

The Aughnasure Logboat

Written by: Bill Daly

'In this Bay was lately discovered a long single-piece oaken canoe, of great antiquity, which Dr. R. Willis, of Oughterard, has presented to the Museum of the Royal Irish Academy' – Sir William Wilde (1815-1876) extract from "Wilde's Lough Corrib" (published in 1867).

I came across the above footnote in Wilde's book during 2018 when I was researching the Mesolithic period (8000-4000 BC). I parked it for a while and revisited it again in 2019 when I was working on the Neolithic period (4000-2500 BC). It was to be my first encounter with Dr. Robert Willis, Dispensary Doctor of Oughterard in the 1860's, and it turned out to be a very interesting one indeed. Before we go any further, let me explain what a logboat is. They were usually made from oak, a single tree, and could be up to fifty feet in length. The felled tree was hollowed out with stone axes, then a controlled fire was lit inside the boat, the embers cleared out, and this was followed by more axe work until the desired shape had been achieved.

I started off by contacting the Royal Irish Academy (RIA) in Dublin, and they confirmed to me that they did indeed have a letter from Dr. Willis to Sir William Wilde in relation to a boat. They wouldn't tell me what was in the letter until I agreed to give them €12, which I did, and then they sent me on a scanned image of the letter by email. Sir William Wilde (father of Oscar) was an internationally famous eye and ear surgeon based in Dublin, had written a renowned medical book as well as some acclaimed European travel guides, and performed some incredible work on Statistics by extrapolating the data from the Census Reports. The Wildes also had a summer house in Moytura, on the far side of Lough Corrib near Cong. Sir William was also an Antiquarian, the forerunner of modern day Archaeology, and undertook some enormous work in the RIA where he classified artefacts by type for the very first time. Dr. Willis and Wilde were very close friends.

The letter itself gives us some important and relevant information. The boat was found in early July 1865 in the Bay where the River Drimneen enters Lough Corrib beside

Willpauk
Oughterard
9th July 1865

Dear Doctor

Within the past day or so, a tenant on the property of Mr E. O'Flaherty of further was found a Boat at some short distance from the shore (Lake Corrib) it was when seen partly covered by sand

Although some 30 feet by 4 feet broad it appears to be of one piece of dark oak

I am aware of many others in different parts of the lake of the same description, if worth getting up I can't tell

perhaps it might be worth a notice to you and I mention it -

hoping you are in the enjoyment of good health

Believe me
my dear Sir
Yours
Robert Willis

Aughnasure Castle. It measured 30 feet in length, 4 feet in width, and was made from a single length of oak tree. Dr. Willis also referenced other boats being at the bottom of Lough Corrib, which was remarkable as they were not in a position to avail of the technology we have at our disposal today. The boat was delivered to the Royal Irish Academy in Dublin during 1867, and we do not have any information as to how this happened. I imagine they would possibly have tied three carts together, used four horses to pull it to Galway, and then put it on the train to Dublin. Not the easiest of logistical projects when you are dealing with a thirty foot boat! My friend and expert craftsman, Brendan Hodgers from Ballymacoda Co. Cork, produced a replica model for us to display (illustrated below).



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My next task was to approach the National Museum and pick up the story from there. I also knew that the Royal Irish Academy had moved all of their archaeological artefacts to the Dublin Art and Science Museum in 1890, and this would later become the National Museum of Ireland after 1922. I then emailed my contact in the National Museum and attached the letter from Dr. Willis. As I awaited the response, I was looking forward to a trip to Dublin and possibly getting the Logboat back to Oughterard if it was only in storage and not on display in the Museum. I waited for a couple of weeks and then decided to ring them. They informed me that they didn't have the boat, and the last trace they had of it was when it was included in Wakeman's Catalogue Volume 3 in 1893. The catalogue had registered the boat at 24 feet, and this was 6 feet shorter than when it was found in 1865. They also told me that all of the boats that were registered around this period were no longer around.

This was a big disappointment for me, but certainly not a total surprise as I knew that removing ancient objects from a bog or the bottom of a lake would disturb the anaerobic conditions. The anaerobic environment and the presence of tannic acids within bogs and lakes can result in the remarkable preservation of organic material. The moment they are exposed to the air, bacteria start to work on them, and they can quickly degrade if oxygen is not excluded. However, we do have the letter to prove that the boat was found in Aughnasure and the critical dimensions thereof. In this particular area there have also been finds of stone axes, polished stone axes, arrowheads and a copper axe head - lending credence to the theory that Aughnasure was occupied over 5,000 years ago in the Neolithic period.

We are eternally grateful to Dr. Robert Willis for his great work in bringing this to our attention all those years ago. As well as being the local Doctor, he was also an Antiquarian and artist; he made many drawings, sketches and stone rubbings in and around Oughterard. Robert died rather suddenly in 1868 at the very young age of 34, leaving a distraught wife and five young children. I will finish this article by including a few lines from his obituary in The Galway Express on Saturday July 18th 1868 –

"On yesterday evening at nine o'clock, the above named gentleman breathed his last in Galway after an illness of only a few days. He leaves an amiable wife and five young children, to mourn their bereavement.

He was one of those gentle beings whose soul was actuated by all the purest impulses of nature; the poor man's friend – a friend wherever he beheld suffering humanity.

He knew none of the formal grades in the social status which men are ever aping after; he always, no matter what his position might be, respected man as man.

To the people of Oughterard he was attached by a thousand fond memories, and they reciprocated that love and mutual intensity. The West with all its natural scenery drew out all the finest feelings of his nature, but now he has left forever the people and the land he loved so dearly and so well.

People of Oughterard, long, long until ye meet his like again. Many fond reminiscences shall remain ever entwined round the name and memory of one whom the people felt was entirely and exclusively their own – their own by his choice and their selection, their own by his sweet bewitching manner and native homeliness; their own by all the fondest chords that can unite a sterling friend and a grateful people". ■



Oughterard Library update

Written by Karen Connolly



Not much to report from the Library over the last few months! It has been a very difficult time for lots of people in lots of ways. Right now though it seems we have weathered the worst of it and normality is coming back - won't be long now.

We're working on getting Oughterard Library back in action, it is looking like it will be the beginning of August. That's to make sure that everything is in place to follow the government guidelines correctly. For the moment you will have to use one of the big libraries which are already kitted out - Westside or Clifden would be good bets for Oughterard borrowers. There has been a contact and collect service in place there for the last few weeks. In essence you ring up and tell us what kind of thing you like and we put together a selection for you, and hopefully a few things hit the spot! That will remain in place for anyone who is minding themselves for another while, but if you are ready to come out for a quick browse the big libraries are ready to welcome you back. Additional services such as PC use, printing and inter-library loans will be coming back over the next little while - see social media channels for details as they come available.

Summer Stars has started as normal in the big Libraries, so you can start there and we will carry on from Oughterard later in the summer. It is too early to say much about our usual Certificate Presentation which normally happens early in the school year. Like a lot of things, we will see how things have unfolded by then. I'm looking forward to seeing the Young Readers of Oughterard tearing through the books as usual - in a year of disruption I expect some things to stay the same!

Deepest sympathies to the family of Chris Mayhew, who sadly died in April. Many borrowers will remember Chris from her time working in Oughterard Library, a gentle, smiling lady of many talents. Ar dheis De go raibh a hanam.

Looking forward to reconnecting with borrowers over the next while - we're getting there!

Oughterard Library: 091 557002 FB: Oughterard Public Library
Westside Library : 091 509091 FB: Westside Public Library
Clifden Library: 095 21092 FB: Clifden Library ■

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