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The Archaeology of the Battle of the Boyne at Oldbridge, Co. Meath
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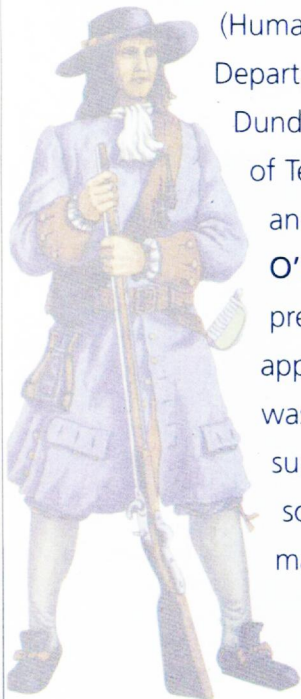
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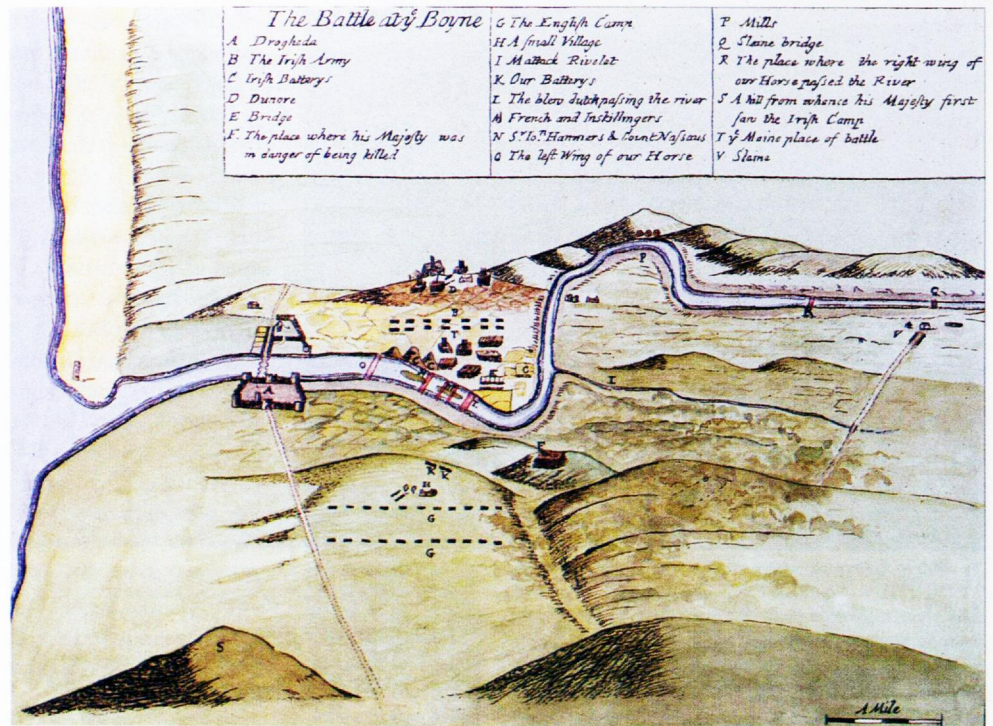
The archaeology of the Battle of the

The Oldbridge estate on the southern bank of the River Boyne, a core part of the battlefield of the Battle of the Boyne, was acquired by the state in 2000. To provide baseline data for the management and presentation of the site, Dúchas The Heritage Service commissioned a team from the Department of Archaeology, UCD, to undertake a pilot survey of the estate with a particular focus on the archaeology of the battle. Here **Gabriel Cooney, Emmet Byrnes, Conor Brady**

(Humanities Department, Dundalk Institute of Technology) and **Aidan O'Sullivan** present the approach that was used in the survey and some of the main results.



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The Battle of the Boyne, 12 July 1690 (the battle was actually fought on 1 July and was only shifted to the 12th following the reform of the calendar in 1752), is one of the best-known and most politically significant military engagements in Irish history. It is well documented historically and much work has been done on the course of the battle, the Williamite and Jacobite armies and their actions. Contemporary reports and depictions, particularly those of George Story and Theodor Maas, give a powerful image of the battle. However, there has been relatively little detailed study of the archaeology of the battlefield itself. Battlefield archaeology can be defined as the study of the remaining material traces of battle, in or on the ground. Material that might be expected on a battlefield like that of the Boyne can include durable artefacts such as lead shot, cannonballs and artillery pieces, horse gear and personal dress fittings, as well as evidence of the contemporary landscape such as traces of settlements, roadways and fortifications.

In the case of the Oldbridge estate the key issues included (1) the identification of the place where the Williamite army, led by three battalions of Dutch Blue Guards, having successfully crossed the river at the ford at Oldbridge (just east of the present 'obelisk' bridge), made its first stand in the face of repeated attacks from the Jacobite cavalry, and (2) the location of the village of Oldbridge, which is shown in contemporary depictions and appears to have played an important role in events on the day of the battle.

Locating the lost village of Oldbridge

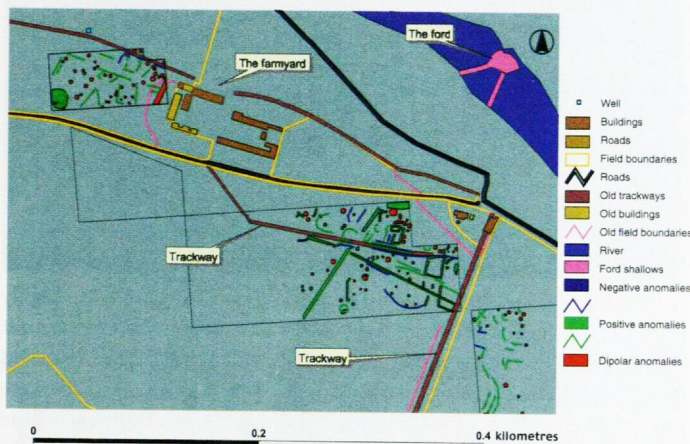
Cartographic and topographic analysis suggested that the village lay further to the east than had previously been thought. The eighteenth-century development of the estate following its purchase by the Coddington family, who remained in ownership until the late twentieth century, brought about major routeway realignment and abandonment of some trackways in the area. There is a disused trackway running north towards the ford on the Boyne at the eastern end of the parkland

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Boyne at Oldbridge, Co. Meath

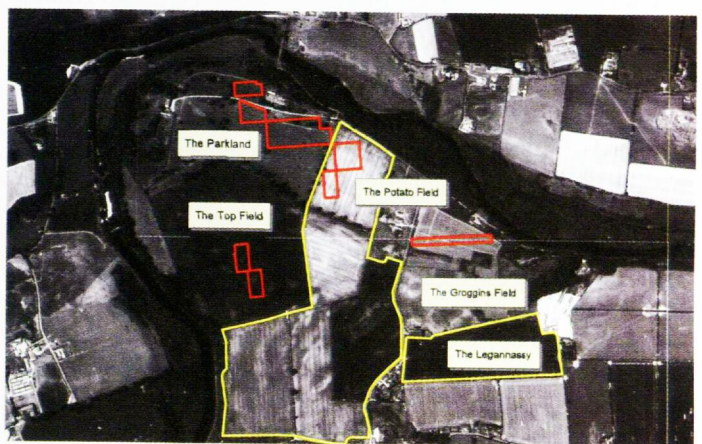
in front of Oldbridge House. Close examination of the topography showed that there is a second trackway running to the west of this known track and south of the modern estate farmyard. This and the low linear earthworks adjacent to the east-west trackway suggested that this was an area that could be tested as being the location of the village.

One of the primary aims of a programme of magnetic gradiometry survey carried out by GeoArc was to locate evidence for



from point sources such as iron objects or features with a strong magnetic signature and could be related to battle activity. However, that the Potato Field was indeed a key location in the battle was demonstrated most clearly by systematic field-walking.

As Conor Brady illustrated in the last issue of *Archaeology Ireland*, this technique has great significance for informing us about earlier prehistoric settlement in the Boyne Valley. But it is also useful for the study of material from later periods which is likely to survive in the ploughsoil. Seven ploughed fields, including the Potato Field, were examined to assess the range of evidence for past human activity in the ploughsoil. Several hundred pieces of struck and worked flint and other stone dated from the Neolithic/early Bronze Age (4000–2000 BC). There was a general spread of this material, with a few notable concentrations representing definite activity areas. Material dating from the medieval and modern periods was also recovered.



the village. Patterns of enhanced magnetism in the soil can indicate a range of archaeological features of which there may be no surface expression. Two panels were placed in the area discussed above and there was good evidence to suggest that this was indeed the location of the village. In a panel located to the north of the modern estate avenue and west of the farmyard there was a high concentration of magnetic anomalies, some of which appear to represent small rectangular enclosures. In a panel further east, south of the avenue, the nature and form of the anomalies suggest the presence of ditches, trackways, possible hearths and structural foundations. It is probable that the features found represent a significant part of the lost village of Oldbridge. At least four probable houses can be detected, integrated into a somewhat irregular system of boundaries. Phosphate survey indicated enhanced levels of phosphate in the putative village area.

A battlefield focus

The field to the east of the parkland is known as the Potato Field. It has been suggested that this was the site of the first, fierce encounters south of the river between the Williamite infantry and the Jacobite cavalry. Here the magnetic anomalies were much more subtle and ephemeral. One pattern of anomalies indicated a curvilinear feature of approximately 50m which probably correlates with a known crop-mark enclosure site. Some of the dipolar anomalies are produced

But perhaps most intriguing was the material that can be directly related to the battle. Most of this came from the Potato Field, including five musket balls, a gun flint and an iron buckle or harness fitting. Remembering that this is only a very small sample of what is in the ploughsoil, the patterning of the musket balls and the gun flint presents dramatic evidence for prolonged musket-firing. There are two possible explanations for this. It could be where Jacobite infantry

Across left: Reconstruction of the Battle of the Boyne based on Story's 1693 map (From *Newgrange and the bend of the Boyne* by Geraldine Stout, (see review page 42).

Above left: Interpretation of the results of the geophysical survey indicating the location and form of the Oldbridge village.

Above: The areas surveyed on the Oldbridge estate. Fields that were systematically field-walked indicated by yellow outline. Areas where magnetometry, metal-detecting and phosphate survey were carried out indicated in red (by kind permission of Ordnance Survey of Ireland Permit No. MP 012202 © Ordnance Survey of Ireland and Government of Ireland).

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lined up to resist the first attempts of the Dutch Blue Guards to secure the southern bank of the river. Alternatively, what we could be seeing is the action of the Dutch Blue Guards, having secured the southern bank and the village, drawing up in battle formation to fend off the repeated Jacobite cavalry charges led by Tyrconnell and Berwick.

One evocative find from a tilled field at the south-east end of the estate where the ground rises towards Donore Hill was a silver half-écu of Louis XIV, minted in 1659. This is most likely to have been in the possession of a French soldier in the Jacobite army, lost in an area where much of the Jacobite cavalry mustered and where the Jacobite camp extended on the day before the battle. It may have been lost then or during the course of the battle.

Down to the river

Given the significance of the river as a crucial feature in the battle, crossed at five different points by the Williamite army, it was important to have information on the character of the riverbed and its profile along the river frontage of the estate. This work was carried out by Management for Archaeology Underwater (MAU) with the assistance of the Centre for Maritime Archaeology (CMA), University of Ulster at Coleraine. It involved magnetometry and side-scan sonar survey of the river along with cartographic, historical and field research. This work identified those zones which could be the subject of more detailed survey work. For example, the side-scan sonar, which in effect provides a tonal map of the riverbed, identified a number of underwater pools that act as natural sediment and deposition traps in the river and hence are the most likely locations where battle-related artefacts might be found. These are concentrated around the islands east of the obelisk bridge, the area that was the focus of four of the crossings. In the same area cartographic research indicates that since the late seventeenth century through depositional activity and change in the river regime the islands have changed shape and that a small island now extends over what would have been the main fording-point at the time.

Metal-detecting as an archaeological technique

In the past a significant amount of material has been recovered from the battlefield through illegal metal-detecting activity. Much of the fine locational detail that is necessary to make such material useful in understanding the archaeology of the Battle of the Boyne is sadly lacking. It is this approach to metal-detecting that has given it a bad reputation as a prospection technique. However, the value of systematic metal-detecting has been shown on battlefield sites such as that of the Little Bighorn in Montana, where it was used to assist in the location, plotting and recovery of finds relating to the battle in 1876, including Custer's last stand.

At Oldbridge a systematic metal-detecting survey was carried out under licence as required by the National Monuments Act. The same survey grid was used as for the geophysics and the phosphate survey. The intention was to delineate the area of the village and to identify scatters of material that might be associated with the battle. The metal-detector used allowed a dual discrimination survey approach. All occurrences of metal were recorded and then larger ferrous (iron) and non-ferrous objects with a high conductivity were

identified. So by systematic recording of the 'hits' registered by the detector we can establish patterns of density and also those likely to signal larger iron or non-ferrous objects. In the areas where the metal-detecting survey was carried out there was a very good correlation with the results of the geophysical and phosphate survey. These suggest a high concentration of activity in the area identified as that of Oldbridge village and in the Potato Field. Much of the latter could be material relating to the battle.

Testing the survey results



Given that the patterns seen in the various surveys are largely undated, a very small-scale and targeted programme of test-pit excavation was carried out, particularly to test the data collected during the metal-detector survey. Four test-pits (2m by 1m each) were dug to the surface of undisturbed archaeological features as the purpose was to identify what was there rather than full excavation. Two of the test-pits produced clear evidence of settlement and small-scale agricultural activity within the area of the village as identified by the geophysical and phosphate survey. Another showed evidence of a wheel-rut on the raised east-west trackway and that this trackway was of gravel construction. The fourth test-pit, further to the east in the field known as the Groggins Field, revealed that the high density of metal-detector hits was related to ground-levelling carried out when an orchard was laid out there some time before the 1830s.

The wider landscape context of the survey

The survey was designed as a pilot assessment of the archaeological potential of the estate with specific reference to the Battle of the Boyne. Key areas of the battlefield have been located, including Oldbridge village, fording-points and the site of the first engagement on the south side of the river. Material directly relating to the battle was recovered during the field-walking survey, and the river survey has highlighted areas of potential. All of this work has major implications for the interpretation of the battle and the battlefield. However, there are a number of crucially important points that need to be made to put this work in a wider context. As an initial point it is worth reiterating that this was a pilot study carried out with a specific frame of reference, with a set and limited time and budget. It provides a starting-point, a baseline set of data demonstrating the enormous potential of the archaeology of the battlefield on the Oldbridge estate.

The events surrounding the Battle of the Boyne cannot be divorced from the longer-term history of the area of the estate. To take one example, the village of Oldbridge must have been in existence for a considerable period before the battle, and indeed was a focus of settlement in the medieval and early modern periods. The combination of the location of ridge-and-furrow cultivation and the plough pebbles and medieval pottery sherds recovered in the field-walking provides the basis for a study of medieval agriculture in the northern part of the estate. Going back further in time, the survey provided the data for an overview of human activity in the Oldbridge area since prehistoric times. It was a focus of settlement and other activity in prehistory, a period when the archaeological focus has been very firmly placed on Brú na Boinne, just to the west.



and west of King William's Glen and up to the Tullyallen ridge. This was the main Williamite position before the battle. In the glen the so-called 'Williamite Encampment' needs to be fully recorded and assessed. It is clear that the actual encampment was in the vicinity of the present village of Tullyallen. Donore Hill was a focus of the Jacobite encampment prior to the battle. It is likely that the flat area in the vicinity of the medieval church was a focus of settlement and the military encampment. These and other key areas have the potential to reveal new information through archaeological

The changing course of the river in the Oldbridge area marks the eastern end of the famous bend in the Boyne and the location of a major fording-point there must have long-term significance. One interesting counterpoint to the Brú na Boinne area is the clear evidence of Bronze Age activity at Oldbridge. The standing stones and two cists discovered in the nineteenth century can now be set alongside what appears to be a ring-barrow cemetery on the flat top of a rise overlooking the estate parkland. This was revealed on the Ordnance Survey vertical aerial photographic coverage of the area and by the geophysical survey.

In relation to the Battle of the Boyne itself, the Oldbridge estate is only part of the wider landscape of the battle. A number of key areas can be identified, including the area north of the Boyne to the east

Across left: Magnetometer survey in progress. The eastern side of the north-south trackway is visible at the right-hand edge of the photograph (photograph by Conor Brady).

Left: East-west raised gravelled trackway in the parkland with Oldbridge House in the background (photograph by Conor Brady).

Above top: The half-écu Louis XIV coin dated to 1659 found in the course of the systematic field-walking survey.

Above: Musket balls from the Battle of the Boyne recovered in the course of the systematic field-walking survey.

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investigation. The wider battlefield of the Battle of the Boyne should be seen as a landscape within which there are key areas requiring appropriate conservation and presentation.

Coming back to the Oldbridge estate itself, it is also crucial that the significance of the demesne landscape is recognised. This landscape is both the creation and reflection of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century ideas about estate design, and much of the fine detail of this—from the house, other buildings and field boundaries to details of features and fittings—survives intact. This is of significant historical importance in its own right but also has a significance in the context of the battle. This was the place in which much of the remembrance of the battle was created.

To take one small example, between the village and the Potato Field there is a low hummock with an inscribed stone marked '1690'. Local tradition says that this is where the Williamite commander, the duke of Schomberg, was temporarily buried after the battle before being interred in St Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin. But it is more likely to mark a spot where human remains may have been interred, or re-interred after disturbance, some time after the battle. The geophysical survey around the hummock indicated burning or buried metal, and there were high levels of phosphate. However, the style of script on the stone is the same as that on a plaque on the north wall of the estate gatelodge which also reads '1690'. It is very likely that these memorial stones were placed at the

same time in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century. Is it coincidental that this was the time when commemoration of the battle gained a central place in Orange celebrations, having been overshadowed for much of the eighteenth century by King William's birthday in November?

It might be useful to conclude by thinking of the archaeological evidence for both the Battle of the Boyne and the longer-term settlement history of the area from two perspectives. Firstly, it has an applied value in the interpretation of events, such as the battle, and processes, such as the evolution of the landscape from prehistoric times onward. Secondly, because of its importance as the direct, material remains of such events, it has the ability to bring the past into the present in a very real way. ■

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