

Sir Hans Sloane – More Than Just The Chocolate Man

Description



Sir Hans Sloane is credited with bringing the recipe for drinking chocolate to Europe.

Jenny Lee takes a bite of Killyleagh history during a walking tour of the Co Down village, birthplace of scientist and collector Sir Hans Sloane, who is credited with bringing the recipe for drinking chocolate to Europe in the 1680s.

WHAT do milk chocolate, the British Museum, Lord Nelson and Takabuti have in common? The answers can all be found in the sleepy village of Killyleagh on the shores of Strangford Lough.

The most famous resident of the Co Down village was Sir Hans Sloane, celebrated in his home town as the man who brought the recipe for drinking chocolate to Europe from the Caribbean in the 17th century.

Born in Killyleagh on April 16 1660, he lived and studied in the village until he was 19. His father died when Hans was just six and shortly afterwards his mother left Killyleagh with a new partner, leaving the youngster and his brothers to raise themselves in their childhood home.

Fascinated with collecting things, as a boy Hans began to gather rocks, shells, and plants from the shores of the lough. With the help of the residents of Killyleagh Castle and the local church rector, he consulted books to begin to classify and organise his collections, which grew throughout his life.

From humble beginnings he might have been, but such was the worth of Sir Hans Sloane's collections that they eventually became the founding collections of the British Museum, where they reside to this day. He went on to study medicine and science, becoming one of the first advocates of inoculation; he rose to the position of royal physician and was both president of the Royal Society, succeeding Sir Isaac Newton, and president of the Royal College of Physicians.

For all these achievements, Sir Hans Sloane is remembered and honoured in London, in his day the world centre of both commerce and learning – Sloane Square and Hans Place named after him – but his achievements are perhaps less well appreciated in his home place.

Sir Hans Sloane by Clive Scoular

One man determined to remind the people of Northern Ireland about their famous son, however; historian Clive Scoular.

Since 2010, the 350th anniversary of Sir Hans Sloane's birth, Clive has taken on the persona and role of a living Hans Sloane and guides locals and visitors on unique tours around Killyleagh.

Dressed in his bespoke velvet period costume and wig, Clive relives the boyhood days of the eminent physician and botanist. I was privileged to be taken by Clive on a private tour of the village and discover all kinds of interesting facts and stories about the famous man and other historical figures from Killyleagh's past.

“As we stand here today, if you could click your mind back 350 years you've still got the same castle, church, lough and same two streets that the wee boy Hans grew up among. Every little place here has got a story,” Clive, who the locals often address as “Sir Hans”, told me.

Starting at the gates of the Castle where there stands a commemorative stone to Sir Hans, we walked down Frederick Street past his birthplace. Sadly the house was demolished in 1970s to make way for a modern housing estate, though a small plaque remains close by to mark the spot.

In 1676 when he was 16, Sir Hans contracted an illness, probably tuberculosis. For the next three years he took great care of his health and rarely ventured out, instead spending his time reading. He did recover and when he turned 19 he was encouraged by the people of Killyleagh to go to London to study – first science and then medicine. His brothers also followed him to England, one becoming an MP.

As our walk continued up Church Hill to the picturesque Killyleagh Church of Ireland, we came upon the burial place of four of Sir Hans's siblings, who died before the age of one.

Clive also pointed out a blue plaque dedicated to another of Killyleagh's notable sons – Dr Edward Hincks. Rector of Killyleagh for 41 years from 1825-1866, he was a world renowned Egyptologist and regarded as the foremost reader of hieroglyphics. He was often called up to identify artefacts being dug out of the sands of the Middle East

“During the 1850s they were making discoveries in modern Syria but had no idea what they writing on them said. So they would copy them or send the stone back to Killyleagh harbour. Hincks was even there at the unrolling of the Takabuti mummy that can be seen the Ulster Museum,” according to Clive.

The graveyard also contains the remains of Sir Henry Blackwood “ Nelson’s only Irish captain at the Battle of Trafalgar.

“He was another wee boy from Killyleagh who did good, becoming an admiral in the navy. He also made life better for the sailors “ introducing higher head heights, better bedding arrangements and bright yellow painting on the decks to guide them,” Clive said.

Once a bustling port and home to the biggest mill and tannery in Ireland, what was once the industrial part of Killyleagh is these days home to rows of colourful modern houses and to Hans Sloane Square. In the village green stands a statue of Sir Hans “ a replica of one erected in the Physic Garden at his former Manor House in Chelsea.

“Whilst only a small part of who he was, Sir Hans is known as the chocolate man, advocating the use of liquid milk chocolate as a medicinal beverage,” said Clive, explaining that the discovery occurred during a trip to Jamaica when Sir Hans was physician to the Duke of Albermarle.

Sir Hans encountered cocoa, which the locals drank mixed with water. The Killyleagh man devised his own recipe using milk and sugar and by the the 19th century, the Cadbury Brothers sold tins of drinking chocolate whose trade cards also invoked Sloane’s recipe.

During his 15 months in Jamaica, Sir Hans discovered another remedy which would help the medical world for many years “ quinine, which was widely used as an antimalarial drug. He lived to the grand old age of 92. So was chocolate the secret to his longevity?

“Whether he had a drink of chocolate every night I very much doubt. Throughout his life he was very careful with healthy eating and active until the day he died,” Clive concluded.

There’s surely food for thought in that.

[Jenny Lee](#)

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