

Christian Heritage in North Down & Ards

Let's go



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North Down and Ards have been at the centre of Ireland's Christian Heritage dating back as far as the 5th century and today's visitor will still find much of Early Christian interest in the area.

Tradition holds that St Machaoi founded the island monastery at Nendrum in the 5th century and this was later followed in 558AD by the foundation of Bangor Abbey by St Comgall, an influence that soon spread across Europe through the work of St Columbanus and St Gall.

Flourishing after Comgall, this early spread of local Christianity saw links formed between Bangor Abbey, Movilla Abbey, Newtownards, and Holywood Priory, as well as sending out important missions to continental Europe and the west of Scotland.



From these early beginnings Christianity in the area has had a varied development from suffering attacks at the hands of Vikings in the 9th Century through to the growth of Presbyterianism during the Ulster Plantations in the 17th Century. The era of industrialisation and the advent of transport, especially the railways, saw the area grow further and with it the construction of a plethora of churches, something that has continued to this day.

This booklet focuses on the key sites within North Down and Ards that make up our local Christian heritage trail. We hope you find it informative.

Cover image: St Comgall stained glass window

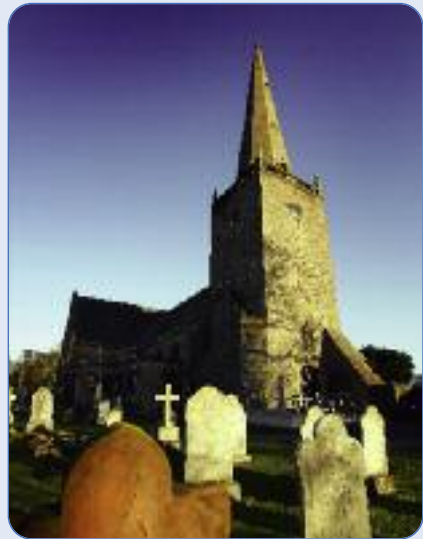
Bangor Abbey

For almost three hundred years Bangor Abbey, founded by Saint Comgall in 558 A.D., was one of the greatest monastic schools in Europe.

Two of the Abbey's most revered missionaries, Saint Columbanus and Saint Gall, spent many years in present-day France, Germany, Austria and Italy. Columbanus died in 615 A.D. at Bobbio in Italy and years later a monk carried The Antiphony of Bangor there. This exquisite service book is now in the Ambrosian Library, Milan.

The Vikings sacked Bangor Abbey during the 9th century and it was entirely abandoned during the 10th century before being revived by Saint Malachy around 1140. He built the first stone church and introduced the Augustinian Order of monks. The only architectural remnant of this era being 'Malachy's Wall' located by the Abbey halls.

By the 16th century the Abbey lay in ruins until Sir James Hamilton, who pioneered the settlement of North Down, rebuilt it as a Parish Church. The present church, dating mainly from the 19th century, is entered under a 14th century tower, topped by a steeple of 1693.



Items of interest within the Abbey;

The Kenneth Webb Mural located in the sanctuary, celebrates Bangor's three principal Saints. **The Rathgael Drum** hanging in the porch, a reminder of the 1798 rebellion. **The Bradshaw Stone**, the oldest tombstone and **The James Hamilton & Sophia Mordaunt Memorial**. **The Bangor Bell**, a cast bronze bell found on the site in 1780, is displayed in the nearby North Down Museum.



Location: On the corner of Abbey Street and Newtownards Road in Bangor.

Open: Graveyard: Open daily. Abbey: Limited opening during the summer or by prior arrangement.

First Bangor Presbyterian Church

The church is a fine example of a traditional Presbyterian Meeting House. Built in 1831, it is the fourth building occupied by the congregation. The town's first Presbyterian clergyman was Robert Blair, a fiery, reforming cleric. He came from Scotland in 1623 to minister local Scottish settlers who came in the early 1600s.

In 1636, the Rev. Blair was among 140 local Presbyterians who attempted the perilous journey to America on the ship 'Eagle Wing'. The crossing failed but its heroism is celebrated each year.

In later years, the congregation worshipped at Meeting Houses in Fisher Hill (now Victoria Road) and at Ballymargee Street (now High Street).

The foundation stone of the present church was laid on 1 June 1831. From the outset it played a prominent part in Bangor life. In 1877 a school 'for the benefit of the humbler classes' was established followed in 1894 by the building of a Guild Hall for the male and female schools.



The pulpit is the focal point of the church symbolising the Presbyterian belief the church is the people of God gathered around the Word of God.

The tower and spire, added in 1881, and the lovely weeping ash tree which graces its entrance, stand testament to First Bangor's distinguished history of Christian ministry.



Items of interest within First Bangor; 300th anniversary memorial window recording the names of the first fifteen ministers from Robert Blair in 1623 to William John Currie in 1923. **Church Organ**, added to the original structure at the turn of the 20th Century and the **gallery windows** depicting the four evangelists.

Location: Main Street in Bangor.

Open: Limited opening during the summer or by prior arrangement.

St Columbanus Church

Until the early 1900s, Ballyholme was a small townland set apart from Bangor. During the 1920s and 1930s the area grew rapidly. The town centre parishes realised a new church was needed to serve families settling in that area and in July 1939 the Rt. Rev. J. Irvine Peacocke, D.D., Bishop of Derry and Raphoe, laid the foundation stone for the church of Saint Columbanus.

Stone for the church was obtained from Roxborough Castle, County Tyrone. A contemporary account mentions, "as no more of this stone can be obtained, this example of church work will be unique."

The church bell was obtained from St. Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin, by Canon Bradley, Rector of Bangor, and comes from a set, cast in 1670. Splendid stained glass windows grace the interior of the church honouring Ireland's Saints.

Ballyholme Church is dedicated to Saint Columbanus, the most famous missionary Saint educated at Bangor Abbey. He travelled across the Continent in the late 6th century, bringing Christianity to many places, including Bregenz, Austria, now Bangor's twin town. His name is still widely revered throughout Europe.

Items of interest within St Columbanus;

The buildings fine collection of **stained glass windows** representing the Saints of Ireland: Saint Columbanus, Saint Columba, Saint Finnian, Saint Comgall, Saint Gall, Saint Patrick, Saint Brigid and Saint Brendan.

Location: Groomsport Road in Bangor.

Open: By prior arrangement.



St Comgall's

St Comgall's Parish Church takes its name from the founder of Bangor Abbey, circa 558AD, and is located a few hundred metres away.

Under the Scottish colonisation of the early 1600's only a few Catholics remained in the area, mainly worshipping in Ards and Saintfield, with occasional summer services in Bangor in an empty house in Ballymagee Street (High Street). By the mid 19th Century Bangor's population had increased, including many Catholics returning to the area. As a result the Rev McAlea decided a Chapel of Ease was required and in 1846 land was purchased by James McGrath on Kennedies Hill (Brunswick Road) with the new church dedicated in 1851.

As the Catholic population grew, there was an ever-increasing need for a larger church. Standing close to the old church the new building was constructed in 1889 and consecrated in 1891.

In 1916 the Rev. Scally, a former chaplain to H.M.S. Caroline, became Parish Priest. During his time many changes took place. Much of the fine décor, stained glass windows, a marble pulpit, a mosaic pavement in the Sanctuary, the Stations of the Cross and Little Flower Hall all came during his time and the building you see today has remained largely the same since this period.



Education:

Schooling has been important to St Comgall's history. The original church converted in 1974 into a mixed sex school, St. Comgall's Primary School. Another school St Malachy's opened in 1975. These buildings developed over the years most notably under Rev Scally and later Fr Fullen. The latter was also responsible for the establishment of St Columbanus High School in Bangor which opened in 1960.

Location: Brunswick Road in Bangor at the Junction of the Belfast Road and Abbey Street.

Open: Open daily. Tours by prior arrangement.



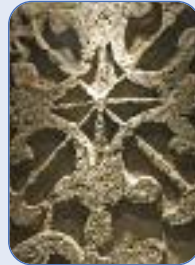
Hollywood Priory

Hollywood's Christian heritage dates to the 7th century when St Laiseran established a Celtic Christian community under the rule of St Comgall.

The next development came in 1190AD when the Anglo-Norman adventurer, John De Courcy, engaged Thomas Whyte to build the Priory for the Augustinian Order. Much of these walls remain. The tower dates from 1809.

After the Black Death (1348AD-1350AD) the O'Neill's won back these lands and about 1490 Niall O'Neill refurbished the church for the Franciscan Order, commissioning the fine tracery window for the east gable.

The Priory's darkest period began on New Years Day 1541 when Henry VIII dissolved the monastery eventually leading to Brian O'Neill burning the roofs of the religious houses at Hollywood, Bangor, Movilla and Greyabbey in October 1572 to prevent occupation by government forces.



By 1609 King James I had granted the lands to Sir James Hamilton. The roof was restored and Bishop Echlin installed Reverend Robert Cunningham, a Presbyterian military chaplain, as minister in 1615AD.

In 1660 the Presbyterians were expelled for non-conformity with the established Church of Ireland maintaining the building until the congregation removed to the Church Road site in 1844.

The oldest memorials found in the graveyards were a 12th century coffin lid, currently on display at North Down Museum, and several medieval stone heads. Many famous Hollywood families lie buried here.

Location: On the corner of Priory Park and Bangor Road in Hollywood.

Open: Graveyard open daily, Priory by prior arrangement.

North Down Museum

These buildings were once the stables, haylofts, stores and laundry of Bangor Castle, built by Robert Ward in 1852. Its displays bring to life the history and archaeology of North Down, from early Christian times to present.

The displays reflect the pivotal role Bangor Abbey held in early Christian Ireland. A large model shows the Abbey as it was in the 7th Century. In the courtyard, a full-scale reconstruction of a monk's cell, surrounded by herb garden, gives visitors a glimpse of their simple way of life.

The Vikings plundered Bangor Abbey several times in the 9th Century. During the raid of 824 A.D. they killed 900 monks and stole the shrine of Saint Comgall. An atmospheric reconstruction in the museum shows the inside of a Viking long house, where these raiders lived.

The museum is home to a number of important artefacts and exhibits central to our local Christian Heritage including;



Bangor Bell

Circa 825 A.D. Workmen at Bangor Abbey discovered the bell in 1780. It stands 14½" high and is a wedge-shaped bronze Sanctus bell, handle and body cast as one piece, with an incised cross and border of Celtic Scroll.

Bangor Antiphony (copy)

The original service book, now held in the Ambrosian Library in Milan was compiled in the 7th century and carried to Bobbio in the 9th century to preserve it from the Vikings. Its contents include metrical hymns, anthems, Canticles from the Bible and Lord's Prayer.

Altar Cross

This beautifully incised stone cross dates from the 12th Century.

Location: Castle Park, Castle Park Avenue, Bangor.

Open: Tue-Sat 10am-4.30pm
Sun 2pm-4.30pm Closed Mon except Bank Holidays and Jul-Aug.

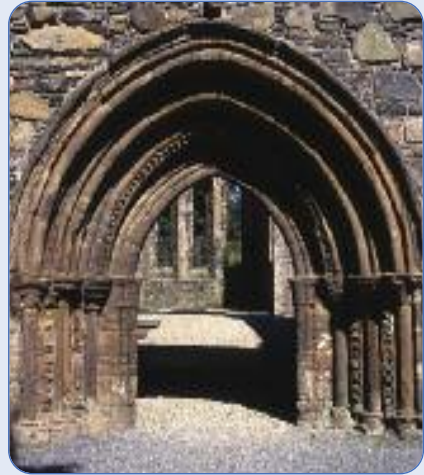
Grey Abbey

These splendid ruins of a Cistercian Abbey are the finest examples of Anglo-Norman church architecture in Northern Ireland.

Affreca, daughter of Godfred, the King of Man and wife of John de Courcy, Anglo-Norman invader of East Ulster, founded the abbey in 1193, as a thanksgiving for surviving a rough sea crossing to Ireland. The first Cistercian monks at Grey Abbey came from Cumbria, and their French background, coupled with the English origins of Grey Abbey, resulted in the first truly Gothic structure in Ireland.

One of the great features of Grey Abbey today is a carefully recreated Herb Garden, containing over fifty varieties of medicinal plants and herbs which the monks made use of in their day.

In 1572 Sir Bryan O'Neill burned the Abbey. It remained empty until the 17th century when the Scottish Montgomery family acquired Grey Abbey. For a time part of the church was used for worship. In the late 18th century the ruins were a feature of the parkland around the Montgomery's 18th century family home, Rosemount House.



There is a small visitor centre. Guided tours available on request.

Note: Informal parking adjacent to the Abbey. Gravel paths and grass areas may make parts of the site difficult or inaccessible for some. Visitors are welcome to wander or picnic among the ruins, however the rest of the grounds are private.

Location: Church Street, Greyabbey and signposted from the main street.

Open: Easter-end Sept 10am to 6pm daily.
Oct-Easter, Sun only 12 noon to 4pm.

This site is conserved, protected and managed by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency Info: 028 9181 1491 or 028 9054 6552.

Nendrum

These ruins are one of Northern Ireland's finest surviving examples of an early Christian monastery. Tradition holds that St Machaoi founded this island monastery in the 5th century.

There are documents referring to the monastery that date from the 7th century until 976AD, when the Abbot was burned in his house - possibly in a Viking raid. In the late 12th Century Benedictine monks established a small cell at Nendrum and the site was recorded as a parish church in 1306. However, in the 15th century this parish church was abandoned in favour of a mainland site at Tullynakill.

The monastery at Nendrum was 'lost' until the mid-19th century when the church historian William Reeves visited the island and recognised the importance of the remains, especially the round tower. The site was partially excavated in the 1920s and parts of it were rebuilt.

The site has three dry-stone walled enclosures, each built inside another. The central enclosure contains a church ruin with sundial, the remains of a round tower and a graveyard. The middle enclosure contains the remains of huts and workshops. The outer enclosure still keeps its secrets, but is thought to have included kitchen gardens and orchards. An internationally-important mill complex has been found next to the site, along with landing places on the lough shore.



A visitor centre houses an exhibition, models, artefacts and video. Guided tours by prior arrangement.

Location: Signposted off the A22 south of Comber.

Open: Daily from Easter–30 Sept, 10am–6pm. For opening times outside this period T: 028 9054 3037.

Note: There is a very narrow road approach, not suitable for coaches.

This site is conserved, protected and managed by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency.



Additional Christian Heritage Sites in Ards

You may also wish to visit some other areas of particular interest and importance to our Christian Heritage in Ireland.

Derry Churches

Two small pre-Norman churches associated with St Cumain, believed to be on an earlier church site. The larger church contains an early cross-carved stone.

Location: Situated 1.5 miles NE of Portaferry on Tullymally Road. Signposted from Portaferry.



St Cooney's Wells

Traditionally founded in the 7th century, at the site where St Cooney performed his penitential exercises. The site now comprises church foundations, a modern altar and three holy wells - a drinking, washing and eye well - reputed to have healing powers.

Location: South of Portaferry, towards Ballyquintin point.

Movilla Abbey

One of Ulster's most important monasteries, associated with St Finian, traditionally dated to the 6th century. Vikings plundered it in 824AD but Augustinian monks re-founded it in the 12th century. One carved stone slab survives from the pre-Norman monastery. The church was long and narrow and the ruins date to the 13th and 15th centuries. The Abbey houses a fine collection of Anglo-Norman stone coffin lids, and some ancient gravestones.

Location: 1 mile E of Newtownards on the B172 to Millisle. Access to the Abbey through the cemetery.

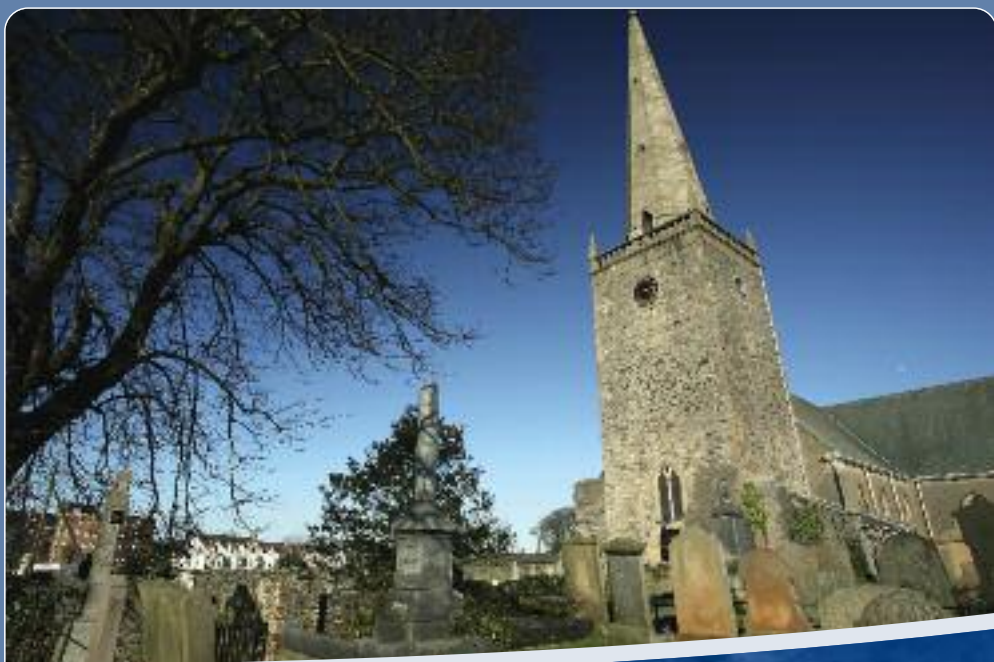
Open all year round.

Tullynakill Church

Ruins of a 15th century church with 17th century additions - a simple gabled building within a walled graveyard and remains of a doorway with a semi-circular arch. It is rumoured the remains of Daft Eddy, a notorious 18th century smuggler, are buried here.

Location: Tullynakill Road, SE of Comber.





For further reading

- Bangor Abbey Through Fifteen Centuries - Canon James Hamilton
- 350th Anniversary of First Bangor Presbyterian Church - William Wilson
First Bangor Presbyterian Church - A Short History
- Forward March, A Short History of the Church of Ireland in Ballyholme
- Rev. John J. G. Mercer
- The Saints in Our Windows - Marsden Fitzsimons, St Columbanus Church
- Bangor, an Historical Gazetteer - Marcus Patton
(Ulster Architectural Heritage Society, 1999)

For further information contact

Bangor Tourist Information Centre
028 9127 0069
www.northdowntourism.com

Ards Tourist Information Centre
028 9182 6846
www.ards-council.gov.uk

