

'SWORDS CASTLE: DIGGING HISTORY'

Author(s): Christine Baker, Brendan Black, Grace Monaghan, Caoimhe Ni Fhearghail Smith and Seán Mac Domhnaill

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'SWORDS CASTLE: DIGGING HISTORY'

Christine Baker describes a community archaeology project in Fingal.

Right: Swords Castle under reconstruction in the 1990s.

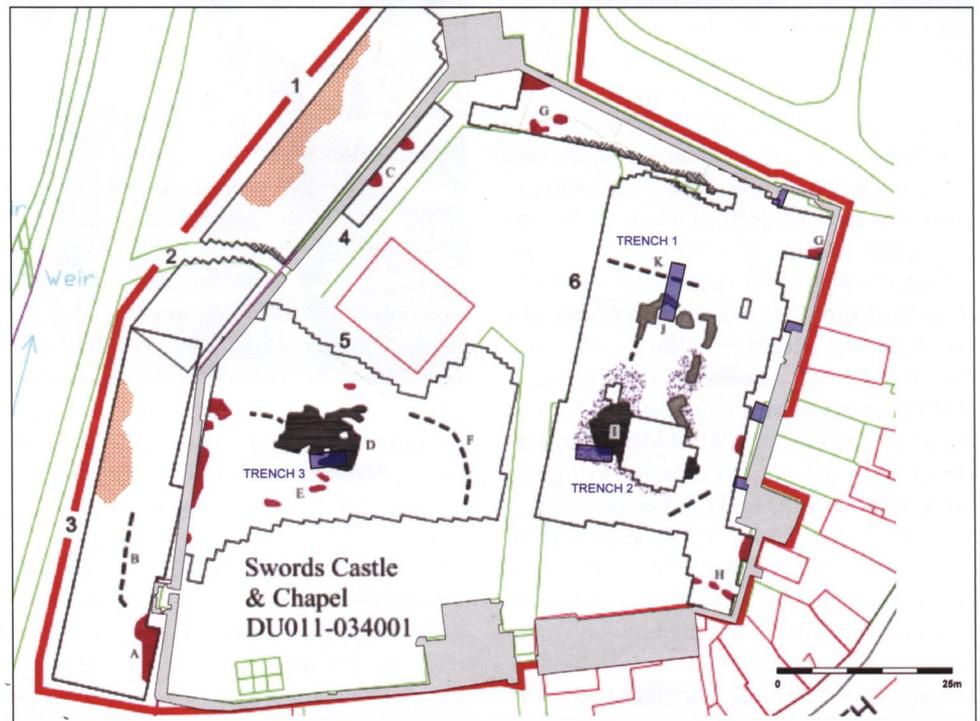
Below right: Trench location. Geophysical survey (2011) courtesy of Target Survey.



Swords Castle is not a castle in the accepted sense but rather a medieval episcopal residence. Attributed to the first Anglo-Norman archbishop of Dublin, John Comyn, it was founded in the later twelfth century as the administrative centre of an extremely wealthy manor. Commanding the north end of the medieval High Street of the north County Dublin town, it consists of over an acre of sloping ground, enclosed by a partially crenellated curtain wall, and is entered by a gatehouse. Notable features include the extant remains of the 'Knights & Squires', the Chapel, the Archbishop's Apartments and the Constable's Tower.

After some 'dubious leasing practices' on the part of the archbishops, the site was recorded as in disrepair in the late sixteenth century. By 1830 the interior was in use as an orchard owned by the Cobbe family, before being bought by the County Council in the 1980s. From 1995 onwards some of the upstanding buildings and the walls were subject to reconstruction. Until earlier this year, however, Swords Castle, a National Monument, had been closed to the public for almost a decade.

Excavation by Tom Fanning in 1971 uncovered a pavement of decorated floor tiles comparable to those in Christ Church and St Patrick's cathedrals, and burials that he attributed to either a sixteenth-century occupation of the castle by Dutch Protestants, Famine burials or a plague.



Other investigations had uncovered building remains and stone walls which have remained *in situ*. In 2014, during stabilisation works at the gatehouse, several layers of eleventh/twelfth-century burials were unearthed. As part of the Swords Castle Conservation Plan (http://www.fingal.ie/media/Swords%20Castle%20Conservation%20Plan_final.pdf), geophysical survey was undertaken in 2011, revealing the possibility of internal structures and other amorphous anomalies. Despite its

importance as one of the best surviving episcopal palaces in the country, Swords Castle has been rather overlooked and its story is still not fully understood.

In 2015 Fingal County Council, in conjunction with the Heritage Council, decided to pilot the position of Community Archaeologist. A central requirement of the brief was to develop a community archaeology project, and the 'Swords Castle: Digging History' project is the result. It encompasses several elements. 'Swords



Archaeofest', which was child-focused, took place in June as part of the Swords Festival, which 24,000 people attended. By the end of the day it felt like most of them came through Archaeofest, and it proved a fruitful opportunity to raise awareness of the project. 'Swords Castle: My Castle' was a means of involving those who may not be interested in excavation. People were requested to submit their memories, images and photographs of the castle—what it meant to them, how they saw it, how they painted it. These were then collated by Fingal artist Andrew Carson in an exhibition in the Chapel that ran concurrently with the excavation. Forthcoming projects include 'Finding Fanning's Burials' and 'The Story of the Stone', which will trace the geology, construction and reconstruction of the castle. The Heritage Office and the Economic, Enterprise & Tourism Development Department of Fingal County Council agreed to fund the project, recognising not only its inherent value but also its community and tourism potential.

The objectives of the archaeological excavation were manifold but were primarily to answer archaeological research questions, to inform the stabilisation works and to give both locals and visitors a way to engage directly with the heritage of Swords Castle. An account of the castle from 1326 tells us that it had a kitchen, a bakehouse and dairy, stables and a carpenter's workshop, as well as the archbishop's hall, chapel, chamber and garden. Some of these can be related to extant remains but questions remain. Are the anomalies on the

Above: Medieval floor tile.

Middle: Alex and Christine enjoying sieving the environmental samples.

Right: Christine, Angela, Ann, Marian and Nina washing finds.

geophysical survey indicative of structural remains? Did the high ground and the slope down towards the river reflect the topography or the subsequent use of the site? What was the phasing of the walls and buildings along the eastern range? What would environmental analysis reveal? How much disturbance had been caused by the orchard? These were just a few of the questions that we hoped to answer by excavating three trenches within the open areas of the precinct and four test-pits at the junctions along the walls.



The first season of excavation took place over four weeks and was timed to coincide with National Heritage Week. The archaeological team consisted of Stephen Johnston, Kim Rice, Siobhán Duffy and me, which added up to many years of experience. The rest of the team was made up of volunteers. I particularly wanted to open up the archaeological experience to new audiences and to those who had always wanted to try their hand at archaeology but never had the opportunity. In all, 103 people took part in the excavation, half for the minimum period of one day and the other half spending from two days to several weeks on site. Participants (who were all over eighteen) included locals, teenagers, retirees, people from the wider Fingal area, members of the new communities, tourists, members of the National Learning Network, Fingal County Council staff members, several heritage professionals, and people who travelled

from Meath, Dublin and Kildare to take part.

The closest that the vast majority of volunteers had come to excavation was watching *Time Team*, and the use of shovels and wheelbarrows was something of a shock. Our sieving station and find-washing tent, however, allowed the participation of those not inclined towards the more physically demanding aspects of trench-digging. The use of the site as an orchard had resulted in significant disturbance, with a cultivation layer averaging 0.4m in depth across the site. This layer was rich in artefacts. From the removal of sod on the first day we were recovering everything from clay pipes and glass bottles to medieval ridge tiles and pottery, making it an exciting experience for all involved.

The east-west trench 2 was closest to the known burials. The undisturbed archaeology consisted of a roughly metalled surface associated with numerous sherds of medieval pottery. It sloped downwards, following the natural topography with no attempt to create a level surface, and was removed to reveal a solitary rubbish pit. Trench 1 held the highest hopes for structural remains and did not disappoint us, a linear geophysical response corresponding with a north-north-east/south-south-west-running medieval stone wall. Internal to the wall were layers of deposits, one of which contained sherds of thirteenth-century pottery. Externally there was a level metalled surface with a build-up of extremely thin layers of deposits rich in fish bone. From here numerous marine shells, especially of oyster and crab, were recovered, indicating a food preparation area. Trench 3 was located to



Archaeology Ireland Winter 2015



Left: 'Digging History' launch day.

Below: Job done! End of season 1.

the west on the lower ground. Here, too, was a rough metalled surface, from which hundreds of nails were recovered, and it is tempting to link this to the 1326 carpenter's workshop. It is more likely that the metalling was there to cover the series of intercutting pits, the deepest of which was at 1.8m below the ground surface and continuing downwards.

The test-pits excavated at the junctions of buildings and walls have allowed us to work out a sequence of construction and destruction. It appears that a portion of the castle wall is in fact a nineteenth-century garden wall. The original wall was either robbed out or collapsed and had been rebuilt sometime before 1906. The western limit of a possible northern mural tower was investigated. There was evidence of intense burning and the collapse of a slate roof, below which we discovered two apparently *in situ* decorated floor tiles.

Thanks to the tireless sieving of our volunteers, the small mammal and fish bones recovered were extensive. Dr Meriel McClatchie held two environmental days on site, teaching participants the joys of wet-sieving. This is the first time that environmental analysis has been undertaken for Swords Castle and the early indications are of large quantities of agricultural produce, including charred grains of wheat, oat and barley and legume seeds. No burials were identified, although a few disarticulated human remains were recovered from each trench.

It has been important to involve volunteers in the different stages of the archaeological process. Finds were cleaned, labelled and bagged on site, to be dispersed among specialists. An 'After the Dig' day

was organised with the National Museum of Ireland at the Collections Resource Centre, Swords, in October. This was a fantastic opportunity to see the conservation procedures and just what happens behind the scenes. A results seminar is scheduled for January 2016.

'Swords Castle: Digging History' is the first excavation run directly by a local authority under the auspices of a community archaeologist. It has proved a real success in terms of answering research questions, engaging people with their local heritage and encouraging visitor participation and interaction with Swords Castle. There is significant potential for other local authorities to use it as a model for heritage, community and tourism. It has also been a lot of fun! Personally, while it has been a long-held ambition to

excavate at Swords Castle, the real privilege has been working with the volunteers. Their enthusiasm, positivity and sheer joy on discovering something just made the whole experience special for me.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS . . .

'The year was 1973, sitting in a mobile home near Rosses Point, Sligo, where the family was on holidays. I had just done my leaving cert. "Hey Bren," my mother said, "What are you thinking of doing with yourself after the leaving?" "I was thinking of becoming an archaeologist." "An archaeologist? What's that?" Thirty-five years and a lifetime in insurance later, I met Christine Baker at the Swords Festival. The dig in Swords Castle has been tremendous. Working under the supervision of the patient professional archaeologists, we peeled back the past, looking at the objects people used and the surfaces on which they walked, worked and perhaps died. Not the wars or great events but the ordinary everyday lives of our ancestors, perhaps immigrants to these shores years ago. We were allowed to see instances in their lives across the centuries. Would I do it again? In a heartbeat.'

Brendan Black





Left: Brendan and Seamus go surveying.

Below: Caoimhe and Monica registering finds.

'I grew up in Swords, under the shadow of its iconic castle, and spent many a twilight in my formative years scaling the great walls and playing within its boundaries. From every approach in the town of Swords the castle eventually reveals itself, and I do believe that it is this very presence which inspired in me a love of all things historical. The opportunity to become involved in the "dig", therefore, was not one to be passed up. To be able to uncover some of the mysteries we had pondered as young children was truly exciting. Working as a Montessori teacher, I figured that I could work in one or two days for the dig. However, after just one day of back-breaking mattocking, shovelling and hoeing I was absolutely hooked! The team were absolutely fantastic. There was a marvellous spirit of camaraderie and great excitement when one of the team uncovered some piece of medieval buried "treasure". The archaeological team offered marvellous support every step of the way, and certainly made me feel like I was a valued member of the project. I learned so much fascinating information from the professionals who were involved in and those supporting the dig. I can now look at my beloved castle in a new, more insightful light. Many local people asked me so much about the dig, and it was wonderful to be able to relay what I had learned back to others who know the castle so well in other respects. I was so sad to finish up when the time came to head back to school. However, the children were fascinated to learn that their teacher had been digging up "old bones"! I am really looking forward to reading all about the archaeological findings and will certainly participate in future projects.'

Grace Monaghan

'After watching the six o'clock news and the feature on the dig in Swords Castle I became involved with the project. I was washing the finds under the watchful eye of Siobhán. As I am a person who likes to get her hands dirty, Stephen then invited me to do a little excavating in his trench, and I enjoyed an afternoon feeling like a child looking for treasure in the dirt; when I uncovered a piece of pig jaw with teeth I felt like I had found the Holy Grail. As the week continued, I was asked to number and bag the finds, which was another step in the process. My partner in crime, Monica, catalogued each one after we had measured and written a tag for it. No one would believe the care and work that go on behind the scenes on a dig, and for me to be part of the whole process was an honour and privilege. The time I spent at the site was the most fulfilling thing I have done in many years. I found the archaeologists, Christine, Stephen, Siobhán and Kim, very welcoming and eager to explain and they gave their knowledge freely; they also had the patience of a saint when for the hundredth time one of us said that we thought we had discovered something special and were gently told that it was just a "stone", but nonetheless a very interesting one. This experience has been an amazing one and has fulfilled one of the items on my "bucket list". I have also decided to volunteer in the National Museum of Ireland following the fabulous experience I had in Swords. I will be first in line next August when the team will return to Swords and would encourage anyone to join in the best fun and educational days of summer.'

Caoimhe Ní Fhearghail Smith

'It was a very interesting and novel experience to be involved in the Swords Castle dig. This was the only time I participated in such a project. I was unable to do any actual digging and so concentrated on the cleaning of the artefacts. Some very interesting items were unearthed and gave a surprising insight into the history of the castle. Though I live in Swords, I was not aware of the extent of the work and study that have been carried out by Fingal County Council. The experience re-ignited my interest in the castle and its history. It was great to share the work experience with neighbours and friends. A weather bonus was that it was mainly dry and sunny. It added to the fun and banter we had together and with visitors to the castle. We became overnight "experts" as we explained the nature and extent of the castle dig. The follow-up visit to the Museum was in itself a big surprise. Again, I wasn't aware that there was such a source of material so close to all of us.'

Seán Mac Domhnaill

Acknowledgements

Thanks to my colleagues on site, in FCC and the National Museum, and to all who supported the project by taking part or by visiting us. You can see us on <https://www.facebook.com/Swords-Castle-Digging-History-110731409262325/?ref=hl>.



Archaeology Ireland Winter 2015