

# Elusive Irish Ancestry

A personalized glimpse of Celtic history.

By Wendy & Rob Lindsay

**T**hey say that Ireland has a thousand shades of green. It certainly looked that way as we peered from the window of a Zoom Airlines plane as it broke through the clouds and descended to Belfast. Below us spread a patchwork of hedgerow-bound fields in myriad shades of green. We were soon to come to know this landscape first-hand from our small rental car.

Last year we travelled to Scotland on an ancestral quest (See "In Search of Our Scottish Roots," February 2005) and discovered that Rob's people had likely been among the "Planters," Protestant farmers who immigrated with royal blessings to Ireland. Now here we were about to continue unravelling the puzzle. It gave an exciting focus to our holiday as we travelled into Belfast City.

My, how Belfast has changed since our visit seven years ago! When peace returned in 1998, the Cathedral Quarter, the Gasworks, the Titanic Quarter and the Old Port became the focus of European-based urban renewal. Now unemployment has dropped to four per cent, and Belfast is a vibrant, busy, safe city with climbing cranes and construction on almost every block in the downtown core.

The Europa Hotel on Great Victoria Street was once called "the crossroads of intrigue" and "the most bombed hotel in Europe." But it's now been restored to its former grandeur. We cavalierly decided to check in and indulge in the luxury of a Hastings hotel. Besides, it was only a few blocks from the Ulster Historical Foundation (UHF).

We found the UHF easily at 12 College Square E. thanks to a giant banner on the building reading "History from Headstones." This research facility, founded in 1956, is a

gold mine for amateur genealogists searching out family links within Ulster (Northern Ireland). It has a library and a database of over 500,000 Irish records. Currently an additional 2.5 million records are being digitized. However, as client services manager Dr. Jonathan Hamill told us, the key to success is registering early and beginning to work with the facility from home.

He cautioned that Ulster research poses some unique challenges. "Up until 1845, church records are spotty due to persecution of both Presbyterians and Roman Catholics," he explained. "Because church records could be a source of oppression if they fell into the wrong hands, often events such as marriages and baptisms were not recorded." In Ulster, Hamill confirmed, Belfast is indeed the best place to start a search because of the volume of records. From there, the trail can be followed out to the smaller county research centres.

For us, the trail on the paternal side of the Lindsay family led to County Mayo – outside the jurisdiction of the UHF – and parts of Ireland we'd never seen before.

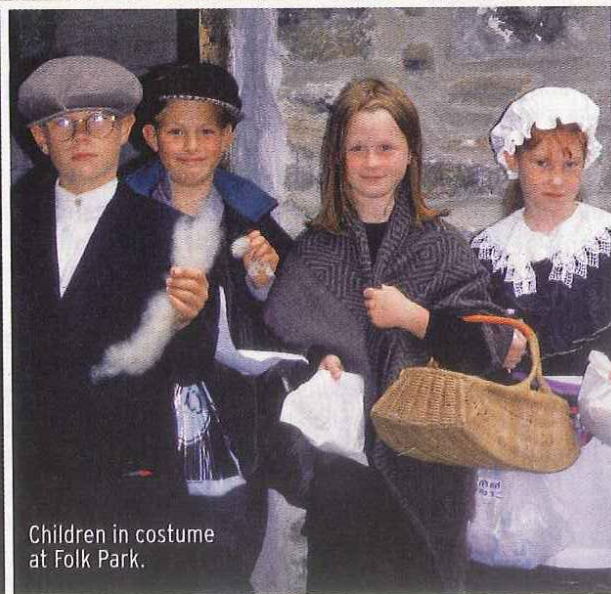
## The Antrim Coast and the Giant's Causeway

Like fully one-third of the tourists who visit Ireland, we wanted to see the Giant's Causeway. But instead of the interior route from Belfast, we chose to take the Antrim Coast Road, said to be "one of the great highways of the world." It covers some 80 miles of dramatic, windswept coastline. If you arrive in Ulster by ferry from Scotland, you can pick up this part of the A2 highway and head north from where you dock at Larne, a place that got its start many centuries back as a Viking port.

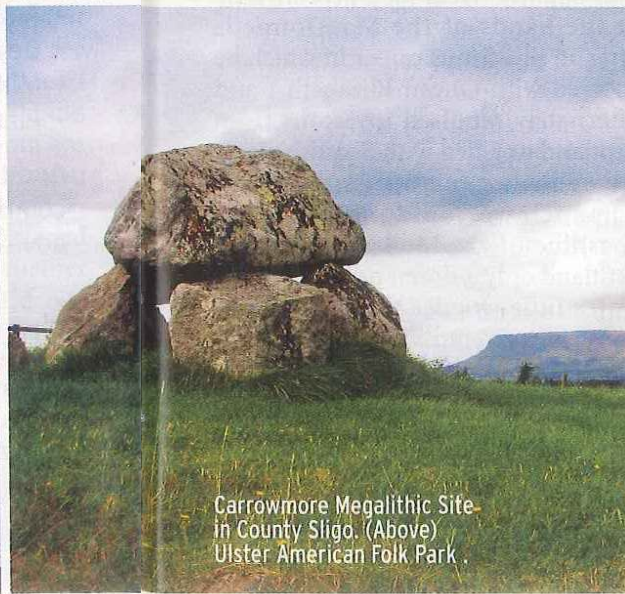
Northward up the coast we head-



Rob at the Ulster Historical Foundation.



Children in costume at Folk Park.



Carrowmore Megalithic Site in County Sligo. (Above) Ulster American Folk Park.

Photography, Wendy & Rob Lindsay

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travel



We left the A2 and headed on Torr Head Road through Cushendun and out toward the coast.

ed, with every twist and turn revealing new vistas – a tiny town of neat white cottages, a quiet fishing village, a pristine beach. Great verdant hills covered in small fields stretched down to the road, which was met by the rolling sea on the other side. At times we found ourselves beneath steep limestone cliffs with the waves crashing just a few feet away.

Along the coast between Glenarm and Ballycastle stretch the famous Glens of Antrim. By the time you reach Carnlough, you're starting to pass the mouths of these deep, beautiful valleys, which stretch miles inland from the sea. Each of the nine glens is different in character, history, legend and scenery.

Stopping to talk with the local folk is a charming way to discover the land and its history. These magical moments are the memories you'll treasure long after the photos are forgotten. For us, one such magical experience occurred when we left the A2 and headed through Cushendun and out toward the coast on Torr Head Road. High on a hill with a spectacular view of the harbour and town below, we stopped to take out our cameras. Here, we met the owner

of the Villa Farmhouse B & B, who told us about a little-known historic site not far down Torr Road. Thanks to her directions and the little brown-and-white historic site signs, we found it. Following a winding footpath past grazing sheep, we came to an ancient stone Celtic cross atop a cairn. A tribute to "Shane the Proud," it had stood for centuries in rugged defiance of the elements. Apparently, the nefarious Irish chieftain Shane O'Neill died here in 1567 at the hands of the MacDonnells after an illustrious career in which he sparred with Queen Elizabeth I and alternately repulsed invasions from Scotland or allied with Scottish clans. As we looked out across the North Channel, we could make out the coastline of the Mull of Kintyre in Scotland only a dozen miles away.

It's little wonder that the Antrim coast is scattered with the ruins of forts, castles, churches and friaries. They recall periods of both conflict and trade when it was easier to travel by sea between Scotland and Antrim than to make the arduous journey inland to the heart of Ireland.

This spot brought it all together – nature and history peacefully co-exist-

ing. There were no neon signs, no tour guides, no admission fees – just silence, the tinkle of sheep bells and us. It was a magical moment indeed.

By contrast, the road to the Giant's Causeway at the tip of the Antrim Coast Road is well marked. A UNESCO World Heritage Site, the causeway has a modern interpretive centre with full tourist facilities. Legend has it that the spectacular hexagonal basalt stones cascading down to the raging sea are the stepping stones of the giant Finn McCool. Whether you prefer this legend or the scientific explanation that says they're the result of cooling lava 60 million years ago, there's nothing else like them in the world, and climbing over the rocks is wonderfully exhilarating. But seldom will you experience them alone.

A few miles farther on is a historic edifice of quite a different nature. The Bushmills Distillery is the oldest "legal" distillery in the world. Here, the smooth double-distilled Irish whiskey that's become globally famous is created. Guided tours show how it's distilled, aged, blended and bottled. Naturally, the last stop is the ever-popular tasting room. The usu-



Dunluce Castle.

ally crowded gift shop is the only location in Ireland where some of the rare blends are sold.

Three miles east of Portrush, watch for Dunluce Castle. Perched on a steep, rocky cliff above the sea, it's thought by many to be the most picturesque and romantic castle in Ireland. Originally built by the Normans, it has a history of capture, recapture, intrigue, and legend, including that of Sorley Boy MacDonnell, who hauled his comrades up the cliff in a basket to storm the castle. Apparently, in 1639, while the castle was under his rule, the kitchen fell off into the sea during a storm, taking with it everyone except a scullery boy who sat resting on an adjoining windowsill. While self-guided tours are an option, they can't compare to those conducted by the genial guides, who provide generous helpings of Irish humour. From the castle, it was approximately a two-hour drive to our next stopping spot in Derry.

## Derry

Situated on the banks of the River Foyle, the city of Derry (formerly Londonderry) is the only completely walled city left in Ireland. It's a fascinating place to walk – filled with historic churches, old pubs, an intriguing craft village, and the beautiful Guildhall, where history is captured in the stained glass windows.

The city is of particular interest to Canadians searching out their ances-

tral roots in Northern Ireland. Derry was one of the principal emigration ports in Ireland from the early 1700s to the onset of the Second World War in 1939, when the last transatlantic passenger steamer sailed out of its large natural harbour. We suspect that Rob's ancestor, like those of so

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