

The Céide Fields and further East



Achaidh Chéide, a Neolithic Site, is referred to as the Céide Fields in English. The name means the flat meaning ‘fields of the flat-topped hill’.

Just a few km west of Ballycastle, over 5,000 years ago, wheat and barley were cultivated in these fields. Domesticated cattle and sheep were kept. With an increasingly wet climate, the bog grew and encroached upon the people’s stone walls and farm buildings. Their farms lay buried for thousands of years, before being excavated - to show the oldest enclosed landscape in Europe and the most extensive Stone Age monument in the world.

The Office of Public Works Interpretive Centre incorporates an exhibition court and audiovisual room, which details aspects of the site's architecture, botany and geology (**a description of the exhibition is available in French and German**).

Ballycastle (Baile an Chaisil, The Town of the Stone Fort)

A small village situated on the Ballinglen River, which flows northwards into Bunatrahir Bay. The chief attraction is the fine rock scenery, five miles north in the neighbourhood of **Downpatrick Head**. Here yellow sandstone crops out on the coast. Powerful Atlantic waves have sculpted, amongst other wonders, the singular and picturesque rock stack of **Dún Briste** (pronounced Doonbrishta, ‘the breached fort’), which is separated by a deep channel from the Head. Downpatrick Head also has a fenced off blowhole, which occasionally shoots up plumes of water.



A number of blow-holes have been formed which explode upwards in stormy weather, carrying vast quantities of water. Near the village is the Pillar Stone of **Doonfeeny**, about 21 feet high, with an incised double cross. In the neighbourhood, at Ballybeg and Ballyglass, are some fine megalithic chambered tombs - of the court cairn type.



Breastagh Ogham Stone

The stone is 2.5 metres high but the Ogham writing is not easy to read. It is in a field by the left side of the R314 just past the crossroads - which has the turning for Rathfran Abbey (not the earlier crossroads which has a sign for both the Stone and Abbey). Cross the ditch just where the sign points to the Stone.

Lackan Bay & Downpatrick Head

Lackan Bay is wonderfully sandy and ideal for young children.

Général Humbert and the Kilcummin Landing spot



The spot is marked where General Humbert and his 1067 men landed in 1798. The French text on the plaque says: The allied armies of Général Humbert landed here on the 22nd of August 1798. A right turn off the main R314 is signposted for Kilcummin. It is remarkably undramatic. The imagination is more easily kindled by the sculpture of the French revolutionary soldier helping a prostrate Irish farmer. It is on the main road, just after the turning to Lacken Bay.

Here stands **Teampall na Naomh** (The Church of the Saints), built of stone and mortar. There is another church, **Teampall na mBan** (The Ladies' Church). There are three **beehive cells**, built of dry-stone masonry, and some crosses. To the south of Inishglora are North Iniskea Island, where there is an early Church dedicated to **St. Columba** (near where an ancient bell was found) and South Inishkea Island, with a similar ancient church. Both islands are now uninhabited.

Inishglora (Inis Gluaire, the Island of Purity)

The island, lying off the west coast of the Mullet peninsula, has extensive ecclesiastical remains, surrounded by a fort, 156 feet in diameter. The most interesting building is **St. Brendan's Chapel** (12 feet by 8 feet). It is a dry-

stone building, with walls 3 feet thick, sloping inwards, and a doorway with inclined jambs. Dry-stone building has the greatest longevity, of all building forms.

Diocese of Killala

The ancient Diocese of Killala

In the year 1111, the Diocese of Killala was created and its boundaries delineated by the Synod of Rathbreasail. At the Synod of Kells in 1152, the boundaries, in North Mayo and West Sligo, were revised and confirmed. Originally, St Patrick had placed his disciple, St. Muredach, over a church called **Cell Alaid** (Cill Ala in Old Irish).

Pope Innocent III appointed **Donatus O'Bechdha** as bishop of Killala in March 30, 1198, when diocesan placenames (in OI) went into the written record. Insula Gedig, for example, is Iniskea (an island in Blacksod Bay). St Brendan (who died in 577 AD) founded a monastic settlement on Inisgluairibrandani (Brendan's Island of Purity), now called Inis Gluaire. The Children of Lir - Conn, Aodh, Fiachra and Fionnuala are buried there - as set out in the legend. All these personal names are still popular.

In the Middle Ages, monasteries in the diocese included, amongst others, Rathfran, Ardnaree, Rosserk, Moyne, and Bofeenau as well as other churches like Kilglass.

Trumped-up Charges: living in a mice-infested room

In the Reformation period, English rule was established along the western seaboard. Conflict with Irish religious authorities ensued. **Bishop Redmund O'Gallagher**, being too outspoken, was imprisoned on a false charge and banished. In 1566, he presided over the synod held to promulgate the decrees of the **Council of Trent**.



1641: Sir Charles Coote “was a stranger to mercy, and committed many acts of cruelty without distinction.”

Francis Kirwan, appointed in 1645, is the only bishop of Killala who had a biography written for him (by his nephew). It gives an insight into the diocese in the mid-1600s. He was a representative of the Irish bishops at the **Confederation of Kilkenny**. From 1642 on, this was the centre of Confederate administration for regions still controlled by Catholics.

Bishop Kirwan introduced a small catechism and had plans to set up a craft school. However, **Cromwell** drove him into hiding. [The race memory of Cromwell in Ireland is one of utter horror.] He lived in a mice-infested room, where he said Mass on a wooden chest. In June 1654 he was taken into custody, with thirty other priests, and, after fourteen months, was deported to Nantes.

Barbaric Wretches

New Penal Laws, under the **Banishment Act**, of 1697, followed the atrocities committed by Oliver Cromwell. He said about these that he had been “persuaded that it was a righteous judgement of God upon those barbaric

wretches [the Irish]”. The Act required that ordinary Catholics keep no weapons **and sever links with the Continent**. They could not travel abroad for education. Teaching in or running schools was forbidden.

This project seeks, inter alia, to remake the ole links between Ireland, France and Germany.

The Banishment Act required registered clergy to leave the Kingdom, by May 1698. This was impractical. A further Act, of 1704, required Priests to register with the Authorities and limited their number to one for each parish. The entry of priests into the country was forbidden.

Priest-hunting

Other Acts portrayed the unconscionable torpitude of the English ruling classes. Their bribed, subordinate Protestant Parliament in Dublin, also in 1697, passed the **Popery Act** to ‘prevent the further growth of Popery’. The aim was to expel all Catholic Bishops and higher clergy. Priests who agreed to swear allegiance to the Crown and be secular, rather than religious, and who registered with the Authorities, were permitted to stay. A small number agreed to these conditions. For others, the priest-hunting days of Elizabeth 1st returned. There had long been an effectively anglicized element in Irish society, for one reason or another, ready to betray their countrymen.

The penalty for non-compliance with the Popery Act was **execution or transportation**. Priests who would not comply went into hiding. Secretly, they said Mass on a ‘**Mass Rock**’ (Carraig an Aifrinn).¹ This was a flat-topped stone, in a remote area, used in the mid-17th century. At the height of the enforcement of Penal Laws by England, in an Ireland long bereft of its nobility, the following measures had effect:

Penalties for not practising Protestantism: proscribed – Catholicism, the Irish Language, Education etc.

An Irish person was forbidden to exercise the Catholic religion (but would be fined for not attending Protestant services), and was forbidden to receive education, to enter a profession, to hold public office, to engage in trade or commerce, to live in a corporate town (or within 5 miles thereof), to own a horse of greater value than £5, to purchase or lease land, to vote, to keep weapons (the sign of a gentleman being his sword), to hold a life annuity, to be a guardian of a child, to educate a child **or to speak or write in the Irish language**.

Enslavement

English legislators, having taken over **all Catholic-owned lands**, acted to reduce the native race to servile, ignorant status. Without bishops, they were soon to be without priests, without their own schools the only education available was in Protestant schools. The Penal Laws brought such deprivation upon the Irish that to scorn them as inferior was easy, if cruelly shallow.

The



For all this, some Irish young people found their way to foreign colleges. Bishops came into Ireland, facing imprisonment and death. **Schoolmasters taught Latin, Greek and Irish in ‘Hedge Schools’**. Overall, Gaelic

¹ There is a Mass Rock on the farm where my Mother grew up, in West Cork.

social structures were stressed to breaking point. Tadhg O'Rourke, a Franciscan friar, was Bishop of Killala, from 1707 to 1739. In a letter to Rome he reported that the diocese had 22 parishes but only 16 priests. The Catholic flock was numerous but they lived in direst poverty. Fertile lands had been confiscated from Catholics, who had been driven out **and lived in the mountains and on the bogs**.

In the time of Bishop Bellew (1779-1812), Ballina became an ecclesiastical centre. When the French landed at Killala, he kept a low profile even though his brother joined the French and was killed. Bellew was involved in the two great issues of his time, the founding of Maynooth College (for Catholic Seminarians) and the struggle for Catholic Emancipation.

Killala Diocese suffered terribly during the Famine. For example, in 1847, a Mayo Road Inspector reported that he had secured the burial, of 140 bodies, which he had found by the wayside. In the same year, English landlords loaded up fourteen schooners in Westport, with wheat and oats for export. Throughout the country, indeed, there was more than enough food to stave off famine. The landlords exported the crops owned by the farmers - under their Gaelic laws. The **Sligo Champion** newspaper, of February 26, 1847, reported: "Every hour the calamity is increasing, hundreds of unfortunate creatures have, within the last week, **died of starvation**. They were hurried to the grave, coffinless and shroudless, so great is the mortality that the ancient customs are forgotten".

After a short period of growth in the 1970s, when 20,000 emigrants returned to Connacht (the western province), rural communities continued to decline. In the 65 years up to 1991, Connacht and Donegal lost one fifth of its population. In the diocese of Killala there were villages and townlands where the total population between the ages of 20 and 35 could be counted on the fingers of one hand. Between 1986 and 1991 the rate of net emigration from the West more than doubled while births more than halved.

Moyne Abbey



Moyne Abbey was founded by permission of Pope Nicholas for the Observantine Franciscans in 1460. The friars remained long after the **Dissolution of the Monasteries** by Henry VIII. Situated in spectacular surroundings close to Killala, Moyne Abbey is regarded as one of the most important ecclesiastical ruins in Mayo. It is remarkably well preserved and there is an interesting, carved **piscina** (a perforated stone basin for taking away water used in rinsing a chalice) in the chancel.