



In living memory

Archaeologist Lydia Cagney, of Archaeological Consultancy Services Ltd, describes her recent excavation at Philpotstown, Co. Meath, with historical contributions from Irial Glynn.

The remains of a nineteenth-century building used as a post office, house and smithy were archaeologically excavated at Philpotstown, Co. Meath, last year. The excavation provided an unusual opportunity to excavate and record an example of vernacular architecture, the former presence of which still survives in living memory. Analysis of historical records and anecdotal evidence from individuals who remembered the building during its use added an interesting and unusual dimension to the picture emerging from the excavation.

The site is located south of Navan on the existing N3 adjacent to Dillon's Bridge, below Garlow Cross. This townland is bounded on the east by the parishes of

Templekeeran and Lismullen, to the south by Tara and to the west by the townland of Dowdstown. The site was one of the areas identified during the archaeological testing programme carried out in 2004 in advance of the planned M3 Clonee to North of Kells Motorway Scheme. Some of the preliminary findings associated with this excavation are presented here, while a more comprehensive post-excavation analysis has yet to begin.

The building survived as rectangular foundations with a number of occupation or floor layers. It was aligned north-east/south-west, measured 21.5m on its longest axis and averaged 6.5m in width. The existing N3 exceeds the height of the site at present by over 1m, but this was not

always the case. Local man Brendan Farrelly confirmed that the road as we know it has been realigned and built up to its present height from being on a similar level to the building. Going further back, according to historian Peter O'Keeffe this was a turnpike road from 1727 to 1855 and was continuously developed, improved, realigned and widened over that period.

The building was subdivided into three distinct areas, each fulfilling a different function. The forge area was at the south-eastern end. Its entrance at the gable end was delimited by a well-worn cobblestone threshold. According to local sources, there was an archway over the entrance through which the horses entered to be shod. The floor just inside the entrance was

Fig. 1 (left)—Aerial view of building mid-excavation: smithy on left, dwelling in middle and post office on right (photo: Studio Lab).

Fig. 2 (top right)—Entrance to smithy (photo: Studio Lab).

Fig. 3 (middle right)—One of two leather straps found during excavation (photo: Clare Crowley).

Fig. 4 (bottom right)—Entrance to post office and dwelling (photo: Studio Lab).



constructed of wooden planking, while the remainder of the building had a beaten clay floor. Excavation of a stone-walled and wood-lined pit cut into the clay floor yielded two leather straps (possibly representing part of a bridle), a large iron buckle, leather lace-holders, a bead, a button, a button catch and a fragment of a metal ruler with graduation points incised into one side. Local man Tony Holten has suggested that this pit was a quenching trough and would have been filled with water to cool the burning metal. The miscellaneous artefacts retrieved during excavation may be a by-product of its everyday use.

The dwelling area occupied the central position in the building and shared an entrance from the front of the building with the post office. This entrance had a porch, indicated in the excavation by a large flagstone threshold, and the rooms were separated internally by a chimney that would have served two fireplaces.

At least two main phases of construction were evident. It was apparent that the rear wall was knocked down or collapsed owing to subsidence and was subsequently extended some time after the laying of a new internal floor surface. An extension to the north-eastern gable of the house, where the post office was located, was also visible after the removal of the beaten clay floor surface. This surface sealed previous occupation layers and the associated/contemporary wall denoting the position of the old gable wall. Although the original roof, according to local sources, was thatched, a scatter of roof tiles was concentrated around the forge, but tiles



were not present anywhere else throughout the building. Brendan Farrelly recalled that the roof of the main building was converted to provide further living space.

Amendments and extensions to this building are echoed by changes to its shape between the first- and second-edition OS maps in 1836 and 1882; the latter clearly annotates the presence of a post office. This is the only cartographic evidence of such a function for the building, while no documentary evidence could be located in either the Irish records or in the British Postal Archives. Excavation of this particular part of the building, however, may testify to the function of this location, as all the coins retrieved were concentrated in this area and were uncovered after the removal of the clay floor surface.

The ground surrounding the front and sides of the building was cobbled. Outside the smithy, between it and the road, a large broken millstone surrounded by a kerbing of smaller stones was uncovered. This is believed to have functioned as a 'wheel-former' for the forging of metal wheel bands. An additional outbuilding was located to the southwest of the main building. No surviving walls were evident; however, a concrete floor surface sealed the internal footprint of this building and impeded any excavation of it at this time. Mr Farrelly recalled that this was a shed that housed a pony and trap.

Historical sources

Philpotstown Post Office would have occupied a focal position in its immediate environs in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Other significant buildings at the time included Dillon's Bridge National School, which was in use between 1860 and 1957, and a police barracks in the townland of Blundelstown. Two mills are also known from the area, one of which was mentioned by William Hogg, who described it as a corn-mill in 1850. John O'Donovan recorded the local legend that this was the first watermill in the country, commissioned by Cormac Mac Airt in the fifth century AD to relieve his concubine of the labour of grinding corn with the quern. The other mill is believed to have stood at Dillon's Bridge, immediately north of the site at Philpotstown, and is depicted in the first- and second-edition Ordnance Survey maps.

Unfortunately for us, the surviving partial remains of the 1821 census for Meath do not contain a record of Philpotstown. We know from the *Parliamentary Gazetteer of Ireland*, however, that Dowdstown parish had a population of 285 in 1831, 280 in 1841, and 53 houses. Peter Connell's study of the surviving 1821 census indicates that 'rural Meath was dominated by labourers, farmers and their servants and the domestic linen service'. This

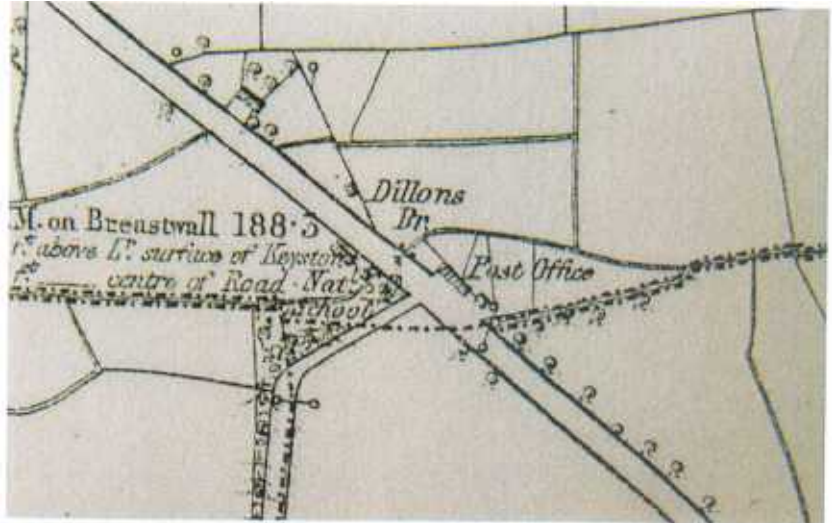




Fig. 5 (top left)—Second-edition OS map, 1882, reproduced from copy in Trinity College Library, Dublin, with permission of the Board of Trinity College. OS Sheet 31, scale 1:10,560.

Fig. 6 (middle left)—Farthing, 1860, showing the figure of Britannia (photo: Clare Crowley).

Fig. 7 (bottom left)—Penny, 1884, showing the head of Queen Victoria (photo: Clare Crowley).

Fig 8 (above)—Millstone reused as part of wheel-former.

created little demand for skilled craftsmen like blacksmiths, of whom there were only 36 from the remaining 1821 census evidence. We do not know for certain when the forge was first in use at Philpotstown 1, but perhaps, based on Connell's analysis, we can suggest that it was later than 1821. Connell points out that the population of Navan grew by over 40% between 1821 and 1841. Surely there would have been a much greater need for skilled craftsmen such as blacksmiths at the time of this growth.

The earliest recorded occupant of the building was Thomas Gartland, who is

known to have resided there with his family in 1855, when the records (held at the Valuation Office) began. An insertion into the description of the property in 1860 records the word 'forge', while 'smith' is entered after the occupant's name. This property continued in use as a forge for a further two generations; the title of the property was transferred in 1894 to John Gartland, also a smith, who was married to Bridget. Both of their sons, Bernard and John, became blacksmiths; their daughter Mary is known to have run the post office after the death of their parents, while John took over the family business. The forge was recorded as dilapidated in 1951 in the Valuation Office records.

The past remembered

The story thus far concludes with Irial and me standing on the ruins of the old building while a local man, Brendan Farrelly, recounted tales of his childhood in the area. Some of his earliest memories included his attendance at Dillon's Bridge school and the playing of mischievous tricks in the forge while 'Johnny' Gartland worked; his final memory of the blacksmith was when he served as an altar boy at his funeral Mass.

Mary Gartland appears to have been the last occupant of the house, although she shared it with a couple of newly-weds for a short time while they awaited the completion of their own house. The post office had, by this time, long gone out of use, and the space it occupied was used as an additional room in the house. Mary Gartland remained there until her death, which is presumed to have been some time around 1955, the year in which the house was sold to a Mr John McCormack. It was subsequently sold to John H. Donnelly and Sons in 1963 but remained unoccupied until its final disintegration.

Acknowledgements

I am very grateful to a number of local people, mentioned above, who contributed their recollections, and would very much welcome any further information on this or similar sites; I can be contacted via the scheme website. Further information on the ongoing post-excavation work and on other sites being investigated on the scheme can be obtained at www.m3motorway.ie. The archaeological investigation of this site is funded by Meath County Council and the National Roads Authority. ■