

**Cliffs of Moher Visitor's Centre, O'Brien's Tower,
Lislorkan North, Co. Clare**

**An Archaeological Monitoring Report
for Clare County Council**

05E1387

Graham Hull MIFA MIAI

(NGR 104200 192200)

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Job J05/05

20th June 2006

Summary

Site name: Cliffs of Moher Visitor's Centre, O'Brien's Tower, Lislorkan North, Co. Clare

Townland: Lislorkan North

Parish: Kilmacrehy

Barony: Corcomroe

County: Clare

Planning Ref. No: Clare County Council P01-333 and Clare County Council LA 03/25 and LA 04-08
(Part VIII development)

Client: Clare County Council

Grid reference: NGR 104200 192200

RMP No: CL014-002

Naturally occurring geology: Not observed during monitoring

TVAS Ireland Job No: J05/05

Licence No: 05E1387

Licence Holder: Graham Hull

Report author: Graham Hull

Fieldwork: Graham Hull, Astrid Nathan and Edel Ruttle

Site activity: Monitoring of topsoil strip around O'Brien's Tower

Date of fieldwork: 5th May-19th June 2006

Date of report: 20th June 2006

Summary of results: Monitoring of topsoil stripping for footpaths and viewing platforms in the immediate vicinity of O'Brien's Tower did not produce any archaeological evidence

Monuments identified: None

Location and reference of archive: The primary records (written, drawn and photographic) are currently held at TVAS Ireland Ltd, Ahish, Ballinruan, Crusheen, Co. Clare.

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Report edited/checked by: Kate Taylor ✓21.06.06

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by Graham Hull

Report J05/05b

Introduction

This report documents the results of archaeological monitoring in the immediate vicinity of O'Brien's Tower at the Cliffs of Moher Visitor's Centre, Lislorkan North, Co. Clare (NGR 104200 192200) (Fig. 1).

The following Government publications set out many of the procedures relating to planning/development and archaeology:

Framework and Principles for the Protection of the Archaeological Heritage (DAHGI 1999a)

Policy and Guidelines on Archaeological Excavation (DAHGI 1999b)

Archaeology and Development: Guidelines for Good Practice for Developers (ICOMOS 2000)

Review of Archaeological Assessment and Monitoring Procedures in Ireland (Lambrick and Doyle 2000)

The planning background

The work was commissioned by Gerard Dollard, Director of Services, Economic Development & Planning, Clare County Council, Unit 1, Westgate Business Park, Kilrush Road, Ennis, Co. Clare.

Clare County Council is currently redeveloping the Cliffs of Moher Visitor's Centre. Under the terms of the Local Government (Planning and Development) Acts 1963 to 1999, a decision to grant Permission (subject to conditions) was made under Section 26 of the 1963 Act (as amended) on the 21st January 2002. The Clare County Council reference number in the Planning Register is: P01-33. The decision to grant was subsequently upheld by An Bord Pleanála (PL03.128695).

The Development includes: Demolition of the existing Visitor's Centre and development of a new visitor's centre, retail unit, public conveniences, 6 no. casual trader bays, waste treatment plant, revised car and coach parking arrangement and entrances including ancillary landscaping works at the site of the existing visitor's centre and car park at the Cliffs of Moher, Co. Clare.

The development is taking place within the existing boundaries of the Cliffs of Moher Visitor's Centre but temporary car-parking and services are located on an previously undeveloped field to the east of the current complex.

An Environmental Impact Statement was commissioned and the archaeological component highlighted the 'high archaeological potential' and recommended archaeological monitoring of groundworks (Parkman Environment 2001).

No archaeological condition was imposed relating to this Grant of Permission.

Clare County Council is also, pursuant to Article 80 of the Planning and Development Regulations 2001, carrying out a Part viii development (File No: LA 03/25). This Development aims to upgrade

and refurbish the cliff edge by increasing the footpath width, enlarging the main viewing area and the surrounds of the O'Brien's Tower, together with creating four additional viewing points. Improved stone slab walling and signage are also being undertaken.

The Council's Area Engineer, Heritage Officer and Conservation Officer and prescribed bodies (including the National Monuments Service of the DoEHLG) have made submissions to the Senior Staff Officer, Planning Section, Clare County Council; with regards to the archaeological issues, it is required that:

Prior to commencement of development an archaeological assessment of the site shall be submitted by an archaeologist (approved by the National Monuments Service of the DoEHLG) for agreement by the Planning Authority. The assessment shall describe impact of the development on the known and potential archaeology of the monument. In the event of any items or features of archaeological significance being discovered, no development shall commence, on this part of the site, until the site has been archaeologically resolved.

Accordingly, a desk-based assessment of the development area was undertaken by Graham Hull (2005). This assessment noted that, on the basis of documentary and cartographic research coupled with a visual site-inspection, an undated earth mound (Recorded Monument CL014-002) is present at the north of the development and that this mound was surmounted in the 1830s by an observation tower. The archaeological potential across other parts of the site is variable and dependant the degree of damage caused by existing facilities and pedestrian erosion. The assessment report recommended that targeted archaeological monitoring take place during groundworks.

Following correspondence between Clare County Council and the National Monuments Section of the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, it was agreed that licensed archaeological monitoring of the area in the immediate vicinity of the mound and tower (CL014-002) would be appropriate. This report describes that archaeological monitoring.

Location and topography

The Cliffs of Moher, an iconic Irish landscape, are an abrupt termination of a rolling range of hills at the Atlantic Coast (Plate 2). Wave-action has formed vertical cliff faces up to 200m high and these extend approximately 10km along the coast. Images of the cliffs are widely used in tourism and promotional material and the Cliffs of Moher is a popular tourist destination.

The Cliffs of Moher Visitor's Centre is located 10km to the north-west of the town of Ennistymon, 4.5km north-west of the town of Liscannor and is centred on NGR 104200 192200 (Figs 1 and 2). The existing Visitor's Centre has been established as a long-term visitor location to the north of the range of hills where the views encapsulate the full experience of the Cliffs. The centre is located to the east of the R478 Liscannor to Doolin road, north of Liscannor Bay, where the road runs in close proximity to the cliff edge.

The local geological formations are characterised by Upper Carboniferous, Namurian sandstones and mudstones. The bedrock outcrops at the surface in places. The landscape is devoid of tree and shrub cover due to the harshness of the salt-laden constant winds. The hill side bordering the Visitor's Centre and edge of the cliffs is steep and the vegetation is primarily composed of semi-natural grassland and heath growth on a thick silty loam topsoil. The cliffs also provide nesting opportunities for internationally significant bird colonies.

Archaeological and historical background

A detailed examination of the history of the development site has been given in the archaeological assessment report (Hull 2005). With regard to the specific monitored area, it is worth reiterating that O'Brien's Tower was built c. 1835 by Cornelius O'Brien and is a two storey castellated folly (Plates 1 and 2). The tower is built on an earth mound and this earthwork has been designated a Recorded Monument (CL014-002). The mound is somewhat oval in plan and measures between 15m and 20m across. The mound is approximately 1.5m high. In places, stone-steps and flag paving have been laid on the mound. Erosion by pedestrians has been severe in unprotected parts of the monument.

Monitoring objectives and methodology

Archaeological monitoring took place during landscaping and path laying works in the vicinity of O'Brien's Tower in order to establish the nature and extent of any archaeological deposits and features related to the mound on which the tower is built.

The monitoring was undertaken by Graham Hull, Astrid Nathan and Edel Ruttle between 5th May and 19th June 2006. Topsoil in the location of the new paths was stripped by a 15 tonne tracked mechanical excavator using a toothed 2m excavating bucket.

The spoil was visually scanned for artefacts. Representative photographs were taken of the site and a written and drawn record was made.

Monitoring results (Fig. 2 and Plates 3 and 4)

Rich loamy topsoil, of a dark brown colour, was seen to be 0.20m to 0.50m thick. The topsoil was observed to directly overlie a brownish grey silty clay frequently mottled subsoil with iron pan flecking. The removal of the topsoil around O'Brien's Tower exposed 0.1m (average) of the deposit of the possible mound on which the tower was built. This deposit was firmly compacted soil with a soft consistency and was composed of light brown slightly clayey sandy silt containing a substantial amount of mortar nodules, sand patches and stones.

The only finds observed in this deposit were occasional relatively modern nails, glass fragments and brick material, all of which strongly indicate, that the mound on which O'Brien's Tower is built is of relatively modern artificial origin and most probably dates to the 19th century. It is likely that the mound was constructed at the same time as the tower itself – in c. 1835 – in order to increase the tower's prominence.

It was also observed that the mound material *abutted* the foundations of the tower, further strengthening the conclusion that the 'mound' is modern.

The natural geological deposits were not reached during the works.

Conclusion and recommendations

Monitoring of topsoil stripping as part of landscaping and path-laying works at O'Brien's Tower at the Cliffs of Moher Visitor's Centre, Lislorkan North, Co. Clare has demonstrated that archaeological deposits were not present and consequently no further archaeological action is required.

Further, it can be stated, with a high degree of confidence, that the mound on which O'Brien's Tower is built is not likely to be of archaeological origin.

The opinions given in this archaeological monitoring report are made subject to approval by the National Monuments Section of the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government and the National Museum of Ireland.

Graham Hull MIFA MIAI
TVAS Ireland Ltd
20th June 2006

References

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- ICOMOS, 2000, *Archaeology and Development: Guidelines for Good Practice for Developers*, The Heritage Council, Kilkenny
- Lambrick, G and Doyle, I W, 2000, *Review of Archaeological Assessment and Monitoring Procedures in Ireland*, The Heritage Council, Kilkenny
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Plate 1: O'Brien's Tower, showing earthwork CL014-002. Looking north



Plate 2. O'Brien's Tower. Looking south



Plate 3: Slab removal by tower. Looking north-west



Plate 4: Topsoil stripped adjacent to tower. Looking east



**Cliffs of Moher Visitor's Centre
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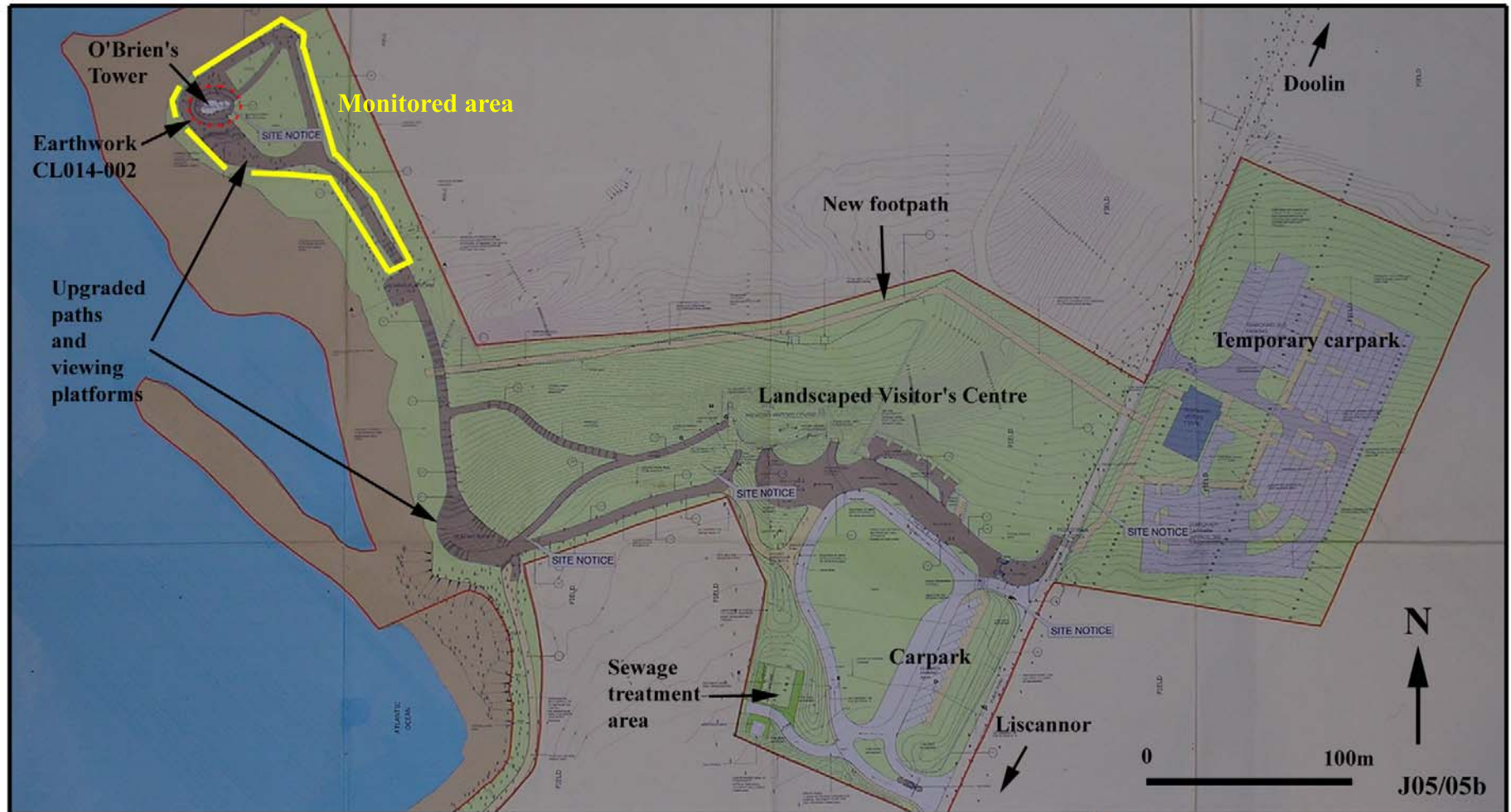
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Figure 1: Site location

Based on Ordnance Survey Ireland, Discover Series, 1:50000,
1st edition, published 1995

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**Cliffs of Moher Visitor's Centre, Lislorkan North, Co. Clare
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Figure 2: Proposed development showing principle features and location of monitored area

Based on Landscape Masterplan, Brady Shipman Martin, Environmental Consultants, Drawing 200

