

Celbridge: Our Heritage, Our Future

Promoting economic, environmental, social and community development in Celbridge and its hinterland through heritage-related tourism

Strategy Framework by Celbridge Tidy Towns Heritage and Tourism Committee, December 2014.

Vision and Objectives

Celbridge, a town rich in history and heritage, both natural and built, can become an important centre of heritage-based tourism, generating significant local economic activity and employment to the benefit of the wider hinterland and, in the process, improving the general quality and character of the area, making it a very desirable place to visit, live, work, and do business. This vision can be realised by capitalising on the area's considerable assets and resources, particularly the presence of an internationally important visitor attraction, unique historical associations and a highly advantageous location. To maximise this potential, the physical fabric and environment of the village centre must be improved, and related amenities, facilities and activities developed in order to enhance the attractiveness of the area to visitors and make it marketable for tourism. This paper outlines the rationale behind these objectives, proposals for their pursuit, and how Celbridge Tidy Towns (CTT), working with relevant public and private sector organisations, can contribute to long term economic, social and community development in Celbridge, while advancing its own core objectives.

Rationale

Castletown is the centrepiece, but the area's built heritage in the beautiful Liffey valley boasts an unrivalled collection of 'big houses' including Killadoon, Celbridge Abbey, Oakley Park, Donaghcumper, St. Wolstan's, and nearby Carton, Lyons and Straffan House. If Dublin is the Georgian capital of Ireland, Celbridge has claim to being its country seat. Other features of interest include Celbridge Abbey, Celbridge Mill, Kildrought House, the former Workhouse, Tea Lane and Donaghcumper cemeteries, and in the neighbourhood, Maynooth Castle and College, the Wonderful Barn, Taghadoe Round Tower and Oughterard Churchyard and Round Tower. To these physical assets can be added the area's close links with a range of major historical and literary figures such as Arthur Guinness, Dean Swift, the Grattans, the Conollys, and Samuel Beckett. Such a rich resource of heritage and history offers obvious tourism potential, and the strategic location of Celbridge should facilitate its realisation.

In addition to the inherent advantages of heritage and location referred to above, the rationale for, and benefits of, this proposal includes the fact that -

- It encapsulates a range of linked sub-themes, with potential to produce significant spin-off benefits - economic, social, community, environmental, cultural, recreational and general quality of life;
- It would involve action that would bring about many other improvements in their own right such as village improvement/renewal, enhancement of physical character, appearance, attractiveness and quality of the area which, in turn, can generate greater public appreciation of the area's potential, increased civic pride, and involvement in action to realise that potential;
- It can take advantage of the current growth in visitor numbers to Ireland;
- It would build on recent initiatives such as Arthur's Way, the Arthur Guinness birthplace statue, Celbridge historical signage, Celbridge Guided Tours, and restoration of heritage sites such as Tea Lane Cemetery;
- There is a considerable depth of resources in the community to support such an initiative, including ideas, energy, commitment, experience and expertise (the exclusion of people from a recent presentation on the Tea Lane restoration due to lack of space is testament to the scale of interest in heritage in Celbridge).

The successful development of Celbridge as a tourism location can produce significant economic benefit and employment potential both directly through spending by a significant volume of visitors, and by generating further tourism-related investment; for example in restaurants, art/craft outlets, historical/cultural facilities and activities. The cumulative effect of the positive developments proposed, allied to the proximity of existing major high tech industry, a third level institution and a very advantageous location, can also help to attract significant external investment to an area offering high quality of life. This in turn will benefit, and forge links with, a wider catchment area.

Strategy

A multi-stranded approach to the development of heritage tourism is proposed, as follows:

Strand 1. Integrating heritage/tourism features and linking them to the town

Castletown House, a major national and international visitor attraction, offers a large, ready-made tourist market on our doorstep and a unique platform for developing the tourism potential of the wider hinterland. It is imperative to find ways to facilitate and encourage access to the village by Castletown visitors while retaining the amenity value of the avenue and the general environment.

Options to explore might include -

- Improved signage in Castletown to Celbridge village;
- Shuttle transport between Castletown, other places of interest and Celbridge village;
- Developing and signing a riverside/nature walk between Castletown and the village;
- A rent-a-bike service between Castletown and another suitable point such as the Mill;
- Developing parking facilities to facilitate access by visitors to the village and relevant sites.

In addition to Castletown, a more integrated approach is needed to exploit fully the tourism potential of built and environmental heritage and historical resources generally by linking these features and enhancing awareness of, and access to, them.

Initiatives that could be considered include -

- Designing/establishing a North-East Kildare Heritage Touring Route taking in, among other attractions, Castletown, Carton, Maynooth Castle/ College, the Royal Canal, the Grand Canal, Lyons House and Straffan House;
- Schemes/programmes to attract some of the large Dublin-based tourist market, particularly through the Guinness connection and featuring the Arthur Guinness birthplace statue in Celbridge.

Strand 2. Improving the physical character, quality and environment of the area

An attractive village centre is paramount to enable Celbridge to benefit economically from visitors to nearby heritage sites. The most immediate requirement is to complete undergrounding of the electricity and telecom cables which will transform both the town's appearance and public perception of it. This must be followed immediately by provision of high quality street furniture and sensitive streetscape upgrading throughout the village.

Further improvements to the fabric of the village centre could include -

- Developing some element of civic/public space at the Castletown Gates/Slip area;
- Sensitive action to enhance the amenity value of the river;
- Landscape improvement works to the Mill precincts facing the Liffey bridge;
- A concerted effort to remove the proliferation of signs (both legal and illegal), poles/posts, etc;
- Installing cantilevered footways to exterior of the Liffey bridge, which would also facilitate possible removal of the pedestrian bridge leaving an unobstructed view of the Mill;
- Restoring/conserving the Mill buildings, walls and roofs adjoining the Main Street;
- Physical/environmental improvements at outer locations e.g. among others, the retail area near Celbridge House (currently a litter and loitering black spot), the former Schneider site, the area surrounding the stone welcome sign at the Maynooth Road entrance to the town.

Strand 3. Conserving/restoring and enhancing the tourism value of heritage/historical features

Restoration/conservation work to relevant buildings, sites, or other historical or heritage features, including -

- Further necessary work at Tea Lane cemetery under the Conservation Management Plan 2014;
- Opening or improving access to places of historical interest, notably Celbridge Abbey, home of Swift's 'Vanessa', a pleasant riverside amenity, a significant heritage resource,

and a potentially important tourist attraction, balancing Castletown at the opposite side of the town;

- The development of a visitor heritage centre to showcase features of heritage and historical interest, making them more accessible, visible and 'alive', adding value generally to the visitor experience and possibly incorporating other services e.g. an internet site and genealogy facility;
- An annual event, or events, based around heritage and history, in effect a 'Celbridge Heritage Festival'.

Strand 4. Marketing/branding Celbridge as a visitor destination and touring base

In order to capitalise on the above resources in the form of tourist traffic, a marketing programme is required. This would be based around the key assets of heritage and history, but also highlighting the availability of nearby amenities, natural, recreational and sporting. Celbridge's strategic location should also be a valuable marketing feature, highlighting ready access to Dublin City and Airport, the countryside and a range of major venues such as Croke Park, Aviva/Lansdowne Road, the Curragh, Punchestown, the K Club and Carton. The impact of a marketing programme could be enhanced by suitable 'branding' which should seek to forge a strong mental association with the key heritage assets of the area (possibly concentrating on the Georgian/18th century link) and also highlighting the convenient location of Celbridge as an access base or 'gateway' to city and country alike. It is understood that relevant agencies are proposing to develop, in 2015, a new tourism brand and identity for the South-East and Midlands tourism region based on the area's comparative advantage in built and cultural heritage. The approach suggested in this paper should align with, and be a useful input to, that initiative.

The tourism agencies and the local authority would need to take a lead role in marketing working with relevant local businesses and organisations. Involvement of Maynooth University and the nearby technology companies would also be useful particularly with a view to developing innovative, technology-based marketing tools/methods. Specific elements of a marketing strategy might include: securing support from well-known figures (ideally with some connection to Celbridge) to 'champion' the area as a heritage tourism destination, targeting the Dublin visitor market (especially the Guinness interest), and reaching to people abroad with Celbridge/Kildare connections, possibly from the genealogy perspective.

The timing of a marketing programme will be important as it would be unlikely to produce a significant return until progress is made with some of the actions suggested in this paper - particularly physical improvements to the village and improved linkage with heritage sites, notably Castletown.

Strand 5. Planning for action

An overall local Heritage Tourism Plan is needed embracing and integrating all of the foregoing elements. This would provide clarity of objectives and a structure and timeline for

action. It would identify implementation requirements, and ensure that all interests continue to work in concert towards agreed objectives in the longer term. It would also provide input into the formal planning processes of the local development company and Kildare County Council including the Integrated Services Programme, the Local Economic and Community Plan, and the LEADER Local Development Strategy- and to relevant programmes of other agencies also.

Elements to be incorporated in this Plan would include –

- Organisational arrangements and responsibilities: CTT is well placed to bring forward proposals as outlined in this document, particularly through its Heritage and Tourism Committee, and to encourage action. It will continue to initiate and support specific projects. However, implementation, funding and specialist expertise (e.g. on marketing and tourism development) will depend on the roles of relevant agencies. It is appropriate to look particularly to the County Council and the Municipal District Members for leadership in view of the enhanced role assigned to local government to “lead economic, social and community development” under the Government’s local government reform programme.
- A rigorous business plan focussed clearly on the key objectives and the actions required to achieve them: this should identify costing of projects, resource implications, timescales, prioritisation, funding requirements and possible sources;
- Clarification of the roles of, and input expected from, various agencies and organisations.

Implementation

It would seem appropriate that Celbridge Heritage Tourism proposals should be incorporated in the Local Development Strategy for the purposes of LEADER funding and in relevant plans and programmes of Kildare County Council and other relevant agencies. The following is an outline of a possible approach to implementation of the strategies in this paper -

1. Short Term Action

- a. Obtain commitment under LEADER or other relevant programmes to complete projects already under way, or carry out those at an advanced planning stage for which there is a clear justification, as follows:
 - Complete undergrounding of cables (both ESB and telecoms).
 - Carry out streetscape upgrading and provision of high quality street furniture to complement and achieve maximum value for investment in undergrounding.
 - Identify and implement measures to improve linkage between Castletown and the village.
 - Complete necessary conservation/restoration work to Tea Lane cemetery.
 - Undertake improvements to the Mill precincts and Liffey bridge.

- b. Parallel with undertaking the projects at (a), draw up a medium/long term Heritage Tourism Plan in accordance with **Strategy Strand 5** above.

2. Medium to Long Term Action

Implement action as set out under the various Strategies above in accordance with the priorities, timescales and other provisions of the Heritage Tourism Plan (Strand 5).

Conclusion

We believe the objectives and ambitions expressed in this document to be achievable; they are intended to chart an overall modular programme to be undertaken over a period. They have strong justification in terms of rationale and potential benefit. It is also relevant to have regard to the relative lack of investment in public amenities in the Celbridge area in contrast with the extent of tax revenue generated from its population over several decades. Finally, it would seem reasonable that, in the allocation of funding, account be taken of the fact that the meritorious 2012 village improvement proposal sponsored by CTT and Kildare County Council missed out on the last round of LEADER funding.

Celbridge Tidy Towns
Heritage Tourism Sub-Committee
Celbridge.
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