Road to the future uncovers a treasure-laden path to the past

Patricia Feehily

THE construction of the new M7 motorway from Limerick to Nenagh has thrown up a whole array of important archaeological finds, including Bronze Age cremation burials and Bronze Age cooking sites, known as Fulachtai fia, examples of which were found in the Castleconnell townlands of Gardenhill, Gorthalagh and Richill.

Evidence of ancient human activity was found throughout the landscape and included houses from the Bronze Age (c.2,400-600BC).

Annaholly bog also yielded important finds, such as an Iron Age timber road found near Toreheen Island that has been dated scientifically to 40 AD, and a leather shoe, believed to be from the 12th century.

Thirteen large enclosures were also excavated, most of which are likely to be early medieval in date. These would have served as defended settlements in the centuries after the coming of Christianity to Ireland.

“One such enclosure was excavated at Richill in Limerick. It was a bivallate enclosure meaning that it was enclosed by two banks and ditches and this would normally indicate that it was a high status site,” said Paul O’Keeffe of the NRA.

A public seminar on the archaeological discoveries on the M7 road scheme will be held on October 10, in the Abbey Court Hotel, Nenagh.

Representatives from all four companies who carried out excavations on the scheme on behalf of Limerick County Council - Aegis Archaeology, Headland Archaeology, TVAS Ireland and UCC - will present papers outlining the nature and significance of their findings.

A total of 174 archaeological sites were excavated along the 27.8 kilometre route during the period from July 2006 to July 2007.

According to Mr O’Keeffe, one of the most important sites was located in Tullahaedey, just south of Nenagh. It revealed that a natural gravel mound had been partially enclosed by a palisade during the Neolithic period (c. 4,000-2,400 BC). The remains of two Neolithic houses were also found, as well as a large quantity of artefacts that included stone arrowheads, pottery and one of the largest assemblages of polished stone axes ever discovered in Ireland.

“This site is unique in Irish archaeology,” Mr O’Keeffe said.

Another impressive site was excavated in Gortybri-gane, situated on high ground to the southeast of Birdhill overlooking the River Shannon. This enclosure was 67m in width and its entrance was flanked by two parallel ditches.

“Evidence for at least three post-and-stake built structures was recorded within the enclosure as well as three corn-drying kilns and quernstone fragments. Only approximately half of this site was located within the road but with the permission of the landowner geophysical survey outside the road revealed the full extent of the enclosure. This was one of the most impressive examples of high-status secular settlement discovered on the scheme,” Mr O’Keeffe revealed.

For further information and booking for the October seminar in Nenagh on the finds, contact Paul O’Keeffe at 061-496800, or email: pokkeefe@nra.ie.