

# MORE IRISH COMMUNITIES NOW SETTING THEIR SITES ON CONSERVATION!

Since 2016, the Heritage Council has encouraged communities around Ireland to take a more active role in maintaining monuments in their area through the 'Adopt A Monument' scheme, which will be reviewed next year to measure how well it is meeting the needs of the community, best conservation practice and the aims of the Council. Report by Peigín Doyle.

**T**he stone fort of an Iron Age chieftain, a 17th century Jacobean Church, an 18th century walled garden and a 19th century ore-crusher building – different structures in different centuries but all four are just a small part of our priceless legacy of heritage buildings. The question arises then how to look after so rich a heritage, especially with many other demands on public funds.

Involving people and communities in protecting local monuments has been central to the work of the Heritage Council since it was founded in 1995. The Council set up the 'Adopt A Monument' scheme in 2016 to encourage communities to 'adopt' or take an active role in the maintenance of a monument in their area.

The programme gives support, advice, specialist expertise and ongoing guidance on the ground. There are small money grants as well but the real focus is on advice and expertise. To provide a community support network, the Heritage Council funded the appointment of heritage officers in the local authorities.

## NURTURING COMMUNITY OBJECTIVES

For Virginia Teehan, CEO of the Heritage Council, the structure of the scheme has allowed it to work very successfully in nurturing communities and letting them set their own objectives rather than having them 'dictated from above'.

"The inclusivity of the scheme is really valuable as it allows the local voice to be heard and we must listen to that voice and follow the local lead," she says. "Local authority heritage officers are crucial to driving projects, by facilitating the three-way networking between the community, the local authority and the Heritage Council," according to Teehan.

The scheme will be reviewed next year to measure how well it is meeting the needs of



*"Local authority heritage officers are crucial to driving projects, by facilitating the three-way networking between the community, the local authority and the Heritage Council" – Virginia Teehan, CEO, Heritage Council*

the community, best conservation practice and the aims of the Heritage Council. So, just how well are local authority heritage officers working with community groups to meet the aims of the scheme?

"We want the public to come to us with a monument they may want to adopt. When we decided to set up the scheme, we issued an 'open call'

asking people if they wanted to adopt a monument. People are interested in learning about places and protecting them, and we are trying to tap into the new spirit of community archaeology,” explains Ian Doyle, Head of Conservation at the Heritage Council.

### OPEN DIALOGUE PROCESS

Since the scheme was launched by the Heritage Council in 2016, 150 entries have been received, with 13 sites across the country selected to become adopted monuments, while another open call for applications is due to be made in September 2020.

In assessing applications, the Heritage Council looks at the monument, what needs to be done and the community group. “We look to see if there is a well-organised, dynamic group. It is about the community and community ownership of the project,” Doyle says.

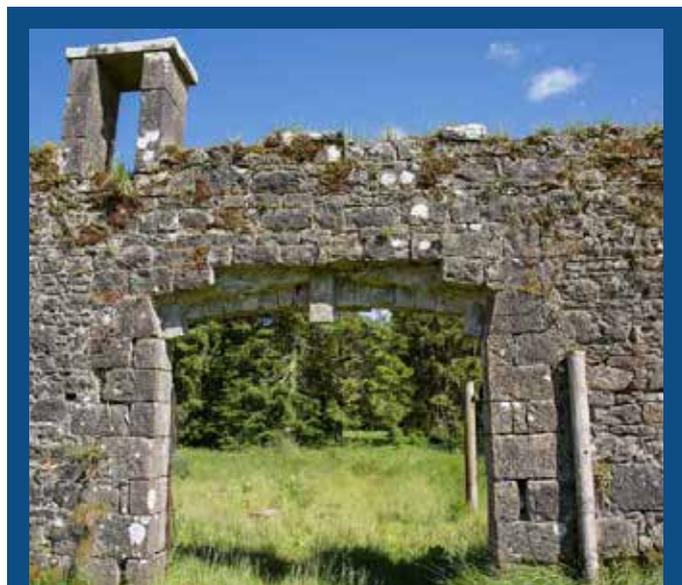
“We check if it’s an interesting monument, in addition to the group’s aims and vision. Tourism potential is a factor as well. A lot of well-organised groups are thinking of creating tourism resources especially along the Wild Atlantic Way,” he notes.



Community workers involved in the conservation of Kilmurry Lime Kiln in Co. Clare. (Pic: Kilmurry Tidy Towns)

“We discuss with each group what they want to do and what they are capable of. It is a two-way process. There is a plan for every site we take into the scheme, which can include training, conservation, research and investigation. We always talk to the council heritage officer and get their views on the local context.

“There is open dialogue between the county council, heritage



### CASE STUDY 1

#### Mountbellew Walled Garden, Co. Galway

*The Mountbellew Heritage and Tourism Network wanted to conserve the high limestone boundary walls and restore some of the original features of the abandoned 18th century walled garden in their village. The heritage officer advised them on the wall phase and after three years they were accepted by ‘Adopt A Monument’ scheme.*

*The initial discussion stage was able to blend the aims of the many different groups and perspectives within the Network ranging from conservation, history and tidy towns to tourism. The Mountbellew committee secured LEADER funding through Galway Rural Development for a feasibility study on how the work should progress.*

*The study helped the Network accept that full restoration would take years and consider all the aspects of the project at the planning stage. Seven local Transition Year (TY) students did the physical work of uncovering early footpaths and the foundations of old glasshouses, the remains of tiled floors and pipework and the pineapple house in the centre of the garden. The students’ work was done to professional standards under the guidance of Galway Heritage Officer Dr Christy Cunniffe. He arranged training in 3D computerised modelling and in how to handle and catalogue small finds.*

*The students’ work exposed what was on the site and showed people its potential. It is expected that more adult volunteers will join in doing the physical work as the old garden is gradually revealed and in time restored.*

officers, Heritage Council and the community. The best projects are ones that the community group, the heritage officer and the Heritage Council work on together,” according to Ian Doyle.

This preliminary open discussion means there is seldom disagreement between the heritage officers and the community on what the adopting group should or can do. There is the potential for friction if a group decides to go it alone and may not understand the implications of what they wanted to do, according to Dr Christy Cunniffe, Galway Community Archaeologist. **ADHERING TO BEST PRACTICE**

Cunniffe was seconded by the Galway Heritage Office to support and monitor an ongoing project to conserve a long-abandoned 18th century walled garden in Mountbellew in East Galway, which was selected for the scheme.

“A community group may want to clean up a holy well in their own way but do not realise you have to give two months’ notice to all the authorities. It could find itself in breach of the National Monuments Act. You could end up destroying the thing you want to preserve. The first port of call is that you have to talk to the heritage officer,” he says.

The bulk of support from the heritage officer and the Heritage Council comes in the form of advice, experience, knowledge of best professional practice and legal requirements. The amount of grant money can be small or none at all.

However, the fact that a group has been accepted by the ‘Adopt A Monument’ scheme gives it a status that can persuade

other funders or agencies to regard it as serious, soundly-based and a good candidate for their own funding.

It is an absolute requirement of the scheme that groups and their work adhere to professional best practice and that the landowner gives a letter of permission. Based on his experience on the ground, Dr Cunniffe says he would thoroughly endorse ‘Adopt A Monument’ as “a new model of working”.

Communities and people can benefit from learning skills like surveying, cataloguing finds, research and greater knowledge of a local building and its history. There is physical exercise, social contact and a sense of confidence in the group.

Local authorities get conservation of their property if they own the monument, many of which do so. They have a community in their area that is dynamic and coming together and contributes to the creation of new skills within the community, notes Ian Doyle.

### ASSISTING LOCAL AUTHORITIES

While the scheme is built around a bottom-up initiative, there is potential for community groups to assist their local authorities in dealing with strategic priorities like responding to climate change, according to Christine Baker, Heritage Officer with Fingal County Council.

A heritage officer could use their regular contacts with local heritage groups to stimulate awareness and interest in adopting a site that is damaged by sea erosion.



### CASE STUDY 2

#### Church of the Rath, Killeshandra, Co. Cavan

*Killeshandra Tidy Towns Committed wanted to adopt the rare Jacobean-style Church of the Rath, so called because of an earlier ringfort on the site.*

*The present church, which is owned by Cavan County Council, dates from the 1600s and went out of use in the 1840s. A community story-telling evening aided by ‘Adopt A Monument’ allowed people to discuss the future of the church, as did talks with the local authority heritage office and the Heritage Council.*

*Through the ‘Adopt A Monument’ scheme, the group were able to secure funding for specialist advice on architectural conservation and to set down a plan in 2016, for the long-term conservation of the roof. In 2017, LEADER funded the erection of a protective roof over the church, guided by a conservation architect.*

*Cavan County Council also helped the group secure funding from the Department of Culture Heritage and the Gaeltacht and Culture Ireland as well as the Heritage Council.*

## HERITAGE COUNCIL

To ensure the ongoing conservation of monuments, after the phase of funded community activity has ended, the Heritage Council's CEO favours future maintenance and monitoring by local authorities.

"Such sites can be decided on a case-by-case basis as some would be national monuments under the care of the Office of Public Works, but there is a definite role for local authorities," according to Virginia Teehan.

And she hopes to see that this co-operation between Heritage Council and local authorities continues to grow, by expanding the role and resources of the heritage office within each local authority.

To nominate a local monument visit [www.heritagecouncil.ie](http://www.heritagecouncil.ie) to download an application form.

### SEVEN MONUMENT SITES SELECTED FOR 2019

*The following seven sites were selected for 'Adopt a Monument' scheme in 2019:*

- **Esker Church, Lucan, Co. Dublin:** Esker Church is an 11th century ruined church in Lucan, associated with St Finian. The Society for Old Lucan aims to further study and survey this site and raise awareness locally of this historic monument.
- **Moygara Castle, Co. Sligo:** Moygara Castle is one of the finest surviving Gaelic castles in the northwest. It was built by the O'Gara family close to Lough Gara in Sligo. The Moygara Castle Research and Conservation Group want to preserve and protect this site for future generations.
- **Kilkerrin Battery Fort, Co. Clare:** The battery fort was built in the early 1800s to repel a threatened invasion by Napoleon's Forces. The Labasheeda Projects Group wants to conserve and promote this landmark on the shores of the Shannon Estuary in County Clare.
- **The Graves of the Leinstermen, Co. Tipperary:** Located in the Arra Mountains overlooking Lough Derg in Tipperary, little is known about this prehistoric monument which commands spectacular views over the surrounding landscape. The Arra Historical and Archaeological Society are eager to survey and research the site and raise awareness about the story of the site.
- **Malin Well Old Church, Co. Donegal:** Set in the landscape of Malin Head, Ireland's most northerly point, the Malin Well Old Church was adopted by Malin Well Conservation Group who hope to further research the story of the site, and to work with experts to ensure the site is conserved and protected for future generations.
- **Kilmurry Lime Kiln, Co. Clare:** Lime kilns were once ubiquitous across Ireland in the 19th century, but many have been lost and destroyed over recent decades. Kilmurry Tidy Towns adopted this lime kiln, located in the heart of the village, to carry out essential conservation works and to make the monument a focal point for the community.
- **Moated Site, Ballyogan, Brandon Hill, Co. Kilkenny:** A moated site is hidden deep within forestry plantation on the slopes of Brandon Hill. This site has been adopted by Tyndall Mountain Club who wants to understand more about the site, through survey, research and investigations.



*Aerial view of Moygara Castle in Sligo – one of the seven sites selected in 2019.*