

what we found

in brief:

Some of the findings on the **M7 Heath-Mayfield Motorway Scheme**.



1. Burials

Archaeologist excavating human remains at **Ballydavis**.



2. River crossing investigations

Archaeological divers investigating the area of the **Barrow crossing**.



3. Burnt mound

Excavation of a burnt mound at **Ballyfarsoon**.

4. Cillín

Archaeologists excavating a cillín site at **Kill**.

background

The M7 Heath-Mayfield (Monasterevin Bypass) Motorway runs to the south of **Monasterevin** and extends from west **County Kildare** into east **County Laois**.

The motorway scheme is 17.5 km in length, and **Valerie J. Keeley Ltd.**, and **Archaeological Consultancy Services Ltd.**, carried out the archaeological works on behalf of the **National Roads Authority** and **Kildare and Laois County Councils**.

Initial studies for the Environmental Impact Assessment revealed a number of potential archaeological sites along the general route. This research included the study of early mapping, literary sources, monument registries, museum and other state archives, aerial photography, local folklore and enquiries, along with fieldwalking the length of the scheme. Local townland and other placenames also suggested potential sites along the route, for example, **Kill** (church or wood), **Greatheath** (a glacial plain and heathland, which, like the nearby **Curragh**, abounds in prehistoric ritual monuments) and **Killaglish** (church or wood of the church).

Archaeological works were comprised of two phases. **Valerie J. Keeley Ltd.**, undertook the first phase in



Archaeologist excavating human remains at **Ballydavis**.

advance of the main construction programme during the first half of 2003. The aim was to resolve sites in advance, thereby minimising any potential delays to the construction of the motorway. This targeted areas of suspected interest for archaeological testing; including previously identified sites and approximately 40% of the route, with follow-up excavation of any confirmed remains. The second phase, undertaken by **Archaeological Consultancy Services Ltd.**, involved monitoring of topsoil stripping at the construction stage, with follow-up resolution of any uncovered sites. This mainly consisted of excavation of the sites, though a small number were preserved *in situ* under the new road embankment. This second phase commenced in April 2003 and was largely completed by the end of that year. A total of 42 sites were investigated.

M7 HEATH-MAYFIELD MOTORWAY SCHEME, Counties Kildare and Laois



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For more information please contact:

Archaeology Section
National Roads Authority
St. Martins House
Waterloo Road, Dublin 4

Tel: +353 | 660 2511
Fax: +353 | 668 0009
Email: info@nra.ie
Web: www.nra.ie

archaeological DISCOVERIES

front cover images

LEFT: Archaeologists excavating a cillín site at **Kill**.
RIGHT: View of the River Barrow crossing with archaeological test trenching visible on left.
MIDDLE TOP: Archaeological divers investigating the area of the Barrow crossing.
MIDDLE LEFT BOTTOM: Archaeologist excavating human remains at **Ballydavis**.
MIDDLE RIGHT BOTTOM: Archaeologists at work at **Ballydavis**.



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ballydavis

At **Ballydavis**, a very important Late Bronze Age to Iron Age complex of burial monuments and ceremonial structures was uncovered.

The site consisted of three circular ditches or barrows within a large oval enclosure. Five adult and two infant inhumations, along with two cremations, were discovered here. The variety of important artefacts from the site and the graves indicated that the original inhabitants probably belonged to a wealthy ruling class.

The artefacts recovered included a copper-alloy fibula and spacer bead, a glass bracelet fragment and bead, a spindle whorl, a barbed and tanged arrowhead, pottery sherds and plaited hair. Structures were evident in the interior of the ring-ditches and also outside the oval enclosure. The latter included a house site with a possible annex. The Ballydavis excavations represent a continuation of the important archaeological works undertaken in the course of the construction of the Portlaoise Bypass in 1995.



Archaeologist excavating human remains at **Ballydavis**.



Aerial view of excavations at **Ballydavis**. (Photo Valerie J. Keeley Ltd.)



Archaeologists at work at **Ballydavis**.

morett

Evidence of **Morett** being an important area of habitation and activity at various stages of the prehistoric and historic past is indicated by the discovery of a complex of features over a wide area and of varying dates.

The features range from three ring-ditches of probable prehistoric ritual or ceremonial origin, to six medieval corn-drying kilns. Structures at Morett were suggested by rectangular, semi-circular and linear arrangements of post-holes. Four smelting furnaces and three charcoal production pits have been attributed to iron working in the area, possibly during the first millennium AD or later. Investigation of a medieval roadway revealed a cobbled surface, complete with cart ruts. This roadway had previously been pointed out "by old natives" to John O'Donovan of the Ordnance Survey in 1838 as

cappakeel

Excavations at **Cappakeel** revealed a complex of features that were dispersed over a wide area, mostly medieval in date and related to iron working. Sites included bowl furnaces, charcoal production pits, a linear medieval ditch and a prehistoric ring-ditch. The medieval ditch yielded a ring-headed pin and a rotary grinding stone.



Aerial view of archaeological test trenching at **Morett**.

running from **Coolbanagher Castle** to **Morett Castle**, "both which they say belonged to the family of O'Kelly". Nine inhumations were uncovered at Morett, three of which were interred in one stone-edged pit. The majority are likely to represent Christian remains, as they were orientated east-west. Radiocarbon dates returned for four of the bodies have given dates of AD 442, AD 1182, AD 1247 and AD 1259. The burial dated to AD 1247 was of an adult female and was adjacent to a horse burial. Radiocarbon dating of the horse, however, indicated that it is modern and unassociated with the female remains.

river barrow

Test excavations on the banks of the **River Barrow**, which forms the boundary between counties **Kildare** and **Laois**, and an underwater dive survey of the river revealed no archaeological evidence. A previous find of an Early Bronze Age halberd (a bronze sword-like object) from the western bank of the river in the area of the roadtake is now housed in the People's Museum in **Portarlinton**. A group of important bronze discs of Iron Age date were found in the river in the vicinity of **Monasterevin** in the 19th-century.



Aerial view of the **River Barrow** crossing with archaeological test trenching visible on left.

ballyfarsoon



Excavation of a burnt mound at **Ballyfarsoon**.

A low-lying, marshy spot in **Ballyfarsoon** townland proved to be the location of a Bronze Age *fulacht fiadh* or cooking site (although various industrial activities may have taken place at such sites). The features recorded consisted of a sunken trough, sump-holes and fire-shattered stone in a charcoal-rich soil. Additional *fulachta fiadh* were uncovered in **Morett** and **Ballyshaneduff** or **The Derries**.

kill

The townland name **Kill**, located towards the eastern end of the scheme, suggested that an ecclesiastical site might have been located in the area.

Intensive geophysical survey over a wide area failed to show evidence of such a site. However, test excavations at one location in the townland revealed a cillín (i.e. a burial ground mainly used for the interment of unbaptised children). This consisted of a small, rounded hollow in the gravel soil, which contained the remains of approximately 70 infants and dated to the 19th and early 20th-centuries. The practice at the time was not to bury unbaptised infants in consecrated church grounds.

ongoing work

Specialist work on the excavation archives is ongoing, including artefact and environmental analysis, radiocarbon dating and the study of human and animal bones, along with processing of mapping, photography and the written documentation of the sites. This post-excavation phase will lead to the full publication of the excavation results and dissemination of the information to a wider audience.



Archaeologists excavating a cillín site at **Kill**.



Archaeologist carrying out site surveying at **Kill**.