



Monitoring Report No. 119

**SITE OF THE OMAGH WORKHOUSE AND FEVER HOSPITAL
OMAGH
COUNTY TYRONE**

LICENCE NO.: AE/07/29

BRIAN SLOAN

Site Specific Information

Site Name: Omagh General Hospital

Townland: Lisnamallard

SMR No. : N/A

State Care Scheduled Other [delete as applicable]

Grid Ref.: H 7350 4555

County: Tyrone

Excavation Licence No. : AE/07/29

Planning Ref No. : K/2006/0991/F

Dates of Monitoring: 29th – 31st January 2007

Archaeologist(s) Present: Brian Sloan

Brief Summary:

Monitoring was carried out in the grounds of Omagh General Hospital, formerly the location of the Workhouse and Fever Hospital. The work was undertaken as part of a planning application prior to the construction of a temporary classroom within the grounds of the hospital, in close proximity to what had been the Workhouse and Fever Hospital. The evaluation consisted of the mechanical excavation of a single area (15m east/west by 12m north/south), to a depth of approximately 0.3m. The original position of the trench as stipulated in the research design coincided with a concrete play area, and concrete bollards associated with the Early Days Centre. The trench was moved to the grassy area approximately 5m to the east of the original location. Several features of archaeological significance were observed in this area. One of these features was investigated and was found to be a grave cut containing a child's coffin (Grave 1), presumably dating to a time when the Fever Hospital was in use. Eleven other possible grave cuts were recorded but were left undisturbed. It is thought that these graves represent an extension of the burial ground for the Fever Hospital, as documented in the map of 1940 (Fig. 9). A layer of geo-textile was laid down on the site to preserve the archaeological horizon and a layer of gravel hardcore was placed on top. Due to the nature of the proposed building (a temporary classroom with no foundations deeper than 0.3m), and the fact that the archaeological remains have been left preserved *in situ*, it is not deemed necessary for further archaeological mitigation at this site.

Type of monitoring:

Excavation of a single area by mechanical excavator equipped with a 'sheugh' bucket, under archaeological supervision.

Size of area open:

A single area measuring 15m east/west by 12m north/south.

Current Land Use: Open area of mown grass.

Intended Land Use: Temporary classroom.

Brief account of the monitoring

Introduction

The evaluation was requested by Edith Gowdy (Environment and Heritage Service: Built Heritage) after an initial Archaeological Impact Assessment had been prepared by Annie Given of Anne Given Archaeology.

The application site consists of a rectangular area of ground (15m east/west by 12m north/south) within the grounds of Omagh General Hospital, formerly the location of the Omagh Workhouse and Fever Hospital (Figs. 1 and 2). The site is approximately 1.5 km to the north of the centre of Omagh town and lies on the northern bank of the River Strule at an approximate height of 90m above sea level. Currently, the site exists as a generally flat green field, although there is a slight slope to the eastern end of the application area. The boundary of the application area is a modern wooden fence, although the cartographic evidence suggests that this boundary respects the line of the original Workhouse boundary (Figs. 5 to 10). The monitoring was in response to an application for the construction of a temporary classroom.

Due to the presence of concrete bollards, a concrete play area associated with a child care nursery and the presence of underground services, and following discussion with Dessie Francrob (site manager for Mc Avoy off site building solutions), the site was moved approximately 3m to the east (Fig. 2). The research design and programme of works associated with this project, advised by Edith Gowdy, stipulated that the topsoil would need to be stripped to a depth of 0.3m, onto which a layer of gravel hardcore was to be placed to provide a suitable foundation for the temporary classroom. A number of potential archaeological features were encountered, one of which was investigated and was revealed to be a child's burial which contained a remarkably well preserved coffin. The other features (considered to be grave cuts for burials) were left undisturbed *in situ*. A layer of geo-textile was laid down over the archaeological horizon and gravel hardcore was then placed on top.

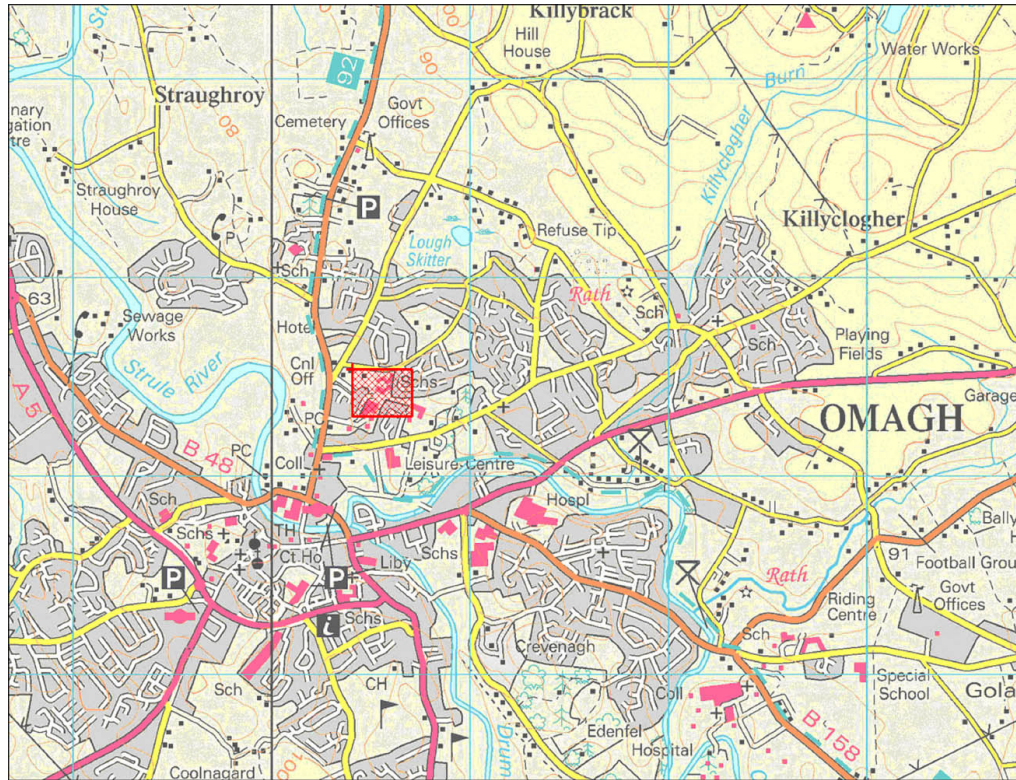


Fig. 1: Location of development area (red box).

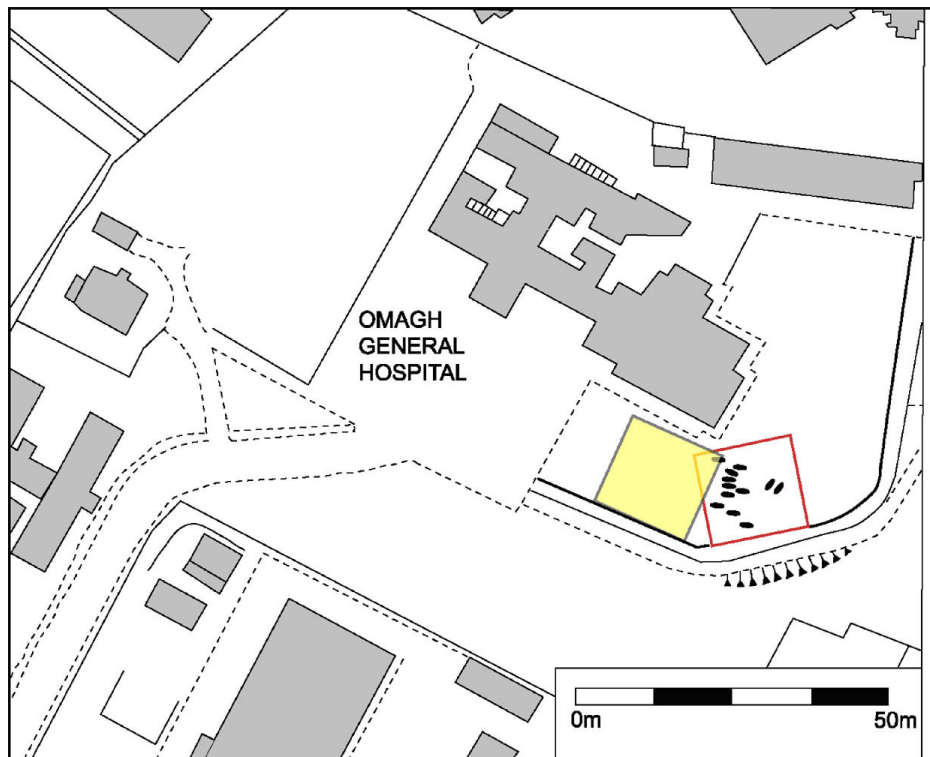


Fig 2: Original location of the application site (yellow box) and actual location of application site (outlined in red).

Historical Background

The Poor Law Amendment Act was passed in 1834, in an effort to improve the poor relief provision, as it had not been significantly altered since the Poor Act of 1601. The 1832 Royal Commission into England's Poor Law found that the old system was expensive yet poorly organised. The Commission advised that conditions within the workhouses should be so spartan so as to act as a deterrent to the poor population, thereby ensuring that only the neediest would be willing to enter them. The Commission also recommended the abolition of the system of 'outdoor relief' whereby help in the form of food, clothing and money were given to the poor without them having to enter an institution such as a workhouse. However, on implementation of the Amendment Act in 1834, this advice was somewhat diluted, with the gradual discouraging of outdoor relief which led to full abolition by the 1840s. The 1834 Act also called for parishes to be grouped into Poor Law Unions, with each Union to set about the construction of a Workhouse. Ireland was divided into 130 areas (Fig. 3), with Workhouses constructed outside market towns. However, with the onslaught of the Famine in the mid 1840's, complaints were made about the distance to certain Workhouses and a boundary commission was established in 1848/9 to investigate the possibility of expanding the number of Unions. This number was eventually increased to a total of 163 Unions in Ireland (Gould 1983).

A single architect, George Wilkinson, was employed to oversee the construction of the Irish Workhouses. He utilized a common blueprint for all the Workhouses in Ireland, based on similar institutions in England such as Chipping Norton or Thames and Witney. Workhouses had a basic design, centered on a 'H' plan. They were split up into three main areas (Fig. 4):

- 1) 'The Front building' which contained the board room, clerks' offices and probationary wards
- 2) The main body of the Workhouse. This contained the dormitories, classrooms, workshops, dining room, and kitchen
- 3) The Infirmary and Dead House.

The Omagh Workhouse and Fever Hospital

The Omagh Poor Law Union was established in 1839 and work soon began on the construction of its Workhouse. The Workhouse was opened on 24th August 1841, designed to provide accommodation for 800 inmates (Gould 1983, 28). Prior to the famine, the area "...outside the Dead House eastward and westward as far as the yard doors on either side" was utilized as the burial ground (Given 2006, 4). However, as the famine took grip on the local population and the fever spread, it became clear that the workhouse could not deal adequately with the influx of people and, presumably, the accompanying fatalities. Indeed, Omagh Union came into criticism in 1847 for not following the other Unions in Tyrone in building separate accommodation to cater for those with infectious diseases such as typhus and other contagious fevers (Johnston 1996). A purpose built fever hospital was eventually constructed to the north of the workhouse. This Fever Hospital was later incorporated into the Omagh General Hospital whilst the remainder of the Workhouse buildings was demolished around 1967 (Gould 1983, 28).



Fig 3: The Poor Law Unions of Ulster showing the location of Omagh Union (Gould 1983, 4).

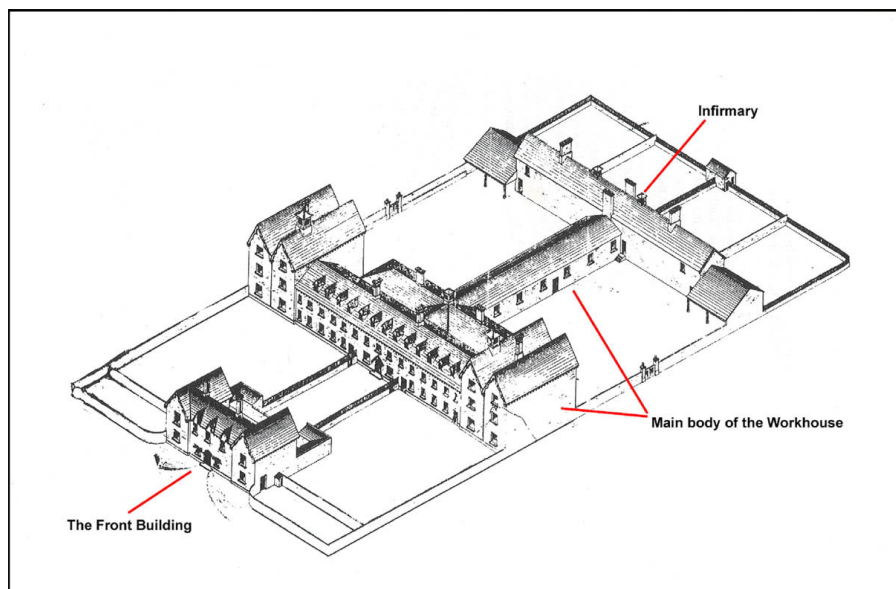


Fig. 4: General layout of the Irish Workhouse (Johnston 1996, 8).

Cartographic evidence

Omagh Workhouse is first depicted on the Ordnance Survey Six-inch map of 1854, and the Fever Hospital is located to the north-west (Figs. 5 and 6). An area of ground is enclosed to the west of the Fever Hospital. This area of ground is not labelled as being a burial ground, although as it is denoted as such on later maps and it can tentatively be suggested that the area was intended/used for burial in the 1850s. It is assumed that the Fever Hospital was constructed between 1847 and 1854. The field boundary around the hospital encloses an irregular shaped field, with the curvilinear boundary (represented by a wooden fence today) clearly visible (red line Fig. 6). By the 1907 edition of the Six-inch map, the boundaries had been largely altered and the area split into two rectangular fields and a tri-angular area which contained the Fever Hospital and its burial ground, with the latter located to the west of the Fever Hospital. The area encompassed by this cemetery is slightly larger than that represented in the 1854 map (Fig. 7 and 8). In the 1940 edition of the map, an additional burial area is denoted to the south-east of the Fever Hospital in the general area of the application site (see Figs. 9 and 10). This area is clearly defined as a small enclosure dedicated to burials; the original burial ground to the north-west of the Fever Hospital is still represented, although it is no longer annotated as such (Fig. 9).

The curvilinear boundary to the south-east of the Fever Hospital proves interesting as it is represented on the early maps and is respected today by the fence associated with Omagh Early Days Centre. This boundary survived the re-shaping of the Fever Hospital grounds, shown on the maps from 1854 to the present day.

The cartographic evidence suggests that a significant level of burial took place in the area surrounding the Omagh Workhouse and Fever Hospital. The first burial area represented on the 1854 Six-inch map was later extended to the western boundary of the Fever Hospital. The burial ground must have provided inadequate space for the Fever Hospital, necessitating the opening of another plot to the south-east. It is in this area that the application site is located.

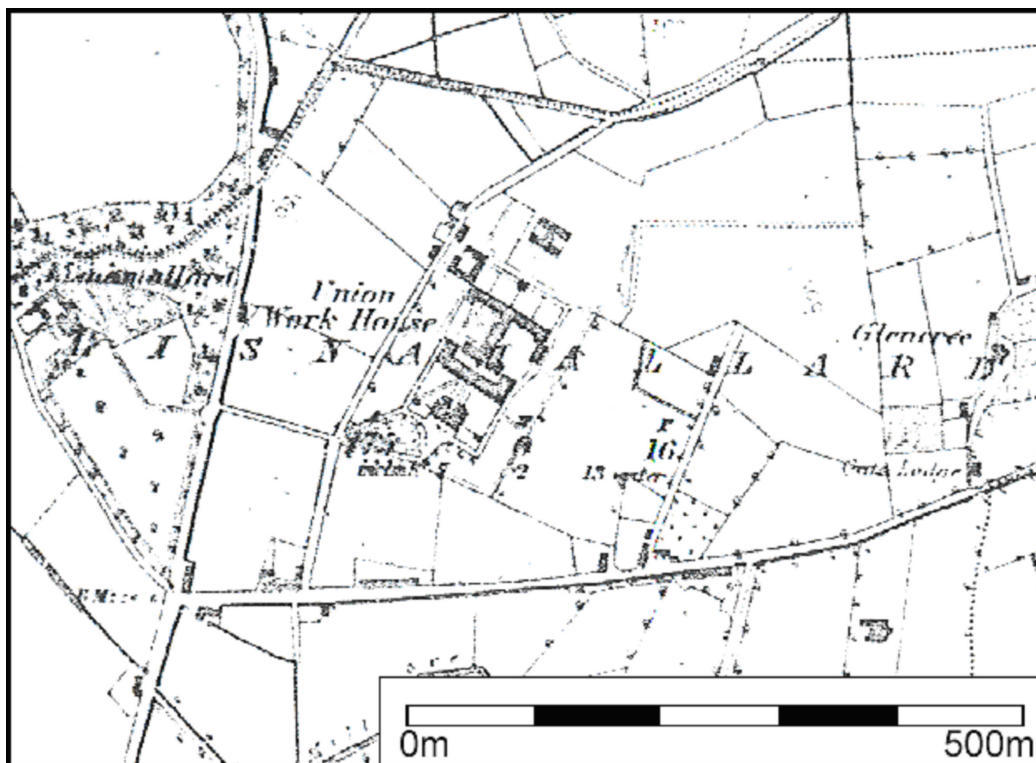


Fig 5: 1854 OS 6" map showing 'Union Workhouse' and the Fever Hospital area.

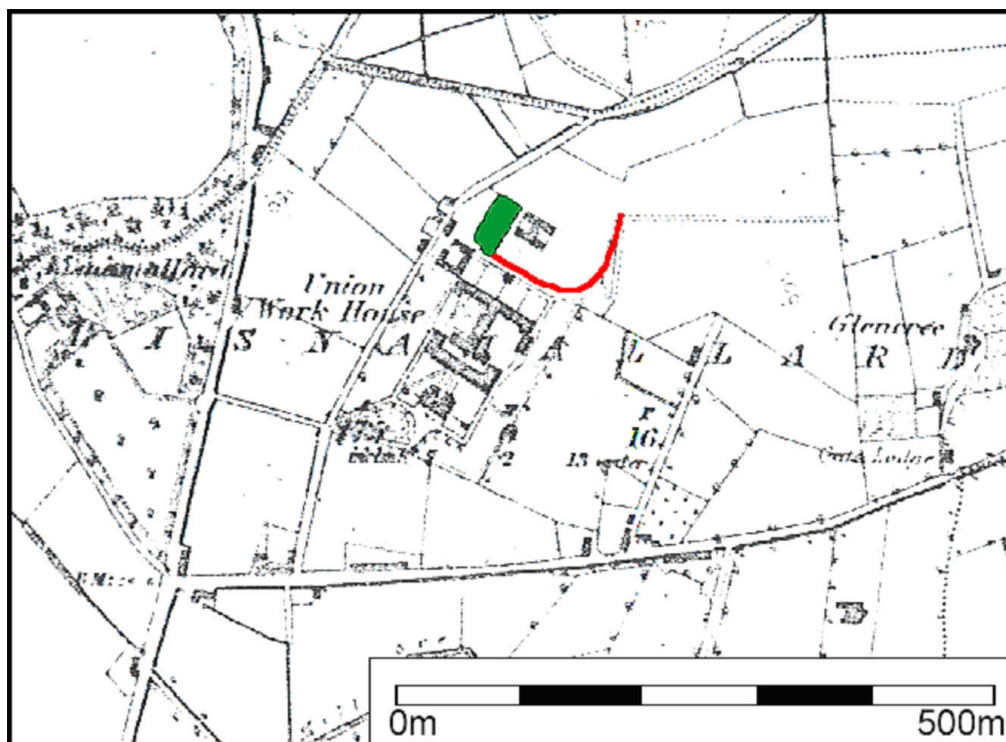


Fig 6: 1854 OS 6" map detailing the Workhouse burial ground (green area) and curvilinear field boundary (red line).

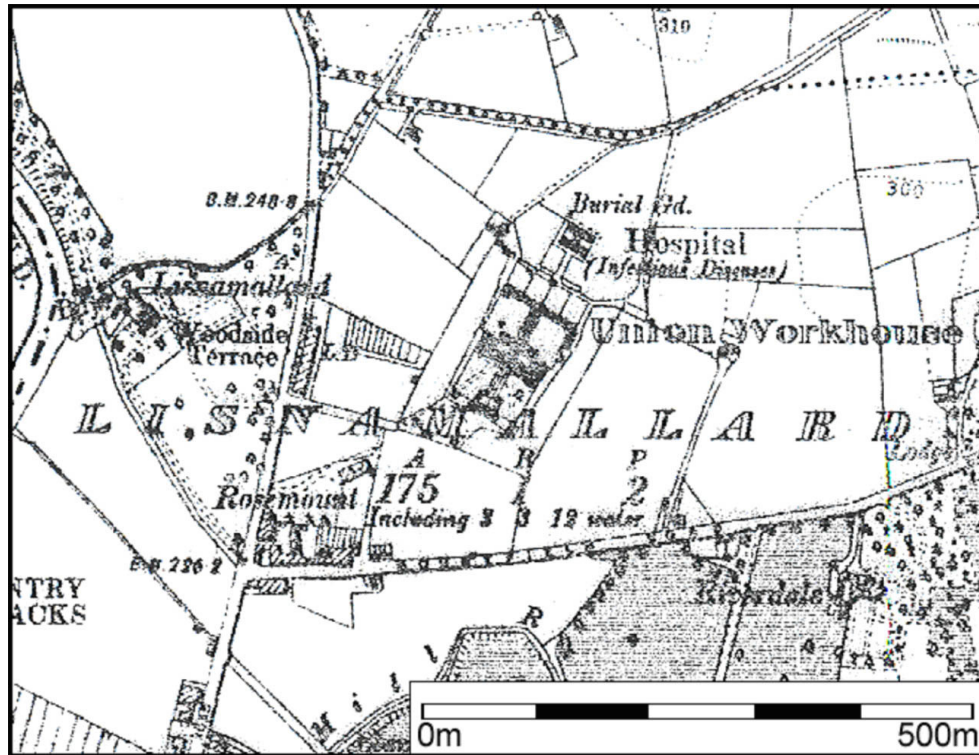


Fig. 7: 1907 OS 6" map showing 'Union Workhouse' and the Fever Hospital area.

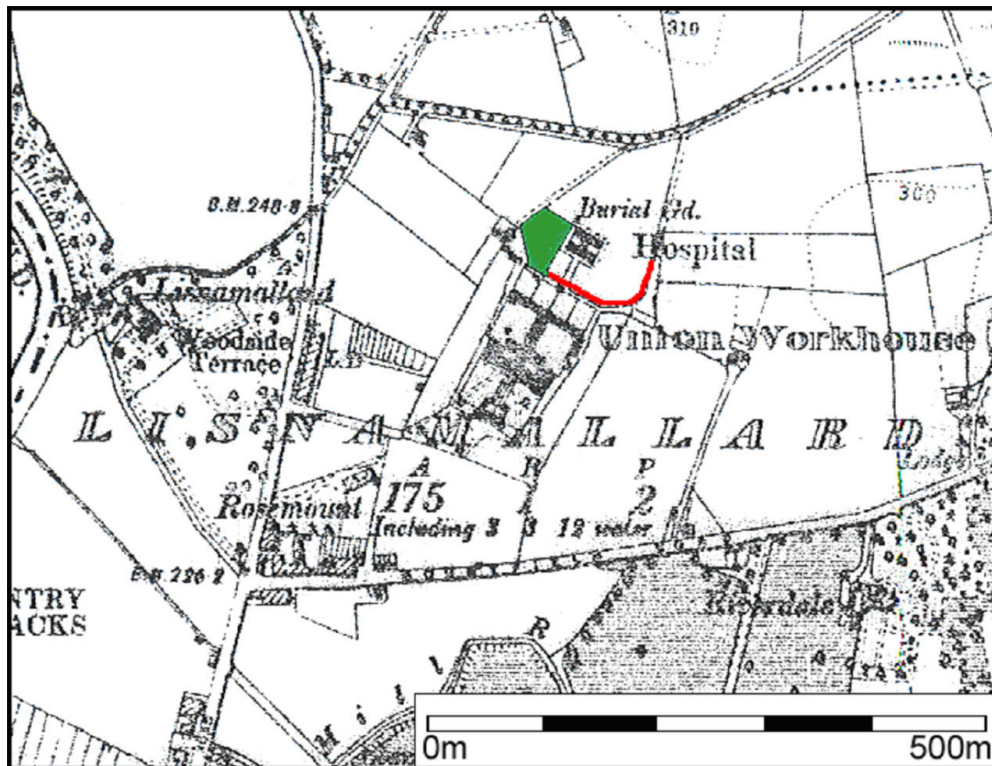


Fig 8: 1907 OS 6" map detailing the (extended?) burial ground (green area) and curvilinear field boundary (red line).

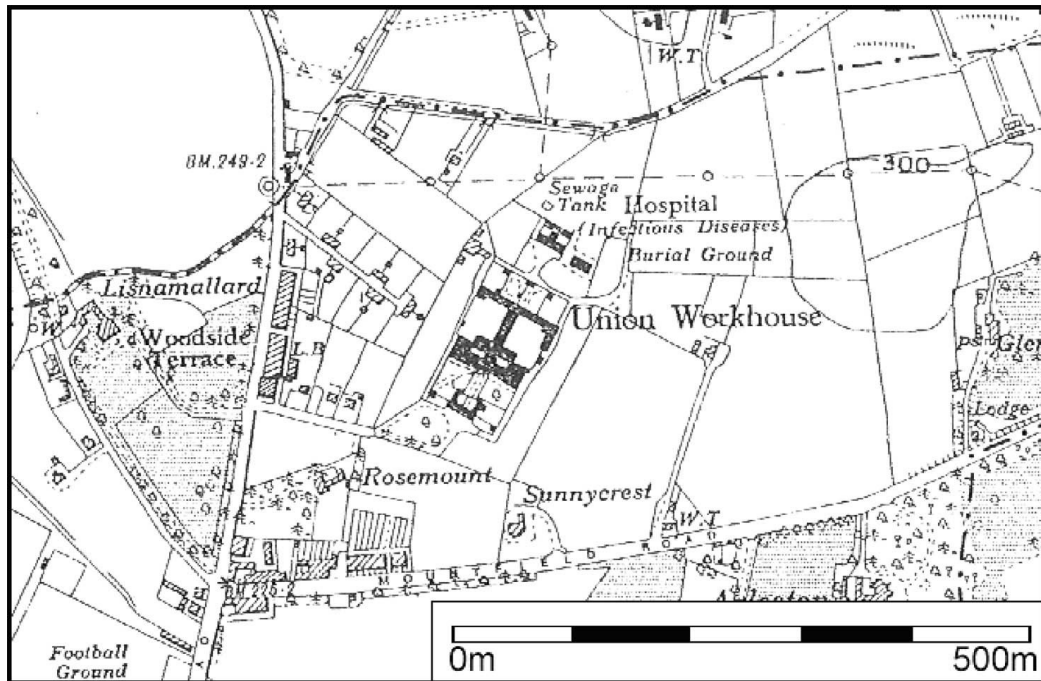


Fig. 9: 1940 OS 6" map showing 'Union Workhouse' and the Fever Hospital area.

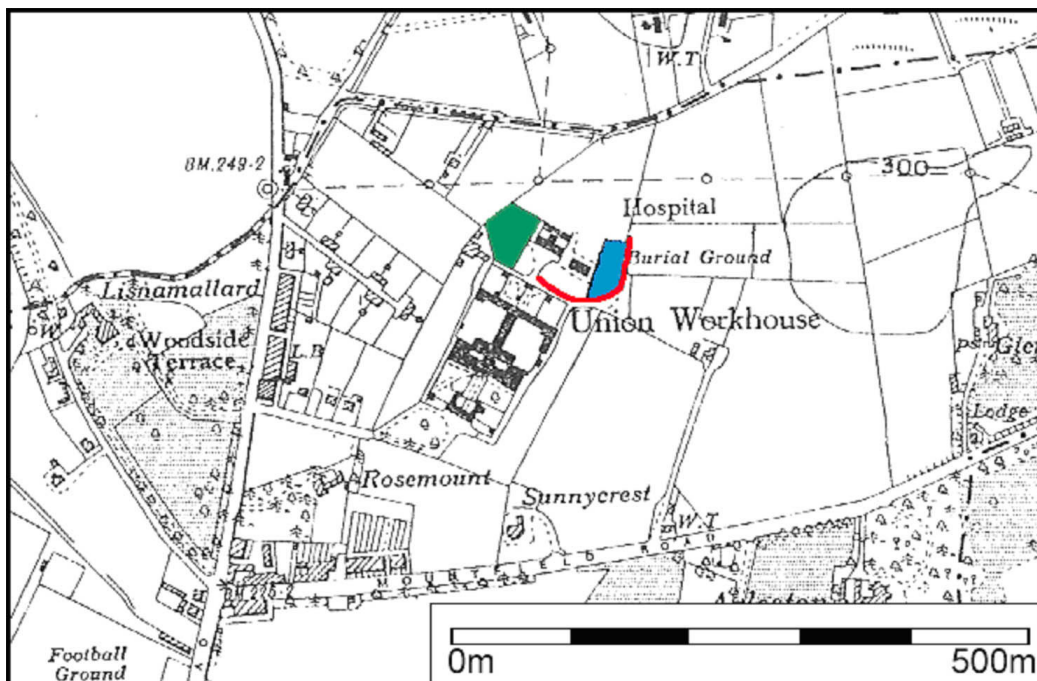


Fig 10: 1940 OS 6" map detailing the old burial ground (green area), new burial ground (blue area) and curvilinear field boundary (red line).

Account of the excavation

The research design for this project stipulated the upper 0.3m of topsoil was to be mechanically removed under archaeological supervision. The excavation area was laid out to the south-east of the Omagh Early Days Centre and measured 15m (east/west) by 12m (north/south). Upon removal of the upper 0.3m of topsoil, a number of potential archaeological features were identified. One of these was investigated and turned out to be the grave of a child which contained a particularly well preserved coffin. The other eleven features identified were interpreted as probable graves and were left undisturbed *in situ*, under a layer of geo-textile and gravel.

The sod and topsoil (Context No. 101) consisted of a mid to dark brown clay loam. This layer contained frequent inclusions of small, rounded and sub-angular stones (average size 70mm x 50mm x 40mm), numerous sherds of bottle glass, plastic, metal fragments and brick fragments. Active tree roots were noted through out this deposit, especially in the south-western corner of the excavation area where shrubbery existed prior to excavation on site. Upon removal of this deposit (Context No. 101) it was found to overlay a compact dark brown gritty clay loam (Context No. 102).

The gritty clay loam (Context No. 102) was the stratigraphically lowest deposit encountered in the excavation, owing to the removal of only 0.3m of strata. This deposit had frequent inclusions of small angular stones (average size: 40mm x 20mm x 20mm), brick fragments, white glazed ceramics and fragments of bottle glass. It became clear that a number of potential archaeological features were present at this level, and cutting the clay loam (Context No. 102). In all, twelve features were visible.

The first feature encountered was archaeologically investigated by means of a small cutting across its eastern end. It was originally observed as an east/west aligned linear smear of buff to whitish yellow clay and sand (Context No. 104) (Plate 2) which was interpreted as redeposited subsoil. The clay sand (Context No. 104) had a depth of approximately 0.55m and was the only fill of a steep-sided cut (Context No. 103). Upon removal of part of the clay sand (Context No. 104) it became evident that it overlay a coffin (Context No. 105) which was in an

extremely good state of preservation, probably owing to the waterlogged conditions of this deposit.

Omagh PSNI were contacted upon discovery of the coffin (Context No. 105), and on the local Coroner's insistence the grave cut was fully exposed, excavated, and the coffin lid fully revealed. On removal of the rest of the grave fill (Context No. 104) fragments of white glazed and transfer printed ceramics and a 'Gladstone Cutty' clay tobacco pipe (Jung 2003, 218) were recovered (Plate 9). These are indicative of the mid to late nineteenth-century (R. O'Baoill *pers comm.*) and suggest that the burial may date to this time.

The lid of the coffin (Context No. 105) was planned (Fig. 11, Plates 5 and 6), and it was evident that it was originally a single plank of wood which had split into three lengths. The sides of the coffin were plank constructed, although the top layer of planks had collapsed in on the coffin following deposition (Plates 7 and 8). This, along with the state of the lid would suggest that the coffin was subject to heavy weight and pressure. The damage could have occurred when heavy plant machinery was driven across the surface of the site. The weight of the wet clay sand acting on the coffin probably caused the lid to split and the side panels to buckle inwards. The maximum dimensions of the coffin were as follows: 0.96m in length, 0.25m in width at the head, 0.27m in width at the shoulders and 0.19m in width at the feet.

The coffin lid was removed in order to attempt to approximately date the period of the burial and to rule out modern deposition of the human remains. Upon removal of the lid, the coffin was found to be full of water and a silty sediment, probably originating from the clay-sand fill (Context No. 104) of the grave cut (Context No. 103). The lid was not nailed down onto the main body of the coffin. It can be suggested that some form of organic material, such as a length of rope or linen strap, was tied around the coffin (if it was sealed at all) at the time of its deposition. Following excavation of the coffin contents, fragments of a child's skull were observed in the western end of the coffin; no other human remains were observed as having survived (Plates 7 and 8). The condition of the remains, considered in conjunction with the artefacts retrieved from the grave fill (Context No. 104), would suggest that this burial probably dates to the use of the site as a burial ground for the Workhouse and Fever Hospital. Linear cut marks were also

noticed on the inside of the side panel on the coffins northern side. It is possible that these marks were made by a saw in the construction of the coffin or that this was a reused timber plank that was incorporated into the construction of the coffin (Plate 8). Following interpretation of the burial as being from an archaeological period, the lid was replaced and the grave cut backfilled.

Eleven other archaeological features were observed during topsoil stripping within the application area (Figs. 12 and 13). Due to the majority of these being aligned east/west, and cut through the same horizon as the burial that was archaeologically investigated (Grave 1), these features have been interpreted as grave cuts for eleven other burials. All of these were left undisturbed *in situ*. The dimensions and alignment of each of these features is given in Table 1 below:

Grave #	Context No(s)	Max. Length	Max. Width	Alignment
1	103, 104, 105	1.50m	0.85m	East/West
2	106	1.80m	0.90m	South-west / North-east
3	107	1.70m	0.90m	South-west / North-east
4	108	1.40m	0.80m	East/West
5	109	1.00m	0.50m	East/West
6	110	1.36m	0.60m	East/West
7	111	1.80m	0.80m	East/West
8	112	1.55m	0.80m	East/West
9	113	1.70m	0.70m	East/West
10	114	1.40m	0.50m	North-west / South-east
11	115	1.20m	0.55m	East/West
12	116	1.20m	0.38m	East/West

Table 1: Dimensions and alignment of probable grave cuts.

The results of the investigation were communicated to the Environment and Heritage Service: Built Heritage. Since the foundations for the temporary classroom would not disturb any feature located below 0.3m, the development proceeded with a layer of geo-textile laid down on the top-soil stripped site and a gravel hardcore placed on top of this membrane (Plates 11 and 12).

The monitoring indicated that there are probable late nineteenth-century burials present in this area. It is proposed that a short note is prepared for publication in the *Ulster Journal of Archaeology*.

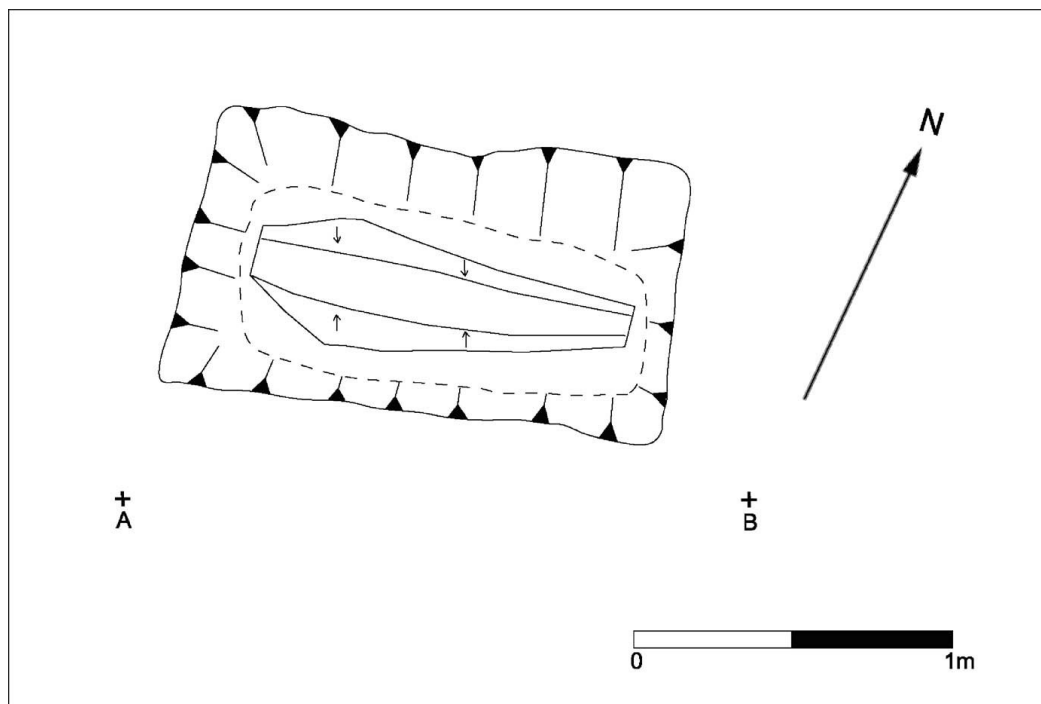


Fig. 11: Plan of Grave 1 prior to the lifting of the coffin lid.

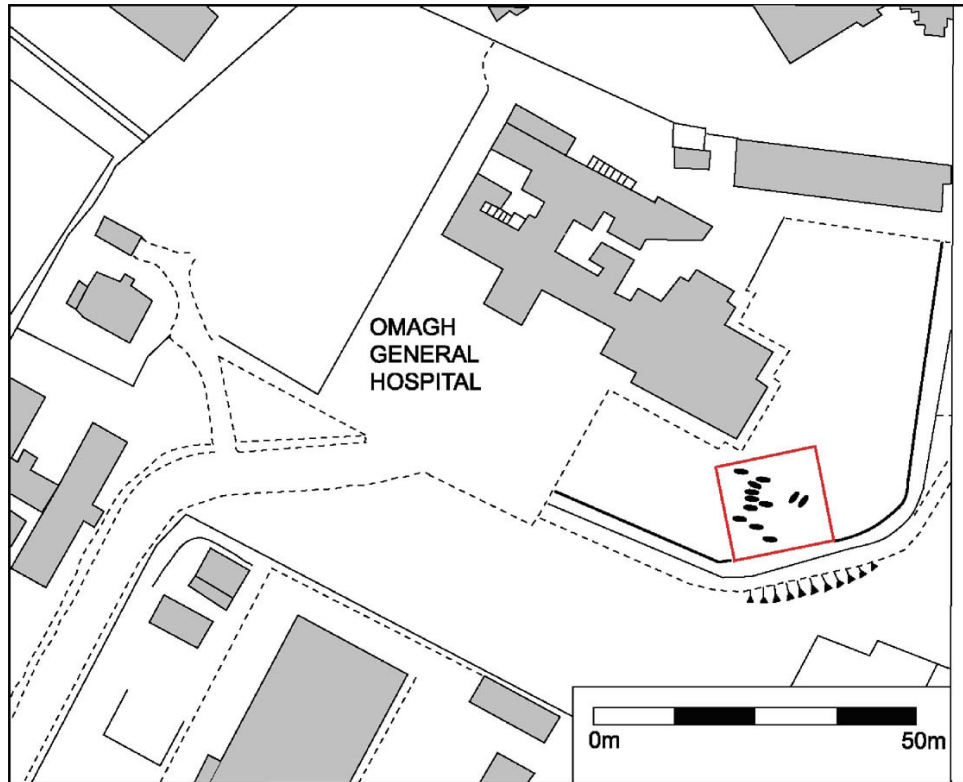


Fig. 12: Modern OS 6" map detailing application area (red box) and burials (black spots)

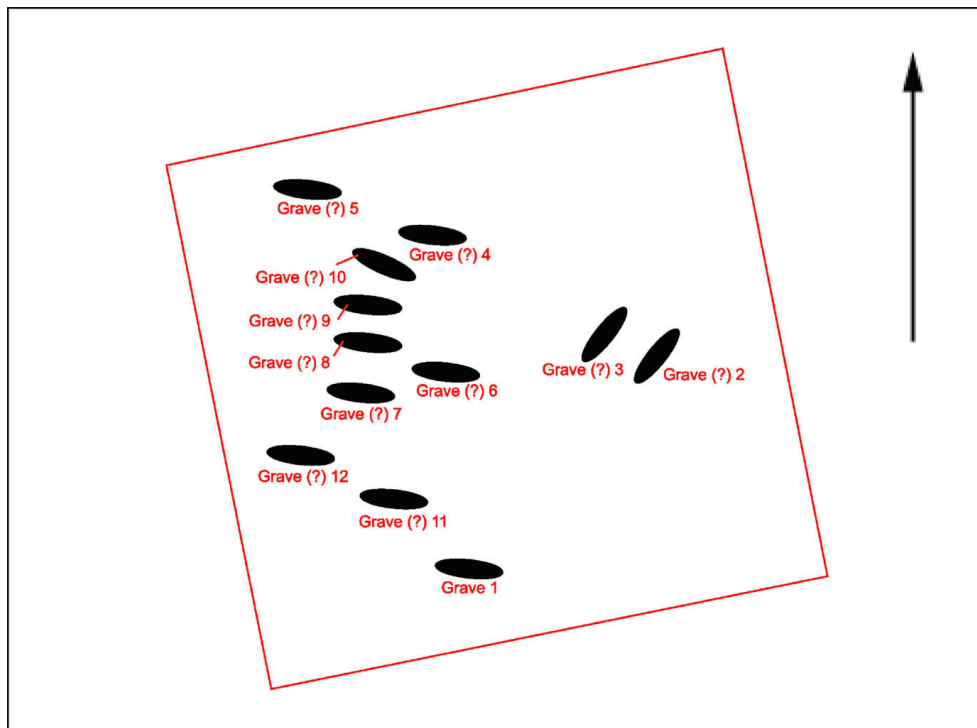


Fig. 13: Detail of application area showing position of burials.

Archive:

Finds:

The finds recovered during the evaluation are archived within the Centre for Archaeological Fieldwork, School of Geography, Archaeology and Palaeoecology, Queen's University Belfast.

Photographs:

The digital images taken during the evaluation are archived within the Centre for Archaeological Fieldwork, School of Geography, Archaeology and Palaeoecology, Queen's University Belfast.

Plans / Drawings:

The Plans and Drawings produced during the evaluation are archived within the Centre for Archaeological Fieldwork, School of Geography, Archaeology and Palaeoecology, Queen's University Belfast.

Signed: _____

Date: _____

References:

Given, A. (2006). *Written Scheme for a Programme of Archaeological Work at Omagh Early Days Centre*. Unpublished Archaeological Impact Assessment prepared for AgivenArchaeology.

Gould, M. H. (1983). *The Workhouses of Ulster*. Ulster Architectural Heritage Society, Belfast.

Johnston, J. (Edited by) (1996). *Workhouses of the North West*. A WEA People's History Publication.

Jung, S. P. Jr (2003). *Pollocks of Manchester: Three Generations of Clay Tobacco Pipemakers. The Archaeology of the Clay Tobacco Pipe XVII*. Edited by David A. Higgins. BAR British Series 352 (2003). Archaeopress, Oxford.



Plate 1: Application site prior to excavation, looking south.

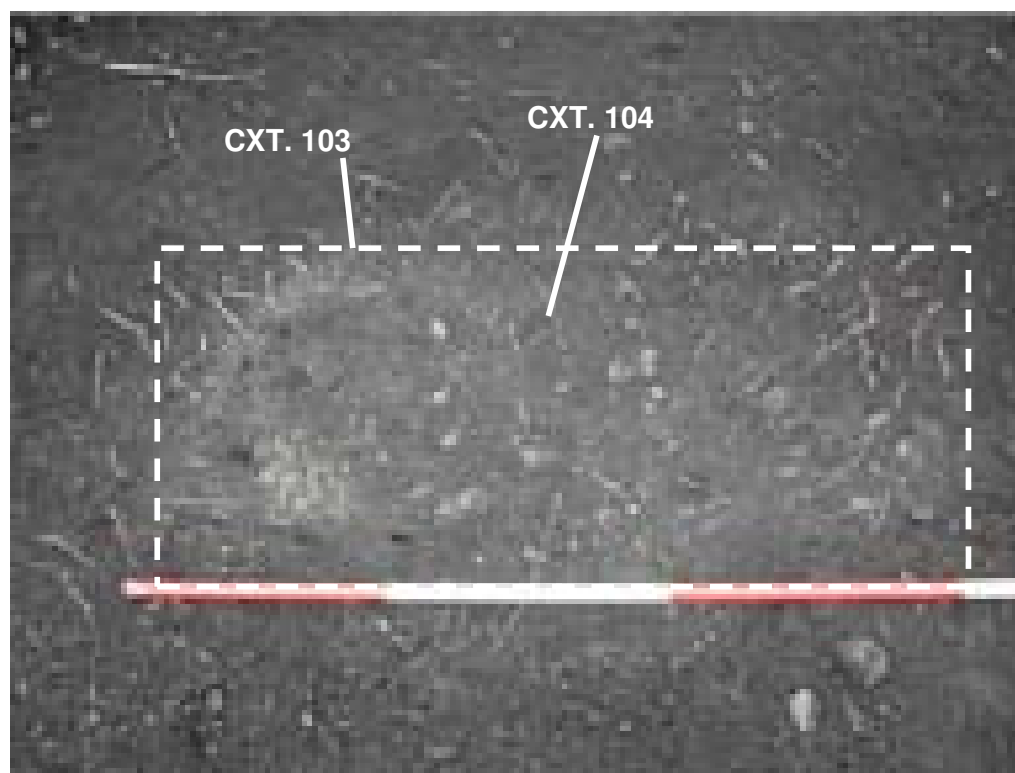


Plate 2: Burial 1 showing cut (Context No. 103) and fill (Context No. 104), looking north.



Plate 3: Burial 1 coffin lid (Context No. 105), looking west.

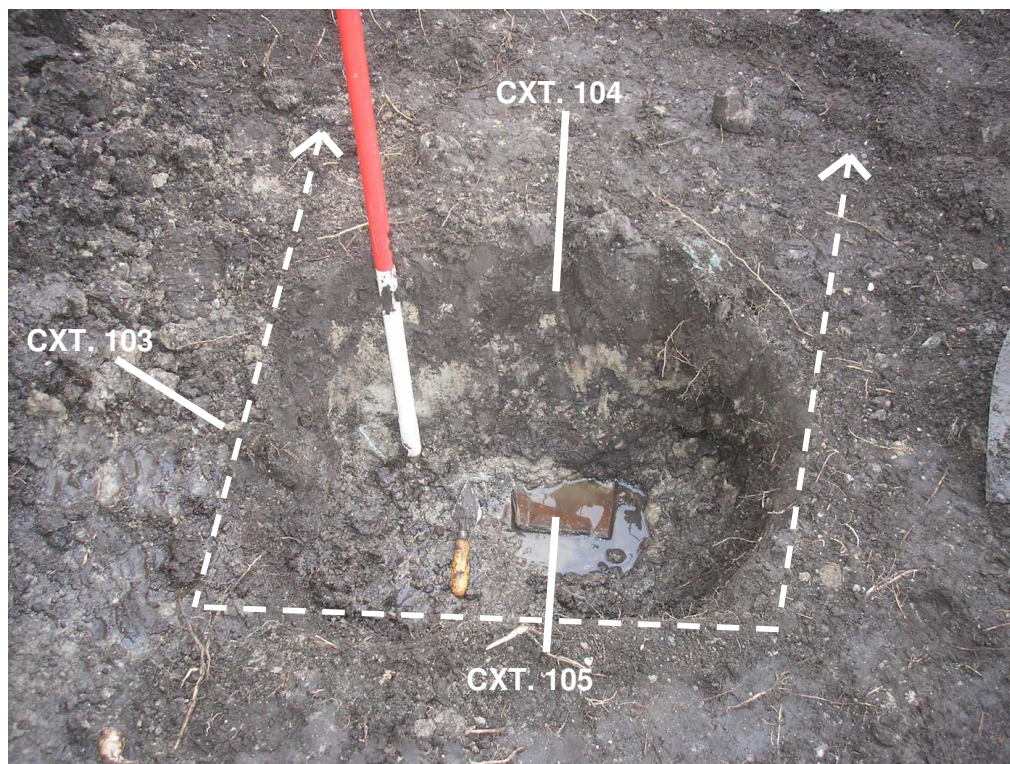


Plate 4: Original box section excavated into the eastern end of Burial 1, looking west.

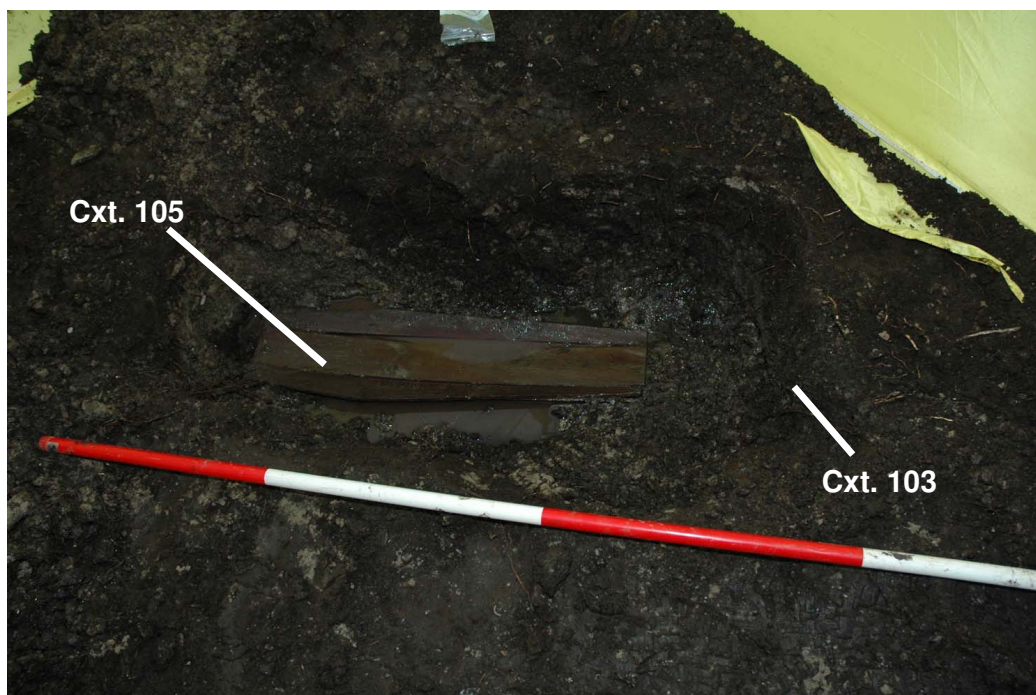


Plate 5: Grave 1 coffin (Context No. 105) following removal of grave fill (Context No. 104), looking north (Courtesy of Omagh PSNI).



Plate 6: Grave 1 coffin (Context No. 105) detailing splits in the coffin lid, looking north (Courtesy of Omagh PSNI).



Plate 7: Grave 1 following removal of coffin lid and water from inside the coffin, looking north (Courtesy of Omagh PSNI).

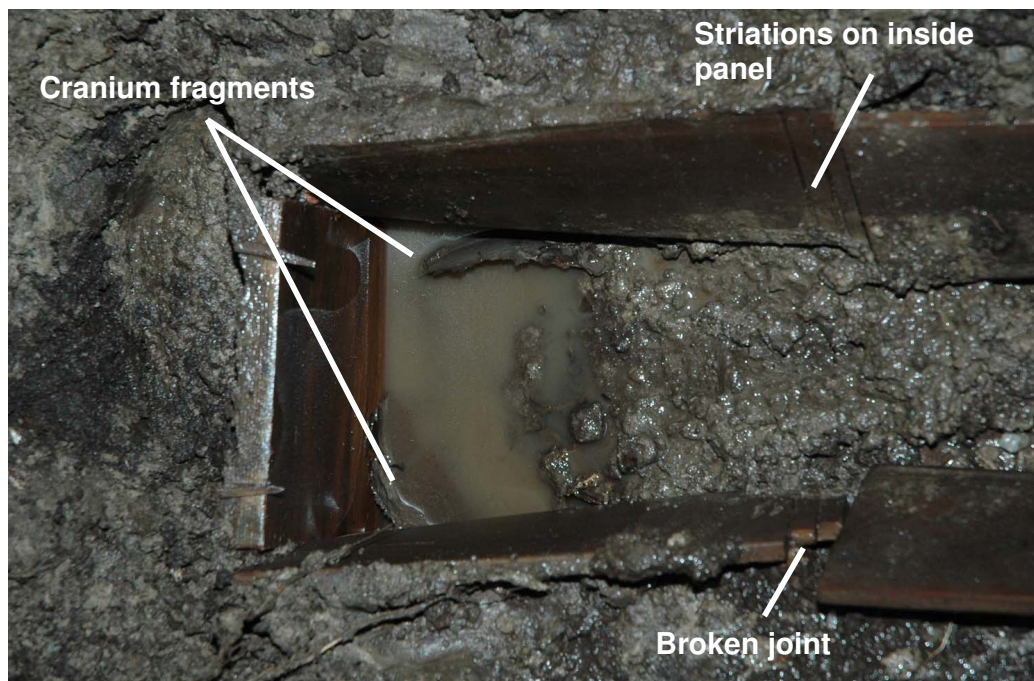


Plate 8: Grave 1 detailing the contents of the coffin (Context No. 105), looking north. Note striations (possible saw marks) and the broken joint between the two timbers of the side panel in the foreground. (Courtesy of Omagh PSNI).



Plate 9: Nineteenth-century artefacts recovered from grave fill (Context No. 104)

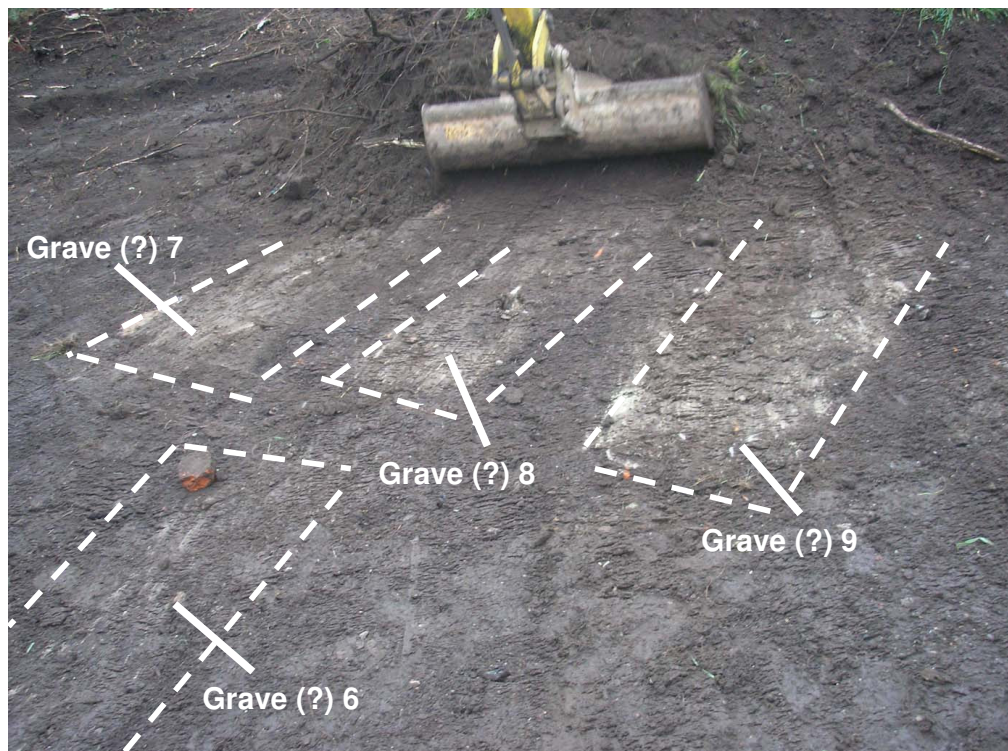


Plate 10: Excavation of topsoil (Context No. 101) revealing Grave (?) 6 (Context No. 110), Grave (?) 7 (Context No. 111), Grave (?) 8 (Context No. 112) and Grave (?) 9 (Context No. 113), looking south-west.



Plate 11: Application area following excavation to a depth of 0.3m, looking south.



Plate 12: Application area showing the layer of Geo-textile, looking south.



Plate 13: Application area showing gravel hardcore being laid down, looking south-east.