Conservation of Irish Bogs. **'Peat Crossing Borderlines'** was a two day event on 28<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> July 2018. On Saturday 28<sup>th</sup> IPCC hosted Professor Matthijs Schouten, the founder of the Dutch Foundation for the Conservation of Irish Bogs, the Dutch Ambassador and the Cathaoirleach of Kildare County Council. The following day two field trips were arranged, firstly a visit to Scragh Bog in Westmeath, which was the first of several sites purchased by the Dutch and given as a gift to the Irish people. It is now in the care of the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) and is a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and is accessible to the public via a boardwalk. The group was led around Scragh Bog by NPWS Ranger Triona Finnen, before moving on to visit Girley Bog, Co. Meath.



*The group on their visit to Scragh Bog*

## Heritage Week

Over 60 events ranging from wildlife walks to archaeological talks were held around the County. Good attendance was noted across these events, helped no doubt by the good weather. Advertisements ran across the week on *Midlands 103 FM* sponsored by the Heritage Offices in Wesmeath, Offaly and Laois. Social media and local press also featured events around the County.

A promotional banner for National Heritage Week. The top section features the text "NATIONAL HERITAGE WEEK" in bold pink letters, followed by a stylized pink logo of a deer head. To the right, it says "An Chomhairle Oidhreachta The Heritage Council" in pink, with a pink fingerprint icon. Below this, a blue banner reads "Over 60 events across the County". The bottom section is a collage of nine photographs showing various heritage events: a man holding a book in a field, a group of men in a room, a person in a red hat working with a large object, a person in a red shirt in a forest, a group of people at a table, a person in a red shirt in a field, a person in a red hat in a forest, and a group of people in a room.

Melanie McQuade January 2018.