



Top: Part of a musical instrument found in the wooden trough of a fulacht fiadh excavated at Charlesland near Greystones (photo: courtesy of Margaret Gowen & Co. Ltd).

Middle: Standing stone at Moorstown, Killiskey, near Ashford.

Above: Standing stone at Kilmurry, near Newtownmountkennedy.



circles, which can be found in several places in west Wicklow. A fine example can be found at Athgreany near Hollywood. This stone circle is known locally as the Piper's Stones. The story is told that the stones forming the circle are dancers who were turned into stone for dancing to the music of a piper. This is not true, of course, but there may be some truth behind the folklore that dancing was one of the ceremonies carried out at these circles. The stone circle at Castleruddery near Donard is unusual in that it is surrounded by a massive earthen bank. The entrance of this circle is formed by two massive quartz boulders. From this stone circle can be seen the Brussellstown Ring, which is a large hillfort probably built about 1,000 years before the birth of Christ. This is one of a number of very large fortifications enclosing the tops of mountains in this part of Wicklow. Two other fine examples can be found at Rathcoran above Baltinglass and at Rathgall near Shillelagh.

Top left: Stone circle at Athgreany, near Hollywood.

Middle left: The massive quartz entrance stones of the stone circle at Castleruddery, near Donard.

Below left: Brussellstown Ring hillfort viewed from the Castleruddery stone circle.

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## Prehistoric Wicklow — sites to visit

Outlined below are a number of prehistoric sites in County Wicklow that may be suitable for visiting. If you are considering visiting any of these sites you should check that the site is accessible and suitable for your group prior to your visit.

There may also be other sites in your local area that may be suitable for visiting such as local graveyards. Information on archaeological sites in your local area may be found in the Archaeological Inventory of County Wicklow and in the Record of Monuments and Places (RMP) maps. Both are available in your local library.

It is very important to note that any sites located on private land must not be visited without the landowner's permission.

### Seefin Passage Tomb, Scurlocksleap

This passage tomb is situated on the summit of Seefin and is best reached from just south of Kilbride Military Camp along the edge of the forest. It has a cruciform passage, a partially surviving corbelled roof and there is decoration on some of the stones.

### Piper's Stones, Athgreany

This Bronze Age stone circle, composed of granite boulders with an outer stone, is situated just 1km south of Hollywood. According to folklore the stones are a piper and group of dancers who were turned to stone for dancing on the Sabbath.

### Castleruddery Stone Circle

Castleruddery Bronze Age stone circle and medieval motte are situated about 4km south-west of Donard. The stone circle is 30m in diameter and is enclosed by an earthen bank. The nearby motte guards a river crossing and is enclosed by a defensive ditch.

### Rathgall Hillfort

This fine hillfort is situated near the Shillelagh–Tullow road, about 6km east of Tullow. It consists of three concentric stone walls with external ditches and is said to have been the seat of the kings of South Leinster.

### Moylisha Wedge Tomb

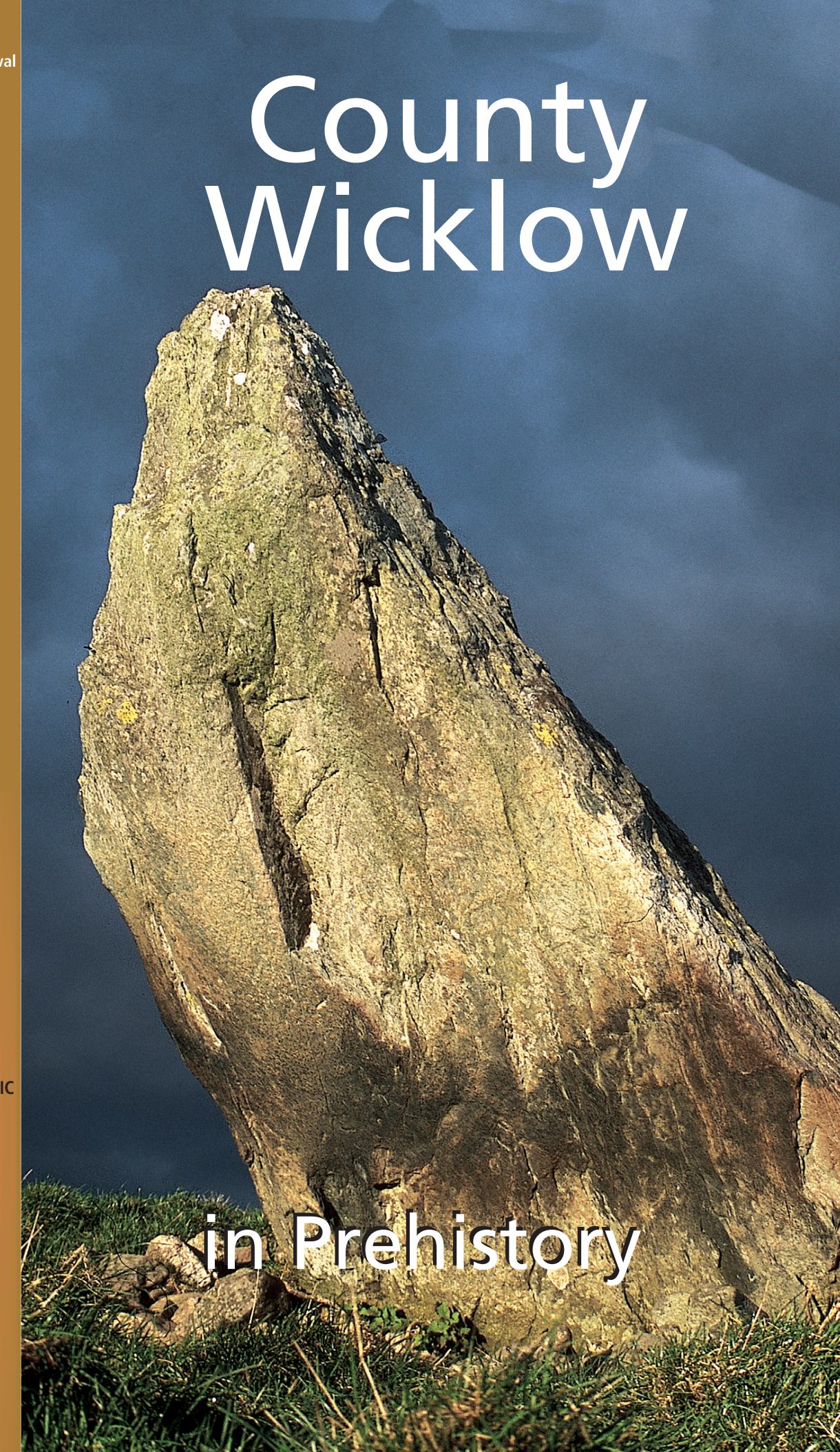
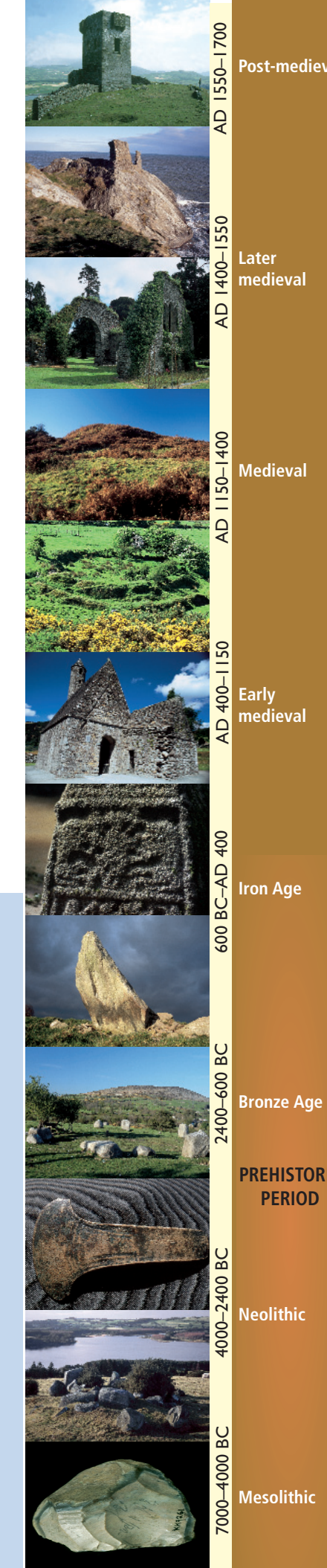
About 3km south of Aghowle Church is a wedge-shaped gallery grave called 'Labhanasighe' (The bed of the Fairies). The tomb has an entrance chamber with a longer burial chamber behind and is roofless.

### Church Mountain Passage Tomb and Church, Ballymooney

About 6km south of Hollywood on the summit of Church Mountain is a circular cairn of stones, probably the remains of a passage tomb. The centre of the cairn has been hollowed out to form an enclosure in which there are the foundations of a church and a well.

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# County Wicklow

## in Prehistory



Left: Quern for grinding cereals, from Ballintombay, near Greenane.

Below: An example of a passage tomb on the summit of Seefin.

wild pig, as well as wild fruits and nuts. The Wicklow rivers and lakes abounded in fish such as salmon and trout. Along the seashore also there were plenty of fish and shellfish. The archaeological evidence for these people is difficult to find—they did not build large houses or tombs for us to find today. Most often the archaeological evidence for these people comes from the stone tools that they left behind. In Wicklow these stone tools have been found mostly from coastal sites and from a rock shelter at Dunbur Head.

### The beginnings of farming—the Neolithic (c. 4000–2400 BC)

Today it is easy for us to think that there has always been farming in Ireland. In fact, farming first arrived in Ireland nearly 6,000 years ago. The domesticated animals and crops that we associate with farming, such as cattle, sheep and cereals, were also brought into Ireland at this time. This meant that the farmers needed to clear trees from the landscape in order to create the fields needed for farming animals and crops. Of course, these early farmers did not clear all the forests at this time, and much of the landscape would have remained mostly wooded. Within these woodlands lurked many dangers, such as bears, wolves and wild pigs.

New technology was developed in order to facilitate this new

### The earliest human settlers—the Mesolithic (c. 7000–4000 BC)

Long before man first arrived in Ireland all the continents of the world, including the Americas and Australasia, had been colonised by human settlers. The earliest people to come to Ireland arrived about 9,000 years ago. These people were hunters, fishers and gatherers who used stone to make their tools. At that time the Irish landscape, including Wicklow, was covered in deep forests. There were no open spaces like fields or parks. Within these forests there was a ready supply of animals for food, such as red deer and



economy and way of life, including stone axes to remove the trees and pottery to store food. Querns were used to grind cereals for food, such as flour to make bread.

These early farmers also built large stone tombs, known as megalithic tombs, as places to bury their dead. It is likely that these monuments were also used for other religious ceremonies at different times of the year. These tombs come in different forms, and those most commonly found in Wicklow are known as passage tombs. The name comes from the fact that the tombs were entered through a passage that led to a burial chamber near the centre of a large cairn or pile of stones. These are most commonly found on the summits of the western peaks of the Wicklow Mountains, for example on the top of Seefin near Manor Kilbride. Any farmers working their lands in this area 5,000 years ago would have been familiar with this tomb, which appears as a small lump on the head of Seefin Mountain. They might have been able to tell us the names of the people buried there, and may even have visited the site to pay their respects. Obviously it would have taken a lot of people a lot of time to build such a tomb. It seems unlikely, however, that the people who actually built them would have been allowed to bury their dead in these tombs, and this privilege may have been reserved for the leaders of the community.

Other archaeological evidence from this period comes from decorated stones known as rock art. Most often these consist of a large boulder decorated with small hollows known as cup-marks. Sometimes these stones also feature a number of circles. The purpose of these stones is a mystery to archaeologists today.

### The beginnings of metal-working—the Bronze Age (c. 2500–600 BC)

For thousands of years stone was the main material used to make objects such as axes, knives and arrowheads. Then came a new invention—the use of metal. The revolutionary idea of producing objects from metal, initially copper, arrived into Ireland nearly 4,500 years ago. Copper can be found naturally in rock. In order to separate the copper from the rock it was smelted at very high temperatures. The copper was made into cakes, almost like pancakes, and examples of these have been found at Monastery near Enniskerry. These cakes of copper could be more easily transported around the country, and could be melted down by a metal-worker and poured into a mould to make an object such as an axe or dagger. Examples of these earliest metal axes have been found in many places around Wicklow. Over time these early metal-workers



Copper axe from Sunny Bank, Bray.



An example of rock art from Humewood, near Kiltegan.



Cup and rings on a boulder from Baltynanima, near Roundwood.



Decorated stone from Tornant, near Dunlavin.



Wedge tomb at Carrig, near Lackan.



Cairns on the shoulder of the Great Sugar Loaf.

learned that if they mixed tin with copper it formed bronze, which was stronger than copper. For this reason, this period of archaeology is known as the Bronze Age. Apart from bronze, these early metal-workers also used gold to make wonderful ornaments.

### Burial traditions

During the Bronze Age, the megalithic tombs of earlier years were replaced by new forms of large stone tombs. These are called wedge tombs by archaeologists, simply because they are wedge-shaped. Unlike the older passage tombs at Seefin and elsewhere, wedge tombs were not built on mountain-tops and are usually found on hillsides. A fine example of such a tomb can be seen at Carrig, near Lackan, overlooking what is now the Poulaphuca Reservoir but was formerly a floodplain where the King's River joined the River Liffey. It was in these tombs that the first people to ever use metal in Ireland were buried.

Over time large stone tombs went out of fashion, and new forms of burial monuments were built as places to bury the dead. The remains of the person who died were usually cremated, and placed within a specially made pot or urn. This was then placed in a small grave. Sometimes a large mound of earth or a 'cairn' of stones was placed over the grave. Sometimes a circular ditch and bank were placed around the grave, forming a 'barrow'. An example of this can be found at Killeagh between Avoca and Aughrim.



Ring-barrow at Killeagh, near Avoca.



A wooden trough found during archaeological excavation of a *fulachta fiadh* at Ballyclogh near Redcross (photo: courtesy of Irish Archaeological Consultancy Ltd).

### *Fulachta fiadh*

*Fulachta fiadh* are mounds of burnt stone believed to have been used for cooking. Archaeological excavation has shown that these were most commonly used between 3,500 and 3,000 years ago. Experiments have shown how *fulachta fiadh* were used: after being placed on a hot fire, the stones were put into a wooden trough that filled naturally with water. The hot stones would then heat the water to boiling point, and the cooking could begin. Averaging about 20 minutes to the pound for meat, this was not a primitive method of cooking, but it was time-consuming and may have been used on special occasions. Many examples of *fulachta fiadh* have been excavated in Wicklow in recent years, particularly in the east of the county. These sites are often found in wet marshy areas or near a small stream. Such wet ground conditions are excellent for preserving the wooden troughs.

### Ceremonial monuments

During the Bronze Age our ancestors sometimes placed standing stones in the landscape. These are found throughout Wicklow, and consist of an upright stone. The purpose of these stones remains a mystery. Perhaps they were intended to mark routes through the landscape, or perhaps they marked the boundary of lands owned by a tribe. Perhaps they marked the place where a warrior fell in battle.

Other mysterious monuments from the Bronze Age are stone