The Mont de Piété: Archaeological Evidence for a Nineteenth-Century Pawn Shop in Limerick

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Detailed survey and analysis of a wall on the Mary Street frontage of Barrington's Hostel and excavation within the grounds of the hostel on the corner of George's Quay and Mary Street revealed the surviving, fragmentary remains of the large classically-influenced building known as the Mont de Piété. Built in 1836, as a charitable pawn shop to help support the adjacent Barrington’s Hospital and demolished in 1892, this large building ranks among the more remarkable of nineteenth-century constructions in Limerick.

Introduction
In 2002 Headland Archaeology Ltd undertook a predevelopment archaeological assessment on a site proposed for development at the corner of Mary Street and George’s Quay, Limerick (Fig. 1). The investigation was undertaken in support of a planning application for a guesthouse and office development. This area, within the walls of the early settlement, was considered likely to contain significant archaeology. The study area was within the grounds of Barrington’s Hostel and adjacent to Barrington’s Hospital. During the assessment it became apparent that elements of a substantial and well built structure were present both beneath the ground and preserved within the structure of a standing wall on Mary Street. Documentary research confirmed that the building in question was the Mont de Piété built in 1836 and demolished in 1892. This standing wall was fully recorded during this assessment. Subsequently ground works associated with the new development were archaeologically monitored in 2006, revealing further elements of the Mont de Piété.1

Historical Background
While the Mary Street site may have been just outside the focus of early historic settlement on King’s Island it was assuredly within the medieval walled town. The line of the medieval town walls, begun in the late 12th or early 13th centuries, have been traced by excavation in many places, though not in the south of the King’s Island. The conjectured line of these defences in this location runs along the George’s Quay side of the proposed development site, adding another interesting dimension to the investigation.2 Speed’s map of 1610 shows a rectangular shaped gatehouse at the north end of Baal’s Bridge, a location very close to the study area.3

Several readily available cartographic sources were consulted in order to trace the history of the site. The earliest of these maps (dated circa 1590) gives us a snapshot of Limerick in the late medieval/early post-medieval period.4 It shows a street pattern largely recognisable today with frontage buildings and backland plots on the roughly triangular area of ground where the

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1 The work was funded entirely by Peter Madden of Aviary Estates. The building recording was undertaken by Colm Moloney and Dr Tim Holden: test trenching by Colm Moloney and Graeme Brown; monitoring by Dun Lalonde and background research by Colm Moloney, Graeme Brown, Tim Holden and Peter Madden. Illustrations were produced by Louise Baker and Mike Middleton.
site lies, a picture which is confirmed by Speed's map of 1610. At the end of the 17th century changes in architectural fashion were beginning to affect the medieval core of Limerick. One notable change was an increased use of brick, although dressed limestone was still used for public buildings, many of which were being constructed in the classical style.

Fig. 1 Barrington's Hostel, Limerick. Site location

5 Ibid., p. 11.
Fig. 2 Rectified photography and elevation of wall.
After 1750 the city was transformed by merchants and developers with the focus moving to a Newtown in the south. English Town suffered considerably from this movement, though it still housed many of the working people of Limerick in ‘slums and large tenements where people lived in acute poverty; some of these hovels were located at the rear of what is now Barrington’s Hospital’.7  

By the time of the 1st edition Ordnance Survey (OS) map of 1840 the beginnings of Barrington’s Hospital can be traced.8 Started in 1829, with the buying up and demolition of the existing buildings on the site, the construction of the hospital was paid for and directly overseen by Joseph Barrington and his sons. The Hospital opened in 1831 for the benefit of the poor of Limerick. The three storey building was constructed entirely in dressed stone, with stone stairs and a balcony leading up to the main entrance.9 All of the original building appears to be standing today though it is not all used as a medical facility, with some of the area having been given over to Barrington’s Hostel.

While the hospital never extended onto the development site, the area was used for another grand Barrington family project. The Mont de Piété was a charitable pawn shop built by the Barrington family to help provide funds for the running of the hospital. The name of the building and its concept originated in 15th century Italy, associated with the activities of the Franciscans. It was deemed necessary to provide an interest free alternative to Jewish money lending, probably as much a political incentive as a social one.10

This classical-style limestone building, begun in 1836, with copper cupola, pillars, railings and a small grass enclosure, stood in the grounds of the hospital just southeast of where Barrington’s Hostel is today. This was the first such institution in Ireland and was considered a great innovation at the time. In 1840 a Mr Porter used the example of the Limerick Mont de Piété to advocate the widespread adoption of such institutions stating ‘that institution is succeeding beyond the most sanguine expectations of its benevolent founder’.11

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8 1840 Ordnance Survey 1:10,560 scale map of Limerick.  
11 W. Neilson Hancock, *The Usury Laws and the Trade of Lending Money to the Poor of Ireland* (Dublin, 1850) p. 8.
In reality, it failed to make a profit and in 1845 it was closed. In the years following it was converted into a convalescent hospital and then to a police barracks in 1847.\textsuperscript{12} Untenant from the early 1880s the building was finally demolished in 1892 and the materials sold by auction. The Mont de Piété is shown on both the 1840 OS 1st edition 6inch map and the 2nd edition of 1872 where it is marked as a police barracks.\textsuperscript{13} Also pertinent to our investigation is the depiction on OS maps of four buildings in the very southeast part of the site extending back approximately 30m from the corner of George's Quay and Mary Street. These may represent tenements which escaped demolition following the building of the hospital.

The four buildings were demolished sometime between 1872 and 1900 as they do not appear on the 1900 OS sheet for Limerick City. It is possible they were removed at the same time as the Mont de Piété as part of a wider phase of site clearance.\textsuperscript{14} No other buildings were depicted in this area and later photographic evidence shows only the hospital garden surrounded by railings.

THE PHYSICAL EVIDENCE

The upstanding remains
The section of wall approximately 30m long on the Mary Street frontage of Barrington's Hostel, was identified by Limerick City Council as being of potential archaeological importance. Because of this a condition requiring the detailed survey of the wall was imposed. The rectified photographs and the results of the survey are presented in Figure 2. The map evidence reveals that the earliest phase probably derives from the early-mid 19th century with repeated modifications occurring up until the late 20th century.

The shop frontage – Mont de Piété
The earliest phase comprised a pair of arched doorways formed of roughly squared limestone blocks and lined with red brick 'quoins'. The central pillar is also of red brick and the bottom 1m of the northernmost doorway has been blocked with similar material. The structure within which the doorways sit is defined on either side by a series of squared and roughly-dressed limestone quoins. Directly behind the frontage these quoins splay outwards indicating that the building behind was larger than the frontage suggests. The two arches, one of which was partially blocked, are therefore likely to represent a door and shop window giving access to a larger, circular space to the rear. These were blocked at the time when the buildings were demolished and consolidated.

To the southeast of the shop frontage
The shop frontage is abutted on the southeast by a later stone wall. This is constructed of random masonry comprising squared blocks, rubble and occasional bricks. It is capped by shuttered concrete which has been used to stabilise the wall-head. A single doorway gives access to the southwest but this has been blocked by modern brickwork (i.e. later half of 20th century). This was probably undertaken at about the same time that the electricity sub-station was punched through the existing wall in the second half of the 20th century. It suggests that this doorway was usable up until that point. The door probably formed an entrance to the Hospital Garden, perhaps being blocked up when the electricity sub-station was built.

At the extreme southeast end of the wall a short portion of the 19th century build survives. This incorporates a dressed stone pier which also acts as the terminus for the wrought iron railings and plinth which form the east and south boundary of the site.

\textsuperscript{13} 1840 Ordnance Survey 1:10,560 scale map of Limerick; 1872 Ordnance Survey 1:10,560 scale map of Limerick.
\textsuperscript{14} 1900 Ordnance Survey 1:7inch to 1 mile map sheet V10.
To the northwest of the shop frontage

The wall to the northwest of the shop frontage abuts the shop front and therefore post-dates it. The masonry type comprises roughly coursed limestone blocks and is potentially of one building phase. There is, however, a visible difference in the character of the fabric above and below a well-defined line approximately 2m from the ground. This difference could indicate an element of rebuild although it may have resulted from parts of the wall having been covered. If this is the case then the colour changes may be a result of differential erosion or sooting.

Within this section of wall are two blocked openings. The southern one is a doorway with a brick lining and the northern one is a window. The latter is only poorly defined because the blocking material is so similar to the surrounding masonry. There is, however, a well-defined relieving arch and lintel at the head of the window. These two openings give access to the west and are the exterior face of a two-storey building.

19th century consolidation

In 1892 the buildings associated with the wall were demolished and the upper course consolidated and brought to a level with brick. The whole wall was then capped with a flat sandstone coping.

Discussion

The oldest elements of the wall are those associated with the Mont de Piété pawn shop. This comprised an arched door and adjacent window and gave access to a larger, circular space behind (Fig. 3). Later, further buildings were built up against the pawn shop on the Mary Street frontage. This is evidenced by two blocked doorways and a blocked window. The presence of a relieving arch over one of these suggests that at least some of these buildings were two-storeys high.

The pawn shop and adjacent buildings were demolished in 1892 but the wall fronting onto Mary Street was consolidated and kept, presumably as a part of the rear perimeter wall of Barrington's Hospital. To the southeast the wall abuts the ornate kerb and railings that run along the George's Quay frontage. Later in the 20th century an electricity substation was constructed and the last remaining doorway blocked with modern concrete bricks.

The buried remains (Figs 4, 5)

Phase 1 – Pre-1830 remains

The substantial foundations of the Mont de Piété together with the basements associated with the tenements at the corner of Georges Quay and Mary Street largely destroyed any trace of pre-19th century archaeological remains. However one possible element of the pre-19th century archaeology was present. This consisted of a stone wall truncated at either end by walls associated with the Mont de Piété, and on a different alignment to the modern street layout. Wall 012 was aligned roughly northwest-southeast and was 0.9m below the modern car park surface. A length of 3.1m was recorded within the trench and it was 0.64m wide. It was constructed of two parallel faces of squared limestone blocks bonded with soft yellow mortar with a core of angular rubble bonded with coarse lime mortar. Unfortunately no datable artefacts were associated with the wall although it must predate 1829 when work started on the construction of the Mont de Piété. A single sherd of medieval pottery was recovered during monitoring in 2006 although this was residual and not from a secure context.

Phase 2 – Post-1830 remains

Mont de Piété

Three parallel walls were recorded in Trench 1 during the test trenching phase of the project. Subsequently cartographic analysis demonstrated that these most likely relate to the curving southern side of the Mont de Piété. Aligned approximately northeast-southwest, Wall 011 was 0.3m below the surface of the car park. It was faced externally (southeast side) with squared limestone blocks bonded with hard white mortar and rendered on its west side with soft yellowish plaster. The plaster was present on the exposed wall face (to a depth of 1.2m) indicating that it
was likely to be the internal wall of a cellar or a basement. A short distance to the northwest of this wall a brick and stone built structure (013) was seen to protrude slightly out of the north section. It was faced with small rectangular hand-made bricks around a rubble core and rendered with plaster on both visible faces. Very little of this structure was observed in the trench and therefore interpretation is difficult. It is also difficult to tell how it relates to the adjacent wall (011) other than to note that the rendering is similar.

To the northwest of Wall 013 another wall (015) was uncovered. This had a number of different elements suggesting several phases of activity. It was aligned northeast-southwest, 0.8m wide and lay 1m below the modern car park surface. Constructed of a rubble and mortar core the wall had a brick facing to the northwest. This facing was cleaned up and investigated, revealing yellow and red colours consistent with exposure to intense heat. The east side was faced with large roughly hewn stone slabs heavily disturbed by the demolition. Some evidence of plaster was also visible on the southeast face.

To the west of Wall 015 a very substantial stone wall (014) was uncovered. The southeast face of this wall was clearly seen to curve though in contrast the northwest face was straight. It measured 2m wide at its widest and was located 0.88m below the tarmac. Faced on its southeast side with random coursed roughly hewn limestone blocks and bonded with hard cement like mortar, the elevation was traced to a depth of 5 courses (1m) below the point at which it was first exposed. The presence of hard cement mortar in the facing suggests a probable 19th century date for construction. The core of this wall was constructed of limestone rubble bonded with lime mortar.

The Tenement Block
During testing in 2002 a massive wall running perpendicular to George's Quay was identified in Trench 2. Subsequently in 2006 during monitoring this was re-investigated and shown to be one of the external walls of a 19th century tenement block which neighboured and co-existed with the Mont de Piété. The main portion of the structure was rectangular in shape and measured 19.5 m east/west by 6.5 m north/south. The eastern extremity was truncated by modern foundation pilings and had been slightly damaged by recent machining. These walls were extremely well built and measured 1 m thick by 2.45 m deep. They were built on a foundation of larger, squared limestone blocks (Fig. 6).

Discussion
The results of the investigation confirm the picture that is presented by the 1st edition of the Ordnance Survey. This depicts the Mont de Piété at the north of the site with a tenement block at the south. Late 18th or 19th century buildings with deep cellars fronted onto George's Quay and their construction appears to have destroyed any trace of earlier archaeology in this area of the site. Four buildings fronting George's Quay are recorded on the 1st and 2nd edition OS maps. These cellared buildings were removed at the end of the 19th century at the time of the demolition of the Mont de Piété (1892) helping to explain the similarities between the rubble infill observed throughout the site. The great depth of made ground in this area is difficult to explain as it appears to exceed the depth of the cellars. A possible interpretation would be that this made ground represents reclamation of the Abbey River, assuming it originally had a slightly different course or was wider at this point.

Discoveries in Test Trench 2 largely relate to the Mont de Piété. Stone walls 014, 015 and 011 were probably part of this substantial edifice. Wall 014 had a curving face which would fit in well with the building. Whether wall 013 is also an element of the Mont de Piété is open to question, as is the date of wall 012 which may be a much earlier, possibly medieval feature. It certainly appears to predate 1st edition OS mapping of the site and is truncated by the construction of the Mont de Piété built in 1836.
Structural elements of the Mont de Piété survive as the earliest features within the standing wall on Mary Street. Here the frontage of the building appears to have been retained within the fabric of the boundary wall when the rest of the building was demolished. A door and possible window are clearly visible.

CONCLUSION

The results of the investigation highlight the value of analysis of the fabric of upstanding historic walls in an urban context. The fragmentary remains of past streetscapes is present everywhere in Irish historic towns and unfortunately the value of such structures is rarely noted and even less frequently recorded, analysed and protected. Combining this area of study with documentary and cartographic research can provide a fascinating insight into urban morphology. This taken together with excavation can link the past with the present in what is, in effect, a continuing story of the origins and development of an urban area.

The investigation has identified the fragmentary remains of a substantial and, indeed, significant building from the more recent history of Limerick’s development as an urban entity. This grand design, albeit a failure, demonstrates an early attempt by a wealthy family to ease the suffering of the lower echelons of society in 19th century Limerick, a stark reminder of the social divisions rife in Irish society at that time and an early example of social conscience.
Fig. 4 Barrington’s Hostel, Limerick:
Site location and modern street layout overlaying the 1872 OS Map, showing location of the Monte Piété and test trenches.
Fig. 5 Barrington's Hostel, Limerick: Features in trenches 1 and 2.

Fig. 6 Barrington's Hostel, Limerick: Viewing of site facing SE, 2006.