

Hidden gems and Forgotten People

BALLINCOLLIG HERITAGE ASSOCIATION



THE DOVE-COTE, BALLYBEG PRIORY, CO CORK

Ballybeg Priory is a 13th century priory situated near the town of Buttevant, County Cork, which lies between Cork and Limerick on the N20.

It was founded by Philip de Barry in 1229 as an Augustinian order and named after the martyred archbishop of Canterbury, St. Thomas à Becket. Ballybeg was an extensive foundation, the priory church measuring some 166 feet (51 m) in length and 26 feet (7.9 m) in width.

The priory is now in ruins but located away from the main ecclesiastical buildings, standing intact in the middle of a field is the most noteworthy remaining structure on the site, a round tower dovecote. It is a truly remarkable structure.

Inside, the walls are built in square compartments in regular tiers to a height of fifteen feet. There are some 352 niches, divided into eleven tiers each containing 32 compartments. It opens to the sky.

The dovecote was important as a source of revenue for the priory as its main agricultural purpose was the production of fertiliser. Pigeon fertiliser was essential for herb gardens and economically more highly valued than equivalents produced by cattle, sheep or pigs. It was also essential for the successful growing of hemp, which was widely used for cloth, rope and sack making.

A string course around the circumference of the building served not only as a structural strengthening of the building but also to prevent weasels, or other vermin from scaling the walls to the entrances.

Since pigeons could also be regarded as vermin as they could cause damage to grain crops, dovecotes were strictly controlled by medieval law. While tenants and others were permitted to keep a few pairs of doves in their roof-attics, a dovecote, such as that at Ballybeg, was the exclusive prerogative of a landowner.