

The Morning

Just after 6am on Tuesday morning 22nd August 1922, Michael Collins, Commander-in-Chief of the Irish National Army and his convoy left Cork's Imperial Hotel for West Cork. Blown bridges and blockaded roads dotted the landscape, frequently forcing the party on to unfamiliar routes. Leaving the town of Macroom for Bandon via Kilmurry, by around 9am they found themselves at Béal na Bláth crossroads **1**. Just 200m away lay one of the most important safe houses in the vicinity, where a meeting of senior officers in the anti-Treaty Irish Republican Army's (IRA) 1st Southern Division was due to take place. When the Collins party arrived, Long's Pub **2** along with every other safe house in the vicinity was filled with anti-Treaty IRA. Eager to ensure the Collins' convoy did not pass the meeting house, one of the anti-Treaty IRA emerging from Long's Pub and passing as a civilian, directed them south towards Bandon. Setting off along the winding road, a road overlooked on both sides by higher ground, Collins and his men continued on their journey.

Laying the Ambush

The anti-Treaty IRA decided to lay an ambush in anticipation that the convoy would return. Moving into the valley, they laid a mine near Carroll's Bridge **3** and barricaded the main road with a broken-down cart. The main ambush party then took up their positions, **4** most of them occupying the upper laneway to the west overlooking the main road. In total, the force consisted of some 30 to 40 anti-Treaty IRA. Their trap in place, they settled down to wait for Collins' convoy to return.



The IRA men in location waiting for Collins' convoy to return **4**

Waiting for the Convoy

As the day wore on, it seemed the convoy would not return. Collins with Major General Emmet Dalton at his side, ranged across much of West Cork, visiting National Army positions in Bandon, Clonakilty, Rosscarbery and Skibbereen. He even stopped near his own birthplace to meet relatives and friends at Sam's Cross which included a visit to the Four Alls pub. As evening approached, and with no sign of the returning convoy, the anti-Treaty IRA at Béal na Bláth began to disperse, leaving a small covering party to dismantle the mine and roadblock. Then, around 7.30pm, the sound of engines was heard approaching from Bandon **5**. It was Collins' convoy finally returning towards Cork City. Encountering the partially dismantled roadblock, the convoy came to a shuddering halt.

Springing the Trap

The crackle of gunfire quickly sounded as the few anti-Treaty IRA volunteers left near Carroll's Bridge and on the upper laneway opened fire. Overriding Emmet Dalton's command, Michael Collins decided not to push on but to fight it out. On hearing the first shots, those anti-Treaty IRA who had left began to rush back to the ambush site **6**. Spread out along the road, the National Army sought cover as they returned fire **7**. Collins and Dalton sheltered beneath a small low bank as the Sliabh na mBan armoured car poured machine-gun fire into the upper lane. This superior firepower began to tell. Spotting the anti-Treaty IRA retreating further up the upper lane, Collins leapt to his feet some short distance south of today's Memorial Cross. However, at some stage the machine gun jammed, allowing the anti-Treaty IRA to move position and return fire leaving Collins exposed.



Collins takes shelter as the anti-Treaty IRA attacks **7**

Béal na Bláth Ambush August 22nd 1922



Collins is Hit

Emmet Dalton later recalled hearing Collins cry "Emmet, I'm hit". A bullet, likely fired from the upper lane, had struck the Commander-in-Chief with a gun shot wound to the head. Dalton and the others quickly realised the wound was mortal. Dalton remembered "I gently raised his head on my knee and tried to bandage his wound...."

I had not completed my sorrowful task when his eyes quietly closed, and the cold pallor of death covered his face." The motorcycle rider was also hit, but he survived. The ambush petered out after some 30 minutes of fighting. The grief-stricken convoy proceeded to Cork calling into a number of places along the way. It was a difficult journey as they were hampered and delayed by the felled trees and destroyed bridges. Collins was administered the last rites at the Sacred Heart Mission at Victoria Cross and finally arrived around 1am at Shankiel hospital.

The Aftermath

Michael Collins' body was brought to Dublin by sea for a State Funeral. He lay in state for three days in Dublin City Hall and his funeral took place in the Pro Cathedral on the 28th August 1922. An estimated 500,000 people lined the streets to pay their respects. He was interred in Glasnevin Cemetery, Dublin, alongside many others who had fought for Irish freedom. His grave to this day remains one of the most visited.

Michael Collins was a charismatic leader and is a name synonymous with the Irish Revolution. The events at Béal na Bláth had enormous consequences for Irish history and immortalised this small Cork valley forever.



Locations along Collins' last journey - 22nd August 1922

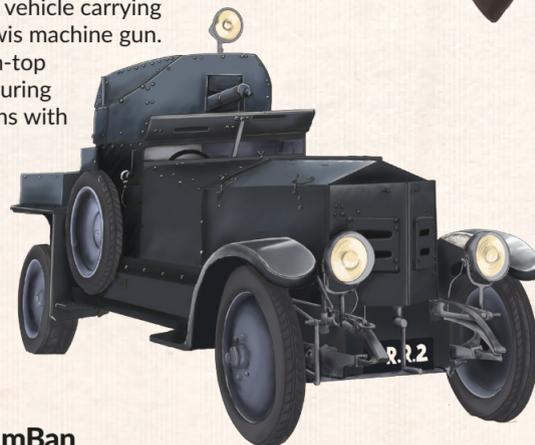


Michael Collins (1890-1922)

Born at Woodfield, near Clonakilty, Collins, who later became known as 'The Big Fella', joined the Irish Volunteers in London in 1914, and served as Aide-de-Camp to Joseph Plunkett in the GPO during the 1916 Rising. During the War of Independence, he was the IRA's Director of Intelligence and served as Minister for Home Affairs following the 1918 Elections and later as Minister for Finance. He was part of the Irish delegation and one of the lead negotiators of the Irish Treaty in 1921. He later became Chairman of the Irish Provisional Government and Commander-in-Chief of the National Army. Although he had sought to avoid conflict, the Irish Civil War began on June 28th 1922. The military tour which brought him to Cork ultimately led to his untimely death at the age of 31 at Béal na Bláth on the 22nd of August 1922.

The Convoy

The convoy consisted of approximately two dozen National Army soldiers. It was led by a motorcycle followed by a Crossley Tender vehicle carrying soldiers and a Lewis machine gun. Next was an open-top yellow Leyland Touring Car carrying Collins with his aide-de-camp, Major General Emmet Dalton, with two soldiers in front. The Sliabh na mBan armoured car followed behind.



The Sliabh na mBan

The Sliabh na mBan, a 1920 Armoured Rolls-Royce carried a Vickers .303 British machine gun that could fire up to 500 rounds a minute. This gun pinned the IRA down during the start of the ambush, but it jammed late in the action, allowing the ambushers to break cover. The Sliabh na mBan is on display in the Curragh Military Museum in Co. Kildare.



pro-Treaty National Army

Formed in January 1922, the National Army grew significantly as the Civil War progressed. Its ranks included former IRA fighters, new civilian volunteers and ex-British Army veterans. They wore a uniform of dark green serge with brown boots, leggings and cap. They were more numerous, better armed and better equipped than their anti-Treaty IRA counterparts. The standard infantry weapon of the National Army soldier was the Lee-Enfield rifle.



The Leyland Eight Touring Car

In 1922, Winston Churchill handed over to the government of the new Irish Free State, a number of military vehicles as well as this touring car. The car was a rare Leyland Eight designed by J.G. Parry Thomas. It was a luxury car and was capable of reaching 100mph.

Irish Civil War 28th June 1922 - 24th May 1923

In July 1921, the Anglo-Irish War of Independence ended in a truce between the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and the British. The negotiations that followed led to the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty in December 1921 and the formation of the Irish Free State. The Treaty required each member of the Irish Government to swear an 'allegiance to the Constitution of the Irish Free State' and be 'faithful to H.M. King George V, his heirs and successors by law in virtue of the common citizenship of Ireland with Great Britain'. In other words, Ireland would be part of the British Commonwealth and some of the northern counties and strategic ports would remain under British rule. This agreement divided the Republican Movement. Michael Collins and others (pro -Treaty) accepted the treaty as 'the freedom to achieve freedom' and formed a new Provisional Government and National Army. Many others opposed the Treaty. On June 28th, 1922, following pressure from the British Government, the National Army bombarded the Four Courts - a prominent civic building in Dublin, which had been taken over by the anti-Treaty IRA. The Irish Civil War had begun and Irish men and women, who had only recently fought side by side, were now in bitter conflict.

In July and August, the focus of fighting shifted to Munster, where National Army landings on the coasts of Cork and Kerry put the anti-Treaty IRA on the defensive. Heavy fighting had seen the National Army secure Cork City on August 11th, 1922 and Michael Collins set out for Cork on 20th August on a tour of inspection. By then the National Army controlled the major towns, but the anti-Treaty forces still held sway in rural areas, including Béal na Bláth, which formed part of the IRA's 1st Southern Division under the command of Liam Deasy. The Irish Civil War saw some of its most significant events play out in the county of Cork and lasted a period of 11 months, coming to an end on 24th May 1923.

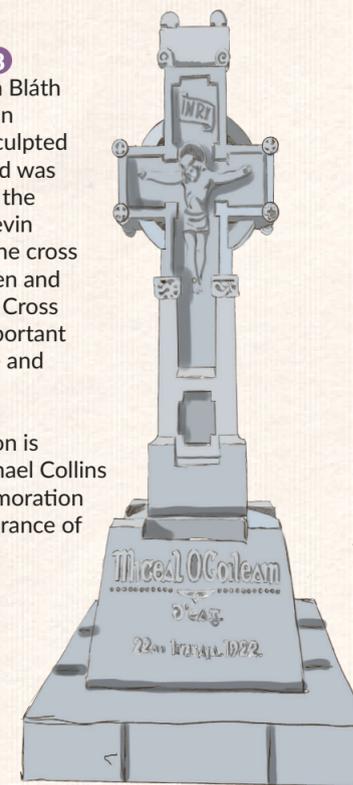


anti-Treaty Irish Republican Army

The core of the anti-Treaty forces was made up of IRA veterans of the War of Independence. By late August 1922 they had returned to the guerrilla war tactics that they had employed between 1919-1921. Most went into action in civilian garb and were reliant on whatever arms and equipment were available within their brigade areas. Most of those who fought at Béal na Bláth were well armed, carrying the Lee-Enfield rifles.

The Memorial

The Memorial Cross **8** was erected at Béal na Bláth by the National Army in August 1924. It was sculpted by Michael Shortall and was originally intended for the Collins grave in Glasnevin Cemetery in Dublin. The cross replaced earlier wooden and metal memorials. The Cross quickly became an important focus of remembrance and commemoration.



Every August an oration is organised by the Michael Collins Béal na Bláth Commemoration Committee in remembrance of Michael Collins.

In 2022, a major refurbishment of the Memorial Site was undertaken marking the centenary of the Béal na Bláth ambush.



Visitors to the Béal na Bláth Memorial will also see a small white marker inscribed with a cross. This is located a few yards to the south of the 1924 memorial. It was erected by a local committee close to one of the original wooden memorials and was later moved to its present location **9**.

Michael Collins Trail

Follow the trail signposts to explore locations associated with Michael Collins including his birthplace at Woodfield, Memorial at Sams Cross, Michael Collins House in Clonakilty (Cork County Council), Michael Collins Centre, Castleview Hill near Clonakilty and the Béal na Bláth ambush site. There is much more revolutionary history to explore in the area, including the nearby Independence Museum in Kilmurry.

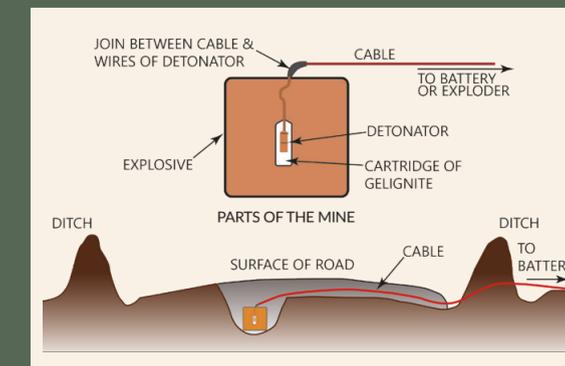
Michael Collins Trail Attractions:

- Woodfield, Birthplace of Michael Collins GPS: 51.616767, -8.980063
- Sam's Cross - Michael Collins Memorial GPS: 51.612457, -8.974012
- Lisaviard, Old National School 1887 GPS: 51.600608, -8.960268
- Michael Collins House, Clonakilty GPS: 51.621747, -8.891474
- Béal na Bláth, Ambush Site GPS: 51.813639, -8.856403
- Michael Collins Centre, Castleview Hill GPS: 51.643297, -8.821937
- Independence Museum Kilmurry GPS: 51.842414, -8.881874

IRA Mines

One of the key weapons of the anti-Treaty IRA during road ambushes were these home-made mines. They were buried under the road surface, with detonator cables running into the hedge-line where the explosion was triggered. Intended to destroy an enemy vehicle and trap convoys in an ambush zone behind.

At the Béal na Bláth ambush site the mine was located somewhere south of Carroll's bridge. It was in the process of being dismantled when Michael Collins' convoy arrived, and so was never detonated.



Béal na Bláth Ambush



Michael Collins August 22nd 1922

