

Group for the Study of Irish Historic Settlement

Report on the Fortieth Annual Regional Conference, Cavan, 6-8 May 2011

The Annual Regional Conference of the Group for the Study of Irish Historic Settlement was held in association with Cumann Seanchais Bhreifne in County Cavan, on the weekend of 6-8 May 2011. The principal venue for the conference was the Farnham Estate hotel, just outside Cavan town.

Friday 6 May 2011

The opening lecture at the conference was delivered by Professor P.J. Duffy, Department of Geography, NUI Maynooth, on the theme of 'Land, landscape and memory: reading Cavan's heritage'. Prof. Duffy provided an overview of the layers of landscape development from the thirteenth to the twenty-first century, illustrating how earlier developments are not obliterated. He demonstrated how we occupy an eighteenth-century landscape and a nineteenth-century roadscape, a slow landscape inherited from a pedestrianised world. He offered various criteria for studying historic landscapes, emphasising the importance of patterns of landownership, the influence or absence of landlord involvement, and allowing in particular for the impact of population change.

Saturday 7 May 2011

The first speaker in Cavan on Saturday morning was Eamon Cody, National Monuments Service, who presented a paper on 'Early regional identity and local prehistoric continuity in the Cavan area'. The Burren area in north west Cavan is an area with rich evidence of prehistoric settlement, with examples of court tombs, passage tombs and portal tombs all surviving from this period. There was a strong social impetus behind such tomb building, as these places devoted to the memory of ancestors served as markers of ownership of land, and shaped identifiable localities. The discovery of neolithic house remains in the course of road excavations has added further to the known monuments surviving from *c.*4000-*c.* 3000 BC in the Cavan area. The extensive early field system associated with hut sits in the Burren has not yet been excavated and so is not definitely dated. For the late neolithic and bronze age (*c.* 3000-500 BC) the main concentration of monuments in Cavan is again in the Burren area and also in the richer lands of the Kilnavert area in the centre of the county.

Linda Shine, Trinity College Dublin, discussed 'Frontier settlement in Cavan in the high medieval period', using the barony of Clanmahon as a case study. She examined contact zones between Gaelic and Anglo-Norman regions as areas of social, cultural and economic exchange, emphasising that much peaceful interaction took place across frontiers, as well as instances of hostility. She categorized various settlement types including moated sites which were areas of Gaelic settlement for the highest social class; platform ringforts associated with farming and located in the areas of most fertile soil; and cashels which were occupied down to the seventeenth century and may have been raised as a response to other earthwork monuments of Anglo Norman settlement. Her research on high medieval settlement in Cavan is part of a broader comparative study that also involves analysis of the contrasting settlement history of the Kilkenny region.

In a paper entitled 'Cloghoughter 1200-1653: at the heart of Cavan's history', Con Manning (National Monuments Service, Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht) introduced the audience to Cloghoughter castle, one of the sites to be visited in the conference field trip. The castle, built at a strategic location, on an island in the midst a complex interconnected series of lakes, was excavated by Con Manning in 1987 and has been the subject of subsequent publications by him. He described some of the more significant finds from the excavation, mostly of seventeenth-century date, but also including a book clasp similar to that which survives on the earliest known binding of the Book of Lecan, suggesting that a similar medieval manuscript may have been in the castle when it was partly destroyed. While approximately one third of the castle was blown away by Cromwellian forces in the mid seventeenth century, a number of earlier building phases can be discerned, including evidence of the original thirteenth-century first floor, and a cross-wall with fireplace probably added in the 1640s. In addition to comparing its architectural features with other similar castles including Dundrum, Co. Down, and Aghadoe, Co. Kerry, Con Manning placed the building of the castle in the context of Gaelic and Anglo-Norman politics in south Cavan in the thirteenth century, while also tracing the key elements of its later history down to its partial destruction in 1653.

Liam Kelly, Cumann Seanchais Bhreifne, presented a well-illustrated talk on 'Photography and settlements in County Cavan, 1839-1939'. Opening with a brief explanation of the development of photographic techniques through the late nineteenth century, he placed the practice of photography in the Victorian period in its social and cultural context, emphasising the link with the society of the big house. He also noted the parallel

development of the camera and the railway with consequences for the ability of photographers to travel to record their subject matter. The photography of individual buildings and streetscapes from the 1860s to the 1930s provide a rich store of evidence for the study of the built heritage of Cavan in this period.

Field trip

The afternoon bus tour departed from the Farnham Estate Hotel after lunch on Saturday 7 May, stopping first to visit Kilmore with the remnants of a medieval cathedral alongside the new Cathedral built *c.* 1860. These ecclesiastical buildings, now in an entirely rural setting, are evidence of a much more substantial medieval historical settlement at the site, which also has a prominent motte. The visit was led by Dr Brendan Scott, and a lively discussion took place on the most recent research on the origins of the twelfth-century Romanesque doorway that has been inserted into the nineteenth-century cathedral. The next site visited was the lakeshore facing Cloghoughter castle, where Con Manning elaborated on the features of the site and its significance for the settlement history of the region. The tour continued with a visit to Drumlane abbey and round tower, where the principal guide was again Dr Brendan Scott.

Sunday 8 May 2011

Following the early morning AGM of the Group for the Study of Irish Historic Settlement, the first paper of the day was presented by Dr Brendan Scott, NUI Maynooth, on 'Native and settler in the plantation towns of Cavan, 1610-41'. The focus of this talk was the towns of Cavan and Belturbet, where the religious and social structure and the economy of the towns as they evolved under the scheme for the Ulster plantation were examined. The nature of the relationship between settler and native was discussed, and evidence provided for the proportion of planted lands that remained in native hands.

Jonathan Cherry, St Patrick's College, Drumcondra, traced the development of the Farnham estate from its inception under Ulster plantation in 1610 down to the time of its sale to Robert Maxwell in 1664. Dr Cherry discussed the allocation of land under the plantation, and the evidence for the clustering of ethnic groups which gave areas a particular regional flavour both in terms of architecture and agricultural practices. He used the evidence of contemporary cartographers and surveyors to help trace the development of the estate within the plantation scheme, and drew on other documentation to contrast the English settlement at Farnham with the more Gaelic identity retained by the nearby town of Cavan.

The final paper on Sunday morning was presented by Mary Sullivan on 'Emigration and its impact on nineteenth-century Cavan'. Having outlined the earlier development of a habit of emigration from Cavan to America, Mary Sullivan focussed on pre-famine emigration to Canada and the US, but also to Scottish towns such as Glasgow and Dundee. She analysed the pattern of migration and the social groups most affected. Drawing on the evidence of contemporary newspapers, obituaries and immigration papers, she described the fortunes of some Cavan migrants particularly in Ontario and New York city. The impact at home of the ensuing population decline was greatest in the east of County Cavan which had previously had some of the largest population densities in Ireland. Migration became the dominant feature of local society, and there was a large-scale abandonment of inferior quality houses, mostly the one-room dwellings of the poorest Cavan inhabitants, some of whom found later themselves among the 'idle and starving' of New York.

Walking tour of Cavan town

On Sunday afternoon, Jonathan Cherry led a lively and informative walking tour of Cavan town, the first Ulster plantation town to receive a charter. Because Cavan was already an urban centre before the plantation it was never laid out like a typical plantation town, and a strong Gaelic presence continued until the 1640s. Cavan is renowned as one of the few Gaelic market towns, and a map of 1590 illustrates the character of the pre-plantation urban landscape. The walking tour began in the new part of the town as developed by the Farnhams from the early nineteenth-century - the 'official' and ecclesiastical quarter - which contains a significant number of large townhouses as well as four churches. The tour then moved into the older more complex part of the earlier urban foundation, visiting both secular and ecclesiastical sites on which later developments have been superimposed.

The programme of events for the weekend conference was ably coordinated by Dr Brendan Scott and Dr David Fleming with Niamh Crowley providing expert attention to detail to ensure the smooth running of events throughout the weekend. The conference received funding from the Heritage Council under its 2011 Heritage, education and outreach grants scheme.