

Ancient Sites & Buildings.

Vol 2, Site 7

Leighlinbridge Area

Ballyknockan

Ballyknockan (*báile an Chocáin*) is a townland immediately south of Leighlinbridge. The most famous landmark here is the motte located on the grounds of Burgage Stud which is accessible to the public only with permission from the landowner. The site is the largest defensive mound of its type in Ireland. The mound was originally hewed from the surrounding high ground as a religious and/or inauguration site for kings or local chieftains in pre-Christian times, hence the name *Ṫinn Rígh*. The site takes advantage of the confluence of the rivers Madlin and Barrow at the south and east sides. The land at river level is low marshy and subject to flooding to the South and East.

No trace of permanent occupation was found for the centuries before the Normans, who converted the mound into a fortress in the 12th century.

Our survey therefore concentrates on the evidence for Norman settlement at the site between the 12th and 14th centuries.

The Normans in common with other conquerors then and now made it their first priority to establish a chain of bridge-heads in newly conquered territory. The bridgehead took the form of a large earthen mound surrounded by a ditch or fosse, topped with a timber palisade with one or more towers. Mottes were relatively cheap to build using unskilled labour and often availed of existing topographical features. A bailey was often added later which took the form of a strongly fenced area adjoining the motte. Here were located the living quarters for the garrison their animals and later their families. In addition to being a fortified position the motte housed the lord of the manor.

The Archaeological Inventory lists eight examples, in this county, many of which were located near an existing church. Listed are Ballyknockan (659), Castlegrace (660), Castlemore (661), Dunleckney (662), St Mullins (663), Knockroe (664), Minvaud Upper (665) and Tullowbeg (666). The church in this instance existed a short distance away in Ballyknockan Graveyard ie the Augustinian ²Priory of St Stephen which also included a leper hospital (*Teach na Labhair*).

Having consolidated their position the conquerors in many cases proceeded to build a stone castle or tower-house nearby. ¹For example at Ballyknockan "The White Castle" in 1428 AD (OPW ref 724) at Leighlinbridge "The Black Castle" in 1320 (ref 712), elsewhere castles at Dunleckney (ref 732), Tullow (ref 769), Castlegrace (ref 735) and Rathvilly (ref 704)

Our survey revealed that Ballyknockan Motte had at one time a bailey attached on the West side. The bailey was connected to the motte by a wooden bridge and steps which led upward to the gate of the stockade atop the motte.

659 BALLYKNOCKAN (Idrone West By.)

OS 16:1:1 (61,553) 'Dinn Righ or Ballyknockan Moat' OD 100-200 26889,16460

Motte Very large steep-sided flat-topped mound (H above fosse base at N c. 10m; summit Diam 38-40m) surrounded by large deep fosse (base W c. 3.5m) with large external bank except at W (H above base at N 5.7m; at E 3.3m; at S 1.2m). Situated at S end of gravel ridge and junction of two rivers to take maximum advantage of natural topography. Gaps in the bank at N and S probably modern. According to Giraldus Cambrensis, constructed in twelfth century (OKR 1985, 187-8). Price mentions discovery of skulls outside fosse and bank at N (Notebook 28, 1966, 26-9).

16:3

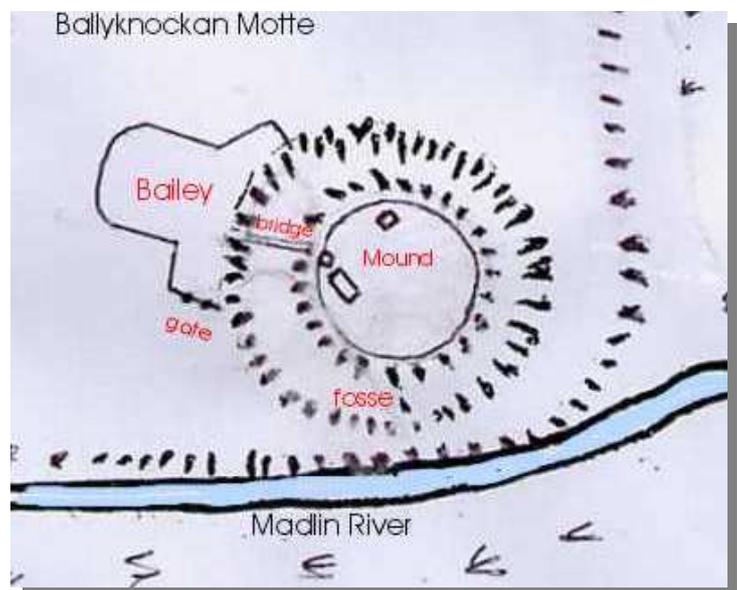
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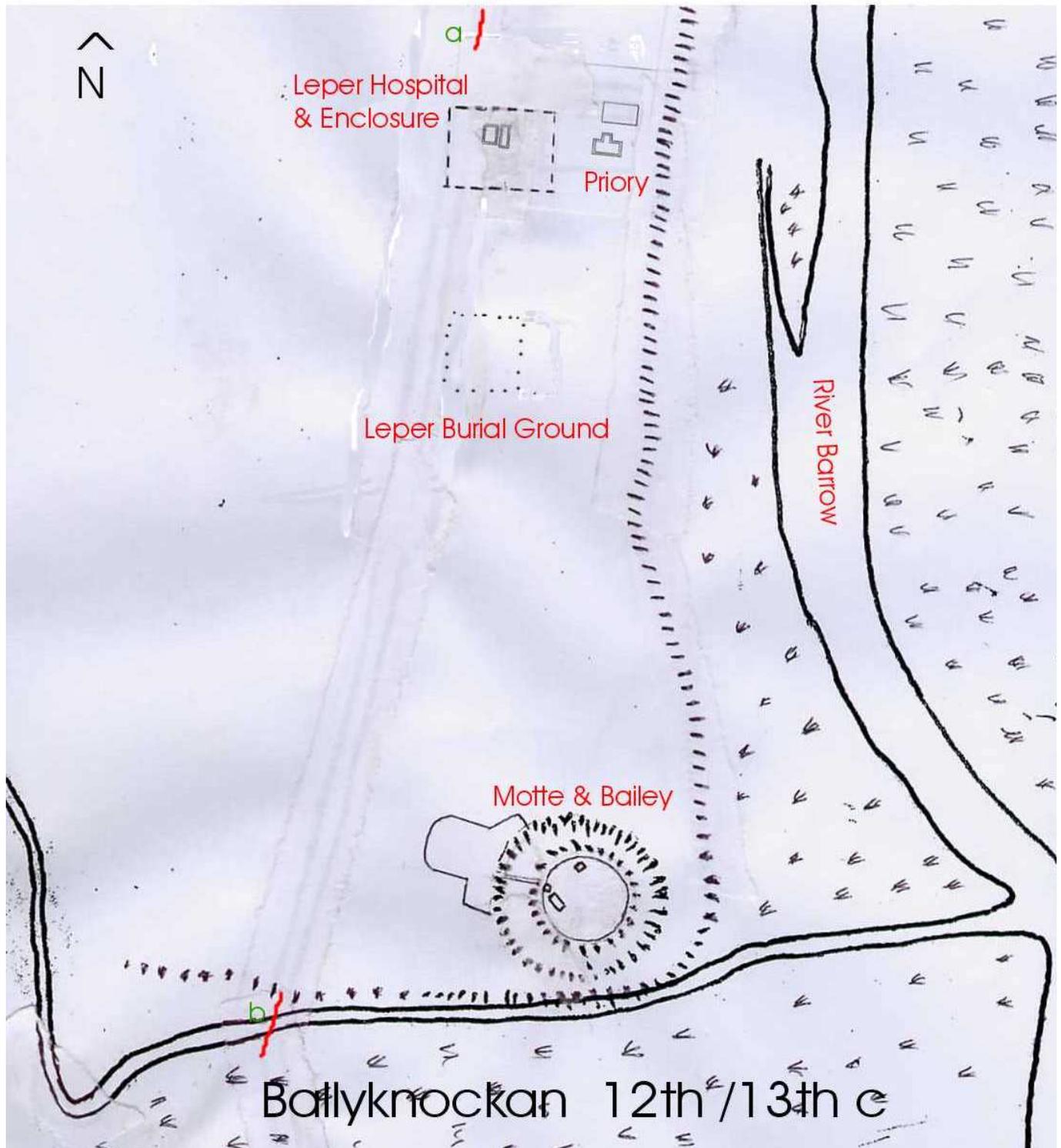
Extract from the Archaeological Inventory of Co Carlow.

The above mentioned ³Giraldus Cambrensis (Gerald of Wales) who had much to say about Ireland and our strange ways was a Norman clergyman who though offered the bishopric of Leighlin declined the position

The top was mainly flat and surrounded by a timber stockade about 2 m high. In this area were two timber buildings. The larger building nearest the gate was 22' x 12' (6.7m x 3.7m), the small building further away was 10' x 7' (3 x 2m). To the left of the gate was a tower 6' x 6' (1.8m x 1.8m) with a total height of 12' (3.7m).

An impenetrable jungle of briars and nettles makes an accurate examination of this area difficult at present.





NB; The route of modern road leading from the by-pass to Leighlin village is between 'b' and 'a' on the sitemap above. Letter 'b' is the site of a modern bridge spanning the Madlin River.

The Augustinian Priory of St Stephen

There are several references in the mediaeval records to a priory at Ballyknockan.

Gwynn & Hancock in an entry under Leighlin state that;
In 1432 the priory of ST Stephen at Leighlin had been derelict for forty years and with the pope's approval it was appropriated to the chapter of the cathedral

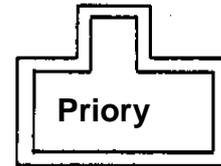
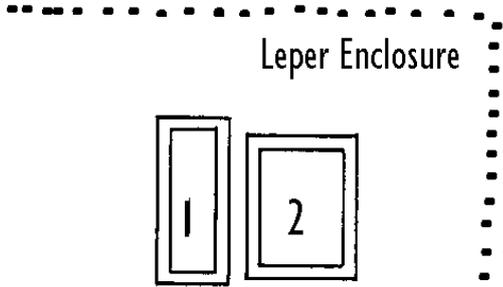
Prof Kenny also refers to a priory here and also a leper hospice in a footnote to his Carloviana Article.

During a survey of the site in late 04 –early 05 the authors located the buildings referred to .
 A total of four stone buildings were located ie
 1. Priory church. 2. Living quarters.
 3. Male dormitory 4. Female dormitory.

Whereas the priory was in Ballknockan Graveyard, the leper compound was outside. See Site Map above

Ballyknockan Augustinian Priory & Leper Hospital 1300 AD

Living quarters



Building Num 1; Males. Dimensions 29' x 9' (8.8m x 2.7m) .
 Windows (unglazed) ; 2 E, 2 W, (tops @ eves level), 1 high up
 in gable at S end. Door @ N end.

Building Num 2; Females. Dimensions. 23' x 17' (7m x 5m)
 Windows (unglazed) ; 1 E, 1 W, 1 high up S gable.
 Door @ N end off centre to W side
 Cooking & Eating. Women & children sleeping accomodation in loft
 space overhead

Entry in Archaeological Inventory of Co Carlow.

531. Ballyknockan (Idrone West By) 'Church, Graveyard'

Church site & Graveyard. According to Comerford ; ' Protestant church of Leighlin bridge now stands here, in the outlets of the town, on an ancient church site. (1886, Vol III, 25) . No visible trace of any antiquity.

Authors note. The Protestant Church (now in ruins) referred to actually covers the living quarters only.

Priory of St Stephen.

Located parallel to ruin of C of I church and 29' (8.8m) from it. Orientation was approx E-W. Internal dimensions of main church ; 36' (10.97m) in length by 16' (4.8m) in width. Side walls 20' (6m) high. Height to ridge 27' (8.3m). Sacristy on N side, internal dimensions 11' (3.3m) By 10' (3m) separated from church by round arch 14' (4.3m) high.





**Markout of 13th c
Leper Hospital
Buildings
At Ballyknockan.**

Foreground (1)
Mens' Dormitory

Background.(2)
Cookhouse &
Refectory.
Dormitory for women and
children in loft space

Ballyknockan Graveyard (now closed) is located on the other side of the trees seen in background of photograph.

Leper Enclosure & Graveyard

The hospital / hospice was built by the Augustinians to house the many lepers cast out by family and neighbours at that time. Although leprosy had been known in Ireland long before the Normans it is likely that they re-introduced the disease from the middle east crusades.

The leper hospice was surrounded by a wattle fence approx 2 m high, which enclosed an area 75m x 48.5m and would have allowed enough space for a gardening and animals etc

This hospice was in use for about 150 years.

Those who eventually died there were buried in a plot on the opposite side of the present doctor's lawn. The burial plot straddles the edge of the lawn and the adjacent field to the south. Numbers buried were;

In the 13th c ——— 38 (part of)
14th c ——— 63
15th c ——— 15 (part of)

The above figures would seem to indicate that the pandemic was over and or that the surviving population had achieved an immunity to this dreadful disease by then.

Human remains have been found in this area in the recent past and thought to be from 'the 'famine times'

Spideal

The occurrence of the place name *spídeál* (*anglicised Spiddle/Spittle*) indicates a hospital once occupied that place. Examples are Spiddle in Co Galway and Ballinspittle in Co Cork. In Co Dublin the village once known as Baile na Labhar which was translated as Leperstown in mid 19th c, was later changed to Leopardstown when it became a suburb of Dublin.

Lepers and other outcasts from society then and now were cared for by the religious orders.

See page 5 for more examples

References:

Archaeological Inventory of Co Carlow. OPW

Discovery Series Map 61. Ordnance Survey of Ireland.

Old Leighlin after Laserian. Dr Colm Kenny. Carloviana 1999 (footnote)

Giraldus Cambrensis. *Expugnatio Hibernica*. The Conquest of Ireland (eds). A.B.Scott and F.X. Martin (Dublin 1943)

Castlemore, Motte & Bailey. Cathleen Delaney. Carloviana 2003.

Mediaeval Religious Houses in Ireland. A.Gwynn & R.N.Hancock. Irish Academic Press

Acknowledgements.

Landowners. Victor Connolly of Burgage Stud Dr Tom & Aoibhinn Foley.

References to Lepers and Hospitals in the Medieval Period.

Search on: Internet + Ireland

1. <http://www.solasbhríde.ie/pilgrimage/pilgrimage-22a.htm>

Brigid the Hearthwoman

A group of lepers came to Brigid looking for some ale as they were very thirsty and hungry. She had no ale, only some water which had been prepared for bathing. She blessed this water with faith and it changed into excellent ale which the lepers drank in abundance. Brigid's hospitality became known throughout all of Ireland.

Source: Cogitosus Life of Saint Brigid (7th Century)

2. <http://www.enfo.ie/leaflets/bs16.htm>

Mediaeval Dublin

DUBHLINN; There may have been a church on the site of St. Patrick's, between two branches of the River Poddle, from early Christian times and a fourth long-distance routeway, the Slige Dlí, came down The Coombe (Irish corn or cm = valley) towards the Poddle crossing. The stream flowing down the valley may have been a major source of drinking water in early times.

The Slige Dála from Munster continued a short distance eastwards as the approach road to an ecclesiastical enclosure, whose characteristic shape is still preserved in the street alignment from Peter Row round to Johnson Place (now broken by a modern block of flats). This was probably the burial ground and inner sanctum of a monastic settlement founded in the sixth century and called Dubhlinn (= Blackpool). The last recorded abbot, Siadal, died in the year 790.

Part of this ancient enclosure was occupied in Anglo-Norman times by [St. Stephen's Hospital for lepers](#). Leper houses were usually located on the edge of medieval towns, since charity towards the sufferers was mingled with fear of the disease itself. St. Stephen's Green was the common pasture for animals kept by the townspeople.

3. <http://www.chapters.eiretek.org/books/Lucania/Lucania5.htm>

Palmerstown

Palmerstown used to be called Laurence Town, after St. Laurence O'Toole. Amongst the ancient records there is mention of a house of lepers in this locality dedicated to the saint, and of the Church given by Milo de Brett to the Hospital of St. John without Newgate. The lepers' house was, in 1427, handed over by King Henry VI. to John Waile at the rent of three shillings a year.

4. <http://www.ballagherreen.com/history2.htm>

Cloonshanville Priory: (Co Roscommon)

Cloonshanville Priory fits into the movement for reform which began in the Mendicant Monasteries in Connaught after the Black Death (1348-49). *The mendicant friars helped the poor, the sick and the lepers and provided shelters for pilgrims and travellers.* The Dominican Priory of the Holy Cross is said to have been founded by McDermot Roe in 1385. The ivy-covered bell-tower still stands and some ruined walls may be seen. A tall stone cross with stunted arms is located in a nearby field and may point to the presence of an earlier ecclesiastical foundation. An interesting feature is a Piscina in the church. The Piscina was a basin made from Stone and used for washing the sacred vessels. It was placed near the altar and a little drain from it led down to the foundations. Theobald Dillon got possession of Cloonshanville after the dissolution of the Monasteries. He rented it to John Davis, who succeeded him as collector of the Composition Rent in Connacht. The Dominican Community had to leave and it is thought some went to Rome – and others to Bayonne and Aquitaine (France).