

12. The Ballyhanna Research Project: an introduction

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Illus. 1—Location of Ballyhanna church and cemetery, Co. Donegal (based on the Ordnance Survey Ireland map).

The cemetery

People were being buried at Ballyhanna, in Ballyshannon, Co. Donegal, from at least the 12th century (Illus. 1). They were laid to rest to the east and south of a small, mortared stone church, which, at the time, stood on the banks of the Erne River, close to the strategic fording-point of *Atha Seanaigh*, a short distance downstream from the low, tumbling rapids known as Cathleen's Fall. For several hundred years, as the artefacts discovered tell us, people continued to bury their dead at Ballyhanna, with men, women and children being interred in the small graveyard. We do not know when the weary tradition of carrying the dead along the riverbank to that place ended. It is clear, however, that the church and graveyard did ultimately fall into ruin and disuse, and that over the centuries that followed all local memory of the site faded. We cannot be certain whether the church or the burial-ground was still in use by the 17th century, when it is recorded in a land audit—the Enniskillen Inquisition. The lack of artefacts from this time suggests that it was not. In any case, Ballyhanna's fate of becoming forgotten was sealed by the loss of so many souls in Ballyshannon during the Famine through death and emigration, as the last memories of a



Illus. 2—Ballyhanna church during excavation, February 2004 (Michael MacDonagh).

church at Ballyhanna were spirited away across oceans and into mass graves—that is, until it was rediscovered in June 2003.

Discovery

June 2003: in a small meadow in front of a B&B at Ballyhanna on the outskirts of Ballyshannon, Co. Donegal, human remains are first unearthed. The bones are in excellent condition, entombed for over 800 years high above the Erne River. The river is much different now than when funerals were held at Ballyhanna, transformed as part of a hydroelectric development in the 1940s into a man-made sluice that entailed the removal of the falls and the ford. By the winter of 2003, over 1,000 burials have been excavated and the ruined foundations of a small church have been revealed (Illus. 2). Shroud-pins are discovered, used to wrap infants carefully for their untimely burial, along with cherished personal possessions, coins to pay the Ferryman and small pieces of white quartz placed in clenched hands by loved ones, people ravaged by illness, disease and simple hard lives. The human stories are plain to see, tragic and loving, harsh and cruel, emotional and poignant.

Ballyhanna Research Project

The National Roads Authority (NRA) established the Ballyhanna Research Project in June 2006 as a cross-border partnership between the Institute of Technology, Sligo (ITS), and Queen's University, Belfast (QUB) (MacDonagh 2006; Murphy & Donnelly 2006;

McGowan 2006; Bird 2006). The project was born out of a clear recognition of the need to know as much as possible about the site and to ensure that the maximum information could be retrieved. The project involves the funding of one doctorate (PhD) in osteoarchaeology awarded through QUB, two Masters of Science (MSc) degrees awarded through ITS, and ancillary research being undertaken by both institutions. Sharing research skills, the project aims to throw more light on the history of Ballyhanna and its people and their human stories. The collection of human burials from Ballyhanna is one of the largest ever excavated in Ireland, and it is hoped that the project will add significantly to our understanding of the lives and deaths of a medieval community.

A detailed osteoarchaeological examination of the burials is being undertaken as part of the project. This analysis is identifying the age and sex of the people buried in the graveyard, as well as any trauma evident on their bones, signs of illness, disease and injury, and in some cases the cause of death. There are three research elements to this analysis. The first focus is on the adult burials (PhD—Ms Catriona McKenzie, QUB) (McKenzie, this volume), the second on the juvenile and infant remains (Dr Eileen Murphy, QUB), and the third on the large quantity of disarticulated remains (Róisín McCarthy, ITS) found during the excavation—the repeated digging of graves in the small graveyard over the centuries resulted in a lot of disturbance of earlier burials (McCarthy, this volume).

A key tenet of the project is the integration of other science research fields into the analysis, providing yet further pages to the human story. Skeletons of infants and children do not show visible signs of either being male or female. This can be determined through analysis of DNA, and one of the project's elements is aimed at attempting to extract ancient DNA (aDNA) fragments from the bones of some of the young buried at Ballyhanna (MSc—Sheila Tierney, ITS). This may assist in an understanding of infant mortality rates as well as illustrating the challenging scientific endeavour of extracting and validating aDNA from 1,000-year-old bones (Tierney, this volume).

What was the environment like in which the Ballyhanna dead lived? What did they eat? Trace elemental analysis of a number of burials (MSc—Tasneem Bashir, ITS) may tell us more about the lifestyle of those buried at Ballyhanna, as well as providing one of the first attempts at such an analysis from an Irish excavation (Bashir, this volume). To establish the time-frame of the graveyard, how long it was in use and when burials ceased, an expansive programme of radiocarbon dating of burials from different levels of the site is being undertaken. This is essential to provide a firm chronological framework for the research results and to incorporate the findings into their full historical context.

Excavation and conservation

The site at Ballyhanna was discovered during test excavations that were carried out along the entire 10-km length of the N15 Bundoran–Ballyshannon Bypass in 2003, in advance of its construction. These were carried out by Irish Archaeological Consultancy Ltd (IAC Ltd) on behalf of Donegal County Council and the NRA. In addition to Ballyhanna, a number of other sites were identified, including an Iron Age linear earthwork, a prehistoric settlement and a 17th-century farmstead. The discovery of human remains (Illus. 3) at Ballyhanna led to full excavation of the site over the next seven months, led by Brian Ó Donnchadha of IAC Ltd, assisted by an excavation crew of up to 30 people (Ó



Illus. 3—Some of the 1,275 skeletons from the medieval cemetery excavated at Ballyhanna (Irish Archaeological Consultancy Ltd).



Illus. 4—Site of Ballyhanna church and cemetery, which was officially opened on 15 July 2007 as part of the 'Flight of the Earls' commemorations in Donegal (Gráinne Leamy).

Donnchadha 2007).¹ They are all acknowledged here gratefully. Following the discovery, the junction design at the location was altered and the church wall foundation was conserved. Funded by the NRA through the offices and with the assistance of Donegal County Council, the conserved church foundation, a landscaped garden around it and information panels were provided, and the Ballyhanna Garden (Illus. 4) was officially opened in July 2007 as part of the Flight of the Earls commemorations, offering a small sanctuary for the people of Ballyshannon and its visitors to enjoy and to re-remember their dead who lay forgotten for so long (Leamy 2007).

Modern-day archaeology is a voyage of discovery driven by that innate wish to know who we are and where we come from, tracing ancestral footprints in the soils upon which they lived. It is a science, and excavation generates bookshelves full of technical reports, of matrices and stratigraphies, lists and tables, plans and sections. Such documentation is essential in ensuring that archaeology is a scientific journey rather than a treasure hunt. Sadly, however, the human stories are at times not fully described—indeed, at times forgotten altogether—in the requirement for the technical story. More than any other archaeological feature, burials remind us that the science of archaeology is about people. They detail the human stories of those interred and those who buried them. They are poignant reminders of our fragility, often of sickness and violence, deathly traits that afflict us to this day and proof indeed that the more we change, the more we stay the same.

In the following papers, four of the Ballyhanna Research Project researchers offer an overview of their research and their preliminary results. The project runs until 2009, after which the findings will be published by the NRA.

Note

1. NGR 188165, 361198; height 15 m OD; excavation licence no. 03E1384.