SKIBBEREEN is a busy market town located on a bend of the Ilen River. The Irish name for the town, an Scibhheann, means a small inlet for docking boats. In the medieval period, this area was dominated by the Gaelic MacCarthy Reagh who occupied a nearby castle. A settlement existed by 1631 when, according to local lore, a group of refugees fled here from Baltimore following the infamous slave raid by Algerian Pirates. The town’s growing importance is evidenced by the charters it received in 1657 and in 1675 when two English settlers, William Frigg and Samuel Hall, obtained the right to hold a market. By the 18th century Skibbereen had a thriving textile industry producing woolen cloths and handkerchiefs. The town’s other industries at this time included bolting mills, porter and beer breweries and an extensive whittle trade. Today the town also has a market where coal, fish, milk, and livestock were bought and sold. The Ilen River was navigable for large ships as far as Oldcourt, two miles below the town, and for smaller vessels far the town centre where ships were docked at Lewis’s Quay.

By the 1830s the town’s fortunes were in decline following the boom years of the Napoleonic Wars. The appalling humanitarian crisis of the Great Famine in the mid-19th century hit Skibbereen and its hinterland very badly. Some 28,000 people died of starvation and associated diseases in the Skibbereen Poor Law Union between 1855 and 1850. Up to 10,000 were buried in common grave pits in Abbeystrewry graveyard 1 mile west of the town where a monument has been erected to their memory.

The arrival of the railway in 1877 made the town less remote and heralded a new era of prosperity. Its importance as a commercial centre in the past is reflected in the many fine shop fronts that still line its streets. Today the tradition of a market continues every Saturday in the old fair green. The town is renowned for its vibrant arts and cultural scene and is home to the Uillinn Arts Centre.

SKIBBEREEN POST BOXES

The modern postal service dates back to 1840 when the Penny Post was introduced to Britain and Ireland as part of the Royal Mail Service. Postage became relatively cheap and popular and a network of post offices and accessible post boxes was developed. The example to the left, located on North Street, is a rare Penfold pillar box. These were manufactured between 1866 and 1879. Only about 150 of these boxes survive in Ireland and the UK. The second is an Irish Post & Telegraphs box dating to c.1940.

The two examples on the right, both located on Bridge St., are known as wall boxes. This type of post box first appeared in 1857. The boxes are made from green and painted green and continued in use. The red brick Palazzo-style building, with limestone detailing, is symbolic of an ancient temple.

Water Pump: erected c. 1880 to provide a fresh water supply to the inhabitants of the town. It houses the award-winning Heritage Centre with excellent exhibitions on the Great Famine and the unique natural heritage of nearby Lough Hyne.

Steam Mill: originally built as a flour mill in the early 1840s. During the famine (1845-52) it housed a much needed temporary soup kitchen.

Railway Bridge: built c. 1839 to enable the extension of the Cork, Ban don and South Coast Railway to Baltimore.

The West Cork Hotel: first opened in 1902, this fine example of late Victorian architecture reflects Skibbereen’s rise as a tourist destination following the arrival of the railway in 1877.

Former Lady’s Well Brewery Store: built c.1827 with a contribution from the Board of First Fruits, this gothic style building, designed by W.H. Hill in 1907, this building, with its massive insignia, is symbolic of an ancient temple.

1. Old Gas Works (Skibbereen Heritage Centre): built in 1867 to a design by R. Lee, to provide lighting for the town. It now houses the award-winning Heritage Centre with excellent exhibitions on the Great Famine and the unique natural heritage of nearby Lough Hyne.

2. Steam Mill: originally built as a flour mill in the early 1840s. During the famine (1845-52) it housed a much needed temporary soup kitchen.

3. Railway Bridge: built c. 1839 to enable the extension of the Cork, Ban don and South Coast Railway to Baltimore.

4. Former Lady’s Well Brewery Store: built c.1827 with a contribution from the Board of First Fruits, this gothic style building, designed by W.H. Hill.

5. Abbeystrewry Church of Ireland: located at the site of a mass house that was in use from Penal times until the late 1820s. The earliest gravestone inscriptions date from the early 1800s but many of the graves are marked by uninscribed stones.

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7. Town Hall: a striking Victorian town hall, built in the mid-19th century and featuring a three-storey clock tower. The clock was donated by local landlord, The O’Donovan, in 1873.

8. Church Hall: designed by W.H. Hill in 1907, this building, with its contrasting render and stone facade, small window openings and emphasis on high quality craftsmanship, is a rare example of early 20th century Arts and Crafts style architecture.

9. Masonic Lodge: originally built in 1863 as a lecture hall for holding public meetings, it was purchased by the local masonic lodge in 1869. It was subsequently altered for its new use by local architect Richard Lee. The façade, with its masonic insignia, is symbolic of an ancient temple.

10. Water Pump: erected c.1880 to provide a fresh water supply to the inhabitants of the town. It houses the award-winning Heritage Centre with excellent exhibitions on the Great Famine and the unique natural heritage of nearby Lough Hyne.

11. O’Leary’s Jewellers: as a young man, the Fenian leader Jeremiah O’Donovan Rossa ran a general shop here.

12. Former Bank: an elegant building constructed in a classical style c.1920. This style reflects stability and importance that the banks built at this time sought to convey.

13. Bank of Ireland: built as a bank and manager’s house in 1877. The red brick palazzo-style building, with limestone detailing, was designed by Millar and Symes of Dublin.


15. Mercy Convent, Chapel and School: a classical-style convent built for the Mercy Order c.1860. In the mid-19th century, religious orders spread throughout Ireland where they were actively engaged in much needed educational and vocational training. The chapel was built in 1867, and was designed in the French Gothic style by renowned architects E.W. Pugin and G.C. Aislinn. The Mercy order closed the convent and school in 2003.

16. St Patrick’s Cathedral: Former centre for the Diocese of Ross, this neo-classical church was built between 1826 and 1832 to a design by Cork Architect, Rev. M.A. Riordan. The high quality of workmanship and imposing design reflect the growing confidence of the Catholic Church in the 19th century. Originally a T-shaped building, major renovation and extension works completed in the early 1880s transformed it into the present cruciform shape. It features a marble relief sculpture (c. 1833) by Waterford-born Sculptor, John Hogan.

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