SITE SYNOPSIS

SITE NAME: DUNGARVAN HARBOUR

SITE CODE: 000663

In landscape terms Dungarvan Harbour lies at the eastern end of the Blackwater valley, though this river now turns south at Cappoquin, vacating its more obvious (and former) course. All that remains to the harbour is the small Colligan River, running south from the Comeragh Mountains to enter the bay by Dungarvan itself. The absence of the larger river means that the bay is essentially a marine habitat though it dries out at low tide to give extensive mud and sand flats. It is extremely sheltered, the linear Cunnigar spit (which almost closes the bay on the east) adding to the effect of hills in the south and south-west.

The rock type of most of the area is limestone though this is only exposed on flat rocks at Ballynacourty. Elsewhere saltmarsh, glacial drift and sand form the shore with a narrow stony beach in places. The most natural saltmarsh occurs at Kilminnin on the north shore and west of the Cunnigar on the south. It is a community in which Sea-purslane (*Halimione portulacoides*), Lax-flowered Sea-lavender (*Limonium humile*), rushes (*Juncus gerardii*, *J.maritimus*) and sedges (*Carex distans*, *C.otrubae*) are prominent along with other typical species like sea-spurrey (*Spergularia* spp.), Sea Arrowgrass (*Triglochin maritima*) and, in the upper parts, Parsley Water-dropwort (*Oenanthe lachenalii*). In several places the saltmarshes, having been reclaimed for a period, have been flooded again and are reverting to their natural vegetation. There is an abundance of Sea Rush (*Juncus maritimus*) in such places often mixed with grasses, with Common Reed (*Phragmites australis*) or Sea Club-rush (*Bolboschoenus maritimus*) in drains. Sometimes this community gradually blends with a freshwater marsh including Tufted Hair-grass (*Deschampsia cespitosa*), Soft Rush (*Juncus effusus*), Brown Sedge (*Carex disticha*) and Common Fleabane (*Pulicaria dysenterica*). Eelgrass (*Zostera* spp.) has been recorded in the area.

There are two beach and dune systems in the area, a tiny one where the old railway line crosses the bay at Skehacrine, and the major one (2.6km) at Cunnigar running north from the southern shore. The latter consists of narrow and low ridges separated at the southern end to give marshy 'slacks' between them but running together to the north. The beach plants include such species as Yellow Horned-poppy (*Glaucium flavum*), Sea-holly (*Eryngium maritimum*), Sea Radish (*Raphanus raphanistrum* subsp. *maritimus*) and Sand Sedge (*Carex arenaria*) while the large Sharp Rush (*Juncus acutus*) as well as Knotted Pearlwort (*Sagina nodosa*) occur in wetter sites.

A major part of the ecological importance of the bay is the wintering birdlife which is present in large numbers. Surveys in the winters 1984/85 - 86/87 showed that Brent Goose (694), Black-tailed Godwit (1329) and Bar-tailed Godwit (1029) occurred in numbers of international importance, while 13 other species were nationally important. These are Shelduck (1721), Wigeon (1015), Red-breasted Merganser (50), Grey Plover (359), Golden Plover (1095), Lapwing (2748), Knot (705), Sanderling (83), Dunlin (4559), Redshank (930) and Turnstone (254). All figures are average

peak populations. A further 10 species were found in numbers of regional or local importance emphasising that Dungarvan supports a greater diversity of species than any other site on the south coast except for Wexford Harbour. It is now a Special Protection Area under the E.U. Birds Directive.

The sand flats to the east of the Cunnigar support an extensive oyster farming operation so there are clearly possible grounds for impact between these shellfish and the invertebrates on which some of the bird species depend. There is also concern that displacement of water fowl and disturbance may be a problem on the shellfish farming area. At present the bird numbers are higher than in the previous survey (l97l-75).