

# The Cooley Peninsula:



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an archaeological landscape  
in County Louth



## Introduction

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The Cooley Peninsula in north County Louth juts out into the Irish Sea, separating Carlingford Lough to the north-east from Dundalk Bay to the south-west. On the northern side of Carlingford Lough are the Mountains of Mourne. Cooley is about 20km in length and 155 square kilometres (60 square miles) in area. The peninsula has a varied geology and topography, dominated by an upland spine, the Cooley Mountains. Not only is Cooley a distinctive physical region but it has long been a distinctive cultural area and was traditionally part of Ulster (Ulaidh). Valleys at the western end of the peninsula still form a strategic inland north-south access route, serving the Belfast-Dublin rail line and the N1 road, for example.

The name Cooley (*Cuailnge*) is recorded in the title of the best-known Irish epic, the *Táin Bó Cuailgne* or the 'Cattle Raid of Cooley'. This tells the story of Queen Medb (Maeve) of Connacht's desire to obtain the Brown Bull of Cooley, the Donn Cuailnge, and of Cúchulainn's heroic defence of the kingdom of Ulaidh. The epic is considered to reflect late prehistoric Ireland, but it is also influenced by the politics of the early historic period, when it was written down for the first time. Besides its prominence in the literary landscape of the *Táin*, Cooley has a wealth and range of archaeological sites, illustrating the long history of settlement on the peninsula.

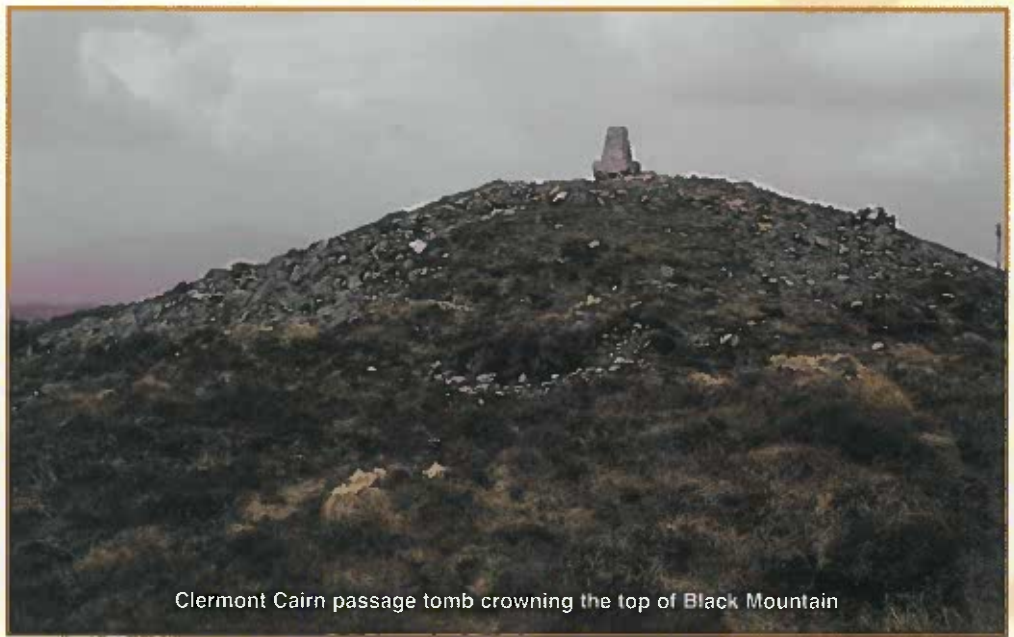
## Geology and topography

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The uplands of Cooley form what is known as the Carlingford Igneous Complex or ring-dyke. The form of the Slieve Gullion uplands to the north-west and the Mourne Mountains reflects related igneous activity. The main feature of the Cooley ring-dyke is the outer ring of craggy gabbro hills, including Slieve Foye (588m), contrasting with the rounded outline of Black Mountain (508m), the highest part of the granophyre (a granitic rock) core of the complex.



Rockmarshall, the location of the Mesolithic midden site, with the Round Mountain in the background



Clermont Cairn passage tomb crowning the top of Black Mountain

The ring of gabbro hills is broken on the southern side by the valley of Glenmore. The older limestone and sandstone through which the igneous activity took place now form the lowland fringe to the hills. In the eastern part of the peninsula the limestone bedrock and the cover of glacial till combine to form what is agriculturally the most fertile part of Cooley. By contrast, most of the upland above 150m OD is unenclosed. The southern coast of the peninsula records the dramatic changes in sea level since the end of the Ice Age. The sea reached its maximum relative height sometime around 4000 BC, and its fall from that level has left raised beaches which represent the contemporary shoreline. It is on these that the earliest evidence for human settlement is found.

## Mesolithic activity at Rockmarshall

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At Rockmarshall near Jenkinstown on the southern side of the peninsula there is a glacial moraine ridge running parallel to the shore. The coast is now over 300m away to the south, with the mudflats of the Castletown River estuary beyond. But during the later Mesolithic the sea lapped against the seaward side of the ridge. People gathered shellfish, fished and utilised the other resources of what was a diverse coastal zone. In the 1940s Frank Mitchell excavated three areas rich in shell and charcoal. The most significant of these was on the landward side of the ridge.

Here people could have sat and talked in comfort, sheltered from the sea and wind, looking out over a neck of land that linked the ridge to higher ground and over the shallow lagoons on either side. They would have a view of wooded hills—Trumpet Hill, the Round Mountain and Slievenaglogh. One of the few pieces of human bone found on an Irish Mesolithic site came from Rockmarshall and has been dated to around 4570 BC. It seems likely that Rockmarshall may have been important as a seasonal meeting place, an aggregation point and social centre for small groups of Mesolithic people.

## Monumentalising the landscape

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We know that there was later Mesolithic activity elsewhere from scatters of stone tools, especially on the raised beach at Greenore. With the transition from the Mesolithic to the Neolithic the evidence for cultural activity becomes more visible, largely because of the construction of megalithic



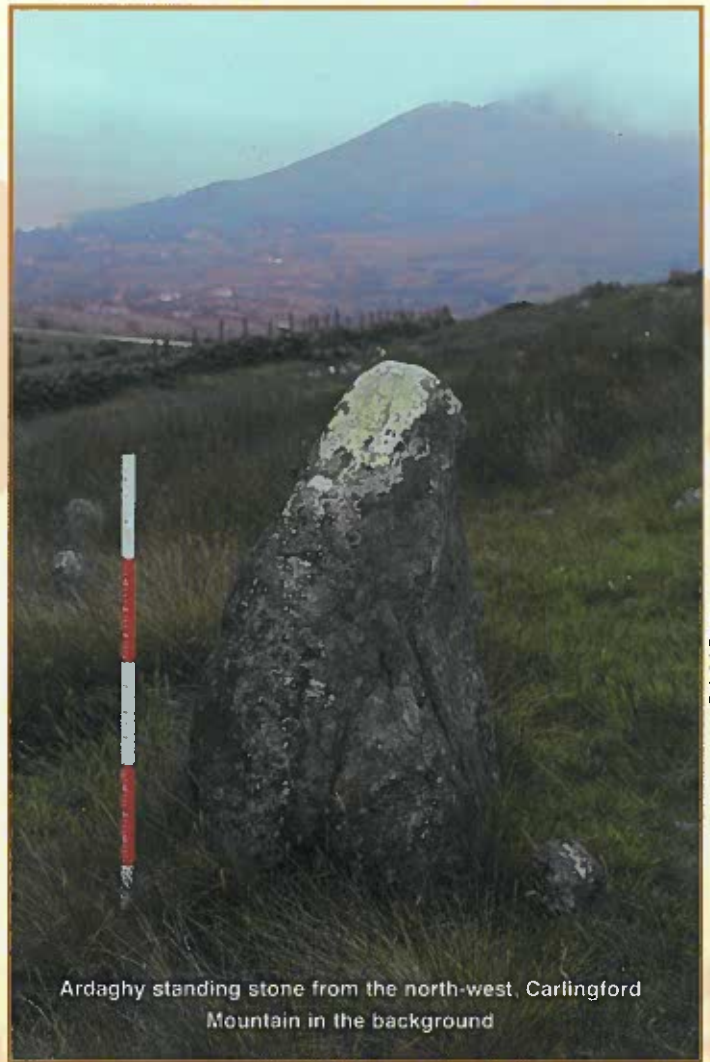
tombs. Examples of all four major classes of megalithic tomb are located on the peninsula. There are portal tombs, as at Proleek, and court tombs, as at Rockmarshall, south-east of and overlooking the Mesolithic site. A passage tomb (Clermont Cairn) crowns the summit of Black Mountain.

The tombs have distinct distribution patterns. The portal tombs are located at the western end of the peninsula, on low ground fringing the uplands. The court tombs are located on the outer slopes of the upland, overlooking lower ground and with the ground rising above them. These are mostly on the southerly and eastern slopes, but there is an interesting group at Clontygora, Co. Armagh, at the northern end of the uplands. Visible from the mountaintop location of Clermont Cairn are the passage tombs in similar positions on Slieve Gullion and Slieve Donard in the Mournes.

Rather than seeing different kinds of tombs as representing separate peoples, it may be useful to think of them as fulfilling different, perhaps complementary, social roles. The occurrence of tombs from mountaintops to low-lying areas suggests that while the lowland fringe and the lower hill slopes are likely to have been the most important for Neolithic settlement, the whole landscape was known and socialised.

## The changing prehistoric landscape

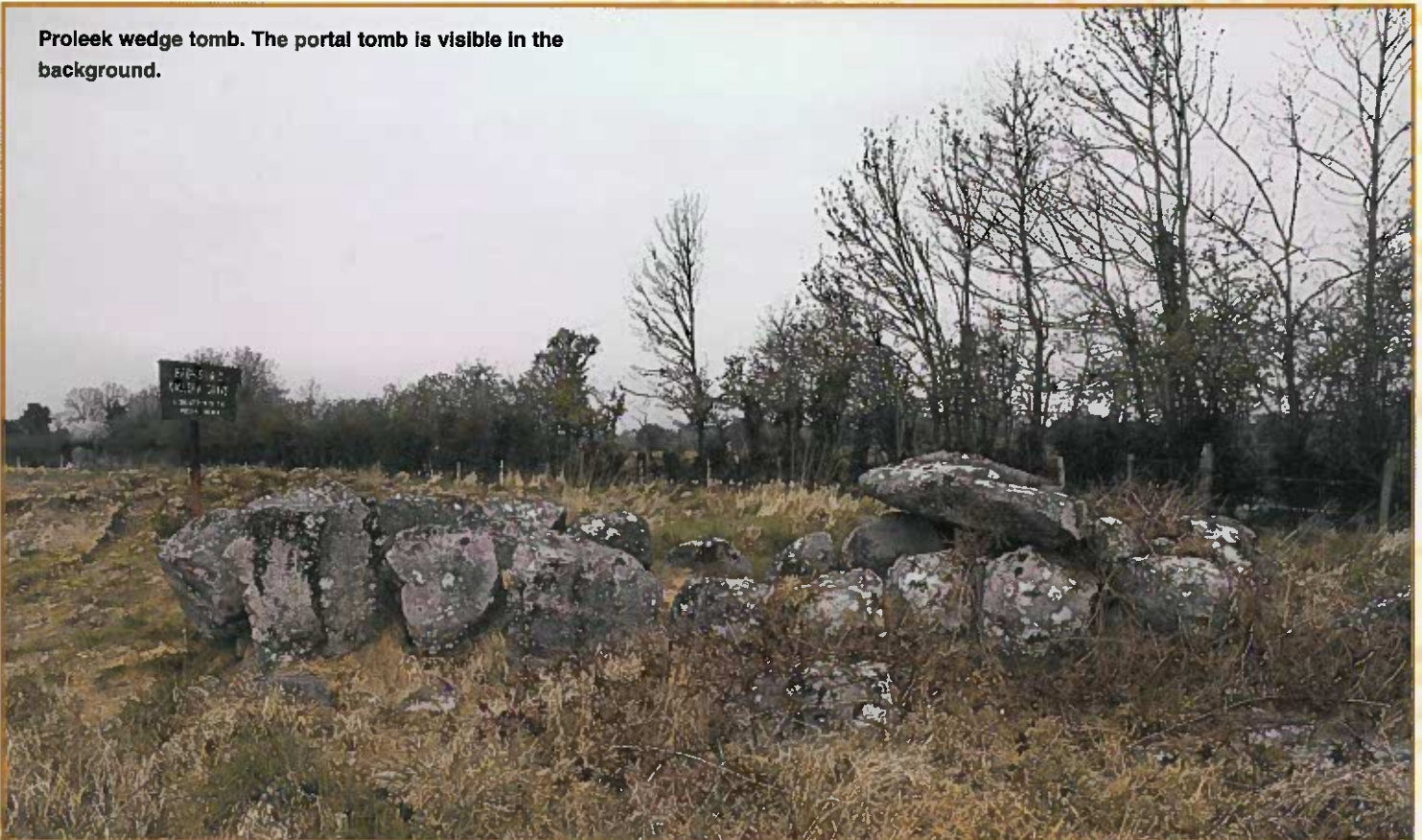
One of the intriguing aspects of Cooley is the question of what was the nature of settlement and ceremonial activity in the Bronze Age and Iron Age. In terms of visible archaeological sites from this period the focus seems to shift more to the western, inland end of the peninsula. A wedge tomb was located close to what would already have been the ancient portal tomb at Proleek, and the portal tomb at Aghnaskeagh was adapted as a Bronze Age cemetery. That this area of Cooley was developing a particular character by the later Neolithic may be indicated by the ceremonial circles at Ballynahattin/Carn Beg and Bellurgan described in



Ardaghy standing stone from the north-west, Carlingford Mountain in the background

Gabriel Cooney

**Proleek wedge tomb. The portal tomb is visible in the background.**



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This range of activity may be related to the critical position of the area as regards north-south movement. Victor Buckley has drawn attention to the possible large late prehistoric enclosure on Faughart Hill, which commands the passes to the north. Faughart was to have long-term significance, as indicated by the early medieval ecclesiastical site associated with St Brigid and the Anglo-Norman motte and bailey nearby. There is more fragmentary evidence for later prehistoric activity from the rest of the peninsula, such as the round barrow at Millgrange, 3km south of



The Dominican friary at Carlingford from the south-east, Slieve Foye visible in the background

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Ballymakellett ringfort with rectangular house in interior, Dundalk Bay visible in the background

Greenore. The occurrence of *fulachta fiadh* at heights of up to 200m OD, as at Mullaghattin, hints at extensive settlement. The recently discovered standing stone in Ardaghly townland, on the eastern slope of Black Mountain, overlooking Carlingford Lough, indicates that there is still much to learn about this period.

## History in the landscape

We can first decipher a definite pattern of settlement in Cooley for the early medieval period. There are very large numbers of ringforts, and many are located along the lower slopes and foothills of the mountains. The most common type of ringfort in Cooley has a single bank with no external fosse. At the south-east end of Glenmore there is an interesting group of bivallate ringforts. That Cooley is a zone of preservation compared to more intensively farmed areas is emphasised by the survival of field systems associated with early medieval enclosures, notably at Doolargy, above and east of Ravensdale. Here, at Lissachiggeil, excavated by Oliver Davies in 1940, a large ringfort (58m in internal diameter) with more than a dozen huts in the interior had an associated field system.

## From the medieval to the modern landscape

In his work on landholding and settlement in Cooley Tom Jones Hughes argued that we can ultimately trace the evolution and shape of much of the modern farmed landscape back to the changes brought about by Anglo-Norman settlement in the twelfth century. The Anglo-Norman interest in tilling the fertile lowlands of the southern and eastern end of the peninsula is marked by the concentration of 'baile' and town placenames associated with a personal name of Norman origin, while Gaelic placenames dominate elsewhere in the peninsula.

The origins of Anglo-Norman settlement are shown by the motte at Faughart and the largely quarried-out motte and bailey at Mountbagnall. That a perceived need for defence against the uplands lasted into the late medieval period is suggested by the presence of a small number of tower-houses, as at Ballug. Much of Cooley was allocated to the Cistercian abbeys of Mellifont (on the south side of the main mountain watershed) and Newry (on the north side of this watershed). With the dissolution of monastic property in the sixteenth century these lands were divided into secular estates. Much of the form of the farmland dates from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, with the organisation of these estates and the maximum expansion of settlement and enclosure into the uplands. But quite a revolution in landholding has taken place since the mid-nineteenth century, when twenty individuals owned over ninety per cent of the land; now Cooley is dominated by family farms.

## The Táin Trail

The Táin Way (40km) is a glorious way to see Cooley. This waymarked trail begins on the eastern slopes of Slieve Foye, ascending the mountain spine and descending to Ravensdale (one day's walk). From there the trail runs south-east to rise over the mountains again between Slievestucan and The Castle before descending into Glenmore, over the southern shoulder of Slieve Foye and downhill back to Carlingford (one day's walk).

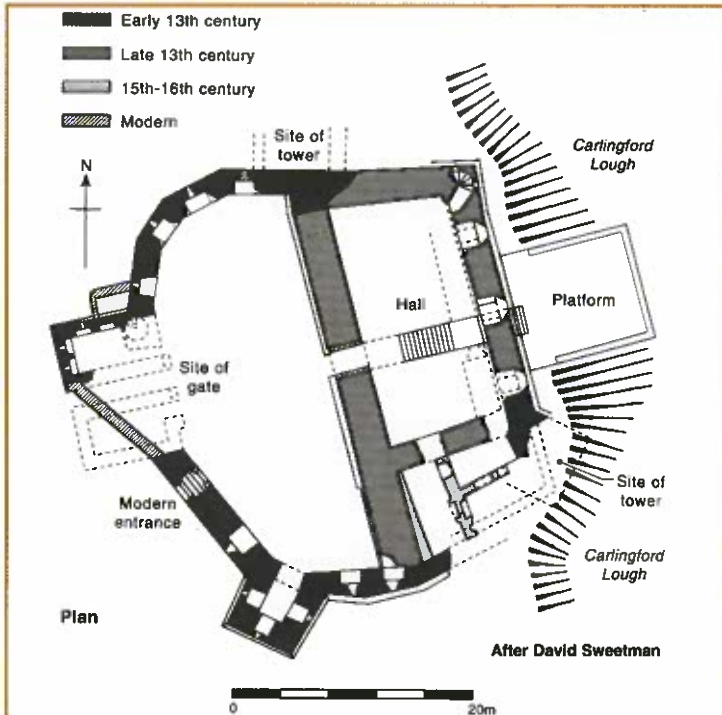




Carlingford

## Carlingford town

While no trace of Viking settlements has been found, the Vikings have left the Norse name *Carlinn Fjord*—‘the fjord (sea-inlet) of Carlinn’. The town of Carlingford was established by the Anglo-Normans. The whole of the Cooley Peninsula had been initially granted to Bertram de Verdon, and a large part of it came into Hugh de Lacy's hands in 1195 on his marriage to de Verdon's daughter. It was de Lacy who founded Carlingford and built King John's Castle around 1200. The castle was constructed on a rocky promontory, dominating the natural harbour to its south. From this location coastal routes linked Carlingford via Greencastle on the opposite side of the lough to the Anglo-Norman



After David Sweetman

Paul Gosling, writing in *Carlingford Town—An Antiquarian's Guide*, notes that: ‘King John's Castle is most readily understood through a study of its ground plan. Firstly, note the position of the modern entrance, through one of the window embrasures. The original entrance, now reduced to its foundations, lies to the north of it. The original castle, built c. 1260, was probably oval in plan. However, c. 1260, the eastern half was remodelled into a large rectangular two-storeyed hall. The south-east corner of the castle, overlooking the harbour, dates from the 15th century and contained the domestic and private quarters’.



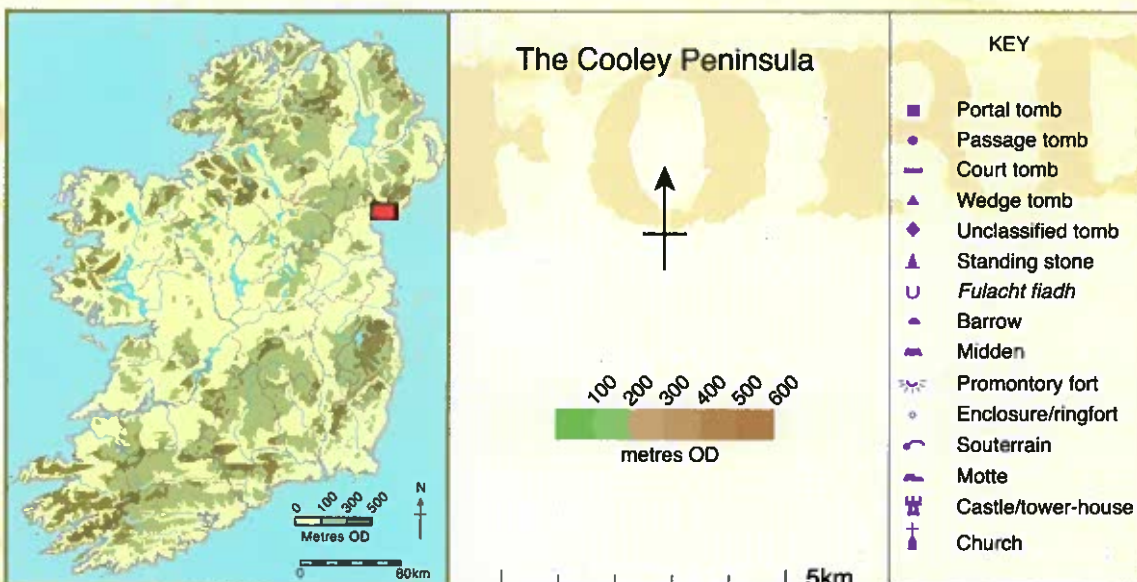
After John Bradley; Paul Gosling

colony in Ulster and to the new town of Dundalk and the Anglo-Norman lands of Leinster. The town seems to have been in existence by 1229. Its distinctive linear street pattern forms what Paul Gosling has described as an elongated H-shape with a central market-place.

Carlingford was a planned town with a town wall, enclosing an area of about 11 hectares. Short stretches of the walls still survive, including a town gate known as the Tholsel (the name indicating that it also served as a town council chamber). Outside the town wall to the south is the Dominican friary, founded in 1305. Here there are the remains of the friary church, portions of the associated domestic buildings, and a watermill and mill-race. What makes Carlingford special is that so much of the medieval fabric of the town has survived. This fortunate circumstance is due to a downturn in its economic prosperity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when Carlingford became isolated owing to the improvements in land routes of communication and trade and a failing of coastal resources.

Consequently, in the modern town you can walk the medieval streets, still recognise the lines of the original property boundaries or burgage plots extending back from the street frontages, and see medieval buildings such as Taaffe's Castle and the Mint. These urban tower-houses indicate the wealth of the merchant élite in Carlingford in the later medieval period. The Holy Trinity church occupies the site of the original thirteenth-century parish church. Part of the present church, including the tower, is late medieval in date. The visitors' centre in the church is a good place to begin an exploration of Carlingford.





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