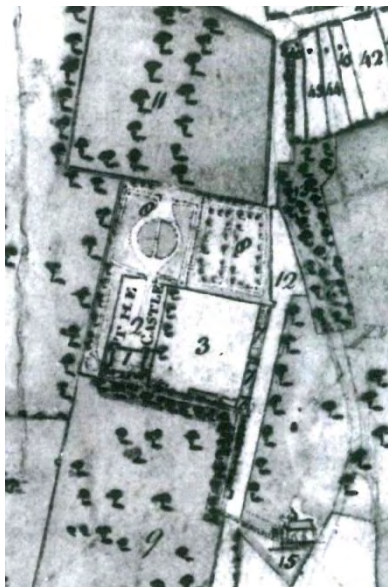


Excavations at Portumna Castle

Portumna Castle has been studied by art historians and architects alike due its innovative design that was influenced by trends originating from Britain and the Continent. However, when it came to the conservation and restoration of the castle and its grounds in the early 1970s there were questions that remained unanswered. Small-scale archaeological excavations at Portumna were carried out over a period spanning almost three decades associated with the restoration programme of the castle. The results of the excavations have revealed fascinating insights into various aspects of the castle's architecture, drainage, surrounding gardens, and early driveways.



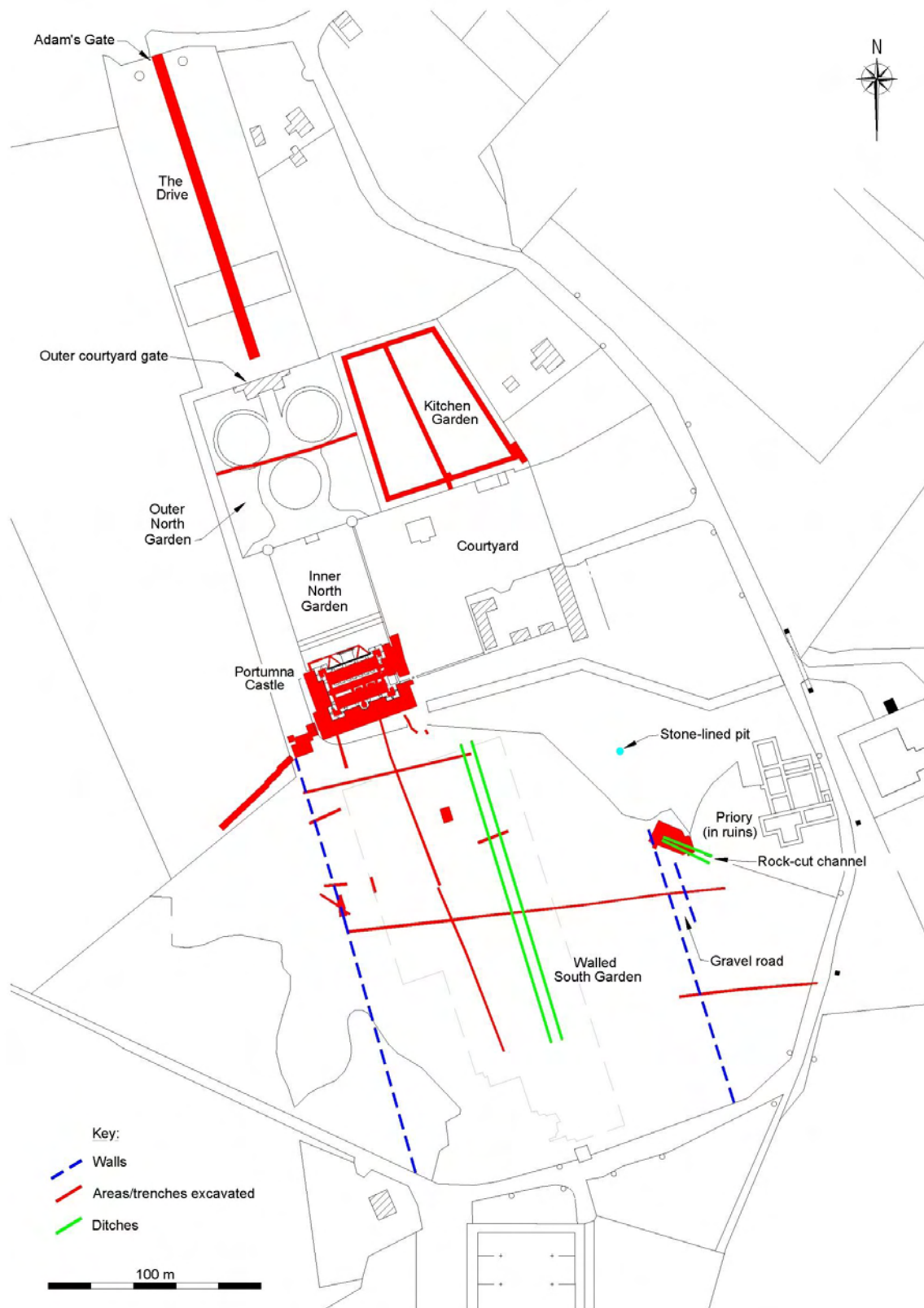
1. Detail of map by Michael Cuddehy 1791

Constructed in the early part of the seventeenth century, the castle comprised a symmetrical, seven-bay, three-storey building (c. 29m by 21m), with a basement and attached square corner towers. Stylised battlements and small curved gables with pedestals and balls adorned the roof line of the castle. The design of Portumna represented a transitional structure between fortified castle and the typical larger house of the eighteenth century, retaining elements of defence such as firing holes and bawn walls, but essentially forming a domestic residence. These types of transitional structure developed in Ireland between the end of the 16th century and the beginning of the seventeenth century (Leask 1999). Amendments and additions to the castle's interior were periodic and often reflected this changing functional dynamic. By the publication of Burke's nineteenth-century guide to *Country Houses Volume 1*, Portumna Castle was regarded as probably the finest and most sophisticated house of this period in Ireland (Bence Jones 1978). However, it was just after one phase of considerable renovations in the 1820s that the castle was unfortunately destroyed by an accidental fire and never rebuilt. Instead, the Clanricarde family adapted recently constructed stables and out-buildings, located to the east of the nearby Dominican Priory, as their residence.

The restoration of Portumna Castle began in the 1970s and research on the history of the castle which accompanied this early phase of work revealed several previously unknown plans (Newman Johnson 1988). These date to c. 1760, more than 60 years before the devastating fire of 1826, and detail the layout of the original rooms in the basement, ground floor and second floor. An estate map by Cuddehy which dated to 1791 has also been instrumental in reconstructing those parts of the castle and grounds with no extant aboveground remains. Guests to the castle, the Beauforts, wrote extensively about Portumna Castle in their travel diary, dated between 1807 and 1810, and this diary provides further information of particular interest, especially concerning the castle interior (Craig 1976).

As part of the reconstruction of the castle there have been multiple episodes of archaeological investigation. In 1979 Tom Fanning carried out some work inside the castle. A brief examination of the flooring levels and the drains in the basement was undertaken by Con Manning in 1980 and several trenches to the east and north of the castle were monitored by Heather King in 1993. A more detailed programme of archaeological works began in 1995 under the supervision of Archaeological Consultancy Services Ltd (ACS) and in consultation with Heather King. Also in 1995, Archaeological Development Services Ltd undertook a geophysical survey of the site. The archaeological excavations continued (1995–1997, 1999, 2005, and 2007) and have, to date, focused on various aspects of the castle, including the drive, the kitchen garden, the south and north gardens, drainage, and the castle exterior and interior. Several research questions were central to these various excavations and aimed to identify:

1. evidence for the construction of the castle;
2. the accuracy of the 1760 plans;
3. information regarding the internal stone-lined drains and how to stop seasonal flooding of the interior;
4. the original depth of the semi-basement
5. the accuracy of Cuddehy's Estate Map of 1791;
6. aspects of the renovations undertaken by the architect George Papworth in the 1820s;
7. evidence for the line of the driveway.



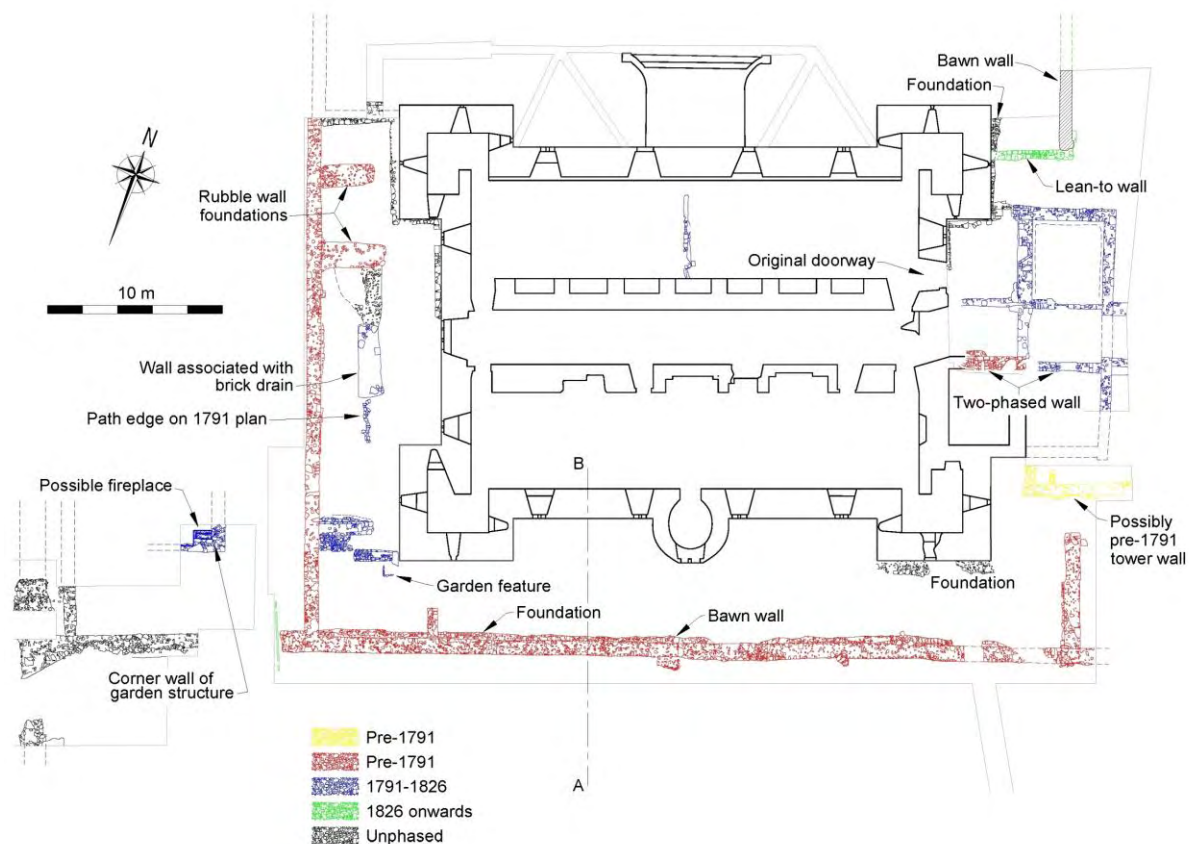
2. Plan of the castle and surrounding area showing all the excavated areas and some of the features found

The Castle pre-1791

Construction

The various excavations revealed a tantalising glimpse into the earliest stages of the construction of Portumna Castle and its associated buildings and gardens. The initial marl layer upon which the castle was built was even

identified, along with an early seventeenth-century layer of mortar which was found in the castle's interior. This layer contained traces of timber and iron slag as well as evidence for scorching which suggested that perhaps smelting had taken place here and that it was possibly even associated with the construction of the original buildings.



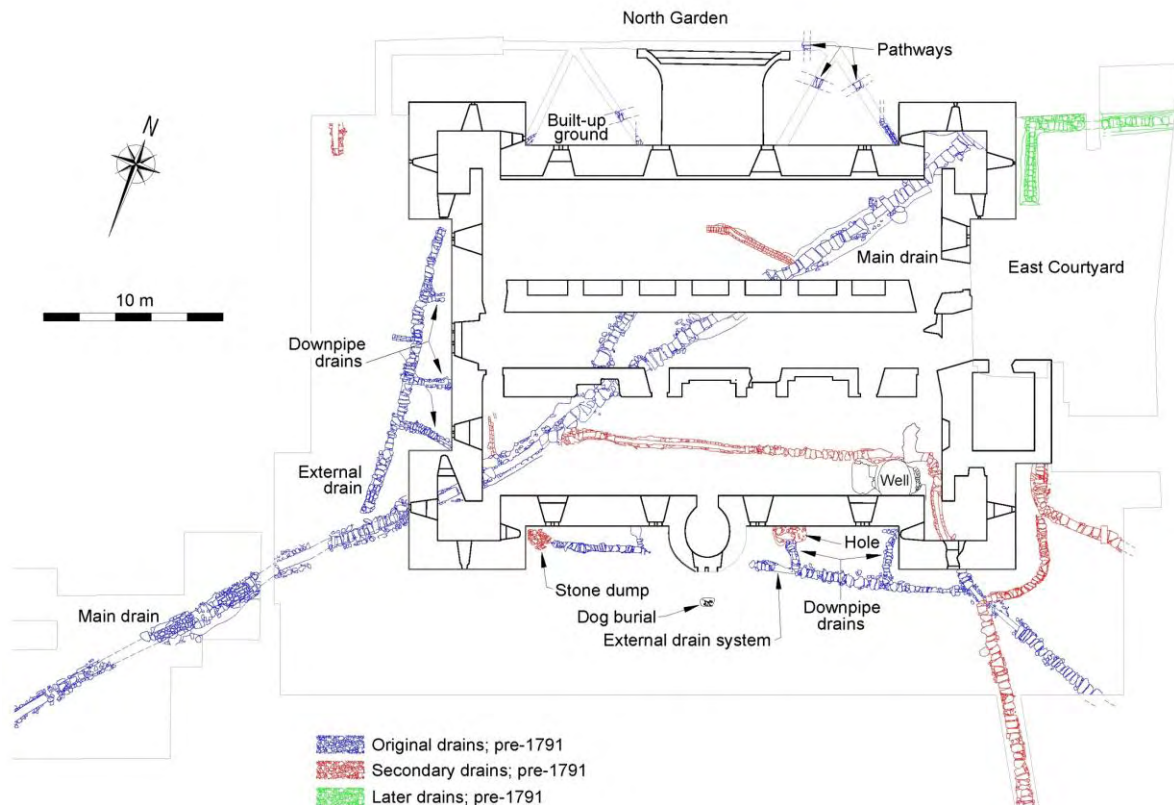
3. Area excavated around the castle showing wall foundations uncovered

Several successive layers were also excavated that comprised the original stone and mortar foundation of the castle (in the immediate area to the west of the castle) and which contained dumps of stone, mouldings and mortar and red brick fragments. Some of this material derived from the construction of the basement. These layers were associated with the construction of the castle and the continued renovations and reconstructions resulted in a fluctuating ground level. It was therefore apparent that the original ground level would have been substantially lower.

Initially, the castle was constructed with some discernable defensive attributes. Foundations for a possible tower which pre-dated the original castle drains were identified in the area to the west of the castle and represent one such defensive measure. A second important original defensive component of the castle was the bawn wall. The bawn wall was, for the most part, destroyed in the late eighteenth century, presumably when renovations were made to the castle; however, some of the east-west and north-south sections were still standing after 1791. Excavations revealed part of the foundation of the original (c. 1612) bawn wall (3m high) which was backfilled with material containing brick mouldings. The original bawn wall had gunports in places and continued past the sides of the castle, returning along the south side where the footing of part of the wall was identified. In addition to the bawn walls some other smaller garden walls were recovered, principally around the southwest corner tower. These garden walls are present on Cuddehy's 1791 map. The construction of these garden walls would have been much later than, and therefore negated the need for, the bawn wall. The shift from the defensive, thick bawn wall with its original gunports to the less substantial garden wall provides an example of the diminishing defensive status of the castle.

Other aspects of the construction of the castle and grounds revealed by the excavations included the castle's elaborate drainage system. The original castle drains were an integral part of the castle's planned layout. During the 1980s and 1990s the castle had been experiencing problems with an internal stone-lined drain – which was not functioning satisfactorily and which flooded every winter in the basement – and therefore, large-scale

excavation in the interior of the castle was designed to explore and repair this drainage system. The system centred upon the original main stone-lined drain into which smaller ancillary drains ran. The main drain ran from the northeast–southwest corners of the castle and out under the bawn walls and into the field to the west where it discharged into an open ditch. The lintels of the drain formed the base of the bawn wall which demonstrated that it was an original feature of the castle’s layout. This drain was relatively undisturbed in the north end of the castle and in the central spine, but was disturbed in the southern castle basement due to previous clearance works. It was this disturbance that had caused the drain to cease functioning successfully and the ACS excavations facilitated its repair and restoration.



4. Site plan showing the drains uncovered and the location of Fury's grave

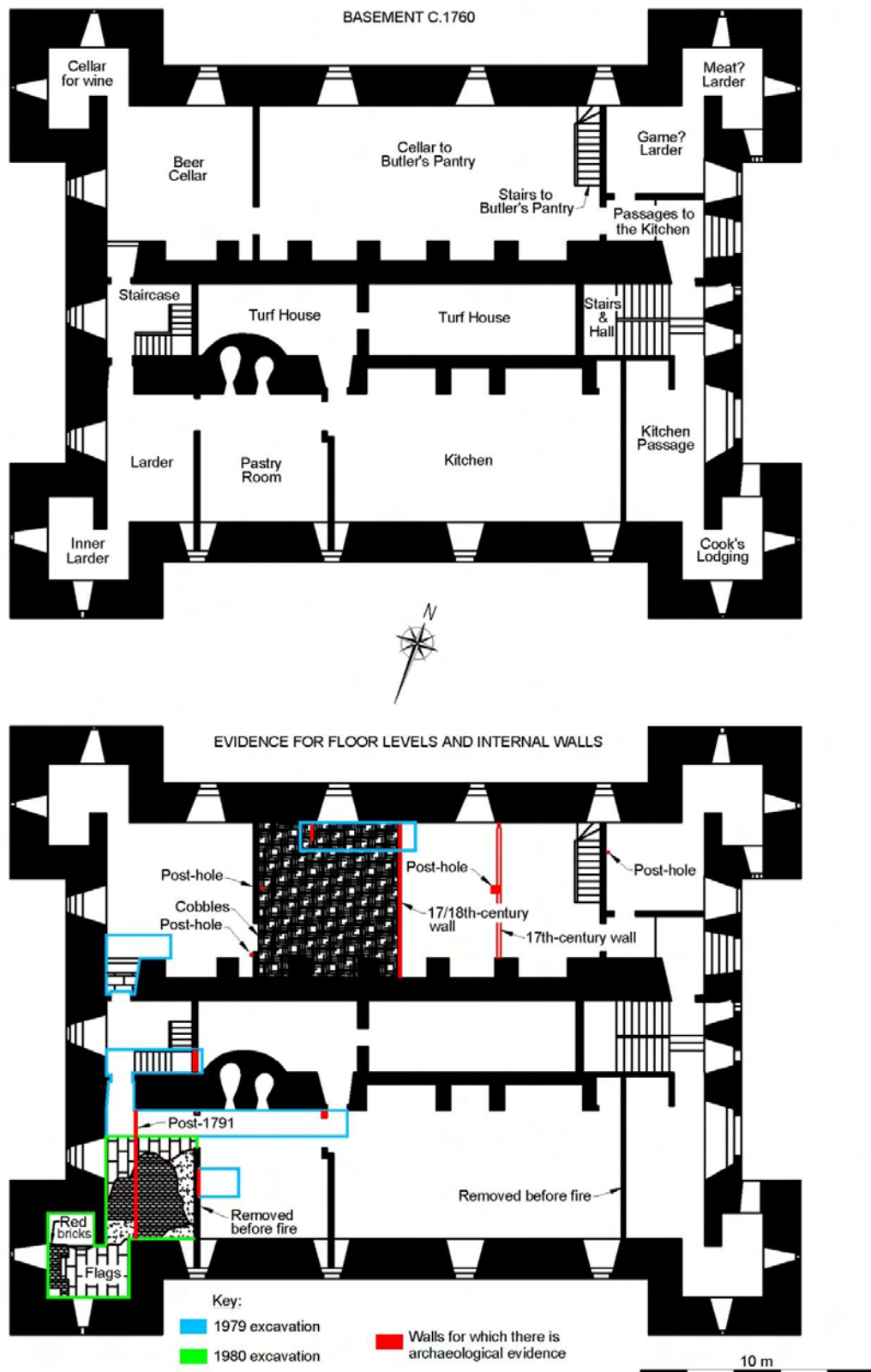


5. The castle drain where it empties into the field to the west

Some of the ancillary drains associated with the main drain were identified in the east courtyard. The placement of two of these drains indicated that the castle builders intended that the water derived from the roof of the castle – at least on the north and east sides – would be used to flush out the garderobes in the two associated northeast and southwest corner towers and to help maintain a constant flow of water running through the main drain. During the latter part of the eighteenth and early part of the nineteenth century it may have become necessary to bring additional water into this main conduit to prevent stagnation and a brick culvert which cut through the garden was most likely constructed for this purpose.

Early Occupation

The 1760 plans of the castle interior give details of the layout of the original rooms in the basement, ground floor and second floor. A substantial amount of disturbance had taken place in the castle interior, especially in the basement, since the fire of 1826. Despite the disturbance, the lines of the walls on the 1760 plan could still be seen in the later walls of the castle, thus validating the accuracy of this early representation. The combination of the plans and the excavations facilitated a greater understanding of the layout of the castle interior during this period.



6. Redrawing of the 1760 plans showing basement (top) and evidence for floors and partitions (below)

Some of the original floor surfaces were recovered in the inner larder in the southwest corner tower and in a room in the northern end of the castle. The larder floor consisted of flags, mortar and some brick and was overlain with later flagstone paving. The floor in the second room comprised a cobbled surface in which small

channels were positioned; these channels obviously drained away liquid waste. On the 1760 plans the beer and wine cellars are located further to the west in the castle but the archaeological evidence from this room indicates



7. Cobbled floor in north room of basement

that the cellars had previously been located here. The presence of the channels and a large quantity of wine bottle fragments from this general area indicates that wine was stored here. One of the earliest ancillary stone drains travelled under the cobbled floor in this room, thus proving that it was used for storage from an early date.

In the kitchen area of the castle there was extant evidence for the ovens resting on a mortar base, which was shown on the 1760 plan. A rock-cut well was located in the southeast end of the same room and would have provided a permanent water supply.

The Gardens

Evidence for gardens associated with the earliest phase of Portumna Castle was also revealed. In the area to the east of the castle, several layers of re-deposited subsoil and garden soil were excavated and represent the remains of a garden dating to the eighteenth century. Four pits and a disturbed, rough cobbled path indicate that the garden contained shrubs and pathways. A particularly notable early feature was found within a test-trench



8. Drains, cobbling and remains of bawn wall to south of castle

located at the edge of the south garden, beside the abbey graveyard. This trench contained a rock-cut channel with stone-lined sides that were battered inwards; the channel was stepped and sloped gently towards the east. At the west end it was cut into the clay and at the east end had been cut into the rock; it extended northwest-southeast beyond the excavation area. A fragment of window mullion from the medieval abbey was found within its fill. The channel pre-dated a gravel roadway (it was evident in section above the channel) which was present on the 1791 Cuddehy map. The rock-cut channel is therefore either an original feature of the castle gardens or is medieval in date and associated either with the nearby abbey or with some other and as yet unidentified structure. The boundary of the medieval borough is known to have existed in this area of the Portumna demesne and it is also possible that the rock-cut channel represents part of this boundary. A north-south ditch was located mid-way across the south garden and had been backfilled prior to 1791. It was located at equidistance between the central front of the castle and the western garden wall and was most likely constructed in order to provide symmetry with the castle.

Ephemeral evidence for other early features included the foundations for a building constructed against the bawn wall to the west of the castle, a further two rubble wall foundations also to the west of the castle, and also a portion of a building

which was cut by a later ha-ha and which contained a fireplace and a flagstone floor, located to the southwest of the castle. Several cobbled paths were also present immediately along the southern front of the castle and some of these were disturbed by the construction of the porch and were therefore dated to the early to mid-eighteenth century. The porch construction in 1797 also disturbed several of the earlier drains in this area.

Artefacts

In addition to the above-mentioned medieval fragment of window mullion, artefacts from this phase of activity include late sixteenth/early seventeenth ornamental wall tiles (which would have been part of the original

house), seventeenth-century pottery, and a coin dating to c. 1680. Other later artefacts include pieces and fragments of terracotta and some of these were actually used in the construction of the downpipe drains. The presence of non-fragmented examples implies that they were never actually used for their original purpose. Many of the brick fragments from this phase that were excavated were examined by Dr Sara Pavia as part of a wider research project: *Materials' Audits for Building Conservation* (Pavia *et al.* 2000). Her analysis revealed that the main mineral components of the Portumna brick are quartz, calcite, feldspar, clay minerals, and mica. The calcite was naturally occurring in the raw alluvial clay (most likely sourced from the floodplain of the River Shannon), rather than being deliberately added during the brick manufacture. The high calcium content in the raw clay resulted in lightly coloured bricks; the low temperature brick was pale–deep orange and the well-burned bricks were a light yellow. Some of the internal stone work including the interior doors through the spine wall consisted of limestone blocks cut and carved with a decorative punch-work finish. Pavia acknowledged that the dimensions, general style and stonework of these doors do not accord with the general Jacobean style of the castle but that the stonework does blend with the surviving gothic doorways in the abbey. She therefore concluded that the doors were originally part of the Abbey and that they were reused in the building of the castle.

The Castle 1791–1826

The Buildings

In addition to ascertaining if there was any extant evidence for the construction of the castle, the excavations were designed to shed light upon the castle's architecture and occupation during the period between Cuddehy's



9. Fury the dog in situ within her grave

1791 estate map and the fire in 1826. Excavations in the castle's interior revealed that several successive floor layers were built on top of each other which had resulted in a considerable raise in the floor levels in the basement. As suggested above, there was a gradual reduction in the depth of the basement and a corresponding increase in the external ground levels. The excavations also produced evidence for internal partition walls, some of which were represented by actual brick foundations and others by postholes. In 1797 a porch was constructed on the south elevation and it disturbed several important, earlier stone-lined drains. This disruption in the drainage system would have caused water to be

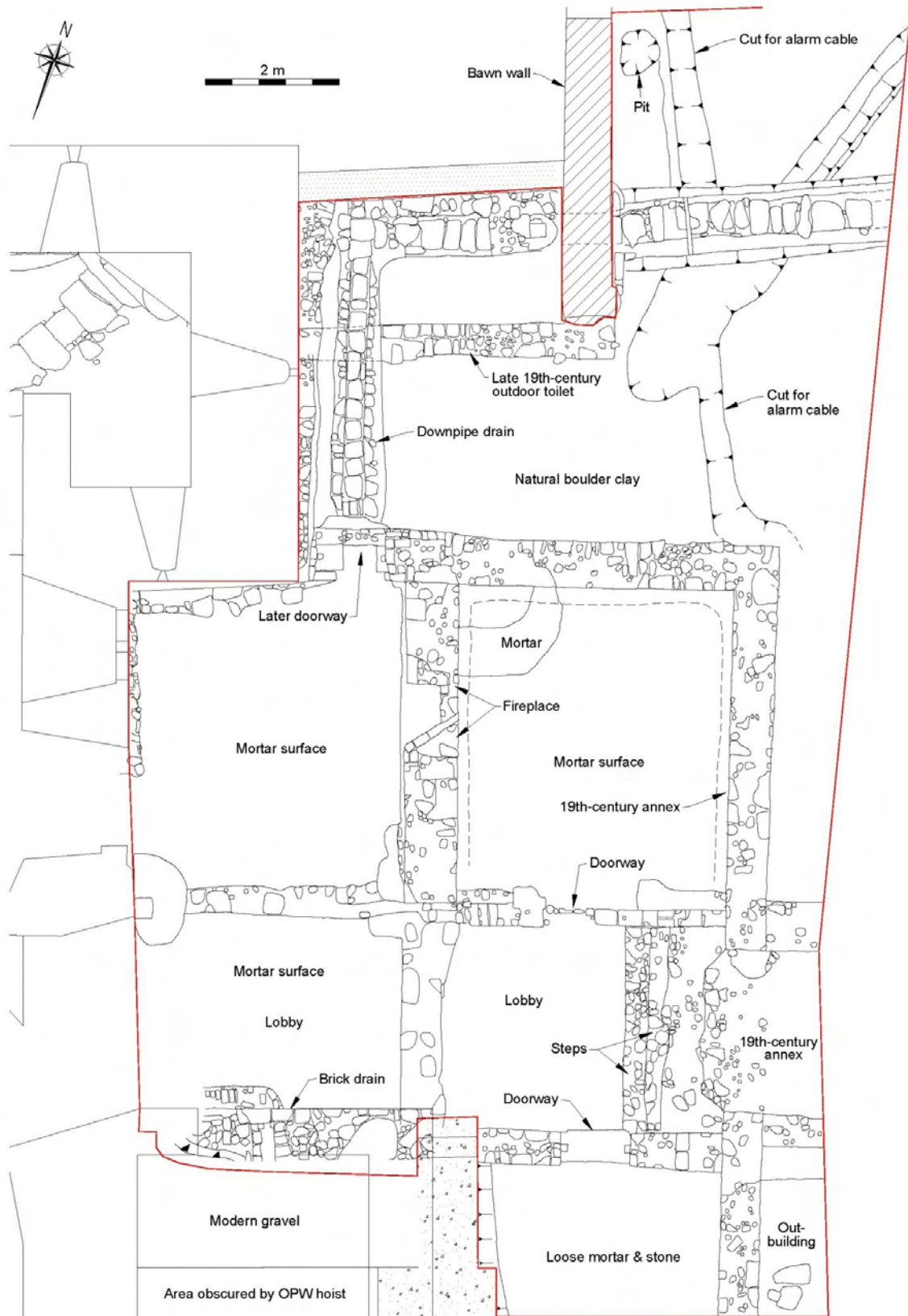
continually flooding into the kitchen from the porch in rainy weather and a concentration of later drains in this area demonstrate continued efforts to rectify this problem. The porch was also associated with the burial place of a former resident of the castle: Fury the whippet. Excavations revealed his skeleton and nails in the corners of his grave indicated that he had been buried in a coffin. The castle's tradition suggests that a child tumbled from the castle, only to have its fall broken by Fury. The damage to Fury's back was considerable and although the child survived the dog unfortunately did not. Fury was buried in the exact spot as the incident happened, and a commemorative plaque was erected into the porch:

'Dying about April
20 1797 aged 11 year was
Interred near this Place.
Alas poor Fury. She was a dog.
Take her for All in All
Eye shall not look upon her like
again.'

An annex was present within the perimeter of the former courtyard, located to the east of the castle, and post-dated an earlier garden in this area. The annex had several phases of renovations and much of it dated to the late nineteenth century but had been demolished during the 1970s and at the time of excavation was covered with a thick deposit of rubble,



10. The remains of the annex to the east



11. Plan of the walls and other features uncovered in the annex area to the east of the castle

indicating that the area had obviously been backfilled. It was originally constructed prior to 1791, across one of the original external doorways. It comprised a substantial four-roomed building (12m long by 10m wide) of at least three storeys, including a basement. Subsequent renovations included the opening of a doorway in the wall

of the castle which gave access from the main stairwell of the castle to the ground and first floors of the annex. Steps also led from the courtyard down into the lobby of the annex. The foundations for various internal walls were identified which demonstrated how the annex had been sub-divided into four rooms and a central hall. Two fireplaces, one on either side of a shared wall, were exposed. A brick doorway with a limestone doorstep represented a later insertion. A cobbled yard was exposed in the northern section of the excavation area and ran almost to the walls of the annex. It was associated with the annex and probably dated to the c. 1824 renovations.

The Driveway

Access to the castle and its annex during this period (1791–1826) would have been from the north. Evidence for a driveway is present on Cuddehys's 1791 map where one is represented by a tree-lined avenue which was not in keeping with the symmetry of the gardens. A northern driveway which extends between the Gothick Gate and the Outer Courtyard Gate is present on the 1837 Ordnance Survey (OS) map. Both of these gates are thought to



12. Surface of the driveway after excavation looking north

date to the end of the eighteenth century, when some major changes in the layout of the castle and gardens took place (Craig 1976, 5). These gates and the driveway represent part of the formal entrance and entering the grounds from this direction would have facilitated some of the best views of the castle's architectural splendour. However, archaeological evidence suggested that this approach was only used on an infrequent basis. It is likely that the driveway present on the OS map was constructed around the same time as the two gates, or slightly later. No aboveground traces of this driveway were obvious in 1995.

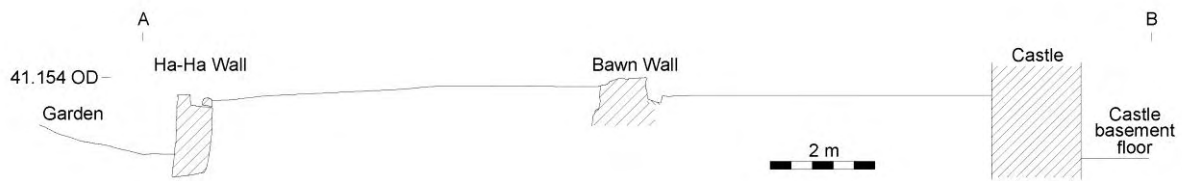
Excavations in spring of that year were designed to locate and fully expose the driveway, which would then be used as the foundation for the main approach path to the castle once restored. Not only did these excavations reveal the precise location of the driveway but they also presented evidence for the use of wheeled vehicles.

The excavated driveway was directly aligned to the centre of the two gates. It consisted of a stone base covered with compacted gravel and was 0.12m thick. These two surfaces appeared to be broadly contemporary although the gravel was not present along the whole length. The driveway widened from 4m to 4.6m immediately before the junction with the Gothick Gate. Two pedestrian openings existed on either side of this gate, and the areas inside the gates and along the edges of the driveway were presumably grassed. A small paved area was uncovered along the eastern edge of the driveway which most likely represents a small path heading from the driveway in an easterly direction. Along the middle of the driveway, three north–south, shallow tracks (0.2–0.25m wide by 0.02m deep) were visible in the top gravel layer. These tracks were difficult to discern in places, due to their shallow nature. It is possible that the two outer tracks represent the ruts of carriage wheels and that the inner track represents that of a horse pulling the carriage. That these tracks were not found in abundance indicates that the driveway was not used regularly.

The archaeological evidence indicated that this northern driveway was only in use for a relatively short period of time. This driveway is of a different alignment to that represented on the 1791 map, which must pre-date it. This dates the construction of the excavated driveway to after 1791 and most likely to c. 1797 when the castle grounds were re-shaped. After the 1826 fire the excavated driveway was apparently no longer used and the castle was more frequently approached from the east. The driveway was covered with gravel following the excavations and now provides pedestrian access to the castle grounds. Rather than lying forgotten and neglected it is therefore once again fulfilling its original purpose – providing the best visual approach to the castle – and is used with much more regularity than it was in the early nineteenth century.

The South Garden

A series of trenches was placed within the south garden in 1998 in order to ascertain if there were any archaeological features in this area. The excavations revealed several outcrops of limestone, the foundations for the bawn wall on the west and east sides of the garden and the above-mentioned pre-1791 ditch. The exposed



13. Profile from the castle basement to the south garden

segments of bawn wall ran beyond the castle and were associated with a possible external ditch. Further segments of bawn wall were identified in other areas during the various excavations and these were marked on the 1791 map. Another section of wall, which may represent an earlier or smaller enclosure, was present on the internal, garden side of the bawn wall. A stone-lined ditch was present to the east of the garden, near the perimeter of the medieval abbey, and would have been associated with one of the later drains exiting the southeast corner tower of the castle. It appeared to take water away from the icehouse, located in a wooded area to the southeast of the castle (beyond the excavation area). Part of the gravel roadway, which post-dated the rock-cut channel (see above), and which was present on the 1791 map was excavated. It appeared to lead from the town, along the old avenue, and into the churchyard, possibly towards the lake which lies in this direction.

A geophysical survey was also conducted in this area and further test-trenches opened in order to investigate any anomalies detected by the survey. These trenches revealed the lines of north-south hedges or flower-beds located in this part of the back garden; these may have divided the garden longitudinally and suggest a formal layout of the south garden. Different phases of use of the garden were identified through various layers of made-up ground, including an east-west artificial bank and associated parallel ditch which effectively divide the garden into two further areas.

The North Garden

In March 2005 the outer front garden, to the north of the castle, was investigated. The OPW planned to re-landscape this area and to model it on the Cuddehy estate map. It was therefore essential to recover any evidence for the previous garden layout and to assess whether or not it concurred with that represented on the map. A single trench was excavated and this confirmed the presence of rough gravelled pathways in a plan that conforms to the layout illustrated on Cuddehy's 1791 map. No evidence was recovered for any other paths or garden features. The paths consisted of coarse gravel and larger flat stones which may represent the remains of paving. They occurred at set intervals from both walls of the garden and therefore appeared to have been laid out very precisely. The evidence suggested the presence of a small path running around the inside perimeter of the garden at a distance of 1.8m from the boundary walls. In addition, a circular arrangement appears to have been present in the centre of the garden and consisted of a 3.2m-wide pathway positioned in a circular fashion with a smaller pathway constructed along its north-south diameter. No evidence was recovered for either an earlier or a later garden layout and it would appear that the arrangement shown on Cuddehy's map continued until the castle was destroyed by fire.

The geometric patterns and formality of this eighteenth-century garden are in keeping with contemporary picturesque theories about garden design. Indeed, the function of this garden is purely aesthetic. This northern garden would have played a crucial role in shaping the views and perceptions about Portumna upon arrival from the north. When this garden was created the northern approach comprised a tree-lined avenue. Visitors to the castle would have had their view and gaze directed by the trees towards the neat and formal gardens which lay in front of the grand architectural splendour of the actual castle. When the Gothick Gate and Outer Courtyard Gates were constructed along with the straight and properly laid driveway, this new heightened sense of formality would have been enhanced by the north garden.

The Kitchen Garden

A community group, funded by FÁS, a government training agency, intended to develop the site of the walled kitchen garden as a horticultural centre. As a result, the kitchen garden was excavated in 1997. Three parallel north-south paths and two east-west paths were identified. With its cobbling and edging of large stones, the central path was the most formal. The east-west paths were marked on the 1791 Cuddehy map along with trees and plants shown along its edges. Several pits were identified in this area and may have represented the actual pits dug for the placement of these eighteenth-century trees and plants. Various trenches representing the remains of cuts for hedges flanked the paths.

In addition to the paths, several areas of the actual garden soil were excavated and these generally consisted of reddish-brown clay. Some of the soil layers may have been earlier than the paths, demonstrating the pre-existence of a garden in this location before the paths were laid. Three areas of soil in particular were interpreted



14. The kitchen garden under excavation from the southwest

as possible vegetable patches or as sub-divisions for different plants within the kitchen garden. Shards of earthenware were recovered from the three vegetable patches and this material would have been included in the manure that would have been regularly spread across the site. An informal pathway consisting of grey subsoil ran through one of these patches and would have been created in order to provide access to the vegetables.

The correlation between some of the excavated paths and those marked on the 1791 map, combined with associated eighteenth- and nineteenth-century pottery, suggests that the kitchen garden was in

existence from the late eighteenth century. The garden is also marked on the 1837 OS map which demonstrates that it was either still in use or that it was at least still laid out formally with the same paths by this date. Much of the kitchen garden area was disturbed due to later activity on the site, including two French drains.

The kitchen garden would have been an important part of daily life at Portumna. Highly productive, it would have contained a diverse range of food, herbs and flowers for the family, staff and guests of the castle. Many of these plants would have been perennials and the garden would therefore have had an all-year-round visual appeal and utility. The pathways enabled the garden to be used throughout the year, and also subdivided the garden into geometric plots. Aesthetics, formality and functionality all combine to make the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century kitchen garden visually striking.

Artefacts

Many of the artefacts from the excavations dated to this period and included late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century pottery sherds, of which some fine examples with a thin gold band along the rim were recovered. Stone and plaster fragments were discovered, along with tile (some Dutch glazed) and decorated terracotta fragments, roof slates and ornamental mouldings. Further domestic artefacts consisted of clay pipe stems, broken glassware, and pieces of iron.

The Castle After 1826

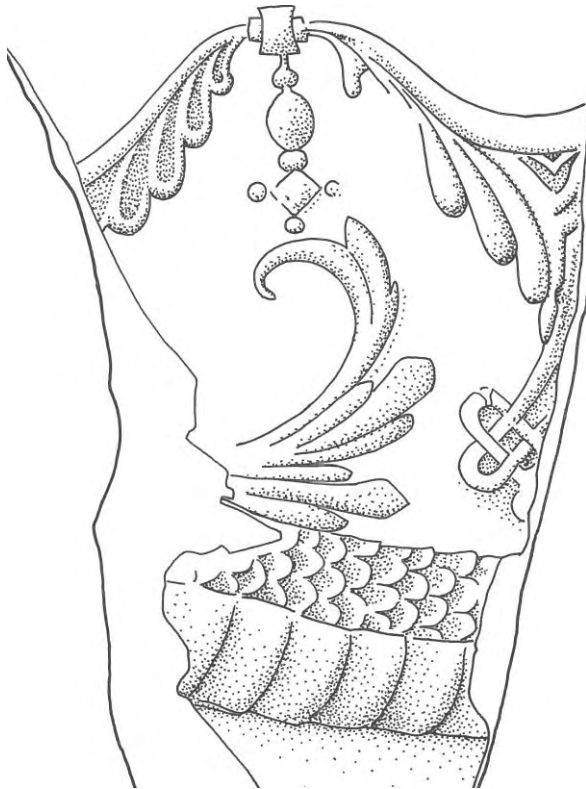
Although the castle was abandoned after the devastating fire of 1826 archaeological evidence for some activity was identified, notably in the area of the annex and the kitchen garden. A cobbled ramp and associated retaining wall were positioned above the stone steps of the former annex. This ramp gave access to two buildings: one which had been built prior to 1791 and which stood next to the castle and one which was constructed on the foundations of the southern end of the demolished annex. Both of these buildings remained standing until the 1970s when they were demolished.

A third building was present in this area. The original roof-line of this building was clearly seen at the time of excavation in the external plaster on the eastern wall of the northeast corner tower ; the building therefore used the external wall as part of its construction. Its other walls included part of the demolished bawn wall, as well as a new wall built between them. This small building only appears on the later OS maps, thus indicating that it dates to between c. 1840 and 1880. It forms an outside toilet, and two garderobes were exposed within its foundations. The garderobes were originally associated with a stone manhole, which was later replaced with one manufactured from red brick. Other walls which represented the remains of sheds or outbuildings were observed; they were located along the southern wall of the courtyard.

Later renovations in the area of the kitchen garden included horse stalls which appear on the 1912 OS map; they are probably of late nineteenth-century date and used in association with the courtyard rather than the castle. A cobbled surface was identified in the southeast of the garden, between the wall and two of the paths, and represents the remains of the stalls. A line of seven postholes was also excavated which ran along the western extent of one of the pathways and forms the remains of a line of sheds that existed in this part of the garden in the early 20th century.

The Castle Excavations: Conclusions

The excavations have revealed much about Portumna Castle that was hitherto unknown and have therefore played a crucial role in its reconstruction. The marl layer upon which the castle was originally constructed was revealed along with evidence for some of the early foundations. An association with the nearby abbey was demonstrated through the presence of the late sixteenth/early seventeenth ornamental wall tiles, early pottery, and some of the internal doors. The reliability of the 1760 plans was reinforced, although evidence indicated that the wine and beer cellars had previously been located elsewhere within the castle interior. A succession of basement floors was evident and demonstrated that the original depth of the basement would have varied over time. A similar build-up of material was identified outside the castle and the original space between the first floor windows and the ground level would also have been substantially greater than observed before excavation commenced. During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century the formal nature of the castle's aesthetic appearance increased with the construction of the Gothick Gate, the increased symmetry of the driveway (from which evidence of the use of wheeled vehicles was also obtained) and gardens, and the construction of the grand porch. The excavations demonstrated the validity of Cuddedy's 1791 estate map. Some of the renovations undertaken in the 1820s were identified, notably within the castle annex and many of the surrounding gardens. The internal and external drainage system was mapped, assessed and the problem of the flooding drain rectified. Viewed in conjunction with the architecture of the castle, the excavations at Portumna Castle help contribute to the portrayal of the castle and grounds, as described by Burke, as probably the finest and most sophisticated house of this period in Ireland.



15. Fragment of decorative terracotta

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