

Group for the Study of Irish Historic Settlement

Landscape and historic settlement in Corca Dhuibhne: the Dingle conference, 2010

The Group for the Study of Irish Historic Settlement fulfilled a long-held ambition in May 2010 with the hosting of a very worthwhile regional conference based in Dingle, Co. Kerry. The conference was held in association with the Dingle Historical Society and Oidhreacht Chorca Dhuibhne, Baile an Fheirtéaraigh.

Friday 7 May 2010

Beginning in Benner's Hotel on Friday evening, the opening lecture, by Isabel Bennett, provided a comprehensive introduction to the settlement archaeology of the Dingle Peninsula from the Bronze Age to the medieval period. As an archaeologist resident in Corca Dhuibhne, working with Músaem Chorca Dhuibhne, Isabel Bennett was able to communicate her in-depth local knowledge of the archaeology of the region. This set the scene most effectively for subsequent lectures and most especially for the field trip held on Saturday afternoon.

Saturday 8 May 2010

Saturday morning's four lectures were held at the Díseart Institute of Education and Celtic Culture, a community-run education and heritage venue located in a former convent in Dingle. Clare Cotter reported on excavations at promontory forts along the west Kerry coast, including that at Dunbeg, a site to be visited on the conference field trip. Discussion following the lecture focussed on the architectural features of the forts with comparison made with promontory forts in other parts of the west coast of Ireland as well as with the construction of early medieval churches. Previous research and related excavations by Terry Barry and Con Manning were also discussed.

Tomás Ó Carragáin's paper drew on new research being undertaken by an interdisciplinary team at University College Cork and Newcastle University on the theme of 'Making Christian landscapes' (an Instar/Heritage Council project). Focussing on the Christian landscapes of early medieval Corca Dhuibhne, the paper also drew comparisons with England and western Europe. The research adopts a holistic approach to uncovering the past, and to characterising historic landscapes, both ecclesiastical and secular. In addition to documentary research, field system surveys, combined with GIS to analyse settlement patterns, have been carried out, and assessments made of the survival of pre-modern settlement patterns in the contemporary landscape. (A detailed progress report on this 'Making Christian Landscapes' project may be consulted on the Heritage Council website. www.heritagecouncil.ie)

Breandán Ó Ciabháin discussed the population groups of the Dingle and Iveragh peninsulas in the early historic period, drawing on evidence of Ogham stones as well as the documentary evidence of the early annals. While one-third of surviving Ogham stones are in Kerry, there are problems with dating since archaisms appear to be a feature of Ogham inscriptions. Place-names with the elements 'cill', 'eaglais', 'teampall' and 'tearmainn' were also discussed.

Dan Graham's paper focussed on the links between the fishing communities of the Isle of Man and the Dingle peninsula in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Coastal settlements in the region were strongly dependent on the fishing industry, and the influence of the Manxmen helped commercialise the catching, harvesting and exporting of fish from Dingle. This led to the development of a 'golden age' for the Dingle fishery. Types of boat used, drift nets, steam engines used for hauling nets were all illustrated, while the seasonal nature of the work in the herring fisheries was also explained.

On Saturday afternoon a full coach party (with some accompanying cars) took part in a field trip around Corca Dhuibhne. The visit to Dunbeg promontory fort was led by Isabel Bennett, who also brought the group to see some nineteenth-century 'beehive' houses nearby. The visit to the Riasc monastic site was led by Conleth Manning, while the Kilmalkedar early Christian and medieval monastic site visit was led by Paul McCotter and Isabel Bennett. The spectacular drive around the Dingle peninsula to visit these sites

took place in glorious spring sunshine which enhanced everybody's enjoyment of the outing and encouraged lengthy visits to each site.

The group reassembled in Benner's Hotel for the evening. Before dinner, the Group for the Study of Irish Historic Settlement's latest publication was launched at a wine reception hosted by the hotel. Published by Four Courts Press, and supported by a Heritage Council grant, *Plantation Ireland: settlement and material culture, c.1500-c.1700*, has been edited by James Lyttleton and Colin Rynne. It was launched by the Group President, Charles Doherty, and is on sale through bookshops and online from the publishers (www.fourcourtspress.ie). The launch was followed by the annual conference dinner at Benner's hotel, where the conference speakers were guests of the Group.

Sunday 9 May 2010

Following the early morning AGM of the Group for the Study of Irish Historic Settlement, there were a further four lectures on Sunday morning. Paul MacCotter's paper on lordship and settlement in Corca Dhuibhne focussed on evidence for secular settlement in the region between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries. Drawing on written sources including genealogies, historical narratives and place-names, and some cartographic material, MacCotter linked the baronies formed in the sixteenth century with older divisions whose borders can be traced back to the eleventh century. Similarly he traced many parish units to older pre-Norman 'baile' territorial divisions. He also revised earlier suppositions about the territories of families such as the O'Sheas, O'Connells and O'Falveys, while also discussing the significance of the MacCarthy kings and their O'Sullivan followers. The Anglo-Norman settlers in the north of the peninsula were also considered. Mac Cotter's research on Corca Dhuibhne is part of a wider INSTAR archaeological research project funded by the Heritage Council.

Declan Downey's paper analysed the evidence for Spanish links with Dingle in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Ecclesiastical aspects in the form of religious orders and even the medieval pilgrimage to Santiago were considered, in addition to commercial links with the Iberian peninsula as evidenced by the presence of Spanish and Flemish merchants.

Mícheál de Mórdha gave a lively talk on the historic settlement of the Blasket Islands since the seventeenth centuries, with particular emphasis on developments in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The islands were finally evacuated in 1953-54, and since 2009 the Great Blasket is largely state owned. Drawing on expertise gained as director of Ionad an Bhlascaoid Mhóir (The Blasket Centre) in Dún Chaoin, de Mórdha's audience was made aware of the various late twentieth-century initiatives to preserve aspects of the Blasket heritage. The talk traced settlement patterns on the island over time, and illustrated the significant role of women in precipitating the gradual move to the mainland and away from island life. Amongst the audience for de Mórdha's talk were some former island residents and their descendants.

The final talk on Sunday morning was delivered by Mícheál Ó Moráin, and concerned the Land Commission instigated resettlement of Baile Riabhach in 1959. Ó Moráin traced the history of the townland from the mid-seventeenth century, including the Cromwellian resettlement, and the nineteenth century clearance of tenants from the lands. The Land Commission initiative meant that the descendants of families that had been cleared from the land in the nineteenth century ultimately regained ownership of the land. Among the audience for the lecture were members of some families who had been resettled in Baile Riabhach in the 1950s.

Following the lecture, a field-trip to Baile Riabhach, led by Isabel Bennett with the able assistance of local residents, proved to be a highly instructive and enjoyable conclusion to a very successful weekend conference. As an encore, the more energetic participants then proceeded uphill to see the nearby early medieval monastic enclosure of Teampall Manchan.

The entire weekend programme of events was coordinated by Isabel Bennett, a member of the Group for the Study of Irish Historic Settlement and director of Músaem Chorca Dhuibhne (West Kerry Museum).

(www.westkerrymuseum.com). Isabel proved to be a wonderful organiser and excellent guide, and her efforts ensured that visitors to the area, as well as local participants, greatly benefited from the conference. The excellent hospitality provided by the organising committee of An Díseart and by the staff of Benner's Hotel were also much appreciated. This was the Group's first visit to Kerry in 40 years, we hope to return at the earliest opportunity. The conference was partly funded by the Heritage Council under its 2010 Heritage, education and outreach grants scheme.

BC
Sept. 2010