

# Village through the ages

■ Archaeologist continues journey through Oughterard's Stone Age history



**Local archaeologist**  
**BILL DALY** first traced Oughterard's history through the Mesolithic period (8,000 - 4,000 BC) to delve into its roots 7,000 years ago. He has now focused on the Neolithic period - and finds remnants from that period all over the area.

THE Neolithic period from 4000 to 2500 BC is associated with the beginnings of agriculture and the building of the large stone monuments - and there is evidence of the era all around us if we dig a little deeper to find it.

There are portal dolmens and wedge tombs in Oughterard and the surrounding countryside - evidence of the migration from the hunter-gatherer existence to a more settled lifestyle in our area.

There are potentially many more stone monuments in the area that have become obscured from view over time - and very large stones that have become incorporated into existing stone walls and clumps of whitethorn trees standing on their own in the middle of a field.

The Neolithic settlers who came to Ireland around 3,500 BC were descended from the old Ice Age stocks of Western Europe. This was at a time when the Mesolithic (hunter-gatherer) phase was coming to an end.

They have left us the physical heritage of paler skins and a higher number of light-coloured eyes than the people of any other area in the world.

At this time, on the mainland of what we now call Europe, people were beginning to explore new territories in a search for the best possible growing climate.

Ireland would have had much to offer the prospective pioneers in the way of landing beaches, rivers leading to the interior of the country, lakes full of fish, woods full of game - with no dangerous animals - a fertile soil and a mild climate.

In archaeology, this is the Neolithic or New Stone Age.

There are two theories in relation to the origins of agriculture in Ireland. The first of these suggests that the hunter/gatherers journeyed out to Europe



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

where sheep, goats and cattle had been domesticated since around 4,000 BC.

They then would have ferried young cattle, sheep and goats as well as varieties of wheat and barley to this country.

The second theory sees a large amount of people who journey from Europe across to Ireland. Whole families would have moved together with the domestic animals and crop seeds between August and November, after the crops had been harvested and when food stocks would have been plentiful.

Which of these theories is the true one will possibly never be known, but I have always favoured the first theory - a movement of ideas and not of people.

Upon arriving, the animals would have had to be securely penned in order to protect them from wolves and foxes, who would never have seen such slow moving animals before.

During this period, the pollen record shows a sharp decline in elm species and an increase in the traditional farming weeds of ribwort plantain, dock and nettles.

This shows that the forests were being cleared for tillage by ring-barking the trees and also by burning the ground scrub, which would give a much more fertile soil. After a while, they would have begun to collect manure and change the tillage patch every four to five years.

The Neolithic people used pottery vessels and implements of stone and flint, such as polished stone axes, digging mattocks, awls, scrapers and javelin



The Druid's Altar Wedge Tomb, to the north of The Hatchery in Oughterard.

heads.

The previous hunter/gatherer people would have been restricted to small families because of the movement involved, but the Neolithic folk could afford to have larger families as they had little or no movement and had more food supplies to go around.

For the first time ever, they were able to create a food surplus which is always a driver of great civilizations and population.

Agriculture and pastoralism were established in Ireland by 3,500 BC, the humble beginnings of our most important industry today.

After the Neolithic people began to organize themselves, settle into a farming lifestyle and increase in numbers, there came into Ireland one of the most remarkable occurrences in the history of Irish culture.

During a period of many centuries, magnificent tombs, large pillars and impressive stone circles were erected in all parts of

the island. These features are called megalithic (large stone) monuments.

They were built so solidly that over 1,500 of them survive in Ireland today, and where they are still looked upon with fascination and reverence.

The houses of the monument builders were poorly fabricated structures of timber and thatch, but much more work went into the construction of the monuments to make sure they were solidly built and dry.

The magnificent passage tomb of Newgrange is one of the earliest buildings in the world, even constructed before the pyramids in Egypt.

Building these impressive monuments required enormous amounts of materials, manpower and also some scientific and technical knowledge. The task was all the more remarkable when one considers that neither the wheel (late Neolithic) nor iron tools were in use during this period.

One such megalithic monu-

ment in our midst is known as the Druid's Altar. This is an old and common term given to stone monuments in the 19th century, it has nothing to do with Druids and was not used as a sacrificial altar.

This monument is actually behind the Hatchery in Oughterard - and has been there for the best part of 4,000 years.

It is a very impressive wedge tomb with an enormous capstone measuring twelve feet by six feet. When I came across it last October it was buried under briars and debris, and over the past few months I have managed to make it visible again.

Proof yet again of ancient history - stretching back thousands of years - right on our own doorstep.

Bill Daly will present his fieldwork and findings to all on Saturday, April 27, in the Courthouse Oughterard at 8pm, complete with replicated equipment and accessories that were in use during the period.



## UNICEF champion

A Galway TD and Junior Minister has been appointed as a UNICEF global champion for education as part of a new initiative to ensure that every young person from ten to 24 will be in school, training or age-appropriate decent employment by 2030.

Minister for the Diaspora and International Development Ciaran Cannon is one of seven Generation Unlimited Champions who will advocate worldwide for the development of the 'Gen U' programme.

Minister Cannon said he was honoured to be chosen as one of UNICEF's Generation Unlimited Champions.

"This year alone our government has committed €1m in funding to UNICEF to help fund key new initiatives, such as Gen U, that will help young people all over the globe meet the challenges of a changing world," said Minister Cannon.

"Gen U" is a new global, public-private partnership that aims to ensure that every young person aged 10-24 will be in school, training or age-appropriate decent employment, by 2030, with a special focus on empowering young women and girls," he added.

## Train trouble

Galway rail customers are advised to check their times before travelling this weekend as there are a number of service alterations due to engineering and construction works.

Dublin to Galway and Westport services have a number of alterations due to the construction of an underpass on the Athlone to Mullingar Greenway and track works.

There are also alterations to DART services to Malahide, Northern Commuter and Enterprise services due to line improvement works between Clongriffin and Malahide. A special timetable is in operation on all routes over the long weekend.

## Killarney case

In relation to a case before Tuam District Court involving the Director of Public Prosecutions versus Thomas Killarney from Ryehill, Monivea, who was charged with employing a non-national without a permit, the Gardaí have asked to point out that the Judge found the facts proven against the defendant and applied the Probation of Offenders Act.