

# SLÍ BHREANNAIN - IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF ST BRENDAN FROM FENIT TO LERRIG

## St Brendan Heritage Committee, Fenit: In memory of the life and work of Father Gearóid Ó Donnchadha

Early-Medieval saints are elusive figures, their lives and deeds embellished by later hagiographers. This is certainly the case for St Brendan of Kerry, the Navigator whose travel adventures across the Atlantic were written down in monasteries across Europe, making him one of the best-known saints in the early-Middle Ages. Unlike other Medieval saints, however, Brendan is unique because many places associated with him exist to this day. Indeed, in and around Tralee Bay we find Fenit Island, where Brendan was born, his place of fosterage in Listrim, his place of baptism at the ancient site of Tobar na Molt, his place of ordination by Bishop Erc in Lerrig, and Ardfert Cathedral, one of his major monastic foundations. Along with the Heritage Park in Fenit, these places form the Slí Bhreannainn (the Brendan Way), researched and established by Brendan's greatest champion, the late Father Gearóid Ó Donnchadha.

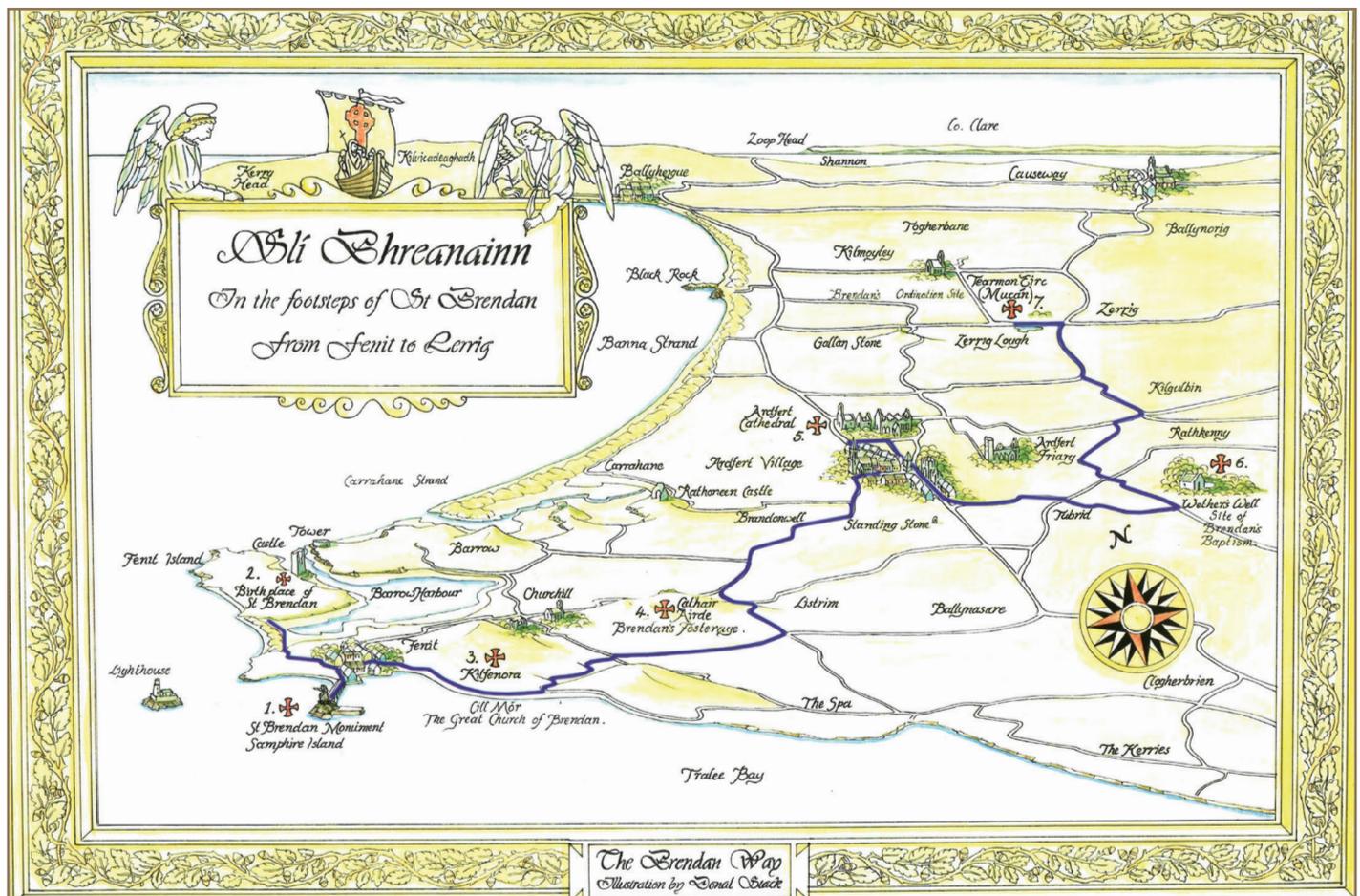
### 1. St Brendan Statue & Heritage Park

**Location:** Fenit Harbour Marina

**Accessibility:** This is an outdoor heritage park; open all year; admission free

In the year 2000, a group of people in Fenit under the direction of Father Gearóid Ó Donnchadha embarked on a journey to

honour St Brendan. Planning permission was obtained for a 12 foot statue on a four-foot plinth to be placed on the summit of Samphire Island at the entrance of Fenit harbour. In 2004, the statue was unveiled and soon thereafter the Heritage Park opened for the enjoyment of local people and visitors alike. It is here that your pilgrimage starts. Following the path leading up to the statue are a number of replica artefacts, which are largely the work of Eoghan and D'Ana O'Donoghue/Ross of Glenflesk. The first depiction shows a tri-circle motif from Newgrange, County Meath, a 5000 year old passage tomb, representing eternity; Ogham writing of 400-800 AD; a copy of the Reask stone near Ballyferriter, West Kerry c.700 AD; a Bronze Age Wedge Tomb, common in West Kerry; a clochán, or beehive hut, used by monks in the early-Medieval period and a bullán stone, of which there are countless examples in Kerry. Bas-reliefs under the statue depict scenes from the *Navigatio* (Voyage) of Brendan. The wonderful five meter bronze statue of St Brendan was sculpted by Tighe Ó Donoghue/Ross of Glenflesk, while the boat shaped plinth was constructed by local stonemasons Tom and Eugene Farrelly. Reflecting the tradition of the mythological Fianna, Brendan is depicted in their battle strategy stance – *glún le glaoi agus troig le taca* - knee bent towards the battle tumult,



The Brendan Way illustrated by Donal Stack.

rear foot against a support – let there be no retreat. We can picture Brendan, leaning into a force 10 storm, like those he faced at sea on his own travels, his cloak blowing out behind him, grasping the Gospel, pointing across the Atlantic and urging ever forward to spread the word of God.

## 2. Fenit Island – Brendan’s birthplace

**Location:** Public Beach, Fenit (at the village shop turn right and follow signs)

**Accessibility:** The beach is open to the public all year around but there is no public access to Fenit Island. Please do not go beyond the limits of the beach.

To the north of Fenit village is Fenit Island, or Fenit Within, a populated island enclosing Barrow Harbour. The island is connected to the mainland by a sandbar, allowing access at low tide. A number of interesting ruins exist on the island including a late-Medieval tower built by the FitzMaurices, two churches and a burial ground. There is also evidence of dense habitation in times past. Somewhere here on Fenit Island is the most likely place of Brendan’s birth in 484 AD. His parents were Finlug of the Alltraighe and Cara of the Corca Dhuibhne. His brothers were Domaingin, Faitlec and Faolán and his sister was called Brig. Bec Mac Dé. A legendary Irish prophet had foretold the birth of Brendan the previous night to Áirde, the local chieftain, who then visited Brendan on the day of his birth and claimed him as his foster child. Another important visitor was Bishop Erc who had seen a bright light shine over Fenit the previous night. He later baptised Brendan at Tobar na Molt. We can imagine Brendan growing up in Fenit Island, learning the ways of the sea and of ships. It is here that he saw the Brent geese gather in March on the Barrow mud flats flying off to the north-west wondering what lies beyond the horizon.

## 3. Kilfenora – Church founded by Brendan

**Location:** On the main Fenit to Spa Road, about 2kms from Fenit on left hand side

**Accessibility:** There is no accessibility to the site. This is a blind bend without safe parking; please be careful.

Kilfenora was also called Kilmore (Cill Móire, the Great Church), stressing its importance in Medieval times. Its name, Kilfenora, clearly shows a connection to Brendan, as the name Fionnoir is a pseudonym of Brendan. According to the taxation list of the year 1300, Kilfenora, along with Fenit, was one of the most important parishes in the diocese of Ardfert. Very little of this once great church founded by Brendan around 520 AD is now visible above ground.



Fr Gearóid O'Donnchadha and Tighe O'Donoghue/Ross discussing the work on the clay model of St Brendan (Courtesy of Elizabeth O'Donoghue/Ross).

## 4. Cathair Áirde – Place of Brendan’s fosterage

**Location:** On the Spa to Ardfert Road, in the townland of Listrim, just beyond Scrahan crossroads

**Accessibility:** There is no public access but Cathair Áirde, located at the highest point on your left, is visible from the road.

This ringfort situated in a prominent location on a hill in the townland of Listrim near Spa village. It was the home of local chieftain Áirde Mac Fidaigh and it is named in the *Beatha Bhreanainn*, the Irish Life of Brendan, written in the first part of the 8<sup>th</sup> century. It is also named in 16<sup>th</sup> century maps and is still called Cathair Áirde to this day; a remarkable incidence of continuity. Very little is left of this ringfort though its outline is quite clear. From the top, one is granted a superb view over Fenit Island, Barrow, Ardfert and the plain of North Kerry. The Irish Life of Brendan tells us that, on the night of Brendan’s birth, Becus Mac Dé, the ‘chief prophet of Ireland’ came to the house of Áirde Mac Fidaigh to announce to him “There will be born this night, between you and the sea, your true and worthy king, whom many kings and princes will adore...” The very next day, Áirde visited Brendan to bring gifts and to claim him as his foster son. After a year with his parents, Brendan would spend the next four years with Áirde in his *cathair* in Listrim. Interestingly, Áirde’s own great-grandson was St Carthage, also known as St Mochuda, founder of Lismore Abbey in 635 AD; an important monastery associated with two Medieval masterpieces, the Lismore crozier and the Book of Lismore.



Collage of St Brendan's Statue and Ardfert Cathedral.

## 5. Ardfert Cathedral – Founded by Brendan

**Location:** Ardfert village

**Access:** The transept of the cathedral functions as a visitor centre from May to September (telephone 066 7134711 for opening hours). The Cathedral grounds are accessible all year round

This important heritage site features three Medieval churches and is testimony to Ardfert's status as Kerry's Medieval ecclesiastical capital. Ardfert cathedral itself with its magnificent Romanesque doorway is built on the site of an early-Medieval monastery founded by Saint Brendan about 520 AD. Interestingly, Ardfert (Ard ferta) means the height of the burial mounds but it is also known as Ard Fertá Breanainn. There is no contemporary evidence to verify Brendan founded a church here but strong local traditions support this claim. Brendan's original church was most likely a wooden structure of which nothing remains today. Architecturally, the cathedral building can be dated from the 11<sup>th</sup> century to the 17<sup>th</sup> century but recent excavations showed continuous use as a burial ground from the 6<sup>th</sup> century onwards. Early-Medieval finds, apart from burials, include three cross slabs. During excavation works it was observed that on May 16, the sun rises exactly opposite the east end of the Cathedral, suggesting that the Cathedral is on the same alignment as an earlier church whose foundation stone was laid on May 16, St Brendan's feast day.

## 6. Tobar na Molt (Wethers' Well) – Place of Brendan's Baptism

**Location:** Ardfert, townland of Tubrid, parish of Ardfert

**Access** with kind permission of the landowners

Tobar na Molt is a holy well that has been a place of devotion since pagan times. To this day, it is a magical place, hidden in a small enclosure and devotedly looked after by the land owners. It is a spring of pure water and the source of the Tyshe River that supplied Ardfert in Brendan's time. Nearby is a mound thought to be the grave of St Ita, a friend of Brendan. There is also a large Medieval stone monument, probably an altar or tomb from Ardfert Cathedral, Friary or Kyrie Eleison Abbey in Abbeydorney. Three figures are on the front of the monument, reckoned popularly to be Bishop Erc in the middle with Brendan and Ita on either side.

Shortly after Brendan's birth, Bishop Erc brought the boy, who was named to be *Mobhi*, to the holy well for baptism. Immediately, a white mist covered them and Erc, taking this as

a sign, called the child *Brén Fhionn* (white drop or mist) which was the name by which he was known thereafter.

The origins of the name 'wethers' well' is worthy of note. According to local tradition, Brendan's foster father Áirde Mac Fidaigh gave three wethers as a baptismal fee to Bishop Eirc for baptizing Brendan. 'Wether' is an Old English word with Germanic roots meaning castrated male sheep. The word 'wether' originated and was popularly used before 900 AD, which gives credence to it being the true origin of the name. Another variation in local tradition links the name to a miraculous incident that purportedly took place during penal times when priests were secretly celebrating Mass at the well. As English redcoats approached with their dogs, three wethers jumped out of the well leading the dogs and soldiers north to a place near Ballyheigue called Akeragh – or *Áth Caorach*, the ford of the sheep – where they disappeared. Meanwhile, the hunted priests made their escape and were thus saved from certain death.

## 7. Tearmon Eirc – Place of Brendan's ordination

**Location:** Kilmoyley, townland of Lerrig

**Access:** With kind permission of the landowner

Tearmon Eirc (locally called the Múcán) has been venerated from time immemorial. There is very little left of the place that was Bishop Erc's See, only about half an acre of grass-grown mounds that have been jealously preserved from disturbance by the local people. Tradition has it that this is the oldest church in Kerry. The word Tearmon means Sanctuary (from the Latin word terminus – boundary), suggesting that this was a privileged place of refuge in troubled times, a place no one dared violate. It was here that Brendan was ordained priest about 510 AD.

### Endnotes:

O'Donoghue G. (2004): *St Brendan of Kerry, the Navigator*, Open Air, Dublin.

O'Donoghue, D. (1893): *Brendaniana*, Browne and Nolan, Dublin.

Moore, F. (2007): *Ardfert Cathedral Summary of Excavations*, Stationery Office, Dublin.

St Brendan Heritage Committee (2004): *Sli Bhreanainn: The Brendan Way Fenit to Lerrig*.

[www.saintbrendan.org](http://www.saintbrendan.org)

[www.ardfert.ie](http://www.ardfert.ie)



Celebrating St Brendan's Feast Day at Tobar na Molt  
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Station Marker Birthplace © Rob Vance.