Skeleton sample may be sent to Miami for tests

Six skeletons found in Nicholas Street dig to be preserved on site

Anne Sheridan

Samples from skeletons which could date back to the Siege of Limerick may be flown to Miami shortly for testing to determine when they were interred.

The remains, which archaeologists believe could date from the time of the Famine or back to medieval Limerick, were discovered on Friday last during construction work on Nicholas Street.

Aegis Archaeology, a private company based on Nicholas Street, had been supervising the dig, in case any historical finds were discovered during the excavation.

Frank Coyne, the director of Aegis Archaeology, said small samples taken from the site will now be sent for radio-carbon testing in either Queen's University in Belfast, or to the Beta Analytic laboratory in Miami, Florida, the world's largest professional radiocarbon dating laboratory. The results are expected back in the autumn, he said.

The remains were found by council workers who were clearing a site by the historic Widow Alms houses to allow for a new access route from the walkway along the river up to the redeveloped King John's Castle.

"The six burials were found in a small area quite high up in the ground, so they're not in excellent condition. We don't want to expose them too much due to weather deterioration, but a sample has been taken for carbon dating. We will leave them in the ground and make sure they're safely covered. Best practice is to get as much information from as little intervention as possible. They could date from any period in Limerick history from the medieval period onwards," said Mr Coyne.

He said the radio-carbon dating is a complicated process, which generally costs in the region of €500, and the results are believed to be 95% accurate.

Linda Lynch, a freelance osteoarchaeologist from Glin, who specialises in examining human bones, was drafted in to help determine the age of the remains.

"There is a medieval church on maps in the area dating back to the 13th century and it's thought there was a graveyard attached. The human bones were discovered in a disarticulated state and there were a lot of butchered animal bones too. We found leg bones, arm bones, which have been disturbed through the years."

The archaeological team on site contacted the gardai, National Museum of Ireland, and the National Monument Service as per protocol.

The bones were discovered adjacent to the front doors of the former Widow Alms Houses built for impoverished widows in 1691. The dwellings were originally built to house the widows of soldiers from the nearby King John's Castle and renovated by the city council in 1993. The council expects that the development works on Nicholas Street will proceed shortly.