

JANUARY 2024

BCV NEWSLETTER

OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER OF THE BURRENBEO CONSERVATION VOLUNTEERS

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Some words from the Chair

BY KATE LAVENDER

It has been a busy year for the BCV with a great range of events organised and attended and it all couldn't have happened without the support of our volunteers and committee so a huge thanks to you all. The BCV are incredibly lucky to be supported by our 'experts' helping us to plan our events and increase our impact upon the ground:

- Elaine Lynch has been invaluable with all her archaeology projects and her enthusiasm has made our archaeology events a true pleasure to attend;
- Liam McNamara of the Fanore Beach Combers has as always been our eyes on the ground helping us to keep the Burren coastline free of marine rubbish (and finding us interesting areas to work in);
- Jesmond Harding from Butterfly Conservation Ireland knows everything there is to know about Irish butterflies and is invaluable in helping us keep the Burren in the best possible condition for the rarer butterflies that breed here;
- Plus we've been delighted to provide some help for Michael Houlihan, recording cillíns in the Burren.

Climate and biodiversity are continuously in our minds as we look to the future and every little action we take in looking after our places can make a difference. Even if you can only make one event a year, your contribution to the Burren is invaluable and very much appreciated not just by us but by all those who live, work or pass through this amazing place.

We have an exciting year ahead with lots of interesting plans in the pipelines, and I would like to say a huge thanks to Karen for making sure those plans turn into brilliant events - not an easy job when trying to coordinate leaders/volunteers/landowners/experts to all come together at the right time and place (preferably with the sun shining...that's certainly the hardest bit to achieve and if you have a direct line to a reliable sunshine provider please do let us know!).

I am looking forward very much to meeting you all in 2024 on our events and as always, please bring along friends/family/colleagues who may be interested - the more the merrier.

Kate





BCV committee changes

We would like to sincerely thank **Wendy Smith**, a star volunteer for many years and former Secretary of the Burrenbeo Conservation Volunteers committee, for all her hard work. Wendy, it won't be the same without you! You will be missed, but we wish you the absolute best and hope to see you again!

Ritchie Jones has temporarily stepped down from his position as Committee member and will be welcomed back anytime!



Kate Lavender (Chair)



Karen van Dorp (Trust liaison)



Mike Scanlon



Margaret Duffy



Louise Brogan



Ristard Crimmins



Tony Galvin



Eileen O'Connor

Current BCV committee

Kate Lavender (Chair)
Karen van Dorp (Burrenbeo Trust Liaison, Secretary)
Louise Brogan (Committee Member)
Ristard Crimmins (Committee Member)
Margaret Duffy (Committee Member)
Tony Galvin (Committee Member)
Eileen O'Connor (Committee Member)
Mike Scanlon (Committee Member)

Join us!

Are you ready to take a(n even) more active role in caring for the Burren? We are looking for committee members to help us organise and coordinate events! For more information, email volunteer@burrenbeo.com.

First-aid training

Part of our event health and safety is that we always have at least one qualified First Aider present on all our events.

This year, 12 of our volunteers will attend the 2-day training course to receive their Remote Emergency Care II certificates. We are grateful for your dedication to safety during our events!

Receiving training to become a BCV First Aider is free of charge. If you are interested in becoming a BCV First Aider, please email volunteer@burrenbeo.com





Archaeological scrub clearing: cashel Ballyganner North

BY RISTEARD CRIMMINS

The volunteers returned to Ballyganner North on Saturday the 2nd of September to continue scrub clearing at the cashel called Cathair na Spíci by Tim Robinson. This is the name that appears in the School's Collection from the 1930's: the 'cashel of the spikes', based it seems on the fact that the walls had stone spikes protruding above the walls (the cashel is also mentioned by John O'Donovan in his letters in the course of the 1839 Ordnance Survey and T.J. Westropp wrote in some detail about it and surveyed it more than once between 1878 and 1914 it would appear). There was no sign of them on Saturday but it is undoubtedly a fascinating structure and as usual we left with more questions than we had when we arrived. The day remained dull which was a blessing - scrub clearing is not light work! There was a good turnout. Elaine supervised and Mary's chocolate biscuit cake was a big hit as always.





Fanore beach clean

BY KAREN VAN DORP

As a group, the BCVs have adopted the whole coastline of the Burren as our target area for the Clean Coast initiative and a Beach Clean with the highly motivated Burrenbeo Conservation Volunteers is never just a Beach Clean! For our September event, BCVs picked up rubbish from Fanore Beach, walking the whole beach from south to north, after which they tackled the parts north of the beach. This involved removing large piles of rubbish left in strategic places, using a wheel barrow and moving everything uphill and placing all rubbish in bags. No need to state that a coffee break was needed! We managed to enjoy our coffees in a sheltered spot, after which we continued bagging up rubbish for another few hours. Huge thanks to expert beach comber and Fanore local Liam McNamara for helping us out on the day and to Clare County Council for picking up the impressive pile of bags later!





Archaeological scrub clearing: unrecorded pyramidal structures (Boston area)

BY KAREN VAN DORP

The work for our archaeological scrub clearing event in October 2023 involved clearing scrub from three pyramidal shaped dry-stone wall structures on a farm located in the townland of Pouleenacoon (Boston area) in the Burren. Two of these structures were similar in shape and the third one was much larger. After some heavy duty scrub clearing, we were able to take a proper look and record them. There was a fourth structure as well but it has completely collapsed. When all the scrub clearing was done, Elaine let the drone up to take aerial shots and we noticed that all four structures are aligned in an almost straight line, along the edge of a turlough! Interestingly, it is not clear why these structures were built in past times. Possible reasons include penitential stations, follies, clearance cairns or a *leacht*. If anyone has an idea or has seen anything similar, please contact the BCVs and/or Elaine!

Special thanks to Elaine for being such an amazing expert leader on yet another fantastic archaeological site maintenance event for the BCVs, and to the landowner for permission to do the work on their land.





Archaeological scrub clearing: The 'Baker's House', Aughinish Island

BY ELAINE LYNCH

We had our last scrub clearing day for 2023 with the BVCs in November on Aughinish Island; a lovely place to visit in North Clare. Our focus for this scrub clearing was an old building locally known as the 'Bakers' House. Not much is known about the house but it is situated to the north-east from the old church CL003-010----. The volunteers did an amazing job and was lovely to be able to see the interior properly. There is an impressive chimney and fireplace still upstanding in the centre of the house with two small rooms leading off from a large central room. We started to clear some of the scrub to the east of the site, and as it turns out the house extends in this direction but has completely collapsed. We did not finish the scrub clearing but we will return to the site in January to complete the works.

Huge thanks to the Burren Conservation Volunteers and the landowner for permission to be there. Also thanks to the National Monuments Service - Archaeology for the permission to do the work.



Clare's infant burials: Cillín recording

BY MICHAEL HOULIHAN, HISTORIAN AND AUTHOR

Accidentally, as with so many good things in life, a few years ago I began tracking down County Clare's Blessed Wells at the behest of Congella Maguire, the then CCC Heritage Officer. The exercise took me and some others all over the county. By the time it was completed we had visited 242 wells, each with its own story and character.

In the past year I have been engaged in another survey, this one quite different from the first, with none of the life-enhancing discoveries at the wells.

I am visiting Clare's Kyles/Cillíns, the informal resting places of the county's unbaptised infants, in use in some instances since the Counter Reformation in the late 16th century. If there was ever an open secret in the county, these burial grounds are it. Stowed away in quiet corners of townlands are the final resting places of children who did not make it to full term and consequently received no sacrament of baptism.

According to the fourth century Saint Augustine of Hippo, without the exorcism of Baptism these souls had not been freed from original sin and could not go to heaven. This was reflected in their burial places, unconsecrated ground on liminal land. The rule was rigidly upheld, especially by the Irish Franciscans at Leuven, who it seems were heavy on theology but light on compassion.



There are 142 recognized Kyles in the county, though I suspect there are a great many more. With some notable exceptions most Kyles are not signposted or highlighted in any way. They are only identifiable by perhaps a low mound and some river-rolled stones as grave markers. Some continued in use until the early twentieth century. Nevertheless they are not forgotten. Speak to any local and they will tell you where the Kyle lies, and perhaps they may be able to explain a little about when last the site was used.

In recent years the prayer communities across Clare are steadily reclaiming these lost infant cemeteries. Plaques have been raised, masses celebrated, prayers offered. In the same manner I have noticed cillíns with fresh planting, fencing and paintwork. For myself, I feel that identifying and recording these cillíns is a hugely cathartic and somewhat overdue work, as the county reclaims its forgotten dead. I have been very fortunate in having the help of good friends and most especially members of the Burrenbeo Conservation Volunteers who unstintingly have joined me in finding and recording remaining cillíns.

We are nearly finished our fieldwork. Much thanks to ICAN, The Irish Community Archive Network for sponsoring this work. In a short time we hope to have a public website available outlining a little about each cillín. We hope you visit it and perhaps reflect on those whose only sin was to die too soon.



Butterfly conservation site maintenance, Fahee North

BY KAREN VAN DORP

For some reason, we have been unlucky with the weather conditions for several years in a row when we pay 'our' butterfly conservation site in Fahee North a visit for site maintenance! Amongst seriously strong squalls of rain, a group of hardy BCU ladies got together in December 2023 for the last BCU event of the year and cleared encroaching hazel scrub from this important breeding site for various species of butterfly - including the Marsh Fritillary; Ireland's only invertebrate listed on the Annex II of the EU Habitats Directive. Removing scrub allows for Devil's Bit Scabious, the Marsh Fritillary's foodplant, to continue to thrive on the site. This way, the habitat stays in the most favourable condition for the butterflies to continue to breed here. The BCVs have been working on this site for the last 12 years under the expert guidance of Jesmond Harding from Butterfly Conservation Ireland. Well done to all that showed up for this event - an impressive amount of work was done and the site looks fantastic!



Special: Expressing our gratitude to archaeologist and expert event leader Elaine Lynch

BY RISTEARD CRIMMINS

Scrub clearing appears a good few times in the Burrenbeo Conservation Volunteers calendar of events. This activity has become a significant part of the work of the BCVs from year to year but its description, while factually accurate, gives no hint at all as to how important and fascinating it actually is. Reflecting on the work carried out by the volunteers in 2023 it is quite remarkable to think that we have been following to some extent in the footsteps of others who have, in the past, found this area equally fascinating. The part of the Burren stretching from Parknabinnia across to Ballyganner was visited and documented by John O'Donovan during the course of the Ordnance Survey in 1839 - he mentions Cahernaspeekie where the BCVs have spent some time clearing away briars and blackthorns from the cashel. Then of course there was the detailed survey work done by T.J. Westropp in the 1890s and in the early twentieth century. Dr William Nolan in his introduction to *The Antiquities of Clare* (Clasp Press 2005) describes the work of O'Donovan and O'Curry at that time as serving "as a measure of both loss and survival" and when one reads the detailed notes taken by Westropp in relation to the aforementioned Cahernaspeekie for example, it is clear that the work of the BCVs in opening up these monuments to view is a tale of both loss and survival; gone it appears are the spikes which may have given the cashel its name, although they are hopefully recumbent awaiting discovery by the BCVs on some future occasion (leaving aside any question marks as to the naming of that particular cashel).

The work of the BCVs on the monuments would not be possible without Elaine Lynch. It is probably fair to both her and the volunteers to say that there is a nice symbiosis to the relationship. Having said that however, I don't think we could have been more fortunate than we have been in having Elaine as our guiding archaeologist; her infectious enthusiasm, good humour and dedication are inspirational. One wonders what more Westropp might have achieved had he the resources of the BCVs at his disposal! Of course it is not a particularly startling disclosure to say that the surface of Burren archaeology has only been scratched but Elaine has, in her work in Ballyganner over the past few seasons, made a significant dent in it. It has been a great privilege for the BCVs to have been a part of this work. I suppose that the full significance of the discoveries there has yet to be understood in the context of our understanding of that landscape which clearly has had a substantial human presence since the neolithic. I saw a discussion by Eoin Grogan and Tom Condit (*The Funerary Landscape of Clare in Space and Time in County Clare Studies* ed. Ciaran O'Murchadha) where they speculated that the very dense clustering of megalithic tombs etc in the Parknabinnia / Ballyganner area is indicative of a relatively high population in the Late/Final Neolithic Period and they go so far as to say that intensive agriculture in the area at that time may have caused soil erosion which in turn may have led to population movement away from the area and this may be traceable in the distribution of wedge tombs in neighbouring parts of the County. It is a hugely significant and magical landscape as we know which is only starting to yield up its treasures in terms of our understanding of the pre-historic past. Elaine's work is central to that at the moment and for the BCVs to be involved with her is a great privilege.

I was delighted to come across a quote by Carol Gleeson in her introduction to *Archaeology of the Burren/Prehistoric Forts and Dolmens in North Clare* (Clasp Press 1999) the collection of Westropp's notes on the area, which is from his Presidential Address to the Royal Society of Antiquaries in 1916 which is as follows: 'Most helpful is it to recall that in Ireland our work always advanced, not by State aid and popular applause, but by self-sacrifice; and having no ambition save the objects of our research. These endowments cannot fail if we continue true'. He could well have made that observation had he witnessed Elaine's hard work dedication and professionalism. From the same introduction by Carol Gleeson comes a quote from his obituary from which we see that he was a genial and good humoured individual with a vast store of knowledge whose presence enlivened gatherings and excursions. Elaine is certainly keeping his spirit alive in County Clare.



Upcoming events

FEBRUARY

18TH - LESSER HORSESHOE BAT SITE MAINTENANCE

24TH - ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE MAINTENANCE, BALLYGANNER CASHEL

MARCH

10TH - MOTHER'S DAY BEACH CLEAN-UP

APRIL

14TH - NATIONAL SPRING CLEAN (25TH ANNIVERSARY)

MAY

TBA - 'THE BIG DIG'

(3-WEEK ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATION IN THE BURREN)



Contact Karen on volunteer@burrenbeo.com for more info and signing up. We'd love to hear from you!

