

Greenways - What are Greenways?

Greenways are shared-use routes for non-motorised users, (walkers, cyclists, roller skaters, horse riders) for pleasure, recreation, tourism and daily journeys. In Ireland, a number of initiatives have been taken to develop them, the longest being the Beara Breifne greenway from Castletownbere to Leitrim.

In North America much is made of their use and benefits for natural heritage while in Europe the provision of alternative transport routes is a great stimulus as well as tourism and recreation needs.

In general, greenways and heritage are very closely linked: greenways often follow inland waterways and disused railway lines, or cultural routes such as pilgrimage routes. Greenways can play a valuable role in the creation of ecological networks, and help to preserve important landscape features such as hedgerows. Bats, birds, insects, and small mammals can all benefit from such links, while the verges of greenways may provide space where semi-natural vegetation could grow, if managed appropriately.

Importantly though, the heritage experienced along greenways is one of the main attractions for the user; greenways are an important tool in raising awareness of heritage and offering people access to different aspects of heritage. Indirect benefits to heritage from greenways should not be underestimated either as the economic gains to an area generated by a greenway may help to provide funding for the protection and maintenance of heritage sites.

On the down side, greenways can also cause damage to heritage through ill-planned implementation works, damage from users, and disturbance to wildlife and habitats. Greenways may result in supposedly "ecological" planting and the cleaning up of "dangerous" or unsightly elements such as dead branches and trees.

Overall, however, the threats posed for heritage by greenways can be avoided or minimised by good planning at the start of the project. A balance must be found between the needs of the users and the actions required to conserve the heritage around a greenway.

Greenways in Ireland

The Heritage Council became involved in the REVER project in 1999. Working in Ireland with the National Waymarked Ways Committee, Waterways Ireland, and representatives of local authorities, and the Countryside Access and Recreation Network in NI, a co-ordinator was appointed, Tanya Comber. The Heritage Council sought applications for potential routes and two possibilities were selected - the Beara Breifne Greenway and section of the Ulster Canal and Great Northern Railway line in Cavan/Monaghan. Three studies were carried out: in Cork City, the Shannon crossing around Portumna, and in Cavan/Monaghan which examined the impact on heritage and the benefits that could be derived from same.

What is REVER?

REVER, Réseau Vert Européen is a network of greenways extending across Northern Europe. It consists mainly of greenways, but also uses low traffic country

roads and was set up under an INTERREG 2C project. Since 2002, each country is doing its best to realise this network and at the moment the network is being extended into the Mediterranean area. A declaration towards the development of a Europe-wide green network was launched in Lille in September 2000.

Current Heritage Council project - Beara Breifne Greenway

AS part of the REVER project 2000-2001, the overall potential for a greenway along the line of the O Sullivan Beare March was examined, and Jim O Sullivan of Beara Tourism made contact with communities and local authorities along the route.

Following the line of the historic march carried out by Donal Cam O'Sullivan Beare in December 1602 and Jan 1603, this greenway links up 11 local authorities and over 66 community groups, making it the biggest community-based heritage project in the country.

To mark the 400 year anniversary of the original march in 2003, a chain of festivals running down the route was held.. Each town and village along the route was allocated a day on which to celebrate the route in whichever way they see fit but all celebrations will be in line with the overall ethos of the development of the greenway. Festivals were be centred around walking, cycling, exploring heritage and the clans with traditional music each evening to entertain all. Further information is available directly on www.bbgreenway.org.

Already, an intrepid band, led by Jim O'Sullivan, walked from Dunboy Castle on 30 December 2002, finishing on 13 January in Leitrim village, site of O'Rourke's castle and final destination of the original march. People came out to join the walkers on all stretches, some joining in for a number of days.

The Beara Breifne greenway is seeking funding from a number of agencies to realise the route which is made up of existing walking routes, and quiet roads with the walking and cycling routes paralleling each other for stretches. Should applications be successful, it is intended to have the route officially opened by the end of 2007.

This route pulls together all aspects of our heritage from archaeology, ecology, folklore and genealogy, and offers an chance to locals and visitors to enjoy these in each area. It forms a spine up the country which, it is hoped, will encourage the development of shorter regional and local greenways linking into it. On a national level the development of a route from Dublin to Galway would be a welcome link. Overall, greenways will offer a new way in which to enjoy and manage our heritage.

Where to get more information:

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European Greenways Association, Belgium

www.aevv-egwa.org