

If riverbanks could talk

A self-guided walk along the River Quoile in Downpatrick



Explore tranquil riverbanks with a hidden history

Find out how the waterway has influenced human settlements

Discover a long history of traders, invaders and settlers who arrived by boat

See what happens when saltwater turns to freshwater

www.discoveringbritain.org

*the stories of our landscapes
discovered through walks*







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Cover image: River Quoile, Albert Bridge, Geograph (CCL)

If riverbanks could talk

A stroll beside the River Quoile near Downpatrick

Rivers are constant yet ever changing. The River Quoile that flows through County Down has witnessed millennia of people come and go.

Prehistoric settlers, Viking invaders, Celtic monks, English aristocrats, industrial traders and modern pilgrims have each left their mark.



The walk along the riverbank and into Downpatrick looks at the natural characteristics of the Quoile and the surrounding landscape of rounded hills and marshes. Find out how this has influenced where humans have established their settlements throughout history.

Discover why Downpatrick developed as an important centre and find out why the geographical location and natural characteristics of the Quoile presented both opportunities and limitations for transporting people and goods.



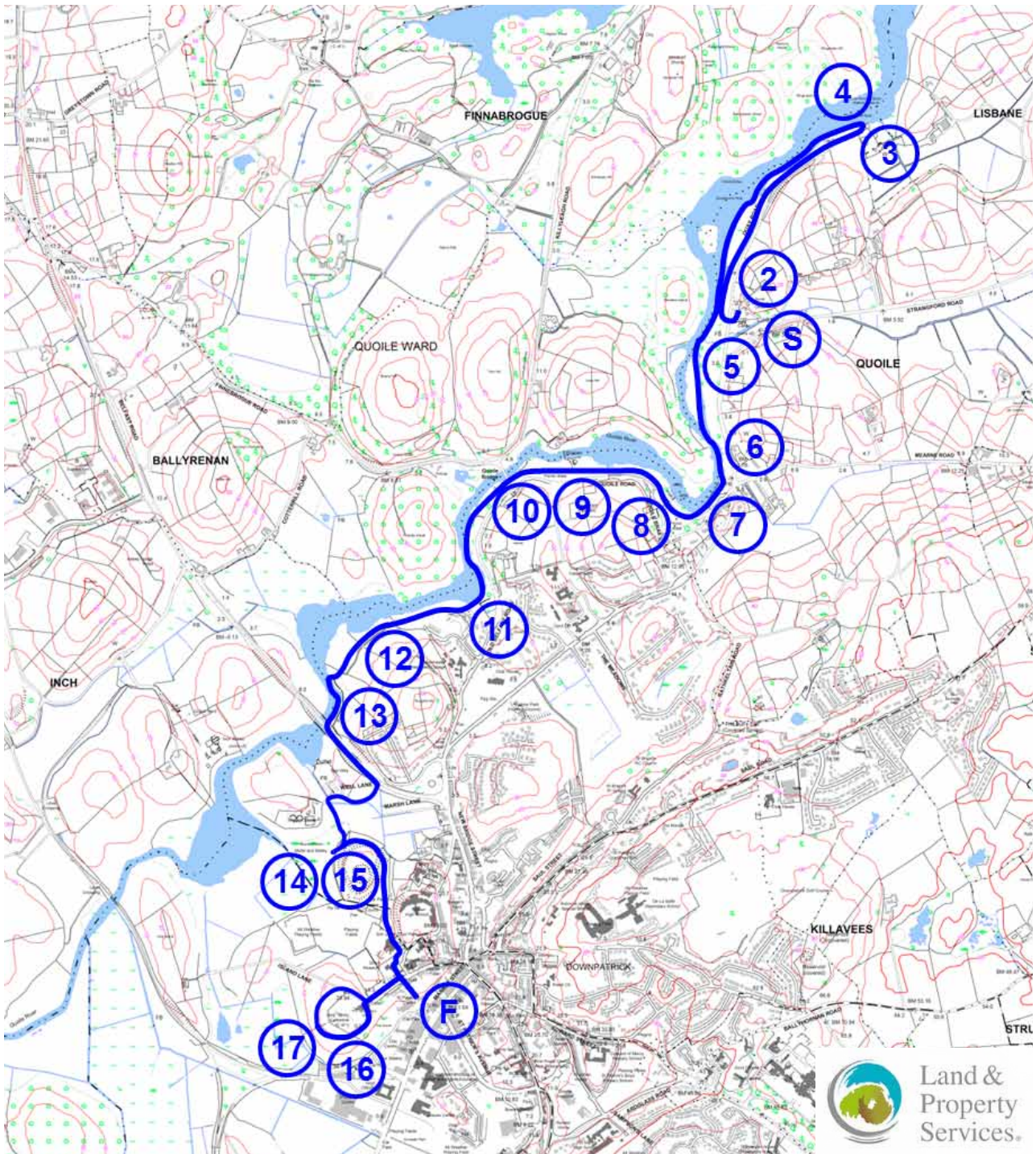
See how humans have tried to manage the Quoile and its seasonal flows through a variety of flood control schemes.

The most recent is a tidal barrier which has transformed a tidal river into a freshwater wetland thriving with wildlife.

Stroll along and allow the river to reveal its stories and secrets.

Top: Down Cathedral from Inch Abbey © Jenny Lunn
Bottom: Cow in the Quoile marshes at Jane's Shore © Howard Lunn

Route overview



Start Quoile Countryside Centre
Finish St Patrick's Centre

Practical information

Location	Downpatrick, County Down, Northern Ireland
Start point	Quoile Countryside Centre, 5 Quay Road, Downpatrick BT30 7JB
Finish point	St Patrick's Centre, 53a Market Street, Downpatrick BT30 6LZ
Getting there	<p>Car - Downpatrick is about 20 miles southeast of Belfast on the A7. The Quoile Countryside Centre is just off the main Downpatrick to Strangford road (A25) about one mile northeast of Downpatrick; it is well signposted. There is a free car park at the centre.</p> <p>Bus - Downpatrick is well served by local buses from various directions including Belfast. The nearest you can get to the Quoile Countryside Centre is old Quoile Bridge (about $\frac{3}{4}$ mile away) using service 14 from Downpatrick to Killyleagh (every 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ to 2 hours from Monday to Saturday). Check with Translink before you travel (www.translink.co.uk).</p> <p>Bicycle - National Cycle Route 99 passes through Downpatrick and alongside the River Quoile; it passes within half a mile of the Quoile Countryside Centre.</p>
Return to start	Please note that this is a linear walk and public transport is limited. Suggested means of returning to the start point are given in Directions 18 but you may also consider parking part way along the route to avoid a long return walk.
Walk distance	4 $\frac{1}{2}$ miles
Level	Gentle – A mostly level route along the river bank and into the town centre with some steps.
Terrain	Predominantly paved or gravelled paths; some grassy tracks; and lanes and pavements in the town.
Conditions	Waterproof footwear and covered legs are recommended after wet weather due to long (and frequently damp) grass in places.

Best time to go

For appreciating the wildlife along the river the best times of year are:

- April to September for breeding waterfowl, kingfishers and butterflies
- October to March for wintering teal, widgeon and mallard

Suitable for

Families - There is plenty of wildlife for children to look out for along the river but little legs may need to have the full walk broken into sections.

Wheelchairs and pushchairs - Quoile Countryside Centre is fully accessible as is about three-quarters of the walk along Quoile Pondage and Jane's Shore (Stops 1 to 13).

Dogs - Dogs should be kept on a lead as the river banks are rich in wildlife.

Toilets

- Quoile Countryside Centre (start of route)
- Quoile Quay (Stop 7)
- Down County Museum (just before Stop 16)
- Down Cathedral (Stop 17)
- St Patrick's Centre (end of route)
- Market Street, Downpatrick (near end of route)

Refreshments

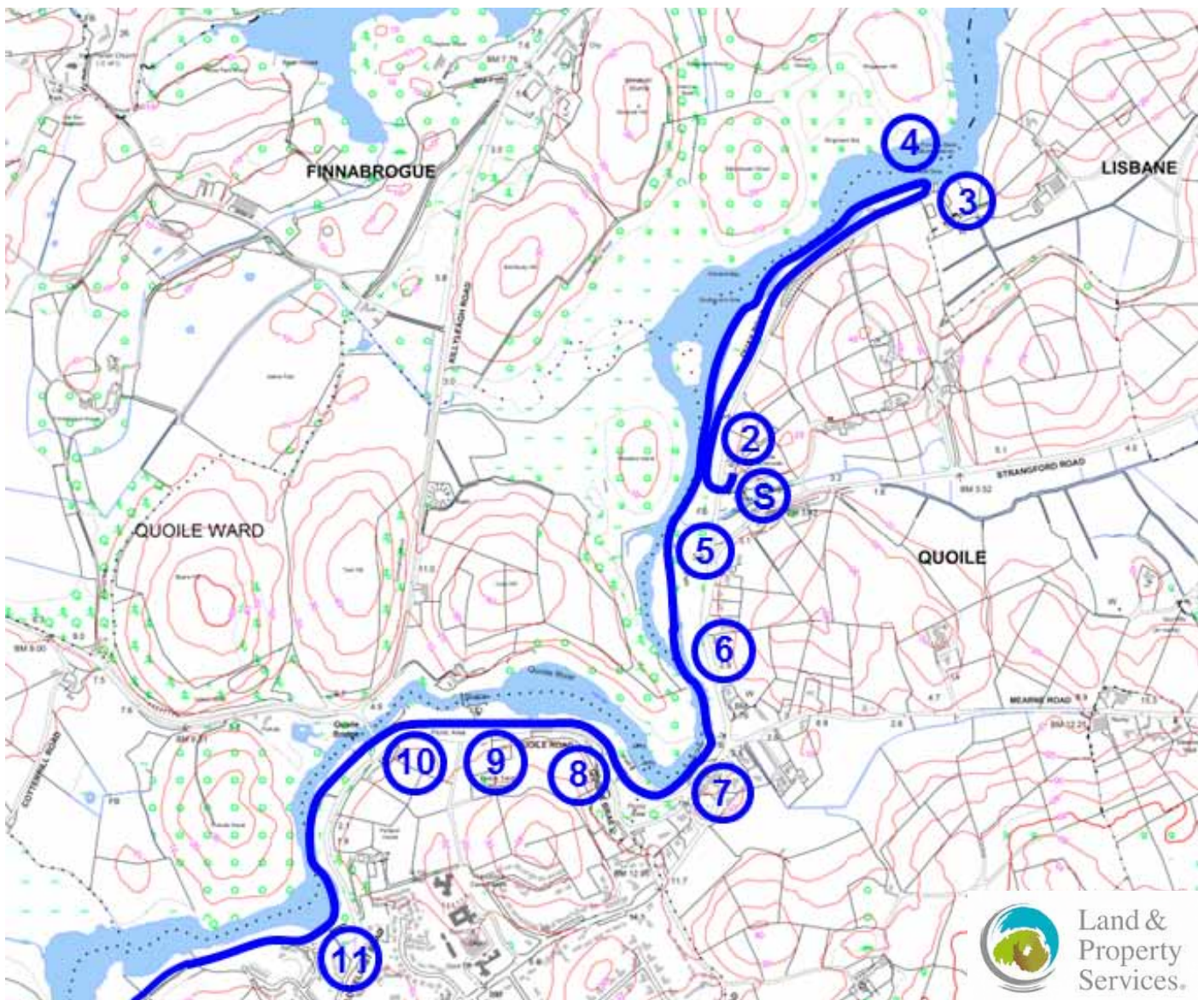
- Quoile Countryside Centre has a water dispenser but no café (start of route)
- There are picnic sites with benches along the river between stops 1 and 9.
- Down County Museum has a café (just before Stop 16)
- St Patrick's Centre has a cafe (end of route)
- Various cafes, restaurants and pubs in Downpatrick town centre (end of route)

Tourist information

Downpatrick Visitor Information Centre
Inside St Patrick's Centre, 53a Market Street, Downpatrick
Email: downpatrick.vic@downdc.gov.uk
Tel: (028) 4461 2233

Visit Strangford Lough
www.visitstrangfordlough.co.uk

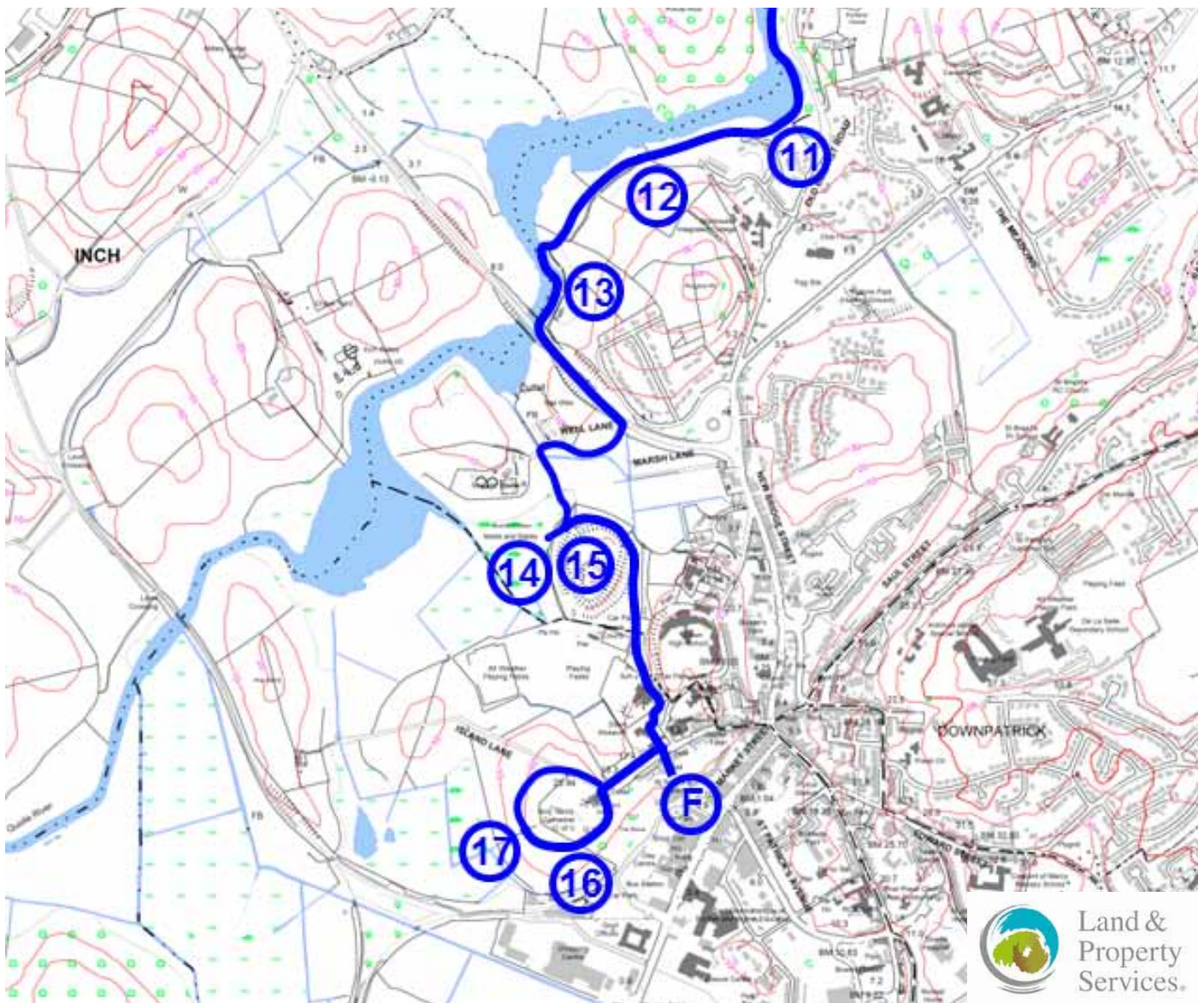
First part of route



Stopping points

- Start** Quoilie Countryside Centre
- 2.** Quoilie Castle
 - 3.** Top of Steamboat Quay
 - 4.** Bottom of Steamboat Quay
 - 5.** Riverbank by The Cut
 - 6.** Riverbank by the remains of a boat
 - 7.** Quoilie Quay
 - 8.** Disabled anglers' jetty
 - 9.** Stone structure near old floodgates
 - 10.** Riverbank near old Quoilie Bridge

Second part of route



Stopping points

- 11.** First boardwalk on Jane's Shore
- 12.** After triple kissing gate on Jane's Shore
- 13.** Second boardwalk on Jane's Shore
- 14.** Top of the Mound of Down
- 15.** Top of the Mound of Down
- 16.** Grave of St Patrick by cathedral
- 17.** View from Cathedral Hill
- Finish** St Patrick's Centre

Places to visit

Quoile Countryside Centre (start of walk)

A visitor centre with displays on the unique wildlife and history of the area plus nature garden
Open daily 10am to 5pm from June to September and 12 noon to 4pm on weekends and public holidays for the rest of the year; admission free
www.discovernorthernireland.com/Quoile-Countryside-Centre-Downpatrick-P2892

Down County Museum (The Mall, Downpatrick, BT30 6AH, near Stops 15 to 17)

Permanent exhibition of 'Down Through Time' covering 9,000 years of history
Open Monday to Friday 10am to 5pm; Saturdays and Sundays 1pm to 5pm; Admission free
www.downcountymuseum.com

Down Cathedral (Stop 16)

Site of Christian worship since the 6th century and burial place of St Patrick
Open for visiting from Monday to Saturday between 9.30am and 4pm and on Sundays from 2pm to 4pm; check website for service times; admission free but donations welcome
www.downcathedral.org

St Patrick's Centre (end of walk)

Exhibition about Ireland's patron saint; includes art gallery, gift shop and café
Open all year round Monday to Saturday from 9am to 5pm and on Sundays in July and August from 1pm to 5pm; General admission free; charges for exhibitions
www.saintpatrickcentre.com

Inch Abbey (one mile outside Downpatrick; accessed off the A7)

Ruins of a large abbey dating back to the 12th century
Open access all year round; admission free (site only partially accessible for wheelchairs)
www.discovernorthernireland.com/Inch-Abbey-Downpatrick-P2876

Ballydugan Mill (two miles southwest of Downpatrick)

Spectacular 18th century, six-storey flour mill by the River Quoile now a restaurant and hotel; top floor houses a permanent exhibition on the history of the mill
Open access all year round; admission free
www.ballyduganmill.com

Saul Church (two miles northeast of Downpatrick)

Modern church on the site of St Patrick's first church in Ireland
Open daily for visiting with services on Sundays; admission free but donations welcome
www.saintsandstones.net/saints-saulchurch-journey.htm

Slieve Patrick (three miles northeast of Downpatrick)

Giant statue of St Patrick on a hilltop with stunning panoramic views of the Quoile, Strangford Lough, coast and mountains
Open access all year round; admission free
www.discovernorthernireland.com/Slieve-Patrick-Saul-P3148

1. A narrow place

Quoile Countryside Centre

This is the Quoile Countryside Centre which takes its name from the river that lies just the other side of the hedge across the road.

The River Quoile starts life near the town of Ballynahinch some ten miles away and meanders south before looping up northwards through Downpatrick then flowing into Strangford Lough.

The name 'quoile' derives from the Irish word for narrow. Looking at the map of Strangford Lough it is easy to see why: as the river meets the lough, a series of islands almost block the river, leaving very narrow routes to navigate.

Downpatrick, where the River Quoile meets this western branch of Strangford Lough, has been a natural meeting place both geographically and socially for centuries.



Map of the Lecale peninsula showing the S-shaped course of the River Quoile (top) Alice Stopford Green (1912), Wikimedia Commons (CCL)



Quoile Countryside Centre
Albert Bridge, Geograph (CCL)

On this walk along the River Quoile and into Downpatrick we will find out why people settled by this river, how they made a living from it, and how the waterway has been managed and controlled.

The conversion of this old stone cottage into the Quoile Countryside Centre is evidence of the latest phase of the history of the Quoile, of it being a haven for nature and place for recreation, but its story started a long time ago...

Directions 1

Look at the ruined tower next to the countryside centre.

2. Location location location

Quoile Castle

This tower house called Quoile Castle dates from the late 1500s but it possibly replaced an earlier structure. At first glance it may not seem obvious why you would build a great tower house here, but if we throw ourselves back into the sixteenth century it soon becomes much clearer.

Look around you and imagine a different landscape. Quay Road between here and the river did not exist. The river itself was higher and subject to tidal flows. This meant that the castle was originally surrounded by water on two sides that would have come up to the walls at spring tide.



Old postcard of Quoile Castle (early 1900s)
showing the river coming up to the side
Courtesy of Down County Museum

The unseen geographical situation was important too. The River Quoile cuts off the Lecale peninsula from the north and to some extent the west. With the Irish Sea to the east and south the result is a location isolated on three sides by water, and mostly by marshland on the fourth. Bridges aside, the only access is by the southwest. If you wanted to build a house to protect yourself from feuding Irish tribes then this was a smart choice.



Remains of Quoile Castle
Ardfern, Wikimedia Commons (CCL)

Not much is known about the castle's history although we do know that the West family resided here until the mid-1700s. During conservation work in the 1980s a workman found a stash of silver sixpences hidden in the remains of the thatch. The coins have been dated to the reign of Elizabeth I in the latter half of the sixteenth century. You can find out more about archaeological excavations and conservation work in the Countryside Centre.

Directions 2

Go through the gate onto Quay Road and turn right. Follow the lane about a quarter of a mile past two small car parks. Shortly after the second, the lane comes to an end at the gateway to Steamboat Lodge. Go down the steps to the left of the lane and turn right at the bottom on the first path. At the end of the path, go up the steps onto the raised platform area which is the old Steamboat Quay.

3. From saltwater to freshwater

Top of Steamboat Quay

This section of the River Quoile is actually a 'pondage' where the river's water is held behind a man-made barrier.

A tidal barrier was constructed about two miles north of here in 1957. It goes across the mouth of the River Quoile, making use of the natural geography by joining one of the islands in the channel, Hare Island, to the mainland on either side.

The barrage was built to stop the frequent flooding of Downpatrick and was the latest in a long line of attempts to control the tide and its effects, as we will discover later.

When the barrier was created, the concerns of those for and against it were predominantly economic; the ecological effects of the barrage were not anticipated or even considered.



The aerial view reveals the tidal barrier with the freshwater of Quoile pondage to the left and saltwaters of Strangford Lough to the right
Google Maps



Quoile tidal barrier seen from near Castle Island Hide
Ardfern, Wikimedia Commons (CCL)

As the protected freshwater habitat developed over the years, marsh plants and reed beds established themselves on the shores while alder and willow scrubs lined the muddy bays.

However, the construction had a huge impact as it changed the natural habitat of this section of the river from saltwater and seashore to freshwater and wetland.



The view downriver from Steamboat Quay reveals the shift from saltwater to freshwater environment
© Verity Peet

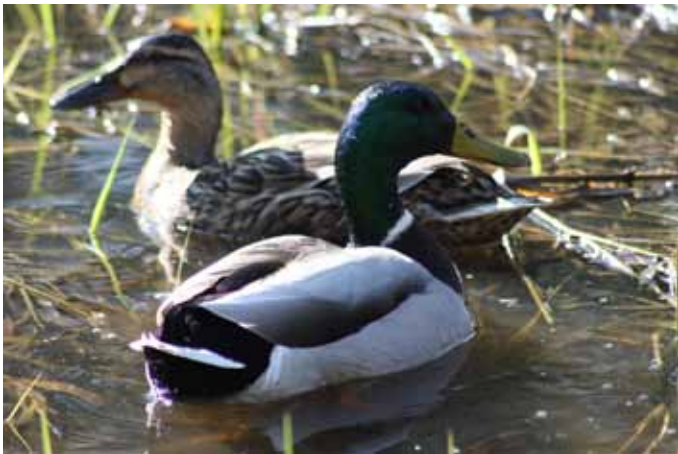
The area has become rich in insects which attract fish such as rudd and eels. These in turn bring grey herons, cormorants and grebes and a wide variety of wintering ducks, geese and swans, several of which remain to breed.

To find out more about the birds visit the excellent hide at Castle Island Road downriver.

Following this human transformation of the natural environment, the Quoile pondage was declared a National Nature Reserve in 1970.



View from Castle Hide across Quoile pondage
Ardfern, Wikimedia Commons (CCL)



Different habitats and species found in Quoile pondage
Ardfern, Wikimedia Commons (CCL)

Directions 3

Carefully descend the other set of steps from the top of the quay to the riverside path, noticing a plaque on the wall. Turn back and look at the stone quay.

4. Steamy scenes

Bottom of Steamboat Quay

When ships relied on the wind and tide, schedules were difficult to keep to. But the invention of steamships in the early 1800s changed all that.

In 1836 The County Down and Liverpool Steam-Packet Company was established to carry passengers and goods across the Irish Sea.

This new quay was built, appropriately known as Steamboat Quay, and a new steamship was commissioned, the Victoria.

When she came steaming up the Quoile, so excited was the crowd that the air was filled with celebratory gunfire. She would have been tied to these mooring bollards still standing today.

Business was brisk initially with livestock, cereal and potatoes carried to Liverpool. The return journey brought tea, wool, lead and copper.

However, less than a year later, the service was struggling. Government taxes, storms causing delays and costly repairs had all taken their toll.

Local farmers complained of goods waiting for days on the quayside while the shareholders complained that there was not enough cargo. There were also accusations of mismanagement.



THE
**County of Down and Liverpool
STEAM-PACKET COMPANY'S**

New and Powerful Steam-Ship

VICTORIA,

(370 Tons Register, 220 Horse Power),

WILLIAM ABERDEEN, Commander,

WILL Sail, with Goods and Passengers, from
STRANGFORD LOUGH and ARDGLASS,

On Saturday (this day,) the 16th of December,

And every succeeding Saturday, leaving ARDGLASS precisely at SEVEN o'clock, P.M.

FROM LIVERPOOL,

LEAVING CLARENCE-DOCK ON

Tuesday,..... 19th December,..... 3 o'clock, P.M.

Tuesday,..... 26th December,..... 10 o'clock, P.M.

No expense has been spared in fitting up the Cabins, and in the other arrangements; for the comfort and accommodation of Passengers; combined with which, will be the all-important advantage, of a considerably shorter passage than from any other Port in Ireland; thus affording facilities which must command the attention, as they will deserve and, no doubt, secure, for this Company, the steady support of the Public.

Advertisement in The Downpatrick Recorder (16 December 1837)

From the 'Lecale Miscellany' (Volume 16, 1998)

Courtesy of the Lecale and Downe Historical Society

Local newspaper, The Downpatrick Recorder, asked, 'If Coleraine can support a steamer plus Dundalk, Stranraer and Drogheda then why can not Downpatrick with all that it has to its advantage?'

The answer lies in the geography. The narrows of Strangford Lough are notoriously difficult to navigate and larger vessels must wait for high tide to pass through.



The view from Slieve Patrick reveals drumlins at the mouth of the River Quoile which were one of the factors that made navigation difficult
© Jenny Lunn



Cargo boat moored at Steamboat Quay (early 1900s)
Courtesy of Down County Museum

The quay was subsequently used by other companies for trade, particularly in timber and slate, but finally closed in the 1920s.

Steamboat Quay's glory days aren't all in the past though. The enormously popular TV series 'Game of Thrones' shot some scenes here. If you're a fan then check out the Game of Thrones jetty en route to the next stop.

In May 1839 the proprietors decided to cut their losses and sell Victoria. Her short service from the Quoile had been plagued by problems. Some perhaps could have been overcome but the difficulties of geographical location could not.



The large mooring bollard is evidence of the size of ships that once docked at Steamboat Quay
Ardfern, Wikimedia Commons (CCL)

Directions 4

Follow the riverside path for about a quarter of a mile which runs parallel to the lane you came along. Go past the two small car parks and path up to the Countryside Centre. Cross a small wooden bridge and look for the next fishing platform on the right. Go to the end of the platform and look to the left at the entrance to a long thin channel called 'The Cut' which was a short canal created in 1857 to help ships avoid an awkward bend in the river.

5. Invasion invasion invasion

Riverside by The Cut

Earlier we discovered that Quoile Castle was strategically sited with water on three sides. While this was good protection against native tribes on foot, invaders could literally sail in. And they did.

It is not known who were the first invaders but river dredging work in 1991 turned up an ancient piece of oak which specialists dated to nearly 3,000 BC. There are several megalithic sites and evidence of Neolithic settlements nearby so we can assume the Quoile has been seeing new arrivals for at least 5,000 years.



Norsemen landing in Iceland from
'Myths of the Norsemen from the Eddas and Sagas' (1909)
Wikimedia Commons (CCL)

In the ninth and tenth centuries Vikings stormed up Strangford Lough and along the River Quoile to pillage Downpatrick. We can see the legacy of their presence in the name Strangford which is derived from the Norse 'strang fiord' meaning strong fjord.



A Norman king, queen, knights and noble ladies
from 'Costumes of All Nations' (1882)
Wikimedia Commons (CCL)

Then in 1177 John de Courcy led a Norman invasion. With a small army of just 22 knights and 300 soldiers, but with far greater weaponry and tactics, he soon defeated the last king of the Ulaid (Ulster tribes) and conquered most of what is now known as County Down.

Finally, in the sixteenth and seventeenth century English and Scottish settlers arrived as part of 'The Plantation' and so began a relationship between Ireland and Britain of trade and trouble, the legacy of which we still live with today.

Directions 5

Continue along the riverside path until you see the remains of an old sailing ship on the left side of the path behind a wooden fence.

6. The unhappy fate of Hilda

Riverbank by the remains of a boat

These remains are the keel and ribs of a boat called The Hilda, apparently named after the daughter of the celebrated Irish nationalist, Charles Stuart Parnell. She was one of half a dozen such boats used for ferrying coal in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. These were wooden sailing vessels with small petrol or paraffin engines for back-up.

Once they arrived at the Quoile with their 130 tons or so of coal they either sold their entire cargo to one of the four yards based here, or else they docked for a few days and sold their coal directly to customers by the cartload thus cutting out the middleman.



The remains of Hilda in 1956, lying in her current position but before the riverside path was developed
Courtesy of Down County Museum

And that is what the Hilda did in 1922. But profits had seemingly hit rock bottom; the night after her cargo was sold the Hilda was aflame. An eyewitness described her dramatic end:

“On the night the Hilda was burned, I was awakened by my mother about midnight, and lifted up to the window to see a ship on fire. This was the Hilda, lying in the berth nearest the Quay Brae, and a wooden ship, tarred every Spring provided a spectacle such as I had never seen, nor ever saw again until I saw the fires in London during the war some twenty years later.”



The remains of the Hilda
© Jenny Lunn

The crew stood by as the ship burned until eventually the two masts fell into the quay. It seems that ‘insurance jobs’ were also part of the culture in 1922.

The sunken hulk cluttered the quay so the remains were re-floated a few weeks later and moved to where she rests today. During the Second World War most of her timbers were salvaged except what is left now. However, you can still get a good impression of the size of the vessels that once populated the quay.

Directions 6

Continue along the riverside path ignoring all left forks. At the end, climb the steps and turn right. Almost immediately you are on Quoile Quay (also known as Coal Quay).

7. A bustling port

Quoile Quay

Long before Steamboat Quay that we saw earlier, there was this quay, Quoile Quay, built in 1717.

The Lord of the Manor of Down, Edward Southwell, recognised that in order to flourish, Downpatrick needed its own port.

In the eighteenth century, as industrialisation began and Belfast began to see an explosion in population, the surrounding countryside was transformed in order to meet the needs of the hungry workers.

Land use swung from pasture to grain and the Quoile was used in two ways: for transportation and for processing power.



Edward Southwell, Lord of the County of Down
Portrait by Sir Godfrey Kneller (c.1705)
Courtesy of Down County Museum



Cargo boat at Quoile Quay (c.1900)
Courtesy of Down County Museum

A ship called at the various small ports around Strangford Lough, including here, collecting grain and then delivering it, when high tide allowed, to the Comber River.

However, in 1792, Edward Southwell's investment in the creation of better facilities here at the Quoile finally paid off and a mill was established a few miles upstream at Ballydugan.



Ballydugan Mill
Ardfern, Wikimedia Commons (CCL)

By the end of the eighteenth century Quoile port had become a real centre of commerce and played a significant role in distributing the goods of other thriving industries such as brewing and distilling.

Forget the serene haven of nature that you see today and imagine large wooden sailing ships capable of carrying up to 100 tons of goods.

Grain, groceries, timber, slate, coal, iron, limestone, wine and spirits were all bought and sold here. The quayside would have been bustling with dockers, porters and farmers shifting cargoes between the carts, boats and warehouses.



Sailing ships moored at low tide at old Quoile Quay
The area in the foreground where the boats are beached is now filled in and is a grassy area behind the road
Courtesy of Down County Museum

If you turn around and look over the road you can see some modern apartments. Up until the 1980s this was the site of the last remaining warehouse of the Downpatrick Timber, Slate and Coal Company.



A tranquil scene at Quoile Quay today
with new apartments on the site of the Downpatrick Timber, Slate and Coal Company
© Jenny Lunn

Directions 7

Follow the paved path between the river and the road as it bears round to the right. When you see a large car park on the opposite side of the road, take a path on the right leading down to a large wooden jetty that provides access to the river for disabled anglers.

8. From work to leisure

Disabled anglers' jetty

Coastal trade declined rapidly through the first half of the twentieth century as road transport became more available, affordable, and reliable. By the 1930s, the Quoile was better known for hosting the local boating regatta. The tidal barrier erected in 1957 finally put a stop to any more river trade.

As we discovered earlier, the construction of the barrier gradually transformed this area from a saltwater environment to a freshwater environment and changes in the vegetation and wildlife soon followed. Locals came to walk between the old quays and admire the changing habitat.



One of the accessible fishing platforms along the riverside
Ardfern, Wikimedia Commons (CCL)

After a few years, the Ministry of Agriculture (now the Department for Agriculture and Rural Development) put in some riverside paths and wooden fishing stands like this one. In recent years these have been extended and maintained by the Department of the Environment. The changing names of these government departments say much about how our attitudes have changed and how we have come to appreciate these small oases of nature.

In the last twenty years the development of the Quoile as a destination for recreation and tourism has been carefully managed. Along the way we have seen the transformation of an old stone cottage into the visitor centre where we started the walk, the preservation of the castle and quays, the addition of picnic areas and car parks, and the extension of pathways and anglers' platforms.

All these have made the Quoile, its heritage attractions and natural landscape far more easily accessible. Indeed, so popular has this area become that there are now plans to extend the riverside walk northwards, past Steamboat Quay, through the nature reserve, across the barrage at Hare's Island and along the edge of the lough north to Delamont Park.

Directions 8

Return to the roadside path and turn right. Follow the path for about a quarter of a mile as it follows a large left bend in the river. Look for a vehicle entrance on the right with gateposts. Turn in here where you will find a large stone monument and views to the old floodgates from the riverbank.

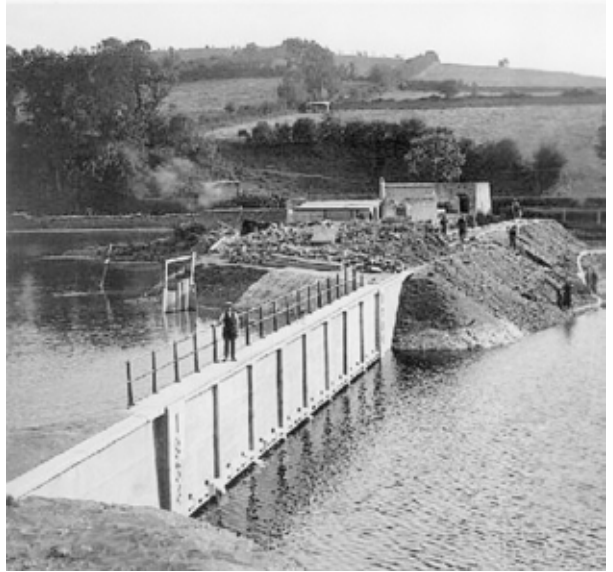
9. Holding back the tide

Stone structure near old floodgates

Once Quoile Quay was built, boats did not need access to the centre of Downpatrick. This prompted efforts to manage the flooding that affected the town.

The first floodgates, built in 1745, were flap gates that only opened one way: they closed when the tide came in and opened to release water when the tide went out. It seems as though they were only partially successful because historical records show that they were replaced several times.

In 1802 a lock gate was installed which was physically pushed open and shut using long poles. This floodgate was more dependable and Downpatrick expanded as a result: new roads developed and imposing civic buildings and residences were built with granite brought in from the Mourne via the Quoile.



Construction of the floodgates in the 1930s
Courtesy of Down County Museum



The old floodgates
© Jenny Lunn

But burgeoning Downpatrick soon required more land and tried to gain it by draining the Quoile marshes. However, this meant that when tidal levels were high, the floodwaters had fewer places to go; they travelled much faster and Downpatrick once again flooded.

More new floodgates were built in 1934 – the ones you can see from here – and the ‘old’ ones buried under the embankment by the road.

The latest instalment in this tale of human versus nature was the creation of the 1957 barrage downstream that we heard about earlier.

Although this has been enormously beneficial for nature, flooding of the riverside and in Downpatrick is still not that uncommon.

Directions 9

Return to the roadside path and turn right. After about 150 metres, and opposite the far entrance to the layby opposite, look for a gap in the wooden fence on the right. Follow this small, unmarked track through the grass to the riverside.

10. Fight!

Riverbank near old Quoile Bridge

In 1640 Thomas Cromwell, Lord Lecale, built a wooden bridge here. This Thomas was the descendant of the more famous Thomas Cromwell who was associated with Henry VIII who lived about a hundred years previously.

The connection is important though, because, it not only provided the younger Thomas Cromwell with his inheritance of land and title, but the actions of Henry VIII in Ireland in the sixteenth century completely transformed the religious communities nearby, as we shall discover shortly.



The old Quoile Bridge
Albert Bridge, Geograph (CCL)

The wooden bridge of 1640 did not last long. Perhaps it had fallen into disrepair but it is more likely it was a casualty of one of the many battles that occurred during the middle of the seventeenth century between the native Irish and English settlers all along the Lecale coast. This bridge was the main connection north out of Downpatrick and therefore a strategic location worth fighting for. A stone bridge was built in 1679; a much more durable material.

The most famous battle here took place in 1688 when the Catholics of Lecale fought once again for civil and religious liberties against the forces of the British Crown and the imposition of Protestantism. The Catholics were defeated and the majority of the remaining land they held was given to English settlers. For the Irish, it was another chapter in the long history of colonisation by the British.

Fifty or so years later in 1744 the historian Harris noted that the Quoile Bridge was built of stone and had six arches. As you can see, it still does today, although it has been rebuilt several times in the intervening centuries.

Directions 10

Either retrace your steps to the roadside and turn right or, if long grass and nettles don't concern you, follow the riverside path through the undergrowth until it reaches the steps up to the road. Carefully cross over the road at the bridge, remaining on the same side of the river. Follow the pavement at the side of the road towards Downpatrick for about 100 metres then look for the sign which marks the way back down to the riverside. This next section of the riverside is known as Jane's Shore. Follow the path about a quarter of a mile until you reach a boardwalk beside rushes.

11. Lord Dunleath's legacy

First boardwalk on Jane's Shore

In 1874 when Quoile port was in its heyday, the Mulholland family, better known as the Lords Dunleath, bought much of the surrounding land. As the decades rolled on, the estate passed from father to son until the fourth Lord Dunleath succeeded his father in 1956.

Despite their lordly status, the Mulholland's started out from lowly origins and had gradually built up their fortunes through cotton and linen mills. Today they would be considered self-made millionaires.



Jane's Shore
Ardfern, Wikimedia Commons (CCL)

Those humble origins are perhaps why the fourth Lord Dunleath was such a dedicated supporter of dozens of charities and sat on so many boards of organisations aimed at improving the lot of the working classes.



Boardwalks allowing access to Jane's Shore
© Howard Lunn

This beautiful riverside walk is part of his legacy. When the tidal barrage was built in 1957 and the area began its transformation from working harbour to nature reserve, Lord Dunleath protected this land. He encouraged conservation and refused developers, instead devising plans that would enable everyone, including those with less mobility, to enjoy this scene.

These boardwalks were part of his vision to share these simple pleasures with all whilst ensuring the intervention in the natural landscape was sympathetic.

Lord Dunleath died in 1993 before his vision was realised but here, where the mountain of Slieve Croob in the distance is framed by the picturesque riverbanks, we might safely assume he would have been delighted with this legacy.

Directions 11

Continue along the riverside path. Go through a single kissing gate and stop after passing through a triple kissing gate that allows livestock access to the river.

12. Big fish, little seals

After triple kissing gate on Jane's Shore

Here we can get a real appreciation of how the landscape has changed from a saltwater to freshwater habitat. Just a few decades ago, before the tidal barrage was built, these shores were sand and mud where you might have seen seagulls pecking at crabs.

Five years later, grass covered these banks and small mammals such as rabbits had ventured into the territory. After fifteen years had passed, the grass had matured into scrubland with bushes taking hold and wading birds finding refuge in them.



Tranquil scenes along the river
Ardfern, Wikimedia Commons (CCL)

Some thirty-five years later, young trees lined the shores and foxes and squirrels had moved in. Today, it is nearly sixty years since the barrage was put in place. As you can see all around, the astounding transformation is truly testament to the power of nature to adapt and survive.

Although this site has become a haven for freshwater wildlife the barrage has affected marine life. For example, Strangford Lough is well known for its large seal population which, until the barrage was built, happily swam along the length of the River Quoile.



Fishing sign at Quoile Basin
Ardfern, Wikimedia Commons (CCL)

Once the barrage was in place, seals no longer had access. However, neither did as many fish and after a few years of unsatisfactory fishing, local anglers persuaded the authorities to modify the barrage gates to facilitate the passage of salmon and sea trout.

The gates were duly altered and the fish swam more freely. Unfortunately for the anglers, so did the seals, which could also now slip through the gates. Now the anglers complain that the seals eat too many of the fish!

Directions 12

Continue along the riverside path passing through several sets of kissing gates. Stop when you reach the next section of boardwalk.

13. Battling nature

Second boardwalk on Jane's Shore

This landscape is scattered with small rounded hills. These are called 'drumlins' and were created towards the end of the last Ice Age.

We have already heard that partly-submerged drumlins – or islands – in Strangford Lough made navigation difficult for shipping but here on dry land they have had a strong influence too.

For thousands of years drumlins were the best places for human settlements, safe above the tidal river and extensive marshes. Meanwhile, drumlin islands in the river were ideal for defensive positions.



Drumlin country
© Howard Lunn



Aerial photographs of the area reveal the traces of ancient paths and tracks, and show the contrast between the drumlin hills and in-between-hollows. Until medieval times this whole area was characterised by small settlements on drumlins.

As you walk towards Downpatrick notice the drumlins in the surrounding landscape and the ancient buildings of the town clearly built on them.



Many of the town's important sites are on drumlins, including Cathedral Hill (top left) while outside the town, many drumlins are used for agriculture (bottom left and right)
© Howard Lunn / Ardfern, Wikimedia Commons (CCL) / Albert Bridge, Geograph (CCL)

The lower land is below sea level and development on it was only made possible by the tidal barrage and various drainage schemes of the last fifty years.

Nonetheless, depending on the weather you may still see vast swathes of agricultural land underwater and, if you're very unlucky, parts of Downpatrick's main Market Street under water, as it is still prone to occasional flooding.



Drainage channels in the marshes by the Quoile
Ardfern, Wikimedia Commons (CCL)



Flooding in Market Street (1963) - after the barrage was built
Courtesy of Down County Museum



Flooding of a picnic area along the riverside
Albert Bridge, Geograph (CCL)

Directions 13

Continue along the riverside path until you reach the end where it makes a sharp left turn up a slope to the main road. Follow the path by the road past the metal sculpture of St Patrick. When you are level with the town sign carefully cross the busy road into the small lane opposite. As the lane reaches its highest point and begins to bend to the right look for a farm gate on the left. Go through the gate and follow the track straight across the field under the telegraph wires.

The next gate takes you into the site of the Mound of Down. This is an almost circular site comprising a ditch (where you are standing), outer rampart, inner rampart and summit. Follow the path straight ahead through the walls of the outer rampart. Turn right at the next junction and follow the path for 90 degrees round the mound. At the next junction go straight ahead through the inner rampart and climb up to the top of the mound.

14. Mysterious mound

Top of the Mound of Down

This large round flat-topped hill is known as the Mound of Down. The earthwork consists of a large pear-shaped enclosure with a smaller mound inside surrounded by a large ditch.

There are several theories regarding its original purpose and inhabitants but the general consensus is that the larger outer enclosure was probably an Iron Age fort for the Dál Fiatach, a group of related dynasties in Ulster in the Early Christian and Early Medieval periods (the fifth to eighth centuries).



Aerial view of the Mound of Down
John Martin, Geograph (CCL)

While there have been no archaeological findings to support this theory the ancient name of this mound, Rathkeltair, may well link to a famous warrior from the time: Celtchar. By the fourth century AD this was the fortress of Niall, King of the Ulaid, and administrative centre for the Dál Fiatach. When John de Courcy captured Downpatrick in 1177, he added a Norman-style motte-and-bailey to the mound.

It is likely there were earlier settlements here, though. Archaeological evidence has been found on sites nearby dating to the Bronze Age (4,000 BC). You can see some of these finds at the Down County Museum in the town.



The summit of the Mound of Down (left) and its walls and ditches (right)
© Howard Lunn

Like the positioning of Quoile Castle that we saw earlier, it is only really possible to understand the strategic considerations of building your home here if you imagine the landscape before the Quoile's floodgates and barriers were in place.

From here on the top of the mound, visualise the surrounding area under water, with only occasional drumlin islands visible.



A defensive site and a dry site
View from the Mound of Down to the Quoile and marshes
© Howard Lunn

Directions 14

Remain at the top of the Mound of Down.

15. Abbey on an island

Top of the Mound of Down

The rolling drumlins all around are very obvious now. The most notable is Cathedral Hill which we shall visit shortly but there is another important religious site on a drumlin almost visible from here.

Behind the industrial estate and across the river are the ruins of Inch Abbey (sometimes obscured by trees).

Despite its name, Inch Abbey is not very small; the word inch is derived from the Old Irish 'inis' meaning island.

There is evidence that by the year 800 AD Celtic monks had settled on the island although like the mound we are standing on now, there may well have been other inhabitants during prehistory.



Inch Abbey
Aubrey Dale, Geograph (CCL)

When the Normans arrived in the twelfth century, the Celtic monastic settlement was transformed into a Cistercian Monastery by the Norman invader, John de Courcy and his wife, Affrica.

The impressive ruins that you can see today date from that period and are well worth a visit.



Inch Abbey
© Jenny Lunn

The monastery survived for 400 years until the English Reformation and the dissolution of the monasteries in the 1530s under Henry VIII.

After he had abolished the monasteries, Henry gave away the land to his cronies. Henry's Chief Minister, Thomas Cromwell (the great-great-grandfather of the Thomas Cromwell who built the old Quoile Bridge that we saw earlier) was given much of this land and it was subsequently passed down through the generations of his family.



View from Inch Abbey across the Quoile to Cathedral Hill Ardfern, Wikimedia Commons (CCL)

Directions 15

Retrace your steps down from the top of the Mound of Down and through the inner rampart. At the first junction turn right and follow the path past an information board and to the far side where modern steps lead through the outer rampart. At the bottom go straight ahead through the ditch and then turn right. Follow the grassy path with the cathedral straight ahead.

Go through the gate in the far corner into the small car park and follow the steep lane up past the primary school. At the top turn right onto Mount Crescent. Follow the road round to the next junction and turn right onto English Street. The Down County Museum (housed in the old gaol) is on the right and is well worth a visit once you have finished this walk.

Follow the pavement towards the cathedral. Stop where the road splits around the cathedral and look at the large stone cross on the grassy area. Walk up the road round the left side of the cathedral. At the top of the slope, turn left up the few steps and follow the path to the large stone which marks the grave of St Patrick.

16. Holy smokes!

Grave of St Patrick by cathedral

Earlier we heard about various waves of invaders from Vikings and Normans to English and Scots, who all sailed up Strangford Lough and along the Quoile. But perhaps the most famous invader was a young man called Patrick.

Although he brought no armies, he arguably changed the country more than any other invader before or since. Patrick arrived from Northern Britain in 432 AD and brought Christianity.

His story is retold inside the cathedral here but, to cut a long story short, he had a vision and founded the first Christian church in nearby Saul before moving on to spread the word of God and establish many Christian sites across Ireland.



Statue of St Patrick on Slieve Patrick, a hill a few miles outside Downpatrick
© Jenny Lunn



St Patrick's Memorial Church in Saul
a few miles outside Downpatrick
Albert Bridge, Geograph (CCL)

Downpatrick appears to have been an ecclesiastical centre for several centuries due to its accessibility via the River Quoile. Celtic, Cistercian and Benedictine monks all arrived by river.

After the Norman invasion John de Courcy set up a Benedictine Monastery here in 1138 and some of that building still remains: if you look to the left side of the entrance to the cathedral you can see a medieval carving.

De Courcy is also said to have reinterred the remains of Patrick along with St Brigid and St Columcille. All that remains today is this large burial stone but it is still a popular tourist pilgrimage.

After the dissolution of the monasteries in the sixteenth century, the church was burnt down and left in ruins for more than 200 years.

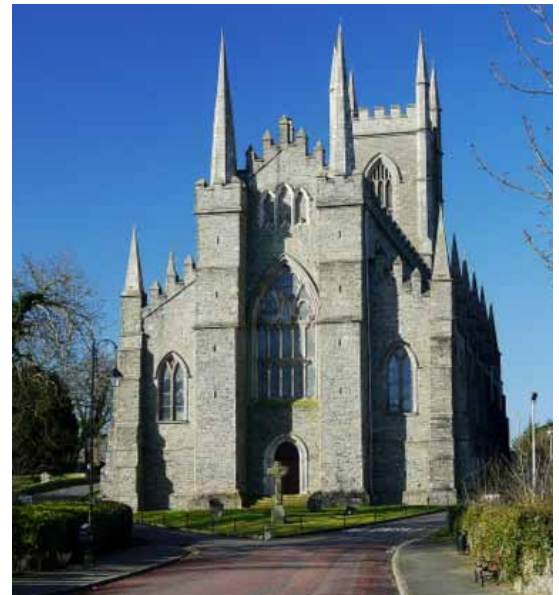


Grave containing the remains of
St Patrick, St Brigid and St Columcille
Eric Jones, Geograph (CCL)

Today's cathedral dates from the end of the eighteenth century when wealthy landowners raised money to rebuild a place of worship on this ancient site.

Every St Patrick's Day, a train of pilgrims – both local people and those from much further afield – walk the hour or so from the village of Saul to Downpatrick. It is a tradition that has taken place every year since at least medieval times.

They start at the memorial church built on the site where St Patrick consecrated his first church in 432. The modern building, replacing several that have been on the site, was opened in 1932 to commemorate the 1500th anniversary of the landing of St Patrick in Ireland. They end here at his grave.



Down Cathedral
Ross, Geograph (CCL)

Today, pilgrims arrive in Downpatrick by car and bus but in medieval times they arrived by boat. From the landing place on the Quoile there was a track that led straight up to the cathedral.



St Patrick's Day in Downpatrick is celebrated through both religious pilgrimages and fun celebrations for all the family
Ardfern, Wikimedia Commons (CCL)

Directions 16

Go back along the path and down the steps. Turn left and walk through the parking area to the gates at the far end that lead into another graveyard. Stop here and look at the view.

17. Living on a prayer

View from Cathedral Hill

From this elevated viewpoint we can once more appreciate the significance of drumlin hills in this area. As we have already discovered, they have been the choice location for defence, human settlement, and ritual and religious purposes throughout history.

This drumlin, Cathedral Hill, has certainly had a varied past. While digging a grave in the 1950s, a verger found a hoard of gold bracelets that have been dated at around 3,000 years old. Some are on display in the Down County Museum nearby.



Down Cathedral on a drumlin above the Quoile
Brian Shaw, Geograph (CCL)

Records show that there was also a 70 feet high monastic bell-tower somewhere up here on the hill. It is known to have been in existence in the tenth century but may have been built earlier; it was demolished in 1790.



Gold bracelets found on Cathedral Hill
from the Late Bronze Age (1100-800 BC)
Notafly, Wikimedia Commons (CCL)

With a history like that it is not surprising there has been extensive archaeological interest in this site. In 1998, the TV series 'Time Team' came to investigate.

Although they could not locate the foundations of the bell tower, they did discover the foundations of a high status medieval guesthouse, as well as finding pottery and window glass. They also found a food preparation building with rubbish chutes that indicated the monks and their guests enjoyed a rich and varied diet.

Directions 17

Do take time to look inside the cathedral. When you are ready, follow the road back down the other side of the cathedral. Go a short way along English street. Opposite the museum look for a set of steps on the right signposted for St Patrick's Centre. The centre is the large building at the bottom.

18. On borrowed land

St Patrick's Centre

This is the St Patrick's Centre and an appropriate place to end our walk about how the River Quoile has influenced Downpatrick because it was built in the part of Downpatrick that only became accessible once the Quoile floodgates were in place.

On this walk we have found out about the natural characteristics of this landscape, particularly the drumlin hills surrounded by marshland and the River Quoile that drains into Strangford Lough.

We have seen that drumlin hills have been strategic places of residence for people as far back as the Neolithic period.

We have also seen how sites surrounded by water provide defence against tribes on foot but also provide easy access for invaders by sea. We have found out how humans have made use of the River Quoile from transport, trade and industry to recreation, religion and tourism.

We have also seen how humans have attempted to control the Quoile and the surrounding landscape by building successive floodgates and draining marshes. In the last few decades there has been a change in our relationship with the Quoile with the conservation of wildlife and preservation of built heritage taking on a new importance.



St Patrick's Centre
© Howard Lunn

Directions 18

To return to the Quoile Countryside Centre by public transport you can catch a bus from the bus station 200 metres away (turn right onto Market Street) but these only go to the old Quoile Bridge (service 14 to Killyleagh), the service is infrequent (1.5-2 hourly) and no buses run on Sundays. From the stop it is then a $\frac{3}{4}$ mile walk to the Quoile Countryside Centre. Alternatively there is a taxi rank just before the bus station on the opposite side of the road.

To return to the Quoile Countryside Centre on foot it is a 2 mile walk by road. Turn left into the main shopping street (Market Street). At the traffic lights, bear left then right and follow the main road (Church Street). At the large roundabout where the A7 to Belfast goes left, bear right on the A22 for Killyleagh. After a short distance bear right on the A25 (Strangford Road). After 1 mile bear left onto Quay Road and the Quoile Countryside Centre is on the right.



Scenes along the Quoile
© Howard Lunn / Albert Bridge, Geograph (CCL)

Further information

Quoile Pondage National Nature Reserve

www.doeni.gov.uk/niea/protected_areas_home/nature_resintro/nature_reserves_quoile.htm

Quoile River Basin Management Plan (2010 – 2015)

http://www.doeni.gov.uk/niea/quoile_lma-2.pdf

Story of St Patrick's life and ministry

www.saintpatrickcentre.com/saint_patrick.php#0_1

Down Cathedral history

www.downcathedral.org/history

Down County Museum

www.downcountymuseum.com

Credits

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<http://www.discoveringbritain.org/walks/region/north-west-england/lancaster.html>



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<http://www.discoveringbritain.org/walks/region/south-east-england/faversham.html>





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