

A Note on Round Towers

You won't see any Round Towers in our presentation: this is why.

The earliest annal reference to Round Towers is at Slane in AD 950. Most Round Towers were probably built between 1050 and 1130, after the Vikings had been well integrated with Irish society. One was even built in 1238, after the Norman Invasion: its construction is recorded in the annals.

So even though our school texts love to tell us that the Irish took refuge in Round Towers from the early Viking attacks, it seems very unlikely that such towers had yet been built or thought of at that time.

School texts emphasize the uses of Round Towers as look-out places to watch for oncoming Vikings, and as places of refuge. While they probably did serve as useful look-out stations (from which to see approaching guests as well as enemies), and while they unquestionably did serve as places of refuge (from Irish raiders as well as Vikings), their primary functions may have been different.

First and foremost they were bell-towers, as we know from their name in Irish, *cloictheach*. The bells that were rung in them were not the enormous bells we see in churches today, but small handbells, no more than --- (a foot?) tall.

Secondly the towers were status symbols that marked the site. Just as a person standing in the top storey could see out afar, so the people travelling far off could make out the tower from a distance and orient towards it. Monasteries were becoming great centres of pilgrimage by around 950 (just when our first Round Tower is recorded in the annals) and an important site wanted to make sure to let people know how to find it. The same was true all over Europe: travellers of all sorts were guided to the towns by the church towers that they could see from afar.

Thirdly the Round Towers may have been used to store books, bells and other monastic treasures. Whether this was just in times of emergency, or whether they were stored there long term is not clear.

Finally, they served as places of refuge in danger, as we know from annals which record the destruction of bells, books and people in towers when they were burned.

Why were the doorways built so far above ground level? We do not know. It may have been to add security in times of danger, it may have been in order to impress the congregation when displaying holy objects.

There are still many mysteries surrounding the Round Towers, but we do know that they were built at a time of economic prosperity, when Ireland had adjusted to a permanent Viking presence.