

Press Release
12th March, 2018



Legendary Star Wars Actor Named As St. Patrick's Festival

Inaugural International Guest Of Honour

15th – 19th March 2018: www.stpatricksfestival.ie

St. Patrick's Festival celebrates our national holiday with a global impact. Each year a cast of thousands of home-grown and international musicians, dancers, storytellers and performers take part in the Festival's rich and vibrant artistic programme of events, inspired for the 2018 Festival by the theme of Home. This year, for the very first time, St. Patrick's Festival appoints an International Guest of Honour. Mark Hamill, star of the stage and screen, and known for his Star Wars role of Luke Skywalker, will be welcomed back to our shores as the inaugural International Guest of Honour.

The new honorary role of International Guest of Honour has been created to celebrate the achievements of an individual from the worlds of business, the arts, or the media, who has a special connection or significant affinity with Ireland. The role will be an opportunity to recognise and celebrate their relationship with and contribution to our country. While here Mark will be a special guest in the Presidential stand to view the National Festival Parade on March 17th.

Susan Kirby, St. Patrick's Festival CEO said: "The role of International Guest of Honour is something we have been considering for a few years. There are so many examples of Irish people and the diaspora achieving eminence across many different art forms and disciplines worldwide. Many of these have a special connection with Ireland and we want to celebrate and recognise this. Mark has a special affinity to Ireland through his filming of Star Wars and family history and has done much for our film industry. We're looking forward to welcoming him back 'home' to celebrate our national holiday and St. Patrick's Festival with us."

Fáilte Ireland's Head of Festivals, Ciara Sugrue said: "The Force will truly be with us on March 17th and we are delighted to hear that Mark Hamill will be joining us as the first ever St. Patrick's Festival International Guest of Honour. Since filming STAR WARS: THE FORCE AWAKENS in County Kerry, Mark has been a great ambassador for Ireland and it is amazing to have someone of such universal – even galactic - acclaim in this new honorary role. Fáilte Ireland continues to invest significantly in the St. Patrick's Festival, an event which not only attracts tens of thousands of international visitors but also showcases Ireland as a fantastic tourist destination to global media. With this year's special guest, we will have an extra bit of magic for this wonderful showcase for an Irish welcome."

Audiences were introduced to the savage beauty of Skellig Michael, the legendary island off the coast of Kerry, in STAR WARS: THE FORCE AWAKENS when Rey tracked down the long-lost Luke Skywalker, portrayed by Mark Hamill. Since the opening of STAR WARS: THE LAST JEDI, Ireland's Wild Atlantic Way has been catapulted to global fame, having

been filmed in some of the most spectacular spots on Ireland's western coastline, from the northern-most point in County Donegal to the magnificent cliffs and headlands of Counties Clare, Cork and Kerry.

Niall Gibbons, CEO of Tourism Ireland, said: "It is wonderful news that Mark Hamill will be the inaugural International Guest of Honour for this year's St Patrick's Festival. We in Tourism Ireland are extremely grateful to Mark for his wonderful comments about the Wild Atlantic Way and Ireland. Our Star Wars campaign, including our films with Mark Hamill praising the beauty and people of Ireland, has been seen by over 8 million people around the world – whetting peoples' appetites to come and visit the Wild Atlantic Way and Ireland."

In addition to Mark's Star Wars connection, research into his family history has found that he has a double-link to Ireland. His great-grandmother Elizabeth Keating was born in Kilkenny on 6th December 1873 and left Ireland for America when she was still a teenager. Further research shows that his great (x3) grandparents John Keating married Margaret Foley of Gurteen married in Carlow Cathedral in 1822. A second family line connects Mark to the Harvey family, possibly from Donegal, who were Famine immigrants that settled in America. In 1864, Frederick Mumford, a young English sailor was married in New Jersey to Mary Harvey, a recent Irish immigrant. These are Mark's great-great-grandparents. The young couple moved to New York City and settled in Manhattan where they had five children.

Trish Long, Vice President and General Manager of Disney Ireland said "As St. Patrick's Festival is such a key celebration of Ireland and Irish culture and the record breaking STAR WARS: THE LAST JEDI has also helped create global awareness of Ireland's powerful beauty, it is both wonderful and highly appropriate that St Patrick's Festival has chosen Mark Hamill as the inaugural International Guest of Honour and we are delighted to welcome him 'home' to Ireland".

A firm highlight of St. Patrick's Festival, the Festival Parade on March 17th will weave its way through the heart of the capital city in a flourish of colour and flair. Community groups and pageant companies from all over Ireland will come together to celebrate the parade theme *Home Is Where the Heart Is* through a variety of performances and street theatre around subjects such as precious moments treasured by the family clock and 'Home' as a tribe, family and shared experience. This year will also see over 2,000 band members from far and wide deliver dazzling rhythms and uplifting music that will reverberate throughout the city's streets.

The full programme of events for St. Patrick's Festival is available on
www.stpatricksfestival.ie

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NOTES TO EDITOR

St. Patrick's Festival's principal funders are Fáilte Ireland, Dublin City Council and the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht. Its aim is to develop a major annual international festival around the national holiday over which the Irish people can stand proud. The first St. Patrick's Festival was held over one day, and night, on March 17th 1996. Preparation used to take five months, but with its subsequent growth, it now takes 18 months to plan for Ireland's biggest annual celebration.

Over 105,000 out-of-state visitors attended the Festival in 2016, spending an average of 8.8 days in Ireland, and 6.5 days in Dublin. During the 2015 Festival, out-of-state visitors generated an estimated total expenditure of €73m while in Ireland, including expenditure of €1.3m while in Dublin, and circa €2m which was spent in the rest of Ireland. (Independent research conducted in 2015 & 2016 by Behaviour and Attitudes on behalf of Fáilte Ireland.)

Why was it started?

- To offer a national festival that ranks as one of the greatest celebrations in the world
- To create energy and excitement throughout Ireland via innovation, creativity and grassroots involvement, and marketing activity
- To provide the opportunity and motivation for people of Irish descent (and those who sometimes wish they were Irish) to attend and join in the imaginative and expressive celebrations
- To project, internationally, an accurate image of Ireland as a creative, professional and sophisticated country with wide appeal.