

Matthew Seaver describes the excavations at a possible ceremonial complex in the foothills of the Dublin Mountains

Digging on the doorstep of the ancestors

Excavations at Laughanstown, south County Dublin

Large-scale excavations have been taking place on a prehistoric monument complex nestling in the foothills of the Dublin Mountains. The work is being carried out by Valerie J. Keeley Ltd for Dun Laoghaire–Rathdown County Council and the National Roads Authority as part of the South-Eastern Motorway Project.



View of enclosure under excavation, from east

Site location

The site is on rising land above the 60ft contour line and has views of the sea to the east and of the Dublin Mountains to the west and south. Outcropping crags of granite and erratics lie scattered through the fields—remnants of the retreat of the glaciers which flattened this area. The land is primarily agricultural and is a mixture of arable and pasture. Immediately south of the site the land slopes sharply upwards into foothills crowned by conifers.

Excavations are focusing on a complex of monuments located near a probable wedge tomb in Laughanstown and Glebe townlands. The sites were discovered as a result of intensive topographical, aerial and geophysical survey carried out as part of the environmental impact study by Valerie J. Keeley Ltd. Archaeological testing confirmed the presence of prehistoric material, and full excavation began in May 2000.

The megalithic tomb lies outside the area of the motorway, but all other newly identified sites will be fully excavated. The remains of a quarried-out cairn are visible on the surface to the south-east of the wedge tomb. A further potential cairn site is located off the route in Glebe townland. The topographical, geophysical and aerial surveys suggested a total of thirteen potential new sites, including four possible ring-ditches, an oval banked enclosure, a number of low mounds or platforms, and a possible large trivallate enclosure.

Excavations to date

Excavations have been taking place on the greenfield site since May

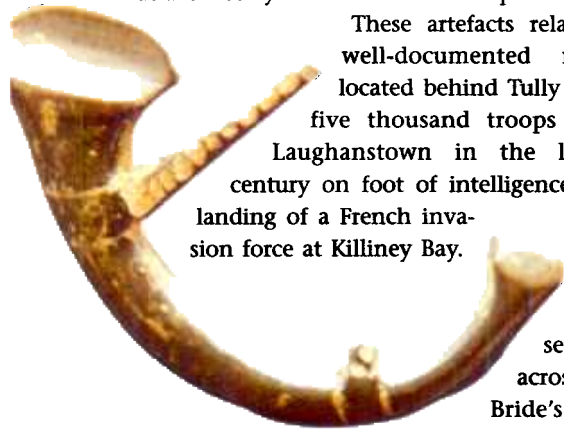
2000 and have concentrated on an area close to the wedge tomb, the oval banked enclosure and the possible ring-ditches within Glebe townland. The deposits and features identified so far suggest activity ranging over a long time: medieval to modern agricultural evidence, eighteenth-century military equipment and extensive prehistoric remains.

Military activity

Considerable quantities of artefacts related to eighteenth-century military activity have been recovered, including musket shot, gunflints, badges and buttons bearing the insignia of the Louth Militia, the Kildare Militia and a number of Scottish regiments. Coins of George III and tokens from Camac, Camac and Ryan have also been found in relatively large numbers. The tokens were used as payment to the soldiers and allowed goods to be purchased at the weekly markets which took place at the camp.



These artefacts relate to a nearby well-documented military camp located behind Tully church. Four to five thousand troops were based at Laughanstown in the late eighteenth century on foot of intelligence suggesting the landing of a French invasion force at Killiney Bay.



A communications route seems to have run across the site to the Bride's Glen, and soldiers may have used the

field for manoeuvres. A route to the Bride's Glen is shown on Rocque's 1760 map of the area. This may be represented by a metalled surface, bounded by a wall near the wedge tomb, which contained a number of iron horseshoes and buttons.

Medieval activity

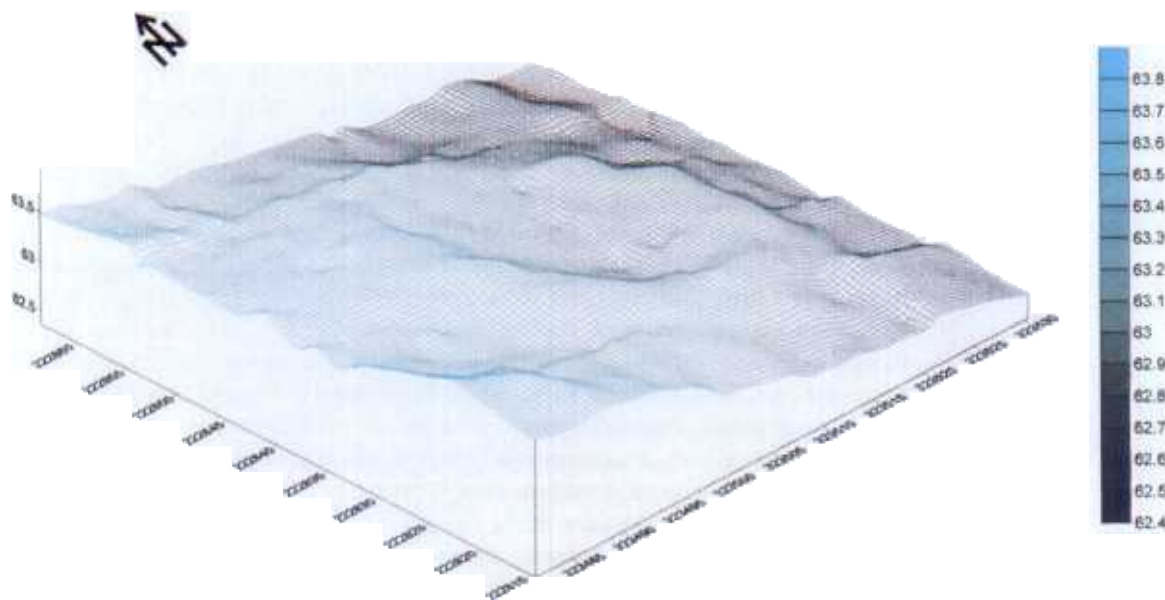
We know from historical sources that the site was part of a small manor in the medieval period. It was administered from some form of farm centre on the site now occupied by Laughanstown Park House, which incorporates part of a recently discovered tower-house. Tully church, to the north-west, was a major Early Christian ecclesiastical site and was the parish church in the medieval era.

Trial excavations at the site uncovered a copper-alloy medieval belt-buckle, and the present excavations have recovered sherds of local medieval pottery, probably resulting from medieval manuring of the long fields. Traces of ridge-and-furrow were not located although considerable numbers of plough pebbles were recovered. This may indicate cultivation in flat fields or that the field systems were ploughed out by later activity.

Prehistoric activity

Excavations of prehistoric contexts are at an early stage. A large number of flint implements, scrapers, blades and some possible hammerstones were found in ploughsoil. A large portion of a saddle quern was found built into a drystone wall in a field to the south of the site. Heavy cultivation is apparent, at least since the eighteenth century, and can be seen in the form of deep ploughsoil and horse-drawn plough furrows which penetrate the intact prehistoric ground surface. A broken polished dolerite stone axe was found in a subsoil context close to the wedge tomb.

A rock outcrop close to the wedge tomb was exposed and showed significant signs of quarrying along glacial fault lines. Modern objects had filtered through cracks in the rock, making the date of this activity uncertain. However, a number of Early Bronze Age pottery sherds were found on the prehistoric ground surface which



Top: Badge of the Louth Militia from the late 1700s—Laughanstown
 Above: Eighteenth-century military insignia from Laughanstown
 Left: Digital terrain model of oval enclosure at Laughanstown

Ceremonia complex

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abuts the outcrop, suggesting that the rock was probably utilised in the nearby wedge tomb and cairns.

The wedge tomb lies 10m north of the edge of the road route. A large oval enclosure with a hollow centre was suggested by the topographical survey. The monument is up to 30m in diameter. On removal of the sod and ploughsoil this was found to be defined by a low earthen bank, c. 8–10m wide, which was cast up from a central hollow some 10m wide. The earthen bank was subsequently capped with a ring of stones, mostly granite, of varying sizes. This survives best on the eastern side. There is no ditch. The entire monument, which had been constructed on a high point within the field, has been gradually reduced by ploughing. A number of pits containing large stones located on the path of furrows suggest the farmers' frustration with continually hitting obstacles. A fragment of a saddle quern formed part of the stone bank, along with a considerable number of hammerstones and a porphyry axe, the latter missing its butt end. The banks contain a number of features within their matrix which are currently being excavated. Some contain burnt bone fragments, charcoal and decorated and plain pottery fragments, while others contain only the latter. A stone spindle-whorl was recovered from a pit in the interior. Scatters of burnt human bone were found on the banks.



Collection of mixed prehistoric tools from excavations at Laughanstown/Glebe

At the moment the monument appears to be related to the ring-cairn/pond-barrow class of site, and may be a local expression of a variant on these types. The site was evidently not intended solely for the deposition of human remains, and seems rather to have formed an enclosure in which rituals took place. These may have related to the nearby tombs and cairns. Initial

indicators point to an Early Bronze Age date, although this has yet to be confirmed.

The resistivity survey undertaken during the pre-excavation survey suggests that a large trivallate enclosure may underlie part of the above enclosure. Archaeological testing to the south confirmed the presence of three ditches cut into natural ground. It is possible that these ditches will return below the monument. An early date would be expected for this site.

Enigmatic post-holes and ditches

Further excavations are being undertaken to the east of the sites above in Glebe townland. The area under investigation is located on level ground on the edge of a deep east/west-running gully with sloping sides to the north.

Following the stripping of sod and ploughsoil a number of features became apparent. Two blue glass beads and a barbed arrowhead were found in ploughsoil, along with a bone button/toggle, flint scrapers and débitage. Regular plough furrows truncated the initial prehistoric horizon. A very large post-hole packed with stones was recorded in the east of the site, cut into this layer. An earlier oblong deposit of red burnt clay with cremated bone was cut by the post-hole. The remaining area of this deposit retained the impression of charred branches laid across it.

Two ditches were also cut into this horizon. These are stratigraphically earlier than the above features. The western ditch has a rounded terminal and curves from north-west to south-west. The excavated sections suggest a V-shaped ditch recut on a number of occasions. The eastern ditch runs north-south and has a shallow U-shaped profile. A number of large pits are located between the two ditches. There are also large cavities created by tree stumps which must have been removed from the post-glacial natural boulder clay. The inner ditch is on average 1.1m wide and 0.8m deep. Both ditches radiate out from a large, ditched, subcircular enclosure. Sections dug into the ditch of this enclosure showed that it measured up to 2.3m in width and was generally over 1m in depth. To date the lower fills have yielded a cow's skull, assorted animal bones and a blank for a flint arrowhead. The enclosure is unusual as it lies on a considerable north-facing slope. Its size, purpose and date are as yet unknown, but it clearly pre-dates the demarcation of the townland boundaries between Glebe and Laughanstown.

Continuing work

The site is located in an area rich in excavated settlement and ritual activity from the Neolithic to the medieval period. Nearby extensive excavations at Cherrywood and Shankill show the proximity of possible contemporary activity in the form of *fulachta fiadh*, houses, pits and hearths. The site is overlooked from the south by Rathmichael hillfort and is situated in an area rich in megalithic tombs, barrows and other prehistoric monuments.

Laughanstown may have functioned as a complex ceremonial centre over considerable periods of time for communities living in the shadow of the mountains. Ongoing excavations will provide the opportunity to assess its significance at both a local and a regional level and over an extensive timespan. Excavations will continue into 2001. ■