

THE BURREN ... a bare, eerie, hilly area devoid of trees and surface water. Below its crust lies a labyrinth of potholes, streams and lakes.



The term "Burren" is derived from the Gaelic *An Bhoireann* for "stony place" - a karst limestone region which lies in the north west corner of County Clare, in Ireland (± 300 sq km²).

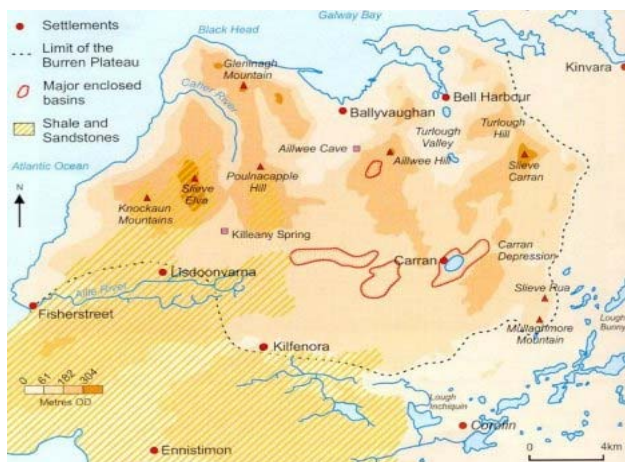
During counter-guerilla operations in Burren in 1651-52, Edmund Ludlow stated, "*(Burren) is a country where there is not enough water to drown a man, wood enough to hang one, nor earth enough to bury him..... and yet their cattle are very fat; for the grass growing in turfs of earth, of two or three foot square, that lie between the rocks, which are of limestone, is very sweet and nourishing.*"

The region is composed of limestone pavements, which are eroded in a distinctive pattern known as *karren*. This pavement is crisscrossed by cracks known as *grykes*, having been opened by acidic rain water thus compartmentalising the rock surface into blocks or *clints*, each a few square metres in extent. And underneath the pavement there are huge caves and rivers that suddenly flood when it rains.

The northern hills of the Burren overlooking Galway Bay rise in tiers of cliffs and terraces where horizontal lines of weakness in the rock have been exploited by erosive waters and the loosened rock subsequently scraped away by glaciers.

Below these terraces, massive, unfractured limestones form smooth slopes whilst above the terraced zones the limestones have crumbled more readily and allowed a thin soil cover to develop. These are the upland pastures of the Burren, long used to graze cattle during the winter months. The stone retains the heat thus making it warmer than the valleys. Thin bands of clay or other non-soluble rocks force water, seeping down through the fissured limestone, to emerge at the surface to form many small springs - the main source of water for stock on the otherwise waterless upland.

In the south-eastern Burren, the rocks have been folded and fractured by earth movements and each distortion of the strata is faithfully reflected in the landscape, for example in eccentrically shaped hills such as Mullaghmore and Slieve Rua.



A large enclosed basin (doline)
Photo by David Drew

The Burren is a unique botanical environment in which Mediterranean and alpine plants rare to Ireland grow side-by-side. The blue flower of the Spring Gentian, an alpine plant, is used as a symbol for the area by the tourist board. From May to August you will find rare wildflowers such as gentian and orchids and Bloody Cranesbill. Holly trees and the hawthorn can gain a foothold in the pavement but grazing and wind restrict their growth.

Stone has of necessity been the building material and hence structures have been preserved. There are more than 90 megalithic tombs in the area, portal dolmens (including Poul nabrone Dolmen), a celtic high cross in the village of Kilfenora, and a number of ring forts - among them the triple ring fort Cahercommaun on the edge of an inland cliff, and the exceptionally well-preserved Caherconnell Stone Fort, and a ruined Cistercian Abbey from the 12th century, Corcomroe. You can find villages abandoned since famine times and green roads on which you can walk for miles without ever seeing a car. In addition, the surface of the plateau is covered by networks of field walls.

The Burren area formed part of the territory of Corco Modhruadh, meaning "seed or people of Modhruadh" which was coextensive with the diocese of Kilfenora. At some point around the 12th Century, the territory was divided in two: Corco

Modhruadh Iartharach ("Western Corcomroe") and Corco Modhruadh Oirthearach ("Eastern Corcomroe") also known as Boireann which in the late 1500s became the English administrative baronies of Corcomroe and Burren respectively. The Ó Lochlainn (O'Loughlin) clan ruled Boireann down to the mid 17th century from their chief residence at Gragans Castle (the towerhouse). The chief of the family was known in later times as the 'Prince of Burren' and clan members were buried in the family tomb near the altar of Corcomroe Abbey. Their kinsmen the Ó Conchubhair (O'Connor) clan ruled Corco Modhruadh Oirthearach from Dough Castle near Liscannor. The villages and towns found within the medieval territory of Boireann include Lisdoonvarna, Ballyvaughan, New Quay / Burren, Noughaval, Bealaclogga, Carron and Fanore / Craggagh.

The Burren's many limestone cliffs, particularly the sea-cliffs at Ailladie, are popular with rock-climbers.

The Burren contains a number of charted caves, most of them narrow, twisting canyon-like passages carrying a stream and located in the west of the area close to Lisdoonvarna. Doolin is a popular "base camp" for cavers, and is home to one of the two main cave-rescue stores of the Irish Cave Rescue Organisation. Exploring the cave of Pol an Ionain at Ballynalackan, involves a low, stony crawl in water. However, at the end of the crawl, the explorer enters a large chamber where, hanging from the roof is a huge stalactite, 6.7 m long and reputedly the longest known in the world.

Links:

Heart of Burren Walks:

www.heartofburrenwalks.com

The Burren Perfumery:

<http://www.burrenperfumery.com>

The *Fr. Ted Series* was filmed in the Burren near Carran and the fictitious area is aptly named "Craggy Island" in the BBC TV series. If you enjoy British/Irish humour check some clips out on YouTube or rent a DVD.
