

ULSTER ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY



Survey Report: No. 35

**Survey of Ballyaghagan Cashel,
County Antrim
UAS/11/08**



In association with



Harry Welsh

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1. Summary

1.1 Location

A site survey was undertaken at Ballyaghagan Cashel, County Antrim on Saturday 22 October 2011. Ballyaghagan townland lies in the parish of Shankill and barony of Upper Belfast in County Antrim. It is ‘a large townland of 486 acres [197 hectares] occupying the plateau top of Cave Hill except that from the southern end of the hill it projects south-eastwards along a steep track, formerly a railway, serving an old limestone quarry’ (Evans 1950, 6-7). The site is a scheduled monument under the conditions of the Historic Monuments and Archaeological Objects (Northern Ireland) Order 1995. It has been given the designation ANT 056:019 by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency: Built Heritage.

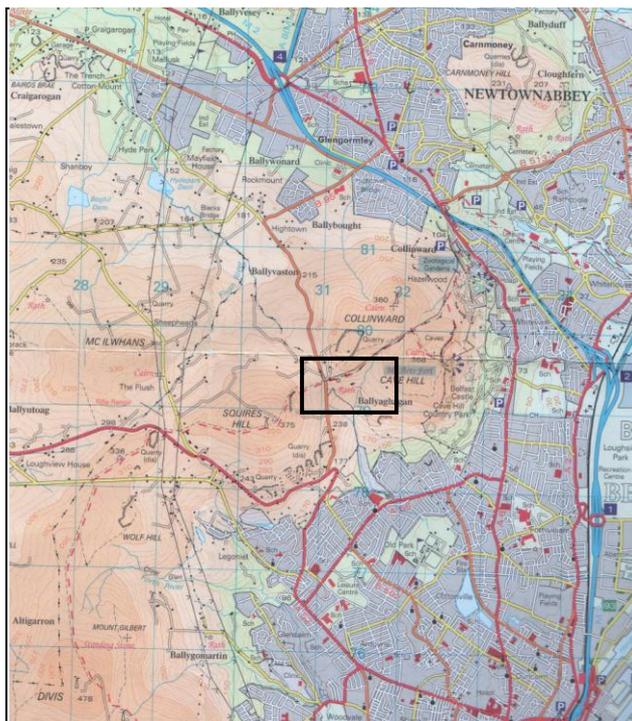


Figure 01: Location map for Ballyaghagan Cashel

The primary monument at the site is a cashel, but the remains of a vernacular house are also present. This has been constructed within and partially over the bank of the cashel to the north-west. Other monuments are visible in the immediate vicinity, including a square-shaped enclosure, with a stone bank at the north, which lies 40m to the south, and a stone-lined drainage ditch, which extends across the field immediately to the south of the cashel bank from east to west. An oval-shaped enclosure is visible on *Google Earth*, some 100m to the north-east. The survey was the eighth in a series of planned surveys undertaken by members of the Ulster Archaeological Society during 2011.



Figure 02: View of Ballyaghagan Cashel, looking north-west



Figure 03: View of vernacular house remains, looking south-west

1.2 Aims

In order to enhance the archaeological record of this site, the aims of this survey were to produce accurate plan drawings of the monument and carry out a photographic survey. This information was compiled into a report and copies submitted to the Northern Ireland Environment Agency, to the Belfast Hills Partnership and to the archives of the Ulster Archaeological Society.

2. Introduction

2.1 Background

The survey of the cashel at Ballyaghagan was undertaken on 22 October 2011. It was carried out by members of the Ulster Archaeological Society, in response to a decision taken by the committee of the society to extend an opportunity to members to participate in practical surveys of archaeological monuments that had not previously been recorded. This followed a bequest to the society from the late Dr Ann Hamlin, from which the items of survey equipment were purchased. The survey at Ballyaghagan Cashel was undertaken as part of a public outreach event, sponsored by the Belfast Hills Partnership in association with the Northern Ireland Environment Agency: Built Heritage and the Centre for Archaeological Fieldwork at Queen's University, Belfast (CAF).

2.2 Previous archaeological surveys

In 1987, the monument was inspected by Claire Foley of the Environment and Heritage Service (now NIEA). She reported that 'the wall is not particularly wide, but has the appearance of reasonable antiquity' (NIEA SM7 File). Another visit was made to the site in 1990 by Richard Warner, then Acting Keeper of Antiquities at the Ulster Museum, who described 'a quite nice, though weak, cashel' (*ibid*). As far as is known, there have not been any formal archaeological excavations or surveys carried out at the site.

2.3 Cartographic Evidence

The cashel is marked *Fort* on the 1833 Ordnance Survey (OS) County Series Antrim Sheet 56 (fig. 04). It is shown as a completely circular enclosure of one bank. The vernacular house is not illustrated on this map.



Figure 04: OS County Series Antrim Sheet 56 (part of) 1833

The cashel is also shown as a completely circular enclosure on the 1857 and 1925 revisions, but not annotated (figs 05 and 06). Again, there is no reference or illustration to the vernacular house.

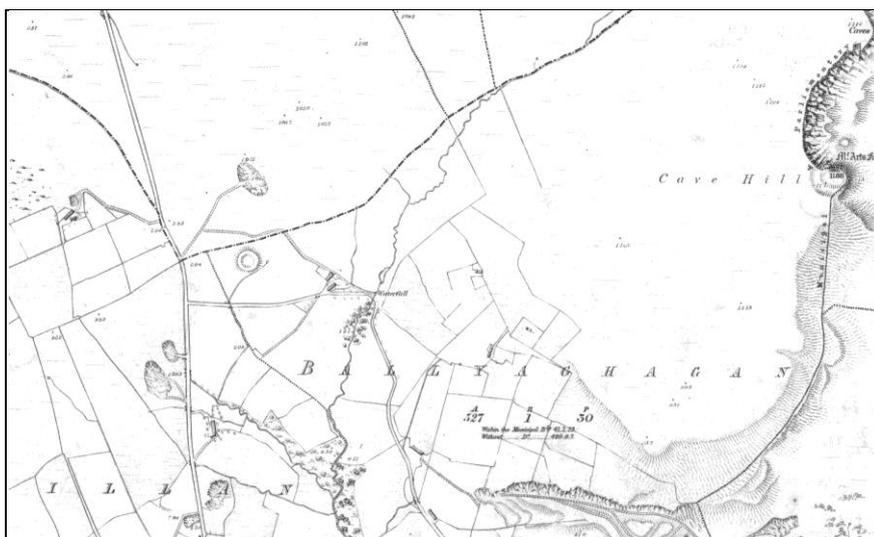


Figure 05: OS County Series Antrim Sheet 56 (part of) 1857

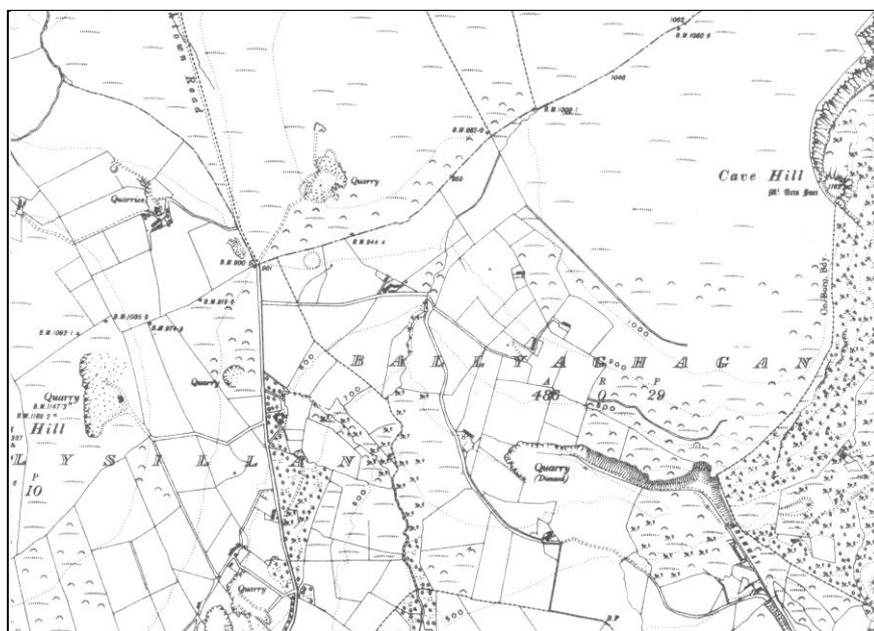


Figure 06: OS County Series Antrim Sheet 56 (part of) 1925

The ordnance survey maps all show the cashel bank to be unbroken, suggesting that the removal of a section of bank to the east was carried out later than 1925. However, the presence of ridge and furrow cultivation ridges within the cashel enclosure, probably dating to the early to mid-nineteenth-century, would indicate that this portion of bank may have been removed at this time to improve access to crops there and was not recorded on the OS maps.

2.4 Archiving

Copies of this report have been deposited with the Belfast Hills Partnership and the Northern Ireland Environment Agency: Built Heritage (NIEA). All site records have been archived by the Ulster Archaeological Society.

2.5 Credits and Acknowledgements

The survey was led by Harry Welsh and included Ken Pullin, June Welsh, Janna McDonald, George Rutherford, Ian Gillespie, Randal Scott, Grace McAlister and Pat O'Neill. The Ulster Archaeological Society is particularly grateful to Lizzy Pinkerton of the Belfast Hills Partnership and Paul Logue of the NIEA in choosing the site and facilitating access for the survey group. Thanks also to Matthew Adams of the Belfast Young Archaeologists Club for his valued help during the survey.

3. The 2011 UAS Survey

3.1 Methodology

It was decided that the survey would take the form of the production of plan drawings and elevations, accompanied by a photographic survey. This report was compiled using the information obtained from these sources, in addition to background documentary material.

3.2 Production of plan drawings

Plan drawings and elevations were completed, using data obtained from the field survey. Measurements were obtained by using the society's *Leica Sprinter 100* electronic measuring device. Sketch plans at 1:200 scale were completed on site by recording these measurements on drafting film secured to a plane table and backing up the data on a field notebook for subsequent reference. Field plans were later transferred to a computer-based format for printing by Sapphire Mussen.

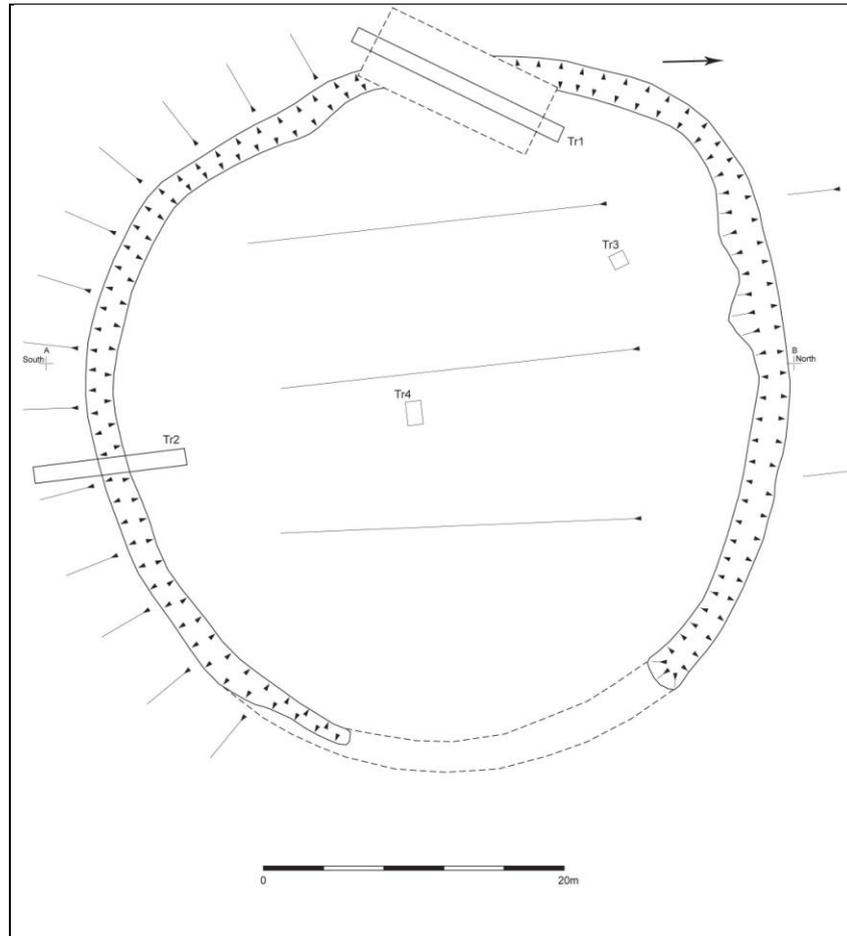


Figure 07: Plan of site, including excavation trenches

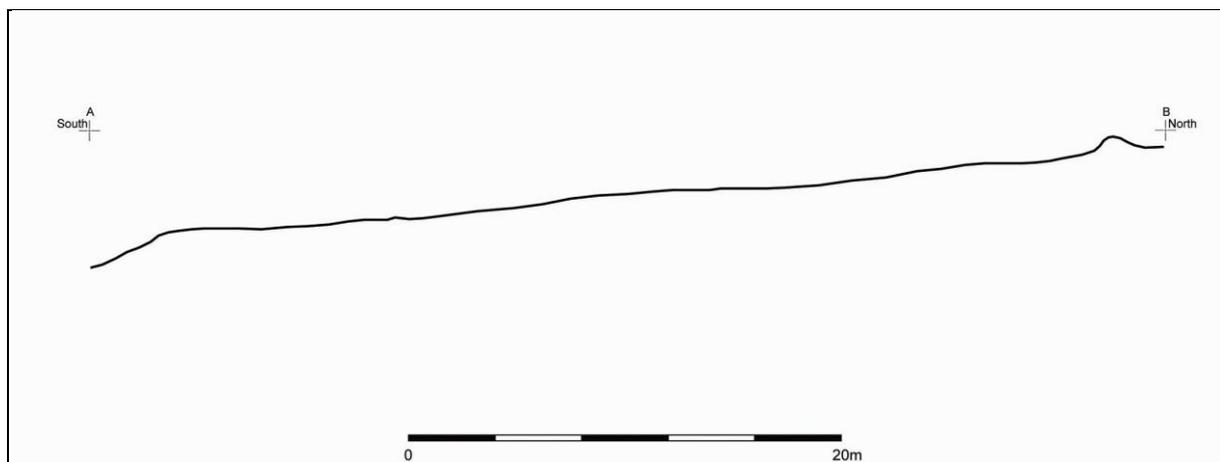


Figure 08: North/south profile of site

3.3 Photographic archive

A photographic record of the site was taken by using a *Ricoh G600* 8 megapixel digital camera and a photographic record sheet was employed, corresponding to photographs taken

during the site survey on 22 October 2011. The archive has been compiled in jpeg format and saved to compact disc.



Figure 09: View of north bank of cashel, looking north-west



Figure 10: View of part of southern cashel wall during excavation, looking east [scale 0.5m]



Figure 11: UAS survey team member at work at Ballyaghagan Cashel

4. Discussion

4.1 Introduction

The UAS survey provided the first accurate plan of this site and included details of the cashel bank, vernacular house site and position of the excavation trenches for the 2011 excavations. It also provided a profile drawing of the site, in a north/south alignment, which captured the profiles of the cashel banks to the north and south of the monument.

4.2 The cashel

Cashels form part of a monument type often referred to as ring-forts. These are enclosed homesteads that take many forms and are the most numerous ancient monuments in Ireland, with over 45,000 examples known (Stout 1997). Rathes can have one, two, or three surrounding earthen banks and ditches and it is thought that the more elaborate examples were a statement of status rather than defensive capability. Rathes are generally found at an altitude of between 30 and 150m above sea level and this is true of the monuments in the Belfast area. Here, ‘around 20 rathes are found along the 600 foot (180m) contour line running between Black Mountain and Cave Hill’ (Ó Baoill 2011, 57).

Townland	Monument type	SMR Number	IG Reference	Altitude (m+OD)
Ballyaghagan	Cashel	ANT 056:019	J 3118 7936	275
Ballygomartin	Raised Rath	ANT 060:020	J 2943 7669	150
Ballygomartin	Rath	ANT 060:022	J 2969 7615	150
Ballymurphy	Platform Rath	ANT 060:036	J 2987 7422	120
Ballyaghagan	Rath	ANT 056:054	J 3233 7844	100
Ballymurphy	Platform Rath	ANT 060:035	J 2986 7408	90
Drumnadrough	Platform Rath	ANT 057:009	J 3302 8117	90
Ballygomartin	Rath	ANT 060:027	J 3079 7566	60
Ballymurphy	Platform Rath	ANT 060:033	J 3117 7275	30
Ballysillan Lower	Rath	ANT 060:042	J 3108 7625	30
Poleglass	Platform Rath	ANT 064:002	J 2782 6949	30

Figure 12: Table of ring fort monuments in the Cave Hill area

Cashels are generally constructed of dry stone walls instead of earth banks and usually do not have a surrounding ditch. It is thought this is more reflective of the local geology than any conscious decision about the type of materials used. In many parts of Ireland, cashels are found at higher altitudes than raths, usually between 150m and 300m above sea level. Ballyaghagan Cashel is located at 275m above sea level and is within this range. Cashels and raths are thought to date from around AD 600 to AD 900, although some may be earlier and others continued to be occupied much later than this. There is much debate about why the builders thought it necessary to construct defensive banks and ditches, but leave a weak-point at the entrance, which is often found to consist of a simple wooden gate. The defences may have been to offer some protection from attack by wild animals, such as wolves, or by gangs of cattle thieves or Vikings. It has also been suggested (Lynn 2005) that the defences were an attempt to keep out epidemics of disease such as plague.

The 2011 plan of Ballyaghagan Cashel confirms that the surrounding bank is roughly circular, with an interior diameter of 42m. A gap of 20m exists at the east and dumps of stones to the north and south of this gap probably represent the remains of the cashel wall that was removed at this point. The profile drawing indicated that there was little attempt made to level the interior of the cashel. Instead, it respected the gentle slope of the surrounding ground to the south-east, although a build-up of soil internally at the south might indicate that the external ground surface here was excavated and placed inside the bank to enhance the appearance of the cashel wall in this area. The bank was found to be constructed of earth, with a stone revetment to the external face. There was no evidence of a surrounding ditch. A geophysical resistivity survey of the interior of the cashel enclosure was carried out by CAF immediately prior to the 2011 excavations. The results indicated the presence of several anomalies within the enclosure, but two test trenches failed to identify any archaeological features.

4.3 The vernacular house

The 2011 plan showed that the later vernacular house was constructed partly within and partly across the cashel bank at the north-west and did not respect the alignment of the bank here. The builders were clearly not interested in employing the cashel bank as a defensive feature and it can only be speculated that the dwelling was so aligned for another purpose. The south gable faces south-west, into the prevailing wind and this was perhaps the reason for this alignment. The position of the door into the dwelling was not positively identified during the excavation, but it is thought to be in the east wall. This would allow for uninterrupted views across the valley below and as far away as Strangford Lough, so perhaps the view alone was sufficient reason for the alignment of the house.



Figure 13: Survey group members excavating

During the excavation, it was found that the original dwelling consisted of a single room, some 9m in length by 6m in width externally (7m by 4m internally). The gables and walls were constructed of large sub-angular boulders of basalt. No evidence of mortar was found, suggesting that clay was employed for bonding the stones. To the north of the original dwelling, a crudely-built extension had been added, 4m in length by 6m in width externally (2.5m by 4m internally). This appeared to be largely constructed of turves and was probably a lean-to storage area. The excavation did not uncover any significant deposits of collapsed masonry and there are two possible reasons for this. Either the dwelling had been constructed of a stone foundation and lower courses, upon which a sod or timber wall had been constructed, or more likely it had been of stone construction throughout and when the dwelling had fallen out of use, the larger stones were removed and re-used in nearby features, such as the enclosure to the south, or to line the drainage ditch that runs across the field. Preliminary examination of some of the pottery sherds recovered during the excavation point to a mid-seventeenth-century date for the vernacular house.



Figure 14: Inscribed stone recovered from vernacular house

Also recovered from the excavation at the vernacular house was an inscribed stone (fig. 14). Preliminary analysis suggests this is of red sandstone, with a segment pattern inscribed on both faces.

4.4 Prehistoric activity

A Neolithic settlement site (ANT 056:092) is recorded on the Sites and Monuments Record some 100m to the north-west of the cashel site in the adjacent townland of Ballyvaston. The findspot of flint flakes (ANT 056:093) is also recorded in Ballyaghagan townland, to the east of the site, although the exact location is not known. During the 2011 excavations, a large quantity of prehistoric flint tools and flakes were recovered and it is possible that the prehistoric settlement may also underlie the cashel or surrounding area.

4.5 Summary

The UAS plan accurately confirmed the position of the vernacular house over the cashel wall and detailed the excavation trenches and other features across the enclosure on an overall site plan. It is clear from initial analysis of the information so far obtained that the Ballyaghagan Cashel site is within an area of significant archaeological activity, stretching back into prehistory, with visible features relating to the early medieval and plantation periods and later activity in the form of large areas of ridge and furrow cultivation.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations for further work

This survey provided the members of the Survey Group an opportunity to participate in a major archaeological event in the Belfast Hills, an area which is being made more accessible to members of the public by organisations such as the National Trust, Belfast Hills Partnership and Belfast City Council. Many members of the group also participated in the archaeological excavation itself, building on the skills and experience gained at previous excavations organised by the National Trust.

Only the interior of the cashel was investigated during the survey of 22 October 2011, but other features in the surrounding field (discussed above) would benefit from archaeological survey. The square enclosure and drainage feature to the south, along with the oval-shaped enclosure to the north-east merit further investigation and knowledge of these features would add significantly to the story of the site. The Ulster Archaeological Society has contributed significantly to this particular event and looks forward to participation in similar endeavours in the future.

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PHOTOGRAPHIC RECORD

Site: Ballyaghagan Cashel, Co. Antrim.

Date: 22 October 2011

Film no.	B/W Print	Colour print	Colour slide	Digital image (m.pixels)
				8

Make and model of camera...*Ricoh G600*

Frame no	From	Details
RIMG0044	N/A	Red sandstone inscribed stone
RIMG0119	S/W	View of cashel, prior to excavation
RIMG0103	NW	View of vernacular house prior to excavation
RIMG0037	S/W	Survey group working in cashel interior
RIMG0033	S/W	Survey group member working in cashel interior
RIMG0030	S/W	Survey and excavation crews at work
RIMG0026	S	Southern end of Trench 1, showing south gable of house
RIMG0022	E	Section through fire deposits at south gable wall
RIMG0020	E	Stone feature at southern end of Trench 1
RIMG0017	W	Lean-to extension to north of house
RIMG0004	S	South-facing section of Trench 3
RIMG0116	E	View of drainage ditch and square enclosure
RIMG0101	SE	View of north bank of cashel
RIMG0038	E	View of Trench 2, with cashel bank and revetment
RIMG0042	E	View of southern end of Trench 2