The Heritage Office of Laois County Council works to promote awareness and understanding of the built, natural and cultural heritage of County Laois. This is undertaken with the assistance of the Heritage Council, through delivery of the projects detailed in the Laois Heritage Plan.

This annual report for 2014 details projects undertaken in 2014, including those delivered with financial assistance from the Heritage Council and others delivered by Laois County Council, with assistance from local communities and other funding agencies such as Laois Partnership, Science Foundation Ireland and the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht. Laois Coiunty Council is grateful to all of these agencies for their continued valuable support.

HERITAGE PLAN 2014 - 2019

The third Heritage Plan for Laois was adopted in January 2014 and implementation commenced in 2014. The plan was formally launched in June 2014.

The Vision of the new Laois Heritage Plan is “A County where Heritage is at the Heart of every home”. Our Mission Statement is “To protect, increase accessibility to, and maximise the value of our heritage by working in partnership to foster an understanding of heritage through participation, education and research”.

Heritage Forum members with the Chief Executive and Leas Cathaoirlech at the launch of the Laois Heritage Plan, Roundwood House, Co Laois, July 2014. (Photos Michael Scully).

Laois Heritage Forum

The Heritage Plan is a partnership plan written and implemented by the Heritage Forum, a group representing all groups with an interest in heritage in Laois. One of the key actions of the new Laois Heritage Plan was to review membership of the Forum. Following public consultation in Autumn 2014, the
review of membership of the Laois Heritage Forum is now also complete, and several new groups have been added to the Forum.

The current Laois Heritage Plan contains 50 actions which will be implemented over the coming years, under five key objective areas:

- Increase understanding of the heritage of Laois
- Record the Heritage of Laois
- Protect and promote active conservation of the heritage of Laois
- Promote community participation on heritage plans and projects
- Promote enjoyment and accessibility of heritage

Projects from the Heritage Plan 2014-2019 were delivered in 2014.

The following information relates to projects from the Laois Heritage Plan undertaken with the support of the Heritage Council, Laois Partnership and others during 2014.

1. **Increase understanding of the heritage of Laois**

   In 2014, the Heritage Officer worked with numerous individuals, community groups and the County Community Forum to plan heritage projects and provide advice on accessing grant aid and project support. In order to ensure wide dissemination of heritage information, all reports and publications produced during the year have been lodged in the local studies section of Laois County Library and made available to download on the Laois County Council website.

   **Events**

   Events held during 2014 to raise awareness of heritage issues included:

   - A week-long programme of over 60 family events, guided walks, talks, slideshows and fun days was organized for national Heritage Week in August;

   ![Heritage Week bug hunt with the Irish Wildlife Trust at Emo Court, August 2014 (Photo: Michael Scully)](image)

   - The Heritage Office assisted with the development of the Laois Heritage Society Schools Heritage Project, a competition for primary and secondary schools, organised in association with the Laois Education Centre;
• The Heritage Officer was involved with the organisation the Laois Marquee for the National Ploughing Championships and attended the event. Free workshops on variety of themes, including wildlife, science, architecture, archaeology, music and art were offered to the public throughout the three days, and these were very successful.

• Science Week in November was celebrated in Laois with a good range of events and public talks. Schools workshops were held in Mountmellick and Mountrath Libraries with the assistance of Discover Science and Engineering. Primary schools from each town took part in invention workshops and Lego robot building, so lots of fun was had amongst the learning.

• Support was given to a range of groups for heritage related events, e.g. BirdWatch Ireland Laois Branch, Portlaoise Men’s’ Shed, Irish Wildlife Trust Laois Offaly Branch, Abbeyleix Bog, Laois Heritage Society etc.

The James Fintan Lalor School
The Second Annual James Fintan Lalor Autumn School took place at the Dunamaise Arts Centre in Portlaoise on 17th and 18th October 2014 and was very successful. The venue was full for both days of the event and all aspects of the event were well received by the public, press and all speakers etc involved.

Book on the Rock of Dunamase
A book on the heritage of the Rock of Dunamase is being written, for publication in 2016. This is the first phase of a three-year project. Text and reconstruction drawings have been delivered. Further research and photography will take place in 2015.

Guide to the Architecture of mid-Leinster
A book in the prestigious “Pevsner Guide” series, published by Yale University Press, on the architecture of Laois, Offaly and Kildare The Laois element of this project is complete, all photos and maps were delivered in schedule and on budget. The Buildings of Mid Leinster volume will be published in 2016, and work is due to commence in Kildare in 2015.

2. Record the Heritage of Laois

The collection and presentation of information on the heritage of Laois is a necessary first step in the conservation and highlighting of this heritage. The following heritage projects were carried out during 2014:

Audit of Laois Castles
Following the demolition of Coolbanagher Castle, after damage caused during Storm Darwin in January 2014, Laois Heritage Office undertook an audit of the 29 Tower House remaining in Laois, to document
their location, ownership and current status. This project will assist in developing future management plans for these sites, in association with their owners.

The report on this study is now complete and will be published shortly. The results have been welcomed by the National Monuments Service, and all data will be supplied to the Archaeological Survey of Ireland.

It is hoped that the results and recommendations of this study will form a baseline for future survey, and may assist in the development of management plans for these important suites, perhaps through the upcoming Glas (agri-environment) Scheme, or through the next Rural Development Plan.

3. Protect and promote active conservation of the heritage of Laois

**Donaghmore Workhouse**

The Conservation of the Dining Hall at Donaghmore Workhouse is now complete & the building was formally opened in July 2014.

The buildings will now be used to further interpret life in a Workhouse and the post-Famine period in Laois as part of the Donaghmore Museum tour.

The project was funded by Laois Partnership and Laois County Council, with input from the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht in the form of the Structures at Risk Fund.

**Borris in Ossory Courthouse**

Funding was obtained from the Department of Arts Heritage and the Gaeltacht to do some conservation work at Borris in Ossory Courthouse. This focussed on cleaning of stonework using a conservation technique, and repair of railings.

It is hoped to carry out further small works to improve the conservation status and presentation of this prominent building in 2015.
4. **Promote community participation on heritage plans and projects**

**Local Biodiversity Action Plans**

The Heritage Officer contributed to the development and launch of a Laois Partnership project to deliver Local Biodiversity Action Plans to 7 communities across Laois, with the assistance of Ballyroan-based ecologist Dr Fiona Mac Gowan.

The plans followed a programme of participative training for each of the communities, and each community wrote their own plan with facilitation by a professional ecologist.

This project has now been mainstreamed within Laois County Council and further training and 4 more Local Biodiversity Action Plans will be delivered in 2015.

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*Local Biodiversity Action Plan for Ballacolla Co Laois, one of seven produced by local communities with help from Laois Partnership and Laois Heritage Office*

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**Timahoe Round Tower**

With the assistance of the Heritage Council, the Community at Timahoe commissioned a Conservation Report for the site, this was completed by a multi-disciplinary team led by Conservation Architect Margaret Quinlan, and will now be used to guide further management of this important historic site.

The plan includes details on the history, archaeology, architecture and ecology of the site, and contains a statement of significance and recommendations for future management.

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**Lea Castle**

The Community at Portarlington commissioned a Conservation Report on Lea Castle, also with Heritage Council funding. This report is now complete and will be published in spring 2015.

Implementation of the recommendations of the Conservation Plan has commenced, following consultation with the National Monuments Service and the National Parks & Wildlife Service This project is ongoing, in partnership with the landowner.
Abbeyleix Bog

A conservation management plan was commissioned for this site in 2014, with funding from the Heritage Council. The Heritage Officer site on a Technical Advisory Group for this community-led management project.

In addition to these major projects, a range of groups were assisted with practical conservation projects, queries and funding applications in areas ranging from wildlife surveys to graveyard management.

5. Promote enjoyment and accessibility of heritage

Audio Guide to Heritage sites in Laois

There has been a very positive response to the Story of Laois audioguides and CDs, created in partnership with Laois Tourism and funded by Laois Partnership. Guides to date include the Rock of Dunamase, Monastic Laois and guides to the historic towns of Portlaoise and Portarlington. Two further guides will be commissioned in 2015, to the Laois Heritage Trail and the town of Abbeyleix. The guides can be downloaded for free at www.abartaudioguides.ie. Each guide has been downloaded several hundred times already.

In addition to the free downloads, a limited number of CD-box sets were created, under the Title “The Story of Laois”.

Laois Heritage Communications Strategy

The Laois Heritage Communications Strategy was adopted in December 2014, and will guide our future work on promoting awareness of the heritage of Laois and its value.

Catherine Casey
15th February 2015