Castletownbere, also known as Castletown Berehaven, is an attractive town in an impressive setting, backed by high hills and sheltered by Bere Island. The safe harbour has been used by fishing vessels, native and foreign, for many centuries. The area has been inhabited since prehistoric times as attested to by numerous prehistoric stone monuments.

In the medieval period a small settlement may have developed around Castle Dermot (16) which stood at the east end of the town. In the 18th and 19th centuries the area was part of the Bantry Estate. The town that we see today grew up in the early 19th century following the development of copper mining in Allihies and the establishment of a British naval base on Bere Island. The architecture of the streetscape reflects its 19th century origins, with a strong sense of order and symmetry. The town, which dates from the early 19th century, had a Bridewell, Coast guard station and a salt manufacturing. Fair days were held once a month on Main Street in the Square.

Until the 20th century, road connections to Castletownbere were poor and the easiest means of access was by sea. The Bantry Bay Steamship Company, founded in 1883, provided freight and passenger services between Bantry, Castletownbere, Bere Island, Adrigole & Glengarriff until 1946. For almost 130 years an important British naval base existed on Bere Island and many of the officers were accommodated in the town. Even after the declaration of the Free State in 1922, Bere Island remained a British port, one of three so-called Treaty Ports in the country; these were seceded to the Irish State in 1938.

In the 1950s and 60s there was a major resurgence of the fishing industry. Dominick Island was purchased and developed by the Department of the Marine in the 1970s and today Castletownbere is the largest white-fishing port in the country.

5. THE BEARA BAY HOTEL: This imposing building was originally a Grand Stewart’s Marine Hotel on the foreshore (now fisheries research centre) which is now reclaimed land. British Army and Naval officers had a rolling schedule to ship in and out which is known as ‘The Rock’. The hotel, which is marked with an asterisk are outside the area covered by the map)

6. GARDA STATION: Built in the 1860s as a Royal Irish Constabulary barracks to replace an older barracks and courthouse. It was burnt in the Civil War and reoccupied by the new Civic Guard in 1927.

7. TALLON ROAD BRIDGE: Named after Daniel Tallon, Lord Mayor of Dublin, who visited the area in 1898, accompanied by his Castletownbere-born secretary James Kennedy, to view works being carried out on the old bridge. The Houses Committee’s Relief Fund setup to alleviate poverty.

8. STANDING STONE: One of several standing stones in the area, this example is 3.2 meters high and 2.45 meters thick, erected in the Bronze Age, perhaps as a grave or boundary marker or ritual monument.

9. RUINS OF OLD PROTESTANT SCHOOL: One gable, with arched windows, is all that remains of the Protestant school located at “The Rock” at the west end of the town.

10. FORMER ROYAL NAVAL HOTEL: Built in the early 1880s as a residence for Bobby White, rent collector for the Lee White Estate, Bantry House. It was converted to use as a hotel in the late 19th century and is now a private house.

11. BLACKSMITH’S FORGE: This former forge was originally one of four forges located in the town.

12. MACARTHUR’S BAR: This is one of a number of fine traditional shop fronts in the town. It had a number of interesting residents and visitors.

13. ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH OF THE SACRED HEART: Without doubt the most striking building in the town was built in an imposing Neo-gothic style in 1911 on the site of an earlier 19th century RC Church. The granite came from the Mountains of Moine in Co Down and sea-shells by sea. Much of the stonework for the building was donated by the British Naval personnel based in Berehaven and by the Irish in the USA. The interior is enriched by a fine display of craftsmanship in stone, wood and stained glass. The strong architectural form reflects the growing confidence in RC Church following a long period of suppression.

14. CONVENT OF MERCY: The Sisters of Mercy came to Castletownbere in 1864 and moved to this location in 1912. In the late 20th century, the building was sold to move to a new convent near the hospital which closed in 1994.

15. HOUSES WITH PORTHOLE WINDOWS: These three buildings were commissioned by Mrs. Pace, the wife of a U.S. Admiral based in Ireland in the late 20th century, dwindling numbers led the sisters to move to a new convent near the hospital which closed in 1994.

16. ST MICHAEL’S: This is a one of a number of fine traditional shop fronts in the town. It had a number of interesting residents and visitors.

17. WRECK OF ‘THE TRAFALGAR’: Visible at low tide, ‘The Trafalgar’ is a three-masted schooner. It was built in 1898 and was lost in the storm of 1903. The remains of a rudder, a wheel and some of the wood were recovered and erected on the site.

18. TIMOTHY C. HARRINGTON MONUMENT: Visible at low tide, “The Trafalgar” was built in the early 19th century to replace Aghakista Bridge (20). The adjacent handball alley was built on the site of the old Brandy Hall National School which was demolished in the 1990s.

20. AGRAKHISTA BRIDGE: A disused humped-backed bridge over the Kilsa River on the old road into town. It is narrow and lacks parapets to allow laden packhorses to pass easily. It may date to the 17th century. The remains of a rudder, a wheel and some of the wood were recovered and erected on the site.

21. SITE OF WORKHOUSE: Built in 1852 to a design by George Wilkinson, the workhouse house up to 600 destitute people in the wake of the Great Famine. It was demolished in the early 20th century and some of the stone was reused to build St Joseph’s Villas.

22. LIGHTHOUSE KEEPERS’ HOUSES*: (1.4 km from centre): A terrace of three flat-roofed former lighthouse keepers’ houses, built in the late 19th century, and now occupied by the Irish Lights Service.

23. ST FINIAN’S CEMETERY*: (1 km from centre): A new cemetery was developed close to the town on land donated by the Earl of Bantry. Contrary to his wishes it was consecrated by Bishop Moriarty in 1875. It contains many interesting burials including those of Padraig Ó Laoghaire, a Gaelic scholar and Patrick Pearse’s Irish teacher, Dean Halahan the last rector for Castletownbere and a number of Commonwealth war graves.

24. DERRINANAGHT STONE CIRCLE* (3km from centre): This multiple stone circle may have originally consisted of 15 stones, only 12 of which survive and some of which have fallen. Stone circles generally date to the Bronze Age when they may have been used for ceremonies associated with the changing seasons. Fulacht Fiaidh, a Bronze Age cooking site, occurs 30 meters to south west.

25. KILLACONENAGH CHURCH AND GRAVEYARD*: (2km from centre): The graveyard, known as the Glebe, contains the remains of a Church of Ireland church, the construction of which was funded by the Board of First Fruits in 1812. It was built on the site of the medieval parish church of Killacleanagh and was soon abandoned in favour of a more convenient site in the centre of the new town where St Peter’s Church was built in 1841.

26. RUINS OF DUNBOY CASTLE* (3.9km from centre): This tower house; probably built by Sir Stephen O’Sullivan Beares. It was besieged and destroyed by English forces in 1602. To the Lee side of the fort, built on the site: this was a new type of fortification designed to withstand and launch an artillery attack.

27. PUXLEY MANSION* (3.5 km from centre): Originally built in the early 18th century by the Puxley mining family, the present Neo-Elizabethan structure is the result of extensive rebuilding carried out in the 1860s to a design by John Sullivan. It was burnt by the IRA in 1921 and lay in ruins for decades before recent restoration work.
Dónal Cam O’Sullivan (1561 – 1618)  

In the Medieval Period, the Beara Peninsula was ruled by Gaelic lords, the O'Sullivan Beares. Their main stronghold was Dunboy Castle (26), located on the coast about 3 km south west of Castletownbere.

Dónal Cam O’Sullivan (b.1561) was the last O’Sullivan chieftain to rule Beara. In 1594 he joined with Hugh O’Neill of Tyrone and Red Hugh O'Donnell of Ulster in an attempt to drive the English out of Ireland with help from Philip II of Spain. In December 1601, he took part in the Battle of Kinsale which ended in a crushing defeat for the Irish and their Spanish allies. In June 1602, Dunboy Castle was besieged and destroyed and many of O’Sullivan’s followers were massacred on Dursey Island. Dónal Cam was outlawed and left Beara with his remaining followers in December 1602 to seek refuge with the O Rourkes in Co. Leitrim. Their gruelling 500 Km trek in the height of winter is one of the epic tales of Irish history. Of the 1,000 that left Beara only 34 arrived at O’Rourke’s castle.

Dónal Cam went into exile to Spain where he was made a Knight of Santiago. He was murdered in Madrid in 1618.

The “Beara-Breifne Trail”, a popular walking and cycling route, follows the line of Dónal Cam’s long march north.