

A report on recent discoveries in North West Cavan & South West Fermanagh by Gaby Burns & Jim Nolan

Draft

THE REPORT

The following is an interim report on an ongoing survey of ancient settlement features in the Burren region of Cavan and the adjacent Marlbank region of Fermanagh. The survey has identified a range of relict walls which may date from prehistoric to post-medieval, and later, times. Habitation and other settlement features have also been discovered.

The survey, to date, has covered 17 townlands. The total length of wall surveyed adds up to over 30 km and the area surveyed is over 270 hectares (2.7km² - 665 acres) The area covered in the course of this study so far is four times that - 12 km². The field work was carried out exclusively by two researchers, Jim Nolan & Gaby Burns, over a period of four and a half years.

The main results can be summarised as follows.

- 30 km of remnant walls;
- 150 house or hut sites;
- Evidence of extensive (probable prehistoric) stone working on wall construction;
- Ring marked stone workings on "typical" split stone;
- Monumental boulder "chamber" features.
- Settlement features under bog ;

Methodology

From the outset the survey relied upon the availability of more detailed and more up-to-date maps than those available from Ordnance Survey although the starting point in all cases used OS maps as a base line. We were fortunate to have a range of orienteering maps at our disposal. More recent surveying has been greatly facilitated by use of GPS satellite and, in some localities, colour aerial photographs. The use of computer multi-layering techniques allowed overlaying of the many sources to reconcile differences and allowed a range of different types of map output formats.

As pointed out Ordnance Survey maps were the base line for our survey. As our approach was that of Landscape Historians our interest ranged from the most recently abandoned settlement features and famine remnants right back to prehistoric times. Our survey attempted, at the outset, to reconcile and identify the different eras of wall enclosures from the 19th Century. Hence we were examining walls from the 1850's and from the earliest records in the 1830's. It very quickly became clear to us that there were much, much earlier farm enclosure remnants in evidence. The resulting survey concentrated mainly on pre-1830 features. A small proportion of those walls recorded by OS, from their morphology and from the fact that they link into unrecorded walls, would also appear to be of ancient origin.

Description of the area:

The study area is located in the North West corner of County Cavan and the South West corner of Fermanagh, at an altitude between 150m and 300m. It has basically two centres - Burren Forest, which was completely planted with forest in the 1950s and the Marlbank & Cuilcagh Mountain Park. The base rock is limestone with a thin covering of soil, much of the area having exposed limestone pavement. Interspersed throughout this karst terrain of hills and dry valleys are areas of glacial drift and bog. Sandstone glacial erratics have been deposited throughout the karst area in very large numbers. These form the raw materials for the many stone features that are of interest in the area; for example there are no less than 5 known tombs in the Burren. The ancient landscape areas in and around Burren and Marlbank has been preserved as a result of a combination of circumstances. The main reason for the survival of ancient remnants was the lack of intensive farming on this region of marginal land.

Remnant walls

The survey of these early settlement features began almost accidentally. While studying evidence of boulder splitting it was noted what at first appeared to be a random scattering of glacial erratic boulders, on closer scrutiny, displayed a pattern of abandoned wall enclosures. The present field wall boundaries appeared to have been built by robbing the ancient walls of their original material with only the larger and less accessible wall material being left *in situ*. Although these remnant walls were in many places intermittent the limestone base rock quite often could be seen as a higher ridge along the line of the abandoned walls. The main task, and the obsessive challenge, for the two researchers was to find the line of these walls from the very flimsy evidence remaining. We have found that as our experience grows even the most ephemeral pieces of wall can be followed and verified by connecting up with sections of more substantial remnants.

The most common sequence is to find remnants of sandstone boulders on limestone outcrops, followed by more substantial remnants on the limestone/bog interface where the wall usually "disappears" into the bog or overgrowth of heather and gorse.

We found it necessary to start a method of classification of the different types of wall. Later on in our survey we became aware of the work of Dr Carlton Jones at Roughan Hill, Co Clare. Following a visit there we were able to extend our classifications loosely based upon Jones' classifications.

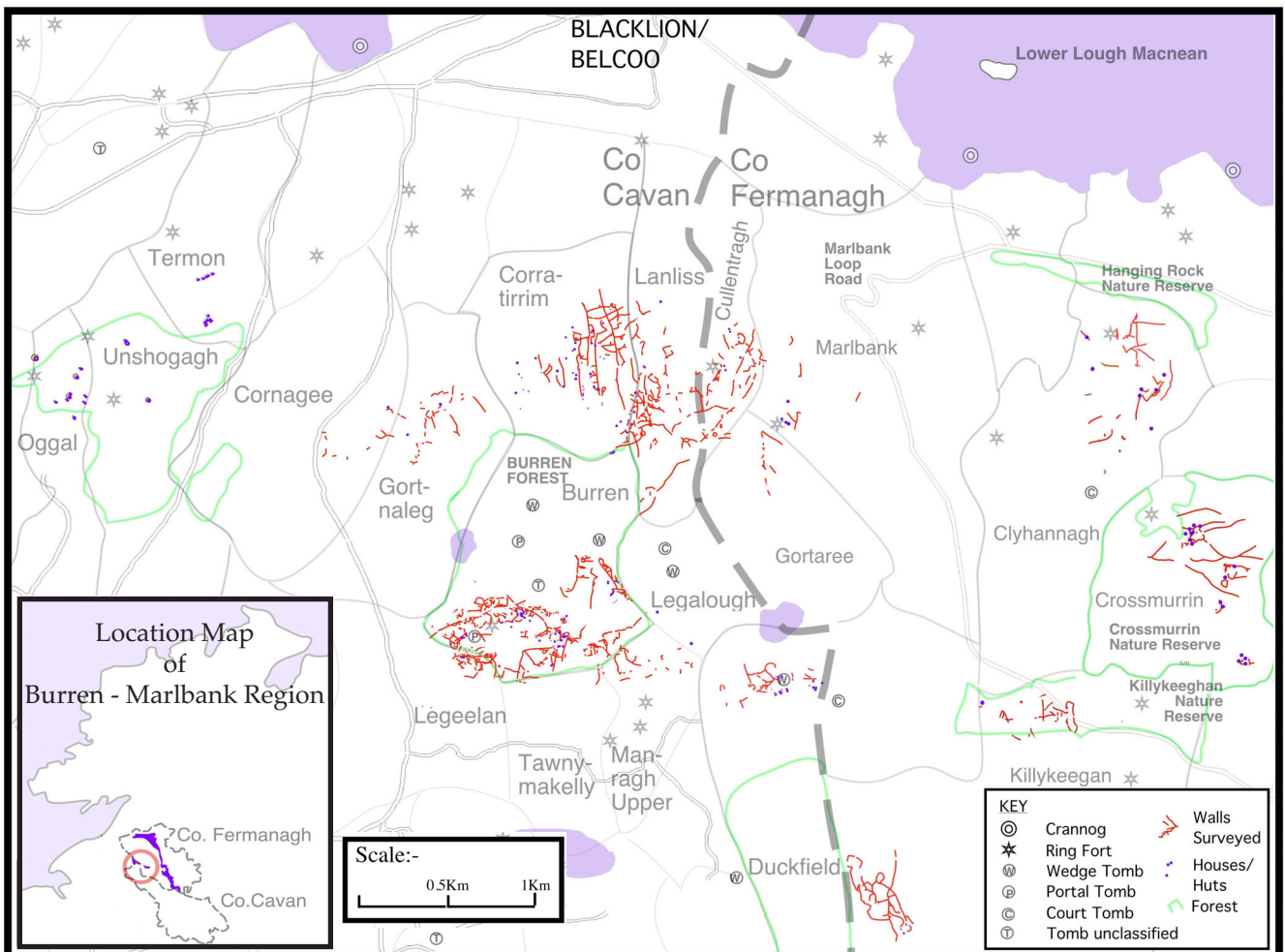
- Tumble Walls –These are walls which have a substantial amount of the original building material present but the wall has fallen into disuse.
- Mound Walls – these are walls with very little wall material remaining but they have fairly visible portions and foundation stones.

- Pedestal ridge – ridge of bedrock capped by thin soil and grass cover which, when exposed, reveals a ridge of limestone higher than the surrounding bedrock.
- Vegetation covered walls – these are transitional walls under a varying depth of heather, gorse and peat covering.
- Bog wall – these are walls clearly identifiable as being intact within or under the bog. We include in this category any wall which is clearly under the present bog even though excavation would be required to prove that a wall actually predated the bog. Where walls have disappeared we have followed, where possible, the line of the wall through probing.

NB. We have often found some walls to form a combination or continuum of the above types.

Split Stones - Sandstone Glacial Erratics.

The feature that most drew our attention to the existence of these ancient walls was a series of unique split stones. The first stone that was brought to our attention had been split along a natural joint but what was unusual was the insertion of a large chock stone. This stone wedge was obviously inserted artificially and would appear to have served the function of driving and/or holding the stones apart. (Fig 1.) Although quite a few more were found to have chock/wedge stones still in place most had the top half of the stone separated and “tossed over” where they still remain. (Fig 2.) Most of these are incorporated within the line of relict walls. More importantly the tossed stones in almost all cases had a significant “protected” limestone pedestal underneath. We combined this evidence with an analysis of the type of farmed land enclosed. We found that many of the old “fields” were quite small and enclosed, in many cases, fairly barren ground. In a number of cases limestone pavement is exposed and there is strong evidence



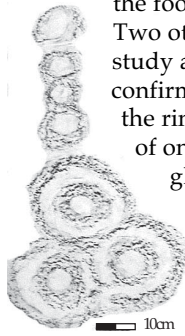
This map shows the distribution of sites & fields surveyed in relation to raths, cashels and tombs.

of severe soil erosion. It can be shown that the limestone pavement was formed under soil. This is indicated by well rounded clints and deep, wide grykes which is evidence of subsoil erosion. The small enclosures must date to the period when there was a good soil cover. However the limestone pavement has been exposed for sufficient time to allow “kamenitza” solutional pits to form. From an early stage in our survey we were of the view that we were studying human structures which were thousands rather than hundreds of years old! We have recorded some 40 split/tossed stones and have found 12 examples with chock stone wedges still in place. We have also noted chock stones placed under one side of larger boulders thereby tilting the stone in order to facilitate the toppling over the top half of the stone.

We have also observed that the relict walls tended to be mainly or exclusively composed of sandstone. 19th century and later walls can be recognised by the presence of a substantial amount of broken limestone pavement which had become exposed and was cleared from the fields to facilitate farming in more recent times. We can generalise by saying that the presence of such broken limestone pavement in walls can often be used to indicate wall of recent origins.

Ring Marked Stone.

Summer 2001 brought about a very important discovery. We found a previously unrecorded ring marked stone several kilometres from this area but on the foothills of the same mountain range. Two other recorded examples exist in our study area. This new discovery helped to confirm one of our basic theories because the ring marks were inscribed on one half of one of our "typical" split stones! A glacial boulder had been raised on one end, split and the top half moved across a short distance of 4m and turned until it faced south and the inscriptions then added. No inscriptions were evident on the other half of the stone. The site was similar in that remnant walls occur on an adjacent exposed area of limestone bedrock with these walls disappearing into the surrounding bog. This was confirmation of Bronze Age stone splitting technology.



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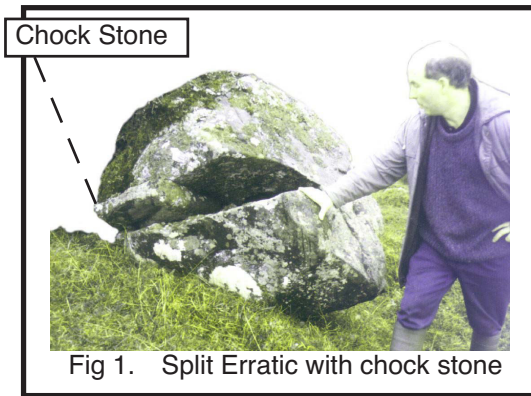
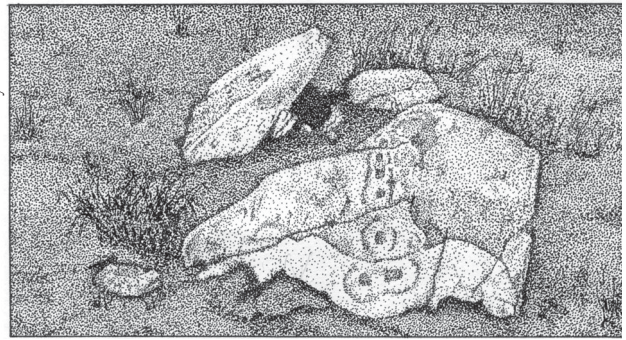


Fig 1. Split Erratic with chock stone

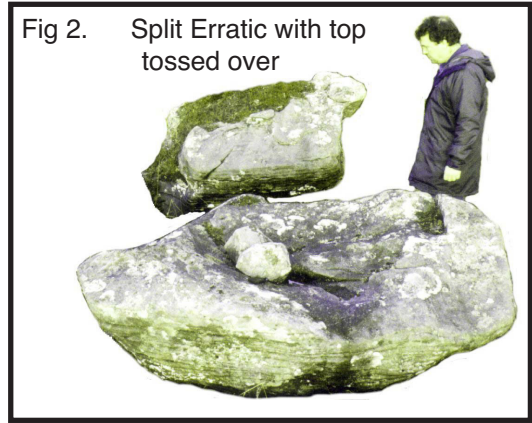


Fig 2. Split Erratic with top tossed over

House/Hut Sites.

In the Summer of 1999 a Report on the Archaeology of the Burren region was published by ADS. Although our survey was not part of this report it did help to validate and encourage our survey. More importantly the author Rory Sherlock had identified 22 house/hut sites in the area. This was a great starting point for what turned out to be a new parallel and complementary direction to our study. We have since then increased the number sevenfold.

The Sites can be classified into two broad categories.:

A] Circular/sub-circular/ovoid/amorphous - 3 – 7 m diameter. These are generally stone based. Most are single roomed. We generally refer to these as "hut" sites

B] Rectangular/sub-rectangular - 7 – 17m in length. These often have an earth covered foundation with a stone base particularly at each corner. Most of these are two roomed. We generally refer to these as "house" sites

Most of the sites in the Burren region are of the former type while those in the Marlbank area are of the latter type – though there are many exceptions in each area.

House/Hut Sites Survey techniques:

The purpose of our survey is to record what is visible and substantial. No excavation is undertaken. We generally record only those features that are clearly identifiable and are enclosed on at least three sides so that external dimensions can be measured and sketched. A more detailed and intensive study would need to record associated cairns and incomplete structures. As a preliminary survey we seek only to record the distribution and relative dimensions of sites and to set these into the context of their associated settlement/farm wall features. Each site is measured at a scale of 1 : 1250. Where the building has an earth covered foundation the internal and external outline is shown. Where boulders and foundation stones are visible these are drawn diagrammatically only. Each area is mapped on a scale of 1 : 10 000 to facilitate easy comparison with OS base map.

Dimensions of Houses/Huts

		External Length	External Width			External Length	External Width
1	Cm1	9.0	4.3	68	Bu16	3.8	3.1
2	Cm2	4.6	3.2	69	Bu17	3.1	3.0
3	Cm3	10	4.0	70	Bu18a	4.0	3.0
4	Cm4	15.5	4.5	71	Bu18b	2.2	2.4
5	Cm5	11	4.5	72	Bu18c	5.2	4.6
6	Cm6	5.9	4.0	73	Bu19	4.9	3.9
7	Cm7	3.0	2.0	74	Bu20	4.3	4.2
8	Cm8	11.6	4.5	75	Bu21	3.8	3.5
9	Cm9	7.6	3.8	76	Bu22		
10	Cm10	5.8	3.8	77	Bu23a	3.0	4.0
11	Cm11	7.1	3.9	78	Bu23b	4.0	2.4
12	Cm12	10.7	4.4	79	Bu23c	2.5	2.5
13	Cm13	6.3	3.7	80	Bu23d	4.2	3.0
14	Cm14	7.7	6.0	81	Bu23e	4.0	3.2
15	Cm15	5.6	2.7	82	Bu24a	3.0	2.8
16	Cl1	13.0	6.0	83	Bu24b	5.5	3.2
17	Cl2	7.8	2.6	84	Bu25	6.0	8.0
18	Cl3	10.1	4.9	85	Bu26		
19	Cl4	15.4	5.1	86	Bu27	4.4	2.3
20	Cl5	13.2	5.3	87	Bu28	2.3	2.0
21	Cl6	13.0	4.2	88	Bu29	2.59	2.8
22	KKW	12.7	3.0	89	Lc11	6.2	5.6
23	K2	4.0	3.3	90	MU5	7.3	6.9
24	K3	3.9	2.9	91	MU6	2.7	2.3
25	Lv1	7.9	5.0	92	MU7	2.8	1.8
26	Ly2	17.1	4.5	93	MU8	4.9	4.7
27	Ly3	14.4	3.6	94	MU9	4.3	3.5
28	Ly4	11.4	3.5	95	L2	5.5	5.3
29	Ly5	11.0	5.3	96	L3	4.7	3.9
30	MA1	7.8	4.5	97	CT2	8.5	4.0
31	MA2	11.1	3.0	98	CT3	10.0	10.0
32	MA3	3.5	3.5	99	CT4	16.0	2.8
33	KKU1	8.0	8.0	100	CT5	9.0	3.4
34	KKU2	4.0	3.6	101	CT6	5.4	3.0
35	KKU3			102	CT7	3.4	3.4
36	KKU4			103	D1	6.8	6.2
37	KKU5			104	D2	11.8	4.1
38	KKU6	6.0	4.8	105	D3	8.9	4.6
39	KKU7	5.0	3.9	106	D4	8.9	4.0
40	KKU8	2.5	2.0	107	D5	3.5	3.5
41	KKU9	5.0	3.8	108	D6	3.9	3.9
42	KKU10	6.4	4.0	109	T9A	9.9	3.1
43	KKU11a	4.0	3.0	110	T9B	8.0	3.2
44	KKU11b	4.0	3.0	111	T9C	9.1	3.3
45	KKU11c	3.0	2.0	112	T9D	8.8	3.8
46	KKU12			113	T9E	13.2	3.0
47	KKU13	5.0	5.0	114	T10A	13.6	3.4
48	KKU14	4.5	4.5	115	T10B	10.9	2.7
49	Bu1	3.0	2.6	116	T10C	13.0	3.3
50	Bu2	3.2	2.6	117	T10D	11.8	3.2
51	Bu3	4.0	2.2	118	T10E	8.3	3.0
52	Bu4	1.6	1.6	119	T10F	8.1	3.2
53	Bu5	2.8	2.6	120	OG1	6.4	6.4
54	Bu6	3.0	1.0	121	OG2		
55	Bu7	3.0	1.6	122	OG3b	4.0	3.7
56	Bu8	5.0	3.0	123	OG3		
57	Bu9	3.2	2.2	124	OG5	10.4	4.2
58	Bu10	4.0	1.6	125	OG7	11.0	3.9
59	Bu11 Taj			126	OG9	10.2	3.0
60	Bu12	4.0	1.6	127	GMC2	8.5	3.8
61	Bu13	4.3	4.0	128	GMC3	11.6	3.0
62	Bu14	3.0	2.2	129	LL1	7.1	4.4
63	Bu15a	2.7	2.7	130	LL2	4.2	4.2
64	Bu15b	3.0	1.99	131	LL3	4.7	4.0
65	Bu15c	6.2	3.9	132	LL4	12.8	11.7
66	Bu15d	5.0	1.0	133	LL5	6.6	6.0
67	Bu15e	2.0	1.7	134	LL6	10.5	3.6

Description of sites.

A] Circular/sub-circular/ovoid/amorphous hut sites.

The largest concentration of these occur in the Burren Forest itself. The average diameter of these is only 3m. One of the smallest sites was only 1.5m diameter. The largest was a structure, 11m x 8m containing five contiguous sub-circular 'rooms'. The majority of these sites contain a low, one course, wall base. Some appear to have entrance features - many do not. The vast majority of these sites occur on the junction of two or more walls which have not been previously recorded. Some have very small walled enclosures, 4 - 8m diameter, attached.

These structures are settlement features of some sort. They could be either for storage, shelter or habitation. Given the context of small fields concentrations the majority of these features must be habitation associated features. These are most likely contemporary with the field boundaries and most likely contemporary with each other. Until an excavation has been concluded we cannot properly date these features but as we have seen from the study of the field walls we are most likely talking about prehistoric times.

B] Rectangular/sub-rectangular house sites.

Crossmurrin and Clyhannagh townlands, in the Marlbank area, provide us with 21 examples of these. 8 were double roomed. The average size was 8m in length and 4 m wide. The largest was 13m x 6m. The smallest double-roomed structure was 5.9m x 4m whilst the smallest single roomed feature was 3m x 2m. Most have stone foundations under the soil cover particularly at the corners. The fact that the foundations are consistently the same all round suggests that this was roughly the height of the *original* base and that some sort of organically based superstructure has since rotted away. If the walls had been earthen the mounds would not be so narrow and consistent and had there been stone walls the stone could not have been so consistently removed to leave such a regular remnant. All the buildings are on two or more field boundaries which have not been previously recorded though many of these connect to more modern walls. Further study will be required to unravel the sequence of dating for this palimpsest of ancient/recent walls. Relict Cultivation ridges have been found beside or close to all of the structures. Some of these cultivation ridges can be seen to undercut modern walls probably dating them to pre-famine/post-medieval.

Comparison with Roughan Hill, Co Clare

Roughan Hill in Co Clare is one of the few areas with ancient settlement features in a limestone landscape that has been studied intensively. It might help to compare this area with it. This area is similar in that it is mainly on limestone bedrock with thin soil cover and many of the wall classifications that Dr Carlton Jones identified can also be applied here. However the presence of transitional areas of bog and glacial drift complicates our study. On the other hand the encroaching bog with the resultant karst oases is very suggestive of the antiquity of these structures. The Roughan Hill study was primarily in one townland whilst our study is spread over 17 townlands and has a wider range of landscapes and features. In Clare the ancient fields are set amongst tombs. Although there are seven tombs in the Burren/Legolough region of Cavan even the features close to these tombs could hardly be described as being amongst the tombs. (See map). There are three possible explanations for this:

- Any ancient walls close to the tombs have been removed or covered.
- The ritual areas were separate from habitations
- There are tombs within these ancient fields but are unrecognizable or destroyed.

Monumental landscape

The suggestion that there are tombs within these ancient fields but are unrecognizable or destroyed will need further investigation. There are a number of cairns and unusual monumental features in the area. The Burren forest area has a mystical feel about it. The presence of so many prehistoric tombs is no coincidence. The massive glacial erratics were doubtlessly of great significance to a people who would have had a close religious feel for natural phenomena. In a number of locations these large boulders appear to have been propped up in a variety of ways and there is a strong possibility that a number have had the limestone base under cut artificially to give an overhang or cavity of sorts. One of these boulder 'monuments' appears to have a chamber cut out from the limestone pedestal underneath, 1.5m x 1m. There are corbel stones inserted to take the weight off the remaining limestone column. Without funerary or comparative evidence we can't classify this as a tomb. There is the feeling, however, that this 'cut chamber' is ancient, perhaps prototype.



Raths/Cashels

As can be seen from the map the present distribution of raths/cashels 95% of the surveyed area is unassociated with any rath or cashel. We were surprised by this as we had set out with the assumption that we would find remnants of walls that would be expected to have radiated out from these 'Celtic' features. We are now inclined to believe that most of the Burren area pre-dates them while the Marlbank sites post-date Celtic times. There are a small number of remnant walls radiating out from a few cashels and these are likely to be contemporary with them. In the Marlbank area a small number of built structures were found within or adjacent to cashels.