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CT scan reveals innards of ancient hurling ball

■ Three Limerick hurling balls in National Museum of Ireland display

AINE FITZGERALD

A CT scan had to be performed on a Limerick hurling ball aged almost 800 years old, to find out what was inside it.

The artefact, which was uncovered in a bog near Athea, underwent the procedure ahead of a new exhibition entitled Hair hurling balls: Earliest artefacts of our National Game.

"First we x-rayed them," explained Clodagh Doyle, assistant keeper of the Irish Folklife Division at the National Museum of Ireland in Castlebar where 14 hurling balls have gone on display.

"We couldn't cut them open but we needed to find out if there was anything inside them."

Of the 14 balls, three were found in a cluster of west Limerick townlands - Glenbawn, Athea and Tooraree Lower. All the balls have been dated to the late seventeenth century or earlier. The earliest - the ball from Tooraree Lower in the parish of Kilfergus - was made in the twelfth century - over 800 years ago.

"The one from Athea," Ms Doyle explained, "was much heavier than the ball from Glenbawn even though they were both the same size."

"We couldn't understand how Athea was so heavy."

Further investigation uncovered the reason why.

"It has this big white thing in the middle of it," said Ms Doyle. "Eventually, we had to get it CT scanned in the hospital in Galway. It showed that it was bone in the inside of it."

Samples of fibres from the balls were radio-carbon dated in 2008 and 2010. The earliest date range was 1157-1227 (Tooraree Lower) and the latest was 1663-1683 (Glenbawn in the parish of Kilmoylan).

"These are the precursors to the modern leather-

covered balls," said Ms Doyle. "We don't call them sliothars because that's a much later word. And also it's more associated with the word for leather, not for hair."

One of the earliest references to hurling and hurling balls occurs in the legendary tale, Táin Bó Cúailnge, written down in the Book of Leinster around 1160. This is based on earlier legends of Cú Chulainn. The design and style of these hair hurling balls did not change over centuries until the development of the cork-filled leather sliothar.

The hurling balls in the exhibition were made from matted cow hair with a plaited horse hair covering.

"They are made out of cow hair that has been pulled off the cows' backs," said Ms Doyle. "They would have been made in the summer when the cows were shedding their hairs, by rubbing the palms of the hands down the cow. You would just start gathering hair from the body of the cow and then rolling it into a ball and making a matted ball. Using spit and hair, it will just mat together."

Recent fibre analysis showed that the hairs of the Tooraree ball were from a predominantly white piebald calf that was less than a year old. This ball was presented to the museum in June 1980 by Maurice Costello two weeks after it had been found in a turf bog on his brother Morgan Costello's land in Tooraree Lower.

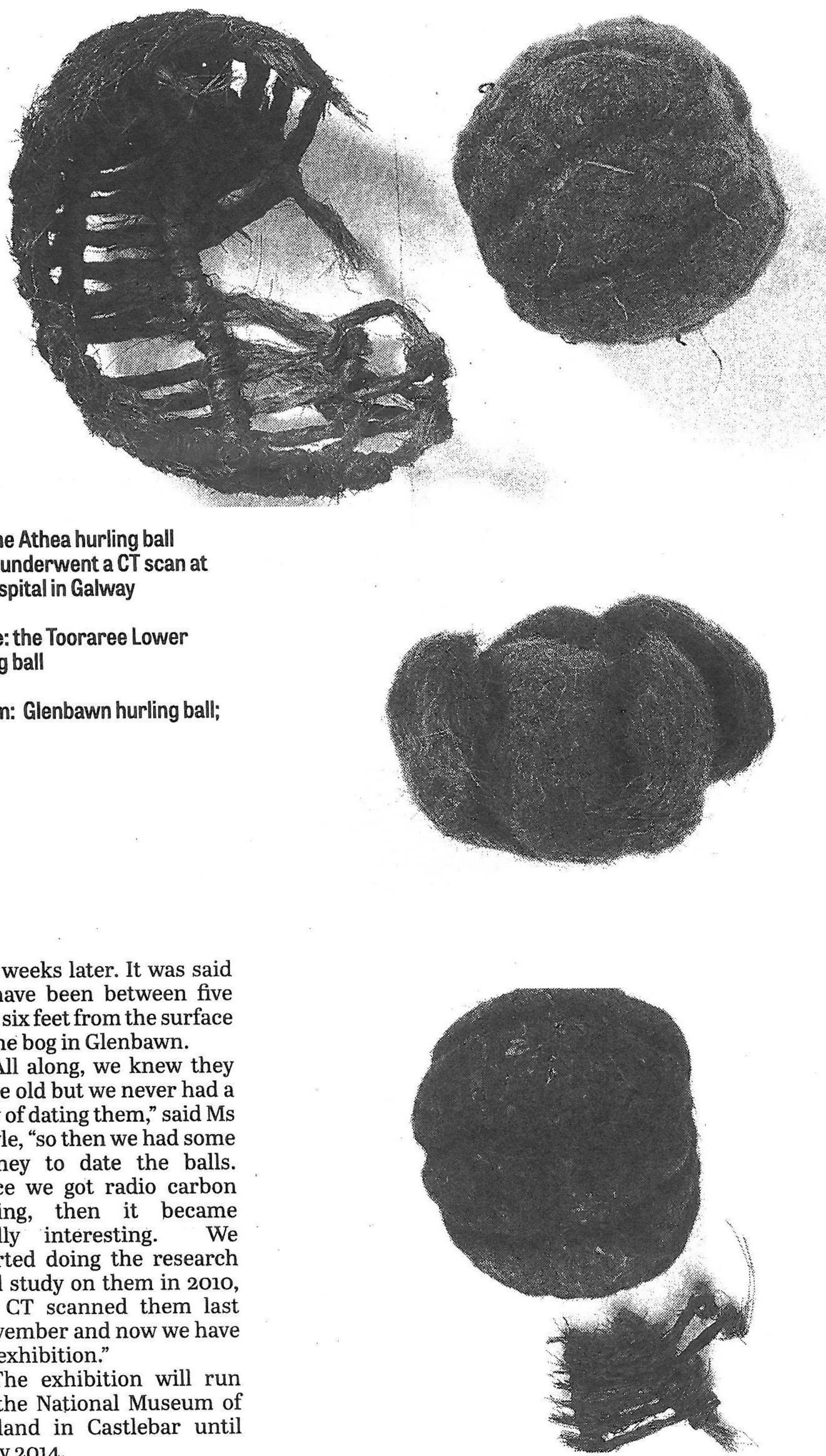
The Athea ball was found seven sods down in the bog during a turf-cutting session in a bog in Athea and acquired by the National Museum in 1954.

There was some confusion over the find details of the Glenbawn ball. The fragment of the outer cover was firstly posted to the National Museum in 1961 and the ball posted a

few weeks later. It was said to have been between five and six feet from the surface of the bog in Glenbawn.

"All along, we knew they were old but we never had a way of dating them," said Ms Doyle, "so then we had some money to date the balls. Once we got radio carbon dating, then it became really interesting. We started doing the research and study on them in 2010, we CT scanned them last November and now we have an exhibition."

The exhibition will run at the National Museum of Ireland in Castlebar until May 2014.



City and County prepares Traveller

NICK RABBITTS

LIMERICK City and County Council is preparing a joint Traveller Action Plan.

The aims of the proposal - which will be presented at next month's full council meetings - are to take into consideration the accommodation needs of the Traveller communities across Limerick.

It will include how needs assessments will be carried out on Travellers, and the types of accommodation which will be made available.

Figures presented to councillors this week show that of the 414 Traveller families in the county availing of support, more than half - 213 - were living in local authority housing.

Some 91 lived on halting sites, while 24 lived in group housing.

A further 40 lived in illegal halting sites by the sides of roads, and 45 lived in the private rental market.

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Hurling