

Global Irish Famine Way

The story of the **Global Irish Famine Way** begins with Caroilin Callery's father, who set out to preserve Strokestown House and, in doing so, protect an important but often hidden part of our history. What mattered was not only the house itself but the story of the tenants who left, the famine that drove them out, and the local experience of a national catastrophe. That work led to the development of the **National Famine Museum**. Building on that foundation, Caroilin developed the **National Famine Way**, tracing the journey of 1,490 famine emigrants from Strokestown to Dublin and turning archival history into something people could physically follow and experience.

Then "*out of the blue*", as Caroilin put it, Dr Eamonn McKee, then Irish Ambassador to Canada, sent Caroilin an email. In Ottawa, he had come across the story of an unmarked famine grave and the fact that over 3,000 Famine emigrants has arrived there in 1847. He proposed extending the National Famine Way to Canada. For Caroilin, it was one of those moments where, you think "this makes total sense." What followed was not a break with the earlier work, but the next stage of it. The Global Irish Famine Way began in Canada, where the Strokestown story first opened outward into the wider world and began connecting with communities overseas.

CASE STUDY



The vision developed as a global project to mark the journeys of all Famine emigrants around the world.

Photo courtesy of Global Irish Famine Way project.

At the heart of the project is a simple and impactful symbol: **the bronze shoes**. In Canada, it was first used to mark the Famine grave in Ottawa. Other locations emerged as fitting sites as the trail developed. The vision then developed as a global project to mark the journeys of all Famine emigrants around the world. They are now used in locations overseas as a clear, repeatable, and deeply resonant way of marking famine migration. In that way, the bronze shoes do more than commemorate the past; they create a live connection between Strokestown, the wider National Famine Way, and the places overseas where the stories of Famine emigrants continued.

The GIFW project grows by *“following the energy”*. Rather than relying on a formal programme, it works with communities that already feel a connection to the Famine story. Each site is locally led, with communities fundraising, securing permissions, researching their local story and organising the unveiling. In Canada, that has helped bring Irish groups into contact with one another, in many cases for the first time. The launch in St John’s, Newfoundland in 2024 showed the strength of that response. The RV Celtic Explorer carried fifteen bronze shoes across the Atlantic, echoing the original famine passage, and after the ceremony people queued to approach and touch them. The reaction was described as *“profound and very moving.”*

Looking ahead, the ambition is to keep building on that connection. The project also wants to strengthen research, genealogy and links back to specific places of origin in Ireland, while connecting the growing overseas network to the planned **Famine Ports of Embarkation** project at home. The longer-term vision is substantial: a wider network of bronze shoe sites, each with a QR code linking to the GIFW website, a connected trail across Ireland and overseas, a 40,000km Global Irish Famine Way, and a major Global Irish Famine Way Conference in 2027 bringing together participants from Ireland, Canada, the US, Australia and the UK. The challenge is that all of this is still being carried largely through volunteer effort and intermittent funding.

The model is clearly working, but to grow well it needs steadier support: dedicated coordination, research capacity and stronger institutional backing to help sustain the international relationships it has already created.

