

The Distant History of Ballymacarrett

The Skainos development site (grid reference J 0721 2786) lies in the townland of Ballymacarrett, in the civil parish of Knockbreda, situated in the modern barony of Castlereagh Upper, the ancient diocese of Down and the County of Down. The site lies on, and just behind, the southern frontage of the Newtownards Road, which road seems to have come into existence by the mid 18th century.

In the earliest period humans arrived in Ireland (c. 8000 BC), the sea level was over 10m lower than it is today. All of Belfast Lough was at that time dry land and was likely settled, and the site would not then have had the shoreline position that it later acquired. However, just as humans were arriving in Ireland, the sea level was slowly beginning to rise and eventually peaked at the Maximum Marine Transgression c. 3500 BC, when the sea reached a level around 4m higher than it is today.

This meant that the formerly dry bed of Belfast Lough was permanently drowned under tidal waters, and much of modern Belfast was also submerged. Wide expanses of estuarine clays were laid down in these inundated areas. This estuarine clay was actually a silt that is commonly known as 'sleech' today. This temporary inundation meant that lower stretches of local rivers, as well as the important historic fords at Belfast and Connswater, could not have existed until well into the Neolithic era.

Maps of the soil types in the area show that the Skainos site was on a low, dry headland between the flooded lower reaches of the Connswater and Lagan valleys to the east and west, and was not inundated and as a result has no sleech deposits. Indeed, the only result of this temporary inundation was arguably advantageous to the attractiveness of the area - to temporarily bring the shoreline closer to the proposed area than it was in any subsequent period. The site has been dry land throughout the period of human occupation of Ireland since the end of the last ice age. Indeed, the subsoil here would have made for fine, free-draining soils of the type that have been highly attractive for agriculture from the Neolithic till the present today.

Around 3500 BC, the sea level began to fall again and over several centuries eventually reached modern levels. In addition, the land then rose slightly, exaggerating the relative change in sea level. This change in level exposed some of the former dry land that had been submerged. This area still remained relatively close to the shoreline, which did not subsequently change here from the mid Neolithic to the 19th century.

On the earliest maps that show the proposed area, the historic natural shoreline of the lough near the site (between the natural mouths of the Lagan and Connswater) followed a line

similar to Island Street, with the mouth of the Connswater opening up into the lough at Dee Street. This natural shore was little altered here for over 5000 years until the middle third of the 19th century, when a series of huge reclamation projects to the north made the area increasingly landlocked.

Good quality land close to the shoreline would have made this an attractive site for settlement in most periods. Even in the early Mesolithic period when land quality was not important and the shore was more distant, the nearby presence of a river, the Connswater, would have made the site attractive. It lay between the Lagan's historic east bank and the Connswater, which crossed the line of the Newtonwards Road at the bridge at Strandtown, near Dee Street.

In this area, the Connswater once reached the lough. Little is known about the ford at Connswater; Raven's map of 1625 shows that this crossed the strand at the mouth of the river. In the early 17th century, a road along the strand led up to this ford from the direction of Hollywood and Strandtown before heading towards the very similar but better-known river-mouth ford over the Lagan at Belfast.

Like the Belfast ford over the Lagan, the Connswater ford may have been in use since the late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age. Eighteenth century maps indicate a strand road between Hollywood and Belfast using this ford. Another road passed well to the south, following the route of the Beersbridge Road at one point. These seem to have been the main routes between Belfast and the north Down coast prior to the formation of the Newtownards Road and its bridge over the Connswater.

Land around Belfast was artificially reclaimed from the 17th to the 20th centuries. This first took place in the wide estuary of the Blackstaff River (which included what is now Chichester Street) in the later 17th century and then, still on a modest scale, along the Lagan in the later 18th century (especially around Ballymacarrett). By far the largest reclamations took place in the 19th and 20th centuries in the docks area north of the M3 and A2 and east of the M2. The area to the north of the proposed site was reclaimed in the middle third of the 19th century.