

what we found

in brief:

Some of the findings from the scheme.



1. Prehistoric pit

Archaeologist excavating a prehistoric pit and stake-holes at **Killybegs**.

2. Medieval house

Medieval house uncovered at **Moneycross**.
(Photo John Sunderland & Valerie J Keeley Ltd)

3. Burnt mound

Trough from one of the burnt mounds excavated at **Raheenagurren**.

4. Flint arrowhead

Prehistoric flint arrowhead found during excavations at **Raheenagurren**.

background

The **NII Gorey-Arklow Link** road project entails building a dual carriageway to bypass the town of **Gorey** replacing the existing NII between the village of **Clogh** in County Wexford and the Arklow bypass in County Wicklow.

Being 23 km long, the scheme represents a substantial slice through what revealed itself to be an exciting archaeological landscape.

An intensive investigation strategy consisting of desk-based archaeological assessment and a walkover study was undertaken to assess the impact of the scheme on the archaeological heritage. The development was designed to avoid all the known archaeological monuments identified within the scheme's proximity.

This archaeological assessment was further informed by both a geophysical and an underwater survey. In January 2005, **Irish Archaeological Consultancy Ltd** undertook test excavations to ensure the investigation and preservation of sites along the route. As a result, a total of 53 previously unknown sites were identified.

That summer, on behalf of the **National Roads Authority** and **Wexford County Council**, archaeological excavations were carried out by **Valerie J Keeley Ltd** to ensure the investigation and preservation of sites in advance of road construction. Analysis of the results is ongoing, but it is clear that the work yielded a diversity of archaeological evidence dating from the nineteenth century AD to the fifth millennium BC. These discoveries are enabling archaeologists and historians to build upon the existing knowledge of man and the environment in this part of Ireland.



Multi-period site at **Moneylawn Lower** following test excavations with the low earthen bank of the ringfort visible.



Site at **Ask** where archaeologists excavated a number of features on the slopes of Ask hill.



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archaeological DISCOVERIES

front cover images

LEFT: Archaeologists excavating three of the prehistoric ring-ditches discovered at **Ask**.
RIGHT: Archaeologist excavates sherds of Beaker pottery from a pit at **Frankfort**. (Photo John Sunderland & Valerie J Keeley Ltd)
MIDDLE: Detail of the cross-shaped mount found at **Ask** prior to conservation. (Photo Valerie J Keeley Ltd)



mesolithic

Hunter gatherers - Wexford's first inhabitants

Mesolithic represents the middle stone age, 7000 – 4000 BC, and later Mesolithic activity was encountered in the townland of **Coolnaveagh** where a collection of flint tools was uncovered close to a hearth. The site was on a plateau overlooking the **River Banoge** to the south-west of **Gorey**. The tools probably indicate a temporary camp for fishing or hunting-related activities. Their discovery shows that people had penetrated the dense canopy of woodland that would have existed in north Wexford during the era of Ireland's earliest inhabitants.



Later Mesolithic butt-trimmed flint flake tool discovered near the Banoge River at **Coolnaveagh**.

neolithic

Wexford's first farmers

Neolithic is the period between about 4000 – 2000 BC. A small stone axehead, found close to a burnt mound in **Moneylawn Lower**, most likely dates to the mid - later Neolithic period and, as such, provides evidence of earlier activity at or in the vicinity of the site. Stone axeheads were used by the first farmers to clear the trees and prepare the land for farming. Further north-east in the same townland, a group of circular pits was found to contain debris from making flint tools and a perfect flint endscraper. The pits also contained sherds of pottery from distinctive round bottomed pots that would have been used by the first farmers. A leaf-shaped arrowhead of Neolithic date was found in a pit at **Raheenagurren West**.



Prehistoric stone axehead was found close to a burnt mound at **Moneylawn Lower**.

bronze age

The earliest metal workers - Beaker activity at Frankfort

Ireland's first metal workers used a distinctive type of pottery vessel, known by archaeologists as Beaker pottery. The earliest metal tools and jewellery were copper and gold, both of which occur naturally in the Wicklow mountains to the west of **Arklow**. Excavation at a site in **Frankfort** townland, roughly 7 km south-west of Gorey, uncovered a group of pits and a small kiln which are contemporary with the first use of metal in Ireland.

bronze age

Several sherds of Beaker pottery were retrieved from one of the smaller pits, while the sieving of soil samples from the site revealed the presence of burnt grain. There was little evidence to suggest the presence of structures or houses on site although a number of possible post-holes were recorded.

At **Raheenagureen West**, Beaker pottery had been buried in a shallow pit. A cobbled surface, a hearth and stake-holes suggest the presence of a flimsy structure close by. The discovery of a barbed and tanged arrowhead shows that the people who made and used the Beaker pottery may have supplemented their diet by hunting or that they may not have lived in total harmony with their neighbours!



Bronze Age Beaker pottery exposed in the fill of a pit in **Frankfort**.

Bronze Age Landscape

Excavations mostly revealed evidence for life and death in the Bronze Age. More than one third of the sites excavated on the scheme were burnt mounds (*fulachta fiadh*). These derive from the practice of using stones heated in a fire to boil water.

Theories as to the function of these sites include the production of hot water for cooking or bathing and industrial activities such as dyeing, tanning, processing of hides and brewing.

The number of previously unknown burnt mounds excavated on the NI 1 bears testimony to the density of habitation in south Co. Wicklow and north Co. Wexford in the Bronze Age

Death and ritual in the Bronze Age

The largest site excavated on the road scheme was in the townland of **Ask** where evidence for respect for the ancestors was manifested in a ring ditch cemetery northeast of Gorey on the flanks of **Ask Hill** - the Irish name of which is *Cnoc na Gréine*. Excavation of this site revealed evidence for 4,000 years of activity from the Neolithic to the early medieval/Viking period.

Five ring-ditches - circular or donut-shaped enclosures defined by a ditch often associated with prehistoric burial - were excavated here and a geophysical survey revealed the presence of at least two more in agricultural land to the west of the excavated area. These monuments measured between 5 m and 10m in diameter and cremated bone was found deposited in each.

A large ring-ditch measuring 24 m in diameter enclosed a group of pits, one of which contained cremated bone and a decorated bronze, cross-shaped mount. The mount dates to the eight century and the best parallels for this artefact are from a limited number of Viking graves in Ireland and **Scandinavia**. Isolated cremation pits, a standing stone and a number of field boundaries were also uncovered at **Ask**.

early medieval

Beside the raths

Some of the most visible upstanding archaeological monuments in the Irish rural landscape are the remains of defended early medieval farmsteads known as raths or ringforts. The scheme was designed to avoid impacting on two ringforts close to Gorey. Investigation of the portion of the road closest to the upstanding monuments revealed interesting results.

On the southeastern slope of a low hill in **Moneylawn Lower** townland a low earthen bank enclosing a sub-circular area, about 24 m in diameter, stands on the west side of the new road. This monument was identified for the first time by archaeologists walking the route for the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS).

Excavation and geophysical survey has shown that the upstanding monument is enclosed by a concentric ditch which encircles an area about 80 m in maximum diameter. The outer ditch had a south-eastern entrance flanked by post-holes. Some of a number of perforated stones recovered from the outer ditch fills could have served as weights or whetstones.



Archaeologists excavating the trough and associated stake-holes of a burnt mound at **Ask**.

A number of metal finds were retrieved from the inner ditch, including the corroded handle of a possible knife. To the south-west of the outer ditch lay a concentration of post-holes, stake-holes, pits and hearths comprising two sub-circular structures that appeared to have been reused or rebuilt over a period of time. The outer ditch of the main enclosure kinked away from the northern of these two structures, potentially respecting it. It suggests that the structure was in use while the enclosure ditch was being dug. Evidence for industrial activity was discovered in the form of bowl-shaped pits and associated flues which had been exposed to intense heat.

The new road was designed to avoid destroying a ringfort in **Raheenagurren West**. Three grain-drying kilns, uncovered to the south of the ringfort, would have been used by the residents of the ringfort to dry their grain after harvesting to make it easier to grind or to ensure that it did not rot in storage. Charred oats and barley were recovered from the soil filling the kilns. A fragment of a broken quern stone had been built into the wall of one of the kilns.



Excavation of a penannular ring-ditch at **Coolnaveagh** which contained burnt bone, charcoal and ash deposits. The site represents a place of burial in the Bronze Age or Iron Age.

medieval

The area of north Wexford through which the road scheme runs was on the border of the area settled by the Anglo-Normans in the 13th century; the Wicklow mountains were the stronghold of the native Irish. There is debate as to whether a town existed in Gorey at this time - if one did it seems it was not a success.

One of the most exciting discoveries on the scheme was evidence for medieval occupation of a site at **Moneycross Upper**. Excavation revealed the foundations of a rectangular house with associated field boundaries and a U-shaped enclosure, all seemingly contemporary and belonging to a small medieval farm.

The structural remains of the house bear similarities to the tradition of Anglo-Norman long houses. It was possibly occupied for a relatively short time by peasants of English origin who settled here as part of the Anglo-Norman colonisation of this part of north Wexford during the 12th/13th century. A large assemblage of medieval pottery was recovered from the features, as well as a bone awl and an iron arrow-head.



Archaeologist excavating pottery sherds from the medieval house foundations at **Moneycross Upper**.

post-medieval



Foundations of a post-medieval farmstead were uncovered at **Moneycross Upper**.

In **Moneycross Upper**, the remains of a post-medieval farmstead were found. A number of buildings were marked in this location on the first edition Ordnance Survey map in the 1830s. Interestingly, this farmstead was probably inhabited during the 1798 uprising and the famine years. Sections of the foundation courses of the buildings were recorded and a broad range of domestic pottery and farming equipment were retrieved. One intriguing find was the discovery of a portion of a carved stone which seems to have been a part of a decorative window of a medieval tower house re-used as the threshold of one of the houses.