

Bangor Abbey which will feature on the St Columbanus heritage trail.

St Columbanus is regarded in much of Europe, including France and Italy as Ireland’s greatest saint. St Patrick called the area 'The Valley of the Angels' and in the 6th century a group of monks under the leadership of St Columbanus set out from Bangor for the continent to 'reclaim' Europe for Christianity at a time when it was rife with anarchy and chaos.

HLF has now provided £40,000 so that the council can tell this story through a number of initiatives. The funding will enable the council to provide training of local volunteers as guides, so that they can tell the extraordinary story of Bangor’s Christian Heritage. This including the story of the ancient monastery and its contribution to the revival of Christianity, during the period historians call the Dark Ages.

The year, 2015, will mark 1400 years since the death of Columbanus and through these projects, including interactive information and educational packs, the Council will have the means to develop its rich heritage and educate both local and visitors of the spiritual heritage of the town and the important role Bangor played in the spread of Christianity throughout Europe.

The council will also develop a 'heritage meditation trail' so that visitors can walk in the footsteps of the Saints and utilise new technologies to inform of the history of the towns’ key sites. There will also be spaces for contemplation provided by local churches on the trail.

Alex Irvine, Tourism Development Officer at North Down Borough Council, explained: “Unfortunately little remains today of the original monastic settlement yet parts of the coastline that they would have walked are very much as the same as in ancient times. We hope this trail will provide contemplative and educational activities that will be of interest to all ages by embracing new technology”.

There has been a lot of discussion and debate about Columbanus in recent years. The former Irish President Mary McAleese described him as Ireland’s most influential emigrant, Pope Benedict XVI called him the first European and currently there is a petition for Pope Francis to name St Columbanus a Patron Saint of Europe in 2015.

Bangor’s Tourism Office reports that pilgrims from France and Italy regularly visit Bangor in the footsteps of Columbanus to learn more about the monastery and the place he was educated under St Comgall. An application is currently with the European Institute of Cultural Routes to recognise the 'Columban Way' as an established 'European Cultural Route' .

Paul Mullan, Head of HLF Norther Ireland said: “It is very exciting to see North Down taking such an innovative approach to Bangor’s contribution to the development of Christianity. It is an extraordinary story that sets the town apart. We are delighted to give our support and wish the council well as it continues to develop this project.”

**Further information**

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