



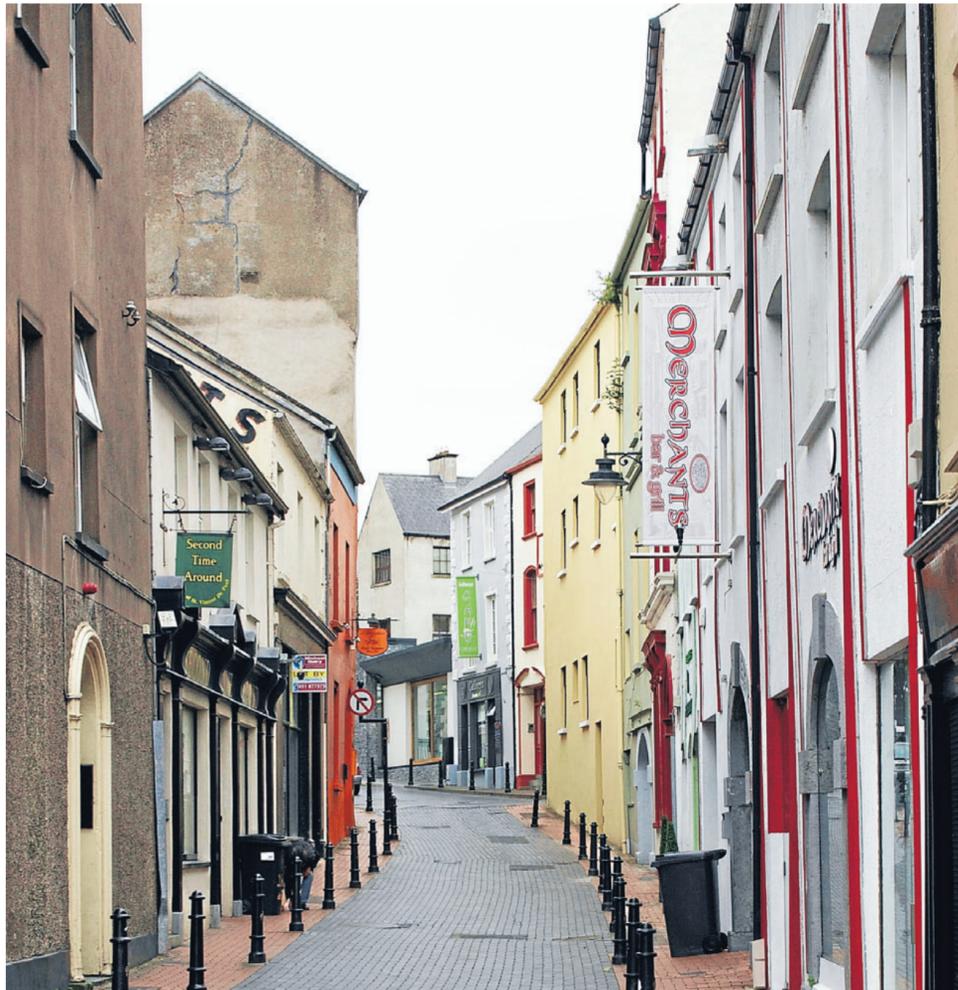
Thomas Wyse: Educational reformer, diplomat, and promoter of Catholic civil rights.

Famous for its crystal, the Irish city of Waterford is also the birthplace of colourful characters and rebels, writes PAMELA WADE.



Irish national symbol: The Harp of Erin presented in crystal.

Photos: PAMELA and ROY WADE



Centuries of history: Cobble lanes, often narrow, lead to notable sites.



Viking fort: Reginald's Tower dates from the 12th century.

Crystal-clear in Waterford

The round blue plaque, high on the wall of an otherwise undistinguished house in a street just off The Mall in Waterford, reads "William Hobson, Naval Officer and First Governor of New Zealand was born here".

"I didn't realise he was Irish," I say, surprised. Jack Burtchaell, not one to pass up a chance to have a dig at the British, replies, "That's because he did well. If he'd disgraced himself, they'd soon have let everyone know he was an Irishman."

Attitude: that's what I like to see in a guide. That, plus enthusiasm, a sense of humour and, of course, real knowledge of this subject; and Jack has all that in spades. In the job for 21 years, he knows this ancient city inside out and enjoys tailoring his customers, hence the detour to make a Kiwi connection. It was just around the corner from the equestrian statue of Thomas Francis Meagher, who had book-ended the walk to the delight of

the Americans in the group.

Waterford is a city of 50,000 on the southeast coast of Ireland on the banks of the River Suir, and when Meagher was born in the building that's now the very splendid Granville Hotel – first stop on our tour – his family was sitting on a fortune from fishing for cod off Newfoundland.

We sit among the brass, stained glass and timber panelling of the hotel as Jack describes how the fishermen returned each Christmas, "Eight thousand young men with nine months' pay and a nine-month thirst: they hit Waterford like a hurricane."

He points to Meagher's portrait and we hear how he, too, stormed through life, rebelling against British rule, consulting with French revolutionaries and returning with a newly designed flag for Ireland: the green, white and orange tricolour. Banished for sedition to Van Diemen's Land, he escaped, ending up in New York, where he raised the Irish Brigade in the American Civil War, became a brigadier-general and acting Governor of Montana before disappearing one dark night on the Mississippi.

"He was the Che Guevara of his generation," Jack concludes, making William Hobson seem like a staid under-achiever.

Founded by the Vikings 1100 years ago, making it the oldest city in Ireland, it's inevitable Waterford's long history would throw up many colourful characters. Jack leads us through a series of cobbled lanes to stand outside the deceptively plain grey Christ Church Cathedral and tells us about its builder, the equally plain-sounding John Roberts.

After eloping to London with his childhood sweetheart, Roberts returned to Waterford and designed most of its municipal buildings including, uniquely, not only this Anglican cathedral, whose foundations date back to 1050 and Catholic origins, but also the Catholic Cathedral of the Most Holy Trinity. The latter was actually the death of him at the age of 82: arriving one morning for his usual supervision of the work by mistake at 3am, having read his watch upside-down, he fell asleep waiting for the tradesmen to arrive and caught the chill which killed him.

In 1796, that was not only a remarkably long life, but a full one, too, as he and Mary, besides running their business with an iron fist – payment on Friday or demolition on Monday – had also had 24 children.

Both cathedrals, although grey on the outside, are Baroque



Altar splendour: Christ Church Cathedral.

delights inside, light and airy and colourful, with moulded ceilings and sparkling chandeliers, although the tomb in the Anglican cathedral of 15th-century mayor James Rice, showing his body decayed and worm-ridden, with a toad feeding on his stomach, is an effective memento mori.

Jack's tour ends, a mile and an hour from its beginning, at Reginald's Tower, a sturdy round Viking fortification that's synonymous with Waterford and dates from the 12th century. Fifteen metres high and three metres thick, the walls have remained intact, only chipped

here and there by cannonballs. At various times a mint, prison, castle and royal residence, today it's a museum exhibiting locally found Viking treasures such as a copper dog-collar, glass beads and the intricate gold and silver Kite Brooch, still pretty and delicate after nearly 1000 years.

Just up the road, in the first of John Roberts' buildings, the Bishop's Palace, there are more treasures on display: relatively modern, from 1700 to 1970. It's always alarming to see familiar items in a museum, and the top floor displays jacks and 45rpm records beside 18th-century accounts of bull-baiting, hangings and the shocking pig buyers' strike of 1892 (Waterford has always been big on bacon).

There's a photo of Patrick O'Keefe, Titanic survivor, and a clockwork tin toy of Miss Busy Bee the Typist from the 1950s. It's an absorbing and varied collection, and I have to drag myself away for the guided tour of the lower two floors. It's worth it though: here's the grand side of life, with huge portraits, heavy silver, rococo mirrors and marble fireplaces, all connected with Waterford's movers and shakers. I hear about the origin of "Bob's

your uncle", look at a lock of Napoleon's hair, see Maugher's sword and sash, and fall a little bit in love with Thomas Wyse (1791-1862).

Unromantically nicknamed "Bullocks" Wyse, he was a politician and educational reformer who got about by cow as a protest against penal laws that treated Catholics as second-class citizens and forbade them to own a horse worth more than £5, but it's the portrait painted by his sister that really takes my fancy. Sensitive, handsome, intelligent: it's all there, and I feel sorry that he became tangled in marriage with the flamboyant Laetitia, Napoleon's niece, who used to throw gold sovereigns down to the crowds from the windows of the Granville Hotel.

Owen's commentary on the items in the collection links all the people and places I've been hearing about, but there's one more essential connection. In the hotel, the cathedrals and here in the museum, I've been admiring the glory and sparkle of immense crystal chandeliers, and just across the road is the world-famous House of Waterford Crystal.

Established in 1783, the company went into receivership in 2009, and 480 workers were



made redundant despite staging a seven-week sit-in at the factory just outside the city. Production was continued overseas by the new owners, but in 2010 a visitor centre and factory was opened in The Mall where close-up tours show all stages of manufacture.

Here signature pieces are made by hand (and breath) and it's possible to hang over the engraver's shoulder to watch the work – if you can bear the dentist-drill whine.

It's a fascinating mixture of hi-tech and low, using diamond cutters and felt-tip pens, and the skill of the blowers, grinders and engravers is inspiring and nerve-

racking. After all that precision Noel, who's busy dusting in the shop, admits "You need nerves of steel – and it helps to be able to run fast."

I look at a grizzly bear priced at €30,000 (NZ\$51,760) and a Cinderella carriage, a snip at €40,000 (NZ\$69,200), and tiptoe carefully away.

Getting there: Take the Stena Express www.stenaline.co.uk from Fishguard in Wales to Rosslare, a two-hour trip on a comfortable catamaran, then drive 45km to Waterford.

Where to stay: Just across the river from Reginald's Tower is Atheneum House Hotel, elegant and friendly with an excellent restaurant: atheneumhousehotel.com; or stay right in town at The Granville Hotel granville-hotel.ie

What to do: Jack's tour (jackswalkingtour.com) is ideal as an introduction and to get your bearings – then just wander. It's obligatory to try at least several of the many cosy pubs.

Further information: waterfordtreasures.com and discoverireland.co.nz

■ Pamela Wade visited Waterford as a guest of Tourism Ireland.

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