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The name **COVAGNI** is the genitive of Covagnas, which later came to be the more modern Cuan (http://www.ucl.ac.uk/archaeology/cisp/database/stone/cskcc_1.html). And as Betty Newman Maguire pointed out, McManus was one who indicated that the element **LUGUNI** in the inscription refers to the tribal group Luigni of Meath, so that the stone is well located for that group.

And so, a fuller modern translation of the inscription would be:

‘Of Thy Cuan son of the sons of Luigne’

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Unmarked medieval and post-medieval burial grounds: a time to reconsider?

Results of excavations from a burial ground in Athboy, Co. Meath

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Introduction

Archaeological excavations conducted by CRDS Ltd. on behalf of Meath County Council have revealed a previously unknown cemetery dating to the cusp of the medieval and post medieval periods. The excavations were undertaken in the townland of Townparks (NGR 272145, 263875; see Fig 1) on the outskirts of the town of Athboy in advance of a new sewerage treatment plant. The works form part of the Meath Bundled Wastewater scheme which was undertaken in eight towns or villages within the county. The site is located in greenfield on an esker ridge, delimited on its eastern extent by the main Athboy - Trim Road (R154). The western limit of the site was defined by a bog margin. Archaeological features were confined to the ridge which dominates the eastern portion of the field.

The most significant remains on site consisted of nine burials which represent a small previously unknown burial ground. With the exception of a single burial, these all appear to date to 1400 - 1660 AD (*note all dates are given in two sigmas*). In addition to the burials a number of prehistoric features, a medieval ditch and gravel extraction pit and some post-medieval features were also recorded. These features appear to represent activity which was primarily agricultural or light industrial in nature.

This paper seeks to outline briefly the results of the excavation, before concentrating on the burials and the significance of unmarked burial grounds for this period. A much abbreviated version of this paper has been published previously (Shine and Travers 2011). However this piece presents a much more detailed osteological discussion.

Excavation results

Prehistoric Features: A small number of prehistoric features consisting of three small pits, a burnt deposit and a series of naturally

accumulating hill washes were recorded at the western extent of the site. These features 'hugged' the western slope of the gravel esker as it descended into a bog margin, with the main focus of activity probably contained north of the site boundaries. One of the pits and 2 of the 'hill-washes' were truncated by a medieval field boundary ditch.

The burnt deposit returned a radiocarbon date of 2880 ± 2750 cal BC and also contained a fine scraper identified as Neolithic to Bronze Age in date. A second date from one of the pits of 2147 ± 2016 cal BC appears to confirm this dating for the features. Cattle bone and plant macro material including small twigs of birch, hazel and oak were recovered.



Plate 1: Prehistoric scraper recovered during excavations

The latter suggest a short lived fire and may indicate that the features represent a temporary encampment or transitory use of the site in this period, possibly exploiting natural resources represented by the bog margin. A number of the features were filled with natural accumulations of silt, suggesting that they were abandoned after their initial use.

Later Medieval Features: A large boundary ditch (2.5m by 1.1m), gravel extraction pit and a small drain and pit dating to the 12th – 13th century represent the next activity on site. The small pit and drain were largely sterile and unexceptional.

The boundary ditch was dug to separate the bog margin to the west and the arable land on the esker ridge to the east. The ditch appears to have been in use for a considerable time period with the lower fills all being fine accumulations of silt. In total, 11 sherds of Dublin type pottery were recovered from the feature, while the ditch was sealed with a generic layer of hill wash which contained an additional 23 sherds of 12th – 13th century pottery (Shine 2010). The

ditch also contained an amount of cattle, horse, pig and sheep/goat bone, as well as grains of elder, oat, wheat, tufted vetch, barley, wheat spelt, goose-foot, dock and bramble (both charred and uncharred). None of these were particularly remarkable as they mainly represent food staples of the time. The elder, a plant which thrives in waterlogged soils, probably indicates the natural tree cover to the west of the site in the bog.

A large gravel and sand extraction pit was located 18m east of the ditch. This had been used to extract building materials, presumably to support the growth of the adjacent town of Athboy. The pit had a secondary use as an 'ad-hoc' corn drying kiln after it was abandoned. Areas of in-situ burning were noted, one of which returned a radiocarbon date of AD 1050 – 1270. Plant remains included large amounts of mustard/cabbage, sedge, tufted vetch, barley, wheat, Einkorn wheat and some wheat threshing material, as well as charred remains of hazel, oak, crab apple and poplar/willow. By far the most common plant material was oat seeds which the pit appears to have been used to dry in advance of threshing and winnowing. The oak and other remaining native species such as crab apple, hazel and willow were probably used as fuel and tinder respectively. Cattle, sheep/goat, pig, horse and dog bone were also recorded. In total 75 sherds, almost exclusively of 13th century Dublin type ware were recovered, 58 from a single fill and probably all from a single vessel. An iron nail and a possible awl were also recorded, while an upper fill contained a Class 9 or club headed stick pin. This pin type can date to the mid 11th – 13th century but is most commonly thought to date to the 12th century. This pin was complete and had most likely been lost accidentally during cereal processing in the pit (Shine 2010).



Plate 2: Stick pin from F71 (68E086571:13)

Post Medieval - Early Modern Features: In addition to the burials (see below) a range of other post-medieval/early modern features were exposed, mainly dating to the 19th century or later. None of these are of particular archaeological significance, consisting of 5 boundary/drainage ditches and 2 furrows/gullies.

Three ditches were identified to the west of the site and correspond to the field boundary as mapped on the first edition of the To Ordnance Survey dating to 1837 (see Fig 4). This boundary was probably removed with the construction of the adjacent rail line which opened in 1865. Clay pipe stems and post medieval pottery were recovered from the fills. Two additional boundary ditches were recorded at the western and eastern extent of the site proper. These contained a mixture of 12th - 19th century pottery as well as some modern corroded metal, potentially indicating that they had crased earlier features.

A large modern gravel extraction pit containing plastic and 12th - 13th century finds confirms that there has been some relatively recent disturbance of medieval features on site.

Medieval - Post Medieval Cemetery

Osteological discussion:

The burials (see Fig 2) were by far the most significant archaeological remains encountered on the site. In total 9 burials and 29 bags of disarticulated bone representing at least 14 individuals were recovered (Shine 2010). These were located both on the brow of, and along the base of a low esker and consisted of: 5 adults, 1 adolescent and 3 children. Of the adults present, 2 were male and 3 were female. With the exception of burial 9, all the burials dated to 1440 - 1660 AD. Average stature of adults from was 169.4 cm (5ft 7in) for males and 163.4 cm (5ft 4in) for females. While this is considerably shorter than modern populations, comparison with other Irish sites from the period shows that body height of both males and females was within average ranges.

The majority of burials were oriented in a general E-W tradition, with their heads to the west and feet to the east. The exceptions to this were Burial 2 (a young adult, possibly male), which was buried head to the east and feet to the west, and Burial 1 (a child aged 6 - 8 years), which was positioned with its head to the north, and feet to the south. The burials were all placed in a supine extended position, with the hands in or around the pelvis, which suggests that the bodies were



Plate 3: Burials 3 and 4 under excavation

wrapped in shrouds. The only burial not placed in this position was Burial 6, an adolescent aged between 13 - 15 years, which was positioned extended and prone (face down), with its hands crossed across its abdominal and pelvic area. While prone burials are often seen as a mark of disrespect to the individual, it is possible that if a winding sheet was used to wrap the body (which the position of the legs and hands suggests), it may have mistakenly been placed in the grave in the wrong position. This is most likely the case as there was nothing identified during osteological analysis that would account for any different treatment of this individual.



Plate 4: Burials 6 and 7 under excavation

The well-ordered layout of the cemetery and the relatively few instances of truncated burials indicates that the location of the individual graves was visible or known during the primary period in which the cemetery was in use. Only in one case, Burial 9, that of a middle aged female, was there disturbance by another grave (Burial 3).

This skeleton was radiocarbon dated to slightly earlier than others at the site (AD 1310 – 1449), and it is possible that the location was not marked at the time that Burial 3 was interred.

Pathological lesions were present on the endocranial (inner surface) of the frontal bone of Burial 9. A large number of conditions, such as meningitis, TB, syphilis, tumours, subdural haematomas and vitamin deficiencies (Lewis 2004) can bring about endocranial lesions. However, the nature and location of the lesions on this individual are similar to cases of *Hyperostosis Frontalis Interna* documented by Belcastro et al (2006). This condition is characterised by thickening of the frontal bone and can be associated with Morgani-Stewart-Morel syndrome (associated with virilism, hirsutism, obesity and behavioural disorders) or from hormonal disturbances, anomalous glucose regulation, arterial hypertension, obesity and genetic factors. Considering the possibility of physical disabilities, abnormal appearance and behavioural disorders associated with the various lesions seen on the bones of Burial 9, it is possible that this individual was deliberately treated differently in burial rite.



Plate 5: Endocranial lesions on the frontal bone of Burial 9

Non metric traits exhibited on multiple burials included ossicles in lambdoid, absence of 3rd molars and tibial squatting facets. The presence of ossicles in the cranial sutures and congenital absence of molars may be related to genetic factors (Schwartz 1995, Hillson 1996). On the other hand, development of squatting facets is activity related. These are anterior extensions of the distal articular surface of

the tibia, and are activity induced, associated with the persistent flexion of the hip, knee, ankle and foot through the habit of squatting (Boulle2001, Larsen 1997). Habitual adoption of squatting or similar posture, perhaps to tend a fire or other tasks low on the ground would be the sort of routine activity which may lead to the production of these facets. It is interesting to note that both instances of squatting facets from Athboy occur in female skeletons.

DJD is the most commonly occurring pathology visible in archaeological assemblages. It is a non-inflammatory disease, involving the degeneration of the articular cartilage of various joints. This degeneration can allow a variety of bony manifestations to develop, and these are frequently observed on skeletal remains. The disease is strongly related to age. Four of the five adult inhumations showed signs of DJD on the vertebrae, while the two young adult individuals also had extra spinal joint disease. Notably, changes to the vertebrae of the young adults were consistently mild, with degenerative changes increasing in severity through the older age categories. Joint disease can occur as a consequence of ageing, as a response to stresses at the joint through occupational activity, or secondary to trauma. The young age at which the Athboy skeletons exhibited signs of DJD, as well as the enthesopathies seen on Burials 4 and 9, indicate that these skeletons had been subject to excessive stresses to muscles and joints.

Indications of nutritional stress were amongst the most commonly occurring skeletal pathologies in this group. Four individuals displayed evidence for changes associated with both healed and active cribra orbitalia. This is described as lesions involving the outer table of the orbital region of the frontal bone and is usually attributed to iron deficiency anaemia, but it may be caused by a number of other dietary and non-dietary factors (low-birth weight, parasitic infection and genetic predisposition; Aufderheide & Rodríguez-Martin 1998, Larsen 1997). Causes of iron deficiency are variable, ranging from a diet lacking in iron rich foods and/or a diet rich in foods that inhibit the absorption of dietary iron, to blood loss through injury or disease. In comparison to other sites, the frequencies of cribra orbitalia from Athboy is high. As all lesions were both active and healing at time of death, it is possible that the individuals were subject to a number of bouts of anaemia throughout their lives.

In general, this group suffered from poor dental health, particularly caries and calculus. The dentition of three of the five

adults showed carious lesions, while all individuals (including sub-adults) exhibited calculus. The high frequency of dental caries is related to high levels of refined sugars and carbohydrates (in the form of refined flour) introduced into the diet in the later medieval to post-medieval period in Ireland (Power 1994). The consumption of gruel or porridge, which formed an increasingly significant part of the diet of the poor, is conducive to the development of the condition.

Levels of enamel hypoplasia from this site were also high. Hypoplastic lines can only be linked to periods of stress during childhood. All six of the individuals with teeth available for analysis showed at least one, and in some cases multiple episodes of hypoplasia, indicating numerous periods of nutritional or metabolic stress during childhood. In general, the high levels and multiple episodes of conditions such as cribra orbitalia and enamel hypoplasia suggest that this group was subject to generally poor dietary conditions over long periods of time, reflecting the enormous poverty that existed in Ireland during the medieval and post-medieval periods.

Finally the low level of infant remains from the site is notable. In pre-modern assemblages, infant remains can be expected to account for up to 50% of all individuals interred in a cemetery population (Brothwell 1981). It is more commonly found that mortality rates in the past were higher during the first years of life where nutritional and pathological stresses, possibly associated with the period of weaning, struck vulnerable infants. Despite the very good preservation of bone from the site, there were only two bones, recovered as disarticulated bone, which could be assigned to this age bracket. It is possible that additional burials exist beyond the limits of the excavation and that the sample recovered may not be representative of the population as a whole.

Unmarked cemeteries: a discussion

No evidence for an associated habitation site was exposed during the excavations (although it is possible that one site survives outside the area of excavation). Similarly, despite exhaustive cartographic and historical research, no record for a graveyard or ecclesiastical site was found at this location.

Elisabeth O'Brien has suggested that the custom of burying the dead in non-ecclesiastical sites was only tolerated until the 8th century, after which time Church legislation required people to be buried in consecrated ground (O'Brien 1992). The most frequently

cited explanation for burial in un-consecrated graveyards after this date is the use of grounds to bury 'unfortunates', such as suicides, strangers, men who died in battle, women and infants who died during childbirth, or criminals (Leigh Fry 1999, 180). However, there is no osteological evidence to suggest this was the case at Athboy. This paper presents in detail the pathologies of this burial group to indicate clearly that these individuals should not be considered as 'unfortunate'. It is acknowledged that there is evidence of dietary deficiencies, poverty and physical trauma caused by repetitive manual labour, but these are largely typical of the period. There is nothing to indicate that this group was an excluded sub-set of a population or that they were treated deliberately differently in their burial rite.

With the exception of Burial 9 all the burials appear to have been treated in a formal way, carefully laid out, and almost certainly demarcated. Burial 9's truncation by Burial 3 is the best indication that an individual may have been treated differently in burial practice to the rest of the group due to its physical appearance during life (as explained above). Alternatively, Burial 9, having been confirmed as earlier than the rest of the group, could simply have been truncated as it represents an earlier phase of burial. The wide range of the radiocarbon dates (1440 - 1660AD), obtained from 5 individuals, also indicates that the individuals were not interred in a single event, such as a plague: an explanation frequently given for burial in un-consecrated ground. This is supported by the osteological evidence which while indicating dietary deficiencies, shows no indication of plague or famine.

Perhaps the burials in Athboy should be a stimulus for us to reconsider our thinking on un-consecrated burial sites of this period. It is possible that this practice may have cultural or social motivations. For example, considering the poverty that existed in Ireland at the time, is it possible that this particular group may have had relatives who could simply afford to give them an "orthodox" burial? This does not make them unfortunates, plague victims or criminals, and certainly their treatment in death indicates they were cared for during life!

Comparison to similar sites of this period is difficult, as the catalogue of excavations is still relatively small with even fewer published. Excavation reports which have been completed frequently do not include radio-carbon dating, and while dates are sometimes conjectured their uncertainty makes meaningful comparisons useless.

Consultation of excavation reports from the last 20 years threw up only a handful of similar sites that have been scientifically dated. However discussion on them is still worthwhile (see Fig 3).

Excavations in Garadice, Co. Meath revealed a previously unknown multi-phase site which contained 4 Later Medieval/Post Medieval burials. These were dated to 1460 - 1640 AD, an almost identical date range to Athboy. As at Athboy, these burials were individually and formally laid out, with some displaying evidence of shrouding. Another similar site was excavated at Stradbally North in County Limerick in 2003 (Coyne 2003). Here 10 individuals were recorded which are thought to date to between the 15th and 17th centuries. Although the burial practice appears to have been rushed, with burials placed into tightly fitting grave cuts, all the burials were formally treated and extended. Shrouding was again noted on a number of the burials, while one was wrapped in a tight winding sheet.

More direct parallels can be drawn between Athboy and a site in County Longford, Mullagh 2. This site, which contained 56 burials, (18 juveniles and 38 adults), was unknown prior to archaeological investigation and was not associated with any church. The site dated to the medieval and post medieval periods, with a previous phase of agricultural use including cereal drying kilns and a large boundary ditch. All the burials were again laid out formally, generally aligned east-west and shrouded on occasions. Just over 12 kilometers from Athboy, another site, Iffernock 1, was recorded in the town of Trim. This has been dated only tentatively by the high levels of dental caries, which indicate that it is likely to be early post medieval or later in date. However, the site contained 31 burials arranged in four well-ordered rows, with each burial again being carefully extended and positioned in its grave cut.

Considering these excavations, it seems apparent that the cemetery in Athboy is not a unique site and that burial outside the churchyard was being practised during the late medieval period and into the post medieval period. There is no evidence to suggest that the group of burials uncovered in Athboy or any of the other mentioned sites are the 'unfortunates' often mentioned in previous literature. In general, the Athboy burials were shrouded and carefully buried to accord with Christian tradition of east-west orientation. Potentially, their burial may have referenced earlier boundaries, or sites which have left no physical or historical trace.

We acknowledge that many burials in un-consecrated sites of this period are indeed for famine or plague victims, soldiers, or unbaptised children. However, this conclusion must be based on osteological observations. In the absence of clear evidence that these people were 'unfortunates', we must conclude either that social processes we do not fully understand were engaged, or that everyday burial was indeed being undertaken outside the graveyard.

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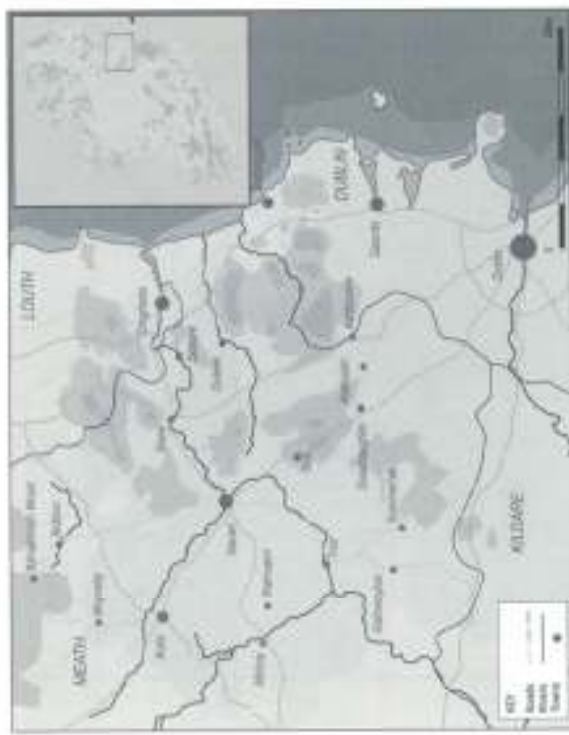


Figure 1. Site location

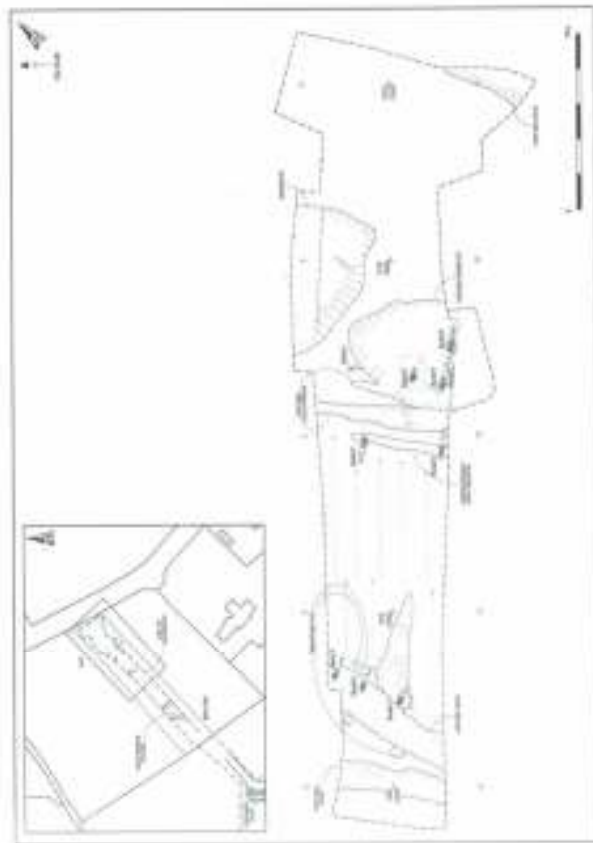


Figure 2. Site plan showing the location of the burials and the major archaeological features.

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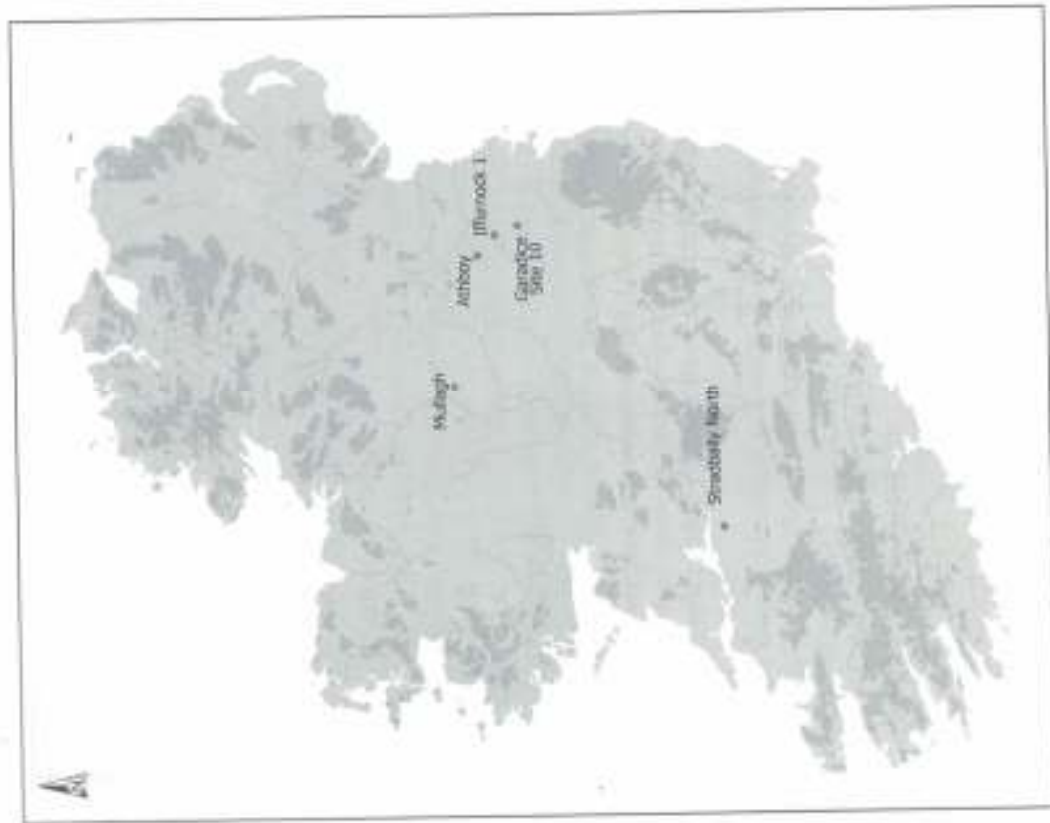
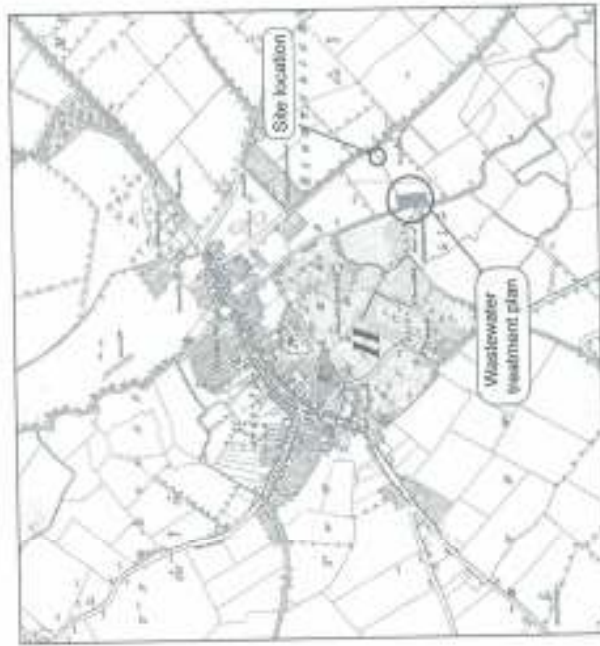


Figure 3: Location of discussed burial sites



Location of site on the first Edition OS c.1837



Location of site on the RMP map c.1894

Figure 4: Location of the site on the 1837 and 1894 OS, also showing the RMP