



**TIPPERARY HISTORICAL JOURNAL
1995**

© County Tipperary Historical Society

**www.tipperarylibraries.ie/thc
society@tipperarylibraries.ie**

ISSN 0791-0655

Clonmel Excavations – 2

Medieval Town Wall — Dowd's Lane site

By Mary Henry

Introduction

On 20 July, 1992 the writer resumed the excavation of the town wall at Dowd's Lane on behalf of Ms Opie. Following the excavation, the digging of foundations for six storage vats by the Contractors on behalf of Showerings Ltd. was supervised. Excavations and monitoring were completed by 30 July, 1992.

Excavation

Permission was obtained by Showerings Ltd. from the Office of Public Works to reduce the level of the exposed town wall by 0.5m. Mindful of the consequences and the information lost by using a mechanical digger to remove the upper courses of the wall, it was decided to remove a sample of wall by hand. A 5m length of wall, which extended between the two stone culverts (F3 and F5), was removed by hand (pick, shovel and hand pick). See Fig. 2.

The wall was built of limestone and sandstone. The stones on both faces were of irregular shape and size. The core of the wall also consisted of irregular shapes and sizes of stone. There was no trace of mortar in the core of the wall. Intermixed with the stones there was a high content of yellowish brown clay. This clay was coarse, loose and had a high content of very small angular stones; see Fig. 1.

The archaeological finds from the core of the wall included animal bone fragments, one clay pipe stem fragment, one clay pipe bowl fragment, modern glass and eight sherds of pottery. The sherds of pottery included three fragments of cream ware, three sherds of 19th/20th century pottery and two sherds of red earthenware with a yellowish brown glazing on their inner surfaces.

Having removed the upper 0.5m of a 5m stretch of wall by hand, it was then decided to use a mechanical digger to do a trial cutting through the wall; see Fig. 2. The purpose of this trial cutting was to establish the presence or absence of a western face to the town wall, the exact depth of the wall, its thickness at its base and to establish the existence or absence of archaeological strata inside the town wall.

A cutting was made on the western or town side of the wall. It extended in an E/W direction and went through the town wall. It measured 2.9m E/W by 2.3m N/S and was 2.25m deep. The water table was observed at the 2.2m level.

The town wall was 2.1m wide along its upper courses. However, it narrowed considerably towards its base. For example, it was 1.35m wide at 1m from the surface and it was 0.9m wide at its base which was approximately 1.8m from top of the wall; Fig. 1 and Plate 2. The base of the wall rested on a dense sandy gravel layer. It had high inclusions of small and medium sized stones, round and angular in shape. This layer was the likely result of estuarine deposition of sand, gravel and stone. There was no evidence of a plinth.



The stratigraphy inside the town wall consisted of a mixed deposit of clay, reddish brown in colour and silty in texture; see Fig. 1 and Plate 2. It contained small stones and sparse inclusions of slate fragments. Underlying this there was a yellowish brown layer of fine grained sandy silt. It had an average thickness of 0.35m. Underlying this there was a reddish brown soil ranging from clay to fine sand in texture. It was compact, heavy and firm.

This layer rested on a dense sandy gravel material, with inclusions of small and medium sized stones, round and angular in shape. The base of the wall rested on this material. There were no archaeological finds discovered in any of the above layers.

A second trial trench was cut in the area where the upper courses of the wall had been removed by hand, north of culvert F5. This cutting extended from inside the town wall and through it; see Fig. 2 and Plate 3. The trial cutting was 2.1m E/W by 1.74m N/S and 1.1m deep. This cutting again confirmed that the wall had a western face extending for at least a depth of 1.6m. The wall was 1.7m wide but, as before, narrowed to a width of 1m towards the base. The core of the wall was similar to that in the first trial cutting. Again the base of the wall rested on an estuarine deposit of sandy gravel with a high content of round and angular stones.

The upper courses of the remainder of the town wall were removed by mechanical digger. In all a total stretch of 17.5m of wall was taken down by 0.5m.

Historical Significance of Site

In medieval times this site was part of the precinct of the Franciscan Friary. The Franciscans, who came to Clonmel in 1269, acquired an area of land incorporating the south-east corner of the medieval town. The development is located on what was the eastern part of the former precinct of the friary.

Documentary references indicate that they were a prosperous self-contained unit existing inside the medieval walls (Shee and Watson 1975) and that at the time of the Reformation the monastery contained a dormitory, three chambers, a kitchen, stable, gardens, weir and cemetery (Burke 1907). Shee and Watson (1975) believe that the cloister and domestic buildings were to the south of the church, towards the river. The exact location of the cemetery remains unknown.

After the Reformation the possessions of the friary were disposed of and in 1543 the friary was sold. In the early 17th century the church was used for prayer, but during Cromwellian times a fort was built on part of the site and the claustral buildings destroyed. In the 18th century Dissenters used the church, but by 1798 it was taken over by the friars (Shee & Watson 1975).

By the 19th century the grounds were much smaller than in medieval times. The eastern part of the former grounds became the focus of a thriving brewing industry in the early 1800s which continued into the 1960s. Considering the rich historical background of the development site and the fact that foundations were being dug to a depth of over 1m below the present surface, the excavation of the site to the 1m level was monitored for archaeological purposes.

Monitoring of Excavations for Foundations

Along with archaeological supervision of the removal of part of the town wall, the preparation of the site for the laying of foundations was monitored.

An area c. 25m N/S by 22m E/W was excavated to a depth of 1.1m. Any archaeological stratification, if present, was likely to be encountered by this depth. However, extensive disturbance proved that it was almost impossible for any archaeological layers to survive. The material removed clearly reflected the post-1800 industrial activity on the site. A series of



foundation walls, concrete floors, redbrick walls and stone lined culverts dominated the site. The material removed consisted of rubble and crushed building debris. It extended to a depth of 1.2m below the concrete surface.

A profile of the western edge of the excavated area consisted of the following layers. Underlying the concrete surface there was a layer of stones of medium size. This layer extended for a depth of 0.2m. A very thin layer of mortar (0.1m thick) occurred beneath the stones.

Underlying this was a mixed layer of dark brown clay extending to the 1.1/1.2m level. It had no discernible stratification. It had a high content of extraneous material such as small stone, pockets of crushed mortar, traces of charred wood, sparse inclusions of slate fragments, some animal bone and sparse inclusions of oyster shell.

Several areas of the site had to be excavated to 1.5m lower than the 1.1m level in order to secure solid ground for the foundations. These areas, each 3m E/W by 1m N/S, extended to the natural riverine gravel deposits. Overlying the gravel deposits was a yellowish brown, fine-grained silty sand which was soft and had a moderate structure (i.e. having a tendency for some break-up to occur on disturbance). This layer was underlying a soft very sticky dark brown clay. It was heavy and gritty and extended from the 1.1m level to 0.4m from the natural gravel deposits.

During Ms. Opie's excavation of the site a wall was exposed some 2m west of the town wall and situated between the two culverts, F3 and F5. This wall, F17, was further investigated during the monitoring work; see Plate 4. The wall extended in a N/S direction and was 1.4m deep.

It rested on a natural deposit of sandy gravel and small stones. The wall consisted of irregular sizes and shapes of stone which were not set closely together (Plate 4). It was of dry masonry with a more modern wall then built up against it. This was 1.6m wide (E/W) and 1.4m deep and built of stone, redbrick and mortar. Because of the existence of this wall it was impossible to establish the exact width or purpose of wall F17. There were no archaeological finds recovered to give any clues regarding the date of the wall.

During the excavation undertaken by Ms. Opie the presence of the town ditch was confirmed. Trial cuttings during the Clonmel Drainage Project, phase 1, indicated that the ditch extended to a depth of at least 3.1m in Dowd's Lane and was at least 7m wide. In medieval times it was likely that the ditch was partly submerged in water, particularly at the lower levels near the River Suir (Lyons 1936). Considering its depth and width it would have provided formidable defences against attack.

It was also necessary to excavate for foundations for vats between the town wall and the boundary wall. There were extensive remains of industrial activity in this part of the site. Present were the foundation of the boundary wall, a concrete floor 1.5m from the present surface, rubble fill and accumulated building debris extending to a depth of 1.7m. Traces of the town ditch were observed at the 1.7m level.

The ditch fill consisted of black clay. It had a rich organic smell and was a silty clay in composition; fine grained, of soft consistency, with a weak structure. (i.e. was liable to break-up easily on disturbance). It contained smallish angular stones, fragments of slate, traces of wood and twigs and some animal bone. There were no datable archaeological finds in the fill. Its final depth was not established.

Summary

Archaeological stratified deposits were non-existent inside the town wall. The extensive post-1800 industrial activity on the site and the depth of this disturbance (up to 1.6m in places) would have made it almost impossible for any archaeological evidence to survive.



A similar picture emerged outside the town wall, i.e. the area of the town ditch, although traces of the ditch did appear at a depth of 1.7m below the ground surface. Trial cuttings through the town wall revealed that it was approximately 2m wide along its upper courses but narrowed to less than 1m at its base. It survived to a height of almost 2m high.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank Showerings Ltd., Clonmel, who provided funding for the excavation and to carry out a watching brief. I wish to express my gratitude to the following: Mr. Pat Reeves, Architect Anthony and Associates, Carrick-on-Suir; O’Gorman Contractors, Ardfinnan, Co. Tipperary; Mr Breandán Ó Ríordáin, consultant archaeologist, for his advice, and to the excavation team, Edward Morrison and Colm Rice.

REFERENCES

- Bradley, J. 1985. "The Medieval Towns of Tipperary:", in W. Nolan (ed.), *Tipperary: History and Society*, pp 34-59.
 Burke, W. 1907. *History of Clonmel*.
 Lyons, P. 1936. "Norman Antiquities of Clonmel burgh", in *JRSAI* 66, pp 285-294.
 Mooney, C. 1955-57. "Franciscan Architecture in Pre-Reformation Ireland", in *JRSAI*, pp 85-87.
 Shee, E. & Watson, S.J. 1975. *A Guide to the Architecture of Clonmel and its Locality (An Taisce)*.

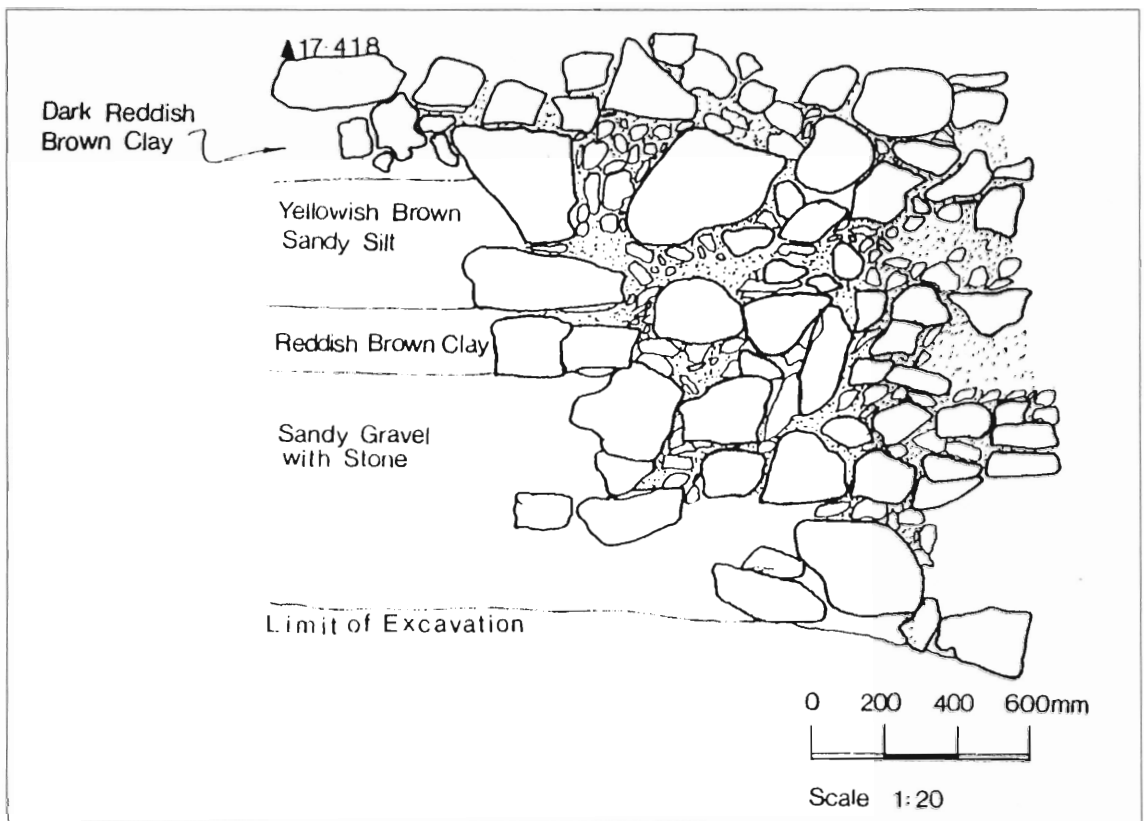


Fig. 1 – Section of south face of town wall (Dowd’s Lane). Legend -- clay and rubble.



Plate 1 -- Looking South at partly removed Town Wall.



Plate 2 -- Looking North at section of Town Wall (Trial cutting 1).

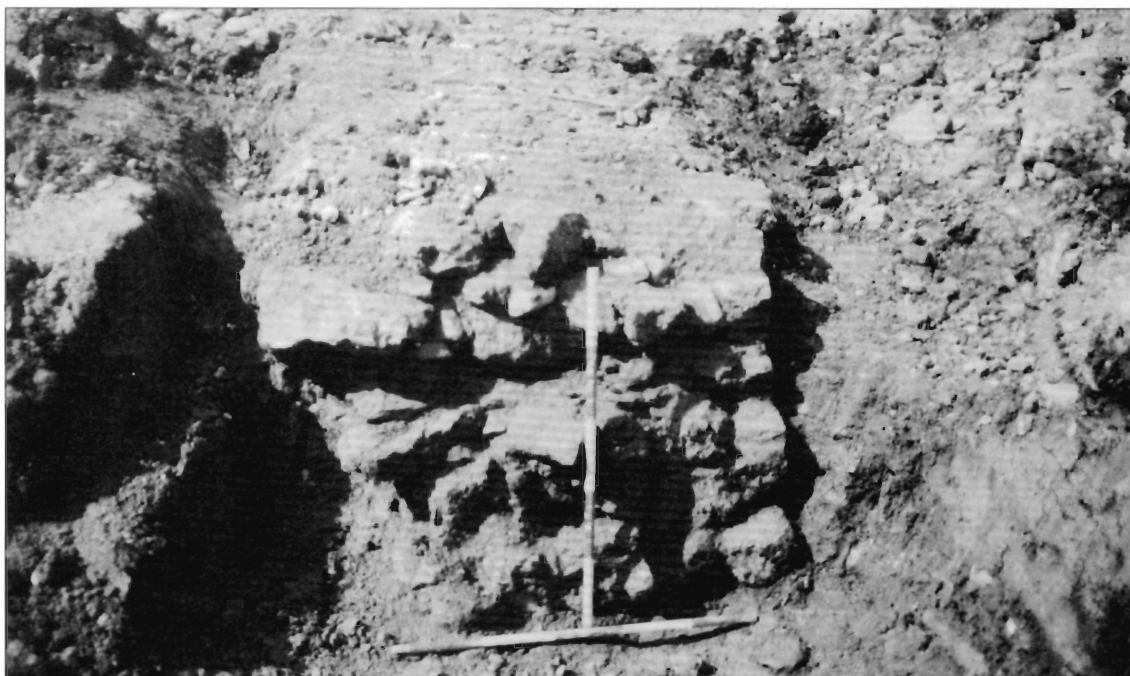


Plate 3 – Looking North at section of Town hall (Trial cutting 2).

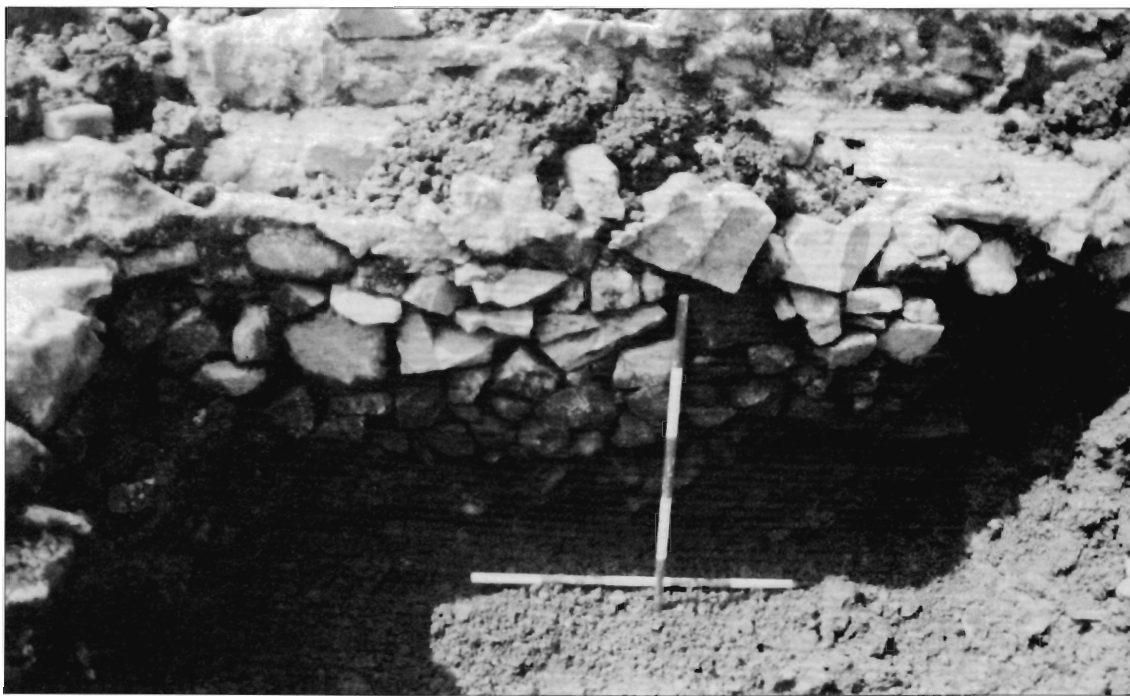


Plate 4 – Looking West at wall (F17) (inside the Town Wall).