

Pádraig Meehan speaking at Ballygawley.



The group at the summit of Knocknarea.

and the cow in stone forever.”

As the true ascent began, Pádraig explained that there is a significance to the mountain's alignment with another notable site.

It was discovered that Listoghil, the central monument in Carrowmore, is directly in line with one of the Ballygawley mountains known as ‘The Saddle’.

During the autumn equinox, the sun rises in the east and moves in a southerly direction until reaching its most southerly rising point at Samhain, the Gaelic celebration for the end of the harvest season and beginning of winter.

Rising on this day, the sun illuminates Listoghil. After this, the sun journeys towards the Cailleach a' Bhéara before returning to the saddle to once again illuminate Listoghil to mark Imbolc, the Gaelic celebration which welcomes the beginning of spring.

Following this fascinating insight into the precision of such historic construction, our attentions quickly turned to the unfortunate destruction of the sites.

The hole which was dug into the Cailleach a' Bhéara earlier this month has been well-publicised in recent weeks and serves as a prime exam-

ple of disregard some people have for such important sites.

It is believed that the party responsible trekked up the mountain on two occasions in search of precious metals.

The importance of teaching history comes to the fore here. These treasure hunters didn't seem to realise that stone-age civilisations weren't dealing in metals yet, let alone precious metals to bury important people with.

One keen observer pointed out that within the monument, they could see a discarded plastic bottle. Assuming it is not the same people involved, it raises the question why someone would take on a not-so-straightforward climb up a mountain to view such a wonderful site, only to dump rubbish inside.

We drove then to the Knocknarea car park, and after a brief moment of respite at the foot of the ascent, it was time to get moving again.

Here we were under the wing of Stefan Bergh, a lecturer in archaeology at NUI Galway who has studied Sligo's ancient landscape over the last few decades.

Stefan began by taking us on a brief walk along the outer path of the mountain to get a sense of said landscape where you could take in views of other passage tomb-laden sites such as

Carrowmore, Cairns Hill and the Ox Mountains, as well as a stunning view of the Ballygawley mountains where we could fully appreciate the old comparison remarked upon by Pádraig Meehan earlier in the day that the mountains combine to resemble an image of a woman at rest.

Stefan explained that Irish passage tombs cluster in groups. This is unique to Ireland – finding passage tombs within just a few kilometres of each other is not found in any other European country.

Later, we stopped at a lesser-known chamber, small and missing some of the outer boulders which should be encircling it. Stefan brought us there to explain that the layout is consistent with what you would find in Carrowmore, which coincidentally was also built on a ridge overlooking the site.

It was also pointed out that the choice of stone material was very specific for the tombs. Despite Knocknarea being rich in limestone, no such material was ever used in the construction of a passage tomb. The rocks which make up the Ballygawley mountains appeared to be the preferred choice for these neolithic sites.

As we progressed towards Queen Maeve's tomb, the reasonable weather was threatening to take a turn for

the worst. It seemed OK – you could see the rain in the distance. Nothing we haven't seen before in Sligo, we believed.

Then, as if someone had done it by snapping their fingers, the rain was pelting down in anger.

There was no time to get the rain trousers on, the ‘waterproof’ jacket didn't quite live up to the billing and one of my waterproof boots appeared to loosen shortly before the rain, leaving me with one bone dry foot, and the other floating within the footwear.

It felt like eight years of rain was coming down in 10 minutes. All the while, Stefan Bergh to his credit spoke at the penultimate stop before the summit. I'm not sure anyone could quite hear what he was saying, but the commitment to the cause was recognised by all.

Within seconds of setting foot on the summit, the rain ceased just in time for Stefan to speak about a little more audibly about Queen Maeve's tomb.

The damage is there for all to see. Years of walking scars have been created through ignorance of the fact that damage is being done to the structure, or ignorance of the fact that it is not the summit of the mountain but someone's resting place (or a site symbolising someone's life, at least).

In addition to the ongoing damage to the cairn, he also pointed out that the removal of quartz has been an issue.

Increased footfall has exposed more quartz over time at the base of the cairn, prompting some people to go to considerable effort to take it out of the ground in a bid to sell it online.

Stefan said that this issue has been addressed and has hopefully been put to an end.

While the primary aim of this event was to record a special virtual tour for this year's National Heritage Week, it will also act as a pitch for Sligo's most precious sites to be considered for Unesco World Heritage status.

Such status would provide new protection for the ancient landmarks which could prevent future damage – there is concern within Sligo's archaeological community that these locations will not be there for future generations, with some even at risk of being lost in this generation if more is not done to preserve them.

Of Ireland's 240 passage tombs, 75 are located in County Sligo. That alone tells you how special Sligo is in terms of our neolithic history.

The preservation of Sligo's neolithic sites is not just a local issue, it is a national issue – perhaps even a world issue.



LEFT: Stefan Bergh speaking on Knocknarea, with Ballygawley mountains behind him in the distance.



BELOW: The Cailleach a' Bhéara in Ballygalway.