Wexford History

In a country steeped in myth and legend Wexford's history isno exception. A story tells of its origin in the mists of time, when Garman Garbh was drowned on the mudflats by waters released by an Enchantress. The vast expanse of harbour thus created was named "The lake of Garman" or Loch Garman, the Gaelic name for Wexford.

As we trace our origins to the Celtic tribes who moved westward across Europe and were attracted to this natural harbour on Ireland's south east coast.

Our Christian heritage almost certainly predates that of the national apostle Patrick, as we had our own missioner Ibar, whose presence is recorded under his many varients such as Iver, Iberius and Ivory.

The Norsemen are accredited with introducing towns to Ireland, and Wexford was among the first, dating back to the early 900's. Our Norse and Viking ancestry is frequently being proven by archaeological finds within the town.
From marauding warriors, the Vikings became citizens and traders of early Wexford and their legacy includes the narrow winding streets and our town's name, Wexford, derived from the Norse, Weissfiord - inlet of the mudflats.

In the Spring of 1169, the then prosperous town was taken by an invading force of Norman knights, who over the following centuries enclosed the town and regulated trade.

Among the many visitors to Wexford around this time was the English King, Henry II, reputed to have done penance at Selskar Abbey for the murder of Thomas a Beckett.

Selskar Abbey

Through many turbulent years, Wexford survived warring factions, plagues and the religious upheaval of the Reformation.

The 1600's also brought suffering. Wexford became a chief naval base for the Confederate Government in its war with the Parliament Forces and this led to a massacre in 1649, when Wexford fell to the army of Oliver Cromwell. Following this disaster, the town was relatively calm for over a century, but in the hot Summer of 1798, it exploded once more onto the stage of Irish history.

In that year of insurrection, many of the woes of previous decades came to the surface, with violent results on both sides. This created memories which still persist in story and song.

From those dark days of 1798, Wexford entered an age of expansion.

The port was about to reach its zenith, with hundred of ships trading with lands in Africa, the Black Sea and the United States of America.
Trade increases led to the growth of industries ranging from whiskey distilling to the manufacture of agricultural machinery.

The population grew steadily and many new streets were constructed, while in 1851, work began on the elegant twin Churches which were to dominate the skyline.

It was also in 1800's that many of to-days important buildings were constructed, St. Peters College in 1819 to the Mechanics Institute in 1849 and the Tate School now the Municipal Buildings, in 1867.

The railway reached Wexford in 1870 and was continued along the quay front by 1882. In the early years of this century, Wexford agricultural machinery companies operated branch offices in cities such as Paris and Buenos Aires.

Wexford c. 1800

Many are familiar with the industrial strife of the British General Strike of 1926 and the Dublin Lock-out of 1913 but prior to both of these, the people of Wexford had endured a lock-out for over six months 1911/1912, to secure the right of trade union representation. The great war of 1914-18 also left its mark on Wexford.
Being still part of the British Empire at that time, thousands of her sons fought on land and sea, with many giving their lives in the struggle.

An American Airbase was established at Wexford during this period.
Its headquarters being where the present day Ely Hospital is at the east end of Wexford bridge. American airmen from the base patrolled St. Georges Channel to search out enemy U-boats.

After World War I there was little respite in warfare as our country entered a period of struggle for independence followed by a civil war.
Throughout all of this Wexfordians played a part and the town continued to grow.

The Second World War found Wexford part of a neutral country, but the war still managed to inflict suffering and death on our people.
Although not part of that war, our merchant navy was to experience many attacks and some of our sailors paid the ultimate price in keeping Ireland fed.

After the war, Wexford had mixed fortunes. Our traditional industries began to decline, as mechanisation advanced.
Nature, by the way of easterly storms and sediment built-up conspired to end our shipping tradition and emigration took its toll on our working populace.
But our cosmopolitan outlook, springing from mixed origins and our seafaring traditions, made the town very attractive to international companies and to a growing tourist industry.

To our narrow streets came a president and ex-presidents.
The American people presented us with a statue of John Barry, a Wexfordman deemed as founder of their navy.
John Fitzgerald Kennedy, President of the U.S.A visited the county town of his ancestors, just months before his tragic death.
Dwight Eisenhower and Mayor Daly of Chicago were other distinguished visitors to Wexford.

Commodore John Barry

Then in 1982, we re-affirmed our Celtic European origins, when Wexford became the 'twin town' of Coueron, France, a fitting ceremony for a major town at the Irish Gateway to Europe.

While looking ever forward, with urban renewal and the increase attraction of international companies to our highly trained youth, we never lose sight of our past. We believe in our history and its importance, not only to ourselves but to visitors.

With this in mind we have developed a major National Heritage Park on the outskirts of our town. As well as preserving our ancient town walls we have established an impressive municipal interpretive centre at Westgate in a tower built around 1300 A.D.

This town of Wexford has a lot to offer you as a visitor and as we begin a new century we hope to present to you the remnants of the past in such a fashion as to please and stimulate your mind to read further about our rich heritage.

Wexford Web

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