

# light & STONE



CATTLE GRAZING ON LARGE EXPANSES OF FIELD ALONG THE BURREN



THE CLIFFS OF MOHER APPEAR TO BE A BORDER FOR THE EDGE OF THE WORLD

BY EMILIE C. HARTING  
photographs by paul haigney



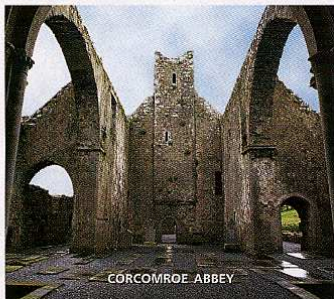
EARTH RING FORTS ONCE SHELTERED RESIDENTS



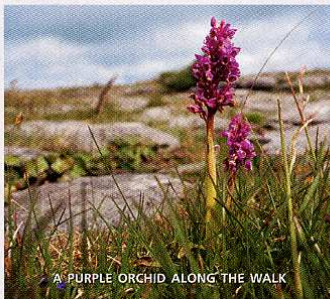
OLD AND NEW COEXIST IN THE BURREN



THE VIEW FROM CORKSCREW HILL



CORCOMROE ABBEY



A PURPLE ORCHID ALONG THE WALK



ABBAY HILLS NAMED FOR CORCOMROE ABBEY

## a walk through THE BURREN in southwestern Ireland lifts the curtain on history, civilization, and the country's rugged beauty

I sit against a pile of rocks inside a ring fort on top of a crusty hill. It is a large circular room about 20 feet across and two stories high with walls of weathered stones piled one upon the other. Our guide, Shane, a wiry, energetic fellow, tells us that 3,000 years ago this structure was probably a military installation. If we had lived in one of the timber huts below, we would have run up here to seek shelter and keep an eye on invaders, since on a clear day you can see many miles over the flat valley. However, by 200 B.C., our occupation in this European locale would likely have been more in line with Shane's — he's a local

farmer (with degrees in history, geology, and agriculture). By that time, forests were cleared and most ring forts had become farmsteads.

Neither seeking shelter from invaders nor harvesting crops, I'm on a three-day walk through the Burren in southwestern Ireland,

along with eight other Americans and Europeans. The Burren is a hilly 14-square-mile plateau of karst limestone desert formed millions of years ago as Ireland slowly rose up out of the sea. Its terrain is varied. Some hills are a combination of grass, shrub, and stone. Others, like the one we climbed to get to the ring fort, are crusty gray rock. In some places, green valleys below are dotted with sheep and cattle.

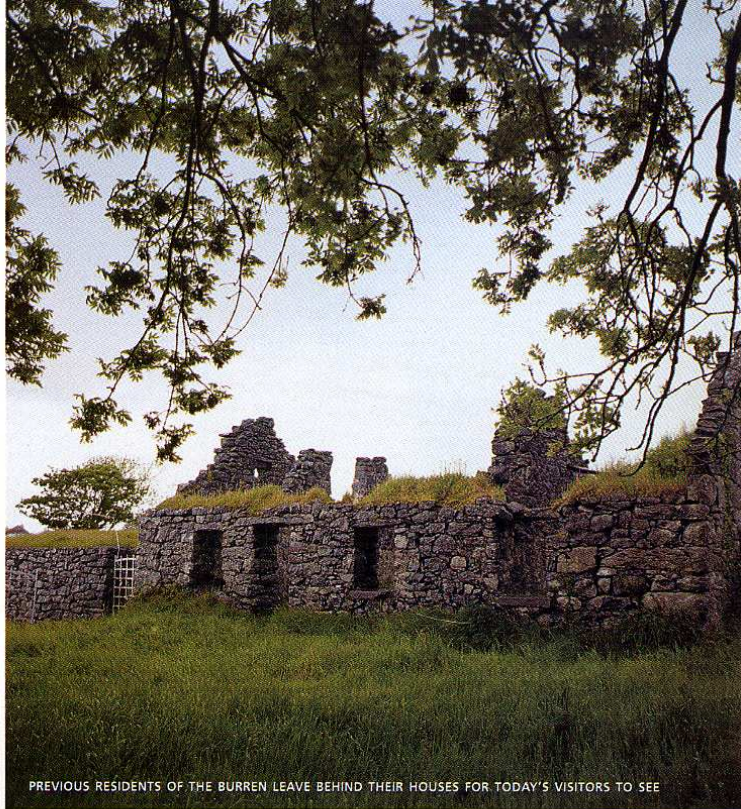
At the southwestern end of the Burren Way, a marked trail, the Cliffs of Moher are a vivid illustration of

how the massively thick beds of rock were formed sequentially over time. Sheer 750-foot cliffs seem to stand as a border for the edge of the world. The impact is immediate in summer when birds fly up the cliffs and then plunge down toward the Atlantic with cackling that shears the wind.

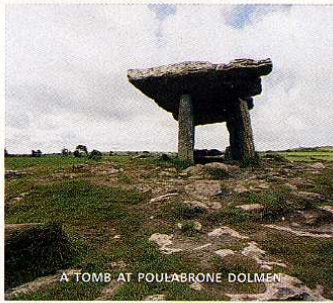
At first I was worried that the pressure of my boots would cause the ground to crumble. But soon I began to bond with this eerie land of fragile beauty and sensed I could do little damage. When Shane took his walking stick and pointed to lichen and fossil formations, he would indicate how old they were, from 30,000 years old to many millions, depending on what plant or animal it was. I felt my presence was both insignificant and temporary. I kept looking down at the cracks, called grykes, in the rocks. Mountain avens, white and purple orchids, heather, rockroses, Saint John's wort, and blue gentians all grew wild. Irrigated by a vast underground cave system, they thrust themselves upward into the world through the many crevices.

Throughout our stay, a curtain of mist would alternately lower and lift, each time treating us to sweeping views of the rugged landscape. On one such occasion, the sun came out and we were able to see a trio of blue-green mounds, the nearest one six miles out into the Atlantic, spreading northwest off Ireland's southwestern coast. They were three of the five Aran Islands — Inishmore, Inisheer, and Inishmaan; their inlets looked like fingers splaying out into the sea.

The fog rose over the valley as we reached the top of Abbey Hill. We saw the walled ruins of the Corcomroe Abbey several miles



PREVIOUS RESIDENTS OF THE BURREN LEAVE BEHIND THEIR HOUSES FOR TODAY'S VISITORS TO SEE



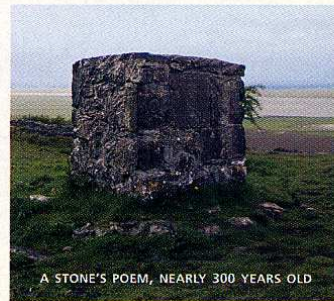
A TOMB AT POULABRONE DOLMEN



MARTELLO TOWER, WITH ITS 8-FEET-THICK WALLS



A STONE MOUND ON GLENINAGA MOUNTAIN



A STONE'S POEM, NEARLY 300 YEARS OLD

down to the southwest. The former abbey, which gave the hill its name, was built by Cistercian monks in the 12th century.

Shane told us to squint and look for little nubs in the ground — remnants of a prehistoric settlement and site of worship dating back 4,000 or 5,000 years. He pointed north toward Galway Bay and a speck on the horizon, which, he said, was one of the 34 Martello towers built along the Irish coastline by the English in the late 1700s and early 1800s. Their purpose was to keep the French from coming ashore and helping the Irish overthrow them.

The Burren and other remote sections of Ireland are home to many abandoned buildings. Some evoke memories of the Great Famine of the mid-1800s, when residents fled in large numbers to America and Britain. One afternoon, as shafts of light pierced the clouds and cast dramatic angles and shadows on distant buildings, we pushed our way through red fuchsia bushes alongside the road and approached the overgrown ruins of a long stone farmhouse and connected barn. The walls of the farm compound, like the ring fort, were mortarless stones, one piled carefully on the other.

Standing there with the wind whipping up from the ocean below, we peered through openings that were once windows and got a sense of the isolation and timelessness of the place. "Quite a few centuries of life in that," a fellow walker said. From a distance, the house appeared as a silhouette against the sea. Up close, we surveyed the few hundred feet that separated the house from the steep cliff that descended into the Atlantic.

In another section of the Burren, I stood at a high spot and looked down over the gray hills to spirals of road built during medieval times, undoubtedly following the contours of ancient walkways where men, women, and oxen have struggled along in wind, rain, and hail. Below we walked across fields of wildflowers growing over centuries-old potato rills, rows of small humps and rivulets where potatoes had grown. I could feel the cadence of human toil as I clambered over the bumps of earth.

Near the end of the trip, we stopped at a 4,000-year-old holy well built into the side of a hill. Steps away, a religious poem from the 1700s was etched onto a waist-high square stone. On the stone's upper left side were the remains of a prehistoric fertility symbol that had been scraped off from the neck down a few hundred years ago when the church was destroying pre-Christian religious symbols. A haunting round face with pensive eyes, at least several thousand years old, looked out at us. Again, one era overlapped another.

Two rainbows seemed to dance on the horizon as we approached Poulabrone Dolmen, one of Ireland's oldest burial mounds. As the sun burst through the mist, a bolt of orange shone a stage light on the flat slab that sat on top of four stubby legs. As so often on this walk through the Burren, the theater curtain was raised and the history of civilization took center stage. ■

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**Getting There:** Continental provides nonstop service to Shannon from its hub in New York/Newark.



### STORMING THE CASTLE

Before I came to Dromoland Castle, I thought the grounds would be rather crowded. After all, it was the height of the summer season. Yet as soon as we drove up the winding driveways, I was struck by the stillness.

The Renaissance castle sits on a plateau of green rolling lawn and is surrounded by golf courses, lily ponds, and a lake where a fisherman or two are often trolling in a rowboat. Extensive walking trails wind through the woods, and 15,000 additional acres of parkland and forest also surround the property.

I spent most of the daylight hours walking the grounds and trails, enjoying the solitude and the scenes — golfers teeing off beyond medieval walled gardens, a wedding along the rose terrace, a banquet in the main hall.

For several hundred years, Dromoland was the seat of the O'Brien clan, whose lineage can be traced back to the 11th century. In 1962, the property was sold, and it has since been renovated with a subtle elegance that combines the original Renaissance architecture with traditional English and French furnishings and state-of-the-art modern conveniences.

In the main dining room, waiters lifted silver covers off our serving plates and a harpist played traditional Celtic music. After a six-course dinner — Dromoland recently won an Egon Award for the best restaurant in Ireland — there was sherry in the drawing room, and drinks and conversation in the bar, formerly the library.

As I left the castle, I was wistful, for this interlude in a world where the best of the past centuries blended seamlessly with the modern world had come to a close. — E.C.H.