

# Archaeological Investigation of a Ringfort at Ballyduff, Co. Limerick

R. M. CLEARY\*

*In 1979, a single-banked ringfort zoned for partial destruction during road-widening operations was planned and archaeologically investigated to a limited degree. Apart from construction details of the bank and fosse, and some evidence in the interior for hearths, a trench and paved/cobbled areas, little else and no dating evidence was found.*

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This site<sup>1</sup> was first brought to the attention of the Department of Archaeology, University College, Cork, by Mr. Richard Leonard, Limerick County Council. Road improvements on T50 (the Mitchelstown-Ballylanders Road) involved its widening and the partial destruction of the adjacent earthwork. The Department of Archaeology agreed to carry out a rescue excavation, which was directed by Mr. Vincent Hurley, now of the Office of Public Works, and the writer. A grant of £1,860 was made available by Limerick County Council in 1979 which allowed the employment of two workmen for the excavation which took place during July/August, 1979, for a period of seven weeks.

## THE SITE

Before excavation the earthwork appeared as a single bank-and-ditch enclosure, oval in plan and measuring 43m. N-S by 48m. E-W externally. The bank was up to 1.50m. in height and the ditch was a maximum 1.50m. in depth. Traces of a second bank were detected when a section was cut through the bank at the South. In the north-western section of the enclosure there was a gap 7m. in length (NW-SE) and 3.2m. wide. The fosse had been cut across this area but was infilled with boulders, now sod-covered; the bank there was gapped with rounded ends and appeared to form the sides of an entrance. However, local information suggests that this may not in fact have been the original entrance but, rather, a way into the enclosure which had been constructed in the early 1950s.

The following surface irregularities were noticed before excavation (see Illus. 1):

*Feature 1.* A crescent-shaped low ridge within the north-western quadrant of the enclosure. Its maximum internal width was 2m. and the external width 5m. (NE-SW). This was partly excavated and is described below.

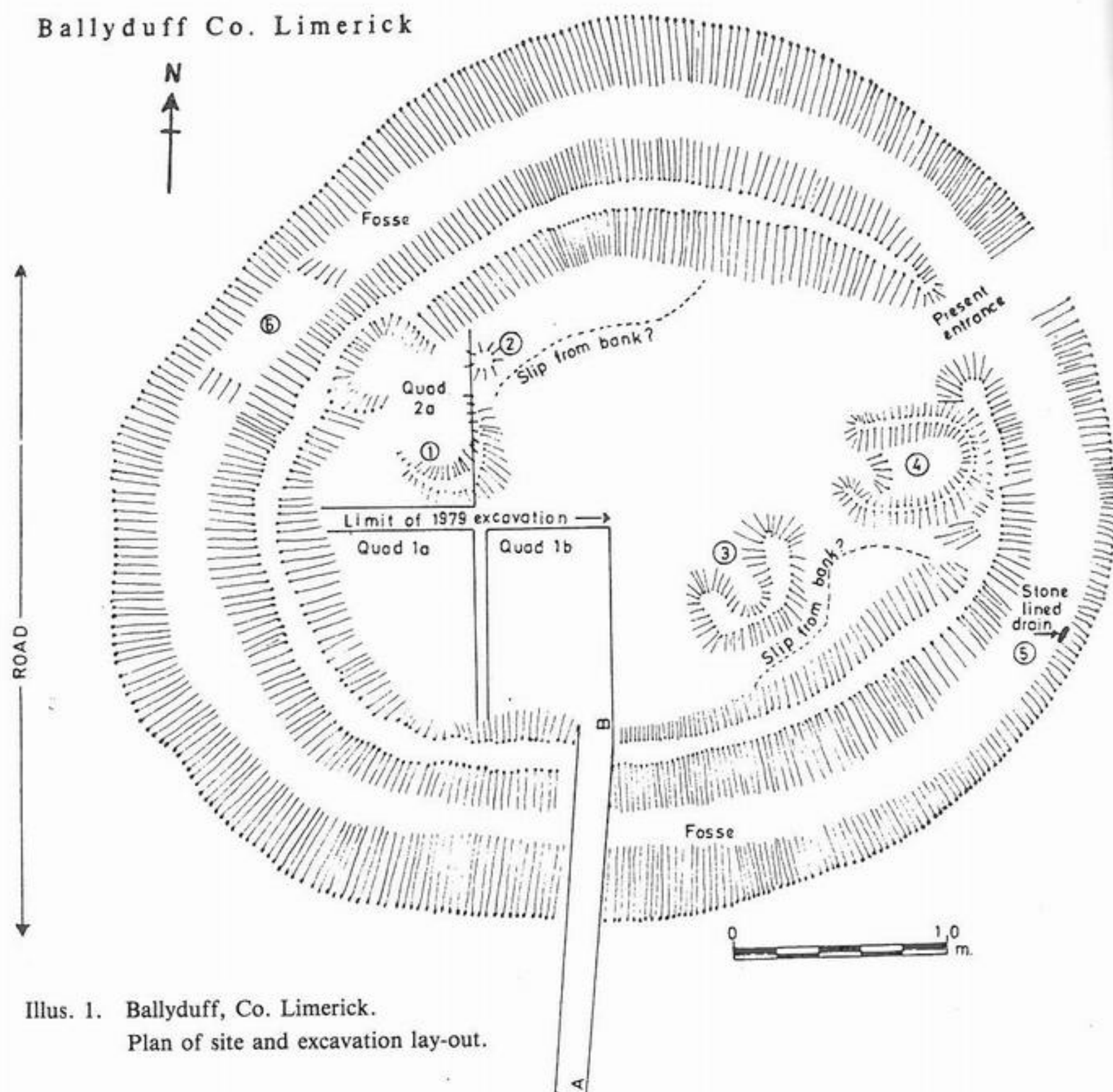
*Feature 2.* A low mound, 1.50m. in diameter, in the north-western quadrant, within an area which was apparently covered by slip from the bank.

*Feature 3.* A crescent-shaped low ridge adjacent to the south-western section of the bank. This was 7m. in width (NE-SW) and the enclosed space was about 1.20m. across.

*Feature 4.* A low horseshoe-shaped bank in the eastern part of the enclosure. The area within it was slightly raised and about 4m. across (W-E).

\*Dept. of Archaeology, University College, Cork.

<sup>1</sup>Td. Ballyduff; Par. Ballylanders; Bar. Coshlea; Co. Limerick; O.S. 6-inch scale sheet 57 (69.5cm. from W.; 44.5cm. from S.; c.575 ft. above O.D.).



Illus. 1. Ballyduff, Co. Limerick.  
Plan of site and excavation lay-out.

*Feature 5.* A stone-lined drain, about 75cm. in width, built into the bottom of the ditch face on the eastern side. Since the ditch was continually water-logged, it may be that it was constructed to carry water from the ditch and the site in general.

*Feature 6.* Visible as a slight 9m. wide rise in the level of the ditch in the north-western quadrant. A depression in the bank occurred at this point. It is possible that this feature, taken in conjunction with the depression in the bank, represents the original entrance to the enclosure but, unfortunately, circumstances did not allow its excavation.

### THE EXCAVATION

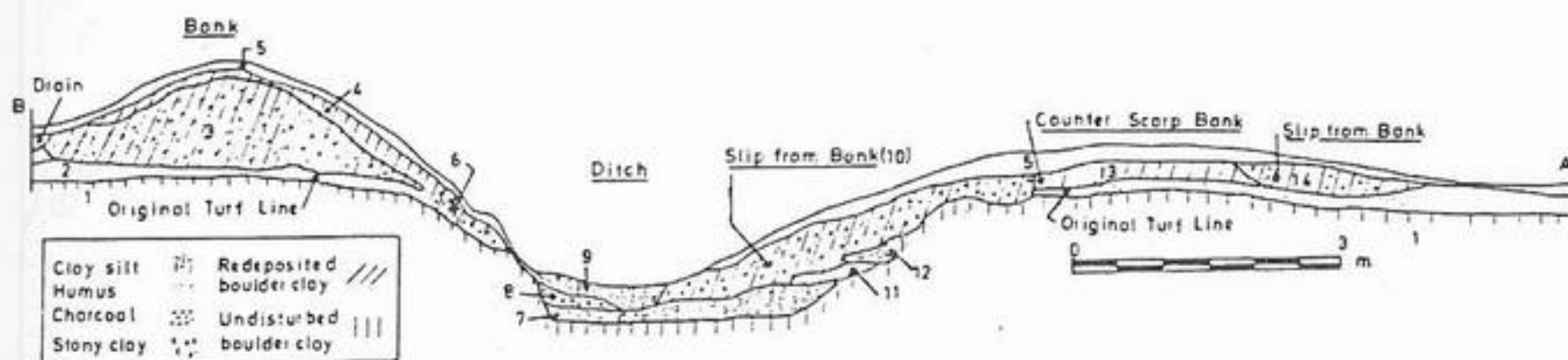
Excavation was concentrated in the western side of the earthwork, that which was nearest the road. This area was laid out in a quadrant system and it was possible to excavate three areas, namely Quadrants 1a, 1b and 2a, a total area of about 170 metres square.



### Bank and Ditch (Section A-B, Illus. 1 and 2)

A cutting, 1.60m. wide and 17.20m. long, was excavated through the southern part of the earthwork. The sectional profile indicated a second, outer, bank. The internal bank was 1.10m. high and 4.20m. wide at this point. It was built directly on the original turf line (layer 2) which was apparent as a 15-20cm. thick band of dark greyish-brown soil on top of the undisturbed boulder clay. The bank consisted of redeposited boulder clay (layers 3-4) and a sod-cover (layer 5). Layer 3 was charcoal flecked while layer 4 was not. The charcoal in the boulder clay of layer 3 may have occurred naturally and the absence of charcoal in layer 4 may be due to the fact that its material was originally deeper than that of layer 3 before being thrown up from the ditch. Layer 6, on the outer edge of the bank, was a mixture of redeposited boulder clay and stony humic clay and probably represents slip from the bank. A shallow drain was cut into the inside edge of the bank. This was 20cm. deep and up to 80cm. wide, and may have been dug to catch run-off water from the bank and thus keep the interior of the enclosure dry.

Layers 7-12 represents silting-up of the ditch which was flat-bottomed. The ditch was 2.60m. in width at its bottom and 1.50m. in depth below the original ground level. The bottom layer (layer 7) was a grey clay silt which varied from 15-40cm. in thickness. Above this, on the northern side, was layer 8 which was similar to layer 6 above, a mixture of redeposited boulder and stony humic clay, and likewise probably represented slip from the bank. Layer 9 was a clay silt. Layer 10 was a mixture of redeposited boulder and stony humic clay, possibly derived from the counter scarp bank to the south. Layer 11, also on the south side, was redeposited boulder clay. Layer 12 was a clay silt. From the above description of the ditch fill, it appears that the silting-up of the ditch occurred in five separate



Illus. 2. Ballyduff, Co. Limerick. Sectional profile (A-B) through bank and ditch.

phases: (1) the lowest level of silting (layer 7) must have occurred soon after the ditch was cut; (2) sections of both the main enclosing bank layer (8) and the counter scarp bank (layer 11) subsequently slipped into the ditch; (3) layer 12 represented some silting over slip from the counter scarp bank; (4) the depth and extent of layer 10 suggests that this was a deliberate levelling of the counter scarp bank into the ditch; (6) layer 9 represented recent silting-up of the ditch and was an organically rich deposit.

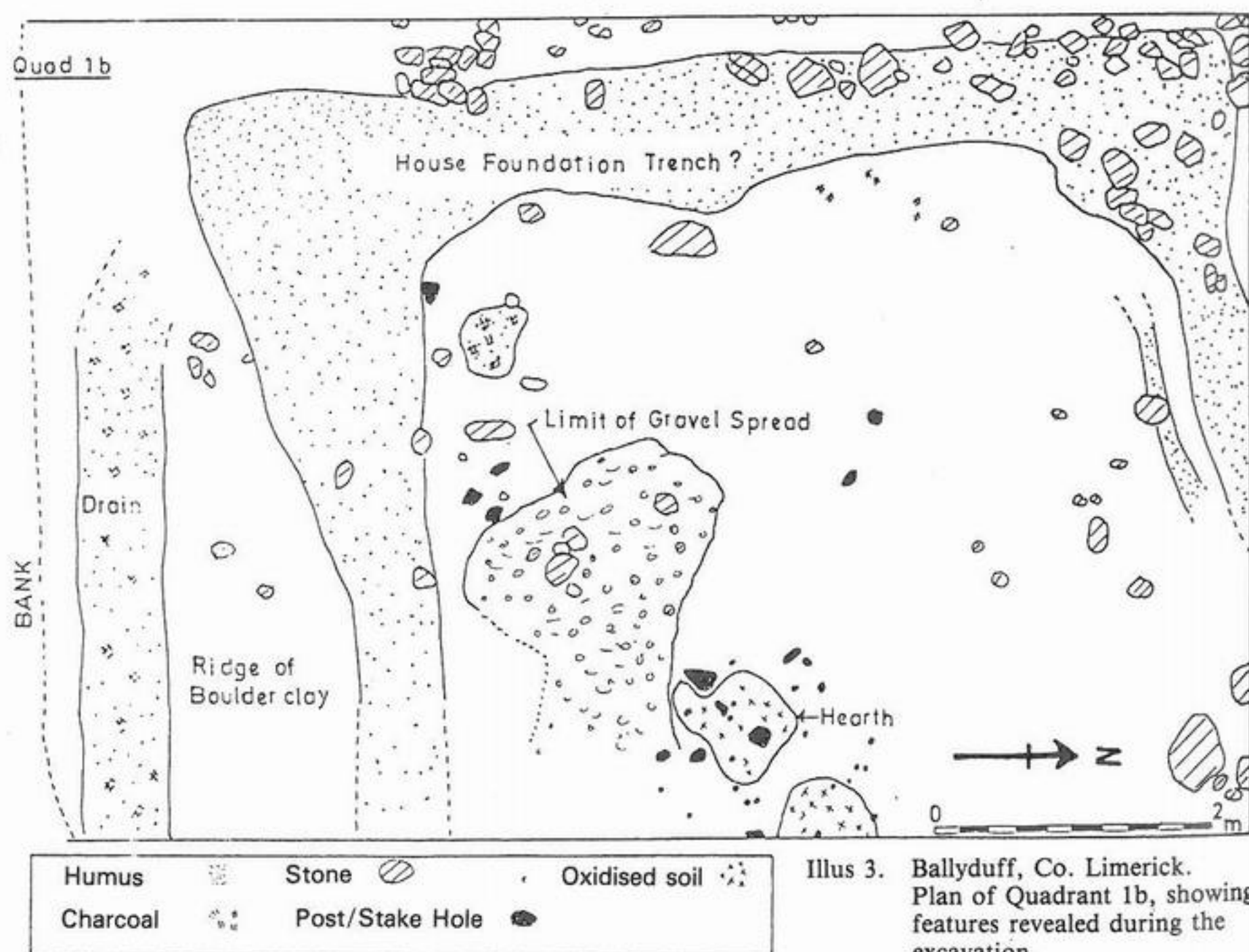
The counter scarp bank lay directly on the old turf line and was 2.50m. wide. It appeared to have been levelled on top and only survived as a 20-30cm. thick layer (layer 13) of redeposited boulder clay similar to layer 4 of the main bank. The slip from the counter scarp bank (layer 14) formed a shallow, round-bottomed feature, 2.20m. wide, and was evident as a mixture of redeposited boulder and stony humic clay. This overlay a 10cm. thick band of humus, the original ground surface.

## The Interior (Illus 1 and 3)

*Quadrant 1b.* This area produced the main evidence for activity within the excavated areas of the ringfort. A trench, which varied in width from 50cm. to 2m. occurred on the south, west and north sides of the cutting. This was filled with humus and small boulders, and has been tentatively interpreted as a house foundation trench. Within this was a hearth-site which was adjacent to the eastern side of the quadrant. It consisted of a circular spread of oxidised soil, 80cm. in diameter. Five post-holes and fifteen stake-holes were recorded in and around the hearth-site. The post-holes were 10-20cm. in diameter, 15-20cm. deep, and generally tapered to a point. The stake-holes were 2-5cm. in diameter and had a maximum of 5cm. in depth. A gravel spread on the southern edge of the hearth was not a naturally occurring feature and must have been introduced. Six post-holes, each about 20cm. in diameter, were also recorded within the area enclosed by the 'house foundation trench'. A 4m. long drain had been dug adjacent to the southern bank of the ringfort. This varied from 70-80cm. in width.

*Quadrant 1a.* The main feature within this area was a hearth-site, about 30cm. in diameter, apparent as a spread of oxidised soil surrounded by a large spread of charcoal-flecked humus. Two amorphous gravel spreads were also recorded in this quadrant.

*Quadrant 2a.* A roughly-set paving composed of small flat boulders was recorded in the southern part of this area. Two more closely-set cobbled areas were recorded on the north-western and south-western sides of the paving. These paved and cobbled areas were



Illus 3. Ballyduff, Co. Limerick. Plan of Quadrant 1b, showing features revealed during the excavation.



visible prior to excavation as a low ridge (Feature 1). Similar features outside the limit of the excavation, *i.e.* Features 3 and 4, may perhaps also be paved areas, or even stone-built structures.

## RESULTS

The site did not produce any finds and there was no indication of a date. The evidence from the partially excavated quadrants, however, suggests that there was occupation of some type within the enclosure at Ballyduff.

A record of the details of the excavation has been lodged in the topographical files in the Department of Archaeology, University College, Cork, and is available for consultation.

## Acknowledgments

The writer wishes to acknowledge Limerick County Council for funding the excavation and servicing the site, and to thank the workmen and students who assisted with the excavation.