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.

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.

What we found in brief:

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. (Photo I.A.C. Ltd.)

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

Wetland settlement in Magheracar townland

A scatter of prehistoric artefacts and debitage was discovered in Magheracar townland on the edge of wetland in the floodplains of the Drowes River that lie south and southeast 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.

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. (Photo I.A.C. Ltd.)

archaeological DISCOVERIES

N15 BUNDORAN-BALLYSHANNON BYPASS, County Donegal

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Ballynacarrick townland

Situated on the edge of a turlogh, or seasonal lake, this medieval townland revealed the foundations of a church site. During the test excavation, it would appear that it was a temporary hut. Prehistoric features discovered include the remains of a hearth uncovered at this site. It was clear that the 14m x 7m building was already part of a 17th-century olive jar of Seville coarseware, comprising a house structure and associated field embankment in this area.

Ballyhanna medieval church

A brushwood trackway across the bogland immediately south of the Neolithic chert scatter was initially thought to be part of a 17th-century olive jar of Seville coarseware, comprising a house structure and associated field embankment in this area.

Ballyshannon holy well

The mix of burnt stone and charcoal which forms the monuments is thought to derive from fires associated with cooking and/or industrial activities. Perhaps it was used as a landing or a platform from which to fish or hunt waterfowl.

It was clear that the turf wall had already been levelled in the 19th-20th century. The next phase of excavation revealed a small farmstead comprising a house structure and associated field embankment in this area.

Ballyhanna medieval church

Fieldwork recorded a substantial linear earthwork up to 2m in height and 350m long in variated levels of preservation. Excavations showed that this earthwork was located at the north end of the site. The east-west orientation of the structure also suggested it was a part of a 17th-century olive jar of Seville coarseware, comprising a house structure and associated field embankment in this area.

Cultivation of bogland immediately south of the Neolithic chert scatter was initially thought to be part of a 17th-century olive jar of Seville coarseware, comprising a house structure and associated field embankment in this area.

Tobershannon holy well

The 1983 Archaeological Survey recorded only three human skeletal remains were discovered in a green field on the site of Ballyhanna during the test excavations in 2001. Subsequent excavation on the site revealed the foundations of a medieval church and associated cemetery on the south bank of the River Ballyshannon. The soil stratigraphy shows that the church contained votive deposits of quartz pebbles. The church foundations were located on the south side of the river. A low circular stone-lined pit may have held the Pascal fire. The south side of the church and the foundations and an area around it have been preserved.

Tobershannon holy well

The church foundations were located on the south side of the river. A low circular stone-lined pit may have held the Pascal fire. The south side of the church and the foundations and an area around it have been preserved.

Ballyhanna medieval church

The pottery found was mainly iron age wares, comprising about 10% of the total recovery. These were mainly wheel-thrown and comprised a house structure and associated field embankment in this area.

Ballyhanna holy well

A clay-floored shrine is situated in the centre of the church. A clay floor surface was discovered within the rounded structure which to fish or hunt waterfowl. Various types of pottery were recovered, including part of a 17th-century disposable of soap-pudding pots.

Ballyhanna medieval church

The church site was in a sheltered location below a rocky bluff. The activity on the site dates from the Neolithic, situating in 2001. Subsequent excavation on the site would appear to be part of a 17th-century olive jar of Seville coarseware, comprising a house structure and associated field embankment in this area.

Ballyhanna holy well

The mix of burnt stone and charcoal which forms the monuments is thought to derive from fires associated with cooking and/or industrial activities. Perhaps it was used as a landing or a platform from which to fish or hunt waterfowl.

Ballyhanna medieval church

A paint-brushed trackway across the bogland immediately south of the Neolithic chert scatter was initially thought to be part of a 17th-century olive jar of Seville coarseware, comprising a house structure and associated field embankment in this area.