

Skibbereen Walking Trail

1. The Square

Skibbereen Town Square was, in the 19th Century, known as Market Square. Here in 1847, the body of an unnamed boy, taken for lifeless, was placed in a 'parish coffin' and conveyed for burial to the Abbey Cemetery. There, as he was lowered into the pit the youth regained consciousness, and was able to walk unaided from the grave.

The following year, one Thomas Guerin, also believed dead, was at the age of three years, retrieved alive from the same communal pit. Tom was destined to live on as the most celebrated Famine survivor in West Cork until his second and final interment in 1910.

2. The Home of Jerry Crowley, North Street

In this building lived Jeremiah Crowley. He was an apothecary, but is referred to as Dr. Crowley. Jeremiah Crowley survived the famine and in this building he, O'Donovan Rossa and others founded the Phoenix National Literary Society. Out of this society later developed the Fenian Movement.

As you pass along North Street, you will notice the numerous porches which lead to the old quays and stores on the River Ilen. An old corn store at the end of Fallon's porch was used as a government depot and at a later stage as an auxiliary workhouse.

3. The Becher Arms Hotel, North Street

Lord Dufferin and G.F.Boyle stayed here in February, 1847. They had come from Oxford to ascertain for themselves the true state of famine conditions in Skibbereen.

Dufferin and Boyle purchased an "immense basket-full of loaves." The starving of the town soon learned of their purchase. They surrounded the hotel. "At first we sent down to the door, but the rush was so great, that the scheme was impracticable, and it only remained to throw it out of the window."

4. The O'Connell Meeting, Curragh Hill Euphoria

Daniel O'Connell held a monster Repeal meeting on 22 June 1843 at Curragh Hill which rises above the level lands of the Ilen valley, directly opposite this spot. Contemporary accounts of the numbers of people present to hear O'Connell's case for repeal of the Act of Union with England vary from 75,000 upwards.

5. St. Fachtna's De La Salle, North Street

The failure of the Public Works Programme

Roadworkers Invade Skibbereen.

On Wednesday, September 30th, 1846 between 800 and 1,000 roadworkers marched on Skibbereen. They were employed on the Public Works Relief Scheme north of the town. Wages were low, about 8d a day, and often workers had to wait weeks for their money.

In front of this building, soldiers primed and loaded as the roadworkers approached on the road

which passed behind the school. For four hours, the demonstrators remained here. When asked to disperse, their constant reply was that "they might as well be shot as not".

6. Windmill Hill

The Workhouse System

In the distance can be seen the high walls of the Skibbereen Union Workhouse and Fever Hospital. The workhouse system was designed to ensure that only the really destitute would seek admission. The workhouse was built to accommodate 800 people, but at the height of the famine it was grossly overcrowded.

Mainly unclaimed victims from the Workhouse were buried in an adjoining Paupers' graveyard.

7. Chapel Yard

On this site stood an old chapel. Here, during the famine years there was a watch-house which was originally build as a shelter for grave-watchers.

In February 1847, Elihu Burritt, an American visitor, described this watch-house: "...and into this noisome sepulchre, living men, women and children went down to die; ... we found it crammed with wan victims of famine, ready and willing to perish."

It is not known how many famine victims are buried here.

8. The Auxiliary Workhouse at Levis' Quay

Response to Overcrowding

This building was used to provide extra accommodation. A.G. Stark who visited Skibbereen towards the end of the famine, tells us:

"I did not visit any of the poorhouses; indeed, the shrill sound of female voices that reached my ears as I passed one of them - Swanton's Store - as if nothing reigned within, except discord and pain rendered the invitation to enter anything but desirable."

9. O'Donovan Rossa

Emigration a Solution?

Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa was one of a family of four. The blight affected the family fortunes. His father found work on the Public Works, took ill in March 1847 and died. In May 1847 the O'Donovan family were evicted. Rossa came to work here for his cousin's husband while his family emigrated to the U.S. in 1848.

As you go through the Main Street car park, you will have passed through the site of Copperinger's buildings, yet another auxiliary workhouse.

10. Townshend Street

Death on the Street

An Inquest of April 8th, 1848 into the death of an unknown famine victim found at this spot, records "starvation" as the certified cause of death. In Skibbereen, the very first meeting in Europe of "The Temperance Society" was held in 1817. A Temperance Hall stood on this site from 1833-1964.

11. Abbeystrewery Church, Bridge Street

This beautifully proportioned Church (built 1890), is in fact the second to occupy this site. The square tower, however, dates from the original (1827). The present Church was built during the incumbency of Rev. Canon James Goodman. He is the subject of the Memorial Arch at the gateway to the grounds. Canon Goodman won national recognition as a collector of countless Irish traditional melodies, now deposited in Trinity College Library, Dublin.

12. J.W. Clerke

J.W. Clerke was manager of the Skibbereen branch of the Provincial Bank. On February 6th, 1847, as secretary of the Relief Committee, he wrote to the Commissary General, Sir Randolph Routh, that over the next four weeks they were planning to feed approximately 8,000 people per day. Clerke kept a time service in Skibbereen and was a keen amateur astronomer. His daughters became world authorities on astronomy.

13. The Poor Law Union Dispensary, Bridge Street

The town had a dispensary in 1824, serving the medical needs of over 21,000 people. Dr. Donovan, visiting this building in December, 1846 recorded that he ... "scarcely entered it when a clamorous crowd rushed up the stairs."

14. Charity Soup House, The Steam Mill, Ilen Street

Local, National and International Aid

The Committee of Gratuitous Relief established a Charity Soup House in what was then the newly built Steam Mill in October 1846. The soup was to be issued daily and huge numbers were fed. By February 1847, the Committee had received many subscriptions, some being local, others from Cork and Dublin and still more from England.

15. Bridgetown

An Eyewitness Account

James Mahony, the artist, best described the conditions in this part of town ... "there I saw the dying, the living and the dead, lying indiscriminately upon the same floor, without anything between them and the cold earth, save a few miserable rags upon them."

Bridgetown then consisted of about half a mile of street with thatched houses on each side. Many of the houses left empty after the Famine were demolished.

16. Abbeystrewery House & Auxiliary Workhouse at Deelish

In local folklore this house is still referred to as "The Abbey Hospital." During May 1847 Dr. Donovan demanded that prisoners who were in fever be removed to this hospital. Across the river from this house is Deelish Pier, the site of another Auxiliary Workhouse.

Dr. Donovan's letters to the newspapers and medical journals give very vivid particulars of the economic, social and public health emergency which existed in Skibbereen. It was he, perhaps, who more than any other person helped to focus world attention on the plight of Skibbereen in the 1840's.

17. The Famine Burial Pits Abbeystrewery Cemetery

It is probable that there are between 8,000 and 10,000 Famine victims buried here.

According to Lord Dufferin, burials up to February 1847, were carried out in a very haphazard fashion ... "In one corner there was an acre of uneven freshly-turned earth ... The bodies had been daily thrown in, many without a coffin, one over another."

During the 1990's - one hundred and fifty years after the Great Famine, a major refurbishment was carried out on this site by the local community.

Acknowledgement

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