

‘All shall forgotten lie’ Archaeological Excavations at Sir Harry’s Mall, Limerick City

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A total of ninety human skeletons, as well as considerable quantities of disarticulated human and animal bone, were recovered during excavations at Sir Harry’s Mall in 2005. Stratigraphic information reveals that there were up to four phases of burial. Between the two earliest phases, the site appears to have temporarily ceased to function as a cemetery. It is surmised that at least some of the later burials may be post-medieval in date. There is no recorded tradition of burials in this area of Limerick City, immediately outside the historic Town Walls.

Location & Background

The site is located immediately outside the medieval town wall at the southern end of King’s Island, Limerick City, and on the right bank of the Abbey River (NGR 158088/157404). Baal’s Bridge – the site of the medieval bridge linking English Town on King’s Island with Irish Town to the south – is located immediately to the southwest of the site. It is in the vicinity of the priory of the Crutched Friars or *Frates Cruciferi* (Priory of Ss Mary and Edward). The site was within the zone of archaeological potential for the historic town of Limerick. Prior to the archaeological test trenching and excavation the precise position of the Town Wall in this area was unknown due to conflicting cartographic evidence. Immediately to the east of the site an earlier archaeological excavation uncovered medieval remains, including part of a medieval burial ground relating to the monastic foundation in the area (Hanley 1998).

A preliminary desk-based archaeological assessment of the site was previously undertaken (Collins 2002). Following that assessment the site was investigated by archaeological test trenching (Coyne 2004; archaeological licence no.: 03E1610ext.). Archaeological material was uncovered during the test trenching and the site was subsequently excavated in advance of development. The excavation took place in April and May 2005, in advance of the development of the site by Kenrite Construction Ltd. To minimise disturbance of the archaeological deposits a pile foundation layout was chosen for the proposed development (plate 1). The excavated archaeological trenches corresponded to the pile locations. The area measured approximately 37m by 10m, of which approximately one-third was excavated by hand.



Plate 1 General view of site from northeast.

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Historical Setting

To the southwest of the site is Baal's Bridge. There was a medieval bridge here and the earliest maps of the area document that fact. It seems to have been built across a fording point of the Abbey River. This bridge was pivotal in the development of the town as it was the only link for many years between the two medieval quarters of Englishtown and Irishtown. It gave Limerick its distinctive 'hour-glass' shape. The medieval bridge at this point was fortified having a gate or tower at both sides of the Abbey River (the gate/tower on the Englishtown side was partially revealed during excavations by O'Donovan 2002).

The origin of the name Baal's Bridge (or Ball's Bridge as it is commonly known) is unclear. One explanation is that the original bridge was known as the 'Bald Bridge', meaning that it had no parapets (walls at either side). The area of Baal's Bridge was a ford when the Normans first attacked the city in 1175 (*Giraldus Cambrensis...*). It is surmised that the earliest bridge at this fording point was a wooden structure dating to 1175 and constructed by the Normans (Hodkinson 2002, 5). Recent excavations by Ed O'Donovan (archaeological licence number 98E0581) indicated that a stone bridge was constructed here in the early thirteenth century (O'Donovan 2000). In Speed's map of Limerick dated to 1611 the bridge is recorded as 'Ye Bridge'. Lenihan states that 'in old maps printed in Leyden in the seventeenth century' it is 'the Thye Bridge' and describes it as 'a sort of old London Bridge in miniature' with houses and shops built on either side (Lenihan 1866, 475). The bridge was repaired in the 1670s. In the 1690s the houses on the east side of the bridge (upstream side) were demolished, in order to make the crossing of the bridge easier. It is recorded that several well-to-do families lived on the bridge, when it was lined by houses just prior to its replacement in 1830. The then bridge was described as having four arches, with the landside ones springing from the quay walls (the abutments of the present bridge were formerly part of the watercourse and is much narrower than the original). In 1830 the old bridge was taken down and replaced, the new bridge being designed by Messrs Paine at a cost of £600. The new bridge was completed by 1831 (*ibid.*) and was a single span (as it remains today).

Henry Hartstonge, MP for Limerick, 1766-1790, was responsible for the construction of Sir Harry's Mall around 1760 after his reclamation of the foreshore. The Georgian houses along Sir Harry's Mall on the site were built outside the Town Walls of Limerick so as to be free from taxes (Hannan 1996, 26). These houses were removed in 1908 and presumably replaced by the structures which were recently demolished at the site. The site is currently the location of *Gaelcholáiste Luimnigh* which was constructed once the archaeological excavation was complete.

Previous Archaeological Investigations

A number of archaeological investigations have been undertaken in the areas surrounding the present site, and these are listed in **Table 1**. The list does not cover the entirety of archaeological investigations carried out in the Englishtown of Limerick. It only lists those sites in the vicinity of the area that was excavated.

Location	Site	Licence No.	Director	Findings
Fish Lane/Sir Harry's Mall	Augustinian foundation and /or that of the Crutched Friars	96E0334	K. Hanley	Medieval and post-medieval structures, human burials
Northern Relief Road	St Francis Abbey	95E0218	F. Hurley	Medieval remains and cemetery
Nos 48-50 Mary St		00E0635	T. Collins	Medieval pottery, late medieval undercrofts
Barrington's Hospital / Limerick Art College		02E0024	T. Collins	Georgian cellars
Sheep Street	'Abbey Site'	02E1318	T. Collins	Town wall, post-medieval remains
Limerick Main Drainage Scheme, George's Quay / Baal's Bridge		98E0581	E. O'Donovan	Town wall, medieval bridge, defensive tower
'Abbey Area'		03E1364	L.G. Lynch	Human burials

Table 1. List of recent archaeological excavations in the vicinity of Sir Harry's Mall

Archaeological Excavations at Sir Harry's Mall

A number of trenches in the original test trenching of this site (Coyne 2004) exposed the Town Wall running east/west on the north side of the site. This subsequently dictated the location of the pile foundations and therefore the archaeological trenches for the excavation (archaeological licence no. 05E0376). A total of 22 trenches was excavated. Ninety *in situ* human skeletons were uncovered in 8 of the trenches (Trenches 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 11, 17, and 18). The present excavations were confined between the medieval Town Wall, which ran east-west along the north of the site along Little Fish Lane, and a later Quay Wall, probably post-medieval, running parallel at the south.

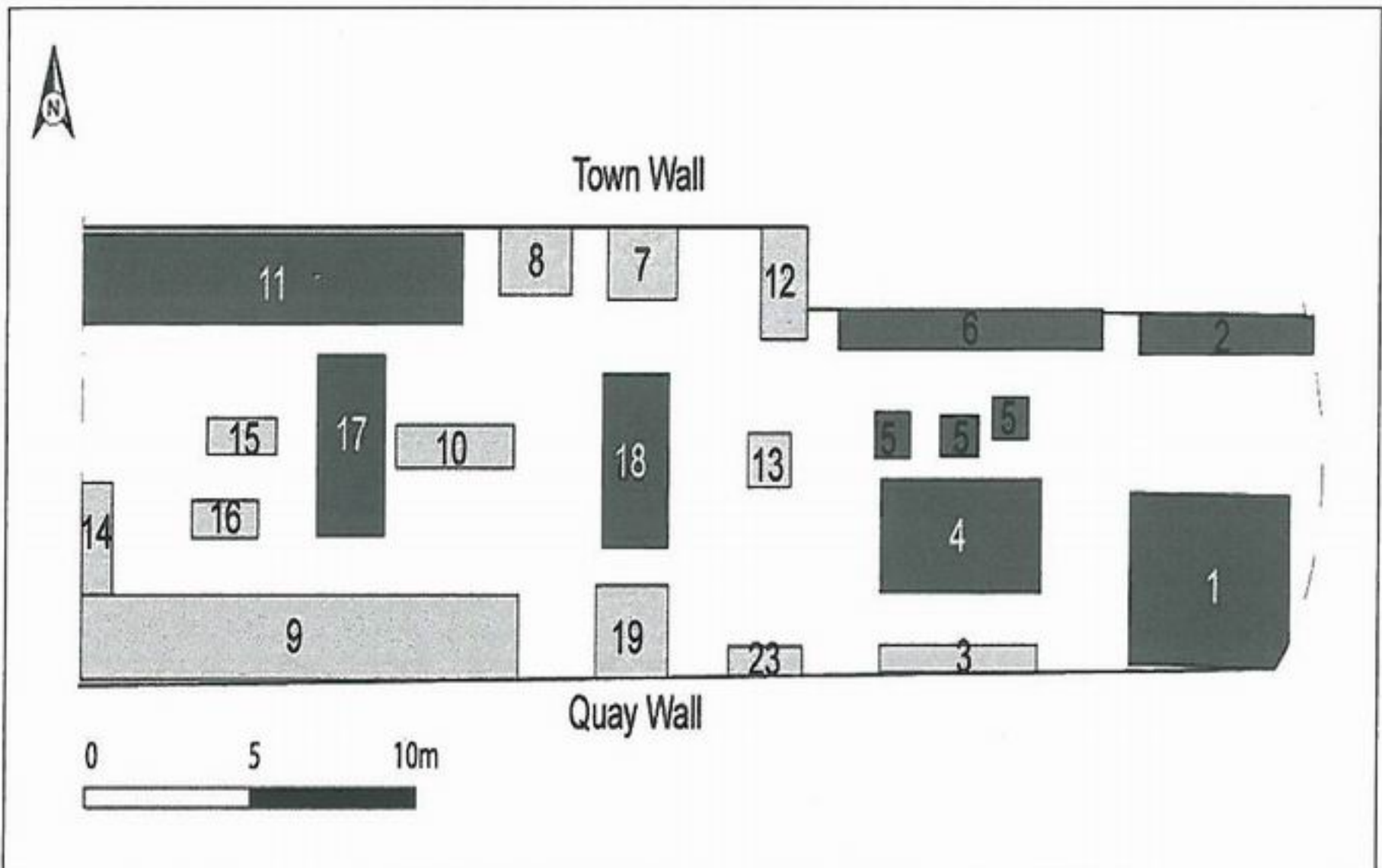


Figure 1 Trench layout as excavated at Sir Harry's Mall, human burials recovered in shaded trenches

The northern side of the site (that is, on the interior side of the Town Wall) was not investigated during the current excavation as piles were not required in this area. However, during pre-excavation testing of the site remains of post and wattle were revealed to the north of the Town Wall and these are probably the remains of medieval burgrave (house) plots, which would have fronted onto to the east side of Mary Street, the medieval main street of the English town (Coyne 2004).

An extensive stretch of the southern exterior face of the medieval Town Wall was exposed during this phase of works and the excavations were confined to the south of the Town Wall (that is, outside the original walled town). While the plinth of the wall was exposed, the actual foundation of the wall was not revealed during the excavations. No evidence of an external ditch was recorded, although this may have been influenced by the pile foundation layout, which confined the excavations.

The north facing aspect of the east/west length of Quay Wall was exposed on the south side of the site. Again, as with the Town Wall, the base of this wall was not exposed. While its precise date of construction is not known, it is surmised that it is post-medieval. The excavation trenches were confined between this wall and the Town Wall to the north.

Few structural remains were uncovered during the excavations. This is not surprising, however, given that prior to the construction of the Quay Wall this area would literally have been on the water's edge. Prior to excavation up to 1.20m of rubble from recently demolished 20th century houses was removed. More wall footings were discovered beneath this layer (particularly in Tr1), possibly of the Georgian period houses built after foreshore reclamation and construction of the mall around 1760. A small square foundation was recovered at a considerable depth in the southeast corner of the site (Tr1; plate 2). This truncated a number of human burials. The structure is likely to be the remains of a basement associated with the Georgian houses. Apart from that foundation and the remains of the modern structures that were recently demolished there were no other structural remains. The main archaeological remains uncovered on the site were human skeletons.



Plate 2 Probable Georgian foundations, from south

The Burials

A total of ninety skeletons was recovered during the excavation and the osteo-archaeological analysis is on-going. The *in situ* skeletal remains were generally in a good state of preservation. However, there was significant truncation of a large number of skeletons in antiquity, primarily through repeated burials in the location, which indicated the longevity of use at the site. A wide demographic profile is apparent in this cemetery from the on-site investigations, from foetal remains (that is, pre-birth infants) through to older adults (45+ years), with both male and female individuals present. The trench method of excavation did not allow for a specific overall site matrix to be established with any accuracy, although it was possible to identify similar deposits within trenches, and thus establish the phasing of burial. Up to four possible phases of burial were identified at Sir Harry's Mall.

The earliest phase of burial (eight individuals) that could be ascertained was in two trenches, Tr4 and Tr11. In Tr4 a series of burials was recovered in a dark silty humic-rich layer. These burials pre-dated the insertion of a double row of wooden stakes. This row of stakes was aligned northwest/southeast. In Tr11 a small number of burials was recovered in the base of the trench,

at a considerable depth in comparison to other burials in the trench. In Tr11 a series of deposits were laid down, some likely to be natural, some manmade, between these lowermost burials and the other burials, indicating a temporary cessation of burial activity.

The next discernible burial period (thirty-one individuals) was identified in Tr4. This represents a very concentrated phase of burial, with frequent intercutting of earlier burials, and at least one “double” burial, (Skeleton 136 and Skeleton 137). This comprised two adult individuals lying side-by-side. The right arm of the individual to the north overlay the left arm of the other individual. The burials of this phase post-dated the double row of wooden stakes that were inserted here following the first phase of burials. All of the burials identified in Tr5 were attributed to this phase. Again, many of the burials truncated earlier inhumations.

Burials in a number of trenches are tentatively assigned to the third phase of burial (thirty-six individuals). These were in Trenches 1, 2, 4, 6, 11, and 17. In Tr1 and Tr2, this was the only phase of burial identified. This phase of burial encompassed much of the site and represents both the most intensive phase of burial and the most widely distributed. Finally the latest burials were identified in Tr6 and Tr11 (ten individuals). A further five burials have yet to be assigned a phase. These are the burials recovered in Tr17 (Skeleton 42 and Skeleton 55), Skeleton 10 and Skeleton 22 in Tr1, and Skeleton 99 in Tr11.

	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4	Unphased	Total
<i>No. of individual burials</i>	8	31	36	10	5	90

Table 2 Preliminary phasing of burials, Sir Harry’s Mall

In general the burials were supine (lying on the back) and extended and were orientated in a west/east direction with the heads to the west. However, there were some noticeable exceptions. An adult individual (Skeleton 37, sex undetermined at present, Phase 4) *was* buried with the head to the west. However, this individual had been buried in a prone position, that is, buried lying on the stomach. In addition, there was one example of a double burial (plate 3), as mentioned above. These two individuals – Skeleton 136 male 14/15 years and Skeleton 137 possible female adult – were buried together side-by-side at the same time in Phase 2.



Plate 3 Skeleton 136 (male 14/15 years) and Skeleton 137 (possible female adult), from east



Plate 4 Skeleton 81 (adult, sex undetermined at present), from north

Skeleton 81 from Phase 3 was that of an adult (sex undetermined at present) who had been buried in a crouched position on her/his left side (plate 4). The burial position of this individual is, in itself, unusual compared with the majority of the skeletons from the site. However, the reason for this burial position is hinted at in the skeletal remains. During the excavation of this individual it was apparent that there were serious pathological lesions on the spine, with destruction and collapse of the bones, and subsequent kyphosis or curvature of the spine. Initial indications are that this may be a case of secondary tuberculosis although further analysis is needed to confirm this diagnosis. Therefore it is likely that this adult was buried in this crouched position due to the abnormal curvature of the spine.

Discussion

‘All shall forgotten lie, with slime o’erspread:
Sand cast on sand shall hide him, heap on heap,
Clad in a miry shroud, the chief shall sleep:
None shall collect his bones: his tomb unknown:’

(*The Iliad*, Book 21, 296)

There are ninety *in situ* burials recovered from *circa* one-third of the area that was developed. It can be estimated that there may be at least another one hundred and eighty skeletons left unexcavated on the site, preserved *in situ* under the current structure. Clearly this site was a well-utilised burial ground. Yet its existence is not recorded in any historical documents.

An initial dating of the burials may be suggested. The earliest burials in Tr11 lay immediately against the Town Wall, and thus post-date the construction of the wall in *circa* AD1237. The indications are that this cemetery may be associated with the site of the *Fratres Cruciferi*. The Priory was founded in AD1211/12 according to the Pipe Roll (Hodkinson 1990, 41). Given the

proximity of the known location of the Priory of Ss Mary and Edward (the *Fratres Cruciferi*) and the evidence of the excavations of Hanley (1998, see above) in the area immediately to the east and northeast of this site, the majority of burials excavated during the present project are likely to have been associated with the Priory. This combined with the evidence of the Town Wall indicates that the site on Sir Harry's Mall began to be used for burial in the mid-13th century.

A double row of wooden stakes were identified between burial Phases 1 and 2 in Tr4. Their survival was ensured by the wet, humic-rich layer in which they were contained. No wattle was recovered during the excavation. The lack of wattle, despite the favourable conditions, suggests that the wattle was removed when the stakes were truncated by the later burial activity in this area, and the stakes that were recovered during the excavation may be only the lowest portion. The actual function of the stakes is debatable. Plots would not be expected in this particular area, particularly as it is immediately outside the Town Wall and, prior to the construction of the Quay Wall, this area would have been immediately on the bank of the river beside Baal's Bridge and therefore very much subject to the tides. Indeed, in a Papal Correspondence dated AD1443 with the *Fratres Cruciferi* that was located immediately *inside* the Town Wall in this area it was stated that the church was in need of repair as part of it '... has been swallowed up by tides...' (Hodkinson 1990, 42).

However, the presence of burials both pre- and post-dating these stakes indicates that the site was accessible and indeed utilised at this time. Indeed, Hanley did note that the medieval town was not confined exclusively to within the confines of the Town Wall (1998, 120). It is known that a number of suburb dwellings had been constructed outside the Town Walls by the end of the 17th century as they were demolished by the inhabitants of the city before the first of the Williamite sieges in AD1690 (*Limerick. A Handbook...* n.d., 48). The stakes appear too small to represent actual structural elements of dwellings but instead would appear to be a fence-type structure. The wooden stakes are unlikely to mark divisions within the cemetery as neither the earlier or later burials respect the alignment. Instead the stakes were inserted here at a time when there was a temporary cessation of burial at the site. This 'fence' was entirely unrelated to the use of the site as a cemetery. The function of the stakes is debatable but it may be related to the use of the river as a mode of transport both of goods and people (the possibility that the fence represents a garden plot is unfeasible as this area would literally have been on the banks of the river). Indeed, Sir Harry's Mall was also called Sandmall as sand that was dredged from the river used to be dumped in piles along the Mall (Joyce 1995, 50), so it is apparent that this area was also used for functions other than burial. The cessation of burial is confirmed also in Tr11 where the earliest burials were separated from the next phase by a considerable depth of deposits.

At some stage later burial activity recommenced. Phases 2 and 3 represent the most intense periods of burial, with 36.5% and 42.4% respectively of phased burials attributable to those two phases. There was no indication that the grave plots were formally marked above ground. No evidence of grave markers was recovered and there was significant truncation of earlier burials during both phases. At least some of the burials in these phases may be attributable to disease epidemics. There was at least one example of a double burial, that is two individuals buried side-by-side at the same time, in Phase 2. These were Skeleton 136 (male 14/15 years) and Skeleton 137 (possible female adult). These individuals should essentially have been in the prime of life yet they died at the same time and were buried together. While this may be entirely fortuitous and coincidental, it is entirely likely that these two individuals died during a time of social stress, such as a disease epidemic. One of the unfortunate aspects of osteoarchaeological analysis of human remains is that there is rarely any evidence on the bones of the great population killers such as smallpox, plague, fever, cholera, typhus, and starvation. Simply stated, these conditions can kill so quickly that the pathological lesion does not have time to manifest on the skeleton. For example, it is known that the 'Black Death' or bubonic plague had reached Limerick by the 1st November AD1349 (Kelly 2001, 35) and it is likely that this claimed many victims in the town. Yet it is not possible to identify this disease in human skeletal remains.

The latest burials that were identified were in Tr6 and Tr11. An adult individual (Burial 37, sex undetermined at present, Phase 4) was a prone burial, that is, buried lying on the stomach. In any circumstances this burial position is unusual. This burial position is offensive in virtually every society and it is complete anathema to the customary Christian beliefs on burial, as based on the traditional teachings that the body cannot rise on the Day of Judgement. In the context of historic Ireland it would be considered as a final means of desecrating both the body and the spirit of a person that was deemed abhorrent by society. Certainly such a burial would not be expected in a consecrated and functioning Christian burial ground. It is likely that at least this burial, and possibly some of the other later burials represent clandestine use of an old burial ground. The Priory was dissolved in AD1538 and parts of it were later rented to the Corporation as a fish house (Hodkinson 1990, 45-6). Therefore formal burial may have ceased around that time. The buildings of the Priory were finally demolished in the late 18th century, when Sir Harry's Mall was constructed in AD1760 (Joyce 1995, 50). Thus the latest phase of burial, particularly with the unusual prone burial, may date to the period between the mid-16th and mid-18th centuries. It is possible that many of these later burials relate to social conditions in the city during the Cromwellian and Williamite sieges of the city in the 17th century. The interpreted collapse of part of the Town Wall just before this latest phase of burial may reflect a degeneration of the area after the dissolution of the Priory.

Initial Conclusions

The burial ground is likely to have been associated with the Priory of Ss Mary and Edward, the *Fratres Cruciferi*. The burials post-date the construction of the Town Wall in AD1237 as they respect its line. There was a temporary cessation in burial after Phase 1, and the next two Phases of burial were intense in nature. Formal burial would have ceased here around the time of the dissolution of the Priory in AD1538. However some later, and perhaps clandestine, burials may have taken place here up until 1760, when the area was transformed with the construction of Georgian houses. At least some of the burials – particularly those in the second and third phases – are likely to be an extension of the cemetery earlier identified by Hanley during the construction of the Northern Relief Road (1998).

Post-excavation analysis of the human remains and other finds from this site is on-going at present. A detailed assessment of the pottery recovered will assist in the dating of the phases of burial, although some radio-carbon dating of the human remains may be undertaken, subject to licence from the National Museum of Ireland. This information will be reported when analysis is complete.

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