

The Great Heath, Portlaoise, Co. Laois



Archaeology
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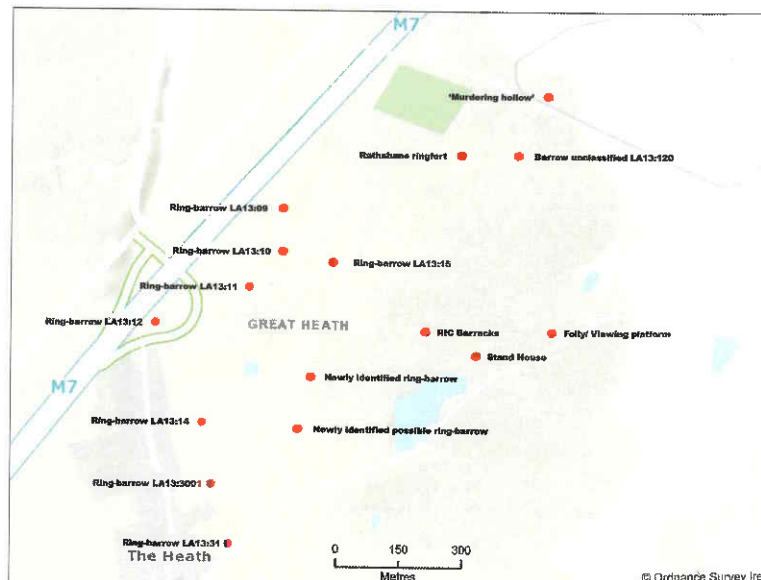
Introduction

The Great Heath of Maryborough (*An Fraoch Mór*, 'big heather'), locally called 'the Heath', is a unique archaeological landscape located along the M7 motorway (Junction 16: Ballydavis) in County Laois, with the Rock of Dunamase 2.5km to the south-east and the Tudor garrison town of Portlaoise 5km to the south-west. The Heath is a relatively level agricultural plain but with localised undulations punctuated by a low, rolling range of hillocks to the east, known locally as the sugarloaf hills.

It is shown as a townland on the Ordnance Survey map of the 1830s, reflecting a nineteenth-century demarcation by Richard Griffith as part of the Boundary Survey. It covers an area of 1.5 square kilometres, stretching north-east from the village of Ballydavis towards Morrett and between the M7 and the Ballydavis/Garryduff road. Local farmers graze their sheep on the land, which is also used for recreation by the Heath GAA, the Heath Golf Course and walkers.

The Great Heath is known archaeologically for a concentration of well-preserved ring-barrows (funerary monuments dating from the early Bronze Age into the Iron

Age). The archaeological discoveries unearthed on its margins during motorway construction (M7), the survival of the visible prehistoric funerary monuments and the potential for new discoveries from a sample drone flight during the unprecedented summer drought in 2018 reveal the special nature of the Heath as an archaeological landscape.



Above: **Fig. 1—LiDAR image of ring-barrows in the vicinity of the M7 motorway** (courtesy of GSI/TII).

Right: **Fig. 2—Distribution map of ring-barrows and features referred to in the text** (© Ordnance Survey Ireland).



Previous archaeological discoveries

In 1967 a hoard of 60 bronze objects was discovered in a pit that appears to have been intentionally sealed. The pit was on the glacial ridge in Ballytegan, some 5km to the west of the Heath. The hoard, consisting of socketed bronze axeheads, bronze rings, sunflower pins (used to fasten clothing) and a bronze cylindrical object, dates from around 700 BC and shows links with Denmark and Ireland at this time (Raftery 1971).

Nearly 30 years later, archaeological excavations in advance of the construction of the M7 motorway at the western roundabout at Junction 16 led to the discovery of four ring-ditches and seven furnaces on a small natural hill. Ring-ditches and ring-barrows were both used for funerary practices during the late Bronze Age and Iron Age, but ring-barrows have an external bank. The largest ring-ditch contained a central burial that consisted of cremated bone in a small bronze box. Over 80 stone and glass beads, blue, green and yellow, were found within the central area. The box (the only one discovered in Ireland to date), with its bronze lid with an iron mount and red enamel, is similar to that found in the Iron Age chariot burial of a young adult female in Wetwang Slack, Yorkshire (300 BC).

The site at Ballydavis dates from the early Iron Age and is one of the few securely dated Iron Age burials discovered in Ireland.



Some 100m to the north was a large, circular hilltop enclosure, demarcated by a V-shaped ditch, 3m wide and 1.5m deep, around a natural hillock on the western roundabout at Junction 16. The enclosing ditch is over 100m in diameter and dates from the late Bronze Age/early Iron Age. Within the enclosure were an Iron Age roundhouse, three mid-late Iron Age ring-ditches and a number of late Iron Age/early medieval inhumation burials.

Archaeological excavations in Morrett townland (adjacent to the northern side of the Heath) revealed similar types of features to those at Ballydavis, specifically a ring-ditch and a ring-barrow on the eastern side of a former hillock along the route of the motorway. In addition, a *fulacht fiadh* (prehistoric cooking site) was identified. A series of medieval burials were discovered in Morrett, as were a series of linear ditches interpreted as a post-medieval field system. Structural timbers unearthed during land reclamation in Morrett some 50 years earlier were found during excavation to be the trough, wheel-house and dam of a vertical watermill dated to AD 700 (Lucas 1953).

LiDAR imagery (laser scanning using pulsed laser light, enabling the creation of surface models of the landscape) for the M7, covering a corridor extending 500m from the line of the motorway in the Heath, shows some of the ring-barrows as a series of circular mounds of varying diameter, with an external bank around the circumference of the central area (Fig. 1). LiDAR imagery for TII road projects is publicly accessible on the Open Topographic Data Viewer (<https://tinyurl.com/opentopographicdataviewer>).

Prehistoric ring-barrows on the Heath

The Great Heath contains fourteen of the county's nineteen known ring-barrows, as shown on the Record of Monuments and Places (RMP) (www.archaeology.ie). Nine of them are clearly visible on the surface, and eight are publicly accessible in two discrete areas. The RMP identification codes are used here to aid the visitor.

Above left: **Fig. 3—Ring-barrow LA013-031- - - .**

Left: **Fig. 4—Ring-barrow LA13-014- - - .**

Above: **Fig. 5—Ring-barrow LA013-012- - - .**



Western perimeter at Ballydavis (parking at Ballydavis National School)

The four ring-barrows described below have public access (Fig. 2).

- Ring-barrow (LA013-031- - - -), well preserved; a pronounced central area with a ditch and external bank (Fig. 3). The Ballydavis/Garryduff road lies immediately to its south-east. The central mound was interfered with in the past and material deposited at the north-west may have been associated with a footpath to Ballydavis National School in the early twentieth century.
- Ring-barrow (LA013-03001-), well preserved; a pronounced central area with a flat-based fosse and very low external bank in places. Heavy growth of gorse.
- Ring-barrow (LA013-014- - - -), well preserved; a pronounced central raised area with a flat-based fosse and a low external bank, denuded at the north-west (Fig. 4). Heavy growth of gorse.
- Ring-barrow (LA013-012- - - -), well preserved, c. 34m in diameter; a raised central area with a wide, flat-based fosse inside a high earthen bank (Fig. 5). There is an entrance at the north-west, possibly filled in over time. Located c. 30m from the cut for the M7 motorway. Heavily overgrown; two wooden poles for a power line are located close to the exterior.



Top: **Fig. 6—Cultivation ridges near ring-barrow LA013-011- - - -.**

Above: **Fig. 7—Ring-barrow LA013-010- - - -** (courtesy of Martin Blake, Bailey and Blake Video Productions).

Above right: **Fig. 8—Ring-barrow LA013-009- - - -.**

Northern perimeter (to rear of Heath GAA pitch)

The four ring-barrows described below have public access, but one has a tee box located within the monument and caution is recommended.

- Ring-barrow (LA013-011- - - -), well preserved, c. 16m in diameter. Located at a gap in the furze along the northern side of the 6th fairway of the golf-course (Fig. 6).
- Ring-barrow (LA013-010- - - -), well preserved, c. 22m in diameter; pronounced central mound with low external bank but quite heavily overgrown (Fig. 7). Located c. 20m to the north of the 6th fairway, behind a heavy concentration of furze.
- Ring-barrow (LA013-009- - - -), well preserved, c. 16m in diameter; pronounced central mound with low external bank (Fig. 8). Located c. 60m to the south of the M7 motorway and adjacent to an ESB pylon.
- Ring-barrow (LA013-015- - - -), partly destroyed, c. 15m in diameter; the tee box platform for Hole 7 has been constructed on the central mound, but portions of the internal fosse and low external bank survive (Fig. 9). Located c. 150m to the east of LA013-010- - - -.



Recent discoveries

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The drought conditions of summer 2018 afforded an opportunity to identify, using a drone (courtesy of Martin Blake), a previously unrecorded circular cropmark on the 10th hole (Fig. 10). It is c. 20m in diameter with a smaller internal circular feature, 300m to the south of the ring-barrow on the 7th hole. The possible ring-barrow was subsequently levelled by the later cultivation ridges of either medieval or later date. The drone footage also enabled a clearer picture of a low-visibility unclassified barrow (LA013-120- - - -) on the northern portion of the Heath, at the 14th hole. The monument appears as a conjoined ring-barrow (Fig. 11), similar to that excavated in Knocklong, Co. Limerick (Daly and Grogan 1992).

In early 2019 the author identified the central mound of a possible ring-barrow at the southern end of the golf-course (Fig. 12). The northern portion was apparently cut into and removed during the construction of the track for the nineteenth-century Heath racecourse.



Early medieval footprint on the landscape

The early medieval period (AD 500–1000) is represented by a large subcircular ringfort, located on the highest point of the Heath and shown on the Ordnance Survey maps as Rathshane. It is up to 40m in diameter, with a high earthen bank and a shallow external ditch/fosse (Fig. 13). Ringforts, which are indicators of early medieval settlement, often contain areas of metal- or glass-working along with agricultural activities and structures. In recent years Rathshane was incorporated as the 13th hole in the golf-course, and it is said that bones were identified during the groundwork. The relationship of the Heath to its surrounding townlands requires further research to fully clarify the location of Magh Reta, a kingship relating to the Lóigis.

Radiocarbon dating of charcoal from pollen cores on the Heath has shown that peat began to form in the early sixteenth century and that the surrounding area was predominantly pastoral with limited arable agriculture. The peat accumulated over the earlier cultivation ridges, and pollen analysis from samples on the golf-course reveal pine and beech pollen in the late seventeenth century (Feehan 2000, 14–17).

The great heath racecourse

The topography, ground conditions and patronage from wealthy local landowners led to the establishment of horse-racing on the Heath in the early eighteenth century (Hyland 2014, 16). The racetrack, as shown on the first-edition Ordnance Survey map, is today partially incorporated within the fairways of the golf-course, in places delimiting its extent. A low linear bank along the southern straight to the north-east of the Club House survives, unlike the associated three-storey Stand House, the ruins of which were demolished in the twentieth century. Visitors cannot but notice the unusual stone building, used as a viewing platform/folly, along the Ballydavis/Garryduff road (Fig. 14).

There are numerous references to the unruly behaviour of the crowds attending the races, and accounts tell of occasional fatalities as a result of public altercations. It is tempting to associate the local name of ‘murdering hollow’ (Jackie Hyland, pers. comm.) with such events, albeit conjecturally. The unruly behaviour in times of agrarian unrest led to the construction on the Heath of the RIC barracks (Fig. 15), the western entrance and enclosing wall of which survive today, reused as a shed for ground works on the golf-course.

The preliminary research shows that additional ring-barrows occur on the Heath. The prehistoric burials, some of which may contain cremated funerary remains, raise questions about the location of funerary pyres. The landscape of burial and remembrance is in close proximity to the extensive prehistoric settlement at Ballydavis. The area of the Heath had intricate relationships with a prehistoric Europe, as seen through chance finds and excavated burials. The Heath, one of the last heathlands to develop in Europe, should be one of your first stops on your archaeological journey in County Laois.



Top: **Fig. 9—Ring-barrow LA013-015- - -**.
 Above: **Fig. 10—A previously unrecorded circular cropmark on the golf-course** (courtesy of Martin Blake, Bailey and Blake Video Productions).



Right: **Fig. 11 a & b—A low-visibility unclassified barrow on the northern portion of the Heath (LA013-120- - -)** (courtesy of Martin Blake, Bailey and Blake Video Productions).

Further reading

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Left: **Fig. 12**—A possible ring-barrow at the southern end of the golf-course.

Below left: **Fig. 13**—Rathshane ringfort.

Top: **Fig. 14**—The viewing stand at the racecourse.

Above: **Fig. 15**—The remains of the RIC barracks on the Heath.

Right: **Fig. 16**—Location map.

Cover: **The ancestral heart of the Heath** (Dave Pollock, ArchaeoGraphix).

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