

Archaeological Investigations at Dysart, Co. Kilkenny 1989-1994: An Interim Report

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Abstract

The work to date, which has included two seasons of excavation, has provided evidence of continuous human activity at Dysart from Early Christian times to the eighteenth century, when the place appears to have been abandoned. The site is renowned for being the childhood home of the famous eighteenth century philosopher, Bishop George Berkeley. This report summarises the findings of the investigations to date.

Introduction

The site is a National Monument not in state care (National Grid reference S597393). It is located on a low grassy hill, near a sharp angle formed by the river Nore, two miles south of Thomastown, in the townland of Dysart (Fig.1). The remains of three stone buildings survive above the ground (Fig.2). The first, consists of the remains of a small oblong church that dates from the 12th century, or earlier (Figs.3 and 4). The second building is a fifteenth century tower house that stands to the west of the church (Fig.3). The third building consists of the remains of a long dwelling house of post-Reformation date. The latter, which has been traditionally associated with the Berkeley family (Carrigan 1905, Vol.IV, 277), extends southwards from the tower house (Fig.2).

Historical Background

The history of the site is sketchy. Dysart is mentioned in the charter of Geoffrey FitzRobert (dating to 1204-06), confirming its ownership by the Augustinian priory of Kells. The charter of c.1193, containing the original grant, does not survive (White 1936, 2, 301). The central portion of the ancient kingdom of Ossory, in which Dysart was located,

appears to have remained under the control of the MacGillapatraic clan until 1192, when William Marshall gained seisin of the lordship of Leinster. He immediately set about sharing out the remains of this small kingdom among his household knights (Empey 1990, 77). The cantred of Kells was granted to Geoffrey FitzRobert, who wasted no time in establishing an Augustinian priory, near his new castle and settlement at Kells (Empey 1984 A, 34-35).

Most of the lands of the priory were located within the parish of Kells (Empey 1984 B, 141). However, Dysart was an exception being located twelve miles to the southeast of the priory, in the cantred of Ogenty. The confirmatory charter (of c.1204-06) refers to the "lands of Disert Moholmoc with churches, chapels, and all liberties" (White 1936, 2, 301). The name means secluded place of St. Colman – after the patron saint of the site. He is commemorated on November 5th. In the Labor Breac, he is referred to as "Colman of Glenn Delmaic" and it states that the latter was another name for Dysart (Carrigan 1905; Vol.1, 15, Vol.IV, 276-77).

The name Dysart of St. Colman would suggest that the seclusion of the site attracted the establishment of a church here at an early date. The churches mentioned in FitzRobert's grant may refer to the pre-Norman church of Dysart, together with that of Ffossith (Famma) in Brownsbarn, on the opposite side of the river Nore (Carrigan 1905, Vol.IV, 275-76). The latter was also the property of Kells priory, and the surrounding land appears to have been part of the Dysart holding. An early date for the establishment of a church at Dysart is confirmed by the discovery of two Early Christian cross slabs on the site (Hall 1991, 853-858).

In 1988, two pieces of Viking hacked silver were found in the field to the east of the site (Hall 1993, 1164-1165). These are now in the possession of the National Museum (I.A./400/88). During the ninth and tenth centuries, the Vikings were active in Ossory (O'Corrain 1972, 94, 103), and the nearby river Nore would have served as an important highway for their activities.

From c.1193 to 1540, the churches of Dysart and Ffossith remained the property of Kells priory. In 1227,

Reginald, prior of Kells, and Alured, prior of Inistioge, reached an agreement concerning the “lands and churches of Dysart” (White 1936, 303). This was probably related to a boundary dispute between the two Augustinian priories over Dysart. The latter is mentioned occasionally in the Red Book of Ossory, concerning ecclesiastical taxations. For example, at the beginning of the fourteenth century, the “church of Dysart” was worth nothing. However, in 1351, the “rectory of Dysart” was worth 11s.8d. In the following century, the “churches of Fosyt and Dysart” between them were worth £5 – a respectable sum of money, and around 1500 “Diserte” was worth 10s. (Carrigan 1905, Vol.IV, 366, 372, 382, 385).

In 1412, King Henry IV ratified in favour of the priors of Kells “for all future time, their title to, and possession of” all their lands and other properties, including “the church of Disert with the chapel and glebe there” (Carrigan 1905, Vol.IV, 59). In 1435 Robert Cardyf surrendered to the prior of Kells, any claim that he had “in toto Manerio de Dysartmoholmok alias vocato Dysard” (White 1936, 28).

In 1540 the priory of Kells was dissolved, and in the following year Dysart was granted to James, 9th Earl of Ormond. At that time, the site consisted of “ten messuages, two hundred acres of arable land, one hundred of pasture, ten of wood, and forty of moor, with appurtenances ... of an annual value, besides of all reprises of £3.13s.4d.” (Carrigan 1905, Vol.IV, 60). The property remained in the hands of the Ormond family until the 18th century, and was leased out to various tenants. Around 1620, Dysart, or “Disertbegg” as it was called, together with neighbouring “Pleberstowne”, was leased to a tenant called Richard Butler (White 1936, 281).

During the second half of the seventeenth century, Dysart was leased to the Berkeley family, and they appear to have resided in the tower house and adjoining wing to the south (Carrigan 1905, Vol.IV, 277). This was the childhood home of the most famous family member, the philosopher, Bishop George Berkeley of Cloyne (1685-1753). The castle described as a large square building with battlements and turrets in his *Alciphron* (dialogue 4, Sect.IX), may have been the tower house at Dysart (Houghton, Berman & Lapan 1986, 18). According to tradition, the Berkeleys destroyed

the graveyard and threw all the tombstones they could find into the nearby river Nore (Carrigan 1905, Vol.IV, 277).

In 1703, together with other holdings, Dysart was leased by the second Duke of Ormonde to the Robbins family of nearby Ballyduff, whose descendants, the Winters remained in the area up to the present century (Pilsworth 1972, 59-60). A number of water colours, as well as pen and ink sketches in the Miller/Robertson papers (now in possession of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland), depict Dysart as being ruined and deserted by the early

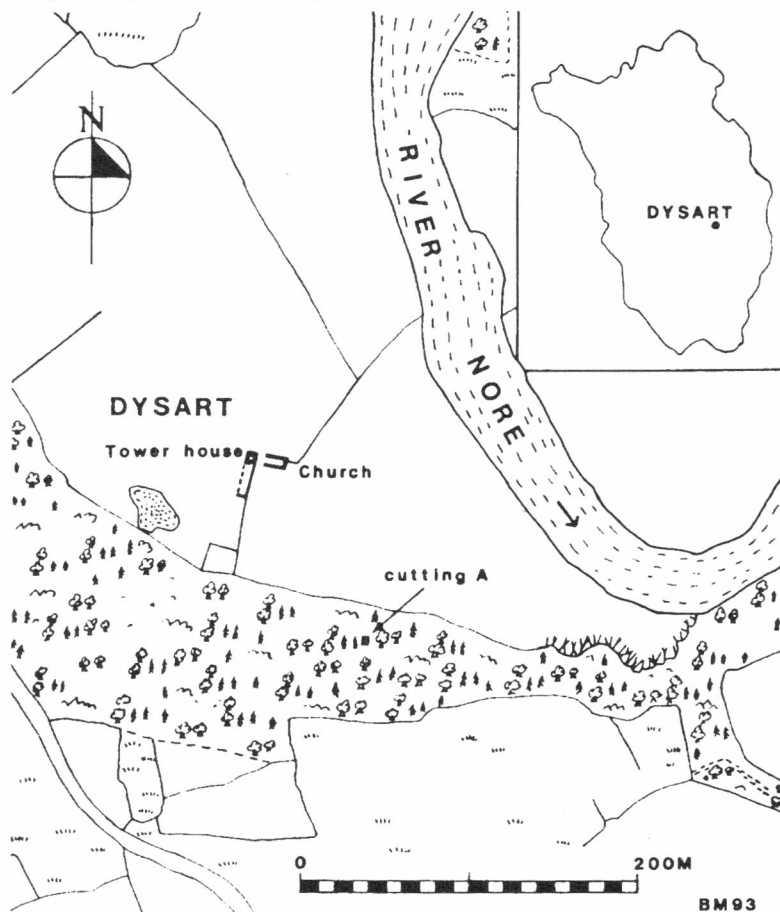


Fig. 1 Location Map of Dysart

nineteenth century (Lyons 1991-92, 11-13).

In 1915, Mr. R. Langrishe of Archersfield, Kilkenny, wrote to Dr. R. Cockrane of the Office of Public Works concerning the state of the tower house and church at Dysart, "being the landmark of the birthplace of the great Bishop Berkeley, whose fame is world-wide". Langrishe stated that he could remember the condition of the "church tower" seventy years previously (c.1845) "as a most picturesque object, quite free from ivy". However, in 1915, he felt compelled to write to Cockrane with a view to having the ivy removed, "and the building properly attended to, and secured against any further dilapidation". The request appears to have gone unheeded, and the site continued to deteriorate.

In 1976, the ruins of Dysart were acquired along with 110 acres of adjoining land, by its present owner, Kilkenny artist, Mr. Ramie Leahy. Since then, the latter together with Dr. Raymond Houghton of Trinity College, Dublin (a renowned Berkeley scholar) have endeavoured to have the site preserved. This culminated in the archaeological investigations that began in the late 1980s.

The Archaeological Investigations

Resulting from a request from the owner, Mr. Leahy, an archaeological team travelled to Dysart in 1988, from the University of California at Berkeley, to investigate the possibility of carrying out an excavation on the site. In June and July 1989, a four week exploratory excavation was conducted on the site, under the auspices of U.C.B. It was co-directed by Mr. Mark E. Hall of U.C.B., and the writer, representing the Office of Public Works. The work began with the clearance of vegetation and growth in and around the surviving buildings. This was to facilitate a closer view of the architectural remains. It was followed by the excavation of three probe cuttings (A-C), that were to determine the nature of the archaeological stratigraphy beneath the ground (See Figs.1 and 2).

The 1989 season of work provided evidence of human activity on the site, dating from Early Christian times to the eighteenth century (Murtagh & Hall 1990, No.61). On the basis of the results of the first season of work, it was decided

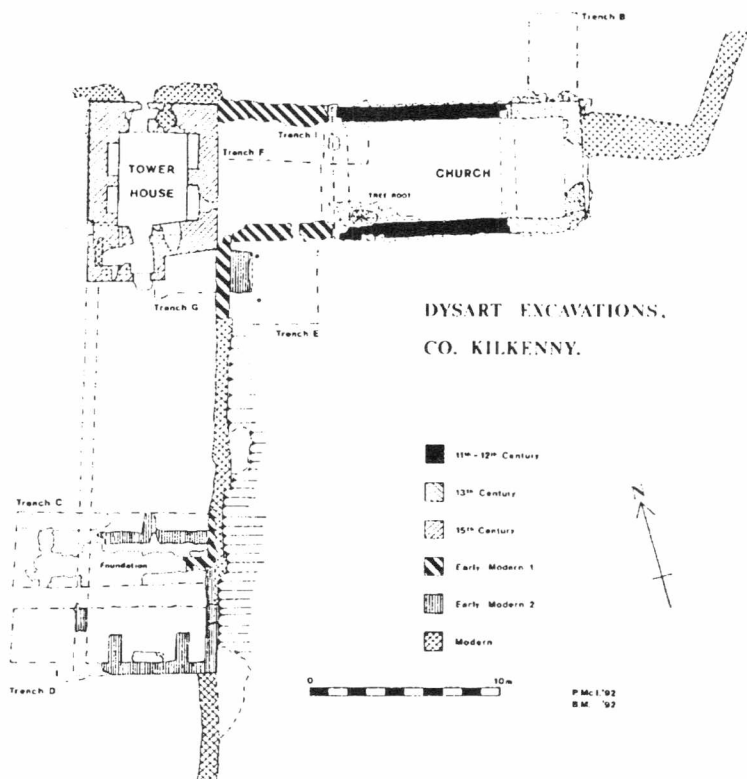


Fig. 2 Site Plan of Dysart, showing location of excavation cuttings.

to conduct a second season of excavation. This was carried out between September and November 1991 under the direction of the writer (Murtagh 1992, No.78). It was funded by the Office of Public Works, on the recommendation of the National Committee for Archaeology of the Royal Irish Academy. In the spring of 1994, an architectural survey was conducted upon the tower house, under the direction of the writer, funded from a research grant issued by the R.I.A.

The archaeological investigations to date, have helped to answer a number of important questions concerning Dysart. These include: (a) the nature of a sheltered rock ledge known as "St. Colman's Cave", that is located to the southeast of the main site (Fig.1); (b) the nature and date of the church; (c)

the nature and date of the tower house; (d) the relationship of the latter to the church; (e) the nature and date of the adjoining wing known as the “Berkeley residence”; and (f) the nature and date of the graveyard.

(a) “St. Colman’s Cave”

This rock ledge, which is approximately 4m in length and sheltered by overhanging rock, is located in woodland 45m to the south-east of the site (Fig.1). The nature of this feature suggested the possibility of it being a prehistoric occupation site. However, a small excavation (cutting A), that was conducted during the 1989 season of work, produced finds which indicated that this “cave” was used as a quarry for local shale during the nineteenth century.

(b) The Nature and Date of the Church

Above the ground level, the surviving structure is rectangular in plan (Fig.3), measuring externally 12.85m in length x 6.9m in width. The west wall does not survive. After the removal of rubble, vegetation and top soil, an examination of the architectural remains revealed that the eastern third of the building is later than the western two thirds. The latter consists of the remains of the north and south walls of a pre-Norman church. These were constructed of large, rough blocks of mainly sandstone masonry. The gaps between the latter were filled with small stones, or spalls. The faces of the walls overlay plinths of large flat slabs of sandstone. This style of masonry was characteristic of Irish church architecture before the coming of the Normans (See Leask 1955, 51-53).

Although the west wall does not survive, an examination of the west end of the north wall clearly indicated the location of the north-west corner. Here a small cutting (I) revealed the remains of the plinth of the west wall. Similarly an examination of the surviving masonry revealed the location of the destroyed east wall of the pre-Norman church, or nave. The latter measured, internally, 8.02m in length x 5.35m (Fig.3). In the absence of excavation within the eastern part of the present building, it is not clear whether the early stone church was a single cell structure, or consisted of a nave and chancel, whereby the latter was

demolished to facilitate the thirteenth century extension.

The recovery of a re-used cross slab (Hall 1991, Figs. 1a and 2) from the collapsed masonry of the north wall of the pre-Norman church, would suggest that the latter was not the first such building that was located at Dysart. Its predecessor may have been a timber structure. The discovery of this cross slab, together with another in the west wall of the tower house (Hall 1991, Fig.3) points to the early establishment of a church on the site, as the name of Dysart (secluded place) suggests. The latter was associated with the early Irish monastic sites, located in remote places that were favoured by austere holymen (Leask 1955, 11). Dysart is still a secluded place, located on a small hill, that is hemmed in between the river Nore on one side and a steep rock incline, that is wooded, on the other (Fig.1).

During the course of the thirteenth century, the east wall of the pre-Norman church was demolished, and the building was extended eastwards. On the south side of the interior, the return of the original east wall can still be traced above the ground (Fig.3). Slightly to the east of this, the outer plinths of the original north and south walls terminate. Internally the church was extended by 3.6m. The masonry of the extension is quite distinct from that of the older part of the building. The former consists of smaller hammer-dressed stones, and the courses are more irregular than in the case of the earlier masonry.

On the left side of the now destroyed east window of the extension, are the remains of a statue niche, while on the right hand side of the same, is an ambrey (Fig.3). Both of these features are constructed of yellow sandstone, and had trefoil heads that were fashionable during the thirteenth century (Fig.5). The remains of the east window consist of dressed sandstone. Carrigan (1905, Vol.IV, 276) described the remains of a window in the south wall. This does not survive. However, dressed sandstones recovered from rubble that was located at the south-east of the church, may have come from either this feature, or the east window.

(c) The Nature and Date of the Tower House

Although this building has a number of serious

DYSART EXCAVATIONS, Co. KILKENNY.

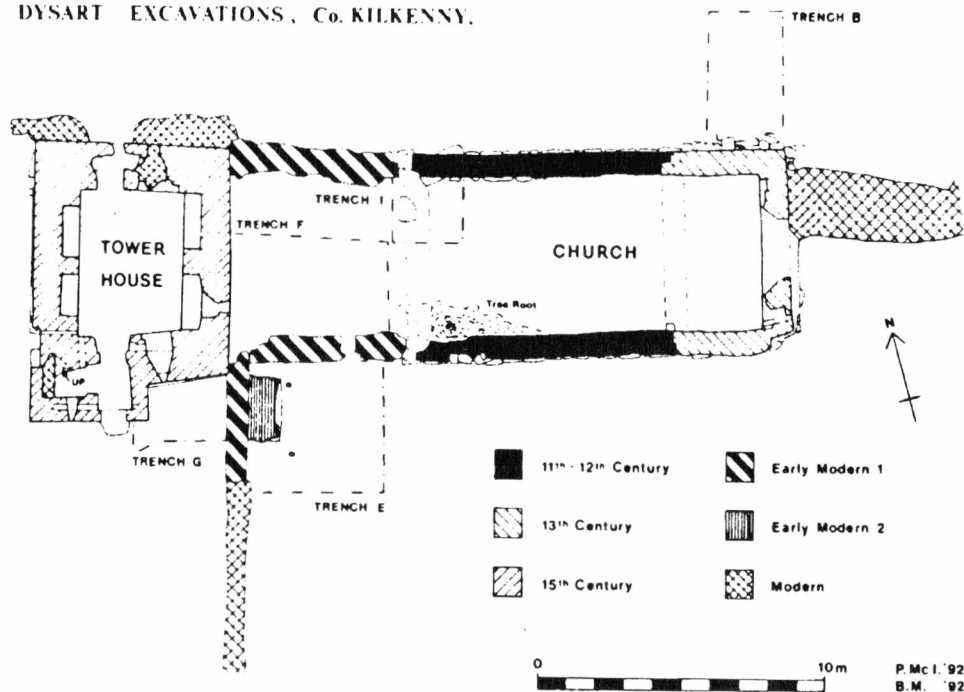


Fig. 3 Plan of Tower House and Church at Dysart.

structural cracks, it still stands to the height of its ruined battlements, and has a projecting spiral stair turret at south-west (Figs. 2-5). It is constructed of irregular courses of hammer-dressed sandstone, and local shale masonry. It consists of a ground, second and third storey, each of which has a main oblong chamber (Fig.4). On the fourth floor level is a wall walk, with the battlement level of the projecting stair turret rising a storey higher.

In the main ground floor chamber are four arched recesses, that can be paralleled to examples in its counterpart, in the tower house of the late medieval Bridge Castle, in nearby Thomastown (Murtagh 1988, 538, Figs. 1 and 4). The main first floor chamber of the Dysart building was roofed with a pointed barrel vault (Fig.4). To the west of the latter is a long garderobe, or privy, while to the east is a secret chamber, access to which was made from the main second floor chamber.

The tower house is the only structure, standing in Dysart, which dates to the late medieval period. On its west face, on ground storey level, are the remains of a gateway, which may have given access through a bawn wall, located to the west of the present site. However, apart from this gateway, no evidence for such a wall survives elsewhere above the ground. Instead, plasterwork on the west face of the tower house indicates that it was abutted at its south-west corner by a later building, possibly part of the wing that stood to the south, and that the gateway was located at its north end. To the north of the latter, the Miller drawing of c.1812-1816, which depicts the site from the north-west (Lyons 1992, fig.2), shows a ruined single storey, gabled wing, running west from the tower house. At present, no trace survives of this building above the ground. In order to establish the relationship between all these structures, it would be necessary to excavate the area to the west of the tower house.

The tower house bears morphological differences to the large number of such buildings that were built at the mother house in Kells. Empey (1984, 148-151) has dated the construction of the latter, centering on the period 1460-1475, based on documentary evidence. He has attributed the

building of these structures to the growing secularisation of the canons of Kells priory, during the second half of the fifteenth century.

The projecting turret at the Dysart tower house, contains both the entrance lobby to the building, and spiral staircase that gives access to the upper floors (Fig.3). Projecting stair turrets do not appear to have been a feature of tower houses in county Kilkenny. Instead, mural stairways were popular, and where spiral staircases exist, they are usually confined within the walls of an oblong structure, as in the case of Clara Castle, twelve miles to the north of Dysart (Leask 1937, 284-289).

The structure of the Dysart tower house can be paralleled to many early examples of such buildings in the area of the Pale. These have a turret, which projects from the main oblong structure, that contains a spiral staircase located near the entrance doorway to the building at the bottom, and rises a storey above to the wall walk level (Murtagh 1985/86, 477-478). The way in which the entrance doorway to the Dysart tower house is located in the south face of the stair turret (Fig.3), is unusual in that it is in a defensively weak position. A more sensible arrangement would have been to have it located either, in the east face of the turret, or to the east of the latter, in the south face of the main part of the building. The weak position of the entrance doorway can be paralleled to that of a destroyed early Pale tower house, Timon Castle, Co. Dublin (Newman Johnson 1988, 568), which bore similarities in design to the Dysart site.

The similarities in design between the Dysart tower house and early examples of such buildings in the area of the Pale, might suggest that it was an outlier of this group, dating from the early to mid-fifteenth century. Perhaps further research could throw more light on this point.

(d) The Relationship of the Church to the Tower House

There is a gap of 6m between the two buildings, but they are linked by the remains of two roughly built walls (Fig.3). It was initially thought that the tower house was located at the west end of the church (Carrigan 1905, Vol.IV,

276). For example, a residential tower, located at the west end of churches, was known in the area of the late medieval Pale (Leask 1960, 19, 20). Attached to the north-east of Kilfane church, which is 3.5 miles to the north of Dysart, is a five storey tower of fifteenth century date, that served both as a residence and a belfry. However, excavations to date, have provided no evidence that the two buildings at Dysart were joined together during the late middle ages. Instead, the work has revealed that subsequent to the Reformation, the west wall of the pre-Norman church was demolished, and the building joined to the tower house by the two above walls.

The two roughly built walls, enclosed the remains of a cobbled surface, and may have functioned as part of an

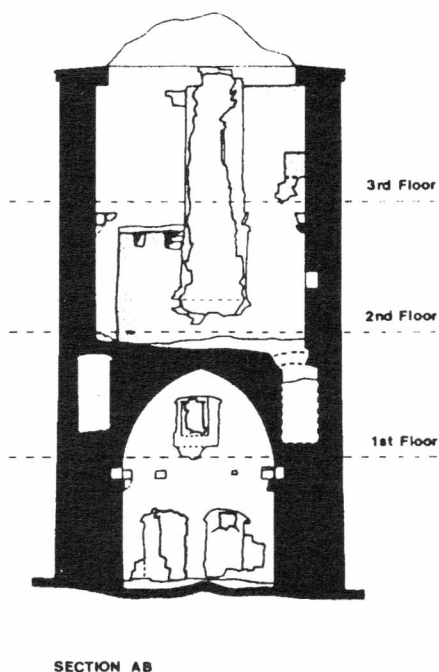


Fig. 4 Cross-section, looking north, through Tower House at Dysart

outhouse, or byre, up to the eighteenth century. However, excavation of this area is incomplete. As a result, the original relationship, if any, between the tower house and church has not, as yet, been established.

(e) The Nature of the Berkeley Residence

Evidence to date, suggests that the two buildings stood to the south of the tower house, on the same site in the post-Reformation period. The first structure extended just over 17m to the south of the tower house, and was at least 10m in width (Fig.3). From the sixteenth century onwards, it had become common practice to have an unfortified wing added to an earlier tower house, in order to provide more comfortable accommodation for the occupants (Leask 1964, 136).

The first extension was constructed of clay bonded masonry and, not surprisingly, it appears to have had a short life having been demolished during the course of the seventeenth century. It was replaced by a longer, but narrower building, which measured 22.6m in length and 7.65m in width (Fig.2). This had a spacious fireplace with a chimney, located in its south gable wall, which was constructed of mortared masonry. It is possible that the second wing was built by the Berkeley family, as part of their residence, in the second half of the seventeenth century. By the early nineteenth century, it was in a ruined condition (Lyons 1992, Fig.1).

Beneath the destroyed south-west corner of the second wing (cutting D), the 1991 season of excavation revealed a series of post-holes, together with part of the foundation trench of what appears to have been a circular building. These features truncated natural strata. Within this structure, was an oval pit, that produced evidence of iron working. However, no other finds were recovered that could produce a close date for this activity. It is possible that the structure found in the west end of trench D, was a circular house associated with a religious community during the Early Christian period. Up to around the time of the Vikings, this was the normal house type in Ireland (Lynn 1991, 126-127). However, further excavation would be required in order to verify whether the Dysart structure is a house, dating to the above period.

(f) The Nature and Date of the Graveyard

Above the ground, no evidence survives for the boundary of the graveyard. The excavations to date have provided evidence of inhumations at the north-east, at the west and to the south-west of the church. During the 1989 season of work, cutting B, measuring 4m x 2.5m, was excavated on the north side of the thirteenth century extension to the church (Figs.2 and 3). This revealed the remains of at least eight inhumations, some of which either, underlay, or were truncated by, the rubble-work foundation of the extension. Therefore, the burials predate the thirteenth century masonry, and may date into the Early Christian period. However, further work will be required in order to verify this.

Further inhumations were found to the south-west of the church, extending as far as cutting G, at the south-east of the tower house (Fig.3). However, many of the burials had been disturbed by later activity. For example, throughout this area, large pits had been dug, and back filled with rubble from around the site. To the south of the tower house in



Fig. 5 Plate showing ruins at Dysart from south-east.

cutting C, further inhumations were found beneath the first post-medieval extension, up to 45m to the south-west of the church. These truncated natural strata, and underlay a humic soil, that produced occasional sherds of medieval pottery. They included local glazed wares, and South Leinster cooking ware.

Although the evidence to date is patchy, the graveyard at Dysart appears to have been extensive. The cross slab evidence would suggest an early foundation, and by the time of the Berkeleys, if not earlier, it had gone out of use.

The Finds

Apart from the cross slabs (Hall 1991, 853-858), a number of other carved stones were discovered on the site. These involved mainly dressed masonry from the church. The pottery finds included both medieval and post-medieval wares. The former consisted mainly of two types: locally made glazed wares, and South Leinster cooking ware. Both types have been found on other medieval sites in Co. Kilkenny (Hurley 1987, 93; Murtagh 1993, 1114). The post-medieval pottery included brown, gravel-tempered, black, tin-glazed earthenwares and cream wares. Other finds included, metal, glass, animal bone, as well as seventeenth and eighteenth century clay pipe fragments.

Conclusion

Resulting from the work to date, a clearer picture has now emerged, concerning the nature and development of the church and the settlement at Dysart, including the building sequence, and dating of the archaeological remains. For example, there would appear to have been an Early Christian church at Dysart, that was replaced with a stone one by the twelfth century. The latter was extended eastwards during the course of the following century.

Although it is possible that the tower house was built with a view to being joined by a westward extension to the church, the evidence to date suggests that this did not happen until the seventeenth century, by which time the latter would appear to have ceased to function as a place of worship. The projecting stair turret on the Dysart tower

house is unusual in the context of such buildings in county Kilkenny, and bears affinities to early examples within the area of the Pale. The wing that ran south from the tower house replaced an earlier structure. By the nineteenth century the whole site had been abandoned.

Finally, a number of important questions remain unresolved in relation to the site. What was the size of the religious community and extent of the settlement associated with the early church at Dysart? What was the full extent of the graveyard? Who lived at Dysart during the period when it was a grange of Kells priory? What was the extent of the bawn as indicated by the remains of the gateway on the west face of the tower house? Was the latter built during the early to mid-fifteenth century? When did the church go out of use? In the hope of answering these questions, further research, including archaeological excavation, will be required. It is hoped to conclude the present programme of field-work at Dysart, with a final season of excavation in 1995, or 1996.

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