

# Stepping back in time

**Joe Dermody** takes his family on a trip through Meath, Kildare and Louth, taking in some of the historic highs along the Ancient East trail

**R**ATTY was not wrong when he mused “there’s nothing half so much worth doing as simply messing about in boats”.

*The Wind In The Willows* rodent would certainly enjoy the Eco Tourism Medieval Trim River Tour, a gentle rubber raft float around the historic walled town of Trim, Co Meath. What could be calmer than floating along the Boyne passing by ancient premonastic stone buildings, two ancient cathedrals and soaking up the views and the history of Trim Castle?

By the castle walls, James Murray of Boyne Valley Activities parks the dinghy to offer brief tales of ye olde Trim. The town was once home to tanneries, where the leather was ‘cleaned’ with animal and human urine. To this we owe the phrase ‘piss poor’, denoting people so short of cash that they’d stoop to selling their own urine to the tanneries.

Moving swiftly along, the inside of Trim Castle is stunning. While it looks every inch a fortress in Mel Gibson’s 1995 movie *Braveheart*, the scholarly actor-director may have been instinctively drawn to the 800-year-old castle’s former use as a library, notably as a home to the weighty tomes of pre-Christian scholars.

You could see why Mel Gibson would shoot parts of his Oscar-winning film here. Trim has more historic stone crammed into its compact town centre than anywhere I’ve ever seen. The town really is a cornerstone in which the history of the Ancient East springs back to life.

We stayed in Trim Castle Hotel, a four-star gem right next to the epic castle. For dinner, we heartily recommend walking across the road to the Stockhouse Restaurant where host Michael Hughes offers a welcome as warm as his chef’s menu is delicious.

Trim was definitely a highlight of our trip, the food was fantastic and the company even better. Have a look online at Trim Castle and the Stockhouse; for such high quality, the prices are surprisingly reasonable.

The Ancient East is a must for

anyone who wants to revisit the sites of Ireland’s historic battles. If the Wild Atlantic Way offers untouched beauty, the east offers living evidence of the footprint of Saxon and Viking visits, with fortresses and battlements aplenty.

However, perhaps the most moving place to visit is the site near Drogheda, Co Louth, of the Battle of the Boyne, where 60,000 troops fought in 1690 in one of the most defining battles in Irish history. Looking across the fields and following the detailed guide in the excellent visitor centre, you really get a sense of the immense scale of the battle, the largest ever conflict on Irish soil.

In short, the Boyne River hosted a royal family feud between England’s deposed Catholic King James II, and the Dutch Prince William of Orange, a Protestant who, with his wife, Mary II (his cousin and James’s daughter), had overthrown James in England in 1688. William won the battle, ensuring Ireland remained under Protestant control.

The visitor centre is a chrome-clad, lavishly developed thing of beauty in its own right. The on-site historians and the wall-to-wall smart screens and mini-cinema walk you through every step of the military smarts which saw William win the battle.

The day we visited, there were visitors from all over Europe and the USA, but we’re also reliably informed that the site is of growing interest to people from Northern Ireland, for whom the battle marked a significant historic moment.

Meanwhile, music fans might enjoy taking the short spin over to nearby Slane Castle, and perhaps stop for a snack surrounded by images of U2, the Rolling Stones, Bruce Springsteen and all the others who have wowed audiences on the epic lawn of Lord Henry Mountcharles.

On our visit, we enjoyed a hugely informative tour of the house guided by Diana Allen, one of the Ballymaloe clan so familiar to Corkonians. She offers colourful insights not only into the visiting rock stars, but also



The Japanese Gardens, top, Trim’s river tour and Barberstown Castle.

tales of how Lord and Lady Conyngham and their kin paid legendary architects James Wyatt, Capability Brown, James Gandon and Francis Johnson to keep the epic house evolving and becoming more beautiful with each passing generation.

The day we passed through, the house was being readied for a wedding. Chairs were laid out for a string quartet in one of the main rooms in which U2 recorded the *Unforgettable Fire* album. The castle is due for an overhaul next year, when a new whiskey distillery is also scheduled to be launched on the grounds.

And as we drove into the opulent grounds of Barberstown Castle, Straffan, Co Kildare, preparations were again in full flight in advance of another wedding party. This is yet another stunning four-star hotel, a magical blend of old world charm and every modern convenience.

Everything from manicured gardens to the four-poster, spoke of quality. The dinner and breakfast menus were magnificent, including the wheat- and gluten-free options required for one our party. Again, prices are not

bargain basement but they are bargains, given the quality.

We could have stayed relaxing in Barberstown’s gardens for days. We’re glad that we didn’t. En route back south we stopped into the unmissable Irish National Stud and Japanese Gardens in Tully, Co Kildare. This really has something for everyone.

The gardens are a joy to walk through, the food and the atmosphere are pleasant. The real magic here, however, is the stud. Around 120,000 visitors visit the farm each year. The majority of the stud’s profits come from being a fully commercial farm.

The star of the stable is Invincible Spirit, for which the stud charges €120,000 to each visiting mare. He has produced multiple top league (or ‘black type’) winners and has also produced 12 stallions of his own. His yearlings average €250,000 at the sales. The stud is home to eight resident stallions, all on varying fees. The stud is also a leading educator for horsebreeding, and people from all over the globe jet in for its various courses.

Big money aside, it was a remarkable experience to

actually get to touch retired National Hunt super stars now resident in the stud. The most famous was probably Hurricane Fly, who was born in the stud in 2004 and who won 22 grade one hurdles and nearly €2.5m.

Hurricane Fly was literally gadding about in a field with fellow champion hurdle winner Hardy Eustace, Kicking King, Moscow Flyer, Beef or Salmon and Rite of Passage.

If the rest of the Ancient East really delivers on its promise to bring Ireland’s ancient past to life, be sure to also pop into the National Stud where our more recent equine history is still very much alive and kicking.

Also worth noting are the excellent road links all along the east coast. Well worth the trip.

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