

Kilrush and District Historical Society

Kilrush and District Historical Society evolved from a Facebook group set up by Kilrush teacher Laura Hogan but it quickly became something more when local historian Paul O'Brien drew attention to the neglected state of the pre-Reformation graveyard surrounding the former Church of Ireland while researching the Glynn family. What began as an effort to clean up an overgrown churchyard soon developed into a wider local history initiative. A first public meeting in December 2011, brought together people with a shared interest in heritage, and the society quickly found its direction.

The turning point came when Paddy Waldron, the group's PRO, identified the National Famine Commemoration as an opportunity not only to tell Kilrush's own famine story, but to bring diaspora back to the town in a meaningful way. A Facebook post about bringing the commemoration to Kilrush was the catalyst: the then mayor, Councillor Ian Lynch replied within an hour to say it was "*an excellent idea*", and both the town council and county council got behind it. With support from council staff, local historians and volunteers across the town, the society helped deliver a major programme of lectures, tours and public events, culminating in thousands gathering on Frances St. to hear President Michael D. Higgins. As Paddy Waldron recalled, "*The whole town came out and joined in.*"

CASE STUDY



Paddy Waldron, PRO of Kilrush and District Historical Society

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Since then, the society has continued to build on that foundation through a regular monthly lecture series, local outings and bus tours, commemorations, plaques, conferences and collaborations with other heritage groups. Alongside this, it has developed a strong **genealogy and diaspora engagement role**. Much of that is shaped by Paddy Waldron's long-term research, including a substantial genealogy database covering families connected to West Clare over the last two centuries, as well as extensive DNA work that has made the area unusually well mapped in genealogical terms. Through years of encouraging local people to submit DNA samples, it is possible for descendants abroad to trace ancestry not just to County Clare, but in many cases to the Loop Head Peninsula, the north-west Shannon estuary, or even to a specific townland, farm or house. The society engages diaspora through its website, mailing list, Facebook presence and YouTube broadcasts, but also through direct contact with people tracing ancestors, planning visits, or reconnecting with local roots. One particularly striking expression of that work is Paddy's **West Clare Diaspora Visitors Book**, begun in 2017 to record the signatures and genealogical details of diaspora visitors who find their way back through the society's research and outreach. That work will continue into October 2026, when the society plans to host a conference linked to the online release of the 1926 census, creating another opportunity to bring people back to Kilrush through family history and local connection.



Members of Kilrush and District Historical Society

With the right support, the society could begin to meet a level of interest far greater than current voluntary capacity allows. As Paddy put it, even one graveyard in Kilrush may connect to *“thousands of people tracing their roots back to that one graveyard or back to the town of Kilrush.”* The society's work is still largely volunteer-led, and meeting that demand is difficult without dedicated capacity. As Paddy put it, *“It would be nice to be able to pay somebody to have office hours there even a day a week... where people could drop in for help.”* With even a small amount of staffed support, the society could do much more to care for its archives, assist visitors, and strengthen Kilrush's role as a meaningful homecoming point for descendants across the world.

