



THE HILL OF TARA

In pre-Christian times, the Hill of Tara was one of the island's most important religious and political centers. For visitors today, there are few physical remains but plenty of mystery, mythology, and archeology to ponder. Nearby, a small coffee and gift shop provides toilets, food, souvenirs, and drinks.

Walk up the path to Saint Patrick's Church in the wooden thicket on the hill's eastern slope. Be sure to stop at the gate to read the OPW (Irish Office of Public Works) placards about the history and lore of the Hill of Tara.

Notice the statue of Patrick, patron saint of Ireland, on the right. This figure replaces an older statue of the Saint which stood atop the hill from the late 1800s. Patrick, in his Episcopal vestments, a robe, miter, and Crozier, holds a shamrock which he used to explain the Trinity to the pagan High King, three petals with one stem. Patrick arrived on the nearby Hill of Slane on Easter eve 533. Pagan tradition dictated the High King light a bonfire on the Hill of Tara at this particular time each year.

In defiance of the High King and pagan traditions, Patrick lit a bonfire on the nearby Hill of Slane hours before the High King did on Tara. Patrick's bonfire burnt through the night and into the next day. Patrick traveled to Tara the next morning. The High King was overcome by the miracle of the long-burning fire. Listening to Patrick's message of Christ's salvation, he converted to Christianity.

In later centuries, the Hill of Tara was the site of several significant events. In 1798, a group of passionate young rebels chose Tara for its commanding and defensible position. They held the position until British troops showed up and sent out a "Trojan-horse-like" wagon loaded with whiskey, which the rebels easily captured and consumed. With a hill full of drunken rebels, it was easily taken by the British forces.

In 1843, Daniel O'Connell (you'll hear about him in Dublin), a champion of Irish liberty, rallied 500,000 Irish Catholic sharecroppers here for his all-time greatest "monster meeting." O'Connell, a charismatic orator, organized peaceful rallies to promote the repeal of the Act of Union with Britain.

In 1899 a crazed group of Israelites believed they were one of the tribes from Israel, had been lost, and ended up in Britain. They descended upon the Hill of Tara and spent two years recklessly and haphazardly digging up the hill in search of the Ark of the Covenant.