

Northern Ireland

COUNTY LONDONDERRY

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Avish – *clachans and booleys* M Pm

In 1999 the National Trust acquired Avish (Co Londonderry), an area of rough upland grazing on Eagle Hill overlooking Magilligan Point, Lough Fough and the hills of eastern Donegal. The extraordinary geology and drift morphology of the area has been overlaid by settlements and field patterns, all of which add to the region's historic environment. It has been suggested that in the late medieval to early modern period Avish was used as a *booley* or *buaille* – a summer pasture for low lying communities (commonly known as *shielings* in England). This certainly has some resonance – even on a modern map there is evidence for track ways leading up onto the high ground – some of these may be modern, relating to the forestry, but others may have origins as drove roads. There is at least one relict drove road on the Trust property. Whether or not the booley relates to the transshipment of animals between the Isles and the north coast is uncertain.

View over Avish to Lough Foyle

R. WOODSIDE/NATIONAL TRUST



Remains of the ruined Clachan and field system at Avish

R. WOODSIDE/NATIONAL TRUST

To the north-east of the viewpoint lies the remains of a very small *clachan*, a nucleated group of farmhouses surrounded by an *infield* of unenclosed cultivation to the north, with an *outfield* of rough grazing to the south, further up the hill. The date of the clachan is likely to be late eighteenth or early nineteenth century, but is thought to have been occupied well into the twentieth century. The field system is commonly known as *rundale*, whereby the infield was permanently cultivated, usually for oats rather than potatoes in the north, the fields being cut by hand in what are known as *lazy beds*, which were well suited to wet, marginal land. They are frequently orientated up and down rather than across the slope, which might appear more logical, but actually accentuates soil loss, making it harder to cultivate. Not all the rigs at Avish are historic; some may relate to modern drainage. The outfield was occasionally used for cultivation, but mostly for grazing animals, and was divided from the infield by a substantial wall, now evident as a long, linear earthwork bank. The inhabitants made the most of their local resources; manure, sand, peat, sods and seaweed, as well as stone, timber, underwood, heather and bracken if available.

Clachans are common throughout northern and western Ireland and cultivation rigs are just about ubiquitous on marginal land. What makes the clachan at Avish of interest and importance is not so much its date or archaeological significance, but what it lends to the history and

character of that place. Understanding that significance will help inform its management and conservation. The acquisition of Avish means the National Trust ownership reflects the diversity of Northern Ireland's historic environment, from the great houses and pleasure grounds of the very rich, right down to the ruined hovels and allotment plots of the very poor. It is proposed that a full historic landscape survey be undertaken in the near future.