



Evaluation/Monitoring Report No. 186

Castle Curlews
County Tyrone

LICENCE NO.: AE/07/195

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Excavation at Castle Curlews, Co. Tyrone

AE/07/195

CAF Monitoring report No. 186

Introduction

The Centre for Archaeological Fieldwork was requested by Claire Foley of the Environment and Heritage Service to carry out a small excavation at Castle Curlews (SMR Tyr:33:09) to provide structural information to assist conservation work there. A single trench 1.5m by 2.5m was excavated, in two stages, at the north side of the fireplace in the northwest wall of the building. Initially a 1m by 2.5m trench was excavated between 26th September and the 5th October. This trench was widened to 1.5m and the excavation completed between 19th and 21st October. Remains of the stonework projecting from the wall of the castle to attach to the fireplace jamb, called tusker stones, were detected as 19th and 20th century rubble and earth collapse layers were removed. At a depth of approximately 1.4m there was a large dressed stone which appeared to be in its original position and although further excavation was impossible because of the depth of the excavation relative to the trench size, it is a suitable base for the reconstruction of the fireplace jamb.

Location

Castle Curlews is located in Kirlish Townland, close to the village of Drumquin, Co. Tyrone (Grid Ref. H31967580) (Figure 1). The castle is sited on the summit of a hill at an altitude of approximately 100m OD. The current land use is pasture. Although the land in the immediate environment of the castle appears fertile and well drained there are significant areas of bog to be found within 500m of the site in all directions

Background

Castle Curlews was built by Sir John Davies, Attorney general for Ireland during the reign of King James I. Davies was born in 1569 and despite lowly birth he became distinguished at court and the bar and was an accomplished poet.

Davies was educated at Winchester and Queen's College, Oxford, although he may never have graduated, and by 1590 was called to the bar (Pawlisch 1985, 15-6). During these years he became a well known poet (*ibid*, 17) and it is likely that his notoriety in this respect

smoothed his path to high office (*ibid*, 22). In the 1590s he also became a figure at the court of Queen Elizabeth. During an official visit, as part of the royal party, to the christening of Prince Henry of Scotland in 1594, he made the acquaintance of King James (*ibid*) and in 1602, shortly after James' ascension to the throne of England and Ireland, Davies was made Solicitor General of Ireland. In 1603 he was knighted and made Attorney General of Ireland a post he held until 1619.

He was granted lands in Ireland, including 2000 acres in Co. Tyrone, one thousand acres at Gravetagh, and one thousand acres at Clonaghmore where he built Castle Curlews (Hill 1877, 271) . The construction, or intended construction of a house at Castle Curlews is mentioned in the Carew Mss for July 1611,

“Precinct of Omye....Sir John Davies, Kt., the Kings Attorney General 2000 acres, possession taken by his agent Will Bradley, who is preparing materials for building a stone house or castle with a bawn which materials will be ready before Allhallowtide next; at this instant the walls of the castle are 22 foot high, and in breadth between the walls 19 foot and in length 36 foot. Already four fee farmers, one leaseholder and a carpenter with their families are ready to be estated on portions which they could not receive until now, for that five quarters of the best of the lands were in controversy and some of it not yet cleared. The said Sir John intends to finish his works next spring and to plant and people his lands according to the articles.” (Brewer and Bullen 1873, 224)

This passage may be interpreted in a number of ways. It may either indicate that there is ongoing work at Castle Curlews and that initial work has been completed with further work being planned, or that there was a pre-existing structure being adapted or added to.

The measurements quoted by Carew do not tally with the main surviving structural elements at Castle Curlews, although the more collapsed structure, not adequately surveyed by Waterman, to the east of the main structure may tally with the measurements in the Carew Mss. In the light of this it seems possible that Davies' house at Castle Curlews is an adaptation of, and an addition to, an older structure, in all likelihood a tower house.

The building is again mentioned in Pynnar's survey of 1619 which describes it, and his second house Castle Dirge (Castlederg) as “strong and fair castles of lime and stone but no bawn” (Brewer and Bullen 1873, 411). This may suggest, given the apparent presence of an overgrown portion of a flanker in the field wall to the south east of the house, that the bawn

was added after that date. Although the inaccuracy of Pynnar's survey has been noted for other sites (Waterman 1960, 92).

Davies died in 1626 leaving his daughter his sole heir. She married the Earl of Huntingdon but it is not known if she took possession of her Irish properties.

Historical sources seem silent about Castle Curlews after this. It is likely that the building would have been affected by the events of 1641 although in what way is uncertain. A witness to the events of 1641 describes all the forts and towns of the English and Scottish in Tyrone as being sacked by the rebels (Hickson 1884, 192) although there is also evidence that Castlederg was being held successfully against Phelim O'Neill by the English (*ibid*, 230-1,) which may suggest either that the reports of destruction in Tyrone were exaggerated or that Castlederg may have become a citadel with a possible retreat from other, less strongly defended, locations.

The Surviving Structure

A fragment of two stories of the original structure survive with a bay window, partially, surviving to the south-east of the building and a gap for an apparent bay window at the south west and a possible further bay window at the north west. There are three fireplaces surviving within the structure, one to the east, one to the west and one to the south. The current ground floor in the structure is probably similar to the level of the original wooden floor in the interior of the house but there appears to have been a basement beneath the wooden floor which is now filled with collapsed rubble and masonry from the walls.

To the north east of this surviving block are large amounts of collapsed masonry which may indicate that there was a, now unrecognisable, additional wing attached to this building.

There are probable traces of a flanker and bawn wall surrounding the castle.

Reason for excavation

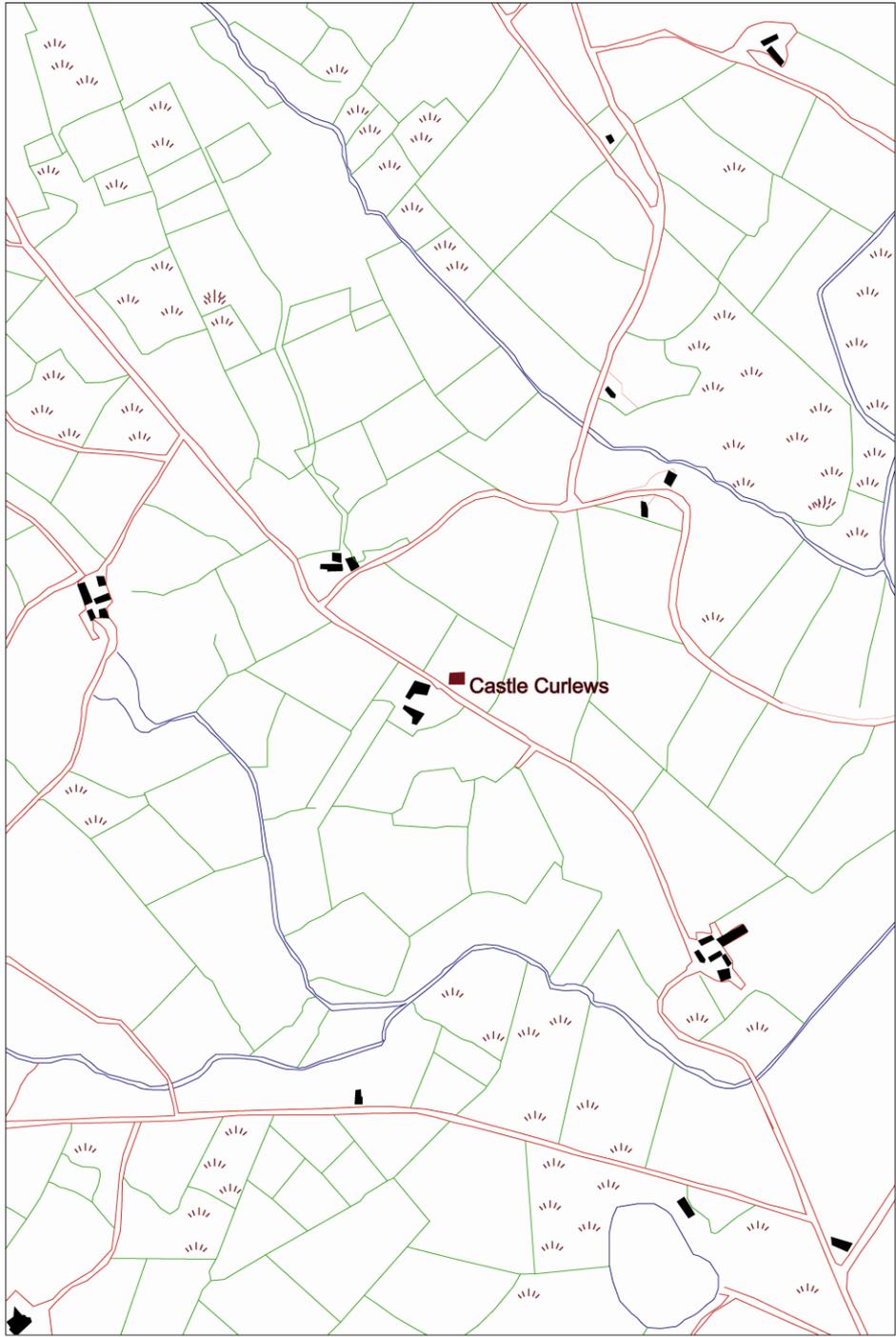
As part of the ongoing conservation at Castle Curlews it is necessary to replace stonework, now missing, which would have supported the chimney breast. Before this stonework can be inserted it is essential to find whether there is suitable walling or buttressing upon which it can be constructed. Additionally the excavation provided an opportunity to locate strata associated with the occupation of the house. Unfortunately it was not possible to complete the excavation of the site to subsoil because of health and safety considerations and consequently original occupation material was not detected.

Research strategy

A single trench 1.5m by 2m was excavated to the southeast of the likely buttress point of the northwest side of the fireplace (Figure 2). The primary aim of this trench was to find suitable stonework to support new buttressing for the fireplace.

Archaeological features were recorded using the standard context recording method augmented by a site diary. Individual features were planned (Scale 1:20 or 1:10 where appropriate) and photographed, both prior to, and following, excavation.

Because of the location of the trench beneath a large cracked fireplace lintel, and the possibility of not just the collapse of the lintel but the several metres of masonry above it, an iron supporting structure was erected by the EHS to allow work to proceed safely.



Key

-  Field Boundary
-  River / stream
-  Road
-  Bog

Figure 1: Location map showing position of Castle Curlews

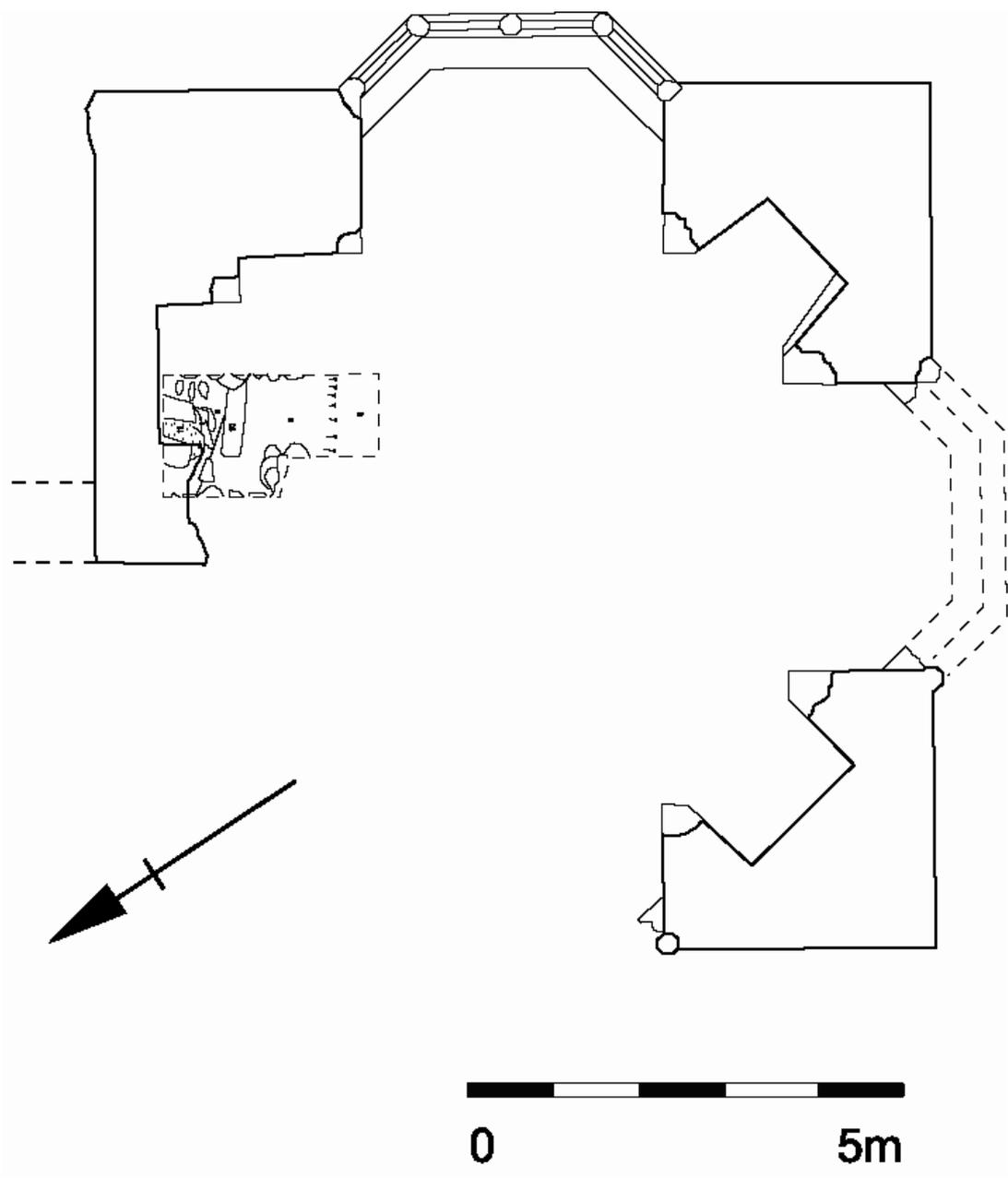


Figure 2: Plan of Castle Curlew showing location of excavation trench (adapted from Waterman 1960)

The excavation

A trench 1.5m southeast-northwest by 2.0m northeast-southwest was excavated in the northern corner of the fireplace inserted into the northwest wall of the building. The topsoil (Context 1) was a brown loam, which varied from 5cm to 30cm thick. On the northwest side of the trench there was a lens of mortar rich loam (Context 2) which underlay the topsoil. Both of these layers overlay a layer composed of large rounded and angular stones surrounded by loose gritty loam but with considerable voiding (Context 5). The considerable voids between the stones gave the impression that this layer was the result of quite recent collapse of a substantial portion of the monument. Beneath Context 5 was a layer of stones and mortar (Context 3) which was up to 15cm thick. This layer appears to represent the collapse of an occasional stone from the walls coupled with flecks of collapsed mortar and humic build-up in the interior of the building. Context 3 overlay Context 4 a much firmer layer composed of sandy soil, medium sized rounded stones and quite a lot of creamy mortar which was up to approximately 30cm thick. Like Context 3 this layer appears to have been the result of a gradual build-up of humic material and collapse of small amounts of material from the walls. The absence of stones from the south west end of the excavated area in Context 4 suggests that there were no significant collapses of masonry from the castle walls during the deposition of the strata. Located beneath Context 4 was a layer of loam and mortar (Context 6) which was up to 50cm thick. There were within this layer quite a few ill sorted stones varying in size from boulder with diameters in excess of 40cm to small fist sized stones. These stones were variously rounded to sub angular and evenly spread throughout the layer, in contrast to Contexts 3 and 4 where the stones were concentrated closest to the northeast wall of the castle. This is indicative, as with Context 5, of the collapse of a large chunk of masonry in a single event rather than a gradual accumulation of occasional stones fallen from the nearest castle wall. The lack of voiding within this layer suggests that it is a significantly older layer than the other strata suggestive of a significant collapse event (Context 5). Context 6 sat above a setting of thin flat stones (Context 7) which seemed too slight to be load bearing. They look in some respects like they may have been part of an attempt to roughly re-floor the building interior they did not extend over the whole of the trench but the trench is so small it could just be that the rough re-floor was irregular and patchy, or damaged in places. Context 7 sat above a mid grey to brown loam (Context 8). It for the most part contained few stones and no artefacts, although there were many more stones in the upper parts of Context 8, presumably settling from the much more stony layer (Context 6) immediately above it. Context 8 was at least 50cm thick and was not completely excavated. Context 8 was above the dressed stone (Context 10) which is likely to have been part of the original fireplace jamb and attached to the tusker stones (11) protruding from the castle wall.

The tusker stones (Context 11) appeared to be sitting on the yellow sandy clay subsoil (Context 9). It was less certain whether the dressed stone (Context 10) sat upon subsoil or on

another dressed stone as excavation had to be halted at this point because of health and safety considerations.

Due to the depth of the trench (1.4m) it was not considered safe or convenient to continue excavation without significantly enlarging the trench and, if the excavation deepened further still to step or shore the trench sides. As the main objective of the excavation, the location of a suitable base upon which to reconstruct the fireplace jamb had been achieved with the finding of the dressed stone (Context 10) it was decided to cease excavation at this point.

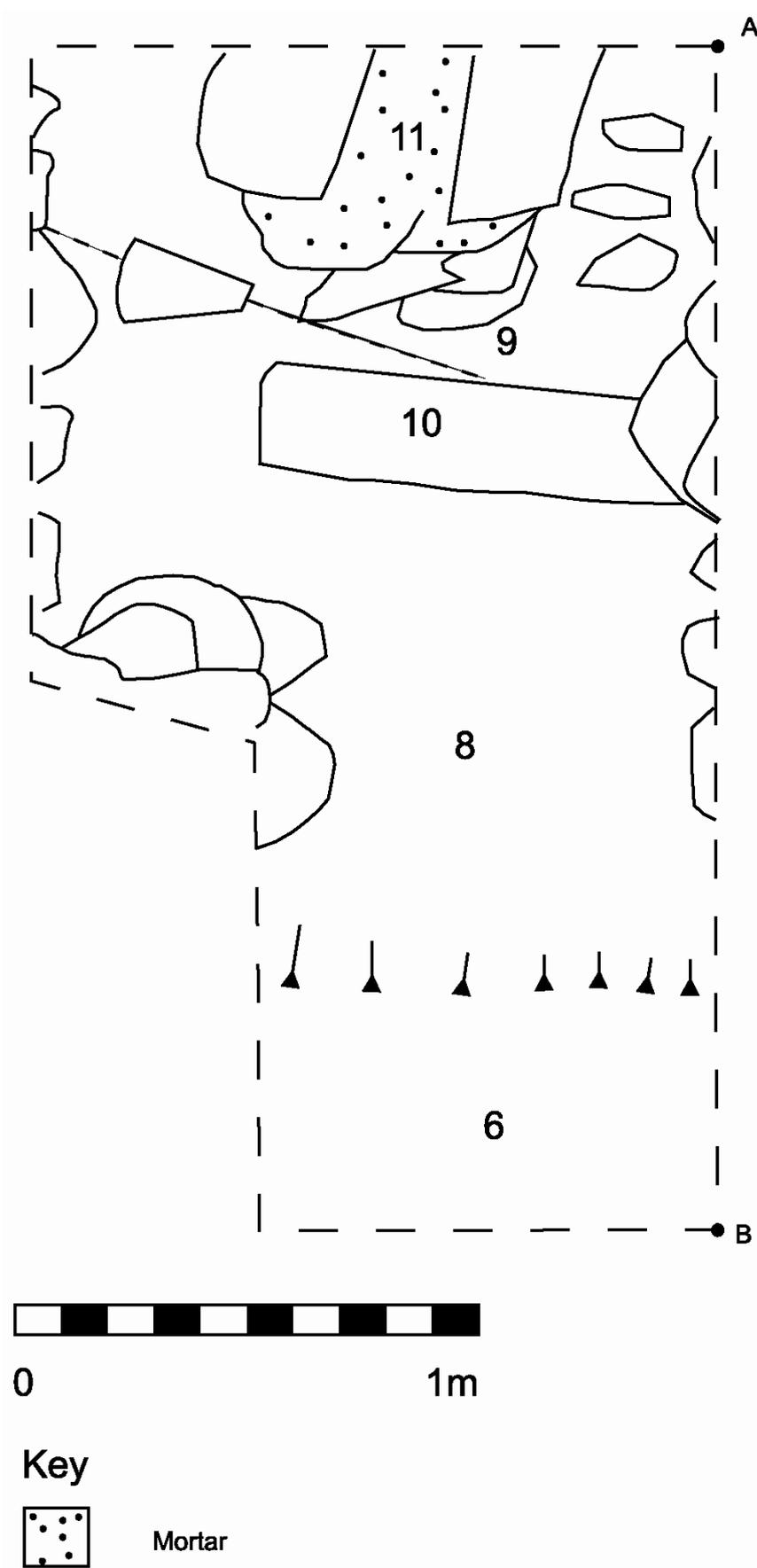


Figure 3: Plan of excavated trench

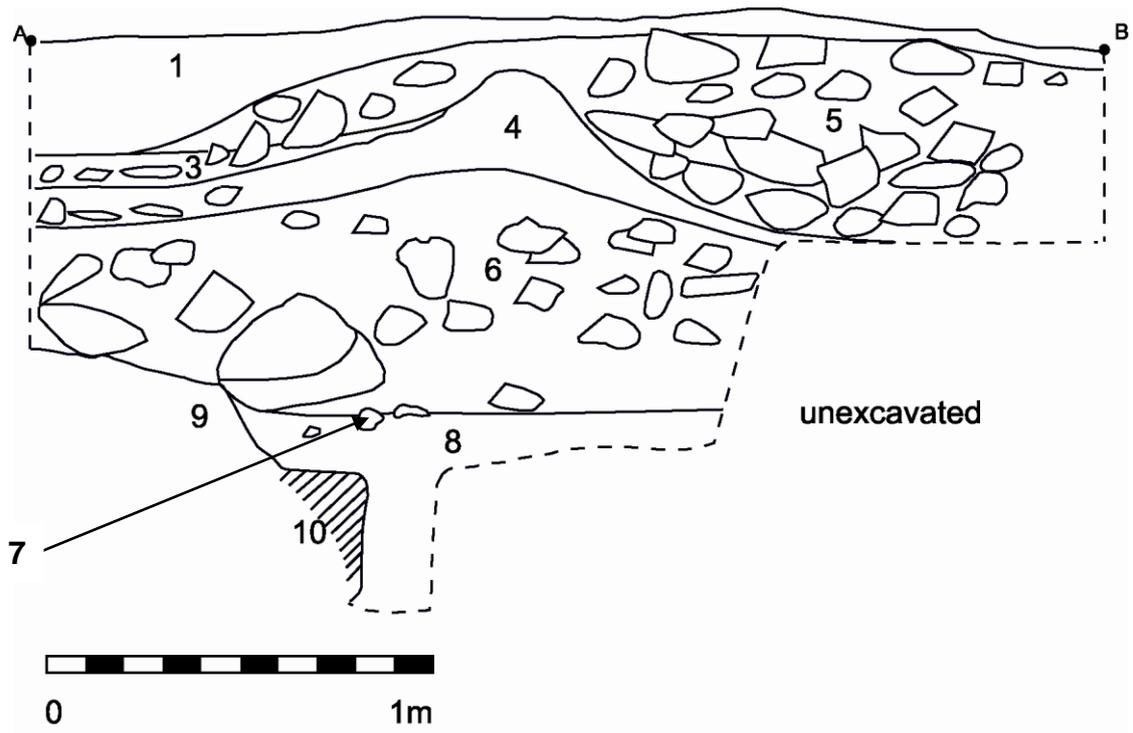


Figure 4: Section of excavated trench



Photo 1: excavated Trench at Castle Curlews showing dressed stone Context 10 and Tusker stones which would originally have joined fireplace to wall

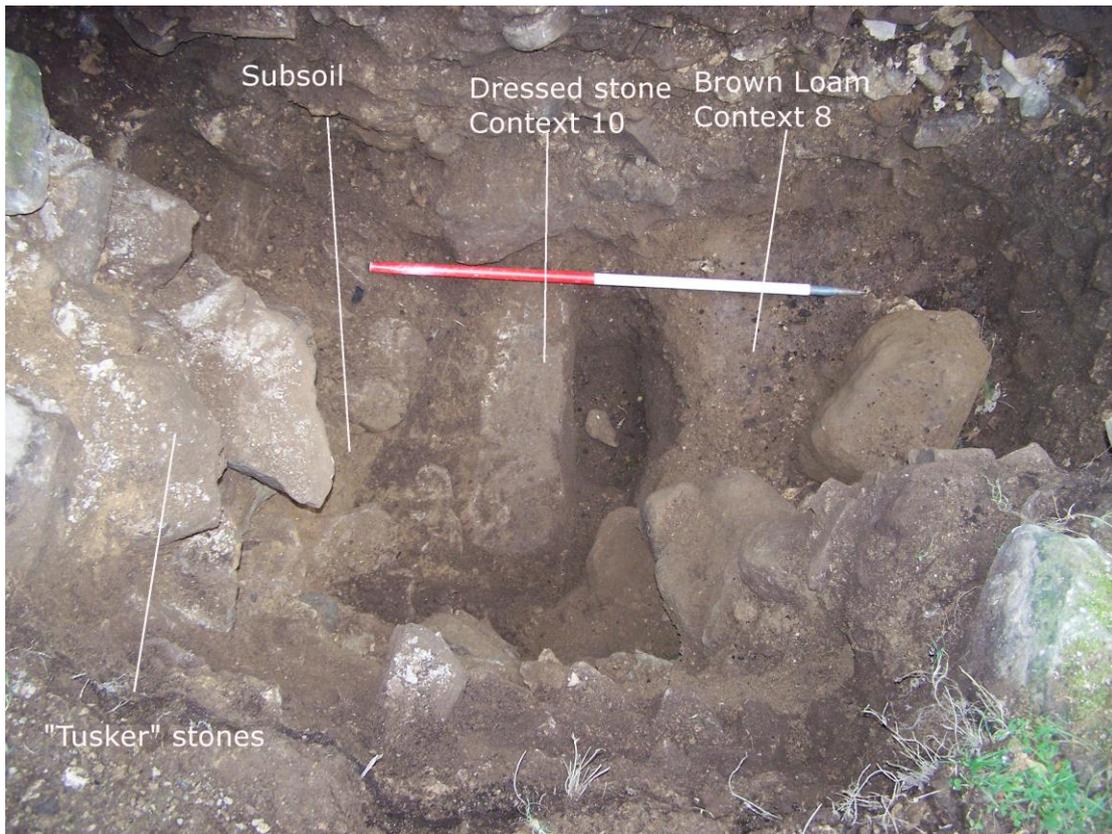


Photo 2: Photo showing dressed stone Context and stratigraphically later loam Context 8. Tusker stones and subsoil are also visible



Photo 3: View of trench under excavation, showing iron masonry supports

Artefacts

There were few artefacts found during the excavation. One piece of a cream stoneware bottle of nineteenth or early twentieth century date was found in Context 3 as were five sherds of bottle glass, three bearing slight patination but two without obvious traces of patina. One handmade iron nail and a “u” shaped piece of iron were also found in Context 3.

Discussion

The dressed stone (Context 10) appears likely to have been part of the fireplace jamb. Although it was impossible to fully excavate around this stone because of the health and safety considerations mentioned above it seems to be well set.

The sequence of build-up of strata revealed by the excavation reveals something of the likely later history of the building. The lowest strata found during the excavation (Context 8) was a loam with no mortar and few stones within it. It is clearly a period when there was humic material building up within the building but perhaps before the building had started to collapse. It is possible that this could represent a period after the use of the building as a house, but while it was still roofed, when it is likely to have been used for agricultural purposes, such as animal shelter. There is some evidence for a deposit of thin flat stones (Context 7), fairly carefully laid on to the surface of Context 8. These stones may have been the result of an attempt to re-floor the interior of the castle. However this is not an indication of an attempt to in any way restore the house to its former condition, the floor was rather an attempt to tidy up a mucky deep loam deposit and make it a cleaner surface to work upon or store equipment or animals. The significance of this deposit is that if Context 7 is part of a floor of a bier or the like it strongly suggests that it was laid while the roof was still on the building implying that the house survived the 1641 rebellion relatively intact. This raises the possibility of later seventeenth century, or even eighteenth century, occupation at the site before it's utilisation as an agricultural building.

The strata (Context 6) located immediately above (Context 7) is rich in mortar and has within it many large stones. It is much more clearly a collapse / destruction layer. The absence of any dressed stones from this layer, and the an absence of the dressed stones from the fireplace jamb itself, is suggestive of stone having been robbed for the purposes of construction, possibly for use in the adjoining farm which has a number of stone built buildings. It is difficult to accurately date this collapse but the few finds recovered from this trench suggest collapse may have occurred in or before the nineteenth century. Contexts 4 and 3, with more occasional stones and bands of mortar suggest more gradual collapse. Context 5 however is different with lots of large stones, with significant voids between them and is suggestive of another episode of significant collapse, although this time a much more

recent one. Not only does its stratigraphic location above Context 3, which dated to the late 19th or early 20th century, indicate that it could have been a twentieth century episode of collapse but the voiding within it suggests that earth from the topsoil layer above it has not had time to percolate down and fill the gaps between the stones, as in Context 6. The absence of dressed stone from this layer, may also suggest that the best stones were robbed for construction elsewhere.

Conclusions

The excavation at Castle Curlews succeeded in its primary objective of finding stonework suitable for basing the fireplace jamb reconstruction. It unfortunately failed to locate, because of the difficulties of safely excavating a small, deep trench in a historic building, original occupation strata. However the excavation was able to shed light on the post-abandonment history of the castle, tentatively suggesting a period of pre-collapse use for a non domestic, possibly agricultural, purpose. This was followed by a phase of significant collapse, with a subsequent period of gradual decay, before a second period of significant, and possibly quite recent, collapse. The absence of jamb stones from the fireplace and the lack of dressed stones from these collapse layers suggests that stone was taken from these layers for use in buildings elsewhere raising the possibility that parts of the castle may have been deliberately demolished for its stone.

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Appendix 1 Context Log

<i>Context Number</i>	<i>Description</i>
1	Brown loam topsoil
2	Mortar rich loam
3	Layer of small stones and mortar
4	Layer of firm, sandy soil, medium sized rounded stones and quite a lot of creamy mortar
5	Layer of large rounded stones with loam filling gaps between them
6	Layer of brown sandy loam with some large stones
7	A number of thin flat stones set within Context 8, immediately above the large dressed stone (Context 10)stone
8	A layer of soft grey brown loam with some small stones
9	Yellow sand subsoil
10	Large dressed stone possibly in-situ
11	Tusker stones protruding from castle wall

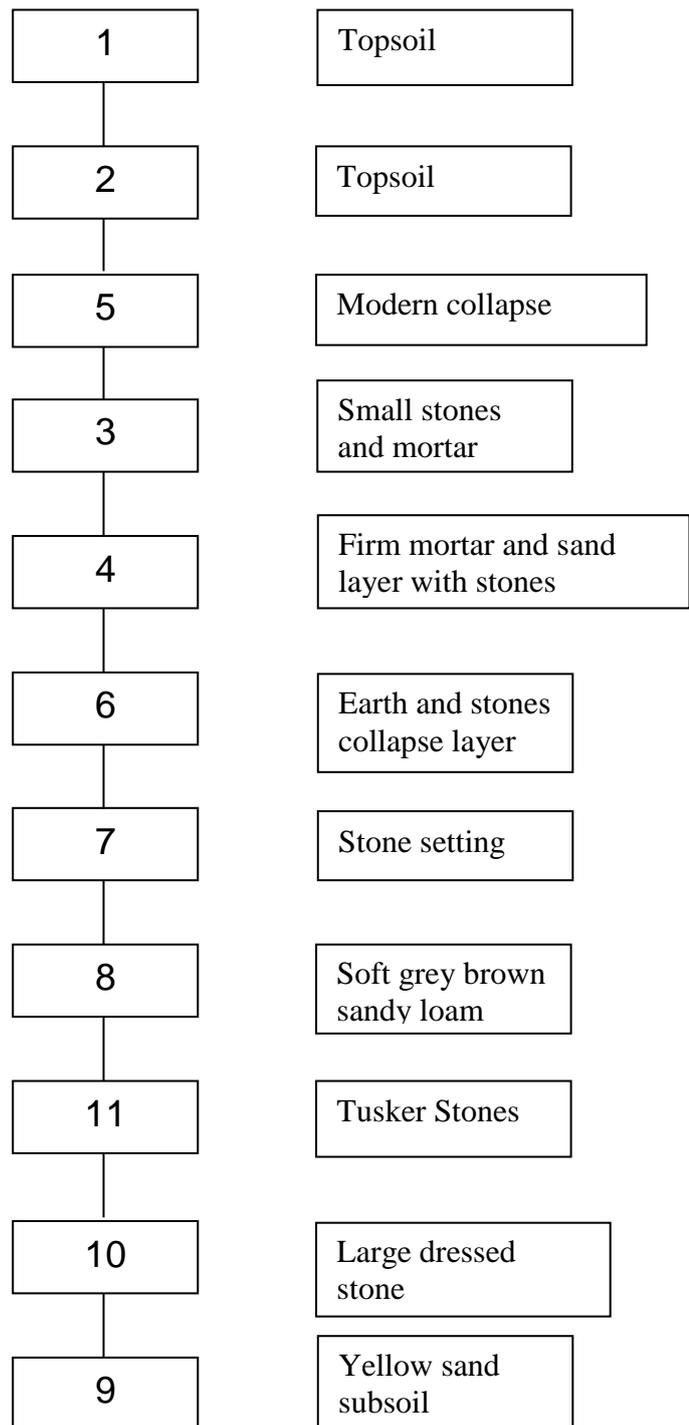


Photo Set	Photo Number	Description
1	1	View of Trench from southeast after removal of scraw and topsoil showing mortar rich layer Context 2 and layer of large stones and soil Context 5.
1	2	View of Trench from southeast after removal of scraw and topsoil showing mortar rich layer Context 2 and layer of large stones and soil Context 5.
1	3	View of Trench from southeast after removal of scraw and topsoil showing mortar rich layer Context 2 and layer of large stones and soil Context 5.
1	4	View of Trench from south after removal of scraw and topsoil showing mortar rich layer Context 2 and layer of large stones and soil Context 5.
1	5	View of Trench from south after removal of scraw and topsoil showing mortar rich layer Context 2 and layer of large stones and soil Context 5.
1	6	View of Trench from southwest after removal of scraw and topsoil showing mortar rich layer Context 2 and layer of large stones and soil Context 5.
1	7	View of Trench from the west showing mortar and stone layer Context 4 and large stones and earth layer, Context 6.
1	8	View of Trench from the west showing mortar and stone layer Context 4 and large stones and earth layer, Context 6.
1	9	View of Trench from the west showing mortar and stone layer Context 4 and large stones and earth layer, Context 6.
1	10	View of Trench from above showing Context 6 under excavation
1	11	View of Trench from above showing Context 6 under excavation
1	12	View of Trench from above showing Context 6 under excavation
1	13	View of Trench from southwest showing flat "flooring" stones, Context 7 sitting on grey brown loam Context 8.
1	14	View of Trench from southwest showing flat "flooring" stones, Context 7 sitting on grey brown loam Context 8.
1	15	View of Trench from southwest showing flat "flooring" stones, Context 7 sitting on grey brown loam Context 8.
1	16	View of Trench from southwest showing flat "flooring" stones, Context 7 sitting on grey brown loam Context 8.
1	17	View of southeast facing section of trench

1	18	View of southeast facing section of trench
1	19	View of southeast facing section of trench
1	20	View of southeast facing section of trench
1	21	View of southeast facing section of trench
1	22	View of southeast facing section of trench
1	23	View of southeast facing section of trench
1	24	View of Dressed stone Context 10 and base of Context 7 above Context 8, from southeast.
1	25	View of Dressed stone Context 10 and base of Context 7 above Context 8, from southwest.
1	26	View of Dressed stone Context 10 and base of Context 7 above Context 8, from southwest.
1	27	View of Dressed stone Context 10 and base of Context 7 above Context 8, from southwest.
1	28	View of Dressed stone Context 10 sort loam Context 8, from southwest.
1	29	View of Dressed stone Context 10 sort loam Context 8, from southwest.
1	30	View of Dressed stone Context 10 sort loam Context 8, from above.
1	31	View of Dressed stone Context 10 sort loam Context 8, from southwest.
1	32	View of Dressed stone Context 10 sort loam Context 8, from southwest.
1	33	View of Dressed stone Context 10 sort loam Context 8, from southeast.
1	34	View of Dressed stone Context 10 sort loam Context 8, from southeast.
1	35	View of trench from southeast showing position of fireplace and support.
1	36	View of trench from southeast showing position of fireplace and support.
2	1	View of Trench from south showing "Tusker stones " Context 11
2	2	View of Trench from south showing "Tusker stones " Context 11
2	3	View of Trench from south showing dressed stone Context 10
2	4	View of Trench from south showing dressed stone Context 10
2	5	View of Trench from south showing dressed stone Context 10
2	6	View of Trench from south showing dressed stone Context 10
2	7	View of Trench from south showing dressed stone Context 10
2	8	View of Trench from south showing dressed stone Context 10

2	9	View of west section of the Trench
2	10	View of west section of the Trench
2	11	View of west section of the Trench (detail)
2	12	View of west section of the Trench showing "Tusker stones" and dressed stone
2	13	View of fireplace steel prop
2	14	Elevation view of the inner north wall of the building
2	15	Elevation view of the inner north wall of the building
2	16	View of east section of the Trench
2	17	View of east section of the Trench
2	18	View of east section of the Trench
2	19	View of east section of the Trench
2	20	View of east section of the Trench
2	21	View of east section of the Trench
2	22	View of dressed stone Context 10
2	23	View of dressed stone Context 10

Appendix 3: Photo Log

