

HIDDEN GEMS AND FORGOTTEN PEOPLE
NAAS LOCAL HISTORY GROUP



KILLASHEE SOUTERRAIN

If one chances to visit the old graveyard at Killashee there can be found in a neighbouring field fine examples of ancient subterranean passages – known as souterrains. These underground passages served as places of safe storage of foodstuffs and valuables, of refuge and secret means of entering and leaving defended places, particularly during the period of Viking/Norse raids in the ninth and tenth centuries – though some were built (and destroyed) as late as the thirteenth century. It was as ringforts vanished that the souterrains appeared; a desperate innovation in defensive architecture. They could be simple passages sometimes roofed or they could be complex labyrinths with defensible “creeps” or stile-like obstacles. Several souterrains were dug into the famous passage-tomb at Knowth in Co. Meath.

It was in the late nineteenth century that the passages at Killashee were discovered and it is interesting to note that these provided the venue for the first outing of the Kildare Archaeological Society in 1891. The passages (which were lighted for the occasion) were reported as being quite extensive, and comprising four distinct branches – one of which lay almost due north towards the old castle at Rathasker. They were about five feet in height and one contained what looked like a “sleeping” chamber – the walls of which were covered with a thin coat of plaster or whitewash. Again another quite fascinating relic of bygone days to be found in the vicinity of Naas.