

A wee bit of maritime history... 33



FREE

The Greyabbey Logboat

Our earliest ancestors would have arrived in this area some 8-10,000 years ago, in a period we call the Mesolithic, or Middle Stone age. They had a hunter gatherer lifestyle, utilizing the landscape and seascape around them and the food resources that seasonal change would have brought. They would have moved around the landscape as availability of food resources at different times of the year dictated.

Our wonderful lough provided a larder of sorts, with available resources of fish, marine mammals, shellfish, and seaweed, while its then wooded surrounds would have seasonally offered edible plants and also deer, wild pig and other animals. The landscape offered wood, earth and stone to enable the crafting of tools and shelters. The ability to move around and relocate seasonally would have been important. We have evidence of places they stopped through shell middens which have been found in different locations around the lough, often exposed by ploughing. We also have occurrences of scatters of flint tools in many locations indicating the activity of these early people in the landscape. They had to be capable mariners to get to these places, leaving signs of their passing on the coastline and various islands around the lough. We know that they utilised boats, including those made from the carefully hollowed out trunk of a single tree, known as a “logboat” or “dugout canoe”. We also know that they continued to be used throughout prehistory, and even into the post-medieval period despite the evolution of new types of craft in the coastal landscape.

In Greyabbey Bay, in the year 2000, during fieldwork to contribute to the Archaeological Survey of Strangford Lough, a group of archaeologists, including Dr Brian Williams, then of the Environment and Heritage Service (now Historic Environment Division) was walking the shore, recording kelp grids, and medieval fishtraps, many of which are still starkly visible as rows of stones at low tide.

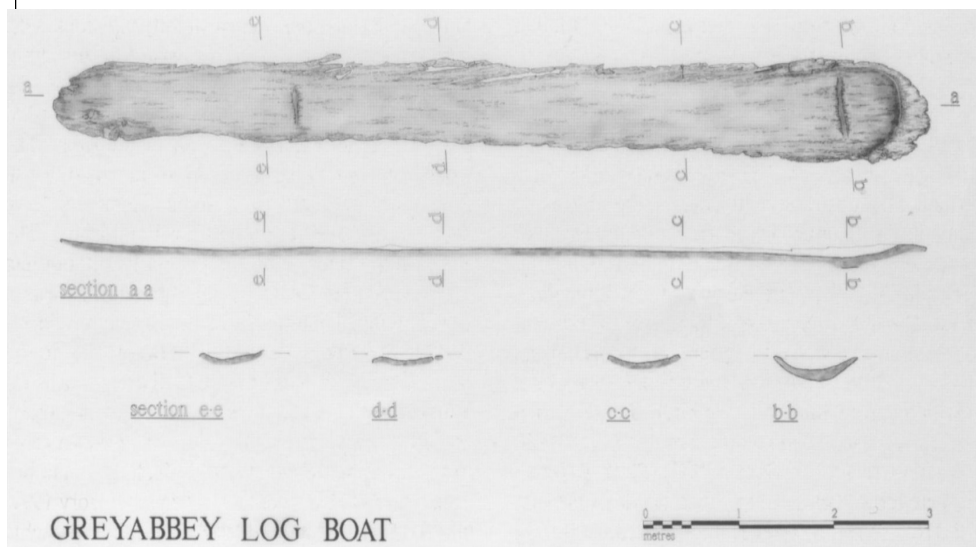


Close to one of the fishtraps Brian identified some ancient wood on the beach and, on further investigation, this proved to be the substantial remains of a logboat.

They were carefully cleaned so that they could be photographed, sampled and recorded by being drawn and measured.

The surviving remnants of this logboat measure an impressive 9.1m in length. This might seem long but the largest logboat so far discovered in Northern Ireland is twice as long at 18m.

The Greyabbey example was constructed by hollowing out the sapwood of the trunk of an oak tree using stone axes and adzes. Although the sides had eroded away through time, the basic hull of the craft remained intact. No artefacts were found in direct association with the logboat but examples have been found with basic paddles indicating the method of propulsion.



"© Crown DfC Historic Environment Division"

Radiocarbon dated to over 3000 years BC, this vessel is from the Neolithic period, when we know that our ancestors had been having a much more dramatic impact on the landscape. This was due to the introduction of farming which necessitated the clearance of woodland, and was also shown by the erection of tombs like the cairns at Audleystown and Millin Bay. The remains show the importance of being able to travel around the lough at such an early time in our history. In the Neolithic period we have good evidence for the trade of items and materials from Ireland, not just locally but across the British Isles and into western Europe. The logboat's excavators commented on its viability for transport of goods and animals as well as people. Communication by water at this time was demonstrably important and there may well have been other types of vessel used outside of the Strangford Lough context but, so far, we have not encountered good surviving evidence.

Most importantly, this example from Strangford Lough is the earliest dated logboat identified as having been used in Ireland in a maritime rather than a freshwater context (another prehistoric logboat was discovered in the Quoile River, close to Inch Abbey). It is also one of the oldest examples ever found on the island of Ireland and demonstrates how people have utilised the lough for communication for over 5000 years.

Following its investigation, the Greyabbey logboat was reburied to preserve the remains in situ, in the intertidal muds and silts which have enabled its preservation for millenia. It is part of the specially protected intertidal multi-period landscape which survives at Greyabbey Bay and is scheduled as a monument of national importance. More importantly, it represents the foundation of a long period of boatbuilding and boating activity which runs through the cultural heritage of the lough to the present day.

Liam McQuillan MCIfA

***Senior Archaeologist, Heritage Records and Designations Branch,
Historic Environment Division, Department for Communities***

This leaflet is produced by Portaferry and Strangford Trust. Our thanks to Liam McQuillan.



Supported by
Ards and North Down
Borough Council



Find out more and see other leaflets in this series at

www.portaferryandstrangfordtrust.org