Excavations at St. Saviour’s Dominican Priory, Limerick, Part I

ELIZABETH SHEE TWOHIG*

During the early 1970s the City Engineer’s Department of Limerick Corporation drew up plans for the construction of a northern ring road around the city. It was proposed to build the road north-eastwards from Thomond Bridge, along Castle Street, across Dominick Street, through the grounds of the Mercy Convent and then across the line of the medieval town wall where it would turn south to rejoin the line of Island Road (Illus.1). In crossing the Mercy Convent grounds it was scheduled to pass alongside the surviving north wall of the 13th century Dominican church of St Saviour and through the presumed area of the claustral buildings. Because of this threat to the archaeological remains, the writer undertook a small scale excavation, at the instigation of Professor M.J. O’Kelly, Head of the Department of Archaeology at University College, Cork.

The excavations were funded by the Office of Public Works on the recommendation of the National Committee for Archaeology and were conducted from 10 June to 15 August 1975. During this period only limited excavation was practicable, mainly to avoid disruption of the conventual gardening arrangements and it was expected that larger scale excavations would be carried out should the road works proceed. In the event, the proposed road was not constructed and no further archaeological work was carried out on the site until 1994 when Ms Josephine Moran carried out excavations in advance of the erection of buildings by the Mercy Community.

The report is being presented in two parts: Part I here deals with the surviving remains, history of the site and the excavation. Part II in the next issue will contain the finds section and specialist reports.

THE SITE

The Dominican foundation of St Saviour is dated to 1227 (see below, history). The conventual buildings of the Dominicans were built on the north eastern part of the King’s Island, which formed the English part of medieval Limerick. The site is bounded on the east by the well preserved remains of the medieval town wall. Leask (1941) gave a very complete description of the wall, stating that in this section a length of 170 feet (52m) survived. Two low recesses are visible on the outer face of the wall, spanned by segmental pointed arches (ibid. fig. p. 99). As Leask suggests, “these may mark the position of a small gate, a sally port or postern”. An opening at this location would have given convenient access to the Dominican lands outside the walls, and also to their fish weir. Leask suggested that the sandstone jamb and heads of three small windows at the level of the garden may have been re-used from the church.

There is some debate as to whether the convent was contained within the original circuit of the town walls (Thomas 1992, 150). The debate arises from the irregular line of the wall on the east side of the English town, specifically where its south-eastern section runs northwards.

*Department of Archaeology University College, Cork.
along the highest part of the island, then turns at a right angle due east and shortly after turns northwards at another right angle. From here the wall runs northwards, enclosing the medieval Augustinian and Dominican religious houses within the confines of the town. Thomas is undecided whether their enclosure is an original feature, or if they were included in the town only after the 1237 murage grant, or, indeed, if any of the Englishtown walls were built before 1237. O’Rahilly (1988) also suggests a two phase walling of the Englishtown. Hill’s (1991, 30) suggestion that the religious houses were only included within the walls after the reformation can hardly be correct since the friary was described as forming part of the fortifications in the late 14th century (see below). The Civil Survey of 1654 records an inner town wall (O’Rahilly 1995, 167) and this is also shown on Goubet’s map of c. 1691 (NLI MS 2742, reprinted in Loeber, 1977, Pl. 23).

The surviving remains (Illus. 2 & 3)

The above ground remains of the Dominican foundation consist only of the north wall of the church, together with a collection of carved stones. The wall is at least 46.5m long (as measured on the inner face). The maximum surviving height is 11m, measured from the top of the wall in the chancel area down to the threshold of one of the doors as revealed during excavation. The nave wall is now 2–3m lower on average than that of the chancel. There is a short return of the east wall, terminating in a window embrasure (Illus. 2c). The surviving wall is datable to the 13th century on the basis of the windows in the nave (Illus. 4) and in the east wall. There are no original windows in the chancel, suggesting that there may have been clausal buildings against the outside of the wall even in the original design. A decorative sandstone string course runs horizontally on the outside wall face at 1–1.40m below the roof line in the chancel area (Illus. 3c).
Illus. 2. Elevations of inner face of extant church wall: a, western end; b, centre section; c, eastern end (with shrine).
Illus. 3. Elevations of outer face of extant church wall: a, eastern end; b, centre section; c, western end.
For key see Illus. 2.
In the north wall, four windows opened onto the nave (Illus. 4). Their sills are level with each other (at c. 4.80m above old ground level), which suggests that they were designed to overlook a cloister. The window surrounds are of sandstone; three are single-light and one is twin-light with a quatrefoil ope. On the inside of the wall the upper window surrounds have been replaced in limestone (Illus. 2b). The surrounds of the window embrasure in the east wall are also of sandstone.

Illus. 4. Outer face of extant church wall, showing nave windows and doorway no. 3.

The indications for an early cloister are also supported by the presence of a horizontal row of sandstone blocks 0.50m below the sills of the nave windows (Illus. 3b); these may have been corbels which were later cut off level with the wall face and replaced with limestone corbels slightly lower down. The roof line of the cloister is immediately below the window sills and exhibits the broken-off slates of the cloister roof (Illus. 3b and 5).

There was an early doorway at the eastern end of the cloister (Illus. 3b); its upper part was completely rebuilt but excavation showed that the lowest jamb stone on each side was of sandstone. The doorway was 1.50m wide, and the limestone threshold stone was also recorded (Illus. 6).

Fifteenth-century alterations
1. Cloister and claustral ranges: The cloister was probably rebuilt, with the roof line as before, but now supported by a wall plate resting on a row of lipped limestone corbels (Illus. 5). The foundations of the cloister walks and ranges have been recovered through excavations, and the combined data from the 1974 and 1994 seasons (Illus. 7) show that the cloister garth measured c. 11.5–12m east-west by c.14.50m north-south. The cloister walk was c. 2m wide. Overall the cloister area measured c. 18m east-west x 21m north-south. Several limestone pillars and capitals, now mostly incorporated into a modern shrine, almost certainly come from the cloister arcade. Some of the shafts have a twisted fluting and at least one of the pillars is of dumb-bell form with a thin web connecting the shafts (Illus. 8a).

The elevations (Illus. 3a and b) show traces of where the eastern range joined the church wall, above where the wall foundation was located during excavation, just east of the early door noted above. The dressed limestone flashings of the gabled roof of the eastern range cut
through the 13th century string course. At the western end of the church two stones survive of a similar flashing for the western range (Illus. 3c).
A number of doorways in the church wall can best be understood in relation to the former buildings which stood on the outside of the wall (Illus. 7). From the west these are:
1. The arch of the door from the church to the western claustral range (Illus. 3c)
2. The door into the western cloister walk, now rebuilt and widened (Illus. 3c)
3. The door into the eastern cloister walk, already noted as probably of 13th century date (Illus. 3b).
4. The door from the eastern claustral range to the church (Illus. 3a). It is 1.55m wide and its limestone surrounds suggest a 15th century date. Its lowest courses were revealed during excavation and the threshold is 1m lower than that of door no. 3 immediately to the west.

An opening (height 1.80m) within the gable of the eastern range may have afforded a view into the church. It is at a height of 5.80m above the threshold of door no. 4 (Illus. 3a).
2. Roof: The roofing at the eastern end of the church was altered by the probable creation of a wall-walk with an outer parapet wall. A line of drip stones was inserted above the 13th century decorative string course (Illus. 3a). At the top of the wall, in the easternmost end of the nave are five further drip stones of the same form (Illus. 3b).
3. Tower: There is documentary and cartographic evidence (see below) for the existence of a tower/"steeple" on the church which would have almost certainly been positioned at the junction of the nave and chancel. No actual remains of the tower survive above ground but the wall has been much rebuilt in this area and on the inner face of the wall a section has been cruelly infilled with red brick, perhaps where the tower was originally set against the wall (Illus. 2c).
Later alterations
The eastern end of the outside of the wall shows three doorways, several small windows and rooflines (Illus. 3a), indicating multi-period alterations and modifications, none of which can be precisely dated. The insertion of a tall lancet window with limestone surrounds removed the lower part of the flashings of the east range, above the cloister (Illus. 3b): the details of this window as seen on the inside of the church suggest it is of quite late date (Illus. 2b).

Miscellaneous carved stones
A large number of carved stones are collected together against the inside of the church wall, near its eastern end. As noted above, several limestone pillars (e.g. Illus. 8a), bases and capitals almost certainly come from the 15th century cloister arcade and most of these are built into the shrine which was erected c. 1868–70 according to Moloney (1938, 23–4), who says that “the Convent Annals show they were handed over by Mr Cussen who sold the garden beyond the church wall to the convent in 1877”. Some pieces of elaborate foliate carvings probably come from a tomb or sedilia; an example of a large pinnacle type piece is illustrated (Illus. 8b). Similar carvings are known elsewhere in the city and in the Shannon area generally (Leask 1960, 170–3).

Begley (1906, 352) claimed that the stones were not from the “monastery”(sic) but had been “collected from old buildings in various parts of the city”. This is probably true of several of the stones with dates and ornamental initials, but Moloney’s information quoted above that they came from the cloister area is more authoritative in regard to the claustral remains.

Illus. 6. Threshold of doorway no. 3, as revealed during excavation
Documented History of the Site

The Dominican Friars came to Ireland in 1224, settling first in Dublin, then at Drogheda. The convent in Limerick was founded in 1227 by Donogh Carbrech O’Brien, King of Thomond, who was buried there in 1241 and who, according to “ancient tradition” had asked St. Dominic, before his death at Bologna in 1221, for some of his friars to be sent to Limerick (Gwynn and Haddock 1970, 7 and 226, quoting Ware, 1665). Gwynn and Haddock (ibid., 226) also note that Edward I later asserted that his ancestors founded the priory (Cal. Doc. Irl., iii, 38). In 1285 the Friars received royal alms.

The Dominican order, like the Franciscan, had been founded in the early 13th century and both orders reached Ireland towards the end of the first quarter of that century, generally being endowed by local patrons who gave them land in the developing urban centres where they were to preach to the general populace. The siting of the Dominican Priory of St Saviour on the edge of the town in Limerick was characteristic practice. Other religious houses were established along the north east edge of the town; St Peter’s Priory for the Augustinian Black nuns (founded c. 1171) was adjacent to the Dominican Priory and further east, the Franciscan Friary was founded in 1267 (Gwynn and Haddock 1970, 253, 322).

Lenihan (1866, 648) cites the Arthur MSS for records that Martin Arthur built a “magnificent peristyle of marble to the church of St. Saviour in Limerick”. This was possibly a cloister, though the surviving cloister fragments date to the following century (see above).
The date implied is c. 1340–50. Begley (1906, 351) quotes Martin Arthur’s will of 1376 bequeathing alms to various churches in the city. Arthur was buried in the friary, as were many other distinguished Limerick citizens, listed, for example, in Archdall (1786, 427–8).

In 1369 when the city was burnt (Annals of Ulster), “the friars provided over a thousand ash trees for rebuilding it, without receiving payment, and the corporation, which had been granted financial aid by Edward III for repairing the fortifications, would not help in rebuilding the friary, which formed part of the fortifications and which was almost in ruins; in 1377 the king enjoined that the friars should be paid 40s. annually out of his grants” (Gwynn and Haddock 1970, 226, quoting Close Rolls 1374–7 and Coleman 1902). In 1462 James FitzGerald, seventh Earl of Desmond is said to have been buried here: he was considered the second founder and probably rebuilt or enlarged the priory (Gwynn and Haddock 1970, 226, quoting de Burgo, 1762). Bradshaw (1988, 448) suggests that the present remains date to the 1460s, and replace the original 13th century foundation. However, the surviving wall is undoubtedly 13th century, though the tower and cloister at least probably dated to the mid to later 15th century. The Regular Observance was introduced here in 1504 (Gwynn and Haddock 1970, 227, quoting de Burgo, ibid.).

The period of the reformation has been fully discussed by Bradshaw (1974 and 1988) and, as part of the general history of the Dominicans in Ireland from 1536–1641, by Flynn (1993, esp. 22–39). The ecclesiastical commissioners (including the Archbishop of Cashel) visited in January 1539 and the shrine of St Dominic was divested. Valuables confiscated at this time (Bradshaw 1974, 102 note 3) included “showes of silver weighing ten ounces, with divers stones ... and 4 stones of crystal bound with silver” and Robert St Ledger who accompanied the expedition was alleged to have taken “both the great bell and the small bell”. The house was surveyed, but not suppressed, in 1541 during Lord Deputy St Leger’s
visitation of the religious houses in the city (Flynn 1993, 24). According to the exchequer inquisition conducted at the beginning of March 1542 the house was declared suppressed following the passing of the Act of Suppression in parliament in mid-February and it was abandoned by the friars as and from the 20th of February (Bradshaw 1974, 150). The prior (Edmund (?)) “was found to be seized of the site, church, steeple, dortor, three chambers, cemetery, sundry closes, of one and a half acres within the precincts, a garden of 4 acres without the walls and 30 acres of land called Cortbrecke; site value 2s., garden and land value £5 2s. 0d” (Gwynn and Haddock 1970, 227). The Dominicans were, however, protected by the two ruling families of the area, the O’Briens, earls of Thomond and FitzGeralds, earls of Desmond. In 1543 O’Brien sued court for a patent of confirmation for the house as a secular college, explaining that it was lately granted that status by the Lord Deputy and Council. Meanwhile the property was bought by the Earl of Desmond, who allowed the friars to return (Bradshaw 1974). With the accession of Mary Tudor in 1553 all sources of income to the Dominicans from the crown were restored, and several houses in the Desmond sphere of influence were recovered from laymen and repaired by the Dominicans (Flynn 1993, 45).

The site was forfeited to the crown in 1569–72 and the friary was granted to Robert Ansley in 1589 (Gwynn and Haddock 1970, 227, quoting Coleman 1902). It was held by James Gould, the Queen’s Attorney General for Munster, until his death in 1600, and passed to his son-in-law, Captain George Ingoldesby who had it at the time of the Civil Survey in 1654. A stone house was built on the north side of the “Abbey” at this time (Simington 1938, 442).

The *Pacata Hibernia* perspective/map of the late sixteenth century (O’Grady 1896) shows the building marked “Chappell” and with a tall belfry tower (Illus. 9a). This tower also appears on the ?F. Jobson map of the same period (reproduced in Thomas, 1992a, fig. 10 (PRO SP 64/1/19)); this may be another version of the *Pacata* map. The c. 1590 map in the Hardiman collection, Trinity College, Dublin (TCD MS 1209 No 57, reproduced in Westropp 1916) shows two parallel rows of round headed arches in the middle of the building which may represent the cloister arcades (Illus. 9b).

Following the death of Elizabeth in 1603, the practice of Roman Catholicism became less difficult, and by 1622 there were seven friars occupying the house (Flynn 1993, 146).

In 1679 part of the site was taken by the Government on a hundred year’s lease and a Barracks was built on this section (Lenihan 1866, 650, quoting de Burgo 1762). A “tan yard”
was also built about this time, as mentioned by the traveller Thomas Dineley who visited the area in 1680/1. Dineley (1864–66, 439) noted “Here is also in the North East part of the town a fair Tanyard in the ruins of an Abbey”. Lenihan is almost certainly incorrect in identifying this as the Franciscan abbey (ibid., footnote), since Dineley had earlier stated that “the County Court is kept in the ruins of St Francis abbey”, and the reference to the north east part of the town is more appropriate to the Dominican house. Ferrar (1787, 191) says that “some remains of the church and walls are now standing, part of the ground was converted into a tan-yard by Alderman Sargent ... The barracks ... was converted into a brewery after the lease expired in 1779”.

A “French map” of c. 1691 (BM 54/14 P26825, lithographed in Lenihan 1866, facing page 258 in the 1967 reprint) shows the church having a cruciform plan, but this is probably a quite schematic representation as the Franciscan friary is shown in the same way.

According to Fenning (1990, 155) the friars opened a chapel around 1730 in Fish Lane and “began to pick up the threads of a community life they had not known for forty years. Apart from the Franciscans they were the only religious in the city” (this publication deals in depth with the history of the Irish Dominicans in the eighteenth century). However Ferrar implies a later date for the chapel which he says “was opened for Divine Service on 26th of October 1780” (Ferrar 1787, 197).

In the early 19th century the Ingoldesby-Massey estates were purchased by John Peter Kelly of Ballintlea, and from his estate it passed first to the Poor Clare community (1815), then briefly to the Presentation nuns, then to the Parochial priests, and finally, in 1838, Mother M. Catherine McAuley opened a convent of the Sisters of Mercy, who remain there to the present day. (These details are taken from an anonymous booklet published in 1913 to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the establishment of the Mercy Convent).

THE EXCAVATIONS

Archaeological investigations took place as shown on Illus. 7. The 1974 excavations comprised three narrow cuttings as follows:

“Wall Trench”, along the north face of the wall, 12m long x 0.80m max. width.
“North Trench”, 23 m long x 2m wide across the claustral area
“South Trench”, 13m long x 2m wide, across the nave
Two 2 x 2m squares in the area of the proposed road.

The numbers in the square brackets in the text are the feature numbers. These are encircled on the plans and sections. More detailed reports have been filed with the National Museum of Ireland, Office of Public Works and Limerick Corporation.

Wall Trench (Illus. 10)

This cutting ran parallel with and outside the church wall, between it and a concrete path, with the result that the width of the cutting was increased from 0.60m at the western end to 0.80m at the eastern end.

The main features revealed in this cutting were the base of a wall [1] which was set at right angles to the church wall and two doorways, numbers 3 [2] and 4 [3] and their associated thresholds.

The wall [1] was 1.20m wide and was built against the church wall, 0.50m east of door no. 3. It survived to a height of 1m. It was originally faced with limestone blocks and had a rubble core. The two lower courses of the eastern face were well preserved but the western face and the top had been disturbed by the digging of a pit [20]. Three paving slabs [4a, b and c]
Illus. 10. Wall Trench. north face section (upper) and plan (lower)
lay on top of this wall, near the church wall, one [4a], was rectangular in shape and had a hole cut to accommodate the heel of a door. Traces of iron could be seen in the hole where the door would have pivoted. This slab was not in its original position. Wall [1] formed the western wall of the eastern claustral range. Traces of the upper part of the wall are visible in the outer face of the church wall higher up indicating that this wall was originally bonded into the nave but the lower part of the church wall has been rebuilt in this area (Illus. 3b). Higher up, the flashings of the gable of the roof of the claustral range can be seen set into the church wall. It seems likely that this wall fragment was part of the cloister which was added to the church in the mid-15th century, as part of the rebuilding undertaken under the patronage of James, Earl of Desmond (d. 1462). A door would have led from the cloisters into the eastern range, so the doorstone may have come from this area.

Door No. 3 [2]: this is the more westerly of the two doorways examined in this cutting. Its position just west of the cloister wall suggests it gave access from the church to the cloister walk. It was blocked with limestone rubble, the face of the blocking being recessed 0.40m back from the face of the church wall (Illus. 3b). The jambs of the door had been replaced with limestone and brick, but excavation revealed the lowest jamb stone on each side [5a and 5b] (Illus. 6). These were of sandstone, with a chamfered angle, and the door width here was 1.40m. Two limestone slabs [6a and 6b] formed the threshold which was 0.63m below the present ground level. The foundation courses [7] of the church wall were clearly visible along here, with a plinth projecting 0.20–0.25m beyond the north face of the church wall. The doorway was 2.90m high overall. To the north of the eastern jamb stone four skulls lay together at a depth of 1.15–1.30m below ground level. Beside these was a group of four disarticulated leg bones, and lower down, directly in front of the doorway, two skeletons (nos. 45 and 51) lay one above the other, heads to the west, and c. 1.50m below ground level.

Door No 4 [3] was completely infilled, the face of the blocking being flush with the church wall face. The upper part showed as a limestone arch with some stones of the arch missing (Illus. 3a). Before excavation the inside of the highest part of the arch was 1m above ground level. Excavation revealed the sandstone jambs of the doorway to a depth of 1.40m below ground level, giving a total height of 2.40m for the doorway. The lowest course of the blocking [8] projected slightly, and below this the foundation courses of the church wall were clearly visible. The level of this door threshold corresponded to the lower levels of mortar (Illus. 10 upper) and with the roughly laid paved floor [9] at the eastern end of the cutting, 1.40m below ground level. West of the door a line of flat slabs [10] was laid flat in mortar close against the wall at 1.60m below ground level.

Apart from the features noted above, the archaeological levels showed considerable disturbance. The sterile levels were reached in front of door 3, with a basal layer of yellow clay [11], above which was a grey clay [12] and above that a red sticky clay [13]. Full details are given in the filed reports.

**North Trench (Illus. 11)**

This cutting ran northwards from the path beside the church wall across the area of the presumed cloister (Illus. 7). The southern end of the cutting was 2.60m north of the church wall, the modern path preventing excavation nearer to the wall. The main feature recorded was a wall [3], 1.18m wide at 16.40m from the church wall. This ran parallel with the church wall and is probably the inner wall of the northern side of the cloister (Illus. 12). It was 0.38m high, with two courses surviving on the north face. The south face was not fully investigated. Traces of render were found on each of the wall faces. The wall was built on a thin layer of charcoal-enriched black/grey soil [4]. Below this was the red sterile clay [1] which also occurred in the
Illus. 11. North Trench. west face section (upper) and plan (lower)
lowest levels further south. The remains of a very roughly built wall [5] were found at the southern end of the cutting at a depth of 1.85–2m below ground level. This may represent the foundations for the southern side of the cloister. It was higher at the eastern end.

A number of skeletons were found in the cutting. Six were found just north of wall [3] and thus within the ambulatory. All were in grey/brown sticky clay [9] and except for no. 54 all were at a slightly higher level than the wall foundations. They are shown projected onto the section (Illus. 11), with square boxed numbers. All these levels were very disturbed, and contained medieval and post-medieval pottery, glass and a piece of china down to a depth of 2m. A considerable amount of animal bone was found in this cutting which probably emanates from the tanning yard which is recorded on the site in the late 17th century.

**Friary South Trench 1 (Illus. 13 and 14)**

This cutting was 2m wide, 13m long and extended southwards from the church wall across the area of the nave. A concrete path beside the wall prevented the trench being extended to the church wall. The northern end of the cutting was 2.60m from the wall.

**Medieval features (Illus. 13a and 14)**

The undisturbed level was reached at 2.20m from the north end of the trench, (see section, illus. 14), and was a hard yellow clay layer [1] at 1.90m below ground level. Above this was a layer of humic grey/black soil with charcoal [2]; above this was red sticky clay [3]; above this was grey silt [4]; above this was a thin layer of compacted sandy gravel [5]. A thick (0.25m) layer of red sticky clay [6] lay above [5], with a mortar floor [7] above [6], 1.15m below present ground level. This mortar floor was found intermittently throughout the cutting and may represent the original church floor level, though it was dug into for the insertion of many burials over time. A number of pieces of 13th century two-colour tiles from a paved floor were found,
Illus. 13. South Trench: Plans (a) lower levels and (b) upper levels
but all were in disturbed contexts. Part of a mortar floor [7] was found at a depth of 1.03–1.10m at 3–4.50m from the north end of the trench. In this area on the east side of the cutting part of a north-south row of roughly set stones [8] was found with the mortar floor [7] abutting the stones.

Three stone-built graves (A-C) were uncovered, of probable medieval date (see below). In grave A [9] (Illus. 15) a test pit was cut to a depth of 1.80m below the present ground level, its levels corresponding to those enumerated at 2.20m from the northern end of the cutting (see above). Undisturbed yellow clay was found at a depth of 1.65m [10]. Above this was a 0.10m thick layer with some burnt animal bones and oyster shells [11] and above this a charcoal enriched grey/brown layer with charcoal and some bones [12]. These levels probably represent occupation on the site before the church was constructed. One sherd of Saintonge green glazed ware occurred in layer [12]. Elsewhere throughout the cutting the lowest levels uncovered were of grey clay [4] with red sticky clay [6] above this.

Graves A—C appear to have been cut into the sticky red clay [6]; they lay east-west, the skeletons in them with their heads to the west. Because of the way the trench was laid out, only the eastern two-thirds of the grave was excavated in each case.

Grave A [9] (Illus. 15) had stone walled sides, with a slab forming the eastern end. Towards the east end of the grave was a large paving slab [13], with smaller, rounded paving stones around it. The east end of the grave was not paved and here the test pit was cut to a depth of 1.80m (see above). The adult skeleton (no. 23) lay on the paving, with its hands in the pubic area.
Grave B [14] was stone built, with mortar lining the inner face, except on the eastern end slab. It was covered with two large slabs, [15 and 16] and two small slabs [17 and 18] overlay these at the eastern end (Illus.16). The skeleton (no. 22, female, late thirties/early forties, height 1.61m) lay on the packed gravel floor [19]. Some disarticulated bones, including a pelvic bone, belonging to another individual overlay the feet area, (Illus. 17), and three fragments of iron coffin nails [20] lay along the eastern end of the grave.

Grave C [21] was also stone walled (Illus. 18); the floor was of red sticky clay [6] and above this was a layer of mixed sandy soil containing some oyster shells [22]. Skeleton no. 21 was found over [22] high up in the grave. Six nails were found round the sides of the grave in the upper levels, suggesting that a post-medieval coffined burial was inserted in a medieval grave; a sherd of Beauvais ware (16th century) was also found in the grave.

Wall: a roughly faced wall [24] was found parallel with the church wall and 13m south of it (Illus. 13a and 19); its northern face was well preserved, but the southern side was cut away by a large grave pit [25], at the bottom of which were the legs of skeleton no. 30. The wall survived to a height of 0.23m, with the upper courses at 1.08m below ground level. Though somewhat flimsy, it may mark an internal division within the church. At the eastern end of the cutting, to the north of the wall, was a flimsy plinth [26], possibly the base of a pier associated with the wall (Illus. 19). These features were overlain by layer [27] which contained post-medieval burials (see below).

Post-medieval phase (Illus. 13 and 14)
Layer [27] was 0.20–0.40m thick and contained a large number of post-medieval burials; it overlay the red sticky clay layer [6]. Layer [27] contained both medieval and post-medieval pottery and clay pipes and thus these burials are likely to be post-medieval in date. These burials also lay east-west, with the heads to the west, though only the lower parts of these

burials were recovered due to the placement of the trench. Where they survived, the hands were in the pubic area. The majority of burials were of adults and both male and female burials were found. A number of children's skeletons were found in the higher levels of this layer at 3.50-4m from the northern end of the trench and bones of neonates were found in various disturbed positions. Details of age at death, stature, diseases etc. are discussed by Power (see Part II). Many skulls and other disarticulated skeletal remains were recovered, and in some cases the skulls had been placed together in a pit, e.g. on the eastern side of the trench at 10-11m from the north end of the trench [28] (Illus. 13bii).

The positions of the skeletons are shown in simplified style in Illus. 13. Because of the degree of superimposition of skeletons in some areas, those skeletons below 0.95m deep are shown on Illus. 13a together with the medieval features, while skeletons from above 0.95m are shown on Illus. 13b with the later features. It should be noted that apart from the burials in the stone built graves, the burials were all in the same layer and they are separated in the figure only for the purposes of clarity. The depths of the skeletons below ground level are included in the table accompanying the demographic study (see Power, Part II).

Pits: several pits were cut into layer [27] (which contained the skeletons).

Arch: Part of a large stone built arch [31] was found fallen or buried in the cutting at 4.50-5.50m.

A narrow wall [32] ran parallel with, and to the north side of grave C.
19th/20th century (Illus. 13b and 14)

The post-medieval burials, pits and the stone arch were all overlain by a layer of large stones 0.15–0.20m thick [33]. Above this the finds included 19th and 20th century glass and china as well as some residual medieval and post-medieval material.

Walls: two walls, each c. 0.45m wide at the top, lay east-west in the cutting: the tops of the walls were 0.15–0.20m below ground level. They were 3.60m apart. The northern wall [34] was 0.60m high and had brick in its upper courses. It overlay skeletons nos. 18 and 19 at a depth of 0.80–0.85m and other bones were visible under the northern face of the wall. The southern wall [35] was 0.80m high. Between the walls a mortar floor [36] lay over the layer of large loose stones [33]. The walls can be interpreted as a post-medieval building within the church.

Test Squares 1 and 2

These 2x2m squares were excavated in the area north of the church (Illus. 7). The main feature of interest was in the south-west corner of Square 1 at a depth of 1.65m where a late 13th/early 14th century layer was found containing Saintonge all-over green glazed, Saintonge green glazed, and Limerick-type glazed wares, together with a silver penny of Edward I dated 1279. These were found with some oyster shells on top of the sticky grey clay. In the upper levels of both these squares there was evidence of the use of the site as a tannery, as documented in the historical records (see above), with many cattle skulls with horns attached and other animal bones. Further details of these cuttings are on file.
DISCUSSION

Prehistoric activity
Some slight evidence for prehistoric activities was recovered in the form of a scraper and a notched flake of chert and a polished stone axe, identified visually as being of porcellanite, a raw material available only in north Antrim where extraction sites are known at Thievebulliagh and on Rathlin Island. Axes of this material are known to have been widely exchanged during the neolithic period (c. 4000–2500 BC).

Medieval activity
A small quantity of medieval pottery was found in an undisturbed context in Square 1, where five sherds of Limerick-type ware occurred, together with two sherds of Saintonge ware and a silver penny of Edward I dating to 1279, the whole group indicating a date of late 13th to early 14th century. Oyster shells occurring with the pottery suggest this was part of a refuse tip, away from the priory buildings.

The Church
St Saviour’s follows the usual priory layout of a rectangular church running east/west. Traces of charcoal enriched layers under some of the structures, e.g. under the cloister wall [3] in the north trench, suggest the area was cleared by burning prior to the building programme.

The surviving north wall of the church dates to the 13th century, and recalls the contemporary King John’s Castle in its use of sandstone for the architectural details. The wall is relatively substantial, and its maximum surviving height of 11m in the chancel area is greater than that laid down in the earliest extant version of the Dominican constitutions which limited the height of the church walls to 9.14m (Pochin Mould 1957, 32). Its length too is considerable and is slightly over the maximum of 45m laid down in the constitutions. It is, of course, possible that the surviving remains do not represent the earliest church, but the sandstone mouldings appear to be quite early and the wall shows no signs of having been built in more than one phase. Several layers of mortar indicate floor levels, and decorated tiles (see Part II) would have been beceded in a mortar matrix to form an attractive patterned floor inside the church. Other hints of embellishment of the interior of the church come in the form of a few pieces of decorative stonework which may be from a tomb or sedilia within the church (Illus. 8b). The presence of a small number of broken roof tiles of both medieval and post-medieval form, suggests that the church, or possibly the claustral ranges, were roofed with tiles during both periods.

Excavation did not succeed in determining the original width of the church. Like many such sites, it may well have had a side aisle or a transept added to widen it to the south, on the side opposite to the claustral buildings. The flimsy plinth [26] and low wall [24] found in the south trench at 13m from the north wall and parallel with it may mark the division between the church proper and an extension southwards. The southern side of this wall was destroyed by the cutting of a grave [25] and a pit [28] in which skulls were placed. Burials were found throughout the cutting, all the in situ burials lying east/west, with the heads to the west.

The demographic study (Power, see Part II) shows that there were slightly more male (25% of total) than female (18.75%) burials and also many juveniles (31.25%). Sex was not determinable in the remaining 25% of the burials. Somewhat similar sex ratios were found at another Dominican foundation, St Mary’s of the Isle in Cork (Power in Hurley and Sheehan 1995), whereas Halpin and Buckley (1995) report a ratio 2.3:1 male:female at the Dominican priory in Drogheda. The formal stone-built graves, A, B and C occurred both in the main part of the church (B and C) and in the possible extension (A). In only one of these graves was the sex of the person determinable: Grave B contained a female (Skeleton 22) in her late
thirties/early forties. As elsewhere throughout the site the disturbance caused principally by grave digging has resulted in post-medieval wares and clay pipes occurring with medieval pottery and tiles at various levels.

A tower appears to have been added to the church in the 15th century and, like the other changes in that period (the southward extension and the cloister), is probably attributable to James FitzGerald, Earl of Desmond who is reputed to have rebuilt and enlarged the priory and to have been buried there in 1462. Nothing survives above ground of the tower, though it is shown on a late 16th century illustration (Illus. 9), and is mentioned as a “steeple” in the inventory at the time of the suppression in 1542. The insertion of towers into earlier churches at the junction of nave and chancel was very typical of the 15th century building programmes: they might fill the width of the church, but were often narrower than the church, e.g. at St. Mary’s of the Isle, Cork (Hurley and Sheehan 1995, fig. 12). The infilling with brick on the north wall of the church here suggests that the tower was the full width of the church. A well preserved 15th century Dominican tower can be seen at Kilmallock, Co. Limerick (Hogan 1991, 7).

The claustral ranges
It has been argued above that the first cloisters may have been built in the 13th century, mainly on the basis of the level line of the sills of the nave windows, which seem to respect the siting of the lean-to roof of the cloister on the north face of the wall. The cloister walls, where excavated in the wall trench and the north trench, however, did not show any evidence for major changes in construction. They are both c. 1.20m wide. Combining the evidence from the 1974 and Ms. Moran’s 1994 excavations it can be calculated that the cloister garth measured c. 12m east-west x 14.50m north-south internally. The ambulatory was c. 2m wide. Overall therefore the cloister area measured c. 18m east-west x 21m north-south.

The only material indication of the form of the arcades comes from ex situ fragments, parts of capitals and bases and one ‘dumb bell’ pier with twisted fluting on the columns (Illus. 8a), parallels for which can be seen in 15th century religious houses, e.g. at the Dominican Priory in Sligo (Leask 1960, Fig. 65). Stalley (1990, 196) notes that these ‘dumb bell’ piers are a characteristic feature of Irish cloisters. It is tempting to see the delineation of two parallel rows of round headed arches on a late 16th century map (Illus. 9) as showing the cloister arcades, but a considerable amount of artistic license must be allowed for in such maps.

The doorways from the cloister to the church can be identified both at the eastern (door 3) and western (door 2) ends of the cloister. On the outer face of the church wall the flashings of the gables of both the eastern and western ranges can be seen, indicating that these were two-storey, at least in the 15th century.

The burials within the cloister area were found mainly in the ambulatory, both on the north and south sides of the cloister (wall trench and north trench) and also, though more sparsely, in the cloister garth (north trench, Illus. 11). All lay east-west, with the head to the west, as in the church, and appear to date to the post-medieval period, after the buildings had largely been demolished. A number of burials were also found in these areas in other excavated sites, e.g. at St Mary’s of the Isle in Cork (Hurley and Sheehan 1995 fig. 13).

None of the domestic buildings was excavated during the 1974 season, with the exception of a narrow cutting (the wall trench) which extended from the cloister area into the east range. Here two distinct mortar floor levels were recorded, similar to those recorded in the church (Illus. 10 feature [16]), together with a paved area [9]. A doorway (no. 4) led from here into the church, its threshold level with the lower levels of mortar and with the paved floor. The sandstone details of the door suggest a 13th century date.
The construction of 13th century cloisters has only gradually come to be recognised as a general phenomenon in Ireland. Leask (1958, 93) in discussing the claustral buildings at Cashel, Co Tipperary, says “it is possible that there were no fully developed cloisters built at friaries in that period”. However in Vol III (1960, 133) in discussing the lean-to roofs of free standing ambulatories he says that these occur on older monasteries, “additions thereto or replacements of similar earlier features”. The latter scenario seems to have occurred at St Saviour’s. Again in 1960 his acceptance of the existence of early (i.e. 13th century) cloisters is confirmed in his statement that all seven early examples are sited to the south of the church while all fifteen later ones are on the north, except at Askeaton. However, this particular statement must be now revised in the light of our arguments for an early northern cloister at St Saviour’s and also at St Mary’s of the Isle in Cork where excavation has revealed two phases of cloister building on the north side of the church, the 13th century lean-to cloister of Phase I being succeeded by an integrated structure in the late 14th-15th century (Hurley and Sheehan 1995, 46-49).

The construction of the fifteenth century cloister may possibly be attributed to James FitzGerald, seventh Earl of Desmond, whose patronage was already mentioned in connection with the tower and possible enlargement of the church. Some authors suggest he contributed to the building of a cloister at the Franciscan friary in Askeaton in 1420-40, and there may have been some confusion between the two sites, which could be resolved by examination of the primary sources. His daughter Joan and her husband Thomas, seventh Earl of Kildare added a cloister and an aisle to the Augustinian priory in Adare (c. 1427-64) and contributed a quarter of the costs of the Adare Franciscan friary cloister (Leask 1960, 97). Patronage of cloister building was clearly very active in the mid-15th century in this part of Limerick and the surviving remains at Adare and Askeaton are among the most interesting examples of the form in Ireland. Ennis and Quin, on the north of the Shannon in Co. Clare, are also well preserved. Indeed, Greene (1992, 169) notes that by comparison with Britain, Ireland “still possesses a remarkable assemblage of friary structures” with over 100 friary sites with buildings surviving above ground, by comparison with only fifteen in England and Wales and six in Scotland, and he notes Adare, Askeaton, Quin and Ennis as among the best surviving examples of cloisters in Britain or Ireland. Stalley (1990, 191) also points out that a complete view of English medieval architecture can only be obtained by making a trip to Kerry, Limerick, Galway or Mayo, but, he says “…there has been no modern study of mendicant architecture in Ireland and many issues await clarification.”

The Reformation and after

At the time of the reformation the buildings comprised a “church, steeple, dortor, three chambers, cemetery” together with closes of one and a half acres within the precincts and 4 acres outside the walls, and 30 acres of land at Cortbrecke. Later activities on the site included a Barracks and a Tannery, remains of the latter being well represented archaeologically through the many animal bones, particularly skulls and horn cores which were found in the upper levels. Some of this activity must have involved the construction of buildings against the north wall of the church, at its eastern end, where several rooflines and windows have been inserted into the original fabric. A range of pottery of the 16th-18th centuries includes many imported pieces from England and continental Europe as well as local red earthenwares (see McCutcheon, Part II). Clay pipes likewise show both imports and local production, in this case from the 17th century onwards (see Lane, Part II). An unusual token should be noted, a copper farthing of a type known as St Patrick’s money, thought to be issued by Dublin Corporation in the mid-1670s; this coinage shows the earliest known use of shamrocks in connection with St Patrick.
CONCLUSION

This project shows that useful information about medieval monastic sites can be obtained through archaeological investigations, even those of limited extent, particularly when integrated with an examination of the details of the surviving architecture, both upstanding and fragmentary. Most of the work done on medieval sites has been driven by the requirements of conservation or developmental agendas. Little archaeological work has been done on sites chosen solely for their potential as part of a research programme aimed at understanding such sites, and it is likely that such an undertaking would be extremely productive.

Acknowledgements

I would like to record my thanks to the following: the excavation team, the Sisters of Mercy for allowing us access to their grounds, the National Committee of the Royal Irish Academy for recommending the excavation and post-extraction grants to the Office of Public Works, the National Museum of Ireland for conservation of the silver penny and Mr John Teahan and Mr Michael Kenny for their comments on the coins.

I am grateful to Clare McClutcheon for helping to arrange the text, to Rose Cleary, Denis Power and Maurice F. Hurley for commenting on the text, to Jo Moran for permission to refer to results from her 1994 excavations and to Lynda Minion and Conor Kelly for the illustrations.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Anon. 1913: A Brief Sketch of the History of the old Dominican Abbey and of the Convent of Mercy.
Begley, J. 1906: The Diocese of Limerick, vol. 1: Ancient and Medieval, Dublin
Coleman, A. 1902: The Ancient Dominican Foundations in Ireland, Dundalk.
de Burgo, P.T. 1762: Hibernica Dominicana, Kilkenny.
Ferrar, J. 1787: The History of Limerick, Ecclesiastical, Civil and Military, Limerick.
Lenihan, M. 1866: *Limerick; its History and Antiquities, Ecclesiastical, Civil and Military*, Dublin.
O’Rahilly, C. 1988: “Recent research in Limerick City” *Archaeology Ireland*, 2:1, 40–44.
Ware, J. 1654: *De Hibernia et Antiquitatibus eius...,* London.