

Vikings' first cut really is deepest

ALTHOUGH the objective of tilling land has remained consistent over the ages, the means of actually doing it have changed considerably over the millennia.

In modern times this is largely due to the arrival of the tractor which had huge implications for the speed and efficiency of the process. But how did the early inhabitants of this island manage to cultivate soil and how effective were these early ploughing techniques?

Niall Brady is an archaeologist and Medieval Rural Settlement Project Director with the Discovery Ireland programme. He has a strong interest in the tools and technology of medieval Ireland and has published a number of important papers on early Irish ploughing.

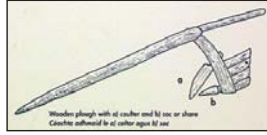
Although no-one can say with certainty when ploughing started, there is certainly evidence that people have been using tools to cultivate land since the Neolithic period.

"Simple devices, referred to as ards, consisted of shares which were pulled across the ground just underneath the surface," says Brady.

"They were found in Ireland and in Nordic countries and the frames were probably formed by using natural branches. If a frame broke it was probably relatively easy to replace it."

Frank Mitchell, in his classic book *Reading the Irish Landscape*, notes that ards were most effective in

Archaeologist Dr Niall Brady says ploughing dates to Neolithic times, then the Vikings made it better. He talks to **Carl Dixon**



LEFT: A drawing of an Irish plough coulter.

stone-free soil and were unable to tackle the tough sod of old grassland.

Whilst such devices may seem primitive in comparison to later developments it seems it was an effective device and in fact these devices changed very little from the Neolithic period right up to the 10th century.

"The fact that these devices didn't change is very interesting and indicate that they were actually quite effective for local conditions," says Brady. "We know that water mills became common in the 8th century, which allowed grain to be processed much more efficiently. These were often located close to churches and may indicate an effort to control and centralise grain production by the lords and

the church. Animal bones also suggest a change from pastoral towards arable farming. However, the humble plough went through this period largely unchanged."

In the 10th century the same crops of wheat, barley and oats are being grown, but the plough underwent a major change. The Ireland of the time was a complex theatre of Irish, Viking and Anglo-Saxon influences and it is probable that the simple ploughing technology no longer fulfilled the needs of society as the population increased.

"Up to then ploughing was achieved with a horizontal share which undercuts the sod but now the coulter and mouldboard were introduced," says



A ploughing match using horses near Berrings, Co Cork, in 1946. Picture Examiner Archives

Brady. "The sod was poorly defined; but the coulter, a knife-like instrument, cuts the sod and inverts it at the same time. This became a much more desirable means of ploughing."

"We don't know what the frames looked like, as they didn't survive in the archaeological record, however, it appears from the parts that do survive that this new form of plough remained consistent for three centuries.

Then, in the 13th century, bigger ploughs were introduced by the Anglo-Normans and more intensive agriculture was developed within the lands they controlled.

"The Normans basically tried to turn the south and east into the bread basket of

Ireland," says Brady, "and we know this because of the pattern of plough pebbles we find. These were small hard stones of flint or quartz which were inserted into base plates as anti-wear devices to slow down erosion of the plough frame. These stones were much cheaper than iron and as they wore away they fell out onto the ploughed fields.

"The distribution of these inconspicuous pebbles provides a real insight in the big business agriculture of this era," Brady says. "They were also found in England, suggesting the lords took a direct interest in the farming of their estates and were very aware of the productive capacity of their land."

Although this may have been primarily a Norman

agenda, the discovery of ploughing pebbles in Tusk in the O'Connor heartland, indicates that the Gaelic lords were not immune to the charms of new technology. The equivalent of the latest John Deere tractor, in modern parlance.

This era of intensive arable farming was not to last however and was eroded by a mixture of economic crises, famines and ultimately the black plague. Strangely there is little archaeological evidence for ploughing in the 14th and 15th centuries, however there are illustrations of ploughs on gravestones in the 16th and 17th century representing the trade of the buried person.

In the 19th century there was a variety of plough

types and local variants, which were used for different types of soil, different crops or at different times of the year.

These indigenous ploughs were considered crude and ineffective by the agricultural improvers of the time who insisted on bringing in English ploughs.

Unfortunately and somewhat predictably, these ploughs which were designed for the Downlands of southern England, proved completely unsuitable.

However, certain elements of these ploughs were incorporated into the native ploughs over time. "During these early stages of ploughing the manpower required did not really change," says Brady. "Generally there was a team of

three with the leader, ploughman and plough boy. We also know that lords made good ploughmen permanent members of staff, rather than hiring them on contract. This indicates how important a good ploughman was to the estate."

All this would soon be swept away with the arrival of the tractor - which completely revolutionised a process, that throughout human history had always been hugely arduous and hugely time consuming.

From ploughing perhaps an acre a day, farmers could suddenly cultivate huge tracts of land in a short amount of time, laying the foundations for modern agriculture and providing the means to feed a growing global population.



ABOVE: Dr Niall Brady, Discovery Programme, with a 10th century plough coulter found at the Ballinderry crannóg, Co Westmeath, now on show at the National Museum of Ireland, Dublin.

Pictures: Billy Higgins

RIGHT: Plough coulter found at Fallowe, Co. Sligo, and plough share that was found at crannóg 31, Rathmuan, Co Sligo (both in centre, now in National Museum.



Ploughing stalwart picks up co-op service award

by **Carl Dixon**

JOHN SEXTON is well known in ploughing circles through his involvement in the National Ploughing Association, as a local historian and for his book *70 Years A Growing*, which gives a history of ploughing in Timoleague, West Cork. He has covered the ploughing championship for the last 21 years for the Irish Examiner. In 2009 he received an award from the Southern Star newspaper to mark 50 years of contribution to it.

Sexton is also deeply immersed in the life of the local community in Courtenasherry and this year, to mark his retirement from the board of Barryroe Co-op, he received an award recognising his service with the cooperative movement.

A veteran of the politics of the movement, he still believes it has a vital part to play in the modern world. "It was the saviour of the ordinary farmer in many ways," he says. "But it needs to maintain its identity. Some co-ops have be-



John Sexton, with his well deserved George Russell award to recognise his long and distinguished service to the Irish Co-op movement. Picture: Denis Minihane

come too big and too focused on global concerns. They have moved away from the concerns of the ordinary man."

As ever, Sexton is looking forward to the bustle and drama of this year's plough-

ing championship in Athy. "It is an excellent site and the odds are that the championship will be held there next year to mark the 80th anniversary of the first championship which was also held in Athy in 1931,"

he says. "It started as a challenge between long-time friends JJ Bergin of Athy and Denis Allen of Gorey as to whose county had the best ploughmen. It developed a life of its own and expanded into nine counties with three men from each. Although neither man made big mileage out of it, Allen prevailed that time."

Whilst other tillage counties such as Carlow are also strong, Cork differs somewhat in that it is the west of the county, where tillage is less prevalent, which has often produced the best competitors. Despite the changes in the championship over the years the skills required to do well remain the same.

"Experience is hugely important and in families such as the Keoghs of Wexford the skills are passed down through the generations," he says.

Having attended his first ploughing championship as a young spectator in 1950 and covered his first championship in 1961, Sexton has seen its explosion from a small niche event to the premier agricultural show

in the country, with broad appeal. It is now the largest rural gathering of people in Europe with a crowd of 188,000 attendees in 2009.

"The cost of the first championship was £10 in total and the championship barely survived on a shoestring through the economic war of the 1930s and the Second World War in the 1940s," he notes.

Now of course it is a multi-dimensional event and of course for many of the participants it is the machinery exhibits, cattle shows, educational stands, lifestyle pavilions, alternative enterprise and the myriad charms of the tented village that attracts them every year.

As always it is a chance to meet up with old friends or in some cases to renew old rivalries.

"I remember seeing a picture taken of the 1935 show in Mallow which showed a group of women with kettle and primus stoves making tea for the competitors," says Sexton.

"Spectators would have brought their own sandwiches of course. If you

contrast that with the chip vans and variety of takeaway food on offer now it illustrates how the championship has dramatically changed."

His long-time involvement with the championship has given him a keen appreciation of its history and how it has evolved over the years. Yet it has not dulled his enthusiasm for the process of ploughing.

"It featured only horses until the mid-1940s, which were supplied by farmers in the surrounding countryside and now of course the equipment is very sophisticated," he says. "However the fundamentals of the process remain unaltered: skill, experience and precision are all required to win."

"I suppose it has similarities to hurling in some ways in that it has its strongholds in a small number of counties," he notes. "Like hurling I have also seen a few lively debates over the years where perhaps a judge might be seen to favour a particular technique or style over another."



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