

Legends with regard  
to the origin of  
St Patrick's Bridge,  
St Patrick's Rock, &  
the Saltee Islands.

Reproduced from pages 25, 28 and 29 of the Journal  
produced on the occasion of the holding of the  
Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI) annual  
congress in Whites of Wexford,  
25-27 March 2008.

# UNITED FOR PROGRESS



**Jim Hurley**

*Jim Hurley is a retired vocational school teacher of Science and Biology. He was Deputy Principal at Bridgetown Vocational College in south Wexford and was recipient of the BP Science Educator of the Year 1987 award and the CIWEM Environmental Merit Award 1999.*

## **A Bridge too Far**

Did Saint Patrick go a bridge too far? Or maybe he didn't go far enough? Legend has it that on one of his trips to County Wexford our National Apostle visited Kilmore Quay on the sunny south coast of the Model County and was responsible for building a bridge there. The results of his handiwork can still be seen today.

The expression "a bridge too far" is attributed to British Lieutenant General Frederick Browning, Deputy Commander of the First Allied Airborne Army during World War II. Browning led the Allied forces in Operation Market Garden, a failed attempt by the Allies to break through German lines at Arnhem in occupied Netherlands. Before the bungled operation Browning remarked to Field Marshall Montgomery: "I think we may be going a bridge too far".

Did Saint Patrick go a bridge too far on his visit to Kilmore Quay? He certainly bungled the attempt he made to keep the powers of darkness at bay. If you haven't been to Kilmore Quay it is well worth paying a visit. The seaside fishing village is less than a thirty-minute drive south of Wexford town and is well signposted off the Rosslare Road, part of the N25 that runs to and from the Europort at Rosslare Harbour.

Kilmore Quay is a thriving fishing port. The long village street snakes its way downhill between some well-kept thatched houses to the harbour and marina nestling beside the roundabout. There is ample free parking behind the pier and a stroll around the fishing port will reveal much of interest. Visitors usually end up in one of the several hostelrys and eating places such as Kehoes Pub and Parlour

opposite St Peter's church, a very prominent landmark perched on the hill overlooking the harbour. In addition to offering fine food and a wide range of drinks Kehoes' Pub and Parlour houses a maritime museum with a fascinating collection of nautical memorabilia of local and national interest.

On his visit to Kilmore Quay Saint Patrick didn't have the benefit of dropping into any pub or eating house. His mission was of a more serious nature according to local legend.

The legend is recorded by historian Dick Roche in "Saltees: islands of birds and legends" by Richard Roche and Oscar Merne, first published in hardback in 1977 by The O'Brien Press Ltd., and still available in the 1987 paperback edition in some local book stores. The legend tells that St Patrick was in County Tipperary. We are not told the date, or the precise part of the county that our National Apostle was in, or the nature of the good saint's business there. However, we are informed that St Patrick met the Devil. Again, we are not told the nature of Old Nick's business.

The pair had words near the Galtee Mountains. Apparently the outcome was a row between the two and the result was that St Patrick made a run at

the Devil causing the Prince of Darkness to retreat at high speed. The pair ran cross county with the saint in hot pursuit of Satan. St Patrick is often depicted as an elderly gentleman with a kindly face, a flowing white beard and long green skirts. His long skirts and his advanced years did not seem to impede his race after the cloven-footed demon because we are told that the good saint almost caught Old Nick somewhere close to Templemore.

Old Nick must have got a severe fright because the legend recounts that in a bid to get away he bit a huge lump out of the mountain north-west of Templemore and made good his escape through the resulting gap. The lump he bit out of the mountain is still known in Tipperary as "The Devil's Bit" and Ordnance Survey Ireland records the placename of the landscape feature as the "Devil's Bit Mountain".

The pair raced on to the huge surprise of local people going about their daily chores. Natives of Tipperary have a legend that the Devil dropped the Bit west of the River Suir and the lump is what they call today the Rock of Cashel. The Wexford legend vehemently discounts that explanation and firmly holds that Beelzebub still had the Bit in his mouth when the runners crossed



*St Patrick's Bridge extends from the mainland shore at Nemestown to the offshore Saltee Islands.*

# UNITED FOR PROGRESS

the boundary of The Model County and entered the Sunny South-East.

Lucifer was well ahead in the cross-country race as the pair neared the South Wexford Coast, a coastline rich in natural heritage resource values and areas of scientific interest. Satan was already on the seashore when St Patrick reached the summit of Forth Mountain some 15km inland. Although known locally as a mountain, even "The Mountain" to signify its uniqueness in the flat landscape of the south Wexford coastal plain, the prominence adjacent to Wexford town is technically a hill as it rises to a height of a mere 237 metres. Sand dunes in the Namib, the oldest desert in the world, have been recorded towering to heights of over 300m.

Anyway, Patrick stood on the hilltop watching the fleeing demon arrive on the distant seashore. Legend tells that in his frustration the holy man tore off a chunk of the top of the hill and flung it with all his might at the demon on the seashore. The chunk of rock missed its target and landed in the sea not far from the shore. It still lies there today and is known as Saint Patrick's Rock and is so marked on Ordnance Survey sheets depicting the Kilmore Quay area. There are even people who claim that they can still see the marks of the saint's fingers on top of the huge rock.

The legend recounts that after the stone throwing incident Beelzebub leapt into the Celtic Sea and quickly swam away from the shore. Considering his over-heated home environment in the everlasting fires of Hell it is strange that the Devil should be a good swimmer. That aside, the legend tells that not alone was he a good swimmer but he swam with 'The Devil's Bit', that huge chunk of Tipperary rock, still in his mouth. It is a tribute to his athletic prowess that he ran cross-country through several counties, Tipperary, Waterford, Kilkenny and Wexford, with the Bit in his mouth and now he was swimming out to sea with it still protruding from his gob.

As the Devil swam out to sea St

Patrick arrive on the seashore. However, the good saint was a non-swimmer. Not many people know that. So, there he was standing on the seashore at Nemestown hot and bothered and in a state of frustration and hopelessness as he watched Old Nick swimming towards the horizon. He resorted to picking up stones from the rocky seashore and pelting the missiles after Old Nick. Unfortunately, he failed to hit the rapidly-exiting demon.

St Patrick wasn't having a very happy day. He had failed to catch Satan in the cross-country marathon, he missed his target when he flung the rock from the summit of Forth Mountain, he wasn't able to swim, and now he was proving a bad shot in the stone-throwing department.

On the positive side he was a trier and he kept firing stones after Satan. The stones that missed fell in the sea and traced the winding path of the fleeing demon. The stones were so numerous that they piled up and stood above the sea surface forming a roadway or bridge along which Saint Patrick ran dry-shod thereby gaining ground on Old Nick as he continued to fire stones. The roadway of stones that St Patrick built according to the legend may still be seen at Kilmore Quay and is featured on Ordnance Survey sheets as

"St Patrick's Bridge".

But what of Old Nick? He was still swimming out to sea with the Bit in his mouth. The legend tells that St Patrick got lucky as one of his missiles very nearly hit the Devil on the back of the head. The demon got such a fright that he flinched resulting in him biting hard on the Bit in his mouth. So hard was his bite that the Bit cracked in two. A small portion of the Bit fell out of the corner of his mouth and he swam on for a further short distance, in a lopsided way no doubt, before the larger portion fell out too.

The two portions of the Bit were so huge that when they landed on the seabed they stood above the surface of the sea forming the two Saltee Islands-Great Saltee and Little Saltee-later to become an outpost of Viking seafarers, a haunt of pirates and privateers, scene of the capture of 1798 rebel leaders, property of Prince Michael and the Neale family, and home to teeming seabird colonies and Grey Seal pupping beaches.

The last that the legend recounts of the pair was St Patrick standing on his bridge still pelting stones after the demon and Old Nick swimming over the horizon in the general direction of Spain. So, that is the legend that explains the origin of the present day seaside features of



*The Saltee Islands looking along the axis of the two islands from the South Summit on Great Saltee.*

# UNITED FOR PROGRESS

St Patrick's Rock, St Patrick's Bridge and the Saltee Islands. However, that is not the end of the matter. A potentially serious difficulty arose when geologists pointed out that the rocks that form the Saltee Islands are not the same as the rocks found in Devilsbit Mountain in Co Tipperary.

The Saltee Islands are composed of Saltee Granite, a fine-grained, pale pinkish-brown granite that is found nowhere else in Ireland outside of the remarkable South Wexford Coast. Furthermore, it is known that the Saltee Granite extends over the seabed in a large oval measuring some 30km by 8km, and that the granite body intruded into the local rocks some 436 million years ago during the Silurian period of geological time. Saltee Granite is rich in the element strontium, a mineral that burns with an intensely bright red flame. Consequently strontium is widely used in the manufacture of fireworks and is therefore very familiar to anyone who has experienced a display.

Even the revered St Patrick's Rock wasn't safe from the scientific scrutiny of said geologists. They declared that it is a glacial erratic, a huge lump of Carnsore Granite that was pushed westwards from Carnsore Point by local ice movements during the last Ice Age. The rock type found on Forth Mountain is quartzite, an altered sandstone that is at least one hundred million years older than the Carnsore Granite. So, it looks as if the legend that claims that St Patrick flung the rock from Forth Mountain may not be entirely in keeping with the facts established in seats of scientific learning.

But not to worry; there are other legends, and those who were never great fans of the Old Nick version may be pleased to learn that their legends are in the ascendant.

The alternative legends all focus on St Patrick's missionary work and the comings and goings of holy men into and out of south Wexford. The fact that the South

Wexford Coast is the closest point in Ireland to both Britain and mainland Europe makes it an obvious departure point and destination for Early Christian missionaries moving back and forth between Ireland and external seats of ecclesiastical excellence.

You will remember that St Patrick was a non-swimmer. Well, another legend holds that St Patrick chartered a boat in Kilmore Quay to set sail for some unknown destination. The marina wasn't there in Patrick's time, of course, and he didn't have to call in to the present Harbour Master's office for customs clearance or to complete any paperwork. The present harbour wasn't even there in times gone by. In the past local fishermen beached their small craft in a boat safe still known today as "The Haven" and it was one of these boats that Saint Patrick is said to have chartered, hired, begged or borrowed from a local fisherman. But the boat leaked as soon as he put out from the shore. He jumped out and waded to safety, wet and angry, and cursing the boat so vehemently that it was turned to stone and that stone is still known today as St Patrick's Rock.

Other individual rocks have names too. With amazing imaginative skills the big rock on the popular bathing beach at Ballyhealy is affectionately known to one and all as "The Big Rock o' Ballyhealy". Two other well known glacial erratics near the Madjeen reef are the Water Witch and Lavender Rock; they

too have stories to tell but these tales are for another day.

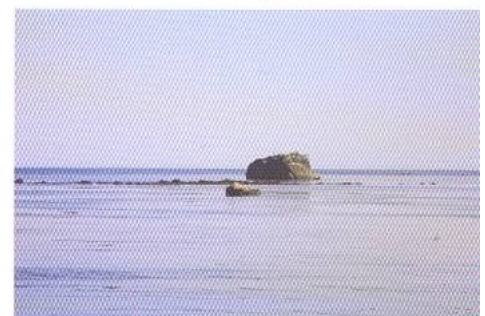
Yet another legend tells that being a non-swimmer and having bad luck with chartering boats St Patrick built his bridge to walk to off-shore missionary destinations. Some say he was visiting monks in a lonely hermitage on the Saltee Islands, others say he was bound for Wales. In 1877 George Griffiths edited the County Wexford Almanac and Directory and he claimed in his Chronicles that Saint Patrick was, in fact, building the bridge with a view to linking Ireland to France! Where ever his grand plan was to take him, the Saltee Islands, the neighbouring Welsh coast, or mainland Europe, Patrick had, for some unexplained reason, to abandon his bridge-building project at an early stage and consequently all that remains today is the butt of the proposed great structure.

In addition to providing scientific insights into the origin of the rocks that comprise the Saltee Islands, and the nature of St Patrick's Rock, the aforementioned geologists turned their attention to St Patrick's Bridge and declared it to be the eroded remains of an end moraine, a place where ice sheets from the last Ice Age melted and dropped their load of stones and other debris carried by the ice. So there you have.

What do you think?  
Did Saint Patrick go a bridge too far?  
Or maybe he didn't go far enough?



The Wexford County Council sign on the wall of the west pier at Kilmore Quay promoting the South Wexford Coast, a natural heritage coastline.



Pic 4: St Patrick's Rock near the shore at Nemestown.