

'We are delighted we are open'

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AILLWEE Caves has been unlocking the secrets of the Burren underground since its first cave tour began in July of 1976.

A resource of education for the beautiful natural landscape, Aillwee Caves prides itself on sustaining careers and bringing business to North Clare.

Acting Managing Director Nuala Mulqueeney talks to *The Clare Echo* about the rich history and enterprising evolution of a second generation family run business, how Covid-19 has impacted the day to day running of the caves and of how the North Clare facility holds community and the loyalty of intergenerational family visitors near and dear to its heart.

Nuala's father Michael, a teacher by trade, later became an original director and shareholder of the company. After meeting Roger Johnson, a mining engineer, they decided to set up a co-op in Kilferna to bring the tourism industry to North Clare. Both men encour-

tered a hydrologist from Trinity College who was familiar with the Aillwee Caves system, armed with the knowledge that it does not flood so easily. Nuala quips that although the trio all brought something different to the table, they were the perfect mix.

Since 1976, the Aillwee Caves has seen the building of an award-winning Access building built into the landscape. In 1985, Aillwee Caves began to champion their own cheese making factory, with produce sold on site in various flavours. The idea was to allow people to stay longer on site.

Diarmuid, the cheesemaker, is a multi-talented man, tells Nuala, a shining example of flexibility that is required to survive in rural Ireland. In essence, a man of many hats. Next up, was Santa's Workshop which is now on its 20th anniversary and Nuala feels that this really cements the Aillwee Caves as an all year-round attraction.

Finally, the Birds of Prey Centre opened its door in 2008 and now houses 35 different birds, a mixture of owls, hawks and vultures.

Nuala remarks the Birds of Prey Centre as a real hit with all generations, something that really brings the whole family together.

On the impact of Covid-19 on the Aillwee Caves, Nuala comments, "On the 12th of March we closed for 14 long weeks. It was a very lonesome place. A place that would ordinarily have been very welcoming to the public at that stage.

"There was myself here and the falconers. We had the birds well groomed, well fed and well cleaned. They don't just go into storage. There was just a small team here for the 14 weeks. We are delighted that we are open. It's not the same.

"We are working and welcoming our visitors alongside Covid-19. Our Access building has been emptied to uphold the logistics of our cave tours.

"Our cave tours have been halved from 30 to 15 to allow for two metres between groups. We can keep the tours flowing in one direction with an entrance and exit.

"We have lots of hand sanitizing stations throughout the buildings. We have asked people to wear face coverings. It is going well. Like everything, if you take a lead, people are grateful, comfortable and safe and get to enjoy their well-deserved holidays."

Aillwee Caves prides itself on sustaining careers in the local community. A total of 35 full time staff

are now back working on the 26 acre site. Normally, this would double in the busy season and Nuala tells of one hundred and ten elves that take up residence alongside Santa during the winter months.

"Sustaining careers has always been part of our ethos here at Aillwee Caves," tells Nuala and it pays dividends, with other businesses in North Clare able to rely on Aillwee Caves to give people a good time.

Like most businesses this summer, Nuala is missing out on international visitors, however; unlike many places which are heavily, if not solely reliant on foreign travel into the country, Aillwee Caves has maintained a 48 per cent domestic visitor rating and a 52 per cent international visitor rating.

Nuala finishes on the loyalty and reverence shown by intergenerational families and of how the staycation has really bolstered business since the Aillwee Caves reopening, "From day one, we have always wanted to be part of the community and North Clare. I think we have managed that.

"If you are part of that, the locals would have brought visiting family with them. The staycation has really gripped the imagination of the Irish people.



PUBLIC NOTICE APPLICATION FOR A FORESHORE LICENCE

Notice is hereby given pursuant to Section 19 of the Foreshore Act, 1933 that ESB, Moneypoint Power Station, Carrowdotia South, Co. Clare has applied to the Minister of Housing, Planning and Local Government for a licence under Section 3.3 of the said Act for subtidal benthic sampling. The purpose of the sampling is for compliance with an EPA IED licence and the location is at Ballymacrinan Bay, Co Clare.

A copy of the application and the relevant maps, plans and drawings are available for inspection for the next 30 calendar days, free of charge, at Kilrush Garda Station, Ennis Road, Kilrush, Co. Clare between the hours of 9am and 6pm daily and Kilrush Library, O Gorman Street, Kilrush, County Clare.

The documentation is available on the Department's website:

<https://www.housing.gov.ie/planning/foreshore/applications/esb-moneypoint-ecological-survey-ballymacrinan-bay>

Any person who wishes to make an objection to, or a representation in respect of the grant of the licence sought should do so in writing, giving reasons, between the dates of 23rd July 2020 and 22nd August 2020 (quoting ref: FS007141), to the Marine Planning, Policy and Development Section, Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, Newtown Road, Wexford or foreshore@housing.gov.ie. The closing date for submissions is close of business on 22nd August 2020.

All objections and representations received during the consultation period will be forwarded to the applicant for comment prior to any decision being made in the matter. Material upon which the Minister shall determine this application may be published on the Department's website. In this regard the Department wishes to draw attention to its policy on defamatory material that may be contained in submissions it receives, which may be found at:

<https://www.housing.gov.ie/planning/foreshore/public-participation-foreshore-consent-process>

Dated this 23 day of July 2020

ESB, Moneypoint Power Station, Carrowdotia South, Co. Clare