The M7 Heath-Mayfield (Monasterevin bypass) Motorway runs to the south of Monasterevin and extends from west County Kildare into east County Laois. The motorway scheme is 17.5 km in length, and Valerie J. Keeley Ltd., and Archaeological Consultancy Services Ltd., carried out the archaeological works on behalf of the National Roads Authority and Kildare and Laois County Councils.

Initial studies for the Environmental Impact Assessment revealed a number of potential archaeological sites along the general route. This research included the study of early mapping, literary sources, monument registers, modern and other state archives, aerial photography, local folklore and enquiries, along with fieldwalking the length of the scheme. Local townland and other placenames also suggested potential sites along the route, for example, Kill (church or wood), Greatheath (a glacial plain and heathland, which, like the nearby Curragh, abounds in prehistoric ritual monuments) and Killaglish (church or wood of the church).

Archaeological works were comprised of two phases. Valerie J. Keeley Ltd., undertook the first phase in advance of the main construction programme during the first half of 2003. The aim was to resolve sites in advance, thereby minimising any potential delays to the construction of the motorway. This targeted areas of suspected interest for archaeological testing; including previously identified sites and approximately 40% of the route, with follow-up excavation of any confirmed remains. The second phase, undertaken by Archaeological Consultancy Services Ltd., involved monitoring of topsoil stripping at the construction stage, with follow-up resolution of any uncovered sites. This mainly consisted of excavation of the sites, though a small number were preserved in situ under the new road embankment. This second phase commenced in April 2003 and was largely completed by the end of that year. A total of 42 sites were investigated.

what we found
in brief:

Some of the findings on the M7 Heath-Mayfield Motorway Scheme:

1. Burials
Archaeologist excavating human remains at Ballydavis.

2. River crossing investigations
Archaeological divers investigating the area of the Barrow crossing.

3. Burnt mound
Excavation of a burnt mound at Ballyfarsoon.

4. Cillín
Archaeologists excavating a cillín site at Kill.
Evidence of Murra is being an important area of habitation and activity at various stages of the prehistoric and historic past is indicated by the discovery of a complex of features over a wide area and of varying dates.

The features range from large ring-ditches of probable prehistoric or Roman origin, to medieval sites, to Late Bronze Age and Iron Age production pits. Sites included bowl furnaces, charcoal production pits, a linear ditch running from a cobbled surface, complete with cart rut. This roadway had previously been pointed out “by old natives” to John O’Donovan of the Ordnance Survey in 1838 as “both which they say belonged to the family of O’Kelly”. Nine inhumations were uncovered at Portarlington, of which three were interred in one stone-edged pit. The majority are likely to represent Christian remains, as they were orientated east-west. Radiocarbon dates returned for four of the bodies have given dates of AD 442, AD 1182, AD 1247 and AD 1259. The burial dated to AD 1247 was of an adult female and was adjacent to a horse burial. Radiocarbon dating of the horse remains dated to AD 1247, an adult female and was adjacent to a horse burial. Radiocarbon dating of a human remains on AD 1247.

The majority of artefacts recovered included a copper-alloy fibula running from Coolbanagher Castle to Morett Castle “both which they say belonged to the family of O’Kelly”. Nine inhumations were uncovered at Portarlington, of which three were interred in one stone-edged pit. The majority are likely to represent Christian remains, as they were orientated east-west. Radiocarbon dates returned for four of the bodies have given dates of AD 442, AD 1182, AD 1247 and AD 1259. The burial dated to AD 1247 was of an adult female and was adjacent to a horse burial. Radiocarbon dating of the horse remains dated to AD 1247, an adult female and was adjacent to a horse burial. Radiocarbon dating of a human remains on AD 1247.

The townland name KIL, located towards the eastern end of the scheme, suggested that an ecclesiastical site might have been situated in this area. Intensive archaeological survey over a wide area failed to show evidence of such a site. However, test excavation at one location in the townland revealed a site [a burial ground]. This consisted of a small, rectangular burial ground, which contained the remains of approximately 50 adults and dated to the 11th and 12th centuries. The position of the grave at the time was not to bury unbaptized infants in consecrated church grounds.

A burial ground is visible at Ballyfarsoon, located towards the eastern end of the scheme. Intensive archaeological survey over a wide area failed to show evidence of such a site. However, test excavation at one location in the townland revealed a site [a burial ground]. This consisted of a small, rectangular burial ground, which contained the remains of approximately 50 adults and dated to the 11th and 12th centuries. The position of the grave at the time was not to bury unbaptized infants in consecrated church grounds.

The site consisted of three circular ditches or barrows within a large oval enclosure. Five adult and two infant inhumations, along with four cremations, were discovered. The variety of artefacts found in the area suggests that the site was probably of great importance during the early medieval period.

Excavations at Cappeal revealed a complex of features that were dispersed over a wide area, mainly relictive in date and related to iron-working. Sites included bowl furnaces, charcoal production pits, a linear ditch, and a prehistoric ring-ditch. The features included a ring-ditched area and a small, rounded hollow in the gravel soil, which contained the remains of a small rectangular burial ground. This consisted of a small, rectangular burial ground, which contained the remains of approximately 50 adults and dated to the 11th and 12th centuries. The position of the grave at the time was not to bury unbaptized infants in consecrated church grounds.

Test excavations on the banks of the River Barrow revealed a complex of features that were dispersed over a wide area, mainly relictive in date and related to iron-working. Sites included bowl furnaces, charcoal production pits, a linear ditch, and a prehistoric ring-ditch. The features included a ring-ditched area and a small, rounded hollow in the gravel soil, which contained the remains of a small rectangular burial ground. This consisted of a small, rectangular burial ground, which contained the remains of approximately 50 adults and dated to the 11th and 12th centuries. The position of the grave at the time was not to bury unbaptized infants in consecrated church grounds.

Specialist work on the excavation archives is ongoing, including artefact and environmental analysis, reevaluation of the study of human and animal bones, along with processing of mapping, photography and the written documentation of the sites. The post-excavation phase will lead to the full publication of the excavation results and dissemination of the information to a wider audience.