

North Mayo Heritage Centre Mayo Heritage Newsletter

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We profile

ACHILL ISLAND

The largest island in Ireland

**Sheep on Achill with Keem Bay,
Achill Island in the background**

Images: ©Failte Ireland (Chaosheng Zhang)

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ACHILL ISLAND

Achill is the largest island situated off the Irish west coast with an area of over 100 square kilometres. Its name derived from the Latin word “*aquila*”, meaning eagle and it is connected to the mainland by a bridge which opened in 1887.

Early history

Achill's first human settlement is at least 5,000 years old. The remains of megalithic tombs and monuments show settlement by Neolithic people dating back to the 3rd or 4th centuries BC.

These people greatly altered the landscape of the area, as it was once heavily forested. Neolithic culture brought farming to Achill, which caused the clearing of forestland for cereal crops, and walled fields for livestock. It is estimated that at the end of the Neolithic era, about 4,000BC, Achill had a population of 500-1000 people.

Proof of the Bronze Age (c. 2000 BC) settlement on Achill includes hut platforms, field systems and enclosures in the area of Slievemore. The remains of several promontory forts along the coast show that settlement grew across the island in the Iron Age (c. 400 BC).

The arrival of Christianity

The early medieval period, dating from about 400 AD, saw a large expansion in agriculture, especially with more iron tools, including the plough. Evidence of early medieval artefacts has been reported at Keem Bay, Slievemore, Kildavnet and Achill Beg island. The arrival of Christianity into Ireland around this period is demonstrated in two remnants on Achill. One at Kildavnet, where the ancient church is named after St. Damhnait (St. Dymphna), a 7th century saint. The other at Slievemore, where an ancient church site and Holy Well are located, both dedicated to St. Colman who was also a 7th century saint.



The Colony (image from achill.tourism.com)

The O'Malleys and Granuaile

Achill once lay within the ancient Kingdom of Umail. It was ruled at different times by a small number of families or clans which included the Butlers, the Burkes, the O'Connors, the O'Donnells and, probably most famously, the O'Malleys.

The name O'Malley is still popular in Achill today, and has links to the area dating back to at least the 12th century. The best known member of this family was Granuaile (Grace O'Malley), the legendary Pirate Queen. Under her leadership the O'Malleys controlled the waters of the western coastline, imposing taxes and levies on all ships passing through this territory. Kildamnait Castle, which still stands on the island, is a 15th century tower house associated with the O' Malley Clan.

Achill Mission ('The Colony')

One of Achill's most well-known historical sites is that of the Achill Mission or 'the Colony' at Dugort. In 1831 the Protestant Reverend Edward Nangle founded a mission at Dugort. The mission included schools, cottages, an orphanage, a small hospital and a hotel (the former Slievemore Hotel).

'The Colony' thrived for a time and frequently produced a newspaper called the 'Achill Missionary Herald'. The Reverend Nangle expanded his mission into Mweelin, where a 'school' was built. The Achill Mission declined slowly after Nangle was moved from Achill and was finally closed in the 1880's. Edward Nangle died in 1883.

The Deserted Village

Near to Dugort, at the base of Slievemore mountain stands the Deserted Village. There are approximately 80 ruined houses in the village. The houses were constructed without cement or mortar to hold the stones together. Each house contained just one room which was used as a kitchen, a living room, a bedroom and even a stable.

For generations, people lived in the village until 1845, when the Great Famine struck Achill, as it did in the rest of the country. A majority of the families were forced to move to the nearby village of Dooagh, which is situated beside the sea, while some others emigrated. Living beside the sea provided fish and shellfish that was used as an essential source of food.

The village became completely abandoned, hence the name 'Deserted Village'. No one has permanently inhabited these houses since the time of the Famine.

However, the families that moved to Dooagh, and their descendants continued to use the village as a 'booley village'. This meant that throughout the summer season, the younger members of the family, teenage boys and girls, would bring the cattle to graze on the hillside and they would stay in the houses of the Deserted Village.

This custom continued until the 1940's. Boolying was also carried out in other areas of Achill, including Annagh on Croaghnaun Mountain and in Curraun.

Sources:

www.destinationwestport.com
www.achilltourism.com

The townland of Slievemore in 1838

(*Sliabh Mór*, great mountain).

Located in the west of the Island of Achill. Bounded on the north by the townland of Dooagort West and the sea; east by the townland of Keel East; south by the sea; and west by the townland of Keel West.

It contains 3,722 acres, 3 roods, 21 perches, including 26 acres, 1 rood, 16 perches of water. The property of Sir Richard O'Donnel, and is held by tenants at will in divisions or by sums, at a rent of £100 for the townland. There are 3 villages here; Slievemore, in the east of the townland, is the largest; the other 2 are Tonreege and Dooega in the south of the townland, on the banks of Tonreege River.

It is all mountain bog and pasture, except about 300 acres of cultivated acres, producing rye and potatoes. At Slievemore village is a well called Tobercolman, and beside it is Slievemore graveyard. Achill Tower stands in the north of this townland.

Extract from Ordnance Survey Namebooks 1838