

# The Life and Times of St Brigid



Created by Abarta Heritage for Kildare County Council September 2023

## Acknowledgements

This educational resource was produced by Abarta Heritage on behalf of Kildare County Council and Brigid 1500 programme to commemorate the 1,500th anniversary of the death of St Brigid. This book was researched, produced and designed by Abarta Heritage.

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# Timeline - up to the time of St Brigid

8,000 BC

Mesolithic hunter gatherers living in Ireland

4,000 BC

Neolithic farmers bring agriculture to Ireland



3,200 BC

Newgrange built



2,500 BC

The craft of making objects of bronze is brought to Ireland

800 BC

Iron working is brought to Ireland

Ireland is a pagan country with lots of small kingdoms

0 BC / AD

Farmers, warriors and slaves lived in wooden houses



432

St Patrick is brought to Ireland as a slave

455

(or thereabouts) St Brigid is born



492

St Patrick dies



520

St Colmcille is born

# Introduction to St Brigid

Hello there, welcome to The Life and Times of St Brigid booklet where you will learn all about one of the three great patron saints of Ireland - Brigid!

My name is Cogitosus. I wrote the oldest surviving version of St Brigid's story in the 7th century, so I think I'm a good guide to help you learn more about her. I was based in the monastery at Kildare so I heard all the stories about her miracles. Mind you, this was all a very long time ago. By the time I wrote her stories down she had already been dead about a hundred and fifty years! I hope you'll forgive me if I get a bit confused about some of the details.

**By the way my name  
is pronounced  
Coj - ee - toe - sus**





## Life in early medieval Ireland



Things haven't changed much in the couple of hundred years that have passed since St Brigid died as we all still live in the countryside. We have none of those towns or cities that people in your

time live in. Most people live in ringforts or raths. These are circular farmyards surrounded by a big bank and a ditch. Inside there is a house and other farm buildings for keeping animals, storing food, and doing other jobs like metalwork or woodwork.

Each ringfort is the home of an extended family - that means that there are parents, grandparents, children and sometimes aunts, uncles and cousins all living together. Wealthier families have larger ringforts and servants and slaves to help with the work.

As there are no towns to go shopping in, people grow their own food and make their own tools and clothes. That means life is very busy and children help with minding animals, growing crops, preparing food and lots of other jobs. We know from Brigid's story that she helped with milking and making butter and cheese.

It wasn't all hard work though! Children had wooden toys to play with, which archaeologists from your time have found in ringforts, and some families kept pet dogs and cats like many of you do today.

**What kind of jobs do you do  
to help out at home?**

## Who was in charge in Ireland?



Ireland didn't have a government in St Brigid's time. There wasn't even a high king of all Ireland yet! Instead the country was divided into hundreds of small kingdoms called tuatha. Each had its own king. Some kings had power over other kings so they ruled over much larger areas. There were often battles over land and property, like cattle. The Irish didn't use money at this time. Instead cattle and female slaves were used to measure how wealthy you were.

## What was happening in the rest of Europe?

In St Brigid's time there was a lot of change happening in Britain and on the Continent. These areas had been part of the Roman Empire, which meant they had towns and money and were ruled by a far away emperor. However, The Empire came to an end in the 5th century. When this happened, tribes began to take over parts of the empire for themselves and introduced new languages, types of buildings, religions and laws.

## Was there a pagan Brigid?

When St Brigid was alive, Christianity was still quite new to the Irish. St Brigid may even have been named after the old goddess Brigit, who is believed to be the same Goddess known as Briganta found in Britain and parts of Europe. It is also possible that some of the stories about the goddess got mixed into stories about St Brigid.



Illustration of early medieval toy boat



# What were early medieval monasteries like?

In St Brigid's day, monasteries were small settlements with wooden buildings. In fact, the monastery I wrote the Life of St Brigid in was probably quite similar to one she lived in herself.

The most important building was the Church, which was a small wooden building, not like the massive cathedral you have now. Monks and nuns would go to mass at least five times a day! They called this building **ecclesia** in Latin.

The area around the church was surrounded by an earthen bank called a **vallum**.

There were lots of **workshops** and **farm buildings** too.

**Cells** were where we slept and studied, sort of like your bedroom but without all the toys and posters.

All these other buildings were surrounded by a second **vallum**.

We also had a **guest-house** for weary travellers who visited us.

Beside the library was the **scriptorium** where they wrote their own books by hand. Printers hadn't been invented yet! My favourite place in the whole monastery is the scriptorium!

Families liked to live near us and to help us with our chores. They lived inside a third **vallum**.

# St Brigid word search



L	R	M	M	B	U	T	T	E	R	M	I	L	K
U	L	A	M	U	I	R	O	T	P	I	R	C	S
M	H	C	I	L	L	M	P	A	G	A	N	T	G
I	O	T	K	H	B	L	D	G	A	U	L	M	A
A	I	M	A	C	D	E	A	I	G	M	N	O	C
R	C	G	E	R	A	L	D	V	T	A	C	O	I
H	E	C	E	L	L	S	P	R	C	C	R	R	A
I	C	L	G	E	L	D	R	O	P	G	H	H	T
B	A	R	C	H	A	E	O	L	O	G	I	S	T
E	A	L	U	K	L	R	L	T	U	A	T	H	A
R	N	A	H	H	R	I	N	G	F	O	R	T	S
I	G	N	R	H	C	T	C	O	L	O	G	N	E
A	C	I	L	L	D	A	R	A	I	E	I	I	E
H	C	H	R	I	S	T	I	A	N	I	T	Y	M

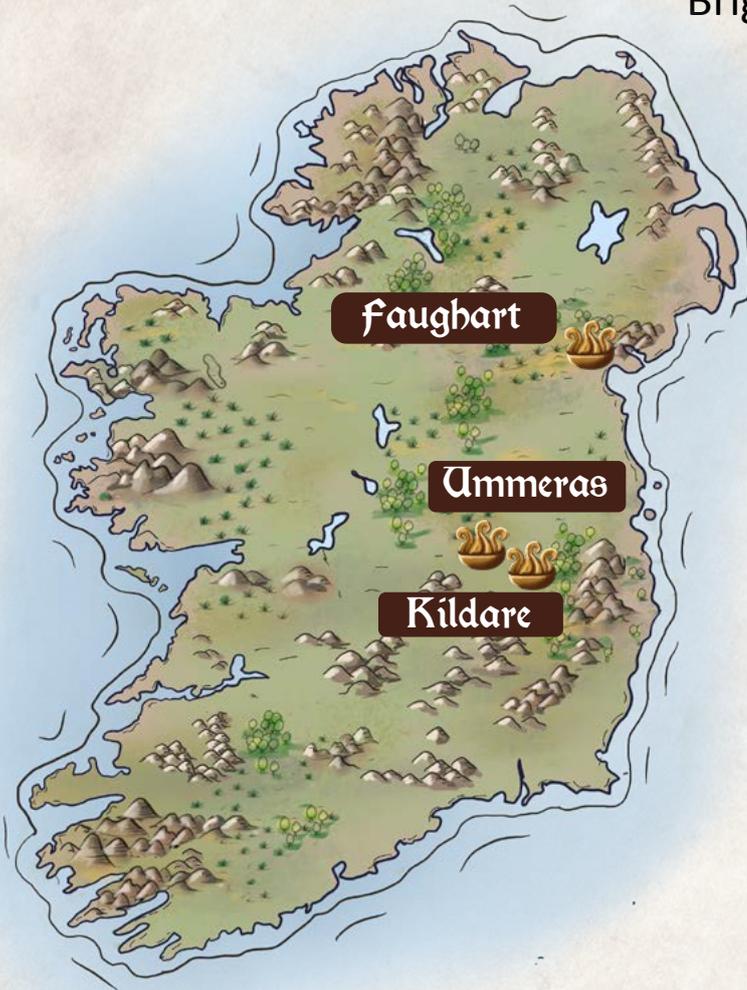
GERALD  
 CILL DARA  
 CELLS  
 ARCHAEOLOGIST  
 VALLUM  
 CHURCH  
 CHRISTIANITY

GAUL  
 TUATHA  
 LUMIAR  
 RINGFORTS  
 GELDROP  
 IBERIA  
 PAGAN

DITCH  
 SCRIPTORIUM  
 COLOGNE  
 BUTTERMILK  
 RATH



## St Brigid's early life



Brigid was believed to be born around Ummeras, near Monasterevin, Co Kildare some time in the 450s or 460s. Like I said, it was a long time ago so we're not really sure.

Her father Dubthach was a lord who belonged to a tribe called the Fothairt. The Fothairt lived near Croghan Hill near the Kildare/Offaly border.

Her mother, Broisech, was his slave. When Dubthach found out Broisech was pregnant he sold her, and she ended up living with a pagan druid. When

Brigid was born the druid knew she was special and freed her and her mother from slavery. They then went back to live at her father's house.

**Other versions of her life say Brigid was born in Faughart, Co. Louth.**

Young Brigid frequently got in trouble with her father - for being too good! She was incredibly kind and generous to people who were poor or ill. Once she gave her father's precious sword to a leper so he could barter it for food.

# Colouring page - Door man with Dubthach's sword





## Becoming a nun and founding Kildare

As far as we know, St Brigid became a nun when she was still a teenager living near Croghan Hill. St Brigid quickly became well known for her good deeds, charity and miracles.

**Becoming a nun is sometimes called 'taking the veil.'**

### How St Brigid got land for her monastery

The King of Leinster had long ears and people made fun of him. He heard about St Brigid's miracles so asked her to make them smaller. As a reward he promised her anything she wanted. She put him into a deep sleep and when he woke up, he was delighted to see that his ears were perfect.

As her reward, St Brigid asked for a piece of his land to build a monastery on. The king didn't want to give away any of his land, but she convinced him to give her as much as her cloak would cover. As she spread out her cloak it miraculously spread over a large area that even included the Curragh.

The place where she built her church became known as Cill Dara which means 'the church of the oak.'



# Life in St Brigid's early medieval monastery at Kildare



St Brigid was in charge of the nuns and was an abbess and her friend Conleth was in charge of the monks and was called an abbot.

Every day they would get up very early for the first prayers and the rest of the day was made up of work and religious worship. A handbell would ring to tell them it was time for the next church service.

**St Brigid's monastery is special because it had both nuns and monks.**

Monasteries owned farms for producing food for themselves and for donating to the poor. They also had craftspeople who could make tools and other important items.

*Some of their tools and precious images can be seen in the National Museum of Ireland in Dublin.*

There were some special jobs that you wouldn't see in a ringfort, however. Monastic metalworkers made precious objects for the church like chalices and decorated boxes for holding holy objects. Only the monks and nuns could read and write back then, so they also worked in the scriptoria.

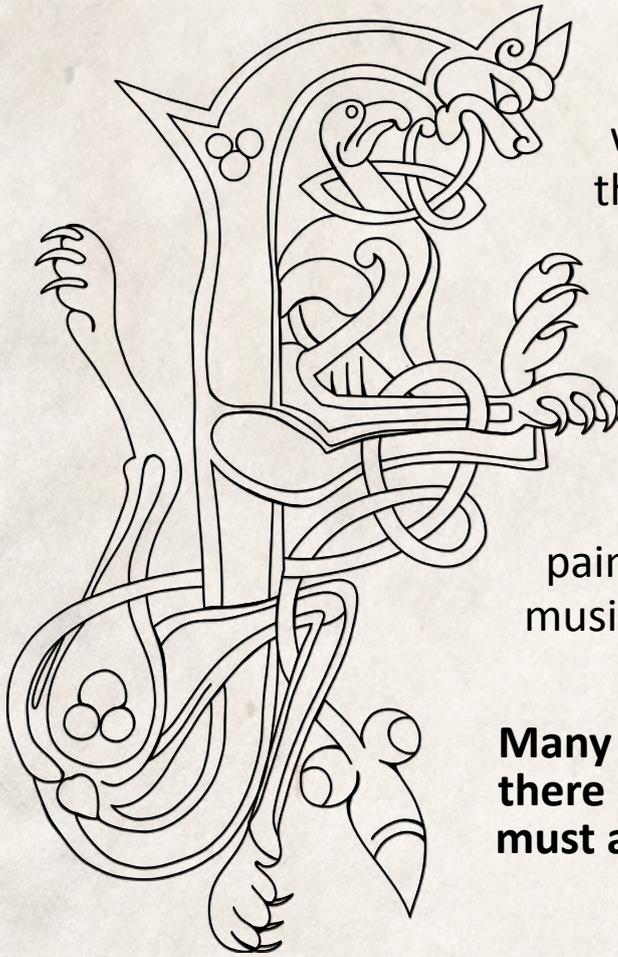
Some of their work took place outside the monastery as they would visit and care for the poor and the sick in the community.

Illustration of  
St Manchan's  
Shrine, Boher.



# St Brigid's monastery

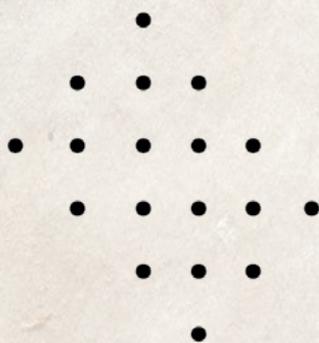
Conleth, the first bishop of Kildare, was also Brigid's craftsman. The monastery was famous as a place where manuscripts and metal objects were made.



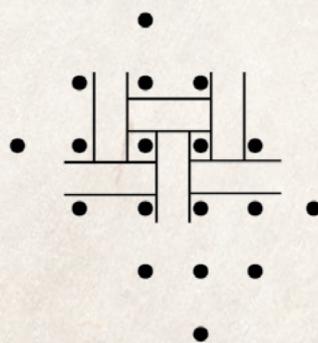
In 1188 Gerald of Wales visited the monastery. He saw a manuscript that was so beautifully decorated that he thought it must be the 'work of angels.' This 'Book of Kildare' is thought to have looked like the famous Book of Kells. Sadly, it no longer exists.

You can still find examples of artwork inspired by Brigid today. These include paintings, stained glass windows, sculptures, music and poetry.

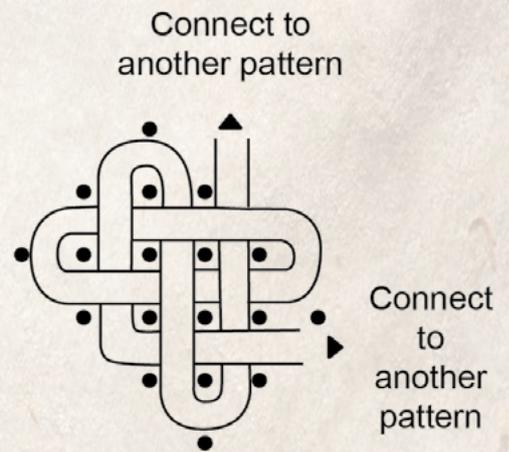
**Many people struggle to create interlace, but there is a trick to doing it, the secret is you must always avoid the dots!**



**Step 1**



**Step 2**



**Step 3**

# Spot the difference



Can you spot the 6 things that are different between the two pictures?



Answer: flame on wall, feather on desk, text in book, chain, snowdrops, chain



## St Brigid's pastures

St Brigid is the patron saint of cows and dairy workers.

As a young girl she worked with her mother, milking cows and making butter. She was even supposed to have had a white cow that went with her on her travels around the country.

St Brigid performed many miracles that involved farm animals.

Once when churning butter with her mother, she gave away all her butter and

buttermilk to the poor. At the end of the day, she was supposed to hand up all she had made but she had nothing left and knew she would be in trouble. She prayed to God, and he replaced all she had given away.

**The Curragh is sometimes called 'Brigid's Pastures' and the land between Dunmurry Hill and Grange Hill was called 'Brigid's Milking Yard.'**

**In the church in Lumiar in Portugal, they used to bring cattle in to the church to be blessed on St Brigid's Day!**



# St Brigid's pastures



Another day, some bishops visited her, and she didn't have enough to feed them. She milked her cow three times that day (normally you could only do it once) and had enough to give them.

St Brigid visited a very poor woman who had no wood for her fire or food in the house. In St Brigid's honour she killed her only calf for food and cooked it on a fire made from the loom she used for weaving. The next day the calf and the loom had both been replaced!

One day a poor man came and asked St Brigid for some honey. She felt bad because she had none but then they heard a buzzing under the floor of the house. When they dug up the floor, they found a hive full of honey.



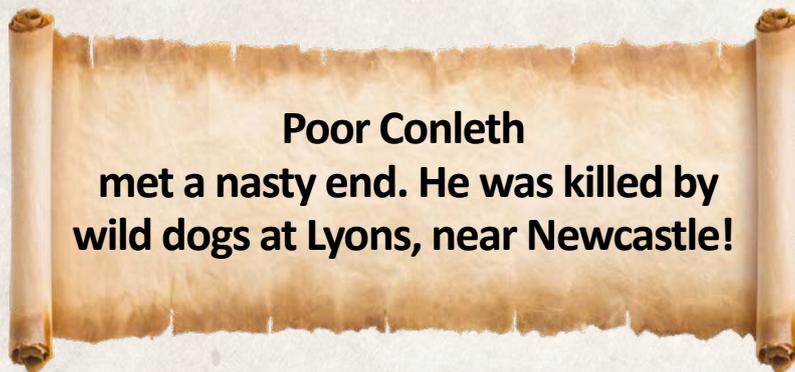
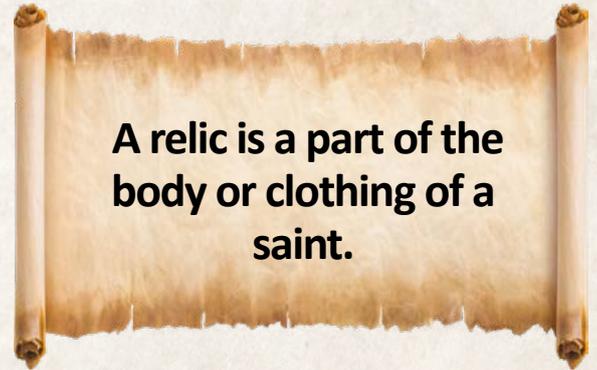
## Bee Scramble: Unscramble these words using the clues provided:

1. Bees live in a (**ehiv**) \_\_\_\_\_
2. This bee is the leader of all the bees in a hive (**neeuq**) \_\_\_\_\_
3. The number of wings a bee has is (**rouf**) \_\_\_\_\_
4. Bees collect this from flowers (**tarcen**) \_\_\_\_\_



## St Brigid's death

St Brigid died and was buried in Kildare some time around 524 - we're not really sure because we can't find where they wrote it down. By the time I came along to Kildare, St Brigid and St Conleth's relics were kept on either side of the altar in fabulous containers called reliquaries. These were decorated with gold, silver and precious stones and had crowns of gold hanging above them. The church was a really impressive place decorated with pictures and carvings.



When I was living at the monastery in Kildare in the 7th century, I saw great crowds of pilgrims travel from all over Ireland and Europe to celebrate St Brigid and see the relics.

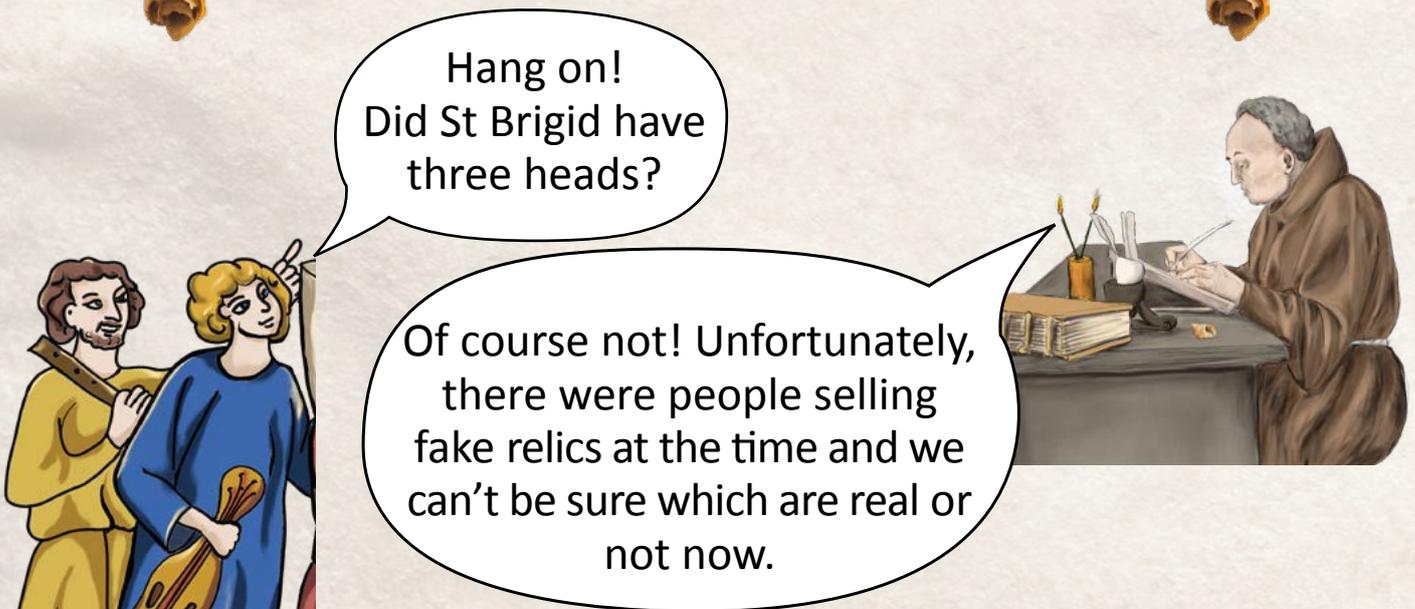
The Vikings attacked Kildare on St Brigid's day in 929. They knew there would be lots of people there that day to steal from and even took some away to sell as slaves.



# St Brigid after death



In medieval times, relics were important to bring pilgrims to churches and to keep the stories of the saints alive. Pilgrims often gave large donations of money or land to churches with the relics of the most important saints. Our monastery at Kildare became very wealthy because we had the relics of St Brigid and St Conleth. At some point Brigid's remains were taken from her grave - they called this 'translation' - and some parts were given to other churches. Relics were sent to different churches all around Europe.



The rest of St Brigid's remains are supposed to be buried at Downpatrick, Co Down alongside the other two national saints, Patrick, and Colmcille.



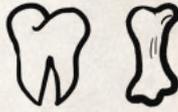
# Relic map

Mark where the relics ended up

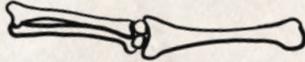
Skull:



Tooth and Finger bone:



Arm:



**The skull at Lumiar is said to have been brought there by three Irish crusaders**

# St Brigid's feast day



St Brigid's Day is on the 1st of February - the first day of Spring. In pre-Christian times this was a Celtic festival known as Imbolc.

St Brigid is believed to pass over all of Ireland the night before her feast day, so people would leave food outside on their windowsill to let her know she was welcome and encourage her to bless the house as she passed. If the food wasn't eaten, they would either bring it in to eat in the morning or give it to homeless or poor people.

The night before people would also give their home a 'spring clean' and spread new rushes on the floor (I don't think your parents would be impressed if you did this today). They used these rushes to make St Brigid's crosses to put up in the house or animal sheds for protection.

## The origins of the cross

Once St Brigid sat by the bedside of a king who was dying. She picked up some rushes from the floor and wove them into a cross to explain the story of Christ. The king believed her story and converted to Christianity just before he died. The cross is still placed in homes today for protection against fire and disease.



**Did you know that if you see a hedgehog on February 1st it is a sign of good weather to come? !**



## A springtime saint



St Brigid's Day is the first day of spring, so it's not surprising that she is associated with some of the earliest flowers of the year.

One tradition says that primroses were scattered on the floor rushes in the old days to keep away the fairies.

The snowdrop is known as Brigid's footprint- the first flower of spring.



The Irish name for dandelions is bearnán Bride. The word bearnán describes the jagged shape of its leaves. As well as being a very important food for bees, dandelions were also used in traditional medicine and can be made into soup.

The liquid that comes from the broken stem of a dandelion is sometimes called 'milk'. It's not really milk though, so don't drink it! An old tradition said that lambs drank it, but they were really just eating the healthy leaves and flowers.

# Spring flowers colouring page





## St Brigid's fire

The nuns of St Brigid's monastery kept a magical fire burning near the church. It was said that it was impossible to put the fire out and even though lots of wood was burnt there, there were never any ashes.

The place where the fire was kept is called the Firehouse. When Gerald of Wales (who was travelling around Ireland writing about what he saw) came across it in the 12th century, he said it was surrounded by a kind of fence and that men were not able to go inside. At some point it was replaced with stone, and you can still see a stone wall there today.



St Brigid's Fire Temple at Kildare Cathedral

Unfortunately, the fire was extinguished at the time of the reformation in the mid 1500s. In 1993 it was relit and is kept alight by the Brigidine sisters at Solas Bhríde. The fire is a symbol of the light of Christianity and burns today as a beacon of hope, justice and peace for the world.

You can also see it in the beautiful acorn shaped sculpture in the market square of Kildare Town.



# Holy wells and healing

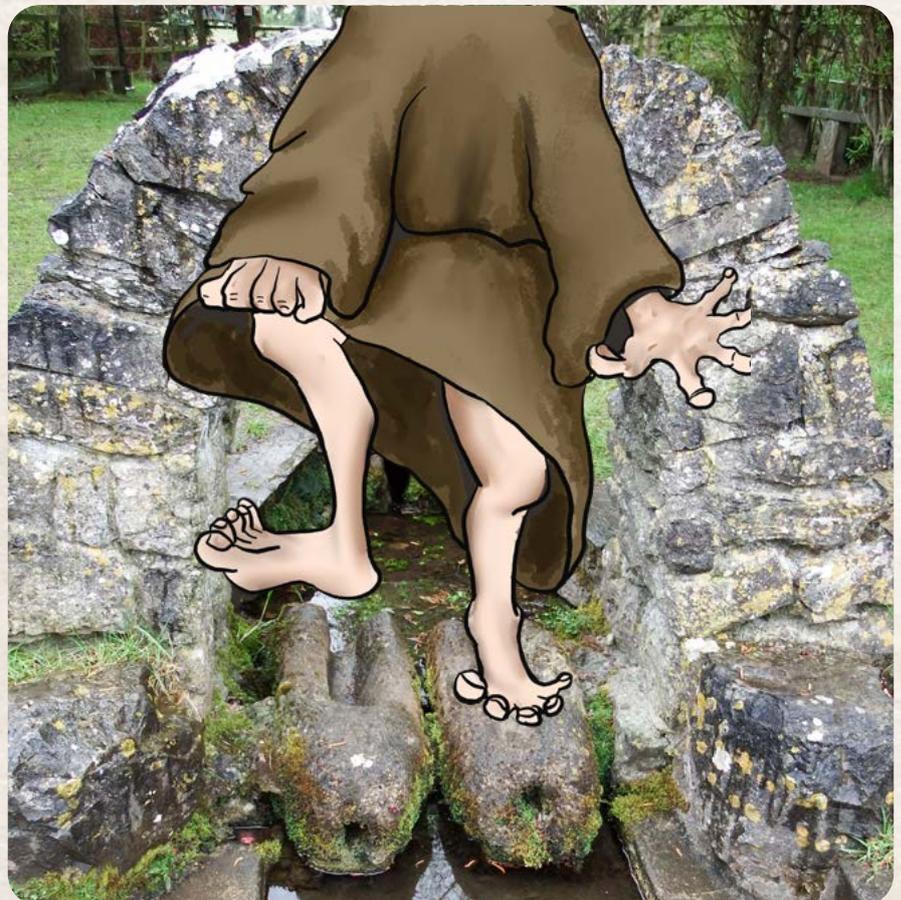


Brigid was famous for helping and healing people. All around Ireland there are holy wells named after her and some are believed to have the power to heal sickness or other problems like toothaches or headaches.

**On Brigid's feast day, people would visit holy wells dedicated to her. The water was thought to be more powerful on that day. They would sprinkle it on animals, people, and objects to protect them from harm.**

The best-known well is located just outside Kildare Town at Brallistown Commons. Here there is a statue of Brigid, a well and a stream. In the stream are two strange stones that probably came from an ancient mill. Their odd shape has earned them the nickname 'St Brigid's slippers.'

They don't look very comfy to me! What do you think?



'St Brigid's Slippers' at Brallistown Commons



## Placenames associated with St Brigid

You have probably come across St Brigid's name a lot living in Ireland.

As a girl's name it's not as popular as it used to be - until the middle of the 1900s it seemed like everyone was called Bridget or Mary! Perhaps you know someone older called Bridget, Bride, Bríd or Biddy?

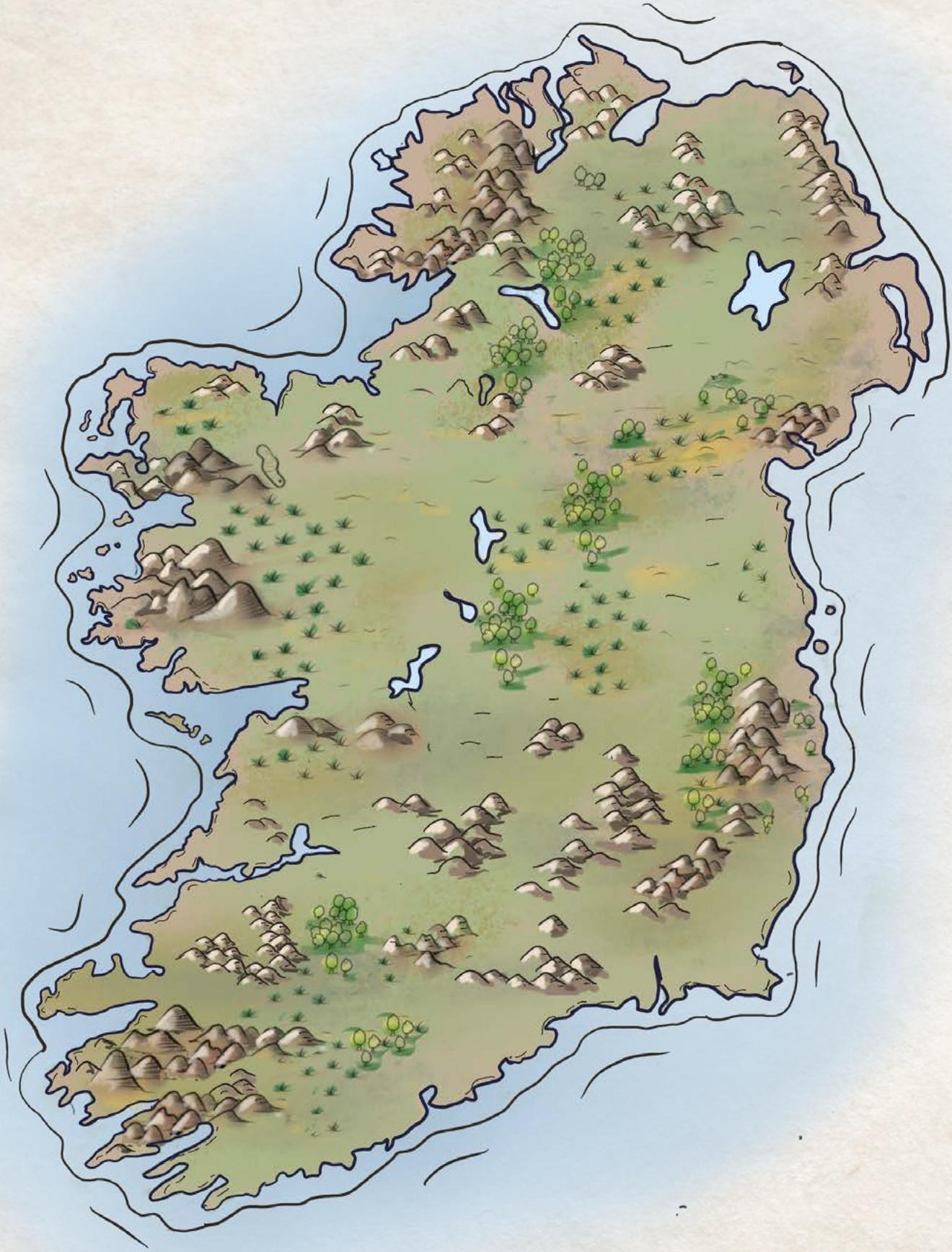
There are at least one hundred place names in Ireland linked to St Brigid. Most of them are in Leinster but they can be found all over the island. For example, Kilbride means 'the church of Brigid' and Rathbride means the 'rath or ringfort of Brigid.'

There are also lots of places dedicated to her memory such as churches, schools, GAA clubs, housing estates, holy wells, streets, and community centres. Are there any of these near you?

Even though she never left Ireland, there are lots of churches in other countries dedicated to St Brigid too. This is because she was important to the Irish people who moved there.



**Activity! Mark where you live on the map and any placenames with Brigid near you.**





## St Brigid's legacy: An overview

I am one of the three patron saints of Ireland along with St Patrick and St Colmcille

I am the patron saint of cows and dairy workers

I taught the importance of kindness and charity to those who are less fortunate

I wove a simple kind of cross that can be made by anybody to remember the story of Christ

I founded the church at Kildare which became one of the most important churches in Ireland

My feast day is celebrated throughout the world on February 1st



# Ireland after St Brigid

c.455 AD

St Brigid is born

c.470 AD

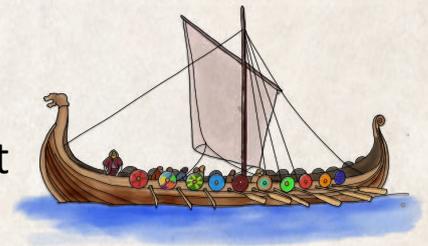
St Brigid becomes a nun

c.500 AD

St Brigid founds her church at *Cill Dara*

c.650 AD

Cogitosus writes his book  
'the Life of St Brigid'



929 AD

The Vikings attack Kildare on St Brigid's day

1111 AD

Kildare was made into a diocese

1169 AD

Normans invade Ireland  
Strongbow makes Kildare his base



1210 AD

The county of Kildare was formed

1534 AD

'Silken' Thomas Fitzgerald's Rebellion

1540s AD

The reformation of the monasteries

1798 AD

The 1798 Rebellion

1845 AD

The Great Irish Famine begins

1914 AD

World War I begins

1916 AD

The Easter Rising

1992 AD

The Brigidine nuns return to Kildare

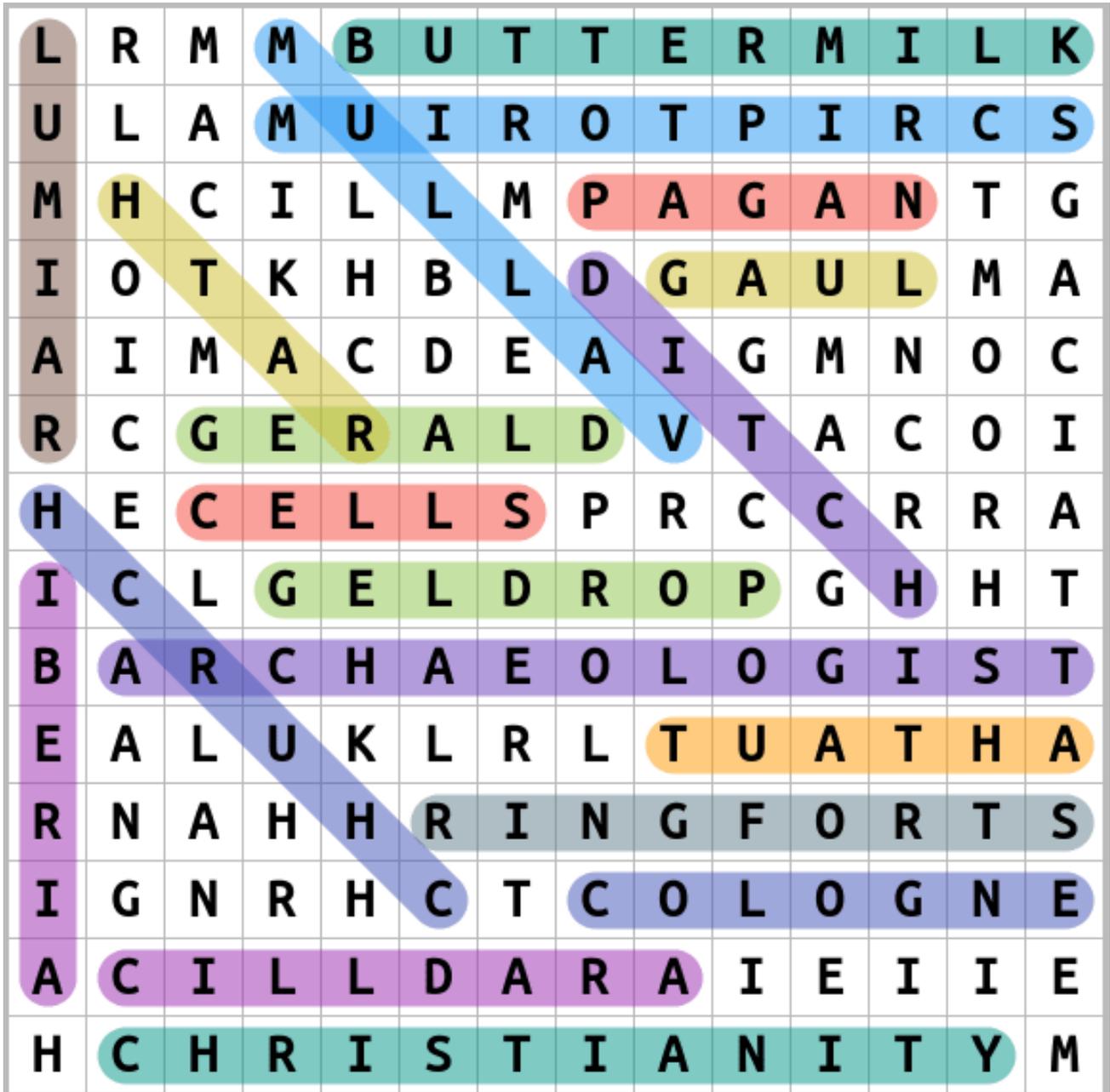
2024 AD

The 1500th anniversary of St Brigid's death

## Additional resources

Name	Content	Link or location name
Brigid 1500 website	As well as a page with information and activities for children, you can find out more about the commemorations	<a href="https://brigid1500.ie/get-involved/school/">https://brigid1500.ie/get-involved/school/</a>
St Brigid's Cathedral, Kildare	Visit the cathedral built on the site of St Brigid's monastery, the 'fire temple', high cross and round tower. There is a museum exhibition inside the cathedral.	Off Market Square, Kildare Town, Co. Kildare <a href="http://www.stbrigidscathedral.com/">http://www.stbrigidscathedral.com/</a>
Kildare Town Tourist Office and Heritage Centre	Find information on places to visit or take a free walking tour	Market Square, Kildare Town, Co. Kildare <a href="https://kildareheritage.com/guided-walking-tours/">https://kildareheritage.com/guided-walking-tours/</a>
Ask About Ireland	Useful resource for pupils to learn more about St Brigid and other educational topics.	<a href="https://www.askaboutireland.ie/learning-zone/primary-students/looking-at-places/kildare/saint-brigid/life-of-st-brigid/">https://www.askaboutireland.ie/learning-zone/primary-students/looking-at-places/kildare/saint-brigid/life-of-st-brigid/</a>
Schools Folklore Collection	A fantastic collection of handwritten stories and folklore by primary school pupils in the 1930s.	<a href="https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/schools?">https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/schools?</a>
Making a St Brigid's Cross - an Easy Step by Step Guide	School resources- activities for school children, including how to make a St Brigid's cross and colouring pages	<a href="https://brigid1500.ie/get-involved/school/">https://brigid1500.ie/get-involved/school/</a>
Kildare Monastic Trail audio guide	This audioguide takes you through the early monastic sites of county Kildare	<a href="https://www.abartaheritage.ie/kildare-monastic-trail-audio-guide/">https://www.abartaheritage.ie/kildare-monastic-trail-audio-guide/</a>
"Exploring St Brigid's Myths & Legends in a Contemporary World" Podcast	Audio documentary exploring what Brigid means to different people	<a href="https://kildareheritage.com/">https://kildareheritage.com/</a>
Legends of Kildare VR experience	Meet characters such as the goddess Brigid and St Brigid in virtual reality	<a href="https://kildareheritage.com/legends-of-kildare-vr/">https://kildareheritage.com/legends-of-kildare-vr/</a> Located at Kildare Heritage Centre, Market Square, Kildare Town, Co Kildare.

# St Brigid Wordsearch - Solutions



GERALD  
 CILL DARA  
 CELLS  
 ARCHAEOLOGIST  
 VALLUM  
 CHURCH  
 CHURCH  
 CHRISTIANITY

GAUL  
 TUATHA  
 LUMIAR  
 RINGFORTS  
 GELDROPP  
 IBERIA  
 PAGAN

DITCH  
 SCRIPTORIUM  
 COLOGNE  
 BUTTERMILK  
 RATH

# Notes



**BRIGID**  
1500