Digging into the Past

Preserving Irelands Cultural Heritage through Cave Exploration

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EVERY BONE TELLS A STORY

INTRODUCTION

CAVE ARCHEOLOGY AND EXPLORATION

Caves exude an air of mystery and wonder and have a hold on our imaginations. Every culture and religion has this association with caves, and nowhere is this truer than in Ireland, a land steeped in myth and folklore.

Caves have been used for millennia as both places of refuge and sacred spaces, and Ireland's cultural heritage is often intrinsically tied to these places.

Caves have significantly contributed to our understanding of past peoples and landscapes, with recent archaeological research from a number of caves drastically altering our knowledge of human and animal habitation in Ireland, and future work expected to advance the scientific record even further.

PRIMARY GOALS

A cavers handbook outlining technical guidance on how to proceed with cave exploration when there is the potential for archaeological finds within a cave, is outlined in this document. This handbook will specifically target how to identify areas of heritage potential within a cave and what to do if cavers find sediments that may have archaeological value. Ireland has a high number of caves where archaeological finds have been made and this number continues to grows as cave exploration continues. To ensure that we protect our heritage when exploring, and especially when digging, it is important to build close relationships between the caving and scientific communities in Ireland.

AREAS OF FOCUS

To ‘push’ a cave the removal of sediment is often necessary. This can disturb archaeological material that may be in the cave, so it is important to ask some basic questions.

Perhaps the first thing which may indicate the archaeological potential of a cave site is the type of cave in question.

Is the cave entrance in a cliff which may have been known locally for centuries?

Has the cave entrance been subjected to erosion possibly by glacial action or later collapse?

Cave entrances can recede so archaeological material may be deposited some distance in front of the present entrance. Collapse can also conceal past entrances that may have been used by ancient people.

How accessible is the cave? Would the entrance have been easily visible, and would it have been easy to enter in the past?

People used caves in the past for many purposes – shelter, burial places etc. - and deposited materials there. Sometimes, bones or other evidence, as well as rocks and other sediments, have been transported by water flows a long way from their point of origin within a cave. Flowstones can grow around ancient surfaces and preserve bones and artefacts.

What kind of deposits are you walking on and seeing in the cave?

Where could they have come from?

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW

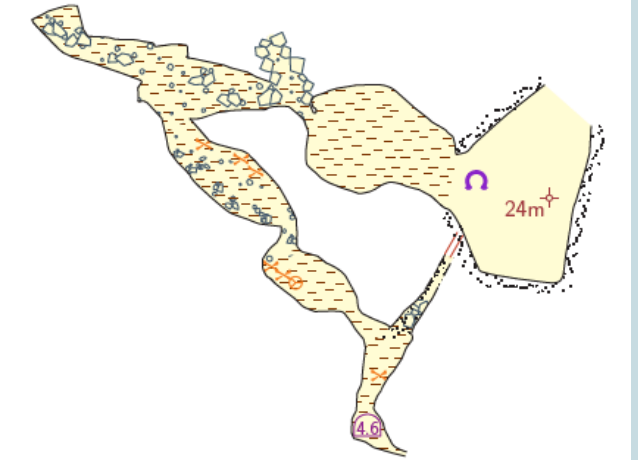
Artefacts, bones or microscopic environmental evidence are generally found within a matrix of other materials, which can provide information about the climate, vegetation types, tree cover and average temperatures of the environment, so the recording of those materials and of the matrix – their context – is of vital importance.

Look at the sediments in caves - have they been cut through by streams or digging; are there intact sediments near the cave walls; do they have a lot of bone in them or is bone or other material present on the floor? Is there stalagmite flooring above, or at different levels in the sediments; are there bones or other material above, below or within stalagmitic flowstone or calcite? Such evidence of how the cave sediments have formed is key to understanding how any archaeological material came to be locked up in it.

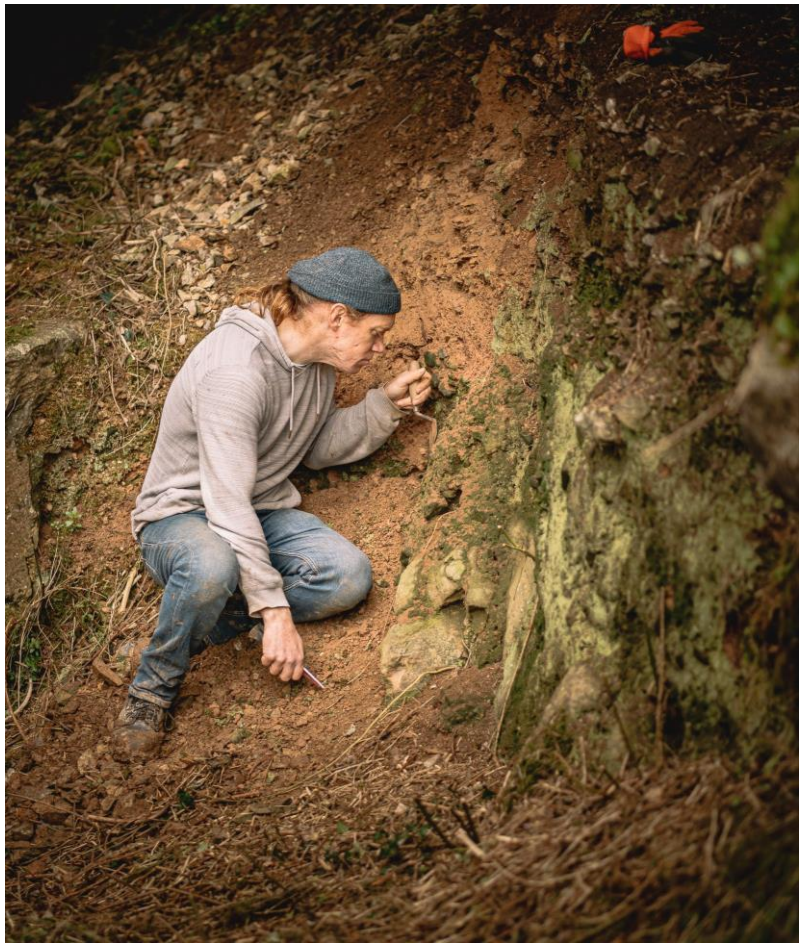
They are also vital for understanding the history of the cave itself and contain many indicators of past landscape and climate conditions, including molluscs, potentially pollen or other botanical evidence, washed-in soil from the surface, etc., and the nature of the sediments themselves can tell us a lot about what was happening on the surface. Also of note is that materials such as charcoal, bones, shells – and even ancient guano deposits – can be accurately dated using radiocarbon dating techniques, and are important for reconstructing Ireland's past landscape, climate, and human presence. Speleothems (flowstones, stalagmites, stalactites, etc.) contain an accurately datable record of climate change through the isotope record they preserve – data from these deposits form the core of our understanding of ancient climate changes in Ireland. They are important scientific resources that should be protected.

HOW TO RECORD

1. Make sure not to remove or disturb any findings.
2. To determine whether features or material are archaeological, clear photographs are very useful. If this isn't possible, record as much information as you can. This could include a description of the type of material, its size and shape or in the case of sediments the horizontal and vertical planes, the nature, thickness and depth of these individual layers.
3. Mark the location of any finds on a survey of the cave if there is one available or if there is no survey, describe (in words) information on the location.
4. Contact a qualified archaeologist or intermediary; if the cave is listed as a National Monument, you should send details to them.



VERIFICATION



EXPERTS IN THE FIELD

Contact Details for Archaeologists and Specialists across the island of Ireland.

Ireland

Ruth Carden - ruthfcarden@gmail.com or ruth.carden@ucd.ie

Helen Lewis - helen.lewis@ucd.ie

Philip Kenny – philipkennytypeperson@gmail.com

Patrick Roycroft – proycroft@museum.ie

Northern Ireland

Mike Simms – michael.simms@nmni.com

HOW TO RECOVER

Please don't take any materials out of the caves! On rare occasions archaeological material in a cave may be under immediate threat of destruction; for example, where the cave is flooded, and it is likely an object or material could be washed away or destroyed. In this instance, follow the steps for recording outlined previously, then carefully remove the object or bones and place in a secure container. Recovery may also be necessary if material is in a location that non-cavers will be unable to access, but this should be done with the support of a qualified expert. If you recover materials, you must report the find immediately.

WHERE TO REPORT - IRELAND

UNDER THE TERMS OF THE NATIONAL MONUMENTS ACTS 1930-2014, ARCHAEOLOGICAL MATERIAL OR OBJECTS FOUND IN A CAVE MUST BE REPORTED TO THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF IRELAND OR A DESIGNATED COUNTY OR CITY MUSEUM WITHIN 4 DAYS. WHILE THIS IS THE CURRENT LEGISLATION, THE HISTORIC AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL HERITAGE MISCELLANEOUS PROVISIONS BILL 2023 IS IN THE HOUSE OF THE OIREACHTAS AT PRESENT, IF PASSED, THIS WILL REDUCE THE REPORTING PERIOD TO 3 DAYS.

THIS IS A LEGAL OBLIGATION FOR ALL CAVERS.

National Monuments Service

museum
National Museum of Ireland
Ard-Mhúsaem na hÉireann

TEL.: 01-6777444

EMAIL:

ANTIQUITIESDO@MUSEUM.IE

WEBSITE: WWW.MUSEUM.IE

WHERE TO REPORT- NORTHERN IRELAND

UNDER THE TERMS OF THE HISTORIC MONUMENTS AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL OBJECTS (NORTHERN IRELAND) ORDER 1995 , ARCHAEOLOGICAL MATERIAL OR OBJECTS FOUND IN A CAVE MUST BE REPORTED WITHIN 14 DAYS. IN THE CASE OF A POTENTIAL ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE WITH ANIMAL OR HUMAN REMAINS THIS SHOULD BE TO THE DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNITIES HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT DIVISION. IN THE CASE OF A MANMADE OBJECT, IT SHOULD BE REPORTED TO NATIONAL MUSEUMS NORTHERN IRELAND.

THIS IS A LEGAL OBLIGATION FOR ALL CAVERS.

NATIONAL MUSEUMS NI

TEL.: 028-90428428

EMAIL:

INFO@NATIONALMUSEUMNI.ORG

WEBSITE:

WWW.NATIONALMUSEUMNI.ORG

Historic Environment Division
HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT FUND

DfC Department for Communities

TEL.: 028-90819226

EMAIL:

HISTORICENVIRONMENTENQUIRIES@COMMUNITIES-NI.GOV.UK

COLLABORATION

WORKING TOGETHER

Cavers provide support to archaeologists during excavations. This includes:

- Rigging lights and communication lines
- Providing health and safety support in the cave
- Acting as guides within the cave
- Providing cave surveys

OUTCOMES

‘Digging into the Past’ is an innovative initiative aimed at deepening the ties between cavers and archaeologists. The collaboration extends beyond the mere thrill of exploration – it represents a unique intersection of adventure and cultural preservation. Caves, often repositories of ancient artefacts, offer a glimpse into bygone eras. With this project, cavers are given an enhanced role, merging their passion for exploration with the importance of preserving Ireland’s rich heritage.

By working together, these two groups can ensure that the secrets of the underground are both discovered and protected, making every expedition a step towards conserving the past. This fusion of adventure and heritage promises to elevate the experience of exploration, making it bot a journey through the natural world and a voyage through time.

SUMMARY

This guidance is a product of collaborative effort, chiefly bolstered by financial backing provided by the EuroSpeleo Protection Label (2023). This support forms a pivotal part of the ambitious project, 'Digging into the past: Preserving Irelands Cultural Heritage through Cave Exploration'. This initiative not only represents and exploration of Ireland's underground wonders but also a deep dive into its rich past and invaluable cultural heritage.

Harnessing the insights from this guidance, cavers are empowered with a comprehensive understanding of the intricate nuances of cave exploration. They're provided with a clear roadmap, enabling them to navigate Ireland and Northern Ireland's cavernous terrains with both enthusiasm and respect. It's more than just about the thrill of discovery; it's about embracing a responsible and informed approach. By adhering to the best practise outlined here, every caver becomes a steward of preservation, ensuring that the natural sanctity and historical significance of these caves remain untarnished for generations to come.

Cork Speleological Group would like to thank all of the sponsors and collaborators who supported the project, particularly the National Museum of Ireland for their input and guidance.

All images were provided by Ruth Carden and Stanislaw Drapala

THIS WORK WAS CARRIED OUT AS PART OF THE EUROSPELEO PROTECTION LABEL