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CHANGES AWAY FROM THE  
TRADITIONAL USE OF THE CURRAGH  
OF KILDARE SINCE 1922

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

This report has been prepared by Con Costello on behalf of Dúchas - the Heritage Service, and is a brief examination of the state of the Curragh of Kildare in its historical context.

*The Curragh of Kildare Act, 1961* confirms that the Curragh is vested in the Minister for Defence. Leases and licences have been granted over the years to various bodies, such as the Irish Turf Club, Kildare Hunt Club and the golf clubs.

While on paper there would appear to have been adequate protection of the plain, in practice that was not the case. It is not the intention of this report to apportion blame for the maladministration of the Curragh, but the negative effects on it by its custodians, occupiers, local government, and the general public will now be outlined.

## 2. BACKGROUND

Agricultural and farming practices on the Curragh of Kildare have been a matter of interest since at least 1299 when an Act was passed to prevent swine feeding on the sward. In 1807 the agriculturist Thomas Rawson remarked of the Curragh: "what a turf it must be to bear twenty sheep an acre". During the occupancy of the plain by the British Army much legislation was enacted for the protection of the Curragh, and in 1961 & 1969 came the Curragh of Kildare Acts. Bye-Laws were made, the most recent being those of 1964.



### 3. THREATS TO THE CURRAGH

The integrity of the Curragh is under threat from a number of sources:

1. *Excessive or uncontrolled use by horses*
2. *Overgrazing, in places, by sheep*
3. *Degradation or physical disturbance of soil*
4. *Importation of topsoil*
5. *Damage to archaeological sites*
6. *Land drainage*
7. *Building, encroachment and subdivision of land*
8. *Lack of full ecological survey or designation*

- Dr. Anne Behan in *Environment Kildare KELT*, Dec 1998.

### 4. IMPACT OF THE BLOODSTOCK AND EQUESTRIAN INDUSTRIES

#### 4.1 Impact of Gallops

Gallop Type	Acres
Ploughed	7
Grass	566
All Weather	12
Lunging & Ringing	38
<b>Total area licenced for training</b>	<b>623</b>

#### Comments:

- Wood-pulp and topsoil used in the All Weather Gallops has caused overspill, sward damage in storage areas and in parking areas for machinery etc. Furze has been cut in the making of gallops. Drainage pipes from the gallops run at intervals into sumps.



Areas affected: Near Cill Dara Golf Club, Rathbride area, Walsh's Rath, Fox Covert area. These gallops are used from early morning until lunchtime.

- Trainers and owners who accompany the horses drive to the training areas in vehicles which cause serious damage to the sward, especially in wet weather. Frenchfurze area is an example of such damage.
- A hard-surface roadway beside the gallops in the Maddenstown area (c 1960s), and two others within the race course area (1990s), have caused permanent damage.
- Horses proceeding to the gallops, and frequently congregating at meeting places, cause extensive soil break-up, such as at the tunnel under the railway line, and at the overpass on the dual-carriageway.
- It is known that horses are exercised in areas not designated for such, and that there is also equestrian activity by other individuals.
- Within the racecourse area topsoil has been removed for the repairing of divots on the racecourse when re-seeding is also done.

#### **4.2 The All-weather Gallop at Maddenstown**

The most recently made 7 furlong all weather gallop at Maddenstown was given planning permission subject to the condition that "it was limited to a period of four years, expiring four years from the date of permission being granted [18.10.1995] to permit a review in the light of the facts and circumstances then existing". When at the oral hearing the question was asked "what would happen after four years if permission was withdrawn" the reply was that "it would be very difficult and expensive to remove [the gallop], virtually impossible".

Unauthorised work took place in relation to the making of that gallop, in that preparatory work was carried out before planning permission was granted.



This gallop was constructed southwest and parallel to an existing gallop 2.5 km in length, and within a licenced area. The new All-weather gallop is 1.4 km in length and 4.5 metres wide. It crosses the existing road to the site.

The gallop is constructed on a hardcore base of 225 to 300mm depth with a compacted covering of wood chips 225 to 300mm in depth. There are 80mm perforated P.V.C. land drains connected to new soakaways at approximately 200m intervals.

At the oral hearings it was also suggested that the new gallop should be made within the racecourse area and that the newly constructed bridge over the motorway would accommodate the trainers from Maddenstown. However a trainer from the Maddenstown area said that the new gallop was needed because of the distance of their area from the gallops on the north side of the Curragh. The proximity of the new gallops to the Maddenstown stables would avoid the necessity for the horses to cross the sward. It was said that there were approximately seventy trainers established around the Curragh, and that 20% of the horses were trained at Maddenstown.

#### 4.3 Number of Horses

The Curragh Commission of 1866 recorded 170 horses in training. More recent totals for licensed horses are:

Year	No. of Horses
1961	650
1981	1,100
1971	1,000
1998	1,200

It is suspected that an unknown number of unlicensed horses also train on the plain.

Training also takes place in an unauthorised area behind No. 4 Range in Blue Lands. Trainers have been fined for the use of unlicensed areas.



#### 4.4 Curragh Racecourse

Within the racecourse area there has been tree planting and fencing. Continuing activity includes soil and sod stripping, soil replacement, the making of hard-surface tracks, and dumping/storage areas.

#### 4.5 Summary of Equestrian Activity

	Acres
Total area licenced for training	623
Racecourse enclosed leased area	810
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,433</b>
Total acreage of Curragh	4,870
Percentage licenced and leased for equestrian activity	29.55%

**Note:** These areas are marked in yellow on the accompanying map (Appendix B).

### 5. IMPACT OF AGRICULTURAL ACTIVITIES

#### 5.1 Use by Sheep

In the *Curragh of Kildare Acts 1870 & 1961* the Curragh is deemed to be divided into Three Parts:

Area	Acres	Activity
1. Brown Lands	771	Occupied by military encampment
2. Blue Lands	815	Firing Ranges
3. Green Lands	3,284	Residue of the Curragh
<b>Total area</b>	<b>4,870</b>	



Section 10 of the 1961 Act permits Blue Lands & Green Lands to be stocked and depastured in common with sheep. No rights of pasture are allowed on Brown Lands by the 1870 Act.

It should be noted that sheep graze in all areas including the golf courses and illegally on the Brown Lands. The only area not grazed is the enclosed racecourse area. The Act permits only rights of pasture, and no other shepherding or feeding activity. The ratio of sheep to pasture is two sheep per acre. It is forbidden to graze cows or any other animals on the sward.

## **5.2 Variety and Numbers of Sheep**

In 1869 the number of sheep for which grazing rights were allowed was 7,897. More modern official figures are:

Year	No. of Sheep
1961	7,957
1971	6,204
1981	6,098
1991	6,011

There are always unauthorised sheep on the plain, for which no estimate is available. Wicklow Cheviot is the breed commonly grazed on the plain.

## **5.3 Loss of Pasture**

- The enclosure of the 810 acres by the racecourse (1962) and the making of ploughed and all-weather gallops in the licenced areas (19 acres) and roadways have reduced the grazing areas, with a consequent reduction in the number of sheep permitted to graze.
- The Athgarvan GAA Club: (1980: 4.5 acres) and Athgarvan School: (1965: 2 acres) reduced pasture for 13 sheep.



- The making of the motorway from Newbridge to Kildare in 1993/4 absorbed 60 acres, thus the loss of 120 head of sheep grazing rights.
- The extension of the motorway to by-pass Kildare town will cut off a c.15 acre section of the plain. It is planned that this will become part of the Racing Apprentice Centre of Education\*(RACE) area. The proposed cuttings into the plain could effect the aquifer.

It is estimated that since 1961 approximately 895.5 acres of grazing pasture have been lost.

Development	Lost Acres
Racecourse	810
Gallops	19
Athgarvan GAA	4.5
Athgarvan School	2
Motorway	60
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>895.5</b>

#### 5.4 Damage to Sward

The damage to the sward by the sheep is as follows:

- Overgrazing due to the concentration of sheep in certain areas by their owners, and consequent assumptions by the owners that they have Rights to such areas.
- *The Irish Naturalists Journal*: (vol.24 no.1:1992 Page 16) recorded a deterioration on the surface of the Curragh due 'largely to the interaction of two factors, overstocking (due to availability of headage payments) and increased dryness. A further threat is the substantial increase in the area



covered by furze'. The latter complaint is still being made in relation to the cemetery area, Rabbit Hill, Ballysax and Little Curragh.

- Grazing of sheep by owners who have not got Rights.
- The use of supplementary feeding, including hay and molasses, in winter. This causes severe damage in areas where feeding stands are placed, and possibility of pollution of ground water by the sheep and residues of feeding materials. The introduction of supplementary feeding materials could also have adverse effects on the sward and plant life.
- Areas damaged: near the Magazine, in the conifer plantation north of the Curragh Golf Club, left of the road leading to Donnelly's Hollow, north of Jockey Hall, Ballysax, near the Fox Covert and Frenchfurze. The flocking of animals at a privately installed water trough at Corrigan's Cut causes damage to the sward, as does the importation of water troughs on to the sward in summer.
- The herding or feeding of sheep from four-wheel drive vehicles causes severe damage to the sward.
- The sheep-dipping pens at Ballymannny are unsightly, but more importantly the congregation there of large flocks causes damage to the sward, while the chemicals used for dipping, or of the pour-on variety where used, are a danger to the flora and aquifer.
- The erection of unauthorised pens for use during sheep branding periods causes cutting to the sward.
- There is slurry pollution from a farm on the western edge of the Little Curragh.



## 6. IMPACT OF MILITARY ACTIVITIES

- Damage to the sward is caused by the passage of tracked and other vehicles, driver training, and military exercises which include the digging of trenches, especially in the Sunny Hill and Flagstaff areas. In 1995 it was reported that the military had removed topsoil and furze from some 3 acres of land opposite Conyngham Lodge, Brownstown.

The recent designation of the Camp as a training area will increase military activities.

- The Sewage farm (30 acres) which caters for the Camp and some modern housing estates on the edge of the plain is in urgent need of upgrading. Its present condition could result in serious pollution.
- The dump for domestic refuse at the western end of the camp has been closed but it could remain a hazard due to leakage.
- Within the Camp environs, the Curragh Golf Club (1883: 188 acres, over 75% of which is in Brown Lands; 4% in Blue Lands, and about 1% in Green Lands) has over the years undertaken landscaping which included extensive tree planting and some fencing. The use of nutrients on the course may have effects on the sward. Grass cutting in certain areas is also part of the maintenance of the course. For the last few winters there has been some flooding of parts of the course, and this winter the course has been closed for the same reason. While some members of the club blame the flooding on the construction of the motorway, others believe it is a consequence of the compacting of the sward during maintenance and from the passage of shepherds' vehicles with feeding materials. The destruction of aerating earthworms by the use of insecticides has also been suggested as a negative factor.
- The Camp Pitch & Putt Club (10 acres) has similar effects to that of the Golf Club. There is no flooding.



- The building of the Magazine [Ammunition Depot] 50 acres (1930s), tree planting (1940 onwards), enclosure of football pitches, and the building of Married Quarters at Orchard Park (1978/9: 5.5 acres), all of which are in Brown Lands resulted in a loss of illegal pasture only. Furze was cleared from about 3 acres of ground close to the Magazine about 1995.

## 7. IMPACT OF OTHER USERS

### 7.1 Recreation

- Cill Dara Golf Club: 9 holes. (1920: 50 acres). Septic tank. Similar effects to Curragh Golf Club, see Section 6.
- Athgarvan Pitch & Putt Course (1950s: 11.25 acres) & Lumville Pitch & Putt Course (1950s: 30 acres). Similar effects to that of Curragh Golf Club, see Section 6.
- Athgarvan GAA Club (1980: 4.5 acres): fenced in area of Curragh, buildings, car park, and tree planting.
- Golf practice in several areas of the plain is also destructive.
- Scrambling/Motor Cross: these activities have caused, and continue to cause, considerable damage in the Walshestown and Sunny Hill areas.
- The driving and parking of vehicles by walkers, picnickers, golfers etc. on the sward has damaged the sward in all roadside areas.
- Dumping and litter is found in scattered areas.



## 7.2 Other Developments

- Periodic Travellers' encampments in the Brownstown area damage the sward and leave detritus.
- Occasional use for film making including the introduction of vehicles and temporary structures may have a negative impact on the sward.
- The construction of Athgarvan School (1965: 2 acres): Alterations to the plain through the building of the school, hard-surfacing, fencing and tree planting.
- The building of the motorway has resulted in considerable loss of sward. It is also feared that some formerly damp areas have dried out, such as that south/east of Lumville Cross Roads, possibly from disturbance of drainage patterns.
- Unauthorised dumping at Corrigan's Cut (close to the Kildare Chilling factory) continues.
- The margins of the plain have been, and are, encroached by buildings and access roads.
- Two identified soakage pits at Friarstown and Ballysax.
- Septic tank at a house at Athgarvan.



## 8. CONCLUSION

While there is damage to the sward of the plain in all areas, in general the bulk of the ancient sward remains even though it may be surrounded by gallops, between roads and trackways, surrounding golfing and football areas, or between rifle ranges, fencing or coniferous plantations. The areas with least disruption appear to be:

- Within the Little Curragh.
- Beside the motorway on the south side of the plain, and south-westwards towards the Gibbet Rath.

The spaciousness of the plain, the undulating sward of green, occasional clumps of golden furze, a few grazing sheep and a string of horses against the horizon, all beneath the great expanse of sky, constitute the very special character of the Curragh of Kildare, which deserves to be preserved in its entirety.

- END -



## Appendix A - Sources

1. Map: Revised Gallops at the Curragh for the Irish Turf Club. 1982.
2. Policy Statement of the County Kildare Council of Trades Council. 5. 5.1993.
3. Notice of Planning Permission granted by Kildare County Council to Turf Club for All Weather gallop at Maddenstown. 18.10.1995.
4. Correspondence from Edward N. Smith & Kennedy Architects on behalf of the Turf Club to An Bord Pleanála: 15.12.1995, 19.12.1995, 16.1.1996.
5. Submissions made to an Oral Hearing by An Bord Pleanála re the Maddenstown All Weather Gallop 27.2.1996.  
Submissions were made by:
  - Irish Wild Bird Conservancy.
  - County Kildare Council of Trade Unions.
  - Curragh Sheep Owners Association.
  - Friends of the Curragh.
  - Mr. Percy Podger.
  - Kildare County Council.
6. Correspondence from Property Section Department of Defence 3.5.1996.
7. *An Act against swine feeding in the Curragh of Kildare*. 27 Ed. 1. 1299.
8. Rawson, T.J. *Statistical survey of Co. Kildare*. 1807.
9. *The Irish Naturalists Journal*: Vol.24 No.1 1992.
10. *Environment Kildare*: KELT 1998.
11. Maps: Kildare Town by-pass. 1998.
  - Revised Gallops at the Curragh for Irish Turf Club. 1982.
  - Other restricted maps.
12. Personal knowledge and observation since 1949.



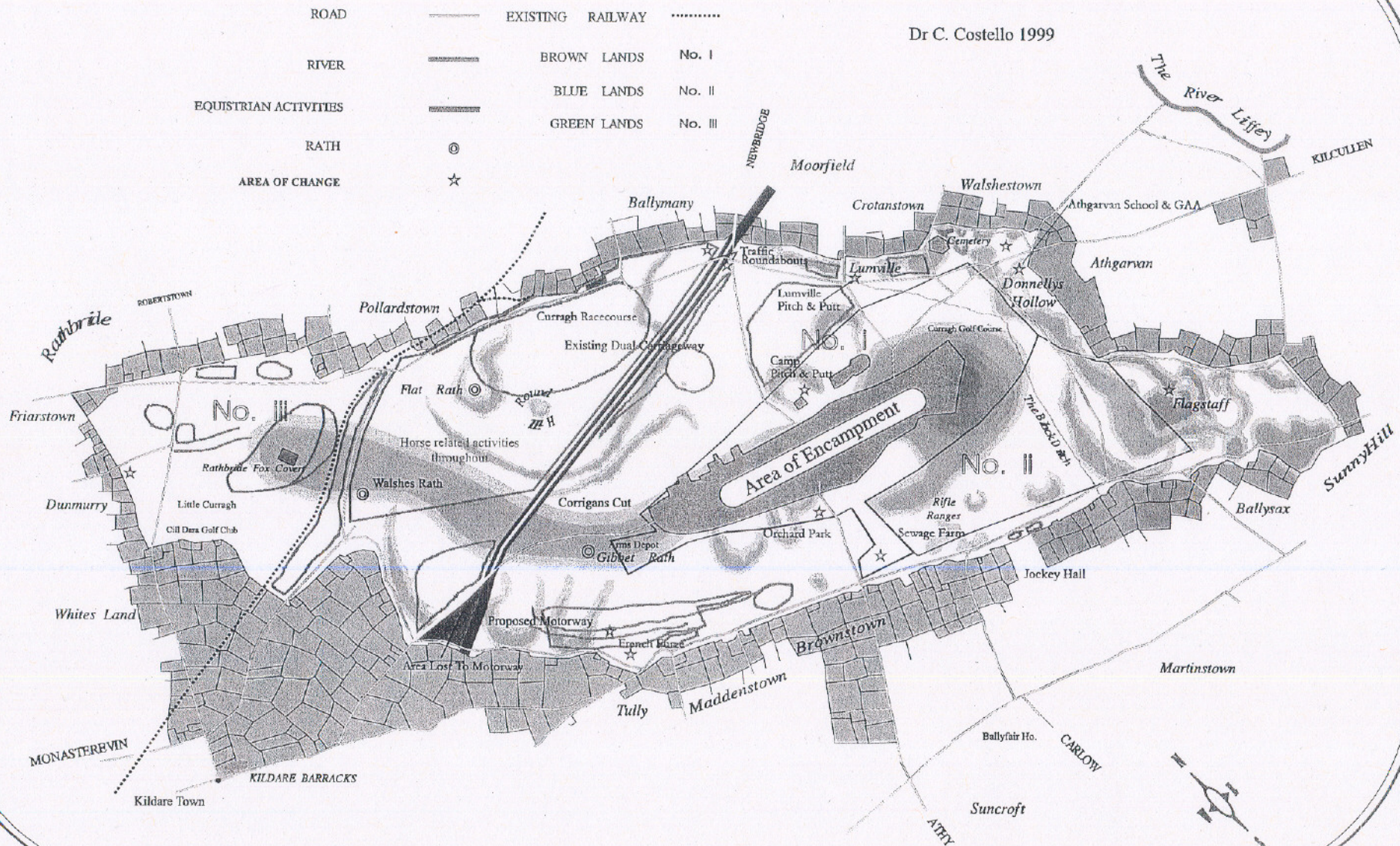
## Appendix B - Map of the Curragh

See attachment.



# THE CURRAGH

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