

Local road ruins lead to archaeological award

By ALAN CORCORAN

CRATER-LIKE potholes may be the bane of motorists throughout the county but excavations on the N6 Galway to Ballinasloe road scheme have led to a top archaeological award.

Brendon Wilkins of Headland Archaeology Ireland scooped second prize at the recent British Heritage Research Awards in London for work he undertook on cemetery sites excavated on the road on behalf of the NRA and Galway County Council.

The awards encourage archaeologists to present their research in Britain and Ireland to people who would not normally be exposed to archaeology and were hosted at a conference at the British Museum in London.

The work on the Galway road led to the presentation 'Recently Reported Road Deaths on the N6: 3500 BC to 1500 AD'.

Mortuary behaviour

"I was involved with excavating 12 out of the 36 locations on the road and the majority of these happened to be funerary sites so we were examining mortuary behaviour," he said.

The various digs on the route led to a number of new discoveries in the archaeological and historical worlds.

A site at Carrowkeel near Athenry held 132 burials that were dated between 700 AD and 1500 AD.

During the three months of work at the location it was found that 80 per cent of the remains were from children's burials.

Brendon explained that this case was unusual as such burial grounds are usually associated with unbaptised infants, however the remains long pre-dated the arrival of Christianity in the country.

"There was a segregation of infant burials dating back to the early medieval period and it is presumed that this

type of burial came much later on, not in pre-Christian times," he revealed.

Another rare find was uncovered in Newford, Athenry where a Bronze Age funeral pyre was discovered.

Brendon revealed the pyre was essentially a large bonfire used for cremations and that normally ashes in a pit would be all that was left.

In this case however remains were preserved and therefore a more detailed analysis could be carried out.

The archaeologist and his team were involved in the road scheme from the beginning, digging test trenches and helping route the motorway around existing archaeological sites.

He said he was delighted to be involved with the dig: "This has been a phenomenally exciting project to work on. This has been a team effort and it's an international endorsement of the caliber of our work."

He said it was not the first time archaeology has benefited from infrastructure work in the country and added it would probably not be the last case: "Over the last ten years Ireland has been leading the world in both the quantity and quality of the archaeological work undertaken, a rarely acknowledged benefit of the construction boom."

Graphics manager Jonathan Millar worked on the visual side of the presentation.

He was delighted with the award and said he would gladly welcome the opportunity to compete at a similar event in Ireland.

The bone assemblage is with Headland Archaeology but like all archaeological objects, they belong to the National Museum of Ireland in Dublin.

In this case the collection will eventually be integrated to the UCC archaeology department, where the bones will be available for study.



ROAD REMAINS: Members of the archaeological team work on the excavation of a burial radiocarbon dated to 678 - 870 AD in Carrowkeel, Athenry.