



**Presentation to Mid Ulster
District Council
Development Committee**

14 March 2024

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History of Benburb Priory Estate 1

- early Christian period, religious settlement
- early 1600s, Sir Richard Wingfield (later Viscount Powerscourt) granted 9,200 acres of land including Benburb and surrounding area
- 1611, Wingfield built a castle/bawn at Benburb (Benburb Castle) on the site of the original Shane O'Neill castle, and built St Patrick's Church (1618)
- 1646, Battle of Benburb. Owen Roe O'Neill's army defeated the army of Col. Robert Monro
- 1877 James Bruce (distiller) bought the estate, remodelled the village, and built the manor house (1887)
- 1917, Bruce died, estate (reduced to around 100 acres as a result *inter alia* of the land acts) passed to his brother. It fell into progressive disuse under successive owners.
- 1940, estate requisitioned by the War Office as a WW2 military hospital for UK, US and Belgian troops

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History of Benburb Priory Estate 2

- 1947, estate purchased by Clonfeacle parish and later sold to the Servite Order (Chicago branch)
- 1949, Benburb Servite Priory established as a seminary for training of friars
- Late 1950s/early 1960s, close to 100 friars and trainees based at Benburb
- 1970s onwards, progressive diminution in friar numbers paralleled by increasing role of the Priory as a cross-community centre
- 2000, amalgamation of Servites in Ireland and Great Britain into 'Province of the Isles'

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History of Benburb Priory Estate 3

- Early 2000s, Servite library holdings and archives from across Great Britain and Ireland transferred to Benburb
- 2010, Library & Museum Board established
- 2012, initial tranche of funding from Heritage (Lottery) Fund (HF)
- 2014, major tranche of HF funding to refurbish Stables area, develop Library and Museum and establish coffee shop
- 2017, Library and Museum officially opened by the Roman Catholic and Church of Ireland archbishops of Armagh
- 2020, revised governance and management structures established in order to maintain Priory (Servite) ethos, and its role and sustainability as a major religious, cultural and community centre (recognising the inevitable inability of the Servite Order to maintain a constant physical presence in Benburb).

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Benburb Priory – A Leading Cultural and Heritage Centre

The Assets

- Beautiful and historic estate
- O’Neill/Wingfield Castle (reopened to the public after years in dormancy)
- the Library and Museum
- the Manor House
- the white bridge spanning the River Blackwater
- the walled garden and its greenhouses dating back to the 19th century
- walkways and laneways
- Fishing and other river activities

The Actual and Potential Offerings

- support for conferences, talks, tours and events
- lecture and meeting facilities, business meetings, residential accommodation
- arts and crafts
- facilities for community groups
- support for local sports groups
- support for local small businesses and tourism

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Benburb Priory Sustainability Physical Requirements

- Refurbishments and replacement builds (including residential) to support events, conferences and activities
- Enhancement of physical estate (improved walkways, signage, interpretative boards etc.)
- Childrens play area
- Roadways (castle), parking

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Benburb Priory Sustainability Human Resource Requirements

- Management
- Accounts/book-keeping
- Events organisation
- Library & Museum support
- Cleaning and Maintenance
- Continued support from committed volunteers (a major strength of the Priory)

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Benburb Priory Sustainability External Support Requirements

- Local Community
- Local Councils (MUDC [and ABC])
- Religious and spiritual groups
- Community Groups and Priory Users
- Culture and Heritage Groups (e.g. O'Neill Country Historical Society, universities, specialist groups etc.)
- External funders (Heritage Fund, Peace Plus, government departments, local councils, charitable foundations, donors etc.)

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Vision

'An oasis of spiritual, cultural and social development and a model of community cooperation for the benefit of all'

Benburb Priory is a thriving and vibrant centre but needs the continued and active support of all key organisations and individuals in promoting a sustainable future for the benefit of the local and wider community

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