

Monster Graves

Remote sensing and the identification of unmarked graves in Irish burial grounds.

IAI Dublin; John Tierney, Jacinta Kiely & Martha Hannon, Eachtra March 2023 V.1

Monster graves was a phrase coined in Ireland in early 1847 during the Great Famine (An Gorta Mór).

Used for about a decade in political rhetoric the phrase referred to a form of **mass common burial**. Mass common burial is institutional burial in a grave with a large number of unrelated ie. non-family, individuals. Mass common burial caused significant alarm then and still causes public disquiet today.

**“The right to decent burial
disappeared first in cities ...
It fell victim to the process
by which the poor went
from being objects of
charity to being objects of
administration.”**

T Laqueur *The Work of the Dead* pg 325/6

Until the first half of the 19th century there was a twofold approach to burial, family first and parish second, if a family were too poor to bury their dead then the parish did it. The 1838 Poor Relief (Ireland) Act changed all of this. In Prof Thomas Laqueur's words the dead poor went from being objects of charity to being objects of administration.

The development of institutional burial practices is a 19th C innovation which has not sat easy in Ireland or indeed with our close neighbours, particularly in terms of the class inequalities represented, because it was the urban working classes and the rural labouring classes who ended up in those Monster graves.

Over the last 13 years working on the Historic Graves project we have regularly had grave markers and grave hollows/humps of various shapes and sizes pointed out to us as 'Famine' graves. For years we reserved judgement on many of those features but over the last few years we've been more systematic in our recording of these supposedly mid 19th C burial features. This talk touches on our recent use of drone SFM/photogrammetry on a site scale and also the use of LIDAR for the identification of grave features including Monster graves.

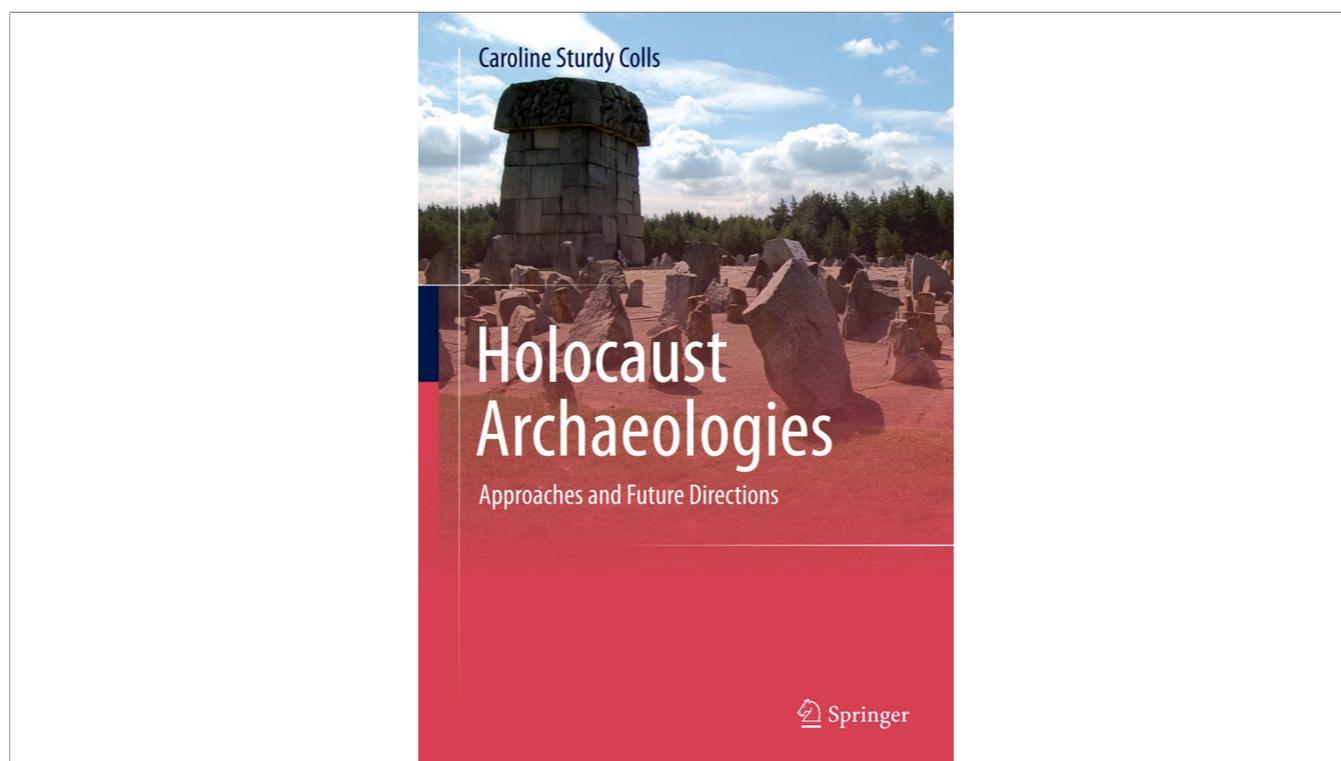
Thirteen years of the Historic Graves project has allowed us to develop an understanding of post-medieval burial in Ireland. And as two historic burial scandals in particular (Tuam & Bessborough) have achieved prominence in a number of political rows relating to adoption, decent burial, church and state, we nowadays find ourselves concentrating more and more on graves and grave structures rather than just mortuary monuments.

We are focussing on methodological questions of how to archaeologically identify and record burial features and structures with the ultimate goal of understanding the burial practices they represent.

The work I am about to run through has been variously funded by the

1. HSE Midlands
2. Bons Secours Sisters (2 months funding 2018/2019 relating to Tuam),
3. an RIA grant testing Lidar & drone surveys (involving collaboration with Dr Paul Naessens and Dr Steve Davis in UCD),
4. the Sisters of the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus & Mary (again the equivalent of 2 months funding for work on Bessborough on a project lead by historian Dr Aoife Bhreatnach)
5. The Carr's Hill work I mention below is being done under a CMF grant for the HSE South.
6. and an EU Horizon 2020 project we are currently working on called Incultum.

This talk and a planned talk to the EAA in Belfast next Summer and associated publications are all part of the Incultum project.



This work is designed to use archaeological principles in order to work out what is happening with 19th and 20th C institutional burial practices in Ireland; using tried and tested methodologies such as Prof C Sturdy Colls' Holocaust Archaeologies.

Rules and Regulations

BY THE
LOCAL GOVERNMENT BOARD FOR IRELAND
FOR THE
Regulation of Burial Grounds

WHEREAS, by "The Public Health (Ireland) Act, 1878," it is amongst other things enacted, that it shall be lawful for the Local Government Board for Ireland, from time to time, to make such rules and regulations, in relation to the Burial Grounds and places of reception of bodies previous to interment which may be provided under the said Act, as may seem proper for the protection of the public health and the maintenance of public decency, and for the proper registry of interments; and to provide for the imposition and recovery of penalties, not exceeding Ten Pounds for each offence, for the breach or non-observance of such regulations.

Now, We, the Local Government Board for Ireland, in pursuance of the powers vested in us by the said Act, or otherwise howsoever, do hereby make the following Rules and Regulations, which shall apply to all Burial Grounds provided, or which may be provided, under the said Act, that is to say

I. Every Burial Ground shall be kept sufficiently fenced; and, if necessary, shall be underdrained to such a depth as will prevent water remaining in any grave or vault.

II. The area to be used for graves shall be divided into grave-spaces, to be designated by convenient marks, so that the position of each grave-space may be readily ascertained. A corresponding map or maps of the Burial Ground shall be constantly kept in some convenient place, at or near the Burial Ground, and shall be open to the inspection of all persons. On such map or maps every grave-space shall be shown with its distinctive mark inscribed thereon.

III. The grave-spaces for the burial of persons above twelve years of age shall be at least nine feet long by four feet wide; and those for the burial of children under twelve years of age shall be at least six feet long by three feet wide.

IV. Each grave, when opened for the first interment therein, shall be sunk to the perpendicular depth of eight feet at the least; and every person interring a body in a grave not sunk to such depth shall be liable to a penalty of Two Pounds sterling.

V. (i) Subject to (ii), no interment shall be permitted in any burial ground, nor shall any dead body be admitted into any place of reception of bodies previous to interment, unless the body be enclosed in a coffin of wood or

some other sufficiently strong material. Any person presenting a body for interment in violation of this rule shall be liable to a penalty of £125.

(ii) Uncoffined burials may be permitted, unless a direction has been issued not to do so by the relevant sanitary authority or medical officer of health of the sanitary authority, in an area of a burial ground designated exclusively for that purpose. Where an uncoffined burial is permitted, any reference in these provisions to a coffin includes a reference to the wrappings of the uncoffined body."

VI. One body only shall be buried in a grave at one time, unless the bodies be those of members of the same family; and every person interring any body in violation of this Rule shall be liable to a penalty of Two Pounds sterling.

VII. No unwalled grave shall be re-opened within fourteen years after the burial of a person above twelve years of age, or within eight years after the burial of a child under twelve years of age, unless to bury another member of the same family, in which case a layer of earth not less than one foot in depth shall be left undisturbed above the previously buried coffin; but if on re-opening any grave the soil be found to be offensive, such soil shall not be disturbed. In no case shall human remains be removed from the grave. Every person acting in violation of this Rule shall be liable to a penalty of Two Pounds sterling.

VIII. No coffin shall be buried in any unwall'd grave unless the lid or upper surface thereof shall be sunk to a depth of at least four feet below the ordinary level of the ground, and every person acting in violation of this Rule shall be liable to a penalty of Two Pounds sterling.

IX. Any person unlawfully preventing or attempting to prevent the interment of any person in a Burial Ground, or unlawfully preventing or disturbing the celebration of funeral rites over any person, shall be liable to a penalty of Five Pounds sterling.

X. No grave, in which any body has been interred shall be opened, save for the purpose of interment or the erection of a tombstone or headstone, without the written order of a Coroner or Peace Commissioner of the County, to be previously produced to and left with the Registrar. Any person violating this Rule shall be liable to a penalty of Ten Pounds sterling.

XI. No body, nor the remains of any body shall be removed from one place of burial to another, or exhumed (except under the conditions set forth in Rule X.) without a Licence from Local Government Board, and with such precautions as such Board may prescribe as the condition of such Licence; and any person who shall remove or assist in removing any such body or remains contrary to this Rule or who shall neglect to observe the precautions prescribed as the conditions of the Licence for removal, shall be liable to a penalty of Ten Pounds sterling.

XII. A proper Registry Book (hereinafter referred to as the Registry Book), made of parchment, or vellum, with strong binding and suitable printed pagings, and ruled in columns with proper printed headings, shall be constantly kept in some convenient place at or near the Burial Ground, and shall be open for inspection at all reasonable

Defining a grave

- walled and unwalled graves
- family and non family usage
- coffined and uncoffined burials
- adult and sub-adult burials
- interval of use
- grave spaces = grave shaft + banks

Before jumping into our archaeological approach to the study of institutional burial features we need to consider some terminology and definitions.

When you parse the relevant public health & burial legislation you end up with a series of binaries

walled and unwalled graves

family and non family usage

coffined and uncoffined burials

adult and sub-adult burials

intervals of use based on the above

a grave space comprising a grave shaft with structural head and side banks - what we archaeologists call a baulk gravediggers call a bank.

That is, parsing the burial legislation helps us define what 19th C & 20th C graves were and also how legislation might have influenced burial practices and associated structures.

Cork Examiner May 1847
Archbishop of Tuam
Mayo Man John McHale

Irish Examiner 1841-current, 21.05.1847, page 4

St. Jarlath's, Tuam,
Feast of St. Antoninus, 1847.

MY LORD—There are, it has been remarked, some prophecies which achieve their own accomplishment. Such, I trust, will not be the result of the prediction ascribed to ministers, that two millions of the Irish people are to fall victims to the present famine. So awful an amount of mortality no one could be so heartless, or unfeeling, as not to deplore. Yet the melancholy records of every week render not at all improbable the truth of the calculation. Funerals retain no longer their former solemnity—the churchyards are not the exclusive repositories of the dead; they are now buried—in unconsecrated fields and ditches, and monster graves are seen daily opened, not for tens or twenties, but for a whole hecatomb of victims! The prediction, then, is in the progress of being verified: and, without arraigning ministers of any such intention, no measure could be more effectual than those they have adopted in securing its fulfilment. Experiments of every kind are multiplied at an enormous expence in this emergency—all but the simple, obvious, and effectual one of importing food for the people; which half the extravagant outlay on foolish projects would have purchased.

www.irishnewsarchive.com

Back to Tuam to see the phrase Monster Graves in use in early 1847. (read the highlight)

The reference to Monster graves mirrors contemporary newspaper accounts of Monster Meetings for Daniel O'Connell and Co. In this case Archbishop John McHale talks of funerals and monster graves as part of his rhetoric. The insult of the graves is obvious but his main point, to my eye, is that up to 2 million will die if the crisis is mishandled.

Cork Examiner 21 Apr 1847

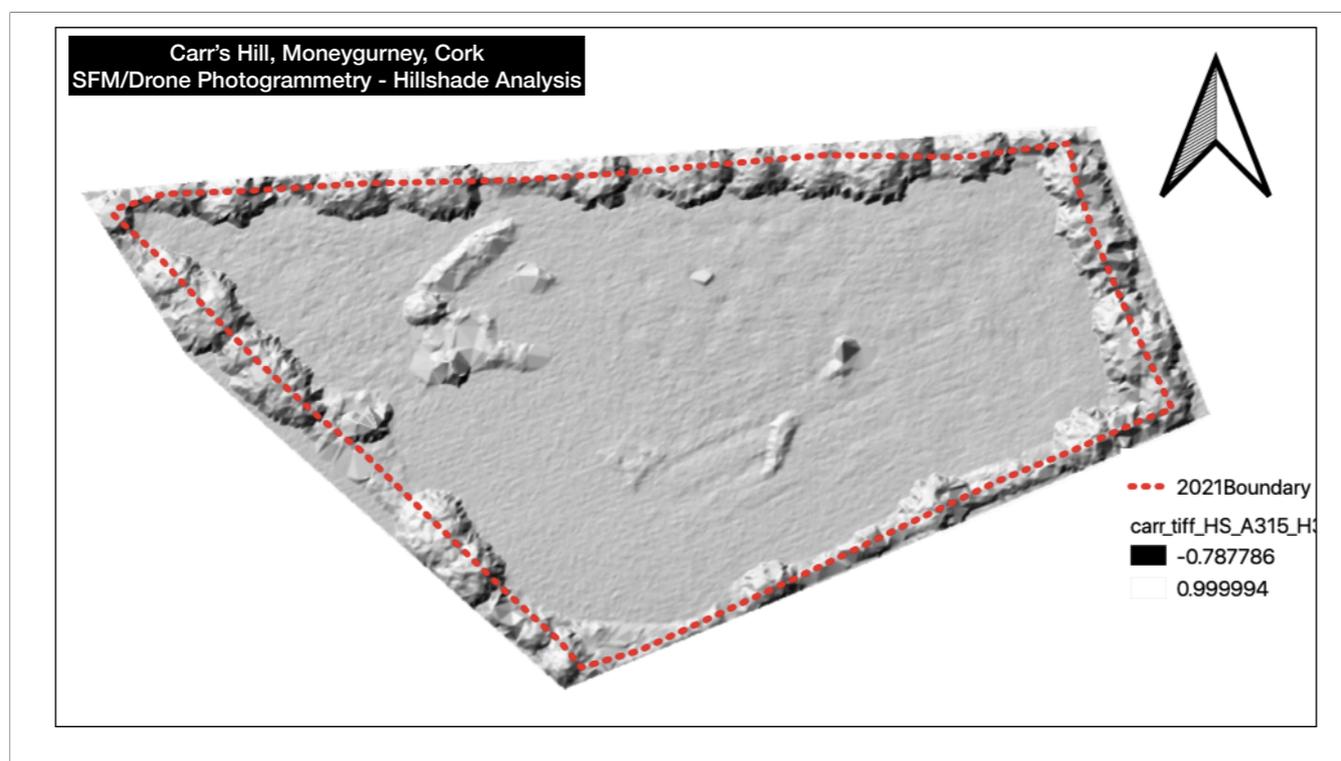
A MONSTER GRAVE.

SOME idea of the dreadful mortality now prevalent throughout our city, may be formed from the fact that on yesterday, there were no fewer than *thirty-six* bodies interred in one grave, or pit, in the pauper department of the cemetery of the Very Rev. Mr. Mathew. These deaths are entirely independent of the numbers occurring in the Workhouse. It has been ascertained that in the last fortnight there were disposed of no less than 300 coffins in *Barrack-street*, the greater number of which were required for the parish of St. Nicholas.

www.irishnewsarchive.com

This is the earliest reference we can find to the phrase in Ireland (April 1847), it recounts a Monster Grave in St Josephs cemetery on the southside of Cork city. 'no fewer than 36 bodies interred in one grave, or pit'.

And when Fr Matthew said his paupers section was filled and the city parishioners refused burial of the Workhouse dead, George Carr, then an officer of the Cork Union workhouse won a tender for burial of the workhouse dead in a new cemetery - on the road between Cork and Carrigaline. The road is now called Carr's Hill while the cemetery he opened is pivotal in our present understanding of 19th and 20th C institutional burial.

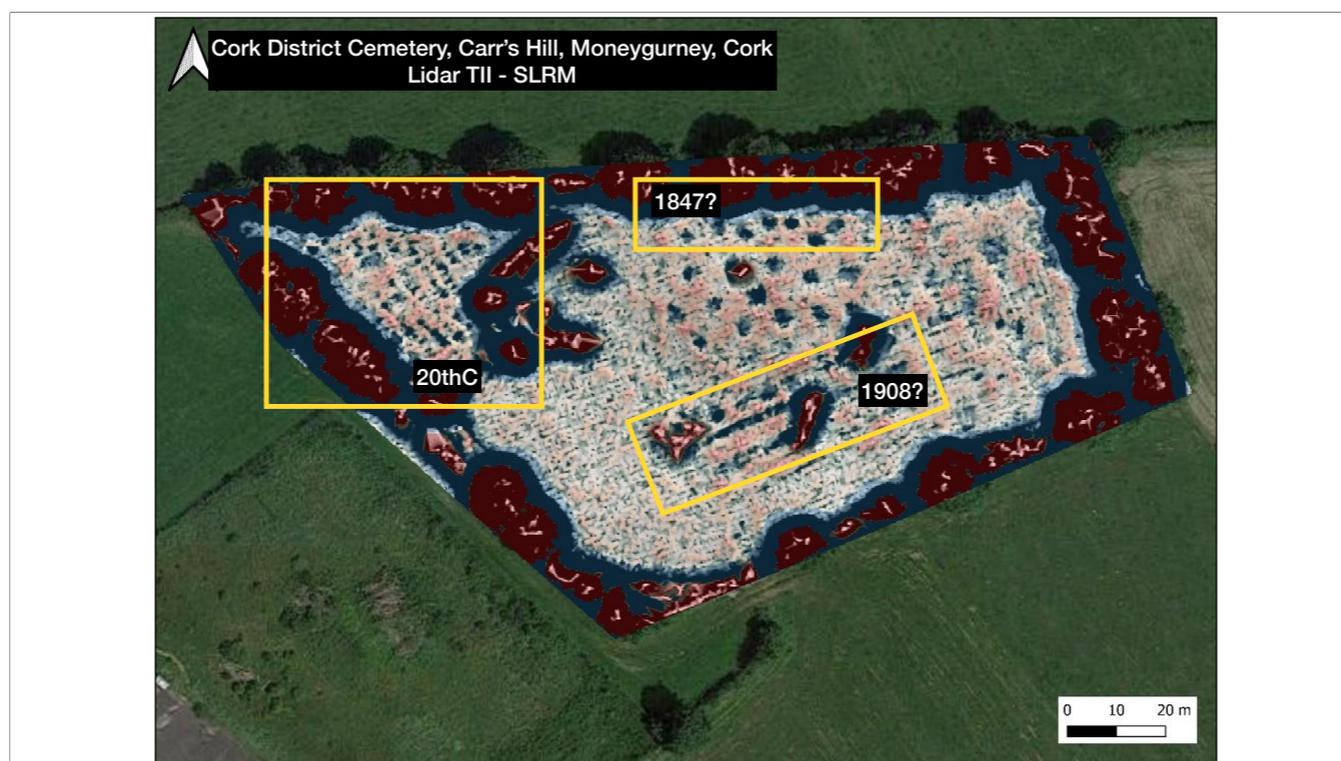


Prior to lockdown we were trying to identify unmarked graves by field walking but dense vegetation allied with the scale of the sites (the big sites measure a hectare and over in area) defeated us more often than not, hence during lockdown we turned to drone survey and lidar.

This survey shows the Cork District Cemetery (now measuring 1.2 ha) in Carr's Hill, Moneygurney, which George Carr opened as the Cork Union Workhouse cemetery in 1847 with the use of mass common burial graves.

This is what a beginner (JT) can do with drone photogrammetry - using a geotiff from Structure from Motion/photogrammetrical drone survey produced by Paul Naessens in Pix4D. Pulled into QGIS and we make ground models by running through RVT. And when you squint your eyes what can you see? eg. see the group of dimples in top centre of the site and the long trenches below them? Even with dense vegetation cover sunken/cut features are discernible from drone surveys. And in a burial ground such features are likely to be graves.

The HSE have a very light touch management approach to this site and as a result it could be one of the best preserved institutional burial grounds in the country. But vegetation is waist high in parts of the site making it difficult to get a sense of spatial organisation without the drone survey.

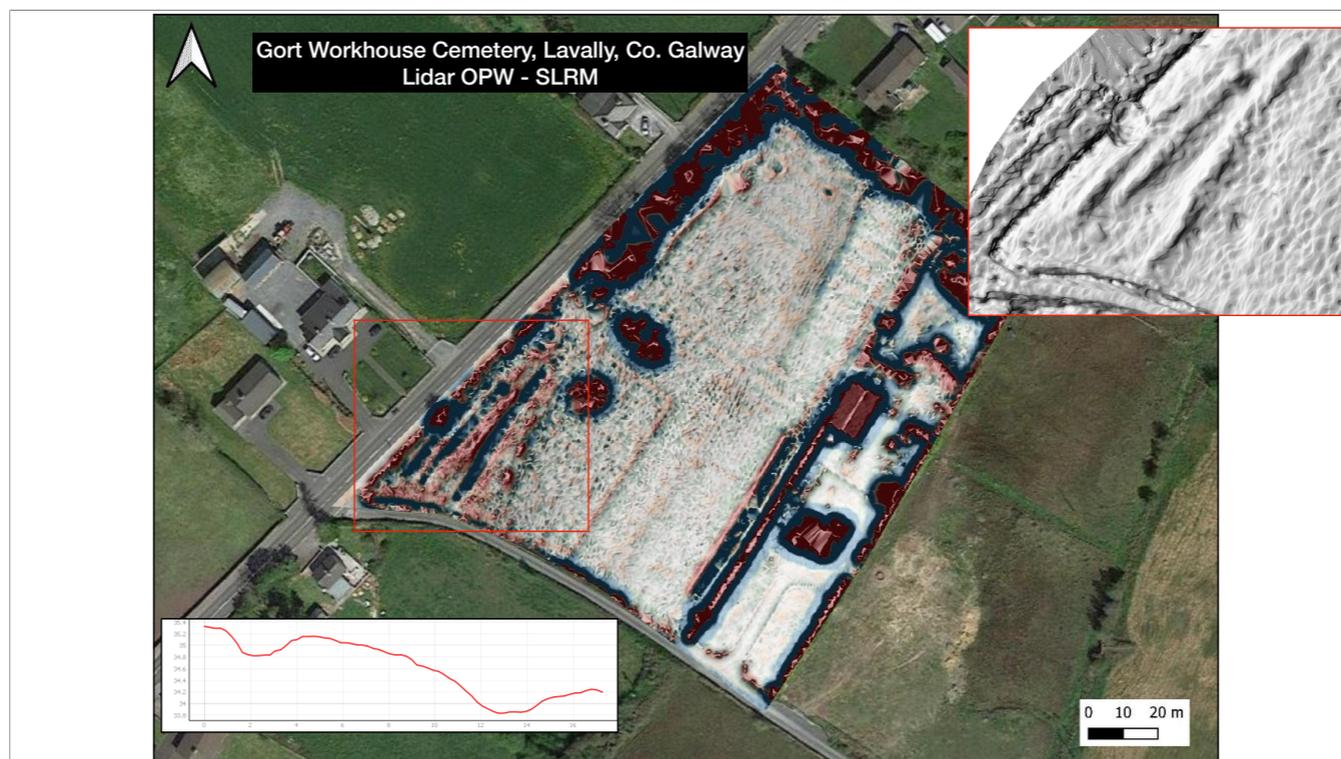


This then is some of Dr Steve Davis's LIDAR work in Carr's Hill - similar to what I did in QGIS only better. Steve's digital wizardry picks up hollows and upcast between. Based on this Lidar model we identified three different types of potential graves in this CMF funded survey.

1. rows of narrow graves in the 20th C cemetery extension - this is where many of the unclaimed dead of the city were buried including some of the Bessborough dead. This is the first time these graves have been recognised and mapped. We do not know if these are common graves or separate.
2. long common graves which we initially assumed were Famine era but for which Dr. Aoife Bhreatnach's research indicates a 1908 date.
3. Rows of subcircular/rectangular common graves which appear to be Great Famine related - George Carr's notorious Famine pit graves, subject at the time to a 'court case' in 1847.



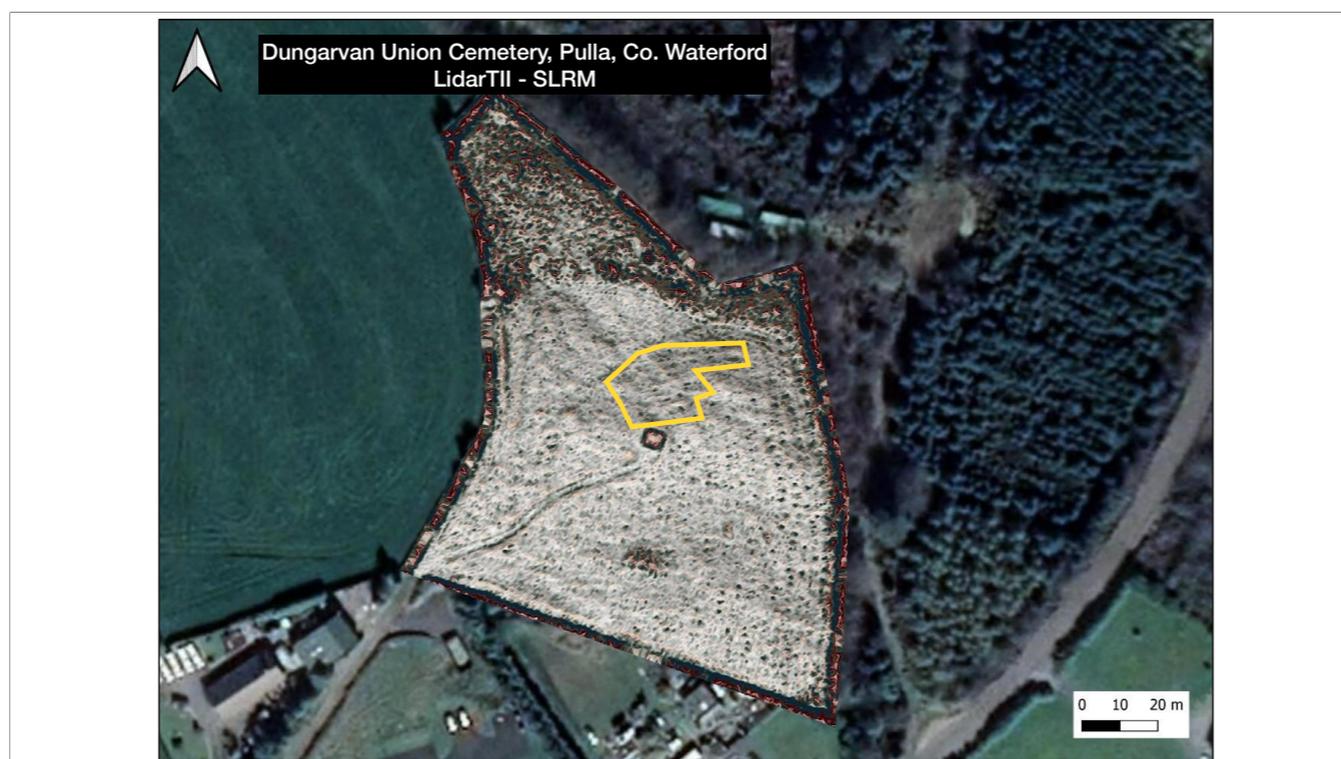
In QGIS, using map regression we plot temporal changes as well as making ground models. In Carr's Hill we propose the Famine graves started in this smaller field (based on 1847 Petty Sessions case measurements) and expanded west and south thereafter.



And here are some other examples we have examined.

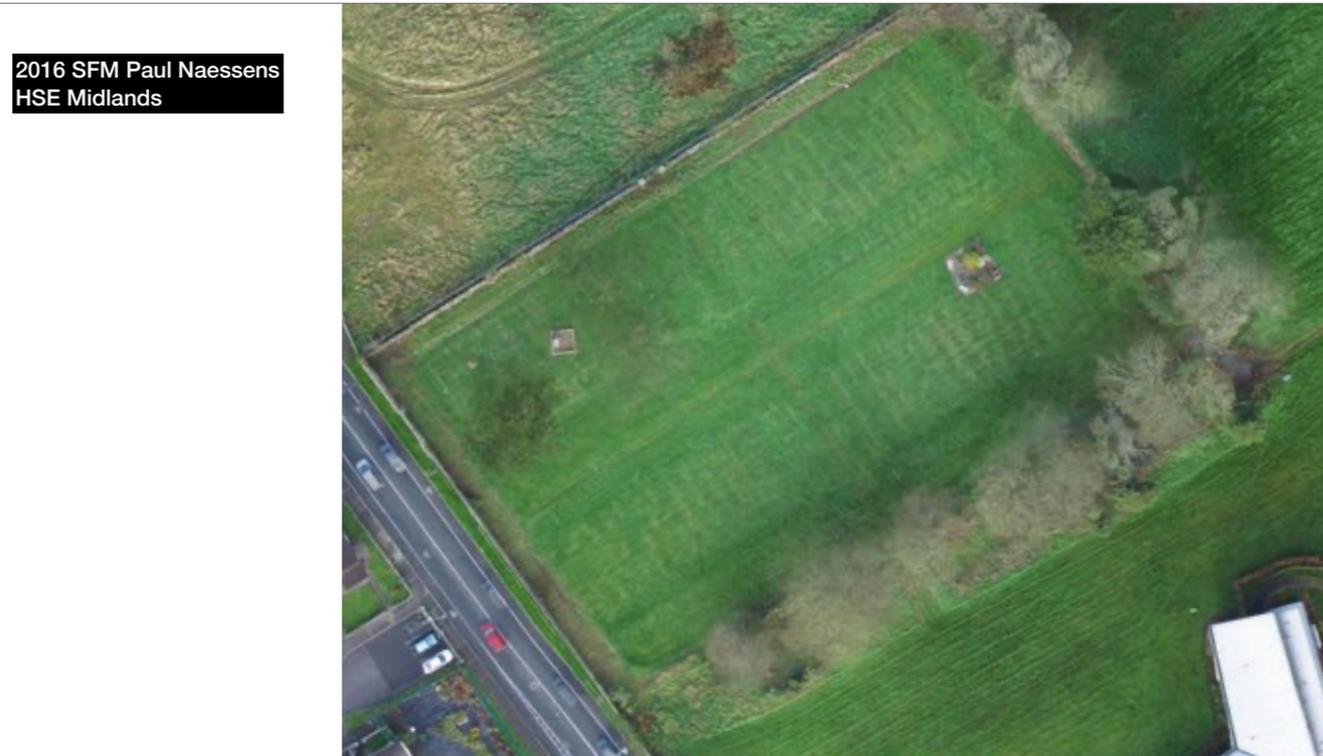
If you've driven the back road from Gort to Loughrea you'll have passed Gort workhouse cemetery. Dr Christy Cunniffe suggested we inspect these long trenches (dark blue colour) measuring between 30-37 m in length x 3-4 m max width which are locally identified as Famine graves.

Situated inside the Workhouse cemetery boundary these trenches are definite top contenders for long common graves although dating needs to be determined.



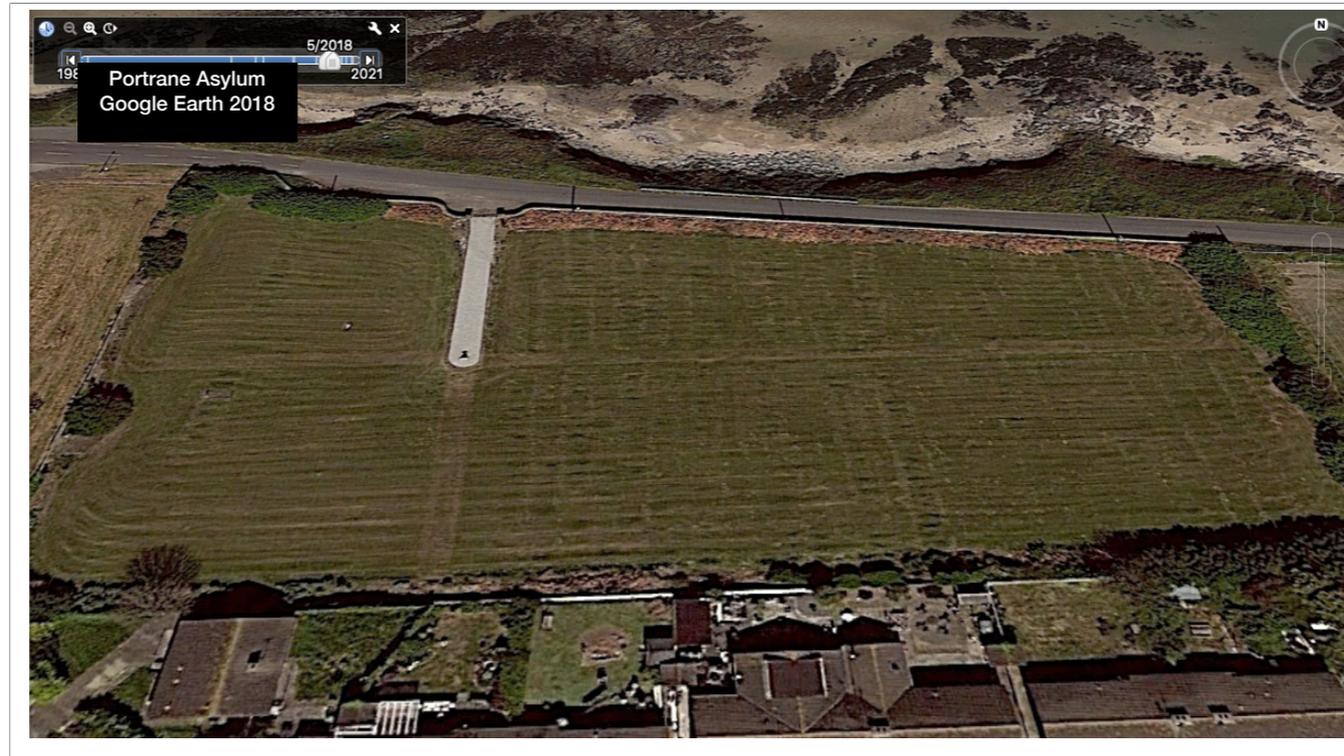
And on the N25 between Youghal and Dungarvan in Gaeltacht na Rinne you'll find Reilig an tSleibhe - the Dungarvan workhouse cemetery. This site is covered by waist high vegetation of grasses, gorse and broom.

We are tentatively identifying potential Famine graves at the N of the site but we have identified rows of late 19th and 20th century County Home narrow graves covering the majority of the 2.3 acre site. Unmarked graves so overgrown and present in such quantities that we failed to understand the site until Steve sent us this Lidar model. What we thought was rough mountainy ground turned out to be a burial landscape. The Lidar shows N-S aligned rows of graves, the graves being the darker dimples.



This 2016 drone survey shows the 20th C asylum cemetery in St Loman's in Mullingar. Rows of grave hollows (darker patches), aligned NW-SE become apparent with banks of undug ground (lighter lines) between them. When you visit this site the grave hollows are often filled with thicker grass growth or wads of fallen leaves. You quickly realise the whole site is filled with rows of graves. All graves here were coffined single use, and quite shallow being dug by patients of the Mental Hospital.

This is a post-1906 institutional burial system avoiding common burial.



Here we see Portrane asylum/mental hospital cemetery - filter out the grass cutting stripes (from Google Earth Pro) and you can once more identify rows of grave hollows(N-S aligned) (darker patches) with undug banks (lighter lines) between. The grave spaces combining banks and grave shafts cover the whole site.



And back in Galway - we are told these are the Ballinasloe Mental Hospital common graves from the mid 20th. Up to ten rows of unwalled narrow graves reportedly filled with multiple coffins, non-family, and used on the fill-up principle ie. left open until filled.

It is apparent institutions were weighing up the practice of common v individual burial in the late 1800s and early 1900s and some asylums and Mental hospitals were selecting single, separate burial. The amount of land available for cemetery use seems to be a factor in this decision making process.

We were going to draw a 3D subsurface model of these graves - intending to demonstrate what rows of earth-cut grave shafts & banks would look like but then we found Dawn Gooney's photographs of the grave cuts from Grangegorman.



Two rows of earth-cut graves with side and head banks in Richmond Penitentiary cemetery in Grangegorman, Dublin.

These are shallow compared to what we are told about the depth of the Ballinasloe graves, for example, but the cut and bank pattern tallies with the legislative description of larger grave spaces within which grave shafts are cut.

So from these various earth-cut grave examples what patterns are emerging?

We are seeing institutional implementation of both common and individual graves.

Institutional burial tends to be highly spatially organised.

We don't just bury our people in graves, on both a parish and an institutional level, we bury our people in rows of graves.

Which results in rows of grave shafts.

Also institutional cemeteries are often multi-phase and contain a range of grave types. St Loman's certainly only has narrow separate graves. Carr's Hill starts with pit graves and we do not know when the long graves start but they were definitely still in use in 1908. Then narrow graves were used for approx the next 50 years, although we still do not know if they were separate or common graves.



But what about walled graves. There's lots done on walled and pauper burials on a parish level in Britain (Mytum and Fitten, Rugg, Laqueur, Tarlow and Hurren) but there is v little done in Ireland while communal and institutional walled burial structures are hardly studied at all in Ireland, Britain or Europe.

Because walled burial vaults are often still in use there are difficulties in recording them. They are still sacred space for associated families/communities and as a consequence we have shied away from recording them archaeologically in the Historic Graves project. But now I think as part of a structured project with clear objectives we can expand into systematic records (with permission).

Here we show a communal walled grave. It is a vault, built in low ground, for men and women of the Augustinian order in Forthill graveyard in Galway city. It is taking us a while to get our heads around this structure but it is a front loaded vault - we haven't looked inside but it is concrete capped and built against the back and side walls of the Forthill boundary wall and mortuary chapel. Front loading vaults are notoriously difficult to use but they are nevertheless found all over the country.

This structure and similar structures need examination and recording.

As a walled communal grave it allows multiple, irregular interval burials fitting within the legislative structure we mentioned earlier. Walled burial structures are particularly important on a communal or institutional level where unrelated (ie. non-family) individuals can die in close intervals to one another.



In conclusion.

SFM and Lidar surveys have become an important part of the field archaeologists toolkit. They are now allowing us to investigate changes in 19th and 20th century burial practices, particularly the development of common graves. They allow us to contextualise the Monster graves of the Great Famine as the first of the institutional mass common graves.