

Early Medieval (AD 400–1169)

The site at Castlefarm occupies a low natural ridge that extends east–west across the proposed road corridor. The elevated area of this ridge was enclosed by a series of ditches, initially constructed in the early medieval period. The excavations have recorded three elements to this early medieval enclosure: an inner enclosure ditch; an outer enclosure ditch; and a southern enclosure annex (Fig. 1). The ditches were constructed by digging through the natural glacial deposit at the site, then the upcast material was banked on its internal side. As the site has been subjected to extensive ploughing in post-medieval and modern times, no trace of the defensive banks survives. In effect, what remains on site are the bases of the enclosure ditches.

Inner enclosure ditch

The inner enclosure ditch, which is 2 m wide and nearly 1.5 m deep, follows the brow of the elevated ridge. Roughly half of this ditch (c. 125 m along its circumference) lies within the proposed roadtake. It is a sub-circular feature with an entrance at the south-west. This is interesting because entrances to Irish earthwork enclosures of this period are usually aligned to the south-east.

To the west of the entrance the ditch was significantly narrower and shallower. This may be due to the fact that it was cut through a more compact, stony clay. The artefacts recovered were largely early medieval in date, but there is evidence that a section of the ditch was re-cut in the later medieval period.

Outer enclosure

An early medieval outer enclosure was also recorded and it is roughly concentric with the inner enclosure at the south end of the site. At the west and north of the site, its banks were cut away by later medieval activity. This ditch was c. 47 m long, over 2 m wide and 1 m deep. Numerous early medieval artefacts were recorded from the ditch. In addition, some rubbish pits were cut into the top of the outer enclosure. A possible entrance was recorded at the south-west, opposite the early medieval entrance. At this point the outer enclosure narrowed significantly and was filled by small- and medium sized stones, creating an artificial causeway.

Enclosure annex

In the early medieval period an annex was added to the south of the enclosure. This measured approximately 30 m east–west by 20–25 m and was formed by two ditches that cut the outer enclosure ditch at the south and south-west. The finds from the enclosure annex were confined to the eastern ditch and, although not as rich as the main enclosure, it did produce a copper-alloy ring-pin and some bone pins.

Artefact assemblage

Many interesting finds have been recovered from the early medieval deposits on the site, including tanged iron blades, bone fibulae (brooches of safety-pin form), worked antler, glass beads, jet bracelets, spindle whorls and both complete and incomplete ringed pins.

Two main variations of ring pin are represented at Castlefarm: spiral rings and plain rings (Figs 2 and 3). Both types are attached to looped pinheads in the majority of cases. Spiral rings resemble modern keyrings. The spiral, ringed, looped headed pins from Castlefarm are predominantly made from copper-alloy materials (although one silver specimen was also recovered). This class of ring-pin has parallels at Early Christian ringfort and crannóg sites in Ireland and, according to the late Tom Fanning's classification, can be dated from the fourth to sixth centuries AD. The Castlefarm plain rings are mainly made of iron and can be paralleled with similar finds from both Early Christian and Viking contexts in Ireland (fifth to 11th centuries AD).



Fig. 2: Silver ring-pin. (ACS Ltd)



Fig. 3: Ring-pin. (ACS Ltd)



Fig. 4: Penannular brooch. (ACS Ltd)

In addition, a silver penannular brooch with traces of bronze gilt (Fig. 4) and a copper-alloy omega pin were found in an early medieval well. This kind of assemblage is common to high-status sites of the early medieval period.

The early medieval deposits also produced substantial quantities of animal bones, which suggests a prosperous pastoral economy. Taken in conjunction with the rich artefactual assemblage, a picture begins to emerge of a significant, high-status, secular settlement with a continuity of occupation throughout the early medieval period. Future specialist analysis of artefacts, faunal remains and environmental samples will provide more specific information on the dating, environment and economy of the site.

Medieval (Fifth–16th century AD)

Substantial medieval activity has also been recorded at the site. Dunboync was an important manorial centre in the medieval period and contemporary records tell us it was the site of a timber and, later, a stone castle. A recent archaeological excavation by Claire Correr—carried out on behalf of Cultural Resource Development Services Ltd in advance of the construction of the Dunboync Castle Hotel and Spa—revealed the presence of a medieval ringwork with a stone gatehouse. The name of the townland (Castlefarm) may indicate that the site functioned as grange or out farm in medieval times.

During this period the outer enclosure was re-cut, widened and deepened at its north and west sides. This activity removed any traces of early medieval activity from the outer enclosure at this point. At the south of the site the line of the enclosure annex was cut away. This created an extension to the early medieval enclosure that appears (on the evidence of geophysical survey carried out by Target Archaeological Geophysics) to extend beyond the eastern site boundary and as far as the eastern field boundary. Three phases of activity were recorded in the medieval enclosure. Numerous sherds of medieval pottery, known as Dublin ware, a bone stick pin and worked timbers were recovered from the earliest levels. The worked wood included a stave (Fig. 5) and a base disc from a wooden bucket. A decorated copper-alloy mount was recovered from the middle phase. The final phase contained a mix of early medieval, medieval and early modern artefacts, which suggests it was derived from modern agricultural practices. Excavation work is ongoing in this area.

An inner enclosure ditch was located towards the south-east of the medieval enclosure and north of the ring-ditch. It was a shallow, curving ditch containing numerous pottery sherds, fragments of iron pins and a fragment of a bone comb. Only the western side of this ditch was located within the proposed road corridor, however evidence from geophysical survey suggests that it may be 20 m in diameter.

The eastern annex ditch was also re-cut in the medieval period. The re-cut was shallower and wider than the primary ditch and contained numerous sherds of medieval pottery and some copper-alloy stick pins. This may have constituted part of an internal sub-division within the medieval enclosure.

Eleven burials have been recorded at the site. Three of these are from the upper levels of various ditches and one is an infant burial that may be much later than the archaeological activity at the site. The remaining seven burials were recorded at the south-west of the site. All of these burials were supine (laid on their back) and orientated east-west, suggesting a Christian burial rite. In addition, the burial posture in some cases suggests they were buried in a shroud, but no associated bone or metal pins or other grave-goods have been recovered.

Significantly, two of the burials were recorded along the south-western entrance to the early medieval enclosure, between the inner and outer ditches. This suggests that these seven burials may date to the medieval phase of site occupation, although further specialist work will be needed to clarify this.

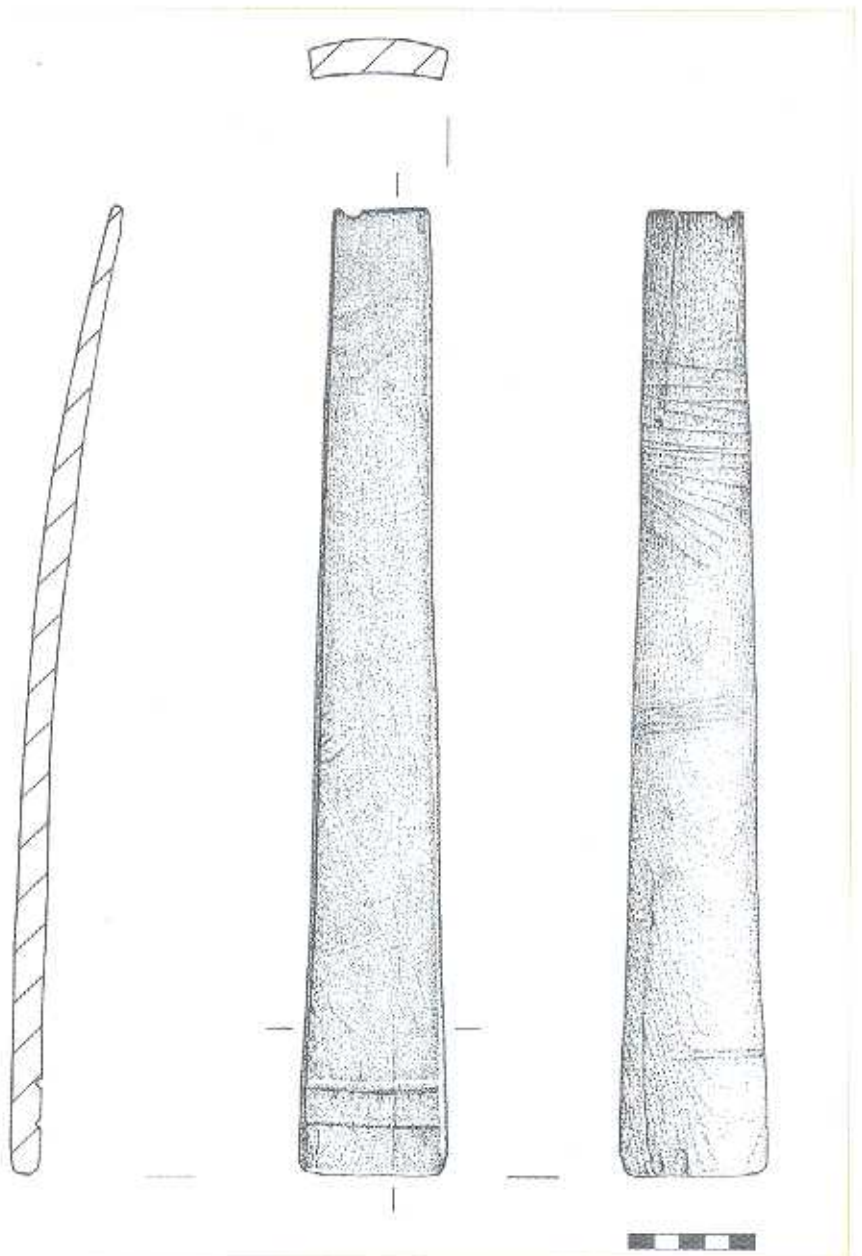


Fig. 5. Wooden vessel: stave (ACS Ltd)