

Title The Ballyhanna Research Project—an introduction

Speaker Michael MacDonagh

Michael MacDonagh is a Senior Archaeologist with the NRA, heading up its NW Archaeology Team based out of the Donegal National Road Design Office. Michael graduated with an MA in archaeology from UCD in 1992 and spent seven years in Northern Ireland working for both the Environment & Heritage Service and the private sector, carrying out excavations, survey, bogland prospection and heritage management. After a couple of years spent in Berlin carrying out excavations he returned to join Donegal County Council working on project managing NRA road schemes and has been in his current position since January of this year.

Organisation National Roads Authority

Road Scheme N15 Bundoran–Ballyshannon Bypass

In late 2003, excavations began on a site where human skeletal remains had been recently discovered along the route of the N15 Bundoran–Ballyshannon Bypass outside Ballyshannon, Co. Donegal. The work at Ballyhanna by Irish Archaeological Consultancy Ltd (Site Director: Brian O’Donoghue) over the next six months uncovered a substantial medieval graveyard around the stone foundations of a small building, thought to be the remains of Ballyhanna Church. People were being buried at the graveyard during or shortly after the reign of Edward I (1272–1307). A silver penny found with one of the burials is evidence of this. Coins from the reign of Henry IV indicate the graveyard, if not the church itself, was still in use in the early 15th century. It was clear following the excavation that the large amount of skeletal material could provide a wealth of information on the lifestyle, diets and causes of illness and death within a medieval population. Accordingly, a cross-border research team was established to identify areas of scientific research that would glean the most information from the material. The result of that collaboration is the NRA-funded Ballyhanna Research Project.

The Project’s academic partners are Queen’s University, Belfast (QUB), and Institute of Technology, Sligo (ITS). Over the next three years these two institutions shall produce a number of significant bodies of research through two Masters of Science (ITS) and a PhD doctorate in osteoarchaeology (QUB). Osteoarchaeologist Catriona McKenzie is carrying out the PhD. Dr Eileen Murphy, QUB, who is herself carrying out specific osteoarchaeological analysis of the juvenile skeletons is supervising the PhD. Dr Colm Donnelly, QUB, is also on the project management board providing project management expertise. Róisín McCarthy, the projects osteoarchaeological research assistant, is co-ordinating the activities of all team members and is also carrying out the osteoarchaeological analysis of the disarticulated remains. Tasneem Bashir, analytical chemist, is carrying out an MSc to use elemental analysis to probe nutritional status and its subsequent effect on human health. Dr Ted McGowan, ITS, is supervising this research. Sheila Tierney, biomolecular scientist, is carrying out MSc attempting to unlock the secrets of the gender of some of the juvenile and infant skeletons buried at Ballyhanna. Dr Jeremy Bird, ITS, is supervising this research and heading up the ITS management of the project.

The results of the Ballyhanna Research Project will be published upon its completion and it is hoped that this multidisciplinary approach will add significantly to our understanding of medieval Ballyshannon and more generally of medieval Ireland.