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Source: *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, Vol. 39 (Jan. - Jun., 1909), pp. 220-227

Published by: [Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland](#)

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## SOME ULSTER SOUTERRAINS.

BY MARY HOBSON.

For many years past I have lost few opportunities of visiting and measuring any souterrains of which I have heard. The sum total is not so great as at first might be expected, owing to our very wet climate. So many are situated far from a railway station, occasionally in almost inaccessible places, and being underground are subject to flooding, some of which never dry up and are consequently impossible to enter, others I have waited for months to see, and again great numbers are closed, the entrances lost, and even their existence forgotten. I have been able to tell people that one existed on their own land.

I have carefully measured all that I shall have occasion to mention and made sketches and taken photographs of some entrances. The measured drawings are by Florence F. Hobson. I need hardly say that souterrain is the name that we give to artificial underground caves in Ireland. They are built of unhewn field stones and take the form of narrow chambers and long passages roofed over with large flag stones and are absolutely devoid of mortar. I shall deal almost exclusively with those in the two counties of Antrim and Down. Farther south a circular type of structure occurs. I have said that they are underground. That is so except in an earthen fort and in rare cases where the earth has been removed. One is always struck by the smallness of the entrances (which are most cunningly concealed) and also of the doorways between one chamber and another; almost always one has to lie down flat and creep through, and some I have been in are

too small to admit the width of shoulder of an average sized man, a point I shall draw attention to later. The structures are quite dark and of an even temperature all the year round. They are near the surface and I have never come across any bad air.

I will take the Antrim caves first. At the foot of Knockdhu, a hill overlooking the coast-road from Larne, is a souterrain containing six chambers with a length of 87 feet exclusive of a flooded chamber (Fig. 1).

Again and again I am struck by the frequency with which prehistoric monuments are found quite near to the caves; in this case

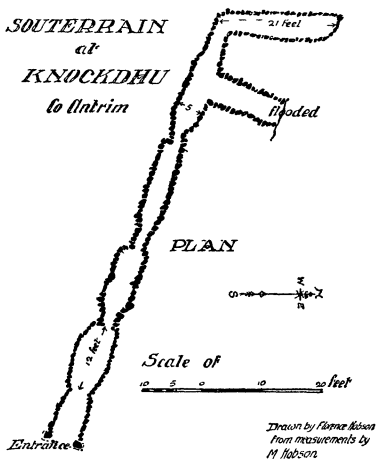


FIG. 1.

we have a giant's grave 32 feet long, a standing stone 17 feet 9 inches high, a second giant's grave, a kistvaen, etc. A small but perfect cave occurs at Crebilly near Ballymena; it contains two chambers.

At Shankbridge is a fine fort known as Fort Hill, and in it a cave. The first chamber is 10 feet long and 5 feet high, second chamber 15 feet long, and near the far end on the right is one of the low doorways leading to another chamber which is flooded; it is probable that this structure runs right through the fort, as on the opposite side is what looks like another entrance.

On the road to Crumlin from Belfast is Lisnataylor Fort. The cave in it

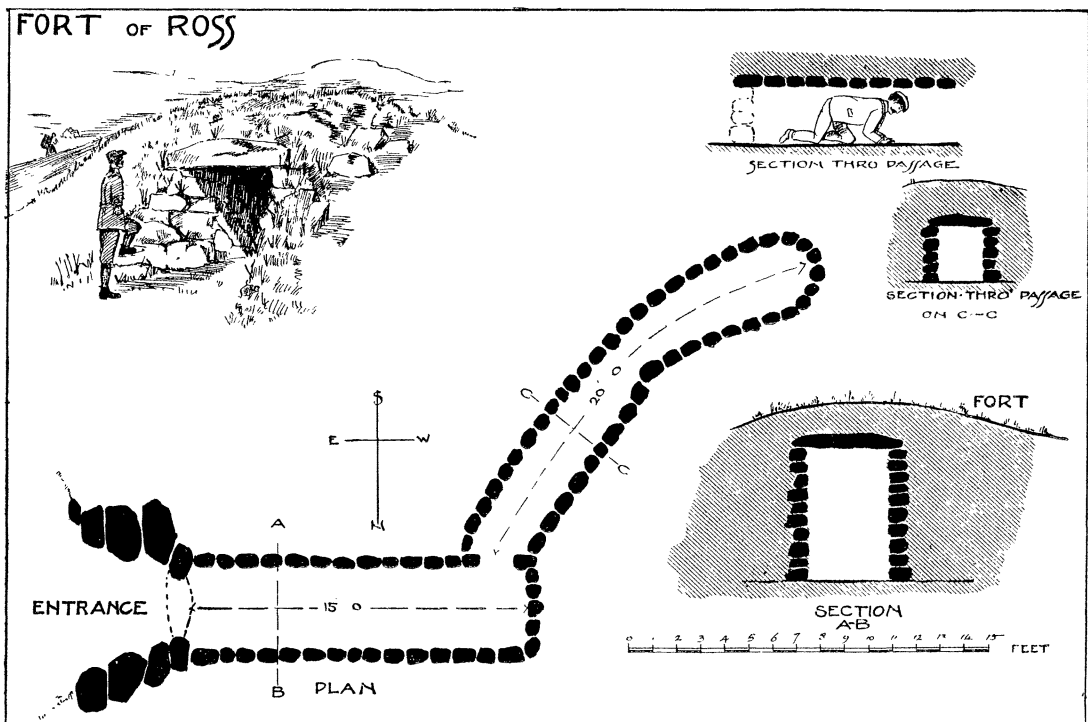


FIG. 2.

contains only a single chamber 10 feet long, 4 feet to 4 feet 6 inches wide, height 3 to 4 feet; the covering stone at entrance is 2 feet 6 inches on the under-side, height of entrance is 2 feet.

The district round Connor is honeycombed with souterrains. Two in the churchyard were measured years ago and reported in an *Ulster Archaeological Journal*. In one day I visited and measured no less than four, Tanneybrack, Ballycown, Fort of Ross (Fig. 2) and Shankbridge (Fig. 3). This cave is a very perfect one and quite dry. It has almost the smallest opening I have been through. The first chamber is 15 feet long, 3 feet 9 inches high, second chamber 19 feet 6 inches long and 4 feet 6 inches high, the last doorway is 17 by 17 inches, and proved a perfect fit; last chamber 16 feet 6 inches long and about 3 feet high.

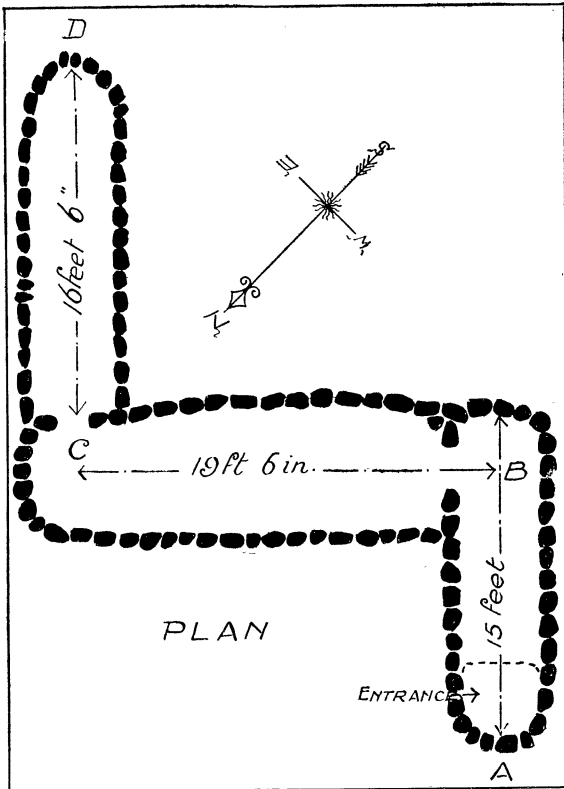


FIG. 3.

In co. Antrim there are certain diversities in structure which are not come across in Down.

At Donegore the entrance is large and looks like a natural cave, but the interior has been scooped out of the rock (basaltic ash), and has another chamber on higher level: the entrance cave is 5 feet 4 inches high, 8 feet 3 inches long, the upward tunnel 20 feet long, entrance 31 inches wide (Fig. 4).

In the same district, at Ballymartin, is another of exactly the same type, cut out of the face of a cliff overhanging the river, but this has a roof of large stones placed across in the usual way. This souterrain has four chambers so rising in height that at the end one is almost in a standing position. The lengths are: first chamber 8 feet, second chamber 17 feet, third 7 feet 6 inches, the doorway 5 feet, and the last chamber is 7 feet, total length 44 feet 6 inches (Fig. 5).

The one case of two distinct stories, one partly over the other, is at Bog Head, Muckamore. This was accidentally discovered, and we have not yet found the original entrance. The dimensions are: a sort of vestibule 5 feet 6 inches long; a low doorway 2 feet 7 inches by 1 foot 7 inches, chamber 7 feet by 4 feet and 5 feet high. A hole in the floor 2 feet 6 inches by 2 feet 2 inches admits to the lower chamber 19 feet 2 inches long, 3 feet 3 inches to 5 feet 2 inches wide. Again another doorway, but now choked up. Both these floors have been dug over by the Rev. W. A. Adams of Antrim, and have yielded pottery of a very primitive description, most likely domestic.

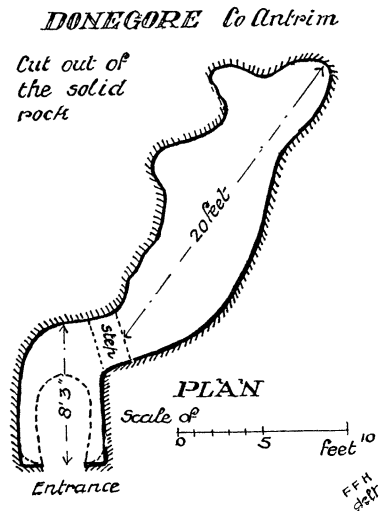


FIG. 4.

Others of smaller proportions are, one at Liminary discovered in June, 1904, containing three perfect chambers, one 15 feet long and 5 feet high.

One near the "Altar in the Woods," Glendun, with one chamber only. One near Tornamona Cashel, Cushlake, on the face of the cliffs overhanging the sea, a quite perilous place to reach.

At Tavenahoney in Glenan I found the only vent or shaft I have seen, though I know of another. I am not sure that it was intended for ventilation, but rather incline

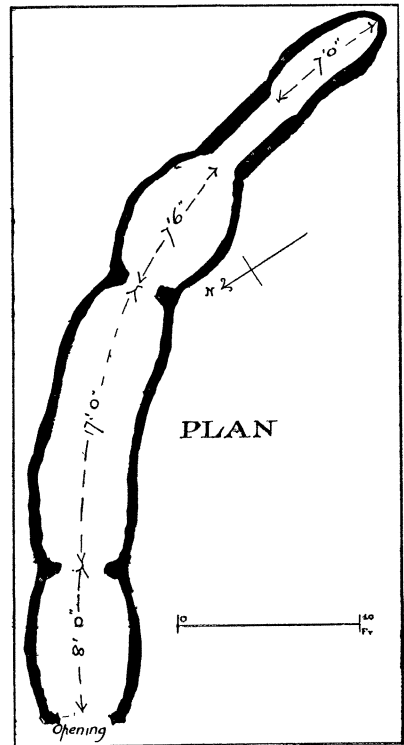


FIG. 5.

to the idea that it is a speaking tube to give warning to those inside; a boy spoke to me through it. It was closed on the outside by a rough stone like thousands scattered over the hillside. There are two short chambers.

At Bushmills and Giant's Causeway I found two caves, one built of rocks *in situ*, and filled between artificially, with the only guard-chamber I know of (three rocks forming a triangle); just within the entrance some tunnelling has been cleverly done in the rock; at the Giant's Causeway near the P.O. tunnelling has also been done (Fig. 6).

The structures in co. Down while not showing the diversities

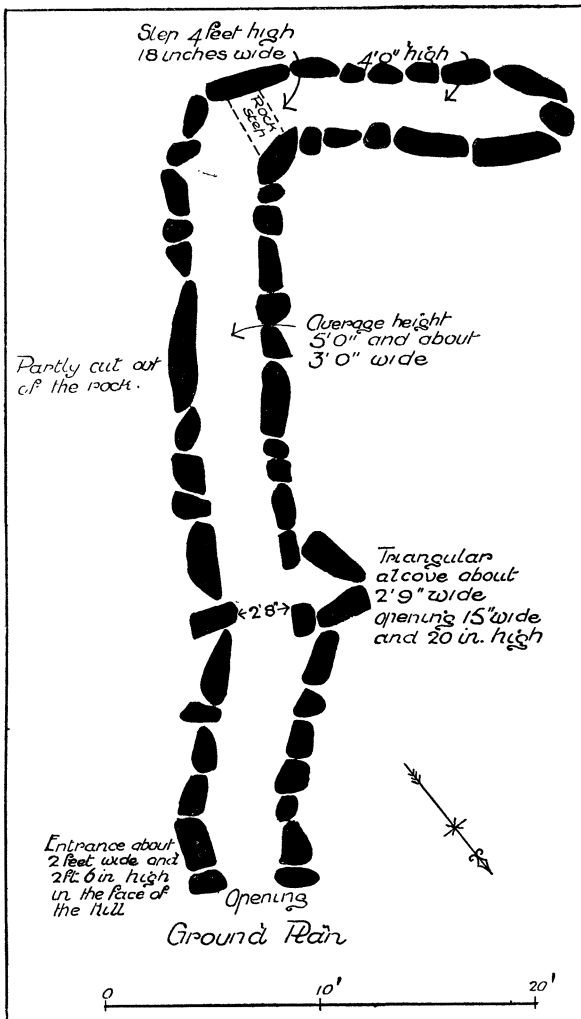


FIG. 6.

of Antrim, *i.e.*, two stories, tunnelling, etc., are much longer. We will take a few of the more important.

At Ballygrainey (the town of the sunny palace) near Craigavad Station and within a few miles of Belfast is a very fine one, 70 feet 6 inches in length, and containing four chambers; the first being 16 feet 6 inches long, 5 feet 3 inches wide and 5 feet 3 inches high; to the right of entrance a passage 19 feet long, 15 inches and upwards in width, and the height of which varies from 2 feet 20 inches, the low doorway to chamber on the left (from entrance chamber) is

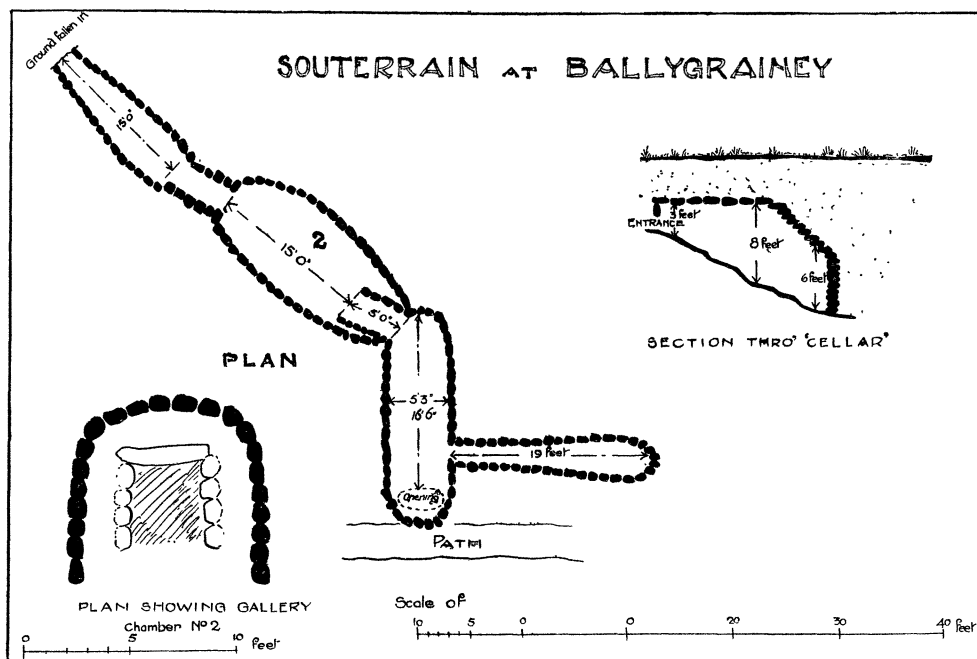


FIG. 7.

42 inches wide and 5 feet long, and just high enough to get through, the second chamber is 15 feet long, 5 to 8 feet wide, third chamber 15 feet long, 4 feet 6 inches high (Fig. 7).

At Cove Hill, near Rathmullan on Dundrum Bay, the cave is 120 feet long,



SECTION THRO' A BARRIER

FIG. 8.

3 feet wide and 6 feet high, with a transverse terminal chamber 14 feet by 5 feet. It has very curious barriers 2 to 3 feet high (Fig. 8), as also has one a few miles distant. This neighbourhood is rich in a fine stone circle, standing stones, cromleacs, kitchen-middens, etc.

Half a mile away I found at Clanmagery another, 54 feet long. I asked had it ever been visited and was told once years ago by a very thin young man! One could well believe it (Fig. 9).

At Slanes, near Cloughy, is a very fine structure about 90 feet long. I found

it flooded on the occasion of my first two visits and only on the third did I reach the end (Fig. 10).

The cave at Ardtole, near Ardglass, is 118 feet 3 inches in length, with a transverse terminal chamber.

On the slopes of Slieve Croob, one of the Mourne Range, is one of the finest cromleacs in the country, known as Legananny cromleac, the cap-stone of which is 11 feet long; not far away, at the foot of Slieve-na-Boley, is the longest cave I have seen in the two counties. The entrance is very small; one feared to stick fast in it and run the risk of displacing the stones; in such an event entombment would surely follow (Fig. 11).

Recently I visited the chambered tumuli on the Loughcrew Hills in Meath. Quite near to them

is a large souterrain with no very small openings, one passage ending in a great circular chamber, each course overlapping until closed by a single stone. A circular cave is in a fort at Lucan, co. Dublin; it is 10 feet in diameter and the same height. I have come across no structure of this shape in the north of Ireland except one now demolished which was really a tumulus; this type of

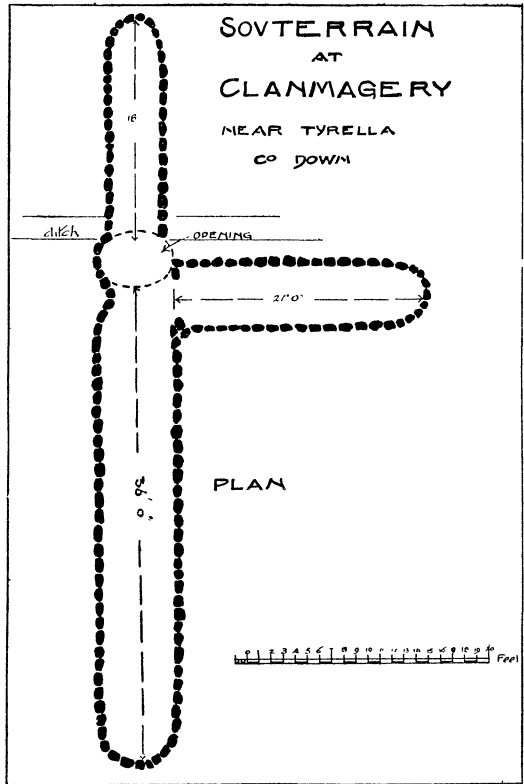


FIG. 9.

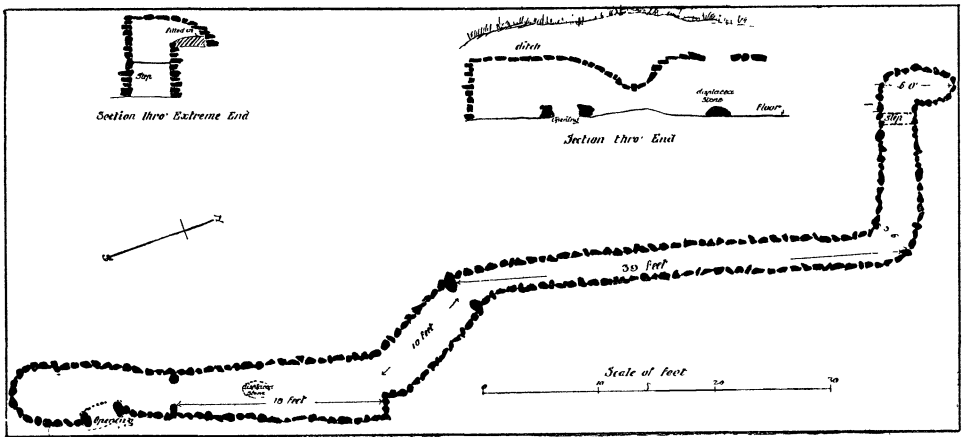


FIG. 10.



souterrain seems to me a link with the chambered tumuli at New Grange, Loughcrew, etc., though the latter are built of larger stones. In plan there is every diversity, some are mere passages, one is like the letter F, another like Γ, another the shape of an inflated stocking, some circular, an elongated W, and a crescent, etc., etc. Nowhere are the entrances oriented, but one thing is certain, it is almost impossible to get a good photograph of one in the middle hours of the day.

I should like to say something of tradition in relation to the structures. The building of them is nearly always attributed to the "Danes," the "Fairies," the "Good People," or in rare instances to the Picts. The Danes here referred to are not the modern Danes, but probably the Tuatha-da-Danaan, a people who are said

to have lived in Ireland before the coming of the Celts. They are the "Fairies," and are said to have been of small stature, like "children," the country people will tell one. Innumerable are the tales of how a person's grandfather has seen them literally disappear into the earth and the hillsides, and how, even to-day, misfortune always follows the meddling with a cave, the cutting of a fairy thorn, or the removal of an earthen fort. Fairly educated people give instances, and will say they "don't altogether believe in it," yet they *know* of people dying within the year, their children being dwarfed, misfortune coming upon their cattle, etc., and very few people, even city-folk, will venture into these caves or palaces, and no wonder, for they are weird and uncanny, always enveloped in an awesome gloom. When creeping through the tiny doorways, if alone, one needs to summon some little courage.

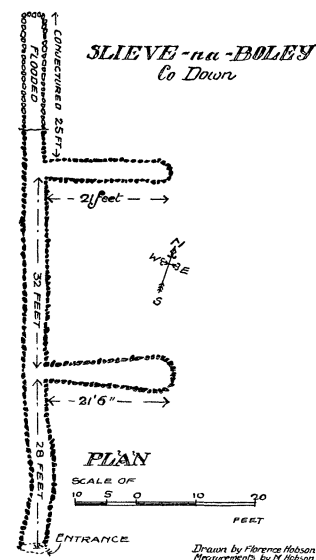


FIG. 11.

To superstition we may attribute their preservation in such numbers to-day; once that fear dies (it is only a question of time) they will disappear, for the owners will close or break them.

The first instance of an Ogam inscription being found in Ulster was at Carncomb, near Connor, a few years ago by the Rev. W. P. Carmody, B.A.; it was on the roofing stones, but so rubbed or weathered before being placed there that it was extremely difficult to decipher. Readings were made by Prof. Rhys and the late Dr. Buick, the former took it to be "Caig, son of Fobrach," a memorial to one who educated and baptized St. Cadoc, one of the early Fathers of the Church, thus bringing the age of this souterrain well on into Christian times (a second inscription is still in the cave). This is the seventeenth instance of Ogams discovered in these structures in Ireland. Though many souterrains may be of fair antiquity (judging by mode of construction, no mortar and no trace of arch, etc.), it is likely that some were built in more recent times. It is recorded that Donough Cairbreach O'Brien in A.D. 1242 built forts and



Brian Boru repaired many in which very probably caves occurred. We read that in 1317 "Donchad O'Brien before the battle of Corcomroe" summoned every man living in an "ooam" (cave) to his army (MacRitchie).

During the rebellion of 1798 the rebels took refuge in them; I know of several with this record.

Perhaps in Ireland no type of structure, whether for the living or the dead, has been so long in occupation, so long a thing made use of, more so even than the chambered tumulus, the cromleac, the kistvaen, the crannog, the bee-hive cell, or the Norman keep; even to-day the modern tramp does not disdain to spend a night in one of the outer chambers when it is big enough to admit him, and every one knows that the fairies of Ireland never forsook them and still continue to hold high revel in them.