The locations visited and photographed are indicated by the red dots.
The Good Shepherd Magdalene Laundry, Sunday’s Well, Co. Cork

Magdalen Asylums grew out of the ‘rescue movement’ in Britain and Ireland the 19th century, which had as its formal goal the rehabilitation of women who had worked as prostitutes. As the phenomenon became more widespread, it extended to include unmarried mothers, developmentally challenged women and abused girls. Even young girls who were considered too promiscuous and flirtatious were sometimes sent to a Magdalene asylums. It has been estimated that around 30,000 women were admitted during the 150-year history of these institutions, often against their will. The last Magdalen Asylum and Laundry in Ireland closed on September 25, 1996. When the Good Shepherd Asylum opened in Sunday’s Well on 29th July 1872 it took in 6 women from the local Lock Hospital – an institution for ‘fallen’ women – and three of these remained in the institution for life. Indeed, a lifetime of penance was the ideal that was upheld in such institutions, guarding (allegedly) against ‘moral relapse’, and providing the institution with the income generated by the unpaid labour the ‘penitents’ carried out, in silence, in the laundry. Upon arrival ‘penitents' were given a new name, their heads were shorn, and they were forbidden to speak of their ‘old’ lives. When they died, they were buried in unmarked graves in the convent grounds.

Le Bon Pasteur, (The Good Shepherd)

French Catholic involvement with the Irish female penitentiary movement began in Limerick in 1848 as the French Order of the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd of Angers took control of a modest yet quickly expanding enterprise that was aimed at reforming “fallen” women. Within a relatively short period of time their first Irish foundation soon housed 150 penitents. Buoyed by this success they opened a second massive operation in Waterford in 1858. This was followed in quick succession by the establishment of a further two penitentiaries in Wexford in 1860 and in Belfast in 1867. However their biggest and most lucrative institution was built in 1870 in Sundays Well in Cork, where its success was due mainly to the introduction of the deeply unpopular Contagious Diseases Acts (1864) that targeted prostitutes or women suspected of being “street walkers”

High Park Convent and Laundry, Drumcondra Co. Dublin

The High Park Laundry in Drumcondra was the first reformatory to be established for the intake of Roman Catholic girls under the recently passed Act to promote and regulate such schools for juvenile female offenders in Ireland. In 1996 the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity who ran the laundry received adverse media attention when a plot of convent real estate was sold to property developers to recoup losses on the share market. The land they sold off contained the remains of 144 penitents, 88 of whom were buried anonymously as no death certificates were issued at the time of their deaths. Only one set of remains was reclaimed by family. Subsequently the disinterred remains were cremated and reinterred in small brown urns in the cemetery at Glasnevin in Dublin.
In their groundbreaking book “Suffer the Little Children” (1999), Eoin O'Sullivan and Mary Raftery write that the use of the term “orphanage” was often misleading. They explain that under various Laws pertaining to the welfare of the children, the majority of Irish institutions were industrial schools whose primary aim was to provide children from impoverished backgrounds with skills to be self sufficient as they grew up. It was a concept of child welfare that emerged during the height of the industrial revolution. Statistical research indicates that children who were committed to orphanages would often have one or even both parents living. According to Raftery and O'Sullivan this was because “the orphanage myth reinforced the perception by society of the supposedly charitable nature of these institutions. The description of the children as ‘orphans’ was far more likely to elicit sympathy for both them and their religious carers. It also undoubtedly assisted with fundraising and a range of other activities” (1999: 12) However, there were indeed legitimate orphanages throughout the country but the majority of these institutions charged fees and were aimed at unfortunate children from the middle classes and in doing so they functioned within the wider institutional system as a class marker between children from different economic backgrounds. Raftery and O’Sullivan state that it was “a strategy which was clearly and publicly stated by the Catholic Church in its various handbooks for Catholic Social workers during the 1940’s and 1950’s” (1999: 13)

A number of these envelopes were found behind St Kevin's Hospital in Sunday’s Well. Patients laundry was bagged and an envelope attached where it was sent a mile away to the Magdalen laundry.

Entrance to Space 3
St Joseph's Industrial School, Artane, Co. Dublin (1870-1969)

St Joseph's Industrial School was established under the Industrial Schools Act (Ireland) by the Christian Brothers at the request of Cardinal Cullen who, at the time was the Archbishop of Dublin. The institution, one of the biggest of its kind in Ireland, opened on 28th July 1870 and its remit was to care for neglected, abandoned, and orphaned Roman Catholic boys whose detention was ordered by the courts on the basis of 'improper guardianship', a failure to attend school, destitution, homelessness, larceny, and other minor crimes. The school was licensed to accommodate 825 boys, and, during its ninety-nine years it housed approximately 15,500 residents. Initially, Artane was situated on 56 acres of land, but this grew over time, and by the mid 1940s the school consisted of 350 acres that included a farm that brought in a large annual income, along with the goods the boys produced. Daily life in the school was highly regimented and corporal punishment was a regular occurrence, as the CICA Investigation Committee Report, volume 1, makes clear. Artane closed in 1969 and the boys who were living there at the time were either returned to their family homes, or were placed in other institutions.

St Conleth's Reformatory School, Daingean, Co. Offaly (1870-1934, 1940-1973)

In August 1858 an Act to Promote Reformatory Schools for Juvenile Offenders in Ireland was passed, and this led to the establishment of a number of reformatory schools for boys and for girls. Daingean was the second such school to be established by the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, or the Oblates as they were more commonly known. Daingean first opened its doors to boys between the ages of 12 and 17 who had been convicted of crimes by the courts and who, had they been over 18, would have been punished by imprisonment or penal servitude. Prior to this the buildings on the site had served as a military barracks, a training ground for the Irish Constabulary, and a prison for adult criminals. Between 1934-1940 it operated as an Oblate Scholasticate, and in 1940 was re-established as a reformatory school for boys. The average number of 'pupils' per year ranged from 216 in the 1940s to 155 in the 1960s, and the largest proportion of boys were between 15 and 15 years of age. Department of Education Records shows that Daingean residents were committed for larceny, breaking and entering, arson, indecent assault, burglary, common assault, and other unnamed crimes, and that the majority came from urban backgrounds.

The CICA Investigation Committee Report Volume 1 states that numbers at Daingean were very large, that facilities were extremely limited, and that there was little or no assessment which ensured that violent or unmangeable boys were excluded, or any resources to deal with them. Corporal punishment was regularly administered, in particular in the form of flogging. Riots occurred in Daingean in the 1950s and this led to the development of 7 major rules that covered 21 typed pages. Between 1963 and 1972 35 children absconded form Daingean on 46 different occasions. The reformatory closed on 31st October 1973, with the last boy being admitted in the May of that year.

The grafitti “Daingean Doris" is a coded language written by the boys. Here you see the numbers that they were given on arrival. The set of three numbers indicates boys who may have formed a group to protect each other. A “Doris" may have been a smaller or younger boy who had protectors. The term “fish" refers to a new boy, as in fresh fish. “No fish cane (came) 1969" means that Daingean was closed down shortly after the Kennedy report was published in 1970.