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A recently discovered barrow cemetery in Nenagh

By Jean Farrelly

It is always exciting to discover monuments which have eluded the eyes of passers-by, but it is particularly rewarding to find prehistoric monuments in an urban landscape where usually all traces of early settlement or burial have disappeared. Such was the case when a barrow cemetery was discovered in the fields to the west of Nenagh Co-Op mart on O'Growney Street, in Knockanpierce townland (Fig. 1). It is located on sloping ground in gently undulating pastureland at 200 ft. OD. Today the aspect is limited by surrounding buildings. However, there is a good, unimpeded view to the south. This complex of possible barrows was first recognised by Katherine Daly in 1992 when examining an Ordnance Survey aerial photograph¹ for the Sites and Monuments Record of Co. Tipperary.²

In 1994 a survey of the archaeological remains in the urban centres of Tipperary North Riding was conducted by the author on behalf of the Office of Public Works.³ Field examination during this survey confirmed that the aerial sites identified for the SMR are indeed barrows, a tight cluster of nine in total. The barrows in this cemetery range in diameter from 5.7m to 9.1m, while the central mounds show little variation, with closely ranging diameters of 2m to 3m (Fig. 2). The slight nature of these sites means that they are highly susceptible to erosion. One of the sites identified by aerial photography (Site I) is no longer visible, and another (Site H) is too denuded to be properly recorded, both as a result of erosion by cattle.

These sites are closest in morphology to ring-barrows, which typically are small, subtle earthen monuments consisting of a central mound surrounded by a fosse and outer bank. In five of the Nenagh examples, however, there is no outer bank. It is possible that these barrows never had a bank, though this absence may also be due to denudation. Similar barrows were recently excavated at Knocklong, co. Limerick,⁴ c.28 miles south-west of Nenagh. While excavation trenches outside the ditches were opened up, there is no mention in the report of any evidence of original outer banks.

Ring-barrows are regarded as being burial monuments. However, the lack of burial evidence at a number of excavated examples, including the barrows at Knocklong,⁵ has led to the speculation that at least some of these sites may be cenotaphs. Caution has to be exercised when assigning a date to these monuments, as excavations have produced dates from the Neolithic to the Iron Age.

In Tipperary North Riding a total of just 12 barrows has been identified. These are dispersed throughout the Riding from Riverstown to Rearcross, though they are slightly more concentrated around Nenagh and Templemore. It is hoped that as a result of a forthcoming intensive field survey commissioned by the Office of Public Works this number will be increased.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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FOOTNOTES

1. Ordnance Survey aerial photo no. 3585, 16.5.1986. See also Daly, K., 1994: "The Archaeological Survey of Co. Tipperary", in *Tipperary Historical Journal*, pp. 155-161.
2. Stout, G. *et al.*, 1992: The Sites and Monuments Record for County Tipperary North Riding (unpublished).
3. Farrelly, J. and Carey, H., 1994: The Urban Archaeological Survey of County Tipperary North Riding (unpublished).
4. Daly, A. and Grogan, E., 1993: "Excavation of four barrows in Mitchelstown West, Knocklong, Co. Limerick", *Discovery Programme Reports: 1*, pp. 44-50.
5. *Ibid.*

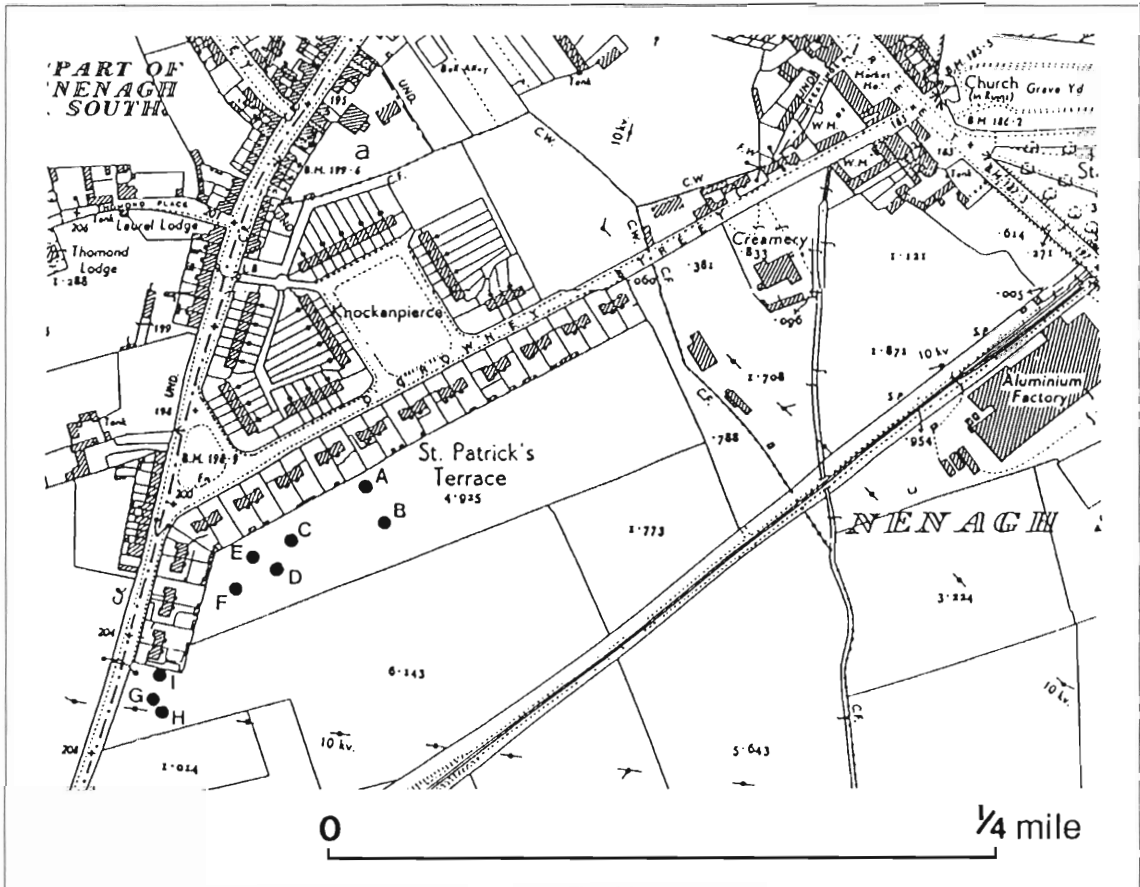


Fig. 1 – Distribution map showing Nenagh barrow cemetery in Knockanpierce townland. (Based on Ordnance Survey 25" sheet 20:8 by permission of the Government, permit no. 6021).



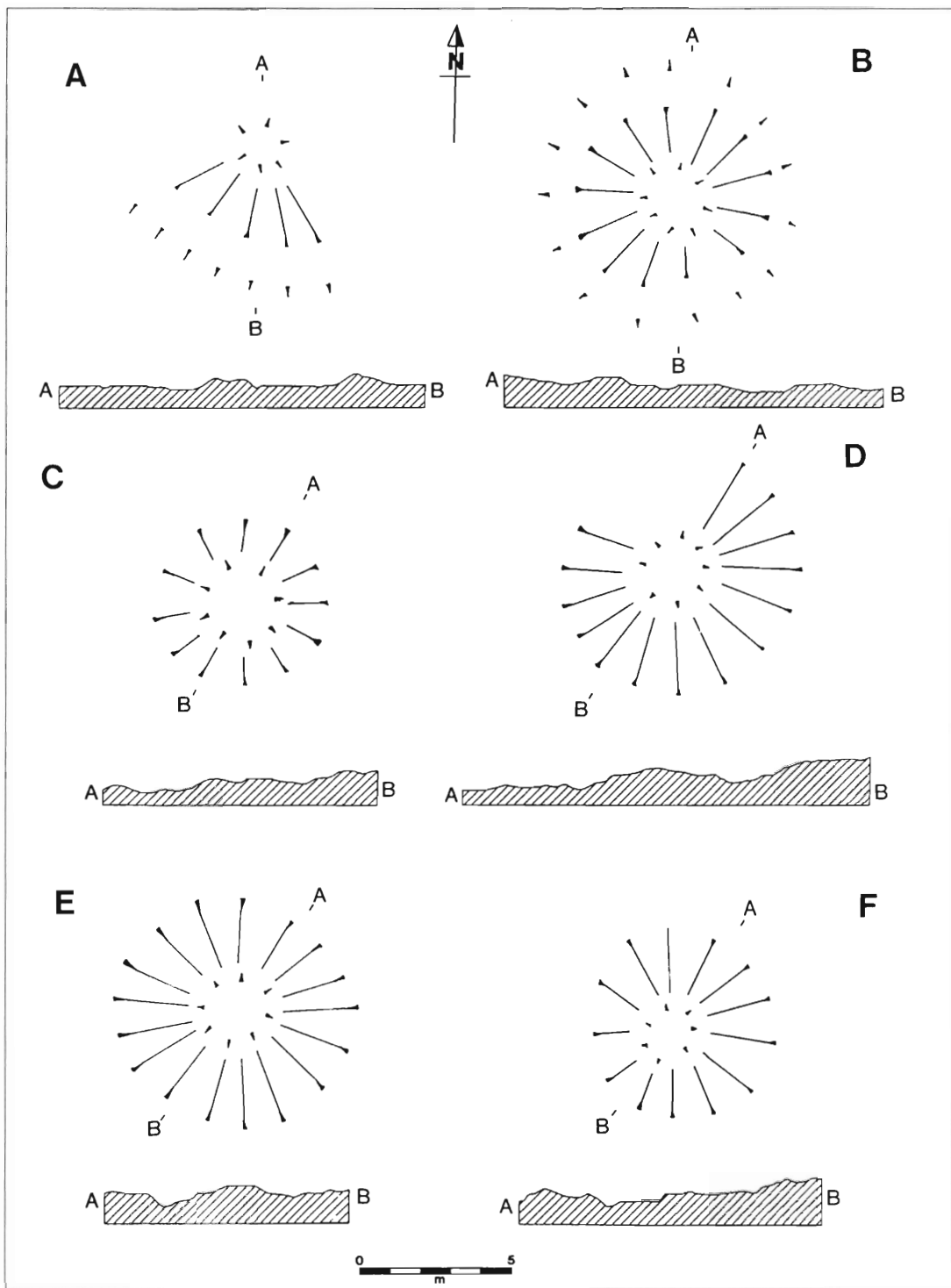


Fig. 2 – Plans and profiles of Nenagh barrow cemetery. (The vertical profiles have been exaggerated x 5).