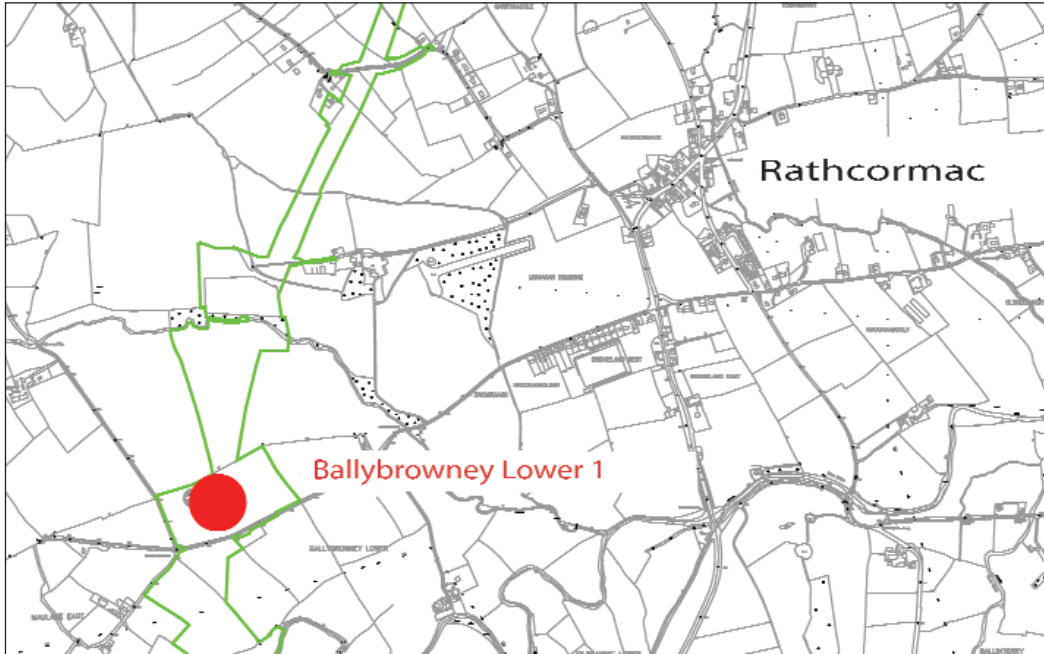


4. Bronze Age Ballybrowney, County Cork

Eamonn Cotter



Illus. 1—Location map of the excavated features at Ballybrowney Lower (Archaeological Consultancy Services Ltd, based on the Ordnance Survey Ireland map)

The Bronze Age site at Ballybrowney Lower¹ is one of the more notable archaeological discoveries made in County Cork in recent years. It represents a tantalising, if incomplete, insight into the lives of a small Bronze Age agricultural community. Evidence from archaeological excavation indicates that this village community practised cereal cultivation and metalwork. In addition, the excavation results also offer an opportunity to investigate the spiritual aspects of their lives as evidenced by a single burial (potentially part of a larger cemetery) and a possible ceremonial building.

The site was first discovered during archaeological testing along the route of the N8 Rathcormac–Fermoy Bypass, which revealed a concentration of features such as pits, hearths and linear ditches. The site was excavated by Archaeological Consultancy Services Ltd on behalf of Cork County Council.

The site was located on the gentle eastern slope of a low hill, overlooking the Bride River valley to the south and east (Illus. 1). It is in an area of good agricultural land with easy access to water from the Bride River, a half kilometre to the south, and its tributary, the Cottage River, a similar distance to the north. The area was obviously a ‘desirable location’ in different time periods, as witnessed by the substantial ringfort surviving immediately to the west of the Bronze Age site and built probably some two thousand years later.

¹ NGR 179146, 090645. Height c. 70 m OD. Excavation Licence No. 03E1058.



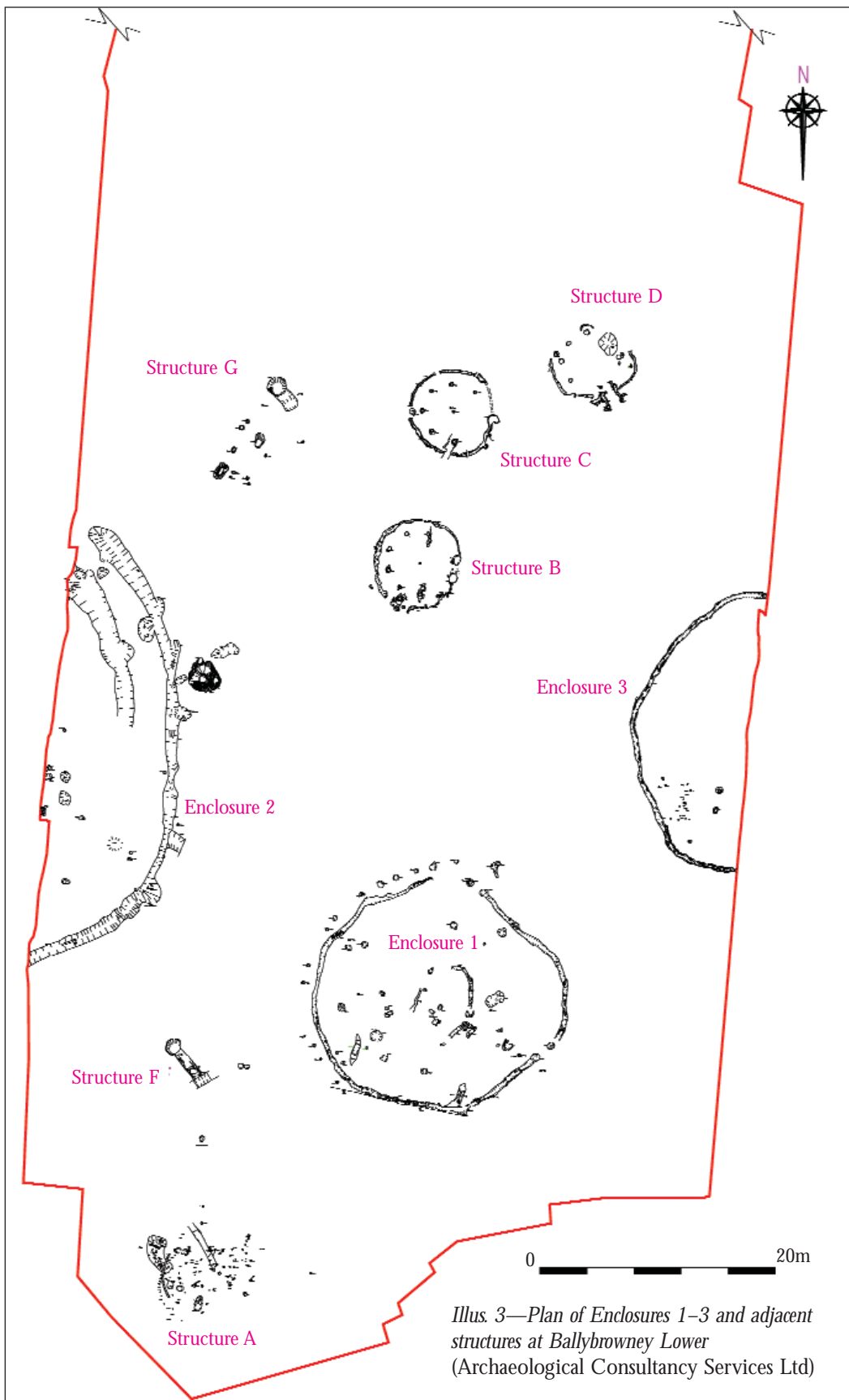
Illus. 2—Aerial view of the excavated enclosures and houses at Ballybrowney Lower (Archaeological Consultancy Services Ltd)

While the concentration of features exposed by the test trenching had clearly indicated the presence of an archaeological site in the area, the full extent of the archaeology only became clear when full topsoil stripping of the field got underway, and for a period of a week or so new discoveries were being made every day.

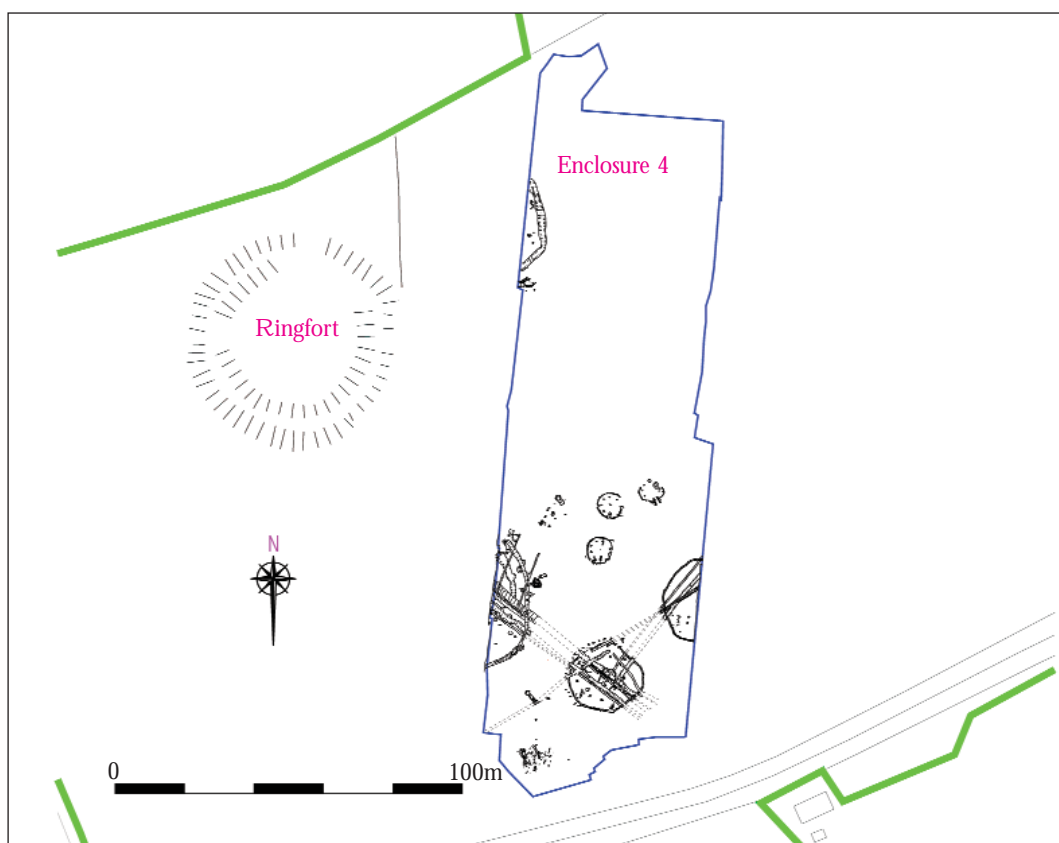
Eventually four enclosures were found, along with three circular houses (Illus. 2). The houses and three of the enclosures were dated by finds of Bronze Age pottery, but the fourth enclosure (Enclosure 4, below) may have dated to the early medieval period (see Appendix 1). In addition, an assortment of later features were found, including a medieval corn-drying kiln, which may have been contemporary with the nearby ringfort, and the remains of several levelled field boundary ditches which had survived until about 30 years ago. Unfortunately, when these boundaries were built, probably in the 18th century, they had cut through the three Bronze Age enclosures, causing some damage.

The enclosures

Only one of the four enclosures, Enclosure 1, lay completely within the roadtake (Illus. 3). It was an irregular, almost hexagonal shape, and measured 19 m by 21.5 m, with entrances



Illus. 3—Plan of Enclosures 1–3 and adjacent structures at Ballybrownney Lower (Archaeological Consultancy Services Ltd)



Illus. 4—General plan of excavated area at Ballybrowney Lower, including Enclosure 4 (Archaeological Consultancy Services Ltd)

about 1 m wide at the north-east and south-east. The enclosure was defined by a narrow trench measuring on average 0.35 m wide and 0.3 m in depth. The inner edges of the trench had been lined with flat stones set on edge, some of which still survived *in situ*, suggesting that the trench held a palisade of upright planks about 0.1 m thick. There was one structure within the enclosure, an oval-shaped house measuring 6 m by 4 m, with an entrance facing south. The house foundation was a shallow slot trench, only part of which survived. Two substantial posts at the centre of the structure supported the roof.

Enclosure 2 was located to the north-west of Enclosure 1 and less than half of it lay within the roadtake. The entire enclosure would have measured at least 37 m in diameter. The enclosing element in this instance was a ditch, ranging from 0.3 m to 1 m in depth. On the northern side the ditch ended approximately 2 m from the edge of the excavation, at what was probably the entrance. The full width of the entrance is unknown as the other side lay beyond the limit of the excavation. Evidence for two possible structures was noted within this enclosure, in the form of two discrete areas of fine metallurgy, along with post-holes and a hearth.

Enclosure 3 was located a short distance to the north-east of Enclosure 1 and was almost identical to it, but only approximately half of it lay within the roadtake. Enclosure 3 was also enclosed by a palisade of upright planks. A number of small post-holes and stake-holes were excavated within the interior but these did not form any coherent pattern that might represent a house. Analysis of a piece of slag from Enclosure 3 has established that it is a



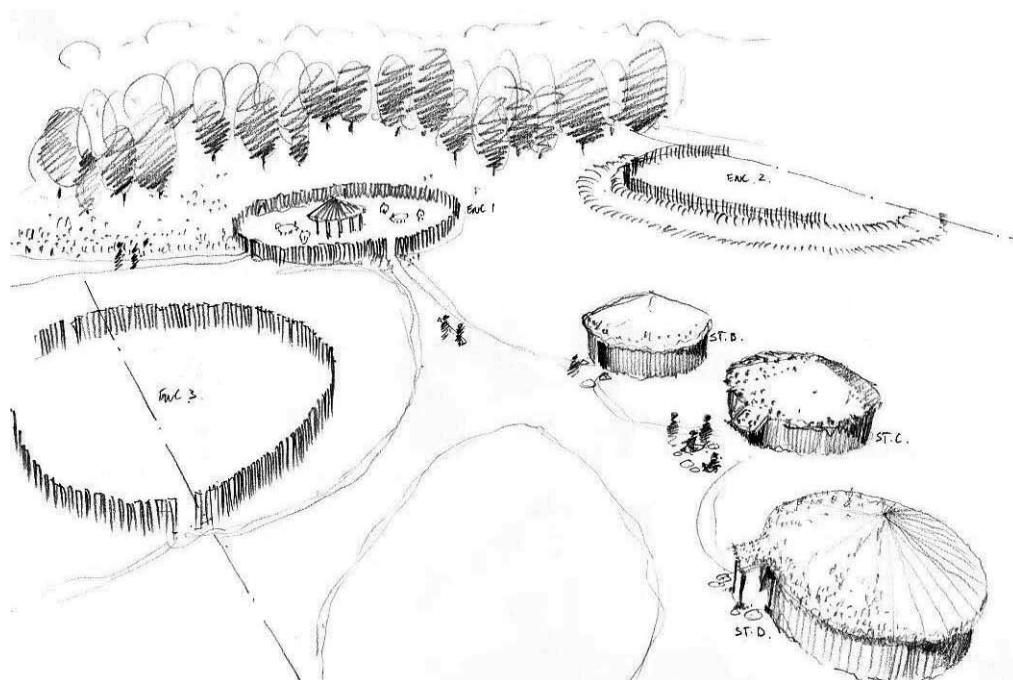
Illus. 5—Excavated ditch of Enclosure 4 at Ballybrowney Lower (Archaeological Consultancy Services Ltd)

product of copper smelting. The radiocarbon date for the enclosure, 1700–1520 BC (see Appendix 1), is now one of only three dates which have been obtained for Bronze Age copper smelting in Ireland and Britain (N Fairburn, pers. comm.).

Enclosure 4 was a rectangular enclosure located approximately 90 m north of Enclosure 2 (Illus. 4 and 5). Only a corner of the enclosure lay within the roadtake, i.e. a c. 7 m long section of the south side and a 15 m long section of the east side. The ditch measured on average 1.7 m wide and 0.6 m deep. A cremation burial placed in a simple pit measuring 0.36 m in diameter and 0.25 m deep was located within the enclosure. The burial was radiocarbon dated to the Late Bronze Age, but the enclosure ditch itself was dated to the late Iron Age/early medieval period. Several pieces of metal slag waste were found in the ditch of the enclosure, indicating metalworking in the area.

The houses

In addition to the enclosures a cluster of three unenclosed Bronze Age houses was found (Structures B-D in Illus. 3). Two were almost identical: they were circular, 6.5 m in diameter and consisted of a shallow slot trench with a circle of internal post-holes. These show that the roof was supported by a ring of posts, with a light wall outside, set in the slot trench. Each of the entrances was represented by two substantial post-holes and faced eastwards. The third house was oval and had its entrance facing south-eastwards, with a ‘porch’ structure extending from it.



Illus. 6—Artist's reconstruction of the Bronze Age settlement at Ballybrowney Lower by Donal Anderson (Archaeological Consultancy Services Ltd)

The total internal area of the houses was slightly over 33 sq m. This would be the equivalent of a rectangular house approximately 9 m by 3.6 m, or about the size of an average 19th-century thatched cottage. No evidence for a hearth was found within or around any of the houses, but since they probably would have had simple open fires, such remains could easily have been destroyed by ploughing.

At the southern end of the site an arc of stakeholes measuring c. 3 m long seems to represent a windbreak erected to shelter activity immediately to the north-east, where two distinct groups of stake-holes may represent supports for a cooking spit. No hearth was found but a pit in the area was filled with heat-shattered stone that could have resulted from the placing of hot stones in water to boil it.

Conclusion

The remains at Ballybrowney represent what could be described as a small Bronze Age village (Illus. 6). The three unenclosed structures are likely to have been domestic houses. Given their size, each could easily have accommodated a family unit.

The single house within Enclosure 1 was of a slightly different construction type to the others, and the very fact that it was within an enclosure suggests a different function. It may well have been a ceremonial or communal building. Although only a very small portion of Enclosure 2 was within the limits of the excavated area, it did have a dense concentration of settlement evidence in the form of post-holes, a hearth and metal surfaces. However, not enough was exposed to allow for any meaningful interpretation as to the nature of the structures in that area, or their full extent.

Few features were found in Enclosure 3, with no evidence of settlement there, and it may simply have been an animal enclosure.

The final enclosure, Enclosure 4, was very different from the others in that it was almost rectangular in plan, and had a deep, wide ditch. Again, only a tiny portion of its interior lay within the excavated area, so very little evidence was found on which to base an interpretation of its function. The dating evidence suggests that the enclosure is broadly contemporary with the nearby ringfort and it seems to be entirely coincidental that it encloses a Late Bronze Age burial, which was probably associated with some of the excavated features to the south.

It is clear that the full extent of this settlement has not been excavated, as three of the enclosures continue outside the limit of the roadtake, and it is entirely possible that more structures remain undiscovered. We can reasonably suggest that we are dealing with a community of at least three families, perhaps all belonging to the same kin group, with a ceremonial centre and possibly a cemetery. This would no doubt have been a farming community, as the discovery of several broken quern-stones for grinding corn indicates (see also Hegarty, this volume). The surrounding rich agricultural land would have produced sufficient food in the form of grain and meat, and with water within easy reach both to the north and south of the site, the immediate hinterland would have provided sufficient resources to maintain this small community.

