

Jubilee Contribution
University of Bristol Spelæological Society

The Society in Ireland

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Hon. Life Member, 1957

"Dr. Buckland also observed that the origin of caves in limestone had during many years occupied his attention and had always been considered by him one of the most difficult problems in geology."

The great Dean's comment in 1835 is still considered by many people as a sufficient justification for the proliferation of societies, clubs and associations dedicated to solving this most difficult problem in geology. When one comes to review the work of the U.B.S.S. in Ireland one is immediately struck by the dedication of the members of the many Irish expeditions to the solving of many aspects of the scientific disciplines that now shelter under the wing of spelæological research.

Particularly since 1948 there have been numerous visits to Ireland by British caving or spelæological societies, but too many have had more of the "caving club" attitude, and research as evidenced by their publications was of secondary consideration or entirely absent.

Let one not give, however, the impression that the U.B.S.S. were (or are not) tempted by the Irish beer—beautiful scenery and more beer—but the published work of the Society bears testimony to a more than ordinary dedication to research. Thus the contributions of the Society to Irish spelæological problems have been of great value, particularly as we have so few resident spelæologists. As one of the few, who has had close relations with the Society since 1945, your President has asked me to outline activities in Ireland—as seen by an Irishman!

Kilgreany, Co. Waterford

In 1928 (when I was still struggling with logs. at the North Monastery, Cork) a Mr. E. K. Tratman and others from the U.B.S.S. camped near Cappagh in south-east Co. Waterford to explore and excavate caves. The camp site was free, but, for some unknown reason, they had to pay a water rate to the Waterford County Council. On the other hand in 1928, Guinness was only 10d. a pint and cigarettes 10 for 8d.

The Society was very brave (or ingenuous?) to come to Ireland in 1928. The country was slowly recovering from the Insurrection and the Civil War. Dumps of ammunition and arms were still around and caves were popular sites for this purpose. One of the 1928 excavators recalls that in a pub one night the locals tactfully suggested that they get a "bit of notice" of which caves were due for exploration—so that dumps could be removed!

The selection of the Dungarvan valley as an excavation site had historic and geological reasons. In 1859, Brenan and Carte found in Shandon cave near Dungarvan the first Pleistocene fauna of Ireland (B & C, 1859). Later excavations in the same area and westward in north Cork added to these finds. The publication of Charlesworth's important paper on the glacial retreat from central and southern Ireland acknowledged that the faunal distribution as shown by the cave sites assisted greatly in the plotting of the End Moraine (Charlesworth 1928). This paper also stressed that *if* Palæolithic man ever reached Ireland there was a sporting chance his remains would be found south of the End Moraine.

A committee consisting of members of the U.B.S.S. and the Royal Irish Academy decided to excavate further caves in the limestone valley between Cappoquin and Dungarvan. The Academy made a grant of £100 towards the expenses and the Society members taking part paid their own living expenses. They were assisted in the excavation work by some students and undergraduates from Dublin.

The 1928 expedition (the first visit of the Society), made trial excavations in a number of caves and finally selected Kilgreany cave. The work was a careful part excavation of the deposits, but the human skeletal material discovered was the subject of a great deal of discussion when published (Tratman, 1929). An upper Palæolithic (Magdalenian) age was proposed for the human remains. The artefacts etc. found, however, were none earlier than Early Bronze Age, as well as Early Christian. Of the faunal finds, the Field Vole [*Microtus arvalis*] was reported for the first time from Irish cave deposits.

The discussions on the 1928 excavation material interested the Harvard Archæological Mission to Ireland and in 1934 Movius (the leader of the Mission) obtained permission to excavate Kilgreany. We now had in Ireland a National Monuments Act, which, amongst other things, prohibited excavations without a Government licence. Movius set to, with ample funds and workmen and completely dug out the cave deposits.

The published report of the excavation (Movius, 1935) showed that:

1. The deposits in the whole cave were, in his opinion, very much disturbed.
2. A Post-Glacial age was established for the charcoal associated with the hearths.
3. No upper Palaeolithic artefacts were found.
4. The stalagmite layer in which the 1928 skeletal material was found was not continuous and this layer also contained neolithic A pottery and domestic animals.

In 1964, Dr. Kenneth Oakley carried out a C₁₄ test on Kilgreany A skeleton and got a dating of 2630 ± or - 150 B.C. (Neolithic). Skeleton B could not be tested as a waxy preservative had been applied to the bones. As in 1928, Movius also added a new name to the faunal list; the Lynx was found for the first time in Ireland.

So we are back in square one and unless future excavators are blessed with luck we are left with the coastal mesolithic sites of north-east Ireland as the earliest Irishmen.

The Pre-Clare Period

From 1928 to 1946 we hear nothing of the Society in Ireland. In 1932 I commenced my caving career enthused by an "abnormal" interest in Physical Geography and the discovery of Baker's *Caving* in the Cork Public Library. I was fortunate early in my caving to discover a completely new cave system at Carrigtwohill, Co. Cork—"complete with fantastic decorations and labyrinthine complexity" to quote the local newspaper of 1933 (Coleman, 1934). Most of my early cave work was done in the limestone valleys of south-east Cork and the Cork Historical and Archæological Society Journal manfully published most of the material with plans that I now know were grade 3 at least!

From 1935 to 1937 the Yorkshire Ramblers' Club paid several visits to north Co. Clare but survey work was not their strong point, although Baker and others had partially surveyed Pollnagollum in 1925 (Baker, 1932). The Y.R.C. deserted Co. Clare for the potholes of the Sligo-Fermanagh region and a spelæological silence descended on the Burren until 1941.

"Grey Burren's rocks all shattered piled
Rugged and rough and drear and lone
A weary waste of barren stone."

(*Monks of Kilcrea*).

In 1940, I met N. J. Dunnington, who was then a textile chemist in Portlaoise (Maryborough of the earlier maps). We explored several Cork caves together and in July 1941 decided to visit Pollnagollum, Co. Clare.

With World War II in progress, travel in Ireland was not easy. I had to cycle (on a well laden bike) the 115 miles from Cork to Lisdoonvarna and Dunnington from Portlaoise. In the forties, Lisdoonvarna was a very unsophisticated "spa"—it still is in many ways! It was then crowded with Irish holidaymakers who could not go elsewhere and these on top of the habitués made it a very lively spot.

The Irish Arms in Lisdoonvarna became our headquarters. The rest of the guests were indeed puzzled why we should cycle over the hills, loaded with ropes and other gear and come back muddy or dust covered from the then untarred roads, when we could be enjoying the delights of spa water and elegant female company! Old ladies, most of them expert card players, patiently listened to our spelæological pearls of wisdom, but always trumped our best with "you're both mad". Still, our dancing efforts (N.J.D.) and my piano thumping made us in great demand once the mud was washed off.

I do recall in 1943, on one of our final sessions surveying in Pollnagollum, and a very wet bike ride from Caherbullog, Mrs. Greene (the now, alas, deceased proprietress of the Irish Arms) delicately suggesting we go around to the back yard and hose one another down before going up to change!

In 1944 the Royal Irish Academy published our paper on Pollnagollum Cave and in it we drew attention to other spelæological features of the district. It was well received—some people dubbed it the "classic" paper—and it also brought the U.B.S.S. on the Irish scene again (C. & D., 1944). Rodney Pearce, Hon. Secretary of the Society wrote me (16/4/'45) after seeing a copy "I hope we shall one day be able to come and explore your Irish caves, as the Society has been very interested in them". In August 1946 Desmond Donovan (now Professor of Geology in University College, London) wrote me from "S/S Argentina at sea" and he and R. D. Stride did visit Ireland in June 1947 (Dunmore and Mitchelstown caves). Johnny Pitts and Charles Barker came to Ireland also in 1947 but owing to a motor cycle breakdown never got to Clare.

In 1946 onwards I had been working on scalloping and had correspondence with R. D. Stride on terminology in 1948. A paper on scalloping and also one on Irish cave pearls eventually appeared in the *Proceedings*—my first contribution to the Society (Coleman, 1948).

The Society comes to Clare

It was not until 1948 that members of the Society got to Clare and the first appears to have been Dr. Charles Barker who joined Dunnington and myself at the Irish Arms, Lisdoonvarna in July 1948. On this trip we found the High and Low roads and had a go at the canal beyond the

Branch Passage waterfall in Pollnagollum. Jointly with a party from the Wiltshire Cave Club (headed by one Adrian Hopkins) a descent of Pollelva was also made. Later on that same trip, Bob Bendall, Johnny Pitts and a medical student Mike Gummer joined us and the siege of the Clare caves by the U.B.S.S. was on!

I must recall an incident from this first meeting of the Society members in Clare. All the party were gathered in the back room (the "snug") of the Irish Arms bar and we talked caves and Guinness far into the night. The said "snug" had a solid wooden table with an excellent surface for drawing diagrams in beer. An occasion arose when one of the new visitors (Gummer, I think) had to use the "facilities" and as these were in the back yard Dunnington directed him through our emergency exit—the window. Alas, progress had been at work the previous winter and whereas we knew of old the sill was only a foot above the ground, it was now over three feet. Intent upon our beer diagrams we were rudely interrupted by the cries of the unfortunate who had tumbled headlong into the now lowered and pitch dark laneway.

Coolagh River Cave

Bendall and Pitts got down to serious work right away and decided to survey the Coolagh River cave system. In 1949 they returned accompanied by Joan Light (now Mrs. Pitts), J. Nash and Noel Blackwell and there emerged the traditional type of party. It was only later that such Irish expeditions became known locally as "Trat's lot"! The 1949 party were also the first to use Ballynalackan and they had the nerve to camp there on the lawn! Mrs. O'Callaghan *did* get a letter from Johnny Pitts seeking permission to camp. So thus commenced the Society's long association with the O'Callaghans and Ballynalackan Castle Hotel. 1950 saw a U.B.S.S. party still surveying Coolagh River caves and it was at the end of this trip when Pitts and Dixon stayed on that occurred the famous trapping of the pair by flood waters. The Coolagh river pioneers were joined in 1951 by Dr. and Mrs. Bertie Crook, Molly Hall and Tratman and he is still coming!

Apart from the Pollnagollum survey (C. & D., 1944) the Coolagh River cave was then the first major survey published by the Society of the north Clare cave region (Bendall and Pitts, 1953).

Progress in Co. Clare

From 1953 onwards when the Society first published on Clare one has only to read the *Proceedings* to see the amount of annual survey and research work that has been carried out in Clare by the Society. Over 30 miles of cave passages have been surveyed which is equal to 31,600

average size Bristolians laid head to toe. Highlights of expeditions from 1951 to 1968 were the discovery of the Cullaun series, the full exploration of the Doolin cave system, complete surveys of Faunarooska, Pollnagollum/Pollclva, Fergus River Cave, Poll-an-Ionain, etc., etc. Geomorphic studies, solution of limestone studies and geological field work were part of many expeditions. The publication of the book *The Caves of North West Clare* in 1969 is a fitting climax to all the work of the Society in this fascinating part of Ireland and I refrain here from a detailed account of all expeditions and bibliography as this volume more than adequately covers the field. The only sad blow to the prestige of the Society was the C.P.C. discovery in 1952 of Poll-an-Ionain almost on the front door of Ballynalackan Castle!

Other Work in Ireland

Every now and then the members interested in forming an Irish expedition appeared to wish for "fresh fields" and in October 1955, Tratman came to Dublin and we set off for the limestone plateaux of Sligo-Leitrim. We spent a weekend in that rather quiet town of Manorhamilton and explored for the first time the Dartry Hills where numerous undescribed potholes hove into view. We also found a congenial base for the proposed 1956 expedition in the Abbey Hotel, Dromahair, Co. Leitrim and on the way back to Dublin drove through the drumlins of Cavan, Monaghan and visited my caves near Carrickmacross (Coleman, 1965). The 1956 expedition based at Dromahair surveyed the Dartry potholes for the first time and also found numerous other sites in the glens radiating from Manorhamilton (Tratman, 1957).

The caves near Tralce, Co. Kerry, on which I had reported (Coleman, 1950) were visited by the Society in 1962 and the party added to the caves known from the area (Squire, 1964).

In July 1965 six Czech spelæologists led by Dr. F. Skrivanek visited Ireland, accompanied by Dr. Tratman. Dr. Paul Williams and myself met them at Dublin Airport and we drove to Lisdoonvarna. The Shannon Airport authority dined us at Shannon Airport, the local reporter took down the usual inaccurately edited version of spelæological lore and we introduced them to Guinness at Lisdoonvarna. Apart from the unique karst features of the Burren, the Atlantic at Doolin proved to be the major attraction to these east European visitors.

Despite the large area of Ireland that is covered by Carboniferous Limestone and rocks of the Upper Carboniferous series very few papers have appeared on the geomorphology of the limestone areas. The study of karst landforms now bulks large at spelæological congresses and in journals devoted to spelæology. It was inevitable therefore that the



PLATE 10

"A weary waste of barren stone"—the President on the Burren
(Photo by J. C. Coleman)



PLATE 11

A Presidential pint in the pub at Fisherstreet, Co. Clare

(Photo by J. C. Coleman)

Society should pioneer the study of the geomorphological implications of their main Irish cave area, the Burren of County Clare.

Ollier and Tratman in 1956 made a start on this complex problem and broadly their findings indicated that the caves of the Burren were mainly juvenile post-Glacial systems, but some, such as Pollnagollum and Poll-an-Ionian show traits that could perhaps be regarded as pre-Glacial and deposits within them assigned to the end of the last glaciation (Würm II). The recession of the shale escarpment, particularly around Slieve Elva is also partly due to glacial scouring and numerous shallow dry valleys indicate surface drainage conditions under periglacial conditions.

Dr. Paul Williams in his study of the physiography of parts of Clare and Galway has shown the influence of glaciation also on the limestone pavements. (Williams 1966).

In many parts of Ireland I have made observations that many small caves (for example those in the limestone hills near Portlaoise), are remnants of once larger pre-Glacial systems.

Solutional problems and hydrology of limestone have interested many members of the Society and in Ireland the annual visits to Clare have been used for research into this problem. In 1963 a large number of temporary rain gauges were set up and the expedition members charged with reading the gauges became as regular in their perambulations as the local postman!

These are only scattered notes on the geomorphic research work of the society in Ireland. Whilst opposing camps still question the validity of otherwise of this discipline it is obvious that whether you call it geomorphology or physical geography much remains to be done in Ireland. Therefore the initial work of the Society has had, I hope, a stimulating effect.

Perhaps I could end this brief survey of the activities and history of the Society in Ireland on a personal note. The continued visits of the U.B.S.S., particularly in the earlier years were a constant stimulus to me to continue work on Irish caves. Indeed I would not have written the *Caves of Ireland* except for the prodding I received from some members of the Society. As a Hon. Life Member I must "earn my keep" and as long as members come to Ireland it will be my pleasure to assist and help in any way possible.

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* See also Chaps. 3 and 4 in "*The Caves of North-West Clare, Ireland*", David & Charles, Newton Abbot, Jan. 1969.