

WICKLOW TOWN



# THE *Halpin Trail*



Special thanks to

**Casapepe**  
ristorante

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**Wicklow Town Forum**  *Our Town - Our Future*

A Celebration Of One Of The  
Greatest Mariners The World Has Ever Known



## STOP 6 *Church of Ireland, Church Hill.*

On Jan. 20th 1894, Wicklow mourned the loss of its most famous and loyal son with the passing of Robert Charles Halpin. Throughout the town, flags were flown at half mast. Ships and fishing boats in the harbour paid similar tribute. On Jan. 23rd his remains were carried from his home at Tinakilly in an open carriage drawn by four horses. A second carriage was needed to carry the wreaths and flowers. The cortege was one of the largest ever seen in Wicklow and the burial ceremony was conducted by Canon Rooke prior to his interment in the church graveyard, overlooking the two things which he loved most in life, the town of Wicklow and the sea. On Oct. 23rd 1897 a granite obelisk was unveiled in his memory at Fitzwilliam Square with great pomp and ceremony. Once again, all of Wicklow's gentry and commonality were present to pay their respects. The memorial inscription reads "Civi Emerito Civitas Genetrix" meaning "The state is mother to the worthy citizen". In Robert Halpin's case it was. The monument stands proudly today as a lasting reminder to Wicklow town's most famous son, Robert Charles Halpin.

*Thank you for your time in following the Halpin Trail and we hope you enjoyed stroll through his life and our town. Go raibh míle maith agaibh!*

## *Who was Robert Halpin?*

The name of Robert Halpin will always be honoured here in Wicklow town but, outside its environs, too little is known about the man himself and his magnificent service to the world of telegraphy in the 19th century. To learn more about Wicklow's most famous son take time out to stroll around our town and enjoy its ambiance and hospitality.



months Halpin's health slowly and painfully deteriorated. Eventually on Jan. 20th 1894 he passed away from septicaemia (blood poisoning). Tinakilly house remained in the family until the mid-20th century and the death of his daughter, Belle Louisa. After having a good look around Halpin's magnificent home (and partaken of its hospitality) make your way to the final stop on our trail, the Church of Ireland, Church Hill.



**Directions:** Exit from Tinakilly, turning left and proceed in the direction of Wicklow town, about 3 kms. distant. As you enter the town turn left after passing Wicklow Rovers Football Field and proceed up Church Hill. On your left, at the top of the hill is the Church of Ireland. Enter the church through the clock/bell tower which was constructed in 1777 (the main body of the church itself was built in 1700) and enjoy the peace and tranquillity there. While there find the stone baptismal water font which came from Tinakilly House. Then make your way into the graveyard where Robert Halpin and his family are interred. His grave is, fittingly, marked by a high Celtic stone cross. Spare a few minutes of your time to remember Robert Halpin and his life and times.



## STOP 1 *The Bridge Tavern*



The Bridge Tavern was established in 1759, where the Stone Bridge (1691) crosses the River Vartry/Leitrim. It probably replaced a shebeen (drinking house) which stood on the same site. Its clientele were mainly seafarers celebrating their safe homecoming or preparing to embark on a new voyage to distant lands. During the 19th century the Bridge Tavern was known as Halpin's Bridge Hotel, owned and run by James Halpin and his wife Anne. Into this environment Robert Halpin was born in 1836, the youngest of thirteen children, two of whom died at childbirth and another in early childhood. Robert grew up listening to the sailor's stories and intrigued by life on the ocean wave he followed in the footsteps of his older brothers, Thomas and Richard, when he went to sea in 1847 at the age of eleven, the youngest member of the crew of the brigantine "Briton". His first few years at sea were traumatic in that during this time both of his parents died while he was away from home, his father, James, died in 1847 and his mother, Anne, in 1849. He, also, survived the shipwreck of the "Briton", off the coast of Cornwall, in 1850. Undeterred by these experiences he continued his training and by 1857, at the age of 21, he completed his nautical training and passed the necessary examinations to qualify as a ship's captain.

**Directions:** Cross the Stone Bridge and turning left proceed for 150 metres. On your right is a large dwelling house with a columned entrance. This is the school which Robert Halpin attended prior to going to sea in 1847.

## STOP 2 *Halpin's Old Schoolhouse, Leitrim Place*



Construction of the impressive terrace of houses at Leitrim Place was commenced in 1836 and took a number of years to complete. The largest of the dwellings i.e. that, with the columned entrance, housed a private school and it was here that Robert Halpin received his early education. How much interest he showed in formal education is difficult to gauge but throughout his life he was always keen to extend his knowledge of the world about him. With his imagination fuelled by exciting tales of far-away lands and having grasped the basics of reading and writing Robert went to sea at the age of eleven. His first mentor, at sea, was Captain Thomas Lightfoot of the brigantine "Briton". Over the next ten years Halpin learned the rudiments of navigation and at the age of just 21 years he had fulfilled all the training and passed the necessary examinations to obtain his captain's ticket.

Between 1847 and 1857 the young Robert Halpin sailed the world. During that period he survived a shipwreck off the coast of Cornwall, England, sailed to Australia aboard the barque, "Henry Tanner" where he experienced the Kalgoorlie Gold Rush and was third mate on the wool clipper "Boomerang" which plied her trade from Liverpool to Melbourne and home via Peru and Cape Horn.

## STOP 5 *Tinakilly House, Rathnew*



After the birth of his daughter, Ethel, in 1874, Robert Halpin decided to dedicate his life to his family and in early 1876 he purchased 300 acres at Tinakilly for £12,000 with a view to having their home built there. The building of Tinakilly House took four years to complete as Halpin was very particular about the materials used, only the best of timbers would suffice. Designed by fashionable Irish architect, James Franklin Fuller, the house was completed in 1880 at a reputed cost of £40,000. It is said that the stairs and landing were built to resemble the bridge of the "Great Eastern" and that Halpin often stood there looking out to sea. Robert's wife Jessie had given birth to daughters, Belle Louisa in 1876 and Edith in 1879, and the family proudly moved into their new home from their temporary residence on Bachelor's Walk. Although retired from life at sea, Halpin's interest in maritime affairs never waned. However, he threw himself wholeheartedly into life in his native town and became involved with numerous projects.



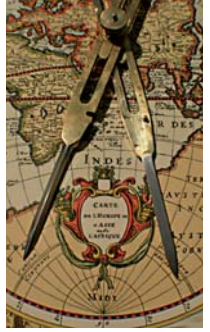
He helped organise Wicklow's first official regatta in 1878 and for many years was a member of the Harbour Board. He was persuaded, against his better judgement, to stand for the parliamentary elections in 1892. It was the time of the Parnellite split and many felt that Halpin could win the seat. Despite the political disarray, Halpin was defeated by the anti-Parnellite/McCarthyite candidate, Sweetman, and this was a great disappointment in his life. Undeterred, Halpin continued to work for the good of his native town. At 57 years of age, he was still a relatively young man and had every reason to believe that he had many years left to raise his young family and give them a proper start in life. Fate had other plans. In late 1893, while trimming his toe-nails, he accidentally nicked a toe. Infection set in and during the following

Unable to retrieve it, the "Great Eastern" was forced to return to port and the mission was classed a failure. However, the following year, 1866, having persuaded the backers to provide funding for a new attempt, the "Great Eastern" set out, once again, from Valentia and this time successfully laid the Trans-Atlantic cable to Heart's Content, Newfoundland, reaching their destination on July 27th. To the world at the time, the successful laying of the telegraphic cable was as monumental as man landing on the Moon, over a century later. The "Great Eastern" had carried extra cable and set out from Newfoundland on Aug. 9th attempting to lay a second cable. First Officer Halpin showed his navigational abilities when he succeeded in guiding the huge ship to the correct location in mid-Atlantic and grappled up the end of the cable which had been lost the previous year. Splicing the cables together the "Great Eastern" completed its journey home to great acclaim. Over the next decade Halpin, as captain of the "Great Eastern", was to successfully lay cables throughout the oceans of the world and he retired from the sea in the mid 1870's. While in Newfoundland in 1866 he met and fell in love with Jessie (Teresa) Munn, whom he married in 1873. (Halpin's story, the construction of Tinakilly House and his family life, continues at the next stop.)

**Directions:** You will more than likely need transport to reach the next stop but it should not be missed. Tinakilly is situated on the outskirts of the village of Rathnew, about three kilometres from Wicklow. To get there proceed along Abbey Street past the ruins of the Franciscan Friary and the Grand Hotel. Continue towards Rathnew. Just past the Cemetery turn right and proceed up the avenue to Tinakilly House, a beautiful town and country house hotel and the home of Robert Charles Halpin.



Having completed his apprenticeship and gained his captain's ticket in 1857 Halpin was now qualified to command 'any' ship but he firmly believed that the future of shipping lay in steam rather than sail. He became first officer on the steamship "Kheronese" in 1857 and later that same year took command of the new steamship "Circassian".



Trans-Atlantic travel boomed in the 1840's as emigrants left Europe in search of a more prosperous life elsewhere. Some fled from political oppression and in the case of Ireland, in particular, from famine. Others sought out a better life, free from persecution. Great profits could be made by transporting emigrants to the New Land and in 1858 the Atlantic Steam Navigation Co. (Galway/Lever Line) was established. Halpin was head-hunted by the new company and in 1859 he made his way to London to take command of the company's new steamship, the "Argo". However on its maiden return voyage from New York the ship ran aground on the coast of Newfoundland and although there was no loss of life, the "Argo", pride of the fleet, was lost. At a subsequent Board of Inquiry Halpin was found to be negligent and his master's ticket was suspended. At a loose end, Robert Halpin became involved in the American Civil War. (His story continues at the next stop.)



**Directions:** Turn left and cross the footbridge named after one of Wicklow's and Ireland's most famous personalities, Charles Stewart Parnell. Turn left and proceed along Bachelor's Walk until you almost reach the Bridge Tavern. On your right, just past the Garda Station is Leitrim Lodge. Halpin, his wife Jessie and their daughters lived here for almost four years (1876/1880), while Tinakilly House was under construction.

### STOP 3 *Leitrim Lodge, Bachelor's Walk.*



Having being deprived of his right to captain a vessel, Halpin began a most exciting and eventful period in his life. Always one with an eye to making a profit, he learned that the Southern/Confederate States would richly reward those who could supply food and arms to their beleaguered armies and Halpin took up the role of a blockade runner during the American Civil War. This was an extremely perilous task and although successful on many occasions there were times when he almost paid with his life. The S.S. "Eugenie" made ten successful runs through blockades between May 1863 and Jan. 1864. Indeed, in April 1864 the steamship "Virgin" with Halpin on board broke through the blockade to the relief of the inhabitants of Mobile, Alabama. Robert Halpin was charged in 1871 in Washington, with blockade running for the Confederate States but was found not guilty due to insufficient evidence. Halpin's involvement in the American Civil War showed his entrepreneurial side. He did not shirk from taking risks. He balanced the risks with the potential gain and was satisfied if the rewards were satisfactory. It became obvious to all who knew him that Halpin would go far, particularly if he had the right ship. On June 22nd 1865 he joined the 'right' ship when he became first officer aboard the "Great Eastern". The "Great Eastern" was the largest ship, by far, in the world at this time, and was the brainchild of the engineering genius, Isambard Kingdom Brunel. (More about the "Great Eastern" and Halpin's involvement with the ship, when you make the next stop.)

**Directions:** Turn right at Bridge Street Books and proceed up Bridge Street in the direction of Abbey Street. Stop when you come to Fitzwilliam Square.

### STOP 4 *The Halpin Memorial, Fitzwilliam Square.*

This monument/obelisk was erected to honour the memory of Robert Charles Halpin and in recognition of his contribution to the world of telegraphy. The memorial was erected and unveiled in 1897, at Fitzwilliam Square, on a piece of ground provided by his friend Earl Fitzwilliam. Referred to locally as the "Smoothing Iron", because of its shape, like an old-fashioned iron, it honours Halpin's efforts in laying telegraphic cables beneath the oceans of the world. Back to Halpin's story!

The "Great Eastern" was a gigantic, iron ship designed by Isambard Kingdom Brunel and built by John Scott Russell at his shipyard at Millwall, London, and launched in 1858, after four years in construction. 22,000 tons in weight, she was five times larger than the largest ship of the time and was built to carry over 3,000 passengers in first class luxury (no second or steerage classes unlike "Titanic"). She was over 300 metres in length and was powered by an enormous screw propeller, two huge paddle wheels and six masts carrying over 6,000 sq. feet of sail.

However, because of her enormous size and the fact that her owners put her on the Trans-Atlantic run rather than the Australian route for which she was designed, she proved a financial failure. Indeed she made more money while in port as hundreds of thousands of spectators paid to visit the giant ship and see her magnificent saloons, cabins and dining rooms. However, because of her size she was the ideal ship to carry the enormous spools of telegraphic cable necessary to transverse the Atlantic Ocean. With her magnificent state rooms and luxurious cabins removed to make way for the thousands of miles of cable needed she began her voyage, from Valentia, Co. Kerry, in July 1865, with Robert Halpin as first mate, on a salary of £25 per month. On Aug. 1st disaster struck when the cable snapped and sank to the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean.

