

Driving Tour of South Sligo

South Sligo is a glorious patchwork - of pasture land rolling from the Ox to the Bricklieve and Curlew mountains, of lakes and rivers, of townlands and forts, of ruined castles and abbeys; a patchwork peopled with present inhabitants, but also with the figures of those who lived, loved and fought here long ago. And it is full of fable, that dream-like dimension where history and legend intertwine inextricably and forever. Let us go on a day tour and explore some of it.

Strandhill, Coney Island and Carrowmore

We start at Strandhill, winding through pretty roads under the shadow of Knocknarea, an ever-present reminder of ancient times, whose cairn is visible for miles. 24m high, it is believed to be that of Queen Maeve of Connaught. Also on top of the hill are the remains of a cashel, an important fort in its day. In clear weather a walk to the top of the hill is rewarded with fabulous views across the whole of Sligo and its beautiful coastline. Beneath lies Coney Island, accessible at low tide across the sand. St Patrick is said to have visited the island, dug a well and installed his wishing chair on the western side. Drink at the well for 9 days and you may sit in the great rock chair and make a wish - but only once a year! One of only 3 silver and lead mines in Ireland was found here.

Resuming our journey, we come to Carrowmore and find the largest Megalithic burial ground in Ireland, where one of the tombs is possibly the oldest building in the world – thousands of years older than the Egyptian pyramids.

Ballysadare

Here at the mouth of Ballysadare Bay, the Ballysadare River –famous for its salmon fishing - enters the sea. The Cooper family of Markree constructed the lift on the falls to introduce salmon to these rivers in the 18th century. Nothing in the little town now hints at the devastation caused here by the cholera in 1832 when scarcely enough people were left alive to bury the dead. Recovery was helped by the building of the mills in 1833, which later thrived under the ownership of Middleton and Pollexfen, the poet Yeats' relatives, whose 'Avena' flour became well known. It is said that while Dublin was still lit by gas, Ballysadare was ablaze with water-driven electricity. The derelict mills are on the right as we enter the village.

Collooney

Turn left over the bridge and we soon arrive in Collooney, passing the monument to Teeling, aide-de-camp to General Humbert. During the Year of the French, the decisive battle of Carricknagat took place here, in which Teeling fought with great valour. After the French surrender, which brought the revolution to an end, officers were exchanged, but this romantic hero of the 1798 Rising was treated like a common criminal and ignominiously hanged outside Arbour Hill Prison, still wearing his French uniform. He was just 24.

Collooney, once the junction for 3 railways still has a pretty little station where the Dublin train stops. The castle, erected in 1225, was the first stone and mortar stronghold built in Connaught, and this leafy town was the scene of many battles between the King of Connaught and his rivals. The place was sold to Joshua Cooper in 1727 for ?16,945 5s 6d. The Protestant Church was built in 1720, and later enlarged by Sir

John Benson, a native of Collooney, who also built the Catholic Church in 1847. The mills (largely dismantled) behind Innisfree Crystal, built in 1838 provided a living for many, and were later converted to produce woollen goods. The hotel, Markree Castle lies nearby, still home of the Cooper family who have lived there since Cromwellian times when the land was given to Edward Cooper in lieu of pay. In 1832 another Edward Cooper founded an Observatory there which received worldwide acclaim for many years.

Ballymote

Leaving Collooney we head south for Ballymote, passing near Annaghmore and Templehouse, ancestral homes of two of Sligo's oldest families, the O'Haras and Percevals. Ballymote is a traditional market town which once had more pubs per capita than any place in Ireland. Granted the right to hold Fair Days twice a year in 1604, prosperity really came to the town in the mid 1700's when the Earl of Shelbourne introduced linen production into the area. The Castle was built in 1300 by Richard de Burgo, Red Earl of Ulster. Its walls are 3m thick containing 1m passages leading to 6 great towers. The marked walk beside the castle tells us more of its history. The Book of Ballymote, a 502 page manuscript about Sligo's history and families, compiled by monks in the castle in 1391 was sold in 1522 for 140 milk cows. The original is now in Dublin, but a replica of the book, one of only 6 ever made, can be seen in The Coach House Hotel in the town. A Bridewell or house of correction was built here in 1813, which later became the Courthouse.

Gurteen & Lough Gara

We pass near to Killavil and Mount Irwin where the old Abbey was founded by Edmund O'Gara in 1320, and flourished until the monks were slaughtered at their prayers by Cromwell's troops. It is said that the pure in heart can still hear them chanting their unfinished office amidst the ruins. So we come to Gurteen where Michael Coleman's life and work are celebrated. 'Master of the fiddle', Coleman had a lasting influence on traditional music in South Sligo, and the Coleman Centre ensures that his legacy endures. Further on, overlooking Lough Gara, the massive 6 towered Moygara Castle, burned in 1581, was one of the finest examples of a castellated building in Sligo. More than 300 crannog sites were found in the lake 50 years ago, some small islands, some just mounds. They were man-made platforms for dwellings and many were occupied as early as 1000 BC.

Kesh

The name Kesh Corann comes from the legendary harper, Corann, who – it is said - was rewarded for his musical skill with this land. There is a cairn on the summit, and caves can be seen 150m up the cliffs from the road beneath. Diarmuid and Grainne, eloping together on the night of her marriage to Fionn Mac Cumhail are said to have sheltered here during their desperate flight from her husband and the Fianna.

Cormac Mac Art, King of Ireland, born at the foot of Kesh Corann, was stolen (while his mother was drawing water from a nearby well,) by a wolf who mothered the infant for a year in the caves, until he was finally found – a story made more plausible by the fact that some of the caves are said to penetrate for miles. Each year the Lughnasa Festival to honour the Celtic god Lugh was held here, on Garland Sunday, the last Sunday in July.

In nearby Toomore Churchyard lie the Kings and Princes of Connaught who fell at the Battle of Kesh Their grave, known locally as The Altar, is close to the church. During excavations, 1,000 year-old bones have been found there.

Ballinacorney, Lough Arrow and Carrowkeel

By small backroads we come to Ballinacorney, the 'entrance to the long ford'. A strategic point between the Curlew and the Bricklieve mountains, The Castle of the Curlews with a round tower at each corner was built here in 1610 by Captain St John Barbe who received the land from James 1 of England.

Lough Arrow, a famous trout fishing lake is a picturesque and beautiful stretch of water, best seen from Carrowkeel above Castlebaldwin. Here, on top of windswept hills is a passage tomb cemetery with 14 cairns, 2 ruined dolmens and many circular stone foundations believed to be the remains of dwellings from between 3,800 - 3,300BC.

Coopershill & Riverstown

Turning right off the Sligo Road we come to Coopershill, where the Unshin and Douglas Rivers meet. The house was

built in 1774, and by local tradition was paid for with 'a tub of

gold guineas', but the last guinea was spent before the house had risen above ground level, so many foundations had to be laid in the soft ground for the access bridge. So bad was the situation that land had to be sold to pay the debts incurred.

Riverstown, where the Sligo Folk Park and Heritage Museum houses a wonderful collection of old agricultural machinery and artefacts is a pretty village between the two rivers. Disaster occurred on Christmas Day in 1841 when the gallery in the Catholic chapel collapsed, injuring over 40 people, but there were good times too - in November 1858 the town was illuminated by tar barrels and bonfires as 200 tenants gathered on horseback to escort Charles Cooper and his bride to Coopershill. A successful creamery was opened in 1898 – butter costing 9pence a pound - and so good was the butter that in 1900 it won first prize at the London Butter Show!

Sooley, Ballygawley, Sligo

Leaving Riverstown, we head to Coolea Crossroads and turn left onto the R284 towards Sligo Town, passing the old forge at Sooley which has been restored and re-thatched. At Ballygawley we drive through Union Wood past the Lough. There is a walk along the lakeside. This is an area rich in wildlife, from otters and deer to falcons, mute swans, goldeneye, wigeon and teal. Not far away lies Castle Dargan, loved by Yeats for its 2 castles facing each other across a small lake. He described the ruins, seen at dead of night, mysteriously lit and filled with people from a by-gone age dancing to ghostly music, wrapped in another time.

Here, fittingly, we leave South Sligo, its stories and fables, like Castle Dargan's ghosts, fading back into the hills and townlands as quietly as its rivers slip down to the sea.