



## *Thin Places, Sacred Spaces, Historical Traces*

### **St Helen's Tour of Mystic Britain A Visitors' Guide**

#### Chapter 10 – Ireland: August 2023

Having circumnavigated England and Scotland completely, we now head across the water to Ireland. There is so much mystery about Ireland that we'll have to restrict ourselves to only a few aspects. Helen will start by reminding us of St Patrick and his contributions to the Emerald Isle, then Heather will bring us to Kildare and its most famous daughter, St Brigid. Val has the privilege of hosting our tour of Newgrange, a site that brings us back to the Stone Age in our history. And so, with a lilt, we press on ...

We cannot visit Ireland without mentioning St Patrick. Surprisingly there is little known about this popular saint; he lived in the late 5th century and was of Romano-British heritage. He possibly grew up in Cumbria in northwest England and was reputedly captured by pirates as a child and taken to Ireland, spending 6 years there before escaping and making his way back to his family. As an adult, he became a missionary, returning to Ireland to win over the Irish he had come to love, and was known to be working there in the last half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century.



*St Patrick's Cathedral Dublin (photo: tripadvisor.ca)*

St Patrick is credited with using the shamrock to illustrate the nature of the Trinity. Though the first record of this having happened didn't come until 1726, the shamrock has become a symbol for St Patrick's Day and even Ireland. It is also claimed he banished all snakes from Ireland, though there is no archeological evidence of any species of snakes in Ireland since the last ice age.

St Patrick's Cathedral was erected in the mid 1220's on the site of the church of the same name, itself built pre 890 AD where St Patrick had baptized people into Christianity in 450 AD. St Patrick has come to represent everything Irish and St Patrick's Day has become a major cultural celebration around the world for anyone who can claim any trace of Irish heritage (and a great many who cannot).

While here, we'll take the chance to visit County Kildare, a beautiful area just west of Dublin. Kildare is spiritually significant as the home of St Brigid, the second patron saint of Ireland. Since Brigid lived circa 450 – 525 AD when historical records are sketchy, not much about her is known for certain. Much of what we do know comes from St Broccan Cloan who wrote a biography or *Vita* about a hundred years after St Brigid's death. He concentrated mostly on her saintly miracles so few details about her own life remain, but there are plenty of rich traditions about her life. One of these is that Brigid was born to a pagan lord named Dubthatch and a woman named Brocca whom some sources suggest was a slave of Dubthatch's but had been baptized by St Patrick. Brigid developed tremendous generosity as a young child – one story claims she gave away a sword granted to her father by the king himself, which would have been an enormously valuable and prestigious item. Brigid refused marriage, and to her father's

relief, became a nun (one tradition suggests that the priest who made her a nun accidentally ordained her a bishop instead, but this seems unlikely).



*St Brigid's Cathedral (photo: [www.danheller.com](http://www.danheller.com))*

Brigid is also famous for founding a double monastery at Kildare. More common in the early middle ages, double monasteries included monks and nuns who shared the monastery but lived separately. This one was on the current site of St Brigid's Cathedral, in the town of Kildare in the county of the same name. Built under an oak tree, its Irish name was "Cill Dara" meaning "Church of the Oak".

Saint Brigid is also associated with several holy wells in Ireland, notably one in her home county and another in County Clare. Today, both have statues of the saint and are popular pilgrimage destinations. The waters of the wells are said to be good for the health and a visit is often an opportunity for contemplation and prayer. Though no history or legends of Brigid having visited these sites exist, they have traditionally seen acts of veneration on her feast day. Perhaps because religious significance and activity at these sites predates Christianity, they became associated with her as an early Christian figure. Part of the reason for the multiplicity of legends and traditions regarding St Brigid is her

link to the pre-Christian goddess of the same name (meaning "exalted one") who was a patron of wells, springs, healing, flame, and fertility. With the spread of Christianity to Ireland, ancient traditions were adapted to the new faith instead of being entirely rejected, so Saint Brigid also came to be associated with sacred wells, and her feast day, February 1<sup>st</sup>, just like the older celebration of Imbloc, related to the goddess Brigid and the anticipation of springtime's renewal and fertility. Some scholars go so far as to claim that Saint Brigid was not a literal historical figure but a Christianization of the goddess; most agree that the two figures are related but think that there really was a Saint Brigid.

As well as being an interesting example of how cultures and faiths intermingle, Saint Brigid is known as one of the saints who helped convert Ireland to Christianity. She is considered the second patron saint of Ireland and is sometimes referred to as "Mary of the Gaels"; many Irish Christians still feel an attachment to the saint and her traditions, so it is fitting that we visited her cathedral and wells while in Ireland.

Newgrange, a Stone Age monument in the Boyne Valley, County Meath, is one of the best examples in Western Europe of what is known as a passage-grave or passage-tomb, but Ancient Temple is a more fitting classification, a place of astrological, spiritual, religious and ceremonial importance. The most reliable dating techniques set its construction around 3200 BC making it at least 600 years older than the Giza Pyramids in Egypt, and 1,000 years older than Stonehenge. Its ancient builders were highly skilled; using only stone, they built it to remain waterproof without the use of mortar (no mean feat in Ireland). The amount of time and labour invested suggests a well-organized





society with specialised groups responsible for different aspects of construction. On the Winter Solstice, the light of the rising sun enters the roof box of Newgrange and penetrates the passage, shining onto the floor of the inner chamber for just 17 minutes. The surrounding Great Circle stones function as a still remarkably accurate calendar.

According to ancient mythology, Newgrange was built as a burial place for the Chief ruling Ireland, Dagda Mór, and his three sons. One of them, Aonghus of the Brugh, is believed to be the owner of the Brugh land. Newgrange is known as a brugh, or brú. The old Irish word for womb is Brú and so, Brú na Bóinne may be translated as Womb of the Moon, or Womb of the Bright Cow. Many researchers and archaeologists believe that the layout of the entrance, passage, and the chamber of Newgrange resembles the female reproductive organs. Newgrange is said to have been the place where the great mythical hero Cúchulainn was conceived by his mother Dechtine. His spiritual father, Lugh, visited Dechtine in a dream while she stayed here.

There's a romantic tale of Aonghus and Caer (see <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aengus> for their history) who flew to Newgrange, living there in the form of swans. Interestingly, Newgrange is a wintering ground for Whooper Swans which migrate from Iceland every October and return in March. It seems these early people quite comfortably combined natural science and mythology.

Newgrange sits on a long ridge by the Boyne River five miles west of Drogheda. The entire area of the Boyne Valley has figured prominently throughout Irish history. According to legend, the foundations of Christianity were laid in the Boyne Valley. Oldbridge, two miles downstream, is where the Battle of the Boyne occurred in 1690. *(Credit, [boynevalleytours.com/](http://boynevalleytours.com/) [newgrange.com/](http://newgrange.com/) [authenticireland.com](http://authenticireland.com/))*

“Ireland’s sacred sites are places on the earth that lift us out of time, out of ourselves and our everyday experiences. Sacred sites connect us to the people who came before us and the people who will follow. Deep inside, and long ago, we are the same people who worshiped storms in great stone fortresses on the Aran Islands. We built shrines and carved elegant designs on dolmens at Newgrange. We cleansed our bodies and souls in sweat houses and built stone mounds. Ireland is covered with some of the oldest sacred sites in Europe. Exploring them fills us with questions, answers, and peace. It restores our connection to nature, and to our own nature as human animals. There is a healing magic worked upon us that is good for our

hearts. This serves our communities and our planet well. Some of our ancient sites are older than the pyramids. We consider the ancient Egyptians to have been educated and knowledgeable about the movement of the stars and their own place in the universe. And so it was with the Ancient Irish, although this piece of information has slipped by many of us and comes as a wonderful, moving surprise when visiting ancient sites.” *(reprinted from: [authenticireland.com/sacred-sites](http://authenticireland.com/sacred-sites))*



*Cliffs and O'Briens Tower (credit, [wikimedia.org](https://www.wikimedia.org/))*

Enough to think about. Till the next chapter ...Your Mystic Britain travel guides