

Poultalloon, Co. Clare

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Introduction

A new cave system was found in the Burren area of Co. Clare in July 1995. The cave consists of a small active streamway, a semi-fossil streamway and a major streamway where the two combine. The cave is unusual as it drains to St. Brendan's Well and is only the second major cave known in this catchment area. The total length at present is 1910m, the streamway being 800m long.

Location

Poultalloon is a small sinkhole on the shale limestone boundary between Lisdoonvarna and Kilmoon in the townland of Ballydonohoe. The site is described in *Caves of County Clare* and is named on Robinson's Map. The Owenadoggan stream forms a sizeable valley as it drains the South Eastern slopes of Slieve Elva. A smaller stream joins it at the shale boundary, the combined water sinking into a small bedding plane. Ten metres down the valley is a slightly larger, dry bedding plane which forms the present entrance. There has been recent excavation of the upstream bed and new entrances may be revealed.

Description

Eight metres into the cave there is a very tight squeeze beyond which the bedding continues for a further 8m where it divides. Both routes are tight and enter a 0.5m high dry canyon, after 10m this meets a 1m square canal passage. Upstream to the right the passage diminishes and breaks up, the water seems to come from the wet bedding entrance. Downstream a short, low passage enters from the left, while the canal continues with some deep water until the passage lowers to a bedding plane. Only 5m long it seems to be due to 2 thin vertical veins of less soluble material that can be seen in the floor of the following cascades, although they do not seem to be present in the roof.

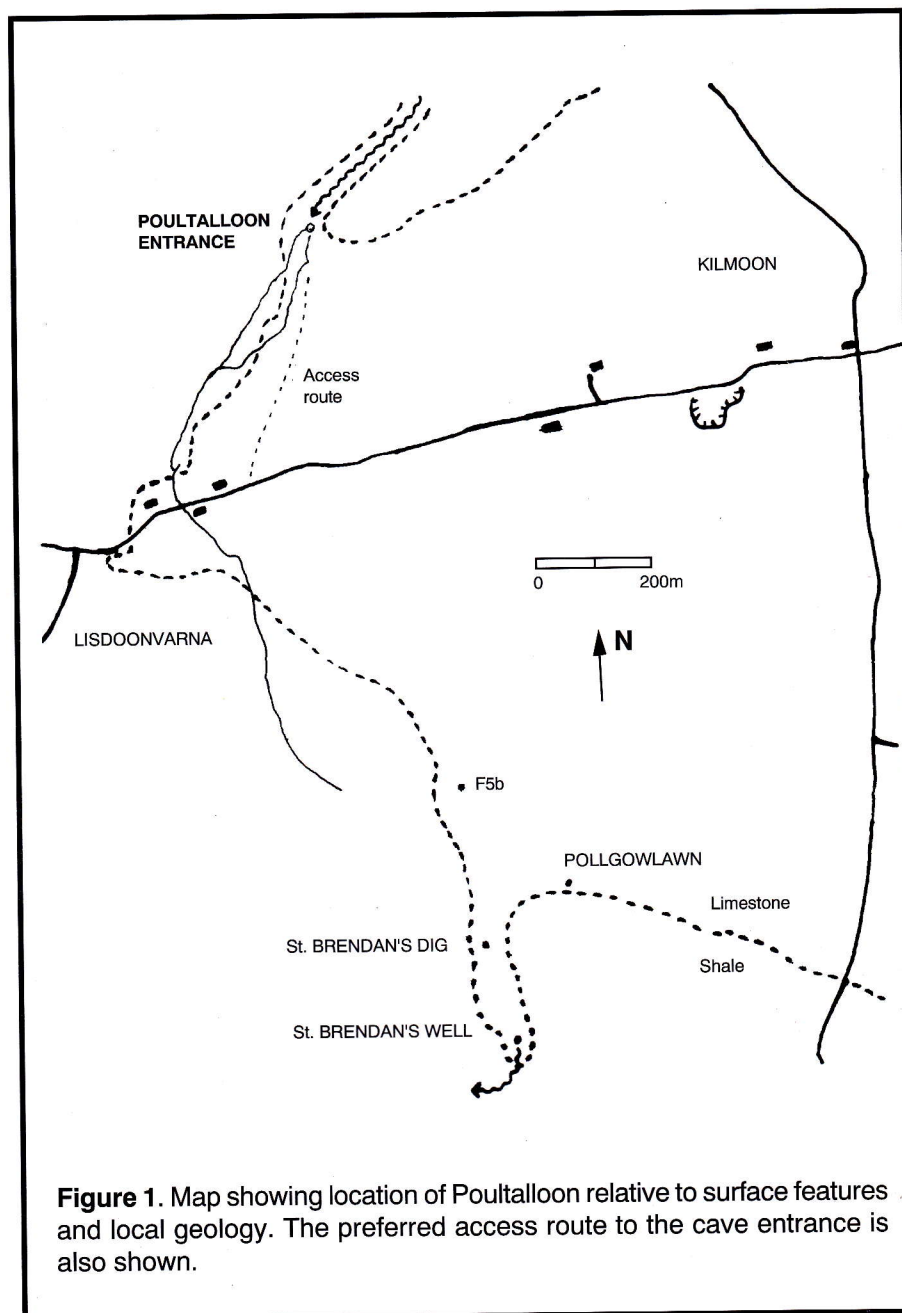


Figure 1. Map showing location of Poultalloon relative to surface features and local geology. The preferred access route to the cave entrance is also shown.

The passage quickly develops to 1.5m high and from 0.5m to 1m wide with abundant formations.

After 170m the upper part of the passage is lost to the right and the stream is followed down some more cascades to a squeeze over a fallen block. Again the passage resumes its former size passing more blocks, fallen and hanging slabs. A further 150m of decorated streamway follows until the stream is lost at floor level and the canyon continues dry until it enters a sizeable chamber with abundant and well decorated

slabs.

A stream enters on the left carrying water from further up the cave, a small stream also enters on the right which may also be water from further up the cave. From the chamber there are 3 routes downstream; directly in front of the point of entry a short squeeze enters a low streamway. The larger stream on the left can also be followed in a low streamway and shortly joins the other low streamway to continue as a hands and knees crawl. Alternatively climbing over the slabs in the chamber leads to a very well deco-

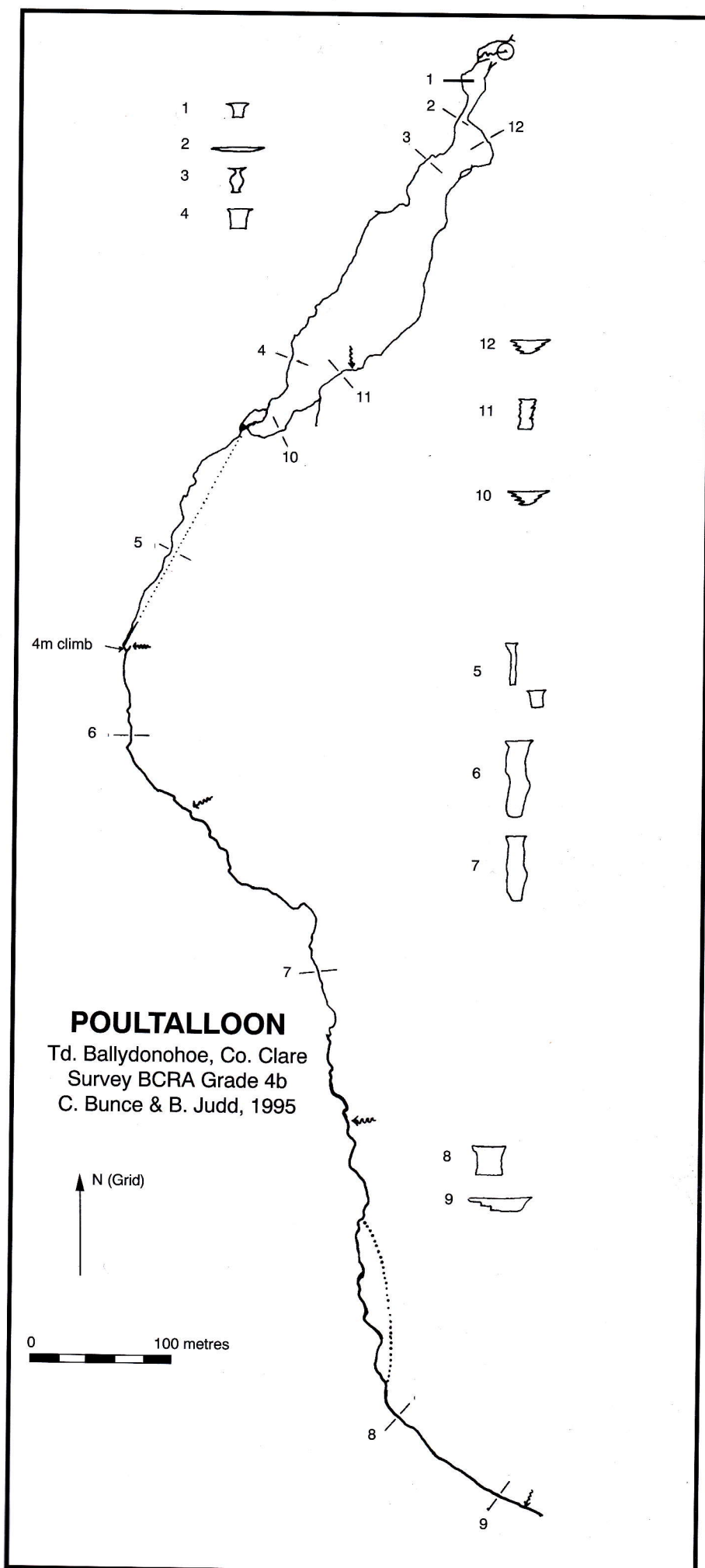
rated fossil passage, after 20m it is possible to climb down to the lower streamway.

This higher passage continues for some distance but should not be followed because of possible damage. The lower streamway continues as a hands and knees crawl for 150m before the passage increases to walking size as the high level passage rejoins. a very well decorated section follows until the high level passage leaves to the left. A short section of crawling leads to head of a 4m climb into a large canyon passage with another inlet entering on the opposite side. A third small inlet enters from high up and has formed a large stalactite about 3m long.

The main streamway begins as a 5m high and 1m wide canyon and continues for 700m averaging 4m in height. A fabulous canyon with several inlets and abundant flowstone, the water is very clear and several eels have been seen in the stream. 500m from the start of the main streamway is the start of a small oxbow on the left about 1.5m above stream level. This oxbow picks up several inlets and rejoins the main streamway as a sizeable inlet after 150m. The passage is notable for a series of gour dams which are home to some type of non-segmented worm which are found parallel to the water flow and have caused the calcite to form tubes around them. The worms themselves are up to 10cm long and 0.5cm diameter and seem to be completely transparent.

Beyond the end of the oxbow the passage starts to change dimensions, over the next 100m decreases to 0.5m while the width increases to 4m over gravel banks. There are a series of larger gour pools and small inlets all on the left hand side which continue to the final pool. This point is about 500m from the resurgence at St Brendan's Well, between the two points is St Brendan's dig - a short cave leading to a streamway ending in a sump in both directions.

From the slab chamber a passage to the left can be followed over a series of gour pools, this leads to a bedding plane about 3m wide and 0.7m



high. The passage increases in height slightly and reaches a small stream, this flows down to the right in a low bedding plane which has been followed for 20m before becoming too low. Following upstream there is a squeeze under a large block into a section of larger passage. A high level route leads back parallel to the route followed and probably corresponds to a similar passage that can be seen at slab chamber, this route has not been pushed because of flowstone on the floor.

The larger passage is obstructed by boulders at first but after 20m an inlet enters on the left and the passage opens out to 2.5m high by 1m wide. A series of well decorated meanders and oxbows follow - stooping height where the oxbows leave, walking when they reunite. Almost 300m from the chamber the passage is blocked by a collapse, this way originally passed on the left but an easier route was then excavated on

the right under a large inclined slab. Beyond the collapse the passage becomes smaller 2m wide by 1m high with an increasing amount of rubbish and shale cobbles indicating proximity to the surface. 100m beyond the collapse, the passage splits up in a wide bedding plane. In one branch it is possible to see daylight through a small crack. This point is very close to the stream sink at the entrance.

Discussion

A number of points are raised by the discovery of this cave:

1. This is the longest cave found in the Burren in the last 25 years but shows there is still potential for finds on the shale margins with only a few hours work.
2. The water drains to St Brendans' Well resurgence, the final resurgence for all waters from Eastern Slieve Elva and Western

Poulacapple Owenterbolea, the swallet below Killeany resurgence, which also drains to St. Brendan's Well is only 6m lower in attitude than Poultalloon so could have caving potential.

3. The cave stays under the shale and closely mirrors the shale margin trending first south west and then south east. The reason for this is uncertain but it maybe due to a plunging anticlinal fold as the Geological Survey map shows a North West (3°) dip to Kilmoon church and a southerly dip (3°) near the quarry.

Access

The entrance is on private land but at present the landowner has no problem giving access (the cave has different ideas!). The best route is to park on the main road south of the entrance and walk north across the field to the entrance.