

Trial excavations at Ballybrado House, Cahir

By Nyree Finlay and Peter Woodman

Introduction

Ballybrado House is situated four kilometres south of Cahir on a terrace (c. 60 m above O.D.) overlooking the Suir river (NG S996 200, Figure 1). Flint artefacts were discovered during gardening by John Gardner in the upper part of the walled garden between 1986 and 1988. This small assemblage of 45 pieces contained several later prehistoric scrapers and a couple of heavily patinated pieces, the latter suggestive of an Early Mesolithic date (Fig.2).

A further six artefacts were found at the upper farm of Ballybrado (see below). In addition several lithic artefacts were found at a number of other localities near Ardfinnan. All of these finds were deposited in the Tipperary South Riding County museum, where they were brought to the attention of one of the authors, who noted the Early Mesolithic character of the Ballybrado finds and initiated the excavations reported here.

To date no Early Mesolithic sites have been identified along the Suir river. Other river valleys in the south of Ireland have produced Mesolithic artefacts such as the Early Mesolithic scatter at Kilcummer on the Blackwater (Woodman 1989; Anderson 1993) and Later Mesolithic finds from the Barrow river (Peterson 1990; Zvelebil *et al* 1996). These assemblages have not been associated with *in situ* deposits, hence the need to identify and excavate further Mesolithic sites with good organic preservation in the south of Ireland to compare with Mount Sandel, Co. Derry (Woodman 1985) and Lough Boora, Co. Offaly (Ryan 1984).

The location of Ballybrado on a high terrace overlooking the river was very reminiscent of sites such as Mount Sandel and Kilcummer. Discussions with John Gardner revealed the possibility that a buried soil horizon might survive, and the rather steep slope of the garden suggested that Mesolithic deposits may have been preserved under hill wash.

Description of excavations

Trial excavations were conducted between 7-18 September 1998 by a team from the Department of Archaeology, UCC directed by Nyree Finlay (Excavation licence number 98E0369). Portions of a one metre wide trench and a series of test-pits were excavated in the upper garden and three test-pits dug in the lower eastern terrace (Figure 1). All deposits were hand excavated and all soil was sorted or dry sieved through a 3mm mesh to recover artefacts.

The walled garden is recorded on the first edition of O.S. six inch scale map (1840-1841); the internal layout of the garden comprised an octagonal arrangement of beds and fruit trees to the north of the central border and a series of rectangular beds in the southern half (Fig 1). At this time the original house was located adjacent to the garden where the courtyard and outbuildings now lie. The present house was built in the 1870s and appears on the second edition map (1904-1905); by this date the internal arrangement of the garden had also changed and remains largely the same today.

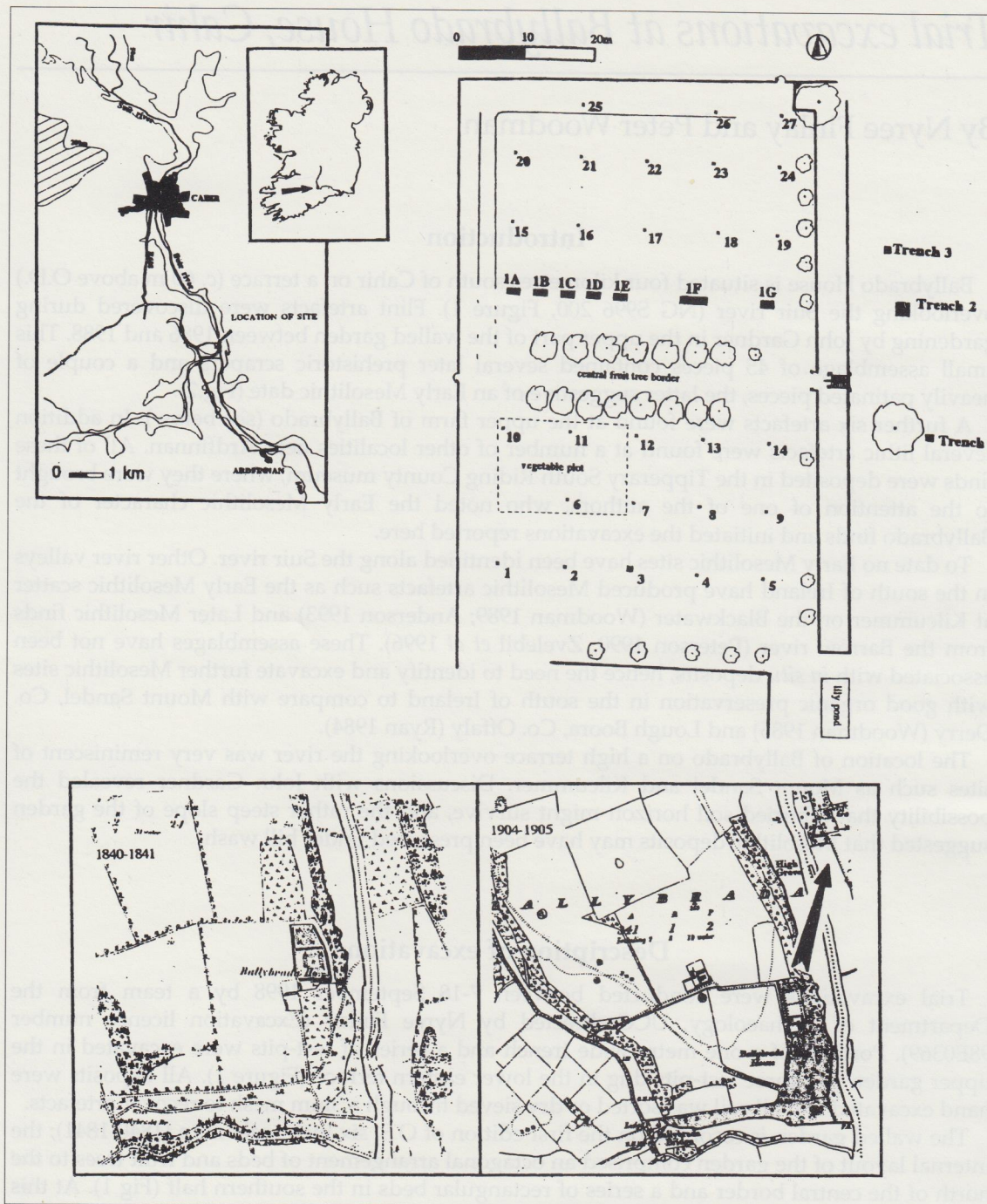


Figure 1. Ballybrado: site and trench locations. Detail of the walled garden layouts as recorded on the first and second edition Ordnance Survey maps, showing the location of the Gardner finds from Ballybrado Upper Farm. Detail of the location of trenches and test-pits within the garden. Extract from Ordnance Survey 6 Inch SurveyC (1841, 1905) Permit No. MP003899.

Upper Garden

Portions of a metre wide trench were excavated in a series of arbitrary steps to depths of 1-1.5 m. Three sections (1B, 1C, 1D) were only excavated to the level of sterile boulder clay. In addition, 27 half metre square test-pits were dug; several of these uncovered garden paths. In general the stratigraphy comprises a deep organic rich topsoil overlying lower garden soil. This directly overlay the boulder clay subsoil, auguring of which failed to identify a buried soil horizon.

Garden features were identified in three of the trenches:

A linear feature was present in Trench 1E; this was orientated N-S with sharply sloping western side and flat base and was 0.1 m deep.

A cobbled surface, c. 1.8 m in width and c. 9 cm maximum depth, was uncovered in Trench 1F. The surface was composed of sub-rounded and sub-angular stones (maximum diameter 10 cm). Adjacent and parallel with this was a linear feature cut in the upper subsoil; this was oriented N-S, width 0.26 m and 0.08m deep. An ephemeral sub-triangular feature in the north-west corner of the trench is likely to be the remnant of deep-spade digging.

The topsoil was 0.35m thick, overlying a 0.5m thick lower garden soil at the base of the slope in Trench 1G. A step cut into the subsoil oriented N-S to a depth of c.35 c appears to be associated with the levelling of soil at the base of slope and probably relates to former cultivation beds associated with the adjacent, but now grass covered, pathway to the east.

Lower terrace

Three test trenches were excavated in the lower terrace (Fig 1); a 2x2m trench (Trench 2) and two 1m² test-pits, c.10 m to the north (Trench 3) and c. 20 m to the south (Trench 4). Prior to excavation it was anticipated that this area would be the most promising in terms of the potential for preserving archaeology. Given the steepness of the slope, it was hoped that landscaping of the garden would have removed the overburden of colluvium making any *in situ* deposits more accessible.

Unfortunately none were identified. Excavation in Trench 2 revealed a thin layer of topsoil over the underlying boulder clay horizon. A bipolar chert core (Fig 2. 13) was recovered from the disturbed surface of the subsoil which was excavated to an arbitrary depth of 0.7m as well as pieces from the topsoil. A modern concrete edging block of an earlier path was the only feature present. The other test-pits were excavated to a depth of 0.25 m and a number of finds recovered.

Finds

Lithics

N Finlay

A total of 48 pieces were recovered during the excavation; half of these are considered to be product of human action. The worked assemblage comprises two raw materials: flint and chert. The heavily patinated and abraded character of the flint finds is suggestive of redeposited material and fifteen are pieces of natural remanié flint.

The worked flint assemblage of seventeen pieces is a small heterogeneous collection. There are seven flakes; three of these are fragments, one is burnt. The technology of these flakes is mixed; a fresh secondary flake from Trench 2 has a cortex platform. A couple of the other

tertiary flakes have flat platforms with pronounced bulbs of percussion, suggestive of hard hammer direct percussion as is a translucent brown flint lateral spall from Test-pit 14.

There are also three flint chunks; one of these is a possible platform core fragment from Test-pit 14, the other two chunks from Test-pit 3 and Test-pit 6 are patinated. Several pieces of fine fraction debitage (<10 mm maximum length) were recovered; two translucent brown flint flakes from Test-pit 6 are possibly retouching flakes; another medial flake fragment (<10mm) was found in Test-pit 3 and two patinated flakes from Trench 3.

There are six chert flakes and one bipolar core (Fig 2.13). The technology of the chert flakes is predominately hard hammer, with one of the flakes having a cortex platform. It is interesting to note that while rolled grey chert pebbles and chunks are present in the topsoil, the evidence for worked chert suggests a preference for the better quality black chert.

The only modified pieces present are two retouched flint flakes. One is an inverse straight end scraper on an inner flake from Trench 2 (Fig. 2.14); the other is a convex side scraper with rather irregular retouch from Trench 4 (Fig. 2.12).

The Gardner collection

Forty-five pieces had been collected during gardening in the upper part of walled garden (finds numbers are prefixed by the museum code- TSCM1997:).

Flint (total=34)

The colour of the flint is variable; grey and brown pieces are present, as is one piece of black chalky flint. The debitage is composed of 16 flakes. Six secondary flakes are present; the rest are tertiary of which three are regular. Two are flake fragments; both are patinated, one a medial fragment the other a lateral spall. Two of the flakes are burnt, seven patinated and five fresh.

The technology is mixed; several flakes have flat platforms with pronounced bulbs of percussion, others have crushed platforms. Some of the fresh flakes have been struck from multi-platform and bipolar cores. Four are edge damaged; two might be retouched but the irregular character of the removals suggests post-depositional edge damage.

Five blades are present; one secondary, four are patinated, one fresh. Lateral edge damage is present on four and one has sustained a recent break to the distal end. One of the blades (Figure 2.5) has a punch platform indicative of indirect percussion. The rest of the blades have flat platforms with relatively pronounced bulbs. There are also five chunks; one of these has no cortex and is abraded, the rest retain some cortex; one of these is patinated, the rest fresh.

Flint Retouched Pieces

Eight retouched pieces are present; there are four scrapers, two retouched flakes and a modern gunflint. Two of the scrapers are convex end scrapers (Fig 2. 7 & 9); one is a double side scraper with 55° invasive retouch (Fig 2. 8). The other piece is also a patinated side scraper (359). Of the other retouched pieces, one is a patinated backed flake (Figure 2. 4). This piece has a missing proximal end and a length of abrupt retouch on the right side. The character of this is reminiscent of Early Mesolithic backed pieces (Woodman 1985).

A further two flakes (not illustrated) have lengths of semi-abrupt retouch (352 & 364). The irregular nature of this is suggestive of edge damage rather than genuine modification or use. The gunflint is a finely made rectangular piece on translucent brown flint.

Chert (total=11)

Six are considered to be natural. The five worked pieces are all black chert and comprise a core, two flakes and two blades. The condition of these pieces is fresh and two are edge damaged. The blades are angular and one is probably the result of bipolar spalling, while the other is also the product of hard hammer percussion. The core, the only one present in the collection, is a bipolar core that has been worked in one direction only (357, not illustrated). It is similar to the core recovered during the excavation (Fig. 2.13).

Lithic assemblage discussion

The excavated assemblage is predominately later prehistoric in character, either Later Neolithic or Early Bronze Age. No further finds suggestive of an Early Mesolithic date were made. The extant cortex of the flint exploited is battered and semi-battered in character. This indicates beach pebble material or flint derived from secondary geological contexts.

The presence of abraded and small pebbles suggests a component of remanié flint at the site. This may not be local to the site but might have been introduced in the form of gravel as material for garden paths. The presence of naturally occurring grey chert, jasper and quartz was noted during excavation. These materials were not present in the artefact assemblage and the worked chert is good quality and black in colour.

The character and condition of the assemblage is mixed, while the blades and backed piece in the Gardner collection are suggestive of an Early Mesolithic component to the assemblage. The character of the scrapers and the bipolar and hard hammer technology is indicative of Neolithic-Bronze Age assemblages. The abraded character and presence of edge damage on this assemblage indicate an element of post-depositional disturbance that would accord with the material being introduced to the garden. It is unfortunate that the lack of contextual information for the pieces limits further discussion.

Other Finds

Ceramics

Ms R Cleary

A total of 81 ceramic finds were recovered; 30 of these were modern glazed wares, with 22 red earthenware and 13 sherds of transfer painted ware. All of the ceramic finds are 19-20th century in date. Two of the red earthenware sherds are stamped; there are also five rim sherds. Several of these pieces represent modern earthenware for pot-plants. A range of blue transfer painted ware is present and the modern glazed ware includes a range of pieces and a teapot spout. A couple of pieces of possibly German 19th century stoneware was noted and five sherds of Buckley type pottery.

Glass

Thirty-three pieces, mostly bottle and window glass, were found. Actual glass artefacts are limited to a glass marble and a rectangular stopper for a small bottle. Three pieces of molten glass slag were also found.

Metalwork & Slag

A small collection of 23 metal objects was recovered. Most of the finds are iron staples, nail

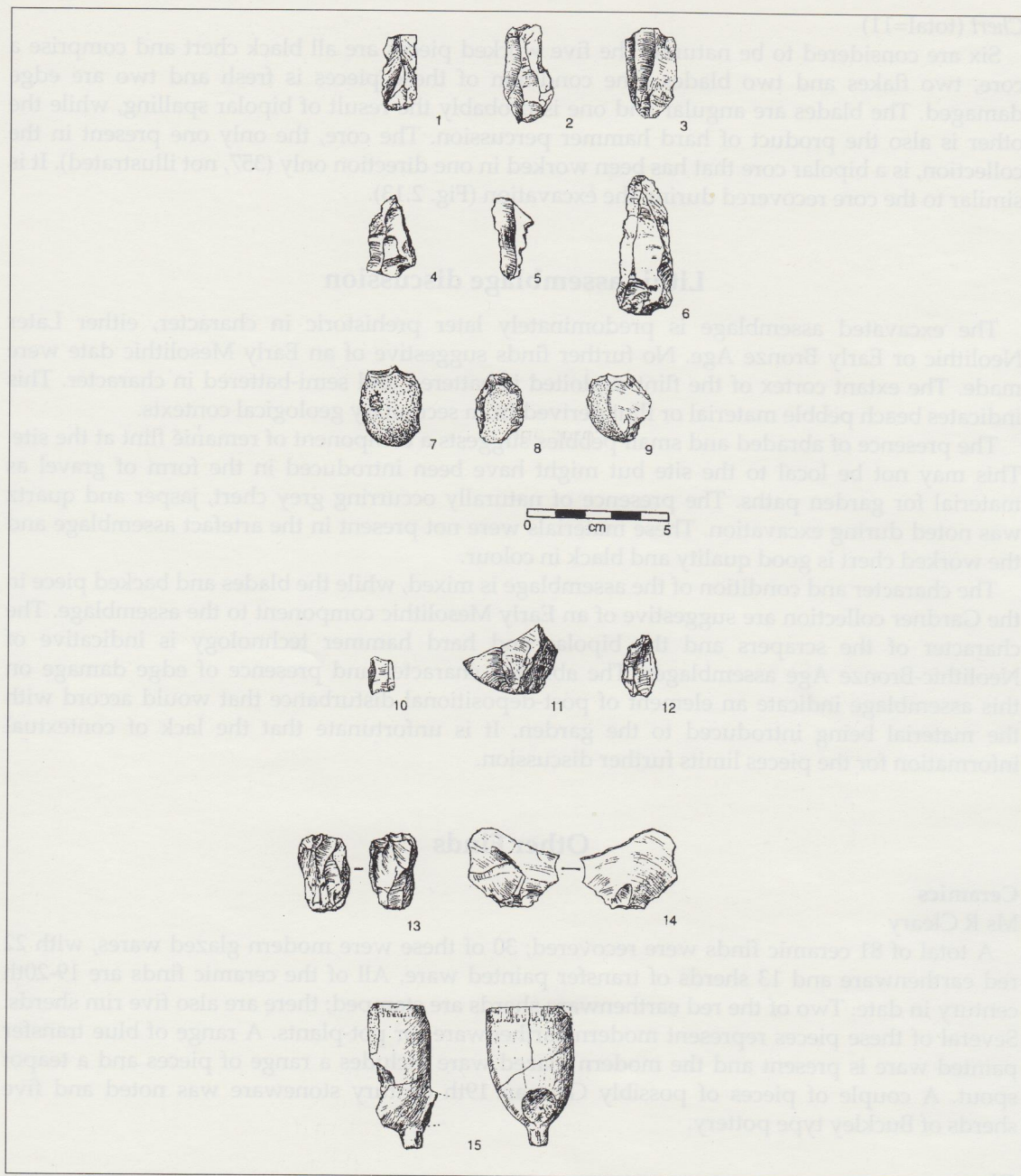


Figure 2. Artefacts from Ballybrado.

Finds 1-9 Gardner collection (finds number prefixed by TSCM1997:); 10-15 excavated finds (finds number prefixed by 98E0369:). All flint unless stated otherwise.

1. Patinated Blade (356); 2. Patinated Blade (353); 3. Blade (360); 4. Abruptly Backed Flake (361); 5. Blade with punch platform (363); 6. Blade (366); 7. Scraper (349); 8. Scraper (350); 9. Scraper (390); 10. Flake (Trench 4, 79); 11. Flake (Trench 2, 61); 12. Side scraper (Trench 2, 70); 13. Bipolar Chert Core (Trench 2, 62); 14. End Scraper (Trench 2, 60); 15. Clay-pipe Fragment (Trench 1C, 171-3).

and wire fragments. There are two lead plant tags and a fragment of a moulded lead object, possibly a radiator or filter unit. A small circular copper alloy fitting, possibly from a watch fob or chain, was found in Trench 4. A couple of pieces of vitrified slag were also found.

Clay-Pipe Fragments

Four clay pipe bowl fragments and a stem were recovered of 19th century date; one of these has impressions around the bowl (Fig. 2.15).

Animal Bones & Shell

Ms M. McCarthy

Of the small assemblage of animals' bones, cattle bones predominate. Pig is represented by two incisors and a vertebra with cut marks. Sheep, hare, rat and several unidentified bird bones were also recovered. The presence of cut marks demonstrates that most of the large mammals were deposited as kitchen refuse. The presence of rat, hare and some of the smaller bird bones also suggests a naturally accumulated component to the assemblage. Several oyster shells and oyster shell fragments were found in the trenches and test-pits. Like most of the animal bones these are likely to reflect relatively recent domestic refuse.

Discussion and Conclusions

The excavations at Ballybrado House were unsuccessful in identifying evidence of Mesolithic activity. The features that were identified remain undated but are best interpreted as the remains of earlier gardening activity. Indeed, the presence of an octagonal arrangement of paths and bedding trenches on the 1840-41 map may account for the cobbled surface and cut features identified during excavation.

While a number of lithic artefacts were recovered from the garden soil, the character of these is generally indicative of a later prehistoric date. With the exception of a couple of blades from the Gardner collection, no diagnostic Early Mesolithic artefacts were found during excavation.

Unfortunately the context of the lithic assemblage from the garden tells us very little about the nature of prehistoric activity at Ballybrado. The possibility remains that these pieces were introduced to the garden with soil from elsewhere. While it seems unlikely that soil would have been brought to the garden from a great distance, this cannot be ruled out as the means by which lithic material was introduced. It may well be that soil was brought in following the construction of the house.

In addition to the lithics, a suite of domestic debris-broken glazed pottery, glass, metal objects and clay pipe fragments was recovered which would appear to date almost exclusively to the 19th-20th century. Several animal teeth and bones and a few oyster shell fragments were also recovered and the character of this suggests relatively modern domestic refuse.

While it remains possible that *in situ* deposits are present in the non-excavated areas of the grounds of Ballybrado House, it seems highly unlikely that these would have survived in the immediate garden area given the extent of landscaping and the nature of the stratigraphy as revealed by excavation. It seems most likely that the lithics were introduced to the garden in soil brought in, perhaps during construction of the house in the late 19th century and the landscaping of the grounds at that date.

The importance of the Gardner collection lies in the fact that for the Early Mesolithic period and prehistory in general, lithic artefacts are often the sole means of locating sites. While the

excavations at Ballybrado were not successful, the hope remains that others will be encouraged to look for lithic artefacts and finally identify the somewhat elusive Tipperary Mesolithic.

Note on the location of the finds and site archive

The John Gardner collection is in Tipperary South Riding County Museum in Clonmel (TSCM1997:348-396), along with the finds reported here and a copy of the archive excavation report.

This small collection of six flint artefacts was found at the upper farm of Ballybrado (see Fig. 1 for find spot). There are five flakes and one possible core fragment. One primary flake fragment is present and a secondary flake with a cortex platform. The possible core fragment is a patinated secondary chunk that has some hard hammer and bipolar working.

The remaining three pieces are scrapers. All are fresh; one is on a primary flake, the others inner flakes. Two of these pieces are side scrapers, both retouched on the left hand side; the retouch is semi-abrupt and quite fine and invasive in character (TSCM1997.397 and 399). The other scraper is an end scraper with irregular retouch (TSCM1997.402). The chronological affinities of the retouched pieces are later prehistoric and the technology and condition of the others also suggest a later prehistoric date, probably Later Neolithic or Early Bronze Age. The small size of the assemblage clearly limits the inferences that can be made.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank the landowner Mr. Josef Finks and his family for their support; John and Pauline Gardner for information about the discovery; Pat Holland and Bob Withers for their assistance in the Tipperary South Riding Museum and for useful discussion. The excavation crew of Mags Bray, John Lehane, Jason Hawkes, Gerry Mullins and Rick Schulting deserve a big "thank-you" for their perseverance and good humour.

We also wish to thank Ms Rose Cleary and Ms. M. McCarthy, Archaeological Services Unit, UCC, for identifying the ceramics and animal bones and for editorial advice. The fieldwork was funded by the Society of Antiquaries of London and the Bob Smith Award from the Prehistoric Society.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Anderson, E. 1993. The Mesolithic: fishing for answers. In E.Shee-Twohig & M.Ronayne (eds.) *Past Perceptions: the Prehistoric Archaeology of SW Ireland*. Cork University Press, 16-24.
- Peterson, J.D. 1990. From foraging to food production in south-east Ireland: some lithic evidence. *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* 56: 89-99.
- Ryan, M. 1984. Archaeological excavations at Lough Boora, Boughal townland, Co.Offaly, 1997. *Proceedings of the 7th International Peat Congress*, Dublin 1: 407-413.
- Woodman, P. C. 1985. *Excavations at Mount Sandel 1973-77*. Belfast: HMSO.
- Woodman, P.C. 1989. The Mesolithic of Munster: a preliminary assessment. In C. Bonsall (ed.) *The Mesolithic in Europe*, 116-124. Edinburgh: John Donald.
- Zvelebil, M., Macklin, M.G., Passmore, D.G. & Ramsden, P. 1996. Alluvial archaeology in the Barrow valley, south-east Ireland: the Riverford culture revisited. *Journal of Irish Archaeology* 7: 13-40.