



LAOIS HERITAGE TRAIL



## INTRODUCTION

Laois, one of Ireland's most interesting counties, is also one of its least discovered. To help visitors and long-time residents explore Laois, this guide offers information on the sites that make up the Heritage Trail.

If you are interested in castles, the Rock of Dunamase is the place to begin. Wildlife lovers and sportsmen should visit the Fly Fishing and Game Shooting Museum. Architecture buffs might want to start at Emo Court, while those who love fine handwork should head straight for the museum in Mountmellick.

At several of these sites, works from the county's Sculpture Trail prove that the creative energy that shaped Laois is as vibrant as ever.

This Heritage Trail is only the beginning. More than 1,000 monuments and places of historical interest have been identified in Laois. All through the county, the people at the sites, museums and tourist offices are there to help you pursue your interests. So set off down one of the county's winding roads. The more you explore Laois, the more you will find.

### Photos:

Laois Heritage Office; The National Inventory of Architectural Heritage, Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government; Patrick Casey.



Comhshaoil, Pobal agus Rialtas Áitiúil  
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An Chomhairle Oidhreachta  
The Heritage Council



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### An Action of the Laois Heritage Plan

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Information on tourism and accommodation in Laois at [www.laoistourism.ie](http://www.laoistourism.ie)



## A BRIEF HISTORY OF LAOIS

The first people in Laois were bands of hunters and gatherers who passed through the county about 8,500 years ago. They hunted in the forests that covered Laois and fished in its rivers, gathering nuts and berries to supplement their diets. Next came Ireland's first farmers. These Neolithic people cleared forests and planted crops.

Around 2500 BC, the people of the Bronze Age lived in Laois. They produced weapons, tools and golden objects. Visitors to the county can see the remains of their hill forts at Clopook and Monelly.

By the first century AD, Laois was part of the Kingdom of Ossory. The county was divided into seven parts, which were ruled by the Seven Septs of Laois: O'More, O'Lalor, O'Doran, O'Dowling, O'Devoy, O'Kelly and McEvoy. When Christianity came to Ireland, holy men and women founded religious communities in Laois. Between 550 and 600, St. Canice founded Aghaboe Abbey and St. Mochua founded a religious community at Timahoe. An early Christian community lived at the Rock of Dunamase.

After 1150, the continental Church began to assert its authority over the independent churches of Ireland. The wooden buildings of the early Christian churches gave way to stone monasteries. The Augustinians and Dominicans established themselves at Aghaboe, while the Cistercians took over an older religious community at Abbeyleix.

Around this time, the Normans seized control of most of Ireland. In Laois, the fortress on the Rock of Dunamase was part of the dowry of the Irish princess Aoife, who was given in marriage in 1170 to the Norman warrior Strongbow. Advancing Normans surveyed the county from wooden towers built on top of earthen mounds, known as mottes. They also built stone fortresses, such as Lea Castle, just outside Portarlington. Several of the county's towns were first established as Norman boroughs, including Castletown and Durrow. From 1175 until about 1325, Normans controlled the best land in the county, while Gaelic society retreated to the bogs, forests and the Slieve Bloom Mountains. The early 14th century saw a Gaelic revival, as a burst of force from the Irish chieftains caused the Normans to withdraw. The Dempseys seized Lea Castle, while Dunamase came into the ownership of the O'Mores. Tower houses belonging to Irish chieftains survive at Ballaghmore and Cullahill, both decorated with Sheila-na-gigs.

In 1548, English warriors confiscated the lands of the O'Mores, and built "Campa," known as the Fort of Leix, today's Portlaoise. In 1556, the town was named Maryborough and Laois named Queen's County in honour of the

English queen, Mary Tudor. The queen also issued orders for the plantation of Laois with English settlers. By 1610, most of Laois's Irish nobility had been transported to Connacht and Munster. Catholic tenants and landless labourers remained behind and served the settlers who now owned the land.

During the English Civil War, Cromwell's forces raged through Laois, destroying tower houses that still belonged to Catholic landowners. After Cromwell's death, Laois became a refuge for outcasts and political refugees. In 1659, a group of Quakers settled in Mountmellick, while a group of Huguenots were given refuge in Portarlinton in 1666.

What followed was a period of relative calm. Anglo-Irish landowners enclosed the land and built fine houses, including Castle Durrow and Emo Court. Fine Georgian houses came to line the streets of prosperous towns. In 1836, a branch of the Grand Canal stretched to Mountmellick, further stimulating industry in that bustling town.

The Famine of 1845-49 devastated the county. Crop failures in the 1860s and 1870s, along with increasing levels of debt, caused tensions between the county's landlords and their tenants to grow worse. Michael Davitt and Charles Stewart Parnell travelled through Laois recruiting for the Land League, asserting tenants' rights and opposing the landlord system. From 1880, a Land War convulsed the county, as members of the Land League challenged the authority of the landlords. Evicted tenants and other destitute people filled the county's workhouses. After the Land Act of 1881, tenants and landlords formed an uneasy truce.

By the foundation of the State in 1922, Celts and Vikings, Gaelic lords and Norman knights, monks and Huguenots, landlords and land leaguers, had all left their mark on this county. The new Ireland gave the county its old name back. Queen's County was once again County Laois.





## THE DONAGHMORE WORKHOUSE AND AGRICULTURAL MUSEUM

Visitors to the Donaghmore Workhouse and Agricultural Museum see the rooms of an Irish workhouse almost exactly as they appeared in the late 1800s.

The Donaghmore Workhouse was built to house the most desperate people of County Laois. Paid for by a tax on local property owners, the workhouse was deliberately made as unattractive as possible so that its only residents would be those who had lost all hope.

People who entered the workhouse suffered the ultimate shame. Once inside, they gave up their clothes and put on rough workhouse uniforms. Families were split apart as boys and girls went to their dormitories, while adults were sent to others. Living conditions were grim. Inmates slept on rough mattresses of straw, covered with rags. The only toilet facilities were large tubs in centre of dormitories. Inmates worked at tasks during the day, then ate their meals in total silence.

By the time the Donaghmore Workhouse opened in 1853, many of the poorest of the area had already perished or emigrated. The workhouse was probably only filled for a few years before it closed in 1886.

In the early 1920s, the "Black and Tans" used the buildings as a barracks. Then, in 1927, the Donaghmore Co-Operative Society adapted the workhouse to serve local farmers. Part of the workhouse was donated to the community as a place to tell the history of the area. Today committed volunteers bring that history to life through the Donaghmore Workhouse and Agricultural Museum.

For opening hours check [www.donaghmoremuseum.com](http://www.donaghmoremuseum.com)  
 Phone: 086 8296685 Email: [info@donaghmoremuseum.com](mailto:info@donaghmoremuseum.com)  
 Facilities: Car/coach park, toilets





## AGHABOE ABBEY

Aghaboe Abbey was founded in the sixth century by St. Canice. The abbey grew into a major centre of learning, commerce and agriculture. The astronomer St. Virgilius, also known as St. Feargal, was its abbot in the 700s before he left Ireland, going on to become Bishop of Salzburg.

After the original monastery burned in 1234, it was rebuilt as an Augustinian priory. Today a Church of Ireland, which dates from the 1700s, stands where that priory once stood. This church appears to contain some fragments of the Augustinians' buildings. On the east side of the doorway, visitors can see a carved limestone head that dates from the Middle Ages. The small belltower at the northwest corner of the church has the same proportions as one from the 1200s.

The fine ruins on this site belong to a Dominican friary founded in 1382 by Finghan MacGillapatrik, Lord of Ossory. The church, which was conserved by the local community, contains a beautifully carved three-light window in the east wall. Monks would have entered through the doorway in the north wall, which led from the cloister. The doorway in the west wall, through which the public would have entered the church, dates from the Middle Ages.

Near Aghaboe Abbey the tree-covered remains of a Norman motte can be seen. The Normans would have built a wooden tower on top of this steep-sided mound of earth, where they could store their arms and from which they could keep a lookout for potential attackers.





## DURROW

The great oak forests that once covered ancient Ireland gave Durrow its name, which comes from Daurmagh Ua nDuach, or the Oak Plain of the people known as the Uí Duach.

The Normans adapted that name to Durrow when they founded a borough on the Erkina River in the early 1200s. This small, self-governed settlement was so successful that in 1245, King Henry III granted Geoffrey de Turville, Bishop of Ossory, the right to hold a yearly fair in Durrow, as well as a market every Thursday.

The way Durrow looks today is largely due to the Flower Family, Viscounts Ashbrook, who gained ownership of the town in the early 1700s. They built Castle Durrow and granted permits for many of the fine Georgian and Victorian houses that still line Durrow's streets.

Over the next two centuries, Durrow prospered. Stagecoaches rattled over the bridge and stopped at the nearby coach house. Local businesses sprang up, including a brewery, a flour mill, a malting enterprise and a factory that made high quality bricks and tiles.

Years of development meant that by 1926, only a fraction of Durrow's forests remained. In recent years local people have worked to preserve Durrow's beautiful setting, as well as its architecture. Today, visitors can enjoy woodland walks as well as strolls down Durrow's fine streets.

Information on Durrow [www.durrowvillage.com](http://www.durrowvillage.com)

Visitor facilities: car parking, shops, restaurants, hotels, accommodation.

For information on the Leafy Loops walks phone 057 873 6257





## IRISH FLY FISHING AND GAME SHOOTING MUSEUM

The Irish Fly Fishing and Game Shooting Museum explores 300 years of hunting and fishing in Ireland. It is a treat for anyone interested in country life.

The museum was founded in 1986 by Walter Phelan, who comes from a family devoted to fishing. He has restored and adapted a traditional farmhouse to house a collection of vintage rods, reels, guns, tackle, tools and specimens of birds and fish.

Exhibits tell the stories of hunting and fishing from two angles. They show ingenious devices — such as hollowed cow horn, used to hold mayflies for fishing — made by ordinary people who hunted and fished to supplement their diets.

The museum also displays the exquisite guns, rods and tackle used by the well-to-do, who hunted and fished for sport. An entire room is dedicated to Garnetts & Keegans, an Irish firm that supplied fine fishing and hunting equipment worldwide. One of the highlights of the museum is its collection of flies, some of which date to the early 1800s.

Visitors to the museum can enter reconstructions of a Gamekeeper's Room from the 1800s and a Gunsmith's Workshop from about 1900. Other displays are housed in the Fishing and Game Shooting Room, the Trophy Room, the Clay Pigeon Room, the Boat House, and the Hatching Room. An ever-expanding Library contains information on all aspects of fishing and hunting in Ireland.

**For museum opening hours contact Walter Phelan**

**Phone: 057 873 6112 or 086 315 3088**

**Visitor facilities: car park, toilets, guided tours by appointment**







## HEYWOOD GARDENS

Heywood Gardens is the site of two garden types: the great park created by Frederick Trench in the late 1700s and the small interlocked formal gardens created by Sir Edwin Lutyens and Gertrude Jekyll in the early 1900s.

After Trench built Heywood House in 1773, he landscaped the area between his house and the village of Ballinakill. Inspired by his Grand Tour of Europe, Trench moved hills, dug lakes, planted trees and placed follies. His results were considered to be the most exquisite romantic landscape of their time.

In the early 1900s, Colonel Hutchenson Poe hired the eminent architect Sir Edwin Lutyens to create formal gardens around Heywood House. The gardens were probably landscaped by Gertrude Jekyll. Although the house is gone, the gardens are among the best surviving example of Lutyens' work in Ireland.

The formal gardens contrast with breath-taking views of the landscape. A walk lined with pollarded lime trees leads to a formal terrace overlooking the surrounding countryside. Another terrace overlooks one of the lakes dug by Trench in the 1700s, where it is possible to spot moorhens, kingfishers and other waterbirds.

In the sunken garden, circular terraces descend to an elliptical pool, where small statues of turtles gaze inquisitively at the grand fountain. On the top level a loggia, roofed with red tiles, includes an inscription taken from the writings of Alexander Pope. In the wall that surrounds the garden, each circular window frames a spectacular view of the landscape so carefully constructed by Frederick Trench.

**Gardens owned by the Office of Public Works**  
**Visitor Information [www.heritageireland.ie](http://www.heritageireland.ie)**  
**Phone: 057 873 3653 or 056 772 1450**  
**Open daily during daylight hours. Facilities: Car park**





## ABBEYLEIX

The original town of Abbeyleix grew up near the River Nore, on the site of an early Christian abbey. The town developed under the protection of a twelfth century Cistercian monastery. In 1562, Queen Elizabeth granted the abbey and associated lands to Thomas, Earl of Ormond. Over the next century, the village grew to contain 52 families. However, regular flooding from the River Nore made the town an unhealthy place to live.

When the de Vesci family acquired Abbeyleix in 1750, they decided that the town would have to move. The de Vescis levelled the old town of Abbeyleix and moved its people to a new planned town. Abbeyleix prospered in its new location and by 1837, had grown to 140 houses. Local farmers traded at the Market House and business premises lined its crescent. Over the next century the main industries included flour mills, a brewery, and a factory that made carpets used all over the world, including on the luxury liner Titanic.

Lady de Vesci looked after poor widows in the Alms House on Temperance Street. The destitute were admitted to the Workhouse, which opened in 1842.

Today visitors can admire the fine period buildings that remain in Abbeyleix, including the Church of Ireland, Baptist Meeting House, Wesleyan Meeting house, and Catholic Church. Those wanting to learn more about life in the mid-1800s can visit the restored Sexton's House. For the full story of the town, go to the Abbeyleix Heritage House in the old Patrician North School.

**Abbeyleix Heritage House** [www.heritagehousemuseum.com](http://www.heritagehousemuseum.com)  
**Phone: 057 873 1653** **Email: [abbeyleixlaois@eircom.net](mailto:abbeyleixlaois@eircom.net)**  
**Facilities: Car park, toilets, coffee shop**





## TIMAHOE

An extraordinary carved doorway makes this the most elegant round tower in Ireland. Carvings of human heads, with flowing beards and moustaches, decorate the main entrance, about five metres from the ground. Smaller carvings decorate a second storey window. No one knows why the monks at Timahoe carved such a beautiful doorway. They may have used it to display a sacred relic to pilgrims, or the elegant decoration could reflect the monastery buildings that have disappeared from this site.

The round tower was built some time in the 1100s, on the site of a religious community founded by St. Mochua around 600. The tower rises almost 30 metres high and is more than 17 metres wide at its base. Its walls are nearly 2 metres thick. Inside there are five different floors, which were reached by ladders.

The tower made it easy for travellers to find the monastery. Bells would be rung to call the monks to prayer, and to signal when the monastery was under attack. When the alarm sounded, monks would grab all the treasures of the monastery and scramble into the tower. Once they had drawn up the outside ladder and bolted the door, the thick stone walls kept them safe.

The tower stands in a lovely setting across a footbridge that crosses the Bauteogue river. Nearby, the former Church of Ireland is now used as a library and a ruined 17th century castle contains elements from a 15th century church.

A sculpture in the tower grounds was commissioned by the local primary school. Entitled Mochua's Desk, it depicts St. Mochua and the three pets in a famous story about the saint: a rooster who woke him, a mouse who nibbled his ear if he fell asleep while praying, and a fly that stopped at the word Mochua stopped on when reading his prayers.

**Tower grounds open daily during daylight hours. Facilities: Car park**





## THE STRADBALLY STEAM MUSEUM

The Stradbally Steam Museum celebrates the steam engines that once ruled Ireland's railways, built its roads and worked its farms.

Inside the museum, visitors can see a variety of steam-driven engines. The collection includes the Mann Steam Cart, built in 1918. This small steam traction engine cleared and ploughed land. The Fowler, another steam traction engine, built in 1936, was used in roadworks and to power stone crushers. Also on display is an elegant black steam engine commissioned by engineer Sam Geoghan in 1912. This small engine hauled raw materials around a track inside the Guinness Brewery. It took barrels of stout to the wharf on the Liffey, where they were put on boats and taken throughout the world.

Not far from the Steam Museum, the Steam Preservation Society operates a narrow gauge heritage railway in the grounds of Stradbally Hall. This track, about one kilometre long, was built between 1969 and 1982 by volunteers. As with the feeder railways of rural Ireland, which once linked into the main railway lines, the gauge, or width, of this track is three feet. The steam locomotive that pulls the train was constructed for Bord na Móna in 1949.

Rides on the narrow gauge railway are available to the public on Bank Holiday Sundays and Mondays from May to September. Each August Bank Holiday Weekend the Society hosts a Steam Rally in the grounds of Stradbally Hall.

**For museum opening hours and running times for Heritage Railway  
Check [www.irishsteam.ie](http://www.irishsteam.ie) or phone 057 864 1878 or 086 389 0184  
Facilities: Car parking, toilets**





## THE ROCK OF DUNAMASE

Stunning views of the surrounding countryside make the towering Rock of Dunamase a strategic place to build a fortress. Through the centuries, warriors have fought to control this limestone outcrop. The first known settlement on the rock was Dun Masc, an early Christian settlement that was pillaged in 842 by the Vikings. When the Normans arrived in Ireland in the late 1100s, Dunamase became the most important Anglo-Norman fortification in Laois. It was part of the dowry of Aoife, the daughter of Diarmuid Mac Murrrough, King of Leinster, when she was given in marriage to the Norman conqueror Strongbow in 1170. When Isabel, the daughter of Strongbow and Aoife, wed William Marshal, Earl of Pembroke, Dunamase was part of her marriage portion. It is likely that Marshal carried out some building on the rock when he lived there between 1208 and 1213, though most of the castle is earlier.

The castle was successively held by Marshal's five sons before passing to the Mortimer family through Marshal's daughter, Eva de Braoise, who passed the castle to her daughter Maud on her marriage to Roger Mortimer. All the Mortimer's lands, including Dunamase, were forfeited to the Crown in 1330. Shortly afterwards, the castle appears to have passed into the hands of the O'Moores and been abandoned. Local tradition has it that the castle was besieged and blown up by the Cromwellian generals Hewson and Reynolds in 1651. While there are no contemporary records of these events, it is probably the best explanation for the ruinous state of the castle as we see it today.

In 1795, Sir John Parnell, chancellor of the Irish Parliament, tried to develop a residence and banqueting hall at Dunamase. All the late medieval features such as windows and doors were taken from other ruins and added to the castle at this time. When Parnell died, his son allowed the buildings to fall into decay. Today the ruins on the Rock of Dunamase are managed by the State. Archaeological excavation and conservation work by the Office of Public Works have ensured that the Rock of Dunamase will survive for further generations to explore.

**Open daily during daylight hours. Visitor facilities: Car park**





## EMO COURT

Emo Court is a country villa designed by architect James Gandon (1743-1823), best known for his great public buildings, including the Custom House and the Four Courts in Dublin.

The house is a magnificent example of the neo-Classical style, reflecting the architecture of ancient Greece and Rome. The house is surrounded by beautiful gardens and parkland which were first laid out in the 18th century and contain formal lawns, a lake and woodland walks with many very fine trees and shrubs.

Gandon designed Emo Court in 1790 for John Dawson, the First Earl of Portarlington. When the earl died in 1798, the house was incomplete. No more work was done until the 1830s, when the second earl completed the garden front and commenced work on the interior. Starting in 1860, the third earl oversaw building of the copper dome on the rotunda, as well as work on the interior and construction of a bachelor wing.

When the last of the Portarlingtons left Emo Court in 1920, the house fell into decline. The Jesuits purchased the house in 1930 and used it as a seminary. In 1969, the order sold Emo court to Major Cholmley Dering Cholmley-Harrison who began the laborious process of restoring Emo Court and its grounds. Today Emo Court and its gardens are owned and managed by the Office of Public Works.

**Gardens open every day during daylight hours.**

**House open during summer, phone 057 862 6573 or check [www.heritageireland.ie](http://www.heritageireland.ie) for details. Facilities: tea-rooms, car park, toilets**





## PORTARLINGTON

In the late 17th and early 18th centuries, Portarlington was the Paris of the Midlands, a place where French, rather than Irish or English, was spoken on the streets. French Huguenots, escaping persecution in their native land, shaped the culture and the architecture of this bustling Midlands town.

Portarlington was founded in 1666 by Henry Bennett, Lord Arlington, on land located in a bend of the River Barrow. Arlington later sold the lands to Sir Patrick Trant, a supporter of James II. After William of Orange defeated James II at the Battle of the Boyne (1690), the lands containing Portarlington were seized by the crown and then given to Henri Massue, Marquis de Ruvigny, Earl of Galway and later Baron of Portarlington. Ruvigny decided to offer the town as a refuge to the Huguenots. These French and Flemish protestants had been forced to flee their homes after the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, which eliminated the right to practice their religion.

By 1702, 500 Huguenots lived in Portarlington. Some were noblesse d'épée, minor aristocrats who traditionally entered military service. The vibrant community they created spread into Offaly and the surrounding countryside. Portarlington became known for its Public Classical Schools, where the children of well-to-do families were taught the French manners considered desirable in ladies and gentlemen.

Today visitors can view houses built in the Huguenot style on French Street and Patrick Street. Not far from Portarlington are the ruins of Lea Castle, a Norman fortress that was seized and held by the O'Dempseys until the mid-1600s, when Cromwell's troops destroyed it.





## MOUNTMELICK

Once known as the Manchester of Ireland, Mountmellick is a town of fine buildings and the home of a uniquely Irish textile art, Mountmellick Work. The foundation of the town was laid by members of the Society of Friends, also known as Quakers. In 1659, William Edmundson settled in Mountmellick and started a tannery. Other Quakers set up malting, brewing, spinning and weaving enterprises. Weaving became one of the town's major industries. By the mid-1700s, Mountmellick was a leading centre of textile production in Ireland.

Pims was the town's main industrial firm. Its enterprises included malting, brewing, baking, tanning, and the manufacture of glue, snuff and candles as well as wholesale and retail businesses.

Mountmellick experienced a boom in 1836, when a branch of the Grand Canal opened, linking the town with markets throughout Ireland and beyond. The rich architectural heritage of Mountmellick tells the story of the town's growth. The oldest surviving dwelling is John Pim's house on Harbour Street, built in 1686. Other fine houses from the 1700s reflect the wealth of the town's first merchants. A number of houses on Lord Edward Street were built in the 1800s for the staff of the Grand Canal Company.

Mountmellick Work, a white-on-white embroidery technique, was invented in the early 1800s by Johanna Carter. Wanting to give Irish women a way to earn money, she set up a small school in Mountmellick to train them in this craft. Today, a fine community-run museum displays examples of Mountmellick Work.

**Museum and Heritage Trail information at**  
[www.mountmellickdevelopment.com](http://www.mountmellickdevelopment.com) Phone: 057 862 4525  
 Email: [info@mountmellickdevelopment.com](mailto:info@mountmellickdevelopment.com)  
**Museum facilities: Car park, restaurant, toilets**







## POET'S COTTAGE

This replica thatched cottage gives visitors a sense of what daily life must have been like for most people in rural Ireland in the 1800s.

Ireland's cottages evolved over centuries. While each community had its own variations, most cottages were one storey high and one room wide. The windows and doors were located on the side walls, with a chimney stack along the roof. The walls of the cottage were built of local stone or mud; the roof was thatched with reeds or straw.

People both worked and relaxed near the kitchen hearth. They used the crane to hoist pots of food for cooking over the open fire. Near the warmth of the fire, families sewed, knitted and mended clothes and tools.

Rooms beyond the hearth wall were considered to be "above" the kitchen, while those at the other end were "below". These rooms were used as bedrooms, storerooms and occasionally as parlours. In early cottages, animals were sometimes kept in a room at one end of the cottage, while people slept in a bedroom on the other side.

The cottage is named after Patrick Ryan, a poet who lived in Camross between 1750 and 1825. He wrote about the natural beauty and the people of this community.

The absolute simplicity of Irish cottages is what makes them beautiful. The stone walls and thatched roofs look completely at home in the countryside, just as this cottage nestles into its flower garden in the heart of Camross.

**For Museum opening, phone Mick Dowling 087 410 6493  
Slieve Bloom visitor information [www.slievebloom.ie](http://www.slievebloom.ie)**









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