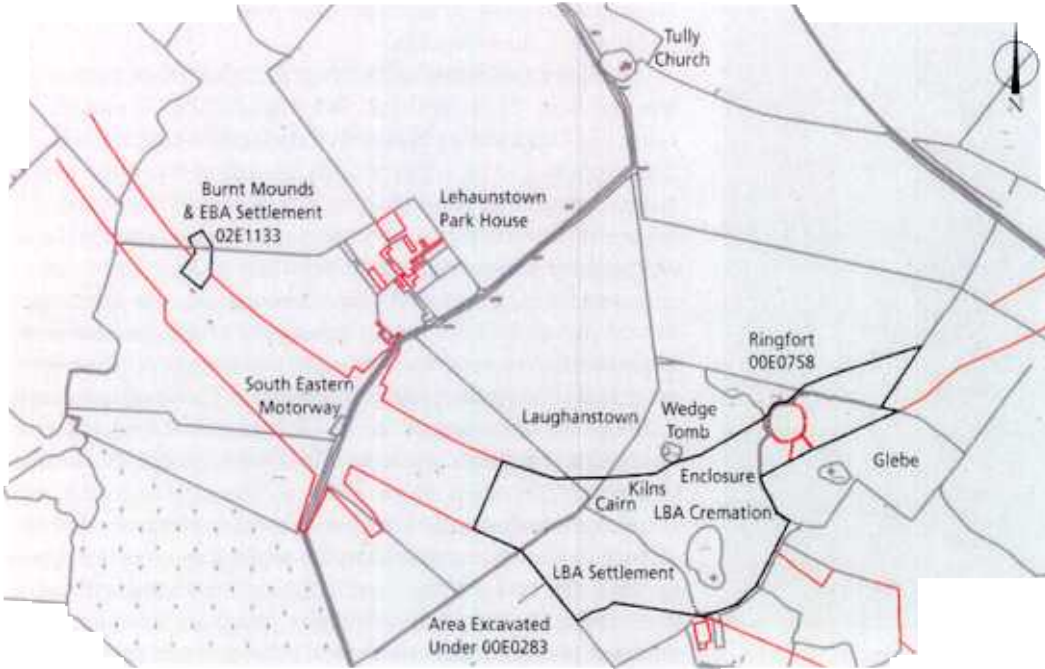




Matthew Seaver provides an overview of excavations along part of the route of the South-eastern motorway in south County Dublin

# From mountain to sea —excavations at Laughanstown/Glebe



Far left. Aerial view of Laughanstown and Glebe.

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Left: Sites at Laughanstown.

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Below left: Early Bronze Age cremation.

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Below: Saddle quern deposit on late Bronze Age settlement.

The townlands of Laughanstown and Glebe can be found up the narrow, winding Tully Lane in the barony of Rathdown in the shadow of the foothills of the Dublin Mountains. The area is a mixture of arable land and pasture, with granite furze-covered hills to the south. It is drained on either side by the Shanganagh and Loughlinstown rivers, whose wide flood-plain extended into Carrickmines and Laughanstown townlands.

Excavations between 2000 and 2002 by Valerie J. Keeley Ltd on the route of the South-eastern motorway uncovered a range of sites and

artefacts ranging in date from the Neolithic to the eighteenth century AD. Excavations were concentrated south of a wedge tomb which faces out to sea.

#### Tools and trees—Mesolithic to Neolithic

Mesolithic evidence was limited to a microlith and a number of blades from the ploughzone and silted contexts to the west. While there was no evidence for Neolithic structures within the excavated area, artefacts were plentiful. Material of probable Neolithic date





included a number of broken and complete stone axes, concave and hollow scrapers, leaf-shaped arrowheads, blades, cores and stray Western Neolithic potsherds. These were present within secondary contexts and within the ploughzone.

A burnt-out oak tree-bowl contained a number of concave scrapers and blades. This is suggestive of specific tasks being carried out in a woodland area, with the tools placed at the base of trees perhaps either for storage or to prevent injury to feet. Future microwear analysis may assist in interpretation of the tools.

### Home, stone and bone: early-late Bronze Age

Evidence for earlier Bronze Age occupation was found c. 65m south-east of the wedge tomb in the form of a scatter of post-holes, a hearth containing pottery of the Beaker tradition and a number of disc scrapers. A post-hole was dated to 2460–2200 cal. BC (OxA-12811).

In the south-west of the same field a cairn measuring 15m by 15m was excavated. It had been heavily disturbed by Early Christian kiln and medieval field boundary construction. A cremation of at least one adult in a cist immediately east of the cairn stones was dated to 2500–1950 cal. BC (OxA-12797). Vase Urn potsherds were found underneath the cairn material and the upper decorated section of a Cordoned Urn was discovered within it, implying middle Bronze Age activity at the cairn.

The pattern of early followed by middle Bronze Age activity is repeated 560m west of the main site, where deposits containing Vase tradition and Beaker pottery along with considerable numbers of end and side scrapers and a cup-marked stone were excavated on the edge of the marshy flood-plain running to the Shanganagh

River. The presence of cattle and sheep was inferred from teeth found within these deposits.

An adjacent burnt mound with circular troughs and stake-holes was dated to 2140–1890 cal. BC (OxA-12750). A number of Cordoned Urn tradition potsherds were found within the occupation deposits and an adjacent adult cremation was dated to the middle Bronze Age. Alder charcoal was commonly identified and suggested a different local environment to the oak, hazel and elm on the better-drained slopes to the east and south.

A second burnt mound was excavated close to the earlier Bronze Age settlement. Here a rectangular trough and two very large waterholes were dug down below the water-table. These were associated with a broken late Bronze Age pot. The trough produced a date at the beginning of the late Bronze Age. Subsequent very heavy silting suggests either land clearance upslope or climatic changes.

In the middle-late Bronze Age there is evidence for intense activity in the fields surrounding the wedge tomb. On the slopes to the south of the wedge tomb field an unenclosed settlement was excavated. Here two subcircular post-built structures were recorded, along with fence lines and other post settings. Artefacts recovered included a circular sandstone disc, sparse sherds of late Bronze Age pottery and an elegant plano-convex flint knife. The predominant tree species identified was oak, with elm and hazel also represented.

Between the two structures an elongated pit contained one large intact saddle quern and a collection of densely packed complete and incomplete examples. Distinctive D-shaped stone rubbers were found with the querns.

A collection of charred weeds, indeterminate cereals, barley and an oat grain were found within a large post-hole in the larger structure. A date of 905–800 cal. BC was obtained from this material (OxA-12754). A very similar date from a post to the north of the structure suggested that the site is from a single period of occupation. The saddle quern deposit suggests permanence (try to lift the largest example!) and crop management and may indicate a



Above: Early medieval drying kiln. © Valerie J. Keeley Ltd

Right: Artefacts from the ringfort site. © Valerie J. Keeley Ltd

Far right: Decorated bone from ringfort. © Valerie J. Keeley Ltd

In the middle–late Bronze Age there is evidence for intense activity in the fields surrounding the wedge tomb.

formal event such as the end of the settlement, as has been suggested in the case of other 'odd deposits' in middle–late Bronze Age settlements.

In the adjoining field, within a low oval stone enclosure 30m in diameter, a cluster of post-holes and a pit containing an identical D-shaped stone rubber were found. Oak charcoal in the pit was dated to 1220–970 cal. BC (OxA-12812). A pit-cremation was found on a rock outcrop to the south of the enclosure. It was partly contained within an upright plain pot sitting on a flat slab and was dated to the mid-tenth to early ninth century cal. BC.

Scatters of late Bronze Age pottery were found on rock outcrops throughout the field, and two large smashed coarseware vessels were recorded in separate pits. They were unaccompanied by burnt human bone; hazel charcoal within one pit was dated to the late Bronze Age.

#### Crops and cows—late Iron Age and early medieval

In the period surrounding the coming of Christianity, Laughanstown became the centre of a church site at *Telach na n-Espac* or Tully. It was an important centre in the territory of the Uí Briúin Chualann and from the eighth century it was linked with the cult of St Bridget. The full chronology of this complex, which includes two crosses, a church and a large external cropmark enclosure, 480m north of the excavations, has yet to be established. Four earth-cut kilns were found within the fields; three were associated with a distinctive cluster of post-hole and stake-hole groups measuring 2m by 2m and dated to 530–650 cal. AD (OxA-12814). The structure is probably linked to the processing of crops.

The kilns contained oats, wheat and barley. The deposits were radiocarbon-dated to the same narrow mid-sixth- to mid-seventh-century period as the post-hole structure. Numbers of common hedgerow species suggest organised fields. The dates and form of the kilns are similar to clusters of recently excavated early medieval examples and imply large-scale crop growth in the earlier part of the first millennium, probably pre-dating the ringfort described below.

#### Glebe ringfort

In the neighbouring field in Glebe a substantial ringfort was excavated on the townland boundary with Laughanstown. Its situation could suggest that the townland was formed from the monument and its associated fields: the boundary curve is depicted on the Down Survey map of 1656 and this is also the parish boundary between Tully and Rathmichael.

The ringfort was on a steep north-facing slope and measured 46m in diameter internally. There was a surviving bank on the western side and a south-east-facing entrance gap. Large quarried slabs and boulders in the expanded terminals of the ditch suggested that the entrance was protected by a stone-revetted bank. An off-

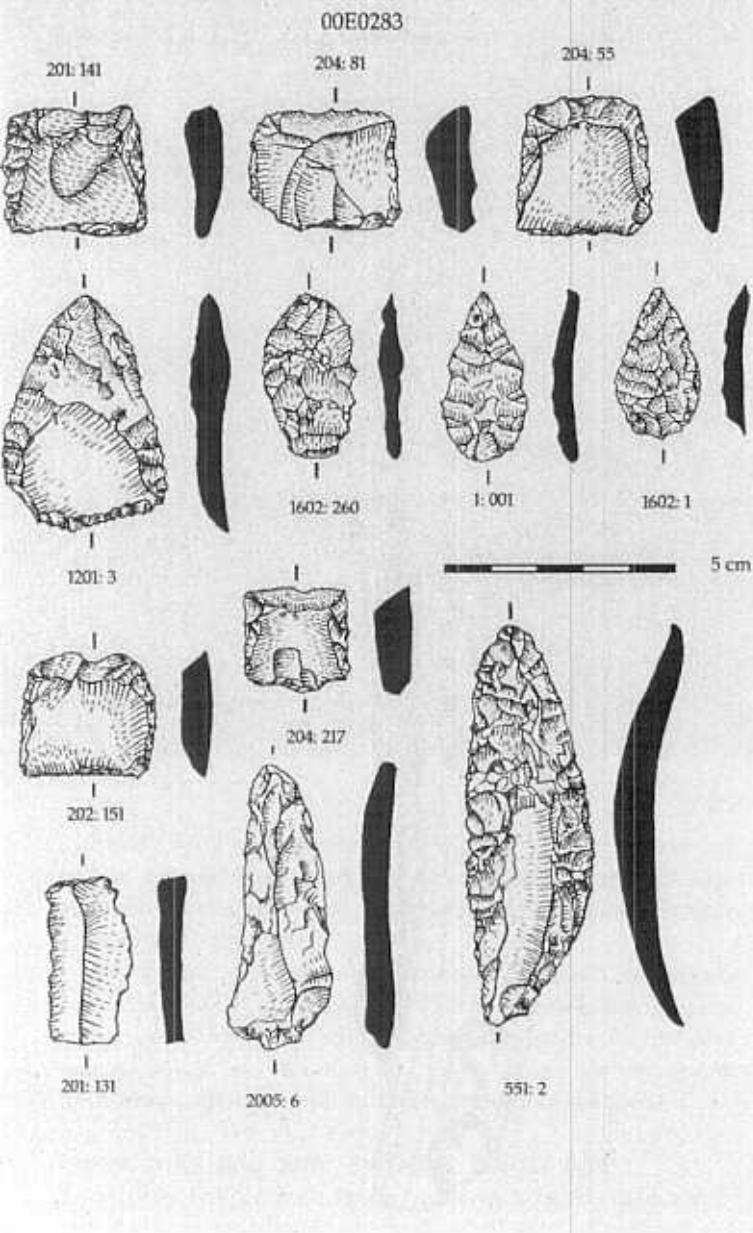


5 cm

centre cluster of post-holes, a hearth and a pit were suggestive of a house. A post-built palisade on the northern side overlooked a steep gully below.

Two smaller ditches radiating away from the ringfort on the flat level ground to the north delimited field enclosures. The curving townland boundary complemented one of these, suggesting a petal-shaped enclosure. A number of the ditches had been recut on the same line. A stone-lined post-hole marking one of these boundaries was dated to between the late seventh and late ninth centuries AD.

The animal bone assemblage demonstrated the presence and on-site butchery of cattle, sheep and pig. Smaller numbers of deer and goat, horse, cat and dog were also present, together with



Above: Prehistoric and post-medieval flint objects. © Valerie J. Keeley Ltd

middens of seashells. Furthermore, the remains of an infant were found in a pit in the interior. Hawthorn, blackthorn and hazel dominated the identified charcoal.

Two bones were inscribed with dot decoration while another had a raised cross formed by four C-shaped motifs. A further example was inscribed with the word *Deo* and a chi-rho symbol. The form of these may suggest that the inhabitants had a knowledge of church manuscripts. It is worth noting that the place-name Glebe denotes church lands and that this is the only part of Rathmichael parish north of the Loughlinstown River.

Other finds include bone pins, parts of ringed pins, glass beads, a stone spindle-whorl and slag associated with smithing. A burnt broken rotary quern was also found, and palaeo-environmental investigation yielded limited amounts of charred oat, wheat and barley. Samples taken from occupation deposits suggested that occupation of the site could be dated to between 670–830 and 650–730 cal. AD (OxA-12718–12720).

Differences are apparent in the specific ways these communities chose to produce food, how they lived with their dead, how boundaries and settlements were built and marked, and the way in which objects were made, worn, deposited or lost.

### Castles, fields and the protection of empire—medieval to post-medieval

Laughanstown was granted to Christchurch Cathedral in the eleventh century by a Hiberno-Norse noble and was subsequently heavily farmed for cereals: an assemblage of plough pebbles was testimony to this, as was medieval pottery in the ploughsoil which was probably deposited during manuring. The lands were administered from the castle located in the nearby Lehaunstown Park House. A medieval gold finger-ring and a club-headed stick-pin were also found in the ploughzone.

A series of intermittent parallel ditches ran east-west across the fields in a long 'S' shape as the land sloped upward into the hillside. One of these features was drystone-revetted. There was evidence of substantial earth and stone banks flanking them, and they seem to have operated as field boundaries. The ditches contained medieval pottery, a fragment of glass and a horseshoe. Post-medieval activity was attested by a multitude of furrows and field drains to the west.

A number of artefacts recovered relate to the military camp at Laughanstown (1796–1801) that was established to counter any threat of a Napoleonic landing at Killiney. These included badges, musket shot, buttons, tokens, coins and gun flints and demonstrate the probability that the wedge tomb field served as a communication route to the Bride's Glen and onward to Wicklow. A now-disused routeway is shown on eighteenth-century maps and is partially preserved in field boundaries.

The excavations have revealed different aspects of the unwritten history of the townlands. The archaeological evidence has demonstrated continuities in the need to work the land for food and shelter. Differences are apparent in the specific ways they chose to produce food, how these communities lived with their dead, how boundaries and settlements were built and marked, and the way in which objects were made, worn, deposited or lost. They connect to broader patterns detected in other archaeological work carried out in the wider area. This synthesis provides an opportunity to interpret and present to the public the archaeology of an area undergoing great changes. ■

#### Acknowledgements

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