

Archaeological Excavation Report E0624 - Bricketstown, Co. Wexford

Isolated Hearth



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Archaeological Projects



NRA
National Roads Authority
An tÚdarás um Bóithre Náisiúnta

Archaeological Excavation Report,
Bricketstown,
N25 Harristown to Rathsillagh,
Co. Wexford

Isolated Hearth

December 2009

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c/o Tramore House Road Design Office,
Tramore,
Co. Wexford

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1. Summary

County	Wexford
Townland	Bricketstown
Parish	Kilgarvan
Civil Parish	Whitechurchglynn
Barony	Bantry
National Grid Co-ordinates	29144 12274
Site Type	Hearth
Excavation licence number	00E0624

2. Introduction

Archaeological testing was conducted by Eachtra Archaeological Projects along the proposed route of the N25 realignment from Rathsillagh to Harristown, Co. Wexford. The proposed routeway was stripped by machine (under monitoring licence 00E0379) and a small, irregularly shaped feature was found within the 50 m wide road take at chainage 6670. Archaeological excavation showed that the site comprised a spread of charcoal-rich material overlying three hearth deposits, within an irregular oval cut. The site was heavily truncated prior to machine stripping, to the extent that the original dimensions of the overlying spread could not be ascertained. The site was excavated under excavation licence number 00E0624 and it lay approximately 240 m west of the possible prehistoric cremation site excavated under licence number 00E0623.

3. Description of Development

The N25 is the main southern east to west route, traversing the counties of Cork, Waterford, Kilkenny and Wexford. It links the port of Rosslare Harbour with Cork City, via New Ross, Waterford City, Dungarvan and Youghal. A section of the N25 route between the townlands of Rathsillagh and Harristown Little was selected for upgrading as the old road comprised a single carriageway in either direction, with several 'blind' junctions and in many cases only a hedge separating farmland from the road. The new route sought to straighten and level out the N25 and to provide a wider single carriageway with hard shoulder in either direction, in keeping with the Barntown scheme completed in 1998 (Fig. 1).

4. Background to the excavation area

The 8.5 km route of the new road crosses a series of low, undulating hills, to the south of the old N25 route, and is situated at a height of between 45 m and 80 m above sea level. The landscape here is characterised by small hills interspersed with many small streams; these eventually flow into the River Corock to the southwest, into the Slaney to the northwest, as well as feeding into Ballyteige Bay to the south. From its western beginning in Rathsillagh townland the routeway climbs gently, running parallel and to the south of the old N25. It then continues through Assagart, Ballyvergin, Shanowle, Camaross, Carrowreagh, Dungeer, Bricketstown and through into Harristown Little, eventually exiting in Harristown Big townland and tying into the Barntown improvement.

The higher ground was lush pasture, well drained, and gave spectacular views all around. Sites on this part of the route included prehistoric settlement activity and a series of medieval/post-medieval kilns. Conversely, the lower ground in Camaross, Carrowreagh and Dungeer was quite marshy and prone to growth of gorse. Sites traditionally associated with low-lying ground were found in these townlands, for example a burnt mound at Dungeer and a moated site at Carrowreagh.

5. Archaeological & Historical Background

There are thirteen recorded archaeological monument sites within 1 km either side of the development; one is a church and graveyard site, nine are listed as enclosure sites of between 30 m and 60 m in diameter and three are moated sites (two of which are destroyed). The ecclesiastical site apparently dates to the medieval period as there is a fragment of a medieval grave cover in the graveyard and the site was originally surrounded by a circular bank (Moore 1996, 129). The enclosures most likely represent the *raths* and ringforts of the early medieval period (Moore 1996, 28). Prior to these excavations, the known archaeological remains in the locality were all medieval and post-medieval but several prehistoric sites were identified during the course of this programme of excavation along the N25 route-way, including Neolithic material at Harristown Big, Bronze Age sites at Dungeer, Ballyvergin and Harristown Big and Iron Age activity at two sites in Bricketstown.

5.1 Mesolithic 7000-4000 BC

The earliest known human occupation of Ireland dates to the Mesolithic period (*c.* 7000-4000 BC). Lithic scatters from the period have been found along the banks of the Barrow river in counties Wexford and Waterford (Green and Zvelebil 1990). Some diagnostic Mesolithic stone artefacts were also found in Camolin, in north Wexford, and along the eastern coastline between Carnsore and Kilmichael point (Stout 1987, 3). However, most activity is identified in resource-rich locations by riversides and coastlines and there is no known evidence for Mesolithic activity within the area affected by the roadtake.

5.2 Neolithic 4000-2500 BC

There is piecemeal evidence for Neolithic occupation in County Wexford. Stout's (1987) distribution map of Neolithic remains includes evidence for one single burial site, fifteen find spots for flint and stone artefacts, two portal tombs and seven other possible megalithic tombs. Work on the Archaeological Survey of Ireland reduced the number of other possible megaliths from seven to five (Moore 1996). Subsequent excavation work has increased the extent of knowledge concerning Neolithic settlement in the county. Early Neolithic pottery was found by McLoughlin (2004) at Kerlogue (02E0606) and at a pit and a hearth excavated under licence 00E0630 at Courtlands East (Purcell 2002). Later Neolithic activity in the county is indicated by Sandhills ware, discovered during an excavation (02E0434) in a pit at St. Vogues (Purcell 2004). An undated excavation at MacMurroughs (1985:59) also uncovered a number of flints and a ground stone axe, associated with a hearth and pit may also be Neolithic in date (Cotter 1986). Some evidence for Neolithic activity was found as part of this project at Harristown Big (00E0424) where Neolithic pottery was discovered at a site where various pits and stakeholes were

excavated. Early Neolithic and possible Middle Neolithic wares were found.

5.3 Bronze Age 2500-500 BC

Some of the earliest Bronze Age finds from Co. Wexford are three chance finds of Beaker gold discs (only one with a provenance). Other Bronze Age metal finds from the county includes hoards of both Early and Late Bronze Age artefacts, e.g. at Cahore Point, a cave at Nash, Ballyvadden, Enniscorthy, Forth Commons and New Ross (Stout 1987, 9-10, 22). At Ballyvadden the Late Bronze Age metal objects were found within a ceramic container, a unique feature in Irish hoards, but apparently common on the continent during the period (Stout 1987, 22).

Burnt mounds are the most common Bronze Age site-types found in Ireland and sixty-three such sites were identified in the Archaeological Inventory for the county (Moore 1996) and since the survey work several have been excavated in the county; examples were found at Strandfield (McCarthy 2004) and along the routes of the N30 (Enniscorthy to Clonroche) and the N11 (Arklow to Gorey) roads (www.nra.ie/Archaeology/LeafletandPosterSeries). Only one burnt mound was excavated during works on the Rathsillagh-Harristown realignment of the N25; this was found at Dungeer 00E0474.

Much of our evidence for Bronze Age activity in Wexford to date has come from burials. There is a recognised concentration of cist-type burials in Co. Wexford which are commonly thought to date to the Early Bronze Age. Stout (1987) identified more than thirty-seven but many were not well documented and Moore (1996) could only pinpoint the locations of twenty-five cist and pit burials in total. Several other burials with diagnostic Bronze Age pottery have since been found during excavation: there was a cordoned urn burial at Ballintubbrid, vase urn burials at Coolnaboy, Gorey Corporation Lands and Kilmurry, a cist with a tripartite bowl at Knockbrack and a ring ditch with cremation burials at Ferns Lower (Bennett 2004-5). Another ring-ditch was found at Kerlogue Sites 4 and 5 and a large round house excavated at Kerlogue Site 2 was probably also of Bronze Age date (McLoughlin 2004). The excavations from the Rathsillagh-Harristown road scheme included one Early-Middle Bronze Age site at Ballyvergin where hot-stone technology was used in association with metalworking. Another metalworking site was found at Harristown Big (00E0425) where a series of Late Bronze Age pits and crucibles were found and the Late Bronze Age burnt mound site at Dungeer (00E0474).

5.4 Iron Age 500 BC-500 AD

In common with much of Ireland there is very little evidence for Iron Age activity in Co. Wexford. Hillforts and promontory forts have possible construction dates in the Late Bronze Age or Early Iron Age and there are two hillforts and five promontory forts in the county (Moore 1996). The artefactual evidence for this period in Wexford includes two pins that are of probable Iron Age date and two possible Iron Age stone heads recovered from Duncormick (Stout 1987, 29-30). Two of the sites excavated along the route of the Rathsillagh-Harristown road produced Iron Age radiocarbon dates, both were from Bricketstown and one was a small cremation cemetery (00E0623), the second was a small hearth (00E0624).

5.5 Early Medieval 500 AD-1169 AD

The beginnings of Christianity are evident in the remains of seventeen early ecclesiastical sites in Co. Wexford (Moore 1996). One of the earliest excavated examples from Co. Wexford was at St. Vogues, at Carnsore, where a wooden church preceded a stone building (O'Kelly 1975). One of the closest known early church sites to the roadtake is located approximately 3 km to the south at the church of Poulmarl/Taghmon, the monastery founded by St. Munna in the seventh century. The list of abbots from this site continues to the end of the tenth century and there is a record of a Viking raid in 917 AD (Moore 1996, 160). By this time the Norse town of Weisford, later to become Wexford, was already established, having been founded by the end of the ninth century (Colfer 1990-1991).

Evidence for settlement in the county during the early medieval period comes from ringforts, typical monuments of the period. These were circular or sub-circular enclosures made from earthen banks that surrounded areas roughly between 25 m and 40 m in diameter. Excavated examples have demonstrated that they generally surrounded single farmstead-type settlement sites. One hundred and fifty-three examples are known from the county (Moore 1996). Of these only two were located within close proximity to the area of the new Rathsillagh-Harristown road (at Haystown, *c.* 3 km to the north of the new road and at Cullenstown *c.* 2 km to the south). There are also numerous circular enclosure sites that probably represent ringforts; thirteen of them appear on the RMP Sheet 36 (covering the area of the new road-take) for Co. Wexford.

5.6 Later Medieval 1169 AD-1600 AD

The Anglo-Normans first landed in Ireland in Co. Wexford in 1169. The county was within their initial land-grab zone between AD 1169 and AD 1190 (Mitchell & Ryan 1997, 305) and was sub-infeudated in the early stages of Anglo-Norman activity in Ireland (Colfer 1987). Wexford county was one of the first twelve counties created by the English Kings in the 12th to 13th centuries, from the original Provinces and lesser Territories of the Irish *Tuatha* (Howarth 1911, 161). By the thirteenth century much of the area covered by the Rathsillagh-Harristown road-take was a frontier zone and the archaeological landscape of these areas is characterised by moated sites: there are ten known sites on RMP Sheet 36 for Co. Wexford, the area covered by the new road, and in total there are almost 130 moated sites known in County Wexford (Moore 1996, 95). One moated site at Carrowreagh was found along the line of the new road. Moated sites were distributed at the peripheries of the colonial organisation centres and probably represent an attempt at secondary colonisation (O'Keeffe 2000, 73-75). However, by the end of the fourteenth century, much of the Anglo-Norman settlement in Co. Wexford had retreated to a southeastern stronghold in the baronies of Forth and Bargy, a pattern that Colfer (1987) suggests was reminiscent of the "Pale of county Wexford". Excavations of medieval sites in the county include the remains of a medieval house, excavated at Ballyanne with pottery indicative of occupation in the 12th to 14th centuries (Moran 2000), and excavations at Ferns, Hook Head, Newtown, Tintern, Taghmon, New Ross and Wexford town (Bennett 2004-5). Along the route of the Rathsillagh-Harristown road the moated site at Carrowreagh (excavated under licence no. 00E0476) was the largest medieval site excavated. A spread of medieval occupation material was also excavated at Bricktown (00E0476) and this was rich in the remains of medieval pottery. It is also possible that

the limekilns at Bricketstown (00E0476) and Harristown Little (00E0417) were in use at the very end of the medieval period.

5.7 Post-Medieval (after 1600 AD)

A few excavations of post-medieval archaeological sites have been carried out in Wexford county, including Brideswell Big, Duncannon Fort, and excavations in Wexford and Ennisorthy town (Bennett 2004-5). Some of the excavations from the Rathsillagh to Harristown road scheme were probably used during this time, in particular the limekilns at Bricketstown (00E0476, 00E0626) and Harristown Little (00E0417). There is Jacobean house site in Dungeer, one of the townlands affected by the road-take. References to the house/castle date to the early seventeenth century (Moore 1996).

6. Methodology

The sub-contractor stripped the sod and topsoil by mechanical excavator (and later by bulldozer), working along the line of the road. Natural subsoil appeared at *c.* 0.3m below the sod. Removal of the subsequent spoil bank was also by mechanical excavator, loading into articulated 6-wheeled dumpers for stockpiling in designated areas off-site.

All works were conducted using experienced archaeologists and co-ordinated by the licensee. The archaeological deposits were investigated by cleaning the immediate and surrounding area with hoes and trowels, in order to ascertain the nature and extent of the site. When the extent of the archaeological deposits was identified, the area was cordoned off using wooden fence poles and hazard tape, both to protect the site from intrusion, and to comply with health and safety practices. A pre-excavation multi-context plan was made of the site, with pre-excavation photographs of individual features, followed by full excavation and preservation by record under licence, as per instruction from the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government, DoEHLG (formerly *Dúchas*).

7. Results

The site consisted of one oval hearth pit (C.6) which was orientated northwest to southeast (Figure 5, Plate 1). It was 1.24 m long by 0.9 m wide and 0.15 m in overall depth. It was filled by three deposits (C.3, C.4 and C.5). The lowest fill (C.5) was an oxidised layer that formed along the base of the pit when the fire was lit (Plate 2). It measured 1.02 m x 0.68 m and had a depth of 0.08 m. Over-lying this there was a primary hearth layer (C.4) that was *c.* 90% charcoal (Plate 3). The charcoal from this deposit was identified as either oak or elm (Appendix 3) and it returned an Iron Age radiocarbon date of cal BC 372-167 (UB-6956; see Appendix 4). The deposit measured 0.9 m x 0.6 m x 0.07 m and it was overlain by the upper fill of the pit (C.3), which had moderate charcoal flecks and very occasional lumps of burnt clay and measured 0.9 m x 0.7 m x 0.06 m. A spread (C.2) sealed the pit; it was a silty clay with moderate charcoal flecks measuring 0.8 m x 0.6 m x 0.04 m and it may have been used to quench the fire in the hearth.

Samples from C.2, C.4 and C.5 (the pit fills and the sealing layer) were examined for plant remains and charcoal. In general the charcoal from each deposit was identified as ring-porous, most of it was probably oak, a common find in prehistoric deposits reflecting the widespread coverage of primary for-

est (see Appendix 3). No seeds were found in the deposits and therefore there was no indication from the sample of the specific purpose of the hearth (see Appendix 5). It may have been in use for only a short space of time. Temporary occupation at the site would explain the absence of other archaeological features in the area, and could also explain why there is limited occupation material in the samples.

8. Artefacts

There were no artefacts recovered during excavation at this site

9. Environmental Remains

Three bulk soil samples were examined from this site, assessed for both plant remains and the presence of suitable charcoal in advance of radiocarbon dating. These assessments were carried out by Penny Johnston. The charcoal from each of the deposits was identified as ring-porous wood types, probably oak (Appendix 3). There were no macroplant remains in any of the deposits (Appendix 5).

10. Discussion

The site has been interpreted as an isolated hearth which was presumably used once or twice for warmth and/or for cooking. The absence of other features and of finds renders further interpretation difficult. Comparative sites where isolated hearths were discovered are relatively frequent in archaeological works but in many cases these isolated sites are not radiocarbon dated and the absence of any finds means that potentially they could date to any period.

Another Iron Age date was retrieved from a different site excavated as apart of the Harristown-Rathsilagh scheme, a small cremation burial site within the same townland (00E0623) where a date of cal AD 103-122 was returned. Although this post-dated the hearth site (00E0624) by several hundred years, the discovery of two sites dating to the Iron Age, located within a short distance of each other, is unusual, given that the domestic archaeology of the Irish Iron Age is generally quite obscure (Waddell 1998, 319). However, the discovery of an isolated hearth from the Iron Age adds unfortunately little to our knowledge of this period in the past.

11. Conclusions

This isolated feature probably represents some form of domestic activity, although a lack of artefacts and any associated archaeological features hinders interpretation. All that can be conclusively inferred from this feature is that material from the hearth produced an Iron Age date, that there were episodes of burning within the cut, and that it may have been extinguished (the overlying spread) and subsequently abandoned.

12. Bibliography

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13 Figures

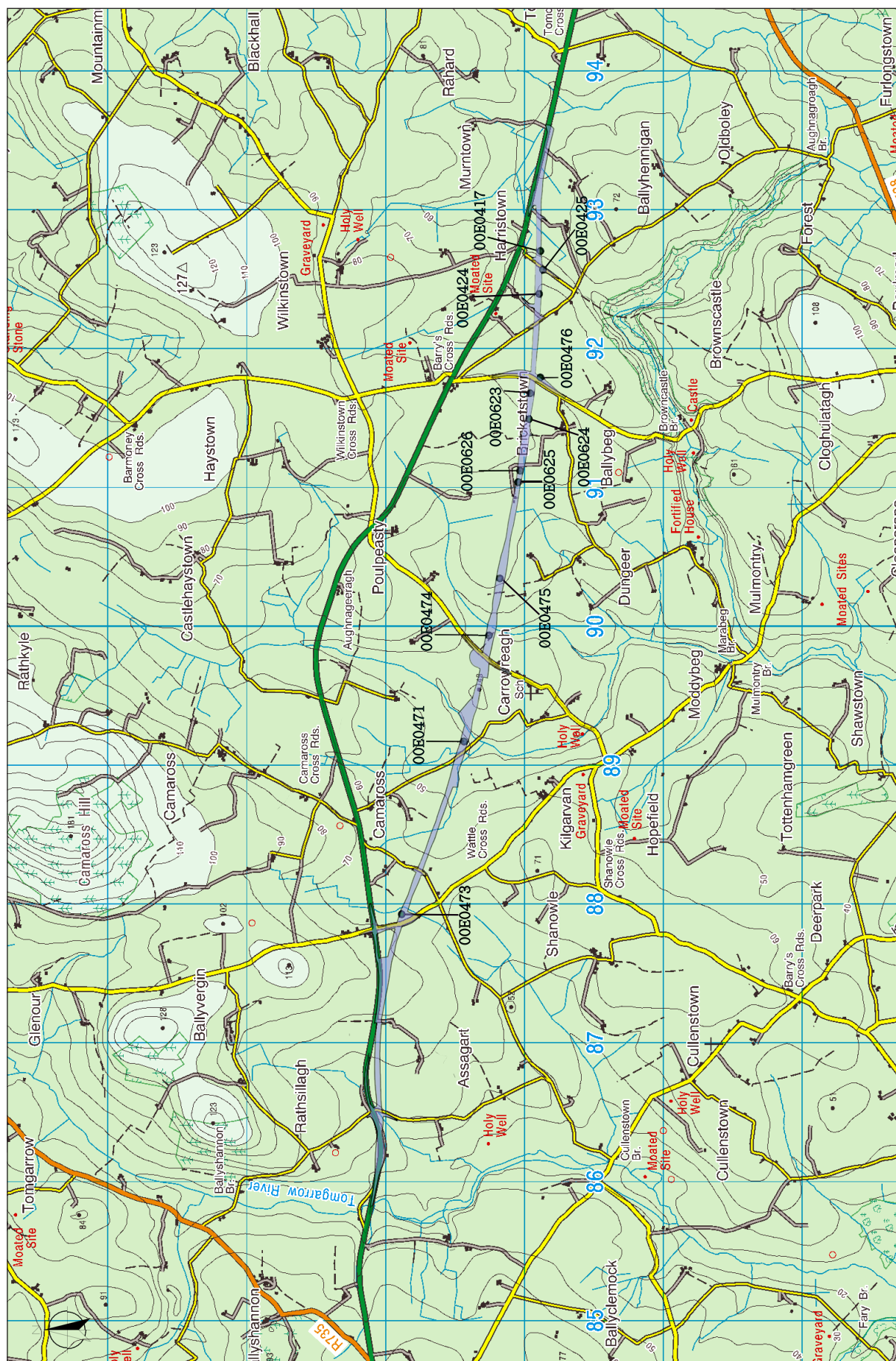


Figure 1: Extract of Ordnance Survey Discovery series No. 77 showing the route of the new road and the excavated sites

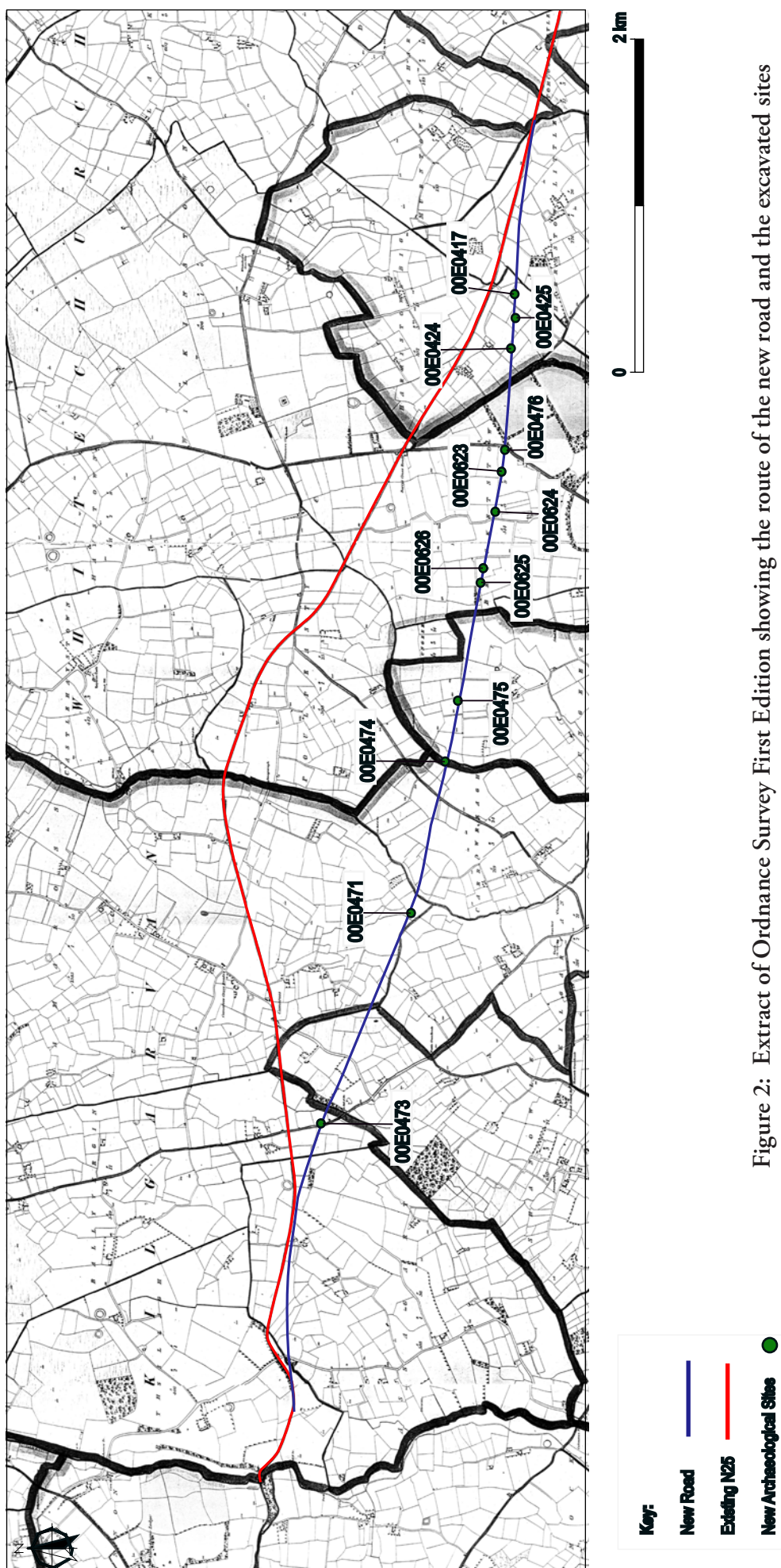


Figure 2: Extract of Ordnance Survey First Edition showing the route of the new road and the excavated sites

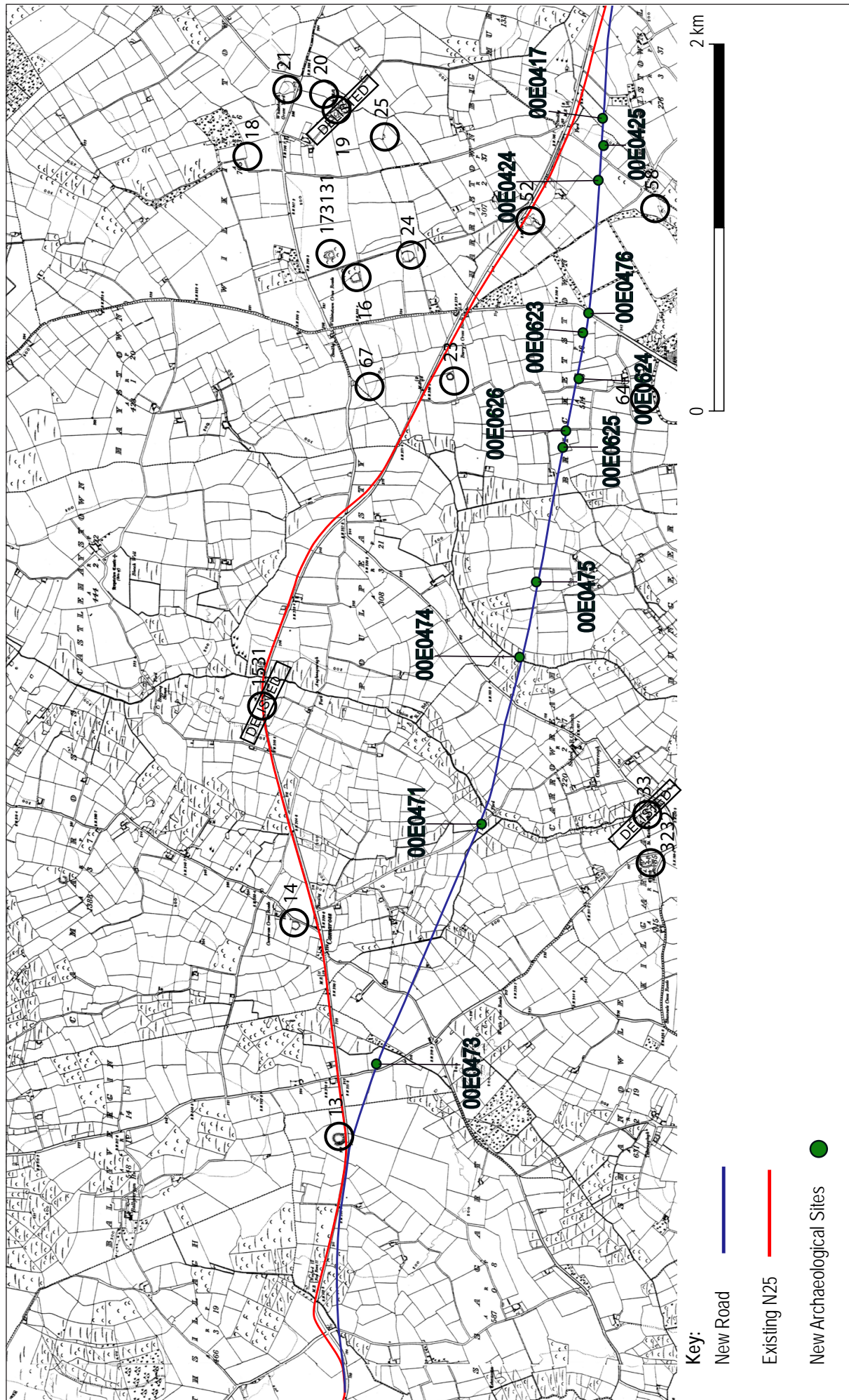


Figure 3: Extract of Ordnance Survey RMP map sheet 36 showing the route of the new road and the excavated sites



Figure 4: Route of the new road with the excavated site displayed

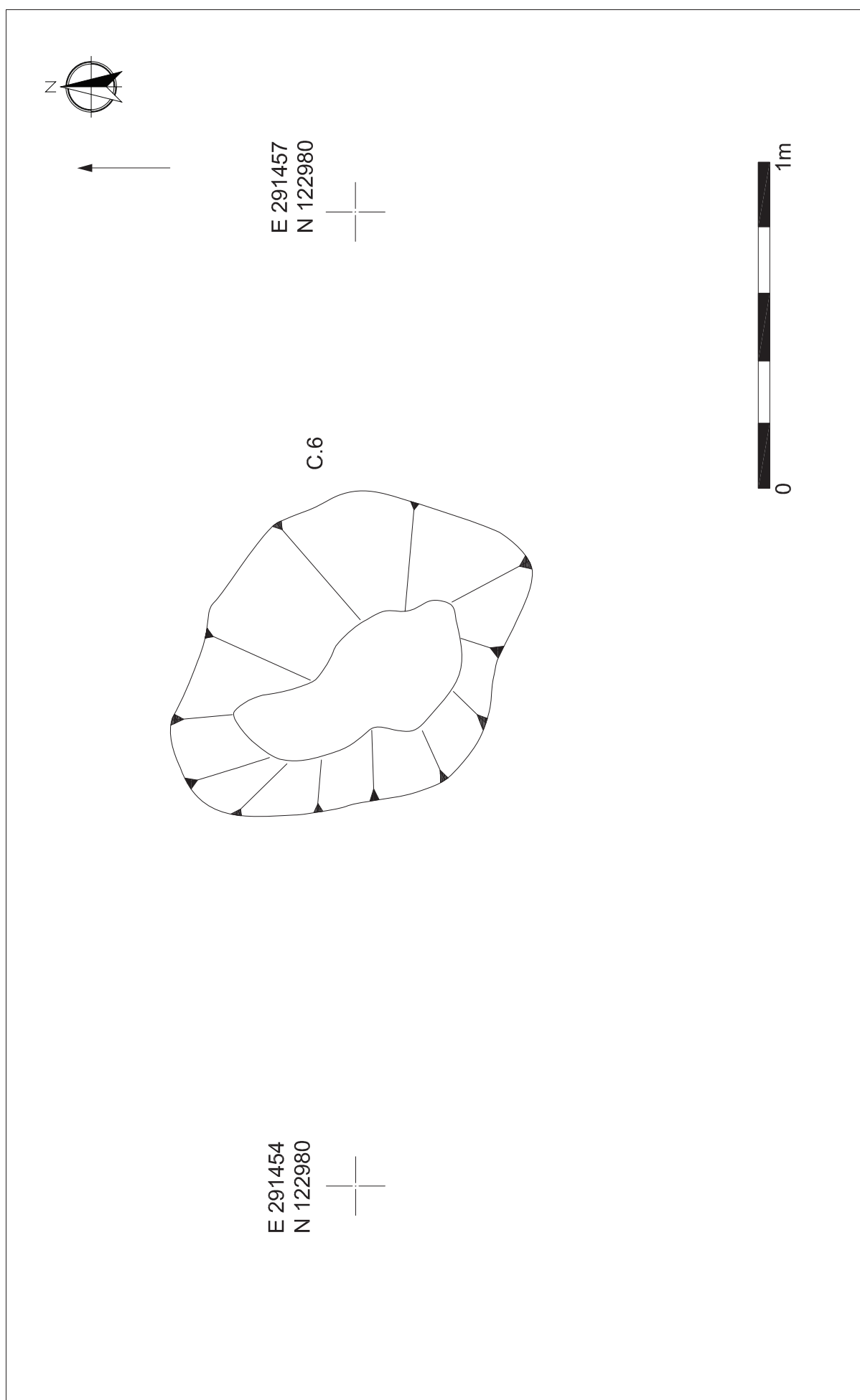


Figure 5: Post-excavation plan of the hearth (C.6)

14. Plates



Plate 1: Post-excavation shot of pit C.6



Plate 2: Basal fill (C.5) of pit C.6



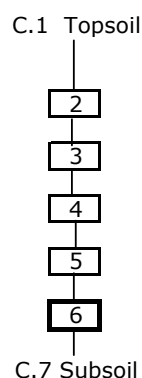
Plate 3: Charcoal-rich fill (C.4) of pit C.6

15 Appendices

15.1 Appendix 1

Context	Type	Dimensions	Description
1	Topsoil	Extensive area, c. 0.3 m deep	Dark yellowish brown silty clay
2	Spread	0.8 m nw-se, 0.6 m ne-sw, max. depth 0.04 m	Light yellowish brown firm silty clay containing frequent fine and medium angular and sub-angular pebbles, moderate small angular and sub-angular stones, and moderate charcoal flecks.
3	Hearth deposit	0.9 m nw-se, 0.7 m ne-sw, max. depth 0.06 m	Mid yellowish brown firm silty clay containing moderate fine to coarse angular and sub-angular pebbles, occasional to moderate angular and sub-angular stones, moderate charcoal flecks, and very occasional lumps of burnt clay
4	Primary hearth deposit	0.9 m nw-se, 0.6 m ne-sw, max. depth 0.07 m	Black, charcoal-rich, soft silty clay deposit containing occasional to moderate fine to medium pebbles, occasional small stones, and occasional lumps of burnt clay.
5	Oxidised layer	1.02 m nw-se, 0.68 m ne-sw, max. depth 0.08 m	Mid brownish red firm silty clay containing frequent fine to coarse angular and sub-angular pebbles, moderate small to medium angular and sub-angular stones, and moderate charcoal flecks.
6	Pit cut	1.24 m nw-se, 0.9 m ne-sw, 0.15 m in depth	Irregular oval cut with rounded corners, sharp top break of slope, and moderately sloping concave sides, except on the northeastern side where it was gently sloping and convex. The gradual bottom break of slope gave way to a flattish oval-shaped base.
7	Subsoil	Extensive	

15.2 Appendix 2



15.3 Appendix 3: Assessment of Charcoal from Bricketstown, Co. Wexford (00E0624)

Assessed by Penny Johnston

Licence	Context	Sample	Identifications
00E0624	4	9	Oak/Elm (<i>Quercus/Ulmus</i>) 16 fragments (<1g)
00E0624	2	7	Probable oak (cf <i>Quercus</i>) 2 fragments (<1g)
00E0624	5	10	Probable oak (cf <i>Quercus</i>) 4 fragments (<1g)

15.4 Appendix 4: Radiocarbon dates from Bricketstown, Co. Wexford (00E0624)

Analysis was carried out by Queen's University Belfast 14 Chrono centre.

Licence	Context	Sample	Material	Lab no.	Radiocarbon age	2 sigma calibration	Period
00E0624	4	9	Charcoal	UB6956	2184+/-33	cal BC 372-167	Iron Age

15.5 Appendix 5: Plant remains from Bricketstown, Co. Wexford (00E0624)

Assessed by Penny Johnston

Three samples from a pit excavated at Bricketstown, Co. Wexford were analysed for plant remains. These were all from the fill of a small pit. Charcoal from the pit returned an Iron Age radiocarbon date. There were no plant remains in any of the deposits from this pit.

Table of results from Bricketstown, Co. Wexford (00E0624)

Context	Sample	Macroplant Remains
4	9	Absent
2	7	Absent
5	10	Absent