

OUGHTERARD'S FIRST SETTLERS:

A JOURNEY BACK INTO THE MISTS OF PREHISTORY

Written by Bill Daly



An Artist's impression of a Mesolithic settlement at River Island, where the Owenriff River flows into Lough Corrib.

When people look back in time at Oughterard it is, more than likely, through the lens of history. We have always learned history from an emotional point of view: we were the victims and they were the bad guys. There was very little complexity in it. However, there was another Oughterard, way back before the beginnings of written history - into prehistory and the realm of Archaeologists. Because of the microliths (small stone tools) which were found in 1975 at River Island, where the Owenriff River flows into Lough Corrib, we can 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.

12,000 years ago marked 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 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 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.

On Friday 27th April 2018 at The Oughterard Courthouse at 8pm, I will be delivering a presentation, hosted by The Oughterard Heritage Group, on Mesolithic Oughterard. 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. It is, in essence, a celebration of our very first residents, and we would very much welcome your support and presence on the night.

FREE
admission!
All are welcome.



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27th April 2018 (Friday)
8.00pm

Hosted by The Oughterard Heritage Group

