



www.brendanharding.blogspot.com

small WORLD

A kind of travel column

Lost towns and found saints

It's surprising what you'll find right on your doorstep. On the banks of the River Nore in County Kilkenny, travel writer BRENDAN HARDING discovers a gem at Jerpoint Park, where history and tradition bursts to life

ONCE UPON a time, in the dark ages of my education, I had a history teacher. This teacher's idea of punishment for my inability – or perhaps unwillingness – to learn verbatim the chronological timeline of the kings of England was to have me copy, by hand, the complete 12-page chapter from the book – twice!

The result of this wrist-aching and futile punishment was this: not only did I not learn the dates in question, but I was soundly infected with an aversion to learning any historical dates, facts or figures for a very long time to come.

To this day, I still find it difficult to control my attention span, as I follow in the wake of some well-meaning guide as they lead me through the transept or chancel of yet another ecclesiastical masterpiece; listing dates and names which, to my uneducated mind, are akin to the mumblings of a caller at a Sunday night bingo hall.

But then, very rarely, something happens and I am lucky enough to meet a person who has the ability, through sheer enthusiasm and plain language, to part the earth and bring history bursting to life. Joe O'Connell is one such man.

As we walk his windswept lands at Jerpoint Park, just outside Thomastown in the county of Kilkenny, Joe stops and leans on his stick. "I'm privileged," he says, "to be the custodian of this place and to make sure that it's here for the next generations to come." And I can see he means it.

For Joe, along with his wife Maeve and their two children Annabelle and Nicholas, Jerpoint Park is their home. However, unlike most regular homeowners, the family have been bestowed with a treasure trove of history buried in their very backyard and, what's more, they've opened it to the public.

In the year 1200, a town was born here on their lands. It was called Newtown Jerpoint and served as a trading centre on the newly-built toll bridge over the River Nore. The town was mainly inhabited by tradesmen, craftsmen or merchants, engaged in buying,



selling and exchanging their wares on this busy thoroughfare of mediaeval commerce.

The town thrived for a further 600 years and then, as suddenly as it had arisen, it disappeared. It was as if a hand had swept the board of life and left the landscape clean, except for the remains of a stone tower and an ample church.

But the town has not disappeared completely, and with a little imagination and Joe's guidance, the town springs to life. Every hillock and mound, every hollow and pile of stones has a story. "If you follow this line," Joe says, pointing with his stick, "you can see that this was a street running from east to west." And he was right. 1,200 years after its foundation, the street is still clearly visible. At its edges, the boundaries of houses and farm plots are traced in the earth, discernable by the raised platforms, now covered in spring grass. "And this is another street running from north to south. The two streets meet at the market square, where they'd sell their animals and any produce they had."

The land has another surprise, one I wasn't expecting. In the cemetery beside the ruined stone church, where headstones lean at awkward angles beside those of the most recently interred owners of the land, Joe pointed to the largest of the flat tombs. "What do you see?" he asked. Etched in the stone, I could make out the shape of a man lying on his back, his hands open in a giving manner. Over each shoulder, a small circular face peered back at me. I outlined my thoughts as he smiled wryly. "This is the tomb of St Nicholas," he pronounced, as if he was introducing me to another member of his family.

St Nicholas was the bishop of Myra in Turkey, where he was buried after his death in the 4th Century. During the crusades, the returning knights rescued his remains from the advancing Saracen armies and carried them to Bari in Italy, where they were reburied. Legend has it that two knights removed the remains once again and carried them first to France and then here, to the furthest part of the Christian world, where they would be safe forever.

If the legends are to be believed, this large stone slab, lying in a windswept field in the county of Kilkenny, is the last resting place of one of Christianity's best loved saints. It was a lot to take in.

Back at the house over hot tea and delicious scones, Joe and Maeve chatted like old friends. A mother and her young son arrived and joined the conversation, clearly impressed by all they had seen. The couple explained that their vision for Jerpoint Park is not all about history. For a family day out, there are pony and trap rides, nature walks, fishing on the river and even sheep dog demonstrations. "Would you like to see one?" Joe asked.

Outside the house – itself with a long and intriguing history – the sight of a man as he called a string of commands to a crouching sheepdog, who in turn herded a flock of white geese along the driveway, only added to the surreal nature of the place. The face of the young boy who had joined us in the tea room said it all. You just don't know what surprises lie waiting on your doorstep, until you go looking.

GETTING THERE

Jerpoint Park, Thomastown, Co Kilkenny is located 2km south-west of Thomastown. Traveling south from Thomastown, turn right at Goatsbridge Trout Farm for 100m.

CONTACT

www.jerpointpark.com
www.jerpoint.ie
 Tel: +353 (0)56 7793186

ACTIVITIES

Jerpoint Park is a unique experience of country living, heritage and traditional activities in a very special destination. Guided tours of the lost town of Newtown. Sheepdog demonstrations. Angling on the River Nore as a solo or family activity – rods and tackle available for hire. Fun and adventure can be enjoyed in the gardens, woodland trail or miniature toy farm. Enjoy a river walk by the banks of the Nore. Delightful tea rooms in a period setting.