

# A VISIT TO IRELAND

## - been there, done that!

- Brian Richardson\*

I recently travelled to the Emerald Isle on a three-week safari and, as a matter of principle, decided to visit all the show caves that Ireland could muster. I found Mitchelstown Caves near Cahir in County Tipperary, bought my ticket at the farm house, went on the 5pm inspection and, later, admired the guide's radiation badge [worn in her pocket]. It was interesting to note that photography was prohibited there but not in the other caves that I visited.

I missed Dunmore Cave in County Kilkenny the first time (my sense of direction was never that good, but I could have sworn a cave was around here. I found the Cave Bar so, I knew I was close, I was). Further west, I found Crag Cave, just outside Castleisland in County Kerry. The guide impressed us all with the acoustic quality of the main chamber and her splendid singing voice. The piped music was, however, somewhat distracting.

On the way up the west coast, I went into the Burren, a massive limestone area south of Galway in County Clare. Whilst I could find Neolithic sites of habitation, I couldn't find Aillwee Cave. Perhaps I was low flying at the time, but "the little people" do have a habit of hiding important road signs by shoving information amid a plethora of B&B direction signs. [The perils of map reading in Ireland, particularly in Donegal, is perhaps the topic of another article.

Having had two strikes against finding caves, I left Dublin again and went back to find Dunmore Cave. Having more faith in my navigation ability now, I started a box search of the area and tracked it down - up some series of back lanes east of the N78. There was a massive sign at the entrance stating that "no admittance until further notice" was the go [and no apologies for the inconvenience either, mate]. I found out later that, as the result of the finding of a cache of Viking era relics in the cave, the Irish Office of Public Works was doing an upgrade of the cave's visitor centre to enhance the display capacity. I might add that the cave is given as much recognition for the cultural

as the natural values [as the site of a massacre in Viking times]. In an attempt to stem visitation, the signs on the highway were apparently removed rather than erecting signs advising of the closure. Logical, I'm sure.

I headed up into Northern Ireland and, after dodging army patrols, was delighted to find Marble Arch Cave in County Fermanagh, not far from Florencecourt and Enniskillen. The Cave is operated by the Fermanagh District Council and is a major tourism drawcard for the county. In charge of the operation is Richard Watson. Richard, an ACKMA member, was delighted to play host to a wandering ranger and to exchange ideas [or was that commiserations]. The caves are being impacted upon by the results of past peat mining and grazing in the cave's catchment area. With Richard's generous assistance, I was able to visit the nearby mountain park area and see the work being done by Richard's work crews to restore the area and reduce the extensive run off from the site.

I would strongly recommend a visit to the Marble Arch Cave. Apart from giving you the opportunity to examine a well set out visitor centre and experience the cave [including the use of low power electric outboard motors on their boats], Richard would benefit from networking with other cave and karst managers. He joined ACKMA [he blames Kent for recruiting him] because the networking wasn't all that good on the Irish side of the globe. I am currently trying to entice Richard to come to the next ACKMA Conference. I should also advise that, yes, Kent, you are still remembered in that pub opposite the Garda Station in Blacklion.

Seriously, if you are touring the Republic of Ireland and wish to visit a number of heritage sites [castles, neolithic tombs, abbeys etc] run by Duchas, the Irish Heritage Dept., buy an annual heritage pass, it saves you heaps.

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### REFERENCE:

Henderson, K. W. *Cave Management in Ireland*. ACKMA Journal No. 29. December 1997.