



ARCHAEOLOGICAL REPORT ON ST PATRICK'S STUDY HALL,
NAVAN

FOR MEATH COUNTY COUNCIL

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INTRODUCTION

This report details the archaeological background to a site located outside the medieval town walls of Navan, County Meath. The site is the former study hall of St. Patrick's Classical School. The redevelopment of the building will provide a home for the County Library and Archive.

The report is based on the following:

Sites and Monuments Record, available online at archaeology.ie Historic Environment Viewer.

Archaeological excavation in the immediate vicinity of the site, available at excavations.ie.

Search of the finds database of the National Museum of Ireland, courtesy of staff of the National Museum of Ireland.

Printed sources and grey literature, primarily Urban Archaeological Survey Navan.

Website of the Navan Historical Society.

Archaeological monitoring of pits within the building in November 2021.

SITE LOCATION

The site lies in the townland of Dillonsland, outside of the zone of notification for the historic town of Navan (ME025-044, Figure 1). It also lies outside of the zone of notification for the site of a souterrain ME025-030 (see Appendix 1).

ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND TO THE SITE

Navan is situated on a triangular ridge overlooking the confluence of the rivers Boyne and Blackwater, on the main route between Dublin and Kells. The site which developed as the medieval town is likely to have been chosen due to the suitability as a fording point. The ground drops steeply to the east towards the river. The name 'Navan' is derived from An Uaimh, the cave.

A small group of prehistoric artefacts testify to the presence of settlement in the area during the Neolithic and Bronze Ages (Urban Archaeological Survey). A souterrain of the early medieval period (ME025-030) was discovered during the cutting for the railway, south of the site (see appendix 1). This would have been associated with settlement in the early medieval period.

A rich accompanied burial of the Viking period was discovered in the locality in 1849 (Urban Archaeological Survey, no further information given).

The early ecclesiastic background to Navan is associated with the placename Nuachongbail, where an early monastery was established by St Fechin. The presence of a significant early monastic site is suggested by the location of a house of Augustinian Canons in Navan prior to the coming of the Normans. The lands of Navan were granted by Hugh de Lacy to Jocelin de Angulo, who built a motte on an esker ridge south of the Blackwater. He or his son William was probably responsible for the foundation of the town.

The history of the early development of the town is obscure. In the late middle ages the town was on the frontier of the Pale, and in 1539 it was plundered by O' Neill and O'Donnell.

The Blackwater was originally crossed at Pollboy bridge, while the Boyne appears to have been crossed at Kilcarne, one mile south of the town. De Angulo's motte lies c. 1.3km west of the town.

The summary of the town given by the Civil Survey (1654-6) notes that there were houses and gardens outside the west gate and others outside Dublin Gate. The Fair Green lay to the south of the town defences, north-west of the subject site. The importance of the town in the medieval period would have rested on its function as the market place for the hinterland, rather than as a fortification. The remains of the town walls and gates were removed in the 18th century. The south wall lay along the line of the rear of the burgage plots on Trimgate Street, and Dublin Gate was located at the foot of Ludlow Street.

CARTOGRAPHY AND BRIEF HISTORY OF THE BUILDING

The surviving maps of Navan are quite late. The 1750s map of Navan purports to show the line of the town wall. The Fair Place is shown to the north east of the subject site.

St. Finian's Seminary was established in Navan in 1802 by the Bishop of Meath, Most Rev. Patrick Plunkett. The school educated young men for the priesthood and for the professions. The Oval shaped study hall was built in the 1840s and was originally known as St Finian's study hall but quickly became colloquially known as Powers Duck Egg after the headmaster who built it. In February 1908 St Finian's moved to a new premises in Mullingar, and the study hall was converted into Saint Patrick's classical school in 1930 where it continued to run as a school until 1968.

The building which was formerly St Patricks' Classical School was built c. 1842, and is not therefore shown on the first edition of the Ordnance Survey map for Navan, compiled c. 1836. This map shows the site for the building as part of the Academy Garden, and illustrates paths and parterres in the former garden.

The 1890s 25inch Ordnance Survey map shows the building with a fringe of trees to the south-west. The very steep embankment on the opposite side of the site is not illustrated here. The south-east border has the back of long narrow rigs or properties extending from Academy Street. The present boundary is formed by modern fencing and concrete blocks.

MONITORING OF EXCAVATION OF STRUCTURAL PITS

Four pits were excavated within the building for supports for a temporary roof on 10/11/21. The pits were monitored by the archaeologist. The location of the pits is given in the drawing by OCSC Consulting Engineers.

Each of the pits was saw cut prior to breaking out with a small excavator fitted with a rock breaker. The present floor is concrete which overlies an earlier stone flagged floor with an upper level of lime mortar coating. A stone socket for an upright was uncovered in the south west pit, and recommended

for retention. The stone flooring is laid on a pale yellow brown silt with a depth of 500mm to subsoil. Subsoil is a relatively loose gravel.

The remainder of the pits revealed a similar silt over subsoil. However traces of stone and lime mortar were uncovered in the two northern pits. It is suggested that these are remnants of a garden feature which predates the construction of the Study Hall.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Although the site lies outside the Zone of Notification for the historic town of Navan, It is recommended that any subsurface works around and within the building are monitored by an archaeologist. It is considered that there is a relatively low probability of uncovering material of archaeological significance. However, early floor levels and other features relevant to the building will be recorded in this process.

A report on the monitoring should be produced on completion, and supplied to the relevant authorities, including National Monuments Archives section, and MCC.

APPENDIX 1. SITES NEARBY LISTED ON SITES AND MONUMENTS RECORD.

Souterrain, ME025-030. Townland: Dillonsland

Wilde (1850, 134-5) records the discovery of souterrain when making railway cutting. It was T-shaped, ending in beehive chambers.

ME025-067 Class: Cross - Wayside cross (present location)

Townland: Dillonsland

Scheduled for inclusion in the next revision of the RMP: Yes

Description: Now on display in the Meath County Library in Navan, This cross once stood beside an old SE-NW road from Navan to Rathaldron Castle (ME025-011----) that fell out of use (Moore 1899). The highly decorated cross shaft (dims 0.24m x 0.19m; H 1.26m) had stood on a plain base (dims 0.74m x 0.7m; H 0.22m) and had been set up in 1588 by Margaret Dexter and her Cusack husband, according to its inscription (Wilde 1850, 133-4; Crawford 1920; King 1984, 110). Excavation in 1977 revealed a plinth of two steps made from cut limestone blocks (dims of base 2.5m x 2.5m). The remains of 8 infants and young children were recovered in the vicinity, confirming local traditions of its use as a Childrens Burial Ground (ME025-059----) (Cahill 1987-8). The cross has been described by King as:

A shaft fragment rectangular in section set in an undecorated rectangular base. The shaft has rounded edges, an inscription, floral motifs and an heraldic shield in false relief. 1st: The lower part of a shield with the Cusack (per pale or and azure a fess counterchanged) and Dexter (argent a cross fleury gules between four parrots vert) arms impaled and the letters M.C. M.D. 2nd: An inscription in contracted Gothic Latin. [C]USA / ARMIG / ER I ET / MARGA[R] / RETAE DE / XTER UX / ORIS EJU / S AC HE / REDU EO / RM QUE/ HANC C/RUC FECE / RUT A. . /DNI 1588 / QUORU / ANIMA / BUS

P[RO/PICIET] U [R / DEUS]. 3rd: Has a stiff undulate band of eight tulips. 4th: Has a vertebrate band of seven tulips growing from a vase.

The date and patrons of this cross are evident from the inscription: 'Cusack Knight and Margaret Dexter his wife and their heirs who had this cross made A.D. 1588 on whose souls may God have mercy.'

ME025-044020 Class: Architectural fragment

Townland: Town Parks (Navan Lower By.)

Scheduled for inclusion in the next revision of the RMP: Yes

Description: Some dressed stones from St Mary's Abbey (ME025-024----) are now in a rockery at St Mary's Roman Catholic church in Navan. The limestone spandrel (dims 0.57m x 0.36m; T 0.2m) of a double ogee-headed window is decorated with three triskels in relief on one side and star shapes in relief on the other. A triangular piece of limestone (dims 0.64m x 0.37m; T 0.21m) with a raised circle divided into six may be the apex of a wall monument. Some smaller stones carry fragments of an inscription.

ME025-004010 Class: Cross - Churchyard cross

Townland: TOWN PARKS (Navan Lower By.)

Scheduled for inclusion in the next revision of the RMP: Yes

Description: A fragment of a late medieval cross shaft with figure sculpture in false relief on two faces (Moore 1893, 62). is in the graveyard of St Mary's Church of Ireland church. The font (ME025-044009-) is within the church. It is described by King (1984, 112) as:

Navan II Material: fossiliferous limestone. Dims Shaft: H 0.6m; 0.34m x 0.2m.

This possible shaft fragment, rectangular in section, is decorated in relief. It is cemented into a base which is buried in the ground and is not in good condition. There is a figure sculpture on two faces in false relief and there are three mouldings in high relief on the other two sides. No inscription. W: A bearded ecclesiastic wearing an alb, dalmatic and chasuble. He appears to be giving a blessing with his right hand. E: A female figure, possibly St Catherine, crowned and holding a sword in the right hand, set in a panel with the remains of shafting on the right. The figure wears a long pleated robe and has long hair or a veil under a crown.

The above description is derived from the published 'Archaeological Inventory of County Meath' (Dublin: Stationery Office, 1987).

ME025-044009 Class: Font (present location)

Townland: TOWN PARKS (Navan Lower By.)

Scheduled for inclusion in the next revision of the RMP: Yes

Description: The limestone font described by Dopping (1693) as being in St Mary's abbey (ME025-024----) (Reynell 1888-91, 463) is now in St Mary's Church of Ireland church in Navan. The font is octagonal (dims 0.6m x 0.6m; H 0.37m) with a circular basin (int. diam. 0.5m; D 0.18m) and shallow chamfered under-panels. The octagonal stem appears to be modern but the octagonal base (dims 0.6m x 0.6m; H 0.25m) is original (total H 1.13m). The font has two shields in relief, one with a cross that has the inscription IN HOC SIGNO VINCES 1716 crudely incised in a secondary fashion. The other has the Butler arms, and Roe (1968, 89-91) associates it with James, the 4th Earl of Ormonde, who joined a confraternity at St Mary's in 1436. The cross (ME025-044010-) is in the graveyard.

The above description is derived from the published 'Archaeological Inventory of County Meath' (Dublin: Stationery Office, 1987).

ME025-004013 Class: Well

Townland: TOWN PARKS (Navan Lower By.)

Scheduled for inclusion in the next revision of the RMP: Yes

APPENDIX 2 EVIDENCE FROM EXCAVATIONS NEARBY

St Annes, Navan, 11E041. The site lies within the Zone of Archaeological Potential for Navan (ME025-044). The line of the town wall in this sector of the town is not clear. A graveyard associated with St Anne's Convent was situated in the north-west corner of the development site. The burials were removed in the 1980s to St Mary's graveyard, Navan. Seven trenches were excavated. At the north-west corner, the disturbance caused by the burial ground was plainly visible. The area had been backfilled after removal of the burials.

Five other features showed up over the rest of the site. All were of recent date. There was no evidence to indicate the survival of archaeological features on the site and no artefacts were recovered. There was no indication that the town wall had crossed the site.

17E0549. Townparks, Navan. A programme of archaeological monitoring was carried out of the Navan section of the Meath Watermain Rehabilitation – Phase 2. An archaeological assessment report of the overall project was commissioned in 2012 and updated in 2016. The assessment detailed areas recommended for monitoring extending from Bridge Street south-east along Academy Street, a section at Abbey Road and on Johnstown Road. These works were undertaken between January and May 2018.

The project involved the laying of c. 1.3km of pipe. . The majority of the work took place along Academy Street, The exposed section faces for the most part exposed modern fills around existing services with a natural gravel and compact clay under the road base.

03E1703. Three test-trenches were excavated on a development site on the corner of Bridge Street and Circular Road, Navan, on 11 and 12 November 2003. The site was formerly used as a petrol station. The development is located within the zone of archaeological potential established around the historic settlement of Navan. The testing revealed that the site had been completely disturbed by its use as a petrol station.

18E0571. Monitoring of Site Investigation (SI) works was undertaken in advance of the proposed Navan Town Improvement Scheme 2030. The SI trenches were dug at: Abbey Road, Kennedy Road, Trimgate Lane, Railway Street, Market Place, Bakery Lane, Trimgate Street, Fair Green Street, Cannon Row, Circular Road, Ludlow Street and Bridge Street, across the townlands of Abbeyland South, Blackcastle Demesne and Town Parks. No archaeological material was recorded.

Townparks, Our Lady's Hospital. In September 1962 human remains were discovered during the digging of foundations for a new building in the grounds of Our Lady's Hospital at Townparks, Navan.²¹⁹ The site was reported to the Gardaí at Navan, who informed the NMI. Étienne Rynne carried out a site visit. On investigation, the skeleton had been removed from its context and placed in a box. The head was apparently to the south and the feet to the north. With the skeleton were found several badly corroded iron nails and pieces of rotten wood, suggesting that the body had been buried in a coffin. The burial would appear to be nineteenth-century in date. It was not in consecrated ground, the nearest graveyard being about 100m to the north-west. The remains were reburied in the hospital burial plot.

APPENDIX 3. STRAY FINDS FROM NATIONAL MUSEUM DATABASE.

The Finds database of the National Museum of Ireland was searched for the townlands of Town Parks and Dillonslands. No finds were noted.

The Urban Survey for Navan lists the following finds for Navan:

Stone axeheads x 2

Bronze palstave, bronze chisel, bronze spearhead.

Roman coin of Faustina (161-175AD), Roman figuring.

Gravegoods from Viking burial. These include seven decorated gilt-bronze plates, a bronze bridle bit, a harness plate, small bronze buttons, iron rings plated with bronze. Found in railway cuttings at Navan Station (adjoining river Boyne) 1848.

Further finds from Navan can be dated to the Anglo- Norman period.



FIGURE 1. SITE ON NATIONAL MONUMENTS CONSTRAINTS MAP.



FIGURE 2. SITE (APPROXIMATE) ON 1757 MAP OF NAVAN.

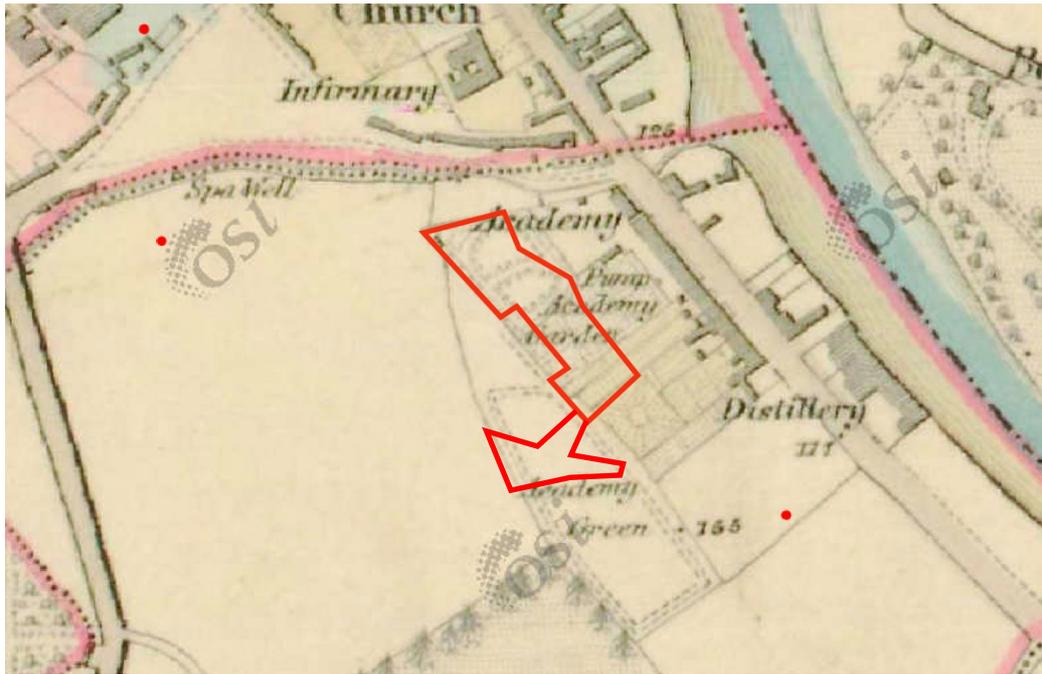


FIGURE 3. SITE ON ORDNANCE SURVEY FIRST EDITION 1836.



FIGURE 4. SITE ON ORDNANCE SURVEY 1909-13.

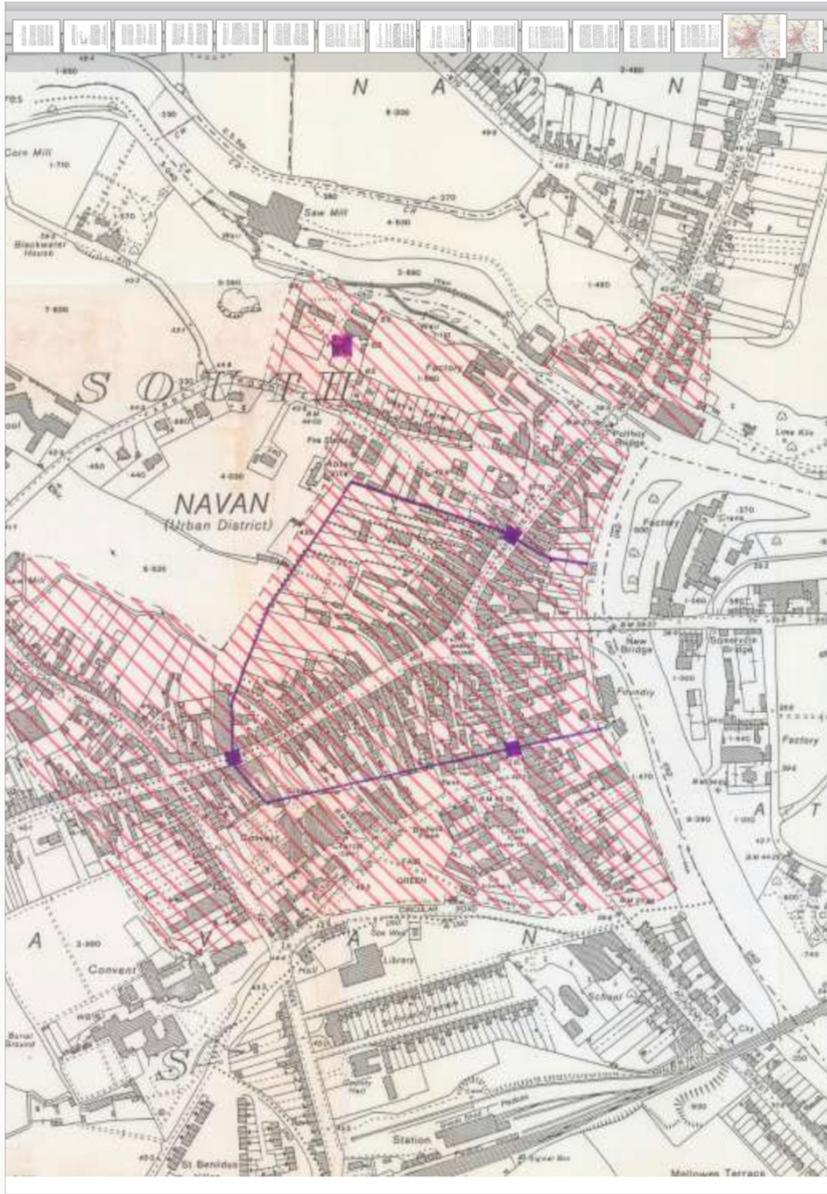


FIGURE 5. URBAN ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY INDICATING TOWN WALLS.

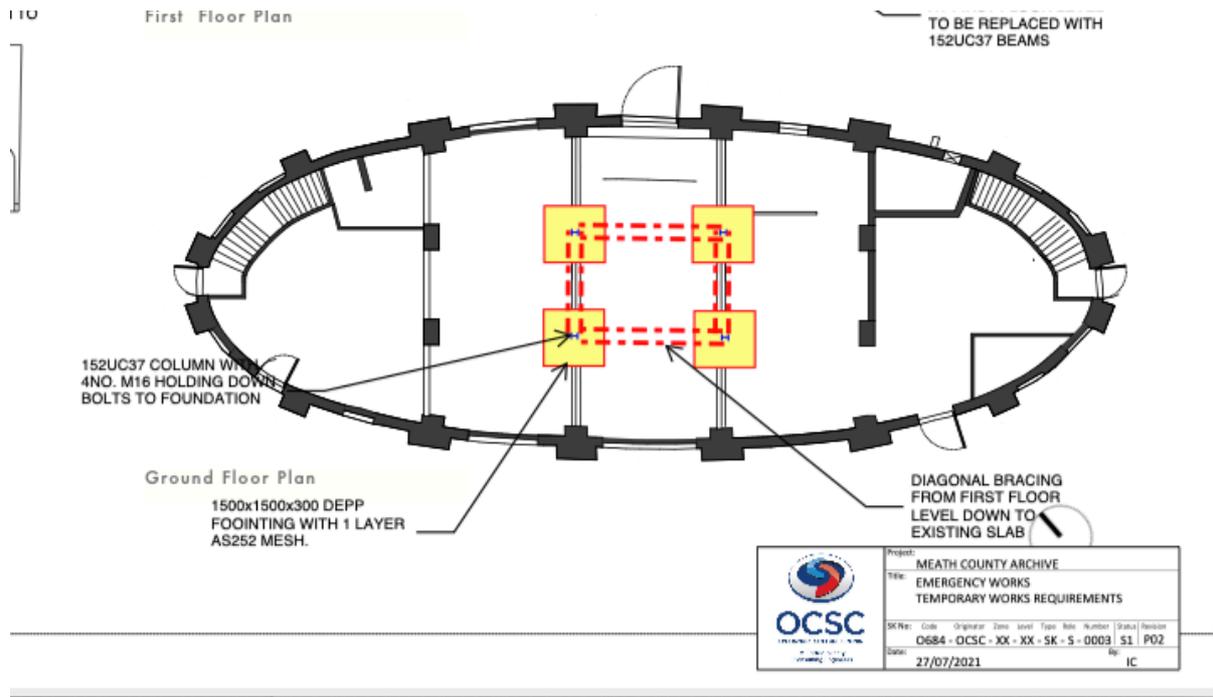


FIGURE 6. LOCATION OF PITS FOR SUPPORTS.



PLATE 1. EXCAVATION WITHIN THE STUDY HALL.



PLATE 2. STONE FLOOR REMAINS AND SOCKET FOR UPRIGHT, SOUTHWEST PIT.



PLATE 3. MORTARED STONE OVER GRAVEL, NORTH-EAST PIT.