

The Kilcorney Depression and its Caves, Co. Clare, Ireland

By

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(O.S. 6 in. to 1 mile, Clare, sheet 9)

The Kilcorney depression is often mentioned in caving literature but it is not proposed to review that literature here. The earliest account is by Lucas* (1740) and this account is a good description of what happens when the area floods and the main cave, "The Cave of the Wild Horses", fills up and a turlough is formed. The main part of the depression lies in the townland of Kilcorney but parts of it are in Kilcorney Glebe which is mainly a valley running down into the turlough area from the north (*Fig. 75*).

Kilcorney depression is part of a much larger depression (Williams 1964). The turlough area south of the road is a good grassy field with several depressions. One contains boulders and is over part of the main cave. There is a considerable amount of alluvium in the valley bottom. The flooding can be very extensive and the approach from the west impassable. The entrance to the main cave is quite often completely submerged (e.g. Coleman 1966). Of all the turloughs Kilcorney is the only one, at least in this part of Clare, in which there is an accessible cave system and as such it warrants much more study.

The old accounts speak of the flood water coming out of the cave accompanied by a loud noise. Though the turlough has been observed in the past decade several times under flood conditions there has been no record of any noise, which could, at times, be produced by the rapid expulsion of air as the cave fills up. Both Dr. Paul Williams (Trinity College, Dublin) and Mr. J. C. Coleman (Bord Failte, Dublin) have observed the depression under flood conditions. They are satisfied that the water first appears at the intermittent rising (F in *Fig. 75*), runs down south-east to the main cave to sink at first through the hollows in the field. There is a record of the water on one occasion bursting up through the road. In each case where proper observations have been made the flooding has been preceded by a period of very heavy rain or prolonged periods of rain. On the other hand short periods of heavy rain which produce

* I am indebted to Cmdr. T. R. Shaw for this reference.

temporary flooding in other areas do not produce flooding at Kilcorney.

The level of the intermittent rising north of the road is about 350 ft. O.D. The cave roof, at the entrance is 337 ft. and the lowest point reached in the cave is about 205 ft. (*Plate 38*, section 13). Thus the difference in temporary water level and normal level is greater than 145 ft. It is too dangerous when the flood is rising to enter the cave to see if the water has risen inside before the flood waters come down from the rising to the north but observations by Hanna (*Plate 38*), demonstrate that welling up of the water from the deeper parts of the cave does occur.

The origins of this flood water and the underground ordinary drainage system require further investigation to elucidate. It is an intricate pattern. There seems to be some analogy with the flood rising system and the poorly developed cave systems upstream from Killeany and downstream to St. Brendan's Well, and also with the flooding of the Coolagh River Cave and the valley beyond. Here restricted exits from the bottom of the cave produce a rise of over 110 ft., which approaches that at Kilcorney.

The head of the valley of Kilcorney Glebe is about $\frac{1}{2}$ mile from the Cave of the Wild Horses at 500 ft. O.D. A short way down from the head is an old rising with its own stream bed. It has never been seen to be active by any U.B.S.S. party. This stream trench cuts through a moraine in the valley and has an indefinite end. At the southern end, just short of the road, water is always only just under the surface but in spite of this the writer has not yet seen the area flooded although it is only *c.* 360 O.D. and perhaps as low as 350 O.D., the level of the intermittent flood rising. The underground drainage down this valley is obviously later than the stream channel, which is later than the moraine, which in turn is later than the formation of the valley as a unit.

In addition to the Cave of the Wild Horses there are three other caves at Kilcorney (*Fig. 75*, 2, 3 and 4). All three are essentially horizontal as far as they can be observed and all lie at about the same level of 400 O.D., that is about 60 ft. above the active cave. Kilcorney 2 is close to Kilcorney 1 in the same cliff face. It has a shockingly muddy floor, kept wet by drips from the roof, and is used as a shelter by cattle. The mud contains a high clay fraction and is probably re-sorted boulder clay. The cave is a uniform tunnel extending for 70 ft. to where the fill comes up to the roof. The passage is a fine example of a phreatic tube.

Kilcorney 3 lies across the gully in front of Kilcorney 2. It is a wide low arch over a fill. It cannot be entered by humans without digging but is inhabited by beasts, which, to judge from the smell, are foxes.

North of the road and overlooking the south end of Kilcorney Glebe is another limestone bluff in which lies Kilcorney 4, (E. 22.8 in., N.

22.9 in.). There has been some alteration of the entrance part by roof falls and the tunnel form is not so well developed as in Kilcorney 2. The floor filling slopes up and at 45 ft. it is necessary to duck under an

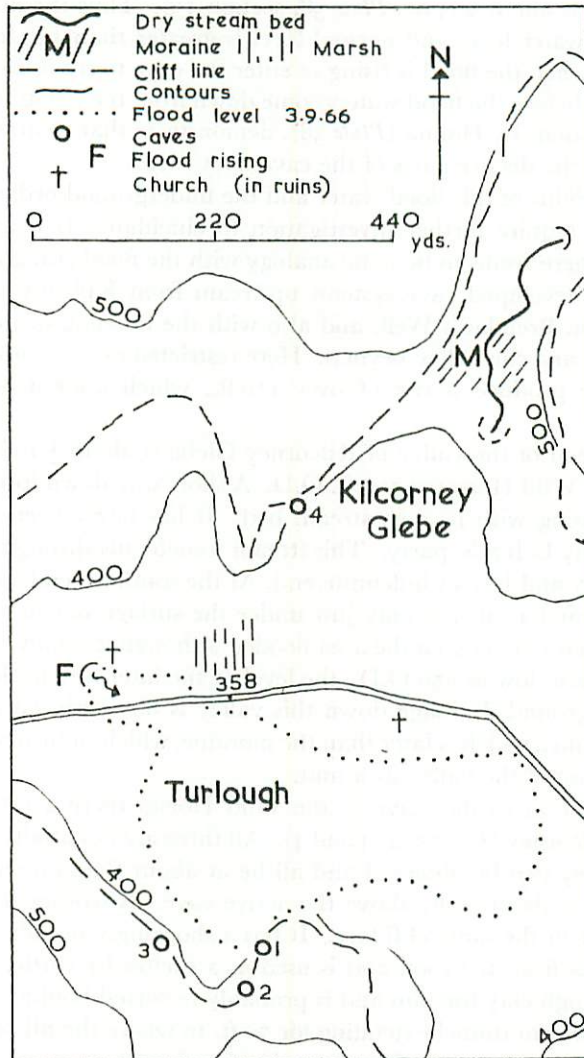


Fig. 75. Area map of Kilcorney Caves.

Based on the Ordnance Survey by permission of the Government of Ireland (Permit No. 1143).

arch to reach a small chamber. The lateral development at floor level here is considerable and the limits cannot be determined because the space between the roof and the fill at the sides of the chamber is so little

that vision, even with a good light, is restricted. In the outer part fairly large scallops indicate former flow outwards.

Kilcorney 2, 3 and 4 all belong to an older system it seems than Kilcorney 1. Kilcorney 1 is itself only active under flood conditions and is thus either on the way to becoming completely fossil or it is just possibly undergoing a process of rejuvenation. If the first interpretation is correct then here as at Vigo Cave (Hobbs and Nicholson 1963) we have parts of cave systems probably older than the last glaciation and as such they warrant further investigation.

The limestone plateau above Kilcorney 4 has a morphologically interesting series of minor depressions (dolines), all arranged along the N-S jointing. There is another doline above Kilcorney 2 and a depression above the Aven Chamber of Kilcorney 1.

The Cave of the Wild Horses. Kilcorney, Co. Clare, Ireland

By

F. K. HANNA, B.Sc.

(O.S. 6 in. to 1 mile, Clare, sheet 9)

Entrance: E. 22.6 in., N. 19.1 in.

Td. Kilcorney.

Total length: 1700 ft.

Tackle required:

40 ft. ladder Pitch Chamber

30 ft. tether

60 ft. ladder 60 ft. Pitch

30 ft. tether

Hand line 15 ft. Pitch

The legend of this cave is that from time to time a number of wild horses emerge, usually in flood time, and they are very fine horses. Many attempts were made to capture them and eventually one was captured and put to stud, and improved the stock of Clare horses very much.

DESCRIPTION

The entrance to the cave lies at the base of a 100 ft. high limestone cliff (*Fig. 75, 1*), which bounds part of the Kilcorney depression, or turlough. The survey (*Plate 38*) shows that the cave may be conveniently considered as having an Upper Series and a Lower Series. The total surveyed length is 1,700 ft. covering a vertical range of some 160 ft. The cave overall gives the impression of being an ancient phreatic system, which has had