

Ellen Hutchins Festival

Annual Report 2024

Festival's aims and activities

The Ellen Hutchins Festival exists to share the story of Ellen Hutchins (1785-1815) of Ballylickey, Ireland's first female botanist; promote botany and botanical art; and celebrate the biodiversity and beauty of Bantry Bay, West Cork, Ireland. The festival aims to bring people closer to nature and engage them with the need to protect plants in their natural habitats.

It runs an annual festival, has a website and produces books and free leaflets. It can organise exhibitions and talks and provide resources for researchers, artists and poets.

Ellen's books and letters

The year began with an Irish Heritage news article published on New Year's Day 2024 about new finds (two natural history books Ellen owned) adding to Ellen's story.

<https://irishheritagenews.ie/new-finds-add-to-the-story-of-irelands-first-female-botanist-ellen-hutchins/>

Throughout the year, 'On This Day, 210 years ago' blog posts on the website tracked 1814, the final year of correspondence between Ellen Hutchins and Dawson Turner. By December 2024 work had been completed on transcribing the correspondence in 1807 – 1809 and this was shared on the website, alongside 1811 - 1814. The last year to be worked on, 1810, was completed just after the year end - by 9th February 2025. A significant milestone has been reached – the transcription project has been completed and transcriptions of the whole seven and half year correspondence are now available on the Ellen's Letters page.

<https://ellenhutchins.com/ellens-letters/>

ERI: Open House

The festival continued its strong links with the ERI - Environmental Research Institute at UCC. An Open House session for families and adults was held on Saturday 10th February 2024 at the Ellen Hutchins Building on the Lee Road with Festival team members providing activities including writing with quill pens. Hand lenses and microscopes could be used to see the miniature world of lichens. There was a display of archives related to Ellen as well as the contents of the Ellen Hutchins Reading Room to be browsed. The date was chosen to celebrate Ellen's anniversary (9th February) and to fit with the International Day of Women and Girls in Science (11th February).

Talks and publications

Also in February 2024, Madeline Hutchins gave a talk to the Cork Literary and Scientific Society on Ellen.

The festival reprinted its books on lichens by Paul Whelan and on mosses and liverworts by Rory Hodd. In December it launched another small batch of its Botanical Art Starter Pack by Shevaun Doherty.

RTÉ: Ireland's Coast

In September, RTÉ broadcast a three part series, Ireland's Coast, in which Ellen's story was told by botanical artist, Shevaun Doherty, filmed on Bantry Bay and in Bantry House in August 2023. The festival team had provided information and access to archive materials.

Ellen: poets and artists

Ellen's story continues to inspire poets and artists, and the festival team has given support and access to archives to a number of people researching Ellen. This year saw the publication of a chapbook of poetry on seaweed and Ellen, *Holdfast* by Annette Skade, published by the leading Irish eco journal, Channel and launched in Bantry Library during the Ellen Hutchins Festival in August. A Canadian academic and poet, Clare Goulet, 'found' Ellen's story towards the end of her research for her book of poems on lichens and metaphor, *Graphis scripta / writing lichen*, and included a couple of poems inspired by Ellen. Clare visited Bantry to research Ellen further and she read at an event at Bantry Bookshop in the Festival – *Plant Passions and Poetry* presented by Karen Minihan and Finola Finlay.

The artists on the Crespo Foundation's artists residency in Glenkeen Gardens near Ballydehob in Autumn 2024 were focused on Ellen and lichens. They met with festival team members in West Cork and on Zoom. They had 'found' Ellen in the book *Stars, Shells and Bluebells* (edited by Mary Mulvihill, published by WITS in 1997) on a secondhand bookstall in Amsterdam.

Festival 2024

The Ellen Hutchins Festival ran again in the Bantry Bay area during Heritage Week. There were 30 events (or more, depending how you counted them) over 9 days, held on the seashore, in woodlands, meadows, and wonderful indoor spaces, exploring botany and the natural and cultural heritage of inner Bantry Bay. As well as the 'core' botany walks, there was an increased programme of family and children's events and of workshops on botanical art and crafts using plant materials, including basket weaving and seaweed specimens.

We were also delighted to participate in the Bantry Agricultural Show - a first for us. Our 'heritage special' stall there on seaweeds proved to be very popular, including botanical artist, Shevaun Doherty; historical re-enactor, Carrie O'Flynn; seaweed specialist, Frances Gallagher and the use of microscopes and hand lenses.

For the programme of art and crafts activities run in collaboration with local organisations, we added the Heron Gallery, Ahakista and the Workshop, Bantry to existing collaborators: Two Green Shoots (Glengarriff) and Kilcoe Studios (Ballydehob). 'New' offers included making natural dyes from plants with Kathy Kirwan, kelp ink making with Samuel Arnold Keane, green sketching with Anne Harrington Rees, seaweed specimen making by Farraige and printing from life by the shore with Clare Henderson. The workshops provided a rich mix

of ways of getting closer to nature – plants in particular – and of learning more about them and their natural environment.

It was heartening to see such good attendances at the outdoor events and workshops. Of those attending, some had been before - many times or a few, and others were new to the Festival this year. We had some great conversations with people and introduced many to the use of hand lenses and microscopes. There was considerable interest in our publications on local flora and the events inspired many people to buy their own hand lenses from us.

We were very pleased to welcome back many botanists, including Dr Astrid Wingler of UCC, Fionnuala O'Neill and Paul Whelan (lichenologist) to work with us on walking talks. We were delighted that Anja Murray, author and broadcaster came and gave a talk on her book, *Wild Embrace*. We had lovely comments, said and written, about enjoying events and being so impressed with the leaders' knowledge and style. Seaweeds, mosses, lichens and urban wildflowers all came into focus and were given more attention than is usual in every day life. Poetry featured in at least two events and as outliers to our main themes, a prehistoric landscape and geology were the subjects of walks.

We thank all those who made the Festival such a success – our walk and workshop leaders, speakers, those working 'behind the scenes' and our wonderful venues, including Future Forests, Bantry House, Bantry Library, Bantry Bookshop and Mannings of Ballylickey.

A County Cork Heritage Grant enabled the Festival to work with the Work Shop in Bantry to run children's workshops on forest mosses and to develop an innovative and imaginative infographic about moss in urban settings to be launched in 2025.

Ellen in books

In addition to the poetry books already mentioned, Madeline Hutchins helped with a piece on Ellen for Paul Whelan's wonderful new two volume book, *Lichens of Ireland and Great Britain a visual guide*. American academic, Elizabeth Lawson, included Ellen's story in her beautiful book, *Moss and Lichen*, published by Reaktion Books in December and she is coming to speak at the festival in 2025.

Thank you to Funders

We are very grateful for our funders' belief in us and their financial input – this year we thank Cork County Council for Heritage and Arts grants, LAWPRO – Local Authority Water Programme for support for our Water Heritage Day activity and Bantry Credit Union for sponsorship of the Children's Nature Art in the stableyard at Bantry House.

Madeline Hutchins

An organiser of the Ellen Hutchins Festival

9th February 2025