The N6 Kinnegad to Kilbeggan Dual Carriageway is part of the major inter urban route connecting Dublin with Galway. Archaeological investigation and excavation works on the scheme began in summer 2004 and were completed in May 2005. The initial investigators were carried out by Eachtra Archaeological Projects and CRDS Ltd. They involved centreline test trenching, site specific testing, geophysical, topographical and bogland surveys as well as written, drawn, and photographic architectural assessments of various vernacular buildings. The vast array of archaeological sites and features uncovered included more than 30 burnt mounds some of which had possible troughs, 35 burnt pits and hearths, a pit with prehistoric pottery, three iron working sites, two trackways (one timber and one brushwood), a cillín (i.e. a burial ground mainly used for the internment of unbaptised children), a prehistoric complex, a late medieval field system, two lime kilns and two post-medieval buildings. Full excavation of the various sites uncovered during testing were carried out between October 2004 and May 2005 by CRDS Ltd, Eachtra Archaeological Projects and Valerie J Keeley Ltd on behalf of the National Roads Authority, Westmeath and Meath County Councils. A total of 52 sites proved to be archaeological with burnt mound sites predominating. Post-excavation works are ongoing and are due to be completed by the end of 2007. Preliminary results from two of the excavations are beginning to offer a tantalizing view of the early historic Westmeath.
The site was initially identified in the Environmental Impact Statement carried out for the scheme as a site of potential importance. The site was subsequently investigated by a team of archaeologists from CRDS Ltd in November 2004 and continued to May 2005, under the overall direction of Valerie J Keeley, and was listed in the Record of Monuments and Places about the site in November 2006.

The clonfad monastic site was identified as a possible church building on the site of existing roadworks, which encroached on roughly 10% of this large monastic site. Excavations were confined to the archaeological remains within the innermost church and graveyard. Excavations were undertaken from 30 m to the west of and outside the N6 road corridor, north of Cholmain hillside close to the shores of the historically and geographically important lake Lough Ennell.

Aerial view of ecclesiastical enclosure and burial ground (Photo Valerie J Keeley Ltd)

The curvilinear ditch enclosed an area of about 1.25 hectares of land. The ditch was quite substantial with a maximum width of 7.9 m and depth of 1.61 m. It is likely that an internal bank formerly existed with a similar circumference to the ditch. The curvilinear ditch enclosed an area of about 1.25 hectares of land. The ditch was quite substantial with a maximum width of 7.9 m and depth of 1.61 m. It is likely that an internal bank formerly existed with a similar circumference to the ditch.

Aerial view of Clonfad (Photo Valerie J Keeley Ltd)

A team of archaeologists, who excavated from the clonfad monastic site, made a large excavation ditch with the back filling of the interior Substantial evidence comprised of wells, refuse pits and post-holes. A large range of artefacts were retrieved from this high status early medieval site. They included iron tools, beads, a ringed pin, a bronze ring pin, bone pins, after which many items were recovered and a large hoard of iron mini-hand bells. A range of internal structures were built out of them, with significant evidence of iron smelting. Fine bronze metalworking is also suggested by the recovery of ringed-pins, crucible fragments, ingots, moulds, sheets and corner strips and stone moulds. The foundations of a possible church building were discovered within the enclosure on the eastern edge spanning a mortuary structure of Brynwenholland. Others date to stone-built and post-built houses which suggest a limited presence. These features contained remains of both re-occupation and domestic waste. A large number of individuals were recovered within the enclosure with particular emphasis on those from local knowledge. A preliminary analysis of the burial deposits identified three phases: Phase 1 consisted of east–west orientated burials with mainly unlined graves and stone head supports. Phase 2 burials were also orientated east–west, some directly aligned with the church. Many were laid out resting on their back, face down. Some of these were also buried within coffins or within loosely stone lined graves with stone head supports. Phase 3 consisted of the use of the site as a cillín, where traditionally unbaptised children and strangers were also buried within coffins or wrapped in shrouds fixed with copper alloy pins. Excavating at the Clonfad site (Photo Valerie J Keeley Ltd)

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