

# Interpretation Plan for Fort Protector, Portlaoise

October 2018



**CUMANN OIDHREACHTA LAOISE**  
**LAOIS HERITAGE SOCIETY**

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# Interpretation Plan for Fort Protector, Portlaoise

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# Interpretation Plan for Fort Protector, Portlaoise

## SUMMARY

Fort Protector sits in the heart of Portlaoise, surrounded and shrouded by the development of the town. It has an important history yet is currently little-known and its significance is under-recognised.

Local people, notably the Laois Heritage Society, propose that Fort Protector is an opportunity for heritage-led regeneration with two, equally important, objectives:

1. local people will know that Portlaoise was built around the first Plantation Fort and feel a stronger sense of local identity and pride,
2. more visitors from Ireland and overseas will come to Portlaoise.

Interpretation, in the widest sense, will be a vital element in any such initiative.

This Plan reviews the strategic background, both local and national, and its implications for interpreting Fort Protector. It also considers target audiences, particularly in the context of Ireland's Ancient East, a national tourism proposition that is highly relevant to Fort Protector in terms of both geography and content.

Fort Protector has a great story that is pivotal in the history of Ireland and the British Empire and resonant for many countries. The theme for the interpretation is clear: *The Plantation of Ireland started here. It was a turning point the history of Ireland and of the British Empire across the world.*

The remains of Fort Protector present considerable challenges as a location for telling this story. Although some improvements can be envisaged this will never be a 'step back in time' immersive visitor experience. However, the presence of the Fort could be a trigger for exemplary storytelling, involving collaboration with the wider community including the Old Fort Quarter Festival.

This Plan recommends a phased approach to developing a suite of interpretation in a range of media appropriate to a wide audience. The first phase should be integrated with the re-landscaping of Fitzmaurice Place adjacent to the Fort. This phase will comprise temporary and permanent fixed interpretation with associated Augmented Reality, themed landscaping and a community celebration of completion. It will be stand-alone project that also forms the basis of future developments. Development of guided walks and events should continue alongside this. Medium to long term possibilities, many of which can only be implemented as and when more spaces become available, will focus on creating an audio-visual or VR experience, an exhibition and an extended programme of events, including arts events.

## **1.0 BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT**

This draft Tourism Interpretation Plan was funded by Laois Heritage Society. It was developed by Susan Cross of TellTale in collaboration with Michael Parsons and Teddy Fennelly of Laois Heritage Society, and Catherine Casey, Heritage Officer for Laois County Council.

### **1.1 The brief**

The purpose of this study is to consider how the development of interpretation at Fort Protector could contribute to the well-being of the local community and building tourism in Portlaoise.

Local people, spearheaded by the Laois Heritage Society, have suggested that Fort Protector could present an opportunity for heritage regeneration that could reaffirm the identity and sense of place of the Portlaoise. This could contribute to attracting more visitors and boosting tourism-related expenditure in the town. Improving the presentation and interpretation of Fort Protector would be an important element in increasing its attractiveness and profile.

Laois Heritage Society have been strong advocates for Fort Protector and have formed successful partnerships with local bodies to increase support for its conservation and restoration. The Society works closely with Laois County Council and has good and developing links with heritage and tourism organisations in Portlaoise and the county.

The development of Fort Protector will take time, but plans are already in place for re-landscaping the surroundings of the Fort. It is, therefore, particularly timely and urgent to review the fixed interpretation around the Fort. This should determine whether new installations should be included as part of these physical works and if so how they could be the foundations of longer term evolving strategic approach to interpretation.

This document reviews the context of Fort Protector, identifies the interpretation potential and suggests directions and priorities for interpretation development in the short, medium and long term.

## **1.2 Methodology**

Susan Cross visited the site and held two workshops with representatives of Laois Heritage Society in July and August 2018.

We are grateful to Michael Parsons and Teddy Fennelly of Laois Heritage Society, and Catherine Casey, Heritage Officer for Laois County Council for their time and assistance in creating this Interpretation Plan.

## 2.0 THE STRATEGIC CONTEXT

This Interpretation Plan is informed by various local and national strategies and initiatives that will determine the opportunities and the potential for developing Fort Protector. The most of important of these and what they mean for the interpretation are considered in this section.

### 2.1 Local plans and strategies

#### 2.1.1 The Fort Protector Conservation Plan

The Laois Heritage Society, with Heritage Council funding, commissioned a Conservation Plan for Fort Protector. The first two phases of this were produced by Lotts Architecture in 2015 and 2016 and the final part will be completed in 2018.

Phases One and Two of the Conservation Plan contain much detailed information relating to the Fort, including a detailed chronology that will be a valuable reference resource for interpretation developers. Phase Two contains the results of several detailed site surveys. Most importantly for interpretation planning the Conservation Plan addresses:

- the heritage significance of the site
- the condition of the physical heritage resource
- potential locations for interpretation

The Conservation Plan makes the heritage case for the significance of Fort Protector and argues for its restoration:

*'A well conserved and appropriately presented Fort Protector would be a unique heritage site. Few towns in Ireland have a history so closely bound up with the Tudor conquest of this country. The development of a heritage site would create a direct link to that history. ... Restoration of the site could fundamentally change the perception of the town. The restored site would give greater meaning to the name 'Port Laoise' and the town could become synonymous with this momentous period in Irish history'.*

**Relevance to interpretation:** This is a unique site with a story that has national significance.

Phase Two of the Plan includes a detailed consideration of the interior of the Fort and the challenges it poses for presenting the Fort to the public. It suggests positive ways forward: *'Clearance of the fort interior would enable the scale and character of the fort to be appreciated. Geophysical archaeological surveys can help to build up a picture of how the interior was originally configured, including the form of the internal bank, position of a well, etc.'*

**Relevance to interpretation:** The scale and character of the fort are not visible at present. Further work is needed to ascertain the shape of the original fort.

Uncovering below-ground remains *'would significantly enrich the experience of the Fort'*. ... *'Reconstruction of some historic features may be appropriate in order to better understand the form and nature of the Tudor plantation fort. The form and location of the original timber-framed barrack building ... would be of particular interest to uncover (Figure 54). ... The reconstruction of this building using authentic construction methods of the period could be a very exciting project'*.

The Conservation Plan proposes in some detail how the properties within the Fort could be amalgamated and suggests some opportunities for development: *'development of the area vacated by the schools and religious foundations of the Presentation Sisters and the Irish Christian Brothers opens exciting possibilities for a development of architectural quality'*.

**Relevance to interpretation**

There is potential for rationalising the buildings in the interior of the Fort. This would open new opportunities for interpretation. A reconstruction project which could have interpretation opportunities.

Phase Two of the Conservation Plan ends with a positive assessment of the tourism potential of the site: *'The restored fort can be imagined as a part in the wider story of the late medieval period. It can appeal to military historians, to people with an interest in history and heritage, but can also have much wider appeal'*. It suggests the popularity of 'Game of Thrones' could be a significant factor in driving visits whilst noting that *'a feasibility study to examine these ideas, as well as the tourism potential of the site, would be an essential document'*.

**Relevance to interpretation**

The appeal of a restored Fort Protector to a wider audience than people with a particular interest needs to be further investigated. This interpretation Plan considers some approaches to interpretation that could enable the widest possible range of people to appreciate the story of Fort Protector.

The focus and ultimate goal of the Conservation Plan is *'the eventual restoration of Fort Protector as an important heritage site. It is felt that a properly presented Fort site would bring about the regeneration of the town centre and become an important place for the interpretation of the Tudor Plantation and of the wider history of the Midlands.'*

### **2.1.2 The Portlaoise Town Centre Strategy**

Laois County Council have recently produced a Town Centre Strategy *'2040 and Beyond: A Vision for Portlaoise'* which was informed by the Conservation Plan. This highlights Fort Protector as an important element in the early history of the town and highlights the potential of its exposure as a heritage asset.

Under the Guiding Principles, Enhanced Heritage and Character, the Strategy states: *'The Fort Protector possesses the power to transform the image of Portlaoise and its standing as a place of history and heritage. ... Similarly, the proposal of an 'Old Fort Quarter', pioneered by businesspeople in the Town, has the potential to promote understanding of the Fort and its historical significance, and make it accessible to local people and visitors'*

One of the Interventions recommended in the Town Centre Strategy focuses on *'The Fort Protector – A Heritage Quarter'* and considers the potential of a restored Fort which it argues *'could fundamentally change the perception of the town. The restored site would give greater meaning to the name 'Port Laoise' and the town could become synonymous with this momentous period in Irish history, as Kilkenny is synonymous with the medieval period, or as Dublin is associated with Viking or Georgian history'*.

**Relevance to interpretation:** This ambition implies a major role for well-planned and integrated heritage interpretation both in museums and in the streets, designed to reach diverse audiences. The experience of heritage-led initiatives elsewhere in Ireland, notably In Waterford and Kilkenny, demonstrate the importance of local traders and the heritage sector working together to create a strong identity.



Waterford for Vikings: The Viking Triangle has made Waterford synonymous with the Vikings in Ireland.



Kilkenny for Medieval: The Medieval Mile Museum is a key attraction on the Medieval Mile.

The Town Centre Strategy, clearly drawing on the Conservation Plan, highlights the potential for the 'Assembly of a Heritage Site within the Fort' emphasising the importance of this to *'enable the scale and character of the fort to be appreciated'*. The Strategy points out that achieving this would require the amalgamation of sites within the Fort and offers five options for this.

'The Exposure of Cultural Heritage' intervention highlights the restoration of Fort Protector as a potential *'driver for re-development in the area to the north of Main Street'* and sets out options for improving connectivity of the Fort to other sites in the Town and proposals for the reconfiguration and rebranding of the Lower Square as the 'Old Fort Quarter'.

### **2.1.3 Laois Heritage Plan 2014-2019**

The Laois Heritage Plan was written by the Laois Heritage Forum in consultation with the people of the county and local, regional and national organisations with an interest in the heritage of Laois. It covers all aspects of National Heritage including: monuments, archaeological objects, heritage objects, architectural heritage, flora, fauna, wildlife habitats, landscapes, seascapes, wrecks, geology, heritage gardens and parks and inland waterways.

The Vision set out in the Plan is *'A County Laois where heritage is at the heart of every home'*. The Mission of the Plan is *'to protect, increase accessibility to, and maximise the value of our heritage by working in partnership to foster an understanding of heritage through participation, education and research'*.

The Plan establishes principles of Sustainable Development, i.e. *'development which meets the need of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs'* and of Social Inclusion i.e. *'reflect(ing) the interests of the socially and culturally diverse community of the county, and accessible to people of all abilities. These principles should be incorporated into all heritage projects.'*

### **Relevance to interpretation**

All interpretation and related developments at Fort Protector should be aligned to the Vision, Mission and principles of the Laois Heritage Plan. The story and significance of Fort Protector should be at the heart of (at least) every Portlaoise home. All developments should incorporate protection of the heritage resource, increase accessibility and involve socially inclusive public participation.

The Laois Heritage Plan has four objectives:

1. increase understanding of the heritage of Laois
2. record the heritage of Laois
3. protect and promote active conservation of the heritage of Laois
4. promote community participation in heritage plans and projects

There is one identified Action in the Plan that is specific to Fort Protector: *'Establish inter-disciplinary working group to progress the conservation, management and future presentation of the nationally important, 16th Century Fort Protector in Portlaoise. Encourage and support research by Laois Heritage Society to raise awareness of the first colonial plantation in the English-speaking world.'*

### **Relevance to interpretation**

The development of the interpretation at Fort Protector will contribute to the achievement of Objectives 1 and 4 and benefit from work related to Objectives 2 and 3. This Interpretation Plan, and the support that the Laois Heritage Society and Laois County Council have given it, are part of delivering the action on Fort Protector.

## **2.1.4 County Laois Tourism Strategy**

The County Laois Tourism Strategy was compiled by W2 Consulting in 2017. It sets out a Vision for Tourism in County Laois 2018-2023 as a *'collaborative approach to tourism that enables Laois to harness the potential of its built and natural heritage to become an all year-round tourism destination'*. This highlights the central role of heritage in driving tourism to the county, good news for Portlaoise and Fort Protector.

The Destination Promise for Laois is to *'attract visitors into the heart of Ireland's story through quality authentic Irish heritage and outdoor activity experiences'*. Again, heritage is front and centre but crucially it is linked to quality, authenticity

and, probably most importantly for the interpretation of the Fort, story and experience.

**Relevance to interpretation**

To impact on tourism, interpretation has to harness the power of story and experience. In the competitive world of international tourism, unique, place-based, participatory and imaginative events are crucial.

Unsurprisingly, the Tourism Strategy emphasises the importance of Ireland’s Ancient East as an opportunity for Laois: *‘The new opportunity presented by Ireland’s Ancient East must be to the forefront of future tourism development in the county. The initiative represents a springboard for so many elements of the tourism sector in Laois. Central to successfully aligning with the Ireland’s Ancient East opportunity is the focus on creating local visitor experiences. Tourism is increasingly focusing on the experience economy and future national and international marketing will gravitate to destinations that offer unique and immersive experiences.’*

These are positive factors when considering the development of Fort Protector. However, it should be noted that although the Strategy details the county’s heritage assets, it does not mention Fort Protector. It also emphasises that tourism is underdeveloped in the County.

In the context of the strategic development of tourism in Laois, highlighted areas for strategic focus include:

- Laois is currently one of Ireland’s least-visited counties.
- Laois’ overseas revenue from tourism per 10,000 population is the third lowest in the country.
- Both domestic and overseas visitors have a lower average spend in Laois than in the rest of the country.
- A smaller percentage of the work population are employed in tourism in Laois than in the rest of Ireland.
- Laois has a relatively higher reliance on the British market now entering a period of uncertainty due to Brexit.
- Laois has the fifth lowest number of hotel beds in the country.

The Strategy identifies Ireland’s Ancient East as the national brand relevant to Laois – the county is located in the very centre of the Ireland’s Ancient East geography.

**Relevance to interpretation**

Interpretation of the Fort alone is unlikely to make an impact on such a low tourism base. The interpretation will need to be part of a wider, multi-faceted development which could be centred around the Fort's heritage.

## 2.2 National context

At a national level the support of both the Heritage Council and Fáilte Ireland will be essential for future developments. The Heritage Council funded the Conservation Plan. Fáilte Ireland representatives have discussed the potential of the Fort as a tourism attraction with the Laois Heritage Society.

### 2.2.1 Ireland's Ancient East

*'5000 years of story, set in lush green landscape, told by the world's best storytellers.'*

Portlaoise lies at the heart of Ireland's Ancient East, a major international tourism proposition, the goal of which is to become the most engaging, enjoyable and accessible cultural holiday experience in Europe. It is part of a long-term strategy for Ireland's tourism that will form the basis of all tourism investment and development in the region for the coming 10-year period at least.

The Ireland's Ancient East brand focuses on historical and cultural assets and great stories revealed through unique and authentic storytelling experiences. In a crowded travel marketplace, stories and story-telling are the key to making this region stand out. Appropriate heritage projects can attract support from Fáilte Ireland to develop such experiences.

#### **Relevance to interpretation**

The story of Fort Protector is highly appropriate for the Ireland's Ancient East brand. There is therefore an opportunity to align with and potentially win support from this national important national initiative.



Interpretation at heritage sites is fundamental to delivering the world-class storytelling experiences of Ireland’s heritage that define Ireland’s Ancient East. The approach to and the criteria of storytelling interpretation that typify the brand are set out in the Fáilte Ireland Toolkit ‘*Ireland’s Ancient East: A toolkit for storytelling interpretation*’<sup>1</sup>. In particular, this requires an approach that reveals history through storytelling approaches that focus on character-driven narratives.

**Relevance to interpretation**

The interpretation of Fort Protector will need to follow the Ireland’s Ancient East approach to storytelling interpretation.

Ireland’s Ancient East has identified nine themes. The Laois Tourism Strategy identifies that the four of these most relevant to the county are: ‘Tales of Two Worlds’, ‘Ancient Ireland’, ‘Castles and Conquests’ and ‘Sacred Ireland’. Of these, ‘Tale of Two Worlds’, which deals with post-medieval land ownership and social

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<http://www.failteireland.ie/FailteIreland/media/WebsiteStructure/Documents/Ireland%20Ancient%20East/Storytelling-Interpretation-How-to-Help-Visitors-Experience-Your-Story.pdf>

division, is the most relevant to Fort Protector. Castles and Conquests focuses on the Anglo-Normans.

### **2.2.2. International visitors to Ireland: Audience segmentation**

Fáilte Ireland have segmented the target international audiences into three segments: Culturally Curious, Great Escapers and Social Energisers. Of these Culturally Curious visitors are the most important in Ireland's Ancient East, with Great Escapers as a secondary audience.

Culturally Curious visitors are independent adult travellers, motivated by a desire to explore and discover places off the beaten track, meet local people and experience the local way of life. They are not specialists and their interests in culture are wide-ranging and not limited to the historical. They like to make connections to places they are visiting so the stories told should both highlight local stories and link to other places in Ireland's Ancient East. Ideally the interpretation should relate to things and places they already know, usually international connections and links to contemporary Ireland.

Great Escapers can be adult or family visitors. They have a stronger focus on 'getting away from it all' and are motivated by activity and events.

#### **Relevance to interpretation**

The interpretation at Fort Protector must be appropriate for international visitors and aligned with Ireland's Ancient East, with a focus on storytelling interpretation, primarily for Culturally Curious visitors, within the 'Tales of Two Worlds' theme.

The approaches highlighted in this Interpretation Plan have been developed in this context.

## 3.0 EXISTING INTERPRETATION AND RELATED ACTIVITY

### 3.1 Interpretation and education

The existing interpretation and education around Fort Protector is mainly run by Laois Heritage Society. To date, it has been chiefly available in response to requests from interested parties.

#### 3.1.1 Interpretation

The interpretation activity comprises:

- **Guided walks.** These are pre-booked specialist groups. They are led by Laois Heritage Society and receive very positive feedback from participants. There are about six walks per year, for a total of 120-150 people.
- **Talks** These are to local groups and visiting special interest groups. There are usually four to six talks per year to groups of 30-50 people, so this reaches a maximum of 300 people per year. The feedback on the talks is very positive.

The walks and talks are successful, but this is a niche audience. The Laois Heritage Society is looking to extend its communication beyond these specialist groups.

- **Portlaoise Heritage Trail.** This comprises a leaflet, and blue plaques around the town. There are plans to update it and put it on-line within the next two years.



- **Audioguide to Portlaoise**, produced by Laois County Council, is available on-line includes Fort Protector and has been downloaded more than 20,000 times. A panel in the main square relates to the audioguide.



<https://www.abartaheritage.ie/product/laois-heritage-trail-audio-guide/>



The existing fixed interpretation and portable interpretation provide the information that visitors with an interest in heritage might look for. It is quite traditional and unlikely to attract new visitors to Portlaoise.

### 3.1.2 Education

Dunamaise College has carried out a range of projects relating to Fort Protector.

There is scope within the curriculum to expand the involvement of local schools with Fort Protector.

***Walking Back to My Heart*** is a project involving local primary school children in making a documentary film about Portlaoise with an independent film-maker. They also created and hosted a family-friendly Heritage Trail for Laois Heritage Week 2018. Fort Protector was one of heritage sites they visited as they explored the foundation of the town.

### 3.2 The Old Fort Quarter Festival

*'The Old Fort Quarter Festival celebrates the heritage of the Old Fort of Maryborough in Portlaoise.'*

The Fort is the stimulus for and gives its name to the Old Fort Quarter Festival, a successful annual medieval-themed festival run by a committee of local traders and Laois Heritage Society with funding from Laois County Council. The Festival, which started in 2016, attracts thousands of people to Portlaoise for an entertaining weekend and has grown year on year.

The Old Fort Quarter Festival includes a range of activities, many of them heritage-related and often with a contemporary twist. The 2018 programme included:

- **Medieval heritage:** archery, armoury, birds of prey, shield-making, crafts, cookery and historic tours.
- **Crinniú na nÓg:** a wide range of free heritage workshops and performances for children and young people.
- **Street theatre:** stilt walkers, jugglers, puppet shows, giant games, face painting.
- **Celtic Comic Con:** graphic novel and comic book market, gaming zone.
- **Heritage re-enactment displays.**

The non-heritage activities include a range of music acts, a comedy stage and an artisan food market.

From the perspective of future interpretation of the Fort, a potentially significant aspect of the Festival is the appearance of the 'Wild Irish' and a group of redcoats (British soldiers) in the main street. A more serious account of Fort Protector is provided in a programme of guided walks around the Fort run by the Laois Heritage Society. In 2018 there were *three* walks attended by about 40 people in total.

The Old Fort Quarter Festival has an attractive website (<https://oldfortquarter.ie>) with graphics that highlight activity and the drama of the Fort Protector story and are clearly targeting a more general leisure audience.



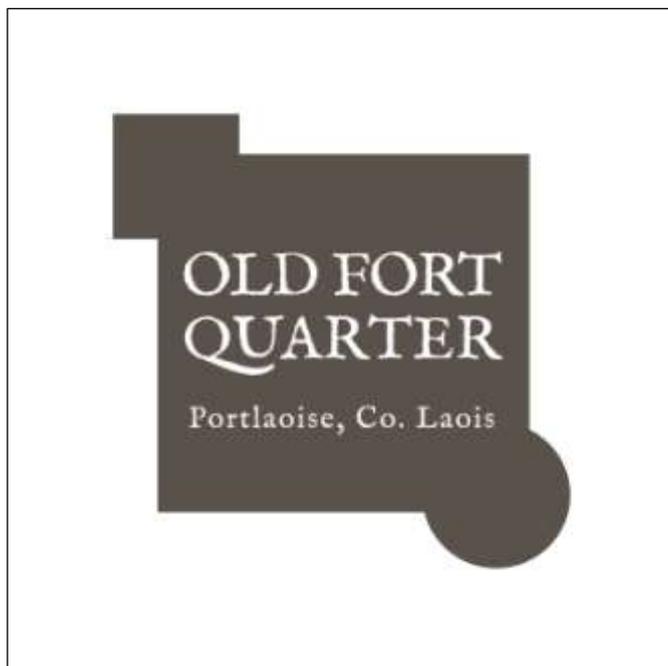
<https://oldfortquarter.ie>



<https://www.facebook.com/oldfortquarter/photos/a.295591610785490/643156762695638/>

The Old Fort Quarter Festival is a good example of how events and activities can attract visitors to Portlaoise, as highlighted in the County Tourism Strategy. The partnership between local businesses and heritage interests is encouraging and suggests that local shops and bars could capitalise on and support developments that would make Fort Protector a more accessible heritage attraction.

Alongside the success of the Old Fort Quarter Festival, an area adjacent to Fort Protector has recently been rebranded as the Old Fort Quarter with a logo that features the round bastion of Fort Protector.



<http://www.judodesign.com/skill/identities/>

## **4.0 THE AUDIENCES FOR FORT PROTECTOR**

Portlaoise attracts few visitors. There is a desire to attract new audiences to the town.

### **4.1 Existing visitors to Fort Protector**

There are three groups of visitors:

- a. specialist groups
- b. domestic independent visitors
- c. overseas visitors

Specialist groups visit Fort Protector because they are aware of the fort and its significance. They are keen to learn more and will probably book a tour with the Laois Heritage Society, which they are likely to enjoy. This group of visitors is being well provided for and are likely to be satisfied with their visit.

Little is known about the independent domestic and overseas visitors to the Fort, but their numbers are estimated to be very low. Those who do visit are usually motivated to visit Portlaoise by factors other than heritage, such as visiting family and friends.

### **4.2 Target audiences**

Fort Protector is not sufficiently well known to attract the domestic independent visitors and overseas visitors to Portlaoise in significant numbers. Attracting these people in very significantly greater numbers will be essential to create a sustainable heritage attraction.

#### **4.2.1 Domestic visitors**

The Laois County Tourism Strategy has identified that festivals and events will be important in attracting domestic visitors to Laois. This will also apply to Portlaoise.

For this audience, it will be important to develop activities that focus on or include the Fort. The Old Fort Festival is an important recent development which has great potential for raising the profile of the Fort; Laois Heritage Society should seek to develop closer working links and to diversify the way in which the Fort is involved.

The Redcoats and Wild Irish could be the basis of a lively and dramatic take on the history.

There is scope for other artistic, creative and sporting events linked to the Fort. the Laois Heritage Society should seek to work in partnership with other Portlaoise groups to develop these.

#### **4.2.2 International visitors**

Although successful events and festivals may attract some international visitors, especially from the Social Energiser segment, the focus for international visitors should be on Culturally Curious visitors to Ireland's Ancient East (see 2.2.2).

A well-told story, ideally with a local storyteller who can reveal not only the past of the Fort and the origins of the town but also the life and character of the modern Portlaoise, will be important for these people. The aim should be to present Fort Protector as a 'hidden secret' of Ireland with an amazing story that visitors will feel pleased to have discovered.

#### **4.2.3 The local audience**

Fort Protector needs to engage more strongly with local people as well as visitors. Residents need to be more aware of the fort's significance so that it becomes a stronger part of the identity of Portlaoise and helps to build a distinctive 'pride of place'.

A strong local 'pride of place' leads to a more evident 'sense of place' that visitors can experience. Local people who value the Fort's history are better able to talk about it so that the stories are told informally in bars and accommodation, as well as in more formal situations. Greater awareness of the Fort is likely to be reflected in other ways: the naming of the Old Fort Festival and the Old Fort Quarter are good examples.

## 5.0 THE FORT PROTECTOR SITE

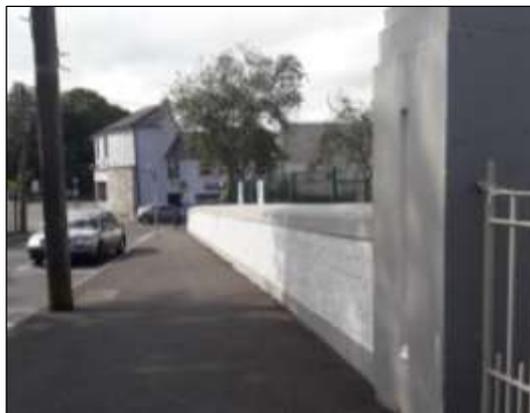
*‘So much has changed here – the Irish town has subdued the British Fort.’*

### 5.1 Site potential

The physical site is challenging. The historic fort structure is heavily compromised which presents very real obstacles to developing a compelling experience of Fort Protector.

At present there is no access to the interior of the Fort and no indoor spaces available for interpretation. The visitor experience therefore comprises walking around the perimeter. This, in turn is not a striking experience, as only some of the fort wall is visible and this is altered and reduced in height. Other parts of the fort wall are hidden but discoverable within the fabric of more recent buildings. Some of the wall is completely invisible and incorporated into new structures. These are significant limitations.

In addition, the interior of the Fort now contains recent buildings.



The Conservation Plan (see 2.1.1) describes a range of ways in which this situation can be changed, mainly through the purchase and rationalisation of the buildings in the Fort interior. Significant change will be necessary in order to create a heritage attraction with public appeal.

## 5.2 Implications for interpretation

It is unlikely that the Fort Protector structure in itself will ever be main attractor to Portlaoise. Its role is more likely to be a key location on which to hang important stories and high-quality experiences.

The existing historic fabric is insufficient for a recreated immersive experience that takes people 'back in time'. The challenge is therefore to use the physical remains to trigger an imaginative experience. It must take people away from modern Portlaoise into the impact of the early Plantations. This requires exemplary storytelling.

However, within these limitations, there are some opportunities. During our discussions we identified that *'this is a story that has to be seen with the imagination and 'history is always with us, even if we ignore it'*. There is a resonance in the tangible history that is so close and so familiar, that it can be ignored.

In Portlaoise you can literally be *'sitting in a bar, leaning on the fort'*. There is an opportunity for the Heritage Society to work closely with the businesses whose premises include part of the Fort to highlight the scale of the original structure.

## **6.0 FORT PROTECTOR'S STORY AND HOW TO TELL IT**

If it is to contribute to tourism and make a difference to how people think about Portlaoise, Fort Protector must become a place that people will remember and talk about long after they have returned home (whether that home is in the next county or on the other side of the world). This means it must provoke thought and emotion. It must tell a great story in way that absorbs people and alters their experience of the place and its significance.

Fortunately, Fort Protector has a great story that is pivotal in the history of Ireland and the British Empire and resonant for many countries.

### **6.1 The interpretive theme for Fort Protector**

Interpretation needs a theme, or a big idea, expressed as simply as possible. People will think and talk about this theme during their visit and after they leave. For Fort Protector the theme is simple and powerful:

*The Plantation of Ireland started here. It was a turning point the history of Ireland and of the British Empire across the world.*

The interpretation should focus on conveying this theme.

### **6.2 Issues for interpreting Fort Protector**

Telling the story of Fort Protector in ways that will appeal to wide audiences, including international visitors, will require careful handling.

#### **6.2.1 Character-led interpretation**

The theme will come alive and accessible to people with little or no previous interest in Plantation history through the stories of the people connected with Fort Protector. Some of these characters are well-known, well-documented figures, such as Bellingham, St. Leger and the O'Connor and O'More clans. However, the interpretation will need the perspectives of others, more 'ordinary' people whose lives were not recorded.

The documentary sources will predominantly reflect the British perspective, so it will be easier to find well-documented British individuals. Careful research and interpretation development will be needed to ensure that this imbalance does not result in biased interpretation and that Irish individuals and their stories are strongly represented. Undocumented individuals will need to be based on more generic research. Irish and British, rich and poor, men and women, young and old, should all be included in the storytelling.

### **6.2.2 The start of the story**

The full significance of Fort Protector lies in understanding both the backstory of Plantation and its legacy. This stretches beyond the time period of Fort Protector which begins 1547 with the building of Fort and ends in 1650 when Cromwell's generals, Hewson and Reynolds demolished the Fort. It also takes in other places, In Ireland and beyond.

Whilst Fort Protector has a good claim on the start of the story there may be other Irish sites that have equal or stronger claim to telling the story in the 17<sup>th</sup> and later centuries.

### **6.2.3 'Plantation'**

The challenges for interpretation are increased by the core content. Irish people and people educated in Ireland will understand the meaning of 'Plantation' in this context. Overseas visitors will not.

This presents a dilemma about whether to avoid the word or explain it. After considerable debate, I believe this is an instance where the principle of not using words that the audience will not understand breaks down. Visitors to Portlaoise can only understand Fort Protector in the light of the Irish definition of Plantation.

Therefore, a core part of the challenge for Fort Protector is to explain Plantation. The theme (see 3.1) requires that people understand Plantation very clearly, otherwise they will not be able to see the wider context that successful interpretation here will depend upon. As far as we are aware, the story of Plantation in Ireland is not told anywhere else.

There are upsides and downsides to taking on the Plantation story. It could give the benefit of both a USP and a national story. It also increases the scale and responsibility of the undertaking both in terms of research and delivery of this nationally important and potentially sensitive topic.

#### **6.2.4 Complexity and context**

The story of Fort Protector is complex and that limits the options for on-site interpretation. This story is too big for panels and leaflets. The most appropriate media for a narrative of this scale, with so many repercussions for a non-specialist audience, are likely to be a film and/or an exhibition. Both of these require indoor spaces.

A guided tour with a good face-to-face interpreter, who can respond appropriately to the knowledge and interests of their audience, could also do this well, especially for motivated groups (as has been demonstrated).

The best solution for most visitors is likely to be the combination of an indoor introduction linked to a tour.

## **7.0 DEVELOPING THE INTERPRETATION**

The vision for Fort Protector is ambitious. Interpretation of the Fort alone will not bring about the desired change in the reputation and fortunes of Portlaoise. That can only be achieved by multi-partner collaboration on a range of well-promoted heritage- and Fort-based activities over the medium to long-term. However, interpretation, that highlights and celebrates the local heritage and its stories, is an essential part of that programme.

The interpretation of Fort Protector needs to be developed based on agreed objectives, a realistic appraisal of the current situation and clear criteria.

### **7.1 Objectives for interpretation**

The planned interpretation of Fort Protector has two objectives:

1. Local people will know that Portlaoise was built around the first Plantation Fort and feel a stronger sense of local identity and pride.
2. More visitors from Ireland and overseas will come to Portlaoise because of the Fort.

These are equally important in terms of judging the success of the interpretation.

The work with local people already has a good foundation. Local schools include the Fort in their curriculum and have engaged with it through a creative project (see 3.1.1). This work should be maintained and developed. However, it is important that the Fort is not simply something that people study at school. It needs to be part of the life of Portlaoise.

The development and success of the Old Fort Quarter Festival is hugely important in this regard and points a way forward for engaging local people (as well as people from further afield) with the Fort. It makes the Fort part of the local conversation and associates it with lively, colourful and fun activities that involve many people.

Of course, the Old Fort Quarter Festival is also very effective at bringing people to the town. It offers important lessons about how heritage needs to be presented to attract wider audiences. New interpretation at the Fort should align with and complement this. It should offer the authoritative story of 'what really happened

here and why we have the Old Fort' for people who want it whilst also being accessible, entertaining and participatory.

### **7.1.1 Name of the fort**

One important that will need to be aligned soon is the name of the Fort. The Festival has dubbed the Fort 'The Old Fort'. Its website refers to the Fort as 'Maryborough Fort' whilst the Conservation Plan, the Laois Heritage Plan and the Town Centre Strategy, like Laois Heritage Society call it 'Fort Protector'.

## **7.2 SWOT analysis**

The strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats involved in developing interpretation for Fort Protector that will raise its profile locally nationally and internationally are as follows.

### **Strengths**

- The story of Fort Protector has local and regional significance and national and international resonance.
- Private and public organisations in Portlaoise are already involved in Fort-related activity.
- The story and site have been well-researched.
- The Laois Heritage Society has in-depth knowledge of the site and are strong advocates of it.
- The Old Fort Quarter Festival is a popular, thriving event that references the fort and builds recognition of it.
- Portlaoise has good access from Dublin via N7.
- The Fort is in the centre of the town and integrated with the town centre.
- Following the Conservation Plan, the fabric of the fort is to be conserved.

### **Weaknesses**

- The integrity of the Fort has been considerably compromised by the development of the town.
- The existing walls are about two metres lower than when built.
- Much of the Fort is hard to see.
- There is no public access to the interior of the Fort.
- There is no indoor facility.
- The story of the Fort involves understanding complex Irish/Anglo history.

- Portlaoise has no other significant attractions and has few visitors.
- There are few, if any, significant artefacts other than the site itself.
- The Laois Heritage Society has limited resources and capacity.
- The Plantation story begins in Portlaoise but it does not end there and other locations may have an equally strong or stronger claim to it.

### **Opportunities**

- The area around the Fort is to be re-landscaped, to create a more attractive approach and a public space adjacent to the Fort.
- Buildings within the Fort may become available for public use, or demolition, creating access to the Fort interior
- Working with local partners to create imaginative participatory projects for local people.
- Working with local partners to create diverse heritage-linked events to attract domestic and international visitors to Portlaoise.
- Building on the Old Fort Quarter Festival to create new ways of showcasing the Fort.
- Contributing to telling the untold stories of the Midlands.
- Ireland's Ancient East emphasises and encourages telling the stories of Ireland.

### **Threats**

- Heritage tourism is a highly competitive field.
- Low performance of tourism in County Laois
- Competition from an increasing number of rival heritage attraction developments in Ireland's Ancient East.
- Over-estimating the public interest in heritage.
- Fluctuations in international visitors to Ireland.
- Difficulty in creating local partnerships.
- Difficulty in attracting national funding and support.

## **7.3 Criteria for interpretation**

The interpretation at Fort Protector needs to meet the following criteria:

**Focused** on the theme *'The Plantation of Ireland started here. It was a turning point the history of Ireland and of the British Empire across the world.'*

**Inclusive**, so that it is accessible for a range of people including people in organised groups (who will need a timetabled programme of activity) and independent visitors. The interpretation should include provision for family groups and people with disabilities.

**Diverse**, involving a range of interpretive media and approaches to widen the appeal for diverse audiences. This should include events, creative activities, fixed interpretation and face-to-face interpretation (including guided walks).

**Layered**, so that it satisfies users with different levels of interest in history and heritage. Some elements of the interpretation will simply communicate the main theme, other elements will go into more detail of one or more particular aspect for instance, the septs of the Midlands, the building of the Fort, life in the Fort, individual characters connected with the Fort, specific incidents in the Fort history and/or the development and spread of the Plantation policy.

**Rooted in local participation** in order to establish a strong and authentic local identity that reflects the Fort as a source of local pride that is part of contemporary life. This means that interpretive activity for local people will be important.

**Based on partnership** with a range of bodies in the public realm, commercial interests, conservation bodies etc.. The active involvement of many stakeholders in an integrated approach to interpretation, community activity and tourism development will be required for long term sustainability.

**Evolving** and responsive to changing circumstances and new opportunities. As detailed above there are number of challenges and constraints both to opening up greater access to Fort Protector and creating interpretation with wide appeal. However, many of things could change. Clear, agreed priorities and objectives for interpretation and visitor experience will ensure that opportunities are recognised and can be capitalised on.

## **8.0 INTERPRETATION PROPOSALS**

The interpretation of Fort Protector will involve a range of small- and medium-scale interventions integrated into a programme. At all stages, the work should involve engagement with the local population as well as investment in attracting visitors.

The development of interpretation at the Fort should be phased. The immediate priority is to ensure that the opportunities for creating new fixed interpretation with the re-landscaping of Fitzmaurice Place are taken. This should be done in the light of medium- and long-term planning of opportunities that will do justice to the wider Plantation story.

### **8.1 Interpretation Projects – short term**

The focus for the first phase of the interpretation will be on getting the basics right, particularly around interpreting the Fort. The core offer needs to be improved to establish good foundations for future developments.

The main activity will be creating contemporary fixed interpretation at the Fort and Fitzmaurice Place. This needs to be in place so that Fort Protector makes sense to independent visitors. It is also crucial for helping local people recognise and celebrate the conservation of the Fort.

#### **8.1.1 Fixed interpretation**

##### **Character-based graphic panels outside the Fort**

High-quality, well-designed contemporary graphic panels that will attract attention within the streetscape are vital to signal the significance of Fort Protector and attract attention to it. In line with Ireland's Ancient East these should focus on giving the headlines of the story of the building of Fort Protector. This should be character-led. We recommend up to four panels each featuring one character who reveals a part of the Fort Protector. The design should be bold and colourful.



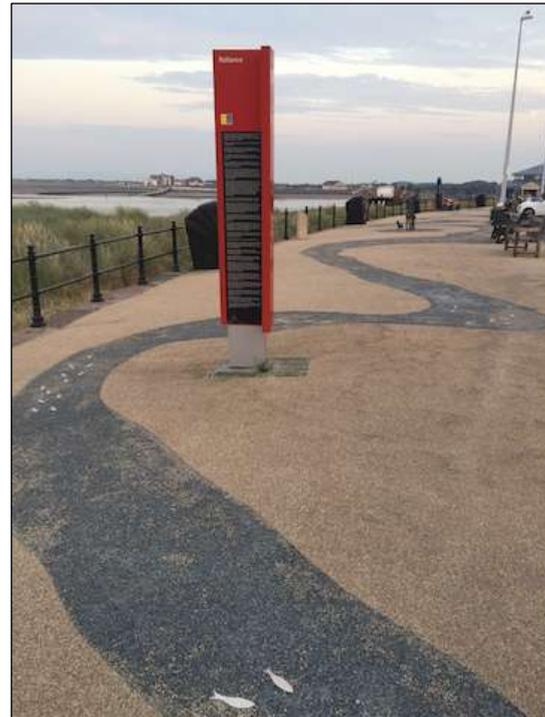
Character-based interpretation panels at Athlone Castle and Sutton Hoo.

Because they are aimed at passers-by and people with little motivation the panels will carry little written information (maximum 70 words). These panels should not attempt to tell the 'whole story' of Plantation but should focus on the impact of the Fort. The character illustrations should be large enough so that people can see, at a glance, the period of history and the types of people involved.

To add some interaction and to tell a bit more of each character's story relating to the Fort, the panels will have an AR facility, whereby people can use their mobile phone to see the character step out of the panel and talk to them. The choice of characters should be given careful thought as they should run through all the interpretation, particularly the audio visual which is high priority for the medium term (see below).

### **Themed landscaping elements**

The new landscaping is being designed in part to improve the environs of the Fort and the approach to it. This will be a significant contribution to the visitor experience. If possible the detailing of any street furniture, such as planters, seating, paving etc. should reference the Fort and the people associated with it to further emphasise the significance of the fort to Portlaoise Town.



Paving at Fleetwood, UK, part of extensive themed hard landscaping that reflects the town's fishing heritage.



Seating on the Thames Path in London highlights local biodiversity.

### **Temporary interpretation while construction work is in progress**

The construction work will be a focus of local interest. Capitalise on this by creating temporary fixed interpretation about the Fort. This will be temporary and will last as long as the construction work. The panels of plaques should not only describe the work that is taking place but should focus on the new views of the Fort. The panels could be a result of a local community project and words and images about the Fort and what local people think and feel about it, and/or a more factual brief account of the Fort's history. There should be a panel about the vision of the Fort's future and an invitation to get involved.

**BUXTON CRESCENT & THERMAL SPA**

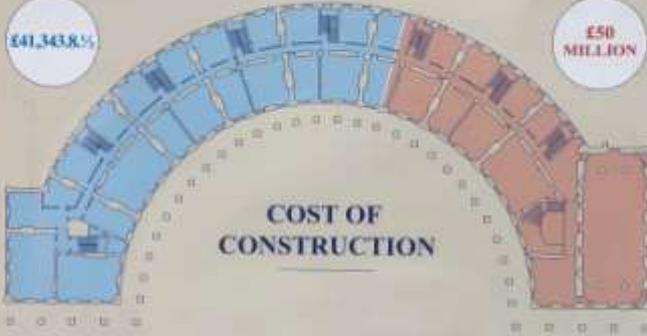
**Georgian Construction**

The construction of the Crescent was paid for by the 5th Duke of Devonshire, William Cavendish, primarily with funds generated from his copper mine at Furness in Staffordshire. The Duke employed notable architect John Carr of York to design and build the entire structure.

The complete cost would be £21.2 million (estimated against savings in 1796). After completion John Carr charged an additional 10% of the total construction cost as his fee – payment that included work on the Devonshire stables and other buildings that formed the grand complex.



**£41,343,875**



**COST OF CONSTRUCTION**

**21<sup>st</sup> Century Restoration**

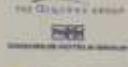
The project is estimated to cost over £50 million. Buxton Crescent Hotel and Thermal Spa Co Ltd will fund approximately £20 million with the rest coming from the public sector.

Crucial to the success of the scheme is a £25.8 million grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund together with grants and contributions from the DUDG Local Enterprise Partnership, Historic England, High Peak Borough Council and Derbyshire County Council.

**£50 MILLION**

**Did you know?**

The 5th Duke of Devonshire built the Crescent to turn Buxton into a spa town to rival Bath. However, at the time Buxton was little more than a hamlet with a population of the region of 200 people, a day's ride from Chatsworth House.




For more information and to see the project visit: [www.buxtoncrescent.com](http://www.buxtoncrescent.com)



Temporary panels explaining the history of The Crescent, Buxton, UK, installed for the duration of the restoration of the Grade One Listed Building.

### **Community celebration of completion**

There should be a community celebration to mark the completion of the physical works and the installation of the panels to build local recognition of the Fort.

This should be an informal event that focuses on the present-day as well as the past. The unveiling of the panels could be accompanied by cameo appearances of the four characters as costumed actors with ideally a brief performance. The event could contain elements of the Old Fort Quarter Festival and could include contributions from schools and other groups.

### **8.1.2 Face-to-face interpretation**

#### **Guided walks**

Guided tours will always be a key part of the interpretation. The existing guided walks led by Laois Heritage Society provide a good starting point and the next stage of work should focus on building on these strengths. Immediate tasks include:

- Documenting the key locations and historic content of the guided tours as a resource for future guides.
- Highlight locations in Portlaoise other than the Fort that are relevant to the Fort, people connected with Fort or wider Plantation history.
- Develop a shorter walk route suitable for a more general visitors, possibly linked to one of the bars.
- Develop a family trail/ guided event based on the Fort and trial it at the Old Fort Quarter Festival (in addition to the existing guided walk). (Developing a guided activity targeted at a different audience will require new skills and approaches, and possibly new people, which will be an asset for building experiences for visitors).
- Run fun, off-season activities based on guided walks, such as a treasure hunt or a night-time storytelling trail, for the local community. Consider the role of costumed interpreters and/or characters in costume and increased audience participation. and trial it.
- Recruit and train new guides.

### **8.1.3. Events**

Imaginative events, large and small, are likely to be the most effective way to attract new visitors to the Fort Protector and Portlaoise.

### **The Old Fort Quarter Festival**

The Old Fort Quarter Festival has already begun to build its reputation. In the immediate term, supporting the development of this festival, in particular its heritage aspects, is the top priority. Maintaining and developing the close links between the festival and the Fort and its heritage is a priority.

The festival can be used to pilot new ideas and initiatives, such as family activities focusing on the Fort as mentioned above. Building the roles of Redcoats and Wild Irish into street theatre could also have potential.

#### **8.1.4 Other**

Identify other locations in the town that could be developed as heritage attractions that could compliment the experience of the Fort.

Develop a social media strategy and establish a social media presence, beginning with the new work at Fitzmaurice Place

## **8.2 Interpretation Projects – medium- to long-term**

The later phases of interpretation will focus on extending the locations and the story of the interpretation. This includes widening the story from the building of the Fort to other topics such as: the lives and times of the Irish people in the area pre-Plantation, key incidents in the life of the Fort, the impact of this and other Plantation Forts, and reflections on the legacy of Plantation from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards. These stories are too many and too complex to be told at the Fort and ultimately will require an exhibition space to do them justice.

In this phase, the interpretation moves from a focus on local and regional audiences to a focus on national and international visitors. This is a significant undertaking that will require careful research and planning and collaboration with a range of tourism partners.

The programme for developing the interpretation will need to be opportunistic and responsive to changing circumstances. As new spaces, buildings and partnerships become available, there may be opportunities to move ahead on these projects more quickly.

The purchase and rationalisation of the buildings inside the Fort and opening up access to the round bastion will be particularly significant.

### **8.2.1 Fixed interpretation**

#### **Panels in the round bastion**

If access to the round bastion is established, the approach to fixed interpretation on the exterior of the Fort should be extended. An illustrated toposcope panel should show how the view would have appeared in 1547 when the Fort was built. This can be animated by AR to show how people moved across the landscape. There should also be at least one character panel here; this would be either a new panel in the style of the ones outside. Alternatively, if the access is confirmed before the landscaping work is complete, the British characters could be inside the Fort and the Irish outside.

#### **Revised Portlaoise Heritage Trail**

The current heritage trail gives a general introduction to Portlaoise for heritage enthusiasts. The plaques are in good condition and highlight key buildings. There appears to be no pressing need for change. At some point, the trail should be reviewed with a view to producing a shorter trail that focuses on the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries (the life of Fort Protector) and is targeted at more general audience and integrated with the interpretation at the Fort.

#### **Directional signage**

Directional signage is a vital part of a successful visitor experience. Signage for motorists and for pedestrians should develop in tandem with the experience development.

### **8.2.2 Exhibition**

There is a need for an indoor space to tell more complex parts of the story and to provide a wet weather activity for visitors to Portlaoise. At its most simple this could be an audio-video, or possibly VR, experience that sets Fort Protector in its wider historical context. The location of such a facility and how it would be managed would require a further stage of planning. The economics of small visitor centres are often precarious, so it would be prudent to be looking for a dual-purpose building that also serves a community function, at least in the early stages.

The question of whether there should be a more significant museum in Laois County is beyond this brief, but it is clear that this could be an opportunity to reveal the lives and legacy of the powerful Irish septs or clans who dominated this part of Ireland, and which is a precursor to the story of Fort Protector and Plantation.

### **8.2.3 Guided and self-guided trails**

#### **Guided walks**

Face-to-face communication is the interpretation media that overseas visitors like best. Guided walks, of different durations and formats, should therefore be part of the offer for as long as possible. Recruiting and training guides will be important; this will build on the preparatory work recommended in 8.1.2.

If there are excavations within the Fort interior, as suggested in the Conservation Plan, they should be the subject of a programme of guided walks and related events, such as specialist talks and public archaeology days.

#### **Self-guided trails**

However, guides cannot be available round the clock and over time increased visitor numbers will mean that other, self-guided, trail options will need to be considered.

These could include:

- A revised Portlaoise Heritage Trail with a redesigned leaflet as a general introduction to Portlaoise.
- A shorter trail with a well-illustrated and designed leaflet about Fort Protector and the Plantations only that includes businesses (especially those that have part of the Fort wall in their building) as well as heritage sites This will require liaison with traders (see above).
- A digital or leaflet family trail that tells the story of the Fort in dramatic form and includes quiz or treasure hunt elements.

Further research into existing and target audiences will be required to determine which of these are most appropriate and when.

New initiatives should be piloted at the Old Fort Quarter Festival.

### **8.2.4 Events**

Developing events that give people specific reasons to visit Portlaoise will remain Vital. In addition to building the success of the Old Fort Quarter Festival,

opportunities should be sought to create other activities that could link, even rather tenuously, to the Fort. This will require working in partnership with local, regional and possibly national bodies.

### **Working with artists and the arts**

Collaborations with artists could be a fruitful. Dramatic art works these can be headline-grabbing and involve local participation, both of which are important.



The 'Waterlicht' light installations by Daan Roosegaarde, as part of AND Festival in Castleton, Derbyshire attracted large crowds and massive social media attention.

Fort Protector could be an attractive opportunity and a challenge for artists, particularly as so much of it is now gone or hidden. A call to artists for a 'Reveal the Fort' competition could invite bold visual, or other, representations of the Fort restored to its original scale. This could be soundscapes, light shows, installations or other. The Creative Ireland Laois Programme could be a partner for this work which could lead to an annual or biennial arts event.

### **Working with local traders**

Local traders whose business premises include part of the Fort wall could be involved in a collaborative project that highlights how the Fort has become enmeshed with the development of Portlaoise.



The Baths in the Cavendish Arcade, Buxton show how historic features can be integrated with a retail area.

This type of project that links the heritage directly to businesses will strengthen the link between the Fort and the town, embed stories relating to the Fort throughout the town, diversify the experience and encourage increased spend.



The 'Windows on Penrith' Project involved local traders in interpreting local heritage. Each trader displayed an artefact relating to an aspect of Penrith's history and an associated piece of creative writing in their shop window. Photo credit Jo Scott

### 8.2.5 Other

Maintaining an active social media presence throughout all the developments will be vital. Building local regional and national press coverage will become equally important.

As part of building the reputation Portlaoise as a Plantation town it will be important to research the wider regional and national story to build up a network of places. This will be needed for the AV and any exhibitions or publications that cover the wider context. It will also be a basis for cross-promotion and cross-selling.



