

# The Other Clare

vol. 32



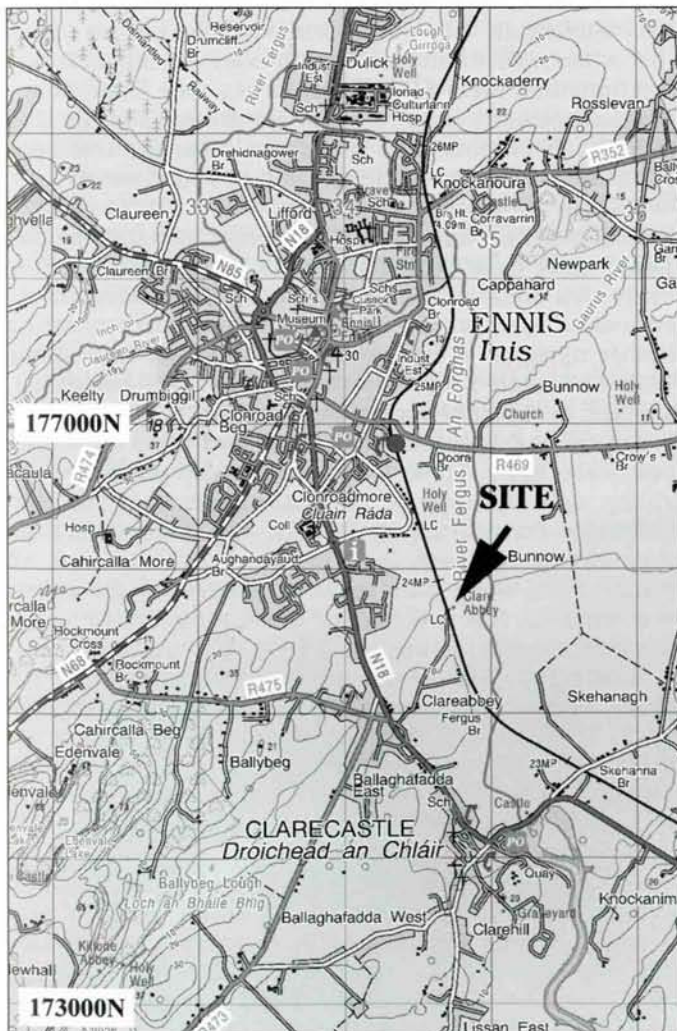
*Hilary Gilmore*

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

## Introduction

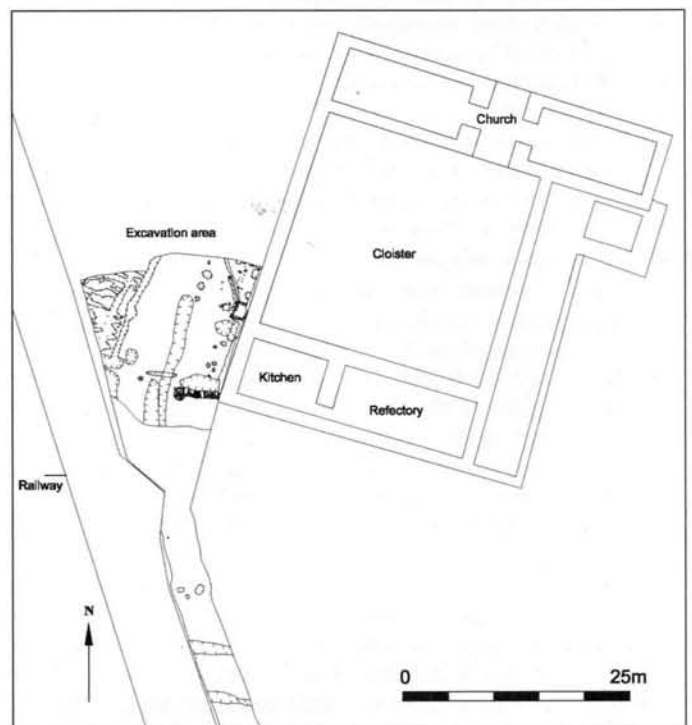
As part of works associated with the N18 Ennis Bypass and N85 Western Relief Road, Clare County Council requested the construction of a small vehicle turning space/car park next to Clare Abbey linked to the new N85 by a narrow roadway (Illus. 1 and 2) (Clareabbey, Co. Clare, NGR 134700 175730; 6 m OD, record nos. E2021 and E2022; ministerial consent C020; ministerial direction A026/001; RMP CL033-120; National Monument no. 197).

Clare Abbey is in the townland of Clareabbey, in the Parish of Clareabbey and in the Barony of Islands. The abbey is 2km south of Ennis and is adjacent to the River Fergus.



Illus. 1 – Site location

## Graham Hull and Sébastien Joubert



Illus. 2 – Excavation area and Clare Abbey (TVAS [Ireland] Ltd)

## The Archaeology (Illus. 5)

The excavation, which took place in Autumn 2005, was located in a triangular plot of land with a linear extension to the south. It was bounded on the east by the west gable wall of Clare Abbey and on the west by the Ennis to Limerick railway. The total excavation area was 900 m<sup>2</sup>. The land use prior to the excavation was a roughly surfaced car park accessed from a level-crossing over the railway line. The ground surface of the excavation area was level.

A total of eight walls were recorded. Linear features include two construction cuts associated with the walls, as well as: three gullies, two ditches, two drains and eleven furrows. Non-linear features were quantified as: four pits, nineteen postholes, fifteen stakeholes, one cess egress hole, features associated with the railway, stoneholes, natural depressions and other non-archaeological features. Twenty-three deposits including wall tumble, buried topsoil, made-ground, hardstanding, interface layers and natural geology were also recorded.

## Monastic Times

Archaeological features associated with monastic activity were recorded during the excavation.

*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. Flanagan (2005) has convincingly demonstrated that this charter is in fact a 15th century forgery designed to consolidate land claims.

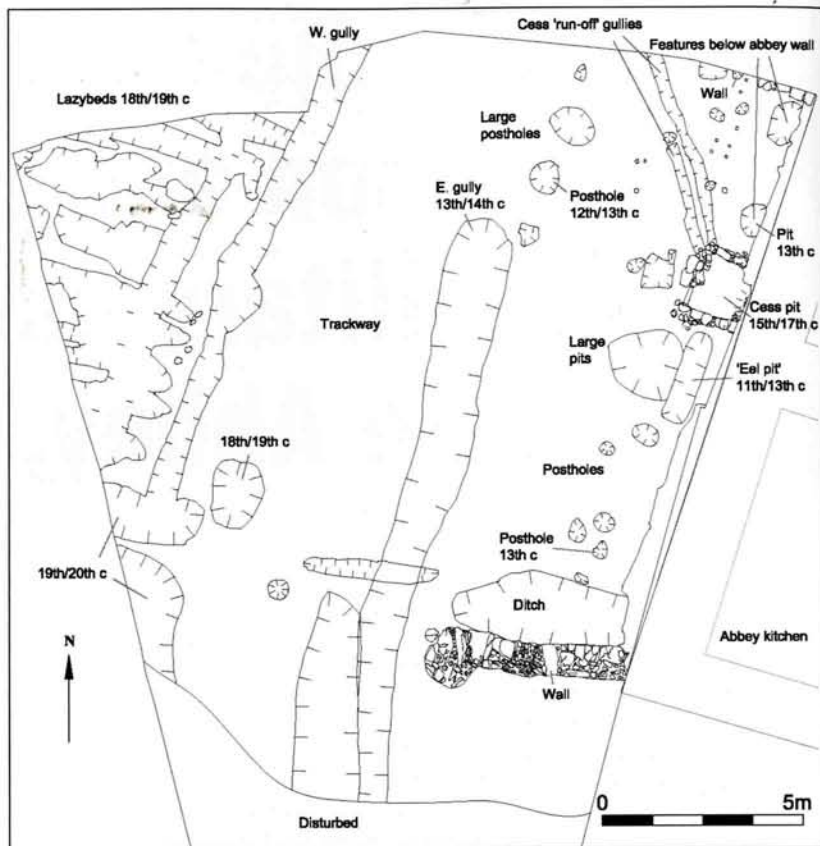
The 1461 copy of the original foundation charter of Clare Abbey indicates that there may have been an earlier church on the site (Power 2004, 21). Westropp (1900) suggests that a church existed on the site before the 12th century, but notes that '...the only suggestion of a pre-Norman building at Clare 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 archaeological works carried out at Clare Abbey did not reveal any traces of an earlier building.

It is suggested that the site was chosen because it was perceived as sacred as 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 (eg Cramp 1976, 204 and Morris 1989, 111). This tranquil setting was, however, shattered in 1278 when '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 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 herdsman," making of them "one universal litter of slaughter, butchering both prisoners and cattle' (Westropp 1900).

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 (O'Donovan and O'Curry 2003, 169). No trace of the battle was recorded during the archaeological works.

Clare Abbey's power and importance grew during the fourteenth century and 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).

The excavation revealed the presence of two gullies running parallel to each other in a NE/SW direction. The space between the two gullies, approximately 5m, was largely devoid of archaeological features. It is possible that modern truncation had destroyed deposits here, but it is also noteworthy that this area corresponds with a trackway shown on the 1840 Ordnance Survey Map that led to the abbey church gate. The eastern gully has been radiocarbon dated to AD 1220 to 1310 and AD 1360 to 1380



Illus. 5 – Archaeological features (TVAS [Ireland] Ltd)

(Beta-231533). Four large postholes continued the line of the eastern gully. The gullies and postholes are parallel to the west wall of the abbey cloister. A radiocarbon determination (Beta-237218) from a pig bone found in one of these postholes shows that the feature dates to AD 1160 to 1290. It is more than 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 west wall of the cloister at ceiling height. These must have been for horizontal timbers and it is likely that some of the posthole 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 'soft buildings' attached to the stonework of the abbey.

East of the large postholes were two rows of smaller post/stake holes. These features were also parallel to the abbey wall and may be internal elements of the 'soft buildings' constructed against the abbey stonework. 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 structure.

Stratigraphically pre-dating the partial collapse of the abbey west wall, were a wall and a seemingly associated ditch. These features were at the south-west corner of the abbey and post-dated the construction of the abbey west wall but were set at approximate right-angles to it, and these features may be the remains of a building appended to the abbey.

Six postholes were observed to the north of this wall and ditch, aligned parallel to the abbey west wall and may represent timber structures. It is also possible that these postholes represent the remains of scaffolding – perhaps used in the construction of the abbey. A radiocarbon date from one of these features indicates a 13th century date (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 0.7 m-0.8 m and was 0.6 m deep. The pit has been radiocarbon dated to AD 1030 to 1220 (Beta-231531). Over 2000 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 strongly suggests that eel formed a significant element in the diet of the monks in the medieval period.

The radiocarbon determination from the 'eel pit' was derived from a charred cereal grain and this short lived organism provides a secure date. The date range, from the early 11th century to the early 13th century, is interesting as the abbey, at least according to a 15th century claim (Flanagan 2005), was founded in 1189. Two somewhat amorphous features were part-excavated, immediately adjacent to the abbey wall. Both features continued beneath the abbey wall, indicating an earlier date than the wall. A piece of Saintonge green glazed pottery, dating to the 13th to 14th centuries was found at the top of the fill of one of these features. Saintonge was imported into Ireland from south-west France as a by-product of the extensive wine trade (McCutcheon 2007). The second feature beneath the abbey west wall has been radiocarbon dated (Beta-237217) to the 13th century and a piece of a Ham Green B jug was recovered from this feature. Ham Green B derives from near Bristol and dates to c. 1175-1250. These dates support the documentary evidence for the founding of the abbey in the late 12th century. The features may have been stoneholes, 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 west wall.

Beneath the abbey west wall a single course of foundation stones was observed. These stones rested directly on the natural geology. It was, however, observed that there could be two different foundation walls that would reflect two different builds in the abbey west wall. This would represent two phases of construction or repair of the building that probably correspond to the separate construction of the kitchen and the cloister.

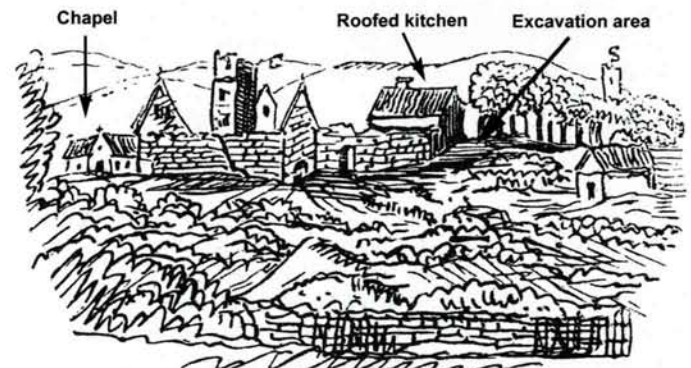
### Turbulent Times

Clare Abbey was dissolved in 1543 and the site and possessions were granted to the descendants of Domnall Mór, the Earl of Thomond and the Baron of Inchiquin (Power 2004, 162).

Also at the dissolution; *'The grantee was pledged to forsake the name "Obrene", house the English manners, dress, and language, to keep no kerne or gallow-glasses [an armed retainer or mercenary in the service of an Irish chieftain], obey the king's laws and answer his writs, to attend the Deputy and succour no traitors.'* (Westropp 1900). Thomas Dyneley's 1681 sketch (Illus. 3) 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. It may be that the post-medieval agricultural and brick manufacturing activity detected to the south of the abbey also dates to this period (Hull and Taylor 2007) and may be connected with the abbey. The discontinuation of religious activity and 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. 4).

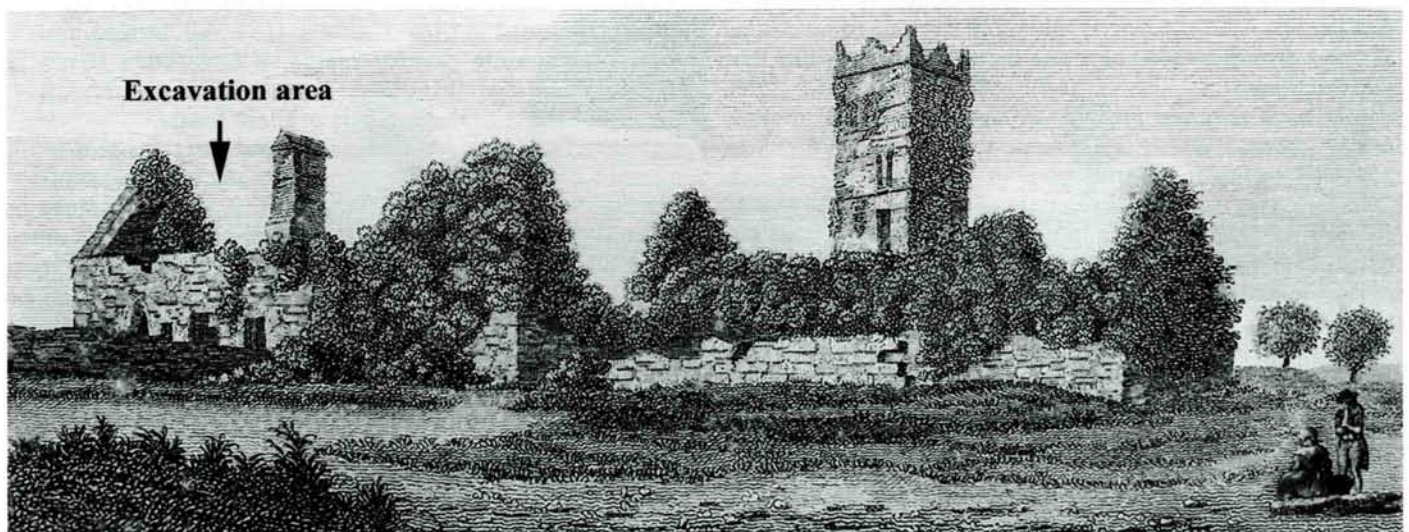
All archaeological features on the site were sealed below a substantial layer of limestone rubble with limestone roofing tile and it is likely that this deposit represents collapse of part of the abbey west wall and also that the building adjacent was roofed. This building may have once been the abbey kitchen. The artefacts found in the collapse were generally post-medieval in date. It might be thought odd that artefacts were found in collapsed wall material and there may therefore be a degree of intent in the deposit that could indicate deliberate destruction.

The fortunes of the town of Clare (now Clarecastle) followed a different path to that of the abbey after the dissolution, as the castle became a significant military



Ruins of the Abbey of Clare. Clare. } S. Castle.  
 } G. Abbey.

Illus. 3 – Thomas Dineley's 1681 sketch of Clare Abbey (Ó Dálaigh 1998, 57). Looking south-east (TVAS [Ireland] Ltd)



Illus. 4 – Henry Pelham's watercolour of Clare Abbey c. 1779-82 (Grose 1793) (TVAS [Ireland] Ltd)

stronghold during the 1641 rebellion, the Cromwellian conquest and the 1688-91 Williamite War. Reference is made by Power (2004) to a threat made to the properties of Sir Daniel O'Brien at Clare Abbey and the English settler Gregory Hickman at Barntick. 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 besieging of Clare Castle by Ireton in 1651. In the latter stages of the siege there were about 2000 English soldiers and 1500 cavalry encamped around Clare Castle (ibid.).

A cess pit defined by three stone walls abutted the abbey and an opening in the west wall (Illus. 6) was recorded. This opening allowed waste to flow presumably from latrines that had been built within the cloister into the rectangular area defined by the walls. The cess could be let out of the stone enclosure by means of a pair of linear gullies. The lower fill of the cess pit was dated to AD 1460 to 1660 (Beta-233431). At the very base of the cess pit, many fragments of high-quality glass from a single vessel were recovered (Illus. 7). The vessel is probably a beaker, made from very fine clear glass and decorated with possible red enamel. The vessel is probably 17th century (Ed Bourke *pers. comm.* and similar vessels are illustrated in Tyson 2000).

The contents of the cess pit included bone from cattle, pig, sheep, hare, woodmouse, duck, chicken, goose, woodcock, eel, pike, flounder, frog and oyster shell (*pers. comm.* Matilda Holmes). 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 would have had to egress from the cloister it is more likely that the cess pit post-dates monastic activity. There was a break in the foundation stones of the abbey that corresponded with the location of the cess pit 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 and a 1691 James II gunmoney halfpenny 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 (Illus. 8). Gunmoney was issued by James II to pay for the war and, if victorious, then the base metal coinage would have been redeemable for regular silver currency (Rice 1990, 212-4). Twenty-eight James II gunmoney coins were found in a hoard at Ballyea, Co. Clare, 6 km to the south-west of Clare Abbey in 1982 (Lenihan 1983, 7). The large body of cavalry that was stationed at Clare in 1691 (Gilbert 1892, 188, 296) would 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 Catholic 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 notes that Clare Castle was held by Catholic forces under Teige MacNamara of Ayle, Tulla. Conditions at the garrison, even before the defeat



Illus. 6 – Cess egress hole cut into cloister wall. Scale 1m (TVAS [Ireland] Ltd)

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.' (Power 2004, 54). Colonel Richards' 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... (Gilbert 1872, 304-5).

Other artefacts found include buckles, a possible book clasp (Illus. 8), and a few lead items of which some may be window calmes (frames for small panes of glass). Information about the roofing of the abbey comes from numerous recovered limestone pegged 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-



Illus. 7 – Seventeenth century glass vessel from cess pit (National Monuments Service)

Norman structures in Ireland from the later 13th to the 16th or 17th centuries (Vince 2007). Brick from Clare Abbey is very similar to the 15th century material found at Tewkesbury Abbey and Llanthony Secunda Priory, Gloucester, both of which appear to have been produced at Worcester (ibid.).

Clay tobacco pipe dating from 1660-90 and identical to examples found in King John's Castle, Limerick (Sweetman 1980) was found within the collapsed wall deposits.

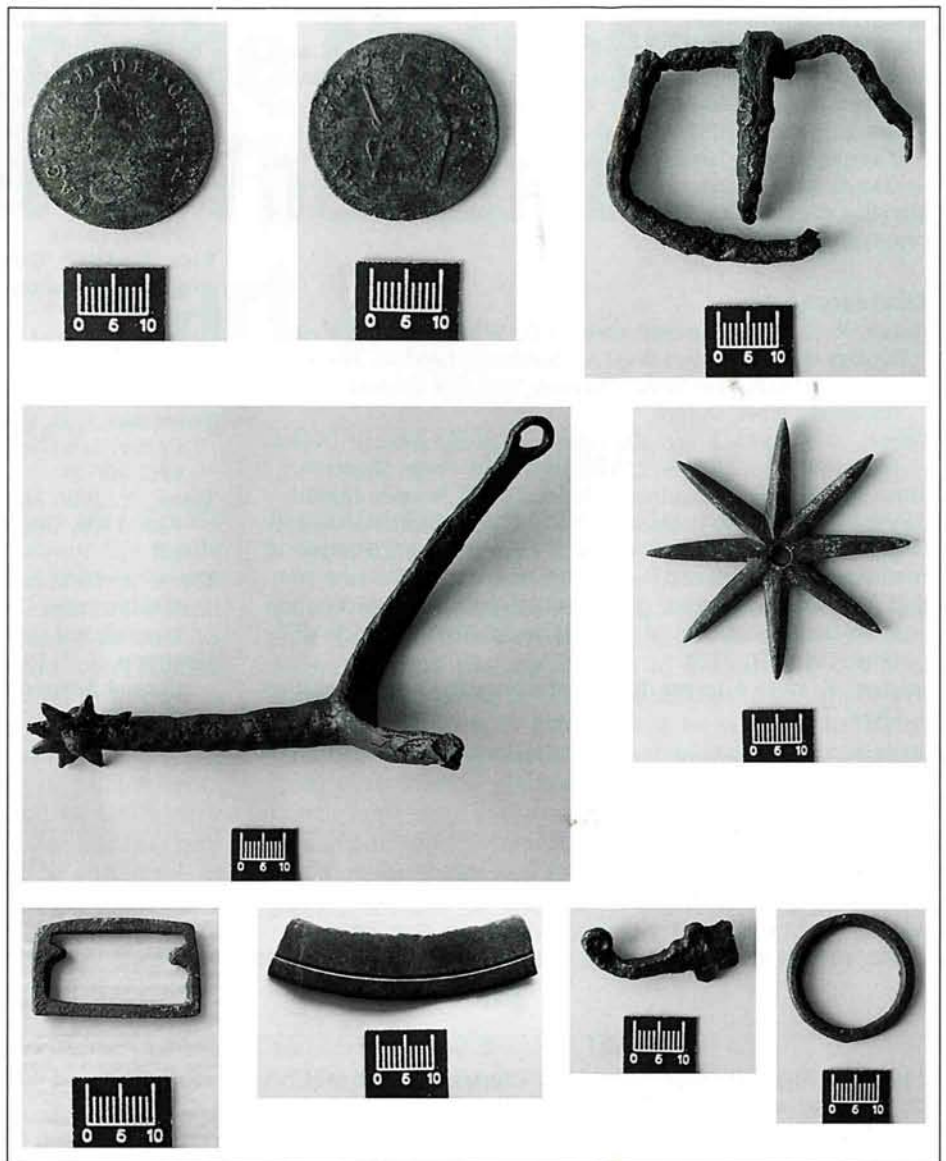
Small pieces of disarticulated human bone were recovered from a number of deposits. Given the presence of the abbey cloister to the immediate east of the excavation site and the insertion of a cess egress hole in the cloister wall, these finds are unsurprising as the cloister would have been used for monastic burials.

### Conclusion

As expected, the excavation revealed archaeological features and structures associated with the monastic occupation of the abbey. It was noted that soft buildings might have been present against the abbey west wall. Indications of scaffolding, used during the construction of the abbey were also recorded. More surprising, were the post-monastic occupation layers and features that were recorded during the excavation. Looking at all the artefacts from the 17th and 18th centuries recovered during the excavation, it is suggested that armies might have camped at Clare Abbey during the Cromwellian and/or the Williamite wars.

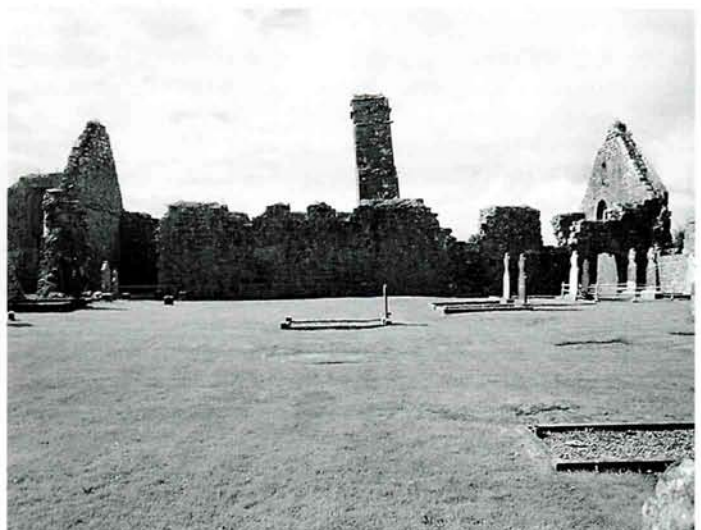
Upon receipt of the engineering final design for accommodation works, it was agreed that most of the features could be properly protected and preserved *in situ* under the proposed car park.

The new road to the abbey will allow easier access to



Illus. 8 – Metal artefacts. L to R and top to bottom. James II gunmoney halfpenny 1691, buckle, spur with rowel, rowel, buckle, unidentified copper alloy object, bookclasp?, horse bridle-piece? (Archcon Labs)

the monument, which has always been remote and fairly unknown to the general public or tourists (Illus. 9). With appropriate signage, the new access road will enhance the heritage of County Clare.



Illus. 9 – Clare Abbey. Left: west wall of cloister and church. Right: cloister, refectory (L) and kitchen (R) (Sébastien Joubert)

## Acknowledgements

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Radiocarbon Dates				
Lab Code	Site	Sample/context	Yrs BP	Calibrated date ranges
Beta-231531	Clare Abbey	Cereal ( <i>Hrdeum</i> sp, <i>Triticum</i> sp) grains from pit fill	910 ± 40	AD 1040-1170 one sigma AD 1030-1220 two sigma
Beta-231533	Clare Abbey	Charred hazelnut ( <i>Corylus avellana</i> ) shell from ditch fill	720 ± 50	AD 1260-1290 one sigma AD 1220-1310 and AD 1360-1380 two sigma
Beta-233431	Clare Abbey	Hare ( <i>Lepus</i> ) vertebra from cess pit fill	270 ± 40	AD 1490-1640 one sigma AD 1460-1660 two sigma
Beta-237217	Clare Abbey	Pig ( <i>Sus</i> ) from pit below cloister wall	720 ± 40	AD 1220-1270 one sigma AD 1200-1280 two sigma
Beta-237218	Clare Abbey	Pig ( <i>Sus</i> ) from posthole	790 ± 50	AD 1210-1270 one sigma AD 1160-1290 two sigma
Beta-237219	Clare Abbey	Pig ( <i>Sus</i> ) from posthole	720 ± 40	AD 1220-1270 one sigma AD 1200-1280 two sigma
Dates obtained using IntCal04 calibration dataset (Reimer et al. 2004)				