

# The Geology of Lough Corrib

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## Introduction

While a considerable amount of research on the Geology of Connemara and the Corrib catchment has been carried out by scientists from NUI, Galway and Professor Bernard E Leake of Glasgow University<sup>1</sup>, most of it is published in peer reviewed publications and is aimed at professional geologists. As a result, the average reader will find it difficult to comprehend. However, Sir William R. Wilde M.D. has provided us with an excellent account of the Geology of Lough Corrib in his book "Lough Corrib, its shores and islands" which is sufficient to satisfy the curiosity of the average reader. The following text is abstracted from the book. Footnotes are provided to explain some of the terminology and place names.

Most placenames mentioned are located on sheets 38 and 45 of the Ordnance Survey Discovery Series and can also be readily located on Google maps. For the convenience of the reader, a table of the coordinates of many of the placenames is appended.

## The Geology of Lough Corrib as described by Sir William R. Wilde

The lake naturally divides itself into four portions :—The upper or Connemara and Joyce Country portion, from Maam to Doon, placid, and untenanted by islands, save the bare rock on which the ancient Hen's Castle of the O'Conors and O'Flahertys stands ; the narrow portion along Doorus and Cannaver ; the broad " old lake," crowded with islands, that forms its middle portion ; the rocky narrow gut that commences below Inchiquin, and, turning to the south, by the ferry of Knock and Kylebeg landing, opens opposite Portdarragh<sup>2</sup>, into the broad expanse of the free lower lake that forms its fourth part, and sends its volume of waters through the Corrib and Menlough Rivers, and the " Friars' Cut," into the Gaillieve, and through it to the ocean, at the estimated quantity of 126,000 cubic feet per minute in summer. In the deeper parts the bottom is mud, and in the shallow ones gravel and rock.

The great carboniferous mountain limestone formation occupies all the eastern and southern shores, and the lower portion of the western, in a line drawn from Oughterard to Cong, occasionally cropping to the surface, and forming stratified fields of smooth bare rock, or where it meets the water being honey-combed like a cullender, and in other places grooved by the action of water, ice, or the attrition of harder bodies passing over it, generally in a south-eastern direction.

The geology of the upper lake is of a totally different character. At Oughterard, writes Mr. Kinahan to me,

"the limestone becomes interstratified with sandstone; and immediately north of that village is replaced by granite, which at Glan gives place to fossiliferous Silurian rocks, that lie unconformably on older gneiss, schist, quartz rock, and primary limestone, with dykes and masses of various igneous rocks. On the north of the lake the geology is similar, fossiliferous Silurian rocks occurring at the north-west end of the Maam valley, and extending by Kilbride and Lough Mask to Benlevy and Cong, under which, bounding Lough Corrib, are found

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<sup>1</sup> Over many years my late father acted as boatman for him during his many excursions to the islands of Lough Corrib (MJH).

<sup>2</sup> Situated south east of Tullokyne

gneiss, schist, and primary limestone; and, extending from Benlevy Lodge on Lough Mask to Cong, the mountain limestone is found capping the primary rocks. In the small eastern tract between the River of Cong and the stream at Cross, a detailed list gives an epitome of nearly all the rocks entering into the structure of the district about Lough Corrib;—carboniferous limestone, yellow sandstone, and fossiliferous Silurian grits and shales in sandstone and a variety of whinstone similar to Cotta's description of diallage rock.

"In the townland of Gortachurra<sup>3</sup> there are Carboniferous limestone, conglomerates, and diallage rock ; and in that of Ballymagibbon South, and the islands adjoining, granite, gneiss, schist, fossiliferous Silurian grits and shale, with igneous (diallage) rocks, and conglomerates. There is also, in a boss of primary rocks at the north-west corner of this townland, a small mineral vein containing lead ore, and a trace of copper and mundic.

" Good Silurian fossils, supposed to be of Upper Llandovery age, have been found at Currareavagh and New Village in Glan, on the west of the lake; also at Kilbride, on Lough Mask ; Benlevy, more especially about Coolin Lough, and from that to Ashford Demesne; also in Lisloughery, and Gortachurra townlands, and the adjoining islets. West of Ashford rare trilobites occur ; and in the carboniferous limestone in that demesne I was fortunate enough to find a Chiton, this being the second locality where chitons are recorded as found in the carboniferous limestone, the other being near Rathkeale, Co. Limerick. Black limestone, that will take a fine polish, and form good marble, occurs at Menlough and Anglingham<sup>4</sup>, which quarries are at present worked ; also at Rushveala<sup>5</sup> and Cregg<sup>6</sup>, near Oughterard. The serpentine, or green calcareous rocks, commonly called Connamara marble,<sup>1</sup> are found in various places between Lissoughter and Clifden ; and at present a company is about to open works on these at Lissoughter and Ballinahinch,

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<sup>3</sup> One right hand side of R346 between Cong and Cross

<sup>4</sup> On lake shore near Menlo outside Galway

<sup>5</sup> On left hand side of N59 as you enter Oughterard from Galway.

<sup>6</sup> On the left hand side of Station Road as you leave Oughterard

<sup>7</sup> North of Recess

company is about to open works on these at Lissoughter and Ballinahinch, from whence it is intended to carry the blocks to the sea, and ship them at Cashel, near Roundstone.

"In the primary rocks, and in some of the carboniferous limestone adjoining the lake on the north, north-west, and east, mineral indications are frequent; but up to the present no deep workings have been carried out, therefore it is impossible to speak positively on the mineral resources of the district. In the carboniferous limestone, on the east of the lake, lead and sulphur ores have been found in the neighbourhood of Ballycurran; and on the west of the lake, at Gortmore, Drumeillstown, Moyvoon, Portacarron, Lemonfield, Ardvarne, and Eighterard, and in most of these places small trials have been made on the veins. In all the primary rock the indications of lead, copper, and sulphur are more or less plentiful, and small trials have been made in Doorus, and other places on the north of the lake. At Leackanvrea, and in Glann, Mr. Hodgson carried on mining operations for some time, and shipped some copper and sulphur ore from the port of Galway, having for the time a steamer plying on the lake to carry the ore to that port. During his operations the hills were burrowed in various directions, and more money spent than, if put in a deep working, would have proved whether the country contains good mines or not. The deepest working in the district is that at Glengowla, in Mr. O'Fflahertie's mine, where large bunches of lead were found some years ago."

His mines at Cregg and Canrower<sup>8</sup> are at present let to a Glasgow Company.

Bogs are scarce, and consequently fuel dear, on the south-east shore of the lower moiety of the lake, but plentiful on the west and south, and near Oughterard supply good turf in puchawns, or large lug-sail boats<sup>9</sup>, to the surrounding districts, and even to the town of Galway, from whence they bring back cargoes of seaweed for manure. Turf is procured in three ways, according to the nature of the boggy material:—by the down cutting or foot slane, a sharp narrow spade, with a wing on one side; by the broad flat "breast slane," which cuts it out in front of the worker; and by raising, mixing, kneading, and forming into loaf-like lumps and then drying, the black mud of old cut-away bogs, and this is called "handturf." There are several varieties of peat, either owing to the nature or age of the bog:

As spoddagh<sup>10</sup>, a whitish towy stuff, composed of the latest layer of uncompressed sphagnum; brown-turf; and black or stone turf, the latter being often used, when charred, for forge purposes.

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<sup>8</sup> On left hand side of N59 as you leave Oughterard for Clifden.

<sup>9</sup> Often referred to as 'sack boats'.

<sup>10</sup> Known as spairteach in Irish.

**Coordinates of placenames referred to**

| <b>Placename</b>    | <b>Discovery Sheet</b> | <b>Easting</b> | <b>Northing</b> |
|---------------------|------------------------|----------------|-----------------|
| Ballinahinch        | 44                     | 763            | 472             |
| Ballymagibbon South | 45                     | 179            | 537             |
| Benlevy             | 38                     | 050            | 549             |
| Canrower            | 38                     | 119            | 428             |
| Coolin Lough        | 45                     | 062            | 554             |
| Cregg               | 45                     | 120            | 423             |
| Eighterard          | 45                     | 124            | 434             |
| Gortachurra         | 45                     | 175            | 547             |
| Hen's Castle        | 38                     | 996            | 502             |
| Knock (Knockferry)  | 45                     | 234            | 416             |
| Kylebeg (Kilbeg)    | 45                     | 239            | 426             |
| Lissoughter         | 44                     | 856            | 747             |
| New Village         | 45                     | 097            | 745             |
| Portdarragh         | 45                     | 261            | 532             |
| Rushveala           | 45                     | 137            | 417             |