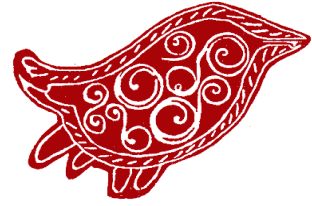


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# Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society

*(Eighty-Sixth year of issue)*

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## Red Abbey, Cork City

By BRENDAN D. O'FLAHERTY

### INTRODUCTION

At the invitation of the Cork City Manager, the Department of Archaeology undertook a small-scale trial excavation of a cleared site immediately to the West of the Red Abbey Tower.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of the excavation was to demonstrate the archaeological and historical importance of the site, with its ultimate goal being a total excavation of the entire Abbey site, its subsequent preservation and its development as an amenity area.

The excavation, aided and serviced by Cork Corporation, was conducted between the 16th and the 24th of May 1977.

### THE EXCAVATION

It was decided to excavate an area 16m x 2m transecting the site (see figure 1). This trench yielded a cross section of the nave of the Red Abbey church.

This area was cleared of tarmacadam and sub-surface rubble by machine (J.C.B.) to a depth of 0.5m. A further digging by hand of 30cm was then undertaken.

At a depth of 80cm several structures became apparent. A total of five walls crossed the cutting. Four of these were certainly the foundation walls of modern houses. The fifth wall was in the north section (see figure 2). It seems likely that this wall was also modern. It may be that the lowest course of one of these walls was medieval in character but from the limited width of the cutting it was impossible to determine this with certainty.

Subsequent excavation revealed a total of ten recorded skeletons. A number of others (fifteen) were also uncovered but as these lay in disturbed positions, under service pipes etc., it was decided to concentrate the resources of the excavation on the undisturbed areas.

<sup>1</sup> O.S. 6" sheet 74, E42.7cm, S24.9cm. Barony: Cork. Parish: St Finbarr's South. Electoral Ward: South Gate A.

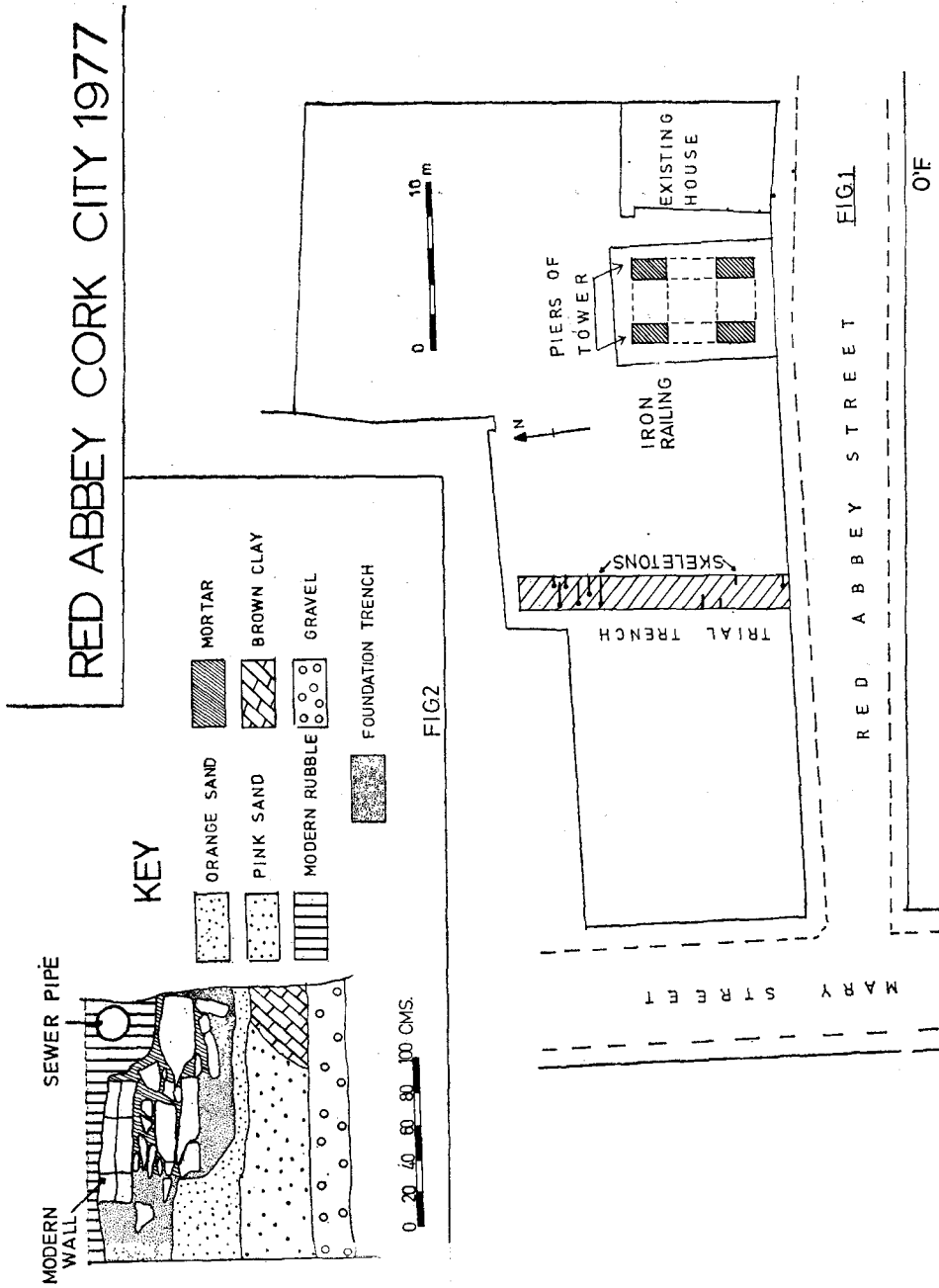


Fig. 1: Overall plan of the Red Abbey area showing excavated area and the positions of the skeletons within it.

Fig. 2: Sectional profile of the north face of the cutting

The skeletons showed conclusive evidence of burial spanning a number of years. In one case, for example, the left pelvic bone and all the long bones on the left hand side had been removed and another skeleton had been subsequently inserted, his head where the pelvic bone had been. All the skeletons lay in an east-west direction, with all the heads lying towards the west. The only find in association with the skeletons was a single sherd of pottery from the Saintonge region of France. While the pottery dates from the 13th century, it is unlikely that the skeletons are also of this date. It is likely that the burials were inserted after the abbey had been abandoned in the 17th century. All the skeletons were interred in the layer labelled "Pink Sand" (see figure 2) at a depth of approx. 1.10m.

As modern disturbance was in evidence to a depth of 70cm, much of the medieval stratigraphy is destroyed and it proved impossible, for example, to identify any layer which may have been the medieval church floor.

At the northern end of the trench an area of 2m x 2m. was excavated to a depth of 2.5m. Underneath the Pink Sand burial horizon a layer of water-rolled gravel was encountered. This was totally undisturbed and of natural deposition. When it became apparent that this was so the sondage was abandoned.

When the excavation had served its purpose, that is to demonstrate the archaeological and historical importance of the site, it was decided to leave as much of the site *in situ* as possible. None of the skeletons was removed and on completion the entire trench was covered with a layer of plastic and then carefully backfilled. This was done so that to any larger scale subsequent excavation the area which was excavated would be immediately apparent and an overall view of the nave of the church would not be precluded. For this reason also the north section face (fig. 2) was deemed the most useful for publication.

## FINDS

All of the small finds from the excavated areas were recorded and collected. They have been deposited in the Cork Public Museum. They can be divided into three groups: bone, pottery and metal.

### *Bone*

The bone which was recorded was almost exclusively human. Much of it was of a very fragmentary nature and consisted mainly of limb bones with foot and hand bones well represented. This scattered and fragmented bone from the upper levels also supports the conclusion that the nave of the church was used for burials over a long period of time.

### *Pottery*

The pottery from the excavation which comprises a total of thirty sherds may be divided into three broad categories: medieval pottery, 17th and 18th century pottery and 19th century modern pottery.

Medieval pottery: Two sherds of Saintonge (Central West France) pottery were found at a depth of 60cm in the stratum labelled "Pink Sand". Both sherds are made of a fine off-white fabric with a mottled green copper glaze. These possibly date to the 13th century.

Two further sherds of medieval pottery from the Severn basin area were also found in the Pink Sand stratum. Both have a light green glaze with a white fabric. One sherd is decorated with three parallel lines incised on the fabric and subsequently glazed.

17th and 18th century pottery: The 17th century pottery consists of two sherds of North Devon gravel tempered ware. One sherd is an almost complete handle. It is fine and hard with a green glaze. The other sherd also has a green glaze on a gray fabric. This is a rim sherd and it is slightly everted. The 18th century material consists of two sherds of Staffordshire combed ware with its characteristic yellow glaze with brown "combing".

The remainder of the pottery is either early 19th century or modern and consists of thirteen sherds of a well oxidised pottery with small quartz grits. It has a brown slip with a white wash which gives a brown and white linear effect. The remaining sherds are generally earthenware, well oxidised with quartz grits and unglazed. Again these date to the 19th century.

### *Metal*

The metal finds consist of approximately three hundred pieces of lead shot of which fifty three were recorded in order to provide a sample for analysis. The remaining balls were left *in situ*.

From the beginning of the 18th century the calibres of the three main categories of small arms, that is musket, carbine and pistol were roughly standardised as 1.8cm, 1.7cm and 1.5cm respectively. The sizes of the shot for these barrels varied slightly according to the amount of windage (the difference in diameter between the ball and the bore of the gun) allowed. (H. L. Blackmore, pers. comm.).

Thirteen of the balls had a diameter of between 1.8cm and 1.95cm which would suggest that they were musket balls. The remaining forty balls had a diameter of between 1.6cm and 1.79cm. This would suggest that these balls are all shot for carbines, the difference in diameter being accounted for by the windage factor.

All the shot is of lead and undischarged. There were casting flashes on all of them and they are virtually uncorroded. They occurred at a depth of 80cm on top of the layer labelled "Pink Sand".

Documentary and cartographic evidence show that the Duke of Marlborough used the Red Abbey tower as a gun emplacement from which he attacked the walls of Cork during the siege of 1690. (Simms, 1969, 180). It seems probable that the balls are associated with Marlborough's use of the Abbey and date to 1690.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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