

Famine fires alight — 150 years later

By **NORMA PRENDIVILLE**

AFTER a gap of over 150 years, smoke once again curled from the makeshift chimneys of houses on Knockfierna Hill, last weekend — the first fires to be lit within these homes since they were abandoned because of the Great Famine in the late 1840's

The fires were lit, last Saturday morning, to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the

Famine and to mark the visit of the Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach, Avril Doyle, to the Knockfierna Famine Village.

And in a manner more convincing than any exhibition or lecture, these thin, smoky fires which barely illumined the dark interiors of the cabins, with their scraw roofs and which gave out scant heat, conjured up the awfulness of life as it was lived out by our forebears in those years of horror.

Moreover, according to Knockfierna Heritage and Folk Group chairman Pat O'Donovan, the experience left a lasting impression on

Junior Minister Doyle.

"All the indications were that that she was extremely pleased with what she saw," Mr O'Donovan told the Limerick Leader this week.

Ms Doyle was invited to visit Knockfierna by the local group to assess its suitability as the official National Famine Commemoration Monument, he said.

"She really loved it," Mr O'Donovan went on.

During her three-hour visit, he continued, she visited all eight of the homes rebuilt by the Knockfierna Group, sat at their hearths and saw for herself the remains of the potato ridges and the boundary walls and paths used at the time of the Famine.

She was also told of the contemporaneous written and oral reports of the Famine as it was happening - and which left some townlands in the Ballingarry area empty of people.

Ms Doyle also met and talked with members of the Knockfierna Heritage and Folklore Group who have spearheaded the work on Knockfierna and who are seeking to have the site officially recognised.

"We would hold it is the most authentic site linked to the Famine to be found in Ireland today," argued Mr O'Donovan, who is also a member of the National Famine Commemoration Committee.

"We haven't heard or

seen anything like it."

They are now hopeful that, thanks to Ms Doyle's visit, the huge amount of work carried out on the site over the last five years, will gain wider recognition and that further work on the unique site will get official backing.

Among the issues discussed with the Minister were the relocation of the transmitters at the top of Knockfierna, the upgrading of the access road and the construction of a parking area.

Ms Doyle also visited the Rambling House, Knockfierna, where she was warmly greeted by the locals.



Group which visited the Rambling House, Knockfierna, when Minister of State Avril Doyle dropped in: Jim Lyons, Sen Dan Neville, Sen Rory Kiely, Cllr Jim Houlihan and (front) David O'Riordan, Minister Avril Doyle, Pat O' Donovan, and Michael Finucane. (C1)