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<td>FitzPatrick, Elizabeth</td>
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Interpreting a cultural landscape: a case for seaweed-harvesting at Aughris, Co. Sligo

Elizabeth FitzPatrick

This paper presents archaeological, historical and folkloric evidence for a local seaweed industry on the Aughris headland, Co. Sligo, in the modern period. It is argued that over 200 earthen enclosures dotting the ‘ruins’ or commons on the cliff line of the headland are not of great antiquity but modern platforms for stacking harvested dry sea wrack. The wrack was stacked in small cocks and remained there until it was carried away and burnt with sea rods to make kelp, or spread on the land as manure. The results of an excavation (01E0700), combined with analysis of aerial photographs, local lore, nineteenth-century estate documents and eighteenth-century travellers’ observations, indicate that many of the enclosures are likely to date from the modern period and are primarily related to tenant activity on the estates of Cooper of Markree and Hillas of Donecoy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The harvesting of sea wrack for the iodine market and for local potato and grain crops continued at Aughris on a small scale into the first half of the twentieth century.

INTRODUCTION

In 2001 the writer published an account of the archaeology of the western side of Aughris headland, Co. Sligo, which outlined some of the results of the Aughris Field Project (1999–2002) based in the Department of Archaeology, NUI, Galway. The focus of that particular enquiry was a group of monuments on the former Ruball Sionnagain racecourse in Aughris townland, and a tiered mound in the adjoining townland of Kilrusheighter (Fig. 1). It was proposed that Ruball Sionnagain may have constituted the site of an Óenach for the Ó Fiachrach within Tir Fiachrach, and that Coggins’ Hill in Kilrusheighter is a likely candidate for Carn inghine Briain, the post-Norman inauguration site of the Ó Dubhda of Tir Fiachrach (FitzPatrick 2001, 75–91).

Ruball Sionnagain racecourse (E148957, N335892) is a large open tract of grazing land defined on its western side by low cliffs of terraced limestone, bounded to the south by Curragh Marsh and to the south-west by Belturlin Bay (Fig. 1). Three former field boundaries have been removed in more recent times from the racecourse area (Pl. 2). Apart from the great mound locally known as Healy’s Round Hill (E149039, N336037), which is located right on the cliff edge (Pls 1 and 2), there are the remains of a passage tomb (SL012-017) on the low ridge that overlooks the racecourse from the south. At the south-west end of the course a large D-shaped, single-banked enclosure (E148886, N335789) hugs the cliff line, and immediately south of it are the degraded remains of a possible barrow (E148908, N335770). A massive boulder, to which no name is now attributed, lies close to the cliff line directly south-west of Healy’s Round Hill.

During the course of fieldwork at Ruball Sionnagain at least a dozen enclosures were noted extending across the former racecourse route (Pl. 2). Additional subrectangular enclosures occur in the fields immediately south of Curragh Marsh, which is liable to flooding from the sea throughout winter and spring. Given the proximity of these small enclosures to the other monuments on the racecourse, the possibility that they might have been related to assembly activity on the headland could not be dismissed. A decision was therefore taken to excavate one of the enclosures on the racecourse, and an example 50m south-east of Healy’s Round Hill was subsequently selected.

The research excavation was conducted between 13 and 23 August 2001 in Aughris townland, which lies in the parish of Templeboy and barony of Tireragh (SL012-002: NGR E149080–149086/N336010–336024). The enclosure (Fig. 2) was aligned north–south and consisted of a grass-covered, elongated subrectangular area, 9m north–south by 3m east–west, enclosed by a shallow fosse averaging 1.2m in width and 0.1m in depth for most of its circuit. The fosse was in turn surrounded by the degraded and flattened remains of a low external bank, visible only in the south-west quadrant and in the northern sector of the site. A notable feature of this enclosure (external dimensions 13m by 7m) was its distinctly rounded north and south ends. The portion of the field in which the subrectangular enclosure lay had not been cultivated within living memory. This was confirmed by aerial photographs that show cultivation ridges throughout the south-western end of the racecourse and on the ridge where the passage tomb rests, but none in the immediate vicinity of Healy’s Round Hill. Prior to excavation, topographical, magnetic susceptibility,
Fig. 2—Topographical model of subrectangular enclosure 01E0700 prior to excavation (drawing: Joseph Fenwick).

Fig. 1—Location of 01E0700 on the western coast of Aughris townland (drawing: Angela Gallagher).
Interpreting a cultural landscape: a case for seaweed-harvesting at Aughris, Co. Sligo

Pl. 1—View looking north across Belturlin Bay to Rubboll Sionnaigh racecourse and Healy’s Round Hill.

Pl. 2—Aerial view of the northern end of Rubboll Sionnaigh racecourse (north is to left of picture) showing the mound known as Healy’s Round Hill on the cliff edge and a passage tomb on the ridge to the east. Note the cluster of small subrectangular enclosures immediately north-east and north of the great mound, including 01E0700 (photo: Gerry Bracken).
magnetic gradiometry and electrical resistance surveys were conducted on the subrectangular enclosure (Fenwick 2000). The results indicated that there was no appreciable difference between it and its immediate surroundings. The outcome of the electrical resistance survey suggested that the underlying bedrock is very close to the surface in this area, which also explains the lack of evidence for cultivation. The bedrock is Carboniferous limestone of the Ballina Upper limestone formation, which is defined as a dark grey, fine-grained limestone with interbedded calcareous shale (MacDermot et al. 1996, 70).

The purpose of the excavation was to determine the composition, function and date of the small enclosure—one of many scattered in the fields along the western coastline of Aughris headland between the cliff-edge enclosure at Pollarea (SL012-001) and Poll Gorm in Kilrushheighter. These enclosures are not unique to Aughris headland but occur elsewhere on the north Connacht coastline (Condit 1998). More recently, Timoney (2002, 50) has investigated the occurrences of at least nine at Portavaud near the entrance to Ballisodare Bay and 8km east of Aughris, two close to the shoreline in Lackan townland north of Inishcrone, and upwards of 40 enclosures at Kilcummin promontory, just west of Killala Bay in County Mayo.

HISTORIOGRAPHY

Prior to excavation, a literature and folklore survey of all available information on the small enclosures at Aughris was carried out. The various opinions about their function, where they occur at Aughris, Portavaud, Kilcummin and Lackan, have been thoroughly rehearsed by Timoney (2002, 51–3). Sheila Kitchin first identified the enclosures at Portavaud and Aughris in the early 1960s, and Finlay Tower Kitchin (2002) subsequently compiled a series of field notes on them for the Sligo Field Club. He concluded that they were hut sites used by people attending the annual festival of Lughnasa patrín on the headland, held on Garland Sunday (the last Sunday in July). There ensued a steady stream of suggestions about the function of these very basic earthen enclosures. Raftery (1974, 5; Timoney 2002, 51) agreed with Kitchin and for An Foras Forbartha listed them as ‘habitation sites’. It has been suggested that they were the temporary dwellings of persons involved in salt-panning or building, that they could be kelp-burning platforms, stands for turf or hayricks, military encampments relating to the French landings of 1798, and pillow mounds for rabbit warrens (Timoney 2002, 51–3). Condit (1998) made the suggestion that the Aughris and Kilcummin enclosures could represent two of the largest barrow cemeteries in the country, and finally Timoney (2002, 54–5) concluded that the question of their function was yet to be answered.

To find that answer was the principal aspiration of the excavation carried out in 2001, and the results, combined with supporting evidence from aerial photographs, estate documents, travellers’ accounts and surviving folklore from two local people who were actively engaged in seaweed-harvesting in their youth, make the best case yet for the enclosures being platforms for stacking dry seawrack.

THE EXCAVATION

Four cuttings (Fig. 3) were opened during the two-week period of the excavation. Two cuttings (1 and 2), 3.5m by 3.5m respectively, were opened in the north–east quadrant of the site. A baulk of 0.5m, running east–west, was left between them in order to provide vertical sections. Two additional cuttings (3 and 4; Pl. 4) were opened in the south-west quadrant. Cutting 3 measured 3.5m by 3.5m, while Cutting 4 was made smaller at 3.5m north–south by 1m east–west. Again, a 0.5m baulk was left between the cuttings. The total area excavated was 41m². In each of the two quadrants a portion of the platform of the enclosure, the ditch and external bank, in addition to a small area of the surrounding field, was incorporated into the excavation. A TBM (11.4m above mean sea level) was established for the top of the peg at the north-west corner of Cutting 1.

Cutting 1 (E149083–149086.5, N336020–336023.5)

Prior to excavation it was observed that the soil cover of the coastal fields on the western side of Aughris headland is very shallow. It is so thin that the north-east–south-west orientation of the underlying bedrock is actually perceptible on the surface of the fields about Healy’s Round Hill, and in some places the solid geology protrudes as outcrop. The field in which the enclosure lies has been carefully fertilised over a decade, which has improved the soil cover somewhat since this enclosure was created. In light of the fact that the soil cover is generally shallow, great care was taken in removing the sod from Cutting 1. It was cut to a depth of approximately 0.08m. Compact, very dark brown, clayey sand (Cl), indistinguishable from the sod, was revealed beneath it, extending across the entire area of the cutting for a depth of 0.08–0.1m. In the north-west corner of the cutting, which incorporated a portion of the surrounding field (Fig. 3), a patch of small fragments of shale and naturally occurring chert and quartz (C2) was noted (E149083–149084, N336023.5–336022.5). Likewise, in the south-west area of the cutting, a patch
Fig. 3—Plan of level 1 excavation, Cuttings 1–4 (drawing: Joseph Fenwick and Angela Gallagher).
AUGHRIS ENCLOSURE
01 E0700:
Level 2: Excavation Plan

Exposed shattered shale
Exposed bedrock

Cutting 1

Cutting 2

Cutting 3

Cutting 4

Key
C2 Context 2: Bottom of ditch fill
C3 Context 3: Cut of ditch
01 E0700: 3:9
01 E0700: 3:10
01 E0700: 3:11

Fig. 4—Plan of level 2 excavation, Cuttings 1–4 (drawing: Joseph Fenwick and Angela Gallagher).
of shale and the same chert was revealed on the platform of the enclosure (E149083–149086.5, N336016–336019.5). Cutting 2 incorporated a clearly defined portion of the platform of the enclosure and a stretch of the ditch. During de-sodding it was noted that the sod in this instance was substantially drier and peatter in texture than its counterpart in Cutting 1. It was removed to a depth of 0.08m, revealing loose, very dark brown clayey sand (C1) indistinguishable from the sod, which extended over the entire area of the cutting and ran to a depth of 0.08m. In colour and composition C1 was identical to its counterpart in Cutting 1 but was looser. On the platform of the enclosure two large flat shale stones (E149083.3–149088.2/N336017.5–336017.3), surrounded by an area of more friable shale fragments, showed up during hand-trowelling of C1 (Fig. 4). It was initially thought that these stones might have been deliberately deposited on the platform as part of a stone bed, but no others showed up on the platform in Cutting 2. Removal of the stones revealed that they lay directly upon natural dark, olive-grey coarse sand (found throughout Cutting 1) and were naturally occurring. The platform area of the enclosure in Cutting 2, as in Cutting 1, proved to be entirely undisturbed natural ground. The ditch was the only man-made feature in Cutting 2 (Fig. 4). The outline of its top was quite ragged and ill-defined, varying in width from 0.4m to 0.6m. During hand-trowelling of C1 a number of artefacts were uncovered. On the immediate east side of the outline of the ditch two tiny body sherds of Jackfield ware (E0700:01) were found (E149085.68, N336017.93; 11.01m OD). Immediately adjacent to these, four fragments of an iron nail (E0700:02) and iron corrosion product (E0700:04) were uncovered at the same depth. During sieving of C1 in the same area a nail shaft was found (E0700:03). An additional body sherd of Jackfield ware (E0700:05) lay in C1 in the crevice between the two large stones on the platform of the enclosure (E149083.73, N336017.3). None of these finds came from a sealed context, but since they were found midway down through C1 it is possible that they were dropped there at least when the enclosure was in use, although the pottery sherds from the platform could also have been deposited as a result of manuring. The fill of the ditch in Cutting 2 (C12) was very dark brown sandy silt, identical to the ditch fill (C2) in Cutting 1, and ran to a depth of no more than 0.12m. The cut (C3) of the ditch was round-bottomed with no perceptible break of slope with the base (Fig. 5). One of the more significant stratified artefacts from the excavation—a lead wine bottle seal (E0700:09)—was uncovered (E149485.224, N336916.9; 10.925m OD) at the base of the ditch fill (C2). Its position indicates that it must have been deposited when the ditch was dug or soon after. It provides a terminus post quem of the eighteenth to nineteenth century for the ditch fill (C2). As in the case of Cutting 1, the external bank did not show up on excavation in Cutting 2.

Cutting 3 (E149079.5–149083, N336012.5–336016) Cutting 3 incorporated a portion of the platform and part of the enclosing ditch in the south-western quadrant of the site. The external bank in this cutting was not discernible prior to excavation and was not found during the course of excavation. The sod was cut to a depth of 0.08–0.1m. Two small body sherds of white earthenware, datable to the nineteenth or twentieth century, were uncovered at its base. The first of these (E0700:06) was found near the internal edge of the ditch (E149080, N336013; 11.05m OD) and the second (E0700:07) was recovered near the western
edge of the cutting (E149078.68, N336013.4; 11.02m OD). A layer of compact, very dark brown clayey sand (C1) extended across the entire area of Cutting 3, running to a depth of 0.08m. It lay directly beneath the sod and, like C1 in Cuttings 1 and 2, its composition, compaction and colour were indistinguishable from the sod. Inclusions in C1 consisted of four naturally occurring flat shale stones outside the ditch in the western area of the cutting. Bedrock also protruded through C1 in the north-western corner. Context 1 was hand-trowelled and a tiny sherd of Jackfield ware (E0700:08) was found on the platform of the enclosure (E149082.71, N336014.37; 11.04m OD). Context 1 overlay the same dark, olive-grey natural layer (shale mud) found in Cuttings 1 and 2. The outline of the top of the ditch, varying in width from 0.5m to 0.8m, was more clearly defined in Cutting 3 than in Cutting 2. The ditch fill (C2)—loose, very dark brown sandy silt—ran to a maximum depth of 0.26m. During hand-trowelling of the ditch fill (C2), two finds, a nail shaft (E0700:010; E149081.3, N336014.06; 10.87m OD) and a small triangular piece of polystyrene (E0700:011; E149081.3, N336015.08; 10.86m OD), were recorded at the base of the ditch. The cut of the ditch (C3), as elsewhere in Cuttings 1 and 2, proved to be round-bottomed with a barely perceptible break of slope with the base.
Table 1—List of artefacts found.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cutting</th>
<th>Find no.</th>
<th>Context no.</th>
<th>No. of pieces</th>
<th>Material</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>E0700:01</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Pottery</td>
<td>Jackfield ware body sherds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>E0700:02</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Iron</td>
<td>Nail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>E0700:03</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Iron</td>
<td>Nail shaft</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>E0700:04</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Iron</td>
<td>Corrosion product</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>E0700:05</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Pottery</td>
<td>Jackfield ware body sherd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>E0700:06</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Pottery</td>
<td>White earthenware sherd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>E0700:07</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Pottery</td>
<td>White earthenware sherd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>E0700:08</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Pottery</td>
<td>Jackfield ware body sherd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>E0700:09</td>
<td>C2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Lead</td>
<td>Wine bottle seal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>E0700:10</td>
<td>C2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Iron</td>
<td>Nail shaft</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>E0700:11</td>
<td>C2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Plastic</td>
<td>Polystyrene fragment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Cutting 4 (E149082–149083, N336008.5–336012)
Cutting 4 (3.5m north–south by 1m east–west) took in a small portion of the southern end of the platform, the enclosing ditch, the flattened external bank and part of the surrounding field in order to complete the north–south section across the entire site. The sod was removed to a depth of 0.08–0.1m. No finds were recovered from C1, the loose, very dark brown clayey sand that lay beneath the sod and ran to a depth of 0.08m throughout the cutting. It in turn overlay natural dark olive-grey coarse sand. The outline of the top of the ditch, 1.64m wide, was revealed, broader here than at any other point. The ditch fill (C2), as elsewhere in Cuttings 1, 2 and 3, was loose, very dark brown sandy silt that ran to a depth of no more than 0.06m. The ditch in Cutting 4 was extremely shallow (0.22m deep). The cut (C3) was broadly rounded with a flat base, and there was no perceptible break of slope with the base. There were no finds from Cutting 4.

THE FINDS
Excavation uncovered eleven artefacts (National Museum of Ireland reg. E0700:), which broadly fell into a single chronological group dating from the eighteenth century to the twentieth century. The small collection consists of sherds of Jackfield ware and white earthenware, iron nails and nail fragments, iron corrosion product, a lead seal for a wine bottle, and a small piece of polystyrene, possibly from a float. Just three of the eleven artefacts, the lead seal, the polystyrene and a nail shaft, recorded at the base of the ditch fill, can be associated either with the creation of the enclosure or with its use shortly after it was made. The remaining eight artefacts, and especially the very small pottery sherds which were obtained from the A-horizon, probably derive from a modern episode of fertilising the field.

The pottery
ROSANNE MEENAN
The assemblage comprises five small fragments of post-medieval pottery. They were all recovered from the sod layer.

Table 2—Pottery.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Find no.</th>
<th>NGR</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E0700:1:01</td>
<td>E149085.68, N336017.93</td>
<td>Jackfield ware</td>
<td>Two body sherds. Dark red-brown fabric, smooth black glaze. (1) 5mm x 7.5mm x 5mm. (2) 5mm x 5mm x 3mm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E0700:1:08</td>
<td>E149082.71, N336014.37</td>
<td>Jackfield ware</td>
<td>One body sherd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E0700:1:05</td>
<td>E149083.73, N336017.3</td>
<td>Jackfield ware</td>
<td>One body sherd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E0700:1:06</td>
<td>E149080.85, N336013.0</td>
<td>White earthenware</td>
<td>One body sherd, plain buff fabric. Crazed white glaze 15mm x 10mm x 6mm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E0700:1:07</td>
<td>E149078.68, N336013.4</td>
<td>White earthenware</td>
<td>One body sherd, plain buff fabric. Crazed white glaze. 20mm x 10mm x 4mm</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Jackfield ware
Sherds E0700:1:01 and E0700:1:05 from Cutting 2 are both body sherds of a fine black-glazed ware. The compact fabric is dark red-brown and the black glaze is smooth, even and glossy. Sherd E0700:1:08 is a fragment of the same ware found in Cutting 3. These sherds resemble the ware in which drinking vessels of the late seventeenth century were made. The even, glossy black glaze, however, is more like the glaze found on black table wares made in Staffordshire from the mid-eighteenth century and known as Jackfield ware. The vessel form is unidentifiable.

White earthenware
Sherds E0700:1:06 and E0700:1:07 from Cutting 3 are plain white earthenware which can be dated to the nineteenth or twentieth century. The fabric is buff in colour although it may originally have been white. Both surfaces are covered in a crazed white glaze. The vessel form is unidentifiable as the sherds are so small. It is possible that the sherds came from a vessel that might have been decorated somewhere else on its surface. White earthenwares were imported from Staffordshire and other pottery-producing centres in England. They were produced on a very small scale in Ireland. It is not possible to identify the place of manufacture of the sherds found on the excavation.

Comment
This small assemblage can be dated to the mid-eighteenth century and later. While it is possible that the sherds from C1 were dropped when the enclosure was in use, there is also a possibility that they were deposited during manuring of the land. This may have been a single episode of manuring because so few sherds were found and there would not have been much tillage in this particular area. The assemblage is too small, however, to allow a definitive statement to be made about how it came to be deposited.

Ferrous and non-ferrous objects
ORLA SCULY
Five metal objects were recovered during excavation. The majority were nails, or fragments thereof. The only surviving head (E0700:1:02) was a small circular one. All shafts were rectangular in cross-section. This simple nail form is the most commonly encountered type from both medieval and post-medieval excavations in Ireland. They are not easily consigned to any particular period. One small fragment of corrosion product (E0700:1:04) is not necessarily an object per se but possibly a by-product of a nearby deteriorating object. It comes from the same context (C1) as some nail fragments. The provenance was the topsoil immediately beneath the sod in Cutting 2. Finally, a crumpled sheet of very thin lead, possibly an alloy (E0700:2:09), probably covered the cork of a bottle of wine. It has a rilling imprint and the partial remains of a stamped design survive. The inner face of the sheet is pinkish orange. It was recovered from the base of the fill of the ditch (C2) in Cutting 2.

Comment
The dating of the thin lead sheet accords with the modern date of the pottery from the site.

Plastic product
ELIZABETH WINCOTT HECKETT
A small triangular piece of solid matter (E0700:2:11) was found in C2 at the bottom of the ditch in Cutting 3. Strands of matter on one side were examined to determine whether or not they were textile fibres or threads. The piece was a brown colour with the appearance of earth. A dampened cotton cloth that had previously been boiled to ensure sterilisation and neutral pH was wrapped around the piece of matter and kept damp with distilled water for three days in order to loosen any attached earth and/or residues. After three days there was little change in the

<table>
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<th>Object</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>E0700:1:02</td>
<td>E149085.68, N36017.93</td>
<td>Iron</td>
<td>Nail</td>
<td>Circular head, rectangular shaft. Other shaft fragments associated. 21mm x 11mm x 10mm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E0700:1:03</td>
<td>E149085.68, N36017.93</td>
<td>Iron</td>
<td>Nail shaft</td>
<td>Point of nail shaft, subrectangular in section. 17mm x 6mm x 5mm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E0700:2:10</td>
<td>E149081.3, N36014.06</td>
<td>Iron</td>
<td>Nail shaft</td>
<td>Rectangular corroded shaft. 17mm x 9mm x 8mm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E0700:1:04</td>
<td>E149085.68, N36017.93</td>
<td>Iron</td>
<td>Corrosion product</td>
<td>Rectangular, flat on one side, slightly raised profile. 17mm x 13mm x 7mm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E0700:2:09</td>
<td>E149085.224, N36016.9</td>
<td>Lead</td>
<td>Wine bottle seal</td>
<td>Crumpled sheet of pliant lead, very thin, partial stamp and rilling evident. 21mm x 16mm x 10mm</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Microscopic examination showed a multi-sided cell moss or lichen-like leaflets, reminiscent of a sea plant, were visible elsewhere. Subsequently, distilled water was dripped onto the sample, with a camel-hair artist’s brush, to examine the surface. Apart from the vegetal growth there was little earth or other residue. At one corner, a small piece of the triangle was gently prised open and a clear white surface was revealed. Microscopic examination showed a multi-sided cell-type structure indicative of a thin piece of polystyrene expanded foam.

**Comment**

It is possible that this piece of polystyrene, adhering to the surface of which were traces of what appeared to be a sea plant, was brought onto the site in the kelp since this kind of polystyrene is often used in floats.

**Table 4—Plastic product.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Find no.</th>
<th>NGR</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E0700:2:11</td>
<td>E149081.3,</td>
<td>Polystyrene expanded foam. Triangle piece,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N336015.08</td>
<td>20mm x 25mm x 5mm.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Moss or lichen-like leaflets reminiscent of sea plant adhere to surface</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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**DISCUSSION**

The excavation confirmed that the morphology of the enclosure was most rudimentary. There was no evidence at all that the platform was an artificial creation. On the contrary, it was undisturbed natural topsoil that incorporated some large, flat shale stones and some seams of more friable shale very occasionally combining inclusions of natural quartz and chert. The ditch was the only man-made feature of the enclosure distinguished during excavation. It varied in depth from 0.12m to 0.26m, and averaged 0.5m in width at the top. The much broader extent of the ditch observed in Cutting 4 (1.64m wide at the top) is the result of erosion and flattening out by the tread of livestock. Those who made the ditch did not dig down to bedrock but merely lifted the sod, cutting into the dark, olive-grey coarse sand that lies directly beneath the topsoil. That the ditch performed its function in keeping the platform area dry was particularly evident from the quality of the sod on the platform in Cutting 2, where the sod was noticeably drier and more peaty, and the topsoil beneath (C1) looser in texture. Simply put, the ditch acted as a drain to ensure that the platform remained dry. Those who made the enclosures were familiar with the soil and knew that, because the geology is so close to the surface on the Aughris coastline, it would take very little effort to create a dry stand or holding place.

The external bank of the enclosure, which was considerably degraded and flattened out, could not be distinguished during excavation. The low and narrow nature of the banks that survive around some of the better-preserved examples of these enclosures on the headland suggests, however, that they were created by simply up-turning the sod from the ditch and placing the upcast neatly outside the line of the ditch to make an external bank. The bank was probably used to peg a cover over the material deposited on the platform. This might also explain the presence of iron nails among the finds.

A comparative analysis of the size and shape of the Ruball Sionnaigh enclosures and those elsewhere on the western side of Aughris headland indicates considerable variation, with size ranging from 5.6m by 5.8m to 18.8m by 8.8m, as well as anomalies in shape. Such variation might be explained by the fact that whatever was intended to be placed there was laid neatly on the ground first and the ditch then dug around it. The finds recovered from the excavated Ruball Sionnaigh enclosure suggest that it was at least in use, if not made, sometime in the modern period. The lead wine bottle seal (E0700:09) found in C2, at the base of the ditch in Cutting 2, and the small piece of polystyrene (E0700:011) found in C2, at the bottom of the ditch in Cutting 3, provide the strongest evidence for the relatively recent origin of the enclosure. It should be noted that the polystyrene is of the type used in floats and that during analysis the specialist observed a moss or lichen resembling a sea plant on the surface of the expanded foam.

The Ruball Sionnaigh enclosure was basically a platform, defined by a shallow ditch and low outer bank, made in the modern period to hold or stack some material. In order to determine what that material might have been, soil samples were taken from the platform, from the ditch fill and from the exterior of the enclosure for plant remains assessment (Appendix 1). The samples produced modern weed seeds and roots, and in one instance tiny charcoal fragments. No other plant remains or marine materials were contained in the samples, although their archaeobotanical potential was limited in the first instance by the shallowness of the soil on Ruball Sionnaigh racecourse. Returning to the finds, however, the piece of polystyrene, of a type used in the manufacture of floats and which bore traces of a possible sea plant, found at the bottom of the ditch may well have come onto the site with a harvest of sea wrack.
Pl. 3—Haphazard scatter of enclosures on the ‘ruans’ or cliff-edge commons, north of Camhra Donn on Aughris coastline. Note the variation in size, shape and orientation, and the narrow roads (upper half of image) leading to the commons from Aughris village (photo: Imelda Byrne).

Pl. 4—View looking south over Cuttings 3 and 4 during excavation, showing ditch and platform of enclosure (left of picture). The Ox Mountains are in the background.
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Pl. 5—A stretch of the 'ruans' or coastal fields dotted with enclosures north of Aughris village. Note the degraded earthen field fences with underlying and overlying enclosures (at left of picture), and the scars of small cultivated fields set back from the sea fields (at right of picture).

Pl. 6—Detail of cluster of enclosures, showing variation in shape, orientation and size. Note that some enclosures join each other while others overlap (photo: Imelda Byrne).
Aerial photographic evidence
A series of aerial photographs of the ‘nuns’ or cliff-top fields of Aughris headland, taken in November 1999 (by G. Bracken) and November 2001 (by I. Byrne), reveal a remarkable density of small enclosures streaming in no particular order along the coastline, from the impressive multivallate, internally ditched cliff-edge earthwork of Pollaree (SL012-001; Pl. 7) as far south as Poll Gorm in Kilrusheighter townland (Fig. 1). Contrary to Timoney’s (2002, 59) claim that ‘many of those at Aughris … are far back in on the land’, the aerial photographs clearly show the concentration of these features almost exclusively in the fields nearest the sea and on the northern and southern edges of Curragh Marsh (note the cliff line visible in Pls 3 and 5), which becomes an inlet of the sea when inundated by the tide from Belturlin Bay. Approximately four enclosures can be seen immediately north of Coggins’ Hill in the fields above Poll Gorm, while thirteen can be identified on Ruball Sionnaigh racecourse, especially in the area north and east of Healy’s Round Hill (Pl. 2).

The coastal focus of the enclosures is more distinct in a particularly well-preserved concentration of approximately 64 in the fields between Pollaphuca and Altbo (Fig. 6) immediately north of Aughris village, which was deserted in the 1960s owing to population migration off the headland.

The group of enclosures on this stretch of the headland was easily reached by a narrow track leading northward from the village. The track also connected the village to the main east–west route across the headland (Fig. 6; Pl. 5). Some of the enclosures in this particular cluster underlie field boundaries that are not marked on the 1837 or current edition six-inch maps, but they show up on the aerial photographs as
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Pl. 7—The eroded cliff-edge multivallate enclosure of Pollaree on the north-east coastline of Aughris headland (north is to right of image), with a concentration of subrectangular wrack stands to the north-west, west and south (photo: Imelda Byrne).

Pl. 8—A winter harvest of Laminaria (sea rods) on Trawee (Trá Bhui) at Aughris, with Healy’s Round Hill visible on the point in the background.
Pl. 9—A variety of seaweeds, including Laminaria (sea rods, to left of picture) and Fucus (bladderwrock, to right of picture), are available on the Aughris coastline.

Pl. 10—Slogain near Easkey used for drying out sea rods (Laminaria) and sea wrock (Fucus).
degraded earthen banks that must pre-date the field fences of the first edition (Pl. 3). This suggests that there are different generations of enclosures. Some join each other while a number overlap (Pls 3 and 6), and it can also be seen that a few appear to join rather than underlie field boundaries.

The arbitrary scatter of the enclosures along the coast strongly suggests that they were thrown up in quick succession and that they are related to a seasonal, maritime activity. The view from the air also confirms that while they all have the same basic morphology, contrary to Timoney’s (2002, 54) opinion that the Aughris enclosures are predominantly ‘playing card shaped’, their plans vary from subrectangular to subsquare and subcircular.

The field pattern on the Aughris coastline is rundale, with its origins in the eighteenth- or early nineteenth-century improvements on the Cooper of Markree estate. Documented for the first time on the 1837 edition OS map, it remains largely unchanged on the subsequent 1913 edition, and much of this landscape remains intact today. The aerial photograph of the stretch between Pollaphuca and Altbo (Pl. 5) also shows earlier linear field boundaries running down to the cliff edge, as well as the outlines of small fields containing cultivation ridges, set back from the sea fields west of Aughris village.

**Function**

Having explored the morphology and geographical situation of the enclosures at Aughris, the question of their function, and by extension that of their counterparts at Portavaud, Lackan and Kilcummin, must now be addressed. It is ironic that such rudimentary enclosures have provoked protracted debate. It is human nature to wish for elaborate and exciting interpretations; the purpose of the Aughris enclosures is quite prosaic, but no less interesting for that.

The many explanations proposed by previous writers and outlined by Timoney (2002, 51–3) can be discounted in view of the excavation evidence and readings of the aerial photographs. The suggestion that they could represent an extensive barrow cemetery (Condit 1998) is eliminated by the fact that some of them clearly post-date modern field boundaries, and the excavation results from a typical example of this enclosure type, as outlined above, have indicated that the platform was undisturbed natural topsoil and that there was no activity there before the eighteenth or nineteenth century. The enclosures are also unlikely to be related to the 1798 military landings. Aughris was not one of the French landing sites, and in any case the degree of superimposition of these enclosures upon each other suggests a seasonal activity. They are clearly not associated with booleying and in no way are they comparable to the Goodland late medieval booley huts, as suggested by Timoney (2002, 51). If booleying was conducted in northern Tireragh it would have taken place in the Ox Tireragh where it was no bogland at all on Aughris headland and the production of hay was very poor owing to the thin soil cover and salt-retarded grass growth that characterises the coastal fields of the headland. By the end of the eighteenth century tillage had gained on grazing throughout Tireragh. The expressed view of them as hut sites or platforms for temporary shelters used during the Lughnasa patrón (MacNeill 1962, 498, 611–12) on the headland is also flawed. The densest concentration occurs between Pollaphuca and Altbo rather than around Aughris pier on the north-eastern side of the headland, where, according to MacNeill (1962, 112–13) and local tradition (FitzPatrick 2001, 70), the Lughnasa festivities were largely conducted in ‘later days’. The pier and its surrounding fields were also the venue for political meetings documented for the late nineteenth century, which helps to date the use of the pier area for gatherings at least as early as 1890 (ibid., 72). Easy landing from Sligo Bay and more sheltered ground are the reasons why the north-eastern side of the headland would have been favoured for gatherings in the modern period. It is highly unlikely that those attending the patrón would have wanted to pitch temporary shelters on the most windswept and exposed western part of the headland, albeit commonage. Finally, any suggestion that the many enclosures on Aughris headland were kelp kilns is not borne out by the excavation evidence. Typically, a kelp kiln was a ‘circular, oval or rectangular setting of stone, open at the top and enclosing a shallow pit’ (McErlean et al. 2002, 348). The excavation on the Rubball Sionnaigh racecourse enclosure revealed a platform rather than a pit, with no trace of any stone setting, and the very small fragments of charcoal recorded in C1 on the platform of the enclosure were not consistent with a major fire (Appendix 1).

**CONCLUSIONS**

All previous attempts to interpret the enclosures have failed to acknowledge the authoritative evidence for a thriving kelp industry on the north Connacht coastline during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which must have left some material remains on the coastal landscape. At Aughris there are no surviving kelp kilns or kelp houses, but local tradition relates that the deep ditches of Pollaree (Pl. 7) were used for burning kelp.
A strong case can now also be made for the scatter of enclosures along the coastal fields as the greatest testimony to the practice of harvesting seaweed on Aughris headland.

The history of seaweed-harvesting in Ireland is usually divided into three distinct phases. During the first phase, 1700–1820, which is also referred to as the alkali period, the best-known bladderwrack, *Fucus vesiculosus*, and *Asophyllum nodosum*, both intertidal plants, were exploited as a rich source of alkali (sodium bicarbonate), which was used in the production of soap, bleach, alum for dyeing, paper and glass (McErlean *et al.* 2002, 334; Childs 2007). Strictly speaking, the soda ashes of the burnt seaweed are what is called kelp, but the word came to be applied to all seaweed. The significance of the kelp industry to coastal communities in the period 1700–1820 is that the high price it fetched allowed tenants to pay their rent, even though their landlords commanded the greater share of the sea harvest by way of a royalty. Although labour-intensive, it was a guaranteed source of income for hard-pressed and heavily populated coastal regions. In addition, the potash content of the wrack was valued as a fertiliser, particularly for potato crops (McErlean *et al.* 2002, 334–5; Hamond 1991, 55). By about 1820, however, the combined impact of the discovery in 1790 that soda could be more easily produced from salt and the importation of Spanish barilla greatly reduced the kelp industry in Ireland (McErlean *et al.* 2002, 336; Hamond 1991, 55).

The second period, from about 1820 to 1940, was characterised by the revival of seaweed-harvesting specifically to exploit *Laminaria*—a genus of subtidal large brown seaweeds—for iodine (Childs 2007; McErlean *et al.* 2002, 334; Hamond 1991, 55). The production of iodine from the seaweed harvested around the Irish coast shifted to Glasgow in Scotland, and the industry went into general decline by 1940. It should be noted that where kelp was still made in a limited capacity, *Laminaria* or sea rods were placed in the kiln to help burn the sea wrack (*Fucus*) that produced the sodium bicarbonate (see Appendix 2). The third and current period of seaweed-harvesting in Ireland, from around 1940 to the present, is dedicated to the production of alginates used in the manufacture of cosmetics and food.

The writings of Rev. William Henry, Coquebert de Montbret and Arthur Young prove beyond doubt that seaweed-harvesting on the Mayo and Sligo coastlines was at its most intense during the period 1700–1820 and that the production of kelp on landed estates was a major activity in north Connacht. In 1739 Rev. William Henry in his *Hints towards a natural and topographical history of Sligo* (SL MS 1249, f. 6) commented on the damaging effects of seaweed-harvesting on fish spawning grounds on the Sligo coast. The seaweed, as he noted, was burned to make kelp or soap ashes.

According to Henry, measures were taken to prevent the depletion of fish stocks: ‘the gentlemen of the County Sligoe observing the evil consequence of this practice have of late discouraged it; by which prudent step they are again recovering their fish’. But evidence of the continued practice of seaweed-harvesting is found in Coquebert de Montbret’s observations concerning the coastline of Tireragh in 1791. At Easkeybridge, a boy showed him four kinds of seaweed used for making kelp, and while driving between Easkey and Rosslee Castle he observed the ‘whole coast covered with smoke from burning kelp’ (Ni Chinnéide 1976, 62–3). Arthur Young, during his tour of 1776–9, was informed by Mr Browne of Fortland, near Easkey, that throughout the barony of Tireragh the main staples were potatoes manured with seaweed, as well as barley, oats and flax. Seaweed was apparently the only manure. As Browne remarked, ‘they depend entirely on it, and apt to do that too much, neglecting other parts of management’ (Hutton 1892, 243). In his travelogue account of the west of Ireland, Henry Coulter (1862, 283) observed at Easkey, west of Aughris, sea wrack ‘piled up in ricks and left for some time to season’ after drying. In Pl. 5 above, it was noted that the scars of small fields set back from the cliffs just west of Aughris village carry visible traces of old cultivation ridges, which were probably for growing potatoes, and it is likely that some of the seaweed harvested at Aughris went into manuring those fields.

The most direct evidence for seaweed-harvesting on the western side of Aughris headland comes from a nineteenth-century valuation document and from oral tradition imparted to the writer by two local people who were both involved in seaweed-harvesting and kelp-making in their youth. A valuation of the Hills Estate dated 17 January 1888 (SL MS 589) reveals that Robert Hills of Donecoy House had ‘the right of collecting and taking seaweed from the shore’ in Killusheighter, immediately south of Aughris townland. There were about 30 tenants in that townland in 1888. Both Cooper of Markree and Hills of Donecoy held considerable shore rights over a swathe of the western side of Aughris headland. This is borne out by the absence of intertidal walls, which would otherwise indicate the division of the shoreline into individual tenant’s kelp allotments, as at Strangford Lough (McErlean *et al.* 2002, 345–6). In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Aughris the lion’s share of the wrack was harvested by the tenants for their landlords and to a lesser extent for their own needs.

In 2001 the writer had the great privilege of recording the late Willie Kilgannon (then 87 years of age) and his wife Mary Kilgannon of Doonmadden,
wherever wrack was harvested and had to be stored wouldn’t get in under it’. He added that the ‘circles’ were stacked to await burning for kelp and to provide a convenient supply of manure for potato and grain crops. Mary Kilgannon (Appendix 2) related how ‘I remember being at that, and taking it right from the sea and putting it another bit further in so that you could bring your horse and cart and asses and creels and fill your creels and bring them up onto the land so that they were away from the sea and you could leave it there then till it would partly dry and that was for your potato crop or your grain crop’.

The processes of gathering, drying and stacking the wrack and the eventual burning for soda ash were separated by a month or more (Department of Irish Folklore 1993, 18). Willie Kilgannon (Appendix 2) explained that ‘if you got a good day wrack would dry up quick . . . and then you would gather it up and make little cocks of it’. He noted that on Ruball Sionnach racecourse near Healy’s Round Hill there were ‘round circles . . . for the wrack. They would build it up there and they would put something round it that the water wouldn’t get in under it’. He added that the ‘circles’ were there from the old people before them and you would just put them on them’. By the first half of the twentieth century the small scale of seaweed-harvesting for kelp production on Aughris headland would not have warranted the creation of new platforms, and in such circumstances it was logical to use those still extant.

The stacking of the wrack into conical ricks was not peculiar to Aughris. It was in fact commonplace wherever wrack was harvested and had to be stored prior to kelp-making or manuring the land. McErlean et al. (2002, 347), writing about the kelp industry at Strangford Lough, note that ‘Before burning, the cut weed was dried to make it combustible and to prevent rotting, which would render it useless for making kelp. The drying process appears to have been very similar to making hay and took place along the shoreline. The weed was spread out on grass or draped on a sea wall and allowed to dry in the sun or wind and then stacked in conical ricks.’

The use of such dry platforms for other harvested crops is known elsewhere. In south Kerry, for instance, O’Sullivan and Sheehan (1992) identified several hundred fionnán grass enclosures, especially in the townland of Gowlane East, near Sneem. Prior to their enquiry, those enclosures had been regarded as of potential archaeological importance owing to the resemblance they bear to certain well-known monuments such as hut sites and ring-barrows. But the scatter of enclosures turned out to be simple devices—a circular or subcircular drained, and sometimes raised, area on which cocks of fionnán grass, used for thatch and as bedding for farm animals and winter fodder, were stored. Likewise, the writer on a recent visit to Ness in the north of the Isle of Lewis observed a concentration of similar enclosures used for stacking harvested grain at Carnan à Ghroisdhair (Barrowman et al. 2007, 38).

One of the arguments put forward by Timoney (2002) against the use of the Aughris enclosures as stands for seaweed is that their exposed cliff-top position would have made for very windswept conditions. But that is precisely what the rods and wrack required to dry out and remain dry. It has also been stated that the lofty cliff-top location of the enclosures on the western coastline of Aughris would have made bringing the seaweed there a very arduous task, but that argument does not stand up to scrutiny. There were at least four locations around Aughris headland where seaweed was collected within living memory. These include (clockwise from south-west to north-east) Trawee in Rathglass, Belturin Bay in Kilrushheighter, and Lacknarookan (below Healy’s Round Hill) and Aughris pier in Aughris townland. The cliffs at Aughris are not consistently high. In fact, in the area extending between Trawee and Pollnamaugagh the cliffs are quite low, consisting of sand-dunes further south and sloping terraces of flat rock as far as Pollnamaugagh. North-east from that point the cliffs rise, but fall again in places into the rocky terraces that tend to characterise the north-western coastline of Aughris townland. The terraces would have made the seaweed quite reachable for
harvesting. Furthermore, it was noted above that where one of the greatest concentrations of the enclosures occurs along the coastal fields, north of Aughris village, there is a road that runs northward through the village on towards those coastal fields (Fig. 6; Pl. 5). This is likely to have functioned as a ‘wrack road’ like those observed by Estyn Evans (1957, 22) in the busy seaweed-harvesting townland of Ballynahatten on the County Down coast. At Aughris the remnants of another possible wrack road are visible on the 1837 edition OS map immediately west of the village road and can also be seen from the air (Fig. 6; Pl. 3). In winter 2002 the writer recorded an earlier wrack route that has fallen out of use between Altbo and Aughris Head.

The density of wrack platforms along the western coastal fields of Aughris headland suggests that this was a well-worked and highly valued kelp shore. Although harvesting seaweed for iodine-processing and for manuring potato and grain crops continued well into the 1950s, it was conducted on a far smaller scale. The heyday of seaweed-harvesting for kelp on the Cooper estate at Aughris was the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and it is to this period that most of the several hundred wrack platforms in Aughris townland are likely to belong. Some of them, however, such as those on Healy’s land at Ruball Sionnaigh townland are likely to belong. Some of them, however, such as those on Healy’s land at Ruball Sionnaigh racecourse, continued to be used for that purpose on a small scale well into the twentieth century.

The challenge presented to archaeologists when interpreting a new monument type is compounded by a tendency to view the unknown as a product of ‘ritual’, that catch-all term that explains nothing but is frequently applied to a whole range of sites and monuments across the Irish landscape. Much of what man created in the past was connected with everyday farming communities along the north Connacht coastline. Reaching an interpretation of those monuments has involved drawing together the results of archaeological excavation, local knowledge, travellers’ observations, administrative records and aerial photographs, demonstrating how the summation of disparate knowledge can often reveal the past.

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The results (see below) indicated that there was no appreciable difference between the soil content of the platform and the surrounding field, and there was no evidence for the presence of seaweed or any other marine material.

**Plant remains assessment**

**ABIGAIL BREWER**

This report is an assessment of the archaeobotanical potential of six soil samples from 01E0700, Aughris. The scanning of the samples did not produce any significant organic remains.

**Methodology**

The assessment involved sieving all samples and then examining them under a microscope. The method of sieving used was a combination of flotation, wash-over and wet sieving, which is considered an effective retrieval method causing the least amount of damage to fragile biological remains. The sieving was conducted by the Eachtra Archaeological Projects team and all the samples were washed through four grades of mesh (2mm, 1mm, 500µm, 250µm). The scanning method involves examining the 1mm flots under a stereomicroscope and recording the relative proportions of organic remains present. This is a reliable method for determining the potential of samples and suggesting research topics for further post-exavation analysis but it is not a final or definitive statement on the plant remains from the site.

**Sample descriptions**

Six soil samples were taken during the course of the excavation in order to determine whether there was any appreciable difference between the soil content on the platform of the enclosure and that of the surrounding field, and more significantly whether the soil on the platform, or in the ditch fill, contained trace elements of seaweed or any other organic crop.

Sample 1 (10–12 litres), Cutting 2, C1, E149084.5, N336018, taken from platform of enclosure.

Sample 2 (10–12 litres), Cutting 1, C2, E149084, N336021, taken from fill of ditch.

Sample 3 (14–15 litres), Cutting 2, C2, E149085, N336016–E149085, N336019.5, taken from fill of ditch.

Sample 4 (14–15 litres), Cutting 3, C1, E149080, N336015, taken from area immediately outside the ‘bank’ of the enclosure in the western half of the cutting.

Sample 5 (14–15 litres), Cutting 3, C1, E149082.5, N336014.5, taken from platform in east half of Cutting 3.

Sample 6 (14–15 litres), Cutting 3, C2, E149081.5, N336015–E149081.5, N336016, taken from fill of ditch.

Six samples from the site were examined. The excavator wanted to know in particular whether there was any evidence for the presence of seaweed or marine mollusc shells, and whether there were any differences between Sample 4 and Samples 1, 2 and 3. There was also a question as to whether there were differences between the ditch fill C2 and the sod layer C1.

There were no significant organic remains in any of the samples. All the samples contained modern weed seeds and roots. Five of the samples also contained insect carapaces but only one sample, from C1, produced any charcoal. There were no cereal remains and no mollusc shells in any of the samples.

Sample 1, Context 1: Produced very occasional modern weeds and moderate amounts of charcoal. The fragments of charcoal were all very small. Abundant modern roots were also present in the sample.

Sample 2, Context 2: This sample from the fill of the ditch contained very occasional modern weed seeds, insect carapaces and abundant modern roots.

Sample 3, Context 2: From the fill of the ditch, the
sample contained occasional modern weeds, very occasional insect remains and abundant modern roots.

Sample 4, Context 1: This sample came from just outside the ‘bank’ of the enclosure. There were very occasional modern weed seeds and insect carapaces and abundant modern roots in the sample.

Sample 5, Context 1: Taken from the base of the sod layer on the platform of the enclosure, this sample produced occasional modern weed seeds, very occasional insect remains and abundant modern roots.

Sample 6, C2: This sample came from the fill of the ditch in Cutting 3 and it also produced occasional modern weed seeds, very occasional insect remains and abundant modern roots.

Conclusions

The samples produced modern weed seeds and roots and C1 contained small charcoal fragments but there were no other plant remains.

There was no evidence of the presence of seaweed, marine molluscs or other marine material.

There were no appreciable differences between Sample 4 and Samples 2 and 3, but Sample 1, taken from C1, did contain charcoal, unlike any of the other samples.

No further analysis was required.

APPENDIX 2: INTERVIEW

The following transcript of an interview between Elizabeth FitzPatrick and Mary Kilgannon and the late Willie Kilgannon (both then in their late eighties), held in the summer of 2001, lends considerable support to the interpretation of these enclosures as seaweed stands.

EF Where did they take the slat man [sea rods] from? Were there different points on the headland where you would go?

WK Well, the sea would drive it in on Trawee strand. You would get it there. You would get it in Pollruckie [Lacknaruacan—the terraced rocks below Healy’s Round Hill] below as well. All along the coast they would come in.

EF When it came in on the wave, what time of year would you harvest it?

WK That would be around November and December—bad, wet weather.

EF And why at that time of year?

WK Because the sea would be so rough outside it would root these up.

MK It’s like growing a crop. The roots are there on the sea bottom and the tops fall down and then they are washed in by the tide. And also that was manure for the crop—the wrack. I remember being at that, and taking it right from the sea and putting it another bit further in so that you could bring your horse and cart and asses and creels and fill your creels and bring them up onto the land so that they were away from the sea and you could leave it there then till it would partly dry and that was for your potato crop or your grain crop. There was no fertiliser that time and no money to buy it either.

EF Were most farmers doing this along the shore?

WK Well, up along the coast. Well now on Healy’s land—all the Healys there would take over that. That was their coast. You are always paying to low-water mark. Your land is covered out to low-water mark. It’s your property out to what they call low-water mark.

EF Did you burn the slat man after they dried out?

WK They had to burn it—the wrack and slat man, and then it went into hard kelp.

EF Where did you burn it? Did you take it away to burn it?

WK You would always bring it home to burn it because you have it everyplace. In Healy’s Round there was things there that you would see—round circles. Well, them was for the wrack. They would build it up there and they would put something round it that the water wouldn’t get in under it, if at all, do you see.

EF How long would you leave the wrack to dry?

WK If you got a good day now, wrack would dry up quick, shrivel up and then you would gather it up and make little cocks of it—a little hand-shaking. You don’t know what a hand-shaking is! Well you would build it into piles and then you would bring it and put it into one big cock and there it would settle and get moist down again. When you got the slat man going you would put a few turf underneath and put parafin or something and get them going. Then you would throw a lock of wrack and then you put a lot of slat man.

EF Did you ever burn the seaweed on the clifftops?

WK You brought it home, you brought it to wherever it would be along the sea. And then they would have this cock of wrack or maybe two cocks of wrack, or whatever would be in it, and you would bring all the slat man there. That was before the slat man was a buying. You would start it off with a little fire and you would put it all down and it would all go. You had to keep all the holes—with the fire you had to keep it all underground so that it wouldn’t get hold of it—with the fire. You would pull in wrack, more slat man and all along came along then. And it went...
EF The little circles—would you make them again the next year?
WK No, you would leave them be. In fact there are some of them here along the sea yet.
EF Would it be one man or a couple of men who would make one of those little circles? Were you ever involved in making one?
WK No. They were there from the old people before them, and you just put them [cocks of wrack] on them.
EF And they were just used for drying—they were not used for burning?
WK Ah, they would be no good for burning. You would have all your slat mana and you would bring them all to the one place because it was the one day you burned the kelp. And you would see nothing but fogs of smoke, and the smell of you—you could smell you for a mile.
EF What size of a stack would you pile up on one of those little platforms?
WK You could put them that height [estimating 5–6 feet] and when they would dry you put more on top of them.
EF How much kelp would you produce?
WK Six or seven ton.
EF Per family?
WK Not every family. There was certain people used to make it. Petey Kennedy used to make it. The Scanlans—they were on the slat market. They are not in it now either.
MK They were all neighbours.
WK They were all neighbours round here.

NOTES

1 In an interview with the writer in 2001 Mary Kilgannon explained that field boundaries had recently been removed from Ruball Sionnaigh to facilitate grazing.
2 I am grateful to Professor M. Williams, Department of Geology, NUI, Galway, who identified this as shale mud with sparsely distributed clasts of angular quartz grains and pieces of bedrock.
3 The finds, with the exception of the polystyrene fragment, which disintegrated after analysis, have been deposited in the NMI.
4 In conversation with the late Sonny Finnegans, 80 years old, and Matty Golden, 74 years old, Aughris, September 1999.
5 My thanks to Chris and Rachel Barrowman for drawing my attention to the large cluster of crop stands in Carnan à Ghrohdhair.