

N8 Glanmire – Watergrasshill Road Scheme

Archaeological Excavation at

Mitchellsfort, Co Cork

Site Number AR 18

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Licence Number 01E0628

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Abstract

The site was identified during archaeological monitoring of topsoil stripping of the N8 Glanmire – Watergrasshill Road Scheme. AR 18 was situated in low-lying ground in close proximity to a watercourse. A spread of black peat with angular stones throughout was revealed at this location. The low-lying situation of the site and the nature of the spread suggested a possible fulacht fiadh had been revealed. Upon excavation this hypothesis changed significantly and the feature was identified as a natural hollow, probably backfilled in the recent past to reclaim this wet marshy area for agricultural purposes. The site was excavated over three days in late July, 2001.

1 Introduction

- 1.1 AR 18 was revealed during archaeological monitoring of topsoil stripping on the N8 Glanmire - Watergrasshill Road Scheme, under licence 01E0204. Following identification of the archaeological potential of the site it was given a specific number, AR 18, in the sequential series used to identify sites along the road corridor (AR was the prefix used on all archaeological sites). The N8 Glanmire-Watergrasshill road scheme involves the construction of almost 10km of dual carriage-way from Riverstown at the south as far as Skahanagh North at the north of Watergrasshill. The main contractors for this project were Bowen Mowlem and the earthmoving contractors were Howleys Civil Engineering Ltd. The N8 project is part of the National Development Plan. It was fully funded by the National Roads Authority through Cork County Council.
- 1.2 The site was located in Mitchellsfort townland at NGR W 176030.290 / 83060.015, chainage 6520 on the road corridor, within the area of Fill 5 (Figs. 1 and 2).
- 1.3 AR 18 was excavated under licence 01E0628 during July 2001; weather conditions were poor at the time. The excavation was undertaken by Avril Purcell of Sheila Lane & Associates on behalf of Cork County Council and the National Roads Authority, Richmond, Glanmire, Co Cork.
- 1.4 The excavation was undertaken on the premise that archaeological deposits revealed would be preserved by record as the site would be destroyed to facilitate road construction, following excavation. Excavation was undertaken with a view towards gaining a full record of the extent, chronology, nature, duration and complexity of activity on the site.

2 Geographic Setting

- 2.1 The road corridor traverses a low east-west ridge, on top of which the village of Watergrasshill is situated. It is one of the characteristic east-west oriented Devonian ridges which dominate the landscape of County Cork (Freeman, 1972, 329). The ridge is defined to the north by the River Bride and to the south by the River Lee.
- 2.2 AR 18 was situated at an altitude of 143m OD in a gently undulating landscape. Land quality and drainage in the area were poor and peat development was apparent in the immediate vicinity. A stream flowed from east to west across the road corridor 25m south of the site.
- 2.2 Visibility from the site was poor. To the north the upward rise of ground significantly reduced visibility. To the south visibility was restricted to approximately 400m by a gradual rise in slope. To the east and west visibility was similarly limited by a gradual rise. To the north visibility extended for approximately 300m.

3 Archaeological and Historical Background

3.1 There are a number of known archaeological sites within approximately 1km of AR 18 (Fig. 1b). In Bishop's Island townland 675m to the northwest there is a possible fulacht fiadh (SMR CO053-28---). In the same townland 850m to the east a circular enclosure (SMR CO053-44---) is located. Those archaeological sites known within Mitchellsfort townland include a circular enclosure (SMR CO053-57---) 700m south of the site, a tree ring (SMR CO053-58---) 300m southwest of the site and a ringfort (SMR CO053-59---) 900m southeast of the site.

3.2 A number of sites were excavated in Mitchellsfort townland in advance of road construction. Two fulachta fiadh (SMR CO053-09201- and SMR CO053-09202-) and a possible fulacht fiadh (SMR CO053-9203-) located 200m northeast of AR 18 were first identified during field walking in 1995. The location of these sites within the road corridor necessitated their excavation which was undertaken by Eamonn Cotter on behalf of Sheila Lane & Associates for Cork County Council under licence number 99E0673.

3.3 Several sites of archaeological interest were revealed within 250m of AR 18 during archaeological monitoring of topsoil stripping. AR 17, also excavated by the author, (under licence 01E0627) was located 50m to the south east adjacent to the natural watercourse, previously mentioned. This site was identified as a spread of charcoal-rich peat with burnt stone throughout presenting as a possible fulacht fiadh site. Excavation of the site revealed no associated features and the charcoal-rich peat (which presented as possible fulacht fiadh material) did not appear to be *in situ*.

AR 19, located 200m northeast, was also excavated by the author (under licence 01E0629). The site proved to be of little archaeological significance, the features revealed appeared to be the result of land drainage activities.

AR 30, located 60m to the south, proved to be the possible remains of a ploughed out fulacht fiadh. The site was excavated by the author (under licence 01E0853). Similarly AR 31, excavated by Rory Sherlock (under licence 01E0970), also proved to be the ploughed out remains of a possible fulacht fiadh. AR 31 was situated 65m west northwest of AR 18.

An isolated cremation burial, AR32, located 70m west-northwest of AR 18, was excavated by the author (licence number 01E0996).

4 The Excavation

- 4.1 An homogeneous dark brown stoney spread of peat (F 2) was visible following topsoil stripping (Fig. 3 and Plate 1). An area measuring approximately 15m east west by 10m north south was excavated by hand however no additional features or finds of archaeological significance were revealed.
- 4.2 Feature 2, the dark brown stoney peat spread, measured 4.65m north south by 4.04m east west. Given the absence of additional features on the site a single section was excavated across F 2 (Figs. 3, 4 and Plate 2). The section was 0.6m wide at the southeastern side and was expanded to 1m wide at the northwestern side. The section was 0.5m deep. Feature 2 was homogeneous throughout with frequent inclusions of medium and large angular stones, mostly sandstone. The deposit was 0.48m deep at maximum and was sitting directly on the grey clay subsoil. No finds of antiquity were recovered. Several sherds of modern ceramic (Willow Pattern delf) were found in F2, these were not retained.

5 Interpretation

- 5.1 Although the site initially presented as one of archaeological significance further investigation indicated it was of minimal archaeological importance. The spread of dark stoney peat, which initially attracted archaeological attention, was found to have been back-filled into a natural hollow or depression. This appears to have been undertaken in the twentieth century to improve land quality as the depression was low-lying and was possibly waterlogged at regular intervals.
- 5.2 The land quality in the area was poor; there was evidence that over the last centuries, and particularly decades, significant efforts have been made by landowners to improve land quality. Generally such land improvement centre on the excavation of drains and widening and deepening existing watercourses to improve the flow of water. However the back-filling and consequent raising of ground level in low-lying areas was probably another component of this process.

6 Conclusion

- 6.1 Following topsoil stripping AR 18 presented as a site of archaeological significance. The spread of dark peat with frequent stone inclusions and the low-lying location of the site in close proximity to a watercourse suggested the presence of a ploughed out fulacht fiadh. However, following further investigation the site was revealed as a depression in the subsoil into which a fill of stoney dark peat had been deposited, presumably to reclaim the land for agricultural reasons.
- 6.2 AR 18 proved to be of minimal archaeological significance thus negating the need for further study or research. No finds were revealed during excavation.

Avril Purcell
December 2001

7 Bibliography

Freeman, T.W. 1972. Ireland: A General and Regional Geography.
Methuen & Co. Ltd.

8 List of Features Excavated at AR 18

- F 1 Topsoil
- F 2 Dark brown peat with frequent inclusions of angular stones
- F 3 Grey clay subsoil

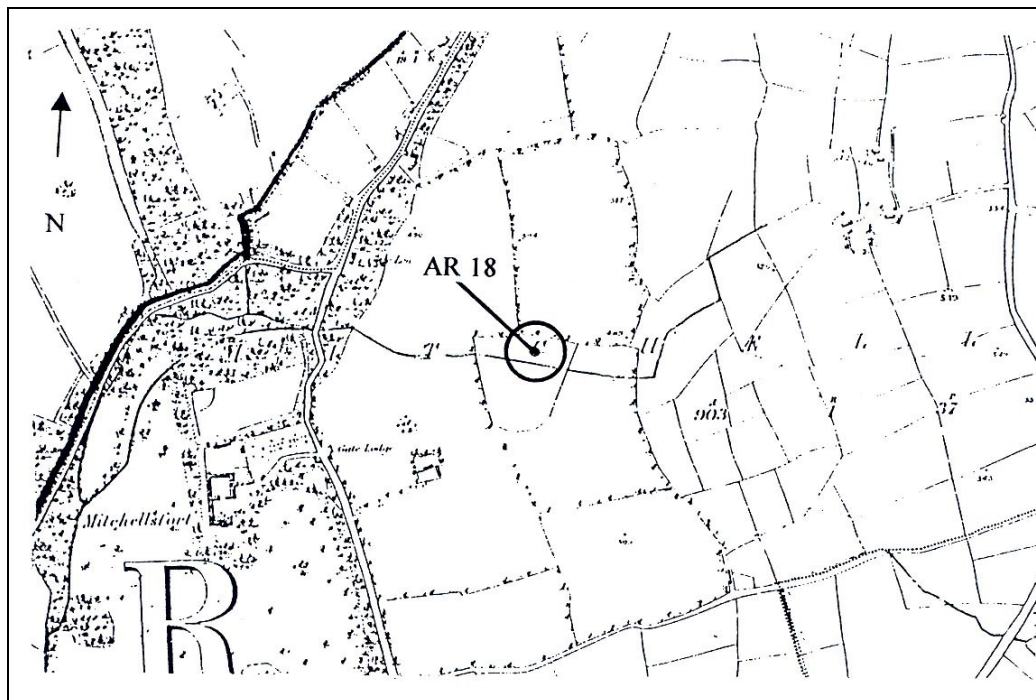


Figure 1: Extract of 1st edition (1841) 6" OS map sheet 53

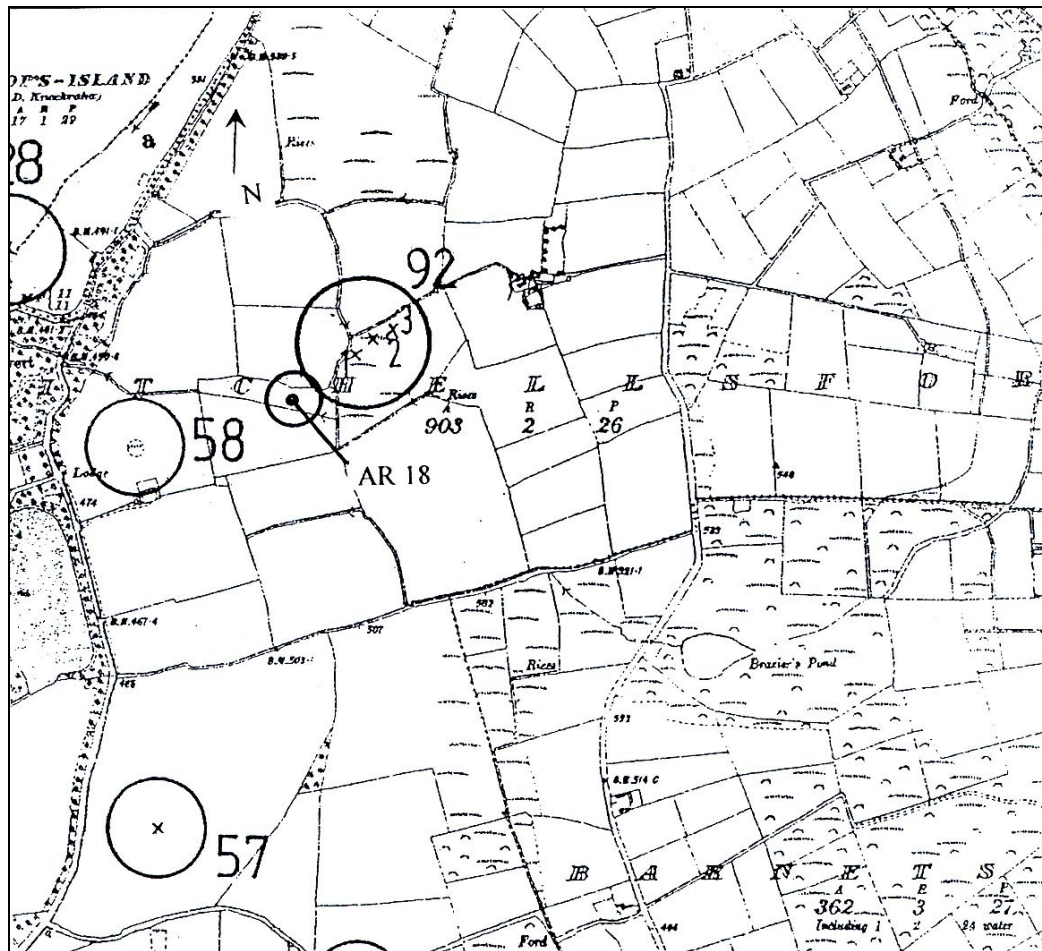


Figure 1b: Extract of map (1936) sheet 53

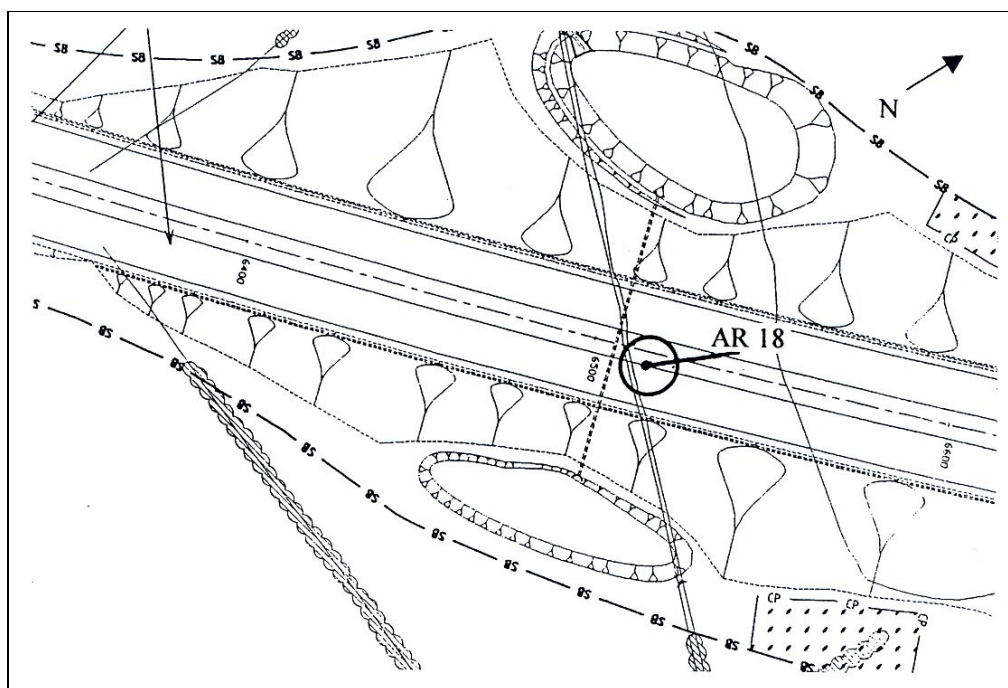


Figure 2: Extract of road construction map

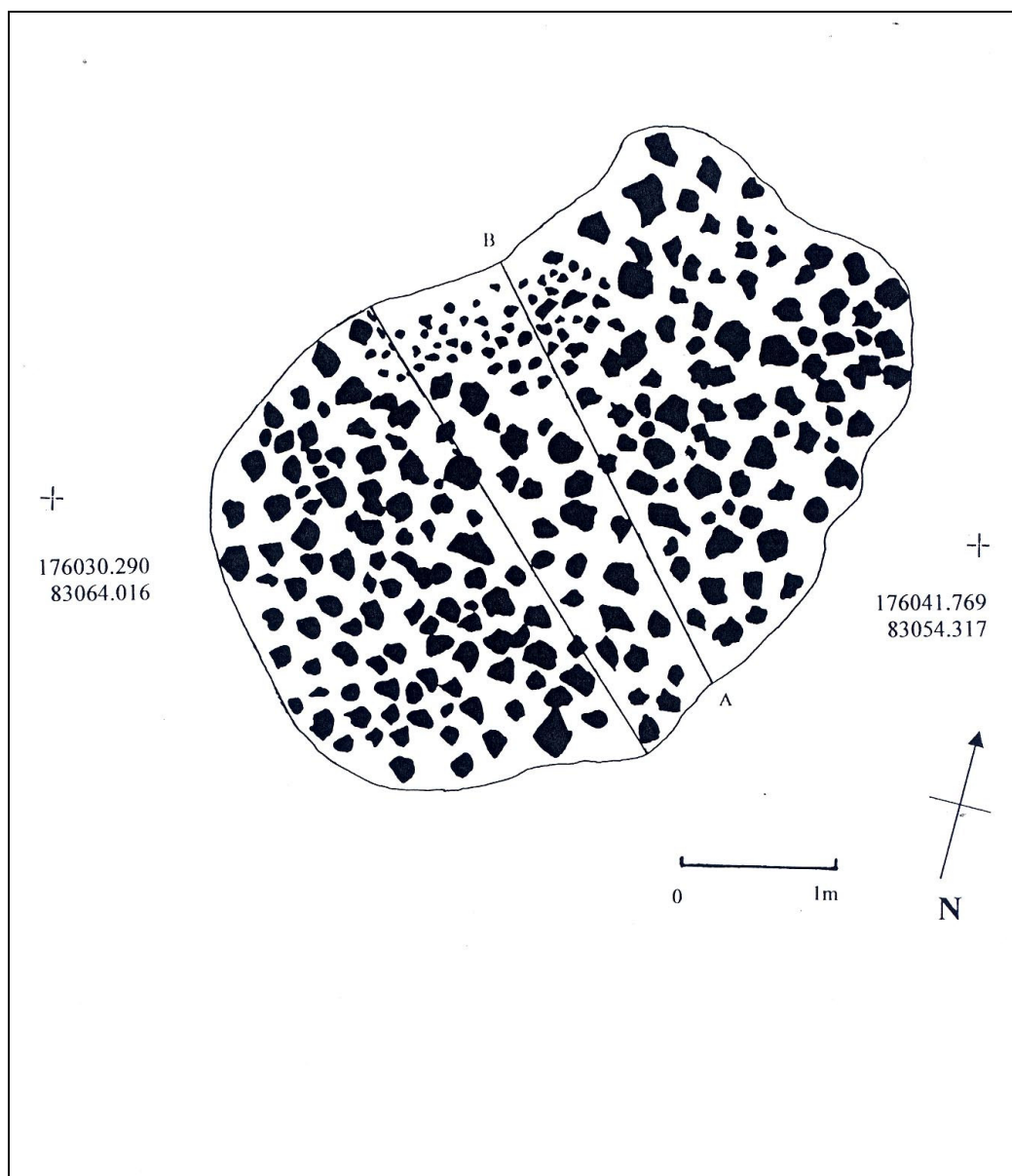


Figure 3: Pre-excavation site plan AR 18

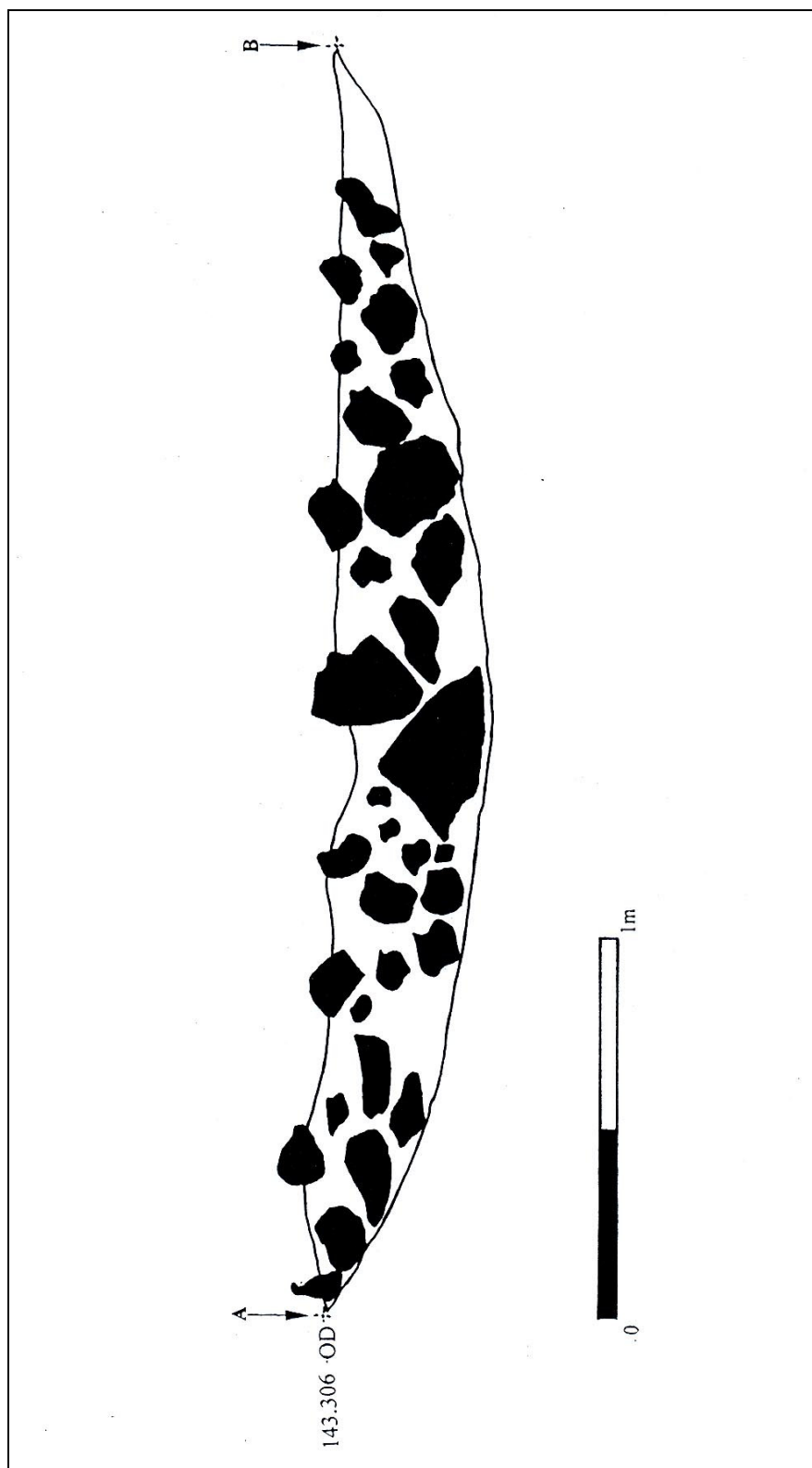


Figure 4: South facing section of F2



Plate 1: View of site from north.



Plate 2: Section through F2.