

6. Medieval monastic occupation and post-medieval military activity at Clare Abbey, Co. Clare

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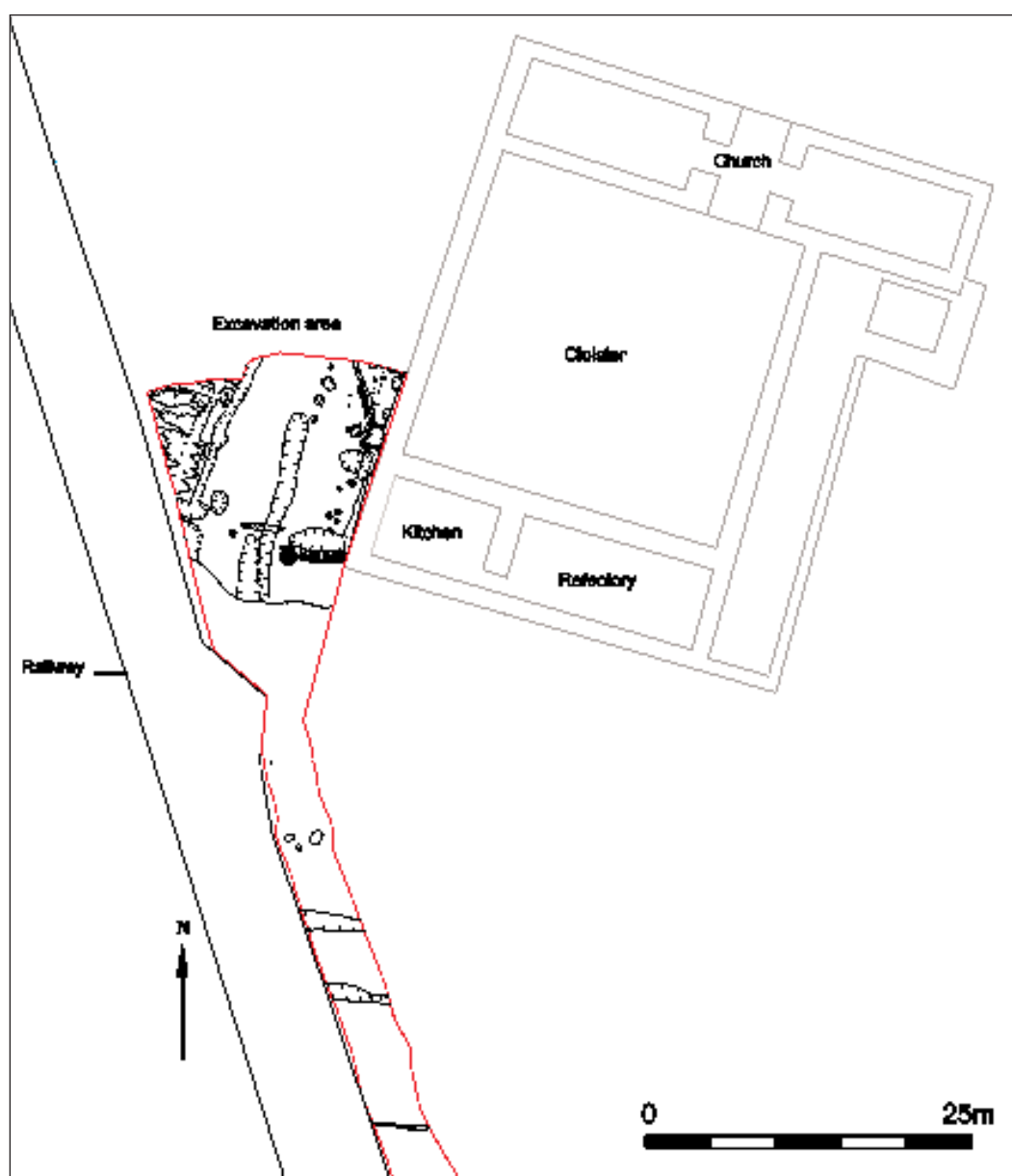


Illus. 1—Location of Clare Abbey, Co. Clare (based on the Ordnance Survey Ireland map).

In August 2005 an excavation was undertaken by Graham Hull, TVAS (Ireland) Ltd, at Clare Abbey on behalf of Clare County Council and the National Roads Authority as part of works associated with the N18 Ennis Bypass and the N85 Western Relief Road.¹ Clare County Council requested the construction of a small vehicle turning-space/carpark next to Clare Abbey, linked to the new N85 by a narrow roadway. This Augustinian abbey, believed to have been constructed in the 12th century, is located in the townland of Clareabbey, 2 km south of Ennis and adjacent to the River Fergus (Illus. 1). The buildings present today consist of a church, domicile and cloister garth, probably remnants of 15th-century repairs. The abbey is a National Monument (no. 197) in state ownership.

The excavation was located in a triangular plot of land with a linear extension to the south (Illus. 2). It was bounded on the east by the cloister buildings of the abbey—including the kitchen and cloister wall—and on the west by the Ennis to Limerick railway. The total excavation area was 900 m² and the site was used as a roughly surfaced carpark (Illus. 3) prior to the excavations.

A miscellany of features was recorded, including wall remnants, ditches, drains, furrows, pits, post- and stake-holes, and one cess egress hole. The majority of these features relate to



Illus. 2—Excavation area adjacent to Clare Abbey (TVAS [Ireland] Ltd).

the monastic activity at the site, but a small number may be associated with military activity in the region during the turbulent 17th century.

Monastic times

A History of the Diocese of Killaloe (Gwynn & Gleeson 1962, 452) refers to Clare Abbey or ‘The Abbey of SS Peter and Paul’ as an ‘important house of the canons regular of Saint Augustine . . . founded by King Domnall Mór in 1189 on the banks of the Fergus’. Papal letters refer to it as *de Forgio*, a name presumably derived from the river (*ibid.*, 120). The

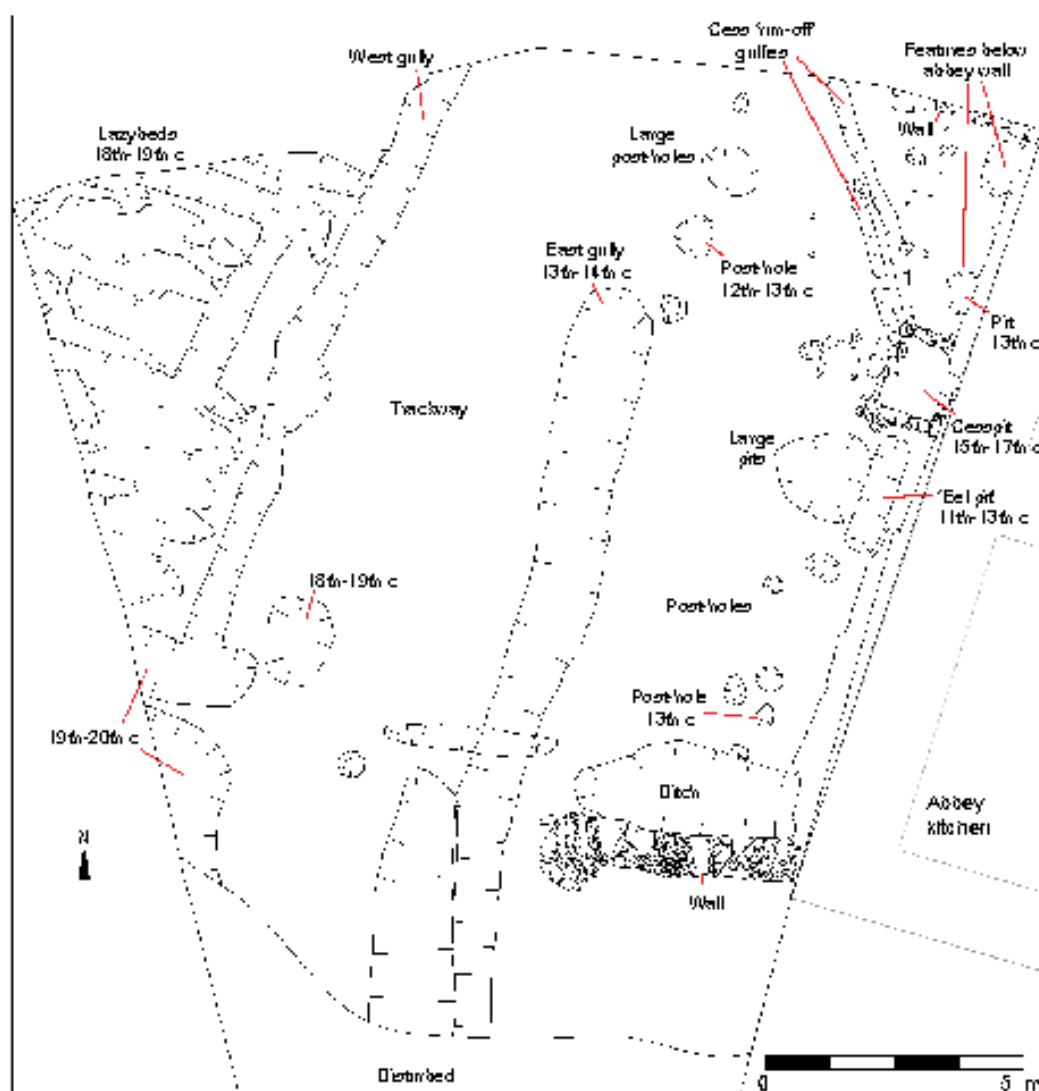


Illus. 3—The roughly surfaced carpark prior to the excavations (TVAS [Ireland] Ltd).

foundation charter of Clare Abbey (1461 copy) indicates that there may have been an earlier church on the site (Power 2004, 21). Flanagan (2005, 163–74), however, has shown convincingly that the foundation charter is a 15th-century forgery, written to extend the Augustinians' control over other parts of Clare. Westropp (1900, 122) also suggests that an earlier church existed, but notes that 'the only suggestion of a pre-Norman building at Clare may be an early-looking Bullaun in a rounded block of pink granite, and, perhaps, a carved block over one of the northern windows of the choir'. The limited archaeological works carried out at Clare Abbey did not reveal any traces of an earlier building, but clearly identified features associated with the later monastic activity.

It is suggested that the site for the monastery was chosen because it is surrounded on three sides by boggy ground subject to flooding by the River Fergus. This marginal setting, allowing monks to contemplate the divine in isolation, is relatively common for abbeys (Morris 1989, 111). This tranquil setting was shattered, however, in 1278:

'Mahon, son of Donall Connachtagh O'Brien with his adherents and the O'Gradies, billeted themselves at Clare Abbey. Their rest was but short. Soon an alarm was raised, and they saw advancing the embroidered standard of Donallbeg O'Brien and the crimson coats of his followers. They "agreed that their lives would be longer for getting out of his way," and rushed out of the abbey in the utmost confusion, so "the rout of the abbey on Mahon O'Brien" became a proverb in the mouths of clan



Illus. 4—Plan of excavated features adjacent to Clare Abbey (TVAS [Ireland] Ltd).

Torlough. Unfortunately the matter did not end in honourable battle, but left a stain on Donallbeg's bravery and his followers. They captured many of the "soldiers, fair-haired women, little boys, servants, kerne [a medieval Irish foot soldier], horseboys, and herdsmen," making of them "one universal litter of slaughter, butchering both prisoners and cattle' (quoted in Westropp 1900, 120).

The Ordnance Survey Letters of 1839 refer to McGrath's *Wars of Thomond* (c. 1350), detailing the period between 1194 and 1318, and state that no actual battle was fought but concur that captives were murdered (Comber 2003, 169). No trace of the battle was recorded during the archaeological works.

Clare Abbey's power and importance grew during the 14th century; the establishment was seen as one of the most powerful and wealthy monasteries in the country, and remained so up to the Dissolution (Gwynn & Gleeson 1962).



Illus. 5—Archaeological features uncovered in the north-eastern part of the site (TVAS [Ireland] Ltd).

Archaeology of the monastic period

The excavation revealed the presence of two gullies running parallel to each other in a north-east/south-west direction (Illus. 4 & 5). The space between the two gullies, approximately 5 m, was largely devoid of archaeological features. It is possible that modern disturbance had destroyed deposits here, but it is also noteworthy that this area corresponds with a trackway shown on the Ordnance Survey six-inch map of 1840 that led to the abbey church. Charcoal deposits within the eastern gully have been radiocarbon-dated to AD 1220–1380 (Beta-231533; see Appendix 1 for details). Four large post-holes continued the line of the eastern gully. The gullies and post-holes are parallel to the west wall of the abbey cloister. A radiocarbon determination from a pig bone found in one of these post-holes was dated to AD 1160–1290 (Beta-237218). It is likely, then, that the trackway indicated in 1840 existed in the 13th or 14th century.

Prior to the excavation, it was noted that a row of holes was let into the outer face of the west wall of the cloister at ceiling height. These must have been for horizontal timbers, and it is likely that some of the post-hole alignments seen in the excavated area would have supported corresponding timber uprights. It is possible to conjecture that in the 13th and 14th centuries there were timber buildings attached to the stonework of the abbey on this west side. East of the large post-holes were two rows of smaller post/stake-holes. These

features were also parallel to the cloister wall and may be internal elements of the timber buildings constructed against the abbey. At the extreme northern limit of the excavation area, an insubstantial stone wall, set at 90 degrees to the abbey, was observed. It is possible that this feature formed part of this extramural building or building group.

A wall remnant and ditch at the south-west corner of the abbey post-dated the cloister/kitchen wall and were set at approximate right angles to it. These features may be the remains of another external building appended onto the main cloistral group of the abbey (see Illus. 4).

Six post-holes north of this wall and ditch may also represent timber structures or possibly scaffolding—perhaps used in the construction of the abbey. A pig bone from one of these features has been radiocarbon-dated to AD 1200–1280 (Beta-237219).

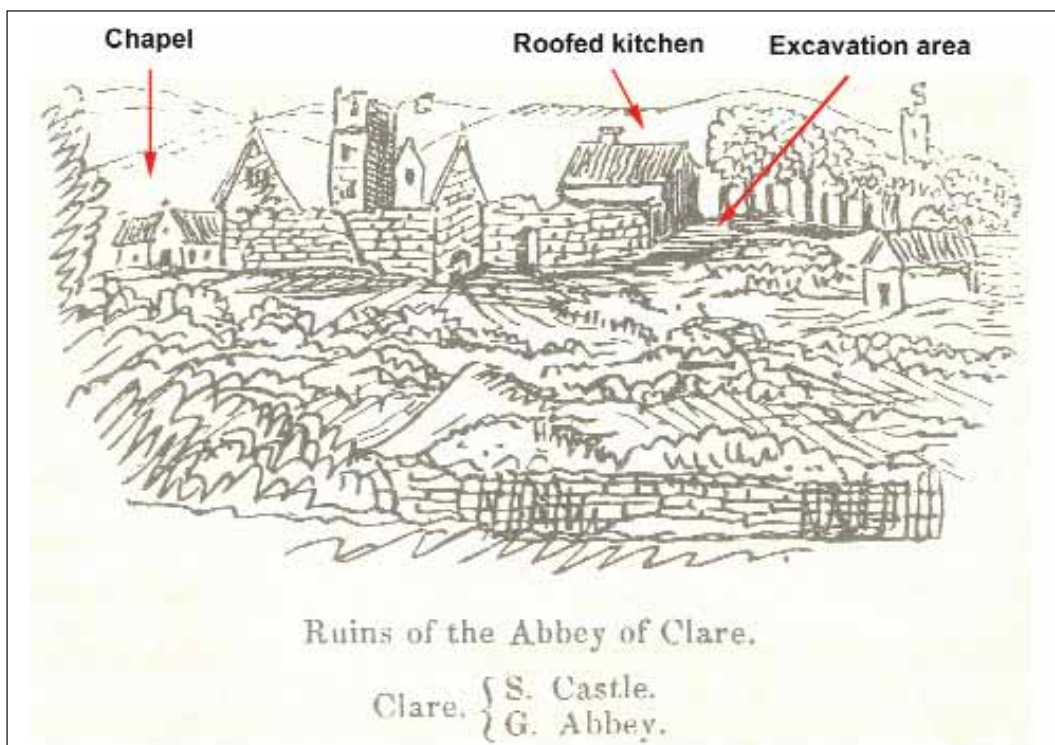
Two large pits were recorded adjacent to the abbey. One was a rounded rectangle in plan and was very precisely cut. The feature measured 2.1 m by 0.8 m and was 0.6 m deep. Over 2,000 eel and fish bones were found in this pit. The River Fergus is famed for its eels, and the presence of so many bones from a pit that was adjacent to the abbey kitchen reveals that eel formed a significant element in the diet of the monks in the medieval period. Charred cereal grain from the ‘eel pit’ has been radiocarbon-dated to AD 1030–1220 (Beta-231531). As cereal grain is a short-lived organism, this provides a secure date for the pit. The date range is relatively early as the abbey, according to (admittedly dubious) documentary evidence, was founded in 1189.

Two amorphous features were partly excavated, immediately adjacent to the abbey wall and continuing beneath it (Illus. 5). A piece of Saintonge green-glazed pottery, dating from the 13th to 14th centuries, was found at the top of the fill of one of these features. Saintonge ware was imported into Ireland from south-west France as a by-product of the extensive wine trade. Pig bone from the second feature beneath this west wall has been radiocarbon-dated to AD 1200–1280 (Beta-237217). A piece of a Ham Green B jug was recovered from this feature. Ham Green B ware derives from near Bristol and dates from c. 1175–1250. These dates support the documentary evidence for the founding of the abbey in the late 12th century. The amorphous features may have been stone-holes, as there were glacial erratics present in the vicinity until modern field clearance, and it could be that some of these boulders were removed immediately prior to the building of the abbey.

A single course of foundation stones was recorded beneath the abbey west wall. These stones rested directly on the natural geology. It was observed, however, that there could be two different foundation walls, reflecting two different building phases in the abbey west wall. This would represent two phases of construction or repair of the building, and this may correspond to the separate construction of the kitchen and the west curtain wall of the cloister.

Turbulent times

Clare Abbey was dissolved in 1543, and the site and possessions were granted to the descendants of Domnall Mór, Earl of Thomond and Baron of Inchiquin (Power 2004, 162). Also at the dissolution, ‘The grantee was pledged to forsake the name “Obrene” [O’Brien], house the English manners, dress, and language, to keep no kerne or gallow-glasses [an armed retainer or mercenary, usually of Scottish origin, in the service of an Irish chieftain],



Illus. 6—Thomas Dyneley's 1681 sketch of Clare Abbey (after Ó Dálaigh 1998, 57).



Illus. 7—Henry Pelham's watercolour of Clare Abbey c. 1779–82 (after Grose 1793, pl. 8).

obey the king's laws and answer his writs, to attend the Deputy and succour no traitors' (quoted in Westropp 1900, 121).

Thomas Dyneley's 1681 sketch (Illus. 6) shows that the abbey kitchen had been converted into a house and also depicts a small chapel adjoined to the abbey, supporting the notion that religious activity continued up to the later seventeenth century. Post-medieval agricultural and brick-manufacturing activity detected to the south of the abbey may also date from this period (Hull & Taylor 2007) but is probably later. The general decline of the

abbey is supported by a 1779–82 sketch engraved by Pelham (Grose 1793), which depicts the kitchen/house as unroofed and the chapel as absent (Illus. 7).

Archaeology of the post-Reformation period

All of the archaeological features on the site were sealed below a substantial layer of limestone rubble with limestone roofing tile. It is likely that this deposit represents collapse of the curtain wall and conventual buildings on the west and south sides of the abbey. The artefacts found in the collapse were generally post-medieval in date and may correspond with an episode of deliberate destruction.

The fortunes of the town of Clare (now Clarecastle), just over 1 km to the south, followed a different path to that of the abbey after the dissolution, as a castle here became a significant military stronghold during the 1641 rebellion, the Cromwellian conquest and the 1688–91 Williamite war. Power (2004, 46) refers to a threat made to the properties of Sir Daniel O'Brien at Clare Abbey and the English settler Gregory Hickman at Barnick. Hickman was a substantial leaseholder by 1640, leasing 640 acres in Clare Abbey parish at this time. The arrival of Cromwell's forces in 1649 led to the invasion of Clare and the siege of Clare Castle by Ireton in 1651. In the latter stages of the siege there were about 2,000 English soldiers and 1,500 cavalry encamped around Clare Castle (ibid.).

A cesspit defined by three stone walls abutted the west curtain wall of the cloister and an opening in the wall was recorded (Illus. 4 & 8). This opening presumably allowed waste to flow from latrines within the cloister. The cesspit was drained by a pair of linear gullies. The lower fill of the cesspit was dated to AD 1460–1660 (Beta-233431). At the very base of the pit, many fragments of high-quality glass from a single vessel were recovered (Illus. 9). The vessel is a beaker, made from very fine clear glass decorated with red, white and black trails and dates from c. 1600 (E Bourke, pers. comm.). The beaker is likely to come from the Low Countries and is made in the fashion of Venetian glass (*façon de Venise*). A very similar vessel is in the collections of the Museum of Decorative Arts, Prague (Drahotová 1983, 57). Glassware such as this would have been used only by the upper classes at this period.

The contents of the cesspit included bone from cattle, pig, sheep, hare, woodmouse, duck, chicken, goose, woodcock, eel, pike, flounder, frog and also oyster shell (M Holmes, pers. comm.). These species indicate that the inhabitants of the abbey (be they monks or post-dissolution occupiers) had a very rich and varied diet. As the cess issued from the cloister, it is more likely that the cesspit post-dates the Augustinian occupation of the abbey. There was a break in the foundation stones of the west curtain wall and south range gable that corresponded with the location of the cesspit and with the eel pit, and it is likely that stones had been removed from the abbey foundations to allow insertion of these features.

There is a possibility that some of the archaeological information recorded at Clare Abbey relates to the wars of the 17th century. Artefactual evidence, in the form of spur parts (Illus. 10) and a 1691 James II gun-money halfpenny (Illus. 11), struck in the Jacobite-held city of Limerick, may be related to the historically attested presence of military forces in the neighbourhood of Clare Castle. Gun-money, or brass money, was issued by James II to pay for the war and, if victorious, the base metal coinage would have been redeemable for regular silver currency (Rice 1990). Twenty-eight James II gun-money coins were found in a hoard at Ballyea, Co. Clare, 6 km south-west of Clare Abbey, in 1982 (Lenihan 1983). The large body of cavalry that was stationed at Clare in 1691 (Gilbert 1892, 188, 296) would



Illus. 8—Cess egress hole cut into cloister wall (TVAS [Ireland] Ltd).



Illus. 9—Seventeenth-century glass vessel from cesspit (National Monuments Service).



Illus. 10—Metal rowel from a spur (Arch Con Labs).



Illus. 11—1691 James II gun-money halfpenny (Arch Con Labs).

have required grazing for their horses and, indeed, Major-General Wauchope wrote a letter on 18 October 1691, following the capitulation of Limerick, stating that County Clare ‘was almost the only place we had to subsist the horse and dragoons’ (ibid., 310). The flat pasture near the castle in Clare and adjacent to a partly roofed institutional structure—the abbey—would have been ideal.

Defeat at the Battle of Aughrim in July 1691 led to retreat and the besieging of Jacobite forces at Limerick. The garrisons at Clare Castle and Ross Castle were strengthened in order to retain Jacobite control over Clare and Kerry, as well as to defend the areas around Limerick (Simms 1969, 240). Power (2004, 54) notes that Clare Castle was held by Jacobite forces under Teige MacNamara of Ayle, Tulla. Conditions at the garrison, even before the defeat at Aughrim, may have been poor, as evidenced by a complaint dated 28 January 1691: ‘Armed soldiers from Clare Castle were looting around the Latoon district seeking victuals and terrorising the poor people in their cabins, including women and children’. Colonel Richards’s diary, written in Limerick at the time of the siege there, notes that on 23 September 1691 a message should be sent ‘to Dominick Sheldon at their horse-camp at Castle Clare’ (Gilbert 1892, 296), and that on 25 September 1691 ‘Major-general Dominick Sheldon with the [Catholic] archbishop [of Armagh] and the [Catholic] bishop [of Cashel] arrived from Clare at the General’s tent’ (ibid., 297). French officers and cavalry were also based at Clare Castle c. 1691 and, indeed, nearly half the Jacobite cavalry seems to have been based in County Clare at this time. Article XI of the Treaty of Limerick refers to the garrison at Clare Castle:

‘The garrisons of Clare castle and Ross castle and all the other foot [soldiers] . . . shall have the advantage of the present capitulation; and such part of those garrisons as deign to go beyond seas, shall march out with their arms, baggage, drums beating, ball in mouth, match lighted and colours flying, with all of the provisions and half the ammunition that is in the said magazine, and join the horse that march to be transported’ (quoted in Gilbert 1892, 304–5).

Other artefacts found—of various dates—include buckles, horse fittings and a few lead items, some of which may be window lead (or turned lead). Information about the roofing of the abbey comes from numerous pegged limestone tiles that probably had a local origin. A piece of plain-glazed ceramic ridge tile was also found. Such ridge tiles were used on Anglo-Norman structures in Ireland from the later 13th to the 16th or 17th century (A Vince, pers. comm.). A clay tobacco-pipe dating from 1660–90 and identical to examples found in King John’s Castle in Limerick (Sweetman 1980) was found within the collapsed wall deposits. Small pieces of disarticulated human bone were recovered from a number of deposits. These finds are unsurprising as the cloister would have been used for Augustinian burials and possibly later burials too.

Conclusion

As expected, the excavation revealed archaeological features and structures associated with the Augustinian occupation of the abbey. It was noted that wooden buildings might have been present against the west curtain wall of the cloister and the gable of the south range.

Possible indications of scaffolding used during the construction of the abbey were recorded, as were post-Reformation occupation layers and features. Considering all the 17th-century artefacts recovered during the excavation, it is suggested that armies might have camped at Clare Abbey during the Cromwellian and/or the Williamite wars.

Most of the features will be protected and preserved *in situ* under the proposed carpark. The new road to the abbey will allow easier access to the monument, which has always been remote and fairly unknown to the general public or tourists. With appropriate signage, the new access road will enhance the heritage of County Clare.

Acknowledgements

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Note

1. NGR 134700, 175730; height 6 m OD; excavation reg. nos E2021 & E2022; ministerial consent no. C020; ministerial direction no. A026/001; RMP no. CL033-120; National Monument no. 197.