

# Kiln at Luffany, Co. Kilkenny

By ELLEN PRENDERGAST

**D**URING the summer of this year investigations were carried out, on behalf of the National Museum of Ireland, on a site in the townland of Luffany, a couple of miles to the N.E. of the village of Slieverue (6" Sheet 43, 3 mm. West, 24 cm. North). Some twelve years ago, the presence of an artificial underground stone structure was discovered there by Mr. Thomas Wall of Ballyvalla, when he was ploughing on land then owned by his uncle and now the property of Mr. Michael O'Gorman of Luffany, who willingly granted permission for our investigations. At the spot there was no indication on the surface of the land of anything unusual, but when Mr. Wall's plough touched on hidden slabs of stone he shifted one and found that it formed part of the flat roofing of a stone-lined compartment. He replaced the slab and the matter was forgotten until the recent discovery of an ancient grave in Slieverue recalled it.

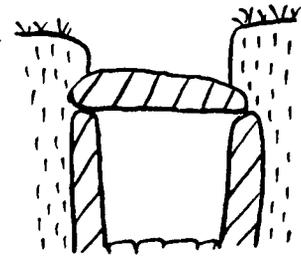
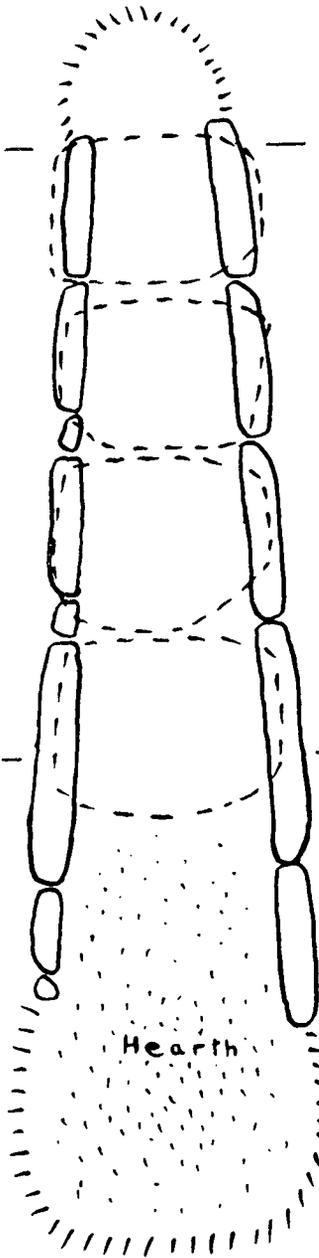
Then, in August last, Mr. Wall succeeded in locating the site again and we uncovered the entire structure, with some difficulty, since the earth was very hard following months of drought. It consisted of a long, low passage lined with upright slabs, paved on the bottom and covered with four large flat slabs (see illustration). This passage was about 3 metres in length and averaged half a metre high, it ran horizontally from West to East into gently rising ground; the tops of the capstones were not much more than 10 centimetres under the land surface. Nothing but a thin scatter of soil lay on the stone-paved floor, the paving extending no further than the limits of the lintels. The stone passage was about 40 cm. wide at ground level at the East end and, gradually, had doubled that width at the opposite end. All the slabs used were shapely and may have been trimmed, they were of local origin being conglomerates and siliceous grit (information kindly supplied by Dr. J. Jackson of the National Museum).

Beyond the stone work at both ends the tunnel was

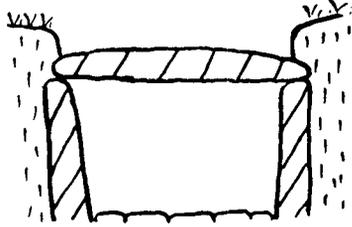
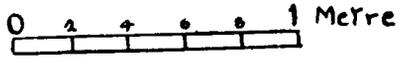
rounded off with a semicircular area excavated in the compact earth. These cavities were dome-shaped, extending upwards beyond the height of the tunnel and, apparently, without a roof so that both ends were exposed to the air in its original state. There was no stone lining here, but the shape was preserved in the firm earth. The cavity at the East end was smaller and less well defined than that at the West end where burning had taken place thus hardening the outline. Here there was an area averaging a metre in diameter and having a deposit of ashes and charcoal on the floor. This burnt layer was, at most, 5 cm. thick at the centre of the area and thinned out towards the edges; it extended back into the stone tunnel for a short distance. On the top of the burnt material and close to its edges were found a small fused stone and a fragment of white-glazed delph—probably portion of the base of a cup. No other object was found. The delph showed no trace of scorching and must have fallen on the hearth after the fire had been extinguished, it may have got there later when the top soil began to fill up the abandoned site; in any case, it indicates that the site is of no great antiquity. The fused stone indicates some intensity of heat, but the rather meagre deposit of burnt material was not the result of any great or prolonged fires; there is the possibility, of course, that the remains of former burnings had been cleared out of the hearth during the period of its use.

It remains to consider the purpose of this structure. The factual evidence does not establish any very obvious function and there was no local tradition known to us which explained it. The only suggestion that seemed feasible was that it could have been a primitive type of kiln for some purpose such as drying corn and confirmation of this suggestion is afforded in recorded descriptions of similar structures in Ireland and further afield. Dr. M. de Paor kindly reminds me of a somewhat similar kiln which occurred within the enclosure of a ring-fort (habitation site) excavated at Letterkeen in Co. Mayo, some years ago, and of Sir Lindsay Scott's investigations on kilns in Scotland. His paper on "Corn-drying Kilns" in the British Isles published in *Antiquity* (1951) leaves no doubt that the

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## LUFFANY KILN

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Luffany structure was for such a purpose. Mr. Hubert T. Knox describes corn-drying kilns of the same type in Co. Mayo which had been in use up to the middle of the last century (**Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy 1906-7**). In Co. Kerry, at Emlagh, a structure recorded by Professor S. P. O Ríordáin and Mr. J. B. Foy, is the same as the Luffany example. A good summary on a limited survey of corn-drying kilns in Ireland is available in Prof. E. E. Evans book, **Irish Heritage** (1942).

In many regions up to the middle of last century there was a corn-drying kiln in every townland, probably used like a lime-kiln on a communal system. The situation of the Luffany one on an exposed hillside and into the prevailing wind, is typical. The corn was laid on a bed of straw, usually, on the stones and the hot air from a slow fire passed around it, the drying process taking a day or so; then it was ready for grinding in the quern or mill. Horizontal kilns are known from as early as Roman times in Western Europe.

Local enquiry might bring to light some tradition of such old customs as this simple method of corn drying: information of this nature is always worth recording and especially in this age when rural crafts are vanishing so rapidly.

The Kilkenny Archæological Society is to be complimented on being the means of bringing the Luffany kiln to notice since Mr. Wall's interest and the enthusiasm of other members who energetically took part in the investigations, all derive from that source.

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