

Southern Ci

Of the 151 souterrains recorded in the Louth Survey, the greatest concentration lies to the west and north of Dundalk, between the Fane and Castletown rivers. It is not surprising, therefore, that a magnificent souterrain has been found in this area during advance archaeological works on the M1 Dundalk Western Bypass. These works have been funded by Louth County Council/National Roads Authority and undertaken by Irish Archaeological Consultancy Ltd.

The initial target for the excavation was a ringfort discovered during trial-trench testing. However, on stripping the hilltop site, parts of a collapsed and backfilled souterrain were revealed, just outside the ringfort on the south-western side.

The ringfort is approximately 45m in diameter with a single ditch, interrupted by a causewayed entrance on the eastern side, facing Dundalk Bay. The potential of this large ringfort had been lessened owing to later agricultural activity, and little of obviously identifiable form survived within the enclosure. This was unfortunate as the enclosing ditch produced a selection of high-status finds, notably decorated glass beads, a superb penannular brooch and a number of stick-pins.

The visible remains of the souterrain comprised a collapsed, T-shaped structure. However, great excitement ensued when the investigation of a void in the gallery wall revealed a creep-hole beyond which were a series of intact tunnels. Over the next few days these complete galleries were tested for stability, explored and roughly mapped, and the wonderful piece of reused megalithic art (see previous issue) was found.



David Bayley, Field Director, and Niall Roycroft, Project Archaeologist, describe the magnificent souterrain in Newtownbalregan townland discovered during advanced archaeological works on the M1 Dundalk bypass.



Facing page: Overview of ringfort and souterrain looking north to the Cooley Mountains (© StudioLab).

This page, above: Gallery 2, collapsed, under excavation; note the way the walls corbel in (© StudioLab).

Top right: Detail of gallery 5 with capstones on; note the use of quarried stone (© StudioLab).

Centre right: Detail of gallery 6 with capstones on; note the use of field stones (© StudioLab).

Bottom right: Detail of brooch: 41mm-diameter copper-alloy penannular brooch (© StudioLab).



Right: Aerial view of excavated ringfort and souterrain construction cut (© StudioLab).

Below: Detail of door area: note opposing 'putlog' holes and vertical door jamb (© StudioLab). An iron bar, possibly a bolt, was recovered from the backfill in this area.

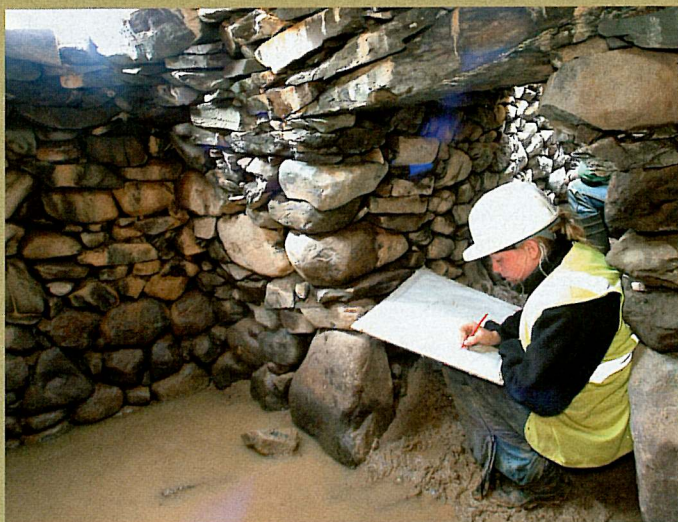
Recording chamber 2: even when pumped out the water returned within a few days. (© StudioLab).

The drystone-built souterrain measured approximately 45m in length and incorporated six galleries, three purpose-built alcoves, a door with powerful locking arrangement (horizontal bracing sockets) and two corbelled chambers, one of which incorporated a drop-hole and a drain. Both corbelled chambers had associated (external) air-shafts. The structure was built on the hillside and the lowest chamber had partly filled with water.

It became clear that different construction techniques had been employed within the souterrain. Galleries 1–5 and chamber 1 were all built in a tidy style of roughly coursed, horizontally placed, quarried stone pieces. Gallery 6, accessed through the drop-hole in chamber 1, was built using stones collected from fields.

The souterrain was a labour-intensive construction; between 170 and 200 cubic metres of soil seem to have been removed from the construction cut. Gallery 1 was visible directly below topsoil, and may originally have been partly constructed above ground, but galleries 2, 4 and 5 were approximately 0.6m below topsoil. With the drop though the floor of chamber 1, the top of gallery 6 was around 1m below topsoil. By excavating down in plan, the top of the souterrain was uncovered and the construction of capstones packed with small stones over the cracks was revealed. All the stones were carefully planned, photographed and removed, so that recording of the walls and floors could be undertaken.

The souterrain was completely empty and so, typically, there was no solid evidence for its function or date. All that can be



Right: Four phases of excavation, galleries 3–5: (1) exposed packing-stones; (2) exposed capstones; (3) capstones removed; (4) construction cut (© Niall Roycroft).



said at present is that the lighting alcoves were practically placed for maximum illumination and the reused art and quarried stone give an impression of high status.

Remarkably, however, part of the souterrain found a later use, after it had been abandoned and the entrance partly filled with soil. The first and highest gallery was reused as what appears to have been a malting or smoke house. A large pit was dug outside the souterrain and was lined with corner-posts and (?)planks. A channel connected this pit to the partly blocked-off and altered souterrain gallery 1, and both pit and gallery were filled with large quantities of charcoal and burnt seeds. ■

Site 114, Newtownbalregan 6
technical details

Element	Length	Orientation	Comments
Gallery 1	4.4m	E-W	Evidence for a door or grille on the eastern side. The floor sloped down to the junction with gallery 2.
Gallery 2	11.5m	N-S	A lighting alcove was located on the eastern side. To the south of the alcove the passage narrowed, with evidence for a door and two bolt-holes in the walls. To the south of the door, the floor of the gallery dropped steeply, resulting in the passage being almost 2m high.
Gallery 3	5.7m	E-W	From the southern end of gallery 2, gallery 3 led westwards and ended in a well-built, stone-lined alcove/recess measuring 0.65m deep x 0.6m wide x 0.5m high. The third capstone from gallery 2 was the reused megalithic art.
Gallery 4	2.5m	N-S	A short length of corridor branched off from gallery 3 just before the well-built alcove. A second lighting alcove was located at the southern end of gallery 4.
Gallery 5	5.5m	E-W	Gallery 5 ended in corbelled chamber 1.
Corbelled chamber 1	2m x 2m	Square	The chamber incorporated a stone flag floor under which a small drain took any water from gallery 5 and diverted it down a drop-hole (which measured 0.5m x 0.3m x 0.7m deep) on the southern side of the chamber. Externally there was an air-shaft 2.7m in length.
Gallery 6	15m	N-S	Accessed through the drop-hole in corbelled chamber 1, both floor and ceiling sloped downwards with the hillside.
Corbelled chamber 2	3.5 x 2m	E-W	This large chamber was partially flooded when found and incorporated an external air-shaft (3m).