

# North Mayo Heritage Centre Mayo Heritage Newsletter

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YouTube



Lá fhéile Pádraig  
sona daoibh!



**A brief history of  
Dún Bríste  
Sea Stack  
at Downpatrick Head**

Main photo: Dún Bríste Sea Stack at  
Downpatrick Head, Co. Mayo  
*(Image from Fáilte Ireland® Gareth McCormack)*

Below: Seamus and Patrick Caulfield  
examining a structure on the top of  
Dún Bríste in 1981 *(image from RTE archives)*



Are you interested in

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The  
North Mayo  
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Centre

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# Dún Briste Sea Stack

The Dún Briste (Irish for Broken Fort) sea stack is located at Downpatrick Head, Ballycastle, County Mayo. Dún Briste and the surrounding cliffs were formed around 350 million years ago (during the 'Lower Carboniferous Period') when sea temperatures were much higher and the coastline at a greater distance away.

The stack stands 45 metres (150 feet) tall and 80 metres from the shore. It was once part of the headland facing out into the Atlantic Ocean. Storms and waves eroded a small hole in the stack. This hole became very large until a bridge was all that remained between the stack and the point of the head.

In 1393, a fierce storm occurred and a tidal wave exploded against the head causing the bridge to collapse. The storm abated and the point of the headland with its fort and farm, were now only a pillar in the sea. The inhabitants who survived the storm were stranded and ships ropes were used to lower them to sea level and safety. It was thereafter named "The Broken Fort" and in Gaelic, "Dún Briste".

In the 1980s, archaeologist Seamus Caulfield, his father Patrick, along with Martin Downes, a professor of biology, made plans to land on the top of Dún Briste, by helicopter, to investigate and survey the top. This was a dangerous endeavour as the helicopter could not land on unknown ground and at the last few feet they had to be lowered down.



Seamus Caulfield pictured on top of Dún Briste in 1981  
(image RTE archives)

On landing they found the remains of two buildings and parts of field walls. The surface measured 50 metres in length and 15 metres in width, at its widest point. One field wall had a door or run and was about two feet square. This would have allowed sheep to pass through but not cattle. This medieval feature is also seen in other parts of Mayo.

The headland was found to be covered in a plant called sea pink but there was no sea pink on the stack which is only 80 metres away from the headland. The dominant grass found was red fescue (a common grass), this was around a foot tall and thickly matted. A broken quern stone (a stone tool for grinding a variety of materials, especially types of grain) was also found.

There have been many attempts to climb the sea stack. The first successful ascent was in May 1990 by three UK climbers who climbed a groove system up the north-facing seaward face of the stack.

It was then another 26 years before a further successful ascent. A Scottish climber and his assistant made four attempts to climb Dún Briste without success. Failure was always due to the sea being too rough for a boat to put them safely on the rock. The collapse of the bridge left great sections of rock on the ocean floor between the stack and the headland creating a whirlpool of currents, even when the surface seemed calm.

Finally, in 2016, a successful climb was achieved by this same Scottish climber who saw a view only witnessed by a handful of people in 600 years! As the stack is safe from any land based predators, it is a haven for a vast array of bird species at nesting time. The stack is occupied by Common and Greater Black Backed Gulls, Kittiwakes, Cormorants and Puffins.

Sources:  
[Mayonorth.ie](http://Mayonorth.ie),  
[Dunbriste.com](http://Dunbriste.com)  
[Uniqueascent.ie](http://Uniqueascent.ie)

St. Patrick founded a church on Downpatrick Head. The ruins of a later-built church now mark the location. St. Patrick is honoured with a statue which was erected in the mid-1980s (pictured left). Given its religious associations, Downpatrick Head was once a popular destination for pilgrims, who came here each year on the last Sunday of July. Today the tradition lives on.

Source: [www.dunbriste.com](http://www.dunbriste.com)



Extract from  
Ordnance Survey Letter of 1838

Brief history of the  
townland of  
**CROSSPATRICK**  
(*Cros Phádrúig*,  
St. Patrick's Cross)

Located in the south of the parish of Killala. Bounded on the north by Meelick and Moyne townlands; east and south by Ballysakeery parish; and west by the townlands of Upper and Lower Tawnaghmore and Meelick. It contains 166 acres, 3 roods, 10 perches, including 1 acre, 0 roods, 4 perches of water. The property of P. Boyd, Castlebar, and is held by James Knox, who lives in Crosspatrick House, built in the year 1832. The land is let on leases of 21 years at £2 7 shillings 6d. yearly. Soil, heavy clay, producing barley, oats, flax, potatoes, etc. There is a graveyard to the west of Crosspatrick House.



Saint Patrick is  
a patron saint  
of Ireland,  
Nigeria, the city  
of Boston and  
the archdiocese  
of New York!

