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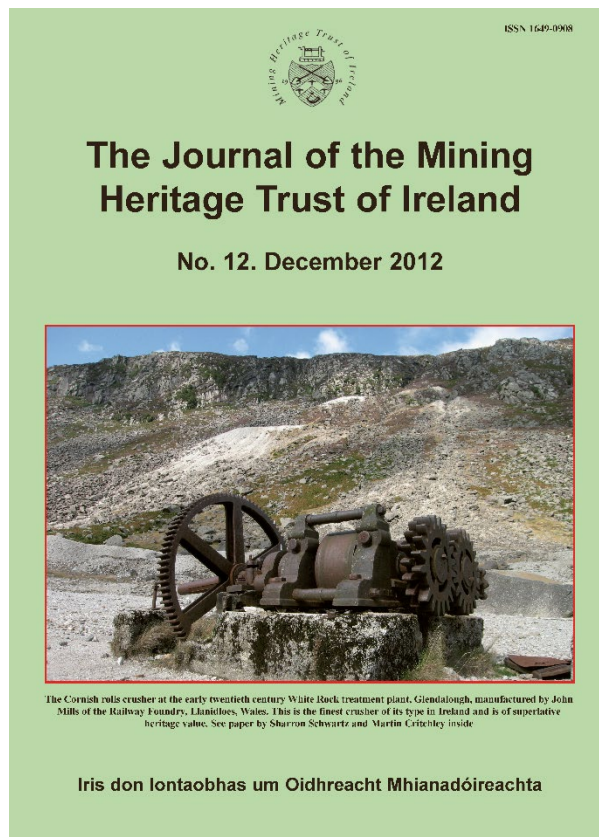
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THE SLATE QUARRYING INDUSTRY ON SHERKIN ISLAND, CO. CORK

Dolly O'Reilly

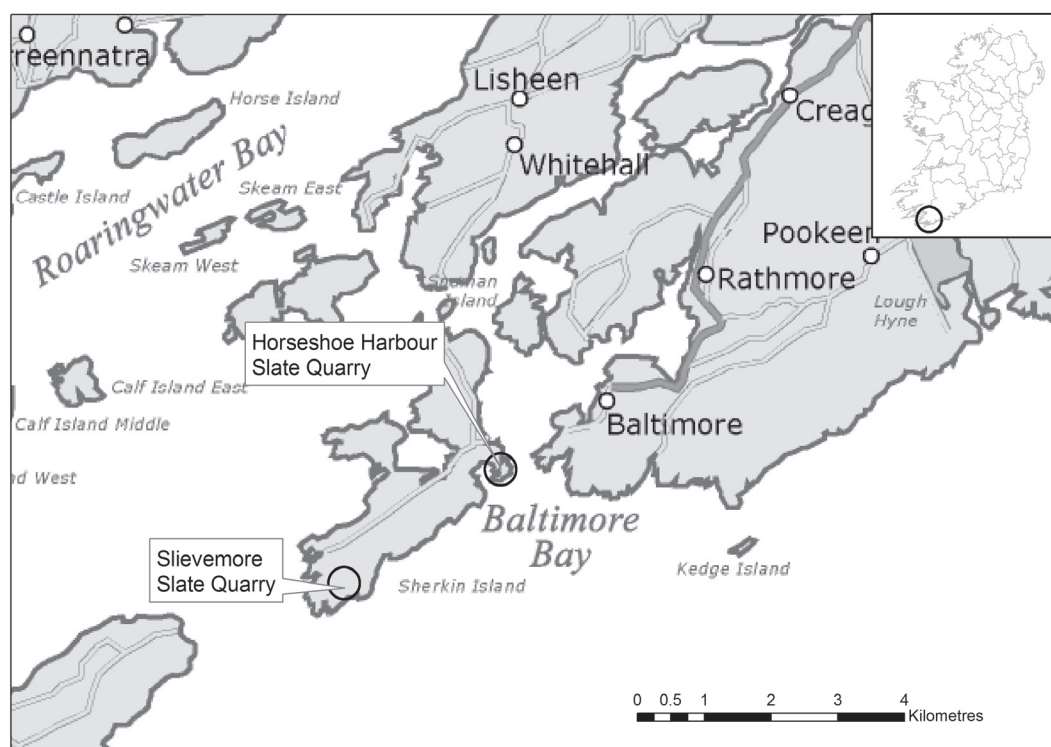
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Abstract: Historic slate quarrying on Sherkin Island, off the coast of west Cork, has not previously been documented. This paper records and illustrates the limited physical evidence on the island. A newspaper advertisement seeking investors from 1835 throws additional light on this minor, but locally significant enterprise. *Journal of the Mining Heritage Trust of Ireland*, 12, 2012, 53-56.

THE IRISH SLATE QUARRYING INDUSTRY

Ireland originally obtained slate, utilised as a roofing material, for flooring slabs and as lintels, from numerous local quarries which, despite being worked only to a limited extent, created significant employment. An increase in the number of buildings in Ireland saw an increase in the demand for slate which began to replace traditional roofing materials like wooden shingles and thatch (Wilkinson 1845, 28). For example, Smith, in his *History of Cork*, describes how the houses on Cape Clear Island (close to Sherkin Island) in the mid- 1750s, were thatched with potato stalks that were kept in place with nets made of straw ropes and weighted down with stones suspended from the nets (Smith 1893. 259).

The importance of slate as a commercial commodity was highlighted during the mining 'boom' of 1824-25, when several Irish companies scrambled to obtain the leases of slate quarries across the island. The Hibernian Mining Company secured the lease to work the Valentia quarry on Valentia Island off the coast of County Kerry, whilst its rival, the Mining Company of Ireland, worked the Killaloe (Curraghbally) quarries near Portroe, County Tipperary, that provided welcome employment to up to 700 men and boys in the 1830s. Besides these two large enterprises, other significant Irish slate quarries included the Victoria and Ormond quarries in Kilkenny, Glentown quarries in County Donegal, the Kilcavan quarries in County Wicklow and the Drinagh and Benduff quarries in west Cork (Rynne 2006. 162).



Map 1. Location of Sherkin Island showing the nineteenth century quarries at Horseshoe Harbour and Slievemore

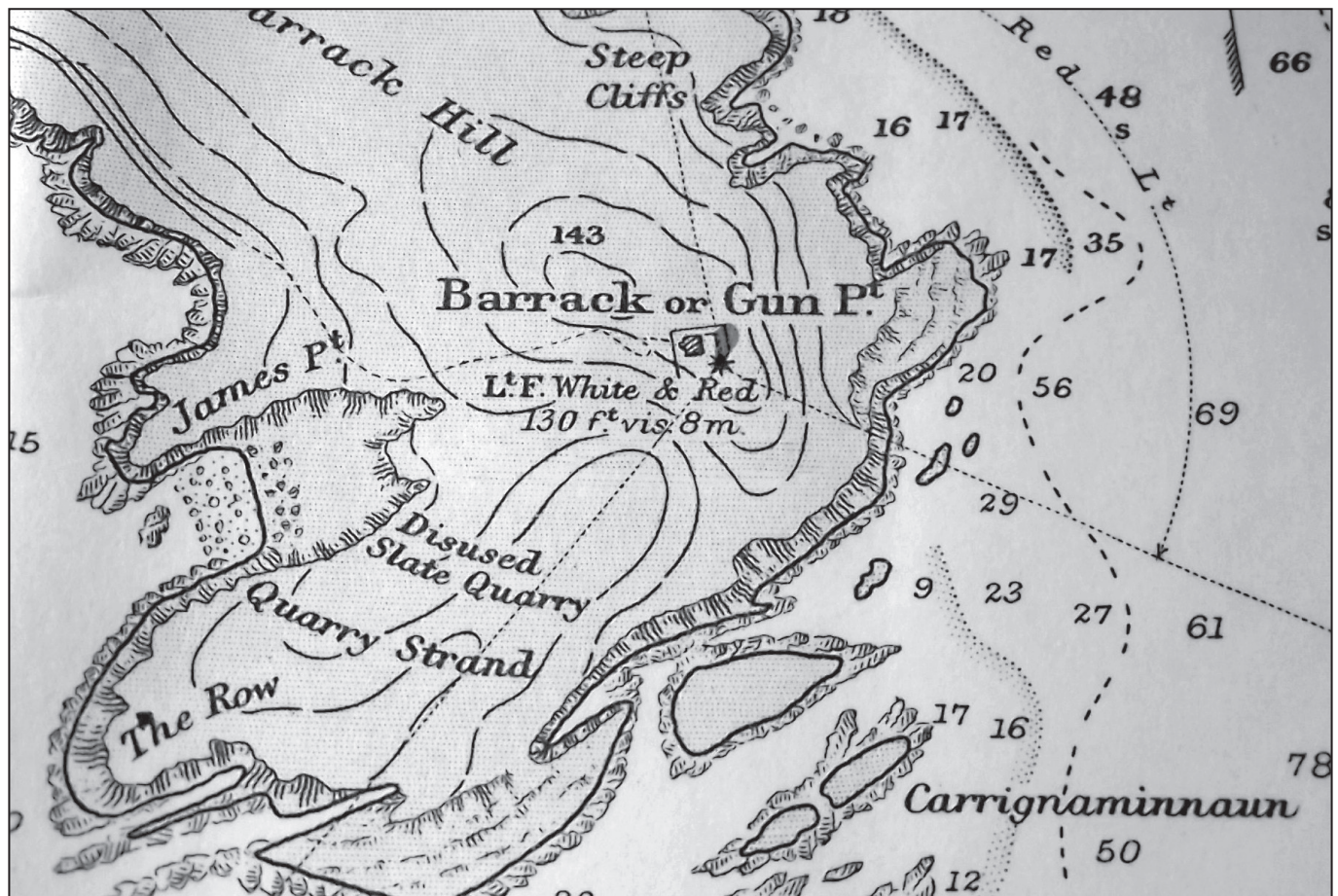


Figure 1. Horseshoe Harbour slate quarry site. Detail from Map of Baltimore Harbour, (Surveyed 1907, published at the Admiralty, London, 1909). Author's copy

According to Wilkinson, in 1845 Ireland still obtained most of its slate from Wales, but there were many valuable Irish quarries which offered potential for development. This in turn, would create employment and save on importing costs (Wilkinson 1845, 28). Indeed, some of the Irish slate quarrying enterprises attracted skilled Welsh migrant labour and much needed expertise to enable many of these quarries to flourish.

SLATE QUARRYING ON SHERKIN ISLAND

The quarry and the Quarry Strand are located in the Harbours Mouth townland on the southeast part of the island below where the present lighthouse is situated. Another quarry was located on the south western side of Slievemore in the town land of that name (see Map 1). Wilkinson included two Sherkin Island rocks, one slaty sandstone and one sandstone in his tables recording properties of standard sized building stone samples, although it would appear he did not consider the slate itself.

The modern Geological Survey of Ireland map and report for the area (Pracht and Sleeman 2002) record that there were at least 25 sites in the west Cork district from which slate was quarried. The Sherkin Island quarries were extracting what is now defined as the Sherkin Formation, consisting primarily of grey and green coloured sandstones with subordinate grey-green and purple mudrocks, which are now the slate units. Structurally the rocks form a tight anticlinal structure, the

Rosscarbery Anticline, and so in Sherkin the beds are nearly vertical, as seen in figures 2, 3 and 4.

We can thank Lewis for information on the Sherkin slate quarries, who recorded them in his *Topographical Dictionary* of 1837 (Lewis 1970, 21-2):

Near the southern extremity are some valuable slate quarries, which are extensively worked, affording employment to nearly 100 men. The slate is of remarkably good colour, and very hard and durable; several cargoes have been shipped to England, where it is in great demand.

As Sherkin Island had a population of almost 1,000 people before the famine, the slate quarries therefore gave employment to almost a tenth of the island's population. It seems that the quarries were commenced not long before Lewis wrote his description of them, as revealed by an advertisement seeking investors placed in the *Cork Constitution* newspaper of 1835 (CC 1835):

Advertisement To Capitalists:

THE PROPRIETORS OF SHERKIN ISLAND SLATE QUARRIES, on part of the Estate of Sir Wm. Wrixon Becher, Bart., now in full work, and valued in £6000



Figure 2. Geological Survey of Ireland fieldsheet for the Horseshoe Harbour area noting the presence of ‘greenish grits and slate beds’. ‘Quarry for roof sl’ is recorded adjacent to the quarry site

and upwards, now yielding a profit of over 20 per cent, having expended a large sum of Money in forming the Works, the purchase of Materials and erection of Buildings, and considered by the most competent practical men to be the best in Ireland, - for the purpose of carrying on the works as extensively as they would admit of being capable of employing over 500 men with the best effect, propose to form those works into 300 Shares of £20 each – £5 to be paid on each share down, and the remainder to be paid in Six, Twelve, and Eighteen Months, in £5 each payment. Those quarries produce Slate in the greatest abundance, and are remarkable for their durability, strength, and lightness, and for improving in Colour to a nice Silver Blue, and are warranted not to gather moss, or Crack from the Heat of Fire, and will resist the strongest Acids. They are worked with the least possible expense, the lines of the Quarries running into Baltimore Harbour in the east and Horseshoe Harbour at the West end, where Vessels can load from the Quarries in deep water in all weathers. There is no expense of land carriage as the Slates are shipped from the spot where they are Manufactured from those Quarries: and when sunk a little more, in about two months, they will produce slates superior to the best in Ireland, and equal to the best Bangor slates. Application (if by letter post paid) to Wm. E. Wright,

Esq. Civil Engineer, Grenville Quay, Cork; Wm. R. Daltera. Esq. Solicitor, South Mall, Cork; and to Mr. H. J. Wright, Skibbereen; Mr. John William Owens, Sherkin Island Slate Quarries, Skibbereen, who will give every information and receive deposits on shares.

EPILOGUE

However, the Sherkin Island quarries are not noted on the 1842 six inch Ordnance Survey map, although they must have been in operation when this, the original Ordnance Survey, was being undertaken. We cannot determine at this remove whether the hyperbole of the *Cork Constitution* advert looking for investors was in fact genuine, and the enterprise then failed for lack of investors, or if it was typical of many a mining prospectus of its vintage, in talking up the prospects to seduce investors. The limited extent of the extant slate quarries certainly indicate that the aspirations of the proprietors were not fulfilled, Kinahan noting almost four decades later that:

In the “Yellow Sandstone” of the same county, or in beds immediately below it, good red slates have been raised in different places, as at Crookhaven and on Sherkin Island, but no extensive works have been opened (Kinahan 1878, 376).



Figure 3. *View of the slate band quarried in a trench (centre) on the cliffs above 'Quarry Strand'. Photo: D. O'Reilly*



Figure 4. *Horseshoe Harbour with Sherkin Lighthouse (built in 1895) above 'Quarry Strand', where slate was extracted in the nineteenth century. Photo: D. O'Reilly, 2008*

Further research amongst company records (if such exist), may yield more information.

The sites where the quarries were located are marked on the revised 1902 edition as 'disused' (see Figure 1). The Geological Survey of Ireland nineteenth century fieldsheet for this area simply records that there are 'Strong greenish grits & slate beds same as at Harbour Mouth' (Figure 2). Today the site of the Horseshoe Harbour quarry is marked by a partially vegetated trench on the cliffs and betrayed by the local place name, 'Quarry Strand' (see Figures 3 and 4).

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