

what we found

in brief:

Some of the findings from the scheme.



1. Artefacts

Selection of artefacts uncovered at **Raystown**. (Photo John Sunderland)



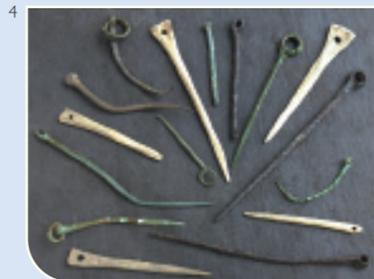
2. Wooden artefact

Wooden artefact uncovered at **Muckerstown**. (Photo CRDS Ltd)



3. Burial

Burial uncovered during excavations at **Raystown**. (Photo CRDS Ltd)



4. Pins

Pins of bone, iron and copper alloy found at **Raystown**. (Photo John Sunderland)

background



Reconstruction of **Raystown** c. AD 900. (Figure Simon Dick for CRDS Ltd)



Elevated view of sweat lodge at **Rath**. (Photo Hawkeye)

Since May 2006, commuters and residents have been enjoying the benefits of the new 17 km road which extends from the **M50 junction** at **Finglas** and bypasses the town of **Ashbourne** along its western side before rejoining the old N2 just north of the town.

The new road represents the culmination of a long process of planning and construction. In terms of archaeology, the investigations began in 2001 and the 20 new sites discovered were fully excavated by **CRDS Ltd** during 2004.

Field archaeologists toiling away at various sites in the area would have been a familiar sight to locals and commuters. The archaeologists meticulously excavated

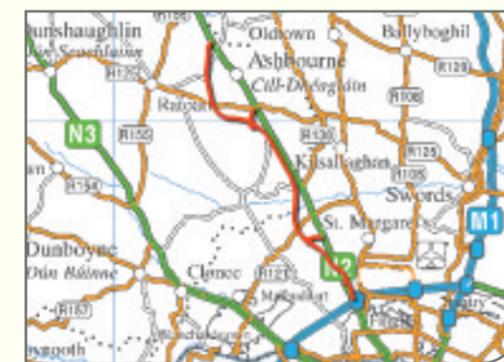
and recorded features and collected animal bones, soil samples and artefacts, ensuring that the sites were recorded for future generations. Specialists have since analysed the human bone, the charred seeds, the animal bones and the pottery. Artefacts have been conserved and organic materials have been dated. It is now the task of the director of each site to assimilate and interpret all this diverse information.

The extensive work both on and off site has resulted in a greater understanding of the people who lived, were buried, practised their rituals or carried out the daily grind of work and subsistence. These diverse activities are manifested in various ways, from short-term dispersed occupation pits and features, burnt mounds, small scale kiln and industrial sites, to extensive habitation complexes as well as sites of ritual, burial or ceremonial significance.

N2 FINGLAS-ASHBOURNE ROAD SCHEME, Counties Dublin and Meath



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archaeological DISCOVERIES

front cover images

LEFT: Excavation of the souterrain at **Raystown**. (Photo CRDS Ltd)

RIGHT: Unusual burial in the remains of a kiln on the edge of the enclosure at **Raystown**. (Photo CRDS Ltd)

MIDDLE: Aerial view of prehistoric complex at **Harlockstown** showing circular enclosure and sub-square enclosure. (Photo StudioLab)



neolithic

The oldest site discovered was a Neolithic ritual enclosure (37 m by 27 m) at **Kilshane**, Co. Dublin dating from the period 3200 – 2800 BC. The site had a period of intense Early Bronze Age activity.

The enclosure ditch, formed by a series of intersecting and overlapping ditch segments, produced from its base a substantial deposit of cattle bone. Preliminary assessment by specialists indicates that 40 to 50 immature cattle were deposited in the ditch segments in both an articulated and disarticulated state.

The animals were generally 18 months old which suggests that they had been killed at autumn time. The bone showed no evidence of butchery which ruled out the possibility that it was the remains of feasting. Some fully articulated cattle were deposited in certain segments and grouping of certain bones was also noted. The site has been compared to the much larger

causewayed camps of **Britain**, a comparison which would suggest that Kilshane was used as a community meeting place. The cattle bone may have been a deliberate symbolic deposition.

Given the nature of the deposit and the timing of the event, it is tempting to speculate that the animals were offered up in gratitude for a good autumn harvest or in appeasement after a bad one.



Archaeologists excavating animal bone layer at **Kilshane** Neolithic enclosure. (Photo Hawkeye)

bronze age iron age

Most of the other prehistoric sites were Bronze Age and/or Iron Age. **Harlockstown** was a burial site dating to the Early Bronze Age period, as evidenced by a circular enclosure with two burials accompanied by food vessel pots and a cremation within its interior.

Specialists identified some Early Bronze Age Beaker pottery from the site. Beaker culture in Ireland is directly associated with the new technology of copper working. Iron Age activity on the site included an extensive metalworking phase within a rectangular enclosure and a small poorly-preserved burial ring-ditch.



Burial with food vessel uncovered at **Harlockstown**. (Photo CRDS Ltd)

bronze age/iron age

Another Bronze Age site was revealed at **Muckerstown**, where two very large, deep wells produced a unique assemblage of wooden artefacts or 'withies'. These have been dated to the Middle Bronze Age period (1600 – 1210 BC) and appear to be unparalleled.

Research and analysis of the artefacts has been undertaken including looking to folklife and ethnography for parallels. They compare favourably with objects used as brooms or objects made for use as firewood. However, specialists have concluded that the objects were most likely to have been votive or symbolic depositions.

Rath was also an extensive Iron Age complex; the main features comprised a sweathouse, four burial ring-ditches, an area of industrial activity and some very large deep waterlogged pits or wells.

This site produced an assemblage of high status and unique finds including a woman buried wearing toe-rings, an unusual copper-alloy **La Tène** or high status Iron Age fibula brooch of British type, faience beads and some prehistoric wooden vessels. The tiny, segmented green faience beads were retrieved from one of the burial ring-ditches. Although not directly associated with a burial, the beads may have been personal ornaments as they were often worn as talismans in life or death. Faience dates to the Early Bronze Age in Britain and Ireland (1900 – 1500 BC) but the ring-ditch has produced an Iron Age date. The beads have been examined by a specialist who suggests that they may be of European form but have been locally made.

The woman buried wearing toe rings also appears to be of unparalleled in Ireland, though both men and

women buried wearing toe rings have been found in Britain. This initially suggested that she had come from Britain or had strong connections with the region.

In order to determine her origins, analysis of the lead, strontium and oxygen isotopes in one of her teeth was carried out by **Bradford University**. These isotopes are incorporated into dental enamel in childhood. Strontium and lead can link a person to the rocks in the region where they obtained their food and drink, while oxygen can be an indicator of the climatic region in which an individual obtained their drinking water.

To date, there is little comparative data from other Irish burials. However, the results were consistent with origins on the limestone in eastern Ireland and suggest that the woman from Rath probably originated in the area where she was buried.



Detail of toe ring burial at **Rath**. (Photo CRDS Ltd)

early medieval

In addition to an early medieval ringfort site at **Cookstown**, a very large and extensive early medieval settlement and burial site was discovered at **Raystown**. Excavation revealed that the site was used between the early fifth and the eleventh centuries and had multiple enclosures, a burial site, souterrains, settlement areas and numerous water-powered mills and kilns.

The site produced a large assemblage of artefacts of bone, glass, stone and metal. Objects associated with personal grooming and adornment included stone bracelets, glass beads, bone combs, and a range of dress pins of metal and bone. Despite the extensive nature of the site and its obvious importance, it appears to have been forgotten about over the course of time.

93 people, mostly adults were buried here. The careful analysis by an osteoarchaeologist has shed light on the lives of the community.

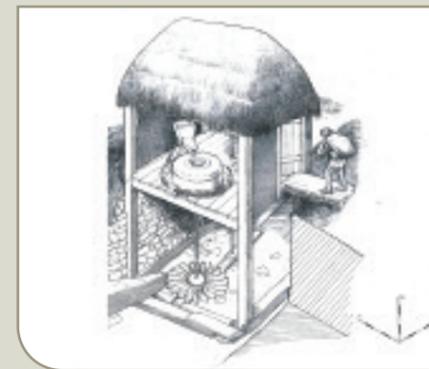


Northern mill 2 at **Raystown** under excavation. (Photo CRDS Ltd)

Their diet was primarily derived from land sources, supplemented by small amounts of fish. There was evidence for diseases such as tuberculosis probably resulting from close physical contact with animals.

Other lifestyle degenerative diseases of the bone joints were noted, reflecting the physical hardship of daily life and the sexual division of labour in the community. The men had suffered from disease of the spine while the women had more non-spinal joint disease.

It has been suggested that the repetitive lifting associated with building, maintaining and working the mills as well as other farming activities may account for the joint disease of the men. Women in this period engaged in food preparation and crafts such as textile production. Bone needles and spinning equipment were recovered from the site.



Reconstruction drawing of the northern mill 2 at **Raystown**. (Figure Simon Dick for CRDS Ltd)

early medieval

Two men buried at the site had been seriously wounded in bladed conflict and remind us that this period of history was occasionally violent and turbulent and the community may have been subject to cattle raiding or Viking raids.

The site was an important centre for food production as evidenced by the eight mills and five

cereal-drying kilns there. Wheat, oats, rye and barley seeds were dried in the kilns before being sent for milling, and reflect, a diverse arable subsistence. Various components of the mills were preserved on site including the millraces, the foundations of the mill structures and the tailraces. The reconstruction of the mill shows how they may have looked in use.

medieval



Aerial view of row of medieval houses including forge at **Cookstown**. (Photo Hawkeye)

The medieval period in the area is well represented by high status, defensive mottes and castles, but the evidence at **Cookstown** augments this picture with evidence for a rural settlement community.

Other medieval farms were identified at **Baltrasna** and **Muckerstown** and these add to the picture of rural settlement in the region. **Cookstown** was a multi-period site but had a primary phase of medieval settlement.

The site preserved a row of medieval houses, one of which was a forge, as well as the kitchen gardens of the houses. This forge probably produced the iron tools required by the community. This site also preserved the remains of a small late 18th or early 19th century cottier's cabin which had been constructed in a ditch beside a narrow lane leading to the house.