



# Ferns Tourism Plan: 2020-2024 Summary

Commissioned by:

Ferns Development Association  
&  
Ferns Community Centre



**Supported by**



Rialtas na hÉireann  
Government of Ireland

# Introduction

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Ferns boasts an abundance of significant, well-preserved historic assets linking it to key events in Irish history and is perfectly aligned to Fáilte Ireland's branding: *'Ireland's Ancient East'*. The community also have a deep appreciation of Ferns historic assets and are passionate to share this village's remarkable stories.

*"St. Aidan founded a monastery in Ferns 1,400 years ago, which in time also became the royal seat and capital of the powerful Kings of Leinster."*  
([www.fernsvillage.ie](http://www.fernsvillage.ie))

There is unanimous agreement that the portfolio of stunning historic sites in the village and the stories associated with them are Ferns unique selling point. The village does attract considerable numbers of domestic and overseas visitors, particularly in the summer months but the visitor numbers in the village are fairly limited at present and do not reflect the true tourism potential of Ferns. It is therefore vitally important to have a Tourism Plan in place, which clearly articulates the strategic direction and roadmap for the development of tourism initiatives in this village.

This research has identified that there is huge scope to further capitalise on this area's unique assets, many of which are under-utilised to grow the tourism industry over the next five years. This would provide economic benefits to local businesses, enrich the vibrant community spirit and boost the attractiveness of the village. It is recommended that a highly focused, strategic approach is adopted to create a step change to Ferns' tourism offering. This is to be achieved through the development of eleven pillars which include: Heritage Experience, Walking Trails, River Bann, Music, Arts / Souvenirs, Cycling, Food and Beverage, Festivals, Integrated Bundling of Tourism Attractions, Marketing and Enhancements to the Village Streetscape.

The development of these pillars have been incorporated into a series of seven recommendations. The emphasis behind these recommendations relate to activities that can be driven by the community of Ferns, in close collaboration with a range of stakeholders including WCC, Ancient Connections, OPW, Fáilte Ireland, Visit Wexford, Ecclesiastical Groups, businesses, landowners and Wexford Trails.

This research has drawn significantly on recent studies on Ferns commissioned by Wexford County Council (WCC) including the: *'Ferns Village Design Statement'* (2018); and the *'Ferns Interpretative Plan.'* In addition, WCC secured funding under the INTERREG programme to deliver an ambitious cross boarder programme between St. David's, Wales and Ferns, County Wexford called *'Ancient Connections'*.

The timing of this Tourism Plan is very opportune as it can build on earlier research and interlink with *Ancient Connections* and the opportunities that are available through this ambitious European Programme.

# Corporate Governance and Management Structure (Company Ltd. by Guarantee)

## Vision

- ❑ To preserve, enhance and promote this area's rich built, cultural and natural assets.
- ❑ To increase the visitors' dwell time in Ferns and the surrounding hinterland thereby generating additional economic benefits for local businesses.
- ❑ To create a unique and memorable Irish heritage experience in Ferns that attracts visitors all year round.
- ❑ Enhance the quality of life for the local community and foster an increased awareness of Ferns rich heritage.



## Under-Developed Tourism Offering in Ferns



## Collaboration





# Summary of Recommendations

This Plan identifies seven recommendations which are considered in detail to create a step change to the tourism offering in Ferns.

Collaboration, grants, volunteering and community fundraising will be required to implement this ambitious Tourism Plan.

1 • Community Governance & Leadership

2 • Greater leverage of existing Heritage Assets

3 • Expand the Tourism Offering

4 • Village Enhancement

5 • Connectivity to Gorey & Enniscorthy

6 • Tourism Clustering & Package Itineraries

7 • Destination Marketing

Potential Investment Estimate:  
€500K +

## Recommendation 1

### Community Governance & Leadership

Good governance and strong leadership will be instrumental to the effective implementation of this Tourism Plan. This recommendation identifies the following elements that are needed to oversee and guide the execution of these tourism initiatives over the next five years.

- I. Formation of an **umbrella development group** with company limited by guarantee status.
- II. Establish **Working Groups** to take leadership in each of the major social enterprise initiatives. (Initial Priority: Arts, Music, Walking, The Shed, Heritage). Establish a Business Committee to drive economic development in Ferns.
- III. **Up-skilling** in the establishment and management of social enterprises e.g. heritage centre / tourism office, guided tours, The Shed, art enterprises, music club etc.
- IV. Seek **social employment schemes** to assist with the management of the social enterprises and identify training opportunities for the personnel engaged on these schemes.
- V. Secure **grants** and undertake ambitious **fundraising** initiatives.
- VI. Establish a mechanism for **recording visitor numbers** so the implementation of this Tourism Plan can be evaluated.
- VII. Set up effective mechanisms of **communication** between all community groups and the public so everyone feels involved in what is happening.

## Recommendation 2

### Greater leverage of existing Heritage Assets

This research revealed that Ferns has an enviable abundance of well-preserved historical assets that could be further utilised to draw additional visitors to the village all year round. The initiatives below offer the greatest immediate potential to attract increased visitor numbers to Ferns, with minimal investment required.

- I. Co-ordination and greater promotion of the availability of **guided heritage tours** all year round, some in full costume. This should be linked to the website and the Tourism Information Office so that advance bookings can be easily facilitated.
- II. Advance the **story-telling dimension** of the guided tours in collaboration with the *Rediscovering Ancient Connections* initiative.
- III. Continue to expand the '**Ask the Locals**' programme and establish a tourism ambassadors initiative that promotes the heritage of Ferns throughout the ages.
- IV. Liaise with **tourism operators, accommodation providers and relevant stakeholders** in the county to raise the awareness of the heritage offering in Ferns which includes guided tours and the '*Wilder Wander*' digital phone app.
- V. Enhance the visitor experience at the heritage sites by creating coherent and informative **navigational orientation** between the attractions, linked to the existing heritage walking trail.
- VI. Create **interactive and fun tourism experiences** in Ferns linked to the Heritage Exhibition and Medieval Playground.
- VII. Commission a dramatic **light and music** show depicting the fascinating medieval heritage of Ferns and the story of its Gaelic Kingship and the Norman invasion in 1169. This epic story could be beautifully illuminated on buildings in the village as part of tourism events and festivals. As an initial lower cost intervention, it is recommended that a cinema system is purchased, that could be used to create atmospheric events either indoors or outdoors in Ferns.
- VIII. Advance the **Irish Archaeological Field School** to promote students from overseas staying locally, and all building that connection to Ferns for their families and future selves.

## Recommendation 3

### Expand the Tourism Offering

The initiatives in this recommendation have the potential to create a transformative change in the tourism product offering in Ferns. However, significant capital investment and community buy-in will be required for this to be achieved. It is likely that these will be implemented on a phased basis.

- I. Develop a year-round **heritage experience with tourist office and gift shop** including necessary upgrades to the community centre internally and externally. In the longer term, this would also include a **community café**.
- II. Assess the viability of developing innovative initiatives to advance the **story-telling** experience in Ferns.
- III. Assess the potential for developing a **walking trail** offering that extends the storytelling interpretation into the hinterlands of Ferns including the river Bann.
- IV. Explore the viability of creating a long distance **pilgrimage trail** between Ferns and Wales.
- V. Develop a **calendar of themed experiences** e.g. Festivals, historical re-enactments, live musical performances, light shows, Medieval banquets etc.
- VI. Expand the **food and beverage** offering through linking in with artisan local food producers and align it with a visitor heritage experience incorporating music, art, story-telling and heritage interpretation.
- VII. Develop the **gift / souvenir** offering focusing on the rich heritage of Ferns.
- VIII. Develop and implement a **musical performance** offering in Ferns.
- IX. Expand the beautiful **Tapestry** offering and turn it into a complete visitor experience. Links with Fishguard, Wales should be continued as they also have a stunning tapestry.
- X. Explore opportunities to **create replica artefacts** from the Bronze, Iron and Medieval periods that were found in Ferns (originals held in Dublin). Alternatively seek to get the artefacts displayed in Ferns.







## Recommendation 4

### Village Enhancement

The heritage sites are located at both ends of the village like book ends, so the presentation of the village streetscape is an intrinsic dimension of the visitor experience. Ferns is very fortunate to have passionate voluntary committees which excels at presenting the village beautifully. However, in recent years the village has been adversely effected by shop closures and a decline in small businesses, a trend which has been mirrored across many rural areas in Ireland. These initiatives identify the key elements that would most significantly enhance the urban design of Ferns.

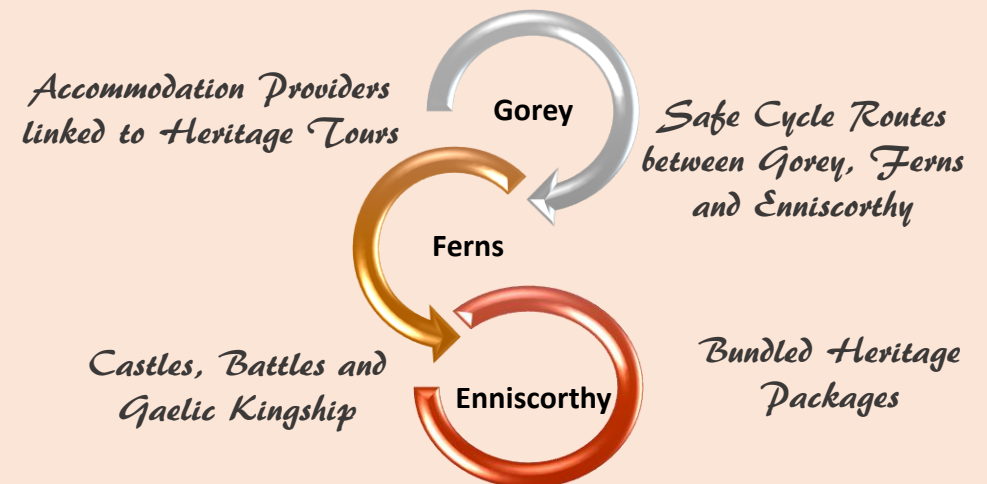
- I. Create a **sense of arrival** with decorative medieval signage at the village entrances, designated parking, interpretative information and orientation. The signage at the village entrances and the front exterior to the community centre are an initial priority.
- II. Enhance the **village streetscape**, particularly near heritage sites, based on recommendations in the Village Design Statement and through new public art works. The development of the square and plaza at the castle could substantially increase visitor's dwell time in Ferns. Alternative, additional carparking spaces would need to be identified to compensate for the removal of parking spaces.
- III. Demark the line of the **monastic enclosure** on the ground, or at key points around the village. The entire village today (almost) fits inside that monastery boundary –one of the biggest in Ireland.
- IV. Partner with **local businesses** to interpret and share the unique stories relating to Ferns.
- V. Address the **vacant premises** on the main street and explore creative solutions to bring them back into use or to utilise them to depict the heritage of Ferns.
- VI. Support the development of **public realm works** in the village.
- VII. Establish '**The Shed**' to support the development of attractive village features such as carved sculptures of key Medieval characters.

## Recommendation 5

### Connectivity to Gorey & Enniscorthy

Ferns is classified as a 'strong' rural village located on the old N11 between Gorey and Enniscorthy. Due to the close proximity of Ferns to these much larger conurbations it is strategically important to foster closer links with the accommodation providers and visitor attractions in both of these towns so that Ferns becomes a popular tourism attraction for visitors staying in north Wexford.

- I. Align Ferns to **Gorey and Enniscorthy** as an interlinked tourism destination, through the development of safe bicycle routes. This would form an intrinsic part of the visitor experience and create opportunities for bike hire businesses in the locality.
- II. Forge closer links with **attractions and natural assets** in the locality. Examples include Kilbora Woods, Camolin Millennium Forest, Sliabh Bhuí, Carraig Rua and Wexford Trail Members (Craft, Heritage, Garden, Walking and Cycling).



## Recommendation 6

### Tourism Clustering & Package Itineraries

Ferns has the potential to offer an immersive and authentic heritage experience which is very appealing to the overseas market segments: Culturally Curious and the Great Escapers. The tourism offering in Ferns is also perfectly aligned to Fáilte Ireland's branding for the South East region – Ireland's Ancient East and more specifically its new VEDP '*Castles and Norman Conquests*'.

These visitors like a range of engaging and immersive experiences connected with heritage, gardens, walking, festivals, evening entertainment and food / beverage. If Ferns is to deliver on all of these experiences, it will be essential that it develops exciting tourism clusters and packaged itineraries.

- I. Partner with tour operators to create themed **short break packaged experiences** involving a series of destinations within the South East targeted at the overseas core markets (Britain, France, Germany and the USA). This could focus on Pilgrimage Tours initially due to the religious significance of Ferns.
- II. Advance **cross-selling** and the development of cross border tourism packages with Wales under the *Rediscovering Ancient Connections* initiative.
- III. Develop **packaged tourism itineraries** focusing on Castles, Gaelic Kingships and Norman Conquests in collaboration with other tourism providers and accommodation operators in the county. This could be aimed at target markets such as: active retirement groups; historic societies; and schools.
- IV. Explore links with other big **royal and monastic sites** in Ireland's Ancient East.

## Recommendation 7

### Destination Marketing

Ferns has an attractive logo, beautifully designed website and there is an active use of social media. There is road signage off the M11, map boards at both the Castle and St. Edan's Cathedral, attractively designed interpretative panels, wall murals and interactive helmets around Ferns.

There is scope to further develop the marketing of Ferns through implementing the following initiatives:

- I. **Build brand awareness** through a wide range of initiatives including blogs, PR campaigns, offers with hotels and ferries, and utilising existing marketing mediums such as Ireland's Ancient East, Visit Wexford, Love Gorey, Wexford Trails.
- II. Further invest in the **Fernsvillage.ie website** to include its availability in several languages; e-commerce platform; and booking function.
- III. Establish the **Tourist Office / Reception Centre** to orientate the visitor on arrival in Ferns.
- IV. Build on the '**Ask the Locals**' Initiative where locals become part of the welcoming experience.
- V. External signage at the new Heritage Exhibition and enhanced navigational signage around the village - **Placemaking**.
- VI. Develop a **joint ticket sales platform** with other tourism attractions in the region.
- VII. Design attractive **heritage trail brochure, DL fliers, map** (on and off-line).
- VIII. Development and marketing of **integrated tourism packages** which includes heritage tours, hospitality, accommodation and evening entertainment.
- IX. Development of fun and informative **school tour** packs - marketed at both primary and secondary schools in the region.
- X. Creation of a fantastic, surreal and memorable '**stand out moment**' for the visitor to provide a perfect picture moment for **Instagram**.
- XI. Work with **countywide networks** such as Visit Wexford on developing connections in Normandy and other overseas destinations.
- XII. Appoint a **PR Team** to manage the marketing and measurement of visitor numbers.





# Ferns Tourism Plan: 2020-2024

At the time of completing the Ferns Tourism Plan, the Covid-19 health emergency was having a massive impact on the tourism industry, resulting in a complete decline in domestic and overseas visitor numbers world-wide. The long-term impact is unknown, but it is certain that the tourism sector will be very negatively impacted in 2020 and quite possibly 2021.

In the short-term, it is recommended that targeting local and domestic visitors should be a priority as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

## Concluding Comments

In the short-term the village of Ferns should focus on growing visitor numbers and expanding the tourism offering which would support and sustain local employment opportunities. However, a longer term goal should be to actively support the development of additional niche accommodation providers in the locality which would deliver a significant economic gain for businesses in the village.

### Ferns Tourism Plan



**Increased Visitor Numbers all year round**

**Increased Expenditure in local Shops and Businesses**