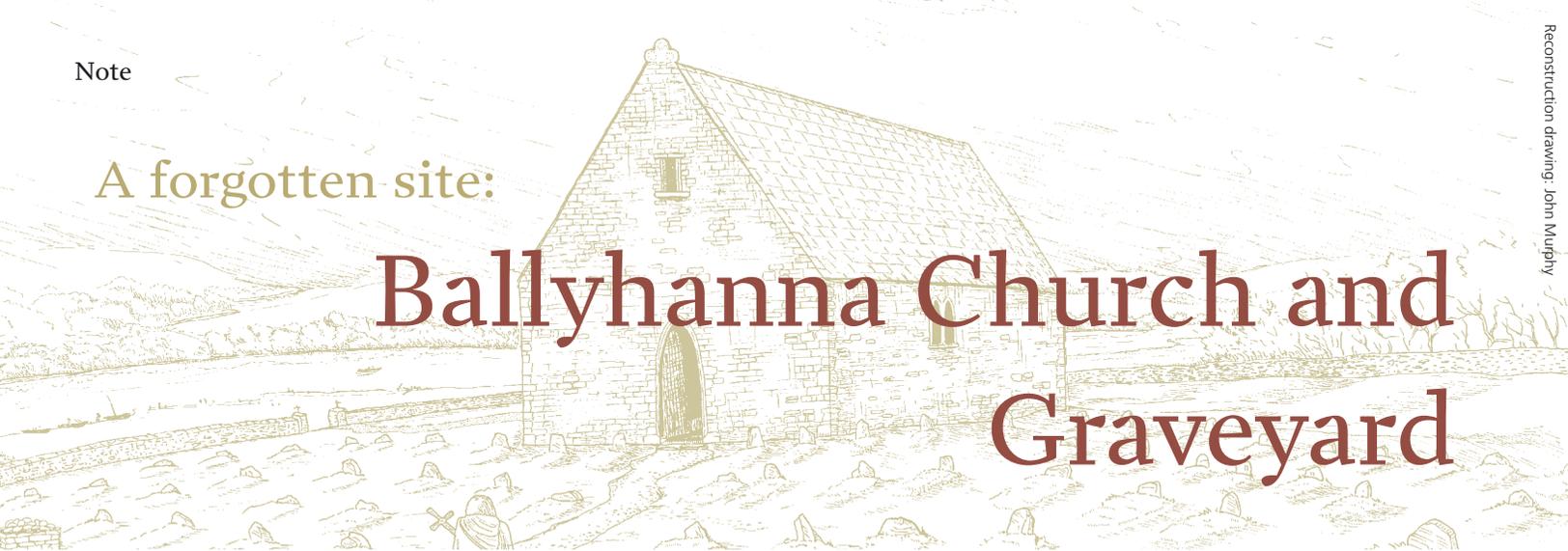


A forgotten site:

Ballyhanna Church and Graveyard

Reconstruction drawing: John Murphy



Gráinne Leamy

Gráinne Leamy, NRA archaeologist (acting) with the North-west Team, reports on the conservation of the remains of a medieval church rediscovered on the N15 Bundoran–Ballyshannon Bypass.

In 2003–2004 some unexpected discoveries were revealed during archaeological works carried out before construction commenced on the N15 Bundoran–Ballyshannon Bypass. Work at Ballyhanna, on the outskirts of

Ballyshannon town in County Donegal, led to the discovery of a substantial medieval graveyard and the foundations of a stone building, thought to be the remains of Ballyhanna Church. The last recorded mention of church lands at Ballyhanna was in the 17th century, but since that date its location had been lost from local memory.

Over 1,000 men, women and children were buried in a subcircular graveyard that measured about 40 m in diameter. Stone foundations exposed during the excavations are probably the remains of a church. The burials were placed in shallow graves around the south and east of the building. Most of the burials were interred in the Christian style: on their backs, with their bodies oriented east–west. They were excavated carefully during the archaeological works and removed, and are now being analysed as part of the Ballyhanna Research Project (see *Seanda* Issue 1, 2006).

Artefacts found on the site during the excavations confirmed that bodies were being interred in the graveyard during or shortly after the reign of Edward I (1272–1307). A silver penny found with one of the burials is evidence of this. Other coins from the reign of Henry IV, in the early 15th century, indicate that the graveyard was still in use at this time. A fragment of a bone comb, a small brass bell, pottery and beads discovered with a number of burials also confirm that the graveyard was in use between the 13th and 15th centuries.

The location of the church at a proposed junction off the N15 allowed—rather uniquely—a re-design of the junction layout to avoid impacting directly on the church. The foundations of the church have been conserved and a garden created on the site of the graveyard. The conservation project involved a consultation process with local interest groups, allowing the local community input into how the site could best be presented. Expert advice was also sought from the Office of Public Works and from Donegal County Council architects. It is hoped that the garden designed as a result of this process will be enjoyed by the people of Ballyshannon and visitors to the town into the future.



Ballyhanna during excavation, February 2004.



Site of Ballyhanna church and graveyard, which was officially opened on 15 July 2007 as part of the 'Flight of the Earls' commemorations in Donegal.



Site of Ballyhanna church and graveyard.

Photos: Gráinne Leamy