

HIDDEN GEMS AND FORGOTTEN PEOPLE
CAVEHILL CONSERVATION CAMPAIGN



BALLYAGHAGAN SOUTERRAIN

This souterrain has only come to light in the last two months. A resident of North Belfast found it as a teenager and now that he is a man in his forties, he has brought this to our attention.

Souterrains typically are hidden chambers used by residents of an area to hide goods and even themselves whenever they were threatened or in some cases for storage only. They date to the late iron age or early Christian era (500 – 1000 CE) though there is some reason to believe that Irish souterrains are a little later than this. They are also associated with early settlements and this particular example is not far from the cashel – the remains of a fortified farmhouse (8th to 12th century) beside the car park at the Hightown Road.

This souterrain has been incorporated into a field boundary in Ballyaghagan Nature Reserve on the back of Cave Hill. Whether this was by accident or design, this has ensured that the souterrain remains hidden, even from a close inspection. The approach is easiest from the car park at the Hightown Road entrance to Cave Hill Country Park. Go through the stile in the northeastern corner and pass the cashel. There is a thin path going towards and through dense gorse in the upper corner of this field. Follow this sometimes muddy path and keep close to the northern boundary of the next field until the path crosses a field boundary. At this point you are now within five meters of the souterrain.

It is a tunnel, carefully lined with stone and now about 2 meters long and about 60 cms broad and high. It has two entrances, both partially collapsed. There are signs a meter or two away that the souterrain may once have been more extensive.

This is the only souterrain known to me within the Cave Hill Country Park. There are two recorded (in 1947 and 1959) outside the park on sites now built over with roads and housing and there are two still extant on Carnmoney Hill.

It has been reported to the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) and will be listed in due course.

A brief general survey of Irish Souterrains and further references can be found in:
O’Sullivan & Downey. “Souterrains”. Archaeology Ireland Vol 70 pp34-36 Winter 2004

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