The Walled Town Crier

An Irish Walled Towns Network bi-monthly magazine.

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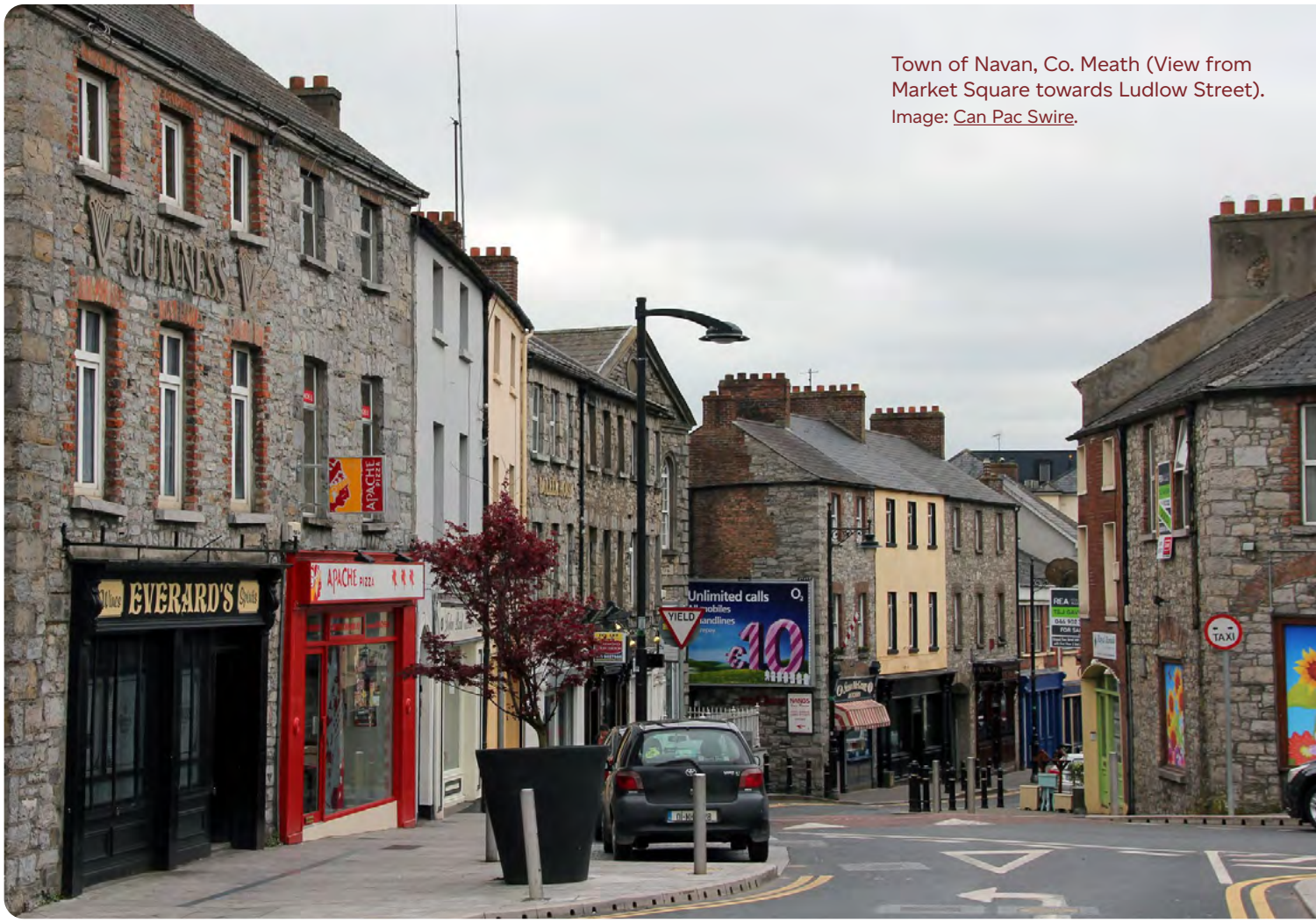

Town of Navan, Co. Meath (View from Market Square towards Ludlow Street).
Image: Can Pac Swire.

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Hello everyone and welcome to the April 2025 edition of the Walled Town Crier.

Spring is very much in the air here in Kilkenny and I trust it's the same wherever you are. It's lovely to see the pockets of biodiversity around our historic towns springing to life in the early sunshine.

We had great attendance for our AGM in Cashel at the end of February and it was fantastic to catch up with so many of you.

In this issue of the e-zine, we're getting to know Navan, Co. Meath and you'll also find a profile piece on the Wonder Wander walking trails that the NIAH has been rolling out in partnership with Architectural Conservation Officers around the country. These are a really nice example of community engagement with trail development and could work well, I think, as a template for similar trails on any number of heritage themes.

Warmest Regards,
Eimear
Eimear O'Connell,
IWTN Project Manager

Members and Friends at the Rock of Cashel on the occasion of our IWTN AGM 2025. Image: Eimear O'Connell.

Getting to Know Navan

Members of Navan & District Historical Society visit conservation works in progress at the surviving section of town wall on Abbey Road. Image: Clare Ryan.

Meath's county town – and famously spelt the same backwards as forwards - Navan has lots to offer the heritage-curious visitor. Here Clare Ryan, archaeologist and member of Navan and District Historical Society, fills us in on the town's early and medieval history.

The location

Navan, Co. Meath, sits where the Boyne and Blackwater rivers meet, on the main routeway between Dublin and Kells. The present landscape may have changed little over the millennia, and it is likely that the riverine confluence formed an important element of prehistoric geographies and travel routes. Navan is a very good example of a small medieval town and was one of the most important settlements in Meath in the Middle Ages, largely owing to its command of crossing-points on the Boyne and the Blackwater. Although some historians have derived the origins of the modern name Navan from an Uaimh or 'the cave', this appears to be a corruption of the earlier name Nuachongbhail, 'new holding'.

Medieval Navan

In 1172, after the subjugation of local rulers, Henry II granted the lands of Meath to Hugh de Lacy, to be held 'by the service of 50 knights'. Navan did not receive its charter until the fifteenth century but played an important role as a market town.

Impression of Medieval Navan.
Image: Clare Ryan.

Tradition holds that Navan was first fortified by de Lacy, but he was dead before the town was established. It is more likely that it was undertaken by one of his followers, Jocelyn de Angulo (or Nangle), to whom the lands of Navan were assigned (Bradley and King 1985, 98). The Norman power base in Meath centred on Trim but included a port at Drogheda and market towns at Duleek, Kells, Athboy and Navan.

Although chequered plans, such as at Drogheda and Galway, are occasionally found in medieval towns in Ireland, the predominant street plan was linear, as in the case of Navan. Generally, the market-place was in the centre of the street, with houses positioned so that the gable end was on the street frontage. Access to the houses was often by means of a side lane, thus giving rise to the laneways that still

Aerial image showing the triangular form of Market Square, with linear roads extending northeast, south and west.
Image: Still image from video footage by Nomos Productions. Courtesy Fáilte Ireland.

characterise Navan. The houses themselves were positioned on long, narrow burgage plots which frequently stretched from the main street to the town wall. Contemporary maps show the property divisions, which date back to the formation of the town. Some of the oldest place-names in Navan, e.g. Corn Market and Bakery Lane, relate to goods and services for sale within the walled town.

Three main streets make up the medieval core: Trimgate Street, Watergate Street and Ludlow Street. Many of the narrow medieval laneways that are characteristic of the original town layout survive. Three gates were also recorded along the line of the walls.

Wells

Historically the townspeople of Navan depended on the wells and springs of the town for their drinking water, and many were reputed to cure certain ailments. One such well, on Toberorum Lane, is still visible today. Toberorum - the 'well of the prayers', an appropriate name for any holy well - was the only large well inside the town walls during the Middle Ages, and it was considered important enough to be restored by the Town Commissioners in 1858. It is said that Meath's famous highwayman, Michael the Robber Collier (1780–1849), lived in Toberorum Lane, and during periods of abstinence from strong drink he drank only the water of Toberorum well.

The medieval walls of Navan

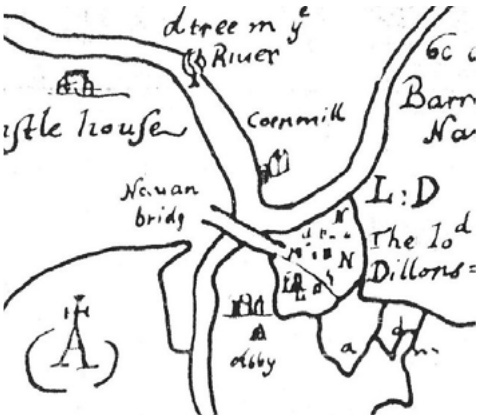
Navan's earliest town defences were earthen. Defences of earth and timber could be every bit as strong and difficult to breach as stone walls, but from about the 1220s onward the larger towns began to replace earthen ramparts with mortared stone walls. Stone defences were more expensive to build and maintain but they were also more prestigious, and in medieval art and cartography they were depicted as the symbol of a town. The walls not only served as a barrier to attack but also enabled the control of movement into and out of the town. The three gates located along the line of the walls were important points for gathering tolls.

The most impressive section of the wall to survive is on the northern side of the circuit in the council yard on Abbey Road. This consists of a 17m stretch of wall and a semicircular bastion to the west, rising to a height of 5.5m. The masonry, 80cm thick, is of coursed limestone with a rubble core. The upper half of the tower and wall are partly reconstructed, and the wall is bonded to the tower at the base but not at the top. The difference in ground level between the inside and the outside of the wall is 5m (Bradley and King 1985, 99).

The walled town was one property plot deep; plots on the west side are noticeably longer than on the east, while those on the south are long but more interrupted. The impact of the town walls remains evident in the urban

Toberorum well. Image: Navan Town Walls Conservation & Management Plan, 7L Architects.

Surviving section of the northern medieval wall and Bastion, Abbey Road, Navan. Image: Morgan Flannagan.



Extract from the mid-17th-century Down Survey map showing Pollboy Bridge labelled "Navan Bridg". Image: Navan & District Historical Society.

Pollboy Bridge, Navan. Image: Navan & District Historical Society.

morphology of Navan. The distinctive curved form of the burgage plots has been retained, except for the north-west corner where the line of the walls is not as clear.

Trimgate Street has been the town's main street since the Middle Ages. A stone plaque on the wall of Ryan's public house, next to the Community Centre, commemorates the widening/rebuilding of Trim Gate in 1795, which was financed by John Fay, a wealthy Catholic miller.

Market cross

The triangular area known as Market Square occupied a central position in Navan. It functioned as the medieval trading space for the town and surrounding area and was the location for the market cross, dated to 1585, which can now be viewed in the Solstice Arts Centre in Navan. This stone cross, carved from Calp limestone, documents the story of the town and its founding Anglo-Norman families.

Pollboy Bridge

This is the oldest bridge in Navan town and is medieval in origin, the original section probably dating from the fourteenth century. It was previously known as Navan Bridge and Swyne Bridge. The name Pollboy/Pollbwee is derived from the yellow clay in that area of the town.

The mottes

There are two mottes in close proximity to the medieval town. The first, known as Navan motte, is 900m west of the medieval town boundary. It was probably built by Jocelyn Nangle or his son William and was contemporary with the founding of the town. The second motte, in Athlumney townland, forms part of a cluster of medieval monuments lying 400m south-east of Navan on the east bank of the Boyne. The other two monuments within this cluster are a ruined thirteenth-century church and associated graveyard and a fifteenth-century tower-house known locally as Athlumney Castle.

Athlumney Castle, Navan, Co. Meath. Image: Nomos Productions. Courtesy Fáilte Ireland.

Silver maces

Navan has a pair of silver maces and a seal, currently housed in Collins Barracks, Dublin. They were made by Andrew Gregory around 1660–1 for the Corporation of Navan.

Round tower at Donaghmore

The ruins of Donaghmore monastic settlement lie 1km northeast of Navan town on the N51 road to Slane. The architectural style of the church indicates that it was built in the fifteenth century. Most likely it replaced an older church built in the Romanesque style; a carved Romanesque head is incorporated into the south wall of the bell-tower. The round tower pre-dates the church and was built in the ninth or tenth century.

The abbey

The Augustinian St Mary's Abbey was not incorporated within the walled area of the town but lay outside to the north-west, bounded on the north by the banks of the Blackwater River. Ellison (1963, 33) dates the establishment of the abbey to 1189, when it is said to have been founded by Jocelyn Nangle 'on the site of an ancient Celtic monastery'. Although the site of the abbey is known, no upstanding structures are evident today. The font from the abbey is now in St Mary's Church of Ireland church, while some fragments of decorated slabs can be seen in the garden of St Mary's Catholic church.

Vikings at Navan

A fleet of 60 Viking ships was active on the River Boyne in AD 837. In July 1848, when workers were building the railway close to where the Boyne and the Blackwater meet, they discovered a Viking burial containing a copper-alloy bridle-bit, harness mounts, chain-links, a boss, iron rings plated with bronze and small bronze buttons. The harness mounts and bridle-bit are directly comparable to those found in graves at Gausel and Soma in western Norway. The presence of at least three

Donaghmore Church and Round Tower. Image: Discover Boyne Valley.

individuals was noted, but no formal burial was identified. Ireland has very few recorded Viking horse burials, details of which can be found in Maeve Sikora's report on comparative research for Norway, Iceland, Scotland and Ireland (Sikora 2003–4, 94).

The Athlumney hoard has been described by Scandinavian experts as a Viking single burial, accompanied by a horse and trappings of ninth-century date; it was further observed that the absence of weapons might suggest that this burial was representative of a settlement rather than the hurried interment of a member of a passing fleet. Clinton (2000) identified the earthwork at Athlumney as the likely site of the Viking fortress of Dún Dubchomair. The Athlumney hoard is on permanent display in the National Museum of Ireland.

The Athlumney Viking hoard. Gilt-bronze horse harness mounts, currently on display in the National Museum of Ireland, Kildare Street, Dublin. Source Image: Treasures of the National Museum of Ireland, 2002.

The Ramparts Walk

If you fancy a nice river walk, the old towpath of the Boyne Navigational System runs for almost 8km to the bridge over the Boyne at Stackallen. On the Ramparts Walk you will see Dunmoe Castle, Ardmulchan Church and Graveyard, and the single remaining eye of Babe's Bridge, the only bridge over the Boyne to survive the great flood of 1330. Babe's Bridge had an expanse of 80m, but only a single stone arch survives of the original eleven. It is the oldest surviving authenticated stone bridge/arch in Ireland (O'Keeffe and Simington 2016).

Ramparts Walking Trail, Navan, Co. Meath. Image: Nomos Productions. Courtesy Fáilte Ireland.

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Wonder Wander Walking Trails

In 2023, the National Inventory of Architectural Heritage (a section within the National Built Heritage Service of the Department for Housing, Local Government and Heritage) commenced a pilot project to develop walking tours of Architectural Conservation Areas in four towns. IWTN members Navan and Waterford were included in the pilot phase, which launched in 2024. This year the scheme has been expanded to six new towns, with plans to add more.

John Beattie, Architectural Conservation Advisor with the National Built Heritage Service, kindly answered my questions about the scheme, and about the community-engagement process that goes into developing each trail.

What is a Wonder Wander?

The Wonder Wander Trail Network is a joint initiative between Local Authority Architectural Conservation Officers and the National Inventory of Architectural Heritage (NIAH) and is designed to celebrate the rich and often diverse heritage of Architectural Conservation Areas (ACAs). The trails are developed in partnership with local communities, who are invited to identify specific buildings or places that they feel are important within their ACA. Community workshops and information sessions facilitate discussions, storytelling, and interpretation and local school students are encouraged to have an active role in the trail development.

The trails are self-guided with maps serving to highlight the selected points of interest in each town. Stops on the trail represent a cross-section of the types of buildings found in our ACAs,

3-D Wonder Wander model of Waterford City. Image: Courtesy Waterford City & County Council.

ranging from local landmarks like churches and courthouses to more modest buildings, reflecting the architecture and cultural heritage of the everyday. All the Wonder Wander trails are free and available to download at www.buildingsofireland.ie with hard copies available from partner locations including the council offices and selected libraries in the relevant counties.

What was the motivation behind the idea?

There are over 600 Architectural Conservation Areas in the country. These range from the designed landscapes of the big house to industrial or institutional complexes. Most often they are the places or groups of structures that make up our streetscapes and form an integral part of our cities, towns and villages.

In practice the success of an Architectural Conservation Area depends on public awareness and support for the ACA. However, ACAs are sometimes poorly understood and in some cases the people who live and work in an ACA can be unaware of its statutory designation. To make our Architectural Conservation Areas effective they must have community buy in. In this light the trails were developed as a way of nurturing community engagement, celebrating sense of place and to help promote positive perceptions of the ACA.

How many of them have been rolled out so far?

We initially piloted four trails in Navan and Dunboyne, Co. Meath and Waterford City and Cappoquin Co. Waterford. This spring, six new walking trails are joining the Wonder

Wonder Wander map of Navan, Co. Meath. Image: NBHS.

School children with their teachers and Kilkenny County Council Architectural Conservation Officer, Francis Coady at the recent launch of Wonder Wander Castlecomer. Image: Courtesy Kilkenny County Council.

Wander Trail Network. The new trails are in Architectural Conservation Areas in Foynes and Newcastlewest, Co. Limerick; Castlecomer and Freshford Co. Kilkenny; and in Ennis and Ennistymon Co. Clare.

What does the process of developing a Wonder Wander look like?

Community engagement is a key part of the project. We work with Edel McWeeney Moran of EZxploring on this element of the process. Community stakeholder and drop-in events are held in local libraries and in community centres, where we ask local residents and business owners to identify specific buildings or places within the ACA that are important to them.

Engagement with local schools is particularly rewarding. Pupils are encouraged to interview family members and to identify their favourite local buildings. This could be carried out around the dinner table or while being minded after school by granny and grandad, ensuring that as many people as possible across all generations have an active role in the development of the trail. To date we have received some great responses that both enrich the trail maps and increase local support for the project.

Do you think this is a template that could work well for other heritage-themed trails?

Trails are a great means of exploring and interpreting the built heritage of an area. Aside from focusing exclusively on Architectural Conservation Areas the Wonder Wander Trails are set apart from others by their focus on community engagement. We believe that community-driven conservation starts by listening to local voices which helps to foster a sense of ownership and promotes the cultural identity of the community.

Was it a deliberate decision not to base the trails around physical signage?

There are many formats a trail can take, from digital apps to map based routes, like the Wonder Wanders. We decided to avoid the installation of any permanent and physical interpretative signage or plaques as part of the Wonder Wanders project. Our aim is to reduce the visual trace of our trail on the very streetscapes and buildings that we seek to conserve and promote. Instead, we offer vinyl window stickers to local businesses within the ACA who wish to publicise the trail in their shop windows. The stickers are fully reversible and incorporate a QR code, which can be used to direct the passer-by to our website where all the trail maps can be download as PDFs free of charge.

Where's next?

We continue to expand the Wonder Wander trail network, and this year will roll out new ACA trails in counties Galway and Dublin.

One of the window stickers that link to online trail maps. Image: NBHS.

How can people find out more?

All the Wonder Wander trails are free and available to download on our website www.buildingsofireland.ie with hard copies available from partner locations, including the council offices and selected libraries in each relevant county.

If you think your Architectural Conservation Area would benefit from a Wonder Wander trail, please contact your local Architectural Conservation Officer for further details.

News and Updates

AGM 2025

The Irish Walled Towns Network AGM for 2025 took place in Cashel on Tuesday 25th February. We had a fantastic turnout on the day and enjoyed a guided tour of the Rock of Cashel, kindly facilitated by the OPW, once the business of the AGM had been concluded.

IWTN Grants 2025

Offers for the IWTN Conservation/Capital Works Grants Scheme 2025 were issued to successful applicants in late March. We are delighted to be supporting 9 projects under the scheme this year. Applications for the IWTN Interpretation & Events Grants Scheme 2025 have been assessed by an external panel and offers will be issued to successful applicants by mid-April.

Mark Lusby Memorial Walk

A memorial walk around Derry's city walls was held on 5th April in honour of the late Mark Lusby, who contributed so much to their conservation and promotion.

Image: Friends of the Derry Walls.

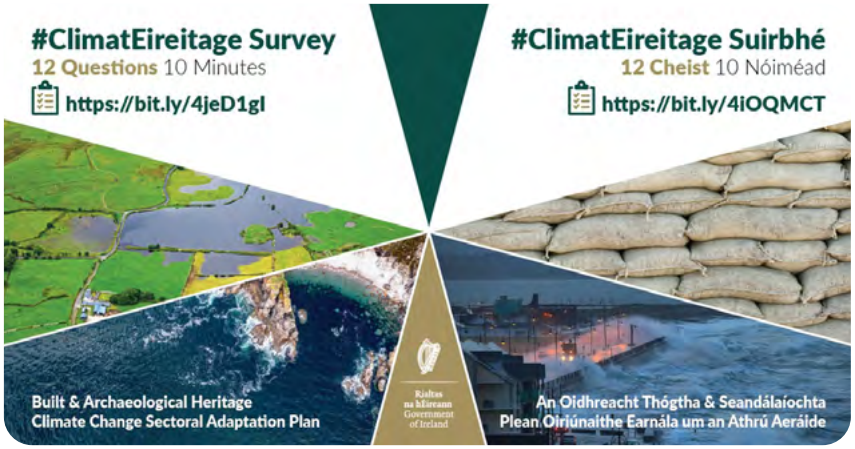
Buildings Archaeology Bursary 2025

Applications are currently open for the National Monuments Service Buildings Archaeology Bursary 2025. The Bursary is open to archaeology/built heritage professionals working in the private/ commercial sector and covers course fees for the Level 7 Certificate in Buildings Archaeology at ATU Sligo. The closing date for applications is 12 June. For further details see here.

NBHS Traditional Buildings Skills Training Days Spring/Summer 2025

The Spring/Summer programme of National Built Heritage Service Traditional Building Skills training days is currently up and running. There are workshops aimed at both professionals and non-professionals to choose from and a range of topics from earth and lime mortars to making creepie stools. For more details on remaining dates see here.

Built/Archaeological Heritage & Climate Survey



A built and archaeological heritage & climate survey is currently open for responses, until 30 April. This is a a short online anonymous survey which will be used to inform the development of Ireland's second Climate Change Sectoral Adaptation Plan (CCSAP) for the Built and Archaeological Heritage (2025-2030). The survey consists of 12 questions and should not take more than 10 minutes to complete.

English language version here.

Irish language version here.

Social Media

Thanks to everyone as always for sending on social media content. Please continue to use the hashtag **#IWTN** on all network-related posts and to tag the relevant Heritage Council account:

@HeritageHubIRE

TheHeritageCouncil

@theheritagecouncil

Not an IWTN member but a walled town nonetheless. This image shows Sweetman's (or Mullin's) Castle in Thomastown, Co. Kilkenny. Strategically located overlooking a bridge on the River Nore, it dates to the 14th century and is thought to have formed part of Thomastown's walled circuit.
Image: Nicola Brady. Courtesy Nicola Brady.

Contact Us:

Please do get in touch at
iwtn@heritagecouncil.ie
if you would like us to promote news or projects happening in your walled town over the coming months.

www.irishwalledtownsnetwork.ie

The IWTN is funded by the Heritage Council and delivered in partnership with Local Authorities and community groups.

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