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A Pipeline Trench at Cahir Castle

by Patrick Holland

Tipperary South Riding County Council began the first phase in providing a new sewerage and drainage scheme for Cahir in late 1985. This work, undertaken by P. O'Brien, Contractors Ltd., Cahir, with Nicholas O'Dwyer and Partners as consulting engineers, included the excavation of a pipeline trench (Fig. 1) through the modern car-park to the east of the castle, across the eastern course of the river at a point where it is narrowed by a mill-race, and then northwards to the bank of the main course, skirting the south and western walls of the outer ward in the area known as the 'Inch' field.

The author, Curator of Tipperary S.R. Museum, undertook to observe the work on behalf of the Council and at the request of the National Parks and Monuments Branch of the Office of Public Works. No excavation or detailed examination took place, since nothing of major archaeological significance was encountered.

On Wednesday 25 September, 1985 the route of the pipeline was laid out and, at the author's request, eight trial trenches were dug along the c 170m of routeway, at intervals of roughly 20m. No structures or archaeologically significant features were encountered; the only feature noted is described below.

The pipeline trench, which was c 1m wide and which varied in depth from c 1.5m close to the bank of the main river course, rising to c 1m close to the river-crossing to the south-east of the castle, was dug in the centre of a 9m-wide strip of cleared topsoil. The pipes were laid soon after the trench was dug; backfilling followed immediately, being completed late on Saturday, 28 September. With the exception of a section close to the south-western corner of the castle, the entire of the excavation of the trench was observed by the author.

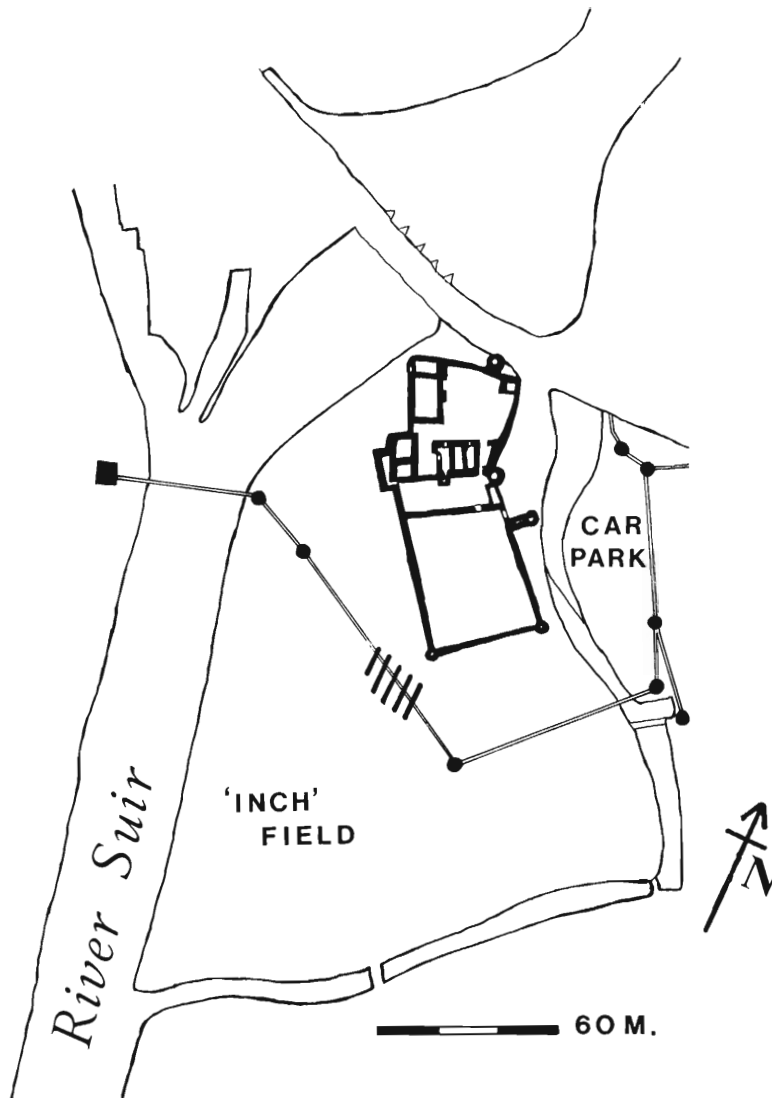
No features were observed in the stripping of the topsoil, although there were a few stray finds of modern pottery sherds and glass fragments. The test trenches and the pipeline trench all showed a generally uniform section, with first a layer of topsoil c 25cm thick, then a thick (c 70cm in places) layer of a heavy clay-like soil, light brown in colour and almost totally stone-free apart from very small charcoal-like flecks of rotten stone, overlying an orange-brown leached layer of the same soil lying on the underlying gravel subsoil.

This profile changed slightly close to the river on the north-west, where there was a greater depth of the light-brown clay layer with the gravel being replaced by waterlogged clay at a depth of c 1.8m. The test trench closest to the river produced heavy black mud, with fragments of driftwood below the clay. As with the topsoil, some late pieces of pottery, clay pipes, 'clay pigeons' and the like, were found in the light brown clay-like layer along the pipeline route.

One feature of note was recorded. An area or layer of rubble was present immediately to the south-west of the south-western turret of the outer ward (Fig. 1). It was noted in both the test pit, which was c 18m from the base of the turret, and also along several metres of the pipeline, which was on a different alignment, so it would appear to be a substantial deposit.

It consisted of loosely packed rubble, mostly small angular stones with some larger ones, in a dark brown soil with air spaces. Where it was exposed in a test trench it appeared as a tapering layer which was thickest in the south, c 70cm, resting on the underlying leached layer, or perhaps on the gravel below it, and tapering upwards in the section to the north, where it ended at a point only 40 cm from the grass level.





The route of the pipeline trench around Cahir Castle, with the area in which the rubble was encountered indicated by cross-hatching.

This might indicate that the rubble was dumped into a hollow in the field or a wide pit dug to receive it. Brick fragments and flecks of mortar were noted among the rubble, and two large clenched nails, some animal bones and a sherd of Merida-Type Ware, a fine red unglazed micaceous pottery from Spain, dating to any time between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries (Hurst et al. 1986, 69) were also found there.¹ These, together with two early modern pottery sherds from the topsoil and light brown layer respectively, are now in the County Museum's collections (Reg. Nos. 1985:53-7). These finds would seem to indicate a late date for the rubble layer.

It is somewhat surprising that little of archaeological interest was found so close to a major castle though, of course, conditions for the observation and recording of features were not ideal. It should be noted, however, that the area floods periodically.

The *Pacata Hibernia* view of the 1599 siege (reproduced in the present guidebook, Wheeler, n.d.,4,) as well as that by Johnson (1975, plate 5) show the area as wooded with plashing or a breastwork of wicker. A military plan of the siege (*ibid.* plate 6) divides the 'Inch' field into three parts, described as a garden, orchard and a grove (*ibid.* 110) without any sign of large masonry structures. Some cabins are seen on the *Pacata Hibernia* view, and a rectangular object appears on the military plan.

A contemporary narrative of the 1599 siege described the orchard as "intrenched by the river and strongly plashed within" (Anon., 1902, 71). Any further works in the area should be monitored, and preferably preceded by an excavation whose aims would include the more definite dating and assessment of the rubble layers noted above, as well as looking for traces of the 1599 siegeworks².

The pipeline trench in the car-park, immediately to the east of the castle, was also examined by the author, but revealed only layers of dry rubble fill with modern refuse. Both the *Pacata Hibernia* illustration and the military plan show the eastern branch of the river as much wider than at present. So does the first edition O.S. 1:10,560 map of 1840, which shows a mill with sluice gate. While parts of the latter remain, nearly all of the mill buildings were demolished a few years later (Walsh, 1988,2) and the river, or mill pond, was filled in and narrowed.

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FOOTNOTES

1. In this case the sherd's red colour indicates a date at the end of the date range.
2. Finds of a wooden stake with two pegholes and pegs and some animal bones were recovered by the contractor's staff during the excavation for the river crossing to the west of the castle and are now in Tipperary (S.R.) County Museum's collections (1985:352-5). Their date and significance are yet unknown.

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