

Ellen Hutchins Festival

Annual Report 2025

Festival's aims and activities

The Ellen Hutchins Festival spans arts and science in its aims of sharing the story of Ellen Hutchins (1785-1815) of Ballylickey, Ireland's first female botanist; promoting botany and botanical art; and celebrating 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.

Celebrating Ten Years and new logo

2025 for the Festival was themed 'celebrating ten years' since the original Festival in 2015, on the 200th anniversary of Ellen's death. A milestone of the year was the launch of the new Festival logo, designed by our graphic designer, Jenny Dempsey, who is based in Bantry. The brief was to have a focus on botany and with a more modern look.

Ellen Hutchins Correspondence Project and Epsilon

Another major achievement was the completion of the transcription of the Ellen Hutchins correspondence (132 letters) and it being accepted onto the Epsilon academic website, where the letters sit alongside those of Darwin and other eminent scientists of the nineteenth century. Search on Ellen Hutchins at <https://epsilon.ac.uk/> sort by date and click the reference number to open each letter. The letters are also on the Ellen Hutchins website, Ellen's Letters page, where the Hutchins / Turner ones are available in PDFs for each year of correspondence. <https://ellenhutchins.com/ellens-letters/>

Throughout the year, 'On This Day 215 years ago' blog posts on the website tracked the correspondence between Ellen Hutchins and fellow botanist Dawson Turner from 1810. See <https://ellenhutchins.com/2025/01/05/5th-january-1810-on-this-day-215-years-ago/>

Links to UCC Sustainability Institute

The Festival continued its strong links with the Sustainability Institute (formerly the Environmental Research Institute) at UCC. An Open House session for families and adults was held on Saturday 8th February 2025 at the Ellen Hutchins Building on the Lee Road with activities including making seaweed specimens with Frances Gallagher and composing poetry about them with Baiba Pruse; writing with a quill pen with historical re-enactor, Carrie O'Flynn; exploring leaf shapes and their names with Lizzy Maskey, one of Ellen's great-great-great-grandnieces; and hand lenses and microscopes to use to see the miniature world of lichens with Paul Whelan. There was a display of archives related to Ellen including books and letters. The date celebrates Ellen's anniversary (she died on 9th February 1815) and fits with St Brigid's Day (1st February) and International Day of Women and Girls in Science (11th February).

International Conference on the Practice of Female Botanists

In June, three papers on Ellen were presented at the conference, Book of Nature, Nature of Books: the Practice of Female Botanists, in Dijon, France. They were given by Madeline Hutchins; another of Ellen's relatives - Maryvonne Hutchins-Boisseau of Strasbourg University; Julia Watson of Ohio State University and Laura Briscoe of the New York Botanical Garden.

Publications / Broadcasts / Exhibition / Memorial

The Festival reprinted its book on seaweeds by Frances Gallagher and prepared and sold another small batch of its Botanical Art Starter Pack by Shevaun Doherty.

In August, Ellen Hutchins was the topic for an episode of NewsTalk Radio's Talking History programme with Patrick Geoghegan. Clare Heardman and Madeline Hutchins of the Festival joined Virginia Teehan, CEO of the Heritage Council, Dr Colin Kelleher of the National Botanic Gardens, Glasnevin, and Dr Eoin Lettice from UCC, talking about Ellen's story in the context of Heritage Week and plant science. Available online at

<https://www.newstalk.com/podcasts/highlights-from-talking-history/ellen-hutchins>

Also in August, RTÉ Nationwide rebroadcast its piece with Anne Cassin on the Festival, filmed in 2021 and first broadcast in 2022. It is available online at <https://www.rte.ie/video/id/3365/> The RTÉ series Ireland's Coast, with a section on Ellen featuring botanical artist, Shevaun Doherty, was rebroadcast in the Autumn and a shortened version (but still with Ellen and Shevaun) was shown in France, Germany and Austria.

Ellen Hutchins featured in an exhibition in the Wren Library, Trinity College Cambridge – In Her Element: Stories of Science's Female Trailblazers. The exhibition ran from May to October 2025 and is also available online. <https://www.trin.cam.ac.uk/library/in-her-element-stories-of-sciences-female-trailblazers/>

Bantry Tidy Towns commissioned a carved memorial to Ellen Hutchins out of the trunk of an ash tree in Garryvurcha churchyard (where Ellen is buried) and it was completed in time for the Festival. See <https://bantrytidytowns.wordpress.com/2025/08/13/garryvurcha-flagship-project/>

Festival 2025

The Ellen Hutchins Festival ran again in the Bantry Bay area during Heritage Week in August. As it was celebrating 10 years, we made use of materials from earlier years' exhibitions and activities to acknowledge what had been achieved since the first Festival in 2015. A County Cork Heritage Grant enabled us to mount a Natural Heritage family trail – Windows on Nature - in shop windows in Bantry. The response from local shop keepers was wonderfully supportive and we used 24 shops! The displays featured botany with seaweeds, lichens, mosses and liverworts referencing our publications and leaflets, others told Ellen's story using material from a window trail in 2016. Also included were at least a dozen of Ellen's seaweed drawings, first shown in 2015 in Bantry House then in shops in 2016.

There were over 30 events in the 9 days. There were botany walks and workshops, family and children's events and workshops on botanical art and crafts using plant materials. We participated in the Bantry Agricultural Show again and ran our 'signature' events at Future Forests, Bantry House gardens and on Whiddy Island. The walks and 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.

New this year was a seaweed workshop run by aqua biologist Frances Gallagher and poet Annette Skade with seaweed facts, specimen making and composing poetry inspired by the seaweed specimens. Kathy Kirwan ran a session on cyanotypes using plants, hosted by Two Green Shoots in Glengariff.

American academic, Elizabeth Lawson, had included Ellen's story in her beautiful book, *Moss and Lichen*, published by Reaktion Books in December 2024. She came to the Festival in 2025, speaking at an event at Bantry Library - Ellen Hutchins, Moss and Lichen: a 21st century conversation - hosted by Lil Stevens from the British Natural History Museum London where she looks after Ellen's specimens. Canadian poet, Clare Goulet, returned to the Festival while researching Ellen further, and joined the event.

Karen Minihan presented a rehearsed reading of a new theatre piece that she had written about Ellen, 'Little Beauties', which played to a full house in Bantry Bookshop. The Bookshop also hosted an Ellen exhibition using materials first shown in the Boole Library UCC in 2018.

Ellen's relative, Maryvonne Hutchins-Boisseau, joined the Archives event held in Mannings, Ballylickey and the walk afterwards through Ballylickey.

Bantry Credit Union

We were grateful for the use of the Bantry Credit Union's community windows in July and August. Bantry Credit Union also provided some much-needed funding to enable us to continue the Botanist Ellen website for children and schools. The site is due a major update in 2026.

Seaweed Specimens

The Herbarium at Trinity College Dublin agreed an exchange of the three seaweed specimens on loan for a different three and these were displayed in the Ellen Hutchins Archive Cabinet in Bantry Library during the Festival and the cabinet is now in the Ellen Hutchins Reading Room at the UCC Sustainability Institute building in Lee Road, Cork.

Research and new connections

In February, Grace Barrett, a student on a documentary photography degree course, had found Ellen's story online, contacted Madeline and helped her photograph notes and dates on Ellen's specimens at the Natural History Museum and Ellen's drawings in the Archives at Kew Gardens.

In June, after the Dijon conference, Laura Briscoe of the New York Botanical Garden (NYBG) travelled home with Madeline and spent two days studying Ellen's liverworts specimens in the Natural History Museum. Laura and Madeline visited the Surrey studio of textile artist, Amanda Cobbett, and saw her amazing machine-embroidered sculptures of lichens and mosses. Amanda and her daughter, Imogen, had visited NYBG, hosted there by Laura. They were fascinated by Ellen's story. Imogen agreed to take on the admin work needed for the Epsilon project and Amanda is planning to visit West Cork and later contribute to a future Festival.

Paul Whelan

We were deeply saddened in December to learn of the death of Paul Whelan, lichenologist, author of the Festival's publication – *Oceanic Lichens: an introductory guide to Glengarriff Woodlands and Harbour*, leader of wonderful lichen walks and workshops in our Festivals, and author of *Lichens of Ireland and Britain: a visual guide to their identification* (Publ. 2024) in which he featured Ellen's story.

Funders

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

Madeline Hutchins

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9th February 2026