

CELEBRATING IRELAND'S OLDEST ROUND TOWER

One year telling 1000 years' history to 1 million visitors at Brú Chrónáin



By Anne Heffernan

Only one year old this summer, the Round Tower Visitor Centre (Brú Chrónáin), right at the heart of Clondalkin village, on Tower Road in west Dublin, has had over 1million visitors since opening in July 2017. It stands beside the oldest and best-preserved, round tower in the country and tells the story of 1,000 years of Clondalkin's proud heritage and history, with an enjoyable, interactive exhibition, suitable for all ages. And admission is free.

Clann Chrónáin

A visit to this heritage centre is enlightening, educational, enriching and enjoyable due to its fun and interactive activities and the wealth of knowledge of its fully-trained, local, volunteer, tour-guides, who are on hand to assist visitors, 7 days a week.

Its a labour of love for the

volunteers, who are known as Clann Chrónáin, the family of Chrónán, after the founder of an original monastery, St. Crónán Mo-Chua, in the late 600s or early 700s, on the site. The Round Tower has been a dominant feature of Clondalkin throughout history, but with the establishment of this wonderful visitor/heritage centre, the village is building a new and positive era for itself into the future.

Mill-workers Homes

The ground floor space begins the story showing the layout of the early monastic settlement, in a circular formation, with the Round Tower in pride of place, close to the Camac River, which flows alongside the settlement. There are a number of buildings, animals and planted areas - everything necessary for life at the time. An animated, audio-visual, interpretation brings the invasion by the Vikings around the late 800s to



life, with their fighting and plundering and the introduction of Norse culture, before they settled in Clondalkin and integrated with the locals. The heritage centre is located within renovated mill-worker cottages dating from the 1800s which have been restored and adapted to house this exhibition, leading visitors on a journey through time as they move from room to room. Many photographs and paintings adorn the walls as you move upstairs to the light-filled space, depicting views of the Round Tower and other noteworthy buildings within Clondalkin, from earlier times.

Local Stories

Using headphones provided you can listen to stories told by prominent townspeople of earlier days, such as Tim O'Brien, a postman from the O'Brien family, who ran Clondalkin post-office for over 100 years. Seán Ó'Connor who was born in No. 2 Millview Cottages in 1929 (the location where the Visitor Centre is now housed) speaks about his neighbours of the time and recalls memories of the Round Tower and playing on the Grand Canal nearby. Jessica O'Neill, another former resident of Millview Cottages (No. 3) recalls her experiences of growing up in Clondalkin and what it was like to have a round tower in her back garden. And if you look through the telescope you will see some old views of Dublin, including the Guinness Brewery. This exciting exhibition exposes many secrets about Clondalkin's past and how the village's

growth and development very much depended on the local environment, particularly the Camac River and the Grand Canal, dating from the mid-1750s, connecting Dublin to the River Shannon, as a means to transport cargo. Many mills were established over time along the Camac River, with gunpowder, corn, linseed oil, and paper mills being most notable in the Clondalkin area (and each with their own story to tell). The paper mills boomed during World War 1 and Clondalkin Paper Mill finally closed in 1987.

The Monastic Garden

Outside, you can walk to the base of the Round Tower itself. A Monastic Garden has been established here, inside the 18th century built wall, bordering onto Tower Road, with planting and landscaping echoing that of a typical medieval, monastic garden. Its designated spaces and planting replicate the importance of monastic gardens for self-sufficiency. Specific areas within the garden are dedicated to plants, herbs and trees grown for medicinal, culinary and spiritual needs, as was the practice during those times. In fact, the building that houses the entrance to Brú Chrónáin was once Clondalkin's local dispensary, issuing healing properties, dental care and even surgery to the local community around the mid-1800s. Today, celebrity twins, David and Stephen Flynn of the Happy Pear fame, operate the heritage centre and have a spacious, light-filled,



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contemporary, café and food shop - serving their signature, wholesome, vegetarian/organic fare - leading onto the newly-developed, dining terrace and monastic garden. It has become a favourite meeting place for locals and a pleasurable dining experience for visitors.

The Happy Pear Flagship Café

By fluke or design it seems that Clondalkin's humble monastic origins, concentrating on self-sufficiency, home-grown fruits and vegetables for health and wellbeing and growing plants and herbs for medicinal purposes, is now coming full circle since the Happy Pear twins introduced their recipes for health, happiness and wholeness to the village, through this, their flagship café and store.

Clondalkin Heritage Trail
Clann Chrónáin (the local,

volunteer, tour-guides) are available to bring visitors on a heritage trail of the village itself and its many historic buildings while regaling them with their stories of old. The heritage trail begins at St. John's Church of Ireland Church, directly across the street from Brú Chrónáin, where you can see the remains of the medieval church of St. Crónán Mo-Chua, two medieval granite crosses and a baptismal font, also dating from medieval times.

Next to St. John's Church is Church Terrace, a row of original, stone cottages, built in 1879, by the Church, as Alms-Houses, to house poor people in Clondalkin, and next to them is the original St. John's school-house, built in 1870. As you continue the heritage trail, you are treated to stories about times past, the coming of the Presentation nuns from County Carlow to open a school

for girls, in 1857, the establishment of the Round Tower GAA Club in 1884 - now a thriving modern club, St. Brigid's Well, where St. Brigid, Patroness of Ireland, is said to have baptised pagans, along with visits to Clondalkin Library, built in 1912, the 1916 Easter Rising Commemorative Garden and Áras Chrónáin, a vibrant Irish Cultural Centre whose members have been actively promoting Irish language,

dance, music and song since 1988. Just a 3-minute walk from Áras Chrónáin and you're back where you started at Brú Chrónáin, having just circled modern-day Clondalkin's village-centre. And would you believe it, today's village-centre layout, with its one-way traffic system is almost a mirror-image of its original, monastic, circular foundations of over 1,000 years ago?



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