

Oughterard's earliest settlers

■ Research offers journey back 7,000 years into the mists of prehistory

BY BILL DALY

IT'S a village with a proud history, but even the most learned of historians wouldn't anticipate that the story of Oughterard goes back almost 7,000 years... way back before the beginnings of written history - into prehistory and the realm of archaeologists.

The village's ancient history was established after microliths (small stone tools) which were found in 1975 at River Island, where the Owenriff River flows into Lough Corrib.

That allows Oughterard to claim a pedigree to be amongst a very small number of places in Ireland where the first settlers to this country came to live and build their homes, almost 7,000 years ago.

Mesolithic Oughterard is the theme of a presentation that I will deliver on Friday week, April 27, at the Oughterard Courthouse at 8pm, hosted by The Oughterard Heritage Group.

We will look at the geology and landscape the first settlers came into, and also their culture and lifestyle.

However, it will not just be a presentation, because we will be bringing it to life by also presenting physical reconstructions of a Mesolithic house, tools, weapons and artifacts.

To put this into context it is 12,000 years to the end of the

last Ice Age. The era between the retreat of the ice and the development of farming is called the Mesolithic, or the Middle Stone Age.

This phase - the one we're looking at on Friday week - lasted from 8,000BC to 4,000BC, which is over 40% of our recorded time on this Island.

Ireland at that time was completely different than it is now and everywhere was covered in a thick canopy of trees.

The new settlers could move more easily on rivers and lakes, and sought out these places for their refuge. A good supply of water was very important, for drinking purposes and also to attract wild game.

They were the last of the hunter-gatherer people, before humans were to become involved in farming (Neolithic) or metal-working (Bronze Age), but they were also very creative and inventive.

Because they did not grow any crops, or have the ability to store their produce, they had to become very skilled at hunting and fishing.

The main animals at the time in Ireland were the wild pig and hare, along with fowl, and the rivers and seas yielded salmon, trout, eels, oysters and mussels. They always had to be on top of their hunting and fishing game, or they did not eat.

From flints and sharp stones, they made sharp blades called



The way we were...a depiction of the first settlers by the shores of Lough Corrib.

microliths, creating tools and knives for cutting, and they were the first humans to create a vital new weapon - the bow and arrow.

Long before there was any hint of farming practices in Ireland, they would have been hunting wild boar, and also collecting hazelnuts and berries that would have been available seasonally.

They would have known their landscape very intimately, and what was available in certain areas at different times of the year.

They also had another hunting asset at their disposal...dogs.

Dogs would have been domesticated for many thousands of years at this stage, and it gave them the ability to become involved in driving game, and it

would not have been uncommon for men, women and children to participate in these game drives.

Nothing went to waste, and they used sharp bone needles and animal gut thread to make clothing.

Wooden poles, saplings, animal skins and rushes were used in the construction of their flexible houses that could be quickly moved if

required.

Our presentation on Friday week will look at that geology and landscape - but we will also be bringing it to life by also presenting physical reconstructions of a Mesolithic house, tools, weapons and artifacts.

It is, in essence, a celebration of our very first residents, and all are welcome on the night. Admission is free.

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