



# The Elk Antlers

**How local brothers, a palaeontologist and a nobel laureate tell the story of our antlers.**

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# The Story

Discovered on the shores of Lough Beg, our priceless Antlers tell a story of local brothers, ancient bogland, hyenas and famous poets.

- Discovered in 1953 by the McGrogan Family
- *Megaceros Giganteus*
- Priceless artifact
- This species has been selected by the Long Now Foundation as a candidate for de-extinction



View these incredible antlers now in the foyer of The Elk Complex.



## 3,000BC

Five thousand years ago in Ireland the great elk wandered through the forests and mountains, it was a land of sweeping mists, gentle rain and soft sunlight, a land of pagan carving and mysterious rituals, a land where the soothing lilt of the harp floated over the cool, clear crystal lakes and rivers. It was the time of Cu Chulainn and Queen Maeve and the Red Branch Knights. This was indeed the celtic twilight.





# Hugh, John, Frank and Bob

## The Irish Naturalists' Journal

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### GIANT DEER FROM LOUGH BEG

BY R. J. G. SAVAGE

#### LOCALITY AND HORIZON

During May, 1953, a very complete skull and antlers of *Megaceros giganteus*, the Irish Giant Deer, was found in glacial sands at Creagh, Toomebridge, near the shores of Lough Beg, Co. Londonderry, on the lands of Mr Hugh McGrogan. The fluvioglacial sands formed around Glacial Lake Neagh are at present worked by means of pumping operations, hence the site is permanently flooded and as yet it has not been possible to obtain a bore of the section. The skull is reported to have been found in sand at a depth of about eight feet. Until this find no fossils had been reported from the locality, though bones associated with the skull indicate that at least two and probably three individuals are represented.

#### DISSEMINATION

The fossils are very well preserved, there is no mineralization of the bone, and the specimens are iron-stained to an uneven muddy-brown colour. The bones and antlers are strong and robust, though the long bones tend to flake readily, a feature common to fossils from Pleistocene and unconsolidated sediments. In the process of fossilization bones, buried in an aquifer, quickly lose their organic soft parts due to bacteria and other reducing agents, leaving only the inorganic salts (mainly calcium phosphate), which become stained with ferric hydroxide. Sedimentation may later change and the presence above of a clay or peat layer would prevent water seep to the sands below. The bones then dry out and shrink, and without any mineralization to bind them, the outer layers tend to flake off. These flakes are fragments of the circumferential lamellae, the tissue between the periosteum and the zone of the Haversian canal systems. The periosteum does not fossilize, and if the outer circumferential lamellae are destroyed, detailed study of the anatomy, myology (and pathology, if any) is impossible. The skull is very fresh though much of the antlers are flaked.

#### ASSOCIATED MATERIAL AND ITS INTERPRETATION

Associated with the main find of the skull and antlers, the workmen found bones of *Megaceros*, but regrettably some of these were rejected before their significance was appreciated. Others were saved, and donated by Mr McGrogan to Queen's University, Belfast, where they are now in the Geology Museum.

Extract from the 1953 Irish Naturalists' Journal detailing the incredible discovery and their findings.

Hanging proudly in the foyer of The Elk Complex, Toomebridge, the priceless antlers were discovered in the sandy banks of Lough Beg by John, Hugh and Frank Mc Grogan. Remarkably well preserved, these bones tell an incredible story. Our great Irish Elk met its fate at the hands of early man, a brown bear or a spotted hyena.

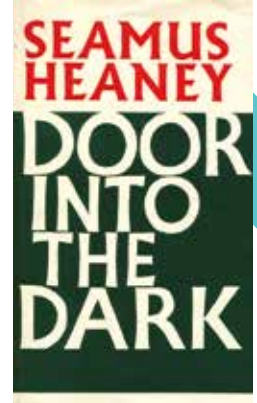


Dr R J G Savage (1927 - 1998)

The discovery of the antlers and Dr R J G Savages' work helped place the Irish Elk in Ireland 10,000 years after it was thought to have died out.

The Mc Grogan Family upon discovery of the antlers notified Queens University. Dr Bob Savage a palaeontologist from Belfast was dispatched to examine the magnificent fossils. Savage, a lecturer at Queen's University in 1952, worked with geologist J. K. Charlesworth. In 1954, Savage was then hired as a lecturer and curator of the Geological Museum at the University of Bristol, until his retirement in 1992. He was one of a vanishing breed: a quintessential scientist, a teacher, a naturalist and a gentleman.

# The Laureate



“Bogland” is a poem that Seamus Heaney (1939-2013) included in his second collection, entitled “Door into the Dark” (published 1969). Verse 3 refers to the discovery of our Antlers. The discovery of these fossils was a huge talking point in the parish of Anahorish where Seamus grew up.

## The Poem

We have no prairies  
To slice a big sun at evening  
Everywhere the eye concedes to  
Encroaching horizon,

Is wooed into the cyclops' eye  
Of a tarn. Our unfenced country  
Is bog that keeps crusting  
Between the sights of the sun.

They've taken the skeleton  
Of the Great Irish Elk  
Out of the peat, set it up  
An astounding crate full of air.

Butter sunk under  
More than a hundred years  
Was recovered salty and white.  
The ground itself is kind, black butter

Melting and opening underfoot,  
Missing its last definition  
By millions of years.  
They'll never dig coal here,

Only the waterlogged trunks  
Of great firs, soft as pulp.  
Our pioneers keep striking  
Inwards and downwards,

Every layer they strip  
Seems camped on before.  
The bogholes might be Atlantic seepage.  
The wet centre is bottomless.

## The Discussion

The bog is the preserver of many things, including the remote past. A symbol of this is given in the third stanza, in the shape of the “Great Irish Elk”, a skeleton of which has been dug up and is now on display in The Elk as “An astounding crate full of air”. There is therefore a question mark over this find; it looks magnificent (indeed, the antlers of *Megaloceros giganteus* had a span of up to nine feet), but it contains nothing of importance. Likewise, what other aspects of Ireland’s past have no real meaning in the present, other than what might be imagined?

**Seamus Heaney**  
1939-2013

