The shipwrecked anchors of Achill Island

Chuck Meide reveals details of one aspect of the maritime archaeology of Achill Island

Achill is Ireland's largest and most westerly island, located off the remote coast of County Mayo between Clew Bay and Blacksod Bay. Long renowned for its magnificent vistas and dynamic coastline, Achill is today a relatively well-known tourist destination that sees a regular influx of visitors during the summer months while somehow still managing to retain a sense of isolation. Archaeological evidence suggests that the island has been continuously inhabited since at least the Neolithic, and Achill's archaeological landscape features a wide range of sites, including megalithic tombs, cashels, promontory forts, ogham stones, the ruins of several booleying villages, nineteenth-century manor houses, a fifteenth-century tower-house and a single crannog. An ongoing excavation programme sponsored by the Achill Folklife Centre has drawn much attention to Achill's archaeology and history, though until recently the island's rich maritime heritage has been mostly under-appreciated.

In 1991 Theresa McDonald, director of the Achill Folklife Centre, initiated the first Achill Archaeological Field School (www.achill-fieldschool.com), which continues to excavate on an annual basis to this day. This research has mainly focused on a post-medieval deserted village site, and consistently attracts enthusiastic students from around the world, as well as renowned visiting scholars from across Ireland. In 2004 the Centre invited Dr Audrey Horning of the College of William and Mary (currently Lecturer in Archaeology at the University of Leicester) to participate in the direction of excavations, which has proved a successful joint venture and has brought even more students from Williamsburg, Virginia, in the USA.

One aspect of the College of William and Mary's participation is a new focus on Achill's maritime history and landscape. The summer of 2004 saw the first season of an ongoing maritime archaeological survey of the island. As on islands everywhere, the

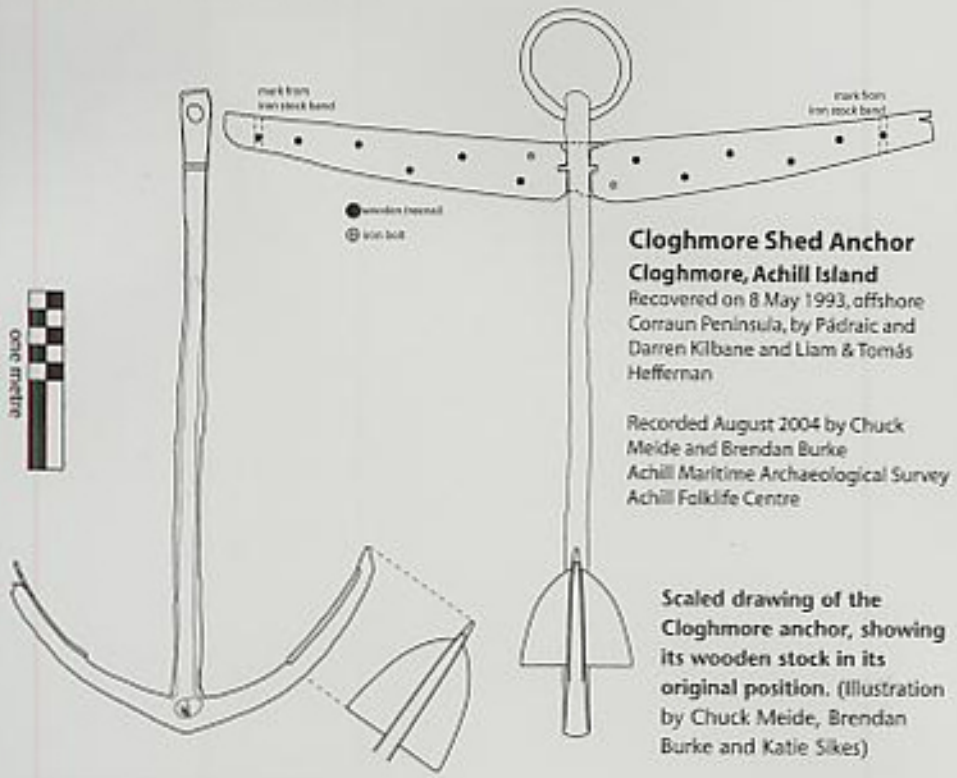
Left: **The dynamic cliffs and treacherous waters of Achill's coastline have caused dozens of shipwrecks over the centuries.** (Photo: Katie Sikes)

sea has provided life and livelihood for countless generations of Achill's inhabitants. Rocky shores, sandy beaches, tidal flats and natural harbours have fostered fishing by boat and weirs, maritime trade, shipwreck salvage and seaweed-harvesting, all of which should be evident in the archaeological record. In the sixteenth century these waters were patrolled by the galleys of the famed pirate queen Gráinne Uáile (Grace O'Malley) and saw the dramatic loss of at least three Spanish Armada ships. By the nineteenth century the nearby town of Westport, aided by pilots from Achill, had developed into a thriving centre of maritime commerce, and many of the ships participating in this trade were lost in the treacherous waters around Achill. In addition, the British coastguard had established a number of stations on the island, and a commercial fishing industry had been introduced by entrepreneurs from Scotland. Today, locals still fish from traditional curraghs and race Achill yawls, the ruins of fishing and coastguard stations dot the coastline, and traces of lost ships remain hidden by the sea or periodically revealed on the foreshore. Achill's historic maritime landscape is readily apparent, though it has not been systematically studied by archaeologists until now.

Above: **This anchor, stored in a shed near Cloghmore Pier, measures 3.6m in length and over 2m across its arms. Initially believed to come from an Armada ship, comparison with other dated anchors suggests that it is more likely to date from the eighteenth century.** (Photo: Chuck Meide)

One aspect of Achill's maritime heritage that was quickly brought to the attention of William and Mary archaeologists was the presence of a number of old anchors that have been raised by divers or fishermen and are currently stored or displayed on the island. It was decided that one of the 2004 season's goals would be to locate, record, and try to determine the original provenance of these artefacts. Three anchors were found and recorded by the survey team; at least one more, believed to be from the 1860 wreck of the sailing bark *Neptune*, was rumoured to have been brought ashore but could not at that time be tracked down.

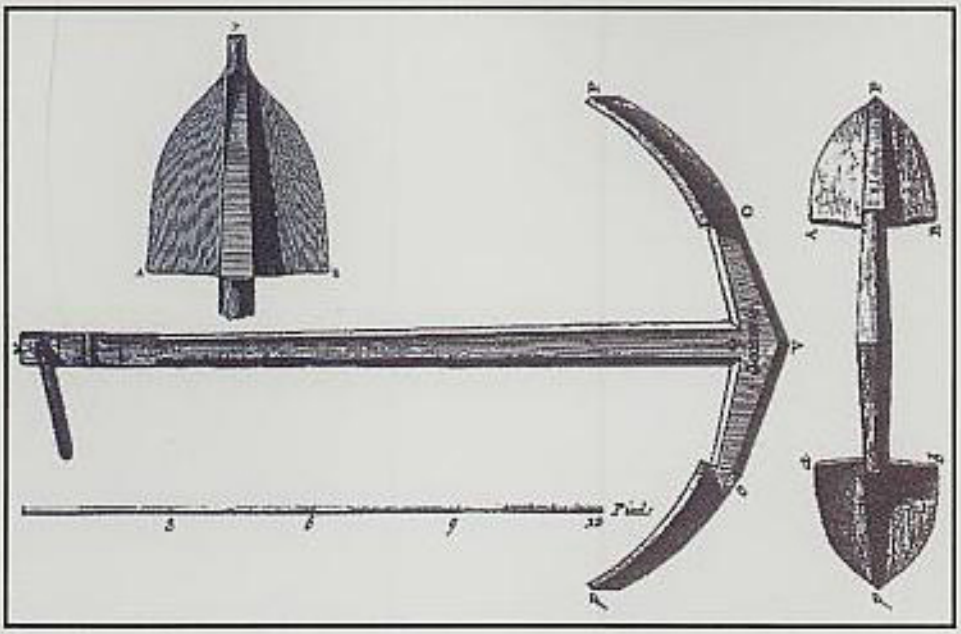
The oldest anchor is also the most mysterious. Stored in a shed near Cloghmore Pier, it is large (measuring 3.6m in length and over 2m across the arms) and appears to be quite old, certainly dating from sometime before the nineteenth century. While everyone agreed that it had been located off the shore of the Corraun



Cloghmore Shed Anchor
Cloghmore, Achill Island
Recovered on 8 May 1993, offshore Corraun Peninsula, by Pádraic and Darren Kilbane and Liam & Tomás Heffernan

Recorded August 2004 by Chuck Meide and Brendan Burke
Achill Maritime Archaeological Survey
Achill Folklife Centre

Scaled drawing of the Cloghmore anchor, showing its wooden stock in its original position. (Illustration by Chuck Meide, Brendan Burke and Katie Sikes)



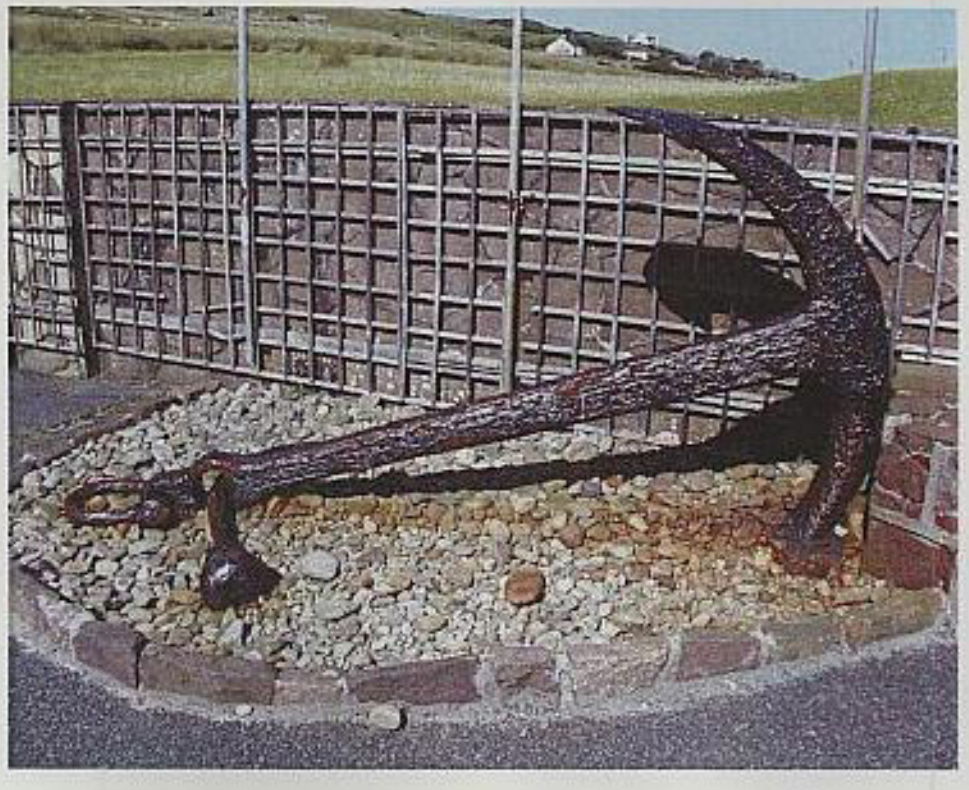
Above: **The Cloghmore anchor bears a number of similarities to this French anchor dating from 1762.** (From Diderot's *Encyclopaedia* (1762), pls X and XII)

Peninsula (just east of Achill), there was a lack of consensus concerning when it had been pulled from the sea: one book and various newspaper articles stated either 1997 or 1993. The locals who knew of its existence couldn't seem to remember exactly when it first saw the light of day. Perusal through the files at the National Museum in Dublin, however, indicated that this anchor was raised on 8 May 1993 by Cloghmore resident Pádraic Kilbane and his son Darren, and divers Liam and Tomás Hefferman of neighbouring Clare Island.

Many people believe that this anchor is from the shipwrecked *San Nicolas Prodaneli*, an Armada ship originally built as a Mediterranean merchantman in Ragusa (present-day Dubrovnic, Croatia). Another candidate is the Danish frigate *Bornholm*, which in 1782 lost an anchor and almost came to grief herself in these waters. Project archaeologists carefully recorded the anchor in an attempt to identify its age and origin. One of the more exciting aspects of this find is that its wooden stock, attached in two pieces to the anchor's shank by treenails (wooden dowels) and iron bolts, has survived amazingly intact. Even more impressive was the preservation of the puddening, or fabric coating, on the anchor ring, which prevented the hawser or anchor rope from chafing. As such organic artefacts rarely survive the ravages of the sea, their presence suggests that any shipwreck associated with the anchor could also be remarkably well preserved, buried beneath the sand at a water depth of around 22m.

Ironically, the remains of this ship, if it indeed exists, will last longer than its anchor. Proper conservation is always vital for any artefact recovered from a saltwater environment, especially large iron objects such as cannons or anchors. This anchor was fortunately soaked in fresh water for almost a year, which allowed some of the salts impregnated within its body to dissolve safely. In addition, some conservation procedures (physical cleaning and the application of rust-inhibitors and tannic acid) were applied to the anchor, which undoubtedly have slowed the ongoing degradation. But at present the anchor is visibly and rapidly deteriorating, and iron flakes readily fall away from its body when touched. This is the classic sign of damage suffered by a salt-impregnated iron artefact allowed to dry without electrolysis. Also known as electrolytic reduction, this process entails the application of an electrical current through the anchor while soaking it in a chemical bath for around a year or longer, which consolidates the corrosion layers and safely draws out chlorides or salts from the artefact, preventing further corrosion. This

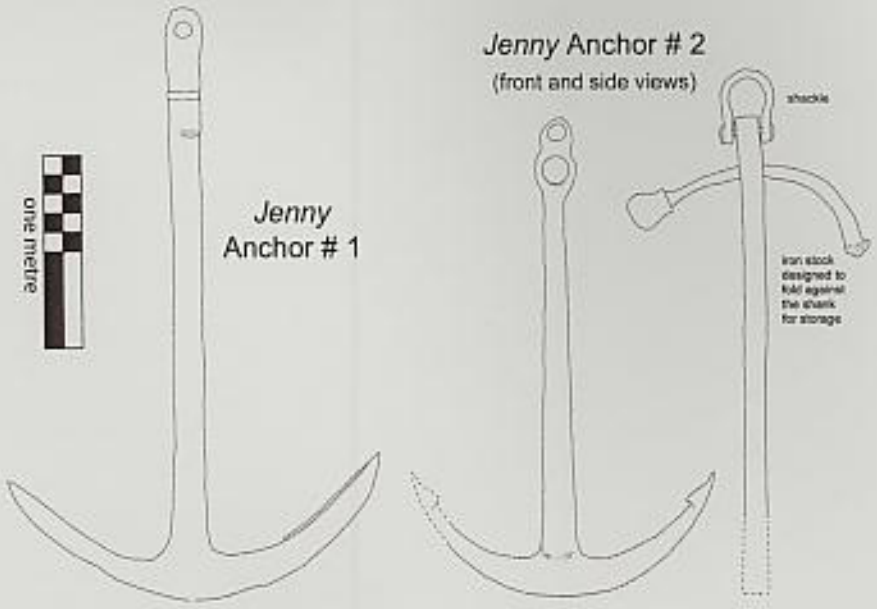
Below: **The smaller of the two anchors recovered from the 1894 Norwegian wreck *Jenny* is displayed in front of Masterson's Anchor Restaurant near Dugort.** (Photo: Chuck Meide)



procedure is considered the standard treatment for iron objects recovered from marine sites. It is not too late to initiate this process, and though it is expensive and time-consuming it is the only thing that will preserve this unique and historically significant artefact.

Determining the age of the anchor also remains problematic. While some aspects of its size and shape are similar to those of sixteenth-century anchors, it is lacking key construction features (such as triangular-shaped palms, stock keys parallel with the arms, and the characteristic finial at the eye of the shank) that we would expect to find on an older Spanish anchor. Of course, it should be pointed out that while many sixteenth-century Spanish anchors have been reported by archaeologists, few, if any, Croatian anchors have been recorded, which means that we have little with which to compare this anchor, if it is indeed that of the *San Nicolas*. At the same time, however, some features of this anchor (the curvature of the palms and the placement of stock keys perpendicular to the arms) appear quite similar to those of anchors dating from the early to mid-eighteenth century. Both the stock and the treenails have been identified as of *Quercus* sp. (oak), which unfortunately does not shed further light on the anchor's origins. Further analysis of the Cloghmore anchor, along with a geophysical survey of its original location on the sea floor, may allow us to better speculate as to when and where it came from.

Conversely, we know the exact history of the two other anchors surveyed in 2004. Both were raised by local divers from the remains of the 492-ton Norwegian bark *Jenny*, which was lost at Achillbeg Island on 13 January 1894. *Jenny* was *en route* from Morant Bay, Jamaica, to Hamburg, Germany, with a cargo of tropical logwood and a crew of ten (all of whom, including the master, L. Andersen, survived). Scattered components of the ship and its cargo—including a third, smaller anchor—remain submerged in a cove off Achillbeg to this day. According to local waterman Jim Corrigan, branches of the hard, dense logwood that for years floated ashore were highly prized by Achill's fishermen, who crafted them into thole pins for their curraghs.



Scaled drawing of the two anchors recovered from the *Jenny*, lost at Achillbeg *en route* from Jamaica to Germany in 1894 with a cargo of logwood. (Illustration by Chuck Meide and Brendan Burke)

Today, the *Jenny*'s two largest anchors can be seen at the Ostán Oileán Acla hotel in Achill Sound and the aptly named Masterson's Anchor Restaurant in Dugort. The first anchor is larger (3m compared to 2.5m in length) but in poorer condition than its partner. Unlike the Cloghmore anchor, both of these would have featured removable stocks fashioned from iron. Both are clearly examples of the nineteenth century's rapidly changing anchor designs. The smaller anchor appears to be a Rodger's Patent Small-Palmed anchor, which after 1854 featured a removable iron stock. That two anchors from the same ship were of different designs is not altogether surprising, given the fact that the *Jenny* was 29 years old at the time of her loss. It was a common practice for Norwegian owners to purchase or continue to use old vessels long after most others would have scrapped or sold them; in such cases expedience and the lowering of overheads were more valued than equipment conformity when it came to outfitting a vessel.

A second season of fieldwork was carried out in the summer of 2005, and plans are in place for further work in 2006. In 2005 archaeologists documented a Famine-era coastguard station, the ruins of a nineteenth-century industrial fishing complex, several vernacular watercraft (including a *c.* 100-year-old Achill yawl) and a number of shipwrecks, including the *Charles Stewart Parnell* (1928), the *Aghia Eirine* (1940) and the fishing trawler *Successful*, believed to date from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In addition, three more anchors were located, including not one but two from the 1860 wreck of the *Neptune*. Future research goals include further work on these sites and on the wrecks of the *Jenny* and the *Neptune*, along with more archival research in Dublin and London.

Thousands of years of occupation and maritime exploitation have left their traces along the seabed, foreshore and coastline of Achill Island. The ships of Viking raiders, medieval traders, pirates, privateers and armed invaders have all plied the waters around Achill, as did increasing numbers of merchant and fishing vessels throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Their shattered hulls and forgotten cargos remain undiscovered offshore, and their memories are encapsulated in the landscape, the people and the traditional boats still in use, which, like the old anchors of Achill, can still be witnessed by those who take the trouble to seek them out. ■