



‘Sheedy’s Fort’, Kilkee

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‘Sheedy’s Fort’, called *Lisnaleagaun* on the relevant Ordnance Survey map¹, known as ‘Studdert’s Fort’ in the mid-nineteenth century and called *Lios an Chairn* in 1835 by O’Curry², can be seen a few hundred yards to the right as one approaches Kilkee along the Kilrush road. However, the best view is from the Low Road to Lislanihan. The name *Lisnaleagaun* refers to the tall standing-stone which is near the fort. Following his visit in 1906, Westropp described the fort as follows:³

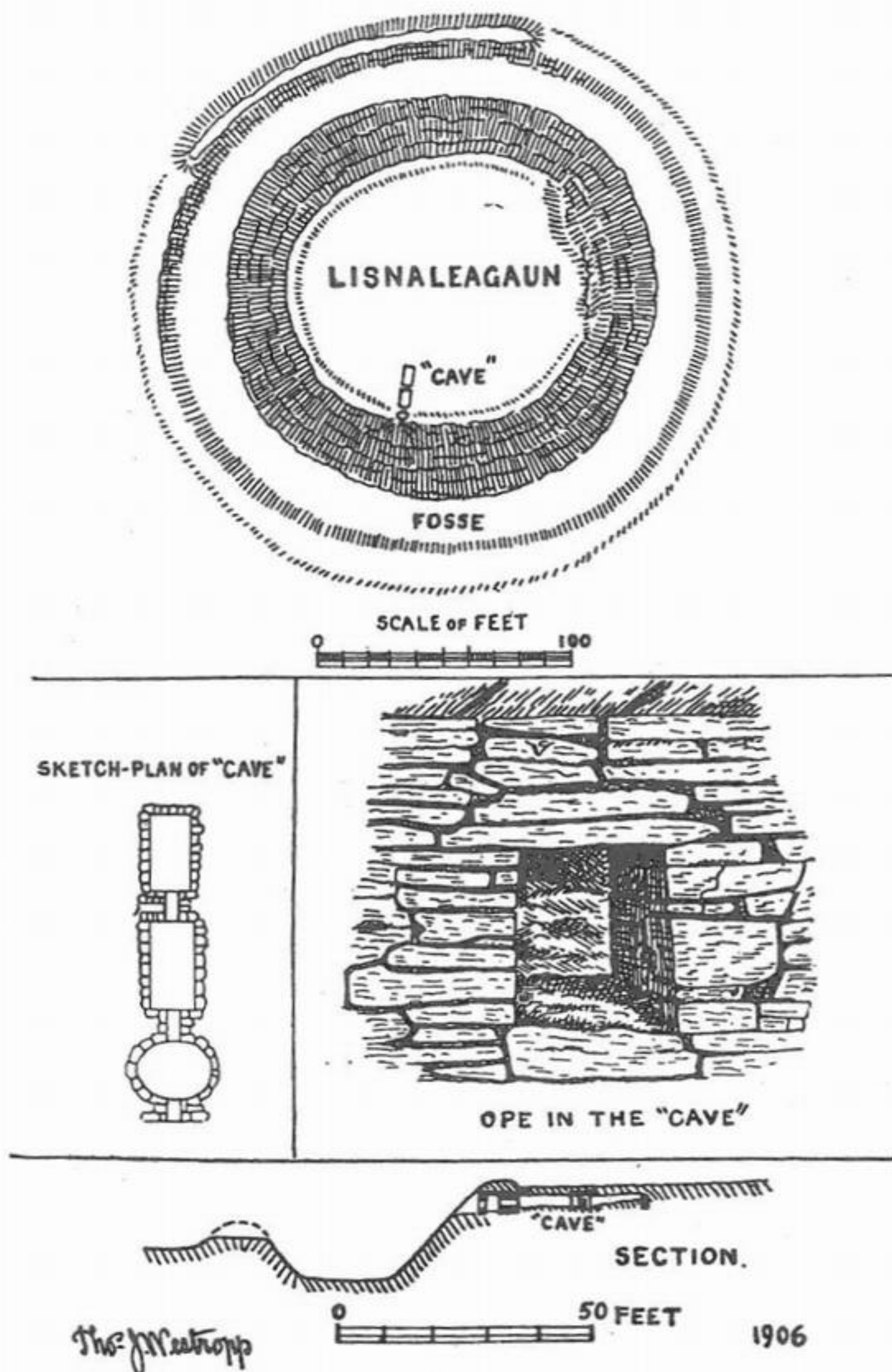
Lisnaleagaun, the fort of the pillar-stone, is of the mote type found all over Ireland and the Continent, only differing in height from the great motes found in such abundance in eastern Ireland. The type is rarely found in County Clare...The fort is oval; the flat platform has only very slight traces of a fence round the top; such traces probably arose from the decay of a palisaded fence, plastered with clay, as a protection against fire. It is, of course, possible that, in some cases, a dry-stone ring-wall crowned the top, and that even the steep sides were faced with stones set in clay mortar. The platform rises 14½ to 16 feet above the fosse, and is 105 feet across north and south, and 120 feet east and west, being 350 feet in circuit round the edge, and 540 feet round the foot of the mound. The sides are very steep; the fosse varies from 20 feet to 25 feet wide, and is marshy; probably, when deeper, it was flooded, and then crossed by a plank...The outer ring is 10 feet high, and 16 to 20 feet thick to the north and west, for 70 feet after which it has been obliterated down to the level of the field, and is only 14 feet thick. The central mote has been dug into and defaced to the north-east, but elsewhere it is well preserved, and is covered with beautiful greensward, stepped into small ridges and terraces. There are no traces of any outworks in the field, or of any house-sites.

There is a “cave” or souterrain in the garth opening on the south edge. The axis of this passage lies E.N.E. and W.S.W. by compass. It is too much filled to allow one to explore the main passage. The present passage is through a cut in the bank, but is partly ancient, and probably resembled such souterrains as Mortyclough, &c., where the ope in the outer bank was closed by a slab. Indeed, at Lisnaleagaun, as at Mortyclough, a thin “plank” of stone lies in the fosse below the opening. We enter and find a neat chamber roofed with flagstones: it is oval, 5 feet 4 inches north and south, and 8 feet 8 inches east and west; the walls are neatly built to the curve with small slabs of gritstone. As the floor is covered with loose stones, and very filthy, we were unable to ascertain the height, which was probably nearly 7 feet. In the north and south sides were neat opes a couple of feet above the present floor; the northern one is 19 inches high, 15 inches wide, and 3 feet deep,

¹Td: Dough; Par: Kildearagh; Bar: Moyarta; Co. Clare (O.S. 6-in. sheet 56).

²Ordnance Survey Letters, County Clare, vol. I, p. 374 (typescript copy) - these letters have recently been published by Clasp Press, Ennis, 1997, under the title *The Antiquities of County Clare* by John O’Donovan and Eugene Curry (see page 124 for the description of this fort) - E.R. Hon. Ed.

³See Thomas J. Westropp, “Ringforts in the Barony of Moyarta, County Clare, and their Legends”, *J. Roy. Soc. Antiqs. Ireland*, 39(1909), 116-118: on p. 116 he mistakenly says that the pillar-stone has disappeared.



Westropp's drawings of Lisnaleagaun fort and souterrain.

leading into the main passage. This gallery is about 12 feet long; the roof has been broken in for about 9 feet; and the whole is so thickly overgrown with brambles that it is a present impossible to explore, though it can be examined at the entrances. At the northern end is another little opening 3 feet deep, with double lintels of flagstones; in its west jamb is a recess, 19 inches wide and 3 feet deep, partly filled, which may lead into a side cell.

The most northern chamber is unroofed, being 9 feet long; the sides and end wall are complete, without entrances, so it was probably entered by a trap-door in the roof from a wooden and clay house now entirely lost. The high level of the souterrain above the field and fosse seems convincing evidence that the fort was raised at different periods, and that the cells belong to the last "stratum".

Eugene O'Curry has told how the souterrain was first discovered about 1818.⁴ A cow which went up on top of the fort got one of her hind legs stuck in the ground. Its owner having failed to extricate her called in his neighbours. They then began to dig and found the cow's legs jammed between two flagstones. This led to the discovery of a passage. "They descended with lights and found the whole area composed of narrow passages crossing one another in various directions. They found nothing but some shells and bones". If O'Curry's information is correct, this indicates that there are more passages than those recorded by Westropp.

In 1835 Mary John Knott visited Kilkee and in her book, *Two Months at Kilkee*, she refers to the "fine old Danish fort" near the town.⁵ She notes not one but two openings on the south side "which lead to subterraneous chambers and occupy the interior of the centre elevation". She mentions that some time previously the neighbourhood was thrown into consternation by a ventriloquist, "who caused sounds of distress and anguish apparently to proceed from these vaults". She was also told that it was a good place to dry clothes in as nobody would dare to steal them from it because of the "spirits". For the same reason, the landlord had failed to have the mound removed, as he could not get men to work at it.

Some time after this it seems the souterrain was filled in and forgotten until rediscovered by Marcus Keane, M.R.I.A., about September 1867. Keane was a well-known land agent in West Clare, still remembered for the many evictions ordered by him. However, he was also a prominent antiquarian, and author of *The Towers and Temples of Ancient Ireland*, published in 1867.

When Keane rediscovered the opening he asked some of his workmen to clear away the earth so that they could inspect the interior, but they refused because of their fears of the fairies. A steward of Keane's eventually persuaded them to overcome their fears and they set to work with shovels and pick axes, clearing the entrance and then the chambers and passages. In all they removed sixty loads of earth and rubbish from the interior. We have this information from Maurice Lenihan who visited the site on the 8th of September, 1870, in the company of John Killeen, the steward who had supervised the operation.⁶ Killeen told him that the only objects of interest found were a very small clay pipe, a copper coin without date or inscription, and a round slender stick of sealing wax.

Lenihan entered the souterrain and we give his description of what lay beyond the first chamber for comparison purposes with Westropp's:

At the end of the cave or room, when at length it was perfectly cleared out, was discovered a large flag, and this having been removed with great difficulty, and with

⁴O'Curry, *loc. cit.*

⁵Mary John Knott, *Two Months at Kilkee*, Dublin 1836, pp.40-41.

⁶*Limerick Reporter and Tipperary Vindicator*, 9 Sept. 1870; 18 April 1882.

perseverance and labour, a narrow passage became visible, also built of masonry, and showing on either side a wall of carefully adjusted layers of stones well bonded, but without mortar. This passage has been called the "hall" since its discovery; and a very cramped and inconvenient hall it is, as we know from the experience of yesterday; it is about six feet in length, and a-half in breadth, and about three and a half feet high; it is covered over with a roofing of sand-stone flags, like the principal chamber, which we should state, is popularly called the "parlour". A second "hall" leads again to an arched room, built also in the same manner; this room, which is called the "bed-room", terminates in an apse, or semicircular bend, and is perhaps one of the most curious features in this very curious subterranean construction. This "bed-room" turns in an angle to the north-west, and is about three and a half feet high, and three feet broad; the mason work is the same throughout, well executed, but without mortar. The roof is of the same thickness and breadth as the roofing of the "hall" and "parlour". Inside this "bed-room" again is another room; but we were unable to see it; and indeed, owing to the fact that the fort since the discovery of these chambers and passages was used for some time the discovery of these chambers and passages was used for some time for very disreputable and wicked purposes by some Kilkeens, and that the opening to the principal chamber had been in consequence closed up, it was with something like difficulty we were able to see as much as we have been endeavouring to describe. It is clear, from the appearance of certain large flags and stones at the side of the chief opening, that there are other chambers within the fort; and it is believed that the interior is a labyrinth of these passages, none others of which, however, have been as yet opened up.

It does not seem possible to reconcile the descriptions given by Westropp and Lenihan. However, the room which Lenihan was unable to see is probably the same as Westropp's unroofed most northern chamber. Lenihan's description was based on internal observation of a kind which Westropp was unable to make because of roof collapse in the interviewing years. Why did this happen? In Westropp's words; "The roofs are now nearly all taken for sills and flags"⁷ In the eighty-plus years since Westropp's visit there has been little change. The first chamber is still in a good state of preservation and no further discoveries have been made.

⁷Thomas J. Westropp, "Kilkee (Co. Clare) and its Neighbourhood", *J. Nth. Munster Archaeo. Soc.*, 2 (1911 - 1913), 162.