

CAVE NOTES: COUNTY MAYO, IRELAND

by

JACOB PODESTA

ABSTRACT

Following the 2012 visit, when wet conditions rendered many of the caves inaccessible or dangerous (Hadfield, 2013), a UBSS team visited Co. Mayo again, focusing mainly on the area in and around Cong. The caves visited are described, and new surveys are presented.

INTRODUCTION

It has been decided to release an updated and extended edition of the book, *The Caves of County Clare and South Galway* (Mullan, 2003), with additional sections on the caves of the north of Galway and of Co. Mayo in time for the Society's centenary in 2019. The majority of the new sites are in the Cong area and two visits have so far been conducted by members of the Society, with further visits planned. The notes from the second of these trips are presented below, along with information on Quealy's Cave, kindly provided by Tony Boycott and Pat Cronin.

By linking this work with other information on the caves around Cong it is hoped that a more comprehensive overview of the region can be produced, allowing future efforts to be better directed. Complete surveys have been produced of Wolves' Hole, Priest's Hole, Lady's Buttery, Horse Discovery and Bunnadober Lake Cave. With the exception of Priest's Hole, which has no accessible water and no diving potential, all these caves have been surveyed up to the start of the diving lines in the hope being that survey data collected for the dry sections of caves can ultimately be linked with data from surveys of the dived sections. A detailed survey of the entrance and main chamber of Pigeon Hole was also carried out, however, the sheer length and complexity of the passage in the 1970s extension made it impossible to make anything other than a rudimentary survey describing the approximate extent of passage past this point in the time available. This cave therefore needs visiting again during future expeditions. Location data for several other caves has been obtained, so they can be investigated further in the future. In addition, access arrangements for Ballymaglancy Cave were investigated.

These notes are organised into three sections: caves in the grounds of Ashford Castle, caves in the Pigeon Hole Woods and finally other caves in outlying areas.

Location data for the entrances is provided. Latitude and longitude are given to provide a universally convertible location, and ITM (Irish Transverse Mercator) is shown for compatibility with maps and global positioning systems. Where ITM co-ordinates are listed, the easting is written first and the northing second.

Much work remains to be done. The area to the west of Clonbur described by Coleman (1955, 1965) and revisited by Farrant (1990) need to be checked and have the site locations recorded, for example. Many other known cave sites across the isthmus also need to be checked and described, including the numerous small fissures near the canal listed by Drew (1987).

As part of this work, a bibliography of all known references to the caves of the area has been compiled by Tony Boycott and a comprehensive database of known sites has also

been produced. These are to be incorporated in the wider resources on Irish caves available on the Society's website at www.ubss.org.uk.

In the accounts of the caves given below, estimated lengths only include dived sumps when data is not available.



Figure 1. *The caves in the area around Cong. 1: Ellechrissaun Spring, 2: Church Cave, 3: Horse Discovery, 4: Lady's Buttery, 5: Pigeon Hole, 6: Priest's Hole, 7: Wolves' Hole, 8: Teach Aille, 9: Dog's Cave, 10: The Lost World, 11: Ballymaglancy Cave, 12: Quealy's Cave. For sites near Bunnadober Lake Cave see Figure 11.*

© OpenStreetMap contributors

HYDROLOGY AND GEOLOGY

This section relies on the account given in Drew and Daly (1993). The isthmus separating Loughs Mask and Corrib ranges in width between 3 and 6 km. To the west of Clonbur, non-limestone Silurian rocks occupy the full width, but to the east, these older rocks form a narrow band outcropping on the northern shore of Lough Corrib and extending to just east of Cong. The remainder of the area is underlain almost entirely by highly karstified limestone. Between Lough Mask and Cong, the dip of the limestone is generally 1-5° to the south-east. In the vicinity of Cong the dip direction is reversed and steeper (10-15°) and thus there is a slight syncline. Well-defined north-south and east-west joint sets are apparent throughout the area and many small faults oriented north-south occur on the southern shore of Lough Mask near the entrance to the Cong Canal.

To the west of Clonbur, there are a series of sinks which take water from the older rocks. This flows northwards and risings can be found which drain into Lough Mask, although no tracing has been carried out to confirm if these connect. East of Clonbur, the Ballymaglancy stream also sinks at the edge of the limestone. This rises, once more, at the end of the cave but soon sinks again into a further cave which has, as yet, only been followed for some 20 m. The water was said to eventually rise at Ellechrissaun Spring in the vicinity of Cong and to flow en route, through the Pigeon Hole group of caves (see below). Detailed dye tracing was carried out here in the early 1970s but although some positive traces were mentioned by Gilhuys and Parker (1972), according to David Drew (*pers. comm.*) this work did not, in fact, produce any convincing positive traces and so was never published. Unfortunately, the comment by Gilhuys and Parker thus became, by default, the primary reference as it was published. It is now clear that no successful tracing has yet been carried out here.

The main drainage in the area comes from numerous sinks close to the southern shore of Lough Mask which feed the major risings in the centre of Cong. These have been investigated by divers and details may be found in Farr (2013). No above water caves of any great extent have been found associated with this drainage, as yet. The recently discovered Quealy's Cave (see below) demonstrates that potential does exist, however.

The final group of caves investigated, so far, are located in the grounds of Ashford Castle, immediately south of Cong. Although these, too, contain flowing water and have been shown by dye tracing to be linked, neither the origin nor the eventual destination of the water is yet known.

ASHFORD CASTLE CAVES

CHURCH CAVE

N53°32'19.6 W09°17'3.2 (ITM: 514875, 755082)

Length: 160 m Depth: 4 m Altitude: 12 m.

Church Cave can easily be reached from Cong village by walking into the rear entrance of the grounds of Ashford Castle, up the track past the Church of Ireland building and left down into the canal, on foot. Passing the church on the left, where the road turns to the right, there is a path straight ahead into the wood. Follow this until a stone wall with a doorway is reached. Climb down into the dry canal bed and turn back along the canal in the direction of the village. The entrance, a roughly 8 m by 3 m hole once blocked by a wall, is very obvious on the left side in line with the Church. This cave in is briefly mentioned by Coleman (1955) but cavers from the Shannon group found and surveyed an extension in 2010, bringing the length of the cave to 160 m (Barry and Kennedy, 2010).

HORSE DISCOVERY

N53°32'20.0 W09°16'59.0 (ITM: 514952, 755070)

Length: 100 m (est.) Depth: 4 m Altitude: 15 m.

The cave is surrounded by a low section of drystone wall. The cave is at the bottom of a fairly steep and muddy slope. The entrance itself is wide and is a junction for three passages. The first is a small, low passage descending a little way immediately on the right. The second is a short section of flooded passage ending in a sump straight ahead and the third, the main route, is to the left, opening into a large chamber.

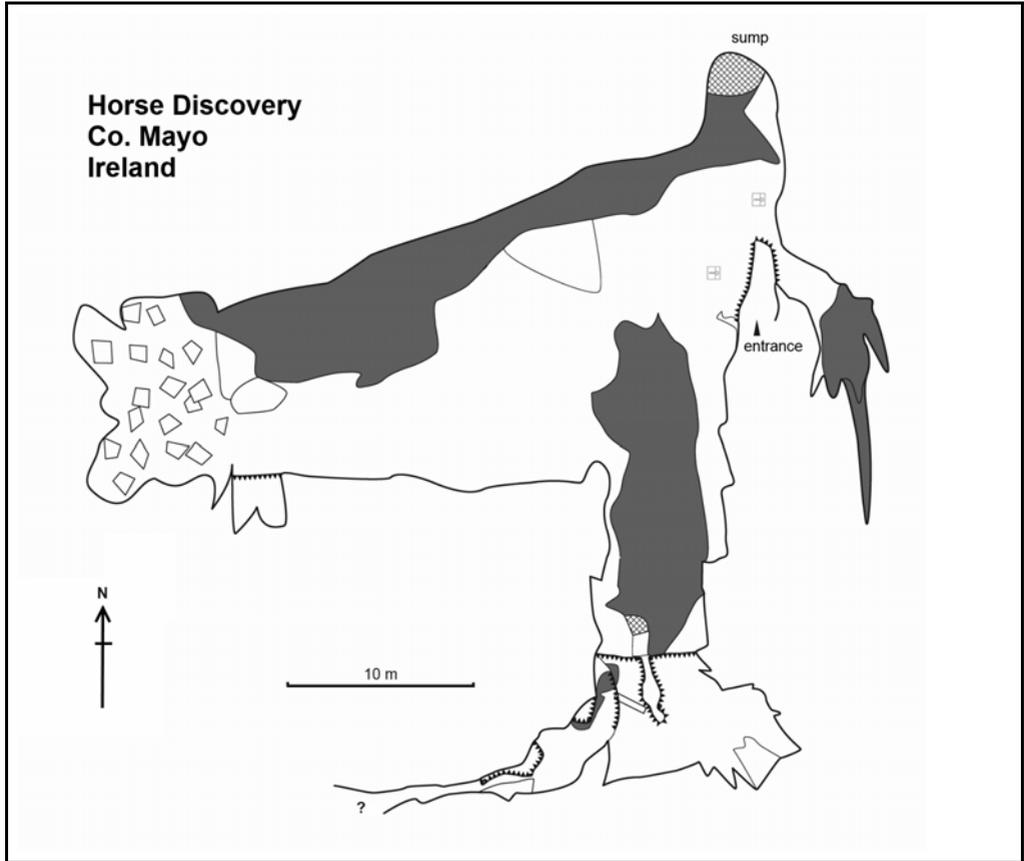


Figure 2. *Plan survey of Horse Discovery.*

Water flows from the first sump and follows the wall opposite the entrance into the main chamber, where it disappears under boulders and exits through a small gap in the back wall of the cave. This has been dye-tested to Lady's Buttery (Gilhuys and Parker, 1972). This body of water supports a surprisingly large population of fish and the bed of the lake is heavily silted. Facing into the main chamber from just inside the entrance, a deep isolated pool can be seen to the left, with numerous stalactites on the ceiling. On the far side of this pool, a muddy slope joins the ceiling to create a crawl, which has a small chimney above containing some white calcite formations. Down the slope to the right of this, a washed-in log partially blocks the entrance to a low and watery rift, which holds a potential lead, blocked only by loose rocks. A dive line leads into this pool, meeting the one leading from the sump. From this point, it is necessary to take a high muddy crawl to avoid damaging delicate calcite deposits on the surface of many of the boulders, which form a divide between the two sections of the main chamber. From here, the water disappears into the back wall where it meets the line of boulders. The chamber quickly tapers and rises to the end of the cave, a couple of metres ahead.

LADY'S BUTTERY

N53°32'22.4 W09°16'58.2 (ITM: 514969, 755167)

Length: 360 m (est) Depth: ? m Altitude: 15 m.

If facing the golf green from the Ashford Castle car park, Lady's Buttery is in a depression in the woods to the left.

A readily accessible entrance chamber quickly splits, with flooded passage on the right and a slightly larger flooded chamber on the left. This has been dye-tested to Horse Discovery (Gilhuys and Parker, 1972). From this chamber, a streamway can be followed roughly due south, marked by a dive line, and is more usually submerged. Alternatively, a comfortable rift in the ceiling leads to an adjacent passage. This runs parallel to the streamway for a short distance until both join at a large junction. From here, a narrow crawl in the right-hand wall is marked by dried crystal pools and abundant straws. This has not been surveyed as further progress would risk damaging formations on the floor. Following the main passage from the junction leads into water of swimming depth, observed to be sumped on a previous visit, and from there the cave opens into a larger passage parallel to the higher route. According to Gilhuys and Parker (1972), this section continues for almost 50 m and human remains were found at the end of the passage. They also reported impressive overhead calcite formations roughly halfway along the passage.

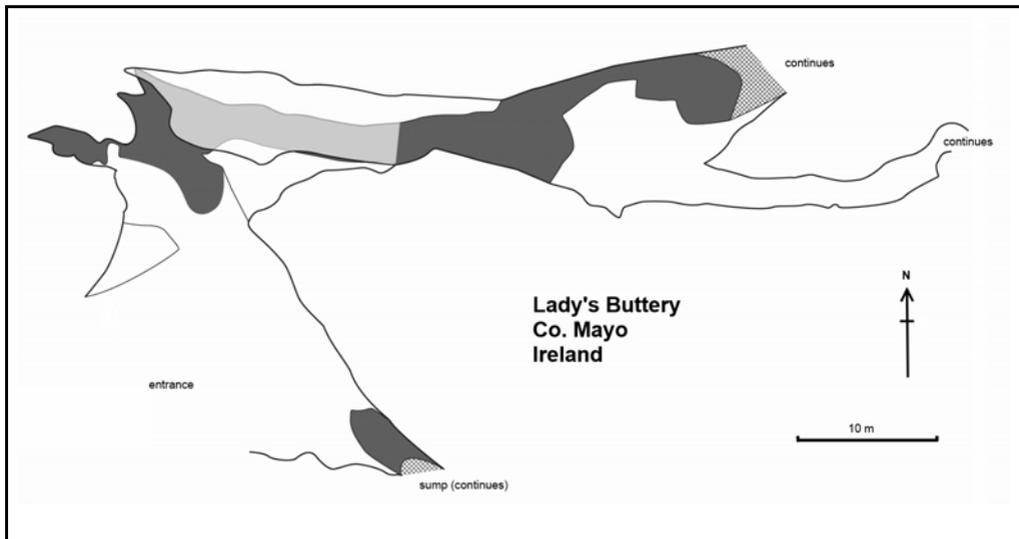


Figure 3. Plan survey of Lady's Buttery.

PIGEON HOLE WOOD CAVES**PIGEON HOLE**

N53°32'31.6 W09°18'24.5 (ITM: 513385, 755480)

Length: 750 m (Est) Depth: 55 m Altitude: 27 m.

The cave is located at the far end of Pigeon Hole Wood ,from the centre of Cong village, and can be easily found by following the ‘Pigeon Hole Loop’ walk. No permission is required to access the cave.

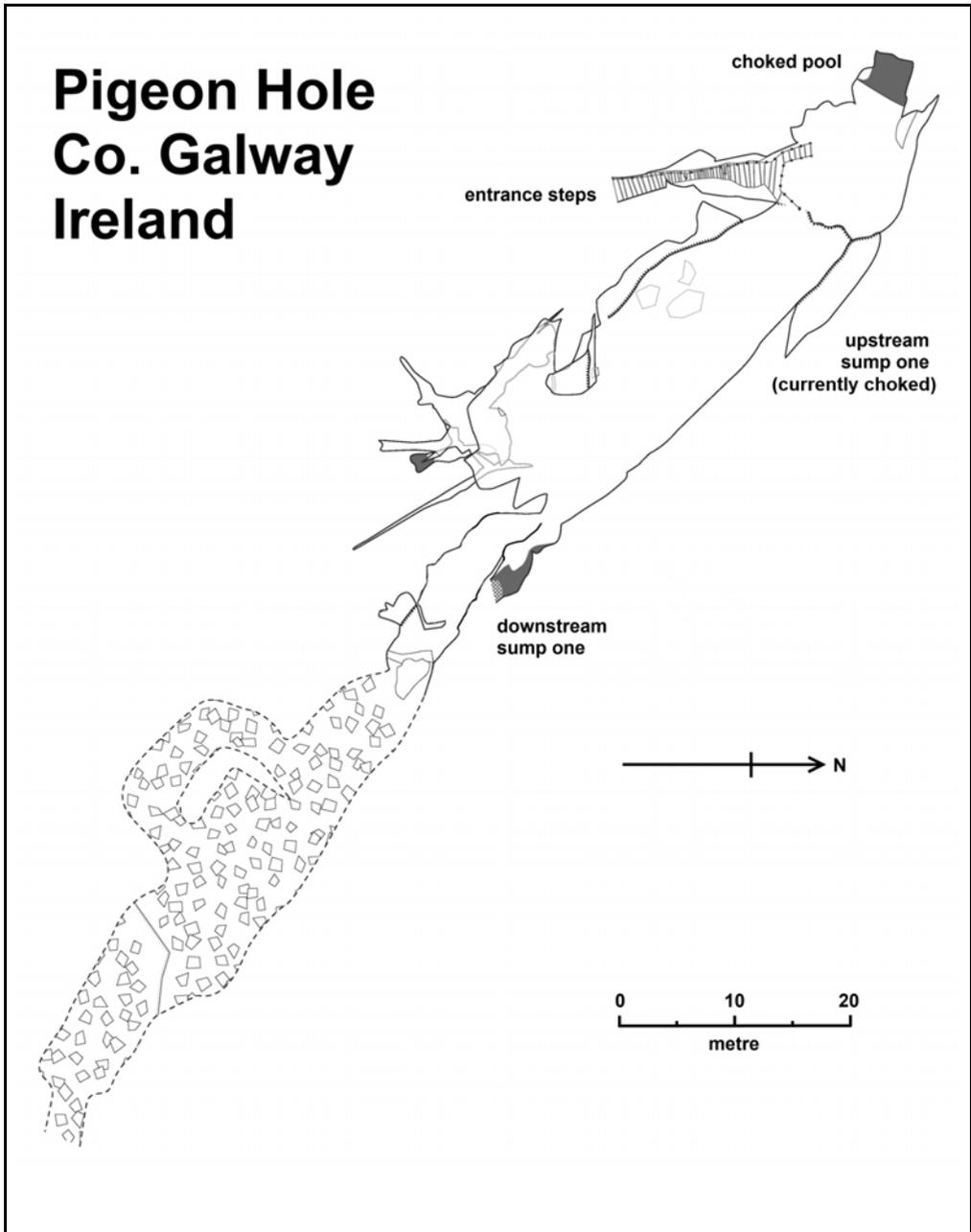


Figure 4. *Plan survey of Pigeon Hole.*

Pigeon Hole, well-known locally, is marked by a surrounding fence and permanently railed stairs accessible from the Cong nature trail. It is thought that Priest's Hole and other sinkholes in the area (such as Pseudo Priest's Hole) follow the continuation of the stream in Pigeon Hole (Coleman, 1955). A set of steps leads down into the cave. From the bottom, the cave appears to progress down a slope to the left, but this quickly ends in a flooded boulder choke. The main passage extends to the right, beginning with a very large boulder-strewn chamber. The boulders present many apparent routes on, but most do not go very far, and higher water conditions would reduce their accessibility. One exception to this is a loop extending from a sizeable cavity in the boulders accessed by a short climb down more or less centrally



Figure 5. *The Main Chamber in Pigeon Hole.*

Photo: Stuart Alldred.

in the back of the main chamber. An easily missed route from here, back in the direction of the entrance, leads to a short climb up and out, high into the main chamber. The dive line and 1970's extension, first described by Gilhuys and Farrell in dry conditions in 1970 (Gilhuys and Parker, 1972), can be found at the back of the chamber on the left hand side. This involves a small climb into a bedding plane above the dive line, which quickly emerges in a chamber full of large boulders. This presents several routes onwards, as well as several loops that leave the chamber. Eventually a flat-out crawl, very muddy when visited, can be entered in low water conditions by clambering through a small vertical rift at the back of the cave, which continues for a short distance before becoming too tight for further progress to be made. The underwater sections have been extensively explored by Martyn Farr and collaborators, with the upstream sump being discovered by Farr in 2006 (Farr, 2013).

Pigeon Hole was surveyed completely up to the dive line, and a skeleton survey produced of the 70s extension to demonstrate the full length of passage. Due to time constraints, a detailed survey of this section could not be produced on this visit.

THE PRIEST'S HOLE

N53°32'29.4 W09°18'20.4 (ITM: 513460, 755411)

Length: 8 m Depth: 2 m Altitude 27 m.

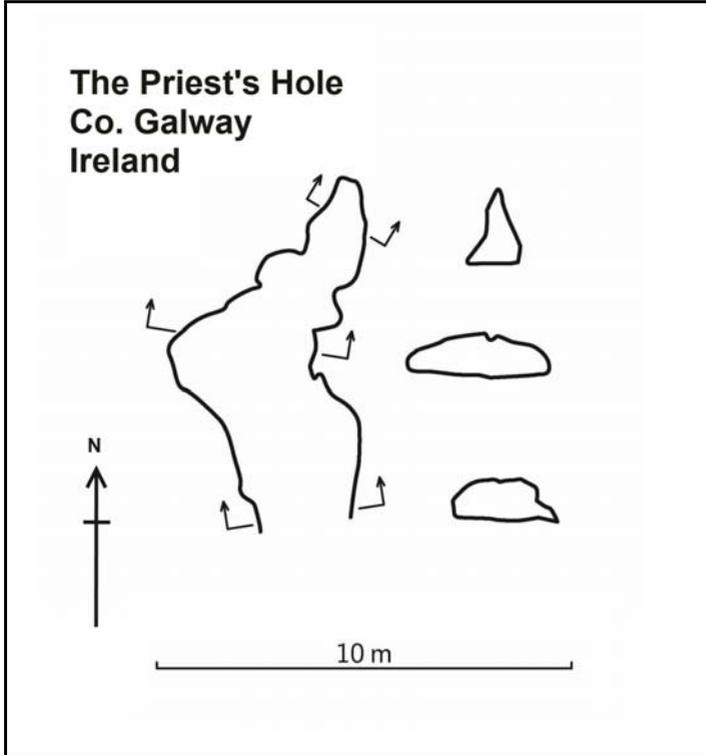


Figure 6. Plan survey of *The Priest's Hole*.

This cave is located just along the higher path from Pigeon Hole, back towards the village. It is sign posted, and mentioned in several leaflets about the area. It is a very short cave (8 m), which nonetheless has some quite pretty calcite formations at the end. The initial section is relatively wide and low, and is followed by a small sub-chamber of stooping height. Coleman (1955) claimed that, after a period of high rainfall, the water of the stream from Pigeon Hole could be heard from this point. Whilst the small fissure at the end of the cave lends this some credibility, no water is actually accessible in this cave.

WOLVES' HOLE

N53°32'27.5 W09°18'13.7 (ITM: 513582, 755350)

Length: 330 m (Est) Depth: not estimated Altitude: 27 m.

Wolves' Hole can be found just off the path near Priest's Hole and Pigeon Hole. After leaving Priest's Hole, continue along the path towards Cong, and when the path takes a sharp left, climb up into the woodland on the left and follow parallel to the path, approximately 5 m from it. Although this cave is open access, towards the end of our visit, we encountered workmen constructing a fence around the entrance to the cave apparently in response to an injury that had occurred there several weeks before. They seemed accepting of the idea of

access to the cave for cavers and made concessions to the positioning of the fence, allowing the ladder to be rigged.

The entrance is an open slope and drop from the surface. A ladder is needed for the 10 m hole and a 15 m one is recommended, to enable the slope towards the pitch to be safely negotiated). There are two nearby trees that can safely be used for rigging from. The main chamber contains of a large rock pile in the centre, littered with old dog bones (as well as some complete skeletons). These were originally thought to be wolf bones, leading to the naming of the cave, but were shown to be dogs by Harrington (1973). Overhead, there are some very large, white calcite formations.

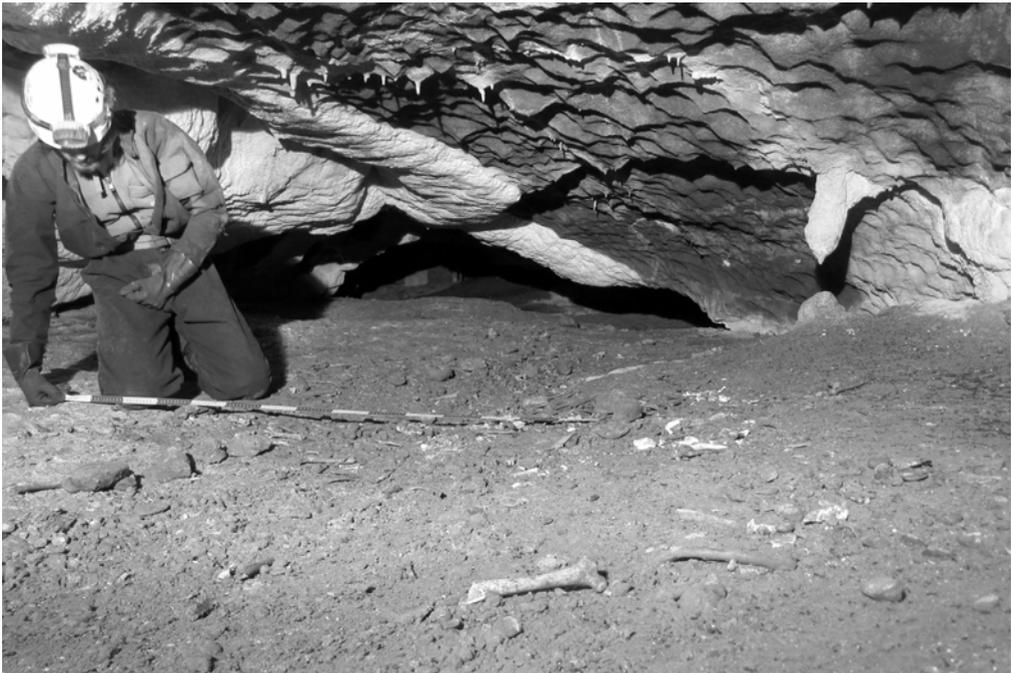


Figure 7. *Surveying amongst the bones in Wolves' Hole.*

Photo: Stuart Alldred.

The upper passage from the chamber is a straight, stooping section, with a small white chamber at the end. This area is littered with bones, some of which are partially encrusted with calcite. At the bottom of the rock pile in the main chamber is a water channel of unknown depth, which it is advisable to traverse. This joins up with a third exit from the main chamber, a small hole littered with rubble. This route continues down left, past a dive line heading right. The passage is low and wide, with a pebbled floor and some boulders. This can be followed though shallow still water pools to a small 'wall'. There the water becomes deep and fast-flowing, and a dive line extends upstream. There is also a rift in the ceiling just before the flowing water, which can entered. From there, a crawling height passage doubles back for a short distance to a 'calcite showroom'. This climb was not attempted as there are a lot of large, loose, apparently unstable rocks in the rift directly above.

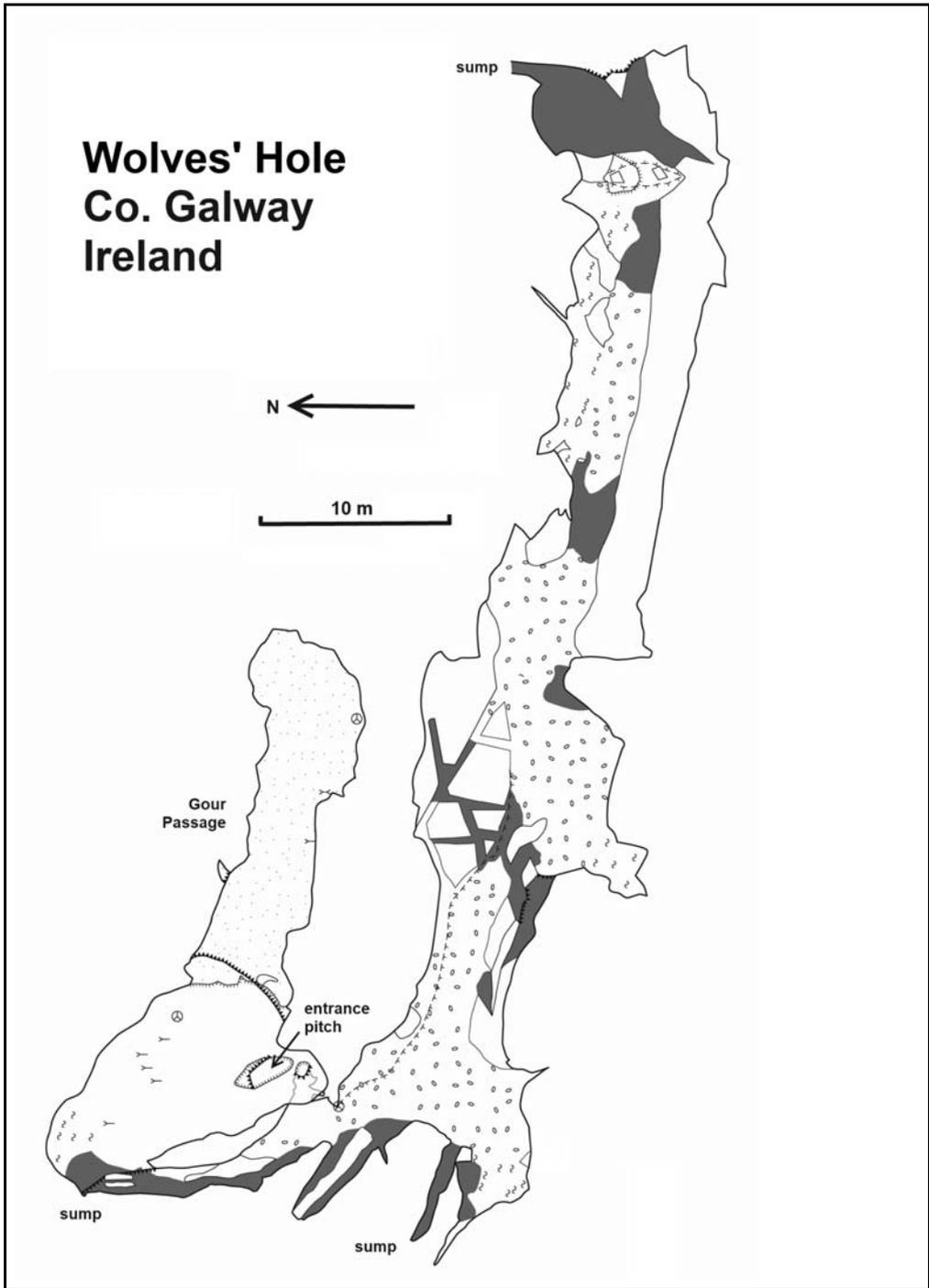


Figure 8. Plan survey of Wolves' Hole.

TEACH AILLE

N53°32'18.9 W09°17'35.7 (ITM: 514277, 755072)

Altitude: 15 m.

This cave is sign posted down an obvious and short offshoot of the Pigeon Hole Loop, very near the start of the trail (following the trail anticlockwise from the village). Steps lead down from a fence, which has a large 'No Access' sign, into a roomy section of passage. A small stream on one side flows into a passage which lowers and soon becomes impenetrable. Following the water upstream leads to a sump, on the right, and a dangerous loose choke, on the left.

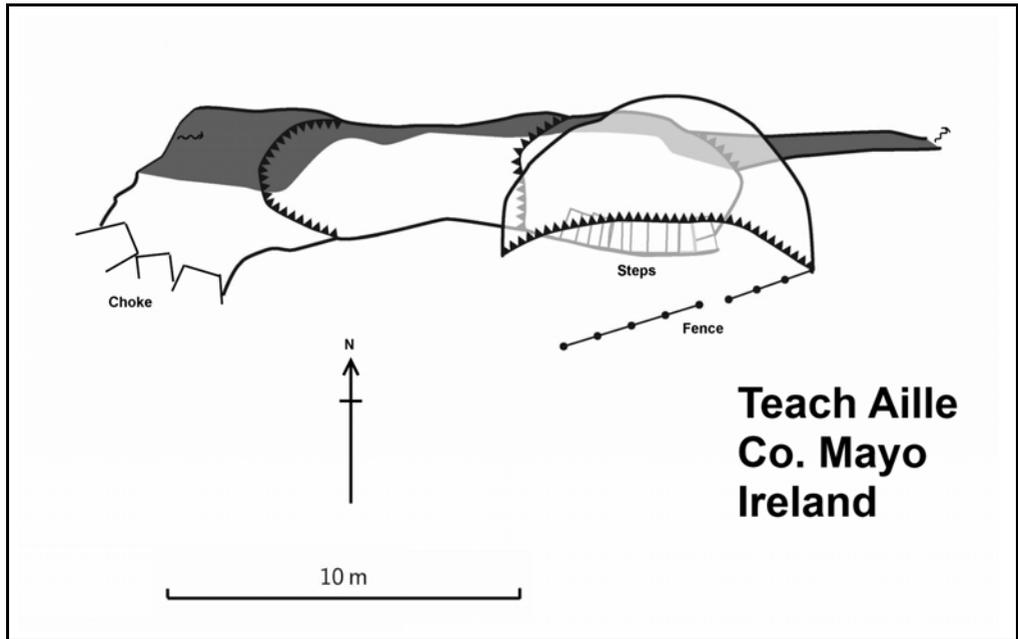


Figure 9. *Plan survey of Teach Aille.*

DOG'S CAVE

N53°32'30.0 W09°17'59.4 (ITM: 513847, 755423)

Located further along the Pigeon Hole Loop from Teach Aille, a sign points to the entrance. Like all the caves on the Pigeon Hole loop, it is open access. A hole in the rocks, visible from the path across a small pool, opens into a small boulder choke with a short squeeze into a second opening. Looking up, a second entrance can be seen.

OTHER CAVES

LOST WORLD

N53°32'36.8 W09°16'59.1 (ITM: 514961, 755612)

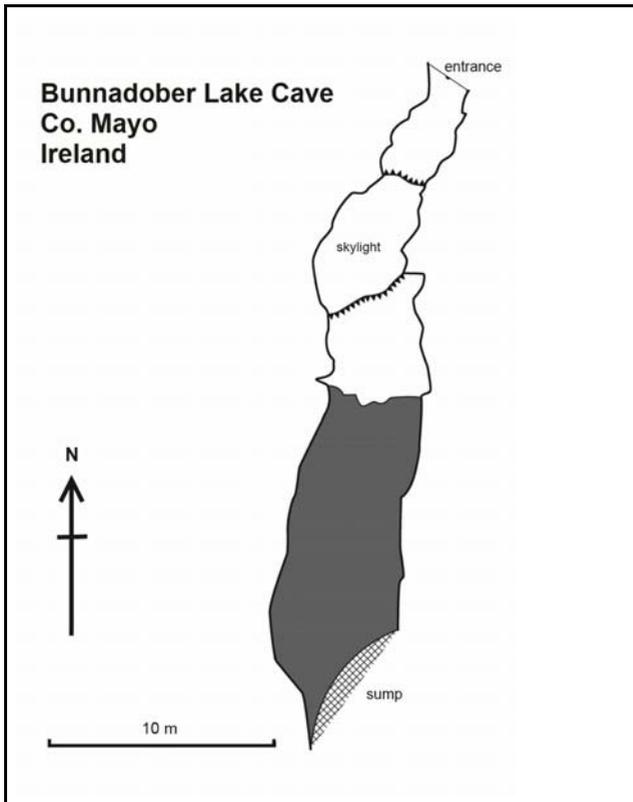
Lost World is very tricky to find, as the only entrance is a low crawl, roughly 10 m long, hidden by bushes on east bank of the usually dry streambed heading north out of the village. This enters a large collapsed cavern, overhung with trees, which is sumped to the north and south. There is a small crawl on the eastern wall of Lost World that leads to a third sump (Farr, 2013). The northern sump leads to a dive on the left and into a smaller collapsed cavern to the right, which can be viewed from above by climbing to the level of the former roof of the cavern and walking around to be above the northern sump.

BUNNADOBER LAKE CAVE

N53°36'17.1 W09°15'28.6 (ITM: 516747, 762392)

Length: 65 m Depth: 28 m Altitude: 30 m.

The land owner has changed since Farr first dived and described this cave in 1983 (Farr, 2013), but there seem to be no difficulties in gaining access. The entrance can be found just below the fence which prevents access to the large hole in the ceiling. The gate is



extremely difficult to open, but can be easily climbed over. A small section of cave can be followed, until it sumps into a large, still, green-tinted pool. The green colouration was almost certainly the result of a dye-trace from Kilglassan sink (ITM 527489 764752), in a turlough in the area east of Ballinrobe, which was undertaken on August 28th 2013, 22 days before our visit. The trace gave a positive at the main Bunnadober spring (ITM 516717 762561) after 9-16 days and also at Cregduff spring (ITM 522240 763284), thus demonstrating a connection. These sites and also Bunnadober Cave, a 100 m long crawl which we have yet to investigate, are shown on the map in Figure 11.

Figure 10. Plan survey of Bunnadober Lake Cave.



Figure 11. Sites mentioned in the text near Ballinrobe. 1: Bunnadober Cave, 2: Bunnadober Spring, 3: Bunnadober Lake Cave, 4: Cregduff Spring, 5: Kilglassan Sink.

© OpenStreetMap contributors

QUEALY'S CAVE

N53°33'28.2 W09°20'5.92 (ITM: 511551, 757264)

Length: 122 m Depth: 4 m Altitude: 26 m.

A number of flood sinks combine beneath a low bluff within Ballykine Forest, at the southern end of Lough Mask. Park in the tiny lay-by on the Cong to Clonbur road at ITM 511342 756218 and walk north, through the forestry gate opposite, along a wide forestry track for 900 m to a T-junction. Follow the overgrown track straight ahead for 150 m until it begins to descend a minor slope, the main cave entrances, labelled 1 and 2, are half way down this minor slope in a small dell on the right, in a low moss-covered bluff. From the main entrance, two parallel rifts join the passage from the second entrance, and continue separately and rejoin after 4m. To the left, a low, sinuous crawling passage leads to two too-tight entrances. The right leads to a 2 m drop to a pool with choked outlet. The water level of the pool has varied from 0 to 3 m between each visit, in relation to the adjacent lake. Traversing over the pool leads to a further rift with daylight entering from a narrow fissure, left is a wide muddy crawl passing several cross rifts to a mud choke. This was passed by utilising a garden rake to enter the continuation of the low, wide bedding plane, irregularly supported by limestone pillars. After 14 m no further progress could be made, but a further 14 m can be seen, leading into an area where the bedding plane widens significantly. The passage here is approximately 8 m wide and 25 cm high.

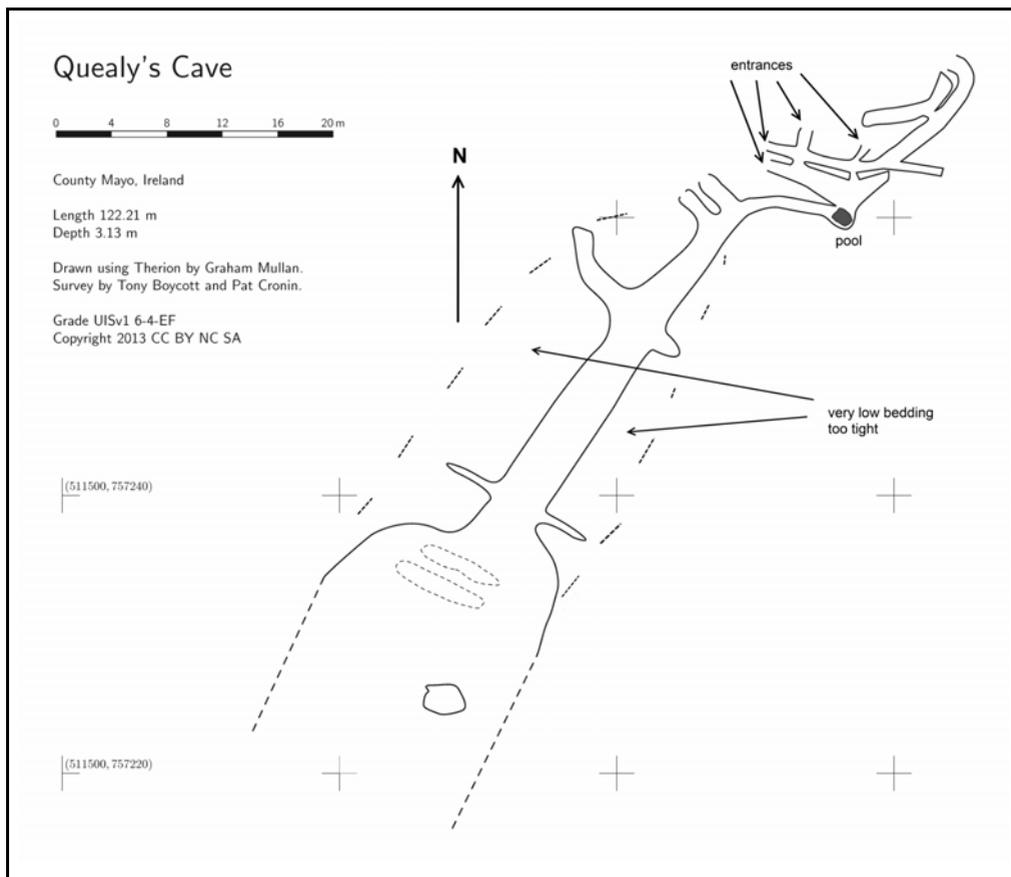


Figure 12. *Plan Survey of Quealy's Cave.*

CONCLUSION

Whilst much work was completed, many more avenues of further work were identified, including exploration of various leads, connecting the cave entrances of Lady's Buttery and Horse Discovery, and extending some of the partial surveys produced. The section of Wolves' Hole rendered inaccessible by the dangerous overhanging rubble could potentially be made safe, allowing the calcite chamber to be surveyed. Additionally, the survey of the 1970s extension in Pigeon Hole remains relatively undetailed, and would benefit from further work. Pigeon Hole, Priest's Hole and Wolves' Hole have been surveyed from entrance to entrance, allowing them to be placed accurately in relation to one another, and the same thing could be done to the caves in the grounds of Ashford Castle. Further surveying is needed in the caves of Ashford Castle, as well as additional surveying in Church Cave and exploring the lead in Horse Discovery. From speaking to some of the few cavers in the area, mostly at the Petersburg centre names and rough directions to other caves in the area (e.g. Cat's Hole, also known as Pollnagot) have been obtained. It was advice such as this that led to Church Cave. It is hoped that contact with the Petersburg centre will provide useful information for future expeditions.

ACCESS

ASHFORD CASTLE CAVES:

These are located within the grounds of Ashford Castle, Cong. Whilst all the caves lie within the grounds, and it is important, therefore, to call at the hotel to ask permission, access is not likely to be an issue as the manager at the time of our visit was very accommodating. Parking for Lady's Buttery and Horse Discovery is available next to a large shed just off the golf course. This can be reached by driving through the main gate, following the road and turning right into the car park before the castle bridge. At the back is a staff only area, follow that road round to the right and through the woods for some distance. A large shed is eventually reached, and there is ample parking nearby. Church Cave is best accessed by parking in the village of Cong and entering the grounds by the village entrance just past the Church of Ireland. Current permission has been arranged through Catherine Kenny, room division manager. (Tel: 353 (0) 949546003, email: catherinekenny@ashford.ie, website: www.ashford.ie).

PIGEON HOLE LOOP CAVES

The Pigeon Hole Loop is a circular walk through the Pigeon Hole Wood, which starts and finishes in the village of Cong. Many of the caves in the wood, notably Pigeon Hole itself and Teach Aille, are sign posted from the path and visits are not just possible but actively encouraged. The only access issue that we encountered in this area was the erection of a new fence around Wolves' Hole, seemingly in response to a recent incident. However, as noted above this did not seem to preclude caving access and the fence was re-sited in order to facilitate our rigging of the entrance pitch.

BALLYMAGLANCY CAVE:

N53°32'12.2 W09°20'16.1 (ITM: 511320, 754920)

This cave was surveyed in 2012 (Hadfield, 2013). It is located at the end of a short section of surface stream to the north of the owner's cottage. The landowner is Kathleen Moran. Whilst the access arrangements for this cave remain unconfirmed, the Petersburg centre, an outdoors centre in the area (<http://www.petersburg.ie/>), has arranged access for their own activities. The cave is not open access, but we have been down several times without problems. (Tel: 353 (0) 94 9546723 / 353 (0) 87 2704187).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The members of the expedition, Stuart Alldred, Cameron Bullen, Simon Hadfield, Adam Henry, Anya Keatly, Jacob Podesta, Rosie Tullock and Alice Whale are grateful to the Tratman Fund of the University of Bristol and the Oliver Lloyd Memorial Fund for financial assistance. Thanks also go to Tony Boycott and Pat Cronin for providing survey data and a description of Quealy's Cave and to Dave Drew for much additional information.

REFERENCES

BARRY, P. and KENNEDY, A. 2010. Church Cave, Co. Mayo. *Irish Speleology*. **19**. 44-45.

- COLEMAN, J.C. 1955. Caves in the Cong Area of Galway and Mayo. *Irish Geography*. **3**. 94-106.
- COLEMAN, J.C. 1965. *The Caves of Ireland*. Tralee. Anvil Books.
- DREW, D.P. 1987. Karst and Hydrology of the Lough Mask – Lough Corrib Isthmus. *Irish Speleology*. **4**. 1. 5-8.
- DREW, D. and DALY, D. 1993. *Groundwater and Karstification in mid-Galway, South Mayo and North Clare*. Joint Report by Department of Geography, TCD and Geological Survey of Ireland, Report Series RS 93/3 (Groundwater), 86pp.
- FARR, M. 2013. *Classic Darksite Diving*. Abergavenny, Wild Places.
- FARRANT, A.R. 1990. Ireland 1990 (Co. Mayo, Co. Galway and Co. Clare). *Newsletter of the University of Bristol Spelæological Society*. **6**. 3. 14-17.
- GILHUYS, D. and PARKER, R. 1972. Caves in the Cong Area. *Irish Speleology*. **2**. 2. 19-31.
- HADFIELD, S. 2013. Cave Notes: County Mayo, Ireland. *Proceedings of the University of Bristol Spelæological Society*. **26**. 1. 101-104.
- HARRINGTON, R. 1973 Identification of Canid Skulls from a West of Ireland Cave. *Irish Speleology*. **2**. 2. 31-32.
- MULLAN, G.J. (Ed.) 2003. *Caves of County Clare and South Galway*. Bristol. University of Bristol Spelæological Society.

Jacob Podesta
University of Bristol
Spelaeological Society
jacobpodesta29@gmail.com