



CONNEMARA SPIRITUAL TRAIL

Connemara's stunning landscape is home to a wide and diverse range of interesting sites with a spiritual or ecclesiastical theme. Many of the region's early settlements have survived thousands of years. The monks associated with some of the often isolated sites lived their lives on the edge of what was a maritime 'Highway' stretching from North Africa to Scandinavia. It was these monks who brought many spiritual traditions to Ireland.

You will find a sample of some of these sites in this Connemara Spiritual Trail, but this is just the tip of the iceberg in terms of early Christian and Medieval sites in Connemara. You may come across others in your travels which stand as valuable symbols of the history and heritage of the region.

Please note that an Ordnance Survey map would be useful if you are visiting a number of the sites. Care should be taken as some sites can be overgrown and difficult to access. Parking is not always available, so take care not to block roads or entrances and please remember to leave the gates as you find them.

PILGRIMAGE SITES:

Máméan, Recess

Máméan is the most important Patrician site in the area. Legend has it that St. Patrick spent time here on one of his journeys through Ireland. There is a long tradition of pilgrimage. The site encompasses two holy wells, a number of "beds" or pilgrim stations, St. Patrick's bed and a rock altar. Of more recent origin are the beautiful Stations of the Cross, the statue of St. Patrick and the small chapel.



This site is on the Western Way and access is from either the Inagh Valley/Recess side or the Maam side.

Pilgrimage dates: Saint Patrick's Day, Good Friday, and the 1st Sunday in August.

St. MacDara's Island, Carna

A wonderful island site off the coast of Carna which is associated with local Saint, MacDara. This early Christian church site contains a well restored church, evidence of enclosures and a number of other buildings and cross slabs. St. MacDara is very much associated with seafarers and an old tradition had the sailors dipping their sails as they passed the island.

Access is by boat, and normally only served on Pilgrimage day. Some local boatmen, however, may take you over at other times. Pilgrimage date: 16th July.

St. Caillin's Well, Keeraunmore



This holy well is situated in Keeraunmore in Ballyconneely. It is associated with St. Caillin who was a local saint and, like St. MacDara, has had a long affinity with seafarers.

The well has been a popular place of pilgrimage for centuries, and is mentioned in O' Flaherty's history of 1684. Around the well are a number of penitential stations, one of which is known as St. Caillin's Bed.

Also associated with St. Caillin is Chapel Island not far offshore from this well. This island contains the ruins of an early Christian chapel.

The holy well and penitential stations is now only visited on the saint's day, November 13th.

CHURCH SITES OF NOTE:

Inchaghoill, Lough Corrib

This island can be reached by regular ferry (May to September) from both Oughterard on the south shore of the lake and Cong on the north shore. Little is known of its early history but it contains the ruins of two churches, St Patrick's Church and Templenanevee, or the church of the saints. Also contains a number of cross inscribed pillars, and cross slabs. There are other structures of interest on the site.

For information on the ferry operators from Cong and Oughterard, see www.corribcruises.com

Moyrus, Carna

This is a small church dedicated to Saint MacDara with some interesting architectural features including the south doorway, with good detailing of a carved figure and plant motif. There are a number of windows including a fine Eastern facing window. The church is surrounded by a modern graveyard. There is a wonderful beach just beyond the site.

Cartron, Moyard

This church is rather poorly preserved, but has a glorious window in the west wall. This would have originally have been a twin light, round-headed window with a small circular opening above. There is a cross slab nearby, now reused as grave marker. The cemetery also contains the grave of Oliver St. John Gogarty, the 20th century Irish writer and statesman who wrote the acclaimed 'Gulliver's Travels'. The church has very fine views of the surrounding landscape and lake.

Lemonfield, Oughterard

As with most of the early Christian sites this church is situated in a graveyard. The church is medieval and is possibly on the site of St Cummin's early Christian monastery. There are a number of architectural features, including a doorway in the south wall and windows on other walls. There is also a later transept which has a twin light window with a round window above, similar to that at Cartron. The site is now very overgrown by ivy, but it has spectacular views over Lough Corrib.



Knock, Inishbofin Island

This is the best known of the two church sites on the island of Inishbofin. The ruins of this medieval church are located in the East end and the site overlooks a small lake known as Church Lake.

The main features are a shallow arched doorway in the south wall and a number of windows including a large round headed one in the east wall. Surrounding the church are a number of features including holy wells and cross slabs, and a bullaun. Bullaun was the name given to a deep hemispherical cup hollowed out of a rock which can be commonly found at early Christian sites.

The site is associated with St Colman who, according to tradition, was the Irish Bishop of Northumbria. He left Lindisfarne, after the Synod of Whitby, and moved first to Iona before coming to Inishbofin Island. He founded his monastery in 665, reputedly on this site. His feast day is the 8th of August. There is a fine beach not far from site.

Inishbofin is served by a regular ferry service. For details see:
www.inishbofinislanddiscovery.com

Cashleen

This small medieval church is also known as the *Church of the Seven Daughters*. A holy well nearby is also dedicated to them. While a number of holy wells and at least one other church is dedicated to the daughters, very little is known about them. There are various stories and legends about the girls, but the site does not provide evidence to support any of these.

The site is magnificent overlooking the sea with most of the off shore islands visible. There is a very fine doorway with a pointed arch in the north wall; there is also a well preserved window in the east gable. This window has an altar below it and there are two aumbries in the corner. An aumbry was a cabinet in the wall of a church or in the sacristy which was used to store chalices and other vessels. Before tabernacles became the norm, an aumbry also held the Host.

Kilbrickan, Rosmuc



This is a small church in ruins most likely dating from the late medieval period. Associated with a local saint, Briocáin, there are few features here other than a doorway in the south wall with a roughly dressed segmented arch. The east wall contains a flat headed window. A number of aumbries are also to be found here.

Within the area of the church there are the remains of a second building which may have been a house for the priest and a holy well. As is the case with most of the other church sites, the church is contained in a graveyard. There are fine views from the site.

HOLY WELLS:

Mweelin, Kylemore

This well within Connemara National Park, is now enclosed in a 19th century well house, which was built by Mitchell Henry to supply water to Kylemore Castle. Associated with Saint Maol or Maol Roc, it is visited little but situated in a beautiful location.

Rusheennamanagh, Carna

This well is known as Tobar Muire, and is found on a by road which leads to the sea. A natural spring feeds a rounded pothole. There is much evidence of recent use and the site contains a statue of the Virgin Mary. There is a nice beach just beyond the well.

Glenagevlagh, Leenane

On the shore of Killary Harbour this well is dedicated to St Joseph. It surrounded by a low dry stone wall and there is a small concrete cross marking the well. It was much frequented in the past and there are beautiful views of the sea and mountains. The well is now dry but long ago the water was said to cure problems with the eyes.

Kilkieran

This fine well is situated just above the cemetery in Kilkieran. The well is beautifully stone lined and set in a concrete pavement. There is a small shrine containing modern statues. Above this well, and reached by a clearly defined path, is the ruin of a small structure associated with Saint Ciaráin. A white cross marks the structure and there are great views over the harbour and islands.

MODERN CHURCHES OF NOTE:

Kylemore Memorial Church, Kylemore

This is one of the most exquisite churches in Ireland and was built by Mitchell Henry as a memorial to his wife. It has been beautifully restored and contains many fine features including good 19th century stained glass, a fine ceiling and wonderful carvings. Described as a cathedral in miniature it can be visited as part of the Kylemore Abbey tour. For further details see: www.kylemoreabbeytourism.com

St Joseph's Church, Clifden

The largest church in Connemara, it was built in the mid 1800s and contains many fine details. The present decoration including the fine stained glass windows are mostly from the Clarke studios in Dublin, set up by Joshua Clarke, father of the famed artist, Harry Clarke.

Christ the King, Tully Cross

This Romanesque-style church has simple but well designed and presented features. The most notable feature of the church is the window behind the altar. This was designed by Harry Clarke at the request of Oliver St. Gogarty, who lived for some time at the nearby Renvyle House, now a hotel.

Cill Einne, Spiddal

Amongst the finest Hiberno-Romanesque churches in the west it was designed by William A. Scott at the beginning of the 20th Century. It is very much in the Celtic revival style with many of the well-known artists from that period working on the project. These included Catherine O' Brien who was responsible for the fine stained glass and Ethel Rhind who carried out the Stations of the Cross in opus sectile. Both of these were part of the famous An Tur Gloine. There are also fine windows dedicated to the Morris family.

Kilmilkin, Maam

This is a small country church which has a wonderful stained glass window by Evie Hone, one of Ireland's finest stained glass artists of the mid 20th century. It depicts a miracle attributed to St. Brendan the Navigator, where a young ancestor of the O'Malley family was restored to

health. The window was installed in 1950 and was presented by the O'Malley family of Kilmilkin in memory of their brother John Francis O'Malley, a noted Harley Street Surgeon.

Church of the Immaculate Conception, Oughterard

The original church was destroyed by fire but was reconstructed in the 1930's. The church is worth a visit to see the famous Harry Clarke stained glass window, depicting the Crucifixion, behind the main altar. The altar was made from Connemara marble.

Suggested further reading:

A Guide to Connemara's Early Christian sites by Anthony Previte
Connemara Part 1 Introduction and Gazetteer by Tim Robinson