



Farming activity in the Burren is thought to have begun almost 6,000 years ago. Ever since then, farmers and their livestock have been one of the main forces in shaping this landscape. Indeed, the bare limestone hills, evocative monuments and bright flora of the Burren are all closely linked to the activities of these farmers of the fertile 'rock'.

Neolithic (New Stone Age) farmers would have removed much of the original pine-hazel woodland cover of the Burren for cultivation. This would have contributed to soil loss and ultimately the exposure of the characteristic limestone 'skeleton' underneath. This unusual landscape later became known as 'Boireann' meaning 'rocky place'.

It was also past generations of Burren farmers who built dolmens to bury their dead, Cahers to protect their herds, churches to worship their God, stone walls to manage their livestock; much of the archaeology of the Burren may thus be viewed simply as a legacy of past generations of farmers.

Even the Burren's famous flora is, in a sense, a by-product of farming activity, in particular the age-old system of winter grazing. Grazing animals spend the winter on the Burren hills grazing back the rank grasses and scrub that would otherwise dwarf the special Burren flowers. They complete this important task at a time when these flowers - orchids and gentians - are safely dormant for the winter.

Today, roughly 500 farm families continue to make a living on the Burren, half the number of just thirty years ago. These farmers are the lifeblood of the region, the guardians of a priceless heritage. Over 90% of the Burren is privately farmed land, much of it farmed by the same families for generations. These guardians of the Burren, their property and their enormous store of knowledge must be respected.

- Do not disturb livestock on the Burren.
- Do not damage farm walls, gates, farm structures or equipment.
- Where possible, support rural businesses and ask for local produce.

For more detailed information on all aspects of the Burren (including free multilingual downloadable fact sheets), Please visit www.burrenbeo.com.

Also look out for the spectacular CD Rom 'burrenbeo - Images of the Fertile Rock' or read the book 'Farming and the Burren'.

www.burrenbeo.com

THE BURREN

A Simple Factsheet



OPEN YOUR EYES TO THE LIVING BURREN



This material has been produced by Burrenbeo, the independent, not-for-profit, information and education provider for the Burren, with support from RRD LEADER, Co.Clare and Fáilte Ireland, the National Tourism Development Authority.

Landscape



The Burren region is located in Counties Clare and Galway, along Ireland's mid-western coast. Stretching over some 560 square km (216 sq. miles), it is composed mainly of exposed limestone reaching from sea level to a height of c. 300m. This limestone - which is up to 800 metres thick in places - was deposited some 340 million years ago at the bottom of a warm, shallow sea during what is known in geological time as the Carboniferous period.

Composed of the compacted remains of marine organisms - corals, shellfish, plankton, etc - this limestone is packed with the fossils of these ancient lifeforms, frozen in time. The beds of limestone were deposited in a series of distinct phases with breaks in between: this has resulted in the terraced appearance of many hills in the Burren today.

Over millions of years the Burren has been shaped by tectonic, glacial and solutional forces. Massive glaciers sciss-crossed the region, removing shale and loose rock, later depositing mounds of glacial till and rounded boulders known as 'erratics' in their wake.

Rainwater, a mild acid, also erodes and shapes the Burren limestone: over thousands of years this gradual process of solution has resulted in what is known as a karst landscape. Features of this karst heritage include dense networks of caves, fascinating 'disappearing lakes' known as turloughs, and extensive pavements composed of blocks of limestone ('clints') separated by deep, narrow cracks ('grikes').

The surface of every piece of exposed Burren limestone has been slowly weathered by the elements over many millennia, resulting in a unique pattern of micro-solutional features generically known as 'karren'. This unique natural footprint can however be destroyed in just minutes. Limestone pavement is listed as a 'Priority Habitat' in the European Habitats Directive, 1992, and is protected by law.

- Do not remove weathered limestone from the Burren.
- Avoid purchasing weathered limestone souvenirs.
- Refrain from building miniature cairns and dolmens.
- Do not deliberately displace limestone boulders (erratics).

Ecology



The ecology of the Burren - its flora and fauna (plants and animals) - is famous all over the world because of its remarkable beauty, richness and diversity. Over 70% of Ireland's native flora is found in the Burren, including 24 of our 28 native orchid species, some with evocative names such as the bee, fly, butterfly and birds-nest orchids.

Probably the best known flower of the Burren is the beautiful blue Spring gentian (*Gentiana verna*) which usually flowers between April and May every year. Other favourites include the bloody cranesbill (*Geranium sanguineum*), golden Carline thistle (*Carlina vulgaris*) and harebell (*Campanula rotundifolia*). However these are but a few of the 600-odd plant species found in this botanical oasis.

The exuberant beauty of the Burren flora is matched by its intriguing nature. Here we find Arctic-Alpine plants such as the mountain avens (*Dryas octopetala*) growing beside Mediterranean plants such as the Irish Orchid (*Neotinea intacta*). We encounter parasitic plants such as the beautiful thyme broomrape (*Orobanche alba*) or plants such as the butterworts (*Pinguicula spp.*) which prefer a diet of insects.

The fauna of the Burren is equally rich: over 100 species of breeding birds, all but two of Ireland's 32 native butterfly species, all of our native bat species and over 70 species of land snail are found in the Burren. The mammals most commonly encountered when walking in the Burren would be the fox (*Vulpes vulpes*), hare (*Lepus timidus*) and feral goat (*Capra hircus*). Less common would be the snake-like slow worm (*Anguis fragilis*) and pine marten (*Martes Martes*).

The presence of such a rich and varied ecology in the Burren is the result of a unique combination of factors including the mild climate, karst geology and the tradition of sympathetic farming practices. This priceless natural resource is easily damaged and can not be taken for granted.

- Do not pick or remove plants or tamper with their habitats.
- Do not camp or park your vehicle on the limestone pavement or species-rich grassland.
- Do not disturb Burren wildlife or their habitats.

Archaeology



As with its illustrious flora, the built heritage of the Burren is noted for its richness, diversity and spectacular beauty. What we find in this rocky kingdom is essentially a record in stone of over 6,000 years of persistent human activity.

Possibly the oldest and best known monument in the Burren is the famous Poul nabrone Portal tomb or dolmen. When excavated it was found to contain the bones of over 21 separate individuals, some 5,800 years old, as well as evidence of an early mixed farm economy in the region.

Approximately 80 wedge tombs - simple burial chambers from over 4,000 years ago - are also found in the Burren. So named for their wedge-like ground plan, their wider end usually opens out towards the setting sun, as if symbolically reaching out to the world beyond.

One of the Burren's most recognizable monuments is the stone fort or 'Caher'. Over 500 known examples of these ancient farmsteads (mostly over 1200 years old) are found in the Burren, including the spectacular Cahercummaun. The three walls of this massive hill fort are estimated to contain 16,500 cubic metres of quarried stone.

The Burren is thought to contain the densest concentration of ecclesiastical sites in Ireland. Spectacular examples of this would include the ancient churches of Oughtmama, Kilfenora Cathedral and high crosses, and Corcomroe Abbey which was founded by the Cistercian Order in 1200AD.

This represents a mere fraction of the rich archaeology of the Burren - look out also for tower houses (such as Leamanagh Castle, home of the famous Maire Rua), holy wells, penitential stations, round towers and much more. The built heritage of the Burren is a unique resource, one that grants us a privileged insight into the lives of generations past. This is indeed a treasure to be cherished.

- Take care not to disturb the Burren's built heritage.
- Do not deface, damage, or remove any part of the built heritage.
- Remember, heritage sites in the Burren are not always 'obvious', so please be extra vigilant at all times when visiting.