

Medieval grange farms

In the 12th century, there was a religious revolution throughout Europe, resulting in the foundation of many new orders. The Cistercians were among the first of the Continental orders to come to Ireland from France, settling by the Mattock River at Mellifont, Co Louth, in 1142.

Their outstanding architectural appreciation is reflected in the impressive abbeys which now constitute some of our most picturesque ruins, such as at Bective, Co Meath and Boyle, Co Roscommon. The ordered layout of their buildings contrasted sharply with the informality of the Irish monasteries.

This systematic approach was also evident in how they managed their farms. The Cistercians were extensive landowners and played a pivotal role in the economic life of medieval Ireland, as elsewhere in Europe. At their height, they are believed to have owned half-a-million acres in Ireland. Their estates were centres of excellence in agriculture, milling and fishing. They created markets for selling cattle, horses and wool, and were the medieval equivalent of Teagasc, Ireland's leading agricultural development organisation.

FARM MANAGEMENT

The Cistercians introduced a radical scheme of farm management which had previously been pioneered on the Continent and in Britain. Their rules demanded that each abbey be self-sufficient. Because the order depended on its own labour, it created the institution of the lay brother to provide agricultural labour. They exploited their lands through a series of model farms known as granges – a generic term for buildings, especially store houses devoted to agricultural production. In Ireland, the word “grange” was used to describe a farm inclusive of land and buildings or, alternatively, to describe a farmyard where only the plough teams were housed and the grain stored. Sometimes a prefix was added, such as saltgrange, irongrange or sheepgrange, to indicate a specialist function.

The Cistercians' monastic estates were divided into granges that were worked by directly employing lay brothers, or *conversi*, for agricultural labour. They were therefore able to establish a self-sufficient economy at each of their houses.

These independent monastic farms supplied the mother-house with agricultural products that were processed on the home grange, which would also have had additional facilities like kilns and mills.

The farmstead of the Cistercian grange in Ireland was contained

This is the latest in a series of articles from the National Monuments Service of the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht to introduce *Farmers Journal* readers to the archaeology of Ireland and to highlight the vital role of the farming community in preserving our heritage.

Bective Cistercian Abbey, near Trim, Co Meath.
BELOW LEFT: Boyle Cistercian Abbey, Co Roscommon.
BELOW RIGHT: The Bullock gatehouse in Dalkey, Co Dublin.



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within a large rectilinear enclosure bounded by multiple ditches and banks. In large granges, there might be an inner and outer enclosure.

The enclosure was breeched by an impressive gated entrance and the approach to the gate took the form of a causeway or bridge. A fine example of such a gatehouse can be found in Dalkey, Co Dublin. This rectilinear form was introduced from the Continent and is earlier than the Anglo-Norman moated sites of the 13th to 14th century, which probably adapted the grange enclosure.

The frequent state of war and unrest in the countryside, coupled with the valuable nature of many Cistercian granges, meant that defensive measures had to be adopt-

ed. Some grange enclosures were replaced by a walled bawn such as those at Monkstown Castlefarm, Co Dublin, Knowth, Co Meath, and Milltown, Co Roscommon.

In some parts of the country, the granges were further fortified with tower houses such as those at Grangecon, Grangeford and Monksgrange on the Baltinglass Abbey monastic estate in Co Wicklow.

Each grange had its own nucleus of farm buildings. The diversity of grange outbuildings described in historical accounts indicates mixed farming practice that required a variety of buildings for closely inter-related farm activities.

Within the grange, individual farm outbuildings were arranged around a courtyard. This configu-

ration has been corroborated in the field at Knowth, Co Meath, Monkstown Castlefarm, Co Dublin, and comparative Irish Augustinian granges. The Cistercians' medieval farming system resulted in the consolidation of vast estates across the country. Many of these maintained their integrity as landed estates in the post-dissolution period.

The Cistercians established a model of farm and farm layout for mixed farming and the legacy of their efficient courtyard farm has continued into modern times. Indeed the full courtyard layout is by far the most common form of farm layout in modern Ireland. **CL**

NEXT WEEK: ANGLO-NORMAN CASTLES OF IRELAND