

In part four of our series in conjunction with the **Irish Ramsar Wetlands Committee**, we look at farming and blanket bogs

“Every layer they strip seems camped on before,” Seamus Heaney wrote about the bogs in Ireland. Bogs are like history books that extend far back into our distant past. Pollen and pieces of bog oak from trees and woodlands, long since felled, can inform us about climate patterns and habitat over thousands of years.

Bogs can also yield up evidence of previous societies, which comes to light as a result of turf cutting and excavation.

The anaerobic, highly acidic conditions of peat bogs provide an excellent environment for preservation. The discovery of bog bodies provides a real insight into how our ancestors lived in the past. Bodies dating to the Iron Age (500 BC to 400 AD) have been uncovered, including Oldcroghan man in Co Offaly and Cloncavan man in Co Meath, both found during peat cutting in 2003.

More recently, Cashel man, excavated in Co Laois in 2013, is thought to be 4,000 years old, making it the oldest bog body discovered in Europe.

The investigation of the Corlea trackway in Co Longford, which extended for more than 1km, found that it dated to 2,161 years back to the Iron Age.

The trackway consisted of runners that supported substantial wedge-split oak sleepers, forming a roadway of three to four metres wide. The construction of this was a serious undertaking in terms of human resources and timber, with some estimates suggesting that 300 mature oak trees would have been used.

The Corlea track is one of the more spectacular such finds in our bogs, yet other trackways, settlement sites and artefact scatters are uncovered in almost all of our bogs during turf cutting as well.

The Faddan More Psalter, an early-medieval illuminated Christian prayer book, was discovered by a turf cutter in a bog near Birr in 2006. It is made of 60 sheets of calf vellum and is considered to be one of the most spectacular archaeological discoveries in Europe in the last decade.

During conservation in the National Museum, fragments of papyrus, a type of reed paper originating from Egypt, were



| DICTIONARY   |   |
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| IRISH TERM   | DESCRIPTION                                     |
| Caladh   | river meadow                                    |
| Caol   | a marsh, a narrow rapid                         |
| Cluair   | meadow, watershed, a place between woods        |
| Corcadh  | marsh   |
| Eanach   | fen, marsh, swamp, watering place, pond or lake |
| Easca, eascain                                       | fen, marsh, swamp, wet sedgy place              |
| Moin   | turf, peat, bogland, moor                       |
| Moine  | overgrown swamp, mossy fen                      |
| Móinin   | grassy patch in bog                             |
| Móinteach  | moorland, moor, reclaimed bogland               |
| Móinteán   | stretch of bogland, moor, bog                   |
| Potach   | turf bog  |
| Riasc  | marsh, moor, fen, wet low ground                |
| Saileán  | a willow grove                                  |
| Samlach  | a swampy place                                  |
| Seiscír  | sedgy, reedy place                              |
| Tuar loch  | dry lake (turlough)                             |
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found in leather binding. Papyrus is made from the pith of a wetland sedge that was abundant along the Nile Delta. It is now on display in the National Museum of Ireland in Dublin.

Wetland terms are fossilised into placenames right across the landscape. These describe habitats that in some cases are no longer apparent, due to drainage, agricultural intensification and land use change.

Anacramph in Co Monaghan is known as Eanach creamha or Marsh of the Wild Garlic. Monagay in Limerick is called the Bog of the Goose.

Kesh in Co Fermanagh speaks of the Ceis, a wickerwork causeway used to cross a wetland. Monaincha, an old monastic settlement is the Island in the Bog, close to Roscrea.

But bogs and wetlands have another cultural significance. “Ní hé lá na gaoithe lá na scolb,” translates as: “The windy day is not the day for thatching”. Until recently, keeping dry under a thatched roof was a common feature of living in Ireland.

In a tradition going back 9,000 years, people have gone out into marshes in late winter to cut reeds and tie them in bundles, which



Roof thatching done in Fontstown, Co Kildare.



were then tied or pinned onto roofs. Traditionally, thatchers use locally-available materials. The most durable thatching material is water reed (*phragmites australis*) which can last up to 60 years.

The river Shannon and its tributaries produce an abundance of water reed, but run-off of farm fertilizers is considered by some thatchers to have ruined this traditional source of reed as a thatching material.

The increase in nutrients allows the reeds to grow longer and faster, becoming more brittle and unsuitable. That said, there are reed cutters providing water reed from the Shannon and Slaney, which are in use by thatchers.

Wetlands and bogs have a cultural significance in terms of archaeology, in placenames, as a vast source of environmental information to show us how we have interacted with the environment and in terms of the history of turf cutting. Wetlands are at the heart of Ireland and so is water.

“What’s water, but the generated soul?” – WB Yeats. **CL**

\*By Shirley Clerkin, Monaghan County Council, on behalf of the Irish Ramsar Wetlands Committee. For more information visit [www.irishwetlands.ie](http://www.irishwetlands.ie)