



Centre for
**COMMUNITY
ARCHAEOLOGY**
Queen's University Belfast

**AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATION AT A "FAMINE ROAD" IN DRUMMACOORIN,
BOHO, COUNTY FERMANAGH**



Data Structure Report No. 143



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Date Structure Report No. 143

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Irish Grid Reference: H 13683 44488

The year 2020 marked the 175th anniversary of the commencement in 1845 of the Great Famine (*An Gorta Mhór*) in Ireland. Continuing to devastate the country until 1852, the disaster was caused by the near-annual destruction of the potato crop as a result of Blight (*Phytophthora infestans*, a fungus-like microorganism) among a population that relied on the tubers for their sustenance. Starvation and its associated diseases caused social chaos across Ireland, as evidenced in the census returns of 1841 and 1851 which demonstrate that the population had reduced from 8.2 million to 6.5 million in a decade, a 19.8% decrease that represents those who either died or were forced to emigrate to survive.

The Centre for Community Archaeology (CCA) at Queen's University Belfast had planned to commemorate this event with two projects. The first of these, working with Glens of Antrim Potatoes and the Belfast Hills Partnership, was a community-based project that would dig cultivation ridges ("Lazy Beds") and plant Lumper potatoes, a crop strongly associated with the period. The second, supported by the QUB Engaged Research Fund, was to undertake an archaeological investigation of a "Famine Road" in County Fermanagh. This schedule of activity had to be abandoned in March 2020 due to the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. The opening up of society again as a result of the ongoing vaccination programme, however, enabled a return to fieldwork in Summer 2021 and we were able to proceed with our plans for a "Famine Road" excavation, with the investigation carried out at an example in Boho, County Fermanagh (Figure 1), over the five-day period from Monday 23rd August to Friday 27th August 2021 inclusive.

"Famine Roads" are a striking element of the historic landscape across Ireland but they have largely escaped archaeological attention, despite the fact that these structures constitute monuments that are directly associated with the Great Famine. Also known as "Meal Roads", "Broad Roads", "*Brachán* (Porridge) Roads", "Cuttings", "Lines" and "New Lines", within Fermanagh they were constructed in the period from October 1846 to June 1847 when the British government's response to the crisis in Ireland was to initiate public work schemes, frequently involving the construction of new roads where the poor might obtain payment or food in return for work. Undertaken during a terrible winter, the schemes caused more harm than good among a population already racked by the effects of the catastrophe, and by Spring 1847 (a year known in history as "Black '47") the programme was abandoned as a failure by the Whig government in London, with a network of soup kitchens to be funded by local taxation instead. The roads that had been started, however, were not always completed and many of them were abandoned unfinished.



Figure 1: Aerial view of the surviving section of “The Line” next Flush Bridge in Drummaccoorin, Boho, County Fermanagh (Ryan Montgomery).

Limited research has been conducted on the roads and there is a tendency for them simply to feature as illustrations within texts (for example, Crowley et al 2012, 79, Figure 5), or to be mentioned in passing, as in the chapter devoted to the Great Famine in *Secrets of the Irish Landscape* (Collins 2013). Their value as a monument of the period, however, has been recognised by some local historians such as Gaby Burns, who charted examples in the Belcoo area of County Fermanagh in the book *“If Only ...”* (1995). Oral history also provides some insight into their construction and Póirtéir (1995, 150-165) compiled a chapter on the subject from information contained within the files of the Irish Folklore Commission, albeit that much of this tended to be family and community recollections from the generations born after the Great Famine. The best overview that we have of what life was like for those involved in their construction is Hugh Dorian’s account. Although written down some 40 years after the event, it is evident that what he witnessed as a young man in County Donegal had made a lasting impression upon him (Mac Suibhne and Dickson 2000, 215-217). A further useful text, but written from the perspective of a government engineer on the public works, is William Henry Smith’s contemporary account of his time overseeing public works in the Athlone area in 1846-1847 (Smith 1848). The structured nature of the work is evident in Smith’s account and chimes with what we know from the British Parliamentary Papers of the instructions provided to engineers, which was accompanied by a diagram that depicted the two types of road to be constructed; either 24 feet in width and with a footpath, or 21 feet in width (Figure 2).

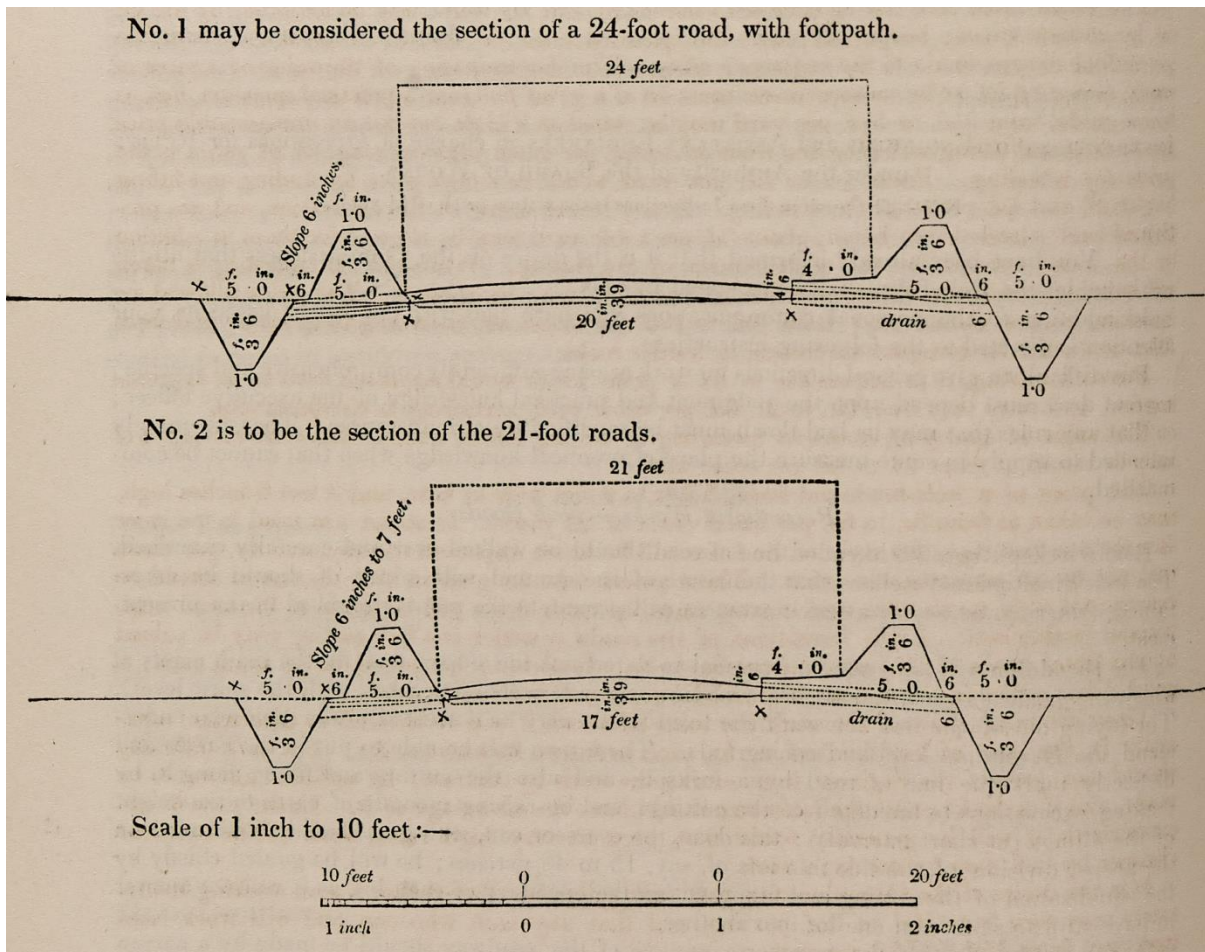


Figure 2: Cross-sections of road construction included in *Instructions for Engineers in charge of operations for relief under the authority of the Board of Works* (1847, Board of Works Series: Second Part, London, 71-75).

These roads were to have “fences” either side, 3 feet 6 inches in height, made of sods and faced with stones if possible. “Models” made of laths were to be used to keep the fences a regular size and shape. Beyond the fences were to be drains, 3 feet 6 inches in depth. Under the road would be cross pipes at 110 yard intervals constructed of 6 inch stones by a mason. The “soling” or foundation layer was to be of clay or sand, “free from stones and vegetable earth”, and the road surface was to be formed of broken stones with “blinding” (sand or gravel) spread across the surface to fill in any gaps. Our project sought to map the roads in two of the baronies within south-west Fermanagh that had been most heavily affected by the crisis; the barony of Magheraboy with the village of Derrygonnelly, and the barony of Clanawley including the Boho region. Initial historical research was undertaken in 2019 by Dr Gillian Allmond (Allmond 2019), work which highlighted 34 public work schemes belonging to the period, with 17 nominated in Clanawley and a further 17 in Magheraboy (although four of these did not receive funding), of which 26 can be located on the modern landscape (Figure 3).

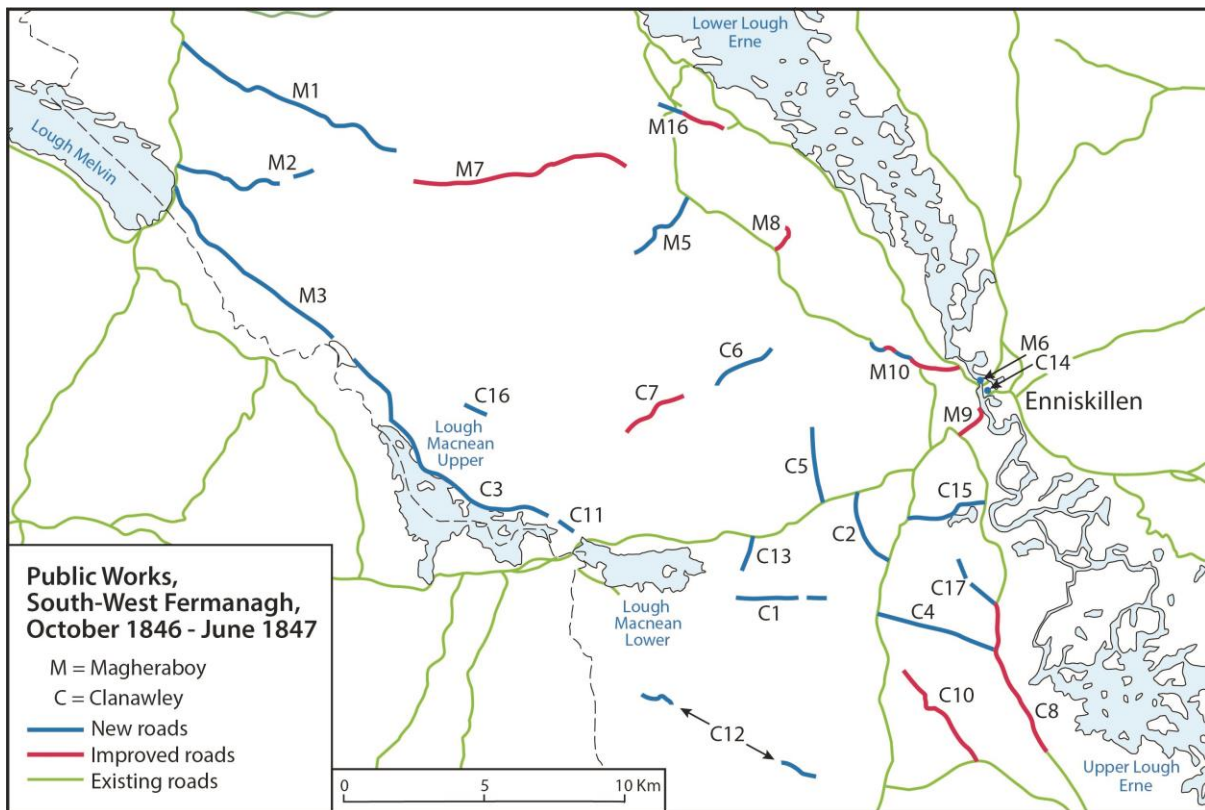


Figure 3: Map of the funded public work schemes in the baronies of Magheraboy and Clanawley in south-west Fermanagh, October 1846 to June 1847.

The engineer for the public works in Fermanagh was Roderick Gray from Enniskillen who was the County Surveyor from 1834 to 1876. Some of the roads that he oversaw the construction of are still in use today, such as the route of the B52 Lattone Road from Agho to Holywell that skirts the northern shoreline of Lough Macnean Upper (Figure 3, Road C3), or the section of the Drumanure Road outside Derrygonnelly between the townlands of Aghakeeran and Derryvary More (Figure 3, Road M5). Elsewhere, a short section of roadway going from the townland of Gortalughany to Beihy and Aghatirourke is now used as an agricultural lane (Figure 3, Road C12). Others, however, were abandoned, including an example in the Civil Parish of Boho (Figure 1 and Figure 3, Road C6; Irish Grid Reference H15511 45594 to H13666 44461), known locally as “The Line”, which ran for 1.38 miles (2.24 km) through five townlands – Drummacooin, Kilnamaddoo, Tobradan, Drumkirk Upper and Drumboy. A surviving section of the monument in the townland of Drummacooin and close to Flush Bridge became the focus of our fieldwork. The Civil Parish of Boho is divided between the Baronies of Magheraboy and Clanawley and was particularly affected by the Great Famine, with 32% of its population vanishing between the 1841 census (2,824 people) and the 1851 census (1,933 people). The relief schemes in Fermanagh commenced on 15th October 1846, although work did not begin immediately and we do not know the exact date when “The Line” – Scheme

Number 6 for the Barony of Clanawley – commenced. A sum of £400 had been requested from the Treasury by the Extraordinary Presentment Sessions for Clanawley on 2nd October 1846 “towards making a new line of road from Enniskillen to Holywell between the barony boundary at Cloghram [Cloghane] Bridge and the crossroads in Acres”; the latter location is Boho Crossroads in the townland of Acres, next to Drummcoorin and Flush Bridge (Figure 4A and 4B).

The request was approved by the Treasury on 28th October 1846 although it is likely that work had not commenced until the week ending 14th November 1846 when there was a major increase in the number of labourers employed across the county, rising from 349 in the previous week to 1,369; thereafter the figure was to rise week-on-week until the middle of January 1847 when 7,576 labourers were employed on public works in Fermanagh, of which 875 people were working in Clanawley, including 33 infirm men, a woman and 44 boys. A second Presentment Sessions for Clanawley was held on 8th March 1847 and a further £500 was requested for Scheme Number 6. The Treasury approved £150 of this sum on 30th March 1847 with another £350 released on 22nd May 1847. As such, the total allocated to the construction of “The Line” in Boho amounted to £900. We do not know when work stopped on the scheme but the fact that additional money was allocated at the end of May might suggest that “The Line” remained active until the termination of all public works in the county in the week ending 19th June 1847.

“The Line” is marked in outline on the 2nd edition Ordnance Survey map of 1855-1859 and it becomes clear that the basic route of the scheme had been laid down during the winter of 1846-1847, while large ditches flanking each side of the road are notable in the 2nd and 3rd edition Ordnance Survey six-inch maps in the townlands of Drumkirk Upper and Drumboy (Figure 5). Fieldwork has confirmed that these deep ditches are still *in situ* and that they were evidently designed to remove water away from the roadway and direct it to the streams feeding into the River Sillies. The presence of the road’s routeway on the 2nd edition map also allows us to establish that it shadowed the pre-existing Boho Road, depicted on the 1st edition Ordnance Survey map of 1834. Somewhat hilly in nature, perhaps the objective had been to replace this old road with one on lower ground, but it was recognised that flooding would be a problem and hence the need for larger ditches than those advocated in the government’s instructions to engineers.

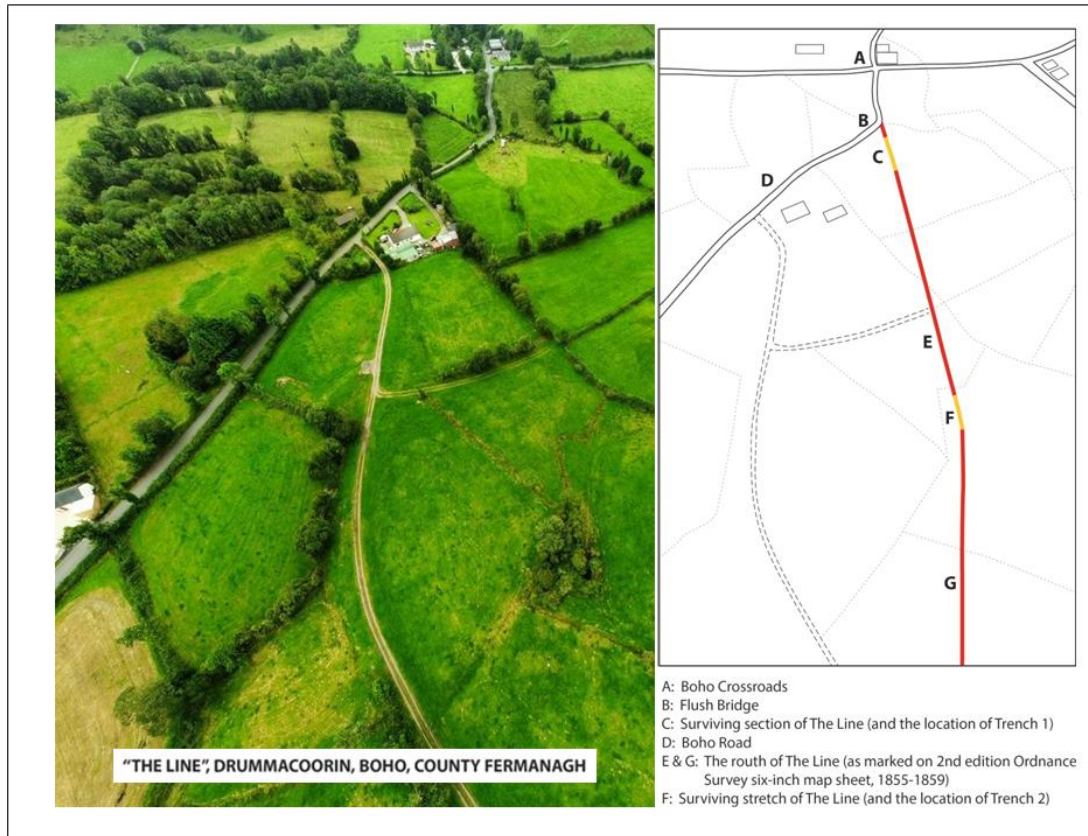


Figure 4: Aerial view of the route of "The Line" in Drummacorin (Ryan Montgomery)

Specifics of daily work on the public works in Fermanagh were not recorded but we know from official documents that conditions were harsh. The labourers were expected to work from 6am to 6pm with an hour for dinner, six days a week. The stipulation of the Board of Works was that a roll should be called each morning at 6am and a quarter of a day's pay deducted from anyone who was not present. If they did not attend by 9am, a half day's pay was deducted. Anyone who attended after that hour was turned away for the day. A roll was also called at 6pm and no payment was made to anyone who was not present. In some cases the labourers may have received food in the morning and at the end of the working day, but the wages – the official rate varied from 8d to 10d per day – were not sufficient to combat ever-rising food prices in the country. Added to this was the fact that the winter of 1846-1847 was exceptionally cold, with the first snowfall reported in Fermanagh in November 1846 and freezing weather continuing into February 1847.

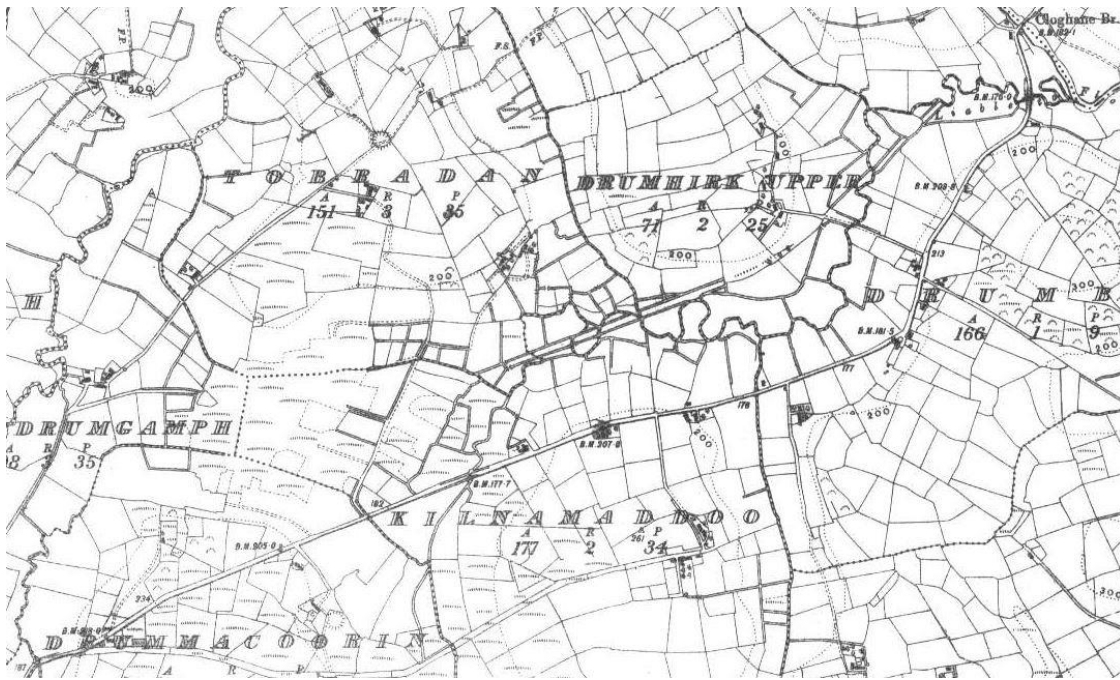


Figure 5: “The Line” as it is depicted in the 3rd edition Ordnance Survey six-inch mapsheet of c.1900. The route through the townlands of Drummacoorin and Kilnamaddoo is not shown, suggesting that much of it had been removed by that time, but the ditches either side of the road through Drumboy and Drumkirk Upper are still marked.

The first death from starvation on the public works was reported in the *Enniskillen Chronicle* on 22nd December 1846, although, of course, others may have occurred previously without reaching the newspapers. A man called James Rolston of the Lowtherstown area was found dead in a field near his house. He had a family of six and had walked three-quarters of a mile the previous day to the public works at Drumschool where he had toiled all day in the snow for 10d. His family had been subsisting on turnips boiled in water. An inquest found he had died of “fatigue and want of sufficient nourishment”. At the time, potatoes were selling for 10d a stone in Lowtherstown market, more than three times their usual price, and Rolston’s daily income would only have bought enough potatoes for himself. This might explain why the family was relying on turnips, cheaper at 2d a stone but providing only a third of the calories.

After this point the newspapers regularly relate stories from the road schemes of deaths from exhaustion and starvation, and deaths and injuries caused by accidents. These accounts do not specifically mention the work undertaken on “The Line”, however, and local oral tradition is limited to the memory that workers did die during its construction, and that some of the labourers resorted to eating grass. That said, the area had an eerie reputation and locals walking the Boho Road through Drummacoorin at night would run passed the field where “The Line” was located to get to Flush Bridge as quickly as they could for fear of encountering

ghosts. One has to wonder if this behaviour was coloured by a folk memory of what had happened or had been witnessed here by the local population in the mid 19th century.

The objective of our fieldwork was to excavate a trench measuring 1m by 16m across an upstanding section of “The Line” in Drummaccoorin (Irish Grid Reference: H 13683 44488) to investigate the form and nature of the monument at this point, how rigidly Roderick Gray (with ultimate responsibility for the road’s design and execution) had worked to the template that had been provided from London with regards the dimensions of the roadway, and to determine if this was a 21 feet road or a 24 feet road with a footpath. A reconnaissance Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR) survey was undertaken by Dr Alastair Ruffell using 2D lines to assess the underlying geology of the site in advance of the excavation. The regional geological mapping suggested glacial clay over limestone bedrock and it had been hoped that the GPR survey might detect imported material (stone) across the surface of the road platform. The survey identified shallow ditches to either side of the roadway but suggested that the platform was clay, with no evidence for an imported stone surface. The expectation had been that we would remove the turf layer within Trench 1 to reveal a stone road surface set over a “soling” platform of clay. The GPR survey, however, had been correct in its findings; the road platform was indeed formed from compacted clay, but no stone had been added to its upper surface (Figure 6).

A second trench (Trench 2), 2 m by 1 m in scale, was opened in an adjoining field where a second stretch of the road is still *in situ*; the turf layer was removed to also reveal a clay surface. The clay platform (C106) in Trench 1 proved to have a maximum thickness of 60 cm (2 feet) and was 11 metre (36 feet) in width, set on the original clay ground surface (C111) in the field (Figure 7). Given that this platform was designed to support a road with a stone surface, we can extrapolate that either of the government’s regulated roads - 21 feet wide or 24 feet wide - could readily have been placed on this footing.

The GPR survey had also been correct in identifying drainage channels running along either side of the road platform, but these features (C103 and C104) had been inserted by the landowner, Sean McLoughlin, in the 1980s and were not features associated with the historic road. While it was evident before our fieldwork that “The Line” had never been completed, we were surprised to discover that the scheme had not progressed to the point that a stone surface had been laid down. Clearly, however, significant effort and £900 of public money had been committed to the project and its extent had been delineated on the ground, with deep ditches excavated for the sections through the townlands of Drumkirk Upper and Drumboy

(Figure 5) and the clay platform created to support the road in Drummacoorin. With no stone surface, however, this could never have become a functioning



Figure 6: Aerial view of the trench excavated across “The Line” showing its clay surface, the “soling” or platform on which the stone roadway would have been set had the road been completed (Ryan Montgomery).

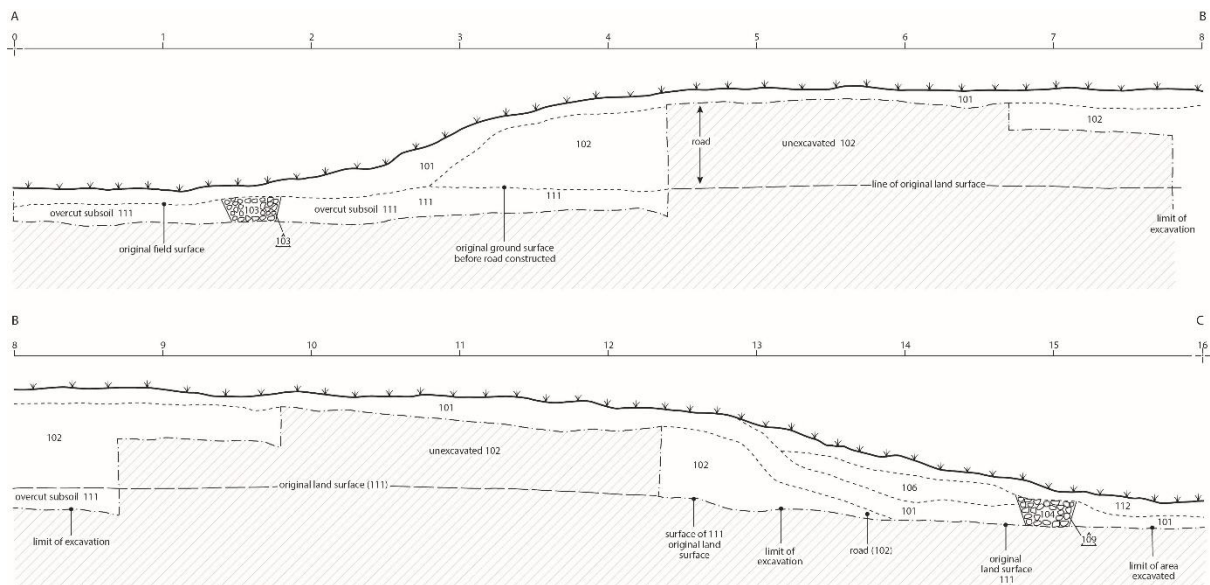


Figure 7a: North-east section of Trench 1, excavated across the route of “The Line” (in 2 parts).

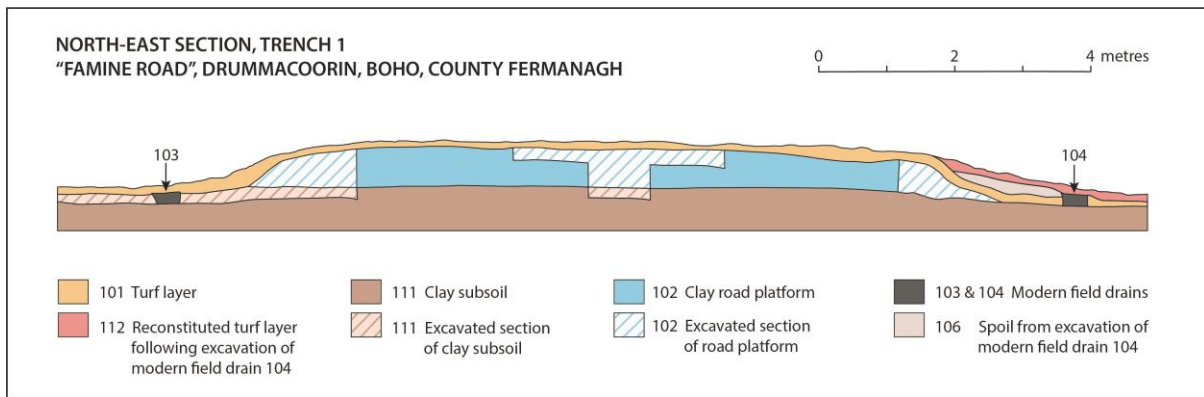


Figure 7: Colourised interpretation of north-east section of Trench 1, excavated across the route of "The Line".

road and the older Boho Road continued as the main route from Boho Crossroads to Cloghane Bridge, as it does to this day. Following its abandonment it would seem that most of the routeway fell into disuse and became overgrown, or – particularly in the townlands of Drummacoerin and Kilnamaddoo – the majority of the structure was removed and the footprint returned to agricultural use.

The goal from the outset was to place our project at "The Line" in the heart of the local community in Boho and to raise awareness of the existence of the monument. We were therefore delighted with the level of interest that the excavation generated, and we had a steady stream of local people visiting the site, with opportunities for volunteers to work alongside the archaeologists (Figure 8). This was greatly helped by the promotion that the project received from the *Fermanagh Herald* before, during and after the fieldwork, and it culminated with an Interdenominational Service of Remembrance and Open Evening held on Thursday 26th August and attended by 70 local people, with the service officiated by Sister Edel Bannon, Fr Seamas Quinn and Rev. Sampson Ajuka (Figure 9 and Figure 10).



Figure 8: QUB students and volunteer participants working on the excavation of Trench 1.

Beyond the Boho community, the excavation featured in the BBC's *Digging for Britain* which further highlighted our project to a wider audience, which is significant given that this is simultaneously a local and national tale; the story of "The Line" is also the story of the Great Famine across Ireland. The "Famine Roads" often survive today as grassed-over scars on the modern Irish landscape, their purpose dimly recalled in contemporary society, but each one serves as a reminder to the events of 175 years ago that forever changed Ireland, culturally, socially and economically. Their importance, however, as monuments of that era needs to be better recognised and promoted. To that end, we are delighted to report that the Historic Environment Division has now listed "The Line" as the first "Famine Road" to be included within the Northern Ireland Sites and Monuments Record (FER 210:105).



Figure 9: The Open Evening provided an opportunity for the local community to view the excavation and meet the archaeologists.



Figure 10: Fr Seamas Quinn plays a lament on the fiddle, flanked by Sister Edel Bannon and Rev. Sampson Ajuka, at the Interdenominational Service of Remembrance.

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