

9. New discoveries and fresh insights: researching the early medieval archaeology of the M3 in County Meath

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The purpose of this paper is not to describe in detail the various early medieval archaeological sites discovered in advance of construction of the M3 motorway but to explore the research opportunities provided by the recent findings from the scheme as a whole. This will involve a thematic appraisal of the archaeological evidence for burial, settlement and landscape in the early medieval period. The preliminary results from the M3 excavations are throwing new light on our understanding and challenging current perceptions of the types of people, settlements and landscapes that characterised Ireland between the coming of Christianity and the arrival of the Anglo-Normans.

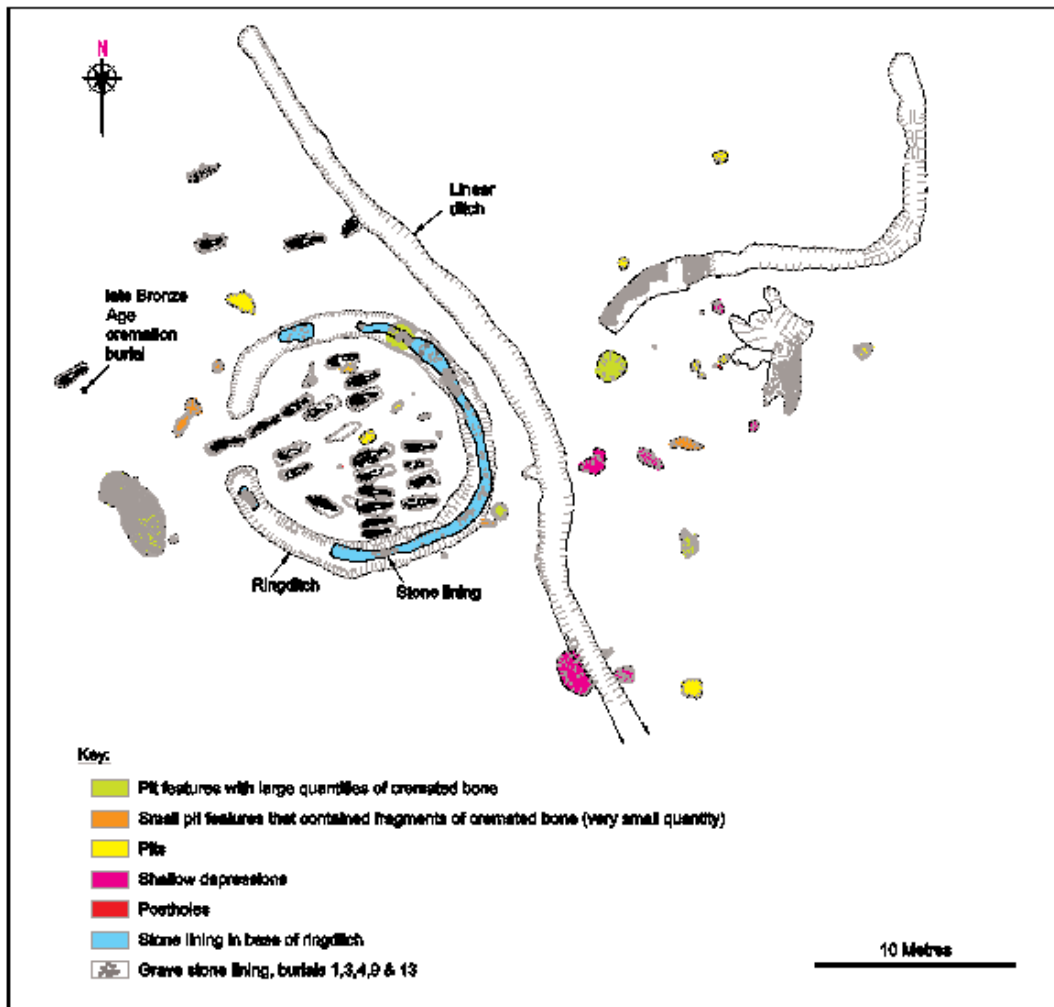
Burial

Among the key early medieval archaeological discoveries on the M3 have been the four small cemeteries at Ardsallagh 1, Collierstown 1, Grange 2 and Castlefarm 1 (Illus. 1).¹ The first three were associated with a type of ancient burial monument known as a ring-ditch, and the cemetery at Castlefarm was associated with a settlement (O'Connell 2006). The preliminary archaeological, historical and place-name evidence suggests that the sites discovered on the M3 were not ecclesiastical. Leo Swan (1983) has listed a number of features that are indicative of a site being ecclesiastical in nature but many of these do not correspond with the evidence from the M3 cemeteries. Ardsallagh 1 (Illus. 2; Clarke & Carlin, forthcoming), excavated by Linda Clarke, and Collierstown 1 (Illus. 3), excavated by Rob O'Hara, were probably abandoned sometime in the seventh or eighth century (see Appendix 1 for details of radiocarbon dates); this follows the recent trend of archaeological evidence, whereby there is a growing recognition that not all people were buried in church graveyards or ecclesiastical sites prior to the eighth century. In the fifth to seventh centuries, people were often buried in ancestral burial-grounds within small enclosures, or in mounds, that may have been known as *fertra*. It was not until the seventh or even the eighth century that the church managed to persuade the population to bury their dead in enclosures associated with churches (O'Brien 1992; 2003; forthcoming; O'Sullivan & Harney 2008). Early medieval burial practice was quite complex and varied across time; the M3 burial-grounds represent the use of particular enclosed burial areas and rites that originated from earlier pagan practices at the earliest period of conversion to Christianity in Ireland.

The skeletal remains from Ardsallagh and Collierstown are also interesting because of the seeming predominance of female burials. (The identification and analysis of the skeletal remains from Grange and Castlefarm are ongoing.) The majority of adult burials at Ardsallagh were female (from a total of 20 adults, 11 were female, four were male, five were possibly female and four were unsexed), and at Collierstown the central and probably most important burial, which was among the first group of people to be interred, was that of a



Illus. 1—Location of the principal early medieval sites on the M3 Clonee–North of Kells motorway scheme, Co. Meath (based on the Ordnance Survey Ireland map).



Illus. 2—Post-excavation plan of Ardsallagh 1 cemetery (Archaeological Consultancy Services Ltd).



Illus. 3—Post-excavation aerial view of Collierstown 1 cemetery (Studio Lab).

female. O'Brien (forthcoming) has identified that female burials feature prominently within *fertae* dating from the fifth and sixth centuries, and suggests that they may have been British women who married into ruling Irish families for territorial and political reasons. She believes that there is growing archaeological evidence pointing to a strong matriarchal influence in early medieval society that was largely overlooked by contemporary learned writers (E O'Brien, pers. comm.).

Early medieval archaeological studies of gender are in their infancy, and further research is required before we can begin to accurately assess the role of women during the period. It is interesting, however, that exclusively female burial-grounds are known from Ballymacaward, Co. Donegal (O'Brien 1999), and Carrickmore, Co. Tyrone (Hamlin & Foley 1983). The former site was a *fertae* that was reused across hundreds of years and probably testifies to the influential role of women within that community. The latter was an ecclesiastical graveyard, and the saints' Lives refer, on many occasions, to a separation of men and women based on religious men's mistrust of the latter. On the other hand, we should be careful because early Irish hagiographies—usually dating from the eighth and ninth centuries—are much later in date than the M3 burial-grounds and are ideologically loaded and often misogynous texts; as such, they are unreliable in determining the true social role of women.

In fact, it may well be that the archaeological evidence from sites such as those found on the M3 will help to inform us about how women were perceived in the fifth to seventh centuries. What these cemeteries, and those discovered on the M3, do show is that people were buried in a variety of ways and monuments, underlining the complexity of human agency and beliefs. Gender studies are but one part of this and offer the exciting challenge of including women within a narrative that until now has been largely lacking in archaeological literature of the early medieval period in Ireland.

Sites, artefacts and landscapes

The early medieval settlement evidence discovered along the scheme included a variety of enclosures differentiated by their size, shape, material culture and longevity of use. This diversity mirrors the complex and stratified nature of early medieval society and demonstrates that people of various social ranks lived and worked both within and around these settlements.

Settlement types

What can the settlement, landscape and artefactual evidence tell us about the function of these sites? Large, multiphase enclosed settlements at Roestown 2 and Castlefarm 1 (Illus. 4) were noteworthy for the quantity and quality of artefacts that they produced. Roestown 2 (Illus. 5; O'Hara 2007), excavated by Rob O'Hara, revealed evidence for non-ferrous metalworking and demonstrated possible long-distance trade and exchange through the presence of the imported pottery known as E-ware, which probably originated in western Gaul (ancient France) or perhaps in northern Spain in the sixth to seventh century.² Castlefarm 1, excavated by Aidan O'Connell, revealed some prestige items including brooches and ringed pins (Illus. 6), and both sites produced a high number of personal dress items. The maintenance and upkeep of these enclosures, evident through the recutting of



Illus. 4—Aerial view of the multiphase enclosed settlement at Castlefarm 1 (Studio Lab).



Illus. 5—Post-excavation aerial view of the settlement at Roestown 2 (Studio Lab).



Illus. 6—A penannular brooch and a spiral-ringed, loop-headed pin from Castlefarm 1 (John Sunderland).



Illus. 7—Post-excavation aerial view of the multiphase enclosure at Dowdstown 2 (Studio Lab).

the enclosing ditches across many centuries, almost certainly required the labour of 'base clients' and the servile classes, and, essentially, both settlements were located on agriculturally productive soils. Roestown and Castlefarm, therefore, were probable high-status or perhaps even lordly dwellings, occupied by people of some power and wealth.

Dowdstown 2, excavated by Lydia Cagney, was another multiphase enclosure but was somewhat different to Roestown and Castlefarm.³ It was initially constructed as a circular rath (a term preferable to the name ringfort, given that 'rath' was used by the people of early medieval Ireland themselves to describe a range of different enclosures), but was later expanded into a larger D-shaped enclosure (Illus. 7). The settlement, including both the

initial phase and later expansion, was associated with a number of fields and a large number of cereal-drying kilns. The artefacts, although not nearly as abundant as those from Roestown and Castlefarm, included a billhook and shears and, when viewed alongside evidence for cereal-drying, demonstrate that tillage played a significant role in the economy. It appears that Dowdstown comprised a settlement and associated agricultural system akin, although at a smaller scale, to the settlement, burial and agricultural complex not far away at Raystown (Seaver 2005; 2006).

An early medieval rath, distinctive in form and location, at Baronstown 1, excavated by Steve Linnane, was strategically located on a low hill that afforded its occupants commanding views.⁴ This was a particularly impressive site owing to its imposing enclosing elements, including very wide and deep ditches (Illus. 8). These ditches, when added to the accompanying bank (which has since been ploughed away), clearly indicate a defensive function for the site (Linnane & Kinsella 2007). Also, very few domestic artefacts were uncovered, perhaps suggesting that the fort was intermittently used in times of danger and attack.

Other sites uncovered along the scheme demonstrate a variety of functions, including an enclosure possibly used to manage livestock at Ross 1, excavated by Ken Wiggins (Illus. 9).⁵ This interpretation is based on a complete lack of occupation evidence within the enclosure and a very limited quantity of artefacts and animal bone. It may transpire, when post-excitation is complete, that the enclosure was occupied, but this cannot be determined at present. It is known, however, that some Irish raths produce little or no structural or artefactual evidence, leading to the suggestion that these are basically cattle corrals. The partial remains of two raths were excavated by Audrey Gahan and Stuart Reilly at Calliaghstown 1.⁶ Both, as at Ross, produced little in the way of finds. They were situated on agriculturally poor land, surrounded by wetland, and may be interpreted as the dwelling-places of low-status farmers who were separated, in economic and societal terms, from the wealth and prominence enjoyed by the lords at Roestown and Castlefarm.



Illus. 8—Post-excitation aerial view of the fort at Baronstown 1, which may have had a defensive or military function (Studio Lab).



Illus. 9—Post-excavation aerial view of Ross 1, a large rath that may have been used to enclose livestock in times of danger (Studio Lab).

The findings from the M3 incorporate a diversity of archaeological evidence that demonstrates the presence of lordly and peasant dwellings, military fortifications, specialist agricultural centres and livestock enclosures. (In addition to the enclosed sites, a possible open settlement is also represented by an unenclosed souterrain at Lismullin 1, excavated by Aidan O’Connell.)⁷ This complex picture of early medieval life and society differs very much from the oversimplified and static view of early medieval Ireland that only recognised a landscape of raths, crannogs and ecclesiastical sites, which represented the dwelling-places of the free and prosperous (see Monk 1998; O’Sullivan 1998).

Cultural biographies

Archaeologists interested in how things and places are used across time have developed the concept of the ‘cultural biography’, which explores how places and objects often have a ‘life cycle’ or ‘biography’, from production through use and abandonment, that mirrors the patterns of birth, life and death. Most importantly, places and objects also shift and change in social and cultural meaning across time. We should therefore attempt to explore how settlements were used and organised over years, decades and centuries, and what this might have meant for people in the past (O’Sullivan & Van de Noort 2006).

The cultural biographies of early medieval sites on the M3 are represented in the archaeological record through the reorganisation of space as houses, barns, animal pens and fields were created, mended, rebuilt and finally abandoned. Evidence for this survives at Roestown, Castlefarm, Dowdstown and Baronstown, for example, as enclosing ditches were recut and maintained and additional annexes, fields and animal enclosures were created, expanded and abandoned. At Roestown and Dowdstown internal spaces were manipulated

across time for specific domestic and industrial activities, yet these were ever-changing as the buildings, activities and meanings attached to them did not remain static. By investigating the cultural biographies of sites and landscapes it is possible to detect both upward and downward social mobility. The fortunes and status of the occupants of Castlefarm, for example, declined at the beginning of the 13th century, as evidenced by a downturn in both the quantity and quality of artefacts and the site's abandonment after seven centuries of occupation. Conversely, the rath at Dowdstown was expanded, after a century, to enclose a much larger space, possibly related to an increase in agricultural activity. Here, it appears, the people at Dowdstown enjoyed better fortune.

Archaeology can therefore demonstrate the ever-changing nature of an individual site's life cycle and can identify episodes of success, hardship and eventual abandonment. Through such analyses we move beyond the chronological details of a ditch or bank to the lives of the people who made them.

Chronology

It has been suggested that some raths were occupied for between one (Lynn 1978) and two centuries (Monk 1995), while Stout (1997, 24) has shown that the majority were constructed between the beginning of the seventh century and the end of the ninth century. Both Roestown and Castlefarm, however, were occupied between the sixth and 13th centuries, approximately, and the numerous ditch recuts and expansions of the enclosure at Baronstown suggest that it too will reveal a long settlement history. These examples can be added to the growing number of early medieval sites that were used for hundreds of years, such as Raystown, Johnstown (Clarke 2002; Clarke & Carlin 2008 and Laytown (McConway 2002), all within County Meath, and Millockstown, Co. Louth (Manning 1986). Thus there is emerging evidence that is challenging the accepted chronologies of early medieval settlements as an increasing number demonstrate prolonged occupation across many centuries.

Landscapes

Excavations along the M3 have offered a significant opportunity to investigate a range of probable contemporary sites in proximity to each other at Baronstown, Ross and Collierstown (Illus. 1). Historical geographers, such as Stout (1997), have examined the relationships between early medieval settlements and have principally based their findings on the shape and size of sites as they survive today rather than on excavation results, which reveal the complex histories of sites in the past. Previously, there have been a few notable excavations at sites such as Cush, Co. Limerick (Ó Riordáin 1940), Garryduff, Co. Cork (O'Kelly 1963), and, more recently, Lisleagh, Co. Cork (Monk 1995), where the excavators have investigated the relationships between a number of raths. The M3 excavations—and other NRA-funded excavations throughout Ireland—have enormous potential in this regard because of the scale of excavations, the survival of environmental remains and the availability of radiocarbon dates.

Initial research into the relationships between Baronstown, Ross and Collierstown, using archaeological, historical and cartographic sources, has resulted in interesting ideas about how they, and the people that used them, related to each other (Linnane & Kinsella 2007). The defensive fort at Baronstown was situated centrally within a number of raths in the neighbouring townlands of Cabragh, Skreen, Colliersown and Ross. The possible livestock

enclosure at Ross was located just 1 km south of Baronstown, while the cemetery at Collierstown was located a short distance to the south-west. The early Irish laws associate lords, such as the *aire forgill* and *aire ard*, with the responsibility for the protection of livestock seized from neighbouring kingdoms, and suggest that they resided centrally within their *túath* (Stout 1997, 123). Could the rath at Baronstown, with its obviously defensive enclosing features and strategic location, represent the fort of such military lords? Its location, within its immediate landscape, meant that the people in the surrounding raths were easily accessible and probably within view of the fort's strategic vantage point. They could therefore be called on quickly in times of danger or attack.

At a more regional level, Baronstown was located roughly centrally within the royal demesne lands or *túath* of Tara, as identified by Bhreathnach (2005a). The fort was therefore ideally placed at a safe enough distance from the turbulent neighbouring *túath* boundaries to offer protection to any livestock seized. The possibility exists that the large rath at Ross was used to enclose livestock in times of danger and that the Baronstown fort, a short distance to the north, assumed a defensive role, perhaps intermittently, during attacks from neighbouring kingdoms. The small cemetery at Collierstown probably contained the remains of the deceased from this community and, interestingly, the entrance to Baronstown's fort faced towards it, suggesting a particular relationship between the two sites. The initial findings from this research highlight the potential of multidisciplinary approaches to the past as we can create narratives about the sites, people and local landscapes of past communities.

The wider landscape—fields and cereal-drying kilns

Development-led archaeology is responsible for the increasing number of discoveries of past cultural landscapes incorporating a variety of field systems, enclosures and cereal-drying kilns (O'Sullivan & Harney 2008). Traditionally, excavations have focused on individual sites and their interior space and enclosing elements. It was left to historians (Kelly 1998; Ó Corráin 2004) to describe the surrounding fields and buildings. Now, however, there is an increasing amount of archaeological evidence that is rapidly developing our knowledge of past land organisation and farming. This can be added to the evidence from the handful of sites excavated previously, including Cush (Ó Ríordáin 1940), Carraig Aille and the Spectacles (Ó Ríordáin 1949) in County Limerick, and Ballyutoag, Co. Antrim (Williams 1984). Apart from the valuable research undertaken by Monk (1994; Monk & Kelleher 2005), cereal-drying kilns have likewise received only limited archaeological attention to date. The discovery and excavation, therefore, of a variety of fields systems, enclosures and cereal-drying kilns is a very significant advance in understanding how they were formed, what they were used for and, most importantly, what this tells us about the people who interacted with them.

Field systems

When the excavated evidence for the fields and enclosures at Roestown 2, Dowdstown 2, Baronstown 1 and Boyerstown 3 was revealed, it was recognised that they, like their associated settlements, were maintained, altered and abandoned over time and that they too incorporate cultural biographies that inform us about their life cycle.⁸ At Roestown, the



Illus. 10—Post-excavation aerial view of Boyerstown 3, a multiphase enclosure complex (Studio Lab).

eastern enclosures initially functioned as a number of small fields that were then removed to form a much larger enclosure, which was used for the processing of animals (O'Hara 2007). A number of radiating ditches respected the western enclosure. These, significantly, were in close proximity to where the cereal-processing occurred, and it is likely that the enclosures they formed supported the growing of crops and cereals (*ibid.*). A number of fields were associated with both the original rath at Dowdstown and its later expansion, which may have been related to increased agricultural activity at the site. The smaller fields found beside the settlement were probably used for cultivation, whereas the larger rectangular fields, found downslope by the River Boyne, were possibly related to livestock husbandry. It is possible that they represent the first recorded examples of flood-enriched meadows dating from the early medieval period, although this interpretation may change as post-excavation work is ongoing. The Boyne may have flooded these fields during the winter, and livestock, possibly cattle, would have been moved there from the higher ground to graze during the summer. At Boyerstown 3, excavated by Linda Clarke and Terry Connell, the sequence of field enclosures and radiocarbon dates indicates successive phases of enclosure, mostly condensed within 200 years (Illus. 10). The fields may have functioned as small cultivation plots, and the ditches would have stopped livestock from entering and causing damage. There are noticeable blank areas surrounding the field enclosures, detected through geophysical survey, so perhaps these were the spaces where the animals grazed.

There is now a growing body of archaeological evidence demonstrating the types of fields, field boundaries and farming practices that were adopted throughout the early medieval period. We are no longer exclusively reliant on the historical sources, and a combination of the written and archaeological evidence can develop new insights into relict cultural landscapes and the people, including the poor and unfree, who laboured there.

Cereal-drying kilns

At least 90 possible cereal-drying kilns were identified on the scheme. From this and other recent road projects there is undoubtedly now sufficient archaeological evidence to demonstrate that tillage played a major role in a mixed early medieval economy. Previously, archaeologists were aware that crop husbandry was an important aspect of the economy but they were hindered by a lack of material evidence (Duignan 1944, 144; Edwards 1990, 60; Proudfoot 1961, 107). Pollen analysis has also highlighted the importance of cereal-processing from the late Iron Age onwards as pollen diagrams feature cereal pollens and weed pollens related to arable agriculture (Hall 2000; Ryan 2000, 31–2; Stout 1997, 39–47). Crop husbandry therefore featured significantly alongside livestock husbandry for the people of early medieval Ireland as both pasture and tillage supplemented each other, supplying the mixed dietary, economic and social needs of each community.

Another interesting line of research concerns the number of kilns discovered between Dunshaughlin and Navan. At least 55 were revealed, indicating that this part of the landscape witnessed intensive arable farming across many centuries. It has been suggested that part of this landscape formed the royal demesne lands of Tara (Bhreathnach 2005a, 4). The level of cereal-processing may therefore have been related to the high tributes expected by the Tara kings from their nobles. This interpretation is based on the high proportion of kilns identified here when compared to the lower numbers on the remainder of the scheme and the number encountered by archaeological investigations on other road schemes, such as sections of the M7/M8 (N Kenny, pers. comm.) and the M4 (Fibiger et al., 2008). Perhaps we are witnessing a highly managed and cultivated royal landscape corresponding to the status of those residing there. The quantity of cereal-drying kilns is unique to this landscape and represents access to labour and resources in excess of that generally encountered in early medieval Ireland.

Conclusion

These are very exciting times for Irish archaeology, as NRA road schemes, and development-led archaeology generally, uncover sites, features, artefacts and landscapes that are enabling new understandings of the early medieval period in Ireland. We can now begin to assess, for example, the role of gender within society through an examination of the burial evidence. The diversity of settlements, artefacts and site locations mirrors a complex society inhabited by a range of people, from the lowest to the highest social grades, who expressed their identity through a variety of means. The archaeological and historical evidence indicates that this was far from a static society as people's fortunes rose and fell. The cultural biographies of the various sites convey their changing roles and meanings across many centuries. We are now beginning to recognise the diversity of field systems and enclosures that were intimately related to the neighbouring settlements as we identify the types of farming activities that occurred; in addition, by using written sources such as law-texts, we can develop narratives about the people who laboured in these fields. Research continues apace on the archaeological findings from the M3, and the initial results have revealed a multitude of evidence that challenges accepted narratives of the early medieval period in Ireland. Ultimately, there is increasing archaeological evidence depicting a complex, multi-layered and vibrant early medieval society in which people expressed social

identities of kinship, status, ethnicity and gender by what they wore, where and how they lived, and where and how they were buried.

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Notes

1. Ardsallagh 1: NGR 288482, 263460; height 57 m OD; excavation reg. no. E3088; ministerial direction no. A008/035; excavation director Linda Clarke, ACS Ltd.
Collierstown 1: NGR 294743, 258825; height 112 m OD; excavation reg. no. E3068; ministerial direction no. A008/015; excavation director Rob O'Hara, ACS Ltd.
Grange 2: NGR 280582, 270068; height 73 m OD; excavation reg. no. E3124; ministerial direction no. A029/006; excavation directors Ciara MacManus & Amanda Kelly, IAC Ltd.
Castlefarm 1: NGR 300394, 241605; height 75 m OD; excavation reg. no. E3023; ministerial direction no. A017/001; excavation director Aidan O'Connell, ACS Ltd.
2. Roestown 2: NGR 295793, 253824; height 106 m OD; excavation reg. no. E3055; ministerial direction no. A008/002; excavation director Rob O'Hara, ACS Ltd.
3. Dowdstown 2: NGR 289684, 262547; height 48 m OD; excavation reg. no. E3086; ministerial direction no. A008/033; excavation director Lydia Cagney, ACS Ltd.
4. Baronstown 1: NGR 294401, 259365; height 107 m OD; excavation reg. no. E3070; ministerial direction no. A008/017; excavation director Steve Linnane, ACS Ltd.
5. Ross 1: NGR 294753, 258471; height 124 m OD; excavation reg. no. E3092; ministerial direction no. A008/077; excavation director Ken Wiggins, ACS Ltd.
6. Calliaghstown 1: NGR 272314, 274591; height 81 m OD; excavation reg. no. E3164; ministerial direction no. A030/016; excavation directors Audrey Gahan & Stuart Reilly, ACS Ltd.
7. Lismullin 1: NGR 293437, 261602; height 77 m OD; excavation reg. no. E3074; ministerial direction no. A008/021; excavation director Aidan O'Connell, ACS Ltd.
8. Boyerstown 3: NGR 283319, 266223; height 71 m OD; excavation reg. no. E3107; ministerial direction no. A023/015; excavation directors Linda Clarke & Terry Connell, ACS Ltd.

