



ULSTER  
ARCHAEOLOGICAL  
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# Survey Report

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Reference: **Survey Report No 80**

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Author: **C Stevenson**

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Location:

**Orlock Coach Road,  
Orlock Point,  
Portavo Townland,  
Donaghadee,  
County Down,  
Northern Ireland.**

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In association with:

**Irishsights.com**

 **National Trust**



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## 1. Summary

### 1.1 Location

A site survey was undertaken at Orlock Point, in the townland of Portavo (can be spelt Portavoe), in County Down, Northern Ireland. It is situated on the shoreline between Groomsport and Donaghadee in the lee of the Copeland Island. (Irish Grid reference: J 55455 83475). The land is owned by the National Trust and it was at their request and, with their assistance, that the survey was undertaken. The survey was the eightieth in a series of planned surveys undertaken by members of the Ulster Archaeological Society and was carried out on 31 August 2019.

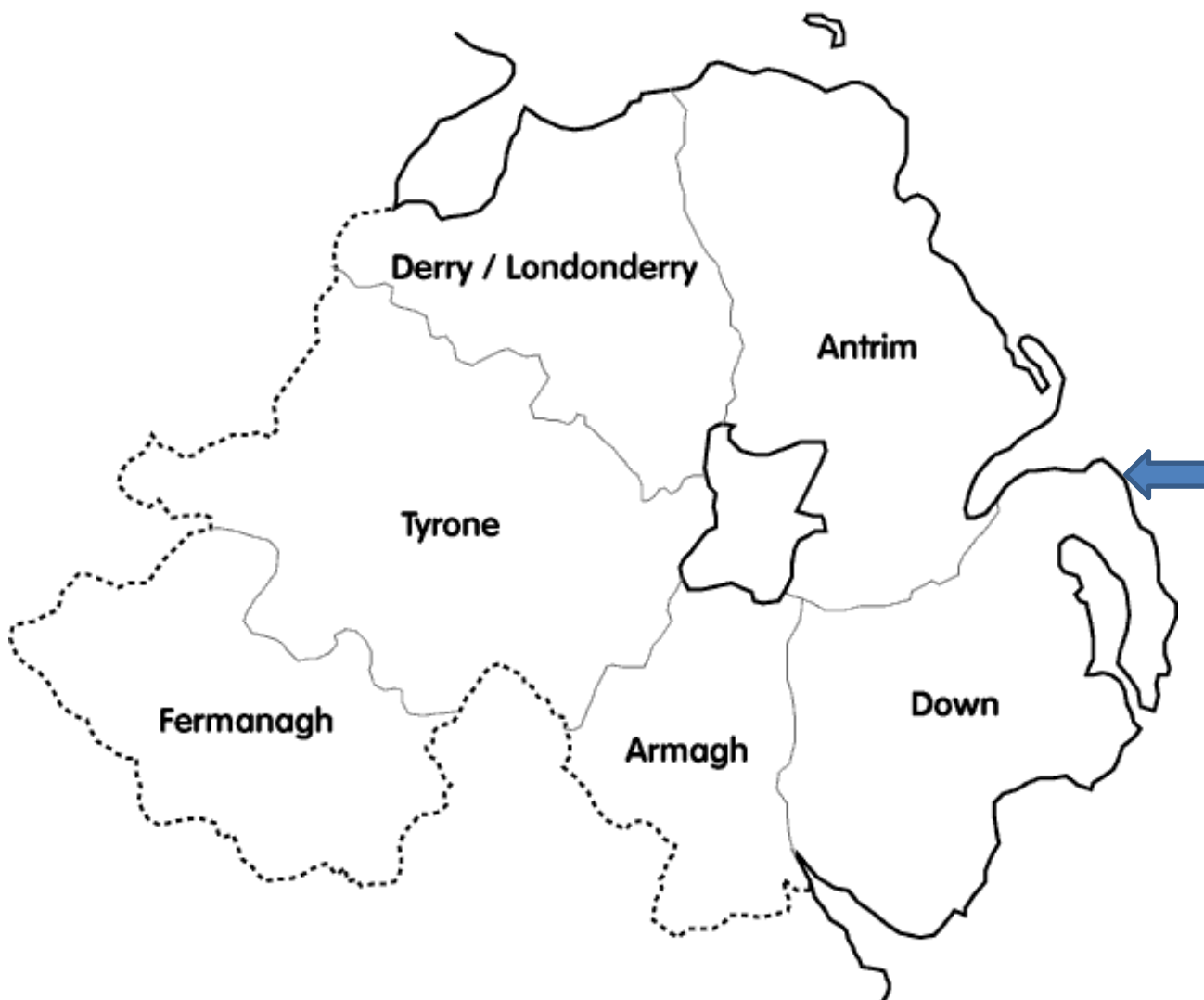


Figure 01: Map of the location of Orlock Point.

### 1.2 Aims

In order to enhance the archaeological record of this site, the aims of this survey were to produce accurate plan drawings of the structure and carry out a photographic survey. This information was compiled into a report and a copy submitted for inclusion in the archives of the Ulster Archaeological Society.



## 2. Introduction

### 2.1 Background

The National Trust have owned the land incorporating Orlock Point since 1984 and includes a gentle 3 mile (4.8 km) walk that is open to the general public and stretches from Portavo to Sandeel Bay and forms part of the North Down Coastal Path. This survey concentrates on the part of the anomaly known as the ‘Orlock Coach Road’ on National Trust property.

### 2.2 Previous archaeological surveys

As far as it is known, there has been no previous archaeological survey of this part of Orlock Head; although it has been written about extensively by Peter Carr in Part One of his definitive publication *Portavo – An Irish Townland and its People*. The White Row Press 2003. In which he records his extensive research and describes the information gleaned from local residents who themselves heard it from their grandfathers. The road is not recorded in the Northern Ireland Sites and Monuments Record (SMR).

### 2.3 Cartographic Evidence



Figure 02: Drone image showing part of the ‘Coach Road’ hewn out of solid rock, with cross-section A-B marked in red.- Courtesy of Irishsights.com





Figure 03: Drone Image of Orlock Head Road.

Figure 04: Drone image of Route of Coach Road.

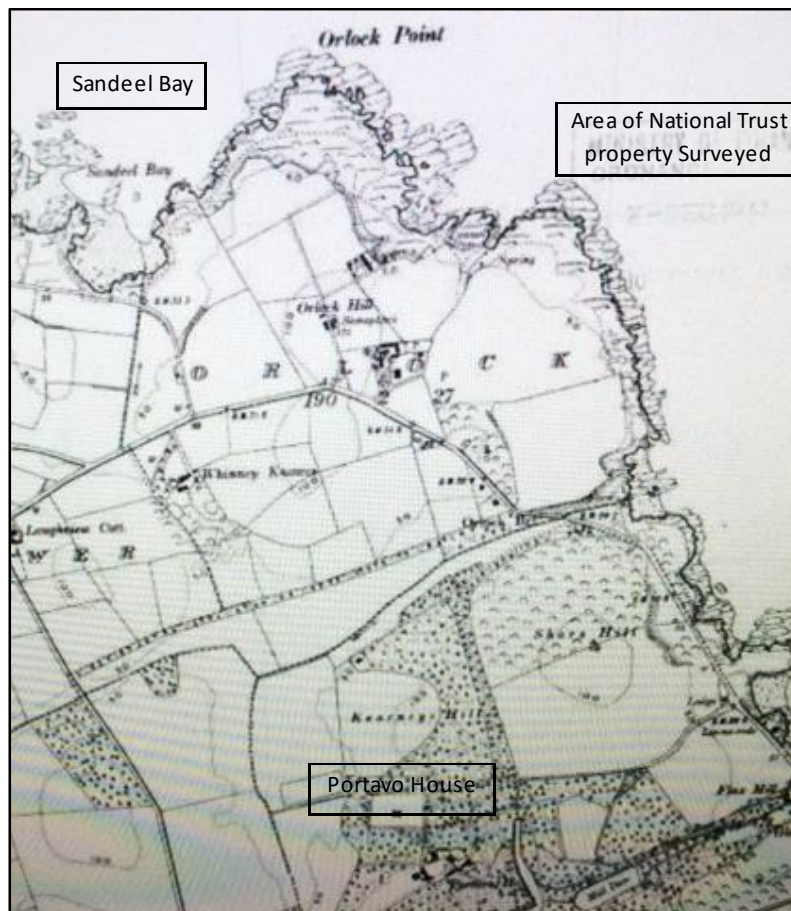


Figure 05: Map showing location of Portavo House and Sandeel Bay. OS, First Edition, 1832, County Series, Down, Sheet 11 (Part of).

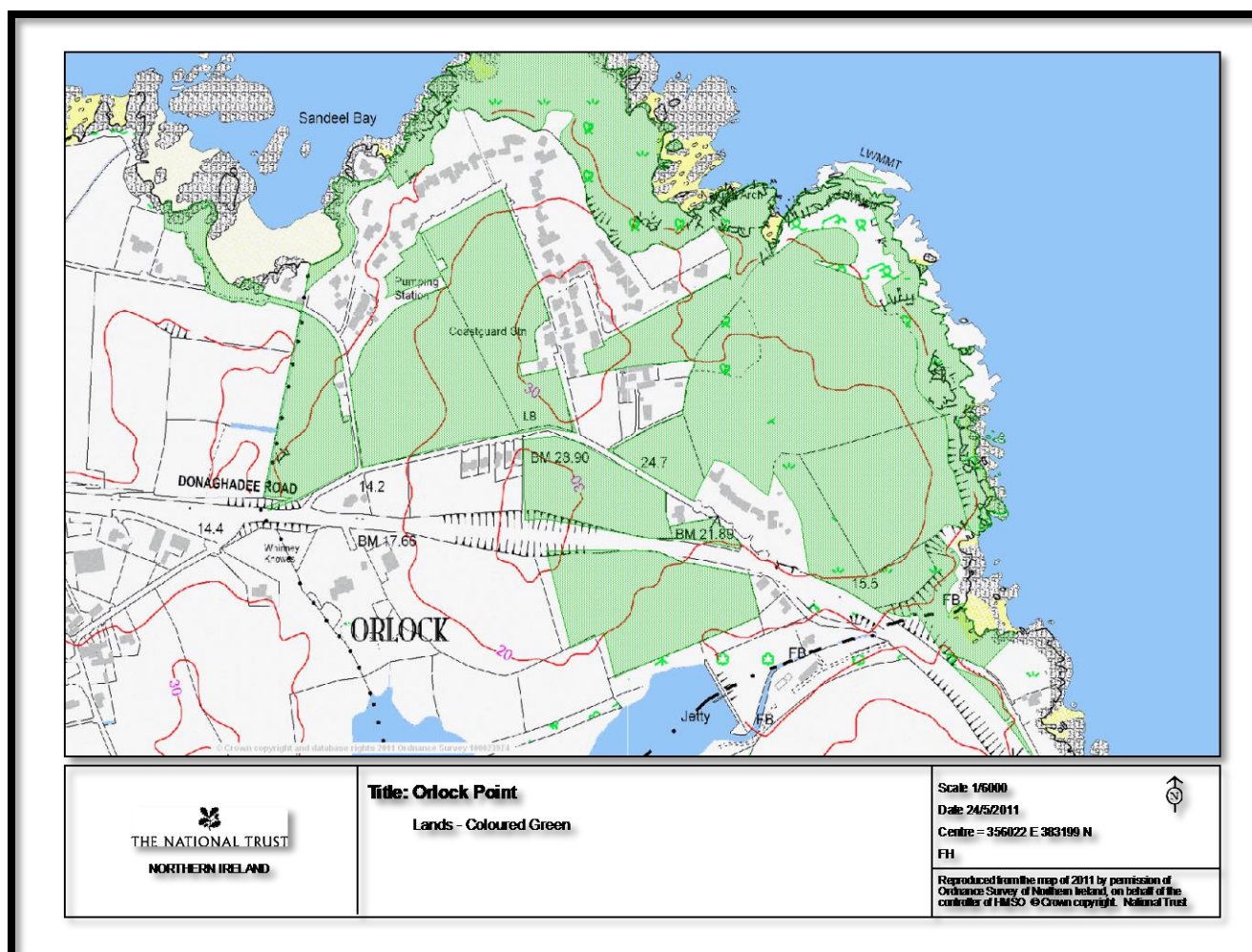


Figure 06: Map showing National Trust Land (in green) *National Trust*

## 2.4 Archiving

Copies of this report have been deposited with the National Trust and the Ulster Archaeological Society. All site records have been archived by the National Trust at Rowallane, Saintfield, County Down.

## 2.5 Credits and Acknowledgements

The survey was led by Dr H Welsh (UAS) and Malachy Conway (NT) supported by George Rutherford, Ian Gillespie, Lee Gordon, Colin Boyd, Ken Pullen, Chris Stevenson, Ian Forsythe, David Pullen, David Craig (Drone Pilot), Hilary Boyd, Anne MacDermott, Liz McShane, Janna McDonald, Randal Scott, June Welsh, Leo Van Es, Kerry Freud and George Johnston.

## 3. UAS Survey

### 3.1 Methodology

It was decided that the survey would take the form of the production of plan drawings and elevations, accompanied by a comprehensive photographic survey and a selection of drone images. This report was compiled using the information obtained from these sources, in addition to background documentary material.



### 3.2 Production of plan drawings

Plan drawings and elevations were completed, using data obtained from the field survey. Measurements were obtained by using the society's *Leica Sprinter 100* electronic measuring device and drone digital technology. Sketch plans at 1:20 scale were completed on site by recording these measurements on drafting film secured to a plane table and backing up the data on a field notebook for subsequent reference. Field plans were later transferred to a computer-based format for printing.

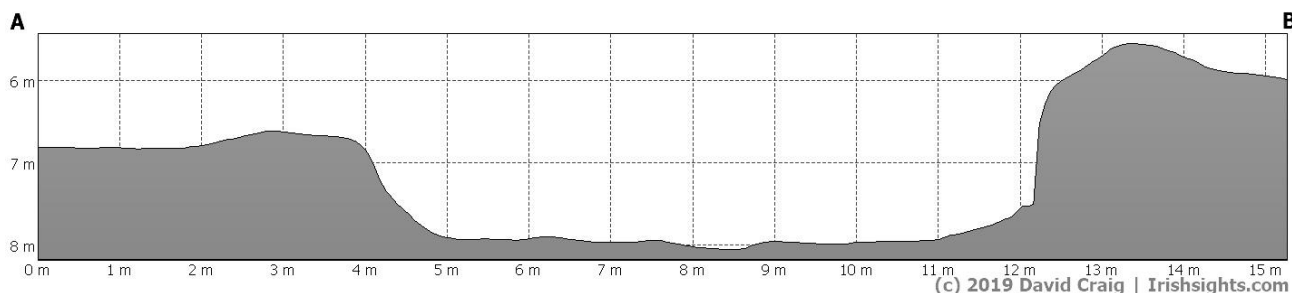


Figure 07: Cross-section of Coach Road (A – B in Figure 02.) Courtesy of Irishsights.com

### 3.3 Photographic archive

A photographic record of the site was taken by using a *Ricoh G600 8W* and other digital cameras and a photographic record sheet was employed, corresponding to photographs taken during the site survey on 31 August 2019. The archive of all photographs taken has been compiled in jpeg format and saved to compact disc.



Figure 8: Route of Coach Road with water obstacles, looking north.





Figure 09: Members of the Survey Team inside tunnel, looking north.



Figure 10: Clearest part of Coach Road, showing proximity to shoreline, looking east.





Figure 11: Rough surface on parts of Coach Road, looking north.



Figure 12: Worked side of edge of roadway, looking west.





Figure 13: Roadway hewn through solid rock, looking south.



Figure 14: Route followed spectacular coastline, looking east - to wow visitors perhaps!





Figure 15: Survey Team members examining route of Coach Road, looking south.



Figure 16: A narrow pathway forms part of the walk, bordered by brick-edged drain, looking north.





Figure 17: Ringed metal poles may have been used to indicate route over causeway, looking southeast.



Figure 18: Large stones may indicate causeway construction, looking southeast.





Figure19: Inlet that might have been bridged, looking northwest



Figure 20: Showing drill marks in tunnel looking east.





Figure21: Showing drill marks inside the tunnel looking east.



Figure22: Showing chisel marks in tunnel, looking east.



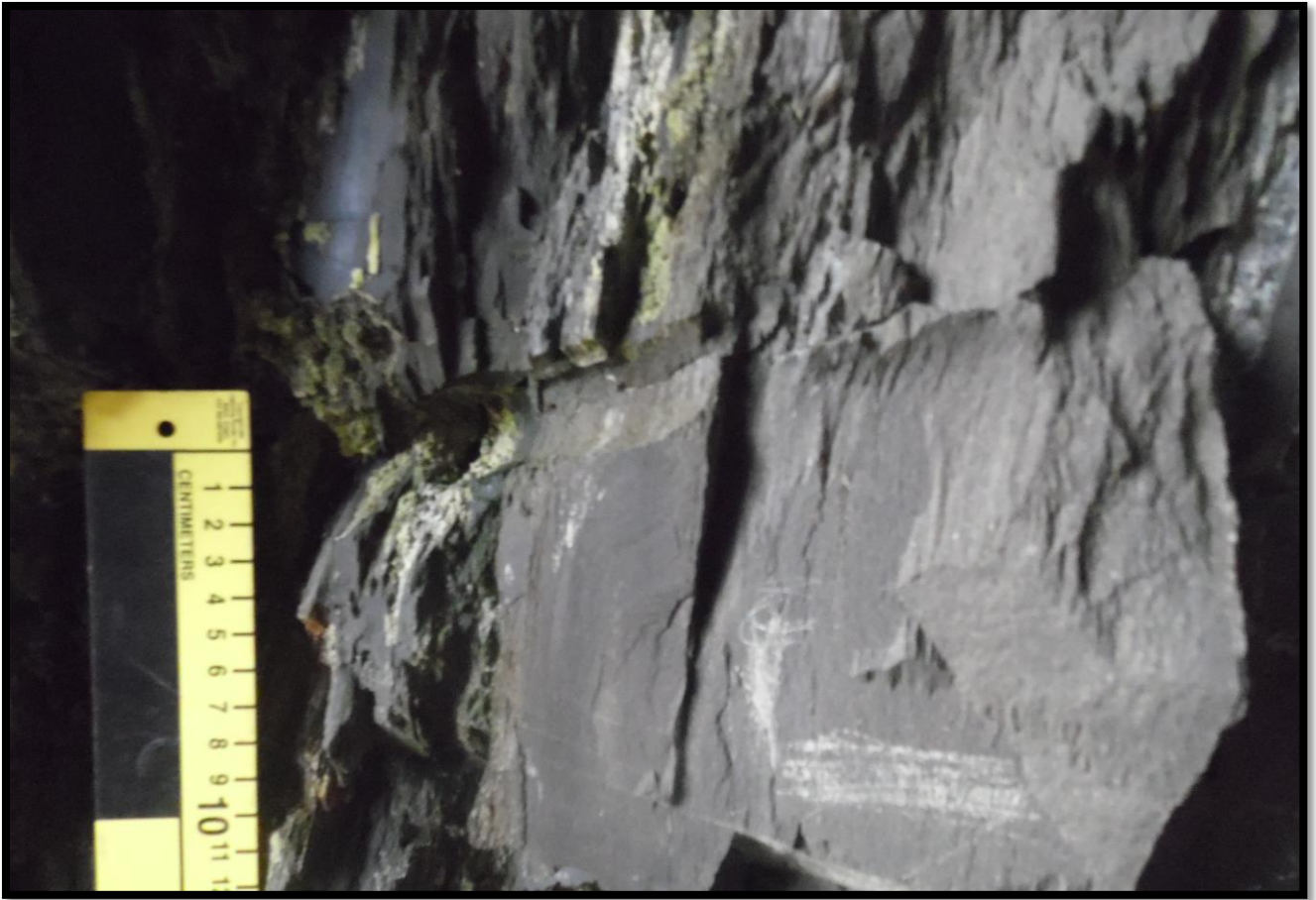


Figure 23: Showing chisel marks inside the tunnel looking east.

#### 4. Discussion

##### 4.1 Decluttering Myths, Folklore and Fiction from Fact and Supposition.

Local people have many a tale to tell associated with their belief in the origins of the ‘Orlock Coach Road’ including that it was:

- a. An ancient pilgrim’s way;
- b. A vanity project by the local landowner;
- c. An adrenalin ride for important visitors;
- d. A smugglers path to outfox the Revenue men.
- e. A famine relief scheme to alleviate the suffering of the poor.
- f. A scheme to transport freshly quarried stone.

All these scenarios (with the exception of ‘a’) are feasible and may have some merit.

a. Pilgrim’s Way. There is no historic record of any pilgrim’s way between Bangor Abbey and any of the ecclesiastic sites in the southern part of the Ards Peninsula. In any case the road is too wide for a simple pilgrim’s way and it is too close to the shoreline for safety, especially as there is a level surface only metres away on higher ground.

b. A Vanity Project. A vanity project is a real possibility. The 1830s were a time of great change and exciting discoveries within the British Isles and the rest of Europe. Queen Victoria was creating an empire and great feats of exploration and engineering were in vogue, with most being

financed by the landed gentry. It is not surprising that the local landowner (Mr David Ker) would feel the same zeal as his contemporaries. It is reported that he paid 100 men 10 pence per day to construct a spectacular coastal coach road from his residence at Portavo House to Sandeel Bay.

c. An Adrenalin Adventure. The road was specifically constructed as close to the shoreline as possible, utilising causeways and possibly bridges to span the various inlets and coves that stood in its way (Figure 13). This road may have been built specifically to give visitors to Portavo House an ideal opportunity to experience an unforgettable daredevil ride close to, and over, the wild and treacherous Irish Sea. I can imagine the whole episode being told and retold, with possibly embellishments, at dinner parties in great country houses, on their return to England.

d. A Smuggler's Track. Smuggling everywhere in the British Isles was a great problem for the Revenue and Coastguard in the late 1700s and 1800s. No less so in County Down, where there was a great deal of money to be made from the illicit import of tobacco, gin, brandy and wines. The problem was so great in the Orlock area that by 1825 the Coastguard (at great expense) had built and manned stations at Groomsport, Donaghadee, Millisle, Ballyhalbert, Cloghy and Tara. They wanted to build two more stations, one at Orlock and one on the Copeland Island, but the local landowner, the same Mr Ker, (who was himself a local magistrate!) resisted their construction. Mr Ker's prevarications delayed the construction of the Orlock station by at least 7 years and the Copeland Island one was never built. (However, the Coastguard out-manoeuvred Mr Ker by permanently positioning a small vessel in a sheltered bay off the west coast of the Copeland Island.) Although built after the 'Golden Age of Smuggling' the easy access to the many coves continued to tempt many a local to try their hand at evading paying the import taxes for years to come and could have utilised the road to ease ingress and egress. There are rumours that even the Ker family were active participants, but they have always strongly denied this. Back in 1732 a timbered slipway was constructed at nearby 'New Kea' which divers have traced timbers to a depth of twelve metres. This could have been put back into service to provide a safe bottom for vessels to discharge their cargo.

e. A Famine Relief Scheme. The idea of a famine relief scheme has some merit, but the timing is not quite right because although the mid 1830s was a period of recession, it was not a time of unusual deprivation. (Carr, 2003). Nevertheless, the chance of some paid employment would have been greatly appreciated by the local workforce (Figure 14).

f. A Quarry Road. The Ker family already quarried stone elsewhere on their estate (notably at Whitehead) and it was hinted that they intended to quarry stone at Orlock Head and use the road to transport it away. (Carr, 2003) However, the quarrying enterprise did not materialise, but the road construction went ahead despite this.

#### 4.2 Terrain considerations

The local area is made up of a sedimentary bedrock known as Gala 3 or Greywacke and shale with a Lamprophyre igneous intrusion and was formed approximately 428 to 444 million years ago in the Silurian Period. This was very hard and difficult to quarry and, given its location at the very edge of the Irish Sea, would have been strenuous and dangerous work for those employed on the project. There is a 6 metres long tunnel forming part of the route and this might have once been a natural arch, but there are a few chisel and drill marks to prove that it was either created or enhanced by hard labour. (Figures 09, 12, 20, 21, 22, and 23.) The western end of the tunnel is 3.8 metres wide, whilst the eastern entrance is 3.05 metres wide with an average height of 2.4 metres. The width of the road varies considerably, from 8 metres at its widest point, narrowing to 2 metres at others. In other places extensive amount of rock had to be removed in an attempt to create a level surface for the road. Part of the excavations were 8 metres wide and 2.2 metres high. (See figures 02, 10 and 12) Large amounts of shingle and large stones were utilised to create causeways to traverse the various coves and inlets.

There is a suggestion that even bridges were constructed in places, but there are no traces left to confirm this.

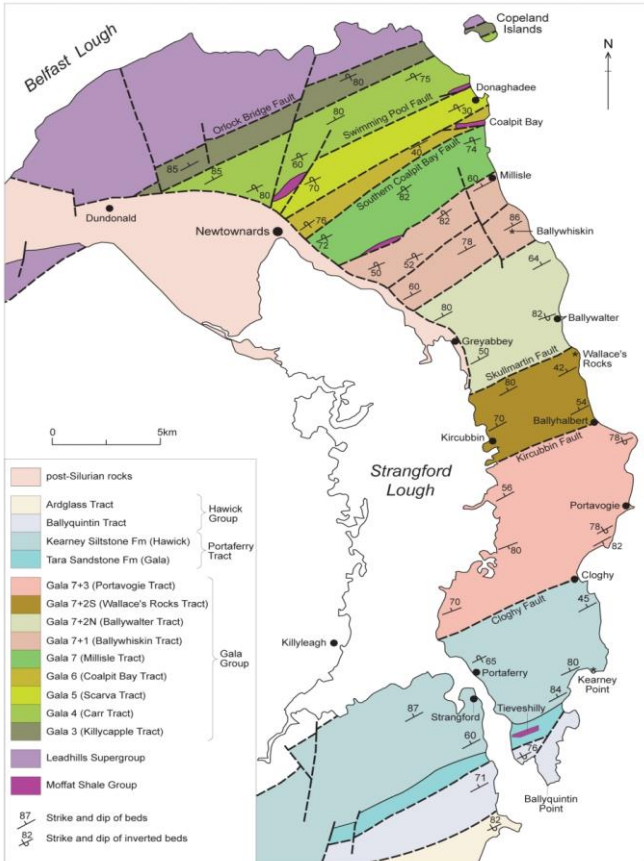


Figure 25: Close up view of Tunnel, looking south

Figure 24: Map of rock types on Ards Peninsula. (Courtesy of British Geographical Society Earthwise)

Figure 26: Bedrock removed to create flat surface, looking north.







Figure 27: Drone image of circular stone structures. (courtesy of Irishsights.com)

#### 4.3 Stone cellular structures

During the drone aerial survey, three groups of what appeared to be drystone cellular structures were observed. These were to the north, south and roughly central parts of the trackway. These were not observed at ground level on the day of the survey, but were later inspected by Malachy Conway, who considered them to be probably modern, perhaps constructed by wildfowlers or fishermen. However, it is difficult to be definitive without carrying out further archaeological investigations.

#### 4.4 Prehistoric standing stone

A standing stone, which was covered in vegetation at the time of the survey, was observed by the UAS close to the modern track at its southern connection to the public road and car park. This is not recorded on the SMR, but is in an area that is known to have significant prehistoric activity. The standing stone was not investigated at the time of the survey.

#### 4.5 International Importance.

The swim from Orlock Point to Portpatrick, in Scotland, (known as the North Channel Swim) is considered to be one of the seven most arduous swims in the world and they are collectively known as the 'Ocean 7 Challenge'. The local route is approximately 21 miles long (depending on the exact setting off point, the state of the tides and the amount of drifting encountered by the swimmer) and has been successfully completed by 88 individual swimmers (54 M, 34 F) and 28 relay teams. (Data compiled by *Irish Long-Distance Swimming Association*.)

N.B. To date only 18 people have completed all 7 challenges. (Information supplied from the *Long Swim Data Base*.)



## 5. Conclusions and Recommendations for further work

This survey concentrated on the route of the Coach Road on National Trust property. A further survey should be carried out to identify the exact route from Portavo House to Sandeel Bay. The circular stone structures identified from the drone data need further investigation (Figure 27). Finally, the possible standing stone should be archaeologically investigated and recorded.

## 6. Bibliography

Carr, P. 2003. *Portavo, An Irish Townland and its People, Part One: Earliest times to 1844*. Belfast: The White Row Press.

## PHOTOGRAPHIC RECORD FORM

Site: Orlock Point, County Down

Date: 31 August 2019

Make and model of cameras - *Ricoh G600, Olympus SZ-31MR and Samsung WB100*.

Frame no	Looking	Figure	Details
RIMG0096	S	Cover	View of tunnel forming part of the Coach Road
DSCN9390	N	8	Route of Coach Road with water obstacles
RIMG0098	N	9	Members of the survey team inside tunnel
DSCN9392	E	10	Clearest part of Coach Road showing proximity to shoreline
DSCN9385	N	11	Rough surface of part of Coach Road
DSCN9383	W	12	Worked side of edge of roadway
DSCN9384	S	13	Roadway hewn from solid rock
RIMG0118	E	14	Route followed spectacular coastline
RIMG0112	S	15	Survey team members examining route of Coach Road
RIMG0100	N	16	Pathway narrows and is bordered by brick-edged drain.
RIMG0092	SE	17	Metal poles may have been used to indicate route over causeway.
RIMG0088	SE	19	Large stones may indicate causeway construction
DSCN9394	NW	20	Inlet that might have been bridged
RIMG0095	S	21	Close up view of tunnel
SAM6360.7	E	22	Drill marks in tunnel
SAM6361.7	E	23	Drill marks inside the tunnel
SAM6348.2	E	24	Chisel marks in tunnel
SAM6349.3	E	25	Chisel marks inside the tunnel
DSCN9387	N	26	Bedrock removed to create flat surface

Note – Many more photographs were taken apart from those recorded here. The remainder are available in the site survey archive.