

Medieval Souterrain at Dunleckney Graveyard

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According to local folklore a tunnel once connected Dunleckney Graveyard with Ballymoon Castle. However unlikely this tale, the authors recently found traces of an underground chamber there. On close examination the chamber appeared to be a souterrain.

¹ Souterrains were common from 750 to 1250 AD around Ireland. They also occur in other Celtic countries but these date from an earlier period.

While their exact purpose is disputed the general consensus is that they were used for food storage or possibly places of refuge. The only other record for County Carlow (indeed for all of South Leinster) is; entry **783** – Archaeological Inventory of County Carlow.

783 Near BAGENALSTOWN

OS 16 NPL

Souterrain (possible, site) Underground passage discovered near Bagenalstown in 1919, apparently with two chambers of orthostatic and drystone construction. Details unclear. (OPW file)

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It is known that a manor farm established by the Norman settlers existed at this site from the 12th. Our view is that the underground structure was used to store butter (boxed) and also honey (jars). ² *Manor farms were set up as a commercial enterprise and replaced the subsistence farming of the native population. Farm produce was supplied to the fortified towns and even exported at that time.*

This example was built at the very end of the souterrain building period in Ireland , Why?

On researching the ² temperature record for the 2nd millennium we found that there was a sharp temperature drop from 1300 AD which continued thereafter.

So the likely answer is that cool storage (as provided by underground chambers) was no longer needed. During the 14th c two major catastrophes occurred which caused many of these manor farms to fail vis the Bruce Invasion and the Black Death, which halved the population..

The souterrain is unfortunately no longer visible and has collapsed. Centuries after it went out of use several burials occurred directly over the chamber.

Souterrain Dimensions. (estimated)

Orientation; E-W. Entrance at South-West corner 11' (3.35m) below present ground level.

Main chamber; 17' (5.18m) long and 10' (3m) wide. Roof height; 6' (1.83.m) barrel vaulted)

. Small chamber; at West end; 4' x 4' (1.22 x 1.22m) . Wall Height; 4' (1.22m). (flat roofed).

Further Reading.

1. Souterrains-. Muiris O'Sullivan & Liam Downey.- Archaeology Ireland. Winter 2004.

2. Shell Guide to Reading the Irish Landscape. (pp 174)- Frank Mitchell

3. Carlow History & Society. Ed- Thomas McGrath.