



## The Story So Far .....

Up until May of this year, the fight to protect the ancient landscape of Tara from the M3 motorway was seen by many as being a lost cause. The Irish government ignored all pleas on Tara's behalf, including a joint-letter signed internationally by 350 academics emphasising what a unique cultural treasure the Tara landscape is, not just for Ireland, but for the world. The plight of Tara began to receive less and less press coverage. The stage looked set for the M3 double-tolled four-lane motorway. On April 30th, the Minister for Transport, Martin Cullen, officially turned the first sod for construction on the motorway to begin. However anyone familiar with the story of Tara knows there is no place in Ireland with a more dramatic and flamboyant history, and as if on cue, the very day after the minister's visit, archaeologists announced that at Lismullin in the Tara valley, a site of national monument status had been discovered smack in the middle of the motorway's path. The site is an enormous find, both literally – it is the size of three football fields, and in terms of its significance. Archaeologists believe the site, which is a wooden henge, was a pagan ceremonial temple used by the ancient kings and queens.

After a recent Irish general election, a coalition government was formed between the ruling Fianna Fail party and some smaller parties, including the Greens. In the ensuing cabinet reshuffle, the Minister of Environment and Heritage, Dick Roche, lost his post, and was replaced by John Gormley of the Green Party. However Minister Roche's last official act was to order that the site at Lismullin should be 'preserved by record', that is, photographed, noted down, and then bulldozed through and cemented over, in effect, completely demolished. The new incoming Minister, previously a staunch supporter of Tara, insisted that he must abide by that order. Yet opposition parties claim he does in fact have the legal right to override the decision of his predecessor, he simply does not have the will to do so. As the situation stands, the royal Celtic temple at Lismullin is set to be destroyed.

A troubling event also happened at the beginning of July. An ancient burial ground at Baronstown in the Tara valley, believed by expert archaeologists to also warrant the status of national monument, was razed by heavy construction machinery in the middle of the night. Thousands of years of heritage destroyed under cover of darkness in a few hours.

Campaigners continue to do all they can to have the motorway rerouted and to prevent the destruction of this unique area. A small number of protesters camping at Tara have

managed to block heavy construction machinery on a daily basis, and continue to do a wonderful job protecting the sites. The first arrests happened in July, when seven protesters were arrested, four of whom refused bail conditions and spent time in jail. The terrible irony is that they were arrested for trying to prevent illegal work. The European Union Commissioner, Stavros Dimas, wrote to the Irish government in June warning that continuing work on the M3 motorway after the archaeological discovery at Lismullin is illegal within EU law. A letter was also sent by the important European Union Petitions Committee demanding that all work be halted on the project immediately. In June, Tara was also placed on the World Monument Fund's list of most endangered heritage sites. However, so far the Irish government is doing what it has done so consistently – continuing to ignore the great national and international outcry at the senseless destruction of the Tara valley.

Tara has seen many battles over the last five thousand years, but no battle has posed a greater danger than the one it is embroiled in now. Its enemy is, the Orwellian titled, Minister for Environment and Heritage, and those behind him. Its champions are the many people who know that a motorway through this ancient, royal and holy valley is a desecration that they will do their utmost to prevent.

\_\_\_\_\_. Fionnuala Devlin 04/08/07