

# Studdert's Bridge, Bunratty, Co. Clare

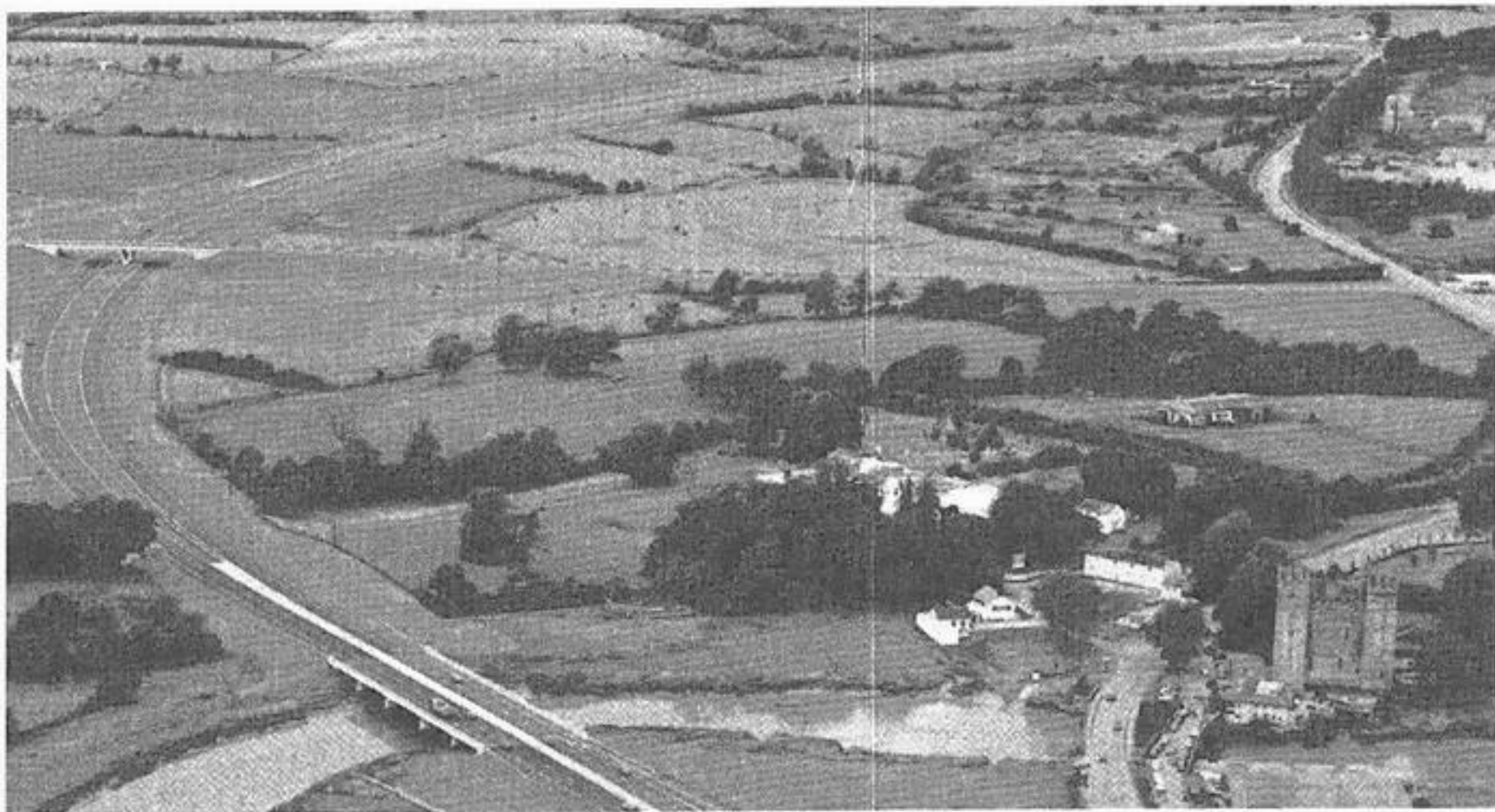
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*The story of the building and survival of the oldest (1804) of the three bridges across the Ratty River at Bunratty Castle.*

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Some visitors to Bunratty are surprised to find three bridges, all close together over the tidal little Ratty River (also tautologically called the Owenogarney River - *Abhainn Ó gCearnaigh* - the O'Garney River, and the Bunratty River), located just below the well known late fifteenth-century Bunratty Castle. Indeed, it is just possible that there may even have been a fourth bridge there, remains of which were discovered in a small archaeological excavation carried out in 1989 under the road between the castle and 'Durty Nelly's' public house<sup>1</sup>.

However, had strict economic reasoning prevailed in the late 1960s there would now be only two bridges present, both modern. At that time the Ennis-Limerick road was undergoing major improvement works. The Department of Local Government (now the Department of the Environment) favoured reconstruction of the then-existing road passing in front of the

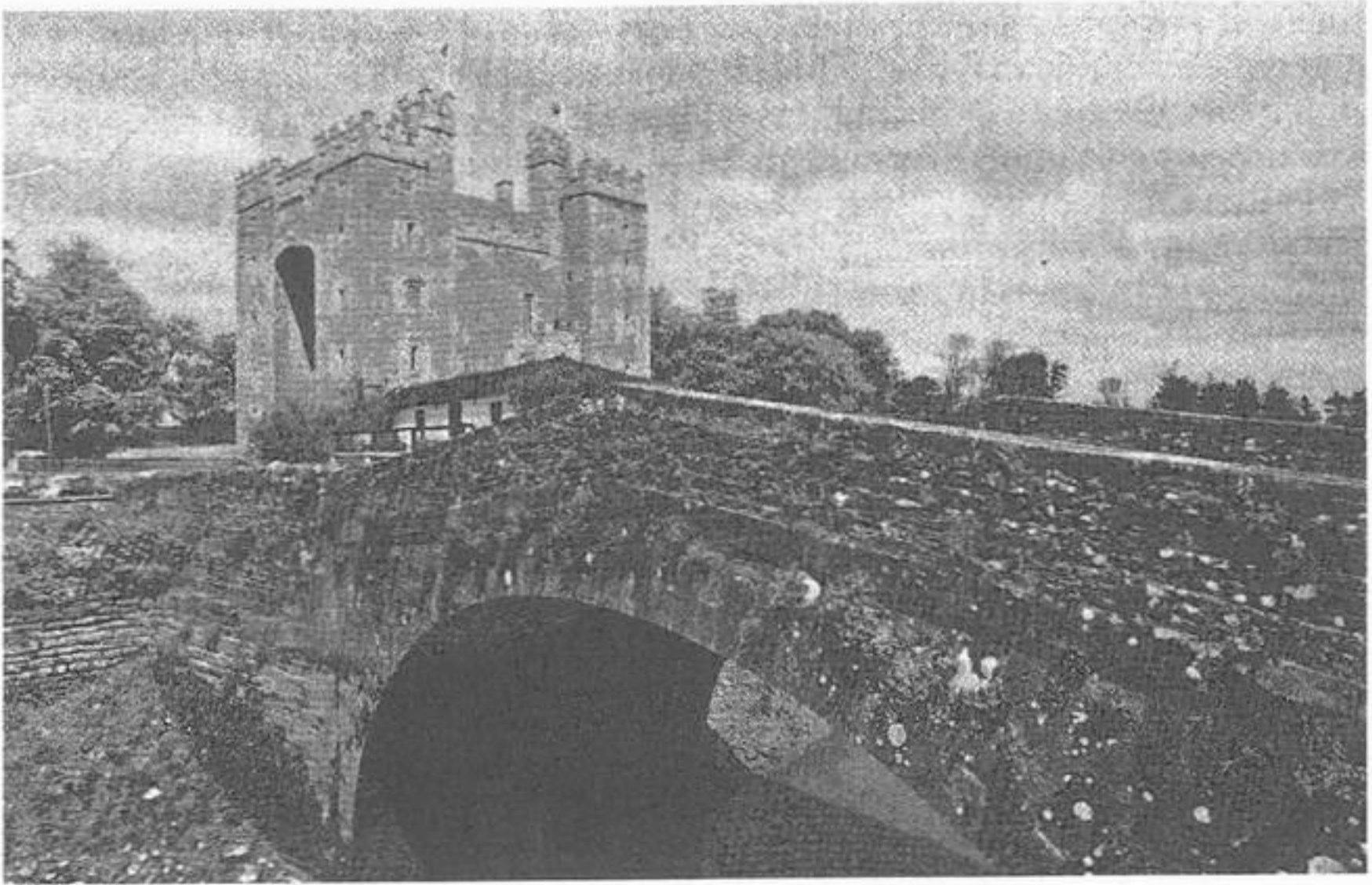


Illus. 1. Aerial view of the three bridges across the Ratty River near Bunratty Castle.

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<sup>1</sup>See Erin Gibbons, "Excavation of an Underground Passage at Bunratty", *The Other Clare*, 17(1993), 29-30. The structure consists of a limestone rubble abutments with a brick segmental arch, and may date from the late 17th century. Though the excavator seems to prefer its interpretation as a bridge, it is perhaps more likely to have been an arched culvert feed to the Castle moat.



Illus. 2. Studdert's Bridge, with Bunratty Castle in the background.

Castle, which would have necessitated removal of the narrow old hump-backed masonry bridge. Clare County Council, on the other hand, believed this high-arched bridge was an important component of the local landscape and that, consequently, it should be preserved. The Council pushed for a new alignment of the bridge portion of the road through Bunratty village, which would require a new reinforced concrete bridge. Finally, the enlightened viewpoint of the Council won out and the attractive old hump-backed bridge was saved and heritage won out over financial rectitude. Later still, in 1992, the third bridge was built across the river nearer to the Shannon Estuary to facilitate the new motorway then being built to bypass Bunratty (Illus. 1).

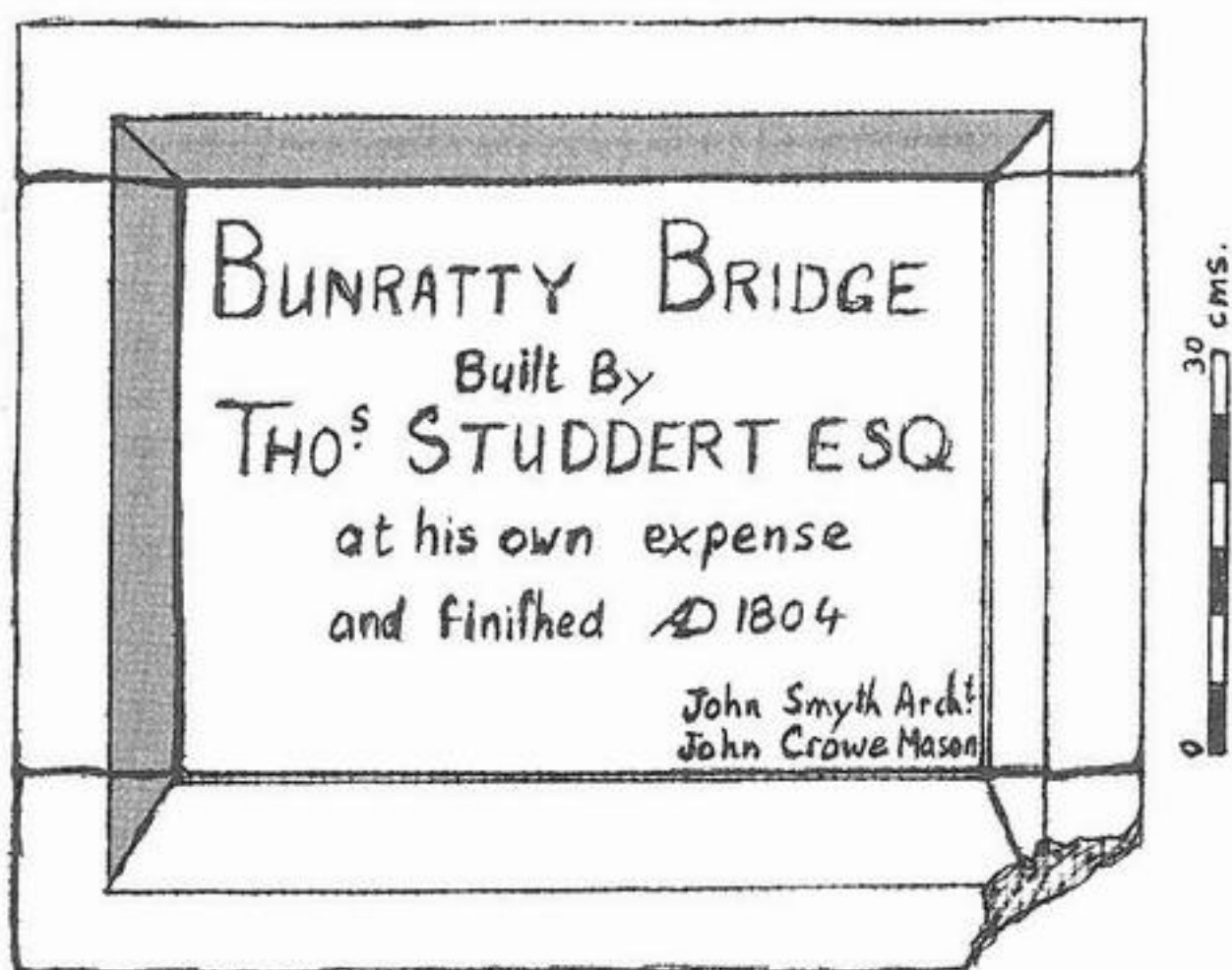
Originally, due to the high tidal nature of the low-lying land around the junction of the Ratty River with the Shannon Estuary, the area at Bunratty (Bun Raite, the bottom/terminus of the Ratty River) was excessively marshy and thus virtually impassable for any kind of mobile traffic - indeed, for all practical purposes, until the first masonry bridge was built there in 1804, Bunratty Castle was almost on an island in the surrounding marsh.

While there almost certainly was a long wooden bridge and/or causeway across the Ratty River and marshes at approximately this point, no trace of it is known. It would have been the type of structure referred to in the Annals of the Four Masters under the years 1154 and 1555 as a *cliathdroicet*, a wicker or hurdle bridge, in this case at Athlone "beside the ancient ford where the river was then about 100 yards wide"<sup>2</sup>.

The oldest surviving bridge (Illus. 2), that nearest the Castle, can justifiably be called Studdert's Bridge as an inscribed limestone plaque (Illus. 3) built into the centre of the

<sup>2</sup>Peter O'Keeffe and Tom Simington, *Irish Stone Bridges: History and Heritage*, Blackrock, Co. Dublin, 1991, p. 59.



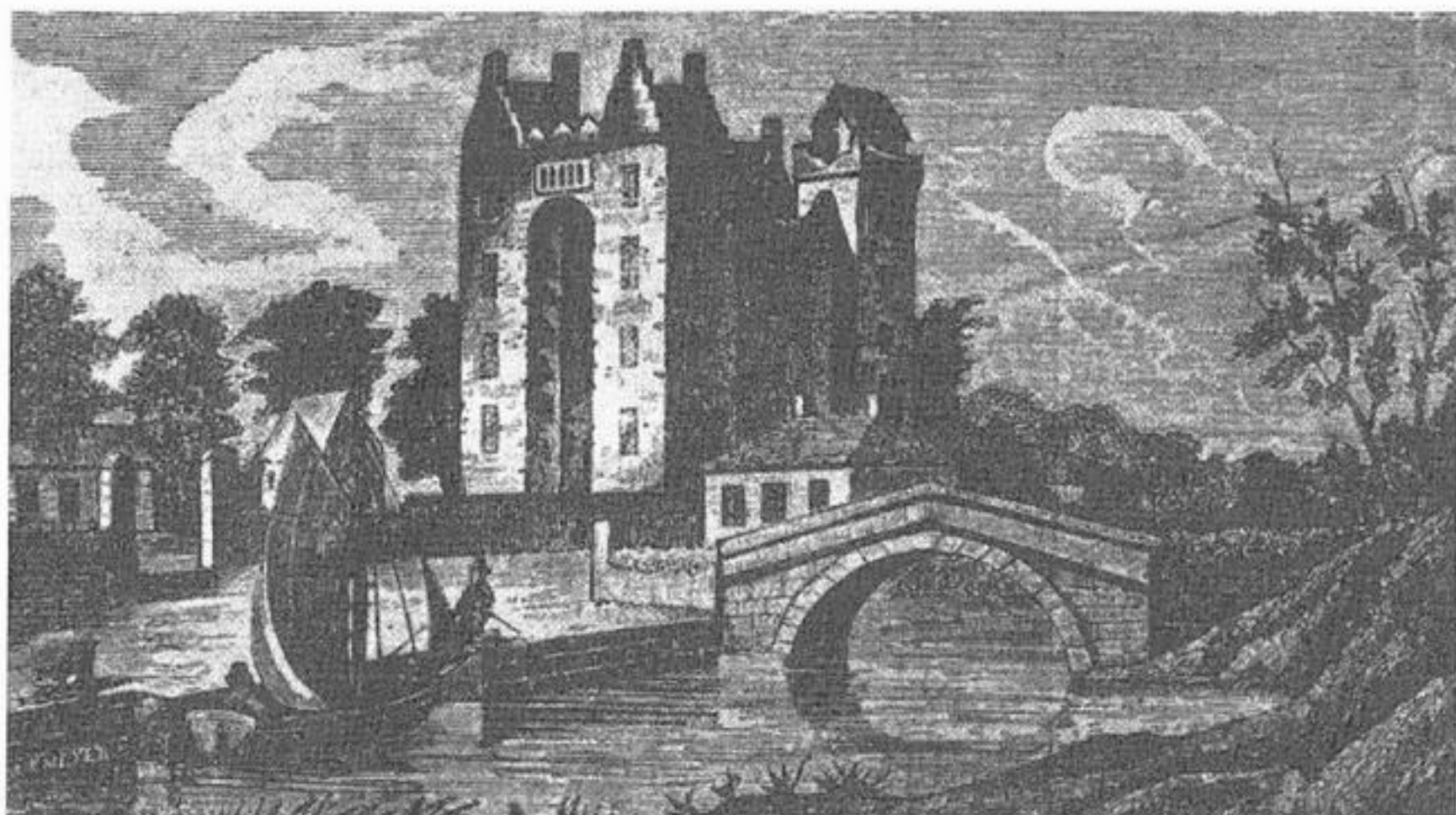


Illus. 3. Drawing of the inscribed stone plaque on Studdert's Bridge.

northern parapet of the bridge informs us that it was built in 1804 by one Thomas Studdert "at his own expense", and also that John Smyth was the architect and John Crowe the mason. This plaque measures 60cm. in width by 44cm. in height, and with its frame of four cut stones is 84cm. in width and 71cm. in height; the frame is internally chamfered to a depth of 9cm. around the plaque.

Hely Dutton, writing four years after the erection of the bridge,

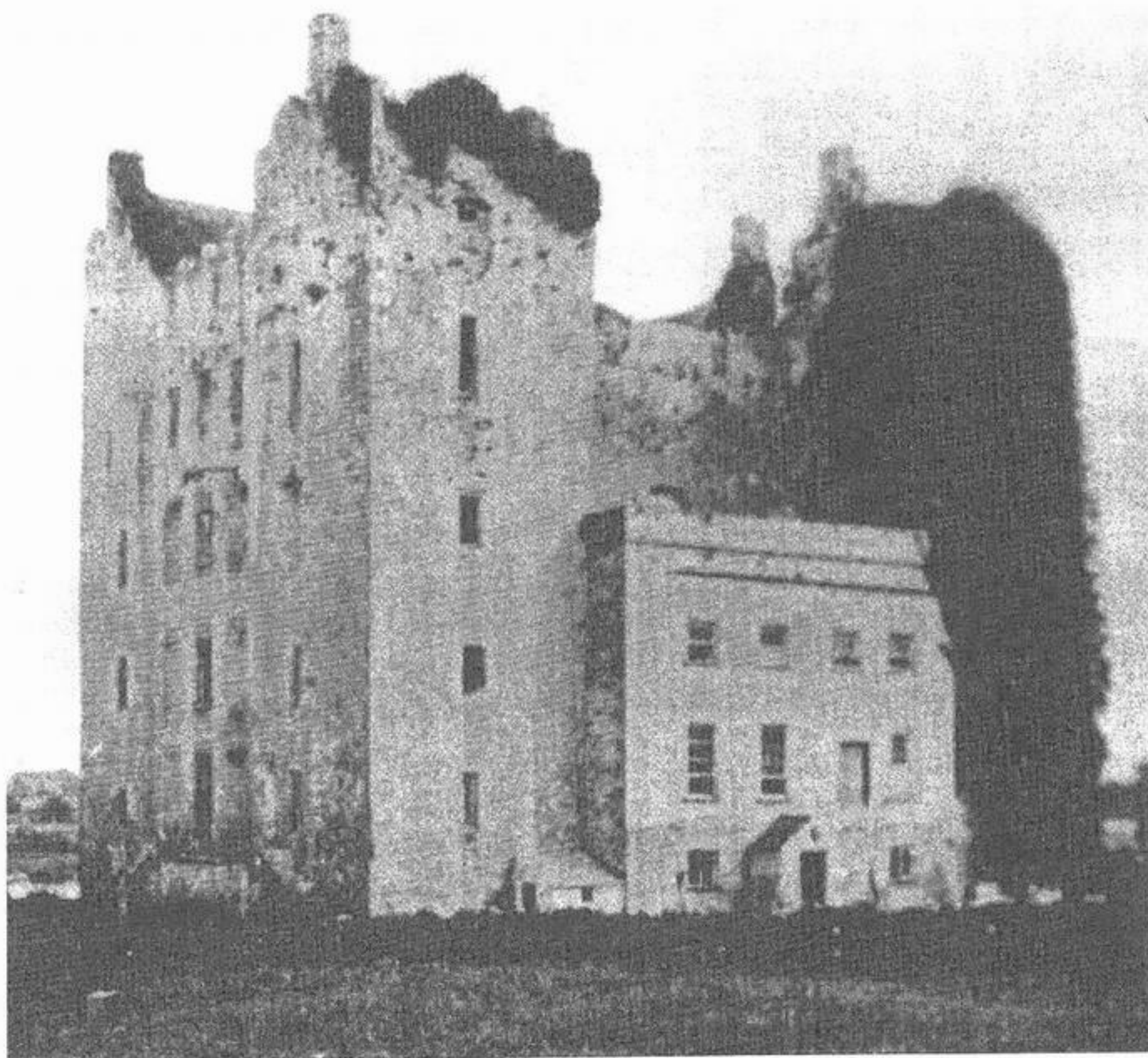
further informs us that "Thomas Studdert, Esq., of Bunratty castle has built at his own expense, a very handsome bridge of one arch over the river Ougarnee [*sic*]; it cost 2,000l., the toll is 6d. for a carriage, and 1d. for a horse"<sup>3</sup>. The final completion cost of the bridge was



Illus. 4. Engraving of Bunratty Castle from the *Dublin Penny Journal* of 1833, showing Studdert's Bridge and, between it and the Castle what was apparently the toll-house, now 'Durdy Nelly's'.

<sup>3</sup>Hely Dutton, *A Statistical Survey of the County Clare*, Dublin 1808, p. 218 – this account apparently means that there was no toll required for those crossing on foot ... one wonders about cattle and sheep!

£2,243. The toll-house reputedly was what is now 'Durty Nelly's' public house, immediately on the western side of the bridge, between it and the Castle – this is supported by the oldest known illustration of the bridge (Illus. 4) which shows that building as the only one close to the bridge, exactly where one would expect a toll-house to be constructed<sup>4</sup>. The emphasis on the bridge having been built at Studdert's "own expense" would, furthermore, be to underline and legitimise his right to exact a toll from those using it. The bridge operated successfully as a toll-bridge for eighty years and it has been calculated that the income over this period was in excess of £15,000. The Grand Jury for County Clare passed a presentment of £1,000 for the purchase of the tolls in 1884, thus declaring the bridge to be free of all tolls, an event which was "celebrated by dancing and other festivities in the Old Castle which was ablaze with tar barrels"<sup>5</sup>.



Illus. 5. Late 19th-century photograph of Bunratty Castle showing Studdert's brick-built castellated house built against its Ennis-facing northwest side.

<sup>4</sup>*The Dublin Penny Journal*, vol. II, no. 75 (Dec. 7, 1833), 177; the short article it illustrates makes no reference to the bridge.

<sup>5</sup>Anon., *Bunratty By-Pass*, commemorative booklet issued to mark the official opening of the by-pass on the 20th of November, 1992, by Mr. Michael Smith, T.D., Minister for the Environment.



At the time of building this bridge, the Studderts owned Bunratty Castle. Over a hundred Studderts have been recorded during the 18th and 19th centuries, mostly as Sheriffs or High Sheriffs of the County. In 1725 a Thomas Studdert of Kilkishen, not far away, bought the fee (lease) of Bunratty from a Thomas Amory for £1,600<sup>6</sup>, but apparently did not live in the Castle but in a large house built against one of its walls (Illus. 5). Another Thomas Studdert is mentioned as Sheriff at the Assizes under the date April 29th 1785, in the Diary of William Stacpoole, of Anagh and Edenvale, Co. Clare<sup>7</sup>, and in a note written by Thomas Johnson Westropp in 1884/85, relevant to that diary entry, it is stated that the Studderts “derive from George Stothert who migrated from Cumberland to Antrim in the time of the great civil war. His son George ... was chaplain to King William in 1691. His son Thomas ... eventually purchased Bunratty, was High Sheriff of Clare in 1797 & father of the Thomas of the diary”<sup>8</sup>. Which of the latter two Studderts built the bridge is uncertain.

The bridge, as Gleeson indicates, opened the road to Limerick from Ennis, “as previously travellers had crossed [the river] at Sixmilebridge on the road via Quin”<sup>9</sup>. Gleeson, however, seems to be somewhat mistaken in this as Henry D’Esterre, Esq., had in 1784 “at his own expense” built a bridge across the Ratty River a good bit down-river from Sixmilebridge at Rossmanagher<sup>10</sup> – an inscribed plaque states this – previous to which the first bridging-point across the river was at Sixmilebridge. The Rossmanagher Bridge was also a toll-bridge, the two remarkable stone-built toll-houses still standing, one on either side of the road, albeit now missing their cut-stone pinnacles and in poor condition<sup>11</sup>. Thomas Studdert knew of the Rossmanagher bridge when having his bridge at Bunratty built, as he took the precaution of ensuring that the arch was sufficiently high to allow ample clearance (headroom) for lighters<sup>12</sup> passing underneath – D’Esterre had caused a riot by building his bridge too low, thus preventing the lighters from travelling upriver as far as Sixmilebridge<sup>13</sup>.

### Acknowledgements

The writers are grateful to The Creamery Restaurant and Bar, Bunratty, Paul Plunkett, Manager, for kindly providing the photograph for Illus. 5.

<sup>6</sup>Dermot F. Gleeson, *Bunratty Castle and its associations with William Penn*, Ennis 1951, p. 6.

<sup>7</sup>*Nth. Munster Antiq. J.*, 23(1981), 43.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 59-60.

<sup>9</sup>Gleeson, *loc. cit.*

<sup>10</sup>Gerrard Ryan, *The Other Clare*, 4(1980), 11.

<sup>11</sup>See John O’Brien, *The Other Clare*, 20(1996), 1 and 13. These interesting tower house-like buildings are unique and are surely worthy of restoration and preservation as National Monuments.

<sup>12</sup>*Lighter*: boat, usually flat-bottomed, for unloading and loading ships not brought to wharf for transporting goods in harbour (*The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English*, 5th edition, Oxford 1964, p. 702).

<sup>13</sup>Information from the late V. Rev. Martin Canon Ryan, at the time parish priest at Sixmilebridge, and a noted member of this Society [see this *Journal*, 30(1988), 71-72] – pers. comm. to P.D.