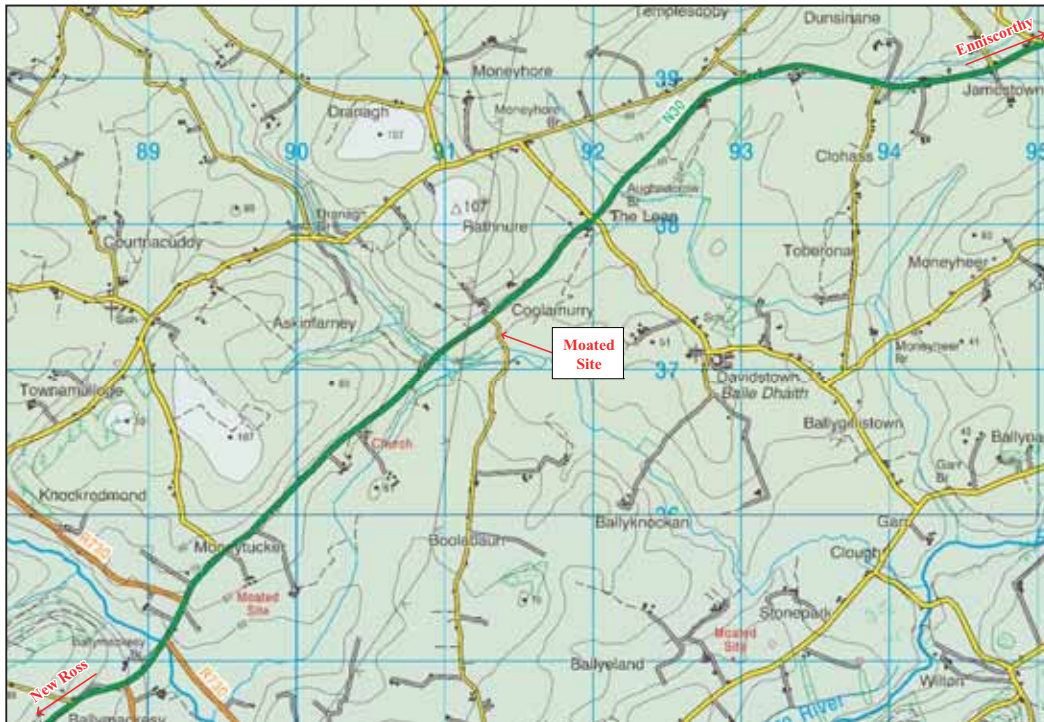


13. Discovery and excavation of a medieval moated site at Coolamurry, County Wexford

Grace Fegan



Illus. 1—Location of the Coolamurry moated site (based on the Ordnance Survey Ireland map)

The site at Coolamurry¹ (Illus. 1) was located on land sloping gently away to the south and immediately east of what is known locally as the Boolabaun Lane. The site was excavated by Valerie J Keeley Ltd on behalf of Wexford County Council in advance of construction of the N30 Moneytucker to Jamestown scheme. As can be seen from the 1841 first edition Ordnance Survey map (Illus. 2) the lane kinks noticeably where it meets the site. The scheme was previously tested by a team of archaeologists and evidence for two large ditches was found in the test-trenches at this location. This, combined with the unusual pattern of field boundaries and local knowledge telling of the removal of a 'mound' here c. 1950, highlighted the site as having considerable archaeological potential.

The land to the east and south of the site has been drained by a network of stone drains and would have been a very wet and boggy area even into the 20th century. Just south of the site is an un-named tributary of the River Baun. The land north and west of the site is upland and would have been of better agricultural quality. This places the site on the boundary between marginal and higher-quality agricultural lands.

¹ NGR 291382, 137239. Excavation Licence No. 03E0326.



Illus. 2—Extract from the first edition Ordnance Survey map (1841) (Ordnance Survey Ireland)

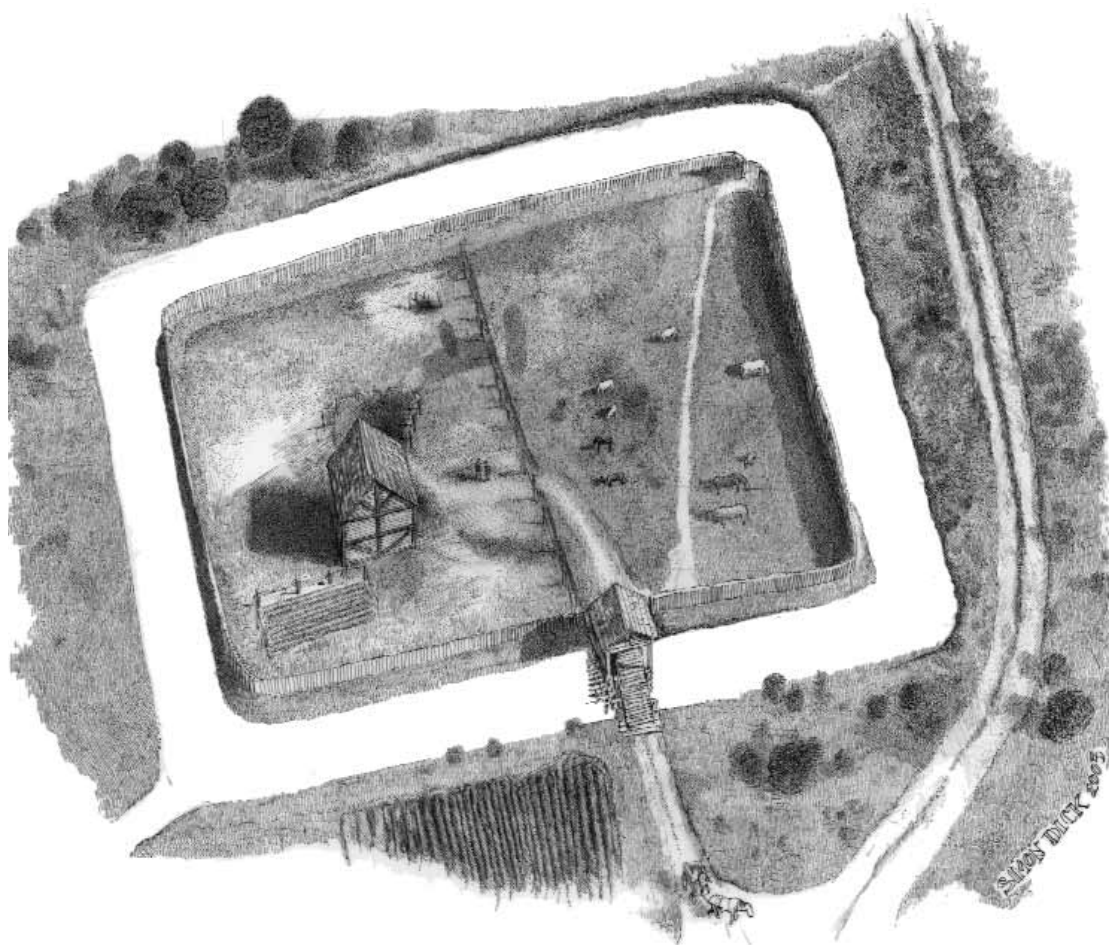
I first visited the site in early February 2004 in the company of other site directors from Valerie J Keeley Ltd and the local authority Project Archaeologist, James Eogan. It was a beautiful, sunny Spring day and although there were no recognisable features visible above ground, the site looked like a great place to spend the next 12 weeks.

When our team arrived on the site later that month we first had to remove all the topsoil from the site by machine, exposing the sub-surface features. Once the topsoil was removed different coloured soils could be discerned. Along with other features we could clearly see two wide bands of darker soil both running east–west across the site. These would turn out to be our enclosing ditch, or moat.

This rectangular ditch defined the site. The eastern length of the ditch comprised of an existing field boundary ditch and bank, as did the eastern half of the southern length. The western length of the ditch was partly covered by the present Boolabaun Lane. Internal to the ditch would have been an earthen bank. The remains of this bank were visible on the site along the eastern length and half of the southern length as it was incorporated into existing field boundaries. The ‘mound’ of earth levelled in the 1950s seems to have comprised of this internal bank, which was pushed into the remaining, partly open ditch, creating the upper fills of the ditch.

This site represented the remains of a medieval moated site, a defended farmstead dating to the 13th or 14th century (Illus. 3). A small community or extended family would have lived and worked within this enclosed area, farming the lands outside the enclosure and protecting their family and livestock within the fortified settlement. This site type is quite common in County Wexford, representing a phase of occupation by Anglo-Norman settlers, but there are very few excavated examples.

Finds recovered from the upper fills were mainly of post-medieval date, such as pieces of glass and sherds of white-glazed pottery. The lower ditch fills were composed of a greyish blue waterlogged clay and contained a considerable amount of locally made medieval pottery and worked timber pieces. As well as this material there was a large amount of brushwood, leaf litter and unworked timber. These organic remains survived in the lower fills of the ditch due



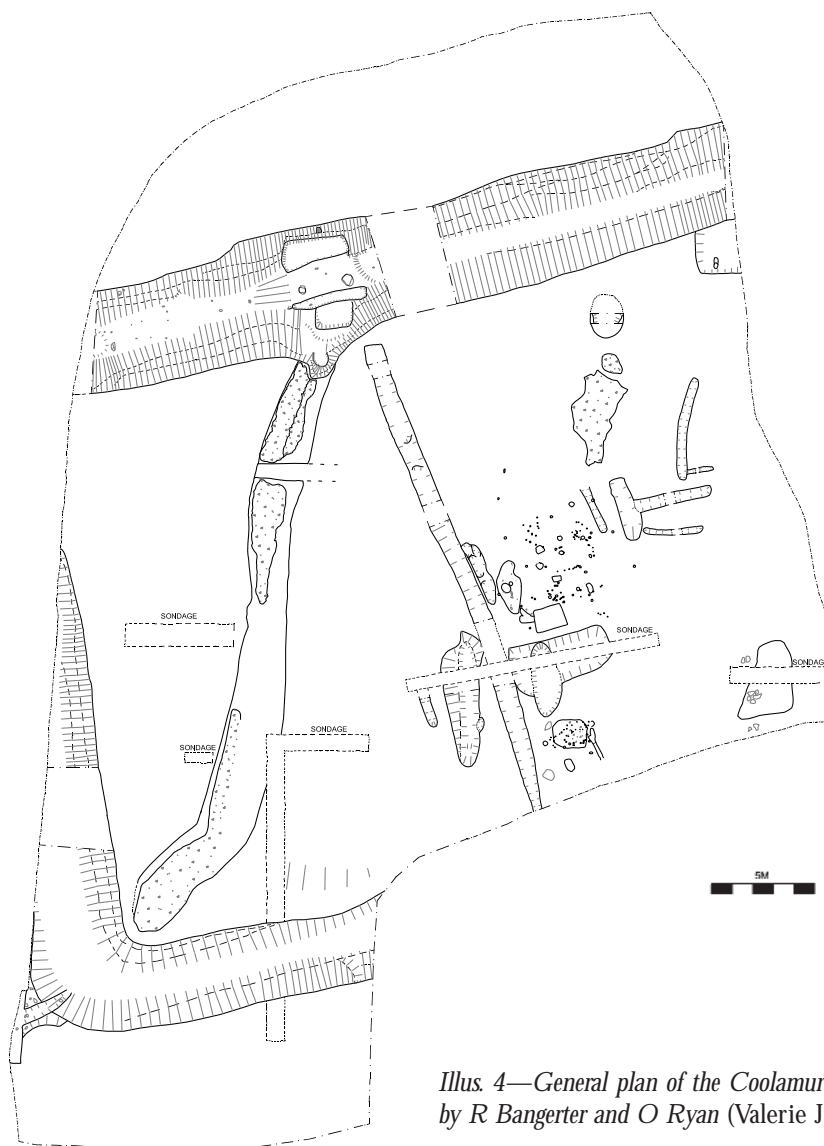
Illus. 3—Artist's reconstruction of the moated site by Simon Dick (Valerie J Keeley Ltd)

to their waterlogged nature. This material seems to have been deposited in the base of the ditch during the 13th or 14th centuries, while the moated site was occupied.

The enclosing ditch or moat was clearly designed to carry water and was dug with the natural lie of the land in mind. The northernmost section was 2.2 m in depth while the southernmost section was 1.2 m in depth, a variation that accounts for the 1 m reduction in ground level from the north to the south of the site. The northern ditch section was also wider at 5 m, whilst the southern section was 4.5 m in width. The ditch was generally U-shaped in profile with steep, slanting sides but in some sections along its length it had a flat base, notably around the entrance area (Illus. 4 and 5).

An interesting feature was located just outside the enclosure, at the mid point of the ditch curve in the south-western corner of the site. It was a linear cut or gully, orientated north-east to south-west and it continued under the present Boolabaun Lane. This feature was located at the lowest topographic point on the site and is believed to represent an overflow drain for the moat water. This location would have been perfect for a latrine, and specialist analysis of the deposits from around this area may tell us if this was the case.

As the northern section of the ditch was being excavated two large oak timbers were uncovered. These timbers were lying flat on the base, parallel to the edges of the ditch (Illus. 6). The larger timber was slightly bigger than a railway sleeper and lay against the inner edge



Illus. 4—General plan of the Coolamurry moated site by R Bangerter and O Ryan (Valerie J Keeley Ltd)

of the ditch. It had half-mortises carved into either end and two smaller mortises on its upward-facing edge. Some tool marks were also visible on one of its sides. The smaller timber was found on the far edge of the ditch, parallel to the first timber. This had two half-mortises carved into either end, in a similar fashion to the larger timber. Between these two timbers were two deep post-holes cut into the base of the ditch.

These features seem to represent the remains of a timber-built causeway or bridge, very possibly a drawbridge. The horizontal timbers found in the base of the ditch seem to have acted as base plates, with upright timbers held in the mortises. The two large post-holes were stone-lined and clearly designed to hold substantial upright timbers. What was



Illus. 5—General view of Coolamurry moated site from north-east (Valerie J Keeley Ltd)

particularly interesting about the timbers and post-holes was that their layout was not symmetrical. The timber on the inside edge of the ditch was considerably larger with more mortises and the post-holes were closer to this timber than the smaller, outer one. Also, a large cut or recess in the inside edge of the ditch was opposing a single post-hole in the outer edge. The layout of these timbers and features being very much asymmetrical seemed to point toward a structure that was far more heavily weighted on one side than the other. This evidence suggests that the timber causeway was not fixed but was in fact a drawbridge that could be raised, cutting off access to the site when required (Illus. 7). The recess mentioned above may have accommodated a counterweight when the drawbridge was raised.

The area enclosed by the ditch was where the people who built the site would have lived. The space was divided almost in half by a slight boundary that ran south from the entrance to the opposite end of the site. All the evidence we had for structures and domestic activity was confined to the eastern half of the site. This evidence comprised of post-holes, stake-holes, horizontal trenches and patches of charcoal and burnt soil, indicating the presence of hearths. It would make sense to assume that the site had been divided in order to separate the area occupied by people from the area occupied by animals. While cattle would have been grazed on land outside and adjacent to the settlement, they were most likely secured inside the enclosure during the night.

A total of 21 post-holes and 51 stake-holes were uncovered in a large cluster in this half

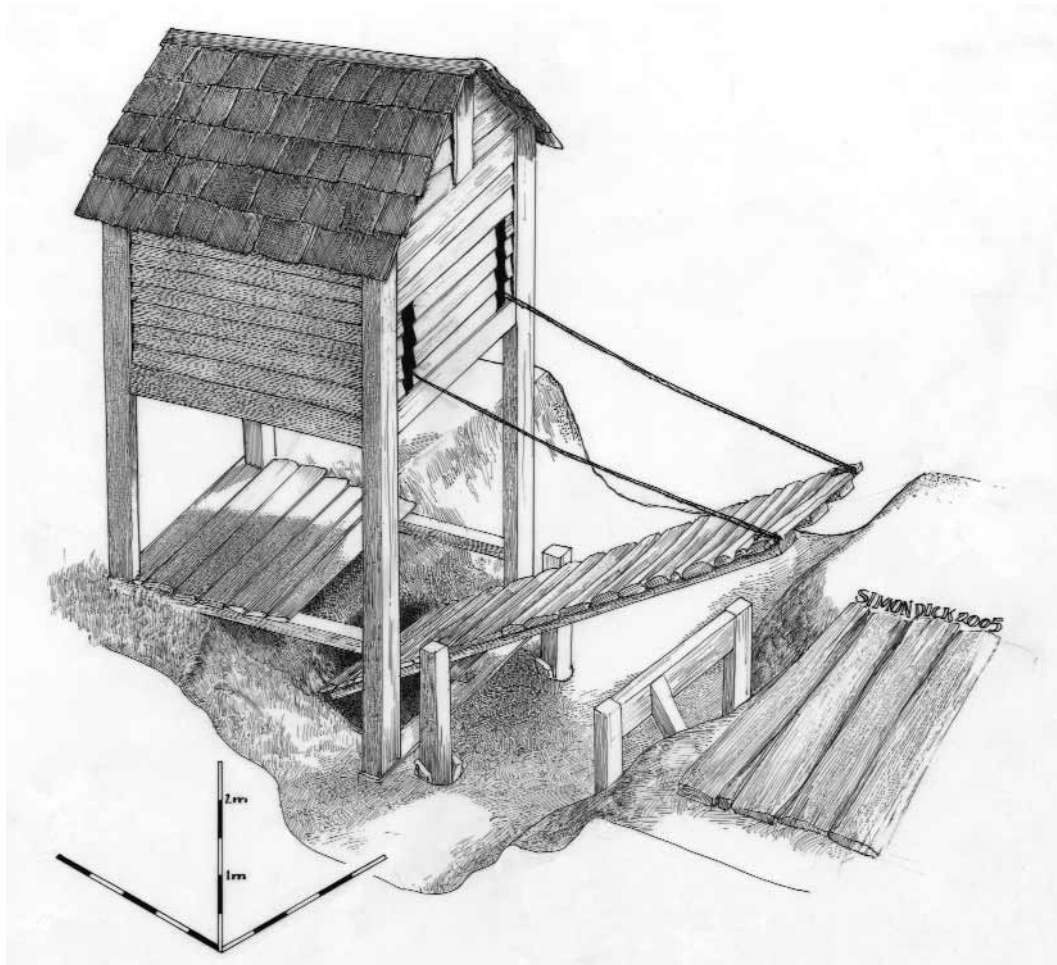


Illus. 6—Cleaning and recording the timbers at the entrance (Valerie J Keeley Ltd)

of the site. As these features were being excavated no discernable pattern could be seen. However, after the features had been planned seven equidistantly spaced post-holes forming a rectangular pattern were noted. These post-holes may represent the ground plan of a building, which would have measured 13 sq m. Other post-holes, stake-holes and horizontal trenches were found in the area that may signify other structures and will need more in-depth scrutiny in order to decipher a pattern and create a possible reconstruction of the buildings that existed on the site. It should be made clear, however, that a considerable amount of evidence might have been lost during the levelling of the site in the 1950s.

Artefacts recovered from the deposits and features in this area included a considerable amount of locally made medieval pottery, of a type known as Leinster Cooking Ware. A copper-alloy coin was found lying on top of a cobbled surface adjacent to the structural features. The coin was quite corroded and could not be identified or dated on site, but having just recently been cleaned and conserved it can now be examined more closely. A rectangular pit was found just south of the area of dense post and stake-holes, and in the fill of this pit a copper-alloy dividers was found. This artefact caused great excitement among the excavation team when it was recovered. Made of the same material as the coin, the dividers was also considerably corroded, but was still in relatively good condition. This find has been cleaned and conserved and we can now see what a high quality piece it is (Illus. 8). It measures 180 mm in length and has some lozenge or diamond-shaped decoration on at least one side.

Dividers can be used for measuring distances from plans and drawings by artisans such as architects and carpenters. It is tempting to think of the people who built and designed the structures on the site in the medieval period using these dividers. Maybe it was used to measure out and work on the bridge timbers? Dividers also have a strong symbolic meaning, and were used in medieval paintings and engravings to represent creation. Its deposition on the site may have an explanation other than having been mislaid or thrown away. It may have been deliberately placed in this pit for votive reasons, perhaps to bless the



Illus. 7—Artist's reconstruction of the drawbridge by Simon Dick (Valerie J Keeley Ltd)

new homestead? One thing that can be said for this artefact is that it is unique in the country. The National Museum of Ireland possesses nothing of similar date or design. Further research into parallels will enable us to place it in its national and international context.

As was mentioned earlier, all of our evidence for domestic activity came from the eastern half of the site. The western half of the site was devoid of archaeological remains apart from one very interesting feature. A cobbled pathway was uncovered that began at the entrance and meandered its way through the site to the south-western corner of the enclosure. The south-western section was best preserved, while the northern section was disturbed in several places by modern agricultural activity. The stones used to create this path ranged from water-rolled quartz to angular granite pebbles. Smaller stones were located on the margins of the surface while larger ones were concentrated towards the centre.

The discovery of this pathway raised further questions about the site. What was it doing on this side of the central divide, away from the structural features? Why did it lead to the south-western corner—was it to access the latrine? We were certain that it was contemporary with the occupation of the site as it respected the ditch, the entrance and other features. But as it continued right up to the edge of the ditch in the south-western corner, this had to mean that there had been no defensive bank at this location. So much



Illus. 8—Copper-alloy dividers (180 mm long) following treatment by a conservator (Valerie J Keeley Ltd)

effort had been made to fortify the site by the excavation of the huge ditch, the creation of the internal bank and the construction of a sophisticated timber causeway, it seems incongruous that a gap was left in the bank in this corner, where the ditch was actually quite shallow. This weak spot in the defences may have been fortified by a timber structure that straddled the gap and had its foundations in the internal bank. The removal of the bank in the 1950s would have destroyed any evidence of this building. Perhaps there was another building of similar design securing the gap in the bank where the entrance was.

If cattle were being kept in the western half of the site the ground here would have been poached and mired, making it quite uneven. If there were two defensive structures located on opposing edges of the site then easy access between the two buildings would have been very important. A cobbled pathway would have provided a safe and swift means of traversing the site.

We still have so many questions about this site. How many people lived here, for how long and between what dates? Was there a flow on the water in the ditch and were there fish in it? Was there a tower above the drawbridge? Was it really a drawbridge? Where did those wonderful dividers come from, who did they belong to and why did they end up in that pit?

The first phase of post-excavation analysis has been completed. This included the washing and labelling of artefacts, cleaning of environmental and dating samples, and the

production of the preliminary report. Specialist analyses of materials retrieved and further research is now required in order to fully comprehend the nature of this site, to complete the record and to fulfil the requirements of the excavation licence. The principal reasons for undertaking those studies will be to attempt to obtain secure dates for the activity on the site, to assist in interpreting the nature of the structures, ditches and associated features, to establish a picture of the environment during the occupation of the site, to place the site in its historical and social context, to reach conclusions sufficient to prepare a fully illustrated final report fit for publication, and to create a thorough archive, thereby preserving the site by record.

Acknowledgements

I would like to offer my thanks to the various people who assisted my team and I in our work on this site, particularly the many interested parties who visited the excavation and buoyed our enthusiasm for what we were doing.

