
ARCHAEOLOGICAL
PREDEVELOPMENT TESTING
KEEL EAST ACHILL CO MAYO

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MAYO COUNTY COUNCIL Áras an Chontae Castlebar

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Archaeological Predevelopment Testing at Keel East, Achill, Co. Mayo.

1 Summary

This report gives the results of archaeological predevelopment testing carried out at a proposed development site in the townland of Keel East, Co. Mayo. The report relates to a planning condition applied on 8th February by Mayo County Council in relation to the development of a water sports facility at Keel Caravan Park in Achill, Co. Mayo. The eastern edge of the proposed development is within a zone of notification associated with a designated archaeological site (MA054-014001-Midden and Field System) as shown on the Sites and Monuments Records for Co. Mayo (Fig 1). Because of this an archaeological assessment was required to ascertain the archaeological potential of the area prior to redevelopment.

The predevelopment archaeological testing was carried out over three days beginning on April 17th 2023 when six test trenches were excavated by mechanical digger. Nothing of archaeological significance was uncovered and it is the recommendations of this report that the proposed development proceed without further archaeological mitigation.

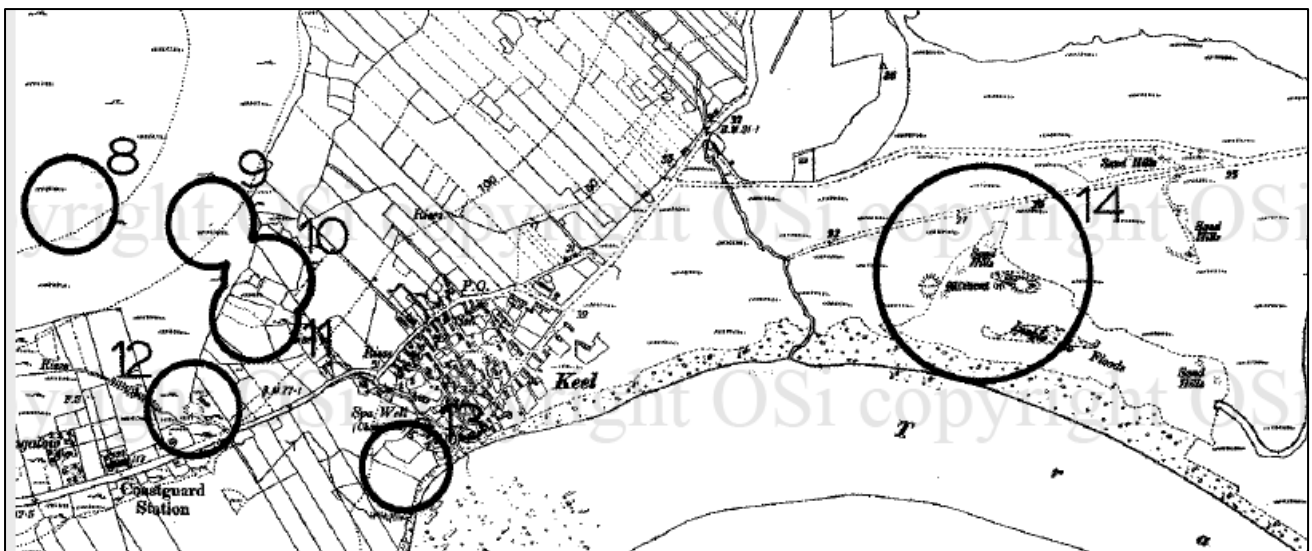


Fig 1 Extract from the Sites and Monuments Record (SMR) showing zone of notification around designated sites MA054-14001 to the east of the proposed water sport development

2 Location

The development site is located in the townland of Keel East, the Parish of Achill and Barony of Burrishoole (ITM 463923/804751). It is found in an area known as ‘The Sandbanks’ adjacent to Keel Beach, about 800m east of Keel village (Fig 2). The site is greenfield area though narrow access routes and hard stands have been provided together with water and electrical points to facilitate the existing caravan park. Geological Survey maps of the area indicate that the site is generally underlain by Quartite (Metamorphic) and is close to the contact with the Schist & Gneiss Formation (Irish Drilling Ltd, 2022).



Fig 2 General Location of Test Area in Keel East shown by blue arrow

3 Archaeological Background

A desk top study submitted with the archaeological licence application found that a number of archaeological sites were designated in the townland of Keel East on the SMR and these were largely prehistoric in nature (Zajac, 2023, 2-3). One archaeological site (Middens and Field Systems MAO54-14001) is approximately 100m to the east of the proposed water sports facility. A field walk over of this area by the writer on 14th February 2023 however could not locate the designated site (MAO54-14001) above ground. It is possible that the area of the archaeological site has now been covered over by successive layers of blown sand. It was also noted that no new archaeological sites were located within the development site itself during the same field walk over.

4 The Development Site

The development site is a roughly rectangular area measuring 75m east x west and 20m north x south tapering to 10m north x south at its eastern end. It is an undulating green field area used by sheep during the winter and consists of well grazed machair grassland. The proposed development comprises the refurbishment of existing buildings as well as the construction of a new a water sports facility at Keel Caravan Park (Fig 3). The development falls under the tourism investment scheme for Local Authorities only, known as *Platforms for Growth 2019-2025*, a national initiative funded by Fáilte Ireland (Fig 3).

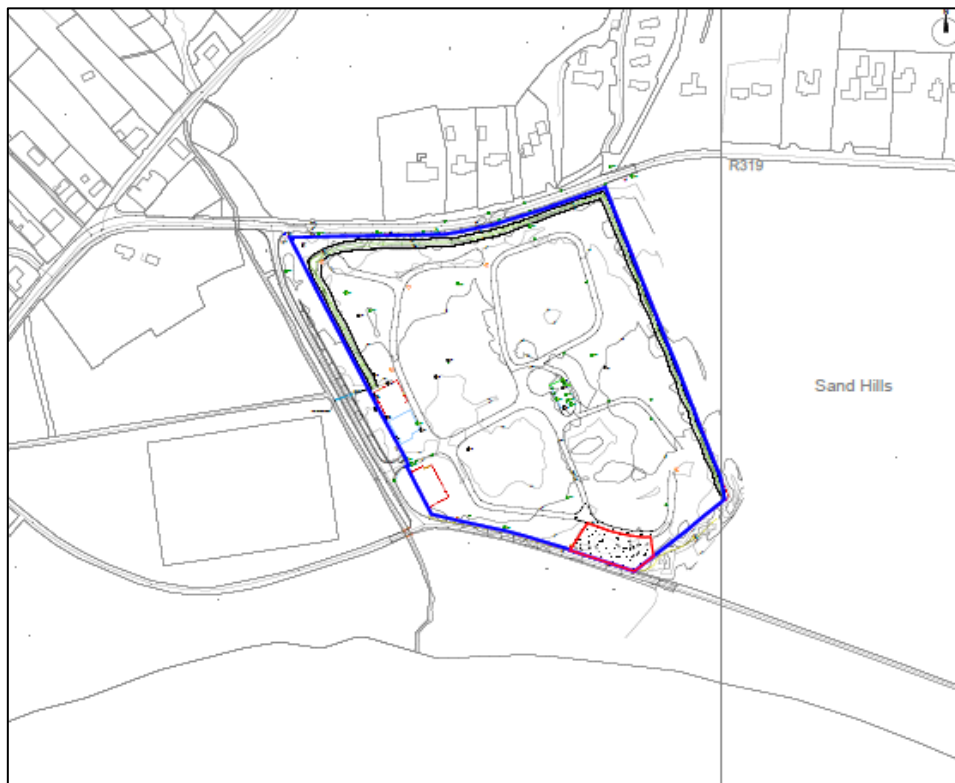


Fig 3 Keel Caravan outlined in blue and area of new development outlined in red. Sandhills where archaeological site (MAO54-14001) is designated to the right of the Caravan Park

5 Aims of the Archaeological Testing

The aim of the archaeological testing was to determine if archaeological features and/or deposits were present at sub-surface levels relating to the designated archaeological site (MAO54-014001- Midden and Field System) to the east of the proposed development. The testing also aimed to identify and

protect any newly discovered archaeological deposits, features or objects that maybe uncovered, or otherwise effected by the works within the proposed development area. Any identified features or finds of archaeological potential would then be reported to the National Monuments Service and the National Museum of Ireland (Stationary Office, 28, 1999).

In order to ascertain the archaeological potential of the development site six Test Trenches were mechanically excavated across the area spaced at 10m intervals. The test trenches were all 18m long except for test trench 6 which was 9m long (Fig 4).

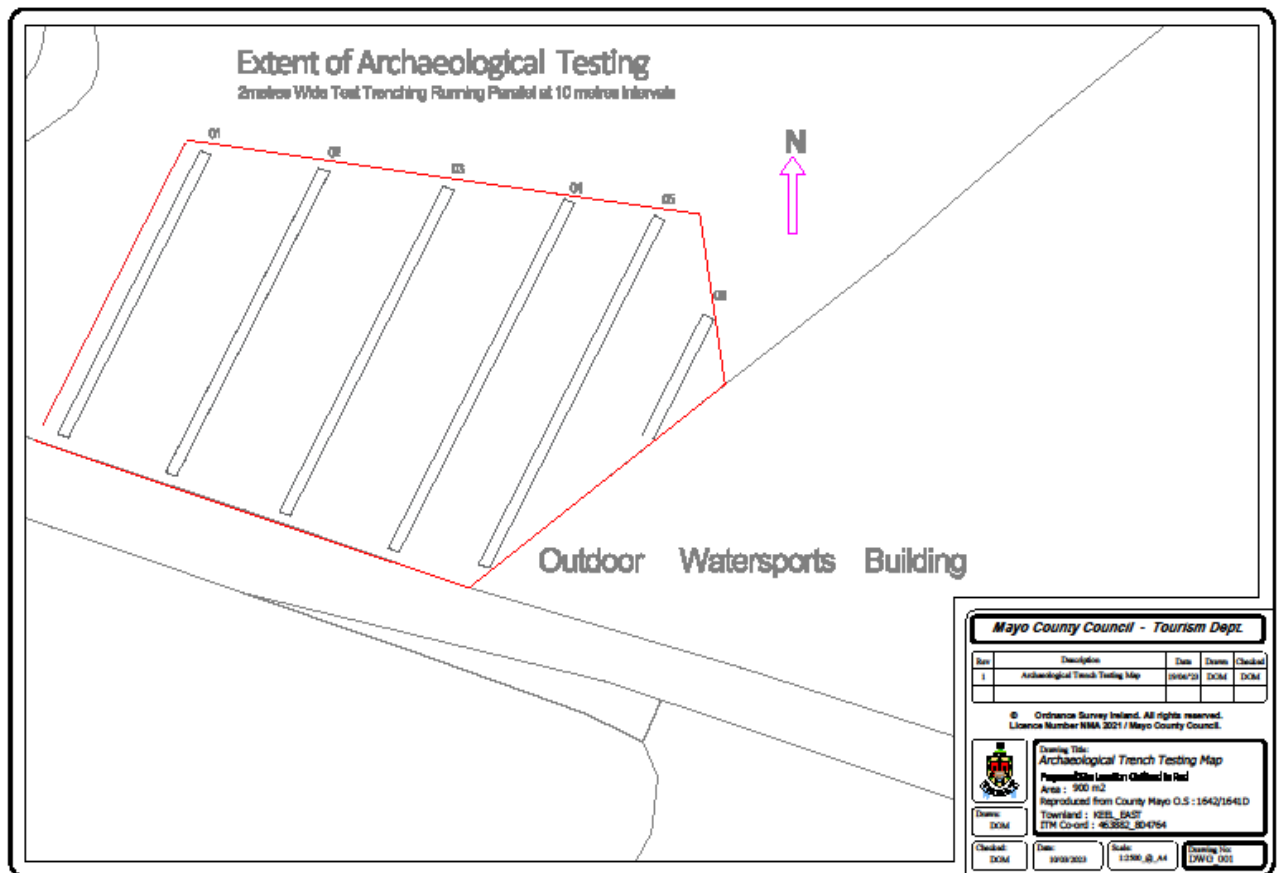


Fig 4 Location of Test Trenches in the proposed development site

6 Excavation Team

The archaeological testing was undertaken by the licence holder (Sue Zajac) assisted by a groundsman supplied locally by Mayo County Council. All test trenches were mechanically excavated using a toothless grading bucket. The work was carried out over three days and each trench was immediately backfilled once it had been recorded. This was for health and safety reasons given the test site was within Keel Caravan Park which was in use at the time of the predevelopment testing.

7 The Archaeological Testing (23E0317)

All test trenches were 1.8m wide and aligned NNE-SSW. They all measured 18m long except for Trench 6 which was 9m long. Trenches were excavated within a roughly rectangular site measuring 75m x 20m. All trenches were de-sodded and then carefully backfilled once they had been recorded and prior to the excavation of the next trench. This was for safety reasons because of the site's proximity to Keel Caravan Park. (Plate 1). Trenches were generally excavated to a depth of 1.5m. In each case a pit was dug in the trench down to natural subsoil which varied in depth between 2.2m and 3m below the sod. It was not possible to dig all of the trench down to natural because of trench collapse and unstable sides from the weight of the excavated material sitting on top of the trenches. The trenches were all archaeologically sterile and there was no evidence to suggest that digging deeper in unstable ground conditions would yield archaeological material or deposits. No seashells were encountered in the sand, suggesting, the material may have accumulated as a result of being wind blown over time.



Plate 1 De-sodding Test Trench 1 looking North with Keel Caravan Park in the background

Test Trench 1

Natural subsoil (C1) comprising beach pebbles and angular rock was reached at 1.8m below sea sand (C2). Within the sea sand at the southern end of the trench and at a depth of 1m was a layer of clay 0.4m deep, with sparse inclusions of cobbles and boulders (C3). A small sherd of cream ware (Find No. 1) was found in the trench and seemed to be associated with this deposit which may be up cast from the construction of the adjacent road. At the northern end of the trench for the final 6m an undulation in the ground had been filled with modern debris, cobbles, and clay (C4). Nothing of archaeological significance was noted (Plate 2).



Plate 2 Fill turning up amongst the sand for the final 6m of Test Trench 1

Test Trench 2

Natural subsoil comprising cobbles and beach pebbles (C1) was seen at the southern end of the trench at a depth of 2.8m. At this depth water was also seen seeping into the base of the trench. Pure sea sand was excavated from the trench though a layer of peat 0.3m deep with sparse inclusions of cobbles (C3) was seen at the southern end of the trench in the section face at south and east and seemed to be related

to the construction of the adjacent road and in this way was similar to Test Trench 1. Eventually the southern end of the trench collapsed in because it was excavated to nearly 3m deep. A deposit of peaty clay (C3) was seen amongst the collapse just north of centre at a depth of 0.7m. Nothing of archaeological significance was noted.

Test Trench 3

Natural subsoil (C1) was located 2.2m below the sod and the trench filled with water at this depth. Pure sea sand (C2) was excavated throughout the trench with peat (C3) occurring once more at the southern end of the trench. It was seen running in both, section faces on the long axis of the trench for 7m and extended for the full width of the trench across the north facing section. No other features occurred within the test trench. Nothing of archaeological significance was noted.



Plate 3 Looking south to peat (C3) coming up in Test Trench 4

Test Trench 4

Natural subsoil (C1) was reached at 2.4m, comprising angular stone or cobbles/beach pebble. A deposit of undulating peat was seen in each section face of Trench 4 between two layers of sand and found at varying depths within the Trench from 0.4m at the southern end of the trench to 1.1m near the centre of the trench. Nothing of archaeological significance was noted (Plate 3).

Test Trench 5

Natural subsoil (C1) was reached at 3m consisting of angular stone and the water table, a substantial deposit of sand was located above it overlain by a layer of fill (C4) consisting of peat, subsoil and cobbles that reached a maximum depth of 0.6m. A further deposit of sand was located above this. Both sand and the peaty fill were archaeologically sterile (Plate 4).

Test Trench 6

As Test Trench 5. Natural subsoil (C1) was reached at 2.5m overlain by a substantial layer of sand. The peaty fill was again seen near the centre of the trench above the sand and it in turn was overlain by a further deposit of sand which was archaeologically sterile. This trench was 9m long and ran at an angle to the other five on a NW by SE axis



Plate 4 Water seeping into base of Test Trench 5 with water table reached at 3m

8 Discussion

Six Test Trenches were excavated in a small development site within an existing Caravan Park in Keel East townland, Achill, Co. Mayo. The stratigraphy consisted of natural stone at a depth of between 1.8m and 3m which seemed to be rising towards the west. Above this was a layer of sea sand. This was overlain in all trenches by a deposit of peat at various depths but was likely to be a continuous undulating deposit between two sand layers. In Trench 1 the peat also contained modern fill and in places at the southern end of Test Trench 1 and 2 it also contained cobbles which may be associated with construction of the adjacent road. The peat may have been exposed in the 19th/20th century suggested by the single sherd of cream ware (Find No. 1), and possibly associated with this deposit. Above the peat and below the sod was another layer of sand. The sand above the peat layer is likely to have been a more recent wind-blown deposit. All the sand was sterile and contained no small finds or organic material and nothing of archaeological significance was seen in any of the six Test Trenches mechanically excavated.

The results of the predevelopment testing have been now been uploaded to www.excavations.ie for publication as part of the final reporting procedure under licence number 23E0317.

9 Recommendations

Nothing of archaeological significance was uncovered during predevelopment testing under licence number 23E0317 at Keel East, Achill, Co. Mayo. It is the recommendations of this report that the development proceed without any further archaeological mitigation.

10 Contexts

Context 1 Natural rock located at the water table and below all contexts excavated during the predevelopment testing.

Context 2 Pure sea sand, moderately compacted and sterile of inclusions visible with the eye. Located below a very thin sod layer of machair grass.

Context 3 Peaty clay seen in all trenches as an undulating layer between deposits of sand. It seemed to represent an original ground surface that was covered over possibly in the twentieth century by blowing sand

Context 4 Fill occurring for 6m at the NNE end of Test Trench 1 and near the NNE end of Test Trench 5. Found between layers of sand and seemed to fill a natural undulation. Comprised a clay similar to marl or subsoil, cobbles and 20th century waste including metal.

10 Bibliography & Guidelines

Framework and Principles Protection of the Archaeological Heritage, Department of Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and the Islands Government of Ireland 1999, Stationery Office, Dublin 2

(<https://www.archaeology.ie/sites/default/files/media/publications/excavation-reports-guidelines-for-authors.pdf>).

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25th April 2023