



North Clare NEWS

With Tara King

Mystery deepens at Caherconnell

ARCHAEOLOGISTS working on the Caherconnell Ring Fort in North Clare as part of Heritage Week believe they may have uncovered a prehistoric monument previously unknown in the Burren.

The archaeology team, led by Dr Michelle Comber of NUI Galway and Graham Hull of the Crusheen-based archaeological consultants TVAS Ltd, initially set out to investigate a partially exposed dry-stone chamber next to the large stone ringfort, or cashel, at Caherconnell.

Before digging commenced, it was thought that the visible remains probably represented a souterrain – a feature normally associated with ringforts/cashels.

These were artificial underground chambers and passageways used for storage and refuge in the Early Medieval period (fifth to 12th century AD). The semi-subterranean structure at Caherconnell was exposed when its roof and part of its wall collapsed. The collapse resulted in the revelation of a souterrain-like chamber located mid-way between two cashels.

As is often the case however, further excavation began to reveal a different story. The circular dry-stone chamber exposed by the excavation team had no passageway leading from it and no artefacts of early medieval date. Instead, small stone tools of prehistoric type were recovered, suggesting the possibility of a prehistoric monument but of a type previously unknown in the Burren.

Other suggestions that have been made during the course of the excavations, which were open to the public as part of Heritage Week, included that of a sunken-floored house, a kiln, a sweat-house, and even a well.

It appears that the current investigations of the area might not be the first, with three medieval silver coins recovered from the topsoil, perhaps reflecting somewhat earlier interest in the spot.

Speaking to *The Clare Champion*, Graham Hull outlined the results of the dig.

“Part of the structure was visible from the surface and we deliberately targeted our excavation at that structure. We initially thought it was a souterrain, which is an underground chamber normally used for hiding or storing food but then as the dig went on, we realised it wasn’t a souterrain chamber.

“This makes things in some way more interesting because now it’s a mystery.

“It may be a prehistoric burial chamber. We did find the skeletal remains of three or four pigs. We hope to know what the structure is by the time the dig is finished.

“If there are human remains there, there is no doubt that they will be ancient, possibly thousands of years old. We do hope that the structure is something unique. We spoke to Dr Coleton Jones of NUIG, who is an expert on burial chambers in the Burren, and he said he had never seen anything like it in the Burren before.

“Assuming there is human

remains present there – and bear in mind there might not be anything there at all – they should be in good condition regardless of the length of time they have been there.

“There has always been good preservation in the Burren. From the dig, we found two silver coins earlier in the week and a third coin later in the week. The third coin was an Elizabeth I silver six pence from the late 16th century.”

The team of archaeologists will be returning to the site this weekend (September 6-7) to investigate the basal deposits within the chamber to uncover the true identity of the structure.

Visitors are welcome to view the excavation work taking place on the site.



Archaeologist Pawel Pobudkiewicz takes calculations at the Caherconnell Stone Fort.

Photograph by Declan Monaghan