

COMMEMORATION 2026 NATIONAL FAMINE

COMMUNITY PROGRAMME



Comhairle Chontae na Gaillimhe
Galway County Council



OPW



The
IRISH
WORKHOUSE
CENTRE



Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

Introduction

Irish Workhouse Centre, Portumna, Co. Galway | 9–24 May 2026

The National Famine Commemoration 2026 in Portumna is supported by an extensive Community Programme of academic, educational, cultural and artistic events, running from 9–24 May. The programme has been carefully designed to deepen public understanding of An Gorta Mór while ensuring strong community participation, intergenerational learning and creative engagement at local, regional and national levels.

Building on the historical significance of Portumna and East Galway, the programme brings together leading scholars, local historians, educators, artists, and community groups from the four corners of Galway County to explore the human, social, political and archaeological legacies of the Great Famine.



Portumna Workhouse. Photo credit: Kerry Kissane.

Foreword

It is a great honour, as Cathaoirleach of the County of Galway, to welcome you to the National Famine Commemoration 2026 Community Programme in Portumna. This programme represents a significant collective effort to remember the Great Famine in a manner that is thoughtful, inclusive and grounded in historical understanding.

I wish to sincerely acknowledge the Minister for Culture, Communications & Sport for his leadership and support in enabling this programme to take place, and for the funding of the Community Programme of events. I also extend thanks to the Office of Public Works, the Department of An Taoiseach, An Garda Síochána, the Defence Forces and the Department of Foreign Affairs for their roles and cooperation in supporting the wider commemoration.

I am particularly grateful to the Irish Workhouse Centre, Portumna, whose dedication to preserving and interpreting this extraordinary site makes it such a fitting national venue for remembrance. I also acknowledge with appreciation Portumna Tidy Towns, Portumna Chamber of Commerce, Portumna Castle, the schools of Portumna, and the many local community groups and local businesses whose involvement and support are central to the success of this commemorative week.

This programme reflects the deep importance of the National Famine Commemoration for the people of County Galway and for our diaspora, whose shared history continues to shape identity, memory and connection across generations and continents.

Cllr David Collins

Cathaoirleach of the County of Galway

Message

The National Famine Commemoration Community Programme 2026 is a recognition of how our past influences us as a people.

This Programme demonstrates the power of partnership between Galway County Council, government departments, national agencies, heritage organisations, educators, artists and community groups. Our Council is proud to support and facilitate this community programme through our Heritage Office and the collective work of many Council staff across the organisation.

To the Council staff involved in this important work, I extend my sincere appreciation. To the Communities, including heritage groups across County Galway and nationwide, I thank you for your invaluable contributions in the delivery of this programme of events. These contributions ensure that the Famine Commemoration is informed and influenced by scholars, by local knowledge, lived memory and community voice.

The Irish Workhouse Centre in Portumna, County Galway, provides an authentic and resonant setting for this national commemoration of a tragic time in Irish history. As a nationally significant surviving workhouse, it bears witness to the lived experience of the Great Famine and to the central role these institutions played in the lives of thousands across Galway and beyond. Hosting the 2026 Community Programme at this location reinforces the responsibility we share to remember with care, accuracy and dignity one of the most important and defining times of our past.

Liam Conneally

Chief Executive, Galway County Council

Message from the Board of Directors

Irish Workhouse Centre, Portumna

The Board of Directors of the Irish Workhouse Centre is honoured that Portumna has been selected as the focal location for the National Famine Commemoration Community Programme 2026. This site, preserved and interpreted for public understanding, offers a unique and deeply significant space in which to engage with the history and legacy of the Great Famine.

We warmly acknowledge the collaboration with Galway County Council, the support of the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport, and the commitment of all partners, contributors and participants who have shaped this wide ranging programme. The events presented over these weeks reflect a shared commitment to respectful remembrance, historical inquiry and community engagement.

The Irish Workhouse Centre remains dedicated to providing a place where difficult histories can be explored thoughtfully and where learning, reflection and dialogue are supported for present and future generations.



Saturday 9 May 2026

Reflecting on the Famine: A Commemoration Conference

Venue: **Irish Workhouse Centre, Portumna**

Time: **9am – 5pm**

The programme begins with a full day academic conference. This conference provides a critical intellectual foundation for the week's events, examining how the Great Famine has been remembered, represented and understood from the nineteenth century to the present day.

Presentations explore themes including public memory and commemoration, famine and the arts, music and cultural loss, philanthropy, governance and the operation of the Poor Law system. A panel discussion draws together senior historians and commentators to reflect on the enduring legacy of the famine in Ireland and within the global Irish diaspora. The conference positions Portumna as a national centre for scholarship and reflection during the commemorative week and strengthens links between academic research and public understanding.

Sunday 10 May 2026

Our Famine Stories – Exhibition opening and book launch of *Hunger, Hardship and Relief: The Great Famine in Killimor, Co. Galway*

Venue: **Irish Workhouse Centre, Portumna**

Official launch : Cllr David Collins, *Cathaoirleach of the county of Galway*

Time: **1pm – 4pm**

Following the academic focus of the conference, the programme turns to community storytelling with the opening of *Our Famine Stories*, an exhibition presenting famine histories from across the county of Galway and Minnesota. Drawing on community research, archival sources and visual interpretation, the exhibition reflects experiences from urban, rural and coastal parts of the county, as well as stories of emigration and settlement among Galway diaspora communities in Minnesota. Together, these perspectives highlight lived experience on both sides of the Atlantic, offering visitors an accessible, yet deeply human engagement with the legacy of the Great Famine and its enduring transnational connections.

Book launch

Hunger, Hardship and Relief: The Great Famine in Killimor, Co. Galway

Hunger, Hardship and Relief, a newly published famine booklet, documents the experience of Killimor during the famine years. Researched and produced locally, the booklet reflects the growing role of communities in reclaiming and interpreting their own histories, and contributes to the wider body of famine studies in County Galway.



Kieran Tuohy,
Portumna Workhouse: Writer's Project
Photo credit Kerry Kissane.

Monday 11 May 2026

Children in the Workhouse

Children's Bi-lingual Educational Book Launch

Venue: **Irish Workhouse Centre, Portumna**

Time: **11am - 1pm**

Educational outreach is a core strand of the Community Programme. On Monday, a new bi-lingual children's educational workbook entitled *Children in the Workhouse*, written by Dr Gerard Moran and illustrated by Sara Nylund, will be launched. It is designed to introduce younger audiences to the history of the famine and the workhouse system in a clear, age appropriate and engaging way. The bi-lingual workbook supports schools, families and teachers and ensures that commemoration is meaningful to the next generation, embedding learning and reflection beyond the commemorative year.



Kieran Tuohy,
Dark Shadows exhibition.
Photo credit Kerry Kissane.

Tuesday 12 May 2026

Lunch & Learn Public Lecture

House Thrown Down by Neighbours: Entering the Grey Zone of the Great Famine: **Lecture by Breandán Mac Suibhne, University of Galway and University of Galway Student StoryMap and book launch of *Beyond the Gates: Stories from Seven Galway Workhouses***

Venue: **Irish Workhouse Centre, Portumna**

Time: **12.30pm – 3.00pm**

Official Launch: Dr Breandán Mac Suibhne, University of Galway

This event forms part of the emerging Lunch & Learn series, which aims to foster informal, yet informed engagement with famine history among local audiences. The lunchtime public lecture will be delivered by Dr Breandán Mac Suibhne, University of Galway, whose work has significantly contributed to contemporary scholarship on the Great Famine.

Lecture: *House Thrown Down by Neighbours: Entering the Grey Zone of the Great Famine* by **Breandán Mac Suibhne, University of Galway**

Scholarship on the Great Famine had long been concerned with what was done to and for the poor, by landlords, charities and the state. Since the late 1990s, scholars have become increasingly concerned with what the poor did to and for each other. Here, University of Galway historian Breandán Mac Suibhne probes the grey zone of the Famine, with particular reference to east Galway.

The lecture will be followed by the launch of a University of Galway student-led digital StoryMap and an accompanying publication, *Beyond the Gates: Stories from Seven Galway Workhouses*. These projects highlight the value of student and community research, digital humanities and place-based learning, while making new research accessible to the wider public. The launch also reflects the strong collaboration between higher education institutions and local heritage initiatives.

Launch and Readings: *Silence of Stone* New writing for the National Famine Commemoration

Date: **Tuesday 12 May 2026**

Venue: **Irish Workhouse Centre, Portumna**

Time: **7.30pm – 8.30pm**

As part of the community outreach programme of the 2026 National Famine Commemoration in Portumna, the Irish Workhouse Centre engaged local writer Noelle Lynskey to facilitate a series of writing workshops. A diverse group of participants from Clare, Tipperary, Galway City, Portumna and the surrounding parishes focused on the ambience and contents of the centre's museum. Some of the project's writings are published in this new publication, *Silence of Stone*.

The workshops were funded under Creative Ireland and supported by the Irish Workhouse Centre and Portumna Arts Group. The publication, designed by Little Bird Design and edited by Noelle Lynskey, is funded by the Department of Culture, Communications and Sport and Galway County Council.



IGHM Illustration

Wednesday 13 May 2026

Lunch & Learn : Public Lecture and launch of *An Gorta Mór i Maigh Cuilinn 1845-1850 (1997)* – Reprint

Venue: **Irish Workhouse Centre, Portumna**

Time: **12.30pm – 3.00pm**

An Gorta Mór i Maigh Cuilinn 1845-1850 (1997) – Reprint

Official Launch: Dr Christy Cunniffe

This event marks the reprint launch of the *An Gorta Mór i Maigh Cuilinn 1845-1850 (1997)*, ensuring continued access to an important local study of famine history. The re-issue reflects sustained public interest in community led historical publications and supports their wider dissemination.

Lunch & Learn Lecture by Kathleen Villiers Tuthill

This Lunch & Learn lecture explores Connemara and the Famine, drawing on regional perspectives and long standing scholarship to examine how famine conditions shaped landscape, society and collective memory in the west of Ireland.

Wednesday 13 May 2026

Walk & Talk

FREE admission for tour

Noel Larkin will give a guided 'talk & walk' entitled '*The 14th Earl of Clanricarde and his pivotal role in administrating his estate during the Famine Period*'

Venue: **Portumna Castle, Portumna**

Time: **3.00pm – 4.00pm**

Bishop Maginn: The Famine and the Fugitive

Venue: **Irish Workhouse Centre, Portumna**

Date: **Wednesday, 13 May 2026**

Time: **8.00pm**

BISHOP MAGINN - THE FAMINE AND THE FUGITIVE

A site-specific, staged reading in one act

Written by **Turlough McConnell** and directed by **Marian Frawley**

“In the darkest year of Ireland’s Famine, a defiant bishop and a hunted revolutionary meet in secret – and must decide how much a nation is worth saving.”

On July 29, 1848, the Young Ireland rebellion was crushed in a matter of hours at Ballingarry, County Tipperary. Its leaders were hunted down, arrested and sentenced to death. A wanted man, charged with treason, he sought the one person who might save him. That man was Dr Edward Maginn, the Catholic Bishop of Derry.

Performed in the very spaces where the starving once sought relief, this extraordinary true story becomes living theatre.

Historic reflections will be offered by **Professor Christine Kinealy**, Quinnipiac University, and **Dr Gerard Moran**, Emeritus Professor, University of Galway.



Thursday 14 May 2026

Lunch & Learn: Public Lecture

Venue: **Portumna Courthouse**

Time: **12.30pm – 2.30pm**

Speaker: Bernie Doherty, *Galway Community Archaeologist*

Bernie Doherty's talk focuses on the archaeology of the famine, examining the physical and material traces left in the landscape, including settlement patterns, relief works, burial grounds and abandoned places. Bernie draws on decades of professional archaeological experience and community based research, and highlights how archaeology provides insights into lived experience, survival strategies and long term legacy, complementing documentary sources and oral history.

Friday 15 May 2026

Lunch & Learn: *The life and political career of John Roche MP (1848-1914)*

Venue: **Portumna Courthouse**

Time: **12.30pm – 2.30pm**

Speaker: Chief Superintendent Gerard Roche

Chief Superintendent Gerard Roche presents a deeply personal and historically grounded lecture examining the life and political career of his great grandfather, John Roche MP (1848-1914). The talk situates John Roche's story within the wider struggle for tenants' rights and land ownership in East Galway, highlighting the intersection of famine memory, land agitation, constitutional politics and grassroots resistance. Through this lens, the lecture illuminates how famine era hardship continued to shape political consciousness into the late nineteenth and early twentieth

centuries, bringing historical narrative and personal heritage together in a powerful act of commemoration.

Famine and Workhouse Walking Trail (Guided Walk)

Date: **Friday, 15 May 2026**

Time: **7.30pm (duration: just over one hour)**

Meeting Point: **Portumna Courthouse**

Venue: **Walking route through Portumna**

David Broderick will lead an engaging and thought provoking guided walk exploring Famine- and workhouse-related sites around Portumna.

The walk will form the basis for a permanent, self guided heritage trail, focused on the story of Mary Fielding, a young girl who lived and died in Portumna Workhouse. The idea for this trail was prompted by the National Famine Commemoration Event 2026.

No booking is required

HUNGER / An Gorta Mór

Date: **Monday, 18 May**

Venue: **Workhouse, Portumna**

Time: **7.30pm**

Curlew Theatre present *HUNGER / An Gorta Mór*, a dramatic play for two voices, performed by **Tegolin Knowland** and **Seán Coyne**, and devised and directed by **Eamon Grennan**.

This powerful work responds to the Great Famine as a long unspeakable subject in Irish life. The piece is structured as an 'audio quilt' of voices drawn from those who lived through, witnessed or were connected to the catastrophe. A historical prologue traces voices from the 16th to the late

18th century, including excerpts from writers such as Spenser, Swift and Goldsmith, leading into the events of the Great Famine itself.

Through text and voice, the performance seeks to give immediate, human expression to the Famine experience and to bring these 'living dead' voices into close contact with the audience.

Curlew Theatre Company, based in Connemara, Co. Galway, specialises in Plays for Voices, focusing on Irish history, literature and culture. Their work relies almost entirely on text and voice, with minimal props, creating an intimate and direct relationship between performers and audience. *HUNGER / An Gorta Mór* has been performed at Ireland's Great Hunger Museum at Quinnipiac University, Connecticut.

"In *Hunger*, Knowland and Coyne briefly and evocatively made that catastrophic time live for our audience ... it was one of the highlights of our year."

— Joseph Lennon, Director, Irish Studies Programme, Villanova University.

EVENING RISE

An Evening of Song

Date: **Tuesday, 19 May**

Venue: **Irish Workhouse Centre, Portumna**

Time: **8.00pm – 9.00pm**

(Doors open at 7.45pm)

Admission: Free

This evening of song brings together **Omna** (Portumna) and Scrum Notes (Loughrea), with guest soloist **Pascal Kennedy**. The programme is directed by **Carmel Dooley**, with accompaniment by **Sophie Ward**, and offers a shared musical experience in the historic setting of the Irish Workhouse Centre.

Joyce Little – *Threadbare*

Venue: **Irish Workhouse Centre, Portumna**

Exhibition Dates: **Sunday 24 May – Sunday 14 June**

Official Launch: **Sunday 24 May at 3.00pm**

Official Launch: Nuala O'Connor

As part of the National Famine Commemoration community programme, visual artist and art therapist **Joyce Little** presents *Threadbare*, an extensive exhibition of textile artworks at the Irish Workhouse Centre, Portumna.

In *Threadbare*, she challenges conventional perceptions of textile art, exploring the expressive and sculptural potential of fabric. Drawing on her background in fashion design, she uses textiles not merely as decorative surfaces but also as structural materials characterised by form, tension and movement. Her work reflects on the cultural, social and environmental significance of textiles, addressing themes such as consumerism, fast fashion, cheap labour and the growing problem of textile waste. Through this body of work, textiles are revealed as materials that accompany us throughout life and play a central role in personal expression and identity.

The exhibition will be officially launched on **Sunday 24 May at 3.00pm by Nuala O'Connor**, and the public is warmly invited to attend.

In addition, Joyce Little will host a **Gelli Printing Workshop for adults** on **Monday 25 May, 2.00pm–4.00pm**, at the Irish Workhouse Centre, Portumna. This hands on workshop offers participants an opportunity to explore Gelli printing, using botanical materials, textiles and lace, supporting both beginners and experienced artists in creating layered monoprints suitable for framing, journaling, collage or textile applications.

This workshop is supported by **Creative Ireland, Galway County Council**.

For further information, please contact info@irishworkhousecentre.ie

For further information on any of the above events please contact:

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Email: info@irishworkhousecentre.ie

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Galway County Council Heritage Office

Email: heritage@galwaycoco.ie

The National Famine Commemoration Community Programme 2026

Project Managers: Dr Christy Cunniffe, Irish Workhouse Centre; Marie Mannion, Heritage Officer, Galway County Council; Dr Gerard Moran.

The National Famine Commemoration Community Programme 2026

Steering Group: Dr Christy Cunniffe, Irish Workhouse Centre; Marie Mannion, Heritage Officer, Galway County Council; Dr Gerard Moran; Martin Sheil, Irish Workhouse Centre; Ann Hodgins, Irish Workhouse Centre and Donal Burke, Irish Workhouse Centre.

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Thanks also to all the community groups and businesses in Portumna, including the following:

- *An Gáirdín*
- *Galway Rural Development (TÚS and RSS schemes)*
- *GRETB*
- *Portumna Active Retirement*
- *Portumna Castle*
- *Portumna Chamber of Commerce*
- *Portumna Co-op*
- *Portumna Community School*
- *Portumna Courthouse*
- *Portumna GAA*
- *Portumna Tidy Towns*
- *Portumna Arts Group*
- *St. Brendan's National School, Portumna*
- *Workhouse staff and volunteers*

The National Famine Commemoration Community Programme 2026 was funded by: Department of Culture, Communications and Sport and Galway County Council

