

Great Sea Caves of Antrim "Mermaid's Cave" by Andy McInroy

The Antrim coast is perhaps the most photographed section of coastline in Ireland. However, hidden under this rugged landscape are some dark and forgotten sea caves which are rarely visited. Interestingly, a search of the old writings, etchings and photographs from the last two centuries yields some fantastic material relating to these old and unchanging places. The adventurous Victorians loved to row into these caves to take picnics, to paint and to snap photographs. Many of the old photographs and etchings can still be found today in antique and curiosity shops. Seeing this old material has inspired me to revisit these long forgotten chambers of the Antrim Coast and to create a new photographic record of these secret places.

Mermaid's Cave

*Where the wild tempests sweep, Over
the rolling deep,
Stands on a rocky steep, That castle
wondrous.
When the shrill North winds blow, Down
in the cave below,
Roll the waves to and fro, Foaming and
thunderous.*

Sir John Ross, 1836
Last Lord Chancellor of Ireland



Mermaid's Cave at Dunluce Castle

Dunluce Castle lies at the end of the White Rocks cliffs to the east of Portrush. It is one of the finest medieval castles in Ireland and is certainly worth seeing. However, in its dark depths lies a cave of enormous proportions that is every bit as grand as the castle sitting above it. This magnificent cave was the third I tackled during the course of my project to photograph the secret sea caverns of County Antrim. The project uncovered some fascinating old stories and this cave again threw up some classic material.

Beneath the immense fortress is a cavern of proportionate vastness; its vault is more than sixty feet high, and its length exceeds three hundred feet. The sea enters it with a roaring sound. Above is the dread tower, where the Banshee of the Macquillains, the ancient lords of Dunluce, appears. I passed under its walls; there is the turret of Mava. I was desirous to remark how carefully it was swept. "Who undertakes that office?" I asked. "No living being," was the answer. "Every night this prison-like chamber is cleaned like a ball-room, and yet no one enters it." "Who then keeps it in order?" "Mava, the sweeper of Dunluce, and the Banshee of the Macquillains."

The Three Kingdoms: England, Scotland, Ireland, Charles Victor P. Arlincourt, 1844

The banshee described in the old writing is in reference to Maeve Roe, said to be the only daughter of Lord McQuillan of Dunluce. Her refusal to take Rory Oge as her husband, resulted in her being imprisoned by Lord McQuillan in the north-eastern tower. This tower is now known as the Roe Tower or Turret of Mava. On a wild and stormy night, her true love, Reginald O'Cahan, attempted to rescue her. The pair descended to the great cave below the castle where they tried to make an escape by rowing boat to Portrush. However, in the storm, they were dashed against the cliffs of the White Rocks. It is said that the tragedy was witnessed by Lord MacQuillan, from the castle walls. The body of Maeve Roe was never found and her ghost still sweeps her prison tower in Dunluce.



Dunluce Castle showing rear entrance to Mermaid's Cave,

Augustus Earle, c1835

I found a subterranean passage admitting to and from the sea, giving access to the ocean from the castle, entirely independent of the mainland. An army could march through it, to embark or re-embark, with all necessary ammunition, with artillery even. And the doubt is, whether it was made by the hand of man or of God. If by the former, the task must have been immense. It passes directly under the centre of the fortress, making a channel for the sea, which at flood tide will float boats half the way in. It has an irregular arched roof, and is generally, after one has got into it, thirty feet high and twenty feet broad. As I entered alone, not anticipating such a scene, and received the salutation of the mighty waters, which came rushing, and murmuring, and bellowing into that deep and dark cavern, it was awful.

Four Years in Great Britain Calvin Colton, Published 1836



Unlike the first two caves visited during the course of this project, this one was straightforward to find and relatively safe to explore. Entrance to the cave is down an eroding ramp which gives it a superb subterranean feel. You can almost feel the weight of the mighty castle straining overhead.

On my visit to this cavern I was accompanied by a photographer friend of mine, Sean Arrow. This gave me a good opportunity to include myself in the shot and give the cave a sense of scale. After setting up the camera on the tripod and programming the exposures needed, I was able to descend to the water's edge while Sean released the shutter. Again, a series of exposures was chosen to overcome the huge contrast range in the cave and its mouth. The final image was created using a High Dynamic Range (HDR) blend of the different exposures.

So here I am, dwarfed by the enormity of the cavern and the thousands (perhaps millions) of tonnes of rock overhead. Nature's very own cathedral under the castle. Perhaps I am even stood in the exact spot where Lord MacQuillan's daughter, Meave Roe set off by rowing boat to meet her end on that dark and stormy night 500 years ago.



Mermaid's Cave, Dunluce Castle © Andy McInroy

*To that lone crumbling tower, Once a fair lady's bower,
Comes in the midnight hour, That hapless spirit.
Mourn for the Lady Maeve, Mourn for her wind and wave,
Naught but a sea cold grave, Did she inherit.*

Sir John Ross, 1836 Last Lord Chancellor of Ireland

Our thanks to Andy for this excellent contribution to our Heritage Newsletters. If you would like to discuss further with Andy his research please email him at andrew.mcinroy@gmail.com. published 3rd October 2020