

## Introduction

This article explores the archaeology of the Creggan Country Park and its environs set within the context of the wider Derry area. Ken Neill has been working in the county of Derry since 1989 and has witnessed our knowledge of the archaeology and potential of the area increase dramatically since then.



Mount Sandel

## Stone Age (10,000 BC – 2,500 BC)

### Mount Sandel

The earliest evidence for settlement in Ireland comes from Mount Sandel, overlooking the Bann just south of Coleraine. The area had been revealing distinctive flints (Early Mesolithic or middle stone age) for over 100 years and an excavation was organised which revealed the outlines of at least four successive huts around 6m in diameter within a hollow, as well as evidence for flint working and food storage. Bones of pig, fish, birds and dog were found, as well as evidence for water lily, apple and hazel nuts. The site was dated to around 7000 BC and, with its evidence for a semi-permanent settlement, occupied through much of the year; it revolutionised our understanding of the Mesolithic period.

While still our earliest site, the flint technology at Mount Sandel had already developed some local adaptations, suggesting that there must be earlier sites awaiting discovery, some of them perhaps located in areas now under the sea. The most distinctive flint tools from this Early Mesolithic period are small blades called micro-liths. I am not aware of any being found in this area, although it is worth bearing in mind that the present location of Creggan Country Park, on a height overlooking a major river close to its mouth, is pretty similar to Mount Sandel.

### Later Mesolithic (5,500-4,000 BC)

Later Mesolithic technology is typified by larger butt-trimmed blades known as Bann flakes and a few possible examples have been found in the area in recent years.

Evidence from the **Neolithic or New Stone Age (4,000-2,500 BC)** consists of a mixture of stone tombs, artefact concentrations and cereal and evidence for clearance in pollen diagrams. We have a lot more evidence from this period as detailed below:

### Established Neolithic evidence:

The Ordnance Survey Memoir (written in early 1830s) states: 'About 10 perches from Mr Doherty's house, in Ballymagroarty, there is a small cromlech, the table-stone of which is about 4 feet by 3; but it is at present nearly concealed by earth thrown over it'. This may represent a removed standing stone separately reported at 'the Branch'. (the current Branch Road)

### 1940: Round Island in Lough Enagh:

Neolithic pottery and flints discovered with the suggestion of two distinct phases

### 1907:Elagh More megalith:

The 1907 OS map shows a 'Giant's Grave' within a field boundary, adjacent to the border. Inspection in 1989 revealed two large stones, the possible remnants of a megalithic chamber and a third to the SW. There was an elongated mound of earth and stones below the boundary (17m long, 5m wide and 75cm high), seen as a possible long cairn. Only one stone was identified in a subsequent visit in 1996. There is a local tradition that fairs were once held here and that a young man tried to lift one of the stones but burst his heart – hence the field is known as Brishmachree or Break my heart.

### More recent discoveries:

1996: Ballyarnet Trackway (Located 270m SW of a lake): A complex of stakes driven through peat in to subsoil were discovered along with a number of voids, which might represent decayed timbers. One void held pieces of a type of Neolithic pottery called Lyle's Hill ware. There were a number of timbers on the peat surface as well as brushwood supporting a platform of sandy soil and stones. Finds included pottery, flints, bone and a polished stone axe.

### 1998: Lough Enagh:

Excavation on a ridge overlooking the Foyle revealed evidence of a rectangular house, 6.2m by 4.3m including wall foundations with stone packed slots and post holes. Two corners had large post holes and there was one small internal post hole close to the centre which may have been a roof support. There was no

evidence of a hearth or entrance, although these may have been removed by ploughing. Some Western Neolithic pottery was found in the slots and a flint knife in one of the external post holes. A second site 300m further east consisted of a large pit 3m by 2.6m filled with ash, and some Western Neolithic pottery.

### 1996: Ballynashallog

A dense scatter of flints included fine arrowheads, end scrapers and hollow scrapers as well as struck flint and debitage (waste from flint working). In 2000 the site was investigated by Paul Logue who uncovered a series of palisaded enclosures around an area approximately 100m in diameter; dated to the Neolithic (c. 4,000BC) by the artefacts found. There were several phases of enclosure containing at least five timber structures, both round and rectangular. There were also hundreds of stake holes, pits, post holes and spreads of occupation material indicating a wide range of activities.

Finds included flint projectile points, stone and flint axes (including a stone example from the Lake District), scrapers and implements probably used for piercing bone and hide. Stone beads, saddle querns, pottery and evidence for quartz working also emerged. The arrowheads and evidence of the palisade being burnt points towards an attack on the site at one point. One axe was found in two pieces 30m apart, suggesting it broke and was thrown away, perhaps in anger.

1992: Ballynashallog flint cache-SW of Ballyarnett lake Revealed on the edge of a drainage channel with an adjacent area of burning. The flints came from a localised pocket around 40cm below the present ground surface close to what was presumably an old lake shore.

## Bronze Age (2500-300 BC)

Most Bronze Age evidence consists of a mixture of burials and distinctive pottery. In general, the Bronze Age saw a move away from large elaborate tombs towards more simple single graves, often containing distinctive pottery. These range from simple pits and cists to stone cairns and barrows. Some were inhumations, others cremations and some sites or even graves have a mixture of the two.

### Burials in the area:

#### 1989: City Cemetery Pit Burial

This was found during grave digging when a machine cut away the eastern edge of a pit, exposing a shale slab cover and the west face of the grave. The oval pit, (76cm by 65cm an 48cm deep) had no stone in its sides or floor; instead there were straight incisions into the yellow gravel. The pit was largely empty except for a quantity of burnt bone on the floor. Part of an infant's jaw was visible with the bone in a darker loose soil. There were no associ-

ated goods. The 8cm thick covering slab was covered by 27cm of sandy gravel below 20cm of topsoil.

### Bronze Age Cists:

#### Pennyburn-found 1920:

This was reported to us by John McCartney, who had re-searched the discovery of a single cist at Pennyburn Pass around 1920. His account describes workmen working on a sand pit. 4-5ft down they struck something hard and discovered it was a large flat stone. When prised up it revealed a stone vault containing a fully grown skeleton with the skull resting on its rib cage. The grave reportedly contained a tallish male with a small hole at the top of the skull-possibly the cause of death?

Beside the body was a small pottery vessel with a zig zag design; a partial broken example was also found nearby. The pottery was subsequently removed and lost whilst the bones were reburied.

#### 1956: Upper Creevagh:

Research by John McCartney uncovered a report on this find at Upper Creevagh in the Derry Journal (Mon 23rd April 1956). This suggests that a cist grave (29" by 19" by 17") was uncovered when George Foster was ploughing Marshall McKay's land. The cist and bones were intact. A food vessel or urn was also found, described as a 'lovely thing'. The bones were forwarded to the Dept of Anatomy at QUB, which suggested that the skeleton was probably a middle aged woman, although it was initially thought to have been an adolescent male. At the time Dr McCourt of Magee College speculated that there might be more in the area as they were usually found in groups.

#### March 1988: Shantallow Cist

This consisted of a stone cist disturbed by deep ploughing. The shale capstone (95cm by 50cm by 45cm) had been disturbed to reveal the interior, which had no flooring slabs. Below some recent plough soil which had fallen in was the poorly-preserved skeletal remains of a single inhumation with its knees up against its chest. It also contained a pottery vessel. The remains consisted of parts of a male skull, femora, tibiae and a fibula. The lack of caries and wear on the teeth suggested an age of 25-30. This good dental hygiene suggested his diet was not coarse so perhaps he was of good social standing. The muscles and ligament markings around the knees also suggested he did a lot of walking. The vessel, a tripartite Irish Bowl, was dated to around 1600BC from similar examples.

#### May 1951: Shantallow:

A total of 6 cists were found and three were well enough preserved for excavation. All were lined with stone slabs measuring 2.5 feet by 1ft by 1.5ft and were filled with dark soil. Apparently one held a small amount of cremated bone; as a wide area had been excavated it seems this was the total number of burials.

### 1985: Straid, Claudy:

A better example, this cemetery consisted of 4 cists containing 7 burials. The first contained the skeleton of a strongly built man around 1.88m tall who died in his early 20s, along with a highly decorated tripartite bowl at his head. The second cist had a single male inhumation and a pottery bowl, whilst third grave held the cremated remains of an adult male and a young child, as well as a large conical urn. The fourth had the flexed skeleton of an adult male in his mid thirties, who suffered from severe osteoarthritis. A small bowl lay near his head as well as the remains of two cremated women placed under his left arm and right foot.

### Ballyoan:

This small Bronze Age cemetery, consisting of two inhumations and two cremations, each in a cist, and two pit cremations, was discovered during monitoring of a water pipeline. Each cist held an inhumation and they were set in a pit. The smaller held a child around 4 years old and the larger an adult male below a large capstone and covering cairn. The Adult was crouched on his right side with his head at the west end of the cist and lay on a surface of white quartz pebbles with the pelvis of a piglet at his feet and a bronze dagger over his chest. The dagger had been attached to its handle by 4 rivets and was still within its bark and leather sheath, decorated with embossed swirl and line. The cemetery held at least six individuals, children and adults, inhumation and cremation, dated to around 1500 BC.

Other Bronze Age evidence includes a Bronze Age lake settlement at Ballyarnett including a burnt mound nearby. Another possible example of a burnt mound emerged nearby at Ballynagard.

## Early Christian (AD 500-1100) Monuments:

Local examples from this period include rath's, souterrains and inauguration stones.

The souterrain is an underground structure, usually lined and roofed in stone and consisting of a passage or passages, which open out into chambers. At least two have been uncovered in recent years. The first was found at St Patrick's PS. in Pennyburn. A second was reported at Glengalligh House in 2005.

Inauguration stones were used to inaugurate local chieftains. The practice continued in Ulster until the Nine Years War and subsequent plantation of the early 17th century. A reference in the Tripartite Life of St Patrick states 'Patrick went to Aileach of the Kings and blessed the fortress, and left his flagstone there, and prophesied that Kings and ordained persons out of Aileach would be over Ireland'. Inauguration is also mentioned by Spencer in the 16th century – 'They use to place him that shall be their captain upon a stone always reserved for that purpose, and placed commonly upon a hill;

in some of which I have seen formed and ingraven a foot, which they say was the measure of their first captaines foot, whereon hee standing, receives an oath to preserve all the ancient former costomes of the contrey inviole, and to deliver up the succession peaceably to his Tanist, and then hath a wand delivered unto him by some whose proper office that is; after which, descending from the stone, he turneth himself round, thrice forward, and thrice backward'.

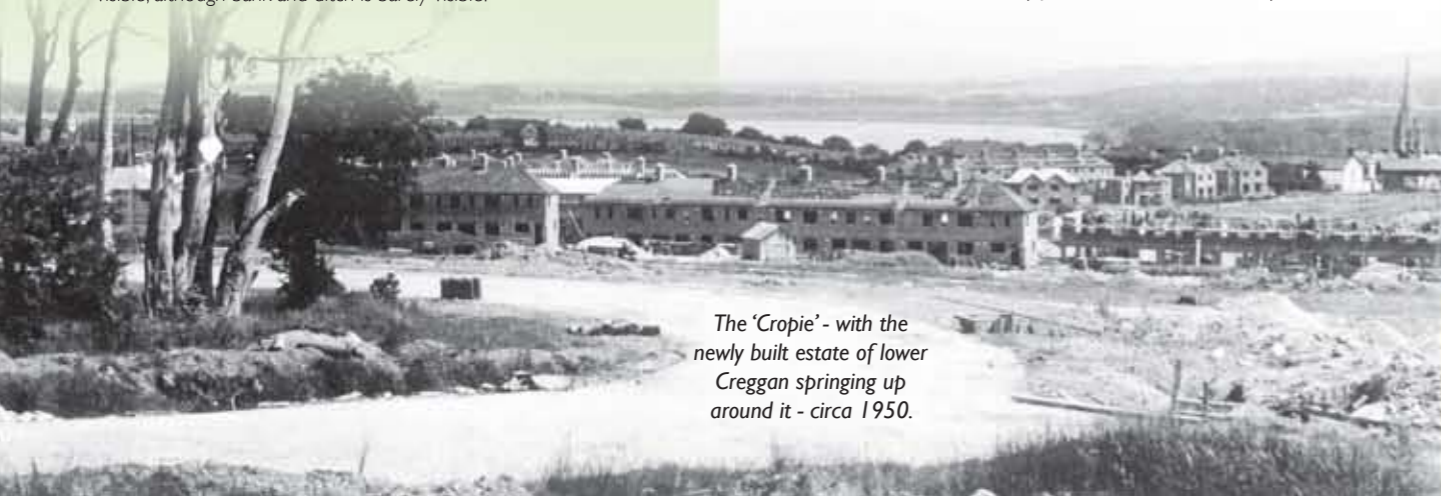
One example was found in Shantallow. A low squarish block with two foot imprints around 10ins in length. The stone is set in the grounds of Belmont House. Though not known where it came from originally, there is a long tradition associating it with the Grianan of Aileach.

Raths, which are found in every part of Ireland where stone is not abundant, often consist merely of a circular entrenchment, the area of which is slightly raised above the level of the adjoining land. But they most frequently present a steep mound, flat at the top, and strongly entrenched, the works usually enclosing a space of ground upon which, it is presumed, the houses of lesser importance anciently stood, the mound being occupied by the dwelling of the chief. Possible local examples include:

#### **Ballynagalliagh Rath:**

Set on a ridge above the Templemore complex site and shown on the first edition OS map (1830's) as a double circle designated fort. There are now no visible remains .

The Ballynagard Rath was described in the Ordnance Survey Memoir 'as the most remarkable example. . . . It is of an oval form, measuring 60 yards from east to west, and 73 from north to south – and is nearly surrounded by a ditch, and a parapet of earth. . . . The original entrance is on the western side; two points of ingress, near the river, appear to have been formed for agricultural purposes'. This earthwork, in an unusual location (close to the river edge) and larger than a typical rath, is still visible, although bank and ditch is barely visible.



*The 'Cropie' - with the newly built estate of lower Creggan springing up around it - circa 1950.*

#### **Creggan Rath - site of Westway roundabout:**

A Report on the site in 1944 records that it was then on grazing ground high above the city.

At widest it was 66 yards in diameter with an earthen rampart, much broken but still 6ft high and 6ft broad in places. A small ditch, inside the rampart was fed by a spring. The surface was level with a few protruding stones. A break on the east was interpreted as the (small) original entrance.

It was viewed as not having been built for strong defence, looking more like a pound for enclosing cattle at night. The 1944 account also suggests that it was used during the siege as a guard post by the besiegers. Indeed the Neville map from the siege shows it with a footnote

'Is fort built by them soon after their approach to the town where they kept a guard, which guard was forced (upon a sally made by the besieged) to quit their post many of them killed and some of the besieged upon their retreat killed by the enemy horse'.

A 1954 account records the rath to be 230ft in diameter as measured on the map. The rampart was 1.5 to 3ft high but gone from a quadrant. The ditch was 2ft deep and 6-7ft wide with a possible entrance on west or south west. By 1983 there were no eroded banks left and the site was around 80m in diameter; up to 2m high on the downslope and 50cm on the upper (W). There was no indication of a ditch but by then the area was encircled by a roadway. The interior was featureless. The site was excavated by James Hadfield in 1987 as part of

*The 'Cropie' - the rath opposite the entrance to the Creggan Country park as it looks today.*

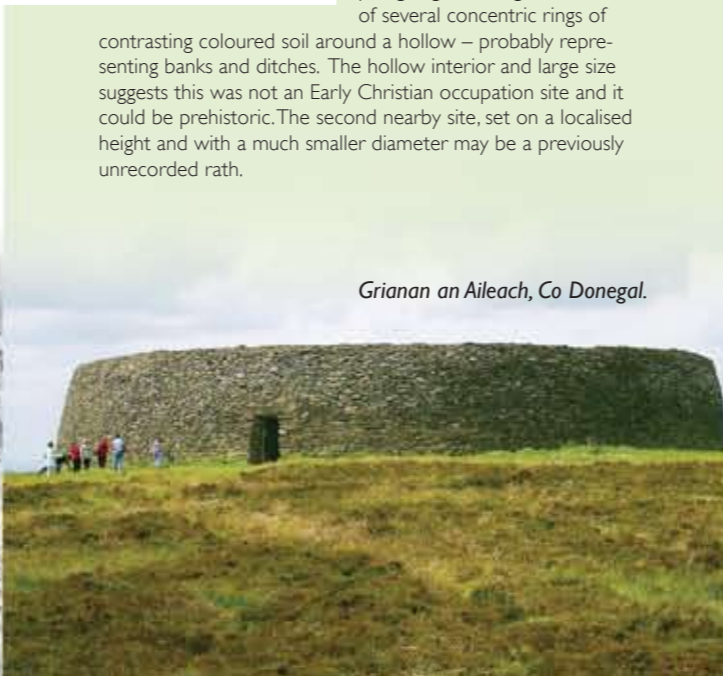


the Relief of Derry Project. It was chosen because it was in an area said to contain several monuments from the Siege as well as being the supposed site of a rath. Two trenches were excavated across the site to up to 3m deep. All material found was modern, probably dating from the building of the estate. A few ditches were revealed but they were also interpreted as modern.

Mr Hadfield concluded that it was unlikely that a rath ever existed here but that stories based on knowledge of the siege works may have become confused with a circle of trees in the area now known as the rath. One other possibility is that this is a landscaping feature built when the area was used as a Deer Park. The image below shows the rath in the 1940's before the estate was built. The trees were believed to have been planted to enclose cattle.

Finally, new sites and potential sites are always being discovered. For example two crop marks at Ballynagalliagh were reported to us several years ago which became very clear even at ground level after recent ploughing. The larger consisted of several concentric rings of

contrasting coloured soil around a hollow – probably representing banks and ditches. The hollow interior and large size suggests this was not an Early Christian occupation site and it could be prehistoric. The second nearby site, set on a localised height and with a much smaller diameter may be a previously unrecorded rath.



*Grianan an Aileach, Co Donegal.*

This pamphlet has been produced as part of the Creggan Country Park's 'Step Back in Time' Heritage Lottery funded project examining the history of the Creggan Country Park site and the wider Creggan area. A number of pamphlets covering subjects linked to the Creggan Country Park heritage are available including:

- The siege of Derry
- Industrial heritage
- Land ownership
- Natural Heritage
- Early History
- Living Landscapes/the Rath
- Talking History

Creggan Country Park can also arrange Walking Tours of its site exploring all these subject matters in detail as well as offering field trips to other sites associated with these topics. Tours can also be tailored to suit groups focusing on specific academic fields. For example the Industrial Heritage module can be expanded to suit groups studying science/geography whilst the siege module can be tailored for modern history groups.

#### **Other sites associated with the early history of Creggan Country Park:**

**Mountsandel complex:** Mountsandel Road, Coleraine, Co. Derry, Website: [www.forestserviceni.gov.uk](http://www.forestserviceni.gov.uk)  
Tel: (028) 2955 6000, Fax: (028) 2955 7162

The earthen fort in Mountsandel Wood, is the oldest known settlement in Ireland. Built during Norman times, the fort is close to the site of the first hunter-gatherer settlement, dating from about 7000BC. Flint tools were found here, indicating that Stone Age hunters camped here to fish salmon in the natural weir. There are good views over Somerset Wood and of the River Bann. The forest walk leads from the Fort down to the banks of the Bann and passes close to the weir at the Cutts. Swans, kingfishers and herons nest along the riverside. As mentioned in this article, Mountsandel has many similarities to the Creggan Country Park and we can organise educational field trips to the site, which can be tailored to suit all age groups including those studying science, geography or history.

#### **Grianan an Aileach:**

The original stone fort at Grianan may have dates to 2,500BC. The current version was built as a replica in the 19th century and can be used as a focal point to explore the diverse history of the site including links to St Patrick, Eoghan O'Neill and the Milesian tribes. Creggan Country Park can also organise field trips to a number of other locations across the region associated with Stone/Bronze Age history. All the tours are organised in association with our partner organisation derrybluebadgeguide ([www.derrybluebadgeguide.com](http://www.derrybluebadgeguide.com)) which specialises in walking and coach tours of Derry and beyond. For further details on all of the above contact (028) 71363133 or [info@creggancounypark.com](mailto:info@creggancounypark.com).



# Creggan Country Park Living Landscapes/The Rath

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