



Viewpoint

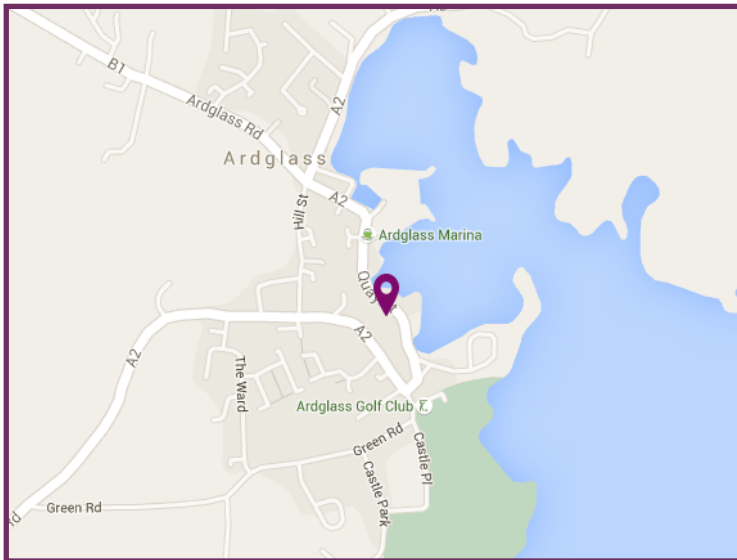
Tower of virtue



Time: 15 mins

Region: Northern Ireland

Landscape: coastal



Location:

Quay Street, Ardglass, County Down, BT30 7SA

Grid reference:

SB 65163 90997

Keep an eye out for:

Ardglass harbour on the right - one of Northern Ireland's busiest fishing ports

Right in front of you, just beyond the tideline, is a small stone tower with an open door to the sea.

It might look like a child's toy fort but the tower had a serious purpose.

What was this tower built to defend against?



This is Ardglass bathing house and the tower was built to uphold Victorian ideals of modesty - it's actually a ladies' changing room! Bathers changed inside, and then braved the sea without allowing onlookers to see more than the bare minimum of exposed flesh. The high wall on the seaward side protected the ladies from inquisitive eyes!

In the nineteenth century, Ardglass became popular with tourists 'taking the waters' for health reasons. Most of the town's built heritage dates from then, and was aimed at visitors using the seaside spa. At one time Ardglass offered hot and cold vapour baths, as well as sea bathing. The Bathing House is the only structure remaining from the town's Victorian spa facilities.

Local landlord, William Ogilvie, was the brains behind it. The tower was built around 1830, to regenerate the harbour and attract visitors. If you look behind you to your left, opposite the Marina you'll see The Crescent, set back from the street and marked out by well-clipped hedges.

The Crescent's period properties are all different in shape and size, but share beautiful views out to sea from their elegant sash windows. This is the town's conservation area. Many of these houses were built to rent out to summer visitors.

As it stands right on the shoreline, the Bathing House is totally exposed to the elements. The wind and waves have taken their toll. Over the years, strong spring tides from the Irish Sea battered and damaged much of the structure. However the Follies Trust recently restored the Bathing House, using local stone.

Today the Bathing House is admired as a Victorian folly, carefully restored as a reminder of an era when bare flesh was concealed at all costs. Stoic bathers still brave the chilly waters of the Irish Sea, but now mainly with wetsuits to protect their exposed flesh, rather than a stone tower.

Working harbour

This coastal area of County Down was built on three main industries - fishing, farming and granite (from the nearby Mourne Mountains).

The Bathing House is just a stone's throw from the busy fishing harbour of Ardglass on your right. Back in its heyday, Ardglass was the main fishing port in the North of Ireland. The natural inlet here made it a haven for boats, and it was an important harbour as far back as Norman times.



Pettman's Bathing Machines, 1921



Fishing boats in Ardglass harbour