

Historic Kilrea

Walking Heritage Trail



Welcome to Historic Kilrea



Image courtesy of PRONI

Located close to the River Bann, Kilrea, from the Irish Cill Ria, meaning 'church on the hill', takes its name from the ancient church which stood near to where St. Patrick's Church of Ireland is located, at the top of the town. Evidence has been found along the river indicating this area has been inhabited as far back as the Stone Age. Much of the history of the area in pre-Christian times is lost in the mists of time, however, in the fifth century, St Patrick is said to have identified a site for a church when he passed through the town.

In the early 17th century, during the Plantation of Ulster, the heavily wooded area around Kilrea was granted, by James I, to the powerful Worshipful Company of Mercers for settlement.

The original 'capital' of the Mercers' lands was at Movanager, about 2.5 miles to the north of the town. The buildings included a fortified bawn and a water powered sawmill. After the settlement at Movanager was destroyed in the 1641 Rebellion the Mercers rebuilt at Kilrea. The Mercers' Company let out their lands, often to absentee landlords, and the estate fell into severe decline.

In 1831, the Mercers gained repossession after the death of the final tenant, Alexander Stewart, and took direct control over the estate and undertook an ambitious programme of improvements with a particular focus on Kilrea town. It was during this period that many of the town's buildings, including churches, were built, and the road network was improved. The Mercers' Company continued to manage the estate until it was sold to the tenants under the Wyndham Land Purchase Act of 1903.



Image courtesy of Sam Henry Collection, Coleraine Museum



Image courtesy of M Kerr Collection

Kilrea has always been a thriving market town, with a marketplace called “the shambles” situated below the old Town Hall. The Mercers’ Company provided the town with two Fair Hills, the Cattle Fair Hill and the Horse Fair Hill. The horse fair attracted people from all over Ireland and Scotland, and in the mid-nineteenth century Kilrea had a thriving linen trade.

The Belfast and Province of Ulster Directory, of 1900, described the town as “thriving,” with a population of about 1,000 inhabitants. Mentioning the rebuilding of the Mercers’ Hotel by the Mercers’ Company, it continues “It also contains great accommodation, and has attracted a large number of visitors, both commercial men and sportsmen, the latter for the far-famed salmon and trout fishing of the Bann.”

Today Kilrea is still a busy market town at the heart of the rural community.



Image courtesy of Coleraine Museum

In addition to the town walk, Kilrea offers several other scenic walks. For those who would like a slightly longer walk, there is a choice of two beautiful riverside walks at Portna. Leave the town by the Moneygran Road and take the first road on the left (Portna Road), then keep right at the fork in the road. As you continue down the road to Hutchinson’s Quay you will enjoy stunning views across the River Bann towards County Antrim. You can choose to go upstream through Moneygran Wood or walk downstream towards the canal. Crossing the bridge will take you towards the Eel Fisheries. Beyond the eel traps on the river you will come to the flood gates, one of three which help to regulate water levels in Lough Neagh.

From Hutchinson’s Quay to Moneygran Wood is about $1\frac{3}{4}$ miles, while the riverside walk by the canal and eel fisheries is approximately $2\frac{1}{2}$ miles long.

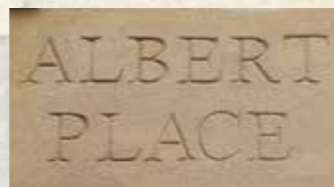
There is short riverside walk, of less than 1 mile, at Portneal, along Bann Road just before you cross the bridge into Co. Antrim.



Image courtesy of M Kerr Collection

1 Mercers' Arms Hotel ◀ Built about 1835, the hotel replaced the original residence of the Mercers' Company Agent. It was used as a barracks during the 1798 Rebellion. Griffith's Valuation noted "Only hotel in the town – it is clean and comfortable ..."

2 Albert Place ▶ Built in the mid-19th century, Griffith's Valuation shows one of the properties as a house and drapery shop, while the other was listed as a house, grocery and hardware shop.



3 Manor House ▶ Built in 1835, as the new residence of the Mercers' Company Agent. Described as 'a palatial palace' it was built at a cost of £4000, to designs by William Barnes, overlooking a lake, named on the Ordnance Survey map as the 'Washing Lough'. Griffith's Valuation noted "This is a very elegant mansion, well built and furnished and beautifully situated near a lake."



Image courtesy of M Kerr Collection

4 War Memorial and Town Pump ▶ Unveiled on the 1st July 1925, the obelisk, built of Newry granite, stands in remembrance of the men from the town and district who served in the Great War. The memorial was constructed over a cast iron water pump, installed by the Mercers' Company to replace the well which had previously served the town - part of which can still be seen in the base.



Image courtesy of M Kerr Collection



Image courtesy of M Kerr Collection

14 Second Kilrea Presbyterian Church ◀ Prior to the church being built in 1838, a 'seceding' congregation was meeting in a linen-cloth sealing room in Bridge Street. The Secession Church was a branch of Presbyterianism that emerged from a split in the Church of Scotland in 1712. It gained a foothold in Ulster with the "Plantation" of Scottish immigrants. The painted panel to the centre of the gable reads KILREA PRESBYTERIAN SECEDING CHURCH ERECTED AD DCCCXXXVIII.

13 Kilrea Baptist Church ▶ Kilrea Baptist Church was formed in 1925. The congregation met in a loft until a building was erected on the Moneygran Road in 1927, before moving to this site when the new church opened on the 1st August 1959.



12 St Anne's Oratory ◀ St Anne's Church was built in 1983. Previous to this the congregation worshipped in the Oratory at the Manor House, which had been purchased for the Mercy Order of Nuns, by Rev D MacCrea, P.P. in 1924. The nuns ran a school for girls called St Anne's Mercy Convent.

11 Northern Bank ▶ Built about 1885, for the Northern Banking Company, the bank occupies an excellent site close to the old railway station and the two markets. Design of the building is credited to Thomas Turner, who also designed Coleraine Town Hall.



Image courtesy of M Kerr Collection



Image courtesy of M Kerr Collection

9 The Emporium ▲ The Emporium, an impressive three-storey building with a clock on top, was one of two establishments owned by the Bamford family. The Emporium was primarily a drapery shop, however, the family business interests were many and varied.



Image courtesy of M Kerr Collection

10 Cow Fair Hill & Horse Fair Hill ◀ The Mercers' Company provided Kilrea with two Fair Hills. In the 19th century, Maghera Street would have been lined with stall holders selling their wares on market day.

6 The Dispensary ▶ Built as a new office for the Mercers' Company in 1843, the building also included a dispensary. In 1832, the Company had established a dispensary "for the benefit of the poor" as part of their efforts to improve the general condition of the estate.

*Private Residence - please respect the occupants' privacy.



8 First Kilrea Presbyterian ▼ The present church opened on the 21st April 1839, replacing an earlier 18th century Presbyterian Meeting House on the site. Built to the designs of William Barnes, the church, funded by the Mercers' Company, the Irish Society and subscriptions from the congregation, cost about £2300. The spire, which is 90 feet high, houses a bell presented to the church by William Barnes.

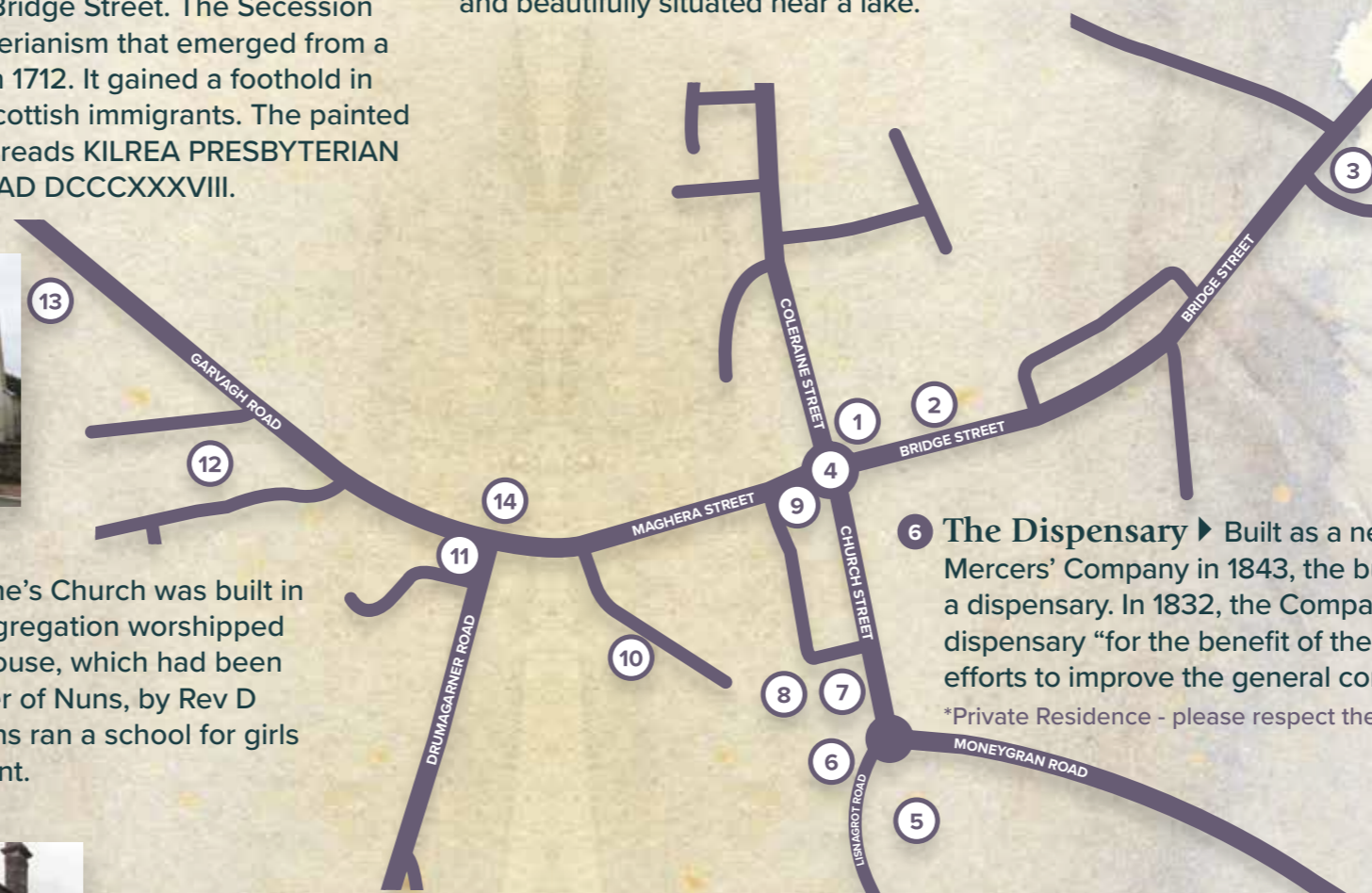


Image courtesy of M Kerr Collection

7 The Fairy Thorn ▲ Originally known locally as 'the Beggarman's Bush', the Fairy Thorn tree has stood on this site for over 200 years. The old tree was blown down during a storm in 1999, fortunately, one local person had the foresight to gather some of its haws and cultivate its successor.



Image courtesy of Kilrea Local History Group



Kilrea town walk is just over 1 mile and along the route, which is all paved, you will take in many of the buildings which were built in the town in the mid-19th century as part of the development plan implemented by the Mercers' Company.

The route which starts at the Diamond, takes you on a leisurely stroll around the town finishing back at the Diamond. In the middle of the Diamond stands the town's War Memorial built over part of the historic town pump. The walk will take in the Mercers' Arms Hotel, Albert Place, called after Prince Albert, and the Manor House. Church Street takes you to St Patrick's Parish Church, where the ruins of the old parish church can still be seen in the adjoining graveyard. Returning towards the Diamond you will pass the Dispensary, the Fairy Thorn tree and First Kilrea Presbyterian Church. On the corner of the Diamond and Maghera Street you will find the Emporium, and along Maghera Street and Garvagh Road you will find the two Fair Hills, the Bank Building, St Anne's Oratory, Kilrea Baptist Church and Second Kilrea Presbyterian Church.

Guided walks are available – contact Maud on 028 2954 0723 or Tommy on 079 8939 7942 for details.

Cover image courtesy of Coleraine Museum



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