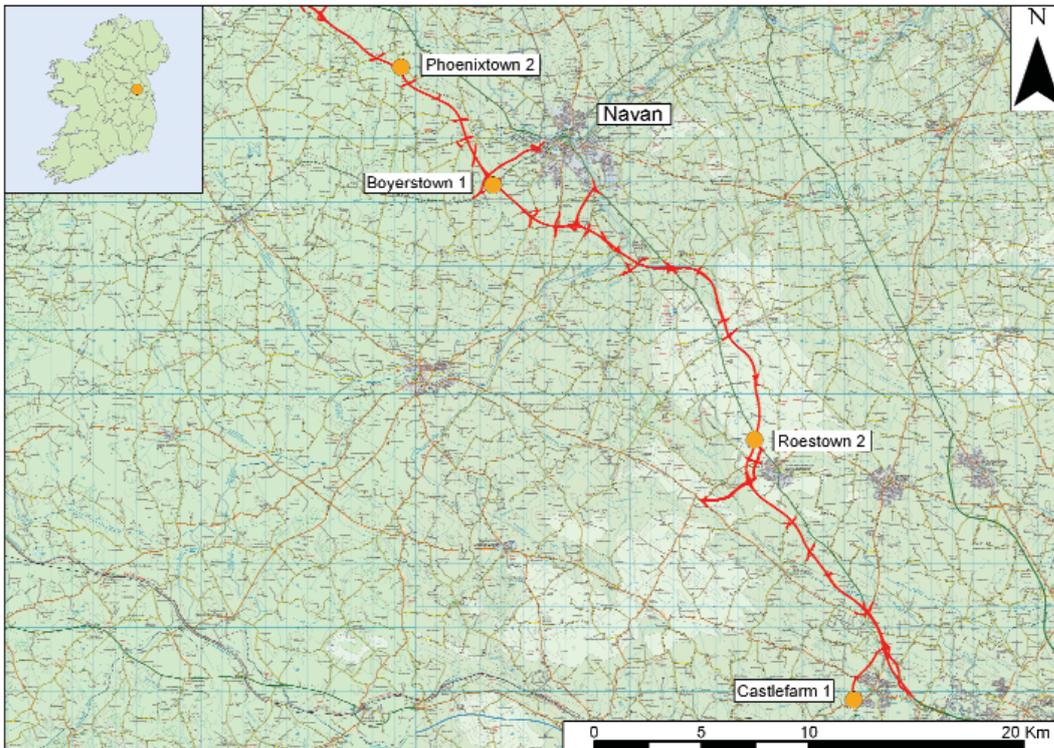


11. Digging with documents: late medieval historical research on the M3 in County Meath

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Illus. 1—Location of the late medieval sites on the M3 Clonee–North of Kells motorway scheme discussed in this paper (based on the Ordnance Survey Ireland map).

This paper provides a brief introduction to the contribution that historical research can make to the understanding and interpretation of archaeological sites. The examples used are drawn from the writer's ongoing research for archaeologists working on sites recently excavated along the M3 Clonee–North of Kells motorway scheme (Illus. 1).

A number of these sites have shown evidence of occupation during the late medieval period, usually defined as lying between the late 12th and the early 16th centuries. The earlier part of this is often referred to as the Anglo-Norman period, as its starting-point is seen as the arrival in Ireland in 1169 of Norman mercenaries from England and Wales, with the subsequent incorporation of large parts of the country into the Angevin empire of King Henry II and its colonisation by English and Welsh settlers.

Starting in the 1170s, Meath was comprehensively settled by the Anglo-Normans and, with the exception of the area immediately around Dublin, was more fully occupied by the colonists than any other rural area in Ireland. It is possible to trace aspects of this colonisation in a variety of documentary and cartographic sources, ranging from the chronicles of the late 12th century to the surveys of the post-Cromwellian period (after the

Act for the Settlement of Ireland in 1652). The principal aims of the historical research currently being undertaken are to locate material relating to the ownership, occupation and exploitation of specific sites, to provide information relating to settlement in the wider and regional contexts of the sites, and to identify ways in which the archaeological and historical analysis of these sites may contribute to an improved understanding of current research questions.

The period 1170–1250 was of crucial significance in County Meath. During this period a new landholding élite established itself in the area and moulded a settlement landscape based around the dual needs of military support and commercially based agriculture. This process saw the evolution and consolidation of a network of territorial and administrative boundaries delimiting baronies, parishes, manors and townlands. This was significantly influenced both by pre-existing borders and settlement patterns and by the continuance of Gaelic settlement in many areas. The process also included the foundation and development of a number of nucleated settlements, some with associated urban functions, many of which survive as towns and villages to the present day. Once again, many of these sites were centres of importance before the arrival of the Anglo-Normans.

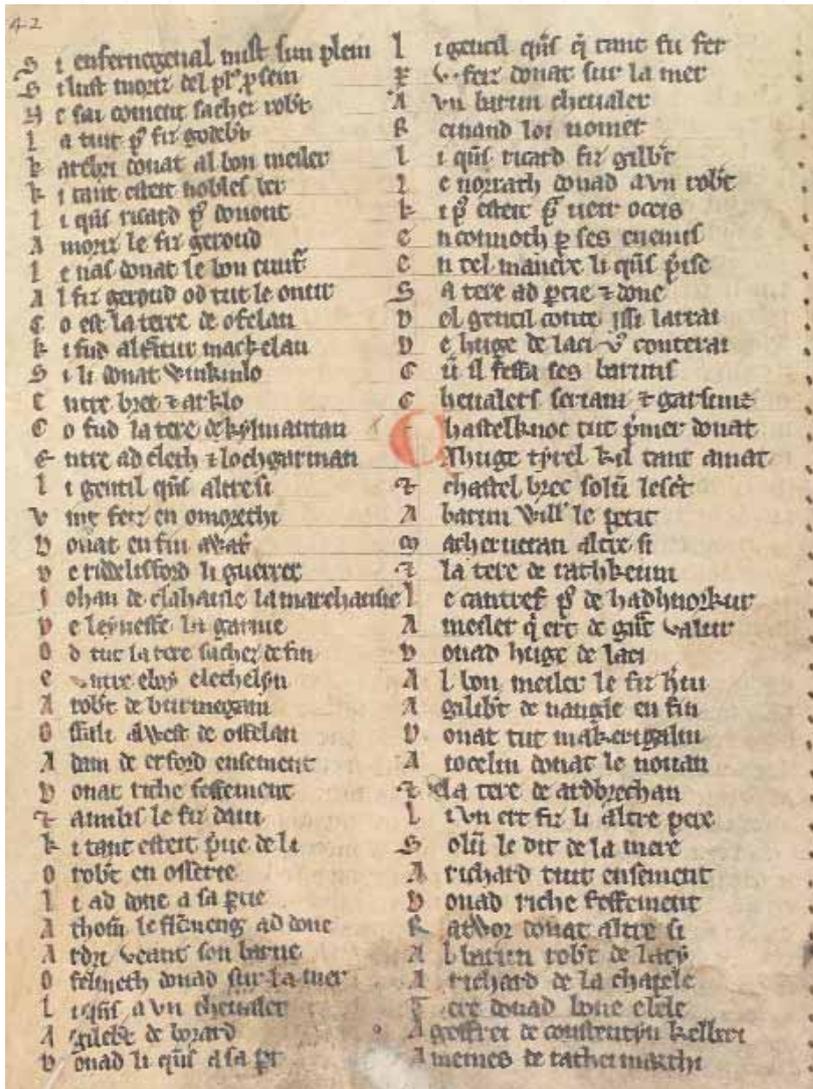
The medieval sites along the M3 were connected in a variety of ways into this settlement matrix by ties that were political, economic and social. Information relating to their size, function and morphology allows them to be assigned to a number of settlement strata. By identifying the occupants of the area or by formulating a plausible ownership profile, historical research can help to fit the excavated archaeological sites into the settlement hierarchy of medieval Meath.

Reconstructing the chain of ownership

From the 1170s the area under study formed part of the lordship or liberty of Meath, a territorial unit comprising the present counties of Meath, Westmeath and parts of Longford and Offaly. In 1172 this lordship was granted by Henry II to Hugh de Lacy, a major baron with holdings in the Anglo-Welsh border counties. De Lacy set up his chief Irish castle and administrative headquarters at Trim. Following the partition of this large patrimony in 1244, the study area remained part of the liberty of Trim and, for the remainder of the medieval period, the apex of the ownership hierarchy was occupied by a succession of lords of Trim, interspersed with periods of direct royal control.

Only a proportion of the lordship was directly occupied and controlled by the de Lacy family themselves. The rest of the land was granted out to the barons and chief vassals who had accompanied Hugh de Lacy to Ireland, in a process that has been called sub-infeudation. This is described in a late 12th-century chronicle written in verse form, known as *The Song of Dermot and the Earl* (Lambeth Palace Library, Carew MS 596) which is one of our most important sources for the decades immediately following the arrival of the Anglo-Normans in Ireland (Illus. 2).

The barony of Dunboyne, which contained a medieval site at Castlefarm 1, was granted to William le Petit; the de Lacys retained control of Ratoath, the barony that contains Roestown 2, and Jocelin de Nangle obtained possession of Navan, which includes the sites of Boyerstown 1 and Phoenixtown 2 (see below). These barons in their turn subdivided their holdings into smaller units, using lands both to reward their followers and to ensure their own



Illus. 2—Extract from The Song of Dermot and the Earl, giving details of Hugh de Lacy's grants of lands to his barons (Lambeth Palace Library, Carew MS 596).

eternal salvation by endowing the church in return for Masses and prayers. The patchwork of landholders that emerged can be partly reconstructed by combining evidence from a variety of different sources. Records of lands granted to the church can frequently be found in surviving registers and cartularies (collections of charters) of religious houses, while grants to lay individuals occur in a variety of estate and central government collections.

Manorial organisation

Within the barony, the primary unit of landholding was the manor, which frequently occupied the same area as the medieval parish of the same name. Territorially, manors were comprised of a number of discrete but interdependent settlement components. The centre or *caput* of the manor was where the lord's own residence was located, along with the parish church and resources such as mills and dovecots. A number of manorial tenants also lived

in close proximity to the *caput*; frequently these were smallholders who owned little land themselves but worked on the lord's lands. The settlements at manorial centres were sometimes given borough status, which conferred a range of urban-type privileges on their principal inhabitants, known as burgesses. The holdings of these burgesses, called burgage plots, consisted of dwelling houses fronting long narrow gardens. The burgesses also held agricultural land in the fields surrounding the village or town. Free tenants who held larger parcels of land often chose to live at some distance from the manorial centre. Native Irish manorial tenants, called *betaghs*, tended to live in large family groups and they also occupied specific areas within the manor often associated with present-day townlands. Thus the townlands in which several of the late medieval sites along the M3 are located can be identified as constituent parts of manors.

While the arrival of the Anglo-Normans and the establishment of the manorial system represented a period of great change in the area, there were also substantial elements of continuity. For example, as mentioned above, the primary phase of colonisation made use of existing territorial divisions and also existing settlement foci. In Meath there is a very strong correlation between the location of important early medieval monastic sites and the places chosen by the colonisers for their early castles and boroughs. Much less is known about continuity of use of sites lower down in the settlement hierarchy, and it is here that the sites recently excavated on the M3 have the potential to increase our knowledge considerably.

Bridging the divide: Castlefarm 1 and Roestown 2

Two sites on the southern section of the M3 show evidence for occupation both before and after the arrival of the Anglo-Normans. Aidan O'Connell of Archaeological Consultancy Services Ltd (ACS Ltd) excavated a significant enclosure complex at Castlefarm 1 (Illus. 3), a short distance south-west of Dunboyne.¹ An inner and outer enclosure, along with an annex, were constructed in the early medieval period, and a rich artefactual assemblage suggests that the site was associated with high-status secular occupation. There was also evidence for substantial later medieval activity at the site, including the recutting of two of the early medieval enclosures. The finds included metal stick-pins and Dublin-type pottery, placing the later occupation in the 12th and 13th centuries (O'Connell 2006). The fact that the later medieval activity was confined within the early medieval enclosures and did not significantly alter the morphology of the site led the excavator to suggest continuity of occupation from the early to the later medieval period (O'Connell, forthcoming).

The barony of Dunboyne was granted by Hugh de Lacy to William le Petit, one of his chief followers. Le Petit and his successors established a manorial centre with castle and borough at Dunboyne in the late 12th and early 13th centuries. The earliest mention of a castle in Dunboyne is in a charter of William le Petit dated to c. 1205 x 1210 (Brooks 1953, 174–5). Remains of this castle may be represented by a 13th-century earthwork recently excavated by Claire Cotter for CRDS Ltd in the grounds of Dunboyne Castle (Cotter 2007). This may have been an example of an Anglo-Norman fortification known as a ringwork, a type of earthwork castle that pre-dated stone castles at many sites, including Trim Castle. The Castlefarm 1 site is located about 1 km west of this castle and therefore would have come under Anglo-Norman political and economic control at an early stage.



Illus. 3—Aerial view of the enclosure complex at Castlefarm 1 during excavation, looking east in the direction of Dunboyne (Studio Lab).

The most likely scenario is that it was incorporated into the demesne or home farm of the le Petits. The name ‘Castlefarm’ dates from the late 15th or early 16th century and was probably associated with the rebuilding of Dunboyne Castle and the reorganisation of the manor undertaken by Edmund Butler c. 1475 (Morrissey 1939, 287).

The possibility that the site at Castlefarm continued in Irish occupation after the arrival of the Anglo-Normans and the imposition of manorial organisation is intriguing. Documentary evidence suggests that in many places native Irish farmers were incorporated into the Anglo-Norman manorial system. This happened particularly in the early years of colonisation, when there appears to have been a shortage of labour. Might Castlefarm provide an example of a site whose existing Irish occupants pragmatically adapted themselves to the incoming regime? It is hard to imagine that the new Anglo-Norman lords would have tolerated the continued occupation of a high-status Gaelic family in an area so close to their manorial *caput*. It is possible, however, that the high-status early medieval occupants of Castlefarm abandoned the site before the arrival of the Anglo-Normans and were replaced by a family who posed less of a threat to the new rulers. The relatively sparse later medieval faunal remains and a significant decline in the quality and quantity of the later medieval artefactual assemblage suggests that the status and economy of the site did experience a downturn in this period.

Another site that showed evidence of both early and late medieval occupation was Roestown 2, excavated by Robert O’Hara of ACS Ltd.² Situated north-west of Dunshaughlin, this large, 3 ha site straddled the existing N3 and primarily comprised a series of early medieval enclosures dating from the seventh to the 10th/11th centuries

(O'Hara 2007). There was also evidence of limited occupation in the Anglo-Norman period—specifically a small ditched enclosure at the highest point of the site (Illus. 4). The ditch contained a small quantity of animal bone, fragments of Dublin-type pottery and a complete bodkin-style spearhead. O'Hara (ibid.) suggested that the enclosure may have surrounded a small house, evidence of which had been removed by later agricultural activity. The small number of finds suggests a transient presence or a short-lived occupation.

Roestown is situated in the barony of Ratoath and in the medieval period was located on the periphery of the manor of Dunshaughlin. The area was retained by Hugh de Lacy as part of his demesne holdings and after his death it passed to his younger son, also Hugh. During its tenure by the younger Hugh de Lacy the area went through a period of instability as Hugh rebelled against his overlord, King John, and his lands were confiscated and frequently became a theatre of war. It is possible that the medieval enclosure at Roestown represents an incipient Anglo-Norman settlement that was abandoned, or even a temporary defensive structure constructed during one of the military campaigns. Sources dating from the 14th and 15th centuries indicate that there was an agricultural settlement and residence at Roestown, which was held by the lords of Dunshaughlin (Tresham 1828, 88; Mac Niocaill 1992, 61). The Civil Survey, a description of lands and buildings that was undertaken in 1654, recorded a stone house and mill at Roestown (Simington 1940, 92). The relationship of this settlement to the early enclosure excavated by O'Hara is unclear, but it may be that the first Anglo-Norman settlers in the area decided to relocate to a more suitable site nearby.



Illus. 4—Elevated view of Roestown 2, Area A, after excavation, looking south-west, showing the small subrectangular enclosure occupied during the Anglo-Norman period (Hawkeye).

Anglo-Norman 'new builds': Boyerstown 1 and Phoenixtown 2?

Moving up to the northern end of the motorway scheme, two late medieval sites were excavated in the barony of Lower Navan—Boyerstown 1 and Phoenixtown 2. Activity at both sites was dated to between the 12th and 14th centuries and no evidence of earlier activity was found.

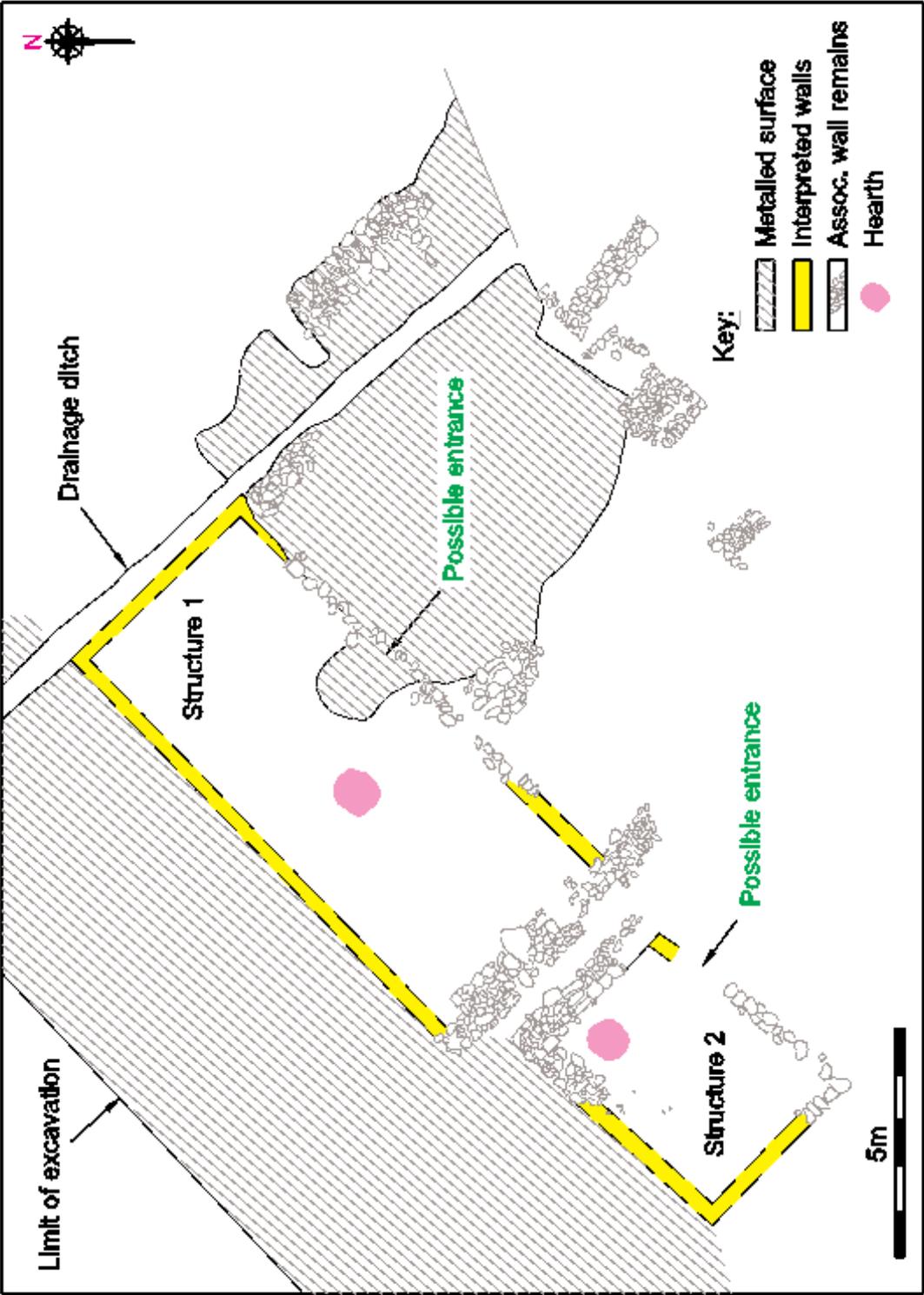
Boyerstown 1 is situated some 3 km south-west of Navan along the N51 Athboy road.³ The archaeological remains were excavated by Kevin Martin for ACS Ltd and consisted of two contemporary structures with hearths and drystone walls (Martin 2007). The buildings, which may date from the mid-13th century, were surrounded by a large cobbled yard, and there was evidence for arable agricultural activity nearby (Illus. 5). The site revealed a particularly rich artefactual assemblage that included both locally produced and imported pottery. The assemblage also contained a large quantity of metal finds, including coins, ornate brooches and a silver crucifix pendant (Illus. 6). It clearly represents the residence of a substantial farmer or manorial tenant.

The Song of Dermot and the Earl (Lambeth Palace Library, Carew MS 596) tells us that Hugh de Lacy granted the lands of Navan and Ardraccon to Jocelin de Nangle in the 1170s, and this family is still found holding Navan 600 years later. Boyerstown is situated in the parish of Ardraccon, which, although initially included in the grant to de Nangle, was held during most of the medieval period by the bishop of Meath. The bishop had a manor house at Ardraccon about 2 km north of Boyerstown and, although no definite documentary proof has been found so far, it appears likely that Boyerstown would have formed part of this episcopal manor. The structures may have formed the residence and farm of one of the bishop's tenants or perhaps a manorial official, and it is hoped that further documentary research will substantiate this proposition.

The site at Phoenixtown 2 is located midway between Navan and Kells and comprised a series of field systems, pits and the remains of a horse mill.⁴ Ed Lyne, who excavated the site for Irish Archaeological Consultancy Ltd, uncovered a quantity of medieval pottery and a section of a metalled medieval roadway in which the tracks of carts were still discernible (Illus. 7). Only one possible house site was identified, but Lyne (2008) has proposed that a small rural community may have been located on higher ground to the west and south-west of the excavated area.

In the medieval period Phoenixtown, or Fennockstown as it was then, formed part of the manor of Martry. Owing to the fortunate survival of documentary material it is possible to identify the occupants of the area in the medieval period. The manor of Martry was held by the de Say family up to the early 14th century and subsequently by the Darcy family. Fennockstown was located just to the south of the manorial *caput* and parish church of Martry, and it was held and farmed by a free tenant of the manor in return for an annual cash payment. An extent or description of the manor of Martry survives for 1323 in a document in the National Archives, London (TNA: PRO C143/168). This includes the information that David and Adam Beg held a carucate (about 300 statute acres) of land in Fennockstown for a rent of 15 shillings per annum. There was also a house plot in Fennockstown at this date.

Another document of the same date reveals that the Beg family were involved in commercial arable agriculture. In 1323–4, John Beg and Hugh Say of Fennockstown are found selling oats to two royal officials who were collecting grain to send to Edward II's army, then campaigning in Scotland (TNA: PRO E101/16/21). A grant of 1389 that



Illus. 5—Plan of the structures and associated remains excavated at Boyerstown 1 (Archaeological Consultancy Services Ltd).



Illus. 6—Silver crucifix pendant recovered at Boyerstown 1 (Archaeological Consultancy Services Ltd).



Illus. 7—Elevated view of Phoenixtown 2 after excavation, with the medieval roadway running through the middle of the site (Hawkeye).

mentions David Beg in connection with Fennockstown reveals that this family continued to farm in the area until at least the end of the 14th century (Tresham 1828, 143).

Conclusion

The site at Phoenixtown is unusual as here it is possible to relate the archaeological findings closely to surviving historical sources. The other sites discussed demonstrate the more usual experience for a consultant historian of being able to suggest a possible ownership profile for an area and propose a chronological range for occupation. Establishing and dating ownership is, however, only one of the areas in which historical research can make a contribution to a site's interpretation and description. A further important role of historical research lies in helping to place a site within a wider political, economic and social context. All of the late medieval sites excavated along the M3 have the potential to add to the current state of knowledge concerning rural settlement in Ireland. It is hoped that this paper has highlighted some of the ways in which combined archaeological and historical research can release that potential.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all the excavation directors who shared their thoughts and pre-publication reports with me.

Notes

1. Castlefarm 1; NGR 300394, 241605; height 73 m OD; excavation reg. no. E3023; ministerial direction no. A017/001.
2. Roestown 2; NGR 295793, 253824; height 106 m OD; excavation reg. no. E3055; ministerial direction no. A008/002.
3. Boyerstown 1; NGR 283589, 265799; height 68 m OD; excavation reg. no. E3105; ministerial direction no. A023/013.
4. Phoenixtown 2; NGR 279305, 271332; height 59 m OD; excavation reg. no. E3129; ministerial direction no. A029/011.