

January 2025

BCV newsletter

Newsletter of the Burrenbeo Conservation Volunteers



THIS ISSUE

Some words from the Chair
page 1

BCV committee/2024 in numbers
page 2

Aughinish scrub clearing
page 3

Cahernaspееkee cashel
page 4

BCV beach clean-ups
page 5

Community excavation
page 6

Yellow rattle/Burren Pine Project
page 7

Cilín recording
page 8

Graveyard recording
page 9

Dry stone wall repairing
page 10

BCV Social/First Aid training
page 11

Burren Ark Project
page 12

SPECIAL BY TONY KIRBY
Pre-famine house scrub clearing
page 13/14

Scrub clearing Fahee North
page 15

Information and signing up
page 16



The Burrenbeo Conservation Volunteers

The Burrenbeo Conservation Volunteers (BCVs) form an active community that works towards the sustainable management of the Burren by addressing key conservation issues and needs in this special place. The group was set up in 2010 by the Burrenbeo Trust as an answer to the need of coordinated, hands-on conservation work in the Burren region; enabling members of the (local) community to work for the benefit of this inspiring but fragile environment. Guided by a dedicated voluntary committee, the BCVs are a welcoming group of people, always on the look-out for new members, new conservation opportunities and new (community) groups to work in partnership with.

Some words from the Chair

BY KATE LAVENDER

A huge thank-you to all involved with the Burrenbeo Conservation Volunteers over 2024 - from volunteers to event leaders, each and every one of you has contributed to making a real difference in the Burren. In addition, you all have all helped make the BCV such a friendly and welcoming group, creating a great atmosphere on all the events.

I would also like to thank the BCV Committee for giving up their time for the committee meetings, helping to run events as leaders and first aiders and contributing to such a varied programme of events.

A final thank-you to Karen, whose hard work and dedication in the office (as well as on events in the Burren) keeps the BCV running smoothly and dealing with all the paperwork and communications.

We have a great programme of events lined up for 2025 and look forward to seeing you all with us at some point during the year. Fingers crossed for sunshine...





BCV Committee

Set up in 2010, the BCV committee ensures that BCV events meet a definite conservation need in the Burren and give volunteers the best experience possible. The committee members meet three times per year and rotate as event leaders to make sure that Health and Safety standards are met during events.



- Kate Lavender**
(Chair)
- Karen van Dorp**
(Coordinator)
- Eileen O'Connor**
(Secretary)
- Louise Brogan**
(Committee Member)
- Risteard Crimmins**
(Committee Member)
- Margaret Duffy**
(Committee Member)
- Mike Scanlon**
(Committee Member)

BCV committee news

We would like to give our heartfelt thanks to Tony Galvin, a star volunteer and former member of the Burrenbeo Conservation Volunteers committee, for all his hard work. Fortunately we still enjoy Tony's presence during volunteer events!

Our work

The BCVs are involved in a range of conservation and maintenance projects in the Burren region; including scrub clearing for archaeological and conservation purposes, excavations and seed collecting. All our work is carried out with permission of the relevant authorities.

2024 in numbers

-  **18 events**
-  **121 volunteers**
-  **2182 volunteer hours**
-  **18 event awards**
-  **2 donations**



Archaeological scrub clearing Aughinish

BY JOE FREIJSER

Aughinish, a small island and townland located on the southern shore of Galway Bay in the Burren, is rich in archaeological history. The island is home to a variety of important monuments, including shell middens, a wedge tomb, an early Christian church, and a Martello tower. Additionally, late medieval seaweed beds – an ancient farming method used for fertiliser and animal feed – can be found to the south of the causeway.

In January, the BCVs returned to Aughinish to continue their important work of scrub clearing, with permission from the National Monument Service and the landowner. The group's efforts focused on an old building known locally as the 'Bakers House,' located northeast of the historic church. As they cleared more scrub, the charming structure gradually revealed its full character, including a remarkable chimney and fireplace that still stand at the heart of the building.

Scrub clearing plays a crucial role in preserving not only archaeological sites but also those of cultural and heritage significance. The unchecked growth of scrub can threaten the integrity of monuments, making the BCVs' work invaluable in safeguarding built heritage. During the clearing of a gable wall, the group uncovered two ovens flanking the central fireplace. A potential hut site was also found, which was reported back to the National Monument Service.





Archaeological scrub clearing Cahernaspeekee cashel

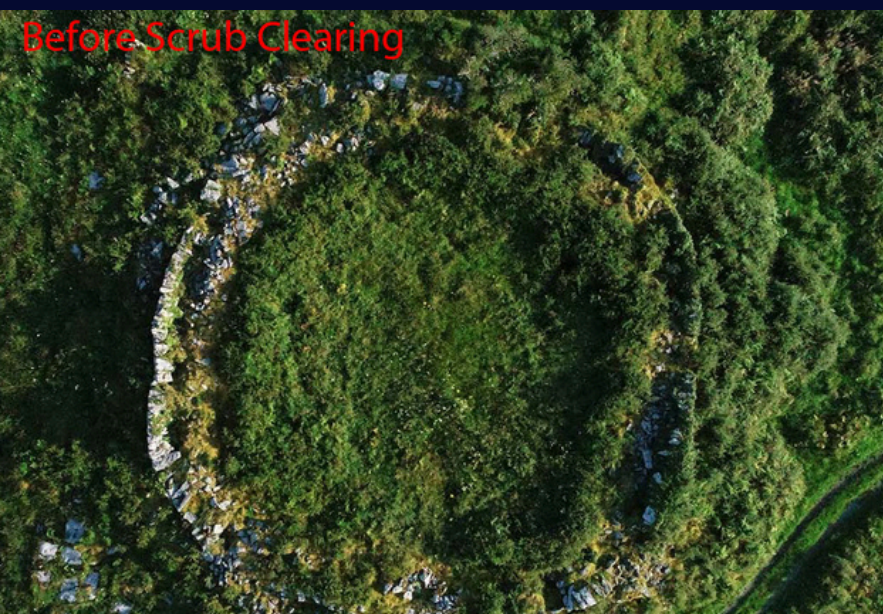
BY RISTEARD CRIMMINS

In February, the BCVs returned to Cahernaspeekee Cashel in Ballyganner South for another day of conservation work. To our surprise, the cattle grazing the winterage had entered the cashel through its original entrance, which we had cleared of overgrowth during our last visit. Not only had the cattle grazed the grass, but they also cleared much of the ivy from the inner stonework, revealing the interior walls and remnants of the inner rampart, now fragile. We also found a few stones that may have once formed the cashel's characteristic stone spikes, though none remain upright.

The BCVs continued clearing briars and blackthorns around the site. While the exterior wall is still obscured by scrub, the areas we cleared provided a glimpse of the structure's former grandeur.

Afterwards, we shifted focus to a section of boundary wall between Lismoher and Ballyganner North. Here, we discovered a substantial lintel stone atop two large side stones, forming a possible opening. This feature was brought to our attention by a neighbouring farmer. Clearing the overgrowth on the Ballyganner North side revealed it, sparking our curiosity due to nearby mound walls and a potential enclosure. This feature doesn't appear on Tim Robinson's map nor is it mentioned by TJ Westropp, who describes the area as a "labyrinth of high-walled fields, crags, and bushes" - a fitting description to this day. While reviewing Westropp's notes, I came across a passage worth sharing: "Along the desolate ridges between Noughaval and Ballyganner lie a group of forts so numerous and implying so much labour that we may conclude that an actual city and considerable population occupied this lonely site." Further investigation will be needed to understand its significance.

The scrub clearing at Cahernaspeekee Cashel (CL009-059054) was one of our most extensive projects, spanning three days. We extend our sincere thanks to Elaine Lynch for her excellent leadership, the landowner for access, and to all the volunteers whose hard work made this project possible. We also appreciate the ongoing support of the National Monuments Service – Archaeology for their role in the FMA scheme.





Fanore Beach Clean-Ups

BY EILEEN O'CONNOR

As a group, the BCVs have adopted the whole coastline of the Burren as a target area for the Clean Coasts Big Beach Clean initiative. Two Beach Cleans were organised in 2024; a Mother's Day Beach Clean-Up in March and a Big BCV Beach Clean in September. Read event coordinator Eileen O'Connor's report for the September Big BCV Beach Clean below.

The BCVs returned to Fanore Beach as part of their yearly schedule of events. A good crowd of volunteers assembled at the car park on the day. The goal was to remove any rubbish collecting along the beach both towards the caravan park site on the north, and to the south in among the large boulders.

The early part of the day concentrated on a large collection of micro-plastics entangled with seaweed at the river bed. While this was somewhat tedious to disentangle great progress was made by lunchtime. While teasing through the mat of material Mary found a number of small plastic toys which we relocated and hopefully surprised the children building forts when they returned! Any opportunity to Reduce Reuse Recycle! After lunch and a chat we turned to the south and made our way through the rocks. This area tends to produce a lot of larger pieces of rubbish including bottles, rope, fish crates etc. Quite large pieces can be thrown up by the sea.

Many thanks to all the volunteers who turned up on the day and special thanks to expert beach comber and Fanore local Liam McNamara for helping us out, the McCormack family for granting access through the caravan park and to Clare County Council for picking up the impressive pile of bags later!





Community excavation Noughaval

BY EILEEN O'CONNOR

This May, a dedicated group of volunteers came together for a Community Excavation at Noughaval, marking the conclusion of a three-year archaeological project in the Burren. Hands-on community excavations like this one offer a unique opportunity for individuals to directly engage in the discovery and preservation of history, and to make meaningful contributions to our understanding of ancient sites.

Directed by Elaine Lynch, Field Monument Advisor for County Clare, the excavation focused on uncovering the date and purpose of the many enclosures scattered across the region. This year, we returned to the same site as last year, and with the help of enthusiastic volunteers, we successfully completed the excavation. Throughout the excavation, each volunteer received training in archaeological techniques, including excavation, sieving, and the recording of findings. Participants also learned how to document discoveries by assigning numbers, creating drawings, and completing context sheets - skills that are vital to ensuring the accuracy and integrity of the archaeological record. While the weather tested our resolve, the excitement among the group remained high! The thrill of uncovering artifacts or features was shared by everyone, and each find added to the collective knowledge of the site.

This year's excavation continued to shed light on the site's nature as an enclosure, with several important discoveries made. The importance of archaeological excavations cannot be overstated - they allow us to piece together the stories of our ancestors and preserve cultural heritage for future generations. Stay tuned for further updates!



Yellow rattle seed collecting

BY KAREN VAN DORP

Brushing your hands through a wildflower meadow at the height of summer and hearing Yellow rattle seeds rattling in their pods is a wonderful experience. Collecting the seed with a group of enthusiastic volunteers, knowing that these seeds will be distributed to hundreds of people that want to do good for nature by creating wildflower meadows, is even better!

Yellow rattle (*Rhinanthus minor*) is a hemiparasitic plant, meaning it gets some of the energy it needs to grow from other plants. It takes the energy mainly from grasses. Because of this, when Yellow rattle is present in grassland, the vigour of the grasses is much less and wildflowers will have a better chance of establishing. Restricting grass growth and allowing other plant species to thrive increases biodiversity. For this reason, Yellow rattle is useful when trying to establish a wildflower meadow.

On an evening in late June of 2024, BCVs teamed up with Analog volunteers to collect Yellow rattle seeds from a stunning meadow on Brendan Dunford's land. It was a true privilege to spend some time in such a well-maintained, breathtaking meadow full of wildflowers. The collected seeds were dried, packed, and sold to support Burrenbeo Conservation Volunteers' efforts.

A big thank you to everybody who collected and purchased seeds this year. Your support is helping to create and protect our important habitats!



Burren Pine Project

BY MARGARET DUFFY

I have been a member of the BCV group for over 10 years now. In the last two years I have been involved in events related to the Burren Pine Project. This project involves planting pine trees which are native to the Burren. Irish pines were originally thought to have become extinct around 2,000 years BC. But a stand of trees at Rockforest (west of Tubber) was found to be a continuation of that native species, and a decision was made to try and propagate it.

The result of this was the Burren Pine Project, fostered by Burrenbeo Trust, involving the propagation and planting of trees from seeds collected from the Rockforest trees. As a pine forest would not have high value in terms of biodiversity, it was decided to plant 3 native companion species (e.g. Birch, Holly, Alder, Guelder rose, Spindle) for each pine planted.

I was part of a group that planted 600 trees (150 Burren pines came in pots and the other 450 were whips) at Gregan's Castle in late 2022. Afterwards I became the monitor of the site alongside Claire McGinley.

Monitoring involves walking the site every couple of months. We stamp the growth at the base of the trees, checking for failures and recently measuring the pines. It has been really interesting to watch the different growth patterns of the various species. Alders shoot up, Hollies are immensely slow growing, and the pines which took a while to establish are now growing at a steady pace. As they get taller there will be less need for monitoring, and the small forest will grow to become a haven for wildlife.



Recording the cillíns of County Clare

BY A BURRENBEO CONSERVATION VOLUNTEER

Through a series of life's turns and twists, I found myself wandering up and down the by-roads of the far flung reaches of County Clare last year assisting the estimable Michael Houlihan in his efforts to document the 142 recognised cillíns in County Clare.

Cillíns, or kyles, are the burial sites of Catholic unbaptised infants or stillborn babies who were excluded by the Church from official graveyards. According to religious thinking at the time - stemming from the works of Saint Augustine of Hippo - infants were born with original sin, and without baptism, were not allowed to enter Heaven (or the sanctified graveyard).

Cillíns were in active use in Ireland up until very recently - the 1940's and 1950's. Many of the cillíns I visited were located within ancient burial or heritage sites, most commonly ringforts: small mounds of stone within the forts, or at the edge of fields, sometimes accompanied by ancient oaks, hawthorns or other trees.

We spoke to people all over the county trying to figure out where each cillín was. You'd hear stories along the way - mainly from the oldest generations: some say that the woman never knew the resting place, that the body was carried away by the man of the house and never discussed again. Others say that they knew of families that used to visit the cillíns up to recent times - that they used to see figures walking over the hills to the sites in silence and leave the same way once a year every year.

Perhaps I'm fooling myself when I hope that the families took some comfort in their loved ones resting in such magnificent and powerful sites. Had the ringforts been the first choice for these poignant burials, you'd have been hard pushed to find more beautiful and culturally significant locations. But they weren't the first choice - and that is very much the point. The hurt and betrayal that must have been felt by the excluded families is difficult to fathom.

Despite the anger I feel whenever I dwell on the origins of the cillíns, I found volunteering on this project poignantly uplifting. Through the cillíns, I met other volunteers - fascinating people - jumped over walls with them, hiked up hills and down dales in blazing (for Ireland) sunshine and driving rain with them - and it was glorious. I also had the absolute privilege of spending time with Michael: an experience I cannot recommend highly enough. And what we didn't chat about in the car on the way to next cillín ...



Graveyard recording at St Fachnan's cathedral

BY EDEL BARRY

During the summer of 2024, the Burren Conservation Volunteers brought their skill, energy and enthusiasm to the village of Kilfenora, where they assisted with a survey of St Fachnan's Graveyard. The graveyard, which is associated with the medieval cathedral of St Fachnan (CL016-015002-), is a recorded monument itself (CL016-015003-). It has likely served as a graveyard for hundreds of years, although the earliest inscribed gravestones in the graveyard date from the 1700s (not including some earlier slabs located to the interior of the building). It is also still in use as the main graveyard for the community, and as such has a strong practical and emotional significance for the people of the village and its hinterland.

FMAP Archaeologist Elaine Lynch began the project by carrying out a drone survey and creating a plan of the graveyard, which contains 211 graves. Over four survey days, the Volunteers worked in pairs to record the majority of the inscriptions on the headstones, the material fabric and measurements of the grave markers. The enthusiasm came in handy because we seemed to get the worst days of the Irish summer! A fifth survey day had to be called off due to an orange weather warning. Nevertheless, the Volunteers showed up on each day, and hopefully enjoyed their time spent deciphering cryptic inscriptions and determining the material of headstones.

The results of the survey were collated into a spreadsheet and informed a draft report, which also detailed the baseline receiving environment of the site and the wider area, and which provided some recommendations for conservation and management of this important site. This report was funded by the Heritage Council under their Community Grant Scheme 2024.

As with many historic graveyards which remain in use for new burials, unsuitable replacement headstones are starting to creep in at Kilfenora, which detract from the historic visual appeal of the site. The draft report seeks to draw attention to the desire to 'tidy up' the site, highlighting the heritage and cultural significance of traditional, local limestone headstones, as well as the importance of the site as a haven for biodiversity, in which grassy hummocks, leaning headstones, lichen growing on stone, and ivy on walls is all of value.

In 2025 we hope to return to the graveyard to fill in any gaps in our spreadsheet. We also hope to carry out further analysis of the results, with a view to determining the demographics represented in the burials, and identifying patterns in terms of the form and detailing of grave markers.





Dry stone wall repairing

BY KAREN VAN DORP

The Burren is renowned for its magnificent limestone pavements and rich heritage in which the iconic dry stone walls are embedded throughout. These walls are a constant reminder of the unique built landscape which surrounds us and gives the Burren its identity. Dry stone walls are constructed using an ancient building technique - a skill still practiced today in the Burren. Apart from being boundaries for land and shelter for livestock, they also provide habitats and corridors for a wide variety of plants and animals. Dry stone walling is a very sustainable practice; however many of the walls have fallen in disrepair over time.

Burren farmer and ACRES Project Agriculturist Aoife Forde led an excellent dry stone wall repair event for the BCVs on the 3rd of August. The group covered much ground on Aoife's beautiful farm in Carran; repairing walls that had been knocked over by feral goats. Thanks to Burren farmers like Aoife and the BCVs for helping to protect this important cultural heritage!



BCV Social

BY KAREN VAN DORP

At Burrenbeo Trust, we deeply value the work of our volunteers. We appreciate so many people giving their time, skills and effort to make the Burren a better place!

To show our gratitude, BCVs are invited yearly to a 'BCV Social' to take a break from all the hard work, acknowledging all the conservation accomplishments while enjoying the beautiful Burren landscape and each other's company. This year, BCVs went on a walk to Templecronan in Carran. Local historian Nick Geh kindly did a talk on the site of the pre-famine house that was cleared of scrub later in the year and the event ended with a visit to the Burren Perfumery, where we were spoiled with tea and a generous selection of delicious cakes!



RECI training

BY KAREN VAN DORP

Having First Aid trained persons on BCV events is incredibly important – First Aiders can help save lives, reduce injury severity, enhance community health. Being First Aid trained gives individuals the confidence to act quickly, which can make a significant difference. As BCVs often work in remote areas, where mobile phone signal might be absent and medical help may be far away, First Aid training is even more essential.

Burrenbeo Trust organised their yearly Remote Emergency Care Level 2 training for BCV event coordinators in February, partly funded by the Galway and Roscommon Education Training Board. The REC Level 2 curriculum covers a wider number of injuries and illnesses than an average First Aid course. Participants were trained for 16 hours over two days in how to use a First Aid kit in innovative ways, and how to improvise with other items that will likely be at hand in an outdoor environment!



Burren Ark Project: tree seed collecting

BY KAREN VAN DORP

Local seed provenance is a key practice in biodiversity conservation, focusing on using seeds from plants that are native to or have adapted to specific geographic regions. This approach ensures that plant populations are well-suited to local environmental conditions, helping maintain regional biodiversity. By sourcing seeds locally, we preserve plant species with unique genetic variations, which are crucial for the long-term health of ecosystems. Additionally, native plants play a vital role in supporting local wildlife, including pollinators, and contribute to sustainable food webs and ecological interactions. In short, local seed provenance is essential for fostering healthy, resilient ecosystems.

The Burrenbeo Trust is embracing this sustainable practice through its latest initiative, the Burren Ark project. This project focuses on collecting native tree seeds from the Burren, which will be nurtured into saplings by forester Bernard Carey, based in East Clare. Once matured, these saplings will be used to plant native woodlands under the Hare's Corner programme, which supports landowners in creating more space for nature.

In September and November, under Bernard Carey's guidance, the BVCs gathered seeds from Guelder Rose, Purging Buckthorn, Alder Buckthorn, and Holly in the areas around Boston and Lough Bunny. This work was conducted with the support of the National Parks and Wildlife Service, as well as local landowners. These efforts are an important step in our ongoing commitment to enhancing biodiversity and fostering a more sustainable future for the Burren region.





There is a house in Fahee North...

BY TONY KIRBY

The Bloods were English settlers who set up demesne initially in Killinaboy, County Clare around 1600. Sometime thereafter they laid out a deer park in the southwestern corner of the Termon townland in Carran. To this day this corner of Termon is known locally as "the deer park". The extant park walls are monumental in scale. They are conspicuous evidence of lordly privilege.

Deer hunting was most popular in Ireland and Great Britain between 1600 and 1750. However, deer parks fell in to disuse around the middle of the 18th century. The pastime was replaced by fox hunting in the open countryside. The dismantled parks were mostly transformed into tenanted farmland. This would appear to have been the fate of the Termon park.

The southern boundary wall of the Termon deer park also functions in part as townland boundary – dividing Termon and Fahee North townlands. Sometime after the dismantlement of the park, a small section of the boundary wall was repurposed as one of the gable walls of a pre-famine dwelling. (The house is recorded in the Ordnance Survey "six-inch" maps produced between 1832 and 1846).

Furthermore, the wall is much reduced in scale in the immediate vicinity of the cabin. That would suggest that the stone for the building of the other three sides of the house was drawn from the wall. Thus it would appear that the Bloods gave permission to a tenant family to build the cabin with material from the dismantled deer park. The park was located at the Termon side of the wall whereas the cabin is in Fahee North.



The house would have been recorded as a dwelling of 4th classification in the census of 1841 – a primitive, single-roomed cabin made of mud (or stone in the case of the Burren).

The Fahee North cabin was a small, single-roomed drystone construction which would have been roofed with thatch. It was a ramshackle, primeval structure. It is physical evidence of the most important event in the modern history of Ireland – An Gorta Mór/the Great Hunger 1845-1849. The house has a singular story in that it is a pre-famine dwelling made of material (stone) from the landscape of power of the gentry.

The house had latterly been overwhelmed by scrub. The scrub was removed by the Burren Conservation Volunteers (BCV) in November 2024. A family with a unique story lived in this cabin. Their daily lives ebbed and flowed in a mix of wretchedness and gaiety. Thanks to the BCV the family's obscured homestead has become a 'garden of remembrance'.

Author's note: The author would like to thank the following for their part in the revival of the dwelling – Karen van Dorp and the BCVs, archaeologist Elaine Lynch, landowner Willie O'Reilly and Burren heritage enthusiast Nick Geh.





Conservation maintenance at Fahee North

BY KATE LAVENDER

An enthusiastic and energetic group of volunteers met up on a cold morning for the purposes of continuing our management of Fahee North. In conjunction with Jesmond Harding of Butterfly Conservation Ireland, the BCV have been working on this site for over ten years. The main aim is to keep scrub cleared from the main part of the field to enable the endangered Marsh Fritillary butterfly to continue breeding at this nationally important site. Scrub regrowth in the centre of the field was tackled by the first group, whilst the second moved to the south end to attempt to clear back to what we had previously cleared around five years ago. Not only are we carrying out vital work for the biodiversity of the Burren but some of the cut hazel also provides us with great kindling for the fire/poles for the garden/walking sticks!

A huge thanks to Karen for organising the event and to the Robson family (in particular Isobel who came out and joined us) for allowing us to work on their land.





Thanks to Ide Deloughry for designing our new logo



Passionate about the Burren's natural and cultural heritage? Becoming a Burrenbeo Conservation Volunteer means you get to enjoy the Burren landscape while working for its conservation together with like-minded people.

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