

A Fulacht Fíadh at Ballyhimmin near Castlecomer

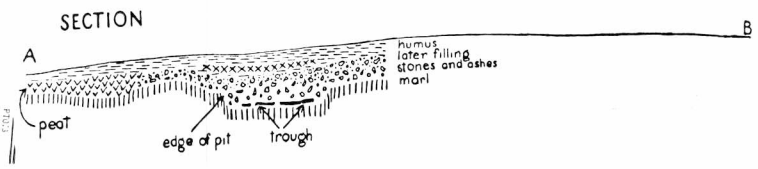
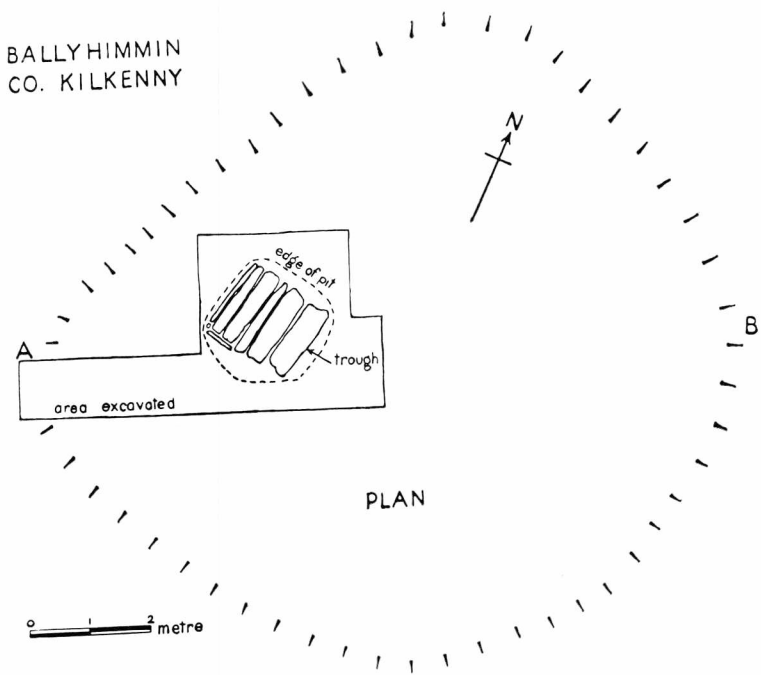
Ellen Prendergast

WHEN a large patch of burnt material was exposed during ploughing on the land of Mr. Edward Brennan at Ballyhimmin near Castlecomer he suspected that it might indicate the site of a fulacht fiadh. He informed the National Museum authorities and a brief rescue excavation was carried out, August 23—24, 1955.

The site¹ was in a marshy field, where old streams, fed by springs, had been drained by modern piping. The burnt material formed a low mound with horse-shoe outline, delimited on the straight edge by an old stream, now dried up. (See plan, figure 1). It measured about 10—11 metres diagonally and its greatest height was about 75 cm. A promising area was selected for the limited investigation where the contours sagged most noticeably. Here a trench was cut from the centre of the mound and extending beyond its edges to the west. It was excavated to the old ground level. The section face (see figure 1) showed that the natural stratification was humus over a deep stratum of peaty soil, overlying marl substratum. In the body of the mound the peaty soil gave way to a mass of burnt stone and ashes which had been deposited close to the marl and over which newer humus had grown. Fortunately, the cutting revealed the edge of a wooden structure under the burnt layer and the excavation was extended to uncover this completely. It proved to be the remains of a trough which had formed the focal point of the site.

This trough (figures 1 and 2) was extremely fragile because of the waterlogged condition of the site. It was rectangular in plan measuring 1.40 by 1.50 metres. The base was formed of five oblong planks averaging in length about 135 cm., in width from 20 to 35 cm. and trimmed flat, averaging 3 to 5 cm. in thickness. They were fitted closely together side by side between the vertical sides of the trough. Only the lower portions of two vertical sides survived in part, maximum measurements 6.50 cm. wide

¹Townland Ballyhimmin, parish Kilmacar, barony Fassidin, Co. Kilkenny, O.S. 6" sheet 6, 1.60 cm. from East margin, 3.25 cm. from South margin.



and 6 cm. high. Two of the flat planks were of oak and three of alder; the fragments of the side planks were of alder. Underneath and around the base of the trough were some branches of willow and alder on which it had rested. Traces of moss (*thuidium tamariscinum*) associated with the wood may indicate caulking. A pit had been dug into the marl to accommodate the trough but its profile had been almost obliterated, due no doubt to the removal or destruction of the sides of the trough. Immediately overlying the planks were burnt stones probably those last used to heat the water in the vessel. All had been submerged beneath the mass of ashes and burnt stone which had been deposited around the trough. The stone debris was of flaggy quartose sandstones of local origin. Samples of charcoal indicated that alder, ash, hazel, willow, poplar, and holly had been used as fuel.

This site provided a typical example of a *fulacht fiadh* or field kitchen as used for instance, by hunting parties of the *Fianna*.² The wooden trough fitted into a pit in the marl would have filled with water from the springs in the surrounding marsh. Stones used to bring the water to the boil were heated in great fires of wood and, after use, the debris was heaped up around the trough, keeping free access on one side. If meat had been cooked in the trough no trace of meat bones was found in the material excavated; the soil on the site was acid and may well have destroyed the evidence of bone. On the other hand it is possible the trough may have served to provide hot water for bathing while the meal was prepared nearby.³ Whatever the purpose the site provided factual information on *fulachta fiadha* and the interest aroused resulted in many similar sites being recorded for the area (See Appendix).⁴

²See, for instance, S. P. Ó Ríordáin: "Antiquities of the Irish Countryside," chapter 5.

³A. T. Lucas: "Jour. Royal Soc. Antiquaries of Ireland," 95, 1965, 78, 79.

⁴Thanks are due to many people for their assistance in connection with the work at Ballyhimmin: to Mr. Edward Brennan, the landowner; Miss Maura Scannell, Keeper, Herbarium, Botanic Gardens, Glasnevin, Dublin who identified the wood, charcoal and moss; Dr. Murrough O'Brien, Geological Survey of Ireland who examined the stones; M. Payne, B.Sc., M.I.C.I., Monkstown, Co. Dublin who analysed the soil samples. Thanks also to those who helped in the recording of new sites, to Mrs. M. Phelan, Mr. T. Hoyne, Mr. Edward Bergin, Mrs. C. Drennan, Mr. J. Mullins and other members of the Kilkenny Archaeological Society and especially to Mr. T. Lyng who visited and mapped the sites listed in the appendix.

APPENDIX

To sites of fulachta fiadha already recorded for Co. Kilkenny (see "Old Kilkenny Review," no. 8, 1955, 1—10, and *ibid.* n.s. vol. 1, no. 3, 1976, 222—3), together with the present example at Ballyhimmin, the following may be added :

Townland	6 inch sheet	Co-ordinates
Coan West	11	40.20 cm. from East, 10.60 cm. from North
Coan East	11	33.80 cm. from East, 2.50 cm. from North
Coan East	11	33.50 cm. from East, 1.50 cm. from North
Coan West	11	44.10 cm. from West, 3.00 cm. from North
Coan West	11	44.20 cm. from West, 2.70 cm. from North
Coan West	11	44.50 cm. from West, 3.10 cm. from North
Coan West	11	44.80 cm. from West, 3.40 cm. from North
Coan West	11	44.70 cm. from West, 3.70 cm. from North
Coan West	11	38.60 cm. from West, 6.00 cm. from North
Coan West	11	38.90 cm. from West, 6.30 cm. from North
Coan West	6	1.10 cm. from South, 43.80 cm. from East
Coan West	6	6.00 cm. from South, 48.60 cm. from East
Coan West	6	9.30 cm. from South, 46.75 cm. from East
Croghtenclogh	6	14.00 cm. from South, 46.10 cm. from East
Croghtenclogh	6	16.10 cm. from South, 51.00 cm. from East
Croghtenclogh	6	15.15 cm. from South, 53.45 cm. from East
Ballyhimmin	5	14.00 cm. from East, 4.80 cm. from South
Clashduff Upper	5	24.15 cm. from East, 4.80 cm. from South
Clashduff Upper	5	25.80 cm. from East, 4.85 cm. from South
Clashduff Upper	10	15.00 cm. from North, 22.20 cm. from East
Moyne	10	8.20 cm. from North, 31.30 cm. from East
Moyne	10	8.35 cm. from North, 31.30 cm. from East
Ballylinnen	5	12.30 cm. from East, 23.30 cm. from North
Ballylinnen	5	11.00 cm. from East, 20.80 cm. from North
Redbog	21	7.25 cm. from West, 17.50 cm. from South
Kilonnerry	38	38.60 cm. from South, 31.20 cm. from East

Further sites have been reported at Ballygorteen (sheet 15), in Shankill at Cranmore and Blackacre (sheet 16) and in Raheen near Cuffesgrange (sheet 23).



24-11-1828

"I rose at six o'clock. The morning threatened rain. I went down by the Nore from Thomastown. It is a very strong river. Large boats come up to the town though the tide only comes to Inistioge."

Diary of Humphrey O'Sullivan.