

## THE JACK COLEMAN ARCHIVE: INSIGHTS INTO CORK'S ARCHAEOLOGY

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# THE JACK COLEMAN ARCHIVE: INSIGHTS INTO CORK'S ARCHAEOLOGY

Marion Dowd highlights the contribution made by non-archaeologists to our understanding of the past.

Jack Coleman, known as 'the father of Irish caving', was born in Cork city in 1914. His early career was in insurance but in 1945 he became assistant secretary of the Irish Tourist Association, and in 1951 he joined Bord Fáilte Éireann. His free time was spent caving. The dates on several of the photos published here indicate that excursions underground often took place on Sundays. Through almost four decades of caving Coleman kept meticulous field notes, which formed the basis of his numerous publications in Irish and British academic journals, including the *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society* and the *Proceedings of the University of Bristol Speleological Society*. In 1965 UCC awarded him an honorary MA in Geography for his research in Irish speleology.

Following Coleman's death in a car crash in 1971, his cave archive was taken into the care of his friend and fellow caver Dónal Gilhoys. When Mr Gilhoys died in 2012, the archive was passed on to me, and in 2013 I transferred it to the library of the Speleological Union of Ireland (SUI) in Dublin, under the auspices of Dr Matthew Parkes. The archive is a valuable source of information on Ireland's caves and contains a wealth of unpublished cave surveys, photographs and site descriptions (Dowd 2013). The purpose of this article is to make readers aware of some of the previously unpublished items of archaeological significance. The surviving part of the archive relates primarily to County Cork; Coleman's papers regarding caves in other counties have yet to come to light. All images are reproduced courtesy of the SUI.

These images from the Jack Coleman archive afford glimpses of Cork's archaeological and historical heritage, as well as providing insights into the life of an important Cork-born scholar. They remind us of the contribution that non-archaeologists can make to the discipline of archaeology, and in particular of the central role that cavers play in our understanding of cave use in the past. The image of Lisnaraha indicates that there may be little or no surviving documentation for some early investigations at archaeological sites. In contrast, the plan of Park North Cave highlights the high standards of many mid-twentieth-century excavations. Several of the photos illustrate the various functions that caves fulfilled in historic times, and the larger archive provides a wealth of information on the social history of caving in Ireland. An interesting realisation for me when preparing this article was that, while the names of important scholars may be well known and their contribution appreciated, we often do not know what these individuals looked like in their earlier years and careers, particularly prior to 1950.

If you have further information on any of the images published here, please contact me at: [dowd.marion@itsligo.ie](mailto:dowd.marion@itsligo.ie). ■



Fig. 1—Mick Murphy (left) and Jack Coleman (right) near Ovens Cave, Co. Cork, 28 October 1934. Coleman was the pioneer of Irish cave exploration and his *magnum opus*, *The caves of Ireland* (1965), is still regarded as the bible of Irish caving. In 1964 he established the Speleological Society of Ireland, the first formal caving organisation in the country. A contemporary in Britain, Edgar K. Tratman, commented that 'For many years he was almost the sole Irish caver in Ireland' (Tratman 1971). Coleman made a lasting and significant contribution to research in Irish cave archaeology. He identified over 40 caves of archaeological and historical merit and singled out small caves as 'good archaeological excavation sites, for ancient man rarely penetrated deep into caverns' (Coleman 1965, 13). Yet another insight confirmed by recent research is that people 'used caverns in sporadic fashion from Neolithic to Mediaeval times, and judging by the quantity of artefacts alone, it would appear that the Early Christian period was the high tide mark of troglodyte occupation' (*ibid.*, 70).

Fig. 2—A group of cavers in the Hall of Pillars, Carrigtwohill Quarry Cave, Co. Cork, 22 October 1933. The presence of caves at Carrigtwohill was first recorded by Charles Smith in 1749. A major extension to the main cave was discovered by J. Coleman, M. Murphy, J. Cotter and C. Marchment in September 1933. In this photo Coleman is second from the right, holding a stalactite. The identities of the others are not known but may include those who were involved in the cave extension's discovery. Within 30 years, many of the formations visible in this photo had been destroyed by vandalism. Coleman carried out a licensed excavation in Carrigtwohill Quarry Cave in 1944 and recovered bones of wolf, pig, dog, cat, rabbit, rook, duck, goose, domestic fowl and corncrake (Coleman and Stelfox 1945).



Fig. 3—This drawing by Coleman of a megalithic tomb (CO088-010----) in Rostellan townland, Co. Cork, was published in the *Cork Examiner* of 22 December 1951. There is some dispute about the authenticity of the monument and whether it is a prehistoric tomb or a post-medieval folly. It is located in the intertidal zone at Cork harbour and a significant portion is submerged at high tide.



Fig. 4—Dated 3 March 1935, this photo is labelled 'Excavations in Lisnaraha' and was taken by Coleman in the interior of Lisnaraha ringfort (CO062-135001-), Loughane East townland, Co. Cork. The bank of the ringfort is visible in the background. A man is removing sod from a stony area of ground using a pick; another man appears to hold a hand-pick or hammer in his left hand and a rod in the other. There are no published references to excavations in Lisnaraha ringfort and the National Monuments Service has no record of an excavation licence for the site. I followed several leads, but neither the identities of those in the photo nor the nature of the investigation could be confirmed. Fortunately, however, Jack Coleman's daughter, Catherine Pearson, discovered the negative of this photo in the family files, which provided additional information: 'Preliminary excavations at Lisnaraha. Mick Murphy, Larry Barry, Jim Cotter'. A second negative was labelled 'Fosse Lisnaraha'.

The photograph suggests a very limited investigation which may or may not have been of an archaeological nature. At least three of the four men were cavers: Murphy, Cotter and Coleman had discovered the Carrigtwohill Quarry Cave extension together two years previously (see Fig. 2). Denis Power has suggested that they may have been searching for a souterrain at Lisnaraha, particularly as the man on the right is holding what could be a rod

used for probing. This is plausible, as souterrains were sometimes constructed against cave entrances in the early medieval period and are therefore of interest to cavers. Another possibility is that the men were seeking to explore whether a natural spring in the ringfort interior may have indicated the presence of a cave. Based on current information, however, this photo raises more questions than it answers.



Fig. 5—Park North Cave in Foxes Quarry, Midleton, Co. Cork, 24 May 1942. In 1942 Coleman carried out licensed archaeological excavations in Park North Cave (CO076-004---), the opening to the centre right of this photograph. The majority of the material encountered reflected early medieval occupation, but the presence of a flint convex scraper suggests prehistoric activity (Coleman 1942). A number of issues arose which affected the progress of work. The level of the water-table was quite high, and on one occasion an excavation trench became flooded. Extensive work inside the cave had to be abandoned after several rocks fell from the cave roof. Note the dry-stone wall built across the cave entrance to keep out livestock; it also features in Fig. 6. The woman to the right of the cave entrance is almost certainly Jack Coleman's wife, Winnie.

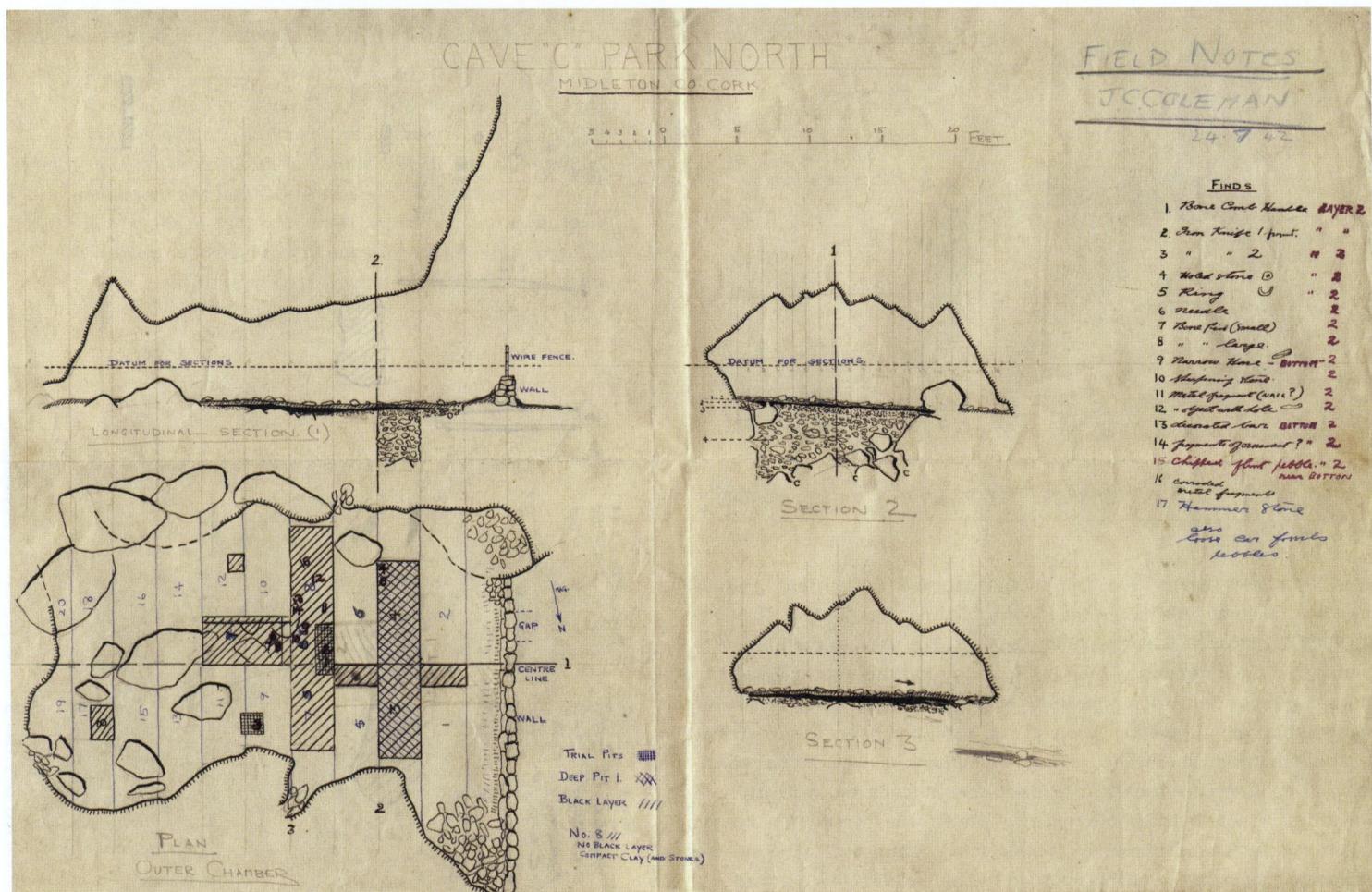


Fig. 6—Park North Cave, plan and sections, 24 July 1942. As illustrated in this image, Coleman's excavation and recording techniques were of a very high standard for the early 1940s. He divided the cave into twenty grids, opened two main trenches, excavated stratigraphically and recorded the find-spots of artefacts. The recovered archaeological material included a bone

needle, bone pins, a bone comb (eighth–tenth-century), a spindle-whorl, whetstones, a hammerstone, iron knives, an iron nail, a bronze ring, seashells and animal bones. A more unusual find was a fragment of a religious shrine, recently identified by Dr Griffin Murray as the ridge-mount of a house-shaped shrine of eighth- or early ninth-century date.

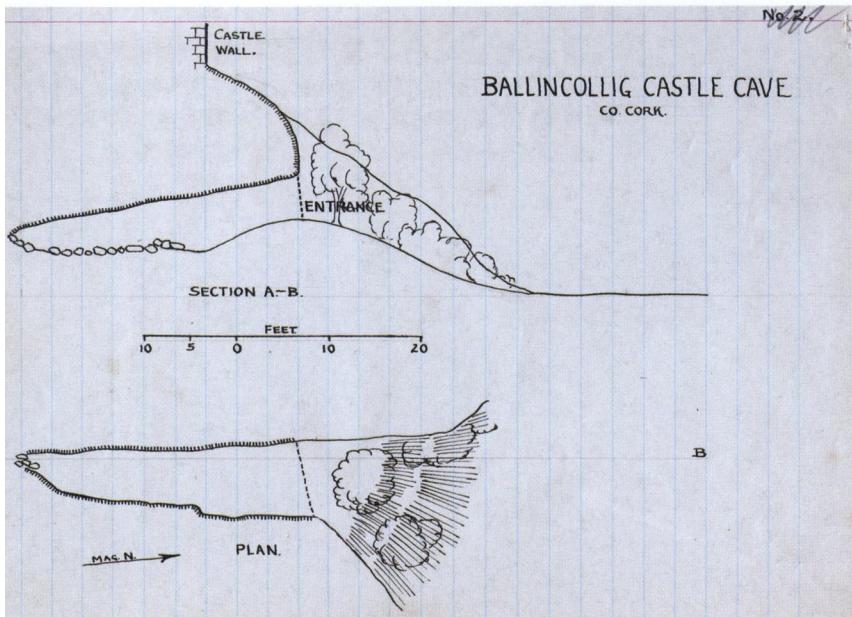


Fig. 7—This profile and plan of a small cave under the walls of Ballincollig tower-house, Co. Cork, were drawn by Coleman in 1934. At the cave entrance he noted the presence of a mound of clay and stones that had collapsed from a ruined portion of the outer wall of the tower-house. At least 30 oyster shells, animal bones and a fragment of iron were noted deeper inside the cave. Coleman conjectured that the cave may have been used by the castle's occupants to dump refuse, but he also highlighted the prehistoric potential of the site.

Fig. 8—Coleman discovered this stash of rifles in Ovens Cave, Co. Cork (CO073-071---), on 28 October 1934. The arms had been placed at the end of a narrow passage over 75m inside the cave entrance; Coleman named it 'the Gun Room'. Dr John Borgonovo has recently identified the weapons as a Lewis machine-gun and a Lee-Enfield .303 rifle resting on a butter box. Borgonovo believes that they may have belonged to the 3rd Battalion, Cork No. 1 Brigade of the IRA, who were active in the Ovens area and regularly used butter boxes to store arms. The weapons were probably concealed in the cave towards the end of the Civil War.

This was not the first time that Ovens Cave had been used as a hideout. Local tradition records that Mass was celebrated in the cave in Penal times. An artificially enlarged chamber over 90m inside the entrance is known as the Mass Rock Chamber (located in a different part of the cave to the Gun Room). Angular boulders that occur here were said to have functioned as an altar, and in the 1930s a thick layer of soot covered the roof (Coleman 1940). Coleman directed licensed excavations in Ovens Cave in 1943, recovering bones of red deer, hare, cattle, sheep/goat, pig, cat and rabbit (Coleman 1944–5).



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