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A port in the storm of history

Featuring everyone from Oliver Cromwell and Walter Raleigh to Arthur Conan Doyle and Gregory Peck, Youghal has an illustrious – and bloody – past, writes **Eleanor Fitzsimons**

AT FIRST GLANCE Youghal has lost a little of its old sparkle, particularly when you visit this east Co Cork town out of season. But don't be deterred, as there's still plenty to enjoy.

There was a time, in the 1950s and early 1960s, when thousands of holiday-makers took the train to this handsome walled town to spend their summer holidays paddling along almost 10km of picturesque shoreline, angling for abundant salmon in the Blackwater or exploring the treasures of this heritage town, one of just 15 in Ireland.

Although the station is still officially operational, trains ceased to run with any degree of regularity in 1963, and, according to local man John Kennedy, the last GAA special arrived home in 1988. Now the old station looks a bit sad. The engine shed is gone, and the redundant turntable is choked with weeds and brambles.

Even the once-pristine beaches have fallen out of favour somewhat, with Front Strand losing its coveted blue flag last year, although the impeccable Claycastle Beach has retained its flag, and, once parking is sorted out, Redbarn is likely to receive one also.

Though hit by the inevitable decline that comes with changing trade patterns and the lure of foreign sun for previously homebound Irish tourists, Youghal can still lay claim to an illustrious and eventful past and has plenty to offer visitors who, for whatever reason, wander in off the N25.

This picturesque town is best explored on foot. The tourist office and heritage centre, on the once-bustling quayside, is an excellent starting point. Whether you stock up on DIY maps and literature or tag along with one of the walking tours that depart from here, it's worth equipping yourself with the knowledge required to appreciate the town's past.

Medieval Youghal wielded considerable power and influence throughout Europe, and as a port it was considered second only in significance to Bristol as the busiest in the British Isles. Seaward access to the town was gained via the imposing Watergate, and heavily laden ships unloaded their rich cargoes at the quayside under the watchful gaze of wealthy local merchants congregating on the main street nearby.

This imposing structure is known locally as Cromwell's Arch, as it was from here in 1650 that the reviled Oliver Cromwell departed our shores, never to return. The brutal despot had wintered here in 1649, lodging at the 14th-century St John's Priory, on North Main Street. From there he could inspect his troops each morning, casting a cold eye over the 10,000 foot soldiers and cavalry that stood to attention, three deep, from one end of the town to the other.

Youghal has experienced more than its share of infamy, attracting marauding bands of Viking raiders and ruthless Algerian pirates, drawn here by the town's trading riches. Traces of a bloody past are evident in the impressive Clock Gate, a structure that has spanned the town's main street since its construction, in 1777. This handsome Georgian building once doubled as a gruesome jail and public gallows, with prisoners being executed via the ingeniously macabre method of being hanged from the windows of the tower.

As an antidote to this chilling legacy, take the short stroll along the busy Main Street towards Myrtle Grove, a striking Elizabethan gabled house that once housed Youghal's most celebrated citizen, Sir Walter Raleigh. The intrepid Raleigh settled in Youghal having been granted more than 15,000 hectares of prime Munster real estate. A popular chap, he was appointed mayor in 1588.



It is widely held locally that he frequently strolled through his fragrant gardens shrouded in tobacco smoke, and also oversaw the planting of Ireland's first spuds there.

The abundance of architectural treasures clustered on Main Street includes the Romanesque St Mary's Collegiate Church, built in 1220 and one of the oldest places of worship still in use in Ireland; the recently renovated town hall, with its strikingly contemporary glass-box extension overhanging Youghal harbour; and the Red House, an incongruous yet remarkably fine example of Dutch Queen Anne-style architecture built in 1710 by the architect Leuventhan for a merchant family named Uniackes. A few doors up you'll find a carefully restored 17th-century alms house standing across the road from the heavily fortified 15th-century Tynte's Castle.

By now it's time to retire to the memorabilia-filled Moby Dick pub and take John Huston's old seat by the window overlooking the market square. It was from here that the acclaimed director gazed out on his faithful re-creation of the Massachusetts whaling

town of New Bedford each morning and planned that day's shooting schedule for his 1956 classic, *Moby Dick*, starring Gregory Peck as the unhinged Captain Ahab.

Proprietors Paddy and Kevin Linehan will serve you a pint and regale you with tales of this extraordinary time when their father, an extra in the film, was moved to rename the pub, which had been in the family for 100 years, in honour of the event.

If you're inclined to stay there, you could immerse yourself in a copy of William Trevor's collected stories. The author spent his formative years in Youghal, and he celebrates the town's unique character in his short story *Memories of Youghal*. Or if mystery is more to your taste, try Sherlock Holmes. Arthur Conan Doyle was so taken with the town that he commemorated it by creating the characters Youghal of the CID and the Earl of Blackwater.



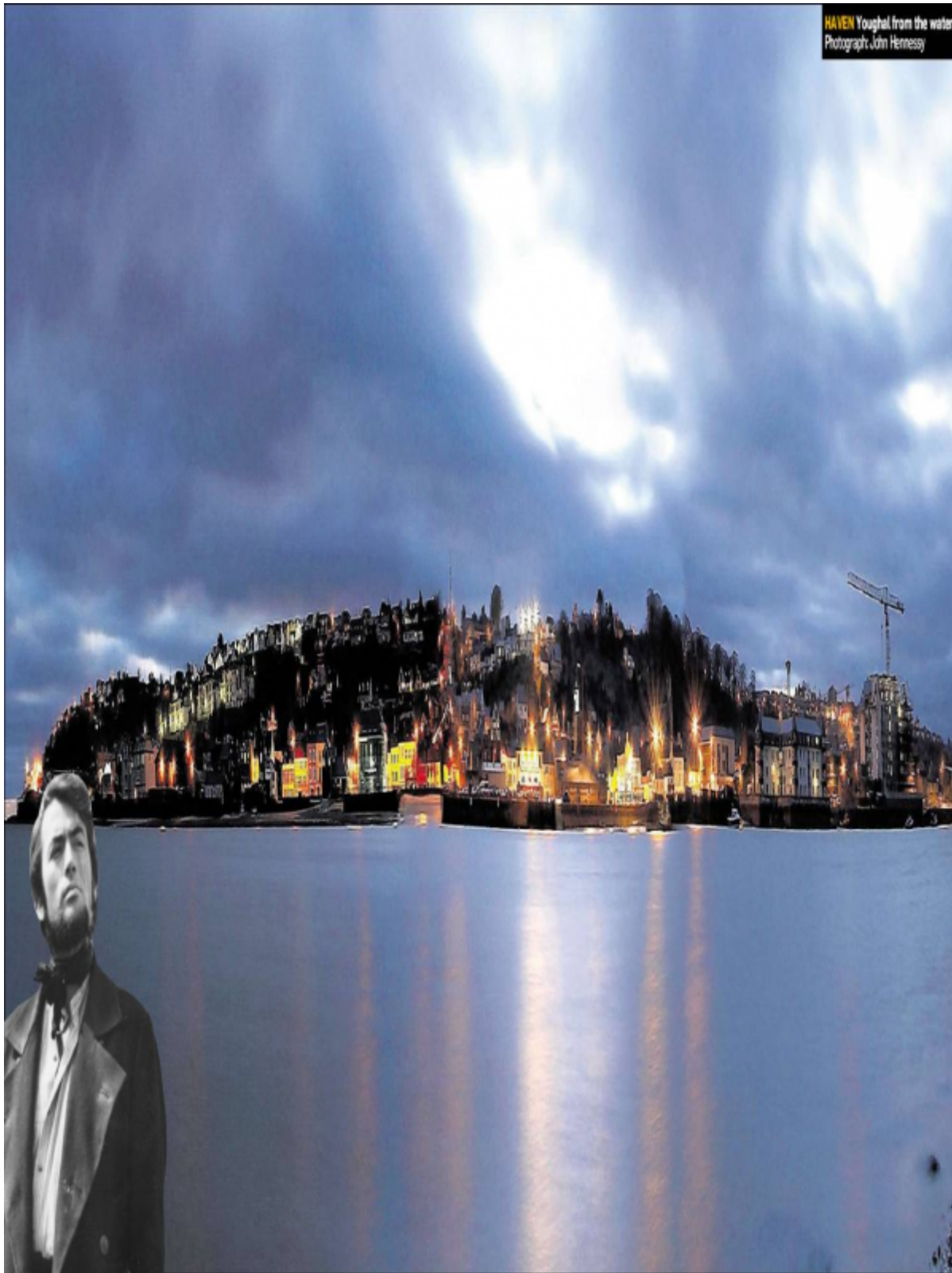
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Gregory Peck in *Moby Dick*, and Youghal Clock Gate. Photographs: Getty and Fáilte Ireland

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HAVEN Youghal from the water.
Photograph John Hennessy



HAVEN Youghal from the water.
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