



World Heritage Site

## The Giants Causeway



The Causeway became widely known as the 'Eighth Wonder of the World' from the 1700s when large numbers of visitors came to view this amazing array of basalt columns, it is estimated that there are around 40,000 in total. Today's visitor is free to wander over the stones but it was not always the case. Growing worldwide fame brought increasing numbers of visitors which inspired a syndicate to engage in a profitable charge's scheme to view the stones at close hand. For over a century prior to this scheme, there had been disputes of access and ownership, the stones have been fenced off, access denied and several legal challenges made. However, in 1897 one lengthy legal battle between this syndicate and local people who objected took place, the High Court in London recognised that a road to the stones had existed for public access to the foreshore but turned down recognition of access over the stones. The Giants Causeway Company subsequently improved the site, fenced off the stones and levied a charge to view them at close hand. The Causeway came into public ownership in 1963 when it was bought by the National Trust but it is thanks to a small band of people who stood up for an ancient right of way in the late 1800's that has led to this free access today. A house once stood at the point where the mini-bus now turns round, a caretaker lived there to monitor the stones and turnstile, through the Giants Gate was a Victorian tea room - both have long since gone. There is nothing left of a two hundred year old tradition that existed amongst local people, who would set up small stalls along the pathway that leads to the causeway or the guides who would show you round or the boatmen who would row you round to Portcoon Cave or round past the Causeway to view the spectacular Amphitheatre.



**Scientific facts** - The causeway was formed during the early Tertiary period some 62 - 65 million years ago over a long period of igneous activity. Three lava outflows occurred known as the Lower, Middle and Upper Basaltic. Lulls occurred between the outflows as is evident in the deep inter-basaltic layer of reddish brown 'lithomarge' which is rich in clay, iron and aluminium oxides from weathering of the underlying basalt. The causeway area would have been situated in an equatorial region at that time, experiencing hot and humid conditions. This came about due to the fact that the earth's crust is floating on moving plates known as 'tectonic plates', these move slowly but over millions of years they can travel thousands of miles. The hexagonal columns of the causeway occur in the middle basalt layer, the same formations can be seen at Staffa in Scotland (Fingal's Cave) and they also occurs in the surrounding landscape of North Antrim and in fact many other parts of the world.

The fascinating pattern that we see in the causeway stones formed as a result of rock crystallization under conditions of accelerated cooling, this usually occurs when molten lava comes into immediate contact with water, as happens today in Hawaii, the resulting fast accelerated cooling process causes cracking and results in what we see today at the causeway. For more information on volcanism please follow the link to the right where you will find references volcanic activities and their outcomes including 'column jointing' as occurs at the causeway.

The coastal scenery adjacent to the causeway is some of the most beautiful and awe inspiring that you are likely to find anywhere. The majestic cliffs and inaccessible bays combine with myth and legend to inspire, but look carefully amongst this breathtaking landscape and you will find echoes of another reality, isolated ruins, kelp walls and shoreline fields bear testament to the harder life of subsistence farming and fishing endured by past generations. Dotted around the coast you'll find small sheltered harbours and slipways, fishermen's cottages and rock formations that you will never forget. Many ships have foundered below these towering cliffs but none so tragic as that of the Girona, a galleass of the Spanish Armada. Carrying the crews from two previous Armada shipwrecks, the Girona was on passage from Killybegs and trying to reach the relative safety of Scotland. As she rounded Inishowen peninsula, heavily over laden and in deteriorating sea conditions, her rudder failed. In the teeth of a full blown north-westerly gale, the crew battled to keep her off the coast but she finally struck Lacada Point in view of the Giants Causeway at midnight on October 30th 1588 with the loss of over twelve hundred men. Only five are believed to have survived. Local folklore tell of descendants living here and that victims of the wreck, maybe Spanish nobility, were buried in St. Cuthbert's graveyard near Dunluce Castle, it is known that cannons from the wreck were placed here.

### **Myths & legends – the Finn MacCool story**

There are many heroic legends surrounding Finn MacCool, comparisons have been drawn between him and the legend of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. Finn was reputed as being the leader of the Fianna, the guardians of the King of Ireland whom he formed from a rough bunch of warriors in an elite group of men who transformed under his command into the manifestation of justice and honour, they were the people's heroes. Finn's famous son whose mother was the goddess Sadb, is said to be buried in Glennaan. It is worth noting that many of the great legends of Ireland are based or linked to the north coast of Ulster, there must be some correlation between this and the fact that Whitepark Bay was where man first settled in Ireland.

However in this section we will concentrate on his role in building the Giants Causeway. The story goes thus:-

Finn a renown warrior was going about his daily duties on the north coast when one of his adversary, a Scottish giant called Benandonner started shouting and ridiculing Finn's fighting prowess. This angered Finn who lifted a lump of earth and pelted it to Scotland as a challenge to this giant. The Scottish giant retaliated with a rock back to Finn shouting that if he could get his hand on him, he would make sure that Finn would never fight again adding that unfortunately he could not swim the short distance across the Channel, so Finn would be spared that fate. Finn got enraged by this and tore large pieces from the cliffs, he worked for over a week pushing these into the ocean bed and made a sturdy causeway to Scotland, when he had finished he shouted 'Now you'll had no excuse' to come over and do your best. Fearing to lose his own reputation and pride the Scottish giant had no alternative but come over the causeway. Finn was tired, having not slept for the week he worked on the causeway and did not feel ready for fighting. He thought about how he could buy some time and recuperate to face the Scottish giant and came up with an ingenious plan. Quickly he made a large cot and disguised himself as a baby ..... and waited. The Scottish giant arrived at Finn's house shouting, 'Where is that coward MacCool', Finn's wife said the he was away but sure sit down and have a cup of tea, he'll not be long. The tea arrived with a cake in which Finn's wife had placed some stones. Benandonner took a bite and broke one of his teeth, and thought to himself, this Finn must be a tough boyo to eat cakes like this, not to be outdone, he finished off the cake and tea, breaking two more teeth in the process. He noticed the baby cot and the baby inside it and his eyes widened in fear, he thought to himself, my goodness if this is the size of the baby? What size is the Father? He reached his hand in to touch the sleeping baby, half out of curiosity and half as a sign of affection, Finn bit the tip of his finger off. Benandonner was shocked by this and thought to himself, if this is what the baby is capable of, what must the father be capable of and what could he not do! This thought terrified him, the fear got the better of him and took to his heels and ran like he had never ran before, back across the causeway to Scotland destroying it as he went. Well.....that is one version of the story, there are many more to choose from, including one of love and romance.

Sources & Links: <http://www.giantscausewaycentre.com>, <http://www.northerntrim.com/giantscauseway.htm>, <http://www.giantscausewayofficialguide.com/home.htm>, <http://www.irelandunveiled.com/home.cgi>, <http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/main/w-vh/w-visits/w-findaplace/w-giantscauseway>, <http://www.geographia.com/northern-ireland/ukiant01.htm>, <http://www.causewaycoastandglens.com/Home/tabid/124/Default.aspx>