

# Druid's circles and vanishing stones

by Sean Barden

## Introduction

Armagh's archaeological remains have fascinated writers for hundreds of years. For instance in the twelfth century the discovery of ancient objects near the Navan Fort warranted inclusion in the Annals. Chronicon Scotorum has the following entry for the year 1117 AD,

*A sword found at Emain in the ground was a man's foot from the centre-groove to its edge on either side, and its width was two feet not counting the groove.*<sup>1</sup>

This fascination has continued to capture the imagination of scientist and poet; amateur and professional, alike. In 1913 local man, Patrick Downey compiled a book of historical notes that is now held in the collection of the Cardinal Ó Fiaich Library in Armagh. Among the contents are interesting notes identifying several antiquities near the Navan Fort. They are frustratingly concise but important nevertheless because some of the sites he wrote about are little known today.

## Who was Patrick Downey?

Knowledge about Downey himself is scanty. Brief extracts from his notebook were published during the 1940's and 50's accompanied by short biographical sketches. From these we learn he was from the Armagh district, learned Gaelic whilst working in Scotland and was an "indefatigable worker on the placenames of his native county". The dates of his birth or death are not mentioned but he was not alive in 1946 when the first of the extracts was published and had spent much of his later life in Lancashire.<sup>2</sup> The fact that one of the articles appeared in a magazine published by Armagh Christian Brothers past pupils and his notebook was formerly in the care of the Christian Brothers tells us a little bit more about his background and education. A search of the 1911 census turns up just

one Patrick Downey in County Armagh, aged 38 with an address in Castle Street in the city, where he lived with his widowed mother. He was a general labourer, born in Armagh and could speak both Irish and English. We cannot say with absolute certainty this is our man but the details support the brief biographical notes above.<sup>3</sup>

## Ballybrolly

It would be of little value to reproduce verbatim Downey's notebook which it seems he wrote as a *aide-mémoire*. In this and a forthcoming article I will explore instead one paragraph on page eight headed "Ballybrolly", the townland immediately north of Navan.

In just 91 words supplemented by a rough sketch map he mentions seven sites or monuments in the area. Some of the sites survive but the first two that are the subject of this article have been destroyed. This is what he says.

### *Ballybrolly*

*Two miles from Armagh - West A druid's circle is found here: 72 stones standing 150 yds. paces directly South is another circle, the stones of which were removed for road metal. ...*

## The Druid's rings

The more southerly of these stone circles was destroyed in the third quarter of the nineteenth century and the other much more recently.

The Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) reference number for the more northerly circle is ARM 012:007 and it is described in the recently published Archaeological Survey of county Armagh as "Passage Tomb, The Druid's Ring". Its companion to the south is described as, "Probable Passage Tomb"

- ARM 012:008.<sup>4</sup>

On the 1835, 6-inch OS map (*fig 2*) they are each marked as "Site of cairn" and on the 1862 OS edition (*fig 3*), the additional words "Wilson's Rock" appears beside the more southerly circle. The associated Ordnance Survey Name Books say of Wilson's Rock.

*A name given to a cairn and so called for the last 40 or 50 years. Derivation not known but said to be called Wilson's Rock from an occupant named Wilson. This cairn is locally known as a fort but there is not sufficient authority to alter it. It has every appearance of having been a Stone Fort as the fosse is still perfect on the SE side but it may have afterwards been used for a tumulus.*

From at least the mid nineteenth century the local name Druid's Ring or Druid's Stones was also applied to them. For example when The Irish Literary Society of London toured the area in 1906 the Armagh Guardian recorded that, "on visiting the Navan they also passed the Druid's Ring".<sup>5</sup>

One of the earliest descriptions was written in the 1870's by Deputy Keeper of Armagh Public Library, Edward Rogers,

*Passing through a lane leading to Tyross, not far distant, in the farm of Mr Knipe are to be seen two Druidic stone circles, each measuring about seventy feet [21m] in diameter. The stones are the common limestone peculiar to the district, and they appear to have been placed with the narrowest or more pointed end downwards.*<sup>6</sup>

Shortly after this the more southerly of the circles was destroyed. H.W. Lett wrote in 1884

*There were not long since two of these circles within a short distance of each other, each measuring about 70 feet [21m] in diameter. One of them has been destroyed, and the stones utilised for repairing roads.*<sup>7</sup>

In the same year The Royal Historical and Archaeological Association of Ireland were conducted around the area by Edward Rogers. They found...

*The space enclosed by the rude stones was of large size and irregular shape, and was partially intruded on by some farm buildings, into the walls of which some of the upright stones were incorporated. Mr Rogers said that another and similar stone circle had existed in the vicinity, but had been removed for the purpose of supplying material to macadamise an adjacent road. It was natural that proceeding should draw forth strong comment, more especially as the Ballybrawley monument has been threatened with a similar fate.<sup>8</sup>*

the stones he disagreed with Rogers' assertion that most of them seemed to be placed with their narrowest end down. Indeed he found "*most of the longer stones lie horizontally in the line of the circle*" and suggested that the then extant monument was actually the last few remaining kerb stones that had once retained a cairn. This disagreement with Rogers' description need not make us doubt what the latter wrote for he was in all likelihood describing the destroyed circle and not the one Lett observed.

Lett also noted that local people knew the circle as the "Druid's Temple" and

Society on the Mall. The present County Museum has many objects formerly held by the Philosophical Society but this is not among them. However the former curator of the museum Roger Weatherup had the foresight to photograph the monument in the 1960's before it met the same fate of its neighbour. (fig 1) A group of amateur antiquarians, The South Armagh Ramblers visited the area on 13 March 1931. Led by the first curator of Armagh County Museum, T.G.F. Paterson, they recorded what remained then. It will be evident to even the casual reader of the passage below that a lot of it is lifted verbatim from Lett's 1911 article and had Paterson's measurements not differed slightly one might wonder if the Ramblers merely glanced over the hedge at the old stones before moving on.

**BALLYBRAWLEY STONE CIRCLE.** *Known locally as the "Druids Temple" this is shown on the OS maps for the county as "Ruin of Cairn". At present it consists of 30 undressed boulders arranged in a circle of 70 ft [21m] in diameter. The sizes of the stones vary from 3 feet by 1 foot [0.94m] to 9 feet by 2 feet [2.8m] and most of the long stones lie horizontally in the line of the circle. Some ruined farm buildings abut on the line of boulders in which two are incorporated. Though there is little left the remains are of great interest as there is now no similar erection of stones in the County as Carnavanaghan which was undoubtedly of like structure had its enclosing boulders removed during the last century. In the next field to "The temple" there was a similar cairn. It was removed completely about 1862 but its site is still easily traceable. Tradition states that there were also other cairns on the same hill and the nearness of the monuments to Emain Macha makes their reputed site of great interest to antiquarians.<sup>10</sup>*



fig 1, The remains of the northern of the two circles photographed in 1964

## Bassett's view

Four years later when Bassett wrote his county Armagh guide he described the stones thus.

*There are no perfect Druidic circles now in the county. About three fourths of one originally 23 yards [21m] in diameter may be seen upon the farm of Mr. Thomas Knipe, Townland of Ballybrawley 2½ miles north by west of Armagh. A second circle occupied a site within 150 yards [137m] of the first. The last stone of this was removed about 12 years ago.<sup>9</sup>*

If Bassett was writing in 1887/8 the destruction would have taken place around 1876.

By 1911 Lett was now Honorary Provincial Secretary for Ulster of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland and wrote the most detailed account of the monument so far. After examining

made the following measurements. The circle was 70 feet [21m] in diameter and "consisted of thirty undressed blocks" that varied in height from 36 inches [0.9m] to 102 inches [2.6m]. He observed that the nearby "unoccupied and ruinous" farm building encroached on the circle with one stone leaning against its east wall. Another stone which was part of the building, he conjectured, had been left in situ and formed "a large irregular corner stone at the front of the house". Emphasising the importance of what did remain he stated, "*Though there is not much left, the remains are interesting, there being no other similar erection of stones left in the county of Armagh.*" He also noted there was a watercolour sketch of the monument by Miss Edith Hardy in the museum of the Armagh Natural History and Philosophical

Paterson's estimated date for the removal of the southern circle is about 14 years before Bassett's but the latter's date seems to be supported by a letter written in 1876 by Edward Rogers to Sir John Lubbock where he said,

*Since I wrote to you one of the "Druids Circles" has been broken up and the stones smashed for mending roads and unless something be done the others will follow.<sup>11</sup>*

It is a pity these two important and enigmatic parts of the Navan complex

are no more, examination using modern techniques and technology could have solved the mystery of their original form and function.

In the second part of this article I will discuss several less well known Ballybroolly monuments alluded to by Downey some of which survive others may perhaps be awaiting rediscovery or recognition.

## References

<sup>1</sup> Corpus of Electronic Texts Edition: T100016  
[<http://www.ucc.ie/celt/published/T100016/>]

index.html]; For discussion of the find see Forbes, Will, *The first recorded archaeological find at Emain Macha* in *Emania* No.7, 1990, p43; *Emania* No.5, 1988, p40

<sup>2</sup> *Seanchas Ard Macha* Vol. I 1954 p116, *Voices from the grave* in *The City Magazine*, 1946, p34

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie/reels/nai001622928/>

<sup>4</sup> Neill, Ken, *An Archaeological survey of county Armagh*, NIEA, 2009, p103-4

<sup>5</sup> *Armagh Guardian* 10th August 1906

<sup>6</sup> Rogers, Edward, *Memoir of the Armagh cathedral with an account The Ancient City*, c1876, p66

<sup>7</sup> Lett, H.W. *Report on Ancient monuments in the county of Armagh* in *The Journal of*

the Royal Historical and Archaeological Association of Ireland, Vol. IV (fourth series), 1883-84, p431.

<sup>8</sup> Graves, James, *Excursions and reports* in *The Journal of the Royal Historical and Archaeological Association of Ireland*, Vol. IV (fourth series), 1883-84, p409

<sup>9</sup> Bassett, George H., *The book of County Armagh*, Dublin, 1888, p31

<sup>10</sup> South Armagh Ramblers notebook in Armagh County Museum collection.

<sup>11</sup> Cahill, Mary, *A note on two items of correspondence relating to Navan* in *Emania* No.6, 1989, p29



Fig 2. Ballybroolly as shown on the 1835 OS map, (Sheet 12)



Fig 3. Ballybroolly as shown on the 1862 OS map, (Sheet 12)