



# The Curragh of Kildare

REFLECTIONS ON POTENTIAL

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## *Foreword*

*This paper provides a series of observations for consideration in relation to The Curragh, County Kildare, with a particular focus on its physical presentation and potential. It is based on a short process of research and site visit made by the author in 2017 / 2018. It is recognised that further, more detailed research, as well as consultation with the many stakeholders of The Curragh, would be required to support and develop suggestions made in this document. Nevertheless, it is hoped that this paper may be useful in stimulating discussion about this special place, with a view to influencing future policy and practice in relation to it.*



## Introduction

The Curragh needs little introduction, in an Irish context at least. That is because this large grassy plain has featured so prominently in the history, culture and psyche of the nation. As the European Landscape Convention reminds us, landscapes are much more than physical settings. They embody the complex interaction of human perceptions and activities that have shaped them through day-to-day-use and management, as well as events of historic and cultural meaning.

## Status

The importance of the Curragh as a distinct ecological habitat and an archaeological site is well documented. Its national significance from a geological, religious, military and equestrian perspective is also undisputed. For these and many other reasons there is a strong case to afford The Curragh the highest possible level of protection. The pursuit of UNESCO listing for World Heritage Status seems wholly appropriate in this context. Such status would help to ensure that the Curragh (along with Dún Ailinne) is protected for future generations, whilst also raising its profile on the international stage.

## Management

The Curragh has its own unique administrative arrangements, enshrined in Irish law by The Curragh of Kildare Act, 1961. This has long been a key measure of safeguarding its 'commons' status and its use for military purposes. Yet the management of this landscape has also long been a source of debate, which is unsurprising given the potential for conflict between its primary uses: sheep grazing, military training, horse racing / riding and walking / jogging. The establishment of The Curragh of Kildare Forum chaired by the Minister for Defence is a welcome initiative, which with the input of local stakeholders and subject specific experts, would appear to provide a practical vehicle for bringing about meaningful improvements in the years to come.

Landscape management is about the need for balance and this appears to be at the crux of the issue for the Curragh and its 1970 hectares. The Curragh is understood to face a range of management challenges and it will be essential therefore, that these are handled through a robust Conservation, Management and Interpretation Plan that balances the needs of its respective users, while caring for its natural qualities.

## Managing Change

Landscapes are constantly changing, not only through natural processes, but the interventions of man. As the iconic new grandstand gracefully takes its place on the Curragh skyline, we are reminded how important good planning and design are to this special location. The architecture of the Curragh and surrounds is varied, with some important buildings and others of a low design quality that detract from the value of this special landscape. The introduction of design guidance for future buildings, be they large public investments or small private properties, would therefore help to uphold design standards and reduce the risk of inappropriate development.



Proposed Grandstand, Curragh Racecourse





A



B



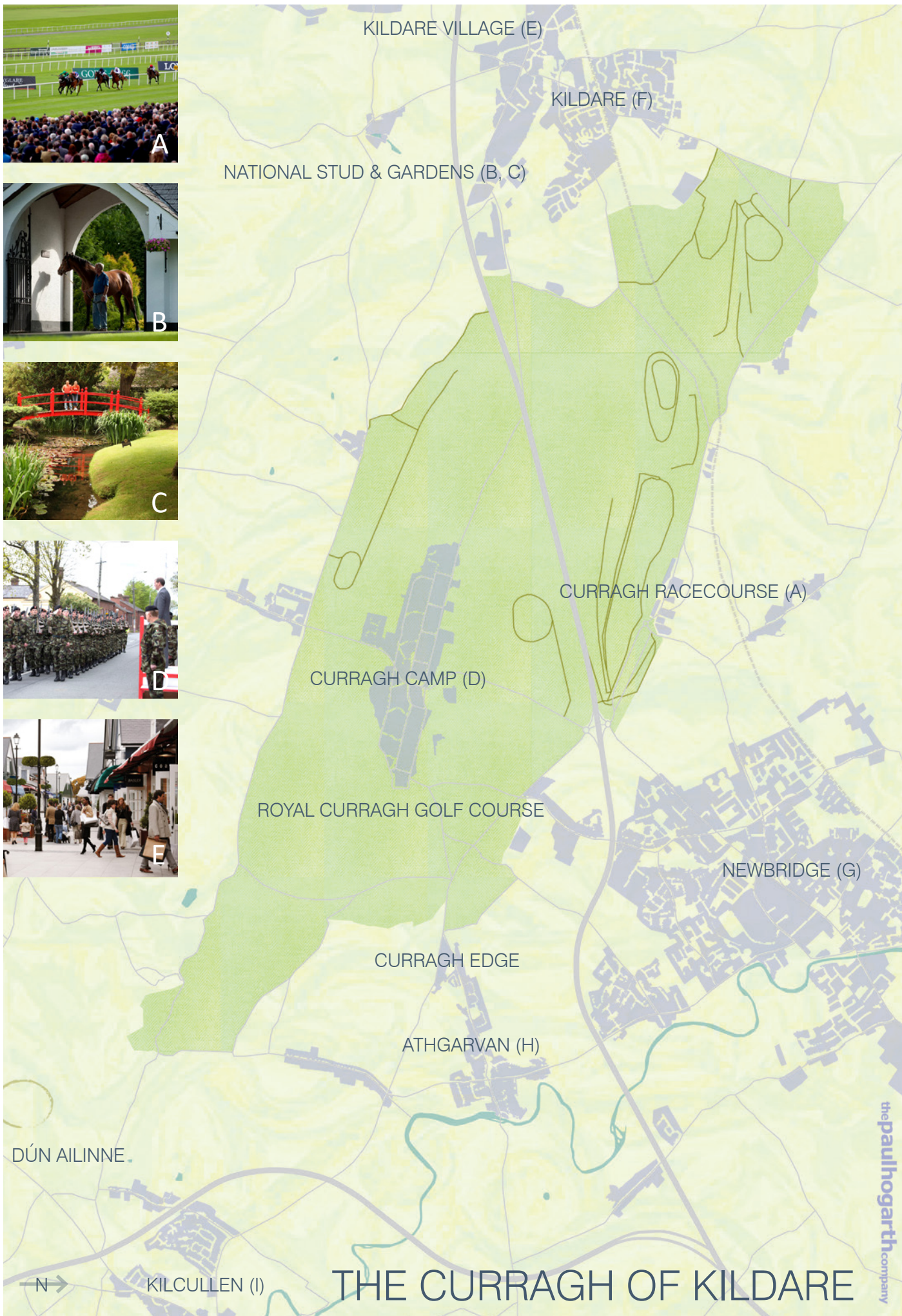
C



D



E



KILDARE VILLAGE (E)

KILDARE (F)

NATIONAL STUD & GARDENS (B, C)

CURRAGH RACECOURSE (A)

CURRAGH CAMP (D)

ROYAL CURRAGH GOLF COURSE

NEWBRIDGE (G)

CURRAGH EDGE

ATHGARVAN (H)

DÚN AILINNE

KILCULLEN (I)

THE CURRAGH OF KILDARE

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## One Curragh

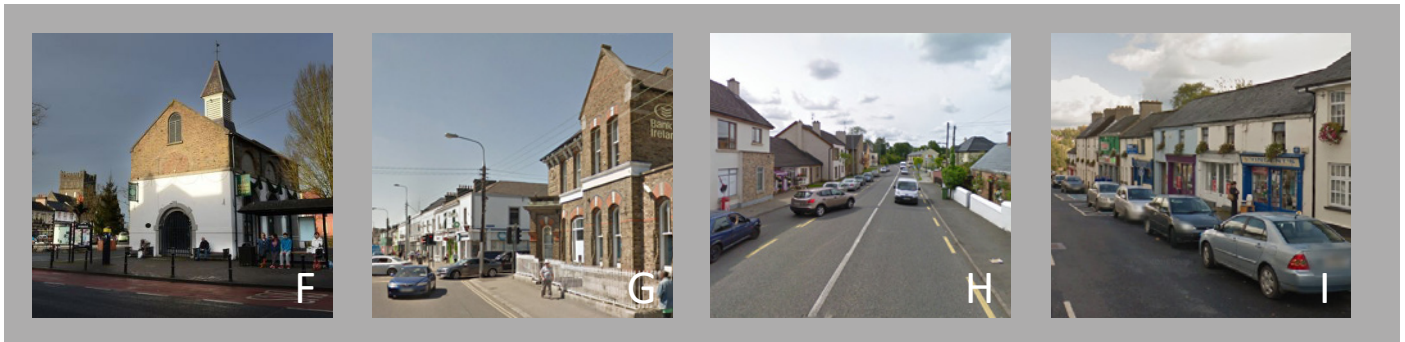
There is only one Curragh, although at times it can feel like there are several.

There is significant value in the various locations in and around The Curragh, be it the racecourse (one of the most important venues in the country), the National Stud and Gardens with over 120,000 visitors each year or the military museum within the camp, which itself is a strategically vital asset with plans for the future. Kildare Village is also a notable success, once again expanding to meet retail demand and drawing thousands of visitors to the area each year.

It is unclear however, on the extent to which such visitors make combined trips to these various destinations. Major potential would appear to exist in facilitating more linked trips, so increasing the 'dwell time' of visitors to the Curragh. This in turn would increase the economic contribution made by visitors to the area, particularly through overnight stays.

Integral to the Curragh are also the towns and villages that surround it, namely Kildare, Newbridge, Athgarvan and Kilcullen. Over the years these settlements, their communities and economies have been inextricably linked to the life of the Curragh. As investment in the area comes forward, so too must stronger physical, social and economic links between these important locations, as well as smaller settlements in between.

In shaping a future for The Curragh therefore, it will be essential for a holistic approach to be taken. Key to this will be the growing and maintaining of strong links between its constituent destinations and communities. By working together, the value of this landscape can be fully realised and harnessed for the common good.



## Shared Vision

While the Curragh is famous and instantly recognisable, initial research would suggest a lack of a qualitative vision for the future of this special landscape. What is the Curragh and what kind of place do we want it to be in the future? Clarifying the answers to these questions through a collaborative process would be a very useful step in reaching a greater degree of consensus about its management. Importantly such a masterplanning process, set within the context of its archaeological and ecological designations, would also present the opportunity to jointly research and identify a series of improvement projects, along the lines of those outlined in the remainder of this paper. Growing the potential of The Curragh as a visitor destination appears to be a key area for consideration, with scope to further contribute to the local economy, employment and tourism.



## Brand Identity

Research has failed to find a clear brand identity for The Curragh, which instead breaks down into separate entities, most prominently the race course and National Stud, as well as Kildare Village. In tandem with the shaping of a shared vision for the future of the Curragh should be the development of a clear brand identity for The Curragh as a whole. This is not to detract from the commercially important brands of its various components, nor the non-commercial qualities of its landscape. Rather an appropriately sensitive process of place branding undertaken with the input of stakeholders, would greatly help to inform the improvement and promotion of the Curragh.



## Learning from Elsewhere

The Curragh is unique and as this paper illustrates, bespoke solutions must be found to the issues and opportunities that exist there. However, it is recommended that connections are made and lessons learned from other places that have managed similar aspects of relevance. The following three places are examples that may prove useful to study through research, visits and dialogue with those responsible for them. Questions to be asked include: How are these landscapes defined and promoted as places to visit? How do they manage diverse uses that have potential to come into conflict with one another? How do they ensure the natural, archaeological and historic environment is given adequate protection? And, what role do these unique landscapes play in driving economic growth and investment?



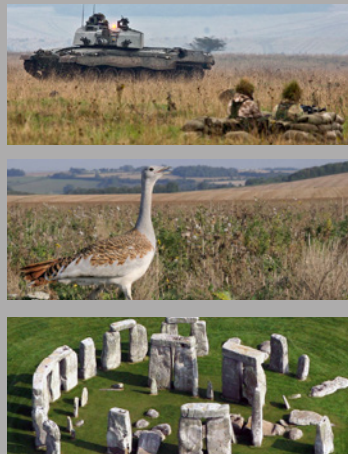
### Newmarket, England 279 hectares

Newmarket, Suffolk is the famous home of English thoroughbred horse racing. 100km north of London, the town and its economy are immersed in all aspects of the equine industry, inc. breeding, training, horse health, sales and racing. Surrounding the town is Newmarket Heath, an ecologically important chalk grassland.



### Phoenix Park, Dublin 707 hectares

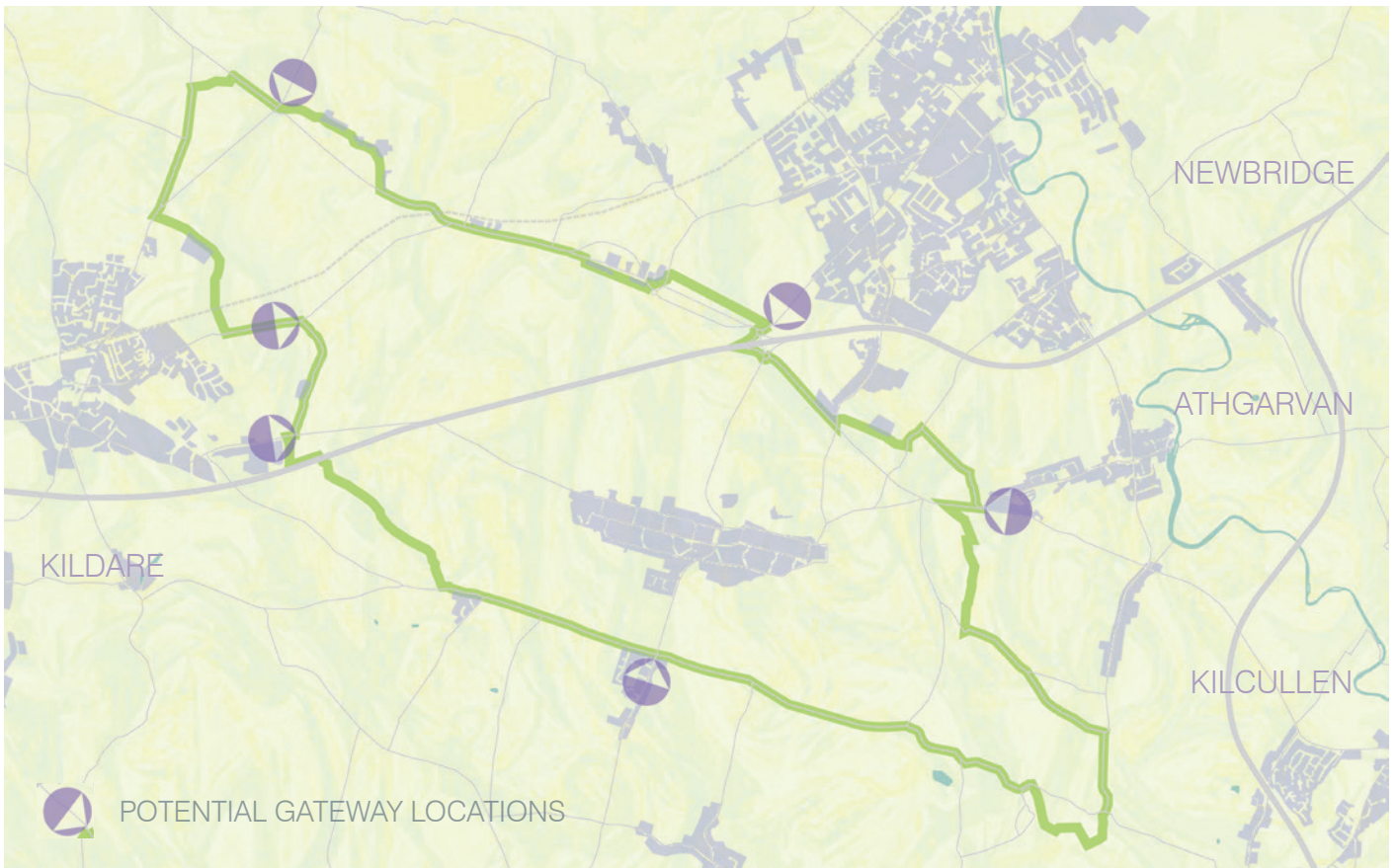
Phoenix Park is the largest enclosed park of any European capital. It is the location of several nationally important locations including Áras an Uachtaráin, Dublin Zoo and the Papal Cross. The park is also home to a population of wild deer. With over 200,000 people visiting its centre each year, the park has to manage a diverse range of activities and uses.



### Salisbury Plain, England 77500 hectares (775 km<sup>2</sup>)

Salisbury Plain is the largest area of chalk grassland in NW Europe. It is home to some of England's most important archaeological sites (including Stonehenge) and rare species of bird and invertebrate. Salisbury Plain is also the location of the British Army's Defense Training Estate, hosting major live firing drills on a regular basis.





### Physical Definition

Whilst The Curragh has a distinctive aesthetic, there is presently very subtle demarcation or celebration of its physical extents. An exception to this is the magnificent sculpture of Fionn Mac Cumhail and his Hounds at the Ballymany roundabout, as well as the bog wood Ghost Horses nearby by the same artist, Lynne Kirkham. Learning from these and examples elsewhere in the country, high quality signage, public art, planting and lighting have great potential to emphasise gateways to this special landscape. Such interventions should be contextually sensitive, compatible with the shared vision and of high quality, bespoke design. Gateway features have the potential to become iconic emblems of the Curragh, while further raising awareness and pride for those who come in contact with it.



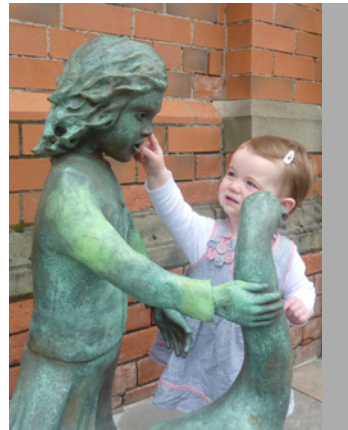
Sculpture of Fionn Mac Cumhail and his Hounds



## Orientation and Wayfinding

A wonderful feature of the character of the Curragh is its lack of footpaths and to some extent, lack of signs. This gives the 'common' landscape a refreshing quality of openness and freedom; an increasingly precious trait in an ever urbanising world. However, there exists a need to provide guidance to visitors so that they can enjoy the landscape more thoroughly. Sensitively managing the movement of people, as well as horses and vehicles, is also necessary to maintain safety and reduce instances of conflict between users.

An Orientation and Wayfinding Strategy would involve the planning and implementation of mapping and where appropriate, signage around the Curragh. This would involve the creation of easy to read maps for use in literature, online and discreet outdoor locations. It may also involve the introduction of a limited signage system, enhanced by digital technologies to help people find their way around - be they in a car, on a bicycle, horseback or on foot. This would help to manage the movement of people and vehicles and encourage them to explore further, spending more time and potentially, more money in the area. Great care must be taken to ensure an appropriate design language and carefully position them so not to detract from the aforementioned qualities.



## Wild Atlantic Way

Place branding, gateway markers, historic interpretation and subtle environmental improvements have combined to elevate the west coast of Ireland as a focal point for international tourism and investment.



## Connemara Interpretation

Currently under construction, a wayfinding and interpretation strategy will help to guide visitors to and around Connemara, highlighting points of interest, while sharing its stories with the visitor.



## Loch Lomond National Park

Gateway markers, developed in conjunction with branding for the National Park now welcome everyone who enters the Loch Lomond area. Each marker responds to the scale of its unique location.





## Historic and Cultural Interpretation

The Curragh is an immensely rich reservoir of stories. From the chariots of Connairé Mór to Saint Brigid and the High Kings of Leinster and from trenches of the Great War to modern day drills of Irish Peacekeepers, they span generations and interests. Sporting tales are also in abundance, from the legendary boxing exploits of Dan Donnelly to famous racing victories of Shergar and Nijinsky.

While there are several documentary, online and physical locations (i.e. museums) where one can learn about The Curragh, there is great potential for these stories to be told in the landscape itself, so enriching the experience of being there. A common way to do this is through interpretative panels that engage the reader with easily read text and graphics. Another exciting means of interpreting The Curragh is through public art, both permanent and temporary. By engaging artists and landscape designers, many creative ways may be found to share the stories of the Curragh, its culture and traditions, with locals and visitors alike.

## Conclusion

Through this paper we have outlined a number of ways in which The Curragh's management and presentation could be improved. These projects and others like them would help to protect this special landscape for future generations, whilst also reducing conflicts associated with its use and management. They also have major potential to improve the value of the Curragh as a resource to local people as a place for recreation and education. And finally, they also have considerable scope to elevate The Curragh to the status of a major visitor attraction that can generate significant economic return for the County and surrounding towns.

Realising this potential will require sensitivity to the unique qualities of this special landscape, avoiding over development or commercialisation. It will also require an earnest commitment to collaboration with its diverse range of stakeholders, not least the residents who live in and around this landscape. Yet by following such a pathway towards the future, the regional, national and international significance of The Curragh can be safeguarded and harnessed to the benefit of all.