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SECRET BELFAST

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JAFFE MEMORIAL DRINKING FOUNTAIN ②

An ode to Belfast's Jewish community

Victoria Square, BT1 4QG
Buses: 18, 19, 26, 26a, 26b, 27, 28, 31

The Jaffe Memorial Drinking Fountain hasn't always been at its present location at the entrance to the Victoria Street Shopping Centre, although that's where it was originally placed in 1874. Sir Otto Jaffe, Belfast's one and only Jewish mayor, erected it to commemorate his father Daniel Jaffe, a linen merchant and founder of the city's first synagogue in Great Victoria Street.

In fact, this gilded, cast-iron Victorian water feature spent 70 years neglected and ignored in the Botanic Gardens in the south of the city. It was moved there in 1933 and was only returned to its original spot in 2008, following extensive and painstaking restoration in England, in order to mark the opening of the shopping centre. It was in such a fragile state upon arrival that it had to be taken apart piece by piece before it could be restored and regilded to its original form and colour.

The fountain symbolises an important link in Belfast's colourful history, as the Jewish community is one of Northern Ireland's oldest ethnic and religious minorities. The community has only about 80 members today, but punches well above its weight in terms of contributing to the city's cultural and religious life.

Jews first arrived in Belfast back in the 1860s and were mainly active in the linen trade. Daniel Jaffe arrived from Germany for just that reason in 1850. One of nine children, his son Otto went on to become Lord Mayor in 1899 and again in 1904. He established the Jaffe Public Elementary School in 1907 – it was open to both Protestant and Catholic children. At various times throughout his time in Belfast, Jaffe experienced anti-Jewish sentiment. The most notable incident occurred when a group of Belfast women refused to support the Children's Hospital as long as Sir Otto and his wife remained on its board.

NEARBY

The portraits of Bittles Bar

Right beside the Jaffe Fountain is Bittles Bar, a small Victorian-era bar in a flat-iron shape. Despite its size, the bar holds a remarkable selection of beers and whiskeys. While you're sipping on its fare, sit back and take in the eclectic art that adorns the walls. The portraits mainly celebrate Ireland's literary and sporting heroes but also convey some of the gossip that surrounds several of Northern Ireland's more well-known politicians.

FAMINE WINDOW ④

A glorious window depicting heart-breaking scenes from the Irish famine

City Hall, Donegall Square, BT1 5GS
028 90 320202
www.belfastcity.gov.uk
Mon–Fri 8.30am–5pm, Sat and Sun 10am–4pm, subject to change
Free public tours are available daily, check website for details
Buses: 1, 1a, 1b, 1c, 1d

Visitors to City Hall often miss the window known as the "famine window" as it is not presently included in the official tour. To find it, look for the fourth window along the east corridor on the left side as you enter through the front doors. With its array of vibrant, modern colours, this striking window depicts one of the greatest horrors that ever plagued Ireland. Called in Gaelic "*an Gorta Mór*" (the Great Hunger) or "*an Drochshaol*" (the bad life), this famine plagued Belfast from the mid-1840s. One of the more moving images in the window is that of a woman in a graveyard and a destitute father and daughter weeping over a pot. Elsewhere, a woman and a child toil in a field searching for edible potatoes amid the blight-ravaged crops. In the lower middle section of the window is Clifton House (see below), a building located in the centre of Belfast that was once used as the poor house. A crouched female figure grieving by gravestones in the top right corner was an all too familiar sight in a tragedy that affected everyone, irrespective of social status. Also depicted in the window is the blessed escape of the emigrant ship, at least for those who could afford the cost of a ticket to the New World. America is shown bathed in golden sunlight, representing hope for anyone who was able to reach its shores. This window is part of a series of stained-glass windows throughout the City Hall. It reflects the significant impact that the traumatic famine years have had on Irish consciousness and on the city of Belfast itself. Many Irish historians believe that the word "famine" is itself a misnomer, as the country was in fact producing enough crops at the time, but other factors such as land acquisitions, absent landlords and the punitive 1690 penal laws effectively caused the death of millions.

Straining already frayed relations between the Irish and the British Crown, the famine is considered a watershed in the Irish historical narrative. Indeed, many modern historians refer to the preceding period of Irish history as "pre-famine". One million people are known to have died as a result of it. Another million escaped by emigrating. Those who died from starvation were buried in mass common graves in the Shankill, Friar's Bush, Clifton Street and Donegall Road graveyards across the city. The graveyard of Friar's Bush has a "cholera pit" and is probably the most famous.

Visitors interested in the plight of the Irish poor may like to visit the former poor house, Clifton House, a short walk from the City Hall in North Queen Street. Established in 1774 by the Belfast Charitable Society as a base for their work with the destitute, it is one of the finest examples of Georgian architecture in the city. Both group and individual guided tours of Clifton House are available by phoning ahead to arrange a time or by emailing: lucy@cliftonbelfast.org.uk (see p. 56).

C.S. LEWIS READING ROOM ㊱

A door and a carpet dedicated to the creator of Narnia

McClay Library, College Park Ave, BT7 1LQ
028 90 976135
www.qub.ac.uk
8am–2am weekdays
Free
Buses: 8a, 8b

The McClay Library at Queen's University is not just an essential part of student life, it houses a rather special reading room dedicated to Belfast-born writer, C.S. Lewis.

You could easily miss the entrance in the general chaos of people coming and going in the tower area on the first floor. However, if you look closely, you will see a wardrobe door like no other, a replica of the enormous, beautifully carved, heavy oak doorway from the 2005 film, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, complete with the handles suggesting the drawer at the bottom.

Another clue as to the existence of the room is the "Narnia" carpet outside, which depicts the character of Aslan. Inside, the circular room is engraved with quotations from several of Lewis's works.

An intellectual giant of the 20th century, Clive Staples Lewis was born in Belfast in November 1898. He wrote more than 30 books but is best known for *The Chronicles of Narnia*, his series of seven fantasy novels. The city of Belfast is peppered with references to his work: the gas lamps, for instance, in the middle of Crawfordsburn Country Park and the grounds of Campbell College (where Lewis boarded) are said to have inspired the lamp post in Narnia, one of the most important landmarks in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Lewis's childhood home, Little Lea, where the Lewis family lived between 1905 and 1930 and where he wrote some of his first essays, is on the Circular Road in Belfast.

Other C.S. Lewis sights in Belfast

In front of the Holywood Arches Library (4–12 Holywood Road, BT4 1NT) stands the bronze statue of Lewis's character, Digory Kirke, the hero of *The Magician's Nephew*. Made in 1997 to mark the centenary of the writer's birth, the piece by Ross Wilson is entitled *The Searcher*. It shows the life-size figure of Digory entering Narnia through the magic wardrobe. The inspiration for the work is engraved on the reverse: a letter by C.S. Lewis in response to a girl who had written to ask why Aslan, the lion and hero, had to die. The girl kept the letter for two years before deciding to donate it to the library at Queen's University, where Wilson found it while researching his C.S. Lewis commission. C.S. Lewis Square, located at the intersection of the Connswater and Comber Greenways in East Belfast, features seven permanent sculptures of characters from *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. A blue plaque at 47 Dundela Avenue marks where the writer was born.

CILLINI GRAVEYARD ②

Where the "dangerous dead" were laid to rest

Milltown Cemetery, 546 Falls Rd, BT12 6EQ
028 90 613972
www.milltowncemetery.com
From 9am every day. Gates close for cars at 3.30pm (October–March) and 4.30pm (April–September)
Accessible on foot throughout the year
Free
Buses: 80, 81

At the back of the Milltown Cemetery, in the Bog Meadow Wetlands, the Cillini Graveyard ("Little graveyard" in Gaelic) stands in stark contrast to the ornate graves of the surrounding great and good.

Until the late 1990s, it was the practice for stillborn babies who died "in limbo" to be buried here. Catholic doctrine only allows the baptised to lie within consecrated ground, so stillborn children who could not be baptised were laid to rest in this small graveyard. Unbaptised babies were typically buried at sunrise or sundown. Mostly, fathers came carrying their infant in a shoebox and carefully placed the baby under the corrugated iron roofs concealing the mass grave. Suicides and individuals who were considered paupers were also secretly laid to rest here.

Cemetery records suggest that some 11,000 babies were buried in the bogland, although historian Toni Maguire believes there could be up to 27,000. The true numbers may never be known as the burials were not documented. Relatives fear that many more graves lie undiscovered in other parts of Milltown.

Thanks to Maguire's work, the area is now populated by tiny white crosses marking recently identified graves. The number of tributes to the dead has grown over recent years as families are traced and approximate locations of remains identified. Although not a unique phenomenon, Maguire believes the Irish way of dealing with "limbo babies" was particularly harsh. The Catholic Church discouraged parents from naming their stillborn children. However, in recent years many parents have searched for the location of lost babies whom they have named, loved, and not forgotten.

The location of these burials may also have been influenced by superstition. There was a widely held belief that the dead could harm the living, so penning them in was thought to offer some protection. Controversially, in 2000 the Catholic Church sold off 15 hectares of the land surrounding the cemetery to the Ulster Wildlife Trust for a nature reserve. This mobilised local people and historians to take action against further loss of information and the anonymisation of the area.

In the north-eastern corner of the cemetery, in Section 27, an archway inscribed with the Gaelic wording "Na Leanai" (the children) leads to a memorial garden created to honour the unmarked graves throughout Milltown.

NUCLEAR BUNKER ⑥

Restored bunker from the Cold War

Derrylettiff Rd, Portadown, Craigavon BT62 1QU
Normally opens twice a year. Check website
www.nibunker.co.uk
Free (but visitors are asked to make a donation to the Royal Observer Corps Association)
By car: from Junction 12 on the M1, take the turn-off signposted "Portadown/ Craigavon A4". Travel approx. 5 km until you turn right onto Derrylettiff Rd. Approx. 300 metres up the road, you will see a bungalow and a lane leading to a farm house on your right: the bunker is in the field half-way up this lane.

Nearly 5 metres below ground in Portadown, a mere 30-minute drive from Belfast, the fully restored nuclear bunker is a fascinating memory of the Cold War period in the 1980s. The bunker was closed in 1991 but has now been returned to its original state. Visitors descend a steep ladder and are greeted by a cosy space that features a steel bunk bed, original war memorabilia, an operations desk and various maps.

This bunker was once part of a wider network of similar structures all over the United Kingdom – they were built to study and report the effects of nuclear explosions and any resulting radioactive fallout.

Before you travel to Portadown to see it, remember that access to the bunker is via a ladder: there is no disabled access and children younger than 15 are not allowed in below-ground areas. Anyone under the age of 18 must be accompanied by an adult. There are currently no toilet facilities and suitable clothes/footwear must be worn.

Another bunker

There is also a rectangular-shaped bunker located slap bang in the middle of one of the wealthiest parts of the city at 148 Mount Eden Park, BT9 6RB. Known as the Northern Ireland Regional War Room in the 1960s, Civil Defence Regional Control in the 1970s and the Regional Government Headquarters in the 1980s, for years Mount Eden has been largely ignored by locals. It stood empty, mysterious and inactive, in sharp contrast to the normal everyday life that surrounds it. Rumours circulated for years that it was a munitions factory, a secret school or a base for spies. Many South Belfast childhoods were spent peering through its surrounding bushes, waiting for some form of life to show. It is entirely windowless, which adds to the intrigue.

The first sign of movement occurred in 2012, when suddenly some bushes were cut back, although no one remembers seeing who did it. In 1983 anti-nuclear protestors managed to force an entry into the building, where they unearthed some intriguing details. Most notably, they found evidence that it had been used to train military professionals in civil defence in case of a nuclear war. It is currently used for storage.

NENDRUM MONASTIC SITE ⑯

A mysterious and magical island commanding great views of Strangford Lough

Mahee Island, Ringneill Road, Comber, County Down BT23 6EP
028 90 823207
https://discovernorthernireland.com/Nendrum-Monastic-Site-Comber-Newtownards-P2877/
By car: from Belfast, take the A20 towards Newtownards, then the A22 towards Comber. Go straight through Comber and follow the signs for Mahee Island

With its breathtaking views and fantastic archaeological remains, each visit to Mahee Island uncovers more about Celtic monastic life here. Accessible via narrow winding roads, causeways and bridges, the Nendrum Monastery is divided into three concentric enclosures surrounded by stone walls which separated the community.

The central enclosure was the ritual core of the monastery. The remains of the church, round-tower and graves are still visible.

The middle enclosure was used for craft activities and was the main space where the community lived and worked. The remains of the stone platforms of wattle buildings with thatched roofs are evident in the south-west of the site, along with a rectangular building dubbed the "school" due to the number of artefacts recovered from its excavation.

The remains of the monastery lay undiscovered until the 19th century, when the scholar and bishop William Reeves uncovered it in 1844 while on Mahee Island in search of 14th-century churches. He recognised the remains of an early medieval stone round-tower. Such towers were generally found in the vicinity of monasteries and may have been bell towers or places of refuge.

Nendrum Monastic Site is thought to have been founded in the 5th century by St Mochaoi, an associate of St Patrick who gave his name to Mahee Island. Monastic life had come to an end here by the 12th century although the place was briefly used as a Benedictine priory after the Anglo-Norman invasion of Ulster. Significant excavations in the 1920s led to the discovery of the Bell of Nendrum (an early Christian handbell), now in the Ulster Museum. Fragments of a free-standing sundial were also found at this time. It would have had nine time markers dividing daylight into eight sections and was used to mark the canonical hours for prayer (see p. 150). The Nendrum Sundial is considered the most sophisticated of the 10 currently known examples of pre-12th century Irish sundials. It has been reconstructed against the wall of the church.

Excavations in the 1990s uncovered the complex remains of two horizontal tidal mills on the foreshore that allowed the monastery to harness the power of the sea to mill grain. A linear bank of stones that form the associated mill pond are still visible at low tide. The mill served the monastery for over 150 years and was replaced circa 789 by a second mill, which remains one of the most complete examples of an early medieval mill discovered in Ireland.

FLAME! THE GASWORKS MUSEUM ⑧ OF IRELAND

Behind the scenes at Ireland's sole surviving coal gasworks

44 Irish Quarter West, Carrickfergus, County Antrim BT38 8AT
028 9336 9575
www.flamegasworks.co.uk
Open all year round. May–Aug: daily (except Sat) 2pm–5pm; Sept: Mon–Fri 2pm–5pm (last tour 4pm). Tours last one and a half hours. Also at other times by pre-arrangement
Free
By car: 30-mins drive to Carrickfergus from Belfast city centre

Located behind an unremarkable facade, the Flame Gasworks are an original, preserved Victorian plant. Built in 1855, the plant supplied the town with gas for 100 years. Today, the buildings house the Carrickfergus Gasworks Museum of Ireland.

One of the first things visitors see is a collection of giant "D"-shaped ovens known as "retorts", which are more than 3 metres deep. According to development officer Sharon Mushtaq, this is the largest collection of surviving horizontal retorts in Europe. Voluntary tour guide Brian McKee (whose father once managed the site) explains, in great technical detail, how the gas used to arrive on site, how the retorts were used to remove dirt such as tar and sulphur, and how gas was ultimately used in people's houses. McKee tells it from the heart and thoroughly enjoys recounting anecdotes during the tour, really bringing the experience to life.

One of his stories is about a stoker's wife who broke into the gasworks one evening because her husband had preferred to go drinking with friends instead of coming straight home. She managed to find the gas distribution lever inside the governor's house and waved it up and down so all the lights in the town dimmed and flared up repeatedly. A clear signal to her guilty husband who, realising he was in deep trouble, hurried home to make amends.

The museum also houses a fantastic array of gas-related memorabilia, ranging from gas appliances to a large assortment of cookers, irons, pokers, heaters and griddles. The modern appliances on display demonstrate how the old ways have been adapted to the natural gas we use today.

The library upstairs holds a collection of documents, drawings and other material from the 19th century. One particular curiosity is a wages ledger that has been locked shut with very heavy-duty bolts for more than a century.

CRANFIELD CHURCH AND WELL ㉛

One of the most atmospheric Christian sites in Ireland

Churchtown Point, Cranfield Road, Cranfield
Dawn to dusk
Bus 222 from Belfast Europa bus station to Randalstown. Alight at The Gables bus stop, then take a local taxi to Cranfield Road (approx. 5 mins)

Hidden at the back end of Cranfield Road is an ancient and mystical spot that has been a place of pilgrimage for centuries. The small church here dates from 1306 but the site was probably under monastic care prior to that, as marked on a stone.

As you stand within the original stone walls of the church, you can still see the doorway with its outward pointed arch in the west gable wall and the remains of a tall window where the altar would have been. A large cross rests against the inner wall: it is not the original but a replica of the ancient cross that would have been placed to mark the boundary of church land. When you stand in the tiny yet atmospheric graveyard attached to the church, it feels like a theatre set … although you have to swipe your hand around to deter the numerous insects that thrive here amid undulating mounds and ancient headstones. It is believed that St Olcran, a disciple of St Patrick, lies buried here with soil brought specially from Rome. The oldest visible date on a headstone is 1704. With its association to St Olcran, this graveyard and its nearby well have long been revered as miraculous places. The well is easy to spot within the boundary of a small stone wall. The tree that sits in front of it is draped

with rags of various colours and textures and the odd prayer note. Pilgrims still journey here, particularly for three specific days between May and the end of June each year. According to tradition, this is when the well is most likely to flood, bringing gypsum crystals to the surface that are believed to have healing properties. In former times, pilgrims would collect these gems, using them as prayer aids, or they would swallow them to ensure a safe passage by sea. Sludge and mud now act as a deterrent to visitors attempting to dip fragments of cloth into the previously clean waters. However, some still persevere, believing that as the cloth rots on the tree, their loved one's ailments will disappear.