

The Stones of the Hollow Hill

The Stones of the Hollow Hill are a series of 18 carved stones by artist James Winnett that can be found at Kerdiffstown Park near Naas, County Kildare. The carvings on the stones tell a story that draws on Irish mythology, the folklore of the surrounding landscape and the recent history of Kerdiffstown landfill.

The tale involves two heroic figures named Brigid and Fionn who set out on an epic quest to recover a stolen fire. The character of Brigid references traditions connected to both Brigid the goddess of pre-Christian Ireland and Saint Brigid. The character of Fionn draws on the stories of Fionn Mac Cumhail, the great warrior of Irish mythology who is said to have lived nearby on the Hill of Allen.

The carvings tell of Brigid and Fionn's journey through a landscape punctuated by several hills that each have their own rich mythological connections. Some of these are visible from the park. The story imagines the hill of Kerdiffstown Park, 'the Hollow Hill' as a *sidhe* – a mysterious subterranean Otherworld that is home to Kerdiff the Giant. The artwork also references the 2011 fire at the site which burnt underground for a month, as well as broader themes around waste, climate crisis and healing.

The project was commissioned under the Department of Housing, Local Government & Heritage Per Cent for Art scheme, with additional funding from Kildare County Council for the Kerdiffstown Landfill Remediation Project.

James Winnett is an artist, stone carver and workshop leader interested in the crossovers between sculpture, archaeology, folklore, place and memory. He carved the 18 sandstone blocks over the period of a year before they were delivered to the site and installed in November 2022. The style of the carvings draws in part on the designs of the medieval high crosses, such as those at Moone, Old Kilcullen and Castledermot along with other carved stones in Johnstown and Kildare. Reflecting on the project James said:

"It's been a fascinating project to be a part of and I'm intrigued to see how people will respond to and interpret the artworks over time. I've always been interested in the way stories reside in a landscape and in the role that carved stones can play in promoting moments of curiosity and connection. I hope that the work will enrich people's experience of the park while encouraging repeat visits to see how different the carvings appear throughout the year. At its heart the work is about the enduring power that stories have to transform our understanding of the land we walk on. I hope that in a small way the Stones of the Hollow Hill will add to this tradition."



All photographs by James Winnett apart from the sunrise photograph above by Michael O'Rourke.

1. The Dream of Fionn

Fionn sits up in bed caught in the grip of a fever. It is Midsummer's Night and a relentless heat has fallen on the land. At midnight a storm of swirling cloud gathers and a monstrous seven-headed beast descends spouting fire, flood, wind and disease. The beast reaches down into Fionn's chamber and inhales the smoke rising from the fire. A figure appears and delivers a prophecy of the ruin of the land:

*Fire on home plains, Almu falls,
Hunter prey-less, raven calls.
Warmth in winter, serpent wakes,
Hollow hill, a thousand lakes.*



The carving shows a scene of destruction with the burnt-out ruin of a house visible towards the top left and a dead fish below. On the right-hand side a woman in long robes gestures towards the beast while a man wearing a band around his arm crouches in the corner. Below these figures a stylised tree appears threatened by the storm while Fionn's two hunting dogs Bran and Sceólang run up the hill. A harp, sword and chariot appear in the panel beneath.

In Irish mythology Fionn Mac Cumhaill lived with his band of warriors the Fianna at a fort on top of the Hill of Allen. The hill, which was also known as Almu, lies 15km from Kerdiffstown Park and it can be seen from the park on the horizon towards the west.

The prophecy warns Fionn of the destruction of his home and the breakdown of the climate. As a warrior and protector of the land he must rise to this challenge.

2. The Dream of Brigid

Awoken in the night, Brigid stands at the threshold of her house in Kildare. An oak tree shakes in the storm as the beast reaches down to feed on Brigid's fire, leaving it extinguished. Two snakes confront the beast as the fire is taken. Brigid hears a prophecy of the ruin of the land:

*Fire on green plains, souring smoke,
Pasture milk-less, fruitless oak.
Land's failed harvest, endless mire.
Hollow hill, a thousand fires.*



The stone is carved with three versions of Brigid's cross – one on either side of the door and one in the roof above. Below are three symbols representing the fires to which Brigid is said to be connected – the Fire of Smithcraft (blacksmith's tongs), the Fire of Inspiration (book) and the Fire of Healing (cauldron). A cow and a sheaf of corn can also be seen, indicating Brigid's link with cattle and the harvest.

The figures of Saint Brigid and the pre-Christian Brigid are deeply intertwined with many of the stories and traditions associated with the saint appearing to carry pre-Christian ideas around fire, fertility and agricultural abundance. The first written accounts of her life date from over a century after her death around the year 524. They describe Brigid as being born on the threshold of a house at dawn, the daughter of a Christian slave, and a Pagan chieftain. She was raised by druids and went on to found a monastery for both men and women in Kildare around the year 480. She was known for exceptional acts of charity and developed a cult following that later spread across Ireland and further afield. She is said to have died on 1st February (Saint Brigid's Day), which is also known as the festival of Imbolc, one of the four quarter festivals of pre-Christian Ireland. During her time a perpetual flame was tended in Kildare that may have been kept burning in her honour for a thousand years.

3. The Oak of Kildare

The midsummer sun shines high above as Fionn meets Brigid at the great oak tree of Kildare. While they discuss how to recover Brigid's fire, the fruits and seeds of different trees begin to fall from above including elder, hazel, yew, pine, rowan, apple, oak and ivy. They spend the day collecting the seeds before setting out north-west in the direction of the setting sun. As they leave they leap over midsummer bonfires for good luck.



Kildare or Cill Dara means 'church of (the) oak'. It has been suggested that Brigid founded her monastery beneath the branches of a large oak tree.

The carving shows three mid-summer bonfires that were traditionally lit on hilltops or at prominent crossroads on the night of St John's Eve (23rd June). Couples would jump over such fires for good luck and cattle were sometimes driven over the remaining ashes.

4. Croghan Hill

Leaving Kildare, Brigid and Fionn follow a network of wooden walkways that traverse the great Bog of Allen. The bog has dried in the summer heat and the shapes of tree stumps protrude from the ground like bones under skin. They pause to plant seeds at the foot of Croghan Hill as a storm brews. A tree bends violently in the wind and loses its fruit as the clouds burst and torrents of water run over the dry land.

Brigid climbs up through the clouds to the top of Croghan Hill where she finds a burning torch – the Fire of Smithcraft. She looks to the north-west and sees the sun setting over the Hill of Uisneach.



Croghan Hill in County Offaly is a remnant of an extinct volcano and it is said to be the home of an otherworldly woman called Éile. In some stories Brigid the Smith or Brigid Begoibne has a workshop beneath the hill while Saint Brigid is also said to have been born nearby. On a clear day Croghan Hill can be seen from Kerdiffstown Park on the horizon beyond Sallins.

The stone shows a blacksmith working beneath Croghan Hill as the sun falls behind the clouds that veil the peak. To the right of the hill a crouching figure, that also appears in the Dream of Fionn Stone, can be seen. He wears a band around his forearm, suggesting he is of high status, and gestures wearily towards a wilted sheaf – the crops have failed. The figure refers to Old Croghan Man, an Iron Age bog body that was found at the foot of Croghan Hill and is now at the National Museum of Ireland in Dublin. It has been suggested that he was ritually killed at a time when the climate became wetter and colder. Faced with failing crops, a community may have decided to depose of their leader in the hope of a better harvest to come. Behind him is an anthropomorphic boundary post with a bird perched on top. On the side panel of the stone Brigid climbs the hill and finds the burning torch.



5. The Hill of Uisneach

Brigid and Fionn follow an ancient road to the Hill of Uisneach at the centre of Ireland. As the sun sets into the hill Brigid climbs up and enters an otherworldly place of poets, musicians and buried gods. A council of kings gathers under the branches of a great ash tree. Brigid stays up throughout the night exchanging poems with those gathered around the fire.

At the rising of the midsummer sun an unusually cool mist rolls in from the north and an old woman, the Cailleach Bhéara appears. The Cailleach and Brigid meet on the hill and share in the Fire of Inspiration. They talk of the balance that must be restored to bring healing to the land. Brigid looks into the flame and sees that her fire from Kildare is being held captive by a giant called Kerdiff who lives in the Hollow Hill near Naas. It is there that she must go to retrieve the fire.



The Hill of Uisneach in County Westmeath is an ancient ceremonial site with a prominent role in Irish mythology as the sacred and symbolic centre of Ireland. It was said to be the burial place of Irish gods and the site of a huge ash tree known as the Bile Uisnig.

The four seated figures on the stone appear as a gathering of poets and musicians but they also represent the Kings of Ireland's four provinces. The King of Connacht is shown on the upper left side of the stone, the King of Ulster on the upper right, the King of Leinster on the lower right, and the King of Munster on the lower left.

In mythology the Cailleach Bhéara is a divine hag that is associated with winter, wildness and the creation of the landscape. In this story she appears unusually at mid-summer from the direction of the rising sun. From the Hill of Uisneach, the summer solstice sunrise aligns precisely both with the megalithic complex of Loughcrew on the summit of Sliabh na Cailleach and further afield with a Neolithic chambered cairn known as the, Calliagh Berra's House near the summit of Slieve Gullion mountain in Armagh.¹

1. Dames M. *Mythic Ireland*. London: Thames and Hudson; 1992. Also: Murphy A. *Mythical Ireland*: [accessed 20 December 2023]. Available from: <https://mythicalireland.com/blogs/news/video-the-incredible-accuracy-of-an-ancient-solstice-alignment-of-uisneach-loughcrew-and-slieve-gullion>

6. The Curragh

Brigid and Fionn return from Uisneach, crossing the Bog of Allen on their way back towards Kildare. Fionn pushes a great boulder into a ditch to help to re-wet the land. As the water returns Brigid lowers a bucket of butter into the bog. Reaching the Curragh plain Brigid rides ahead on her chariot, checking on her cattle.



On the left of the stone the distinctive outline of Croghan Hill can be seen with with a lunula necklace and a bog body beneath the surface. On the right a dog chases a wild boar. 'The Race of the Black Pig' is a linear earthwork running across the Curragh that is said to be the route of an ancient road to Dún Ailinne.

7. Dún Ailinne

At the far end of the Curragh, Brigid and Fionn climb the grassy bank of Dún Ailinne – the Beautiful Fort. Following the sound of music ahead they come across a harper playing a lament beneath an apple tree. He sings about the old kings of Leinster and a tragic princess called Aillinn who fell in love with Baile the heir to the throne of Ulster. Fionn sits on a boulder and carves a love poem into a branch from the tree. Brigid breaks off a branch and makes a key to enter the Otherworld.



Dún Ailinne, at the south east end of the Curragh near Kilcullen, is an ancient ceremonial enclosure on the hilltop of Cnoc Ailinne. It is thought to have been a royal inauguration site for the Kings of Leinster.

The stone shows a female figure inside the hill with the roots of an apple tree above. A face can be seen in the branches of the tree. To the right is a harper that appears similar to the carving of the King of Leinster on the Hill of Uisneach Stone. Fionn is shown sitting on a large rock with a footprint carved into it.

The carving refers to a tragic love story of story of Aillinn, the daughter of the king of Leinster, and Baile the heir to the throne of Ulster. The couple had arranged to meet on the shore near Dundalk but a strange figure approached Baile and falsely told him that Aillinn had died before she left Leinster. Baile died from a broken heart and was buried. The same otherworldly figure then appeared to Aillinn and delivered the news of Baile's death causing her to die of grief. Over time an apple tree grew from her grave and a yew tree grew from the place where Baile was buried. It was said that as both trees grew the face of each lover could be seen within their branches. Years later the poets of Leinster and Ulster carved the tale into wooden tablets cut from the two trees. Two hundred years later when the tablets were brought to a library at the Hill of Tara they suddenly sprang together and intertwined so that they could not be parted.

8. The Dark River

Leaving Dún Ailinne, Brigid and Fionn head north-east towards Naas. They pass two standing stones at Craddockstown and Punchestown that Fionn had thrown from the Hill of Allen some time before. Finding a boat, they travel downriver towards Johnstown, where a fish reaches out of the dark water and grabs a hair that falls from Fionn's head.



The stone shows Brigid and Fionn travelling north along the Morell River in the direction of Johnstown. Two streams join the river near to the Johnstown Holed Stone which can be seen in a field to the west of the village. This small standing stone has an angled hole cut through the top that is said to align with the summer solstice. Two swans mirror Fionn and Brigid's journey below while a fish swims off downriver with Fionn's hair.

On the back of the stone Fionn is seen throwing the Longstone of Punchestown from the Hill of Allen. The stone can be seen today near the entrance to Punchestown racecourse. At 7 metres tall it is the tallest standing stone in Ireland.



9. The Dún of Naas

Fionn and Brigid arrive at the Dún of Naas and meet an otherworldly figure named Lugh. Harvest celebrations are taking place for Lughnasadh, one of the four quarter days in the old year. Lugh invites Fionn and Brigid to prove their strength in a series of competitions including hurling, wrestling and football. After excelling at the games, Lugh presents them with prizes to aid their advance on the Hollow Hill. Fionn receives a sword and shield made by Lugh's blacksmith while Brigid is given a flaming spear along with a healing cauldron. Lugh advises them to wait until the longest night of winter to make their move on the Hollow Hill.



In Irish mythology the supernatural figure of Lugh is variously described as a warrior, king and master of the arts. He is said to have founded the harvest festival of Lughnasadh which involved feasting and competitive games in the lead up to the celebrations of 1st August. Naas may have been the location of one such Lughnasadh celebration. It is said to be named after Lugh's wife Nás who was buried at Dún Nás, a small hill in the centre of the town known today as the Moat Hill. The following text appears in the Dindshenchas (Lore of Places), a 10th century manuscript that appears to be based on much older oral traditions:

*Nás, mother of Ibic of the horses,
claims of right the brow and the beauty of the spot,
since she is gone, with the noise of combat,
how should ye know at all the spot where she died?*

*Nás took in hand a deed unwise:
(truth and not folly) death o'erwhelmed her;
'tis from her Nás was named,
famous perpetually for stern law.*

*Nás of the Leinstermen, bright with splendid bounty,
'tis there the lady was buried;
from her it is called with clear certitude:
the lore of the ancient hides not this.*



10. Advancing on the Hollow Hill

With the arrival of winter Brigid collects rushes from the edge of a frozen pond and weaves them into a rope at the foot of the Hollow Hill. Fionn meets a fox and asks him how to gain access to the hill. Beneath the ground a large dog guards the entrance to a tunnel. Fionn tentatively enters the tunnel, draws his sword and cuts the chain by which the dog is tied. As they approach the hill Brigid forms a circle with the rope and they step through it for good luck.



The large circular rope that Brigid weaves is known as a Crios Bríde or Brigid's Belt. Traditionally these were woven from three lengths of straw and were large enough for people to step through on Saint Brigid's Day for protection from illness in the year ahead.

According to local folklore there is a cache of treasure that is guarded by a black dog in a tunnel that runs under the canal in Naas.



11. The Hollow Hill

Each night Kerdiff the Giant scours the land for treasure and returns to the hill with his hoard. Deep underground the beast guards the hoard, one head always eating, another always sleeping. Steaming odours rise from the ground as the hill fattens. Pollution leaks from below, poisoning the river. The giant sits on his throne with Brigid's fire safe by his side. Spear in hand, he lunges at a passing fish. As he eats the fish he learns of Fionn and Brigid's plan to take back the fire.



The main face of the stone shows the Hollow Hill with Brigid's fire held captive at its centre. Two figures bring loaded bags of treasure to the hill under the watch of a hooded fox.

The Hollow Hill is shown both as an underground lair full of treasure and as an unmanaged landfill that pollutes the surrounding environment.



12. Entering the Hollow Hill

Brigid and Fionn climb the Hollow Hill on the longest night of the year. Guided by the fox, they reach a fork in the path. Brigid holds the apple branch high above her head and a doorway creaks open before them. Fionn ties the rope around a large stone and lowers himself into the darkness. Brigid walks ahead to a frozen pond and melts the surface of the ice with her flaming spear. As clouds of steam rise from the water she transforms into a swan and swims into the hill from below.



Swans play a prominent role in Irish mythology and have several associations with Brigid. During winter the swan constellation Cygnus appears to fly beneath the northern horizon over night, returning to the surface before dawn.²

² The relationship between Brigid and the Cygnus constellation is explored by Anthony Murphy and Richard Moore during research for their book 'Island of the Setting Sun'. The Liffey Press; 2006.

Since 2013 a Brigid's Way pilgrimage has taken place walking between Brigid's Well in Faughart, County Louth and Kildare following an alignment of ancient and sacred sites that draws parallels with the Cygnus constellation.

13. Entering the Hollow Hill

His sword drawn, Fionn crawls through a network of darkening tunnels. He lays Brigid's rope as he descends to act as a guide for his return. Reaching out for the wall Fionn realises that it is entirely made from thousands of everyday objects, all crushed together from the weight above. Turning a corner he glimpses the outline of the sleeping beast, the scales of its belly shimmering with each breath. A deep murmur rises through the ground.

Tipped off by the fox, Kerdiff the Giant climbs down inside the hill and carefully lifts the rope from the floor, following it deeper inside.



15. The Battle

As Fionn and Brigid enter the cavern the beast awakens with a thunderous roar that shakes everything around. Brigid thrusts her flaming spear at the neck of the beast but reels backwards, lifting her shield just in time as a volley of fire bursts from its mouth. Fionn turns away from the scorching heat, only to be met by the onrushing giant. Beneath the surface of the cavern a swan can be seen battling with the beast for control of the sun.



15. The Fire

The battle rages on for over a month with neither side able to overcome the other. Fire spreads as the hill burns from within. Great piles of treasure melt into the earth and clouds of acrid smoke choke the air. Eventually, the exhausted giant falls, wounded by Brigid's spear. Fionn, entangled in the beast's grasp, strikes out with his sword, fatally wounding it from below. Brigid retrieves the flaming torch and climbs up to escape the inferno. Alongside her the swan flies towards the surface with the sun held in its beak.



In January 2011 a catastrophic fire broke out at the Kerdiffstown landfill site which continued to burn underground for a month.

16. Brigid Emerges

Brigid emerges from the smouldering hill and holds her flame aloft as the sun rises on 1st February. Musicians and poets gather to celebrate her return. Below ground, Fionn goes to the aid of the wounded giant and offers healing water from his cupped hands. The defeated beast falls away, shedding its old skin. Snakes emerge heralding the spring to come. As the fires are quenched the land begins to heal.



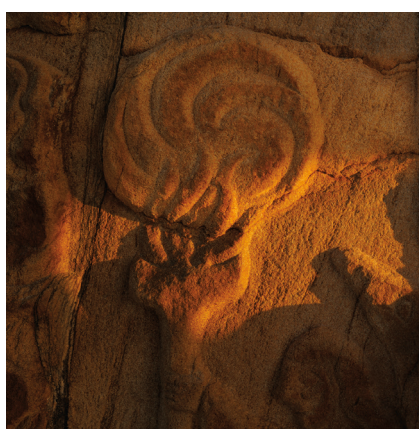
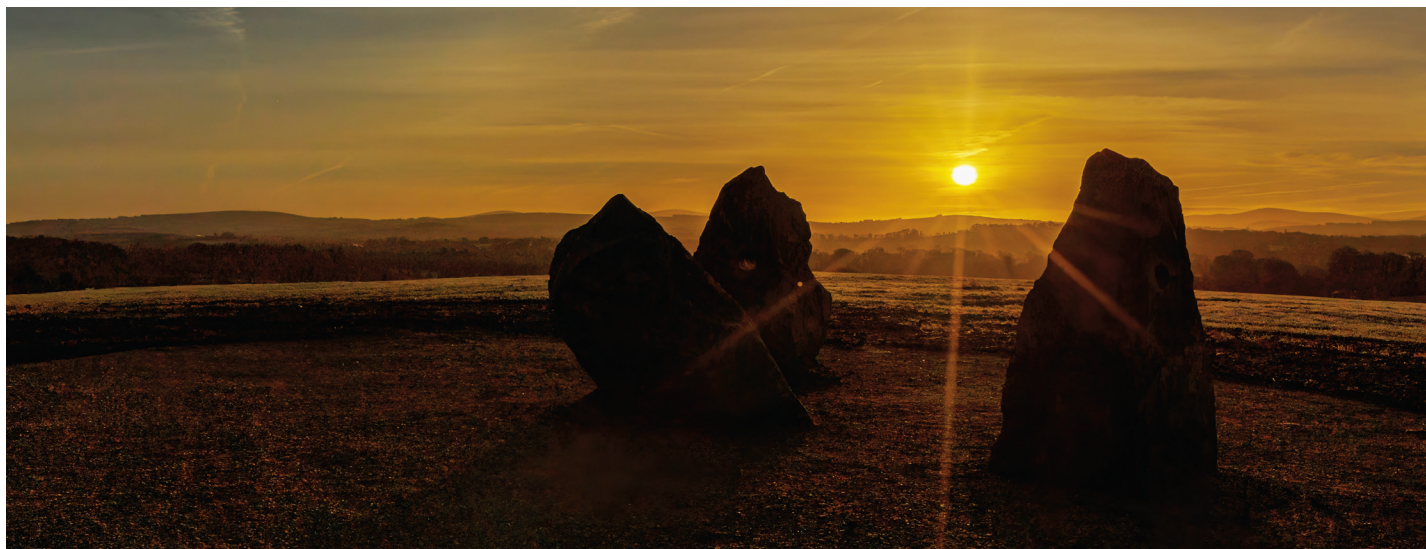
Several familiar characters from previous stones appear in the carving including the Cailleach and blacksmith from Croghan Hill and the four musicians or kings from the Hill of Uisneach. Brigid emerges from the ground with the Fire of Healing and holds this alongside the Fire of Smithcraft and the Fire of Inspiration.

The restorative nature of her fire is mirrored below by the healing cauldron from which Fionn brings water to the fallen giant. In the stories of Fionn Mac Cumhail he has the power to heal the wounded with water carried in his hands.

17, 18. The Sun Stones

The holes in the final two stones are aligned with the sunrise and sunset on 1st February. At this time of year the first and last rays of sunlight pass through the holes and illuminate Brigid's fire in the final carving of the story.

Between 31st January and 3rd February the sun sets precisely over the centre of Kildare.



Share your adventure: #TheStonesoftheHollowHill #KerdiffstownPark

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Comhairle Contae Chill Dara
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