

Feature

A visit to ancient monuments that we must protect

In June, **Alan Finn** spoke to Dr Robert Hensey of Sligo Neolithic Landscapes about the damage to our neolithic landmarks. On Saturday, he went to see two of Sligo's most important ancient monuments as part of a Heritage Week event, where he learned more about their place in history and the efforts to save them



SLIGO's rich neolithic history is in many ways the envy of Ireland and, indeed, Europe.

Our ancestors have left over 5,000 years of history behind them – but that history is slowly being eroded and this is certainly not due to the consequences of accident or the simple passage of time.

Damage to Queen Maeve's Cairn on Knocknarea mountain has been pointed to for many years, while more incidents of archaeological damage have recently occurred at an ancient site in Ballygalway.

I was delighted to be welcomed along on a day-long tour of those two

precious and myth-laden sites. The day was part of the creation of a virtual tour, which will be shared during National Heritage Week later this year.

Rain was promised for the day all week, but things were looking promising with the early proceedings happening in humid conditions – sickeningly humid at times.

The dry weather was needed to tackle the hike to Teach Cailleach a' Bhéara (The House of the Witch) which made Knocknarea seem like a canter by comparison, on a normal day at least. More on that later.

We were guided for this section

“Around 4,000 BC, new people arrived in Ireland. They looked like modern-day Sardinians. They cut down the forests and they built these monuments”

of the tour by Pádraig Meehan, a researcher and member of the Human Population Dynamics at Carrowkeel research team with a passion for pre-history.

Pádraig took us back to the start of Sligo's neolithic period. He also spoke about Sligo's pre-neolithic people, whose origins have been traced back to Africa. What ultimately happened to them remains unknown.

Pádraig said: “In 4,000 BC there are new people arriving in Ireland. These people are setting off the start of the neolithic period. They are new people who look like modern-day Sardinians. They are Ireland's first farmers so they had to cut down the forest and these are the people who ultimately built these monuments.

“In 5,500 BC we had the the mesolithic period. Ireland had a very small population of people with a dark complexion who carried genetic markers consistent with that of people from sub-Saharan Africa. What happened to those people is still being explored.

“Were they wiped out when the farmers got here, or were they still around? There is an indication a number of them may have survived for another couple of hundred years.”

Further into the trail to the mountains, we find ourselves before three stones. An old tale is attached to them, known as ‘The Thief, The Boy and The Cow’ which Pádraig explained is closely associated with the cailleach, who is recognised as either a deity or a witch across Ireland and Scotland and who controlled and shaped Ireland's natural landscape.

He said: “The cailleach can be both a positive and a destructive influence. She is associated with wild nature and in some contexts is seen as a goddess who embodies both old age and decrepitude as well as the promise of spring. It is very much a metaphor for nature.

“People have come here over the years and left items on top of ‘The Thief’. ‘The Cow’ is somewhat obscured and the theory is that it was

once 1.6 metres high but fell over at some point.

“‘The Boy’ is represented by the last stone. He used to milk the cow for the cailleach and he would go home and talk about this cow to his father, telling him that it was a magic cow who produced more and better milk than any other in Ireland.

“The father got sick of the story eventually and told the boy not to repeat it again. The family did not have a cow of their own and the father actually came up with a plan of stealing the cow.

“One night, the two of them headed up the mountain where the witch lived and the boy knew where to find the cow. They set it free and everything was going well, but on their way down, the dad stepped on a dry stick and made a loud noise, waking the cailleach. She was not pleased and froze the thief, the boy



The group listening to Pádraig Meehan's talk at the Cailleach a' Bhéara in Ballygalway.