

14. Wining and dining in a medieval village at Mullaghmast, Co. Kildare

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Illus. 1—Location of the deserted medieval village at Mullaghmast, Co. Kildare (based on the Ordnance Survey Ireland map).

The site of Mullaghmast, Co. Kildare, was identified as having archaeological potential in the Environmental Impact Assessment for the N9/N10 Kilcullen–Waterford Scheme: Kilcullen to Carlow because of its proximity to a potential medieval castle site (Record of Monuments and Places no. KD036-018). A geophysical survey within the proposed road corridor (Bartlett 2002) and aerial photographs of the route (taken by Markus Casey on behalf of the NRA) revealed a number of features of probable archaeological origin. This was confirmed subsequently by test-trenching (Bayley 2006), and full excavation of a 45-m-wide corridor running for c. 400 m through the site was undertaken in April–December 2007.¹ The archaeological investigations were conducted on behalf of Kildare County Council and the NRA and resulted in the discovery of a deserted medieval village comprising building foundations, stone and clay occupation surfaces and industrial remains, such as kilns, hearths and furnaces, within a tenement plot framework defined by roads and boundary and drainage ditches, with water features such as wells, stream channels and a pond.

Post-excavation assessment and analysis are at a very early stage at the time of writing. This paper is therefore intended to provide a broad, and necessarily provisional, picture of what was found and to give an outline indication of some of the directions which

subsequent research may take, using the evidence from c. 2,500 written context records and more than 10,000 associated individual finds.

Early history and archaeological remains

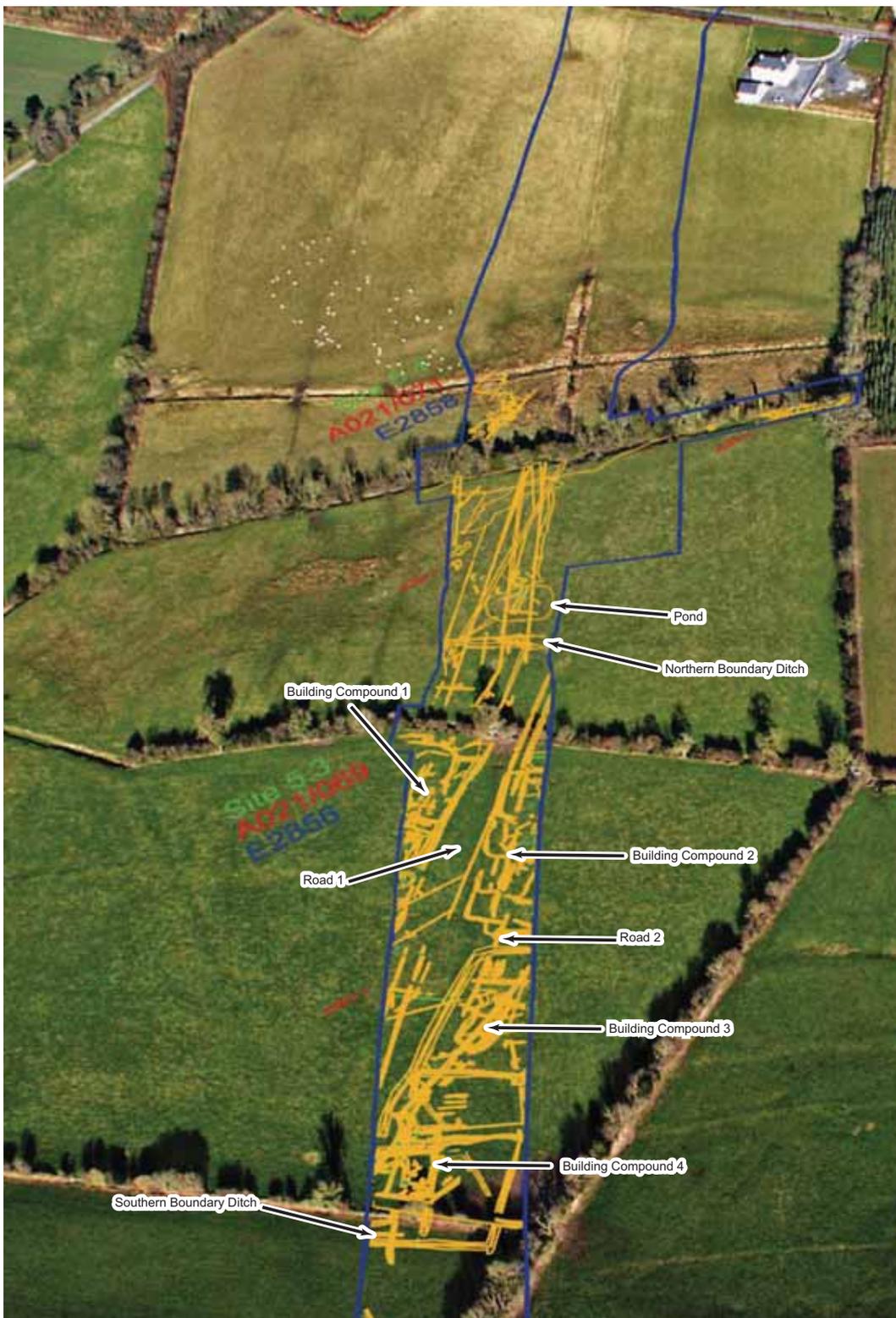
The site lay on the north-facing slope of a low hill, rising to c. 140 m above sea level, in the southern part of County Kildare (Illus. 1 & 2). Approximately 1 km to the west, a large ringfort, the Rath of Mullaghmast, sits on the brow of an escarpment overlooking the broad, flat valley of the River Barrow (Illus. 3). The excavation site and the ringfort were easily visible from each other. The ringfort was a long-established and conspicuous landmark from well before the Norman invasions, appearing several times in Early Christian annals as a local tribal capital and meeting place (Fitzgerald 1895, 379).

After the first Anglo-Norman invasions in AD 1169, this part of southern Kildare was granted by Strongbow to Walter de Ridelisford I (whose name has several variant spellings and who had a son of the same name), who received the substantial territory of 20 knight's fees in Omurethi (Mulally 2002, II, 3096–8), which has been identified as the tribal territory of the Uí Muiredaigh, of which the O'Tooles were lords (Orpen 2005, 146). Brooks (1952b, 118) dates the original disposition to 1173. As the colonising settlement gathered momentum with the defeat of the O'Tooles in 1177–8, de Ridelisford sought to establish control by constructing castles and planting colonists in southern Kildare (O'Byrne 2003, 17). The continuation of this activity saw the foundation of castles in the early 1180s at Castledermot and Kilkea, both properties controlled by the de Ridelisfords (Orpen 2005, 146). Although there is evidence supporting the existence of a later castle at Mullaghmast, no trace of an early motte-and-bailey-type earthen fortification was found during the excavations.

The basic layout of the settlement seems to have been planned from the outset, with a central crossroads and defining boundary ditches around the village (Illus. 4). The roads and ditches within it had the effect of dividing the settlement into zones, which were modified substantially several times during its existence. The stratigraphic evolution of the site is likely to be well dated by an assemblage of approximately 10,000 sherds of medieval pottery, found scattered over the whole site in all types of features and layers, including those disturbed by later agricultural activity. A preliminary assessment of this assemblage suggests that a high proportion of it dates from the 12th and 13th centuries, comprising Leinster Cooking Ware and other local wares, with a scattering of foreign imports from England and France (A Kyle, pers. comm.). Substantial numbers of metal finds and a range of household objects were also recovered.

The contemporary writer Giraldus Cambrensis, who was related to Walter de Ridelisford I through a shared grandmother, famously commented that Ireland

' . . . has not, and never had, vines and their cultivators. Imported wines, however, conveyed in the ordinary commercial way, are so abundant that you would scarcely notice that the vine was neither cultivated nor gave its fruit there. Poitou out of its own superabundance sends plenty of wine, and Ireland is pleased to send in return the hides of animals and the skins of flocks and wild animals' (O'Meara 1982, 35).



Illus. 2—Pre-excavation aerial view of the site from the south, with the post-excavation survey overlaid (features shown in yellow). The neighbouring fields suggest evidence of the extent of the deserted village (Headland Archaeology Ltd/Markus Casey).



Illus. 3—Part of the deserted medieval village under excavation in the foreground, with the Rath of Mullaghmast on the horizon in the background (AirShots Ltd).



Illus. 4—Medieval road with side ditches leading into the centre of the village from the north (Headland Archaeology Ltd).



Illus. 5—Boundary ditch at northern edge of village with pond beyond (AirShots Ltd).

It seems likely that the analysis of the pottery assemblage from this site, which includes many recognisable fragments from baluster-type glazed jugs, will show evidence of such trading contact between Ireland and France. The most likely route by which wine would have arrived in Kildare would be by the River Barrow, 9 km to the west at Athy, via Waterford rather than Dublin. An incidental detail that might support the suggestion of such river transport was the presence on site of oyster shells. These are not at all uncommon on medieval sites, particularly near the coast, but Mullaghmast's location some 25 miles inland suggests that considerable effort would have been needed to deliver them.

The site sloped down sharply at the northern end and a series of springs on the slope fed a number of streams at the bottom of it. Their meandering former courses were clearly visible and contained medieval pottery in their fills.

The bounds of the occupied part of the settlement were established by two substantial east-west-aligned, V-profiled ditches, approximately 240 m apart. Between the northernmost of these ditches and the streams lay a small pond measuring c. 25 m by 20 m across (Illus. 5). Ponds were frequently maintained in medieval settlements for a variety of purposes, one of which was the holding of fresh fish before consumption (Hammond 1993, 23). This pond may have been initially formed and filled by one of the springs on the slope, but it appears to have been managed using a ditch running very close to it. Gravel pathways were also traceable from the village to the pond and beyond to the streams.

This pond contained a sedimentary sequence with peat layers and medieval pottery, but the most conspicuous finds were several deer antlers at the bottom of it amongst dumped timbers. It seems likely that these were the product of hunting or butchery, but the possibility remains that the antler tines were collected after natural shedding for conversion



Illus. 6—Medieval stone foundations under excavation, with Leinster Cooking Ware pottery (Headland Archaeology Ltd).

into artefacts. Antlers need to be soaked before carving (MacGregor 1985), and these finds may be evidence of craftworking as well as diet. Walter de Ridelisford II was granted the hunting privilege of 'free warren' for manors including Kilkea in 1226 (Brooks 1952b, 135), and arrowheads and large dogs' (or wolves') teeth recovered from the site might support the hunting hypothesis.

A roughly square area c. 20–25 m across, midway between the village's boundary ditches, appeared to have been left open deliberately and was never built over. To the north of this space, a compacted slightly cambered surface lay on the interface with the glacial till, with side ditches to the east and west. This ran diagonally, from north-east to south-west, across the site for c. 80 m, with the side ditches converging slightly to the north. A similar layout was evident on the eastern and southern sides of the central area. The full effect appears to represent a village-green type of space at the centre of the settlement at a crossroads. The roadways with flanking drainage ditches approached this area from all sides.

The north-east-south-west-running roadway in the northern part of the site defined triangular areas on both sides of it within the road corridor, although the original plots would have been of a different shape. A complex and evolving series of ditches marked out the settlement plots within them. There were ditched enclosures at the northern end of the settlement backing on to the major boundary ditch, with building plots between them slightly up the slope on the flatter areas. On the eastern side of the road at least two phases of building took place, whilst on the western side there were at least three. Within the plots, buildings appear in the first instance to have been formed as clay-and-timber or wattle-and-daub structures, with beaten clay floor surfaces. Some features have been identified as post-

holes, stake-holes and sill-beams, but the evidence they supply for the plans of the structures is very incomplete. These sequences are likely to produce better evidence for the use of space within the village than for details of the construction of the buildings.

On the western side of the northern road, the buildings were physically extended over the earliest ditch, which had been backfilled. At its southern end, a 1.2-m-wide stone-packed foundation with an internal clay floor ran parallel to the ditch before being linked to another curved foundation over it (Illus. 6). These foundations could have supported a very substantial structure. Road metalling ran up to a cobbled gap c. 1.5 m wide at the buildings' southern end, representing an entranceway into the main part of the structure. To the south another foundation, represented by a double line of rocks parallel to the original roadside ditch, was recorded for a further 8 m. There was little evidence for the use of mortar in any part of the site, suggesting that some buildings may have been constructed using a drystone-walling technique combined with timber and clay.

At some point this access route was altered by backfilling the ditches and covering them with a dense stone surface: the ditches of the roadway running downhill from the south would have flooded the green. A much larger ditch, c. 2 m wide and between 1 m and 1.5 m deep, was dug, linking to the ditch running eastwards downhill from the green. The north-south ditch was excavated for a distance of c. 75 m, and a further large ditch coming off it at right angles to the east near its exposed centre was excavated for c. 35 m.

When combined with the southern boundary ditch of the settlement, these ditches marked out two large separate compounds. The basic layout of each of them may have been roughly similar, with a metalled access road or path on the west side between the ditch and the buildings and individual plots defined within them by further ditches. The original setting out seems to have involved plots roughly 5 m² being marked out and later extended, although this scheme is more applicable to an interpretation of the southern compound than the central one, which was radically realigned on at least one occasion.

The southern compound measured c. 70 m from north to south and enclosed a series of buildings fronting onto the edge of the trackway beside the western ditch. These buildings were set at the western ends of a series of ditched enclosures, with an alleyway behind them and a matching series of workshop areas set back across the lane. To the east a series of parallel ditches crossed the site to meet the eastern arm of the southern boundary ditch. A large hearth was excavated in one of the rear workshops and another had been truncated by a modern field boundary ditch. The area to the north of the buildings contained numerous intercutting linear features, most of which appeared to be attempts to improve drainage.

The central compound was similar to the southern one but was more obviously concerned with industrial activities, with a realigned, partially stone-revetted, ditch arrangement involving a central water-filled pool. Features in this area included a keyhole-shaped cereal-drying kiln, with a windbreak and a possible clamp (another type of temporary kiln); a stone-lined pit in a ditched enclosure, with an extensive spread of charcoal, ash and stake-holes; a deep enclosure ditch filled with charcoal and ash; and a large hearth standing separately in its own enclosure. This hearth lay over a square-shaped cut, which was 3 m across with rounded corners, and a stone foundation beside it, measuring c. 2 m long by 1 m wide. The design of these compounds suggests a division of labour supervised by a central authority within the settlement, as they were subjected to large-scale cross-compound realignment at least twice during their occupation.



Illus. 7—Silver long-cross penny of King Edward I (19 mm in diameter), minted in Canterbury between 1294 and 1299 (Headland Archaeology Ltd).

Five larger pits were excavated across the site. These had been dug down to the water-table and are thought to have been wells. In the backfill of one of these, a silver long-cross penny of King Edward I was found (Illus. 7); this was minted in Canterbury between 1294 and 1299. Its deposition here suggests a point in time when the well in this part of the site went out of use.

Later history and abandonment

Walter de Ridelisford II died in approximately 1240. He had two daughters: Emmeline, who first married Hugh de Lacy, Earl of Ulster, then Stephen de Longespee, subsequently justiciar of Ireland; and Margaret, who married Robert de Marisco (or Mariscis). Margaret and Robert had a daughter, Christiana, and after a series of family deaths a jury's inquisition into the land deeds concluded that she, at the age of about seven, was the heir of both her father Robert de Marisco and her grandfather Walter de Ridelisford II in 1244 (Brooks 1952b; 1931–2). After marrying Ebulo de Geneva at the age of eleven and becoming widowed soon afterwards, Christiana and her sister Eleanor controlled lands scattered across Ireland from Bray to Galway. In 1280 she made an arrangement with King Edward I and Queen Eleanor to exchange her lands in Ireland for their equivalents in England. The situation was complicated further by the death of Queen Eleanor in 1290, after which another arrangement was made, whereby Christiana took an interest for life from Edward in some of her Irish properties again, with a reversion when she died to Maurice Fitzmaurice Fitzgerald, who had married Christiana's niece Emmeline. By a series of transactions involving the maintenance of moieties, or shares, in the lands, it fell to the justiciar of Edward I, Sir John Wogan, to consolidate all of these interests in 1305, including 'all the lands and tenements in Kilkea and Tristledermot [Castledermot] which the king had

of the gift of Christiana de Marisco, to hold for ten years at a rent of £40 a year' (Sweetman & Handcock 1886, quoted in Brooks 1952a, 53). By this means Wogan obtained direct control of the Uí Muiredaigh estates of the de Ridelisfords, which descended to his heirs for several generations (Devitt 1916). Christiana de Marisco died without issue in 1312, and King Edward II confirmed the grant of all the lands of Kilkea and Castledermot to Wogan in 1317 (Morrin 1861, 21).

The dates are significant because this was a particularly turbulent period in Irish history. In the early 14th century the military situation for the Anglo-Normans in Leinster was precarious, and the River Barrow frontier was 'in a state of collapse' (O'Byrne 2003, 82). The Irish resurgence against the Anglo-Normans had begun in the later 13th century, and there were continual outbreaks of hostilities both to the east and west of County Kildare (Orpen 2005, 440–60; O'Byrne 2003, 58–86). To make matters worse, Edward Bruce invaded Ireland in 1315 with an army from Scotland, and in the campaign at the end of this year the armies of both sides would have passed very close to Mullaghmast between Castledermot and the battlefield of Ardscoil a short distance to the north-west.

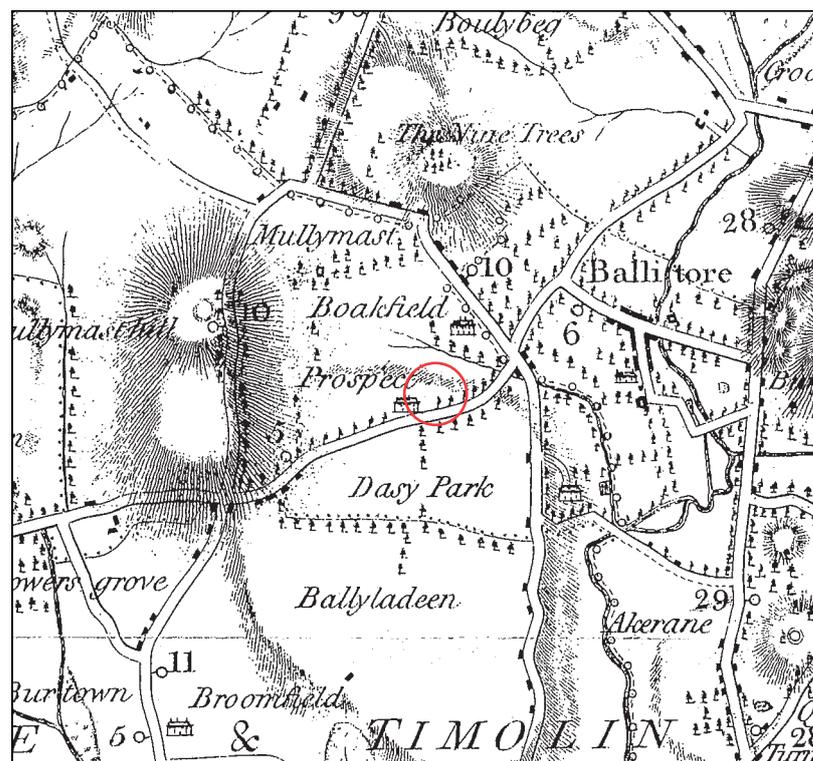
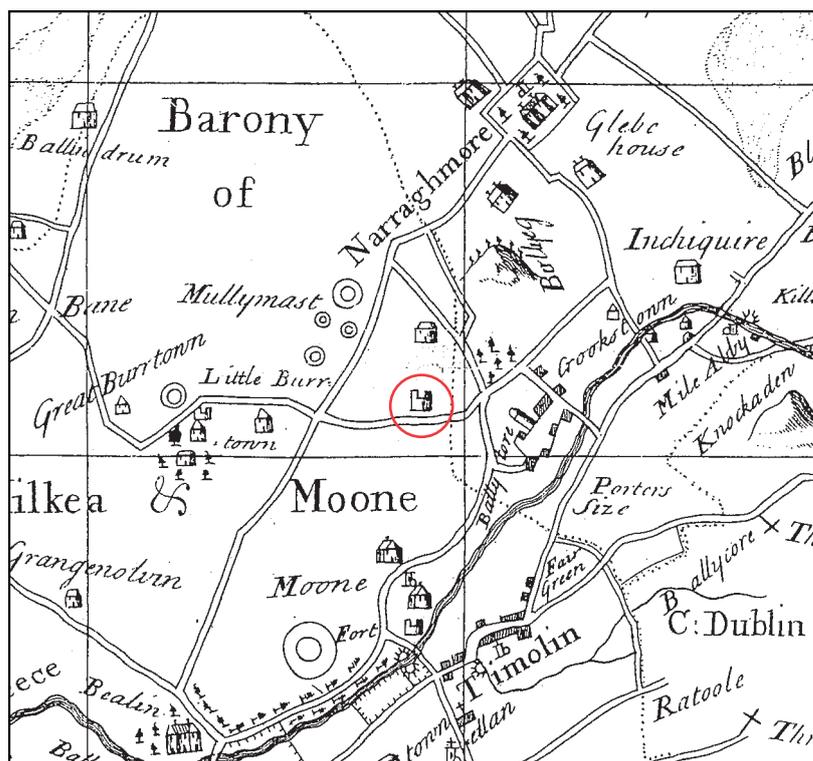
At a time when the Anglo-Normans were suffering from severe taxation and purveyance burdens to finance costly foreign ventures in Wales, Scotland and France, a series of bad harvests caused by heavy rainfall at critical times resulted in famines, outbreaks of sheep and cattle murrain, and plague amongst a weakened population. These are recorded in many places in the Irish Annals, but in the worst years of 1315–16 famine was widespread throughout the whole of western Europe (Prestwich 2005, 439). Edward Bruce had to curtail operations at times through inability to feed his army by ravaging the countryside in the usual manner of medieval warfare. The final catastrophe of this period arrived with the outbreak of the plague known as the Black Death in 1348–9. It might be expected that a peasant community living in an exposed nucleated settlement amongst an increasingly hostile native population would be particularly vulnerable, and it appears that the vast majority of the finds from the village site date from before the late 14th century, suggesting at least a severe decline in prosperity after that time, if not complete destruction or abandonment.

Mullaghmast, however, puts in later historical appearances when royal military services, presumably to deal with specific local problems, were requested in 1422–3 and 1430 (Otway-Ruthven 1980, 362–9; Frame 1996). This implies that the location was at least recognisable for the musters of temporary militia. Perhaps the explanation is that the castle remained inhabited whilst the village faded away. The archaeological and historical records for the site will be used during the post-excavation analysis to try to cast light on the stages of such a process.

The castle appears for the last time on the Noble and Keenan map of 1752. On the Alexander Taylor map of 1783 it has been replaced by Prospect Farm, which is shown in roughly the same location (Illus. 8).

A final word may go to Lord Walter Fitzgerald (1903, 245), who wrote in an article about a prehistoric sculptured stone recovered near Prospect Farm:

'All that I could gather from Murray, the herd on [Prospect] farm, was that the stone was originally built into a castle which formerly stood in a field called "the old town" and that when the ruins were thrown down, the stone was removed to the present dwelling house. The late Mr S. Wilfred Haughton, of Greenbank, Carlow, informed me



Illus. 8—Noble and Keenan map of 1752 (top); Alexander Taylor map of Kildare, 1783 (bottom), with site location indicated by red circle.

in 1897 (he died recently at a good old age) that his great-grandfather owned the place and demolished the ruins of the Fitzgerald Castle there to build the present dwelling house with the materials.'

Acknowledgements

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Note

1. NGR 278130, 195837; height 130 m OD; excavation reg. no E2856; ministerial direction no. A021.

