

Sands of Time by Dr Peter Wilson

Sand is both evident and abundant at the West Strand, East Strand and beneath the fairways and greens of the town's golf courses, and many residents and visitors avail themselves of the recreational opportunities provided by these areas. Sand also underlies a significant part of the business and residential areas of the town. The geological map depicts sand not only extending from the West Strand to the East Strand (those low hillocks on the north side of Crocknamack Road are landscaped sand dunes), but also from north to south - from the vicinity of the Town Hall to a line roughly defined by Glenvale Avenue and Girona Avenue.



Photo 1: The Portrush dunes where Knowles did some of his collecting.

Sand is also present as a narrow strip, some 50-400 m in width, stretching along the cliff top towards Portstewart. In places the cliff-top sand is 6 m in thickness; in the East Strand dunes sand thickness exceeds 10 m. These substantial thicknesses of sand did not accumulate at a single point in time or even in a single period. Rather they represent intermittent accumulation over several thousands of years as on-shore winds carried sand inland from the beaches.

Knowing when the sand was and was not blowing about provides a fascinating glimpse into relatively recent changes that have occurred along the coast. In addition, since the 1870s a great variety of archaeological material has been found in the sands and has provided information about earlier peoples who used the 'sandlands' as part of their everyday routines.

In the latter third of the nineteenth century an abiding passion of several professional gentlemen in County Antrim was the collection and description of prehistoric antiquities. Probably the most prolific of these 'Northern collectors' or 'Hobbyist antiquarians', as they have been called, was William James Knowles (1832-1927) of Cullybackey.

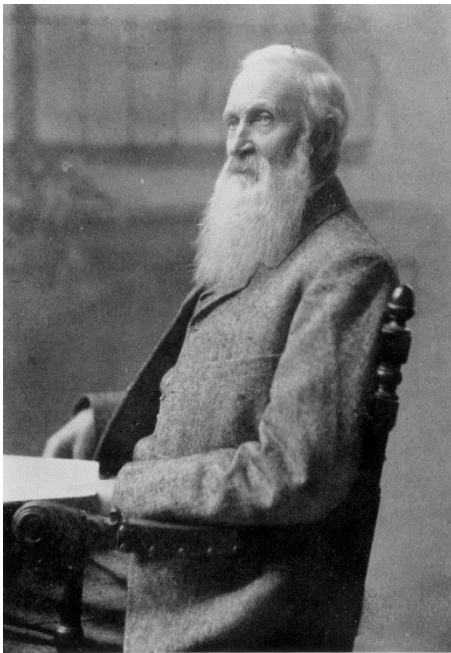


Photo 2 William James Knowles

Of his 95 years, 45 were spent in publishing details of the finds that resulted from his numerous field excursions. Between 1870 and 1914 he published over 60 scientific notes or papers documenting ancient settlement and burial sites and the tools used by early man. Such had been his influence on the advancement of archaeology that one obituary notice called him 'the Father of Ulster Antiquaries'. This distinction was acquired in spite of him being an amateur – recording and collecting simply because he loved the subject. Many of the reports that Knowles published were based on his studies of sand dune settlements and their artefacts. Very few, if any, of the sand dunes north of Malahide on the east coast and north of Tralee Bay on the west coast, in addition to those of Antrim, Londonderry and Donegal, escaped his attention.

Knowles excavated and collected artefacts at Portrush on several occasions. He writes of finding objects in sand pits near the chalk quarries on the road to Bushmills, in pits closer to the town, and along the shore towards Portstewart. The artefacts discovered included flint scrapers, flakes and cores. He also reported finds made by other people, to which he was allowed access, including axe and spear heads. From examining the artefacts closely he was able to deduce how they had been 'dressed' to their final shape.

Although many of the artefacts were recovered from the floor of the sand pits, some were obtained from black soil layers that were visible in the sides of the pits. These black soils were recognised as being old land surfaces on which the artefacts had originally accumulated, having been abandoned by their owners. The black soils had then been buried as more sand was carried in by the wind. Similar pits with black soil layers and artefacts were recorded in the dunes at Portstewart and White Park Bay.

Knowles was not the only antiquarian to spend time searching the sands for evidence of earlier cultures. Other prominent collectors were William Gray, the Rev. George R. Buick and the Rev. Leonard Hassé, all of whom published their work in scientific periodicals and brought to wider public attention the wealth of information hidden in the sands.

The artefacts that Knowles had collected were auctioned at Sotheby's in 1924. His total collection was at least 32,000 objects (one source claims 50,000). Not all of these items were from sand dunes and of the ones that were, not all were from Portrush. Nevertheless, some of the Portrush pieces probably now reside in the store rooms of the Ulster Museum. Some 10,000 items were gifted to the Ulster Museum in the 1960s by the Wellcome Historical Medical Museum who had acquired them in the 1924 sale. It would be good if some of them could be displayed in the town. Today there is very little opportunity for finding flint tools in the sands because they are largely hidden from view by the extensive development that has taken place and by the careful management that keeps the dunes stable in order to allow the golf courses to function.

However, occasionally small areas of sand become visible as a consequence of building work or other ground disturbance. One such place, on the cliff top at Ballyreagh, was discovered a few years ago as a consequence of the burrowing activity of rabbits. Pieces of worked flint appeared



Photo 3: Pieces of worked flint from Ballyreagh.

at the surface as sand was cast up from below. Examination of the sand face at the cliff edge showed a black soil layer about 50 cm below the surface and directly below that were numerous pieces of flint embedded in the sand. A selection of these pieces is shown in Photo 3. It has been suggested that these flint pieces show similarities to material found at the Early Mesolithic site of Mount Sandel dated to 7000-6000 BC. However, an age determination for the Ballyreagh sand has indicated a younger age of around 4000-3000 BC – making them of Neolithic age.

At present the significance and age of these artefacts is not fully known, but they hold the potential for providing us with greater knowledge of the activities of early humans along the local coastline. Even now, over 100 years since William Knowles and his contemporaries scoured the sands for flint tools and evidence of settlement, sites like Ballyreagh show that there is still much to find, decipher and learn about our north coast predecessors. The story is not yet complete.

Our thanks to Peter for this excellent contribution to our Heritage Newsletters.

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