

# Britain & Ireland's Walling Treasures: Irish Stone Forts #1

Ireland is awash with ring-forts, essentially circular, fortified, settlements/farmsteads generally built during the first millennium AD, some are thought to date as far back as far as the Bronze Age. Estimates tend to settle on there being 'over 45,000' and not surprisingly with that many, they come in a variety of shapes and

sizes. By far the most common are those composed of earth banks (often known as ráth). Less common, but arguably more spectacular are the caisel (anglicised to cashel), meaning stone fort or rampart. In western Ireland the caisel were known as cathair (anglicised to caher), and here they often outnumber the ráth in areas, such as the Burren in County Clare, where you have a relatively barren, rocky landscape. There are said to be around 450 on the Burren alone, (around 1 per square kilometre).

They can be 'univallate' -having only one wall - as can be seen with Loher, above. It is thought that many of these might have been built with stone as an indication of status. Many are 'bi', or even 'multi'-vallate, with three or more walls forming outer rings, and perhaps of a more defensive nature than univallate forts, although prestige probably enters the equation somewhere. Those with more than one wall are often labelled amongst the 'great western stone forts'. To generalise somewhat, the inner wall typically encloses an area around 20 metres in diameter, with the larger ones encompassing slightly in excess of 30m.

The overall preponderance of ráth, and the lumping of some many structures under one label, has until recent years led to a neglect in the study of the cathair (even then only a couple of hundred out of all the ring forts have been scientifically excavated). In recent years this has been partly redressed following the addition of the



to the 'Ring of Kerry', a fairly miserable, wet and misty day which somewhat detracted from-in fact at times completely obscured-the famed beauty of the area.

Staigue was however striking. In places the walls rise to over 5m in height, forming a complete ring of just under 30m internal diameter.

Inside there are a steps, lots of impressive steps, forming X shapes (above), with the bottom inverted 'V' built proud of the wall and the top 'V' recessed within the wall, which is a single wall rather than a rampart with tiers/walkways part way up.

It is thought to have been built sometime in the first half of the first millenium AD, but as with many of the Irish structures dating is somewhat imprecise. Some recent thinking

"Western Stone Forts" onto the UNESCO World Heritage Site 'Tentative List' in 1992 and the 'Western Stone Forts Project' part of the Irish Discovery Programme (see [www.discoveryprogramme.ie](http://www.discoveryprogramme.ie)) from 1992-5, although Matthew Stout, author of one of the leading studies of ringforts, published in 1997, told me "I don't have much to say on cashels because when the ringfort book was written there weren't any really good studies."



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The UNESCO listing is a little vague as to which of the hundreds of forts are covered; it lists Dun Aonghosa, on Aran, Cahercommaun on the Burren and Caherconree, Benagh and Staigue all in County Kerry, whilst the actual description refers to "the 7 Aran Forts".

The first of these I personally encountered was Staigue, during a brief visit



s. Courtesy of Erik Lansbury

suggests most were constructed between the 7<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> centuries, with occupation, especially in the stone forts of the west of Ireland, during 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries not unusual. Some appear to have remained under occupation into 17th century.<sup>i</sup>

Staigue is `univallate` although there are remains of an outer ditch. There are also no remains within the fort, originally there are likely to have been stone huts etc., as can be seen in the much reconstructed Loher. (Shown earlier).



**Reconstructed remains of roundhouse/beehive hut at Caher Gael, County Kerry, courtesy of Dave Perry**

At Cahergall (or Caher Gael) there are the remains of a couple of buildings within the encompassing wall. Thought to date back to around 600 AD this site has been much restored, as has Leacanabuaille fort just a few hundred metres away and is a little squarer than `usual` and crammed full of dwellings. A quick Google images search would give you the general idea. Excavations here in 1939 unearthed various remains dated at around 1000 years old, although various other sources have suggested settlement on the site dating back to the Bronze Age.

The UNESCO statement of authenticity/integrity suggests that there has been little maintenance work at Staigue. Extensive `renovation` is perhaps why many other sites are not included on the listing, however they are still worthy of some mention here.

At Cahermore (Chathair Mhór) on the Burren there is a marvellous gatehouse. This is thought to be an addition to the original structure. Recent work suggests that a number of these forts were inhabited through the middle-ages, and it is thought this was added sometime in the 14<sup>th</sup> or early 15<sup>th</sup> Century. That said its current incarnation reaches back all of a dozen



**Gatehouse at Cahermore, County Clare, courtesy of Wendy Hannan**

years at most, having been reconstructed following excavations in 1999.<sup>ii</sup>

One of the most famous, or at least most visited of the stone forts, is that of Grainán of Aileach, in County Donegal. Technically a hill fort as it sits on the highest peak in the area (albeit only 800 feet), it was described by artist/surveyor George Petrie in the 1830s, as a mere ruin and little more than 6 feet high in places<sup>iii</sup>. Once the home of the northern kings, it is reputed that following a 12<sup>th</sup> Century battle each man in the conquering army was required to take one stone home to the south. A later addition to the legend is that these stones were then used to construct Limerick Cathedral<sup>iv</sup>. In the 1870s it was extensively restored. This seems to have been a particular predilection of the Victorians, and many of the better preserved stone structures of Ireland which we see today are only in such good state because of work carried out in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Few significant dry stone structures remained untouched, and how well they represent what they would have been like, can be the source of much conjecture.

Grainán of Aileach has also undergone modern stabilization in the form of mortaring the rampart walkways in order to protect them from the number

of visitors to the site, whilst at most popular sites there are just signs (or occasionally barriers) requesting that you do not do so.

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Thomas J Westropp wrote *"Baffled in our search into the records, lost in the mazes of tradition, and getting no certain answer from the forts, we must lay up careful descriptions for that future scholar who can answer the riddle of the ruins. For the rabbit-catcher and road-contractor are overthrowing the walls, and even where conserved they have too often been rashly modernized; 'palaces and castles,' it has been said, 'are more attractive objects in ruins than in complete repair.'"*<sup>v</sup> Plus ça change.

Despite the numbers of forts on the



**ns and walkways, Grainán of Aileach, County Donegal, courtesy of Nick Kaye**

Burren, recent excavations there seem to have been the first since 1934. A relatively small excavation took place at Caherconnell in 2007 (one of the largest sites, claimed by the owners to be in its original state), the report suggested this was the first since another at Cahercommaun in 1934, noting Fitzpatrick's then ongoing excavations at Cahermacnaghtan<sup>vi</sup> (Cathair Mic Neachtain), although E Fitzpatrick cites the report of M Fitzpatrick's dig at Cahermore in 2001 (the full report can be found at [www.burrenforts.ie](http://www.burrenforts.ie)).



**rtesy of Nick Kaye**

Having set the scene, next time I'll, primarily, take a look at some of the forts found on Inis Mór in the Aran Islands, probably the most spectacular of the Western Stone Forts listed by UNESCO.

Meanwhile for those who are interested the Walling Treasures website has moved to [www.wallingwonderland.info](http://www.wallingwonderland.info)

Photos copyright the author unless noted. Thanks to everyone who provided photographs.

Sean Adcock

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<sup>i</sup> Fitzpatrick.E 2009 , *Native Enclosed Settlement and the Problem of the Irish 'Ring-fort'*. Medieval Archeology Vol.53 p.277

<sup>ii</sup> Fitzpatrick 2009. p.294

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[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grian%C3%A1n\\_of\\_Aileach](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grian%C3%A1n_of_Aileach) [extracted 27.06.2011]

<sup>iv</sup> *The History and Topography of the County of Clare* by James Frost. *Part II History of Thomond.*

[http://www.clarelibrary.ie/eolas/coclare/history/frost/chap12\\_murtagh\\_more.htm](http://www.clarelibrary.ie/eolas/coclare/history/frost/chap12_murtagh_more.htm) [extracted 30.06.2011]

<sup>v</sup> *Archaeology of the Burren: Prehistoric Forts and Dolmens in North Clare* by Thomas Johnson Westropp *Part I: Foreign and Irish Forts*

[http://www.clarelibrary.ie/eolas/coclare/archaeology/arch\\_burren/index.htm](http://www.clarelibrary.ie/eolas/coclare/archaeology/arch_burren/index.htm) [extracted 27.06.2011]

<sup>vi</sup> Hull G & Comber M 2008 “

*Caherconnell Cashel, Caherconnell, Carron, Co. Clare*

*Final Archaeological Excavation Report*”. P28. [www.burrenforts.ie](http://www.burrenforts.ie) [extracted 27.06.2011]

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