

# Record of Conservation Works at St. Columba's, Swords, Co. Dublin

CMF23-1-DF001



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## Introduction

Funding was allocated to St. Columba's, Swords, Co. Dublin under CMF Stream 1 (CMF23-1-DF001) for conservation works on the round tower (DU011-34005--) and the residential west tower of the medieval church (DU011-34004--). A methodology for works on the east and south face of the later tower, to its internal floors and to the beams that support the bell, and for repointing of the lower levels down to ground level of the round tower and re-flooring the interior was submitted. An excavation licence to monitor works and to carry out investigations into the deposits in the base of the round tower was applied for and granted to Finola O'Carroll. The initial proposed scheme of works had to be modified due to rising costs. The replacement of floors in the round tower was not carried out and works in the interior of the later tower were confined to reinforcing the rotted end of one of the beams that support the bell and some other minor work.

A small excavation took place within the base of the round tower. A possible original floor level was uncovered consisting of stone set into mortar. Samples of the mortar were taken, and it is hoped to get this mortar dated at some point in the future.

All of this work followed on from the production of a Conservation Management Plan in 2021. Visits were made by the author over several weeks while the works were ongoing from August to November.



## Report

### Round tower

The scaffolding was erected to a height of about 15m around the round tower and in use by the second week in August. Specific areas had been highlighted for re-pointing, notably the southeast side and part of the west side, starting midway between the levels of the south and north windows extending down to ground level.



Plate 1: the tower with scaffolding in place

The southeast side had been noticeably scoured by the effect of the prevailing winds channelling between the two towers though the upper third or more of the tower was less affected. This resulted in the noticeable loss of mortar from a strip running from the ground level to a point over halfway up the tower, with deep erosion of the mortar from the affected area.



Plate 2: View looking west along the southeast side of the tower showing the effect of wind scour





Plate 3: The same section after re-pointing



Plate 4: the northwest side next level down with deep gaps being filled.



In places the mortar loss was such that pinning stones had to be added in with the initial mortar infill before finishing.



Plate 5: the southwest side after re-pointing



Plate 6: the northwest side at ground level before work was completed.





Plate 7: the same side after work was completed



Plate 8: a stonemason at work



In addition to observing works on the exterior of the tower I attempted to assess the condition of the interior, where there was some visibility through, for example, the north window.

Plate 9: view through the north window at the condition of the wall on the east side.



Plate 10: View from the north window looking down. The east window is left below, and the apparent stone loss is from above the corbels of the first floor.

This limited examination suggests that there is considerable mortar loss from the interior of the tower, and quite probably significant stone loss also. It is however possible that the stone loss seen in Plate 9 is in fact the position of the original floor level at that point, and that the timber floor remaining in situ was placed in an incorrect position. But, when looking below this level it can be seen that apparent stone loss there cannot be explained this way, as the area where stones are missing is too close to the corbels of the so-called treasury floor to be another level.

It was also noticed in looking upwards from the base of the tower that the stone loss in this lower level was not anything like as noticeable. There is mortar loss throughout the interior, but less so at the lowest level, perhaps because the corbels of the first floor offered some protection.

The condition of some of the stones in the lowest level also suggested that they had been affected by heat. This was especially noticeable in the interior lintels of the doorway. However, information from Mr. Eric Wolfe suggests that this may have been caused by a fire which occurred sometime in the 1990's when nesting material which had accumulated within the tower was set on fire. He stated that the fire smouldered for several days.



Plate 11: view looking up the tower from the basement; the inner lintels of the door are visible on the right and appear to be heat affected





Plate 12: view looking NW at the upper floors of the tower showing some vegetation re-growth

It was noted that there has been some re-growth of the vegetation on the tower since the upper levels were cleared last year. This doesn't appear to be affecting the areas which were repointed, but it's not entirely clear if this is so.

## The later Medieval Tower

The brief for the later tower (belfry) was for work to occur on both the east and south faces, and to one of the beams on which the bell is supported. Work on the east face consisted of:

- Remove vegetation and kill ivy at the base of the projecting parapet.
- Replace wooden sill at clock.
- Stitch and repair vertical crack below the clock.
- Repair a vertical crack on the south side of the east face.
- Add mesh to the window opes.
- Repair and stitch the lower quoins at the northeast corner.

The work for the south face was:

- Remove and treat vegetation.
- Stitch the broken window arches back into the wall fabric.
- Fill and repair the joint where masonry was formerly attached.
- Repair the corner at the southeast which had been cut back and faced with brick.

Once the work on the exterior of the round tower was completed the scaffolding was taken down and re-erected at the belfry tower. Prior to this the repairs to the lower quoins at the northeast corner were undertaken, using steel rods, mesh sleeve, and a chemical agent to hold the bar which was then threaded into a nut at either end.



Plates 13 and 14: hole drilled for bar, and bar fastened with washer and nut. See also frontispiece.

After the scaffolding was erected in mid-September work on the faces began.



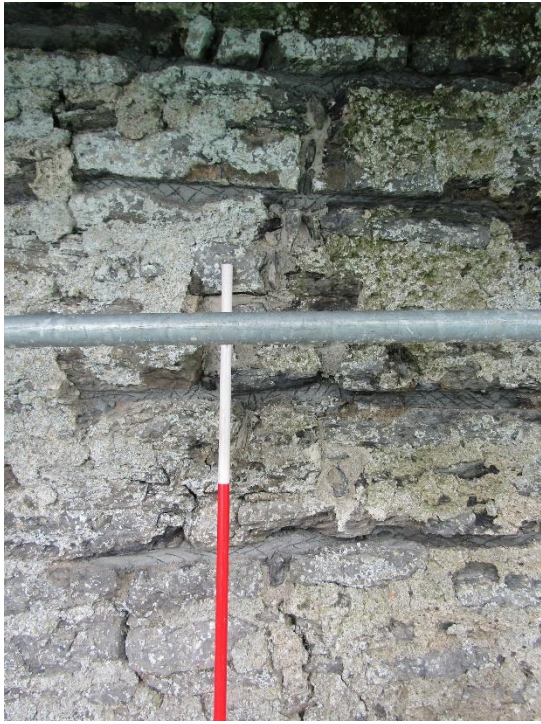


Plate 15: East face, base of projecting parapet, east face after vegetation removal and re-pointing



Plate 16: East face, repairs to string course beneath clock





Plates 17 and 18: East face, crack below clock being stitched, filled and then pointed.



Plate 19: East face, round headed window with mesh grille inserted and re-pointing of surrounding stonework.





Plate 20: East face, crack at south side prior to repair.

Re-pointing continued down the wall, and when the larger crack was reached that had to be fully packed and then repointed.



Plate 21: East face, crack at south end after repairs

The work on the south face continued also.





Plate 22: South face, re-pointing of the crenellations at the angle of the projecting stair tower.



Plate 23: South face, arches above window after stitching with steel bars.



The window in the south face has had its tracery broken out and the remaining pointed arches in the frame were in danger of collapse. These have been stitched and stabilised. The ends of the bars are visible.



Plate 24: South side, replacement wooden sill and repointing of the string course at the base of the window.

Plate 25: South face prior to conservation, note the area of the join of a former wall.







Plates 26-28: South side, repairs to the masonry join. Preparatory work, (Plate 26) followed by final pointing (Plate 27) and lower level, Plate 28.





Plate 29: Southeast corner, brick facing on cut out corner, before repair.



Plate 30: Southeast corner, repairs and re-pointing work completed.





Plate 31: Interior, steel shoe in place to repair the end of one of the beams supporting the bell.

A steel shoe was made to join a new piece of timber to the original beam to replace the section on the wall ledge where it was decaying. The shoe had been made deeper than required and filled with a plank of timber.



## Stray Finds

### *Medieval and post-medieval ceramics from the graveyards*

The present groundsman, Szymon Mierocha, has been observing finds of worked stone and ceramic in the soil of the graveyard in the course of maintenance of the grounds. He had identified one tile as being of a line impressed tile, recorded as L46 (Eames and Fanning 1988<sup>1</sup>).



Plate 32: Line impressed tiles of pattern L46 (bottom) and unidentified two-colour tile (top)

A second fragment of the same pattern of line impressed tile was also found by him. These tiles have been found before in Swords Castle and recorded by Eames and Fanning (P. 34) and from Lusk in Co. Dublin, as well as from various sites in Dublin city. Mr. Mierocha also found a small fragment of a two-colour tile. This is too small to identify the pattern with any accuracy. Only one two-colour tile is known from Swords, T59, a four-tile design with lion's face in a circular band, but this fragment does not appear to fit with this pattern. Tiles of this type were found in Swords Castle (Baker 2022<sup>2</sup>) but not illustrated.

In addition to these medieval tiles, he also found a relief tile of possible late medieval to early post-medieval date. This appears to be of the tile pattern R87, known from Dublin Castle (Kieran Campbell, pers comm). According to Eames and Fanning such tiles were rarely in use in Ireland until the late fifteenth century, (ibid p. 57).

<sup>1</sup> E. S. Eames and T. Fanning 1988, *Irish Medieval Tiles*, Royal Irish Academy

<sup>2</sup> C. Baker 2022, *Swords Castle Digging History: Excavations 2015-17*, Wordwell



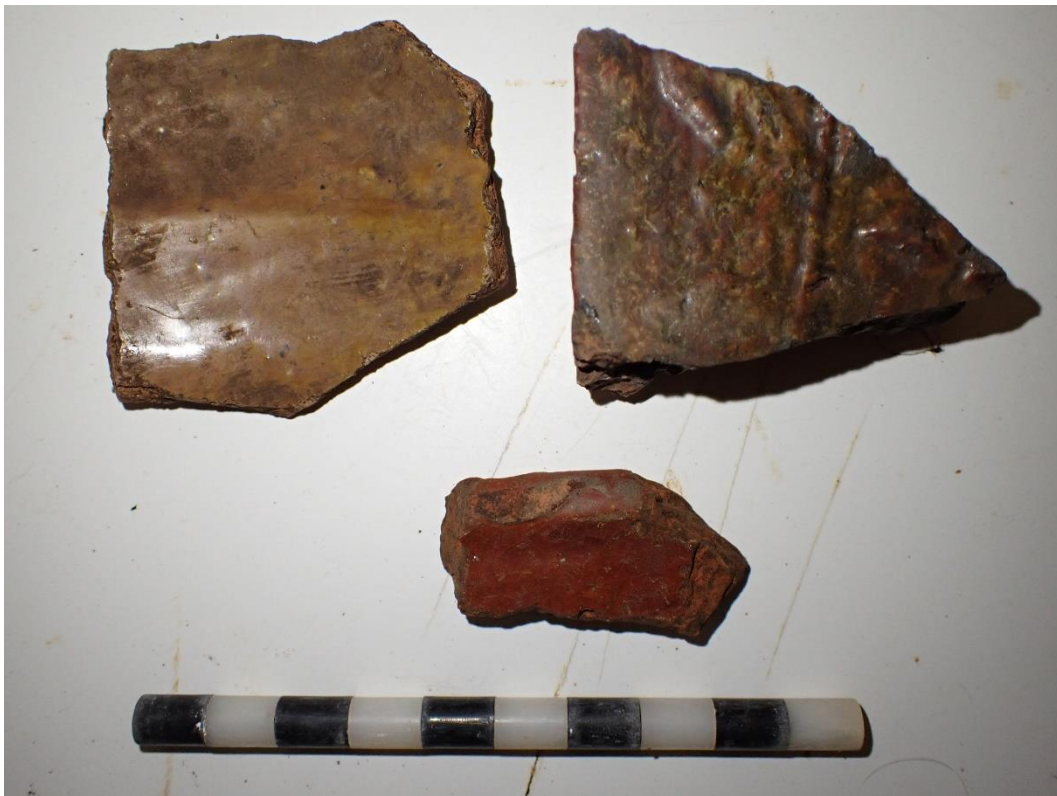


Plate 33: Fragment of relief tile (top right) with two fragments of post-medieval pottery

### Comments

The conservation works have hopefully ensured the ongoing preservation of these monuments. The re-growth of vegetation on previously conserved parts of the round tower, and on the north face of the belfry tower will need to be monitored. The interior of the round tower is concerning, both because of the clear erosion of mortar from the joints and the lack of clarity about how the original floors were fixed into the walls.