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A deserted medieval village at Ballysheehan, Co. Tipperary

By Edmond O'Donovan, with a history of Ballysheehan by Dr. Seán Duffy

Introduction

There is archaeological evidence for medieval settlement around the church and graveyard at Ballysheehan, within the grounds of Ballysheehan Stud, Co. Tipperary. Desk research and fieldwork were conducted as part of an archaeological assessment associated with the redevelopment of the stud.[1] This paper presents the results of this research, beginning with a description of the topographic and historical landscape, followed by a detailed history of the parish and a description of the archaeology at the site. The paper concludes by drawing together the archaeological and historical evidence for the presence at Ballysheehan of a medieval village (now deserted) associated with the early Anglo-Norman conquest of Tipperary.

The principal archaeological sites discussed in this paper are a medieval church and graveyard, an Anglo-Norman motte and earthworks linking these sites. These constitute the remains of the deserted medieval village in Ballysheehan townland from which the parish derives its name.

Topography and Archaeology

The sites are situated on a flat undulating plain three miles north of the Rock of Cashel, along the eastern edge of the Suir valley. The townland of Ballysheehan is bound on its northern and western sides by the banks of the Arglo River, a tributary of the River Suir, and the main Dublin to Cork road to the east. To the southeast lies a ridge of hills from Mount O'Meara to Ballyknock Hill, terminating at the Rock of Cashel. This ridge marks the watershed between the land to the northwest of Cashel, which drains into the River Suir between Golden and Holycross, and the ground to the southeast, which drains into the River Suir at Clonmel. The townland of Ballysheehan lies on the gently sloping land at the foot of Mount O'Meara. The ground is fertile, although poorer marshy ground occurs along the flood banks of the Arglo River. Both the motte and the church in Ballysheehan are located on opposing ends of a low undulating ridge that runs parallel to the north–south course of the river. The earthworks are located on level dry ground to the east of the motte and the church and graveyard, above the flood plain of the river.

The History of Ballysheehan (by Dr. Seán Duffy)

The boundaries of the region that later became known as Tipperary derive from the years following the Anglo-Norman invasion of Ireland in the late twelfth century, especially the

period 1185–99, when the future King John was lord of Ireland and actively involved in the colonisation of the area. King John granted the early Anglo-Norman conquerors 'cantreds' of land based on the territorial divisions already in existence. These boundaries were preserved by the Anglo-Normans, groups of cantreds forming, in an ecclesiastical context, the basis of rural deaneries reflecting earlier regional boundaries. Thus, the parish of Ballysheehan, Co. Tipperary, formed part of the cantred of Eoghanacht Cashel, an earlier land division. This corresponded, for ecclesiastical purposes, to the rural deanery of Cashel, and the latter subsequently developed into the barony of Middlethird.

In the early thirteenth century, Eoghanacht Cashel was frequently referred to as Ardmayle, although the cantred was considerably larger than the actual manor of Ardmayle, which lay at its core. The manor of Ardmayle, in turn, included the parish of Ballysheehan. In 1207, King John granted the cantred of Eoghanacht Cashel or Ardmayle to Walter de Lacy, the lord of Meath (Sweetman 1875, no. 601). Eoghanacht Cashel was forfeited with the rest of de Lacy's lands in 1210 and then delivered to Philip of Worcester in 1215 (Sweetman 1875, no. 613). de Lacy's lands in Tipperary were eventually restored to him in 1216, but Richard de Burgh acquired the cantred of Eoghanacht Cashel sometime before 1225 in right of his wife Egidia, de Lacy's daughter. The de Burghs thereafter ruled Eoghanacht Cashel until the cantred became part of the vast expanse of Ormond territory accumulated by the Butlers throughout the later Middle Ages.

Throughout the thirteenth century, the Butlers (who gained the title 'earl of Ormond' in 1328) steadily acquired an ever-increasing amount of land. It was Theobald Butler, through his marriage in 1242 to Margery, daughter of Richard de Burgh, who acquired the manor of Ardmayle. Included in the marriage settlement was the parish land of Ballysheehan that was held by the manor of Ardmayle (Curtis 1932, nos. 99, 100).

The Ormonds lost possession of Ballysheehan in 1407 when, on the 10th of January, James le Botiller, the earl of Ormond, granted to Robert Haubryk and Nicholas Stokes the custody of all the castles and manors of Ardmayle (Curtis 1932, ii, no. 389). In the period that followed, Ballysheehan Manor passed through many hands. On the 12th of August 1579, during the reign of Elizabeth I, Ballysheehan was leased to Edmund FitzGibbon (Fiants, iii).

Although the de Lacys, de Burghs, Butlers and their successors were lords of the cantred of Eoghanacht Cashel, beneath them stood tenants, many of whom, by the early modern period, were titled gentry in their own right, holding estates of the Butlers' land in what had by then become the barony of the Middlethird. Recorded in the Carew Manuscripts in Lambeth Palace is a list of the inhabitants of the barony of the Middlethird during the reign of Elizabeth I (circa 1600) in which the names that feature most prominently are, indeed, Butlers, but also Hacketts, Stapletons and Macleeres (Brewer & Bullen 1871, 514).

In the Civil Survey for the County of Tipperary, the predominant proprietors of land in the parish of Ballysheehan in 1640 are the Hacketts, including Philip Hackett of Ballyherbery; Patrick Hackett of Dually, Kylballyherbery and Ballytarsny; and John Hackett of Ballysheehan (Simington 1931, 215-18). In the Census of Ireland, circa 1659, the two gentry who are associated with the parish of Ballysheehan are Edmund Hackett and Thomas Conin (Pender 1939).

The later prominence of the Hacketts in Ballysheehan raises the question as to when they acquired lands there in the first place. A surviving 'extent,' or description, of the manor of Ardmayle, dated the 13th of December 1305, states that John, son and heir of William Hackett, held 23 carucates (or ploughlands) of land in Ballysheehan (White 1932, 63). A similar extent for the manor of Ballysheehan itself survives from the 11th of June 1305 and states that 'there are

no buildings there whereof its lord [presumably John Hackett] may take any [profit] per annum, except a garden valued at 12d. per annum.' There were also two mills, worth only a mark a year, and the manor's total value, due to decay, was 110s 10d (White 1932, 61). From this account, it would appear that the settlement at Ballysheehan, which would have been the original manorial centre, had ceased to be inhabited, but there is every reason to believe that the Hacketts had been its builders and that they had held Ballysheehan since its conquest in the late twelfth/early thirteenth century. Remarkably, they too were the occupiers of the 'big thatch house with several cottages' referred to in the Civil Survey of Tipperary, 1655–56, and reputed to have stood on the site of Ballysheehan House.

The disintegration of the Ormond monopoly in the secular world is directly reflected in the ecclesiastical sphere of the time. The Tipperary region fell under the spell of the monastic movement well before the coming of the Anglo-Normans, as is evident in the foundation of Cistercian houses at Holy Cross, Inishlounaght and Kilcooly. The Normans exploited the lands of the see and established a parochial network. The see lands were organised into manors that the archbishop held within his domain, while the diocese was divided into rural deaneries in order to police the parishes. The crown remained steadfast in its determination to maintain control over the church, to such an extent that none of the episcopal lands in Tipperary ever came under the jurisdiction of the earls of Ormond. In effect, this provided the Irish Church with protection from the growing power of local magnates, who regularly assumed positions of ecclesiastical power. However, it was the weakening of royal authority over the Church in Ireland that gave local interests an opportunity to exploit it.

The church of Ballysheehan located in the town of Ballysheehan partook in all these trends. On the 11th of April 1467, Thady O Lauthnan, principal official of the ecclesiastical court of Cashel, ruled in favour of the Cistercian Holy Cross Abbey and against the rector and vicar of Ballysheehan, as regards the tithes of Ballykelly (White 1936). It would appear that the rector and vicar of Ballysheehan lost their bid to control the tithes of Ballykelly because Ballysheehan was notorious for its unorthodox behaviour.

On the 1st March 1498, the abbot of the monastery at Holy Cross, the prior of the Priory of St John the Evangelist in the diocese of Ossory and the canons of Cashel Cathedral moved in favour of Hobertus Stapelton, a cleric of the diocese of Cashel. The Pope was informed that one Thomas Okayll had installed himself as priest in the vicarage of Ballysheehan for almost three years. To counteract this, Hobertus Stapelton proposed to unite Ballysheehan to Cashel under his clerical guidance for the term of his office; his petition was accepted (Bliss *et al.*, 1893, 614-5).

The church of Ballysheehan was once again brought to the attention of the Pope when David, archbishop of Cashel, was permitted by the papacy in 1503 to unite the vicarages of Cashel, including Ballysheehan, which had remained long vacant. This union was to remain for as long as David presided over the church of Cashel (Bliss *et al.*, 1893-, 52-3). The archbishop of Cashel was loath to see a parish in his deanery fall into disrepair through the hands of non-canonical interests and possibly even sought to control land in those parishes that had a history of independent action.

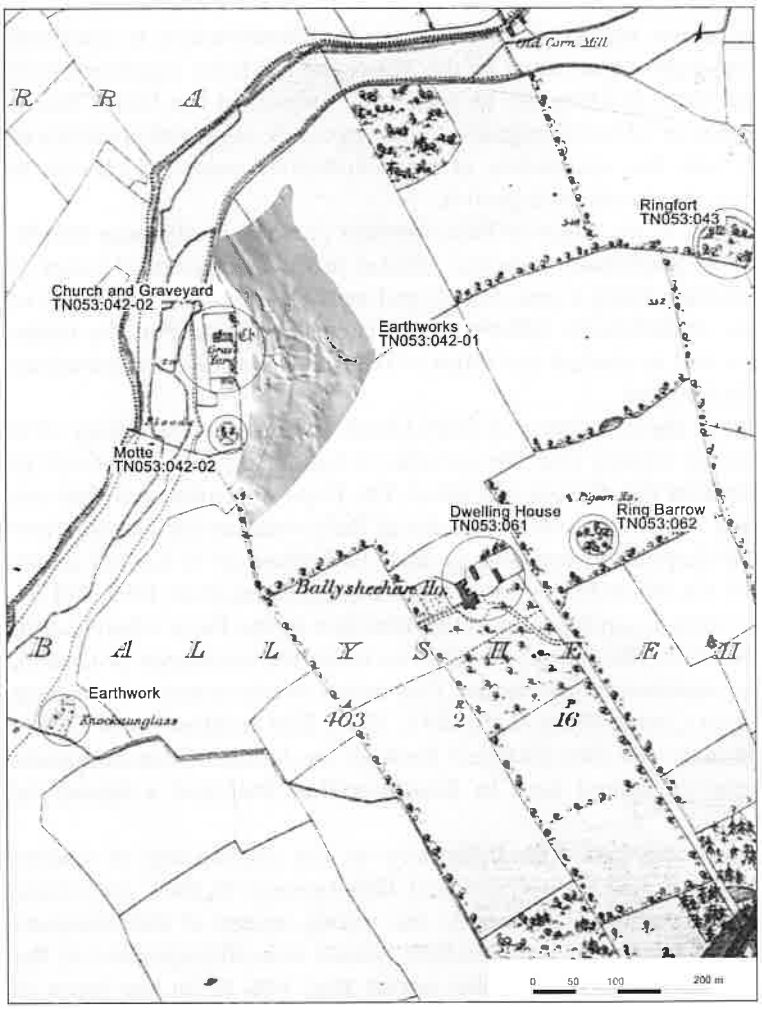
Thus, in 1640, Patrick Hackett mortgaged Kilballyherbery to the archbishop of Cashel (Simington 1931, 212). The Hacketts of Kilballyherbery and Ballytarsney in their turn were patrons of numerous churches, both within and outside the parish centre at Ballysheehan (Nolan & McGrath 1985, 129). Where control of Ballysheehan manor was all-important in the preceding centuries, it was control of the church in this parish that was to be the focus of attention in the ecclesiastically centred centuries to come.

The Wider Archaeological Landscape

The parish of Ballysheehan has a dense distribution of archaeological monuments indicating settlement from the prehistoric period up to the present day. This is indicated by the place name Ballysheehan, from *baile sídheán*, the townland of the fairies.[2] This name may be derived from the dense distribution of earthworks in the area, as the association of archaeological monuments and the supernatural is a characteristic of the Irish folk tradition.

A prehistoric ringbarrow is located to the east of the medieval Ballysheehan complex centred on the church and motte. The Rock of Cashel was the royal seat of the kings of Munster until Muirchertach Ua Briain of the Dál Cais gave the Rock to the church in AD 1101. Several ringforts are distributed on the well-drained soils around Ballysheehan, and one such site survives to the southeast within the townland.

After the Anglo-Norman invasion, a new group of settlement monuments appears in the Irish rural medieval landscape: two rectangular earthworks, 'moated sites' (Barry 1977), are located to the south in Gartmackellis townland, one is named 'Shanabone' on the first edition of the Ordnance Survey; Synone Castle, a medieval tower house, is located to the northwest; and medieval church in Ballykelly is located to the east. The motte and church in Ballysheehan townland also date from this period. Eight archaeological sites in all were identified within Ballysheehan townland, and each site is now described individually.[3]



Archaeological Fabric Ballysheehan Townland.

The ring barrow at Ballysheehan

The ring barrow site (RMP TN053:062 and NGR 20966/14521) is located in the centre of a large rectangular field. The ring barrow is 46m in diameter. It consists of an externally ditched enclosure defined by a flattened 8m wide bank and an internal ditch that measures 3–4m wide and 0.40m deep. The externally ditched enclosure surrounds a central ring

barrow. The ring barrow consists of a low flat mound 8m in diameter surrounded by a 0.30m deep, 2m wide ditch. A level concentric 6m wide platform surrounds the central barrow inside the externally ditched enclosure. A possible 5m wide entrance feature is located in the northeast corner of the outer enclosure. Two large trees are present on the northern external bank. The bank survives to a greater level at this point, indicating that the monument has been considerably denuded; however, it is still clearly visible on the ground. The site is likely to have functioned as a burial monument and dates from the prehistoric period. The site is illustrated on the first and subsequent editions of the Ordnance Survey.

The enclosure site at Ballysheehan

The enclosure site (RMP TN053:063 and NGR 20991/14520) was first recognised by aerial photography undertaken by Cambridge University in 1971.[4] It appears as a circular cropmark and has been classified as an enclosure in the Sites and Monuments Register of Dúchas, the Heritage Service. No trace of the monument is present on the field surface, and further elaboration on the site is beyond the scope of this paper. It is located at the western end of a large triangular flat field.

Motte at Ballysheehan, Co. Tipperary.

The ringfort at Ballysheehan

The ringfort site (RMP TN053:043 and NGR 20966/14521) is located in the southeast corner of a large flat rectangular field. It is illustrated in the first, second and third editions of the Ordnance Survey; however, it was levelled prior to 1971.[5] Very slight traces of the levelled bank and ditch survive around the monument. A curved depression, 0.10m deep, marks the location of the ditch on the western side of the monument. A low-level earthwork, 0.10m high, indicates the location of the bank on the northern side of the monument. A new field boundary and path have removed any trace of the monument to the south and east. Substantial remains of the monument are likely to still be preserved below the present ground level.

The motte at Ballysheehan

The motte (RMP TN053:042/02 and NGR 20921/14534) is situated 70m to the south of the graveyard, on the southern end of a natural gravel ridge. It consists of a flat-topped mound measuring 9m east–west by 14m north–south, raised *c.* 4m above the summit of the ridge. The base of the motte measures 16m east–west. A gravel pit/quarry measuring *c.* 25m in diameter is located immediately to the south of the monument, where the monument has been partially destroyed. There are good views extending south to Cashel, to the east over the O'Meara Hills, to the north over the earthworks and the graveyard and to the west over the narrow flood plain along the Arglo River. The monument was built in the late twelfth/early thirteenth century as an earthen castle during the Anglo-Norman conquest.

The church and graveyard at Ballysheehan

The church and graveyard at Ballysheehan (RMP TN053:042/01 and NGR 20921/14544) are located at the southern end of a low undulating ridge running parallel to the course of the Arglo River. The church has been fortified with the addition of a tower. Many architectural features and gravestones are present on both buildings and in the graveyard; however, a full description/building survey of the structure is outside the scope of this paper.

Medieval stone head at Ballysheehan Church, Co. Tipperary.

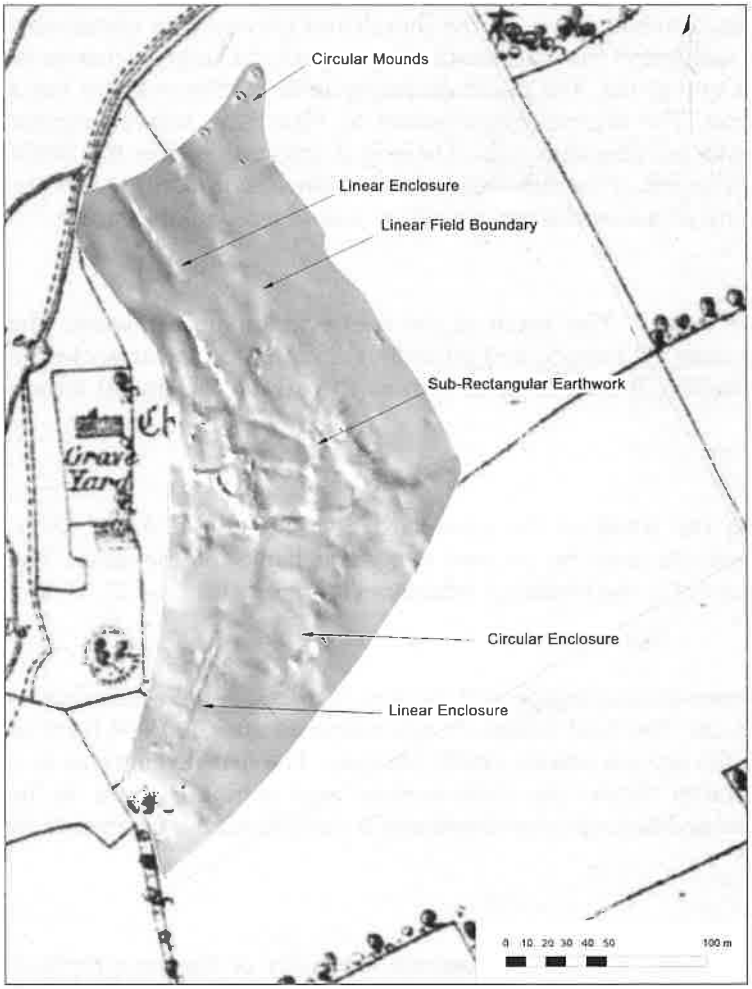
The church dates from as early as the thirteenth century, although it has been altered and remodelled up to the early seventeenth century. It is rectangular in plan and is oriented east–west. The building is densely overgrown with ivy, and much of the northern side of the church is in a state of collapse. A fine sculpted medieval human head is present on one of the quoin stones on the external southeast corner of the church. An internal dividing wall separates the nave and chancel. An altar survives under the east gable end window, which is located in a deep wall embrasure. A decorated sedila and water font are present on either side of the altar. Corbels that originally held the wooden framed roof are present along the interior of the nave and chancel. A vaulted passageway is present along the northern church wall and terminates as it turns north, leading to a separate collapsed structure. The structural remains of robbed-out scar walls are present on the northern external wall of the church.

Church and graveyard at Ballysheehan, Co. Tipperary.

The western end of the church has been fortified with the addition of a tower. The structure appears to date from the fourteenth/fifteenth century. It originally consisted of three floors over a vaulted ground floor, which has now partially collapsed. There are traces of a parapet and wall-walk at the top of the building, although the structure is heavily overgrown with ivy. Chimney flues and fireplaces are present internally; however, the stone moldings surrounding these features have been removed. The internal floors, which were originally wooden, were

supported by stone corbels extending from the interior of the tower. No evidence of a stone spiral staircase is evident in the walls and therefore the stairs are likely to have been wooden.

The rectangular graveyard around the medieval fortified church is walled. The graveyard wall is built from coursed limestone and dates from the post-medieval period. It is contemporary with the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century upright grave slabs that proliferate within the graveyard. No trace of earlier medieval grave slabs was identified, but these monuments are likely to be stratified beneath the more recent burials. The graveyard is overgrown, and dense deciduous trees augment the eastern and northern boundary walls.



Earthworks at Ballysheehan.

The earthworks at Ballysheehan

A series of earthworks (RMP TN053:042/03 and NGR 20924/14559) are located to the south and east of the graveyard and motte in a level dry field to the east of the glacial ridge. The earthworks extend 110m into the field to the east of the graveyard wall and cover an area measuring 300m north–south. They appear as hummocks on the field surface. It was originally difficult to decipher a pattern within the hummocks, such as roads, house platforms or defensive ditches. However, the digital terrain model of the site has indicated the morphology of the earthworks, which have been sub-divided into the following elements: the sub-rectangular earthwork and the linear enclosure, the circular enclosure, the mill or fish pond, the linear field boundary and the circular mounds.

A small collection of archaeological objects was discovered in Ballysheehan townland in 1953 (NMI Reg. Nos. 1953:9-15).[6] All of the objects were described as being found on the farm of Mr George Keyes in a 'hummocky field' at Ballysheehan. The artefacts were recovered and transferred to the National Museum of Ireland through the office of the Rev. Dr. Wyse-Jackson in the Deanery of Cashel. The description of the

'hummocky field' corresponds with the earthworks identified in the digital terrain model. The objects include an iron spearhead, an iron spike, iron horseshoe fragments, an iron nail and several sherds of medieval pottery. The pottery sherds represent a minimum of two glazed jugs. The artefacts date to the medieval period, between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

The sub-rectangular earthwork and the linear enclosure

A large sub-rectangular earthwork measuring 50m northwest–southwest and 60m northeast–southwest is located 25m from the eastern boundary of the graveyard wall. The earthwork is subdivided by ditches into four unequal parts. A curving linear enclosure running 185m along the eastern and northeastern boundaries of the church and graveyard is identifiable on the topographical survey. It is suggested that this feature forms part of a large enclosure or boundary around the church and graveyard. The linear enclosure is discontinuous and has a 15m wide gap at its northern end. The feature also appears to bisect the sub-rectangular earthwork across its northwest and southeastern axis. There is a suggestion that the linear enclosure continues for at least 60m south of the sub-rectangular earthwork, towards the motte, but this is less clear. The southern tip of this enclosure appears as a doubled-banked feature.

Circular enclosure

A possible circular enclosure is located 25m south of the sub-rectangular earthwork. The feature is 45m in diameter and is situated outside and partially adjoining the linear enclosure south of the sub-rectangular earthwork. It appears as a faint earthwork on the digital terrain model.

Mill or fish pond

A mill/fish pond is present to the south of the graveyard adjacent to the Arglo River, suggesting that archaeological features may be present along the banks of the river. The presence of mills at the site is borne out in the historical references to the site for June 11, 1305.

The linear field boundary

The digital terrain model illustrates archaeological and modern features. A field boundary is evident running northwest–southeast. The field boundary was removed after 1903–04 (year of OS survey), as it is illustrated on the second edition (1905) OS map. The feature survives as a long, low, linear bank barely 0.10m above the field surface and is not thought to be chronologically associated with the archaeological monuments. It dates from the eighteenth or nineteenth century.

Circular mounds

Three circular mounds were identified at the very northern extremity of the topographical survey. The features measured 5–6m in diameter and appeared as shallow ring ditches. They may be residual features from circular feeding troughs. However, a prehistoric origin should not be discounted without evidence to the contrary.

Knockaunglass (earthworks) at Ballysheehan

A series of earthworks (NGR 20924/14559) is illustrated on the 1905 OS map as 'Knockaunglass.' The place name is possibly derived from *cnocán glas*, the little green hillock.[7] It

is not known what these earthworks represent, although their illustration on the map with an Irish place name suggests an archaeological association. Field inspection of the earthworks was hampered by forestry plantation, although the features illustrated on the OS map appear to illustrate a combination of some sort of mounds and a possible roadway or track along the spine of the ridge running parallel to the Arglo River, leading north towards the medieval complex of monuments around the motte/church and graveyard.

The dwelling house at Ballysheehan

The dwelling site (RMP TN053:061 and NGR 20951/14517) was identified in the Civil Survey as the 'big thatch house.' It further states that 'Ballyshyhane [contains] fower Acres old extent.' The house was described as 'a bigg thatch house with several Cottages.' The site of the big thatch house referred to in the Civil Survey (*c.* 1655–56) is thought to be located on the site of Ballysheehan House, a much altered, late eighteenth-century estate house. Ballysheehan House is indicated on both the first edition (1840–43) and all subsequent editions of the Ordnance Survey. Substantial redevelopment of the property has occurred in the past twenty years, with the addition of a large new extension to the rear.

The Chronological Context of the Monuments at Ballysheehan

The monuments at Ballysheehan have a long and broad cultural background, dating from the prehistoric to the early modern period. The presence of the large ring barrow (RMP TN053:062) is surrogate evidence for late prehistoric settlement in the locality. This site may be associated with the small ring ditches identified to the north of the church and graveyard or the mounds at Knockaunglass. The evidence for settlement continues into the early medieval period with the presence of a ringfort (RMP TN053:043) in the townland.

The greatest proportion of the archaeological and historical evidence indicates a period of activity dating from the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. The earliest phase of Norman occupation at the site took the form of a motte—an early earthen castle. The construction of this monument is likely to have been undertaken as part of the Norman campaign in Tipperary and may even be associated with Walter de Lacy. The site was chosen for its strategic location on the river along a local glacial ridge or prominence with Cashel, the seat of the kings of Munster to the south. The presence of the medieval artefactual evidence, earthworks, mill/fish pond and church indicate that the early Norman motte helped to seed the development of a larger settlement. The site was certainly associated with the Hackett family from at least the late thirteenth century, and the Hacketts may have been the principal family at Ballysheehan from its early origins as a Norman settlement.

The pottery and other artefacts identified at Ballysheehan date the earthworks to the medieval period (1170–1540). The sub-rectangular earthwork located along the enclosure could define house plots, small fields and possibly even a manor house associated with an early Norman village. The centre would have required an administrative centre or manor house. Parallels can also be drawn between the sub-rectangular earthwork and the medieval moated site type defined by Barry (1977). However, these parallels are less than clear without further investigation. There is also the possibility that the earthworks post-date the thirteenth century and are associated with the continued worship at the church in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. However, on balance, an interpretation as small field systems, house platforms and manor house is more satisfactory.

Parallels for the Deserted Settlement at Ballysheehan

Deserted settlements dating to the medieval period have been identified throughout the country. Examples occur at sites such as Piperstown, Co. Louth (Buckley & Sweetman 1991) and Cannakill, Co. Offaly (O'Brien & Sweetman 1997). The identification, classification and dating of the site type arises through a combination of certain characteristics. These include historical references; the presence of a motte; earthworks, such as house platforms or field boundaries; and medieval church sites. All of these features are present at Ballysheehan.

Little archaeological excavation has been conducted on the earthworks associated with deserted settlements. One such exception was the excavation in Piperstown, Co. Louth (Barry, 2000). The excavation focused on a house platform and field enclosure. The evidence indicated that the site had a long history of settlement originating in the thirteenth century. However, the morphology of the earthworks identified at this site draws little comparison with the earthworks at Ballysheehan.

The Growth and Decline of a Medieval Village?

The decline of Ballysheehan by the later thirteenth century is indicated from White's account of the manor of Ardmayle, where he records that the settlement was almost deserted by 1305 (White 1932, 63). Thus, the period of occupation at the site in the thirteenth century had lapsed by the early fourteenth century. The reasons for the decline of the settlement at Ballysheehan are not clear. The date of 1305 pre-dates many of the events associated with the decline of the Anglo-Norman colony in the fourteenth century, such as the Bruce Invasion and the Black Death (Barry 1997, 168). Therefore, it is more likely to relate to changes in settlement patterns with the growth of Cashel as a centre, coupled with the decline associated with the affairs of Edward I (Duffy 1997, 125).

The church at Ballysheehan is likely to have been founded in the thirteenth century and owes its construction to the reorganisation of the Church with the introduction of Norman rule. It is clear that the church survived the decline of wider settlement at Ballysheehan in the early fourteenth century, with references to clerics and the church at Ballysheehan continuing into the fifteenth century. The archaeological evidence in the building history of the church matches this historical reference and indicates successive phases of alteration, addition and repair through to the early post-medieval period in contrast to the terminal decline of the medieval village.

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FOOTNOTES

1. Edmond O'Donovan is an archaeologist with Margaret Gowen & Co. Dr. Seán Duffy is head of the Dept. of Medieval History, Trinity College, Dublin. Consultation with Dúchas, the Heritage Service, led to the archaeological survey work at the site and the commissioning of a digital terrain model of earthworks at the site by Finn Delaney and Liam Murphy of Margaret Gowen & Co. Ltd.
2. Dr. Annaba Kilfeather provided the etymology of the place name.
3. The sites were identified through the records of the Dúchas, the Heritage Service, principally the Record of Monuments and Places (RMP) and through field inspection at the site. A national grid reference (NGR) is included for each site.
4. Reference Cambridge University Archaeological Air Photo 1971 BGO 14
5. Reference Cambridge University Archaeological Air Photo 1971 BGO 12
6. The finds are currently located in the National Museum in Kildare Street in Dublin and are referenced in the museums topographic files for the townland of Ballysheehan, Co. Tipperary.
7. Dr. Annaba Kilfeather provided the etymology of the placename.