A SURVEY OF THE EARTHWORKS IN THE
DISTRICT OF OLD PALLASGREAN

By Michael O'Dwyer

It is generally accepted that monuments of the ring-fort type are not only
the most numerous but also the most widely distributed class of ancient structure
in Ireland. Estimates of their number vary from about thirty to forty thousand.
These figures have been obtained by counting the forts shown on the six inch
scale sheets of the Ordnance Survey, but for several reasons this is not a reliable
method. While our surveyors deserve the highest praise for recording so many
of them at a time when archaeological studies in Ireland had scarcely begun, it is
not surprising that many earthworks were missed and likewise, that sites were
recorded in error. Also, some sites which superficially look like ring-forts can be
shown to be monuments of other types. Indeed even the trained archaeological
field-worker of to-day will often have difficulty in deciding the exact nature of a
structure unless he can excavate it. This being the case, it is obvious that it
would be churlish to blame the surveyors of one hundred years ago for such
mistakes as they may have made.

But whatever the exact number of earthworks may be, it is clear that they
offer a challenge to Irish archaeologists, a challenge which must before long be
taken more seriously than it has been in the recent past. In proportion to the
numbers that exist, a pitifully small few have been scientifically excavated—a
few dozen in the past twenty years—and this small number is by no means a
statistical sample. Those that have been dug have thrown much new light on the
way of life of the people of ancient Ireland and this is only to be expected since
these sites were for the most part the dwelling places and farmsteads of the
people. Comparatively few of them were forts in the purely military sense.

The origin of the type remains obscure, though as the late Professor O
Riordáin pointed out(1) there are now some indications that it may have been
a native development which began as early as the beginning of the Bronze Age.
Sites, such as Circle K at Lough Gur, formerly thought to have been ritual stone
circles, O Riordáin had come to regard as habitation sites and he saw them as
steps in the beginning of the evolution of the ring-fort. Unfortunately, he did
not live to publish these findings in full. Another early ring-fort was that at
Carrigtogort,(2) Co Cork, where the finds indicated a date in the Early Bronze Age.
Other excavated sites have given dates in the Late Bronze Age, the Early
Christian Period and down to the eleventh century.(3) It is probable that there
are some of even later date than this. On present evidence it would seem that
the majority of the ring-forts fall within the first millennium A.D., but as pointed
out above, the number of excavated sites is not a statistical sample and it is
therefore dangerous to generalise. Even if it is shown conclusively in due time

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(3) O Riordáin: ibid., p.4.
that the heyday of the ring-fort is late, this is not an argument against an early Irish beginning for the type.

If the true range in time of the ring-fort is what it now appears to be, it is obvious that persistent excavation of this class of monument should prove rewarding in the amount of information that would be obtained on the activities of our ancestors over a period of about three thousand years. It is all the more tragic therefore that these earthworks are being destroyed at an alarming rate all over the country now. Land improvement schemes have brought bulldozers and other heavy earthmoving machines into all parts of the country and these machines can remove the finest ring-fort in a few hours. It is true that more ring-forts have been destroyed in the past ten years than were destroyed in the previous fifty, and usually with little if any economic gain to the land-owners.

No archaeological survey of the twenty-six counties has yet been attempted—a full survey is in progress for the past five years in the six northern counties—and as the rate of destruction of monuments is increasing, it is obvious that unless something is done to record them, a most valuable source of information will be lost to archaeology. It is for this reason that we present here a survey of those sites in a small area of east Limerick. If some of them are destroyed before any excavation is done, there will be available at least this record of their surface features.

The ring-forts of east Limerick exhibit a wide variety of structural forms as was shown by the Small County survey published in this Journal several years ago. Some of the forms recorded for that area recur in the Pallaskeney neighbourhood, such as those platform structures where the circular area enclosed by a continuous ditch is a little higher than the surrounding field. Sites of this class sometimes have in them small circular features which are either huts or ring-barrows (see Nos. 3 and 18 below). These small structures are usually marked only by a narrow shallow continuous ditch which is very similar in appearance to the ditches of known excavated groups of burial barrows in east Limerick. But it remains for excavation to show whether these also are barrows or hut-sites, and if barrows, whether they are contemporaneous with the platforms on which they lie or later additions.

It may be that some of the platform sites are not habitation but ritual monuments. Published results are available to us from a single platform earthwork and unfortunately this example differs significantly from the majority if not from all of the recorded sites. This one at Grange, near Lough Gur, exhibited before excavation not only a low bank on the edge of the platform as well as a clearly defined causeway across the ditch, but also within the enclosed area another low bank which indicated the position of a hut. Normally, the entrance to the platform is not visible and the hut (or barrow?) within is represented by a continuous ditch of barrow form, not by a bank as at Grange. While the Grange results were very useful, we cannot yet generalise from them and apply them to all the platform sites. Furthermore, O Riordain reported on the excavation of two isolated houses, i.e., houses not on platform earthworks.

which beforehand, were scarcely distinguishable from barrows because they too were marked by ditches only, though in one case the entrance was marked by a causeway across the ditch. Sites in the same field and very similar in appearance, proved to be barrows on excavation! (8)

These Limerick platform sites are also similar in appearance to such sites as Ballacagan and Ballanorris in the Isle of Man, (9) which Bersu excavated and found to be great circular houses of Iron Age date covered by domed roofs supported on concentric rings of wooden posts. The interior diameters of these houses were about 70 to 90 feet. The same excavator has claimed similar findings at Lissus, Co. Antrim, this time dating to the ninth and tenth centuries. (10) His findings at these three sites have tempted Bersu to argue that many of the Irish ring-forts were provided with great roofs of this type. Three out of thirty thousand hardly provides evidence for such a generalisation, but just the same, the notion has escaped into print (11) and this despite a much larger body of evidence to the contrary!

There are other higher platform sites, however, (Nos. 19 and 20 below) which may be late structures of the Norman motte type, but even here, outward form is not always reliable. Mr. John Hunt found at Ballingarry Down, Co. Limerick, that a high platform site had had several periods running from the Early Christian to the early Norman and each time the place was re-used an addition was made to its height. No. 8 below is a curious monument in that it has a broad berm around the central platform on which there is a standing stone. Again, excavation is necessary before it can be said whether this is a habitation site or some form of burial or ritual monument.

In presenting the Pallasgruean sites, only sectional profiles have been given as these convey all the essential information. Where little or no surface detail is visible, the publication of plans would add nothing to that obtainable from the profiles. All of the profiles are drawn to the same scale so as to enable accurate comparisons of diameter and height to be made easily. Furthermore, they have been arranged so that sites of closely comparable dimensions come together in each of the three figures. This prevents the smaller sites from being over reduced in block-making. The drawings show what a considerable range there is even in this small area.

The district surveyed lies south of the Mulkear River some eleven to fifteen miles south-east of Limerick city and is contained for the most part in the Barony of Coonagh. A few of the sites lie outside this barony and in those cases the relevant barony names are given in the text. All of the sites examined (except one) fall within the O.S. 6” scale sheet Limerick no. 24, to which the co-ordinates given in the text refer. The co-ordinates are measured from the map margins given, i.e., N.20.0; E.10.6cms means 20cms from the north margin and 10cms from the east margin.

(8) J.R.S.A.I., LXXIX (1947), 139-145.
(9) Journal of the Marx Museum, V (1945-6), 177-182.
1. Dromlara. N.17.8; E.39.5cms. A large ring-fort 198' in internal diameter. The enclosed area is level and shows no features. The bank, 8' to 10' thick and 6' high, seems to be entirely of earth. The original entrance is not recognisable though there are two breaks in the bank, one of 24' wide on the NE and another on the SW. The latter has been built up again in modern times. The ditch is about 12' wide.

2. Kilduff. N.34.5; W.51.3cms. The local name for this site is "Rathfaun." This again is large, the internal diameter being about 200' though it is not quite circular. The whole of the interior area is slightly raised above the level of the surrounding field and in the NE quadrant are what appear to be the remains of a circular house 21' in diameter. The outline of this structure is about 1' over the level of the garth of the fort. The enclosing bank is denuded to a height of about 3' and its basal width is about 10'. A 6' wide gap on the E side may have been the original entrance. The wide ditch, about 18' across, seems to have a trench connecting it with an adjacent stream as if to enable it to be water-filled.

3. Castlecloghan. S.15.5; E.17.0cms. A platform earthwork surrounded by a continuous ditch 18' wide. There may have been a bank on the edge of the platform but in the absence of excavation it is not possible to be certain of this. The platform is slightly higher than the surrounding field and there is a suggestion of a counter-scarp bank on the outer edge of the ditch. The diameter of the platform is 140' and at its centre there is a circular area 21' in diameter delimited by a narrow shallow ditch. The very slight mounding of the area within this little ditch suggests the possibility that it is a burial barrow, but
allowance must be made for the equally strong possibility that the feature is a hut site.

4. Pallasbeg. N.1.8; W.29.5cms. (Barony of Owneybeg). A well preserved platform earthwork with slight traces of a bank on the edge of the platform. The ditch is continuous and there is some suggestion of a counter-scarp bank. A small mound near the centre of the enclosure may be a hut site. Some holly trees grow on the edge of the platform.

5. Garravin. N.36.1; E.10.5cms. A large but low platform earthwork so denuded as to give the impression of having been ploughed down. The continuous ditch is very wide at 33’. There are no features in the...

6. Pallasbeg. N.1.6; W.26.0cms. (Barony of Owneybeg). It is difficult to decide if this is a platform structure or a ploughed down fort of the ordinary form. There are traces of a bank at the edge of the platform and again just outside the ditch. It may, therefore, have been a double banked ring-fort. The platform is 225’ in diameter and shows many irregularities. If the site has not been ploughed over, these may represent hut sites. The ditch is about 12’ wide.

7. Ballyhurst. N.25.0; W.37.0cms. The O.S. map name for this site, “Rathbaun,” is not now known locally. A very low bank encloses an area not quite circular, whose maximum dimension is 165’. The enclosure is level with the surrounding field and shows no surface traces of hut-sites. The building of fences around the earthwork renders it difficult to distinguish ancient features from modern additions.

8. Longstone, near Cullen, Co. Tipperary. O.S. 6’’ scale sheet no. 58. W.30.8; S.21.4cms. (Barony of Clanwilliam). This interesting monument is just over the county boundary in Tipperary. Excavation would be needed to determine the nature of the site. It is an earthwork, but it appears more likely to be a ritual or burial monument than a habitation. Within the enclosing bank there is a broad ditch and within this a wide berm surrounding a concentrically placed flat-topped mound 8’ high over the level of the berm. On the centre of this mound is a fine pillar stone 10’ high, 3’ wide and 2’ thick. The area within the ditch is 138’ in diameter and the central platform 72’ in diameter.

9. Knockballyfookeen. N.31.1; E.29.7cms. A platform 90’ in diameter which has a slightly depressed centre and a raised edge. This probably denotes that a bank once stood at the edge of the platform. The ditch, about 10’ wide, is continuous and the position of the entrance cannot be determined. There are no indications of internal structures.

10. Cloghaderreen. S.4.7; W.38.3cms. A low platform structure surrounded by a continuous ditch and low outer bank. There does not appear to be an outer ditch. The interior is 90’ in diameter. There are no indications of internal structures.

11. Brookyle. N.26.4; E.32.0cms. A circular enclosure 100’ in diameter delimited by a continuous ditch about 12’ wide. The entrance is not recognizable—a sloping ramp cut into the SE edge is probably modern. There are no indications of internal structures.
12. Ballynagally. S.10.0; W.12.5cms. A low platform structure 150' in diameter. There are faint traces of a bank at the edge. The shallow ditch appears to be continuous. There is no evidence of the position of the entrance and there are no internal structures.

13. Nicker. N.12.3; W.46.0cms. Not marked on the O.S. map as an
antiquity. A low slight bank now appearing to be about 3' thick encloses a circular area 180' in diameter which is slightly higher than the surrounding field level. The position of the entrance is uncertain and there is no evidence of an external ditch. There are no indications of structures in the interior. The site appears on the map as a small roughly circular field.

14. Cross. S.32.5; E.24.5cms. A low platform 90' in diameter surrounded by a ditch which appears to have been filled in on one arc. The position of the entrance is not determinable and there are no internal structures.

15. Nicker. N.22.0; W.37.4cms. A platform structure 75' in diameter with a slightly depressed centre. There may have been a bank at the edge. The broad deep ditch is continuous and there is no indication of the entrance nor of any interior structures.

17. Ballynagally. S.13.7; W.21.3cms. The platform here is markedly higher than the surrounding field level and its edges are steep. The interior, 30' in diameter, shows no evidence of a bank at its edge, but broad parallel ridges show that the site has been tilled in the "lazy bed" manner and this has obliterated all other surface indications. The position of the entrance is indeterminable.

18. Ballynagally. S.15.0; W.24.1cms. Another high platform 90' in diameter, surrounded by a broad deep ditch outside which there is some evidence of a counter-scarp bank. The entrance is not determinable but in the NE quadrant of the platform there are two conjoined circular areas forming a figure-of-eight in plan and marked by narrow shallow ditches. These are 15' and 12' in diameter respectively. Excavation is needed to determine if these are huts or burial barrows. The ditch is permanently waterlogged and this has helped to maintain the platform in a fine state of preservation.

19. Knockballyfookeen. N.33.8; E.27.7cms. A high platform structure 84' in diameter. The surface of the platform slopes from E to W and has a slightly depressed centre. The edge of the platform is 20' high over the ditch bottom on the E side and 9' on the west. The edges have remained remarkably steep. The ditch appears to be continuous and is 13' wide. The position of the entrance is unknown.

20. Cloghaderreen. S.14.0; W.37.4cms. This is the fine Pallagreen motte which is 50' high and has well preserved steeply sloping sides. The flat top is 66' in diameter and in the NE quadrant there are the remains of a rectangular structure 24' by 27'. The ditch is 18' broad and is regular and well-shaped except on the west side where damage has been done in the making of a farm entrance. The bailey may have been on this side too, but if so, is now very difficult to discern because of the modern disturbance.

21. Glen. N.33.3; W.23.5cms. This site is much damaged and an old denuded fence passes through it. It lies on sloping ground and because of this the ditch is well-marked on the higher side of the site, while on the lower the ditch is little more than a scarping away of the natural slope. The monument may have been of platform type, but there is some slight evidence of a bank at the edge of the enclosure. The diameter of the latter is 78'. There are no indications of internal structures.

22. Pallashill. N.35.5; W.31.5cms. A platform type of site though there are slight indications of a bank on the edge of the platform. A field fence cuts
through the centre of the monument. The ditch is best defined on the west side where it is about 6' wide. The diameter of the platform is 66'.

23. Moymore. N.33.0; W.37.0cms. This site has suffered some interference and denudation, but it appears to be a platform structure with some evidence of a bank at its edge. The ditch probably was continuous but is now filled up on the western side of the site. The platform is 54' in diameter and on its NE quadrant has a low mound about 18' in diameter—probably a hut-site.

24. Lisheen. N.18.3; W.37.5cms. A very low platform structure which has suffered disturbance and denudation and a field fence cuts across the SE edge. There are no indications of structures on the platform which is 74' in diameter. The ditch was probably continuous but this is not certain because of the way in which the south-east side of the site has been obscured by the fence.

25. Corelish West. N.13.3; W.20.4cms. (Barony of Clanwilliam). A well-marked platform structure built on sloping ground, so that the E side is much higher than the W. On the E, too, the ditch had to be made deep and wide to cut off the monument from the rising ground above it and the extra material thrown up has added to the height of the platform on this side. On the W the natural slope was little more than scarped away in lieu of a ditch. The platform is 87' in diameter and there are no indications of internal structures. The ditch on the E side of the monument has been incorporated into the course of a swift stream and in doing so was probably further deepened as its bottom here is partly rock-cut.

26. Knockavannroe. S.6.0; W.29.3cms. This monument appears to belong to the ordinary ring-fort class, that is, a circular area 99' in diameter enclosed by a normal type bank and ditch. The interior level may be slightly higher than the field outside. The bank is 4' high and of earthen construction. The ditch is well-marked on the southern half of the monument where it is about 10' wide. On the northern half it seems to have been filled up in modern times. The original entrance may have been on the NE side where there is an 18' gap in the bank. Otherwise, the fort is well preserved. There are no indications of houses in the interior.

27. Reask. N.21.8; E.14.5cms. This monument is quite clearly a platform structure, but is unusual in that there is a broad berm about 27' wide around the edge of the platform. The ditch outside the berm is not well-marked. The overall diameter is 135', while the central platform is about 70'. There are no indications of structures on the platform and excavation would be necessary to decide whether this is a habitation or a ritual site.

28. Cluggin. S.10.5; E.13.5cms. This is a much destroyed site but it appears to have been of platform type. The O.S. map name 'Rathnagalles' is still known locally. The platform seems to have had a diameter of about 63'. The ditch is much disturbed so that it is uncertain if it was continuous or not.

29. Knockballyjooken. N.32.7; E.32.5cms. A platform structure 93' in diameter slightly raised above the surrounding field level. There is no trace of a bank at the edge of the platform nor is the ditch visible though it probably exists. There are no indications of structures on the platform.

30. Bunowie. N.15.5; W.32.7cms. This appears to be a ring-fort of simple form where the interior is level with the surrounding field. The enclosing bank is low and has a gap 9' wide at the E side which may be the original
entrance. A ditch is not visible but it is likely that there was one. The interior, 112' in diameter, shows no indications of huts or other structures.

About 80' to the SE (not marked on the O.S. map) there are very denuded remains of a small enclosure about 21' in diameter. There are traces of a low bank inside a shallow ditch. This is small enough to be a house site but allowance should be made for the possibility that it is a ring-barrow.

31. Gortnauniv. N 30.0; W 29.5. (not marked on O.S. map). This platform structure is cut through the centre by a modern field fence and the portion of the site to the E of this is so much damaged that the edge of the platform and the ditch outside are hardly discernable. West of the fence there are some indications that the platform had a bank at its edge, and perhaps, a slight counter-scarp bank outside the ditch. The original diameter of the platform seems to have been about 70'.

32. Longstone. N 30.7; W 3.5cms. (Barony of Clanwilliam). This is a somewhat unusual earthwork of small size. A broad bank, 24' thick at the base, has a gently sloping outer face and an almost vertical inner one. The height inside is almost 10'. A 6' wide gap in the bank at the E side gives access to the interior and may have been the original entrance. There is no evidence of an external ditch. The enclosed area, 30' in diameter, is below the level of the land outside and this has led to waterlogging of the interior. Excavation is necessary to determine the exact nature and purpose of this site.

33. Knockgream. N 37.0; W 28.4cms. As this monument now stands, it is a low mound about 70' in diameter and about 3' high. It may be a severely destroyed platform earthwork or some form of barrow or burial mound. No stones show through the turf and there is no evidence of a surrounding ditch.

34. Correlish West. N 10.2; W 17.0cms. (Barony of Clanwilliam). This is a low platform structure about 60' in diameter surrounded by a narrow shallow ditch. Outside this there are indications of a low bank. There are no signs of structures in the interior.

35. Gortnakistim. N 25.8; E 0.6cms. A platform structure 75' in diameter surrounded by a slight ditch. There may have been a slight outer bank. The ditch is continuous and there is no evidence of the position of the entrance, nor are there any indications of structures in the interior.

36. Coolnaphisla. N 22.0; E 20.5cms. A low platform monument 72' in diameter surrounded by a slight continuous ditch and low outer bank. Part of the SE side has been levelled out. There are no indications of structures nor can an entrance be identified.

37. Glen. N 32.0; W 31.5cms. This appears to have been a small circular ring-fort of about 50' in diameter. It is now very much denuded—the bank practically levelled and a ditch is not visible.

38. Newtown North. N 3.0; W 20.0cms. This is “Rathaelin” on the O.S. map, but locally is “Rathallen.” It may have been a platform structure with a broad low bank at its edge, or it may have been a simple ring-fort. A 15' wide gap on the E side may have been the entrance. The diameter is about 70'.

39. Garranobog. N 24.0; W 45.5cms. This monument is denuded and damaged, but appears to have been a simple ring-fort enclosed by a bank and ditch. A 12' gap on the E side may have been the entrance. In the interior, which is 71' in diameter, there is in the SE quadrant a circular hollow 3' deep and 15' in diameter. This may be the remains of some structure or may indicate modern disturbance.