

# The Geological Heritage of West Kerry

## Volcanoes at Clogher Head

Patrick Wyse Jackson

It may surprise some readers that volcanoes on the Dingle Peninsula have been responsible for spewing out vast amounts of ash and lava which can be seen around Dunquin and further inland at Caherconree. In recent years erupting volcanoes have produced many hazards and their effects on human activity are starkly illustrated when one remembers the devastation of the Mount St Helens eruption in Washington state, western USA in 1980. More recently in 2010 many thousands of travellers had their plans disrupted when Eyjafjallajökull volcano on Iceland pumped huge clouds of ash into the atmosphere.

On the Dingle Peninsula volcanoes were active 430 million years ago long before mankind had appeared on Earth. At the time, during the Silurian geological period, two land-masses that now make up Ireland were separated by a vast ocean called Iapetus. It closed slowly at a rate of a few centimetres a year, eventually causing the oceanic plates to be destroyed beneath the converging continental plates. As this happened a great deal of rock became melted at considerable depth and the molten materials started to move upwards towards the surface, where they erupted and formed a string of volcanic islands in the ever-shallowing ocean. These are known as island-arc volcanoes and today Mount Fuji in Japan is probably the most famous example of this type of volcano.



**View towards Clogher Head, a headland composed of volcanic lava. (Photograph by Patrick Wyse Jackson)**

Clogher Head is composed of the rare volcanic rock rhyolite which is a variety of lava. It is a distinctive white colour and contains numerous bands that formed as the lava flowed downslope from the volcanic crater. This rock is rather resistant to weathering and erosion and produced the craggy outlines of Clogher Head itself, Minnaunmore Rock just inland, and the Sleeping Giant's head at the northern end of Inishtooskert. Other lava flows are found on Inishvickillane and further west at the tiny Foze Rocks. As well as rhyolites the unstable volcanoes produced thick layers of ash and coarser fragments, and these were deposited into the shallow waters surrounding the islands. The fossilized remains of many marine organisms from the Silurian period can be found in the rocks around Dunquin and Ballyferriter, and these will be the focus of a later article.



**Rhyolite, a pale-coloured volcanic rock. (Photograph by Patrick Wyse Jackson)**

By the end of the Silurian the volcanic activity on the peninsula had

stopped, but it continued elsewhere in Ireland such as in County Waterford and sometime later a series of large granite bodies, formed of additional molten material, were injected into the crust. These now form mountains in Leinster, Galway and Donegal. Today there are no active volcanoes on the Dingle Peninsula or in Ireland. The nearest centres of such explosive geological activity are in Italy, the Canary Islands or Iceland.

The volcanic rocks around Clogher Head are highlighted in a roadside interpretative panel recently erected by Kerry County Council, in a scheme in association with the Heritage Council and the author of this article.

*Patrick Wyse Jackson is a frequent visitor to the Dingle Peninsula and teaches geology at Trinity College, Dublin.*

## GoKerry Benefit Night,

**December 7th 2012 @ 7.00pm**

**Kingdom Greyhound Stadium, Tralee**

As part of their fundraising initiatives GoKerry are organising a Benefit Night at the Dogs in the Kingdom Greyhound Stadium on 7th December, 2012 with doors open at 7.00pm. To be in with a chance to win the prize money, all you have to do is purchase a ticket for €20 which buys you entry for two adults and two children to the track on the night and includes you in the draw to win the €500 up for grabs.

**Tickets are available immediately from the following and will be available in outlets throughout the Dingle Peninsula in the coming weeks:**

**Susan Ní Churnáin, 087-2063504**

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ISSUE / EISIÚINT 88

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