

# A Tour of the Archæological Sites in the Parish of Aghaderg

by JOHN LENNON

**A** RCHAEOLOGY is precise, clinical, technical and rather dry. It is the study of peoples of long ago through the material remains that have survived and come down to our time. By and large Archaeologists locate, date and comment clinically on the remains and monuments of people who lived thousands of years ago.

I have no claim to be an Archaeologist but am fascinated by the relics of our ancestors and by the people who left them to us. Our field monuments are all around us in the Parish of Aghaderg — we just can't ignore them. They stand defiantly and proudly as they have done for thousands of years. They seem to demand our attention, our interest, our respect, our awe and a little fear and dread we all feel when in the presence of something we do not fully understand.

## STANDING STONES

If we date the New Stone Age from C. 3000 B.C. we can begin there. Earlier man had lived in Ireland, mainly along the rivers — hunting, fishing and gathering — but no sites from this earlier period have been identified. The first people to settle in our area were those during the New Stone Age — the first farmers.

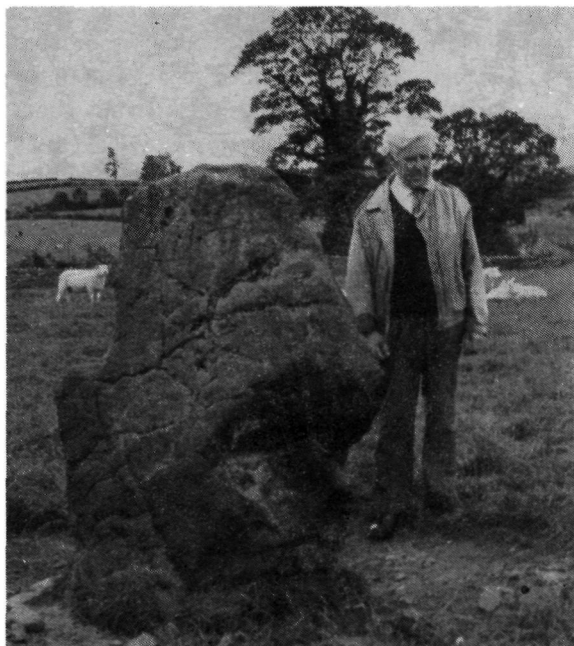
They:

- \* herded cattle and sheep.
- \* cleared arable slopes of our drumlins.
- \* planted rye, barley and oats.
- \* wove woollen cloth.
- \* lived in homesteads of wattle and daub.

They were:

A prosperous people producing their food from their herds and farms.

Skilful workers in stone, using tools of polished stone as well as tools of bone, horn and wood.



Standing Stone, Lisnabrague

These were the people who left us our earliest monuments, the Megaliths or Standing Stones.

These huge stones are the simplest and oldest relics — the simplest in construction. The people found a huge stone, or quarried one, and stood it up on one end. Why? Their very simplicity makes them the most difficult of all for Archaeologists to understand or interpret.

Were they:

- (a) Monuments to mark burial spots? Some have been excavated and found to be so. Others show no traces of any burial.
- (b) Objects of worship or pagan idols? Crom Cruach in Co. Cavan was such until St. Patrick's time. Turoe Stone in Co. Galway was another such. But both of these were highly decorated whereas the vast majority of standing stones bear no decoration. Were

these decorated stones erected at a later date? We simply don't know for stone cannot be dated of itself.

- (c) Are our standing stones the last remains of some larger structure — the remainder having been removed for whatever reasons by subsequent farmers?
- (d) It has been suggested that they were connected with ancient boundaries because of their frequent position near or on the boundaries of townlands. But what about those which evidently are not near any known boundaries?
- (e) Are they mementoes of some event in the lives of those who raised them?

Some have names—Conn's Stone and Tamlacht na Min (plaque monument on the hilltop—P. J. Joyce) in Drumillar townland.

There are seven standing stones in the Parish—suggesting a fairly thinly-spread population.

However the sheer size of some, especially Tamlacht na Min, required a high degree of organisation simply to raise it in position — or possibly to move it to the position where it was raised. So the society that erected them was capable of some social organisation if only for the purpose of their erection and possible quarrying and moving. If they are marking burials they again show social organisation and hierarchy since only seven are found in the Parish—only seven people were considered sufficiently important to have a stone raised over their last resting place as a monument. Dating them is extremely difficult.

### THE THREE SISTERS OF GREENAN STONE ALIGNMENT

What were these that we call the three sisters of Greenan?

- \* A stone alignment? There is alignment.
- \* A ruined and quarried Cromlech?
- \* A primitive observatory? — the alignment seems to indicate the point of sunrise at the time of Winter Solstice.
- \* Is it a ritual site?

The stones are 5 to 6 feet tall and about 3 feet wide spaced at intervals of 8 feet and 18 feet.



“The Three Sisters of Greenan”

Archaeologists cannot agree on their function and dating them is impossible.

However they show a high degree of social organisation or co-operation to quarry, move and erect them on top of this hill.

### CROMLECHS (DOLMEN)

These are one of the easiest of our monuments to recognise — when they are complete. Three or more support stones supporting huge capstones (some capstones in Ireland are estimated to weigh over 100 tons!). These are all burial sites. Their size indicates:—

- (a) A high degree of organisation of labour in large numbers.
- (b) A social development of a high order to allow (a) to occur.
- (c) A hierarchical development leading to the idea of raising such impressive monuments over the deceased who was considered worthy of the monument.
- (d) Manipulative skills and engineering to assemble and erect these.

Two of these striking monuments were erected in the Parish. The first, in Legananny has been

completely quarried; there are no remains. It was last recorded on the Ordnance Survey map of 1860. Does the name suggest 'Leic an Aonaigh'—The Fair Stone—indicating a site of an ancient assembly or Aonach? The second in Coolnacran townland has been partly quarried.

Dates for these monuments — 3000 B.C. to 1000 B.C.

The "Three sisters in Greenan" may have been another.

### CAIRNS — PASSAGES — GRAVES — CISTS

In Drumillar townland the Ordnance Survey recorded a cairn or pile of stones. It was known as Cairn Eochaidh. Its dimensions at the time of the survey (C. 1840) were, height 75 feet, circumference of base 225 feet. Unfortunately nothing of this remains. The engineers constructing the branch line linking Scarva and Banbridge used it as balast for the track! In Drumnahare is another Mound/Cist. It is surrounded by a shallow ditch and shows some signs of excavation. However nothing is known of its date. Cairn Eochaidh, however, can be dated to C.350 A.D. Eochaid was one of the three Collas who fought in the Battle of Aghaderg. This Battle is known as "Cath Cairan Eochaidh Leath Dearg" or "The Battle commemorated by a Cairn for Eochaidh who was half covered in blood. Eochaidh was slain in this battle and was buried here. His other two brothers Conal and Eoin survived, won the battle and afterwards divided Ulster between them — their territories are still commemorated — Tir Eoin (Tyrone), Eion's land, and Tir Conaill (Donegal), Conaill's territory.

### "THE DANES CAST"

In connection with the battle and just following it the winners decided to mark out their newly won territory. They constructed what has been called "The Danes Cast" or "The Valley of the Black Pig" or "Black Pigs Dike." This ran from Lisnagead Fort to Donegal Bay. It consisted of a ditch and earthen banks. The ditch was some ten

yards wide and the banks were equally impressive—and still are! Originally they were five yards high but time and weather have reduced them to two or three yards high.



Part of the "Dane's Cast" near Poyntzpass,  
Loughbrickland Road

This construction was mainly designed to:

- (a) Outline the territory.
- (b) To protect the territory from the incursions of raiders in search of cattle or captives.

It was Geraldus Cambrensis who gave it the name "Danes Cast" but it had nothing to do with the Danes. Whether the term "Black Pig" referred to one of the victors of the battle of Aghaderg or a mythological animal is unknown. The boar was admired in those times for his bravery, strength and ferocity.

Mention of this battle and the Black Pigs Dyke links these two features to Lisnagead (Fort of the Hundred).



Three Ringforts — Lisnagead is on the right

### RINGFORTS — LISNAGEAD

Lisnagead was constructed by the Collas—who were descendants of Conn of the Hundred fights—(hence the Cead—Hundred?)

The Ringfort is our most common feature or field monument. There are some 30,000—40,000 in Ireland. They are given various names, Lis or Lois, Rath, Cathair, Cashel or Fort.

The terms Lois or Rath usually refer to those constructed of earthen banks and ditches enclosing a circular area, generally found where sufficient depth of soil and clay allowed construction. Where the soil was rocky they were constructed with stone and were called Caiscals (Cashels) or Cathairs. Excavations of many have yielded evidence to date the construction to the period 1000 BC to 300 AD. The vast majority of these have a single bank and ditch generally enclosing a circular area 25 to 40 yards across.

The bank or raised part was usually inside the ditch but occasionally the ditch was inside. These were the farmsteads of the Celts. Where the enclosed area was protected by two banks and two ditches excavations show evidence that these were homesteads of wealthier farmers or occasionally Forts in a military sense. Where three rings are found, as in Lisnagead, the banks and ditches were

of such high dimensions that they were undoubtedly fortified forts for military purposes, Lisnagead is one of the best examples of this type of fort. Coolnacraun Fort has two massive rings of banks and ditches. There are many Forts in the Parish and Bricrues Fort of the Watery Fort in Brickland townland has the bank on the outside and the ditch on the inside. There are also several examples of double Forts in the area which have the appearance of a large figure '8'.



One of the deep ditches at Lisnagead



Lisnagead Fort

### CRANNOGS

At the same time as these ringforts were inhabited another type of dwelling was common in Ireland—these were Crannogs, usually an artificial Island in a Lough — built up and constructed into a circular form with a palisade surrounding the enclosed area. There were many of these throughout Ireland and one survives in Loughbrickland Lough. Others have appeared in Loughadian Bog, Lisnagonnell Bog and in other places in the Parish indicating that these bogs were then loughs which were subsequently drained. (Loughadian is mainly under pasture at the present time).

Besides Lisnagead, which is the largest ringfort in the Parish, having triple ramparts, Bricruis Fort must be the most famous.

Bricriu was a chief, and a poet of the 1st Century AD called Bricriu Neamh Theanga (Bricriu of the poisoned tongue). He was widely known throughout Ireland for his sarcasm. His poetry made him powerful and respected, as all poets were, and his incisive language made him feared. No one wanted to be the subject of his poetry and be ridiculed and lampooned in the Forts and Crannogs throughout the country.

Bricriu was powerful enough to press Connor Mac Nessa and the Red Branch Knights to do him the honour of dining with him. Afraid to refuse

him, yet not really wanting to do him the honour. Conor and his heroes Cu Chulainn, Conaill Cearnach and Laoire Buach attended the feast which is known in history and legend as "Bricriu's Feast". At the feast Bricriu tried, and almost succeeded, in making a laughing stock of the heroes by creating a petty squabble amongst not only the heroes but their wives as well. The tables were turned on him, however, when Cu Chulainn threw him headlong into the muddy ditch round his own fort! It must have been quite a sight to see when King Conor and his entourage of heroes and retainers passed through Poyntzpass (Staharnag Pass then) on their way to and from the feast from Eamonn Macha!

These ringforts were inhabited during the golden age of Celtic Ireland. Indeed some were inhabited as late as the 15th century and very many have been superimposed by modern farmsteads as a glance at an ordnance survey map shows. The inhabitants of the forts developed from Bronze age to Iron age and even up to the early Middle Ages and Norman times.

Highly civilised people, they produced spectacularly fine traditions of culture and learning. Their art and craft work is extremely intricate and ornate, incorporating stylised birds, animals and spiral patterns which reached its peak in the illuminated manuscripts of the early Irish Church,



Loughbrickland Lake showing Crannog. Bricrius Fort is on the horizon, right

most notably the Book of Kells.

They survived and flourished without a written language. This was a deliberate decision. They opted instead for an oral tradition for, history, law, legend and genealogy and of course poetry and music. Their legends survived for up to 2000 years before they were put down in writing by the early Christian Monks in the 8th—10th century AD.

Society was well organised and people knew their rights and privileges according to social rank, custom and law. They held large assemblies at regular intervals on religion—social-commercial basis. They were self sufficient farmers and herders of cattle which was their currency. They had a highly developed system of education and law. Poetry, music and art were highly specialised and respected professions that were studied for many years by those who wished to follow these professions. Women held a privileged position in their society, an unusually civilised and futuristic feature of their era—many rose to positions of great power. — Macha of Eamonn Macha and Maeve of Connaught, and earlier Tailte were good examples of the status of women.

Although they were a highly organised society they were so independent in mind and character they never banded together into a single nation or power. They were rural dwellers, farmers and

warriors. They lived in tribal or Clann groupings in territories dominated by the Clann Chief. They found it difficult to submerge tribal identity to form a single nation under one ruler—only Brian Boru managed to do this successfully. Even in his success he had not 100% support from the clans. Apart from his era much time and energy was spent in inter clann warfare and petty jealousies and rivalries which eventually left them open to invasion and suppression by the Normans in the 12th Century.

These people left us a unique heritage in all these ways and further, farmers and herdsman they identified, named and demarcated every patch of ground in the country and named each part. Our country alone in the world, is covered by a patchwork of townlands, each named. They are partly topographical and partly historical. They were means of identifying territory or the rights of the individual to a territory for ownership or inheritance.

Some of the topographical names of the townlands are:—

Drumsallagh—Mucky Hill, Hill of the Herds.

Edenderry—Slope of the dark trees.

Coolnacraun—Back/Corner of the trees.

Meenan—Mossy place.

Ballinskeagh—Place of the hawthorns.

Scarva—The Watershed.

Greenan—A Sunny Place.

Creevy—A Bushy Place.

Historical terms:—

Ballyvarley—Place of the slaughter.

Aghaderg—Red Field (from battle of Aghaderg).

Brickland—Bricriu's place.

Lisnabrague—Place of the games.

Legananny—Stone of the Assembly or Fair.

Lisnagead—Fort of the Hundred (Fighters).

Shankill—Old Church (1st Church, 6th Century).

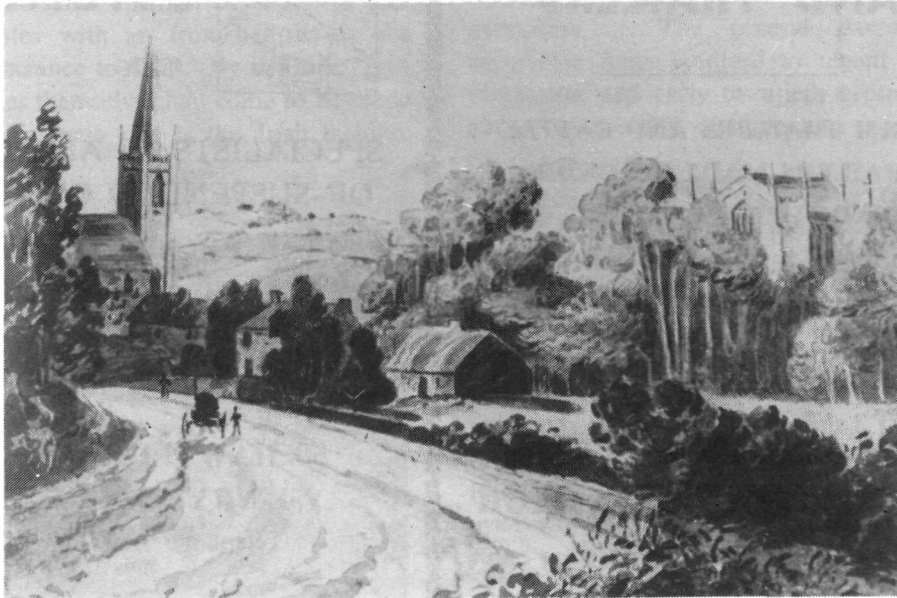
Ballinteggart—Priest's Place (Co-Terminous with Shankill).

The Parish of Aghaderg is a small speck on the map of Ireland. Yet within the Parish are reminders of the progress of man from the earliest inhabitants of this Island. In every area of Ireland these monuments and remains can be found and deserve to be preserved for posterity. Man may be on the edge of intergalactic exploration, which may lead to the colonisation of the solar system.

We have come a long way from raising a stone over our ancestors. Would the colonists of a new

planet shrug off their long history on Earth and begin anew as if the past was irrelevant? It is only by looking back that we can judge how far along a road we have travelled, and while we keep our eyes to the future we need at least to be aware of the past "from whence we came".

As we increase our knowledge of science and technology the future becomes blurred with possibility. Wouldn't it be a proper application of modern learning and science to focus on our dim past and clarify that picture? No one would be so silly as to advocate the abolition of our museums and their precious contents held in trust for future generations. Nor should the greatest museum of all, our countryside with its rich stores of monuments, be allowed to be robbed or plundered in the name of progress or modernisation. Conservation is a topical theme in the latter part of the 20th century. Much of our history has, like our flora and fauna, been lost through negligence and misunderstanding of its importance. Surely it is time to save at least what remain of our field monuments and rich heritage not just in Aghaderg but in every little country place throughout Ireland.



Loughbrickland c.1830