

# The Excavation of Clonrush Church, near Whitegate, Co. Clare

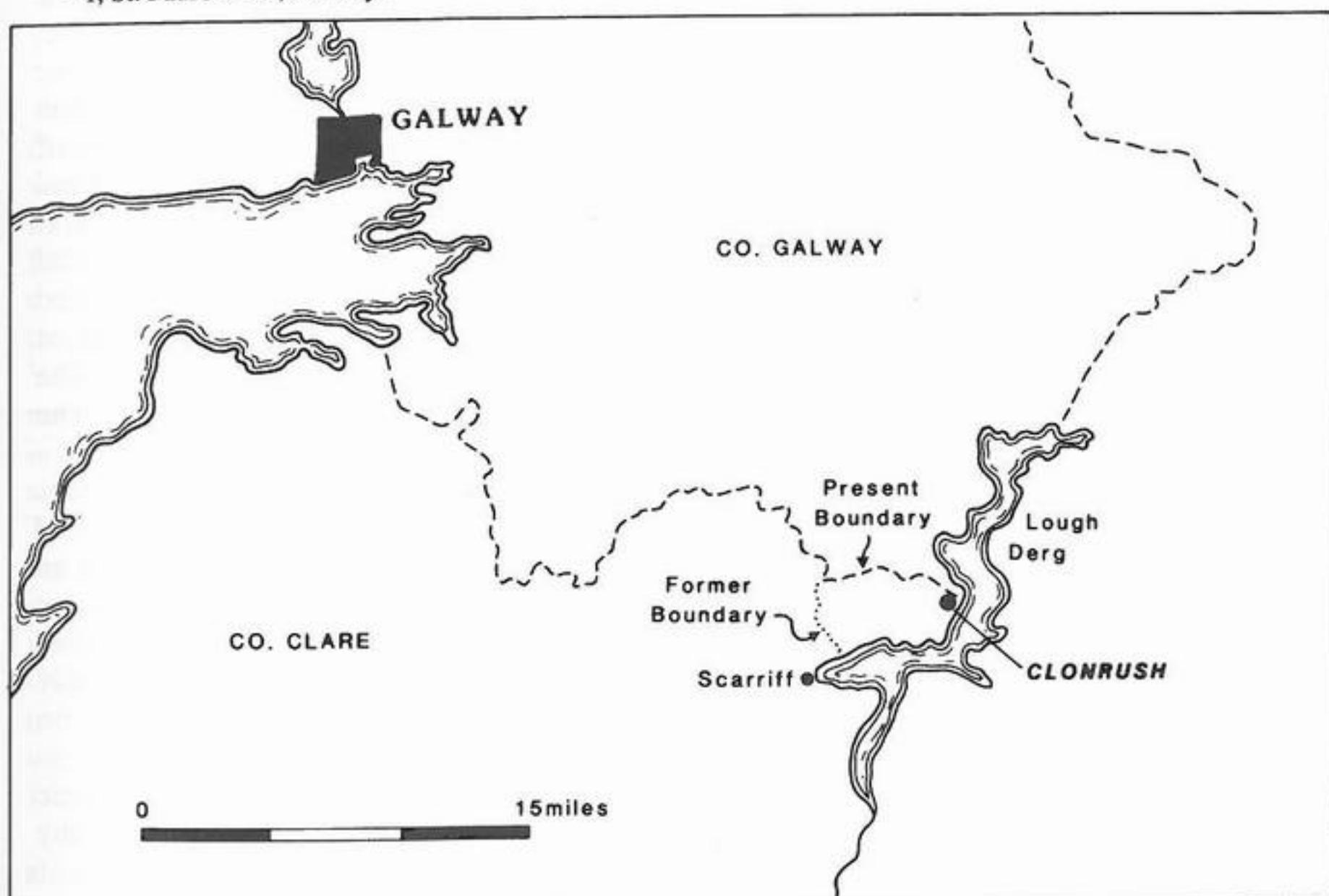
CARON McCARTHY\*

*Archaeological investigation in August 1991 of this small church, in advance of conservation/restoration work, revealed that it was probably built originally as a parish church in the 13th century, was altered and embellished in the late 15th or 16th century, and that by the 19th century was clearly abandoned although the graveyard still continues in use.*

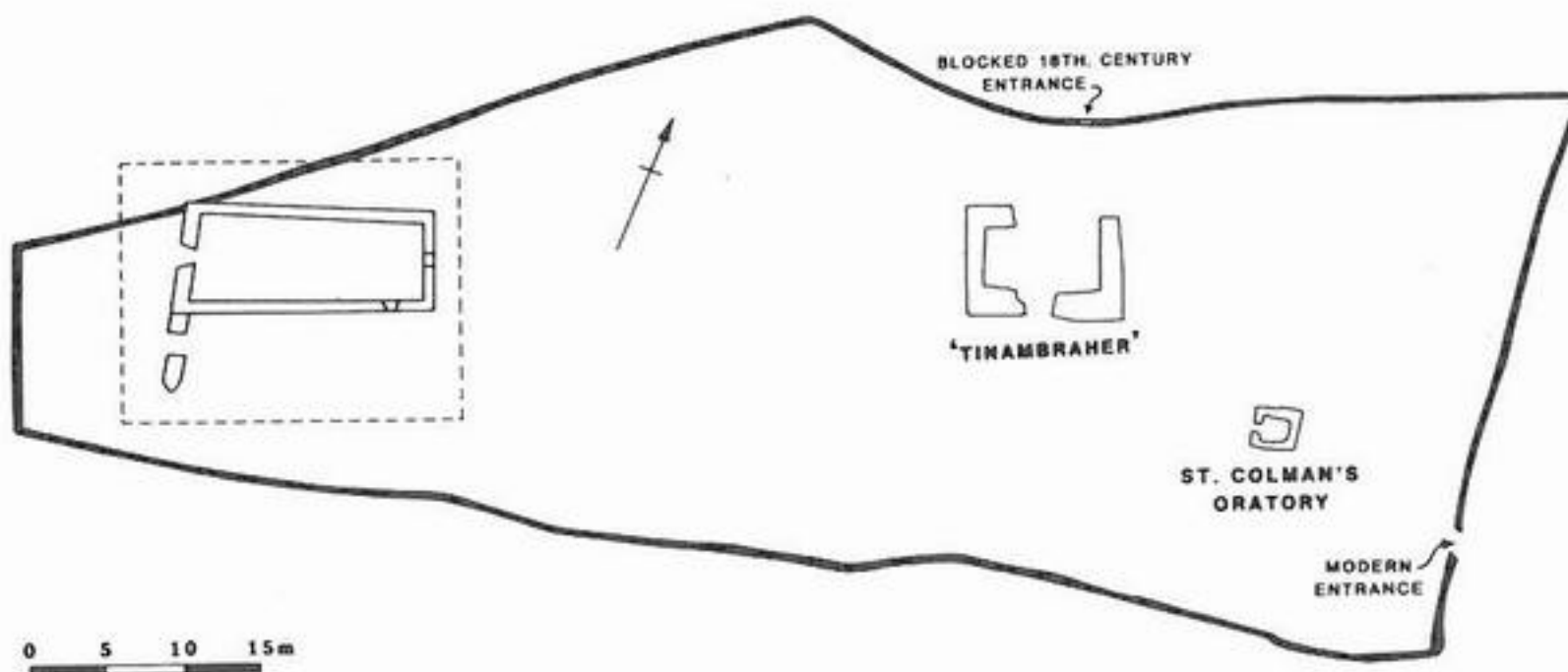
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The parish of Clonrush in the townland of Meelick and the barony of Leitrim was located in Co. Galway, according to the O.S. 6-inch map sheet no. 137 dated 1847 and those prior to 1930. It is now located in Co. Clare, and marked on the O.S. 6-inch map sheet 29A for that county 13.5cm. from the West margin and 1.8cm. from the North margin; Nat. Grid. Ref. 16643/18686. The graveyard at Clonrush is situated on the shores of Lough Derg on the River Shannon, roughly one mile from the village of Whitegate, about 6 miles Northeast of Scarriff (Illus. 1). Clonrush, or "Cluain Rois" could mean the "meadow of the headland" or the "meadow of the wood" or indeed the "meadow of the burial place", the word rois often

\*1, St. Paul's Road, Galway.



Illus. 1. Map showing site of Clonrush relevant to former and present county boundaries.



Illus. 2. Plan of Clonrush graveyard (dotted rectangle indicates area of Ullus. 2)

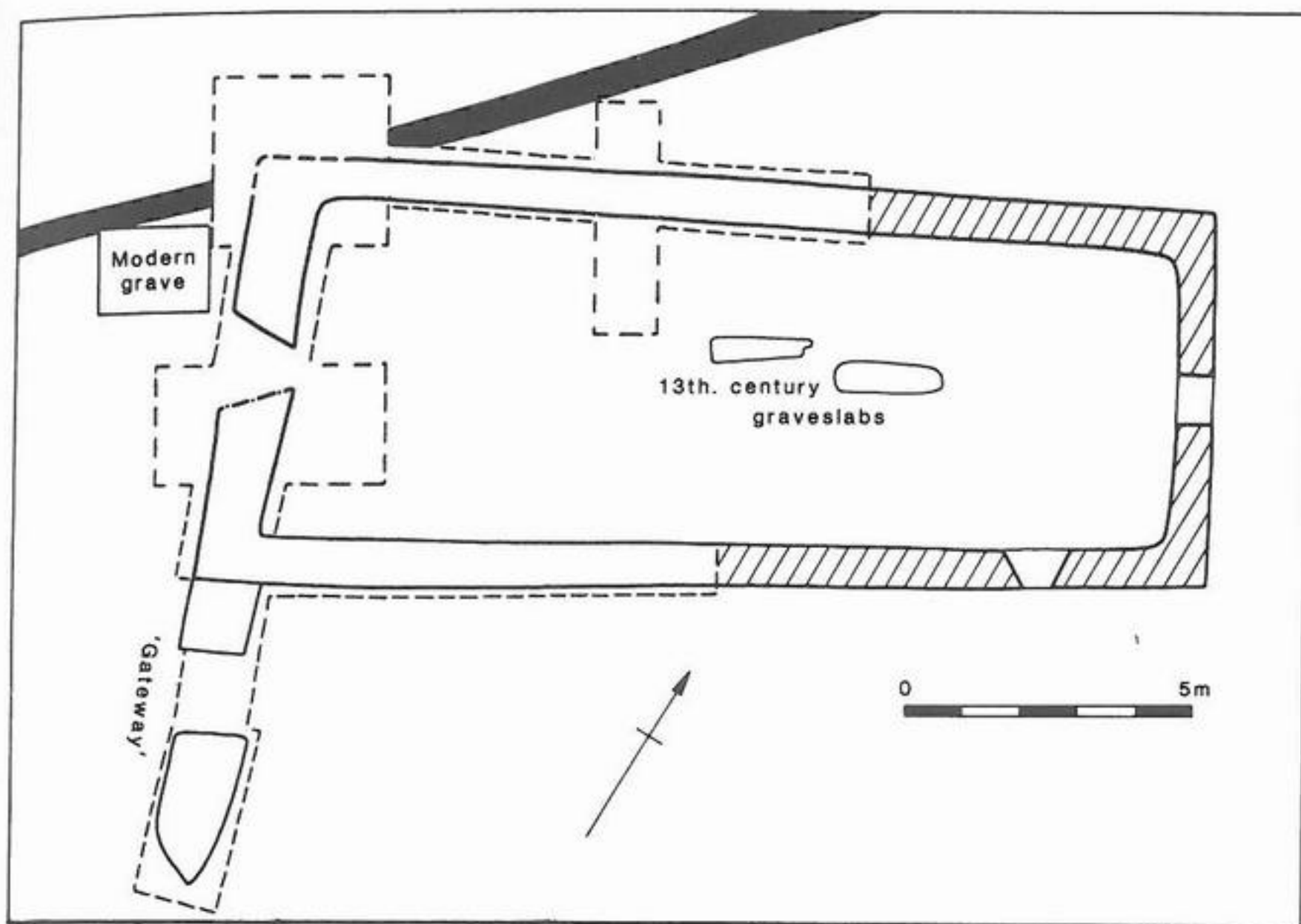
being an indication of an ancient burial place. The graveyard, enclosed by a boundary wall, has at its east end a small oratory dedicated to St. Colman and marked on the O.S. map as "Pollcholman". There is a tradition associated with the oratory that St. Colman, while kneeling on a stone which, subsequently, bore the imprint of his knees, at the east end of the oratory, could hear mass being celebrated in Rome. This oratory has recently been reconstructed and a 16th century doorway been inserted into its western end by The East Clare Heritage Society<sup>1</sup>. The ruins of another structure known as "Tinambraher" (Tigh na mBráthar, the Brothers'/ Friars' House), but locally as "The Priest's House" lie roughly in the centre of the graveyard. The ruins of the old church, with an adjacent arched feature, apparently a gateway, are in the west end of the graveyard, (Illus. 2). The excavation of the west end of the church was undertaken in August 1991 in advance of conservation/restoration work, which was conducted under the supervision of Mr. Peter Geraghty, former Clerk of Works with the OPW. The project was funded by The East Clare Heritage Society, a local heritage committee based in Tuamgraney, Co. Clare. The graveyard was visited in 1838 by T. O'Connor, who recorded "the ruin of an abbey in the west end" of the graveyard, the internal measurements of which were 49ft. long and 18ft. wide. He mentions a window of "pointed style" in the east gable and the remains of another in the south wall. The west gable was, at that time attached to the north and south walls and was "falling fast to destruction". The doorway was indicated in the west wall by a large breach but no trace of it was evident. The apparent 'gateway' was, at that time, built up against the south-west corner of the church.

The church is orientated East-West and is built of red and yellow sandstone, large stones being used in the lower courses of the walls. Only the east gable and sections of the north and south walls of the church remain standing. The only architectural features that survive are an early 13th century round-headed, sandstone window in the east gable which was later widened to facilitate the insertion of a 16th century, limestone, ogee-headed Gothic window. There was another round-headed window in the south wall which is now almost totally destroyed, with only a few fragments remaining in situ. Prior to excavation there was no visible trace of the doorway.

The west wall and parts of the north and south walls of the church were excavated. Three cuttings were opened to reveal sections of the north and west walls and to investigate any interior or exterior features of the church that might have survived (Illus. 3).

<sup>1</sup>See Gerard Madden, *Slieve Aughty*: East Clare Heritage Society, 1(1989), 27-29.



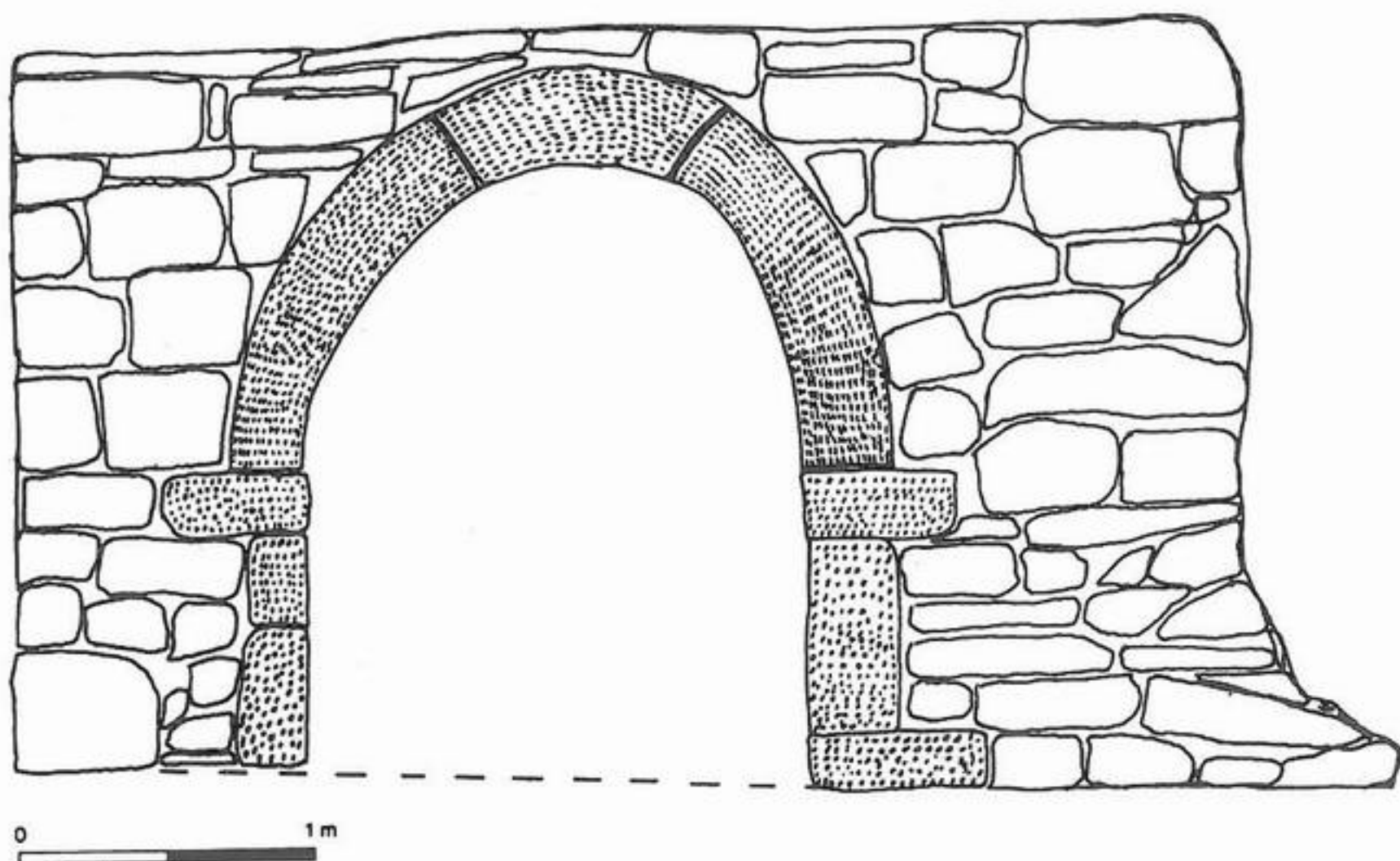


Illus. 3. Clonrush Church showing excavated area and site of medieval graveslabs.

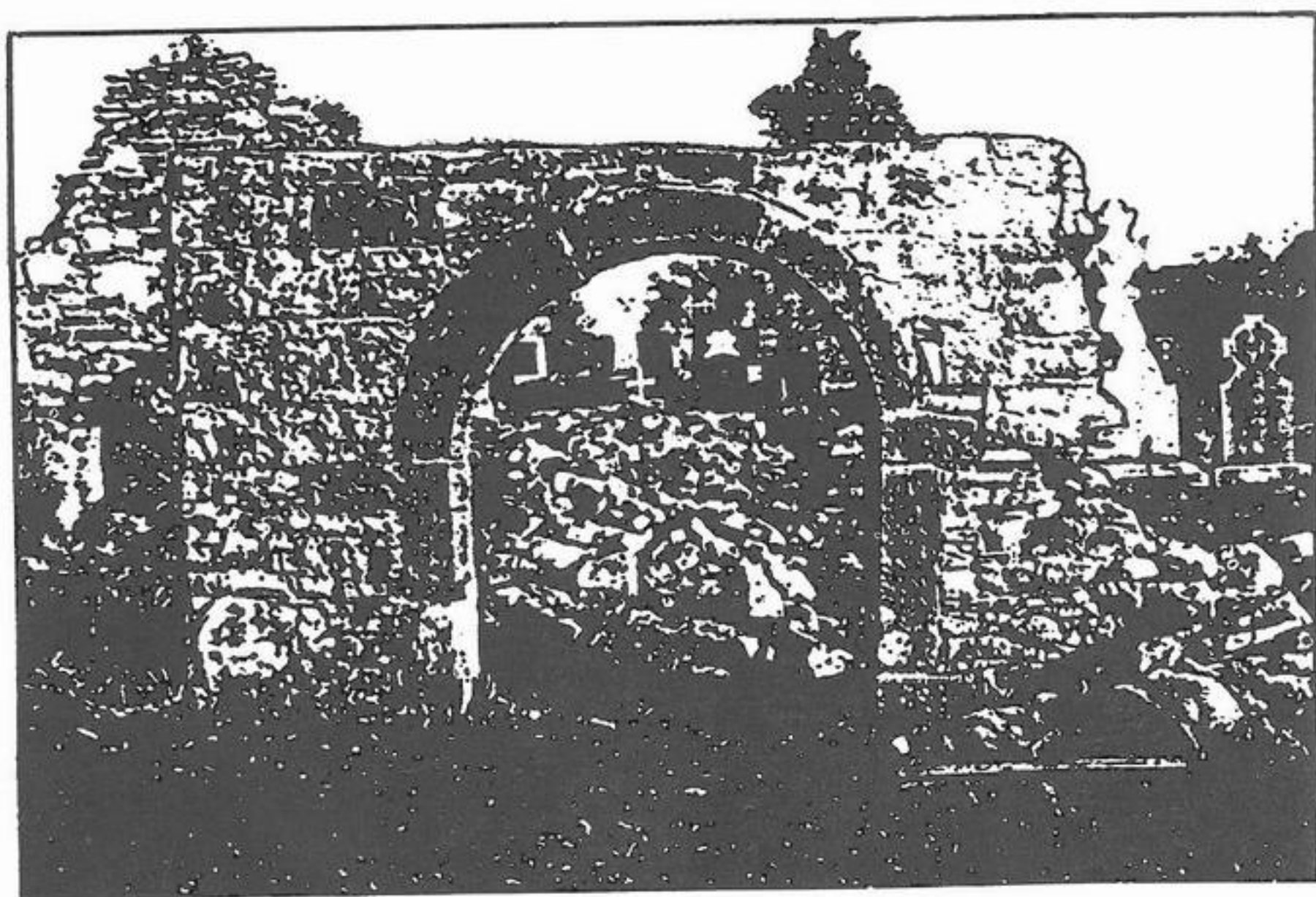
Two courses of the north wall with a plinth were uncovered. Internally the plinth was displaced. The wall was constructed with an inner and outer facing of medium-sized stones, with rubble and mortar between. The shell mortar found in the lower courses probably indicates an early phase of construction. Two rotary quernstone fragments (E579:14 & E579:15) were found built into the wall near the north-west corner of the church. The external length of the north wall was 17m, its internal length 15m, and it averaged 70cm. in thickness. The excavation of the west wall revealed a regular external and internal plinth. Very little of the wall survived. A spud-stone was found on top of it about 2.50m. from the north-west corner of the church. What appears to have been the doorway was indicated by an inward splay of stones just above the threshold level on the north side of the wall. The south side of the doorway did not survive. The area immediately outside the entrance was paved. The external length of the west wall measured 7m., its internal length 5.50m, and it averaged 1m in thickness.

Excavation of the south wall was limited due to modern graves. The western end of the wall was partially excavated to reveal a regular external plinth and the top face of the wall. Only the foundation stones remained in this section of the church. This part of the wall seems to have been robbed at some stage. Some clay pipe fragments and 19th century bottle sherds were found in this area during the excavation. The south wall measured 17.30m externally, 16m internally, and averaged 80cm in thickness.

The areas immediately south and east of the apparent 'gateway' and under its arch were also investigated, but no evidence was found for foundation stones or a threshold stone in these areas.



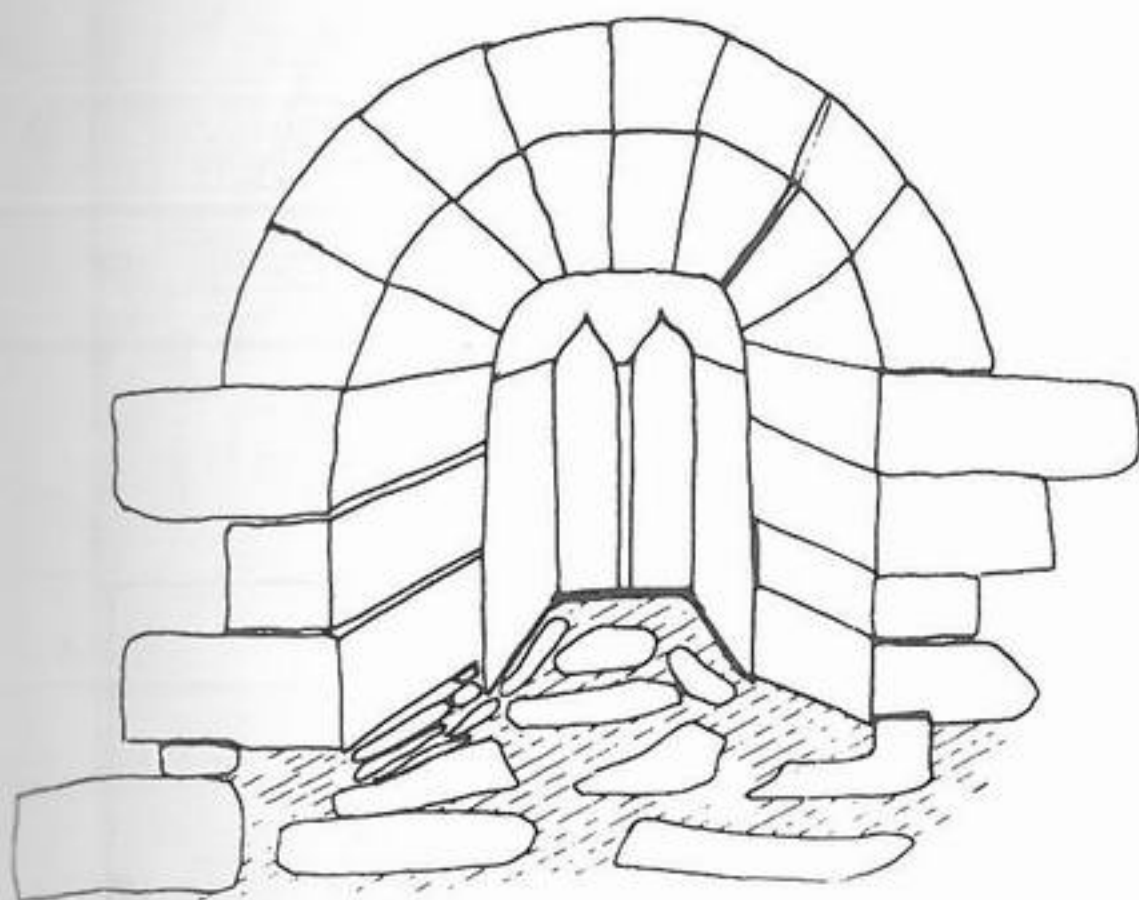
Illus. 4. "The Gateway", indicating pack-dressed stones.



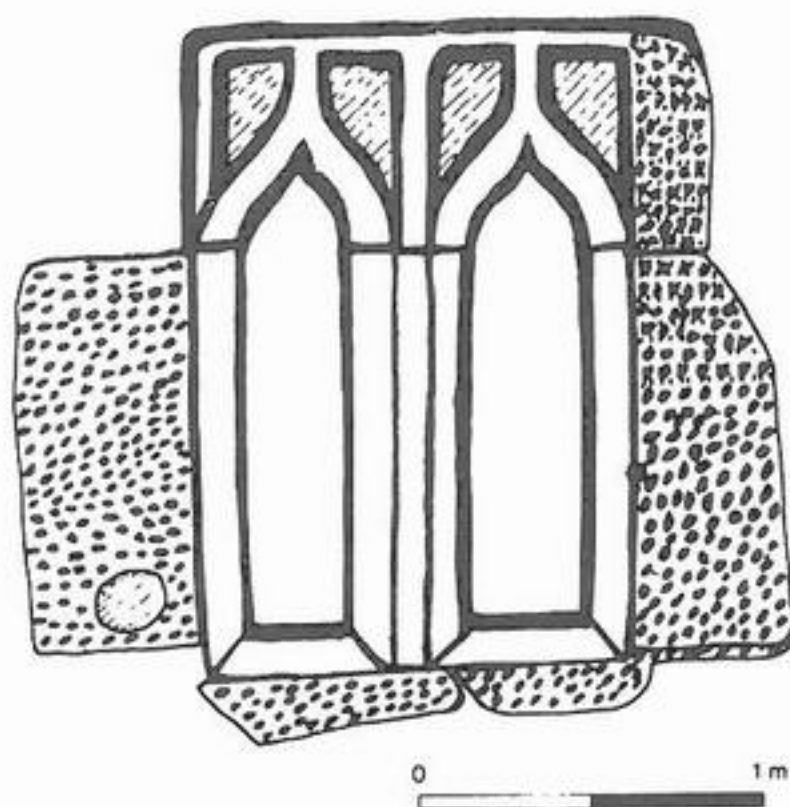
Illus. 5. "The Gateway"; Clonrush Church in background during excavation.  
(Photo: East Clare Heritage Society)



The 'gateway' stands 2.40m high in the west end of the graveyard, built against the south-west corner of the church (Illus. 4 & 5). It measures 4.70m in total length and has an average width of 70cm. It is constructed of sandstone in the same style as the church, and a similar type of mortar was used. It was built slightly off-line with the west wall of the church and seems to have been extended at one stage to the south where there is some collapse. Its rounded arch is of limestone and stands 2.20m high spanning an area 1.70m in length. The tooling on the arch dates to the late 16th/early 17th century. Two holes located near the top of the jambs suggest that the structure originally held a door. It is known locally as the 'funeral arch', stemming from a tradition that all funerals must pass through it before burial, stopping once before and once after going through.



Illus. 6. View of 13th century interior arch of east window.



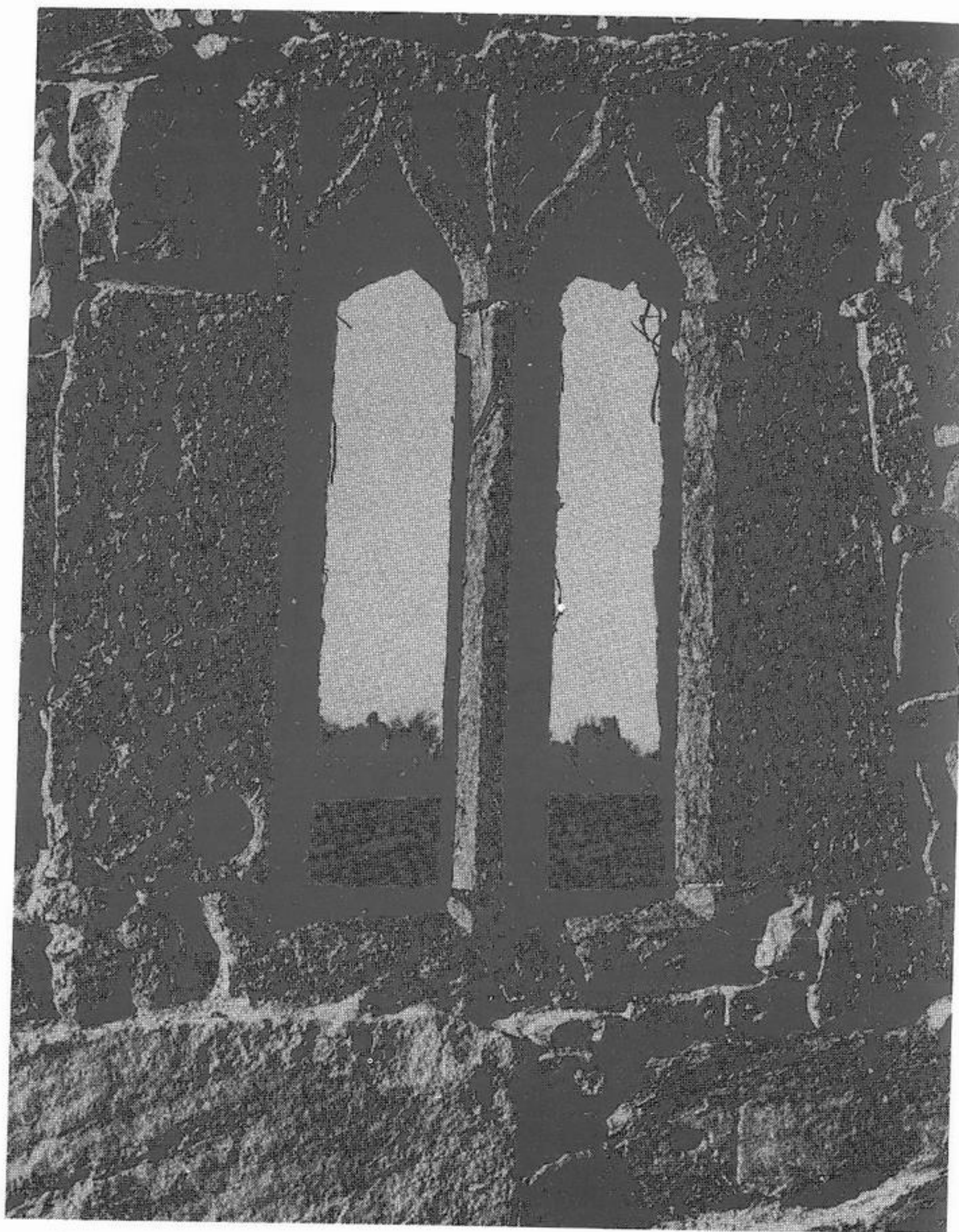
Illus. 7. Two-light 16th century insertion into east window, showing pocked outer face.

The plain round-headed window in the east gable, only visible from the inside of the church, is an original feature of the church and probably dates to the early 13th century. It is constructed of small blocks of sandstone, each measuring 22cm in height. The window area measures 1.54m in height and is 1.20m wide. It splays inwards to a width of 70cm where it had a two-light insertion in the 16th century. Only one stone of the sill feature remains in situ. (Illus. 6).

Another round-headed type window was built into the south wall 1.50m from the east gable, but is now in a delapidated state with only a few of the original stones in situ. Its original height can be approximated at roughly 1.50m and its width at 80cm.

The two-light Gothic insertion in the window in the east gable can be dated to about the 16th century. It has a double ogee-headed top with hood-moulding and a sill feature. It is 1.69m in height and has a maximum width of 76cm. There is a circular depression, 9cm in diameter, in the south jambstone, the function of which is unknown. The sides and the window sill are heavily pocked. (Illus. 7 & 8)



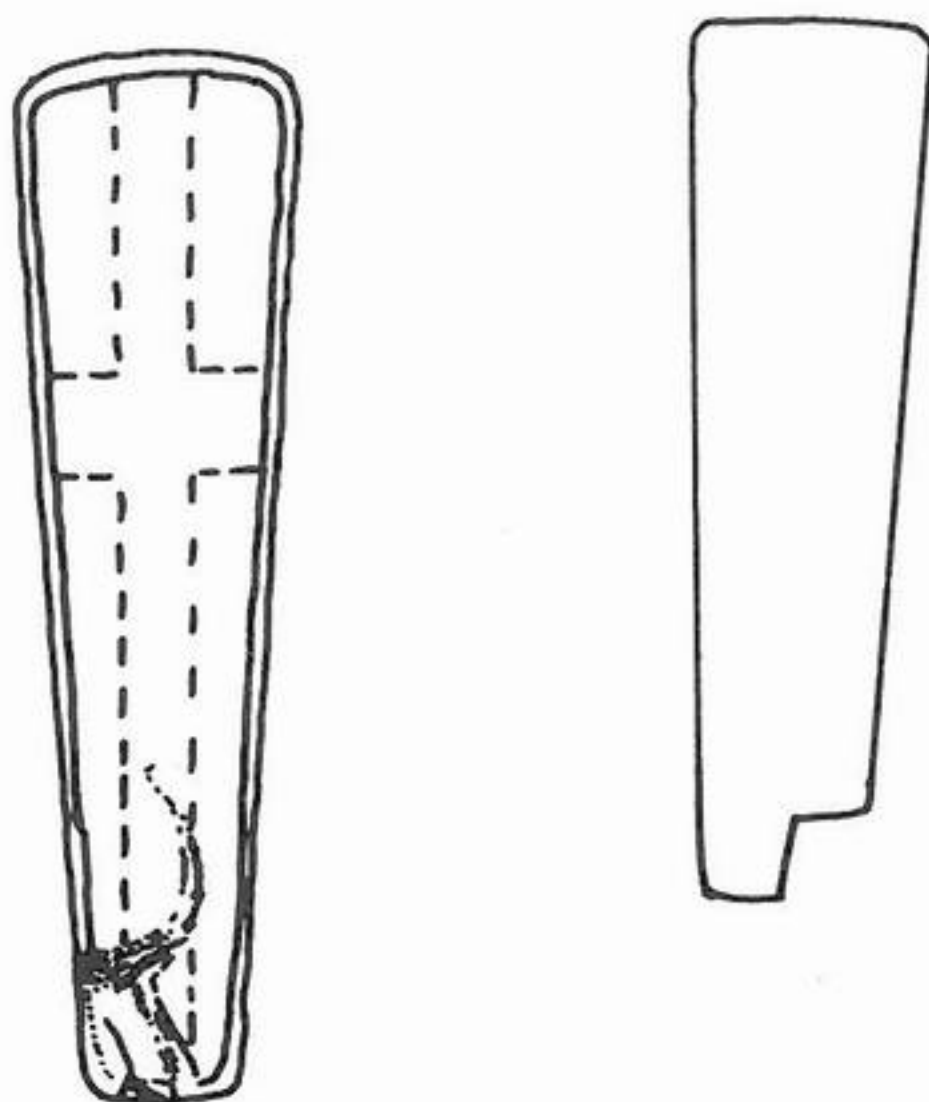


Illus. 8. External view of 16th century east window.

*(Photo: East Clare Heritage Society)*

There is very little evidence to suggest the form of the doorway in the west gable. Its width can be approximated to 1.60m externally narrowing to 1.10m internally. Architectural fragments of a late 15th or 16th century doorway found in the graveyard would have spanned an area roughly 1.60m wide. It is possible, therefore, that this doorway was inserted in the west gable, perhaps at the same time as the Gothic replacement in the east gable.

Most of the gravestones in the cemetery are modern in date, with two possible exceptions. Two recumbent slabs situated in close proximity to each other in the church interior appear to be early in date and possibly contemporary with the foundation of the church in the 13th century (Illus. 9). The first slab is located 4.20m from the east gable and 2.20m from the north wall of the church. It is trapezoidal in shape with a slightly rounded head. The top of the slab measures 56cm in width and tapers to 30cm in width at its base. It is 1.90m in length and 10cm thick. An incised line borders the slab and traces of a double-lined plain incised cross are also visible.



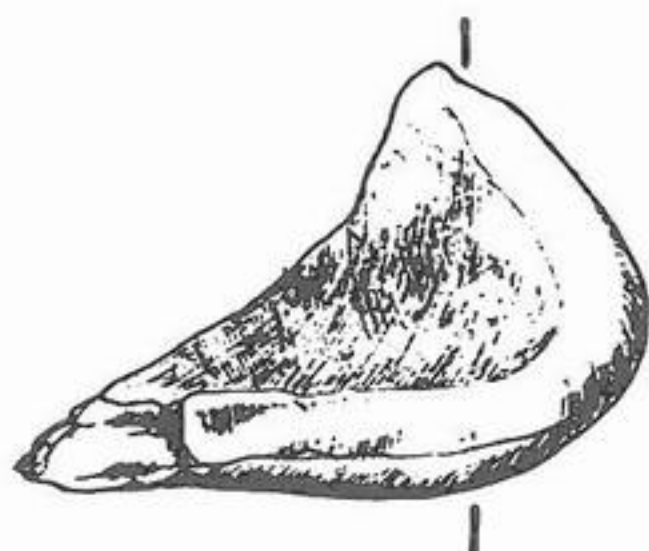
Illus. 9. Two early medieval (13th century ?) graveslabs.

The other slab is slightly smaller and is situated 6.55m from the east gable and 2m from the north wall of the church. It is trapezoidal in shape and has a tenon-like feature at one corner of its base. The top of the slab measures 44cm. in width and tapers to a width of 31cm. The 'tenon' measures 16cm by 13cm. The total length of the slab, including the 'tenon', is 1.70m and it is 10cm thick. It is plain and uninscribed. The presence of a tenon, if acceptable as such, implies that the slab was set into a base at some stage which is *not* a common feature of 13th century graveslabs.

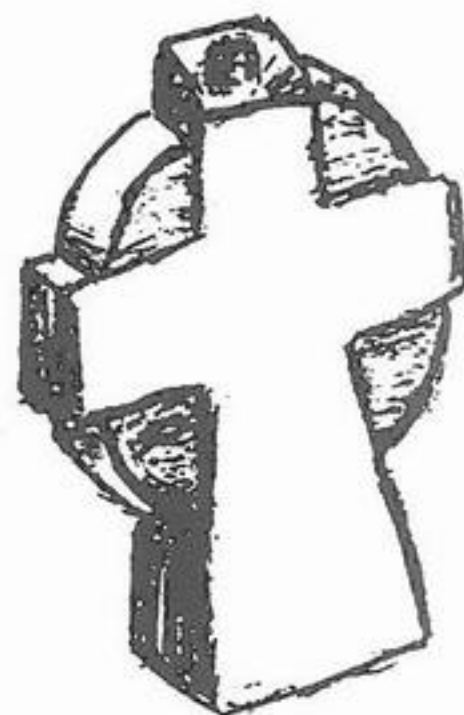
During clearance work in the graveyard some objects of interest were found. These include a broken saddle quern and a solid-ringed stone cross.

The saddle quern (Illus. 10), which was broken roughly in half, was found on top of the west wall near the south-west corner of the church. It has a shallow depression and measures 70cm in length and 50cm in width; it averages 20cm in thickness at its broken edge.





Illus. 10. Broken saddle quern.



Illus. 11. Small Stone Cross

The solid-ringed cross (Illus.11) was found among the loose stones in the south window of the church. It was carved in sandstone and measures 34cm in length and 29cm in width. The diameter of the ring measures 29cm at its greatest point. The whole cross has an average thickness of 10cm. The form of the cross is plain with the arms splaying slightly towards the centre. The cross was carved in relief and stood 1cm above the ring. The top and bottom of the cross were partly broken. It may perhaps have originally served as a finial cross on the church roof in the 16th century or a little later.

The excavation itself yielded very little material of archeological significance. Fragments of two rotary querns, as mentioned above, were found in the north wall, and the upper stones of two other rotary querns were found in 1985 during gravedigging behind the north-west corner of the church. Other finds include clay pipe fragments, 19th century bottle sherds, and a small quantity of iron slag.

The two quernstones that were found in 1985 are now in private possession. One was a complete upper stone, 40cm in diameter, of Disc C type<sup>2</sup>. It had a plain central perforation measuring 5cm in diameter and a handle-hole measuring 3cm in diameter. The upper surface of the stone was uneven. The other stone was also an upper stone, of Disc B type<sup>3</sup>. It measured 35cm in diameter, and was broken in two and incomplete. It was well cut and had a lipped central perforation, 5cm in diameter. The stone was decorated with two splaying panels in relief, each with a small circular depression near the edge of the stone. Both stones appear to be late medieval in date.

The larger of the two quernstone fragments found during the excavation had a diameter of 37cm and retained a plain central perforation, 4cm in diameter. The stone had a rough uneven surface and is now missing its handle-hole. Only an edge portion of the other stone remains. It is well rounded and has a smooth texture. Its original diameter can be estimated at 38cm.

Eight clay pipe fragments were found. Nos. E579: 1-7 are stem fragments; E579:8 is a bowl fragment. The former range in length from 2.4cm (E579:5) to 4cm (E579:2) - E579:6 has a thickness of 1.2cm compared to an average thickness of 6mm for the other examples. All the pipe fragments are plain and appear to be 19th century in date.

<sup>2</sup>As classified by Séamus Caulfield in *J. Kerry Archaeo. Hist. Soc.*, 2 (1969) 61-62 and Fig. 1.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*



## *Comments*

The masonry and the round-headed windows in the church suggest a date for its foundation in the early 13th century. At this time the church had a simple rectangular plan with a window in the east and in the south wall and the doorway in the west. The tooling on the 'gateway' is very similar to that on the 16th century ogee-headed window so a contemporary date may be assumed for it. The history of the church is very obscure after this period. The structure recorded on the O.S. map as 'Tinabraher' suggests a friar's presence on the site at some stage but no supporting evidence for this survives.

The church, therefore, can probably be viewed as a small 13th century rectangular structure with a north doorway, which was embellished in the late 15th century or, more likely, the 16th century by the insertion of a Gothic arched doorway in the west gable and a two-ope window in the east gable, and also by the erection of the 'gateway'. It was probably built originally as a parish church as it was in the 13th century that the parish system really began in Ireland.

The quernstones seem to have been used throughout the history of the site for the grinding of corn; it is possible that the saddle-quern may have been used for the grinding of iron as some traces of iron are apparent on its surface and some iron slag was found on the site<sup>4</sup>. It is not apparent when the church fell into disuse, but by the early 19th century it was in a bad state of disrepair. The entrance to the graveyard was relocated in the north-east sometime in the 18th century, which may indicate the church decline. The graveyard, however continues in use to the present day and is now entered from the south-east.

Work has been undertaken on the church by the East Clare Heritage Society to stabilise the existing walls and to conserve those uncovered by excavation. The project aims to restore the church, as much as possible to its original form.

## **Acknowledgments**

Thanks are due to the following for their help and advice throughout the excavation: Mr. Peter Geraghty, former Clerk of Works in the O.P.W.; Mr. Robert Chapple and Miss Paula King who kindly assisted me on the site; Professor Etienne Rynne and Dr. Thomas Fanning, Dept. of Archaeology, University College Galway, for encouragement and advice; the Hon. Editor for assistance in preparing this report, and, finally, to the East Clare Heritage Society which funded the project.

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<sup>4</sup>I am grateful to Anne Connolly, B.A., who is at present researching Irish Saddle Querns for a Master's thesis in University College, Galway, for supporting this suggestion.