

what we found

in brief:

Some of the findings from Bundoran to Ballyshannon.



1. Medieval church and burial site

Archaeologist excavating a skeleton uncovered at the **Ballyhanna** church site. (Photo I.A.C. Ltd.)

2. Holy Well

Tobershannon holy well during excavation. (Photo I.A.C. Ltd.)

3. Hearth

Hearth uncovered at **Ballynacarrick**. (Photo I.A.C. Ltd.)

4. Early medieval trackway

View of the brushwood trackway uncovered at **Magheracar**. (Photo I.A.C. Ltd.)

5. Medieval pottery

Cross decorated medieval bowl handle uncovered at the **Ballyhanna** church site.

6. Building

Post-medieval building uncovered at **Rathmore** and **Finner**. (Photo I.A.C. Ltd.)

background

In the summer of 2003 archaeological works connected with the construction of the N15 Bundoran-Ballyshannon Bypass commenced.

Test excavations were targeted at a number of potential archaeological features identified during the course of the Environmental Impact Assessment carried out in 2001. Intensive archaeological testing was carried out along the length of the route, to identify any other archaeological features or complexes not visible above ground. The outcome of the extensive archaeological work was the identification and full excavation of a number of archaeological sites along the route of the bypass. The archaeological works were carried out by **Irish Archaeological Consultancy Services Ltd.**, (I.A.C. Ltd.) on behalf of the **National Roads Authority** and **Donegal County Council**.



Tobershannon holy well during excavation. (Photo I.A.C. Ltd.)

Discoveries ranged from wooden trackways south of Bundoran, to the remains of a post-medieval house in **Finner** Townland. Representing settlement and ritual activity dating to some of the earliest periods of human settlement in Ireland, the discoveries included the remains of a forgotten medieval church and graveyard on the banks of the **Erne River** in **Ballyshannon**; one of the frequently found burnt mounds, dating predominantly to the Bronze Age, and a probable Iron Age linear earthwork south of Bundoran.

neolithic

Wetland settlement in Magheracar townland

A scatter of prehistoric chert artefacts and debitage was discovered in **Magheracar** townland on the edge of wetland in the floodplains of the Drowes River that lie south and south-east of **Bundoran** town. Excavations did not reveal any associated structures, though a shallow pit containing a quantity of burnt animal bone may date to the same period of activity.



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archaeological DISCOVERIES

front cover images

LEFT: View of linear earthwork at **Magheracar**. (Photo I.A.C. Ltd.)
RIGHT: Archaeologist excavating a skeleton uncovered at the **Ballyhanna** church site. (Photo I.A.C. Ltd.)
MIDDLE TOP: Post-medieval building uncovered at **Rathmore** and **Finner**. (Photo I.A.C. Ltd.)
MIDDLE LEFT BOTTOM: Hearth uncovered at **Ballynacarrick**. (Photo I.A.C. Ltd.)
MIDDLE RIGHT BOTTOM: Cross decorated medieval bowl handle uncovered at the **Ballyhanna** church site.



neolithic/bronze age

Prehistoric settlement in Ballynacarrick townland

Situated on the edge of a turlough, or seasonal lake, this settlement was in a sheltered location below a rocky bluff. The activity on the site dates from the Neolithic, though later metalworking activity may also be present. Features discovered include the remains of a circular structure formed by up to ten stake-holes and two linear features, possibly slots for structural beams. It would appear that it was a temporary hut. Prehistoric pottery was recovered, three sherds associated with the circular structure are similar to Late Bronze Age pottery. A shallow pit contained possible slag, potential evidence of metalworking that would indicate later activity on the site from the Bronze Age at the earliest.

Another pit was over 3m in diameter and contained burnt soil and charcoal that appear to have been burnt elsewhere and deposited later in the pit. Flint debitage, burnt bone and a piece of possible worked quartz

bronze age

Burnt mound in Sminver townland

Test excavations discovered the remains of a burnt mound in **Sminver** townland. Consisting of the charcoal-blackened remains of burnt stones and soil, it measured about 4m x 8m across and formed a low mound about 10cm in height.

The 1983 Archaeological Survey recorded only three

were also recovered. A Neolithic plano-convex flint knife was found within a second pit over 7m long and up to 2.6m wide. Provisional interpretation suggests that it may have been a corn-drying kiln or a butchering pit. Neolithic pottery was recovered. It may be that this feature and the circular structure were contemporary.



Hearth uncovered at **Ballynacarrick**. (Photo I.A.C. Ltd.)

such features in County Donegal. Since that time and due mainly to large infrastructural projects, they have become probably the most widespread archaeological feature in Ireland. The mix of burnt stone and charcoal that forms the monuments is thought to derive from fires associated with cooking and/or industrial activities and predominantly date to the Bronze Age.

iron age

Magheracar linear earthwork

About 1km east of the lakeside settlement in **Magheracar**, fieldwork recorded a substantial linear earthwork up to 2m in height and 350m long in varied levels of preservation. Excavations showed that the west end had been levelled in the 19th-20th century, while upstanding sections further east revealed the construction method. The bank artificially augmented a natural ridge, with material dug up from parallel ditches on either side. South of the bank the ditch was more substantial than the shallow northern ditch. Secure dating of the earthwork's construction is not possible since no dateable material was found, though it has been suggested that the earthwork is part of the **Black Pigs Dyke**, an Iron Age territorial boundary of **Ulster** running in sections between the east and west coasts of Ireland.

A nearby furnace contained substantial quantities of slag and charcoal. The furnace was composed of a



View of linear earthwork at **Magheracar**. (Photo I.A.C. Ltd.)

small pit with a linear flue-like gully several metres long. Burnt clay found in the pit may represent the remains of a collapsed furnace superstructure.

early medieval

Magheracar trackway

A brushwood trackway across the bogland immediately south of the Neolithic chert scatter was initially thought to have been associated with the prehistoric settlement, however; radiocarbon dating of some wood samples suggests a felling date of the 5th to 7th-centuries AD. Axe marks showed that the brushwood was deliberately felled and the timbers were laid down horizontally to form a trackway, or a platform, leading out to the edge of the body of water that may have been present at the time. Perhaps it was used as a landing or a platform from which to fish or hunt waterfowl.

medieval

Tobershannon holy well

This well was marked on the 1836 Ordnance Survey map as **Tobershannon** but was not located during the main County Donegal Archaeological Survey in 1983. Fieldwork re-discovered the well, and archaeological excavation revealed a number of large, rough-hewn uncoursed, unbonded stones placed in a sub-circular D-shape around the mouth of a natural spring. A low spread of rounded stones around the well was probably constructed to provide a dry and level surface to stand on and also may have provided some structural stability. The holy well has been preserved *in situ*, facilitated by a minor design change of the road embankment in this area.

Ballyhanna medieval church and cemetery

Human skeletal remains were discovered in a green field on the outskirts of **Ballyshannon** during the test excavations in 2001. Subsequent excavation on the site in **Ballyhanna** townland revealed the foundations of a



View of the church uncovered at **Ballyhanna**.



Cross decorated medieval bowl handle uncovered at the **Ballyhanna** church site.



Archaeologist excavating a skeleton uncovered at the **Ballyhanna** church site. (Photo I.A.C. Ltd.)

medieval church and associated cemetery on the south bank of the River Erne, thought to date from between 1100-1400 AD. The site was not known before its discovery by the bypass archaeological works.

It was clear that the 14m x 7m building was already standing when the burials were interred, as they respected the surviving foundations. The east-west orientation of the structure also suggested it was a church. A clay floor surface was discovered within the interior; and a bowl handle decorated with a crude cross may have belonged to a Eucharist vessel.

The National Roads Authority and Donegal County Council reconfigured the junction layout in this area, and the church foundations and an area around it have been preserved *in situ*.

Approximately 1200 skeletons were excavated in this communal graveyard. Most of the burials were in the Christian manner; with the head at the west. Some however were in crouched positions, evoking pre-Christian burial rites. The potential of the **Ballyhanna**

medieval

skeletal assemblage, clearly representing a large portion of the population, cannot be overstated and it will provide much understanding of life, and death, in an Irish medieval town. Dating evidence came from coins associated with some of the burials, notably, three silver long cross pennies and halfpennies from the reign of Henry III (1251-1276 AD) and Edward I (c. 1280-1302 AD). The pottery found was mainly

post-medieval

Post-medieval farmstead at Rathmore and Finner

These remains were first identified during fieldwork, and excavations revealed a small farmstead comprising a house structure and associated field walls. The farmstead does not appear on the first edition Ordnance Survey map of 1835, or the 1847-50 revision.

A dry stone-built rectangular building 9m x 5m with collapsed walls survived to a height of around 0.5m. An internal wall divided the two-roomed clay-floored building, with burnt clay on the floor possibly representing the hearth. Finds of roofing slate and window glass indicate how the structure may have looked. A large rotary quern and the remains of an iron scythe are evidence of agricultural activities.

Various types of pottery were recovered, including part of a 17th-century olive jar of Seville coarseware,

Everted Rim ware, probably used as cooking pots by the 'native Irish'. Other artefacts included bone beads, shroud pins and pieces of quartz, found placed in the hands of many burials. East of the church, a stone-lined hearth-like pit may have held the Pascal fire. The remains of a medieval stone-lined shrine south of the church contained votive deposits of quartz pebbles.



Post-medieval building uncovered at **Rathmore and Finner**. (Photo I.A.C. Ltd.)

sherds from an 18th-century plate of White salt glazed stoneware, part of an 18th-century Bristol/Staffordshire slipware cup, and earthenware storage vessels dating to the 18th-19th century. A pewter button with the number '47' embossed on it, belonged to a uniform of the 47th Loyal Regiment of Foot, first stationed in Ireland during the Famine of 1846-1851. While no building is shown on the mid-19th-century Ordnance Survey maps, there was clearly some activity during that period, possibly using the ruin as a military outpost.