

Chairperson's Report
Friends of Columbanus Bangor AGM

March

The last thing I did before the first Covid Lockdown on 23 March 2020 was to hand deliver an application to Ards and North Down Council for a Community Festival grant to run the Columbanus Festival in November 2020. And like so many well laid plans pre-Covid it was all downhill since then!

April

With Covid at its height in Northern Ireland in April, it was obvious that we would not be able to hold physical meetings in the near future. A decision was taken to buy a Zoom package which would allow us to have meetings that lasted longer than 40 minutes. I would like to thank all the members who have joined us on those meetings.

June

I had organised a trip to Luxeuil-les-Bains, St Gallen and Bregenz in June which had to be cancelled; we had a year long programme of walks, talks and festival planned. We were successful with our grant application to run the Columbanus festival and had been awarded £4,800 but this was withdrawn because of Covid.

July

As Covid gathered pace in Europe, a trip planned to visit Bangor in July by a Swiss group was cancelled. This was swiftly followed by the cancellation of a trip planned by Friends of Columbanus in Brittany to cancel their trip to Bangor in September.

August

In August we got the very sad news that our esteemed treasurer, Brendan Hehir, had died. Brendan had been a member of FoCB since its inception and had held the post of Treasurer for three years. He is sadly missed by us all. I am forever grateful to Maire Foley for agreeing to be our acting treasurer.

September

However, last year was not all doom and gloom. In September, after talking to Simon Doogan, the Minister of Columbanus Church of Ireland at Ballyholme, we came up with the idea of recording an online cross-community ecumenical service which would be aired on U-Tube on Sunday 15 November 2020. With the help of Alderman Scott Wilson who offered to do the filming, recording and editing for free, we invited St Columbanus Church of Ireland; St Comgall's Catholic Church on the Brunsiwck Road, 1st Bangor Presbyterian Church and Ballyholme Methodist Church to take part in the service which was filmed and recorded in Columbanus Col. We selected a range of music to accompany the service including Ards CCE, Bangor Ladies Choir, Ballyholme Primary School, Columbanus Hugh School, the Breton Male Voice Choir, and an Italian choir from Imperia.

Columbanus Project

In September, I set up a meeting with Councillor Ray McKimm, Jane Morrice and Martin Craigs to discuss how we could make the Columban Way happen and ensure that Columbanus was enshrined in the Queen's Parade development in Bangor. Since then we have had regular meetings about the Columbanus Project and are developing a business case to set up a Columbanus Centre in the town. Ray McKimm will be telling you more about that later.

November

The Feasibility Study on Long Distance Walking routes in Northern Ireland was finally published in November 2020. Apart from Ards and North Down Council, the response from the other Council areas where the pilgrim route will pass through was disappointing with none of the Councils committing resources to develop the Columban Way in their respective areas at this time. The study proposed that the route should be called 'The Way of the Saints' but at a Council meeting on 3 November, I proposed that it should be called the Columban Way as that was the original plan from the outset. I am pleased to report that this was unanimously agreed at the Council meeting.

You Tube

The cross-community service was launched on YouTube on Sunday 15 November on YouTube. This was a huge amount of work for a very small group of people. I would like to thank Scott Wilson, Maire Foley, Manuella Berchconi in Italy and Simon Doogan as without their voluntary contribution the service would not have happened. At the last count, the film had almost 400 views.

Show video

The Way Forward

Everyone has had to adapt to living with Covid and so we must adapt too in order to keep the legacy of Columbanus alive both here in Northern Ireland and in Europe. Plans for this year are to apply for grants to write a new membership leaflet and develop the website. I would like to thank James O'Fee for contributing to the first draft of this publication. I would like to think that by this time next year we will have purged and updated the website, managed to get online banking set up and a programme of events which will include walks, talks and music. I am delighted to report that the Council has recently been awarded a sum of money from the Heritage Lottery Fund to develop the first phase of the Columban Way in our Borough from Comber to Newtownards through the Clandeboye Estate, to Helen's Bay where it will join the coastal path to Bangor. Ards and North Down Council are leading the way and hopefully when the other Council and Tourism NI witness the success of the pilgrim route that they too will join us in the next couple of years.

Show logo here

Finally, I would like to thank my fellow office bearers – Maire Foley, Acting Treasurer; Roberta Dunlop, Secretary; and Kenneth Irvine, President for their work and support.

European Update

As you are aware, the European Association of the Columban Way was not working and the French, Rol, Northern Ireland and Swiss members decided to leave the Association and concentrate on developing the Columban Way in their respective countries. To keep connected, a Columbanus Charter was drafted and sent to member countries to sign to say that they support the development of the Columban Way and to keep people informed of developments.

An international Zoom meeting will be held next week to discuss how the Columban Way can become a Cultural Route of Europe and gather together the evidence to submit an application in September 2021.

France

The **Via Columbani**, a satellite navigation website that charts the Columban Way across Europe was launched in July 2020. The French Associations have raised the funds to pay for this system and so far it has cost 48,700 Euros.

The French have formed their own Federation which comprises representative from across France representing Brittany, Brie, and Luxeuil les Bains and will be responsible for planning the route across France.

Switzerland

In June 2020, the Swiss Friends of Columbanus launched their route called the Kolumbansweg. The route is starting to gain momentum with many people now walking the route. St Columbanus Day Festival, which was to be held in St Gallen Switzerland in July 2021, was cancelled because of Coronavirus.

Austria

I have recently had contact with a former mayor of Bregenz and have passed on the contact to Stephen Reid, the Chief Executive of Ards and North Down Council who is following up with an invitation to invite the current Mayor of Bregenz to visit Bangor. Incidentally, both Stephen and the director of regeneration were scheduled to travel to Bregenz last June but this too was cancelled because of Covid.

Italy

We have had very little contact from the Italians in northern Italy but by all accounts they have mapped out their route. However, our connection with our friends in the Liguria region continue to be strong. I am delighted to welcome Manuella Bertoncini who has been instrumental in setting up exchanges and connections with schools and organisations in her area with similar organisations in our Borough.