

The Burren, County Clare, Ireland. 17th to 20th June 2019: Archaeology, Geology and Speleology!

by Vince Simmonds



Limestone pavement, The Burren.

Sunday afternoon/evening: After doing all the things planned for the day it came around to washing and giving the inside of the van a clean ready to be loaded. The van had been filled up with fuel earlier in the day.

The van loaded, dinner was prepared for the family, we ate, then tried to get a little rest before our journey began.

We set-off for Pembroke Dock around 21:00. An uneventful journey by a large and we arrived at the ferry port just before mid-night, so there was a little bit of waiting around until check-in at 00:15. That done we were able to nap for a couple of hours until boarding at c.02:00. We went to look at the kennels on the ferry and immediately decided to leave Buster in the van where he would be more comfortable. Then up to the passenger deck where we found somewhere comfortable to get our heads down for the duration of the crossing (c.4 hours).

Monday: I awoke at 05:30 and went to find some coffee, Roz was still asleep.

The boat arrived on time, 06:45, at Rosslare Harbour and before too long we were disembarking and on our way. We didn't get far, a very brief stop just outside the dock gates and a walk along the sand dunes to let the dog have a stretch, and other things. We then resumed our journey north-west to Co. Clare and the Burren.

We stopped at a supermarket in Clonmel to buy some food items and a comfort break then continued the journey.

We arrived at Doolin about mid-day, c.5 hours after leaving Rosslare Harbour. Needed to check the route a couple of times other than that we were fine.

We parked at Doolin Pier and walked a short way along the coast to stretch our legs before going to find a campsite. We stayed at O'Connor's Riverside Campsite (€44 for 2 nights). Put the tent up then had something to eat before setting-off to visit **Doolin Cave** (*showcave*), also known as Poll-an-Ioniain. Not a lot to see really but the Great Stalactite is impressive and worth the visit. An interesting story about the cave's discovery in the 1950s by members of the Craven Pothole Club and its subsequent development as a showcave. The c.20m deep shaft must have cost a small fortune.



The Great Stalactite, Doolin Cave.

Our guide, Richie Jones, recognised that we were 'cavers' and he would have liked to talk more, unfortunately he had another group to lead and there wasn't time. He was acquainted with Messrs. Tony Boycott and Pat Cronin and was a digger himself.

After the underground bit we strolled around the nature trail and located the original entrance, now blocked. It was probably a decent caving trip, *back in the day!*

Leaving Doolin cave, we followed the road signposted 'Burren Coastal Route' and went north-east along the scenic Atlantic coast, a lot of barren, limestone pavement scoured clean by glacial movements, super stuff. We stopped briefly at the little shop in Fanore before turning to the south-east to follow the Caher River up onto the Burren.



A bank of glacial till, Caher River.

We stopped to look at an exposure of glacial till that formed a bank alongside the Caher River, on the opposite side of the road were erratic's left behind as the ice receded. The road led over the Burren and we admired the limestone landscape. Finding the archaeology marked on the map wasn't so easy and most of the land appears to be privately owned, no footpaths either. We stopped in Lisdoonvarna for sundry items, then returned to the campsite in Doolin.

At the campsite we had something to eat and chilled-out for a while. We had intended to go for a walk later with the dog but that didn't happen. As we sat around the tent, reading and studying maps it became obvious that after all the travelling we were very tired, and an early night was the result.

The two of us and the dog in the little tent (*OEX Phoxx II*) was a bit cosy. It was okay but there wasn't too much room spare for any kit.



Erratic's, Caher River valley.

Tuesday: Just a brief disturbance in the night when Roz decided she needed to get up in the early hours but, overall an excellent night's rest. We awoke to a fine morning. A shower, then breakfast and a think about today's itinerary; a walk along the **Cliffs of Moher**.

We set-off from the campsite, south-west along the road following the signs marked 'The Burren Way'. The road led to a track heading off towards the cliffs. Here, the signs suggested that dogs weren't allowed. Well, Buster can't read, and we ignored the advice, we carried on regardless. We soon left the track and followed the cliff-top footpath, it has eroded in places as the cliffs collapse into the sea and diverts from the edge.

Some interesting geology along the way prompted a scramble down to investigate further, some fine examples of folded rock strata. Plenty of scope for discussion.

Even found an archaeological artefact, an unfinished sandstone millstone. Probably the millstone fractured along a weakness in the rock and was discarded.

We scrambled back to the cliff-top path and continued. As we approached the visitor centre at Branaunmore, the numbers of people increased dramatically. All teetering around and taking some quite reckless opportunities for 'selfies', which seems to be the fad at present. At the viewpoint we had some refreshments, and an expensive ice cream! And then we made our escape from the maddening hordes. We returned, mostly by the way we had come, admittedly, we found some detours and other distractions along the route.

From our vantage point at the top of the cliffs, sea birds could be seen nesting on the cliffs and stacks below; including guillemots, razorbills and fulmars.



Folded rocks, Cliffs of Moher.



A discarded millstone, Cliffs of Moher.

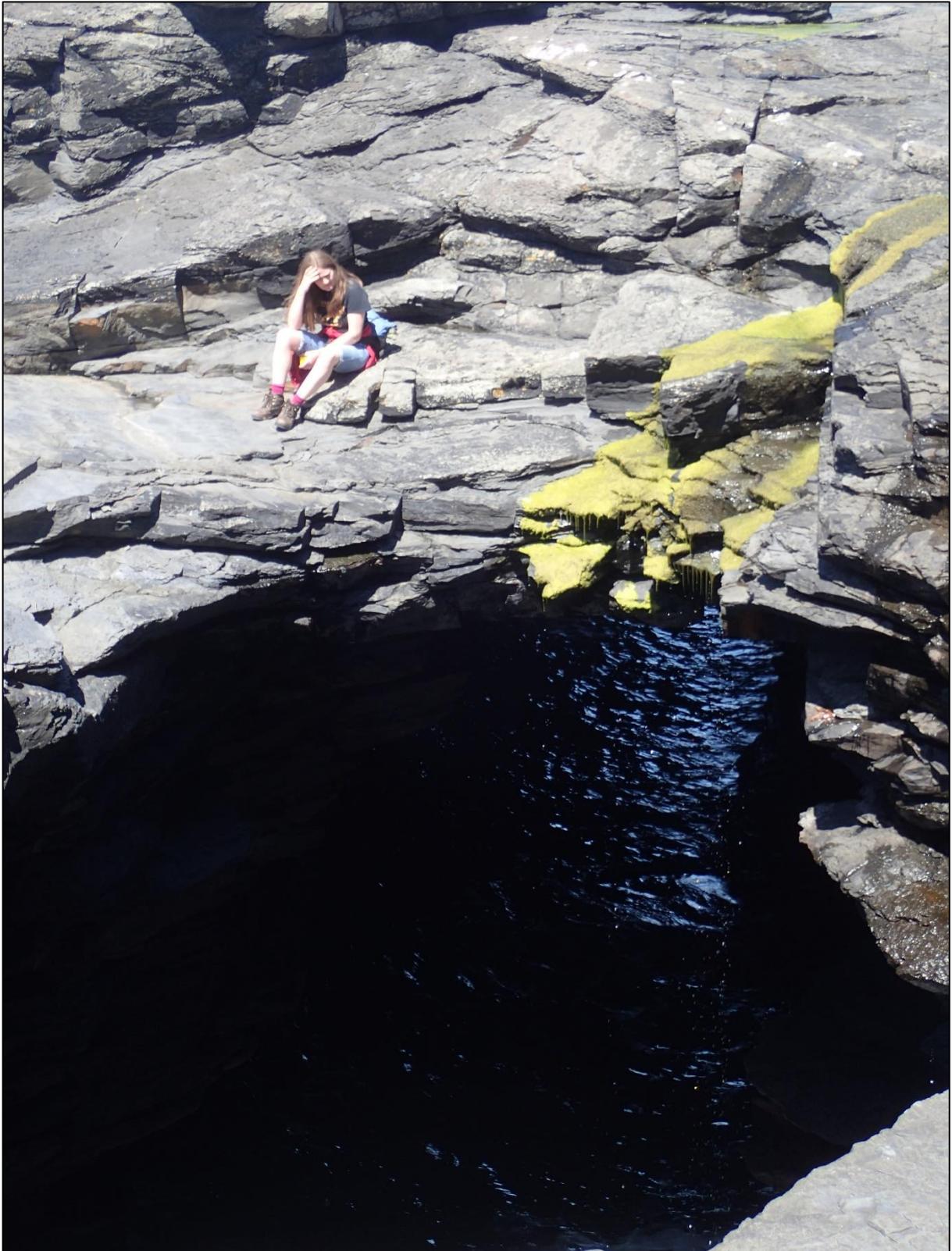


The magnificent Cliffs of Moher.



Birds nesting on the stacks; guillemots, razorbills and fulmars.

There is a spectacular coastal cave at Faunmore (*couldn't find any reference in the available literature*), we just had to scramble down for a closer look and to find the other end at a blowhole we had noticed on the outward journey.



Roz peers into the blowhole at Faunmore.

Really impressive but, unfortunately the cave was inaccessible for any further investigation.

While admiring a fossilised rippled beach surface, that is an unconformity over the folded rock strata previously noted, I noticed some impressive fossils. Stromatolites were my first thought but I'm not sure, they could be the base of plants that had been swaying to and fro' in the currents. Some more research is required to identify them.



Fossils and ripples, Roz provides a size scale.

We scrambled back up to the path and continued the walk back to Doolin. A brief stop at O'Connor's Pub where Roz enjoyed the first pint of Guinness although she did comment "it made her feel a bit wobbly". Then back to the campsite for something to eat and a little time to chill and relax.

Late in the afternoon we decided to take a stroll around Doolin to locate some of the archaeological features close by. We left the dog in the van for this one, he'd had enough today. From Roadford we followed the lane north-west towards the coast. At the end of the road, **Teergonean Court Tomb**, c.3500-3000 BC.

The court tomb at Teergonean is in a poor state of repair and it's difficult to see the characteristic court at the north-east end of the burial chamber. A few upright stones forming a fragmentary arc are all that remains of the façade. The cairn of stones that originally covered the burial chamber has long since disappeared (Carthy, 2011).

The geology was good too, limestone pavement and erratics.



Teergonean Court Tomb.

We finished the evening with fish and chips at The Ivy Cottage in Doolin. Very good they were too, we returned to the campsite sated.

The weather today had been fantastic, a warm and sunny day, Roz had caught the sun and was a little bit red, the back of my neck was tingling as well.

Wednesday: Roz's 50th birthday. It was a greyer start to the day, and we'd had a couple of early showers. A good night's sleep though, cosy in the little tent, followed by a relaxed breakfast. That was our last night in Doolin and time to pack the tent and other kit away and load the van ready for the journey back to the ferry port.

Today's excursion was going to include a good deal of driving. We set-off along the 'Burren Coastal Route' north towards Ballyvaghan.

We made a brief stop at Fanore Beach so that Roz could swim in the sea. Fair play to her, I wasn't about to do it. She did say after it was chilly but soothed her sunburn. Also earned her the admiration of some local horse riders who commented on her endurance.

After Roz had dried off and dressed, we continued along the amazingly scenic coast road around Black Head to Ballyvaghan where we turned inland. At Ballyvaghan we turned south-west onto the N67 for a short distance, then a south fork (R480) to Aillwee Cave.



Roz about to step into the sea at Fanore Beach.

Aillwee Cave (showcave), was formerly known as Mc Gann's Cave. The cave is located on the eastern side of the Ballyvaghan re-entrant valley. The name *Aillwee* is derived from the Irish *Aill Bhuí* which means "yellow cliff".

The cave is considerably older than most of the Clare caves and originally contained a large stream. The stream has all but disappeared from the cave and is heavily backfilled with glacial infill. The formations visible on the show cave tour are rarely more than 8,000 years old but calcite samples in the recesses of the cave have been dated to over 350,000 years old.

From the (blasted) entrance tunnel the cave continues as a single passage enlarging into three chambers – Bear Haven, Mud Hall and Cascade Chamber. The cave is accessible to the public as far as The Highway, where another blasted tunnel leads back to the entrance.

During the later 1970s the scattered remains of various small mammals and a horse together with a bear tooth and other bones were discovered. In 1979 the upper part of the skull of a large male bear (*Ursus arctos*) was found at the eastern part of Bear Haven. These finds lend some support to the theory that the shallow pits in Bear Haven were excavated by bears (Drew and Cohen, 1980).

Some interesting fossil assemblages noticed too.

After speleology, archaeology was next on the agenda and we left Aillwee Cave and drove off to find Poul nabrone Portal Tomb.



Bear bones, Aillwee Cave.



Poulnabrone Portal Tomb.

Poul nabrone Portal Tomb is one of the most accessible and photographed ancient monuments in the Burren and there were plenty of coaches and cars in the car park by the time we arrived.

It stands in a prominent location near one of the highest points in the Burren landscape and is believed to mark an access route into one of the 'tribal' homelands of the Neolithic period.

Poul nabrone was excavated in 1986 and 1988 following the discovery that one of the stones forming one side of the tomb was cracked and in danger of collapsing the tomb. The remains of thirty-three individuals were found, men and women, adults and children, together with various stone and bone objects. The human remains were dated to the period 3800-3200 BC (Carthy, 2011).

It was disappointing to find that quite a few potential sites were inaccessible, i.e. Gleninsheen Wedge Tomb, being on private land. In retrospect, had we read the guidebook properly the access to specific sites was clearly described.

We stopped at **Caherconnell** (cashel/stone fort) and visitor centre, which was more of a gift shop and rather disappointing

Caherconnell is the largest of four drystone enclosures in the townland of the same name. It is an unusually large cashel at 42m diameter, it is defined by a drystone wall currently standing c.3m in width and c.3m in height, but it was probably c.4m when it was in use. Its entrance, like most ringforts, faces east (Comber, 2018). The size might imply it was occupied by an important family. Caherconnell was probably constructed in the late tenth century, occupation continued into the 17th century. Long before the cashel was built a rectangular timber structure was erected in a doline just to the south-west during the Early Bronze Age. The postholes for this structure were discovered during the investigation of a small adjacent stone building in a deeper section of the doline. The stone structure comprised a small circular chamber built against two walls of the doline. The chamber's drystone walls, at least 1m thick, probably originally rose gradually to form a corbelled roof. It has been interpreted as a Medieval food store (Comber, 2018).

After leaving Caherconnell we went on a bit of a 'wild goose' chase trying to locate Poulawack Cairn, all in vain, and we gave up. We then were thwarted by 'No Dogs' signs at a potential walk – the Carran Loop. Instead we ended up visiting a rather pleasant 12th century church site (without the dog who was left in the van).

Teampall Chrónáin (Templecronan) is suggested to be one of the most charming monuments in the Burren and is, surprisingly, not often visited.

In its day the church was part of a monastic settlement and an important focus of pilgrimage. Tradition has it that the monastery was founded in the 7th century by St. Cronan. It is possible that an earlier timber structure occupied the site, but since no archaeological excavation has been conducted here, it is impossible for this to be certain. The settlement consisted, in its heyday, of the church, two shrines, a termon¹, at least one termon cross, a holy well, and several domestic structures (Carthy, 2011),

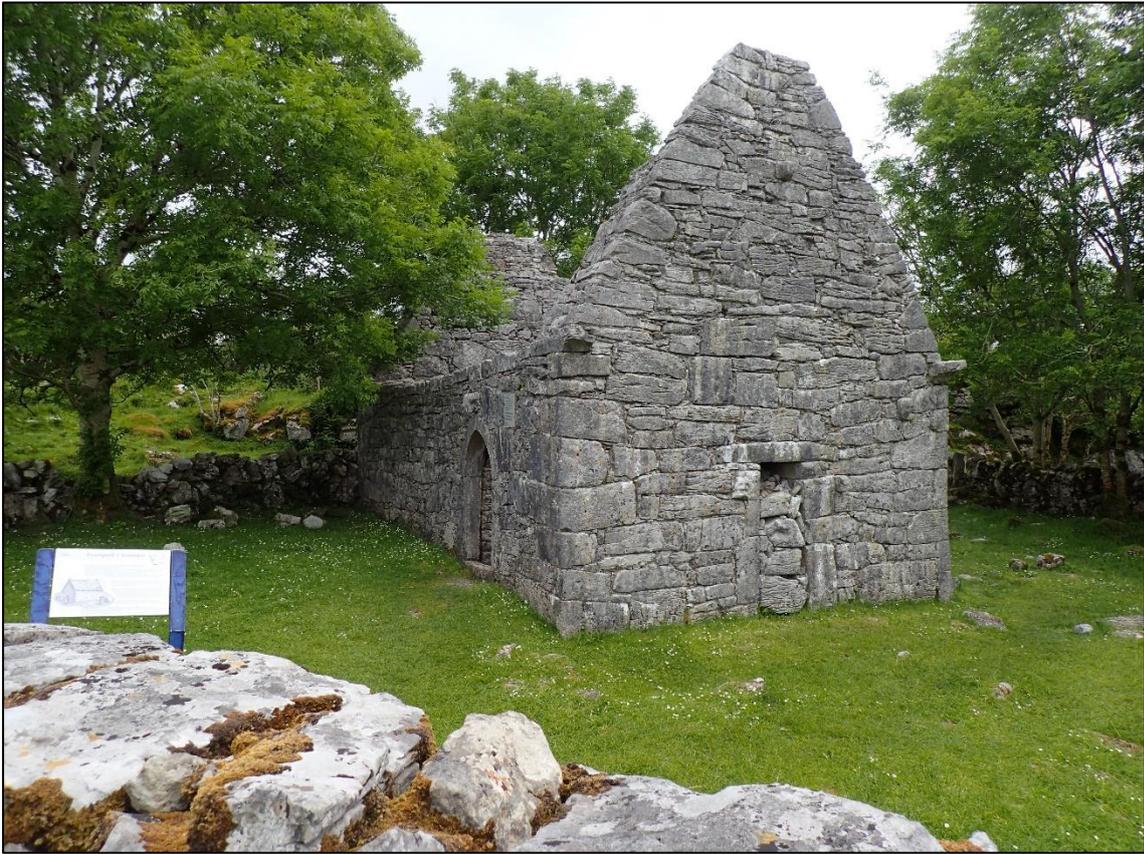
¹ 'termon', an ecclesiastical land division.



Remains of the Medieval food store, Caherconnell.



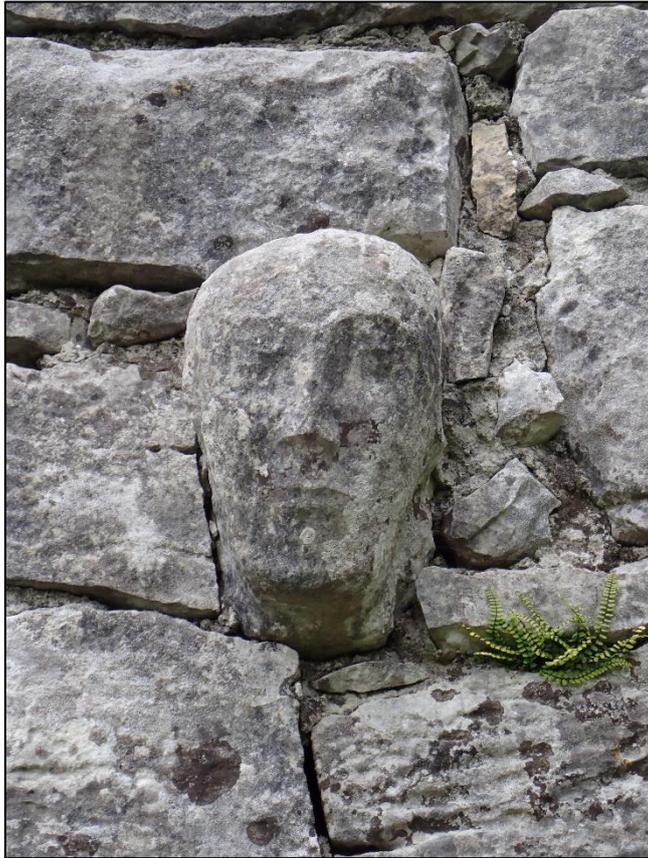
Cashel walls, Caherconnell.



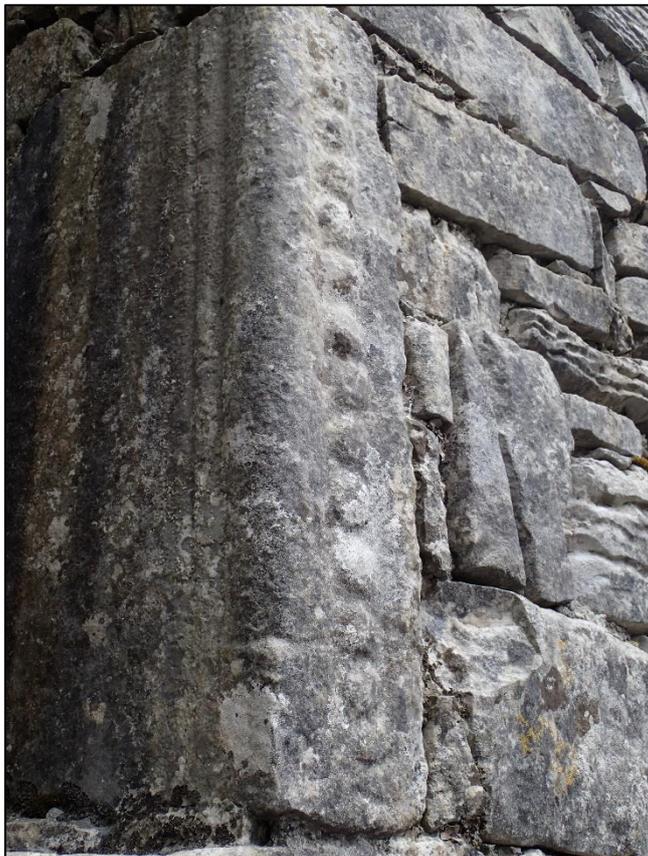
Teampall Chrónáin



Cyclopean construction style, Teampall Chrónáin



Carved stone features at Teampall Chrónáin. Above; carved human head in the wall. Below; button decoration and incised lines on the right-side of the embrasure.





Teampall Chrónáin. 15th century Gothic arched doorway inserted into the north wall.

The church is a single-room oratory. It is built in a very early, pre-twelfth-century style, but includes features that are characteristically post-twelfth century. The walls, particularly those at the south and east, are constructed with massive stone blocks in a style known today as cyclopean. The trabeate doorway in the west wall is another characteristically early form with jambs sloping inwards towards the top under a large stone lintel. Another early feature is the tiny window in the east wall. Viewed from outside, it appears as no more than a slit in the wall. However, a decorated embrasure makes the window appear much larger from the inside, and the lower part forms a shelf on which the host or chalice, or possibly a relic of some sort, may have been placed for veneration.

The decorated stone forming the lower part of the right jamb of the embrasure was almost certainly matched on the left; though all trace of the unusual button decoration has fractured off the front face, the stone on the left was moulded in a similar fashion to the right and includes similar vertical incised lines on the inner face of the embrasure.

Despite the evidence for an early date for the construction of the church several features indicate that it might have been partially rebuilt after the 12th century. The carved human and animalistic heads dotted around the walls, and the carved corbels at each corner are likely later additions. The present entrance to the church is a 15th century Gothic doorway inserted into the north wall (Carthy, 2011).

About 100m to the south, a holy well is located at the base of a small cliff, currently adorned with rags and trinkets. This might have marked a contemporary southern approach to the settlement. Another approach from the north-west is marked by a termon cross.

After a snack we decided to go and find something else nearby, a cave, **Glencurran Cave** to be precise. The cave is marked on the OSI Map No. 51 and described in Self (1981), the directions weren't great, so it took a little time to locate the entrance. It was one of those occasions that if I had followed the feint path I was on, just a little further the entrance was obvious. It was a bit disappointing to then find the entrance gated. Fortunately, the lock on the gate had received the attention of someone with a 'universal' key and access to the cave was possible. Once inside we followed a large former stream passage for about 50m to a junction. Ahead the passage became lower and ended at a choke after 20m, at a point close to the scarp outside. Left at the junction, a wide and low bedding could be seen but we didn't venture any further – no proper kit, just one light (although I had my phone in my pocket) and the dog.

Just up the road from the cave, **Cahercommaun**, another cashel. Unfortunately, another sign 'No Dogs' so Buster was left in the van again.

An impressive site both visually and spatially, such an incredible cliff-top setting. The inner wall is massive, estimated to contain 16 500m³ of stone; outside this inner wall are two less substantial, roughly concentric walls; the remains of both circular and rectangular stone structures are found within the cashel. It is possible that there were timber structures later destroyed by fire at some stage during occupation. It is suggested that the cashel was occupied from the 5th/6th centuries to no later than the 10th century.

The outer walls are intriguing, Cahercommaun has been referred to as a tri-vallate (three-walled) fort and it has been suggested on this basis that it was a high-status site.



Above and below: Glencurran Cave





Entrance, Glencurran Cave.



Cahercommaun.

The site was excavated in 1934 by Dr. Hugh O'Neill Hencken as part of the Third Harvard Archaeological Expedition in Ireland. The excavation report provided a comprehensive record of the huge volume of material recovered by the excavation team, unfortunately, much potentially useful information has been lost due to the less rigorous excavation and recording standards of the day (Carthy, 2011).



The inner wall of Cahercommaun.



Outer walls and structures, Cahercommaun.

Just as we got back to the van, so a heavy rain shower passed over. It was 18:00 and we decided it was time to start the journey south-east to Rosslare Harbour where we will spend the night in the van before boarding the ferry on Thursday morning.

We came to an archaeological bonus on route, **Parknabinnia Wedge Tomb**.



Parknabinnia Wedge Tomb.

Wedge Tombs, dating to the Late Neolithic and Early Bronze Age (c.2500-2000 BC), were the latest in a sequence of megalithic tomb building. They are wedge-shaped with the higher, wider end facing consistently between west and south, and the opposite end being low and narrow. Parknabinnia is typical in this respect (Carthy, 2011).

No Burren wedge tombs have yet been excavated and so conclusions can only be by analogy with others that have been investigated elsewhere.

What is certain is that the builders of wedge tombs attached some significance to the setting sun. All wedge tombs in Ireland are orientated to the south-west (Carthy, 2011).

From Parknabinnia, a steady trip to Rosslare Harbour, although it was late and a long way along the road before we stopped for something to eat and drink, pub grub at the Rhu Glen Hotel in Co. Kilkenny. Once sated we continued our journey, arriving at the ferry port about 22:30. We parked at the little beach car park near to the harbour gates for the night, there

were other vans already parked. The dog had a walk along the beach as well before we settled down for the night.

Thursday: Awoke, got up, walked the dog, coffee then checked in and joined the queue awaiting to board the ferry. Buster was again confined to the van rather than the available kennels. A smooth crossing but quite boring, should have bought more to read. Did see a small, rocky island with a large colony of gannets just off Milford Haven. It was sunny as we sailed up the inlet to Pembroke Dock. A 4-hour crossing, thereabouts.

Quickly disembarked, stopped at the supermarket (Tesco's) for something to eat and fuel, then on our way. We didn't get too far as the dog needed some exercise after being left in the van for hours. We stopped at Carew Castle which is partly Norman with later Elizabethan additions and close by is a tidal mill. There is a pleasant circular walk around the castle and the tidal mill. That done we resumed our journey.

The route home was busy at times, but we made good time, no major hold-ups and about 3 hours later we were back at Rugmoor. The van was unloaded and sat down for a drink.

Total distance for the trip: 707 miles on the road, and across the Irish Sea, twice.

A fantastic time in Co. Clare, Archaeology, Geology and Speleology, what more could you want!

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Wildflowers adorn the path to the Cliffs of Moher.