

Exploring
BELLEEK WOODS



Image: www.con-telegraph.ie

Cover image: Part of the enchanting Fairy Trail at Belleek Woods (Image: Northmayo.ie)

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Belleek Woods

Belleek, known in Irish as *Béal-Leice* (the mouth of the flagstones), is located 1.5 km from Ballina town centre and extends along the River Moy in north Mayo.

On its grounds stands Belleek Castle, which now runs as a hotel, and was originally known as Belleek Manor. Its earliest structure is believed to date back to at least the 13th century. The castle is the ancestral seat of the first Earl of Arran, Sir Arthur Gore, and it's at this point that the property's history as Belleek Castle begins.

Under the 1662 Act of Settlement, the Gore family was gifted 14,000 acres of land in Ballina. The Gores became one of Mayo's most significant families. They expanded the estate over generations to a vast 33,000 acres, which stretched all the way to the banks of the Moy Estuary. In the 1700s, Arthur Gore's niece, Mary Gore, married Francis Knox, and consequently the family surname Knox-Gore was adopted.

In 1818, Francis Arthur Knox-Gore, who was Mary and Francis' grandson, inherited the estate. Shortly after his marriage to Sarah Nesbitt Gore, he commissioned the construction of Belleek Castle. It was built between 1825 and 1831 in a Neo-Gothic style, designed by architect John Benjamin Keanes.

Belleek Woods was also planted during this time, with approximately 2 million trees that were mainly oak, beech, ash, sycamore, willow and yew. Francis Arthur was laid to rest within its woodlands in 1873. His grave is marked by an impressive Neo-Gothic monument designed by James Franklin Fuller.

Belleek Castle remained in the Knox-Gore family until 1942, however, due to rising costs and the challenges caused by World War II, the estate was sold. Between 1942 and 1961, the property changed hands several times, passing from the Beckett family to Mayo County Council. In 1962, Marshall Doran, a merchant navy officer, purchased the estate. It is currently owned by his son, Paul Doran.

Today, Belleek Woods is one of the largest urban forests in Europe with over 22,000 trees. It has a number of trails and looped walks with many historical features to discover such as a hermitage site, an old ice house, the SS Crete Boom concrete boat, and a famine wall.

Along the pathways grow flowers such as bluebells, foxgloves, primroses and wild garlic. It is home to wildlife including pine martens, foxes, hares, the great spotted woodpecker, ducks and herons. The woods are managed by Coillte in partnership with the local Belleek Woods Enhancement Group who have worked successfully to reintroduce the native red squirrel to north Mayo.

For young explorers, there are also fairy folk to spot. They are believed to reside in the Belleek Woods Fairy Trail, located beyond the duck pond. The little wooden fairy houses on the trail are an initiative of the Ballina Men's Shed, spearheaded by William Maughan, and Niamh Allen of St. Muredach's College, Ballina.



Left: A member of the red squirrel population at Belleek Woods (www.westernpeople.ie)



Above: The Knox-Gore Monument at Belleek (www.buildingsofireland.ie)

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Article References:

www.coillte.ie
www.belleekcastle.com
www.mayo.ie
www.discoverireland.ie



Aerial view of Belleek Castle and Woods (northmayo.ie)