

Archaeological Trial Excavations at Bunratty, Co. Clare.

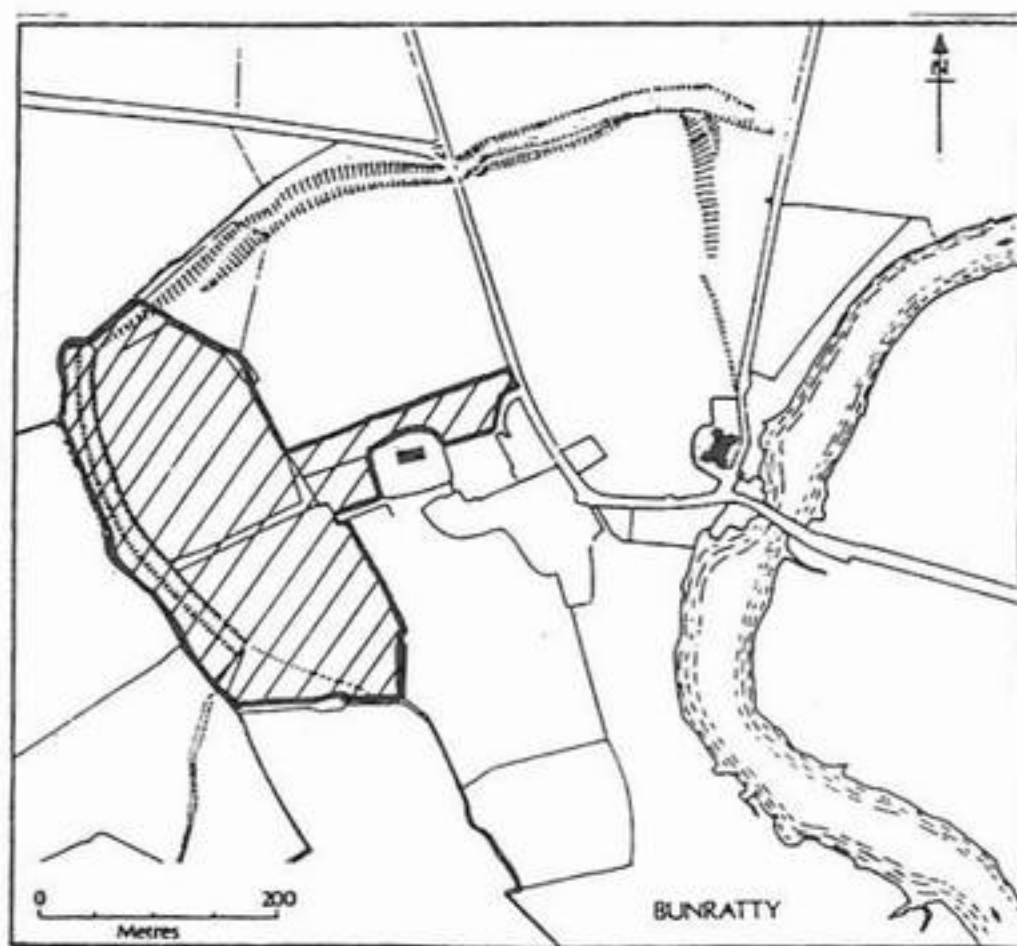
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Excavations were conducted on two areas within the medieval borough of Bunratty. Archaeological deposits of thirteenth and fourteenth century date were located near the old parish church (Area 1), where the features uncovered included pits, a hearth and two possible field boundaries. Area 2, the ridge to the west of the old church, was found to be archaeologically sterile. The ditch enclosing the ridge on the north and west, thought to be part of the medieval defences, is an enclosure of seventeenth century date.

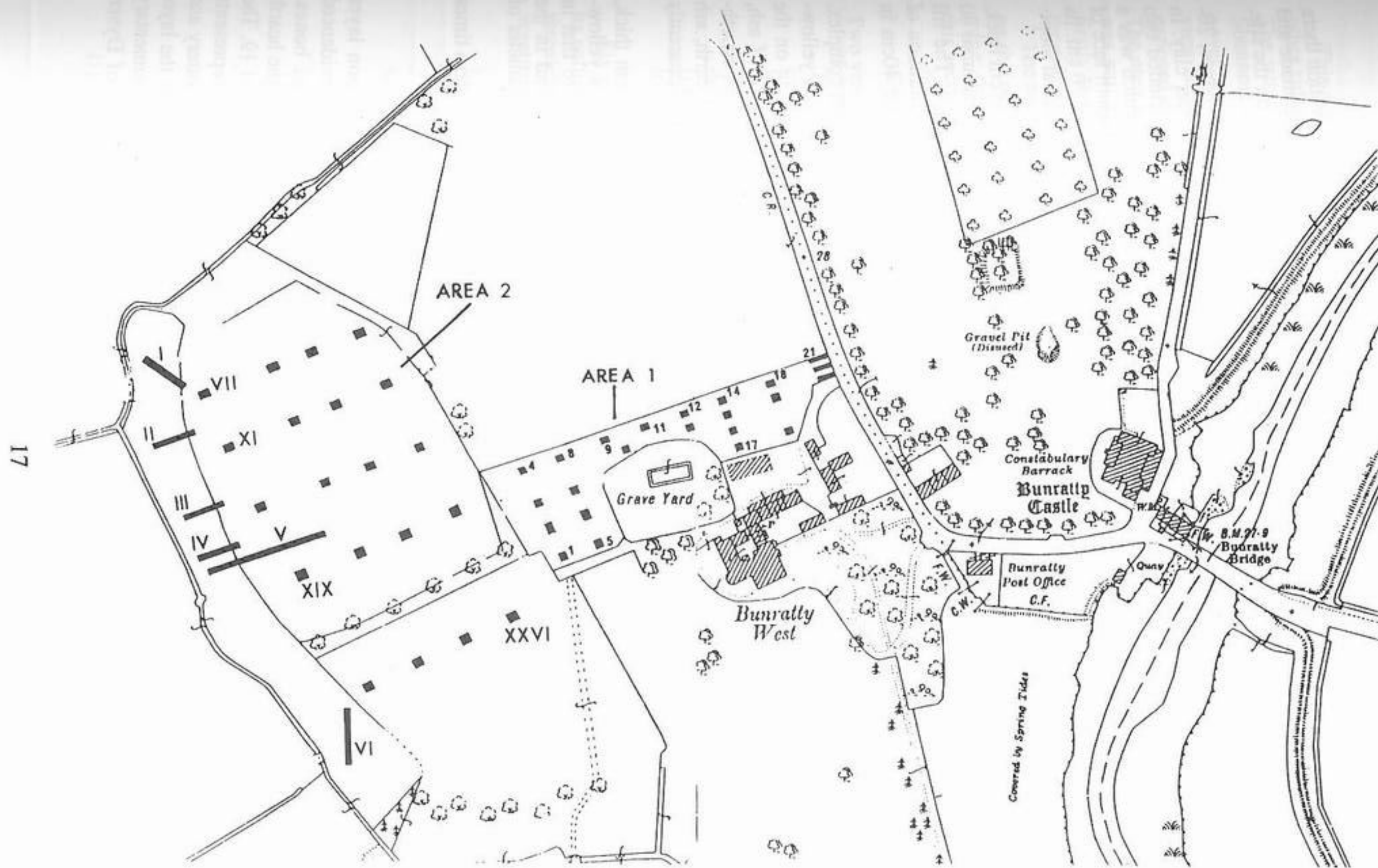
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The excavations were conducted in July 1990 in advance of seeking planning permission for the proposed development of a residential and commercial complex on the west side of the Limerick-Ennis road at Bunratty (Illus.1). The site consisted of two blocks of land. The first, Area 1, was a C-shaped area stretching from the Limerick-Ennis Road around the old Parish Church; the second, Area 2, was an oblong field of about 13.5 acres which included a prominent natural ridge to the west of the old Parish Church (Illus.2). The archaeological relevance of the site rested in the fact that it lay within the suggested area of the medieval borough of Bunratty (Westropp 1915, pp. 314-315; Bradley 1988). The purpose of the trial excavations was to determine what, if any, archaeological deposits survived within the two areas.

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Illus. 1. Location map of the excavation site.



Illus. 2. Map showing areas excavated near Bunratty Castle.

Area 1

This comprised about two acres of open ground used for grazing. Prior to excavation there was no trace of archaeological features above ground. Twenty-three cuttings were made and these were laid out so as to obtain a cross-section of the sub-surface stratigraphy on the site. The position of these cuttings is shown on Illus. 2.

The stratigraphy in Cuttings 1-15 revealed a layer of brown clay with animal bones, 20-30cm thick, lying immediately below the sod and directly above the natural boulder clay. In Cuttings 1-8 the soil was more humic than elsewhere. Finds from the layer included two 13th/14th century green-glazed, pottery sherds of local manufacture, one of which was a strap-handle. These were found in Cuttings 13 and 15. A pit was present in the south face of Cutting 12. It was 1.5 m wide at the mouth and penetrated the subsoil to a depth of 20 cm. Its eastern side had been cut vertically into the subsoil but the western side had a gradual slope. The fill consisted of grey-brown earth with animal bones.

In Cuttings 16-18 and 20 the layer of brown clay with animal bones was over 55cm thick. In the south-east corner of Cutting 16 a pit was uncovered. The exposed portion measured 80 by 50cm at the mouth and it penetrated the subsoil to a depth of at least 50cm. The fill consisted of a grey-brown earth with animal bone, charcoal and shells. A concentration of stones in the east face of Cutting 16 probably formed part of a wall; it averaged 40cm in height.

The stratigraphy in Cutting 19, which measured 4 by 1m, was found to be more complex. Below the sod was a layer of grey-brown earth, 25cm thick, underneath which was a yellow-grey clay with animal bones also averaging 25cm in thickness. At the base, sitting on the original ground surface, was a hearth which consisted of a sub-rectangular spread of ash, charcoal and burnt earth, together with two stones which may have functioned as hearth-stones; it measured 50 by 50cm. Associated with the hearth was a spread of burnt earth, ash and charcoal, which extended right across the cutting. A number of large stones, apparently forming part of a wall 60cm high, was present at the east end of the cutting.

Cutting 21 measured 6 by 1m. Below the sod was a layer of brown earth, 15cm thick, underneath which was a layer of grey-brown earth, 10cm thick. Below this was a yellow-brown earth, varying in thickness from 10 to 20cm and of similar consistency to that in Cutting 19. Two sherds of local thirteenth-fourteenth century pottery were found in the yellow-brown earth. The yellow-brown earth layer sealed a pit with an exposed diameter of 2m and a depth of 60cm, the fill of which consisted of dark brown earth.

The stratigraphy of Cuttings 22 and 23 was found to have been disturbed in modern times and sherds of black ware were recovered in the lowest layer.

Comment

The trial excavations found clear evidence for the presence of an occupation layer extending right across Area 1. This is the layer of grey-brown charcoal flecked soil evidenced in Cuttings 9-23 and continued in Cuttings 1-8 as a brown clay with animal bones. Associated with this layer were a number of features indicating in situ occupation: the hearth in Cutting 19; pits in Cutting 12, 16, 19 and 23; and possible walls in Cuttings 16 and 19. The recovery of four sherds of 13th/14th century pottery from this layer indicates that it represents the archaeological remains of the medieval borough of Bunratty. The absence of pottery and other objects of later date together with the presence of sod immediately above the layer suggests that the settlement was deserted in the Middle Ages. This supports the documentary evidence which indicates that Bunratty was abandoned shortly after the Battle of Dysert O'Dea in 1318 (Bradley 1988, p.25)

Area 2

This was delimited on the north and west by marshy ground which is continued on the other sides by a drain. Westropp has suggested that this land was flooded in the Middle Ages. The summit of the ridge affords commanding views to the south and west along the River Shannon. On the east the battlements of Bunratty Castle project above the surrounding tree cover while in the far distance the view is bounded by the Cratloe Hills. On the north the view is restricted by a ridge of hills which rise directly above Bunratty. The site is somewhat exposed and this fact suggests that it would not have been an ideal location for a settlement. The area was bounded to the north and west by a bank and ditch which Westropp suggested was part of the defences of the medieval borough. The purpose of excavation was twofold, firstly to determine the nature and date of the enclosing bank and ditch, and secondly to test the ridge for evidence of medieval occupation.

The bank and ditch still survives on the northern side of the field but the only surface trace on the west side was a band, about 12 feet across, of taller, greener, grass at the foot of the ridge; this indicated the position of the ditch in that area. Westropp (1915, p.315) described this section of the ditch as:

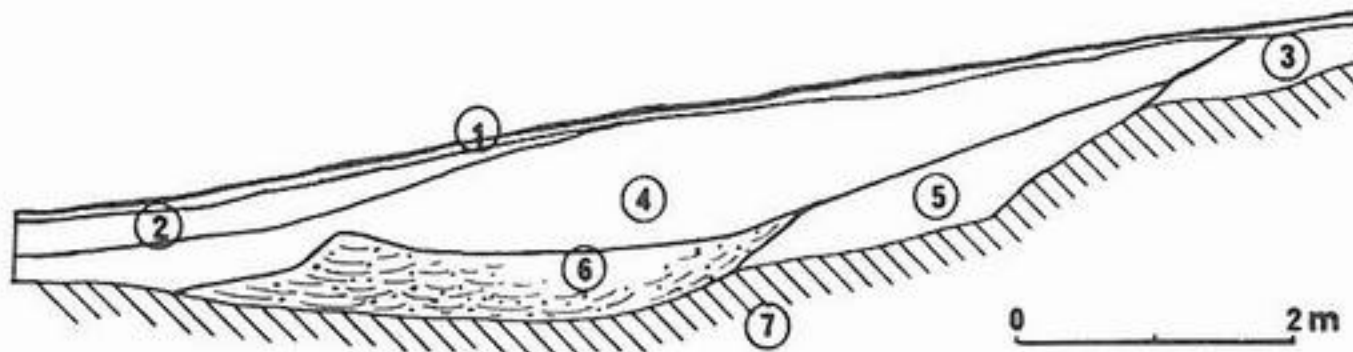
from 20ft. to 30ft. wide, and 11 ft. below the revetted bank along the face of the rising ground; the bank is still from 6ft. to 8ft. high all around.

Two years later Westropp (1917, pp. 14-15) described it as follows:

The fosse is filled in for much of the north and west segments, but it is marked by an even band of iris and rushes ... To the south-west we find a great fosse 2,000 feet long and well preserved for 900 feet. It is from 20 to 30 feet wide, 9 to 11 feet below the revetted bank, with a rampart 5 to 8 feet high. Where the ditch ends was evidently a deep marsh round to the river. It is cut into the foot of the natural slope of the Island [*i.e.* the Bunratty ridge] and leaves a band like an outer bank all round feet [*sic*] 36 feet to 48 feet wide.

Six cuttings were dug across the line of the ditch on the western side in order to determine its nature and extent. No work was carried out on the line of the northern ditch as this was not threatened by the proposed development. Cuttings I-V, ranged along the western side of Westropp's "great fosse", revealed a similar stratigraphy, typified in Cutting IV (Illus. 3):

- | | |
|------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1. Sod | 5. Dark grey earth with twigs |
| 2. Brown soil | 6. Closely packed roots and branches |
| 3. Yellow sandy soil | 7. Natural blue-grey marl |
| 4. Redeposited boulder clay. | |



Illus. 3. Cutting IV: section drawing of the north face. The layers are as follows:
(1) Sod; (2) Brown soil; (3) Yellow sandy soil; (4) Redeposited boulder clay; (5) Dark grey clay with twigs;
(6) Closely packed roots and branches; (7) Natural blue-grey marl.

The ditch was found to be a shallow U-shaped scoop averaging 8m in width and 1.5m in depth. It had been cut through the natural yellow sandy soil (layer 3) into a blue-grey marl (layer 7) that had formed naturally at the base of the slope. The fill of the ditch consisted of a dark grey silty soil with twigs (layer 5) on the upper part of the slope and solidly packed twigs and branches (layer 6) at the base of the ditch. Above was a layer of redeposited boulder clay through which twigs and sods were mixed (layer 4). This redeposited layer had been pushed downslope and spread over the area of the ditch. It varied in thickness from 50 to 100cm. The presence of fresh sods within this layer indicated that it had been pushed into this position in recent times. Its extent and consistency suggest that this material is to be identified as bulldozed remains of the bank seen by Westropp in 1914.

A bronze half-penny coin of James II (1685-89) was found embedded in the redeposited boulder clay. Its presence indicates one of two things. Either the bank was constructed c. 1690 and the coin was lost in the process of building it, or else the bank was in existence by c. 1690 when the coin was dropped on top of it. A long cutting (VI) was cut along the south-western side the ditch line to check if the ditch had existed here but no trace was found.

Twenty 3m by 1m test pits were dug across the ridge to check for traces of medieval occupation. With the exception of a handful of brick fragments in the sod no archaeological features or objects were recovered in these cuttings. The stratigraphy was uniform across the site, and along the ridge summit it consisted of:

Sod	0-15cm
Brown soil	15-30cm
Boulder clay	30-45cm
Limestone bedrock	45+cm

Off the ridge the layer of brown soil was thicker (up to 60cm) but the stratigraphy remained the same.

Comment

The absence of an archaeological occupation layer and of any artifacts of medieval date suggests that the ridge did not form any part of the Anglo-Norman borough of Bunratty. The coin of James II indicates that the bank and ditch feature is as old or older than c. 1690 but the absence of any artifacts in the fill makes it highly unlikely that this formed part of the defences of the medieval borough. The question then arises as to whether this feature could have formed part of the defences constructed around Bunratty during the sieges of 1642 and 1646 (MacNamara 1915, pp. 297-8; Kerrigan 1980-81, p. 11). The absence of any objects indicative of military activity makes this impossible to prove. Nonetheless the balance of probability must favour interpreting this as part of the seventeenth century defences.

The following sequence of events for Area 2 can therefore be proposed:

1. In 1642-46 the ridge was enclosed by a bank with an external ditch.
2. c. 1690 a half-penny coin was dropped on the bank.
3. Trees were planted along the bank (as shown in the O.S. first edition maps).
4. The ditch began to silt up as a result of the deposition of twigs, branches and leaves.
5. Westropp visited the site in 1914 and saw the silted up fosse (visible only as a band of iris and rushes) as well as the eroded bank. Knowing of the documentary references to the defences of medieval Bunratty he concluded that these earthworks were the remains of these defences.
6. c. 1960-70 the remains of the bank was bulldozed into the fosse and a continuous hillslope was formed.

Acknowledgements

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