



BANBRIDGE
DISTRICT COUNCIL

Finnis Souterrain/'Binders Cove'



Parking Grid Ref

Lay-by off Carrigagh Road, Finnis (Massford), County Down

Finnis Souterrain J272442

Legananny Dolmen J289434

OSNI Discover Map Series 1:50,000 Sheet 20 Craigavon

Slieve Croob Outdoor Pursuits Map.

"A souterrain is an artificially built or dug underground structure. Most common is the dry-stone souterrain, made by digging an open trench building up dry-stone walls within it, roofing them with large lintels, and covering the whole with soil. Souterrains were also cut or tunnelled into rock or clay..."(DoE (1987) Historic Monuments of NI; HMSO)

Binder's Cove offers a unique opportunity to visit a fully enclosed underground souterrain. Known locally as 'Binder's Cove', its entrance is concealed in a shallow dip in an agricultural field, off the Carrigagh Road, in the townland of Finnis. It is located few miles south of the hamlet of Finnis (Massford), near Dromara, in the heart of County Down.

This is a hidden gem for those interested in local history or archaeology. Its setting is the rolling Dromara Hills, foothills of the high Mourne Mountains found in the area between Castlewellan and Dromara. The area comes within the Mourne Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Narrow, winding country roads give access to a distinctive landscape well worth exploring by car, by bicycle or on foot.

The souterrain is located approx. 1.5 mile north-west of the famous and picturesque Legananny Dolmen. A short distance to the south of the souterrain is the well known 'Windy Gap' car park and viewpoint. A mile or so to the north-east is the Dree Hill Car Park and viewpoint at the foot of Slieve Croob (534 m) – source of the River Lagan.

Visitors can park at the small lay-by provided and walk along a 120 m/131 yard route fenced off from the surrounding fields to reach this underground curiosity. To enter the souterrain visitors will need a certain degree of flexibility as you have to bend and stoop along a narrow, very low, entrance passage and under a very low lintel to enter the monument. However, once past this low lintel the main passage rises at its highest point at the back of the main passage to over 5ft in height. Solar powered lighting was installed as part of the works to open the souterrain to the public.

Dating from the 9th century AD

The souterrain dates from around the 9th century AD – some 1000 years ago. This was during what is termed the 'Early Christian Period' in Ireland - between roughly the 5th and 12th centuries AD. Christianity came to Ireland with Patrick (and other missionaries) in the 5th century AD, marking the dawn of written history here. The nearby Legananny Dolmen stretches back to the Neolithic period (c.4000 BC to 2500 BC) and is some 4000 years old - so the souterrain is a relative newcomer in comparison!

Binder's Cove was in use at a time when Irish society was sophisticated, tribal, socially stratified, rural and violent. There was a settled mixed agricultural economy with both pastoral and arable farming. The tribes ('tuatha' in Irish) were very small kingdoms (roughly a quarter of the size of a modern county), each with a king (Irish *ri*). Personal wealth was measured in terms of the number of cattle possessed and stealing cattle, valuables and people (for slavery) from neighbouring kingdoms was a popular pastime of the nobility. There is some debate about the original purpose of souterrains but it's thought they were built primarily as refuges to hide from raiding parties - though they could also have been used for storage and perhaps temporary habitation.

Souterrains are normally found close to occupied sites such as ringforts – enclosed, fortified farm settlements oval or circular in outline, cashels (the ringforts of upland rocky areas with stone walls instead of earth banks and ditches such as at Drumena, near Castlewellan, County Down), open settlements and ecclesiastical settlements. Looking at the isolated site today try and picture the scene of a bustling and prosperous farm settlement with dwellings, outbuildings and animal enclosures. A stream in an adjoining field, now piped, would have provided water.

There probably would have been several buildings in the vicinity of the souterrain the largest of which would have been a substantial dwelling house. This house would have been up to ten metres (33 ft) across if the owners were nobles, and might have been circular (made of woven hazel rods), or rectangular (with clay-and-stone, or wood-and-wattle) walls with a thatched roof.

Although no trace of an associated settlement remains today a geophysical survey commissioned by the Council in the area directly around the souterrain found traces of:

"... an unusually large number of archaeological features" including "... a large enclosure complex, or a series of succeeding complexes, to the western side of the survey area appearing to be associated with at least one substantial stone structure, of medieval or post-medieval origin. In the north, the souterrain appears to dominate the landscape with all adjacent archaeological features respecting its limits, with the added possibility of a trackway leading to it. In the east another potential enclosure was identified."

'Binder's Cove' – is the local name for the site – this was the nickname of a previous owner of the field in which the souterrain is located. In the countryside souterrains were colloquially known as 'coves' or 'caves'. Clinton (2001) states they are

commonly referred to in ancient tracts in the same way, as 'an uamh' – a cave and the going rate for building a souterrain was two cows! Having the resources to have a souterrain built and possibly later extended with the addition of a second side passage indicates that the owners were wealthy and possibly nobles.

Known for at least 200 years...

The existence of this site has been known for at least 200 years. The Ordnance Survey Memoirs of 1834 state:

"In the townland of Finnis, close to the south west boundary of the parish, a curious subterraneous cave has been discovered. Its mouth was sufficiently large to admit the entrance of a boy by sliding down on his back. The Revd E. Boyd, the rector of the parish, caused it to be opened. A regular descent by steps was discovered into a doorway of about 6 feet high and a large gallery running to the west..."

Lewis (1837) in his Topographical Dictionary of County Down refers to it as:

'a remarkable cave, 94 feet long, 6 feet wide, and upwards of 5 feet in height, with a transept near the centre, 30 ft long; the walls are rudely arched near the top, which is covered in slabs of granite: in 1833, the Rev. H. Elgee Boyd, rector of the parish, caused it to be cleared out and an iron door fixed up to protect it from injury.'

Potentially dangerous places...

Souterrains are relatively common but apart from the few that have been secured such as this they are potentially dangerous and should never be entered by a visitor alone. They are, by their very nature, dark underground defensive structures designed to make access difficult. The name derives from the French words for 'under' and 'ground'. The simple form of this souterrain, lacking many of the defensive features of other sites, together with its sheer size meant that with relatively little work this souterrain could be made secure for public access.

In the early 1990's, local man, Mr Oliver Quail, had pointed out to the Council's Countryside Officer the existence of the souterrain and suggested that it should be opened. The Countryside Officer agreed but convincing others that this muddy, dark and seemingly inaccessible 'hole in the ground in a middle of a field' could be opened to the public was not an easy task. The landowner Mr Pat O'Hare was supportive of the scheme and eventually, funding became available through a funding package put together by the Mourne Heritage Trust with additional funding from Banbridge District Council and EHS Built Heritage. This enabled Banbridge District Council to take the far sighted and adventurous initiative to open the souterrain in July 2003 having taken steps to ascertain that the structure was completely stable and safe and undertaking the relatively minor works that were required within the structure itself. The fact that the structure has stood for 1000 years is testament to its stability and good construction. Apparently, souterrains will become unstable often only as a result of groundwork carried on above, or around them, such as construction works.

From 2003 until 2007 we commissioned an annual survey from a structural

engineer until he advised that it was no longer necessary to continue as the stability of the structure had been established. However, the Countryside Officer checks the site on a very regular basis.

As the souterrain is a scheduled ancient monument only works authorised by EHS Built Heritage could be carried out. This did not permit any permanent fixing of lights to walls, etc. EHS Built Heritage would not permit a soakway to be dug in the field to the western extent of the structure to deal with the regular flooding it was known occurred in the souterrain. So, unfortunately it regularly floods to a depth of up to 4 feet or more during periods of prolonged heavy rain – even submerging the wall lights. This leads to quite a bit of maintenance of the lighting. At the moment we are looking at replacing the existing lights with lights which are designed to work underwater!

Souterrains do not often yield archaeological finds and despite removing quantities of soil caused by animal burrowing no finds were made during the course of this work.

Facts and Figures...

The souterrain is sited in a shallow depression approx. 120 m/131 yards along a path across a field from a roadside lay-by. It is a securely built underground structure made up of 3 passages. The main passage runs E-W for approx. 95 ft/29 m. The first 24.6 ft/7.5 m or so consists of a low roofed passage of around 3.4 ft/1m in height running to a low lintelled constriction, a defensive feature. Beyond the low lintel the passage opens out, and becomes higher rising to about 5ft 4"/1.64 m from floor to roof at the end of the main passage. From the low lintel to the end of the main passage is 70.5 ft/21.50m m. The main passage curves gently downward.

Two side passages extend from the central passageway to the right in a NE direction. There are low lintels at the entrance to these chambers. The chambers are around 20ft/6m in length. The entrance to both passages is constricted by low lintels causing one to stoop down to enter - both passages widen significantly near the rear.

A feature of the first side passage is an apparent roof aperture immediately inside the entrance where no lintel is present. Examination of this aperture and the corresponding sidewalls on which a lintel would have rested suggest that a lintel was never positioned here, possibly providing a vantage place for someone to hide and surprise an unwelcome intruder?

The 2nd side passage displays a well constructed lintelled entrance of constricted form while also displaying a roof aperture immediately inside the entrance with lintels in the form of two long but narrow squared sectioned stones which are set perpendicular to the entrance gap and over the lintels of both the entrance and main passage. An air vent is recorded in the sidewall of the 2nd passage and the whole structure is well ventilated. The air quality within this souterrain is remarkably good and not musty or heavy as is the case in other souterrains with little ventilation. A suspected 4th side passage, on the left of the main passage, in the vicinity of the low lintel, was investigated but no evidence was found to establish its existence.

The souterrain is of dry stone construction built of granite. There are larger stones near the base of the main passage walls and smaller stones higher up creating an inward batter or curve. From the lintel constriction close to the entrance the main passage sidewalls are characterised by an outward stepping of the topmost wall course which provides a platform or ledge onto which the roof lintel stones were set and in so doing relieve pressure from the lintels on the side walls. Thus, the lintels along the main section of the passageway do not have to span the entire width of the passage a feature which reduces not only the size of the lintel stones but the weight of stones as a result. Towards the rear of the main passage the walls and roof take on a more corbelled appearance and here the structure appears to widen as a result. (Conway (2002))

Clinton (2001) states that Walter Harris and Charles Smith in 1744 were the first to note the 'presence of cupboards or cubby-holes in this souterrain, which they described as 'niches'. There appear to be a least 3 such niches, 2 at ground level, and a cubby-hole at waist level towards the end of the main passage, there are also air vents.

Geophysical Survey:

A 1977/78 survey mentioned the possibility of a 4th passage and the owner's grandfather had, many years ago, lost a crowbar through a gap between the souterrain and the rocky outcrop in the field. Was there a second souterrain or another passage? The Council commissioned a small scale archaeological geophysical survey in 2003 to check for the possible 4th passage & to look for evidence of a settlement in the vicinity.

The Geophysicists did a magnetometer and earth resistance survey of 0.64 ha in and around the souterrain. Sadly, the survey

"...did not locate additional passages within the souterrain complex, however a number of field systems, possibly of medieval origin and at least one structure was identified".

Advice

- **Field monument normally open at all times but floods during periods of prolonged heavy rain making much of the structure inaccessible.**
- The site is a scheduled ancient monument on private land. Access has been granted under an agreement between the landowner and Banbridge District Council and relates to the fenced-off area only.
- Information panel and parking at site.
- There are 3 pedestrian gates along the path and wooden steps down to the entrance. **It is a narrow, confined underground structure which requires bending and stooping to enter.**
- A low level of solar lighting has been provided but it may be an idea to bring a torch as well.

Under the Historic Monuments and Archaeological Objects (NI) Order 1995 it is an offence to search for archaeological objects without a licence.

Other attractions nearby

- Legananny Dolmen.
- Dree Hill Car Park, viewpoint and walk to summit of Slieve Croob the source of the River Lagan can be linked with the Pass Loaning Walk - (Finnis/Drin Road to Slieve Croob).
- Windy Gap and Lighthouse Road picnic areas and viewpoints.

(Legananny Dolmen)

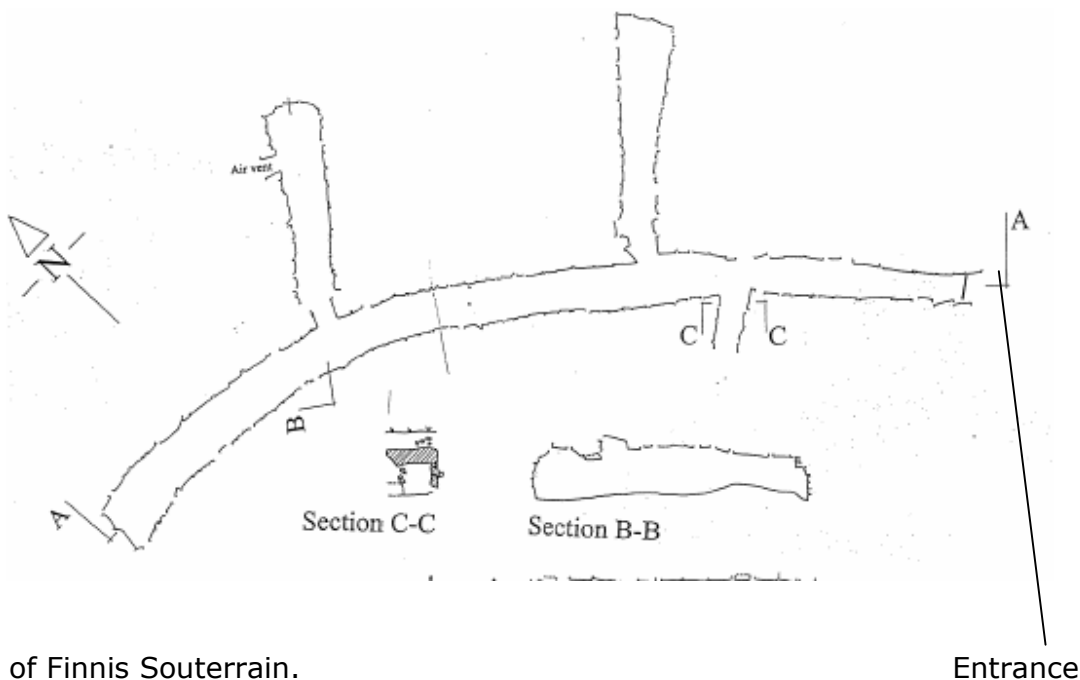
How to get there

From Dromara: Take the B7 to Finnis/Massford, about 1 ½ miles south of Dromara. At **Finnis/Massford** take the first road on your L past the chapel, the Carrigagh Road (signed for Legananny Dolmen). Stay on this road through x roads and ignoring sign for Dolmen until you see lay-by for site on L. To visit nearby Legananny Dolmen retrace your route along Carrigagh Road, take a R into Legananny Road and continue until you reach the junction with Dolmen Road, turn L into Dolmen Road and park at lay-by provided.

From Banbridge: take the A50 - Banbridge-Castlewellan Road for Castlewellan for approx. 9 miles to Moneyslane X roads. At Moneyslane, at 'Ulster Arms,' turn L into the B7 towards Dromara. Continue towards Dromara for around 3.5 miles until you see a sign for 'Legananny Dolmen' at X roads. Turn R into the Slievenaboley Road. Continue along the Slievenaboley Road looking out for first road on your left - the Carrigagh Road - turn L into this road. Continue for a short distance until you see a lay-by on your R and a wooden signpost for the souterrain.

Further info

See also the BBC NI Website - "Your Place and Mine" for info, video, etc on this site - <http://www.bbc.co.uk/northernireland/yourplaceandmine/down/A1956017.shtml>
For further general reading: Clinton, Mark (2001) *The Souterrains of Ireland*, Wicklow: Wordwell Ltd



Layout plan of Finnis Souterrain.

Entrance