

County Kildare Archaeological Society

The County Kildare Archaeological Society's 2013 annual three day excursion took place to Sligo and Roscommon on 16 - 18 May led by the Vice-President, Hugh Crawford. The Society's base for the duration of the excursion was the Sligo Park Hotel overlooking the majestic Benbulbin and one of Ireland's most scenic landscapes.

The first major stop on the tour was the Cruachan Aí Heritage Centre in Tulsk, Co. Roscommon which is the Office of Public Works approved interpretative and visitor centre for the Rathcroghan Complex. It is one of Ireland's leading Celtic Royal Sites bursting with history, mythology, archaeology and spirituality. The complex has also been nominated to the tentative list for UNESCO World Heritage Status. Gary Dempsey, the educational officer at the Centre, was the Society's guide for the duration of the stay and he expressed his honour to be leading, as he put it, one of the most highly regarded and oldest societies in the country on their first visit to Rathcroghan. Gary guided the group through audio and visual presentations, models, aerial photography, geophysical survey information and examples of historical costumes, armour, furniture and manuscripts. Particular attention was given to the recent extensive geophysical and survey work carried out at Rathcroghan by NUI Galway Archaeology Department headed by Professor John Waddell. Gary explained that the mound itself is ninety metres in diameter, seven metres high and also the complexity of the monuments in the vicinity of the mound i.e. two standing stones, four barrows and an ancient roadway, all being part of what appears to be an elaborate complex of ritual monuments. The group heard brief descriptions of the legends such as the Ulster Cycle or the *Táin Bó Cuailnge*.



CKAS members listening to Gary Dempsey at the Cruachan Ai Heritage Centre

Following lunch at the centre, Gary led a coach tour of most of the main sites, however, due to heavy rain it was not possible to visit any of these sites for safety reasons. The weather did

not dampen Gary's enthusiasm as he continued to pour out information and outlining the various aspects and placements within the complex including; Oweynagat - Uaimh na gCait or the "Cave of Cats". Legend has it that it is an important entrance and exit from the "Otherworld" while Christian scribes described Oweynagat as the "Gates of Hell". Eventually the Society's time slot ran out and Hugh Crawford thanked Gary for his presentation and also for his help together with that of his colleagues in the prior planning of the visit. The President, Con Manning then made a presentation to Gary on behalf of the Society. It is worth stating that the Rathcroghan Complex is really much more than words can describe.

At Boyle Abbey, which is now under the care of the OPW, the CKAS group was greeted by Eugene Handley. The restored ruins of the abbey which is an outstanding example of Romanesque and Gothic architecture has been enhanced by the new wood and glass structure on its north aisle. The group heard that the Cistercians were brought to Ireland in the twelfth century to reform the Irish church which had got out of line with the rest of the Christian church in Europe. The Cistercians were given a large land grant by the ruling family the MacDermots which they farmed efficiently along with their simple life style of silence, work and prayer from dawn until dusk. The last abbot of the abbey was executed by the English in 1584 for refusing to renounce his allegiance to the Pope in Rome. Eugene outlined in his guided tour the destruction to the abbey by the Elizabethans in 1592 and later by the Cromwellians in 1645 for the purpose of providing accommodation for a military garrison.



Boyle Abbey showing the extent of the structure and part of the new wood and glass structure on its north aisle.

The military remained at the abbey site until they moved to King House in 1788 after the King family had move to Rockingham. Eugene pointed to the usual Cistercian plan, the cloister area, chapter house, kitchen and refectory, store houses, dormitories and the church with its nave, side aisles, chancel and large tower. Despite the destruction of the abbey during the dissolution of the monasteries and the military occupation a considerable

number of elaborate stone carvings and decorations remain such as the image of the peacock and dogs or cats seemingly eating a human head, an image of a number of monks and last but not least a 'sheela na gig'. The latter provided much debate amongst the group as to why such an image would be incorporated in a Cistercian abbey structure. Ending the visit to the abbey the President Con Manning thanked Eugene Handley for a most informative tour.

The journey to Sligo involved crossing the Curlew Mountains and from the summit the natural beauty of both Lough Key and Lough Arrow came into view. The summit is the site of the famous 'Battle of the Curlews' fought in August 1599 in the Nine Years' War between the English force and the rebel Irish force under Hugh O'Donnell in which the English forces suffered heavy losses. The site has a magnificent sculpture by Maurice Harron called 'The Gaelic Chieftain' which was unveiled in 1999. A little further on it was possible to see the distinctive Bricklieves hills with its famous Kesh Corann and Carrowkeel on which one of the top passage tomb cemeteries in Ireland is located. The site was not included in the itinerary due to access difficulties, nevertheless, for the fit and hardy it is a 'must see' with a total of fourteen tombs in all.

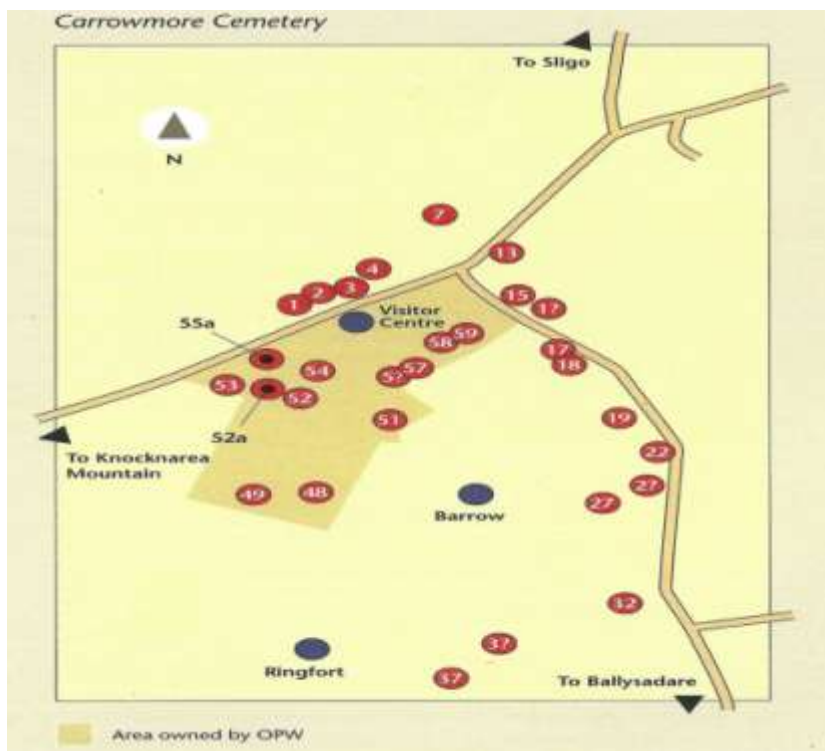
Day 2

Day two began with the short trip to the megalithic cemetery and exhibition centre at Carrowmore. Austin McTiernan from the Carrowmore of the important monuments. It was pointed out that much of the site is under the control of the Heritage Service of the OPW while the remainder is under private ownership but protected under the various National Monument Acts. Austin pointed out that Carrowmore is the largest of the four megalithic cemeteries in Ireland. On the ground he brought the group through the time frame that shaped Carrowmore from 4000 BC right through to modern times and also the various studies carried out. Austin explained that the various tombs were given numbers by the archaeologist George Petrie when he was conducting his survey for the Ordnance Survey in 1837. These are spread over an area 1 km north to south by 0.6 km east to west.



(Austin McTiernan with the CKAS group at one of the sites)

The surviving monuments in various state of survival are outlined on the OPW map below while another twenty-five or more have been destroyed since 1800 mainly through gravel quarrying.



(Map courtesy of the Office of Public Works)

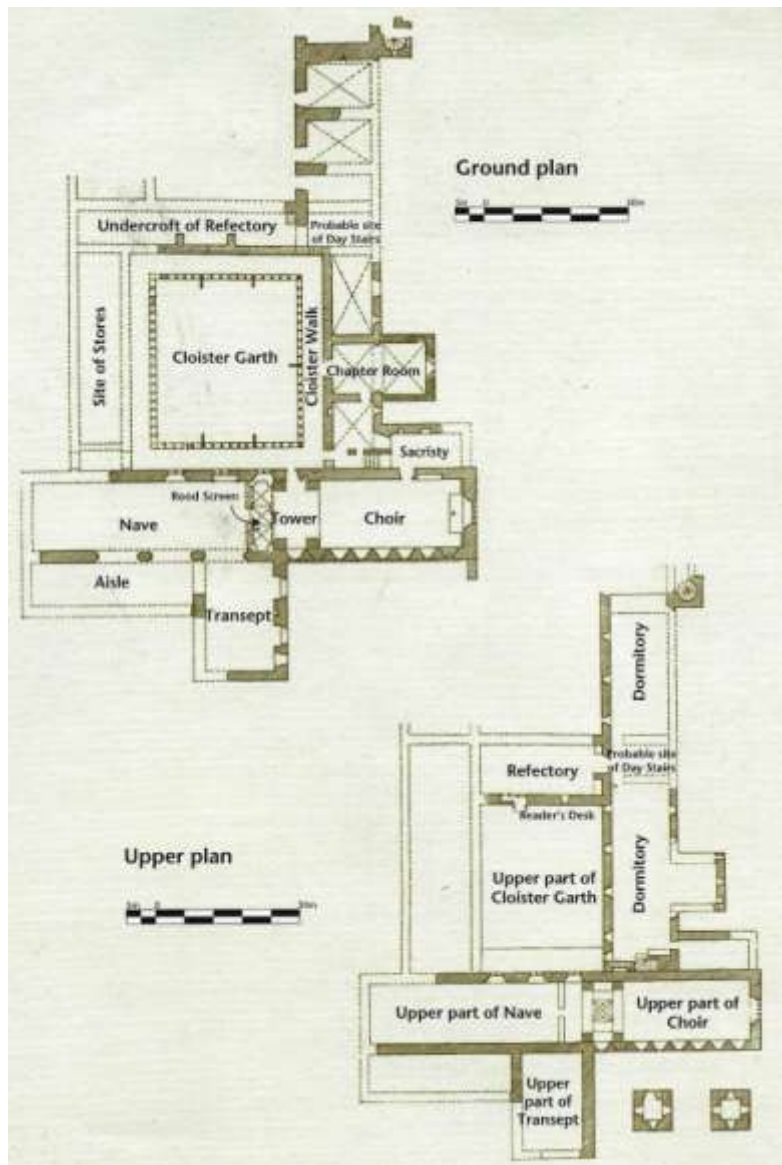
A further survey was carried out in the 1870s by a local antiquarian W.G. Wood-Martin who excavated a number of the tomb chambers and the inventory of this work can be found in the

National Museum. Earlier a local landlord R.C. Walker had carried out digs in the 1830s and the artefacts found were passed on to the Duke of Northumberland some of which have been purchased by the National Museum. Regardless, much of the information currently available is credited to the Swedish archaeological investigations under Dr. Burenhult between 1977 and 1982 and again in the 1990s. The field tour ended at the most notable monument - number 51, also known as Listoghil which is located on the highest point of the Carrowmore complex. This is the only tomb believed to have been covered by a cairn and is also the largest having a diameter of 34 metres. Dr. Burenhult carried out considerable work on the tomb and the OPW has added to this with restoration of the cairn following centuries of damage. Austin drew attention to the orientation of monuments and those located within the surrounding landscape. Bringing the visit to a close, the President, Con Manning on behalf of the Society made a presentation to Austin for his most informative tour of the Carrowmore complex.



Photograph of Listoghil showing the passageway with the tomb in the background (Courtesy of Anne O'Byrne)

Following luncheon at the Sligo Park Hotel the group made the short journey to Sligo Abbey or more correctly the historic Dominican Friary. This picturesque ruin, once one of Ireland's finest buildings, is now under the care and management of the OPW. The Friary was founded in 1252 for the Dominicans by Maurice Fitzgerald and was accidentally burned in 1414 but rebuilt in 1416. Robert Hensey on behalf of the OPW welcomed the group and then provided a guided tour of the site. Interestingly, Sligo Friary/Abbey was not dissolved by the English under the Dissolution of the Monasteries as the O'Connors, the local ruling family, had a good relationship with Queen Elizabeth I. Indeed the Dominicans survived many difficult times before moving to their current site in High Street, Sligo in the 18 century.



(Plan of Sligo Abbey, Courtesy of the Dept. of Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and the Islands)

Robert outlined the significant features and the periods of when the various structural works were carried out. Parts of the church were built in the 13 century and the cloister and transept were added in the 15 century as were the unusual rood screen and belfry tower. Noteworthy are the O'Carain tomb of 1506 in the nave which is built into a niche in the north wall surmounted by sharply pointed arch. The alter tomb consists of stone slabs over a frontal carved stone having nine canopied niches – the Crucifixion in the centre and eight other figures including Our Lady and St. John. In the east wall in the Choir is a 15 century window and under is the beautifully sculptured high alter. Just to the right on the south wall is the O'Connor Sligo Monument of 1624 near the high alter. This is a memorial to Sir Donagh O'Connor, Lord of Sligo and his wife Lady Elinor. The tour concluded after viewing the sacristy, chapter room, cloister garth and cloister walk in addition to part of the upper plan. Con Manning conveyed the thanks of the Society for a wonderful tour.

The final part of the itinerary for the day was a visit to the magnificently restored plantation Parke's Castle which is under the management of the OPW. The genesis of the castle can be traced to the Spanish Armada in 1588, in which one of the ship-wrecked sea captains was provided with hospitality by Sir Brian O'Rourke who had a 15 century tower house on the site at that time. In retaliation for this hospitality the English destroyed his tower house confiscated his lands and after indictment he was executed at Tyburn in 1591. The English settler, Captain Robert Parke, acquired the confiscated lands and constructed a fortified castle or manor house in 1610 on the site.



(Parke's Castle courtesy of the Office of Public Works)

Siobhan McGowan, Annamay Smith and Mark Keane each took turns in providing a guided tour for the Society members. In this beautifully restored building visitors are encouraged to view the excellent audio-visual presentation which outlines the history of the Castle. The various aspects of the castle and bawn were pointed out such as the arched entrance, the defence flankers, the dovecote in the northwest flanker, the stone paved courtyard and ancillary stone buildings, postern gate and through the sally port to the sweat-house in the adjoining garden. Inside the restored structure can be seen the magnificent work of the skilled local craftsmen and the use of specially selected Irish oak with all of the work being carried out to 17 century techniques. Inside there is also a specially crafted left-handed timber stairs together with a number of exhibitions including a tenant discussing his agreement with his master. To conclude the visit Con Manning thanked the staff at the Castle for a wonderful informative afternoon.



The sweat-house at Parke's Castle

On the journey back to the Hotel the coach travelled along the northern side of Lough Gill making a brief stop at the historic St Angela's College founded by the Ursuline Sisters in 1952 to provide home economic teachers and now a constituent college of NUI Galway. While the college has experienced massive expansion the Sisters still reside in what is known as Clogherevagh House originally built by the Gore Booth family of Lissadell as a fishing lodge, on land the property of the Wynne family of Hazelwood House, who were extensive land owners in the area gifted to them by Oliver Cromwell. At Clogherevagh the group received a very warm greeting from Sister Mary Kane who was overjoyed seeing her brother Eamon, the Society's Assistant Editor who was part of the group. While time did not permit the group to partake of the hospitality of the Sisters, nevertheless, it was an opportunity for the group to view one of the most scenic and tranquil sites imaginable with the idyllic Church Island in the background together with its ruined monastic Church. W.B. Yeats was once a very regular visitor to the Morris-Wynne family when they resided at Clogherevagh House. He was known to have taken regular boat trips with the family on Lough Gill and picnicked with his hosts on Church Island. Information from reliable sources suggests that Yeats substituted in his poem the name Innisfree for the idyllic Church Island.

Day 3

The final day of the excursion commenced with a visit to the Creevykeel Court Tomb at Cliffony in north Sligo. The tomb consisting of a wedge shaped cairn about 50 metres long with an oval shaped court at its eastern side which dates from the Neolithic Period (4,000 – 2500 BC) is one of the best examples of court tombs in Ireland. Con Manning acted as guide for this visit which was challenging due to weather conditions, nevertheless, the site was scrutinised in great detail by all members of the group. The entrance to the court is from the eastern side by way of a narrow passage of upright stones. The court itself is approximately 50 feet x 30 feet which is large in terms of Irish court tombs and this leads to the burial

gallery. This gallery believed to be once covered by a corbelled roof is divided in two with upright stones and has the remains of three subsidiary chambers.



Maeve Costello negotiating her way back from the tomb gallery to the court

The remains of a kiln in the court indicated that the court was used in the early Christian period for iron smeltings. Extensive works were carried out on the site during the 1930s and excavations revealed cremation burials, flint knives, scrapers, stone axes, Neolithic pottery and clay balls.

Drumcliffe has been a place of Christian worship for over 1,500 years and a monastery was founded there by St. Colmcille or Columba in 574. On arrival the party made their way to the magnificently restored St. Columba's Church of Ireland, while nearby, is the simple grave and final resting place of W.B. Yeats. The Church has recently celebrated its 200th anniversary having been constructed in 1809 using stones from the original monastery. While some found the beautiful tea rooms and craft shop a diversion from the inclement weather others made their way to view the magnificent High Cross dating back to the 9th century. On the east face there are carvings of Adam and Eve, Cain slaying Abel, Daniel in the Lion's Den and Christ in Glory while on the west face there is the Crucifixion and a number of other unidentified images. In addition there is extensive interlacing and animal ornamentation.



The west side of Druncliffe High Cross

It is said that these crosses were used with the carvings to illustrate the biblical stories to a mainly illiterate people. Alongside the main road is the shaft of another cross while sections of a third cross were found built into the walls of St. Columba's Church during refurbishment works. Across the main road is the stump of the 10 or 11 century Round Tower which was struck by lightning in the late 14 century. The tower it is believed to have acted as a bell tower for the adjoining monastery for a period. In more modern times, the local Development Association, commissioned in 2003, a magnificent bronze and stone sculpture by Jackie McKenna featuring the words of William Butler Yeats, "He Wishes For the Cloths of Heaven". This sculpture which is in a quiet peaceful corner of the car park, invites visitors to ponder on the meaning of the sculpture or reflect on the familiar last line of Yeats's poem, "Tread softly because you tread on my dreams."

The usual excursion celebratory luncheon took place in the award winning Coach Lane Restaurant at Donaghy's Bar on Lord Edward Street, Sligo. The restaurant, broke from its normal routine to lay on a special luncheon for the Society. Such was the ambiance, hospitality, superb food, wine and reflection that the time schedule was forgotten. Before departure, the President, Conleth Manning took the opportunity on behalf of the Society to thank the management, chef and staff for the wonderful meal and for their hospitality. He thanked Hugh Crawford for planning and organising a marvellous itinerary for such a successful excursion and also thanked Siobhan McNulty for her input.

The excursion was completed with a visit to the Georgian Palladian mansion Strokestown House followed by a guided tour of the main parts of the house. Most of the group were very familiar with the house following the recent TV series on TV3. Strokestown Park, has been from the Cromwellian war period, the family home of the Mahons and later Pakenham Mahons until 1979.



The main house courtesy of Strokestown Park House

By 1979, the house had reached almost total dereliction and the house, along with what remained of the estate, was purchased by Jim Callery of the local Westward Garage Group. While browsing through the rooms on the tour it was clear that very sensitive refurbishment and restoration works have been carried out by the current owners. The company negotiated an arrangement with the former owners to retain virtually all of the original furnishings. This ensured that the house is pretty much unchanged from the time when the Mahons lived there as can be seen from the remaining photographs in the house. The current mansion was constructed in the 1730s on the site of the 16 century castle the former home of The O’Conor Roe Gaelic chieftains. The house was designed by Richard Castle and has many similarities to his other work at Hazelwood, Carton, Powerscourt and Russborough.



The Kitchen courtesy of Strokestown Park House

In the early 18 century the family had a private demesne of 1,000 acres for their sole use for hunting, fishing, shooting and farming with a further 10,000 acres rented to tenants in various farm sizes. However, prior to the Great Famine the estate had fallen into serious debt but was saved by a marriage to a member of the Pakenham family which rescued the estate. Attached to the house is a six acre walled pleasure garden which is almost restored to its original splendour providing an insight into horticultural and architectural design from the 1740s. Time did not permit a tour of the Famine Museum which has been developed by the Westwood Group. The purpose of the museum is to balance the history of the ‘Big House’

using the original estate records to tell the tenant's story and the circumstances of the Great Famine. It deals with the various aspects from the ascendancy, tenants, potato crops, workhouse, emigration, evictions, secret societies and the aftermath. It is worth noting that Major Denis Mahon was assassinated in November 1847 during the Great Irish Famine and was the first of seven landlords to be assassinated during this period.

There were many contributions on various subjects during the excursion including Con Manning, Hugh Crawford, Michael Jacob and Tom Keegan, all of which added to the overall occasion. There was a great sense of camaraderie amongst the group and active participation at the various sites. There was relaxation and enjoyment throughout and much appreciation of the Society for organising these excursions. In conclusion, the organisers expressed their gratitude for the wonderful cooperation by the entire party throughout, the Sligo Park Hotel, Coach Lane Restaurant and Kane's Coaches.

Hugh Crawford

June 2013.