A Souterrain recently discovered in Co. Kilkenny

BY MISS ELLEN PRENDERGAST

AMONG the various monuments which survive throughout the Irish countryside is a type of underground structure known as a souterrain. There is rarely any indication above ground of the presence of these, so that their discovery is usually accidental, and so it was in the case of one at Kildalton near Piltown. Last year Mr. Nicholas Kenneally decided to build an extension at the west gable-end of his dwelling-house. The foundations had been laid down and, in levelling the enclosed area, a flagstone was removed, revealing a large stone-lined cavity underneath. Some bones were visible at the bottom and it was thought this might be an old tomb. Mr. Kenneally immediately reported the discovery to the Gárda Síochána at Piltown, who got in touch with the National Museum authorities in accordance with the National Monuments Act, which serves to bring previously unknown antiquities to notice and to protect them in the interests of the Nation. The writer examined the site on behalf of the Museum, and the investigation disclosed that the structure was a souterrain.

Being in such close proximity to the residence, it was not practicable to have the exterior exposed or to have this ancient monument preserved and made accessible; all that could be done was to make as complete a record of it as possible. It was then filled up with stones so that it now lies buried under the extension to the house. Mr. Kenneally and the local Gárdar deserve every thanks for bringing this newly discovered antiquity to notice and making it possible to have it recorded.

This souterrain consisted of a stone-lined chamber approximately rectangular in plan and with a narrow low passage opening off it at the west end. The floor was paved with stones, though the pavement was not intact. At floor
level the chamber measured 3.30 Metres in length and the width varied slightly, being 1.80 Metres at the east and gradually expanding to 1.90 Metres at the centre and narrowing to 1.60 Metres at the west end. The dry-stone walling was very carefully constructed in the corbelled manner and not one stone was displaced or loose. At the base was a single course of blocks with flat oblong faces, above which courses of smaller stones were placed, oversailing each other, thereby gradually narrowing the dimensions until at roof level the length had been reduced to 2 M. and the width to 80 cm. The roof was closed by four large flat flags laid side by side, and it was the most easterly one of these that had been removed originally in the building clearance. The height of the chamber in the centre was 1.60 M., so that an average-sized person could have stood upright in it.

The passage was constructed at floor level in the same manner; its dimensions were 40 cm. high and 60 cm. wide. The floor was likewise paved, but only a short length of it was visible as it was blocked with collapsed stones. This may have led to other chambers and must have led to the exit, which would have been concealed from outsiders when it was in use, and no trace of which could be recognised. All the stones used in the construction could have been of local origin, being limestone, some sandstone and conglomerates. Only fragments of animal bones were found in the chamber; these were identified as of ox and sheep together with two small bird bones, by Miss G. Roche of the National Museum, to whom we are indebted for this information. It is not possible to say if they were deposited in the souterrain when it was in use or at a later stage when it was still open.

Souterrains are frequently associated with raths or ring-forts, but there is no trace of one here, and no antiquity is marked in the vicinity on the old maps of this place. Its position is in the townland of Kildalton, parish of Fiddown, barony of Iverk, Co. Kilkenny, 6” map no. 39, 23 cm. East and 12.5 cm. N. The distribution of souterrains is widespread throughout the country, and they vary in many
respects. From the few objects that have been found in them, and their associations with dated monuments, it is known that they were being constructed from the Late Bronze Age to the Early Christian period. They were used as refuges in times of danger and probably as storage places as well.

There are some old accounts of the existence of several souterrains in Co. Kilkenny. Wm. Tighe in his *Statistical Survey* of the County (1800) mentions that "Some raths, particularly in Galmoy, have flagged chambers beneath; in some, two chambers. Chambers underground, roofed with flags, are found, not accompanied by raths, as at Rathard, near Tory Hill; Kilmanaheen near Bessborough; and at Graigue, near Castletown, one with three chambers connected by steps," (p. 628). In the first volume published by the original Kilkenny Archaeological Society (1849-5, pp. 386-8), six souterrains are listed — (1) in Scart, connected with a rath and having many chambers, (2) in Killenaspig, within a rath, with at least two chambers, (3) in Rathard, within a rath, (4) in Knockhouse, (5) in Corbally rath and (6) at Listerlin near the moat, the largest and most remarkable example of all, which is stated to have contained an urn with bones and ashes. The Listerlin souterrain is again described by John O'Donovan in the Ordnance Survey Letters (vol. II, pp. 51-2) and in Shaw-Mason's *Parochial Survey* (III (1819), 240-1) and seems to have been similar to the present one at Kildalton in most respects. A souterrain in a rath at Acres near Mullinavat had a large chamber with two passages leading off it (J.R.S.A.I., II, 1852-3, 206-7), and another in the Rath of Borrismore near Johnstown had three chambers (J.R.S.A.I., XXI, 1890-1, 490). It is quite probable that there are others which have not been recorded and which still await the fortunate circumstance that may lead to discovery.