

what we found

in brief:

Some of the findings from the scheme.

1. Well

Well uncovered at **Bushfield** or **Maghernaskeagh**.

2. Glass bead

Glass bead uncovered during excavations at **Parknahown**. (Photo ACS Ltd)

3. Glass bead

Glass bead on bronze wire found at **Parknahown**. (Photo ACS Ltd)

4. Bone necklace

Bone necklace found with a female burial at **Killeany**. (Photo ACS Ltd)



background



Aerial view of Bronze Age enclosure and settlement uncovered at **Tintore**. (Photo ACS Ltd)

During 2006 archaeological work has been ongoing on this large motorway scheme which, when constructed, will form part of the Trans-European Network and fulfil commitments given as part of the National Development Plan. The 41 km of motorway with 11 km of side roads, starts at **Portlaoise**, and extends as far as **Borris-in-Ossory** in the west and **Cullahill** in the south.

The route, extensively tested by **Archaeological Consultancy Services Ltd (ACS Ltd)** has revealed more than 90 previously unknown archaeological sites.

Testing techniques consisted mainly of 'central strip testing', - cutting a 2 m wide strip down the centre of the motorway by machine, with off sets every 15 m and 20 m and extending across the entire width of the route. Detailed geophysical testing, a form of ground probing radar, was also carried out by **Earthsound Archaeological Geophysics Ltd** along various sections of the scheme. Metal detection and numerous aerial surveys completed the testing strategy. To date 95 archaeological sites have been discovered, which range from the Neolithic Period (circa 4000 BC) up to and including a 17th century house, complete with cobbled yard, well and stables. However, it should be emphasised that these archaeological sites should not be viewed individually, but rather as forming a previously hidden archaeological landscape, created by ancient people who lived and died within County **Laois**, during the past millennia.

All of the archaeological work discussed was carried out by **ACS Ltd** on behalf of the **National Roads Authority** and **Laois County Council**.

**M7 PORTLAOISE TO CASTLETOWN/
M8 PORTLAOISE TO CULLAHILL MOTORWAY SCHEME,**
County Laois



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archaeological DISCOVERIES

front cover images

LEFT: Decorated cross mount found during excavations at **Parknahown**. (Photo ACS Ltd)
RIGHT: Archaeologist wrapping furnace at **Derrinsallagh** prior to lifting. (Photo ACS Ltd)
MIDDLE: Wooden walkway uncovered near the Bronze Age settlement site at **Coolfin**.



neolithic

settlement/ritual - derryvorrigan

A small sub-circular 7 m diameter structure with a central pit was discovered at **Derryvorrigan**. The central pit revealed a small round perforated stone disc, which had been roughly shaped and smoothed. It is possible that this small structure has some ritual significance. A small amount of Early Neolithic Pottery was also recovered from the site.

Out of the numerous archaeological sites revealed, only a few have proved to date to the Neolithic period. However, it is important to note that where Neolithic sites and landscapes have been discovered they are not in isolation, but lie in close proximity to Bronze Age settlements and/or early medieval remains. Indeed, there does appear to have been a Neolithic

phase on many of our more major Bronze Age and early medieval sites, perhaps indicating the significance of a place throughout various timeframes.



Stone disc found during excavations at **Derryvorrigan**.

bronze age

ritual/settlement/industrial - cuffsborough - coolfin - tintore

More than 60% of the archaeological sites discovered on the scheme appear to be Bronze Age in date. At **Cuffsborough** a number of these sites appear to form part of an archaeological complex from that period. This complex consists of a large ritual site, 17 m in diameter with 23 post-holes, including a

central post-hole. These may have held large upright wooden posts which could have formed a sacred space for worshippers or a priest like figure. Close by is another circular structure 8.6 m by 7.4 m in diameter. A further cluster of circular structures to the west may indicate settlement close by.

bronze age

ritual/settlement/industrial - cuffsborough - coolfin - tintore



Aerial view of the archaeological complex uncovered at **Cuffsborough**. (Photo ACS Ltd)



Aerial view of the Bronze Age house uncovered at **Coolfin**. (Photo ACS Ltd)

The evidence for settlement is further demonstrated by the remains of a *fulacht fiadh*, a low mound of heat cracked stone with burnt clay and charcoal revealed in the adjoining field. A well was also found close to the *fulacht fiadh*.

To the east of the main ritual site, and across the existing country road, a third site of Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age date was found, providing further evidence for activity in this area. Cuffsborough is one of the main Bronze Age complexes on the scheme which provides a tantalising glimpse of an archaeological landscape which has lain hidden for more than 4,000 years.

A small settlement site at **Coolfin** provided excellent evidence for a Bronze Age house within a wider Bronze Age landscape. It was situated close to a well and with an oak planked walkway. This consisted of two oak planks, one on top of the other; supported at either end by a series of stakes - clearly a firm surface to stand on when collecting water from the well. It also ensured that the water-gathers kept their feet dry! *Fulachta fiadh* discovered in the immediate area complete the Bronze Age landscape.

A very fine Bronze Age structure within a large enclosure was uncovered at **Tintore**, while a *fulacht fiadh* and a Bronze Age cremation were also discovered in the adjoining fields.

iron age

industrial - derrinsallagh - kilcotton

Within the archaeological record in Ireland the Iron Age period is one which is seriously under represented by archaeological sites, landscapes and artefacts. However on this scheme several areas have revealed what appears to be firm evidence for Iron Age activity. One of these is in **Kilcotton** where testing revealed several enigmatic features - square pits, with fine dark brown to black soil.

More than 40 of these pits were fully excavated over an area about 200 m long. No archaeological artefacts were recovered to indicate any possible age, but initial radiocarbon dates suggest that these features date to the Iron Age.

A large industrial archaeological site was found during testing within the townland of **Derrinsallagh**. On a flat plateau in an area of rising ground, 42 furnaces were discovered within a 7,000 m² area. Many of these

were conjoined furnaces, their shape similar to a figure of eight. Under a metallurgical specialist's guidance a complete furnace was removed for detailed analysis. While there is no direct evidence for the actual items which were being manufactured, a portion of a small *tuyere*, a type of small bellows which would have been used to control the heat within the furnaces, was found. Slag, a by-product of smelting, was also recovered. Further archaeological excavation on this site has revealed a circular structure 5.5 m in diameter. Could this structure have provided temporary or permanent shelter for the workers on this site? A pit just outside the structure revealed large sherds of coarse pottery, which has yet to be identified, and a fine hammer stone was found nearby. Radiocarbon dating has placed this site firmly in the Iron Age at 10 BC to AD 250.



Circular structure uncovered at the Iron Age site of **Derrinsallagh**.



Furnaces uncovered during excavations at the Iron Age site of **Derrinsallagh**.



Archaeologists preparing the furnace for lifting at **Derrinsallagh**. (Photo ACS Ltd)

early medieval

settlement/cemeteries

Many enclosures discovered on the scheme appear to date from this period. The sixth century enclosure at **Parknahown** with its large cemetery has now been fully excavated revealing a multi-period site - one of the scheme's most significant archaeological discoveries. Detailed geophysical survey should reveal the entire enclosure and cemetery, as a large portion of the site lies outside the actual motorway route. The 600 burials there provide us with a fine array of highly decorated glass beads, many of which were placed with infants.

Another fine enclosure and cemetery was discovered at **Killeany**. Originally thought to be an Iron Age site, the large enclosure at Killeany estimated to be up to 130 m in diameter, has provided evidence for agricultural practices in the form of a series of fine

corn-drying kilns and a possible structure. A small number of the 60 burials excavated had artefacts buried with them. A young woman had a very simple but beautiful bone necklace placed with her in the grave. This necklace has been dated to the fifth/sixth century by the National Museum of Ireland.



Close up of skeleton and necklace as found during the excavations at **Killeany**.

late medieval

settlement

Additional testing at **Bushfield** or **Maghernaskeagh** has revealed the remains of a 17th century stone house, the foundations of which are in excellent condition. It is also possible to make out stables, cobbled yards and a fine well, with stone surrounds. Local information has placed this well on a pilgrimage route, and it is possible that the well in question may have earlier origins.