

A VISIT TO BALLYBUNION SAND-HILLS, CO. KERRY.

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The following short account of a visit to the Ballybunion sand-hills, made by the author in company with Dr. G. Fogerty, R.N., in the spring of 1902, will, it is hoped, prove of interest to the members of the Limerick Field Club.

We arrived in the pretty little seaside village of Ballybunion on the morning of the 28th March, and having secured our rooms at the Hotel, started off immediately to walk to the Cashen river, the mouth of which is situate some two and a-half miles in a westerly direction from the village. The day was a glorious one, and our route lay principally along the sea-beach, which faces the Atlantic, and showed by the terracing of its gravel and boulders the effects of the fierce westerly and north-westerly gales which sweep it during the winter.

On coming near the mouth of the Cashen we left the beach and went in amongst the sand-hills, where Dr. Fogerty found one or two interesting botanical specimens, but we found nothing to indicate a settlement of pre-historic man until we reached a point quite close to the river, where Dr. Fogerty found a large *hammer-stone* and portion of a broken *anvil-stone*, and the author found a rather doubtful specimen of an *anvil-stone*. We found some indications of the existence of *kitchen middens*, but the sites had been too much denuded to yield anything of value. We had not time to explore the left bank of the river, and indeed only to a small extent the right bank, so that there is plenty of scope in that locality for any of our members who may visit it in the future.

On our way back to Ballybunion we kept in among the sand-hills

and on reaching the top of one of them, when about half way between the Cashen and Ballybunion, were rewarded by seeing underneath us a crater-like hollow with a floor covered, as if by a shower of snow, with white specks, which proved on nearer approach to be shells bleached by the action of the weather. On the first glance Dr. Fogerty pronounced this an ideal site for a kitchen midden, and we descended into it and proceeded at once to explore it.

The *black layer* was much in evidence everywhere, in some places merely superficial, in others—where the sand had been benched by slips—showing as a thin band. Our first finds consisted of bones, teeth, portions of deers' antlers, and shells, the latter principally limpets and mussels, but amongst them one whelk. The bones in all cases were broken into small fragments, presumably for the purpose of extracting the marrow, which it is reasonable to suppose furnished a delicacy to these early settlers; it is worthy of mention, however, that the author found one small piece of bone which presented the appearance of having been fashioned for use as a rude instrument for cutting or piercing.

We excavated the sites of two *kitchen middens*, and found several stone *flakes* and *cores*. These sites were about six feet in diameter and presented the appearance of small mounds, the *black layer* lying at a depth of about three inches under their surface; one of them which the author measured gave the following succession of layers:—superficial sand, one to three inches; *black layer*, one inch; brown clayey band, with particles of charcoal, bones, etc., two inches; grey ash, two and a-half inches; brown ash, two and a-half inches, succeeded by the ordinary yellow sand. Most of the stones in and adjacent to the mounds, including the *cores*, also the shells and bones found in them, presented the appearance of having been subjected to the action of fire, and the charcoal looked as if it had boiled the tea-kettle of a picnic party but a few days previously—the very grain of the wood being still visible—but it crumbled into a black paste at the touch, and left our hands in a condition that would have done credit to a christy minstrel troupe. The bones also crumbled the moment we attempted to remove them from their clayey envelope. We found some *hammer-stones* here, and a broken *anvil-stone*.

Twilight was coming on before we had satisfied ourselves with our

investigation of this site, so we started homewards, with the determination to come next day and renew our search. On the way we passed some other likely sites.

Next day we started again for the sand-hills and began work on the places we had noticed on our way home the previous evening. These sites seemed more denuded than the first we had found, but were full of interest and yielded many interesting finds, in fact we had to leave a number of our finds after us, as they were too heavy to carry, and we only brought away the best specimens.

At one of these places we made rather a gruesome discovery as, in the course of the search for stone implements, the author came across portions of a human skull, and on searching further found other parts of a human skeleton partly exposed where the sand had been drifted away. There were flat stones stuck up on edge where the bones lay, which were evidently intended to mark the site of a rude grave, and we found some eight or nine mounds in the sand with similar stones around them.

On our return to Ballybunion in the evening we made inquiries about these graves, but nobody seemed to know of their existence; we were told, however, that there was a tradition in the locality that there had been a shipwreck many years ago to the west of Ballybunion, and that numbers of the bodies picked up had been buried in the sand-hills. No doubt we had come upon the graves of these unfortunate mariners, which the shifting nature of the sand had exposed to view. The author has often wondered since if these could have been the graves of some of the ill-fated Spanish Armada, one of the ships of which was lost in or about this locality.

Having thoroughly searched this site we proceeded to what we called "our first find"—that of the previous afternoon—as we felt we had not quite worked out its possibilities. We were right, in fact there is little doubt that if we went back there to-morrow there would still be plenty of scope for further investigation, and we might feel assured we would not come away empty handed, although on this second visit we adopted a most systematic method of exploring every inch of the ground. Our procedure was something like this: the sand being soft, and easily taking and retaining footprints, we kept in a narrowing series of circles until we had covered the whole ground, the footmarks showing

us the course we had previously taken. The author found a rather large *anvil-stone*, and a very good specimen of a *hammer-stone*, which had been used on both ends. Dr. Fogerty found an equally good specimen of a *hammer-stone*, and several stone *cores* and *flakes*.

We worked as long as the light of a March afternoon would permit—with the prospect before us of a walk back through the sand-hills, full of rabbit burrows, and on our return proceeded to classify, label and pack our specimens. Some of those specimens you have before you this evening, and any of you who examine them and think of their antiquity, the light which they throw on the implements, usages, and customs of the early inhabitants of our island, cannot fail to be struck with the fact that a visit to the Ballybunion sand-hills possesses some interest.
