MOUNT GAMBLE

Discovering Mount Gamble Cemetery

The discovery of a previously unknown cemetery at Mount Gamble in 2003 has shed new light on some of the ancient inhabitants of Swords. The burials were identified during investigations in advance of a development and the remains were carefully and respectfully excavated by archaeologist Edmond O'Donovan and his team.

The site was identified at the southern suburban fringes of Swords village – now The Pavillions Shopping Centre – on a low hillock named Cobbe's Hill (after the Cobbe family, important landowners in north County Dublin in the 18th century). The name of the site, Mount Gamble, derives from a house built there in the 18th century, probably by Sir Robert Molesworth; the house was demolished in the 1980s when a supermarket car park was constructed.

The cemetery was in use between AD 550 to 1150 (the early medieval period), from the end of the Iron Age to the arrival of the Anglo-Normans, during which time almost 300 people were buried here. The foundation date of the cemetery reveals that burial began around the time that Christianity was gaining a foothold in pagan Ireland.

The cemetery was unenclosed and the burials were up to seven deep at the centre, becoming less dense toward the ill-defined edge of the site. With no enclosing wall or fence, it is possible that low grave mounds were the only physical presence on the hill to identify the site. A single stone lined post-hole was recorded on the site's eastern edge, which perhaps housed a wooden pillar that would have marked the cemetery's location.

Some time after the cemetery fell out of use, a windmill was erected on the hill-top, the foundations of which were found during the excavation. The hill is referred to as 'ye Windmill Hill' in the records of the Down Survey (c. 1656), though there is no other indication of a windmill having stood here. The windmill was a simple timber post-mill built upon a timber frame and was either demolished or fell into disuse by the end of the 17th century.

Map of Swords indicating the location of the cemetery at Mount Gamble


Site Plan of Mount Gamble Hill


Site plan showing density of burials at Mount gamble

Compiled and edited by Dr Clare Crowley, Courtney Deery Heritage Consultancy with assistance of Mr Paddy O'Byrne

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Burial Practices at Mount Gamble

The treatment of the dead through burial was important in both pre-Christian and Christian cultures in Ireland. The typical early Irish Christian burial pratice lays the body in a grave orientated west/east, with the head placed at the western end of the grave looking east over the body, so that the deceased could rise on the Day of Judgement and face God in the east. This burial form was the predominant rite uncovered at Mount Gamble, where the body is laid in a grave, flat on its back with straight legs and the arms either by the side or crossed over the torso. The principal difference between Christian burial 1000 years ago and burial today is the absence of a coffin – Early Christian burials were usually placed in a grave wrapped in a shroud.

Some of the burial practices at Mount Gamble (such as the positioning of the bodies) suggest that the Christian burial rites had not yet been fully accepted in the earlier years of the cemetery. A small number of graves had unusual burial positions (crouched and flexed burial), which are more typically found in pre-Christian burials. The introduction of Christianity in Ireland, with all its associated rituals, was not a seamless process. Converts to the new religion may have lived side by side with neighbours who still prayed to the old gods or who held on to certain traditions, in this case pagan burial rites.

Very few artefacts were discovered associated with the burials at Mount Gamble, which no doubt reflects the Christian belief that worldly goods cannot be brought into the afterlife. The small number of exceptions include the discovery of aiglets or lace chapes, which suggests that some of the burials were interred in their clothing (aiglets were used to protect the end of lace cords to prevent the thread from fraying; such cords would have tied a shirt or vest).

There was also a simple bronze finger-ring found on the left hand of a woman (on the fourth finger, where we wear wedding rings today). The burial of this woman with a piece of jewellery is in contrast to the other burials and perhaps it remained on the woman's finger as an omission. However, it may have been a deliberate act, signalling that the ring was of particular importance to the woman or to those who buried her.


A typical 'Christian' burial at Mount Gamble (young adult male around 20 years of age).


A 'pagan' crouched burial at Mount Gamble (an approximately 9 year old child).


Close-up photograph of the finger ring in female burial.

Who was buried here?

A total of 281 burials were identified during the excavations, two thirds of whom were adults. The burials cover a broad spectrum of the local population, with men, women and children of all ages buried on the hillock. The cemetery has been interpreted as a family or tribal burial place that was used continually for 700 years.

The earliest dated burial discovered at the site was the grave of a man who was c. 40-50 years old when he died, some time between AD 549 and AD 610. It is possible that this was the grave that established the cemetery and the elaborate lining of the grave with lintel stones tells us that the man held a high social standing – only one other burial at the cemetery had a lintel grave (large stone slabs set on edge to line the sides of the grave).

The results of scientific analysis of the bones (osteology) are interesting, revealing that the male population was on average 11cm (4 inches) shorter 1000 years ago and females were on average c. 9cm (3 inches) shorter. Such population differences can relate to diet and living conditions, but some individuals bucked the trend (as today) and were smaller or taller than average.

Many of the adult skeletons showed evidence of wear and tear in their spine and joints (osteoarthritis), though it was more common among the women. Women's bodies had to bear the toll of multiple pregnancies, but the results also suggest a division of labour, with men and women having different roles. Grinding grain, for example, is an arduous repetetive task that is more often carried out by women (this can be seen in tribal communities today) and which affects the hand, wrist and shoulder joints, a well as the spine.


A burial with ear muff stones at Mount Gamble of a 26-35 year old


A 'lintel grave' at Mount Gamble, burial of a man aged over 40 years.


Intercutting burials at Mount Gamble show the continued use of the burial ground over 700 years: Burial of an approximately 6 months old infant, a 7 year old child and a 25-34 year old man.


This skeleton of a 30-45 year old female displayed severe spinal degeneration due to several collapsed vertebrae. The condition was likely caused by either trauma or osteoporosis, which had resulted in a curved spine (kyphosis) which was also clearly reflected in the position of the skeleton in the ground.

How did they die?

A high proportion of the men buried at Mount Gamble died violently, perhaps in battle or in a dispute with a neighbour. Six men between the ages of 23-44 years old showed evidence of significant weapon-related injuries on their bones, including stab wounds and sword cuts. All of these men were taller than average, with robust frames, suggesting that they were warriors, maybe part of an elite warrior class in the community. The evidence from the bones demonstrates the vicious and brutal means by which they died. Three of the men were beheaded. The sharp cuts in the left forearm of one of these men shows that he was defending himself with that arm before the fatal blow. He also had cuts on his left leg (one of which cracked the bone into two pieces), which rendered him incapacitated and helpless in the face of his enemy. Another of the men was stabbed in the gut, while a third had had his ear cut off.


The left femur of a man, displaying deep sword cut marks


Burial with evidence of multiple battle wounds.


The mandible and first three cervical vertebrae of a decapitated man, displaying sword cut marks.


A double burial, both displaying weapon-related injuries which could be determined as the causes of death.

Early childhood mortality was high in the early medieval period and this can be seen at Mount Gamble, where one in ten infants died within the first year of life. One sad example of this was the discovery of two neonatal skeletons buried next to each other, probably the case of twins born prematurely who did not survive. Nevertheless, both were given a formal burial, demonstrating the love, respect and profound grief of their parents.

Other children died of disease or malnutrition, which could strike at any time during their childhood. At Mount Gamble, three young children were buried together in the same plot, having died aged only 8-9 years, two years and six months old. All three died of scurvy, possibly over the course of a single winter season.

Scurvy is a disease resulting from a lack of vitamin C. Early symptoms include weakness, feeling tired, and sore arms and legs. Without treatment, decreased red blood cells, gum disease, changes to hair, and bleeding from the skin may occur. As scurvy worsens there can be poor wound healing, personality changes, and finally death from infection or bleeding. The family at Mount Gamble may have suffered from a severe lack of food – perhaps at a time of food shortages or famine, or maybe they had fallen on hard times – which would affect the most vulnerable members first (usually the very young and the very old).

The hazards of pregnancy and childbirth is likely to account for the higher number of young adult women buried at Mount Gamble than men. About five times as many females as males died between the ages of 17 and 25 years and a clear connection between female mortality and pregnancy/childbirth was seen in three cases. The best preserved case was the complete skeleton of a 20-29 year old woman, which had the perfectly articulated skeleton of a fully-developed baby in "birth position" within the pelvis. The young woman probably suffered from complications during the last weeks of her pregnancy or in childbirth, and sadly, both mother and baby died.


Communal burial of three children - possibly all three suffered from scurvy and died around the same time


Burial of young mother who appears to have died in the last weeks of pregnancy or during childbirth

The Story So Far...

There was no record of a cemetery and no folk tradition relating to burial at Mount Gamble prior to its discovery, which makes this a significant find. Despite the incredible detail provided by the excavation on the individuals buried here, there are still many questions left unanswered. Early medieval burial sites are rarely found in isolation. Where did the people who were buried at Mount Gamble live? The burials themselves indicate that the population were Christian. Where did they worship?

No evidence was discovered during the excavations for a stone or timber church or any other building. The historical sources indicate that there were at least three churches at Swords. Previous scholars have suggested that these were all situated within the early monastic site at Swords, close to the round tower. However, the presence of an early medieval cemetery at Mount Gamble may imply that there was an outlying ecclesiastical site around the summit of Cobbe's Hill or in its vicinity. The Martyrology of Oengus the Culdee describes St Cronan's monastery of Glasmore as a 'desolate church to the south of Swords' – could it have been near the Mount Gamble cemetery? Perhaps new discoveries in the future will provide some of the answers.

Acknowledgement

The text of this poster draws heavily from an article discussing the excavations at Mount Gamble by the site director, Edmond O'Donovan, and osteologist Jonny Geber (see below). All photos were taken by O'Donovan and are reproduced here with his permission.

O'Donovan, E. & Geber, J. 2009. 'Archaeological excavations on Mount Gamble Hill: stories form the first Christians in Swords', in Baker, C. (ed.) Axes, Warriors and Windmills: Recent archaeological discoveries in North Fingal, Fingal County Council.

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SWORDS MONASTERY

The Foundation of a monastery at Swords

A settlement at Swords has existed since early Christian times when the monastery dedicated to St Colmcille was founded on high ground to the west of the Ward river (known in medieval times as Reynen). St Colmcille is also referred to as Columb, both of which derive from his Latin name *Columba*.

There are two alternative traditions associated with the foundation, centred around St Colmcille and St Finan or Finian. According to a 17th century document, the monastery was founded by St Columcille in 512 AD, who is remembered in the early Irish name for Swords – *Sord Columcille* – which translates as the pure well (sord) of St Colmcille.


St Columcille's Well, Swords


Bronze relief *'St Finian hastening to bring water to a young leper'*, in St Finian's Church, River Valley.

A later, 19th century source tells that Swords was founded by Finán Lobhar (St Finian the Leper), the monastery's first abbot, and later conveyed to the monks of Colmcille. The place-name Spital Hill, on the north side of Swords, suggests that there was a leper colony in the vicinity, perhaps associated with St Finian. The first abbot of Swords is celebrated on his feast day of 16th March and is still remembered by the Christian community here, with a church in River Valley parish dedicated to the saint in 1991.

The first mention of Swords in the *Annals of the Four Masters* dates to 965 AD, when Alild mac Maenach, bishop of Swords and Lusk, is said to have died. The Annals also record that in 1012 and 1016, the 'Danes' attacked and burnt Swords, one of the many Viking raids on Irish monasteries. The fact that it was a target for the Vikings suggests that the ecclesiastical centre was well established by this time.

One of the most notable events in the history of Swords is associated with King Brian Boru and his son Morrough, who were killed in the Battle of Clontarf in 1014. Their bodies were brought to the monastery at Swords, before being processed to Armagh, the ecclesiastical capital of Ireland, where the High King was buried.

There were bishops in Swords until 1138, after which it was absorbed into the Dublin diocese, and their substantial medieval archepiscopal castle (Swords Castle) still stands at the top of Main Street.

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The early monastery at Swords

The original monastery at Swords is likely to have followed the typical pattern of early medieval ecclesiastical sites, with the church, graveyard and other sacred structures enclosed at the centre (the inner sanctum). One or more outer enclosures generally surrounded the inner sanctum and were reserved for secular activities such as cooking, sleeping and craft-work, as well as holding gardens and cultivated areas. Traces of the curving enclosures can still be seen on the Ordnance Survey six-inch map of 1843, in the oval area housing the church, graveyard and round tower, and the curving street to the north.

First edition Ordnance Survey six-inch map (1843), showing the curving road to the north of the early monastic site
(Courtesy of Ordnance Survey of Ireland)


Artistic reconstruction of the early Christian monastery at Swords, by Johnny Ryan
(Courtesy of Fingal County Council)

The very early churches erected when Christianity was first introduced to Ireland in the 5th century AD have left no surface remains. They are described by later Irish writers as rectangular timber structures – the *duirtheach* or *dairthech* (literally 'oak house') – generally of modest proportions. The majority of the other structures in the earliest monasteries were also made of wood, leaving little trace in the archaeological record. The widespread use of stone on monastic sites did not occur until the early 10th century, when the occurrence of *damliac* (literally 'stone church') becomes much more frequent in the annals. Three churches have been recorded at Swords – dedicated to Saints Fintan, Brigid and Catherine – all of which are presumed to have been located within the present Church of Ireland site.

The Round Tower

The round tower is the only upstanding element of the original monastic establishment at Swords; the medieval church tower that can still be seen belongs to a structure which was erected in the later Middle Ages.


19th century sketch of the 'Ancient Round Tower and church of Swords, Co. Dublin', by G. V. Du Noyer
(Courtesy of Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland)


19th century lantern slides showing round tower at Swords
(Courtesy of Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland)


'View of Swords Round Tower, St Columba's, Swords, Co. Dublin with ruins of monastery in foreground', by William Frazer, 1905
(Courtesy of National Library of Ireland)

The vast majority of round towers are thought to have been built in the 11th and 12th centuries, with a small number dating to the 10th and 13th centuries. The Swords round tower is one of the oldest in Ireland, dating to the 10th century; the stones are roughly cut and irregular, in contrast to later towers which tend to have a much smoother surface. At present the entrance at Swords is only about 70cm off the ground, but the ground level in the early medieval period would have been considerably lower, as evidenced by the nearby square tower, where the entrance is now below the present ground level.

Round towers are likely to have been used as belfries, as is suggested by their Irish name, *cloig-theach* (literally 'bell-house'). As the only tall, stone structures at the time, their prominence in the landscape signalled the importance of the ecclesiastical centres. They stood as a status symbol, a testament to the wealth of the monastic community.

It is also likely that they offered a ritual space for religious activities beyond the church itself, with the doorway commonly facing eastwards, to the church, and the windows set at cardinal points. They may also have served as safe places to store valuables, with the entrances generally about three metres from the ground and requiring a ladder to access the tower. The height of the doorway may have formed part of the ritual, allowing the reliquaries to be presented, both to God and to the congregation of monks.


'The round tower, belfry & church of Swords', by Robert Brandard, 1832
(Courtesy of National Library of Ireland)

A Souterrain in Swords

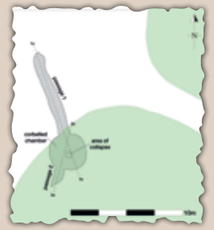
A souterrain, or underground structure, was recently discovered during the removal of a tree in the vicinity of the monastic centre. It is of dry-stone construction, with a corbelled bee-hive shaped chamber, the floor of which is c. 2.6m below the present ground surface. Access to a passage from the chamber to the north-northwest is provided via a creep-way, with another opening from the chamber to the south. The souterrain is similar to examples found in the County Meath area. The leading authority on Irish souterrains, Dr Mark Clinton, visited the site and pronounced it an excellent example of its type.

Although the souterrain has not been archaeologically excavated, a 3D laser scan of the underground structure provides a detailed picture of the complexity of its construction. The souterrain is not accessible and cannot be visited by the public.

The generally accepted dating for souterrains in Ireland is c. 500-1200 AD, placing them firmly in the early medieval period. They are, however, most common after c. 750 AD – wood found in a souterrain at Balrenny in East Meath, for example, has been radiocarbon dated to the 8th century AD.

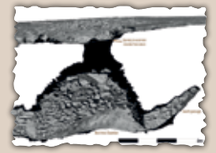
The souterrain is not exclusive to Ireland but is also found in Brittany, Scotland, Cornwall and Denmark. In Ireland they are often found on early medieval ecclesiastical settlements, as well as their secular counterpart, ringforts. A tantalising idea by Clinton proposes that the association of souterrains with church sites is not merely coincidental, but that it may have been church personnel who first introduced the idea of souterrains to Ireland and that the earliest examples may thus be found in association with early church sites.

Souterrains were probably used primarily for storage, providing an even, cool temperature and dry conditions for foodstuffs, in much the same way as cellars do. It is also probable that they were used to hide valuables, particularly at times of unrest. For example, Swords is recorded as being attacked by either Vikings or native marauders many times between the years 993 and 1185, when the monastery was plundered by an O'Melaghan of Meath. It is unlikely that they were designed as places of refuge for people – given the constraints of the narrow, low passages and small chambers (which would have fit only a very small number of people) – though they may occasionally have been used as such.


Plan of souterrain at Swords
(Courtesy of National Monuments Service, Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht)


3D laser scan of souterrain at Swords
(Courtesy of National Monuments Service, Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht)


3D laser scan of souterrain at Swords, showing section of passage
(Courtesy of National Monuments Service, Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht)


3D laser scan of souterrain at Swords, showing section of bee-hive chamber
(Courtesy of National Monuments Service, Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht)

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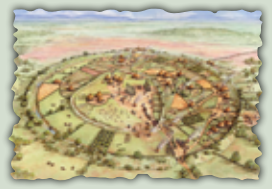
EARLY MEDIEVAL SETTLEMENT AT OLDTOWN-MOORETOWN

A previously unknown early medieval complex was revealed in Oldtown and Mooretown townlands in 2003, along with archaeological sites representing human activity and settlement in this area from the Bronze Age (c. 2400-5000 BC) through to the early post-medieval periods (c. 1534-1700 AD). The complex is centred in the southern half of the Oldtown townland and extends further south across the Rathbeale Road into Mooretown.

The large-scale complex was first discovered after human bones were revealed during the construction of a temporary road. Despite being known locally as the 'Bone Field', there had been no prior record of burials in this location. Geophysical survey and subsequent archaeological testing of the site identified a large early medieval settlement complex, which appears to have been abandoned by the late 12th century. This complex may represent a religious and settlement centre, inhabited by a Christian monastic community and other lay adherents, but as yet no church building has been identified. It is also possible that this is an example of a contemporary site type known as cemetery-settlement sites, which are laid out with similar enclosures, with central burial grounds, but are secular and familial in origin.

What is a typical ecclesiastical settlement?

The layout of early monasteries in Ireland tends to conform to a universal pattern. The plan was based on an idealised form, with the holiest place in the centre and areas of sanctuary decreasing in holiness as they moved outwards. At its most basic, this means an inner curvilinear enclosure around the most sacred elements (e.g. church and burials) and one or more outer enclosures for the secular activities of living and working. It is also common to find radial lines subdividing the outer enclosures into different areas, perhaps marking out separate sectors for commercial, industrial, and domestic activity.



Artistic representation of the monastery at Lullymore, Co. Kildare, showing all the characteristics of a typical early medieval ecclesiastical settlement *(Copyright of artist Philip Armstrong, www.philarm.com)*

There are examples in the canons (early church law) which appear to divide the ecclesiastical settlement into three separate areas, essentially: *tabernaculum* (church), *atrium* (place of habitation for the priests of the settlement) and *faithche* or *platea* (an open space which could be used for communal activities or for dwelling). There are also references to the *tabernaculum* and its *suburbana*, i.e. 'suburban' development, but in its simplest sense, as development beyond the church 'zone'. Monastic enclosures do not appear to have been intended as fortifications but instead acted as sacred boundaries, the importance of which is noted by many contemporary writers – it was the sanctity of these boundaries that enabled them to act as places of refuge.

Monasteries were self-sufficient, and we know from contemporary accounts that the monks and lay-brothers worked the fields themselves. Adomnán of Iona, the 7th century biographer of Columbanus, describes how the saint was greeted at Clonmacnoise by those working in the 'small fields near the monastery', outside its *vallum* (enclosure).

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Settlement pattern at Oldtown-Mooretown

The complex at Oldtown-Mooretown seems to follow a similar pattern to early medieval ecclesiastical settlements, with three concentric oval enclosures and a surrounding field system. The inner enclosure of c. 70m appears to circumscribe the burial ground, which contained at least twenty burials (it had been somewhat disturbed). Examination of the bones revealed the typical hardships of the time – worn, rotten teeth, broken bones, nutritional deficiencies, and evidence of abscesses, lesions and arthritis.

The largest, outermost enclosure is 200m in diameter and defines the edge of the main settlement / activity area. A circular building there suggests a date prior to c. 800 AD, and may represent the remains of an early medieval roundhouse. Dwellings and work huts at that time were generally wattle-and-daub constructions, where wooden posts are woven with wattles (wooden strips), then daubed with sticky material usually made of some combination of wet soil, clay, sand, animal dung and straw. The date of this building is consistent with artefacts found in the inner enclosure, including a perforated stone bead, bone comb and a bone pin, which are typically early medieval in date. Radial divisions of the outer enclosures are also striking in the geophysical survey results.

Results of geophysical survey undertaken in 2003, showing early medieval complex at Oldtown-Mooretown

Assumed layout of settlement complex at Oldtown-Mooretown, based on results of geophysical survey and archaeological testing.

Experimental archaeology: The reconstruction of an early medieval round-house by UCD School of Archaeology *(Courtesy of Professor Aidan O'Sullivan)*

Bone pin and perforated bead found during archaeological investigations of the early medieval complex *(after Baker 2004)*

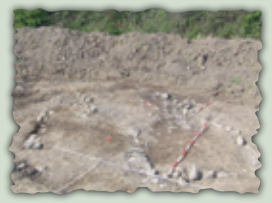
The presence of possible dog whelk shells here is intriguing: such shellfish could be used to produce an expensive, valuable dye. Their presence may be an indication of the harvesting of such a resource and consequently, suggest a participation in high-status luxury exchange. Frequent remains of butchered cattle bone were found during the investigations. If this is a monastic site, then the presence of the shell and bone may even suggest the existence of a scriptorium (requiring both vellum – pages made from calf skins – and coloured illumination inks to produce manuscripts), but the present evidence is too scant to confirm this.

Bone comb fragment found during archaeological investigations of the early medieval complex *(after Baker 2004)*

The layout of the two annexes at Oldtown-Mooretown, to the northwest and south, appear to respect the boundaries of the main complex and are probably associated field systems. Possibly some of the larger 'cells' served as fields for arable cultivation, but perhaps others served instead as corral enclosures for livestock (cattle husbandry in particular, was fundamental to the early medieval Irish economy).

Milling at Oldtown-Mooretown

An early medieval / medieval watermill was identified, along with part of its headrace and its tailrace, at a watercourse c. 285m south-west of the complex. Early medieval horizontal watermills were used to grind grain but were also a means through which local potentates could control agricultural production. Their construction, the engineering of the neighbouring landscape (millraces, ponds, etc.) and the sourcing of certain materials (millstones) all required specialist technical knowledge and significant resources. They also required a sizeable labour force, even if the labour was acquired via 'customary' payment-in-kind obligations rather than conscription or payment.



Stone foundations of early medieval / medieval watermill excavated at Oldtown-Mooretown *(after Courtney 2010)*

Because of this, early medieval mills were invariably under the control of a significant local or regional power, and archaeology has increasingly demonstrated that that power was often ecclesiastical. On High Island, off the coast of Galway, for example, a horizontal wheeled mill is directly associated with the extensive remains of an early medieval monastic community. At Nendrum in County Down, the tidal mills were substantial and early in date, with tree-ring analysis dating the first tide mill to AD 619-21. The mill, like the enclosure, should be seen as a characteristic component of the early Irish monastery.

A similar situation also pertained later in the medieval period (12th – 16th century), and certain medieval monasteries–such as the Abbey of St Thomas in Dublin–were well-known for their control of milling activities. In practice, control over this aspect of grain production seems in most cases to have entailed the literal overseeing of the mill by an ecclesiastical or lay authority, and mills are usually found in close proximity to a monastery, a castle or similar site. The presence of the water-mill at Oldtown-Mooretown is, therefore, an indication that this settlement – be it ecclesiastical or secular – was an important one.

How did it work?

Until the introduction of water-mills, the grinding of cereals was done by hand using quern-stones. This was a slow, tiring process, yielding only small quantities of flour. This process was revolutionised by the water-mill. These were split-level buildings, with the lower storey (undercroft) built into a pit so that the water fell from a height through the flume onto the mill wheel to drive its rotation. The flume was a wooden channel which accelerated the flow of water from the stream as it passed through it. The wheel in turn moved a spindle attached to the grinding stones in the upper storey of the mill. Cereal was fed into a hopper above the millstones which, as they turned, ground the grains to flour.

Artistic representations of an early medieval watermill (based on a mill excavated at Raystown, Co. Meath), by artist Simon Dick *(Courtesy of Transport Infrastructure Ireland, from their publication Illustrating the Past)*

Rathbeale Archaeological Park

Plans are underway by Gannon Homes to ensure the continued protection of this important archaeological site, the majority of which remains intact below-ground. The Rathbeale Archaeological Park is being designed through consultation between archaeologists, Gannon Homes, Fingal County Council, and the National Monuments Service (Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht). This park will form a naturalised landscape and amenity area for people to enjoy, with information panels, creating a local awareness of the significant archaeological remains that lie beneath the surface.

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There is a total of seventeen churches dedicated to Saint Werburgh in England, together with one in Dublin, one in Western Australia, as well as a village in Zimbabwe. There is a district of Bristol named St Werburgh and, somewhat surprisingly, there is St Werburgh's Holy Well in Swords.

Why does a holy well in Swords bear St Werburgh's name?

In Dublin, St Werburgh's Church was built in 1178, shortly after the arrival of the Anglo-Normans, replacing the earlier church of St Martin of Tours. In the same way as the colonists brought new architectural ideas, they also brought new language and culture. It was not uncommon for existing religious sites and churches to be re-built or simply re-dedicated to an English saint. The church is located on Werburgh Street (to which it gave its name), close to Dublin Castle, though the existing building dates to the 18th century. After St Werburgh's Church was constructed it was much frequented by people from Bristol, who were amongst the earliest English settlers in Dublin. St Werburgh's Church held lands in Swords in the 15th century and it is believed that this is how a holy well in quite an isolated location became dedicated to a female Anglo-Saxon saint.

Votive offerings at St Werburgh's Holy Well

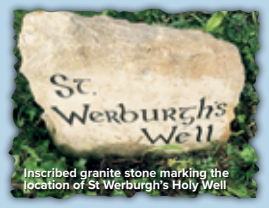
Icon of St Werburgh, abbess of Chester

ST WERBURGH'S HOLY WELL

Holy wells are a Christian adaptation of a pre-Christian tradition of sacred springs. Water in springs, rivers and lakes was clearly venerated in prehistory, with valuable possessions (such as gold ornament or bronze / iron weapons) thrown in as offerings. Like their pagan predecessors, the holy wells were often visited at certain times of the year and many had a reputation for affecting cures. There are numerous wells marked around Swords on the first edition Ordnance Survey six-inch map (1843), though not all of these are necessarily holy wells. Those dedicated to saints are named as 'St Columb's Well', which was associated with the early monastic foundation in Swords, 'Cronan's Well' and 'St Werburgh's Well'. St Werburgh was not an early Irish saint, which makes this a curious dedication.

First edition Ordnance Survey six-inch map (1843), showing St Werburgh's Holy Well

St Werburgh's Well is located behind the Ryan Air building, beside the Airside Retail Park. It gives its name to the nearby St Werburgh's and Holy Well estates. The natural spring well is situated by a stream and originally had a stone superstructure of some kind, but was largely obscured by vegetation overgrowth in the later 20th century. There was a local tradition that its water provided cures for sore eyes but by the 1950s it is recorded that it was no longer venerated. In March 2011 the well was cleared and reconstructed during drainage works. It is now signposted with an inscribed stone which preserves the memory of this holy well. St Werburgh's Well remains a spiritual place for the local population, with small religious icons and personal momentos still placed there as votive offerings to the saint.



Inscribed granite stone marking the location of St Werburgh's Holy Well

Who was St Werburgh?

St Werburgh was born in England sometime early in the 7th century AD, of noble blood. Her father was the king of the Saxon kingdom of Mercia whilst her mother was a daughter of the king of Kent. As a princess and a renowned beauty, Werburgh had many suitors vying for her hand in marriage, but she resolved to dedicate her life to God. With her father's consent, she became a nun and entered the Abbey of Ely, which had been founded by her great-aunt St Etheldra. After a life of service to the religious administration of Mercia, Werburgh finally died on the 3rd February in 699 and her remains were enshrined at Hanbury. The shrine was relocated to the walled city of Chester after Hanbury came under threat of Viking raids in the late 9th century. Chester became the focus for devotion to St Werburgh and she remains patron saint of that city.

Although a Saxon saint, St Werburgh remained popular after the Norman conquest of England in 1066. The elaborate shrine at Chester was broken up in the mid-16th century, during the Dissolution of the Monasteries under King Henry VIII and Werburgh's relics were lost.

St Werburgh's Holy Well

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Compiled and edited by Dr Clare Crowley, Courtney Deery Heritage Consultancy with assistance of Mr Paddy O'Byrne

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ST CRONAN & GLASMORE ABBEY

Who was St Cronan?

St Cronan founded an early monastery at Glasmore, somewhere near Swords, in the 7th century AD. We know little of St Cronan, whose feast day is celebrated on 10th February, and almost no detail survives of his monastery. The first of the Viking raids in Ireland is recorded in the Annals of Ulster, which tells of the burning of *Rechru* [Lambay] by the heathens in 795, with an attack on St Patrick's Island, Skerries only three years later. The onslaught continued in the Fingal area with a devastating attack on St Cronan's monastery. This is the earliest reference to the church at Glasmore (from the Irish *glás mór*, meaning great / big stream). It appears in the Martyrology of Oengus the Culdee, which tells us that on 10th February 631 /636 AD, St Cronan was killed along with his fellow monks of 'Glas Már' by 'the Northmen from *Inbhear Dombhainn* [i.e. Malahide]'. The Viking attackers were merciless and not one of the community survived.

First edition Ordnance Survey six-inch map (1843), showing St Cronan's Holy Well and a ruin named *'Glasmore Abbey'*

St Cronan's Holy Well

A holy well dedicated to St Cronan is recorded within Mooretown townland. The well is described as a natural spring in a hollow marked by a tree and archaeological testing at the site of the well in 2003 identified the precise location of the spring. St Cronan's well was formerly a station well ('stations' or 'rounds' were rituals commonly performed at holy wells in order to receive a requested favour or cure) and local tradition thought the water held a cure for sore eyes and chicken pox. Holy wells are often indicators of early ecclesiastical settlement and its presence here may strengthen the argument that St Cronan's monastery was located nearby. However, it may also be that the well was associated with the possible ecclesiastical complex discovered in Oldtown-Mooretown c. 700m north (holy wells are frequently located at some distance from an ecclesiastical site). The veneration of the saint in the locality continued into the later 20th century, when in 1977 a new church in Brackenstown was opened with St Cronan as its patron.

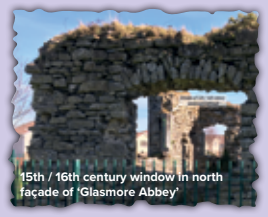
St Cronan's Holy Well

'Glasmore Abbey'

The ruins of a small building on the green area between the Cian Lea and Lios Cian estates are known locally as 'The Nunnery' and have long been thought to mark the site of St Cronan's monastery. An extract from a talk by Reverend William Reeves in the Old Borough Schoolhouse in 1860, for example, noted that:

View of 'Glasmore Abbey', facing west

In Moortown, which is about an English mile north west of you, on the way to Kilossory, at the left-hand side of the road is a curious, sombre-looking ruin, and in the adjacent meadow is a well, with an old tree overhanging, and having all the appearance of a holy well. The place is marked on the Ordnance Map as the site of the Abbey of Glasmore and the Well as St Cronan's, who founded a church here, before the middle of the seventh century.



15th / 16th century window in north façade of 'Glasmore Abbey'

The surviving remains are of coursed limestone with dressed quoins set on their narrow sides, standing to a single storey. At the northern end of the structure there is a window of 15th / 16th century date, though this was probably removed from another building and re-used here. The structure itself is likely to be of 17th / 18th century date, but it is of vernacular construction and so not readily dateable by its architectural features.

It is a curious structure, which does not resemble a church and is certainly not old enough to be a part of an early medieval monastery (nor is there any historical evidence for a later, medieval abbey at this location). Archaeological work nearby by Swan in 1999 found no archaeological material and in particular, no burials or any enclosure, both of which would normally be expected in the vicinity of an early medieval / medieval church. The building also lacks a fireplace, such as might be expected in a house. Nonetheless, some 16th / 17th century dwellings lacked proper chimneys and possessed instead a simpler firehood or even just a central hearth (with either a smokehole or a permeable thatched roof).

A 16th / 17th century house?

The small amount of 16th / 17th century pottery found in a field to the north may be a clue as to the real origin of this building: it could be the surviving part of the house or barn (or a related outbuilding) owned by Edward Bolton in the mid-17th century. The Civil Survey of c. 1654 describes several structures at Mooretown in the possession of *'Sir Edward Bolton, knight of Brazeil, Protestant'*, including a house, a barn and eight cabins. The survey also recorded ornamental ash trees, an orchard and a garden plot, which indicates that the house was occupied by someone of middling station; in other words perhaps not Bolton *'of Brazeil'* but rather his tenant. The house and neighbouring cottier 'cabins' may represent a later phase of the medieval settlement that was discovered in the field to the north in 2003.

'Glasmore Abbey', east façade

'Glasmore Abbey', west façade

The identification of this small structure as the remains of Glasmore Abbey (or its site) is based on the knowledge of a local man in the early 19th century, but historical evidence suggests that Mooretown is not the site of 'Glas Mor' monastery. The Martyrology of Oengus the Culdee describes Glasmore as a 'desolate church to the south of Swords' (not the north-west as in this case). The local tradition recording an early monastery in this area is significant, however, as it might preserve a long-forgotten memory of the possible early ecclesiastical complex that once existed at Oldtown-Mooretown and was only rediscovered in 2003.

The building underwent a programme of conservation in 2001, in which loose stone was collected and inserted into the structure. It is now protected by fencing and it stands as a testament to the past settlement of Mooretown.

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