

## Ireland 2016

By Susie Coggles

One Friday morning late September members of the club were gathering at Bristol airport. Despite some issues getting through security (remember only one plastic bag for your liquids and if you've got any joint replacements expect a thorough frisking!) the group eventually boarded the plane.

It was a Ryanair flight to Knock, an airport built solely to accommodate the catholic pilgrims visiting the shrine to an Apparition of Our Lady, which appeared in 1879. Notwithstanding surviving an extremely bumpy and stomach churning landing, the godless group eschewed the opportunity to give thanks at the shrine for their miraculous survival and hurried instead to the first site.

This was the start of a 3 day trip starting in North West Ireland and travelling diagonally South East to explore the megalithic tombs of Ireland. Three days of Neolithic tombs....what could be better!

Our first stop the "Giant`s Grave "at Deerpark is found up a meandering, ascending path through woods of rhododendrons, set on the top of a ridge. "Giant`s Grave" is an example of a court cairn, a megalithic tomb which also includes an open area or court. The court at the "Giant`s Grave" was, unusually in the centre, with two chambers at the east end and one at the west. It had been excavated several times in the 1800`s with the bones from ten individuals recovered.

Returning to the bus we set off to Sligo where we were to spend our first night. Before making our way to the hotel we made a brief stop at a monument which formed a roundabout, surrounded by houses. A fine example of "cultural appropriation" it now sports a statue of Christ on the cross and two attendant figures, one presumably Mary.

So on to the hotel. After freshening up we reconvened in the bar and set off to find an eatery. Enterprising individuals amongst us had used modern technology to identify possible venues. On exiting the hotel and turning left, they were all plainly visible down the road. We chose one with a reasonably priced bar menu and all went on to select our meal from the a la carte menu, pricey but worth it. The belly pork with seafood and squash was out of this world. Back to the hotel for an obligatory scotch, then off to bed.

The next morning, breakfast under our belts, and lunch purchased from the local Spar off we set for our first full day. First stop was another Court cairn, Creevykeel. This one was on a low stretch of land near the coast. It is an impressive 50metres long. The court was at the eastern end leading to a burial chamber which may once have had a corbelled roof. The remaining tail of the cairn had three perhaps four more chambers in it.



Carrowmore came next, described in our booklet as “A veritable megalithic feast”. The dates for this site are discredited but it is generally held to be Early Irish Neolithic 4000-3600 BC. It covers an area 1 km across and contains over 60 tombs. The tombs seem to be boulder built chambers within a stone circle, there are no passages. The setting is amazing, the site is surrounded with ranges of hills, on top of one, Knocknarea Maeve’s cairn an unexcavated tomb, stands out on the horizon; it was visible for most day one.



We spent a few hours here, first exploring on our own and then listening to an interesting guided talk from Lynda, one of the guides. She spoke about the history of the excavations and was able point out how the site links with aspects of the landscape, some ideas which created debate and questions within the group. The final tomb, imaginatively called 51, was amazing but unfortunately spoilt by the reconstruction of the cairn around it.

After a tortuous bit of off road driving by Laurie, we reached our next site Carrowkeel. Again the setting and views were amazing. The tombs were not easy to access, but required a bit of squeezing and crawling. Those who did venture in, as well as muddy knees, were rewarded by the sight of the sophisticated construction of cruciform chambers. The use of lintels in the internal construction and their similarity to the lightbox in Newgrange, led to more surmising and discussion. They have recently been given a late fourth millennium date.



After a careful descent we made our way to where we were to stay for two nights, Castlepollard. The hotel was very comfortable and what Castlepollard lacked in the way of sophistication was more than made up for by the helpfulness and good humour of the young hotel staff and the lovely bread provided at breakfast.

On day two, after a quick stop at a café to pick up the key, we drove east, to our next site Loughcrew. A steep walk was rewarded yet again by big skies and lovely views. We were filled with anticipation, as this was the first site where we would see megalithic art. We had the key to Cairn T, the largest on the site, smaller cairns circled it. We were able to see art on even some of these cairns. They were passage graves with cruciform chambers and as cairn T clearly showed, corbelled roofs.

The variety of the art in cairn T was very impressive abstract patterns using concentric circles, diamond patterns and some which could be interpreted as being more naturalistic. Again questions raised about intention, meaning and relationship to the landscape and other sites.



*Is this a leaf or an insect?*

Returning to the bus we were caught in one of a number of heavy showers, fierce but brief, it only added to the experience.

Tara next stop with more brief showers. Tara is a multi-period site from the Neolithic to medieval. There is a Neolithic tomb dated between 2500 and 2100 BC. It has a short passage with seven orthostats, one of these is decorated, the tomb is not accessible, so we weren't able to explore. It was apparently used later by Irish kings to imprison hostages, thus getting the name Mound of the Hostages.

After studying the information board and with our Excursion to Ireland books ready we went on to explore the whole site, investigating the monuments and the Iron Age enclosure. Fun was had unpicking the puzzle seeing where the different monuments were and how they related to each other.

The final day was an early start, we headed further east to the valley of the Boyne and Newgrange and Knowth. The visitors centre is very good and the information gallery very informative, but you do feel as though you are on a conveyor belt, with not enough time and freedom to explore on your own. However it's

well worth the visit, if only to stand in the chambers and see the construction and the art which are very impressive.

There are obvious questions about the reconstructions, particularly at Newgrange, it was interesting talking to our guide about her opinion after we came out of passage grave; it's her fault we kept the bus waiting!

A decision had been made that going into Dublin to see the Book of Kells would be too much of a rush, particularly as we would have had to take our luggage. I'm very pleased we made that decision as it meant we were able to visit two more sites, Dowth and Fourknocks.

At Dowth we were able to explore the site at our own pace and spent a happy time trying to find the entrances to the two passages.

We finished our excursion at Fourknocks, again a key had to be collected before we could explore.

It was a great site to finish on. Another passage grave it has a short passage leading into what is quite a large chamber with three chambers off it. Again some stones display impressive art, with zig zags and circles. On one some people see a figure, I wasn't so sure.

When it was excavated in the 1950's a post hole was found in the centre, leading to the supposition that unlike all the other passage graves, it had a wooden roof. It is certainly a big chamber, perhaps too big to support a corbelled roof? This of course begs the question why this passage grave should be so different to all the others.



So we finish our excursion with more questions....What could be more fitting?

It was a great few days, spent in good company, looking at great archaeology in beautiful settings, what could be better.

Thanks again to the organisers for all your hard work.