

# BALLINGIRLOUGH

By Marie Leo

## *Introduction*

The following article, written by Marie Leo, was published in the *Lough Gur & District Historical Society Journal* in 1985. The content will be of interest to the Grange reader.

**B**allingirlough is a townland in the parish of Bruff, bordering the Knockainey/Patrickswell Parish. It is situated approximately two miles from Lough Gur and measures roughly two square miles. The amount of history associated with this small townland is an indication of the huge historical and archaeological importance of the greater Lough Gur area.

Baile na gCailleach, anglicised to Ballingirlough, means the “Town of the Women or Nuns”. *Fitzgerald’s History of Limerick* includes a map dating 1841 which marks the spot as “Hagstown”. The area is named after an Augustinian Order of nuns at Mainistir na Gallaigh, a ruined abbey on the hill of Ballingirlough. The Augustinian Order was one of the first and most important in the country, and the abbey at Ballingirlough was founded as far back as 941 but was disbanded during the Danish invasion.

The Convent was re-established in 1283 by the Fitzgibbons, who were a branch of the Desmond family. In 1349, it became a house of the Canonesses Regular of St Augustine, who appear to have remained there until the dissolution of the monasteries in 1539.

There are some ruined walls near the site of the abbey, and historians differ as to their origins. Owen Bresnan, having seen the remains, later wrote in a letter to Rev JF Lynch that “On top of Ballingirlough Hill, we discovered the extensive foundations of the town of that name. The foundations of the stone buildings and even the partitions of those buildings”. *Fitzgerald’s History of Limerick*, however, states that these ruins are the remains of a great house which belonged to a branch of the Brown family of Camass, who became famous for their military exploits in

Germany and Russia. I would favour the latter theory based on the traditional connection with the Browns of Camass and the lack of any other reference to a town in the area.

A second Augustinian Abbey was founded in Grange, where the comparatively new Roman Catholic Church now stands. It was at the time called the “Nova Grangia”. The inmates of this abbey travelled half-way to meet the nuns from Ballingirlough, possibly as a social occasion, or perhaps to discuss the policy of the order and exchange ideas. The crossroads where they met was called “Holy-Cross”. This original Holy-Cross was somewhere east of the present-day cross [*roads*] and was on the ancient road of “Cliadh na Leac”, which ran from Grange Hill to Ardalooda, just behind Grange Stone Circle, to Ballingirlough, to Gírlough, to Ballydaheen and to the Hill of Bruff, where it met another road which ran into Bruff via Crawfords Lane. The new road to Bruff incorporated the place that we now know as Holycross.

The Ordnance Survey maps mark four “Giant’s Graves” in Ballingirlough. These graves are the remains of megalithic tombs, dating from the Stone Age. “Leaba na Muice” or the “Pigs Bed”, on the borders of Ballingirlough and Lough Gur is a relatively simple construction, consisting of only four stones, all of which are limestone. Of the three perpendiculars or standing stones, two are merely flagstones, while the third is a huge limestone block which totally supports the capstone. The chamber measures approximately eight feet in length and is open on the western end. Another megalith was sited just south of Ballingirlough Cottage, but this, unfortunately, has disappeared. Stones from this grave were according to Owen Bresnan, taken by a Mr Fitzgerald to “perfect the circle of ‘Ronach Chroim Duibh’, near his own residence”. He was, of course, referring to the Great Stone Circle at Grange.

The other two graves are on the opposite side of the road, to the south-west. Of the first, all that remains is a large flagstone sloping to the east, which remains in place by virtue of the fact that a large portion of the stone is underground. At some stage in the latter end of the twentieth century, the perpendicular stones were removed by a landowner, and local seanachees claim that ill-luck followed him ever afterwards.

Just south of this is the fourth megalith, consisting of three remaining stones, which are not in their original positions. One of these stones is now embedded in the nearby ditch, and it is this stone which is locally known as the “Sleeping Stone”. It is said that anyone who rests on this stone for a few moments will fall into a profound sleep. In the early 1900s, the then owner of the land, one Mr Leahy, said that he had unaccountably fallen asleep on the stone on several occasions, and that each time he was awoken by a “supernatural agency”. Over the sleeping stone grows a large whitethorn bush, the sacred tree of the little people, who are said to

protect this grave and its sleepers. The tree has not grown in almost one hundred years, but a man who once cut off some branches, later developed a sore finger and died. The other two stones are perforated at the side as they were once taken from the site to hang gates on. They were later replaced by order of Crofton-Croker, and local sources claim that this measure was taken to ward off misfortune. Owen Bresnan comments on the fate of this tomb, “Only that its guardian spirit conceived the happy idea of sticking troublesome thorns into those intruders’ fingers, and shelling their corn crops with unexpected storms, the sleeping stone would be left companionless by unscrupulous vandals”.

Just west of the abbey in Ballingirlough is a small tumulus or burial mound, made of earth and stone, which has been partly dug away. At one end are two large stones which may have formed part of a kerb, while on the other end are traces of, what looks like, an outer bank. This could, however, simply be some of the material which has been dug away from the tumulus itself. The mound measures 24 feet by 20 feet and is built on a rock platform. The site is known as the “Hero’s Grave”.

Of the few artefacts found in the area, the National Museum of Ireland has two stone axes and a bronze axe, while UCC Archaeology Department retains a stone axe and hammer as well as some flint flake found at Holy Cross. Various historians have made reference to a stone coffin found in the area, which contained one skeleton, but I was unable to discover any details of the coffin itself or its fate, or even, indeed, its exact location. Perhaps some of our readers could help us out here.

Ardanreagh, just west of Ballingirlough Hill means the “Height of the Kings”, and one field in the townland is called “Croc Eilís” indicating that people were hanged there during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. The hill consists of two conical peaks, the highest of which, called Almuran was the site of a windmill at one time. Almuran is still called the “Mill-Field”.

Moving east in the direction of Knockderk is a swamp which is called “Mona Gap”, but no information is available as to the origin of this name. On the western edge of the swamp are two small black pillar stones called “The Twins”. Also on the edge of the bog are the remains of the foundations of the church of St Becan, which consisted of a square building with a square enclosure outside. Near the south-west corner of the enclosure is a rock well or ‘bullau’, which is almost exactly like the well at Lough Gur (“Wart Well”). It measures fourteen inches in diameter and is six inches deep, with a perfectly smooth interior. Like the well at Lough Gur, it is reputed to contain a cure for warts.

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*References and Notes:*

- (1) *Fitzgerald & McGregor: History of Limerick*
- (2) *O’Kelly: Survey of the Barony of Small County*
- (3) *Bresnan: Manuscript*