



# Ballyhanna Research Project



Fig. 1: Catriona McKenzie examining skeletal remains from Ballyhanna at the Institute of Technology, Sligo. Inset: Róisín McCarthy conducting analysis. (studiolab.ie)



by Michael MacDonagh

*Michael MacDonagh, project archaeologist with Donegal County Council National Roads Design Office, describes the background to an important research initiative.*

In late 2003 an archaeological excavation commenced on a site outside Ballyshannon, Co. Donegal, where test excavations a few months earlier had revealed the presence of human bone. The work carried out at Ballyhanna over the next six months by Irish Archaeological Consultancy Ltd led to the discovery of a substantial medieval cemetery and the foundations of a stone building, thought to be the remains of Ballyhanna Church. The last recorded mention of church lands at Ballyhanna was in a 17th-century audit—the Enniskillen Inquisition—but since that date its location had been lost from local memory. In the 17th century land in Ballyhanna was leased by the ex-military Folliott family, granted to them for services to the Crown.

It may be that it was then that the ruined church was levelled and its stone used to build the Folliott residence, Rockville House, which was burned out in the 1920s. In the 17th/18th century garden landscaping over the church site would have removed any physical trace of the church and its graveyard. The general passage of time and the specific 19th-century decimation of Ballyshannon through Famine mortality and emigration would have removed the last vestige of any folkloric knowledge of the church's existence. This was the case until 2004, when the church was rediscovered during the works connected with the N15 Bundoran–Ballyshannon Bypass.

The landscape of Ballyhanna in the 13th century would have been very different from what we see today. The church and graveyard would have sat close to the southern bank of the River Erne. That wide watercourse, cascading down from the upper reaches of Lough Erne, served as a formidable boundary. A ford of the river at Ballyshannon was of huge strategic importance throughout history, and indeed back into prehistory. Located close to the tumbling rapids of St Cathaleen Falls, the ford of Atha Seanaig offered the only safe passage across the Erne at Ballyshannon until the 16th-





century bridging of the river. Twentieth-century construction of the hydroelectric plant utterly changed the Ballyshannon/Erne landscape. Both falls and ford were removed and the Erne was channeled into a deep, narrow, rock-cut channel, tailracing its way from the dam to the sea. That work, undertaken in the 1940s, unearthed a number of Bronze Age swords, retrieved by Lucius J Emerson of Ballyshannon. These weapons suggest that control of the fording point was fought over long before the 12th century when the O'Donnells, the O'Connors and, in subsequent centuries, the British and others recognised this natural link between Connacht and Ulster and struggled to maintain control of it.

We know that during, or shortly after, the reign of Edward I (1272–1307), bodies were being interred at Ballyhanna graveyard on the banks of the Erne. A silver penny found with one of the burials is evidence of this. Other coins from the reign of Henry IV, in the early 15th century, indicate the graveyard, if not the church itself, was still in use at that time. A fragment of a bone comb, a small brass bell, pottery and beads—sentimental treasures left in graves by loved ones—discovered with a number of the burials all confirm that the

burial ground was in use between the 13th and 15th centuries. Men, women and children were buried at Ballyhanna, laid to rest in a sub-circular graveyard that measured no more than 40 m in diameter. Most were buried in the Christian style, that is laid supine (on their backs) in shallow graves set around the church, with their bodies set east–west. Over 1,000 burials were recorded within this small area during the excavation. Such density of burial led to the severe disturbance of many earlier burials during the digging of later graves, leaving many of them disturbed or cut through. Fortunately, due to the favourable soil conditions on site, the skeletal remains, though in cases disturbed, were extremely well preserved.

Following the excavation it was clear that the large amount of skeletal material, with its excellent state of preservation, could provide a wealth of information on the lifestyle, diets and causes of illness and death within a medieval Irish population. The science of osteoarchaeology (analysing skeletal remains) enables us to draw this information from the dead. At an early stage some fascinating information on the Ballyhanna burials had already come to light, such as illnesses and diseases displayed on skeletons and the traumatic



ending to one man's life: an iron arrowhead embedded deep in his spine. Accordingly, a cross-border research team was established with the aim of identifying the areas of scientific research that would glean the most information from the Ballyhanna material. The result of that collaboration is the Ballyhanna Research Project, funded by the NRA through Donegal County Council.

The project's academic partners are Queen's University, Belfast (QUB), and Institute of Technology, Sligo (ITS). Over the next three years, sharing facilities, expertise and resources, these two institutions will produce three significant bodies of research on the Ballyhanna material through two Masters of Science (ITS) and a doctorate in osteoarchaeology (QUB). In addition, QUB will carry out specific osteoarchaeological analysis of the juvenile skeletons, with specialist assistance and management of the project provided by an osteoarchaeological research assistant.

The results of the research project will be published upon its completion and it is hoped that this multi-disciplinary approach will add greatly to our understanding of medieval Ballyshannon and, more generally, of medieval Ireland.

The N15 Bundoran–Ballyshannon Bypass opened in April 2006 and as you drive off it at the Ballyshannon exit, heading north-east, a small parcel of land to the west marks the location of Ballyhanna Church. Its conserved foundations are now adjacent to the junction, which was redesigned to ensure the church would not be lost again.

*To the memory of Mr Lucius J Emerson (RIP), Ballyshannon, who graced the excavation with his enthusiasm and energy and became a friend of all involved.*



Photos: studiolab.ie

## In Brief OSTEOARCHAEOLOGY

Osteoarchaeology is loosely defined as the specialised study of human behaviour through skeletal remains. These are not simply 'dry bone' but represent the end product of a complex series of interactions, some genetic, some environmental, that record bio-cultural information about life history. As such, they tend to inform about the life of an individual rather than the manner of their death. Osteological analysis can provide us with information about the biological sex of an individual, their age at death, how tall and well-built they were, what diseases they may have suffered from, their ancestry and the geographical region of their upbringing and, very rarely, the manner or cause of their death.

*Patrick Randolph-Quinney, osteoarchaeologist, ODK Resources.*

