

what we found

in brief:

Some of the findings from **Rochfort Demesne**.



1. Bone pin

Bone pin uncovered during excavations.
(Photo Valerie J Keeley Ltd)



2. Decorated ring pin

Close up of decorated ring pin head found during excavations.
(Photo Valerie J Keeley Ltd)



3. Decorated ring pin

Decorated ring pin found during excavations.
(Photo Valerie J Keeley Ltd)



4. Decorated bone comb

Fragmented decorated bone comb found during excavations.
(Photo Valerie J Keeley Ltd)

background



Aerial photo enclosure site of **Rochfort Demesne** with test trenching visible. (Photo Markus Casey)

Major excavations were recently carried out by archaeologists in the townland of **Rochfort Demesne** near the shores of **Lough Ennell**, about 5 km to the south of **Mullingar**, County Westmeath.

This work, undertaken by **Valerie J Keeley Ltd** on behalf of the **National Roads Authority** and **Westmeath County Council**, was part of the N52 Mullingar Belvedere Road Improvement Scheme, a single carriageway extending 4.2 km from the **Mullingar By-Pass** project at **Tullanisky** to the existing N52 connection at **Carrick Bridge**.

The site, recorded in the Record of Monuments and Places (RMP) as a ringfort, was identified in the Environmental Impact Study (EIS) as lying within the pathway of the N52 Realignment and on the demesne lands of Rochfort Estate. Close to the shores of Lough Ennell and the entrance to Belvedere house, on the N52, it is one of many similar site types recorded in the Lough Ennell area. There are 22 recorded ringforts within a 2 km radius.

Archaeological investigation work at the site was undertaken by **The Archaeology Company** in December 2004. The work included digging a series of test trenches and a geophysical survey. Valerie J Keeley Ltd began the main excavation of the site in August 2005, finishing in January 2006.

Prior to excavation, the site was visible as a roughly oval enclosure defined by a ditch with a low inner bank. Quarrying disturbed the interior of the monument leaving behind a large hollow in the north.

N52 MULLINGAR BELVEDERE ROAD IMPROVEMENT SCHEME,
County Westmeath



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archaeological DISCOVERIES

front cover images

LEFT: Decorated bone comb *in situ* as found during the excavations. (Photo Valerie J Keeley Ltd)
RIGHT: Close up detail of a bone pin found at **Rochfort Demesne**. (Photo Valerie J Keeley Ltd)
MIDDLE: Aerial view of **Rochfort Demesne** site post excavation with **Lough Ennell** in the background. (Photo Valerie J Keeley Ltd)



the excavations

Excavations revealed three enclosing ditches, two of which appear to date from the seventh and eighth century AD based on radiocarbon dates. The third ditch, dated to the post-medieval period, had a stone revetment, or wall, lining its inner edge and produced evidence of an associated bank to the north. It is likely that this later ditch with stone revetment is dated to the post-medieval period, and may possibly reflect the reuse of the site as a folly.

The innermost ditch appears to be the earliest phase dated by radiocarbon to AD 600 (AD 602 +/- 35 years) and the outermost ditch, which had an internal bank, is later, dating by radiocarbon to AD 750 (AD 750 +/- 35 years). A few features survived within

the interior, including several pits, possible hearths and possible metal working evidence. There was no clear evidence of any internal structures, which may be attributed to the nature of the coarse subsoil, quarrying and past tree planting.

A range of artefacts were discovered including a decorated bone comb, a copper needle, an undecorated bone needle and a blue glass bead. One of the most spectacular finds was a highly decorated ring pin which is likely to have come from Viking Dublin in the 10th century AD. A rare dress fastener was also found which is considered to have similarities to a swan headed pin dating to the Iron Age.



Enclosing ditches uncovered during excavations.



Stone lined hearth uncovered during excavations. (Photo Valerie J Keeley Ltd)

the excavations



Possible Iron Age swan headed pin found during the excavations. (Photo Valerie J Keeley Ltd)

The radiocarbon dating and artefacts found so far suggests that the site was built and used in the 7th century through to the 10th century AD. During this period, the Lough Ennell area was very important due to its geographical location in the centre of Ireland, its proximity to **Uisneach** as well as its proximity to major route ways. This is supported by the large number of early medieval settlements such as crannógs on the lake and ringforts in the surrounding area, and the wealth of the artefactual material.

Documentary sources show that it was an important centre of power where the **Clann Cholmáin** kings of the **Southern Uí Néill** dynasty resided between the 8th and 11th century.

The royal seat was relocated from the **Hill of Uisneach** in the 8th century to the royal complex of **Dún na Sciath** ringfort and **Cróinis** crannóg, on the western side of the lake. King Maelseachlin I, the first High King of Ireland resided there in the 9th century and King Maelseachlin II lived and died there in the late 10th/early 11th century.

The function and context of the site within the early medieval landscape of Lough Ennell has yet to be fully interpreted. It may be where a community lived around its Lord or King, or may have been a place for public assemblies or feasting or other activities associated with kingship. Post-excavation work underway will shed more light on this important site.

N52 schools project



Children from Gainstown National School dressing up as part of National Museum introduction to Hiberno-Norse world.



Children from Gainstown National School visiting the site at **Rochfort Demesne** during the excavations.

An archaeological school project was held in January 2006 in conjunction with **Gainstown National School**. Its aim was to introduce the 4th class pupils to archaeology, and give them hands on experience of archaeology, which in turn would complement the *archaeology in the classroom* programme which is now part of the primary school curriculum.

This was done through a series of talks detailing the role of archaeologists, including one from an osteoarchaeologist about the specialised study and analysis of human and animal skeletal remains in order to tell the story of how people in the past lived and died.

The children also visited the excavations at Rochfort Demesne to experience first hand how archaeologists work, from the excavation and recording of the features, to the examination and analysis of artefacts.

The **National Museum of Ireland** introduced the children to the many wonderful artefacts found in their local area and from County Westmeath. Following the Hiberno-Norse connection with the excavation, they also had an opportunity to handle replica Viking tools and weapons and try on replica tunics and shoes.

N52 schools project

Finally, the children participated in a workshop held by **Montague Heritage Services**, and introduced them to family life in the first millennium AD, talking about what people ate, what they made, the tools they used, as well as discussing the Brehon (Early Irish) laws and how they governed life.

Once post-excavation archaeological works are complete it is proposed to return to Gainstown National School to update them on the results.



Children from Gainstown National School attending workshop by Montague Heritage Services showing life in first millennium AD.

conclusion

The excavations at Rochfort Demesne, have provided an excellent opportunity, to explore not only an archaeological landscape, but also an important historical and ancient political landscape.



Aerial view of enclosure at **Rochfort Demesne** after excavation. (Photo Valerie J Keeley Ltd)