The Ballyhanna Research Project at Queen's University, Belfast

Eileen Murphy, lecturer in palaeoecology, and Colm Donnelly, manager for the Centre for Archaeological Fieldwork, School of Geography, Archaeology and Palaeoecology, decribes QUB's involvement in the project.

The Queen's University, Belfast (QUB), component of the Ballyhanna Research Project involves the osteological and palaeopathological analysis of the human skeletal remains recovered during the excavation. The results of this skeletal analysis will provide a thorough understanding of the health of the Ballyhanna adults. A biocultural approach will be adopted, meaning the skeletal data will be studied in combination with the available archaeological and documentary evidence for the period. This multi-disciplinary approach will allow a thorough reconstruction of the health and lifestyles of the Ballyhanna people. Furthermore, the Ballyhanna discoveries will be compared to osteological information obtained from other Irish and British medieval populations to place our understanding of their lives and deaths within a broader medieval context.

This important programme will be carried out under the supervision of Dr Eileen Murphy and Dr Colm Donnelly. Ms Catriona McKenzie MSc has been appointed to undertake doctoral research on the adult remains, and she will determine each person's age-at-death, sex and stature, and any evidence for past diseases or injuries. Dr Murphy will study the children's skeletons and the information retrieved will undoubtedly provide new insights into the lives and deaths of Irish children in the past. Finally, Ms Róisín McCarthy MA has been appointed to assist with the management of the project and to help with some aspects of the osteological analysis.

One extremely interesting skeleton has already come to light. Skeleton 331, a 25–35-year-old adult male, displayed the genetic condition diaphyseal aclasia, or hereditary multiple exostoses. Although this condition is quite common today, there are only around six cases known from the archaeological record worldwide and the Ballyhanna example would appear to be the first archaeological case to have been discovered in Ireland. The condition probably first appeared when the individual was a child and would have got progressively more debilitating as he got older. Numerous bony projections were present at the ends of his long bones, particularly those of his lower legs, which had become fused together. He would have been knock-kneed and would have had limited use of his left arm and left ankle. In addition, he would have suffered pain and tenderness at the sites of the abnormal bone growths. As a physically disabled individual he would probably have been at quite a major disadvantage compared to other members of his contemporary society, but we might hope that he was cared for by his family and friends and that he was a valued member of the community in which he lived.