



**Report on Archaeological Monitoring at the Ward River Valley,
Swords, Co. Dublin**

Client:

Fingal County Council

Licence No.

21E0630

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Introduction

Background

In 1999 a human skull was exposed in the bank of the Ward River. This lay within or beneath an extensive midden that was exposed for between 35 to 40m along the riverbank. The articulated remains of six individuals were discovered; finds from the associated midden included late 13th and early 14th century pottery and a silver penny of Edward I dating to the 1280's, (Brady & Kelleher 2000, 94). Further exposure of remains led to limited excavation in 2020 by Maeve McCormick of Archer Heritage and Planning, (McCormick 2020).

History

The site is located on the banks of the meandering River Ward to the east of the Ward River Valley Park within sight of the ecclesiastical centre of St Colmcille and the medieval high street of Swords. Prior to excavation in 1999 (Licence No. 99E0554) it was not known that there was a medieval burial ground within Ward River Valley Park. Geophysical survey (Leigh, 20R0098) was undertaken to try to define the extent of the burials but did not yield any useful results. Excavation in 2020 revealed a juvenile skeleton (SK1), aged between 9-11 years at time of death. A radiocarbon date of 1045-1225 cal AD (UBA-43540, 883±29 BP) was returned from the left first metatarsal (McCormick 2020).



Fig. 1: Extract from the Historic Environment Viewer showing the location of DU011-090. Correct location of taken from Archer Heritage and Planning Ltd.

Methodology

The proposal for protection works as outlined in the Method Statement was as follows:

- Placement of 1msq/c. 1 ton boulders basally set away from the bank extending approximately 1m into river, at the curve of the river (c.35m in length).
- Placement of at least one upper layer of smaller boulders set closer to the bank (contiguous with topsoil). No profiling of the bank required.
- Infill gap with clean stone and local topsoil mix topped with sods.
- The work area will be isolated from the flowing water, e.g. within a sand bag bund or similar.
- Bog mats will be used to protect grass and spread weight of machinery
- A storage area for rock etc. has been identified at the end of Bell's Lane.

The works to be carried out under archaeological supervision. The Fingal Biodiversity Officer and Inland Fisheries have been consulted. The Ward River is a salmon spawning river and Inland Fisheries have advised works must be undertaken before September.

Monitoring Works

Works began on the 13/09/2021. The main Contractor was Integrated Utility Services Ltd. Heras fencing was installed to create a working space separate from the general public. A wade survey and photographic record of the riverbank were carried out with the assistance of personnel from Integrated Utility Services. No material relating to the burial site was noted within the river, which was relatively shallow with approximately 30 – 40cms depth on average along its length, though it deepened at the location of the previously exposed burials. See Survey Report below for a full record.



Plate 1: View looking east at the southern bank of the river; Heras fencing now positioned on the bank

The following day (14/09/2021) bog mats were laid on the surface within the fenced area in order to allow machinery to track across the grass. Then a series of one tonne sandbags were placed in the river in a line parallel to the bank but 2m out from it. This formed a bund to contain the working space and prevent undue contamination of the river.

The next stage (15/09/2021) was to clean the riverbed along the base of the bank in order to have a stable surface on which to place the boulders. A claw bucket was used to lift vegetation, but no further disturbance of stones or river silts occurred as this was deemed unnecessary.



Plate 2: View looking east at sandbags and cleaning of the riverbed



Plate 3: View looking east at cleaning operations, note bog mats on the surface.

On Thursday 16/09/2021 deliveries of large boulders were made to the site, and these began to be deposited in the river on Friday, 17/09/2021. The riverbank was firstly protected with geotextile and then the boulders put in position.

Depending on the depth of the bank, which varied somewhat over its length, and the size of the boulders, two to four courses of boulders were required. The spaces behind the boulders were infilled with smaller stone to minimise the effect of scour during flooding episodes.



Plate 4: View looking west at the placement of boulders against the bank, protected by geotextile



Plate 5: Looking west, general location of exposed skeletal remains marked by ranging rod



Plate 6: View looking west at the boulders in position.



Plate 7: The area of the exposed burials has been infilled by soil and protected by rock armour

The following Monday, 20/09/2021, smaller stones and soil having been used to infill the boulders the geotextile was cut back, and the boulders capped by topsoil. The sandbags were lifted from the riverbed prior to the final reinstatement.



Plate 8: Looking west at soil capping of boulders, the sandbags are being removed



Plate 9: Looking east with the re-buried skeletal remains in the middle of the photograph



Plate 10: Removal of bog mats after completion of all the reinstatement measures

Work was fully completed on Wednesday 22/09/2021. The fencing and bog mats were removed, and the boulders fully bedded into the riverbank.

During the course of the monitoring no archaeological deposits were disturbed, and none were noted in the riverbed prior to the commencement of the works.

Survey Report

The wade survey along the river was carried out in order to inspect the riverbed for any potential archaeological objects that might have eroded out of the riverbank, and to record the bank prior to its being covered by rock armour.

Previous excavations had detailed the stratigraphy of the bank specifically as it had related to the burials under excavation (Brady 1999; McCormick 2020). In noting the visible deposits an attempt was made to reconcile these with those noted in the previous work.

The bank averages 1.65m in depth, although at the deepest part of the curve or bow where the burials had eroded from the river its depth on the west side is closer to 2m. A thick deposit of river cobbles with associated silts and gravels forms the lowest visible deposit at the waterline as it was during the survey, see Plate 1. This deposit is a minimum of 0.70m deep. This was Brady's Context 12, and he records it as being 0.85m deep (1999, Context 12). At the western end of the stretch being worked on the gravels extended out from the bank forming a ledge, as the overlying bank had clearly been eroded (Plate 11). The character of the deposits overlying these river cobbles is also much stonier at this western end. At the eastern end where the initial excavation was done the deposit overlying the cobbles was characterised as natural river silt by Brady, and effectively as the upper part of his Context 12, and as a buried turf layer by McCormick (2020, 5, C4). Whether it had ever formed a grassed surface is a moot point.

Overlying this is a deposit characterised by both as a midden deposit and recorded as being between 0.10 – 0.15m deep (McCormick) and 0.17 – 0.21m deep (Brady). It is described as a blackish brown or greyish brown (humic) silt with frequent stones, shell, and animal bone. This deposit is apparent along the length of the bank, though not so clearly visible at the western end. It also seems to rise and fall somewhat in level, (see Plate 13).

The deposits above this midden layer are interpreted differently by Brady and McCormick. Both agree that there is an introduced build-up beneath modern sod. McCormick considers this to be a landscaping layer that extends from beneath the sod level to the top of the midden deposit, whereas Brady divides it into an introduced layer of river dredgings dating to the 1970's, overlying a series of deposits. The upper deposit, his Context 3 he attributes to flooding episodes. The successive deposits beneath, Contexts 4 – 9 produced datable finds suggesting that Context 4 was essentially post-medieval, Contexts 5 – 9 were medieval and burials were stratified in Contexts 6 and 9, the latter being the midden layer. McCormick on the other hand stated that the burials were cut into the layer beneath the midden layer, which covered them. The date obtained by McCormick for one of the burials, (1045-1225 cal AD), coupled with a coin dating to the 1280's recovered by Brady from the midden deposit supports the idea that the burials might pre-date the midden.

Observations

Having inspected the riverbank I believe that the amount of introduced material is no greater than 0.25 – 0.30cms in depth. A clear line of grey to brown fairly stone free soil approximately 0.15m deep is visible at this depth the entire length of the riverbank and is indicative, in my opinion, of a buried sod-line, (Plates 14, 17-19). Beneath this are the deposits characterized as both alluvial in origin and occupation related. As the riverbank is close to the foot of a slope which is now covered in trees, it is not unlikely that there was soil creep from this slope in the past, and that the natural silts referenced by Brady are the result of this and are not alluvial deposits. The presence of significant amounts of

occupation debris may fit with the idea of nearby occupation but it is not necessarily the case that this area flooded regularly in the past. There has been significant alteration of the ground through the presence of mills and mill races which may have impacted the natural floodplain, most likely predominantly to the north of the river. In fact a simple exercise of overlaying the 1st Edition OS maps of the area onto the modern maps, and onto recent aerial imagery shows the southward tracking of the river in the past 180 years (Figs. 2 – 4).

From my own observations I would question the assumption that this was a burial place of plague or famine victims, not accorded burial in consecrated ground. McCormick observes the presence of stones marking the grave of one burial (SK1) and she adds to this the fact that the burial had likely been shrouded to question the idea of hasty burial.

It is also worth noting the presence of burials beneath the gatehouse of the castle (Moraghan et al, 2021). The burials have returned dates placing them predominantly in the late 11th to early 13th century, broadly comparable with these. Both sets of burials are on relatively low ground close to the river, and thus both could be considered as marginal sites, though I believe that was actually not the case. The burials on this site under discussion are at approximately 17.14m OD, whereas those from beneath the gatehouse are at c. 16.00m OD, which is consistent with their position downstream. In my opinion it is possible that the bed of the Ward River was several metres further north than it is now at the location of these burials, and to consider the site as marginal and representing an abnormal burial ground may be incorrect. It would be useful to have the burials recovered by Brady dated to ascertain whether a single episode of burial, or something of longer duration is represented here.

The question of what this site might have been is perhaps beyond the scope of this report. However, it is worth noting the references to the churches attributed to St. Brigit and St. Finian, as well as St. Columba, however spurious the latter may be. These have been summarised (see Moraghan et al, 2021, 31-33; Baker forthcoming) and note that the location of the church attributed to St. Brigit is unknown, whereas it's not clear if St. Finian simply took over from Columba. There is also reference to a church of St. Catherine's. So it is possible that there were at least two other church sites in Swords, neither of which has survived as St. Columba's has done. Given the date of the burials, it is possible that religious establishments which may have served as burial grounds were 'reformed' or suppressed in the 12th century, when significant changes to monastic establishments occurred.

Activity of pre-Norman date has been indicated, but not confirmed by independent dating at two nearby locations, at the site of the Old Borough School when the new Primary School and Parish Centre were being developed (O'Carroll, (98E0082), and Myles, (08E0058). The former site is on the same side of the river, further to the east and the latter is on the opposite side, again to the east just west of the bridge on Church Road. In both cases midden type material clearly pre-dating later 13th century deposits suggested earlier activity.



Plate 11: View looking west showing ledge formed by lower cobbles



Plate 12: Continuation of bank running to east showing decrease in upper stony fill



Plate 13: Looking west showing location of burials behind boards; grey buried sod layer is visible near top



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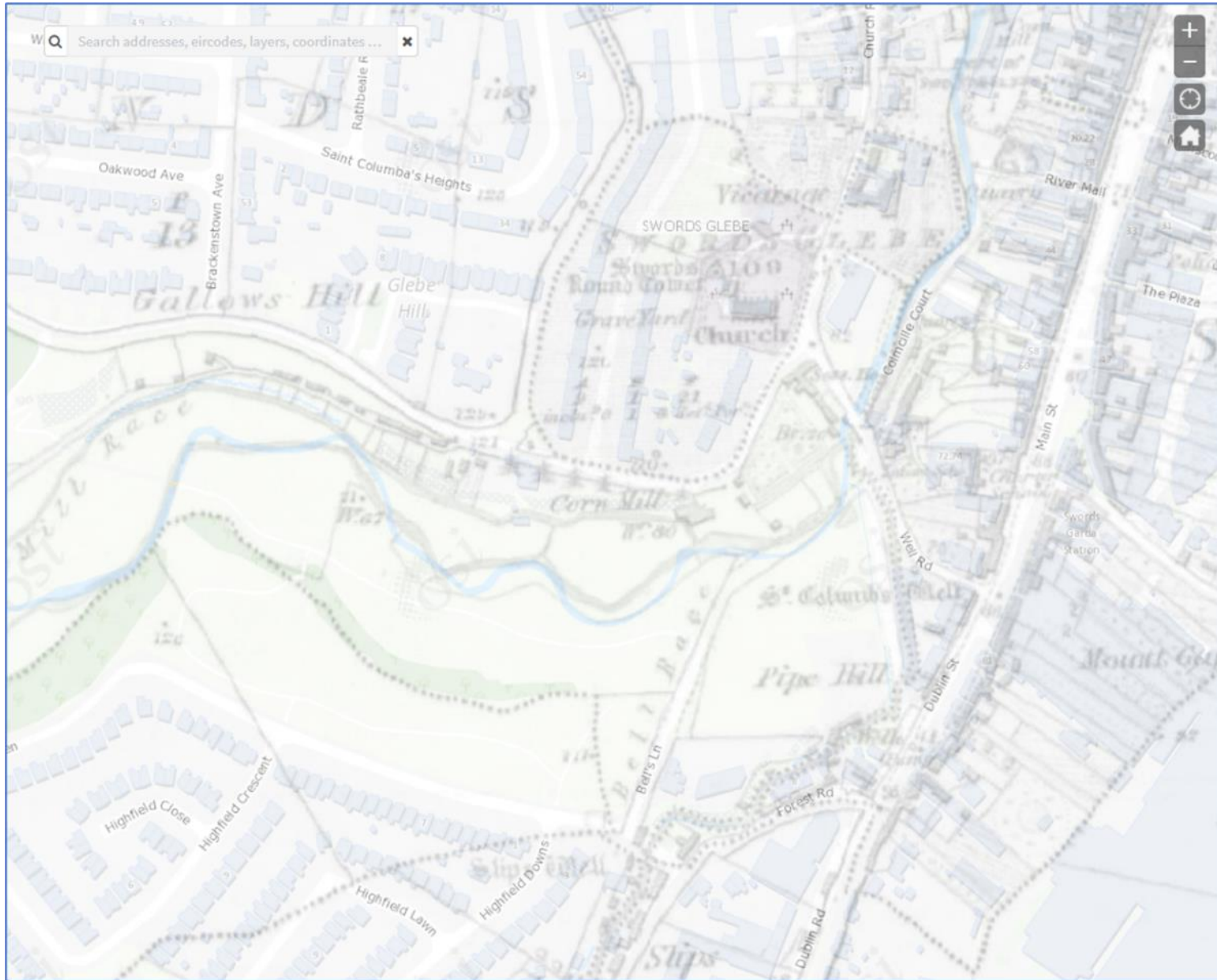


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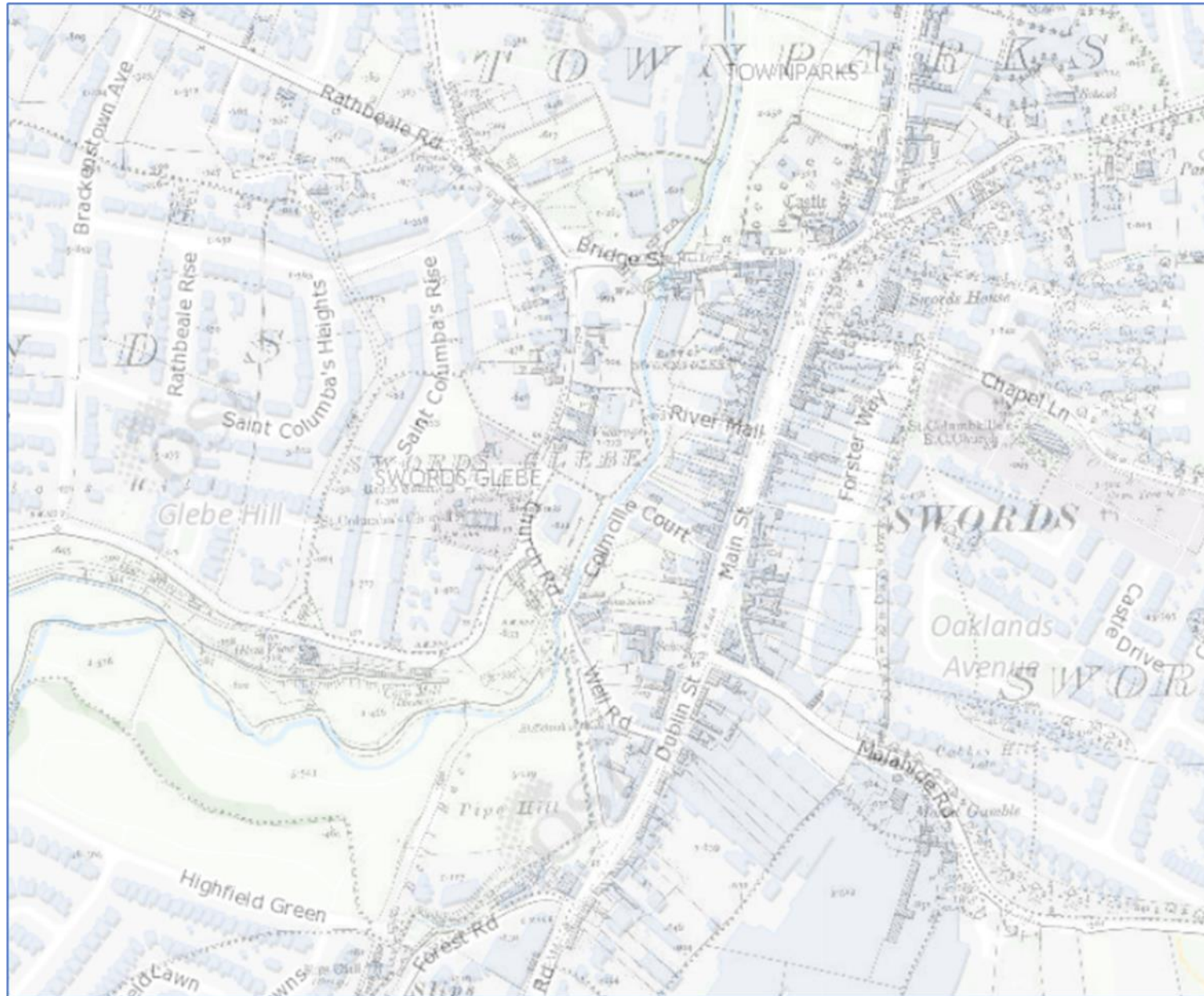


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References

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