

Archaeological testing report

**Lands at Balscadden Road
Howth
Co. Dublin**

Planning and Development (Housing) and Residential Tenancies Act 2016
Planning and Development (Strategic Housing Development) Regulations 2017

Excavation licence 17E0533

For

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**Archaeology
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1 Introduction

1.1 This report describes the results of a programme of archaeological testing undertaken in advance of the development of a c. 1.55ha site located in the centre of Howth, Dublin 13 (Figure 1). The development is the subject of a Strategic Housing Development application to *An Bord Pleanála* and is located on a disused twentieth-century quarry which exploited the ridge of sand and gravels extending south of the rocky spur under the adjacent Martello tower. The ridge slopes off sharply to Balscadden Road to the east, and less dramatically to Abbey Street to the west (Figures 1 and 2). The gravel pit is occupied today by disused tennis courts and a derelict sports hall, the Edros Centre,¹ where the area is still known locally as the ‘Sand Pit’.²

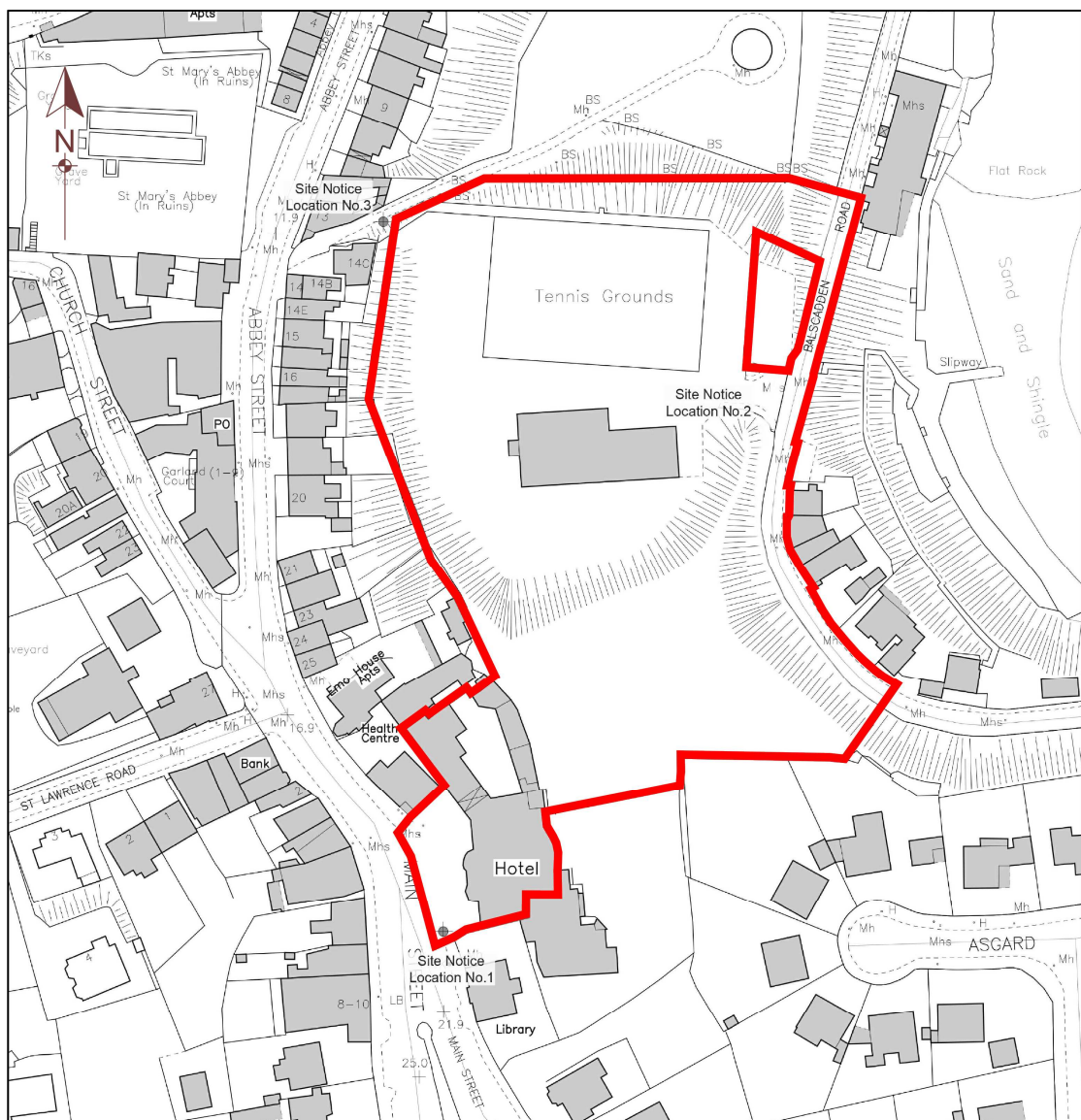


Figure 1 Site location

¹ Ptolemy mapped Howth as the island of Edros in the second century AD.

² Letter from Thomas Broughan TD to planning authority, 11 April 2014 (F14A/0108).

1.2 The subject site has been granted several historic permissions on applications for its constituent parts. These include

- the Edros Centre site (Reg. Ref F14A/0108), the largest of the three sites, which occupies the level base of the quarry pit to the north;
- the Bailey Court (formerly the Royal) Hotel to the southwest, which has a significant recessed frontage to Abbey Street (Reg. Ref.15A/0072). Where the hotel has been entered on the National Inventory of Architectural Heritage (NIAH), it is not a Protected Structure listed on the *Fingal Development Plan 2017-23*;
- the Cluxton site (Reg. Ref. F06A/1879/E1, now expired), refers to the southern, more elevated area of the site, a level which extends beyond the southern site boundary towards Asgard Park.

The greater site has now been consolidated under one owner. The proposed development comprises three residential blocks plus a mews building accommodating 160 apartments with associated basement levels and landscaping. It is proposed to both deepen and widen the existing gravel pit to accommodate the development and to ameliorate its visual impact on historic vistas.

1.3 There are no recorded monuments within the site footprint. A Martello tower, constructed c. 1804, is situated on the spur to the immediate north and is afforded statutory protection on several statutory levels (RMP DU016-002002; NIAH Reg. 11359033; *Fingal Development Plan 2017-2023*, RPS Reg. 570). The tower was constructed on an Anglo-Norman motte (DU016-002001), however a recent community excavation on the site failed to detect substantial medieval occupation.

There are several recorded monuments in the immediate vicinity of the development site, which itself lies outside the eastern boundary of the Notification Zone associated with St. Mary's Church, a National Monument (Ref. No. 36). As such, any development of the site will not require Ministerial Consent under Section 14 of the National Monuments Act 1930 (as amended).

2 Archaeological and historical contexts (Franc Myles)

- 2.1 The name Howth is derived from the word *hoved*, meaning 'head'. The Irish name for Howth, *Ben Edair*, translates as the 'Hill of Edar', commemorating a chieftain buried on the hill of Howth. There is extensive evidence on the peninsula for occupation from the prehistoric period onwards (Stout and Stout, 1992) and where the character of the village is essentially Victorian, its morphology was influenced by the medieval ecclesiastical site and the stabilised sandy ridge which protected the coastal settlement from the east.
- 2.2 In 1180 the Manor of Howth was granted to Almorice Tristram (who took the name St. Lawrence); he is believed to have constructed a motte on the site now occupied by the Martello tower. Berenger sketched the monument in 1775 as a prehistoric tumulus or cairn, depicting a flat-topped mound with an outer ring and fosse (Figure 2). This image could equally depict a motte constructed within an earlier rath, or has been suggested by others part of an Iron Age promontory fort. Extraction of the south-facing hillside is clearly evident, which may represent groundworks excavated for the first houses on the eastern side of Abbey Street

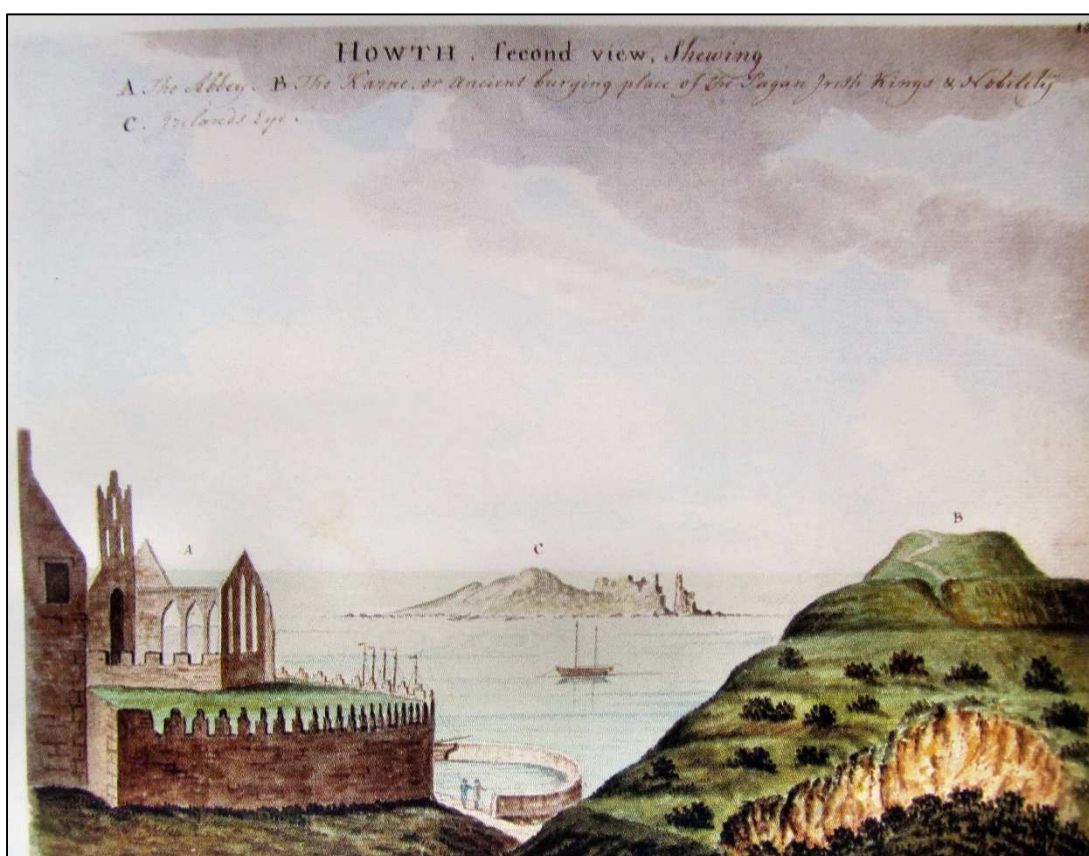


Figure 2 Gabriel Berenger, Howth with St. Mary's Abbey (A), 'The Karne, or ancient burying place of the Pagan Irish Kings & Nobility' (B) and Ireland's Eye (C), 1775

- 2.3 The proposed development is centred approximately 130m east of a medieval ecclesiastical complex on the western side of Abbey Street, a late eighteenth-century street which extends north-south through the village, sitting in the valley in between (Figure 3). The complex centres on St. Mary's Church, a National Monument also known as Howth Abbey (DU015-029001),

which was constructed on the site of a church founded by Sitric, King of Dublin c. 1042. The church comprises a double aisled structure with a bellcote in its west end and dates to the fourteenth century (Leask 1978, 34-7). Two medieval grave slabs (DU015-029004) are attached to the eastern and southern walls of the south aisle. A fifteenth-century altar tomb (DU015-029003) is located at the eastern end of the southern aisle, the covering slab of which bears the effigy of Sir Christopher St. Lawrence, Lord of Howth and his wife Anne Plunkett.

The associated graveyard (DU015-029006) contains burials ranging in date from the eighteenth century to modern times. Items of interest within the graveyard (which is enclosed distinctive crenallated walls as depicted by Gabriel Beranger) include a holy well (DU015-029002) in the northwestern boundary wall and a grave slab (DU015-029005) reused as a kerbstone in the southwest corner.

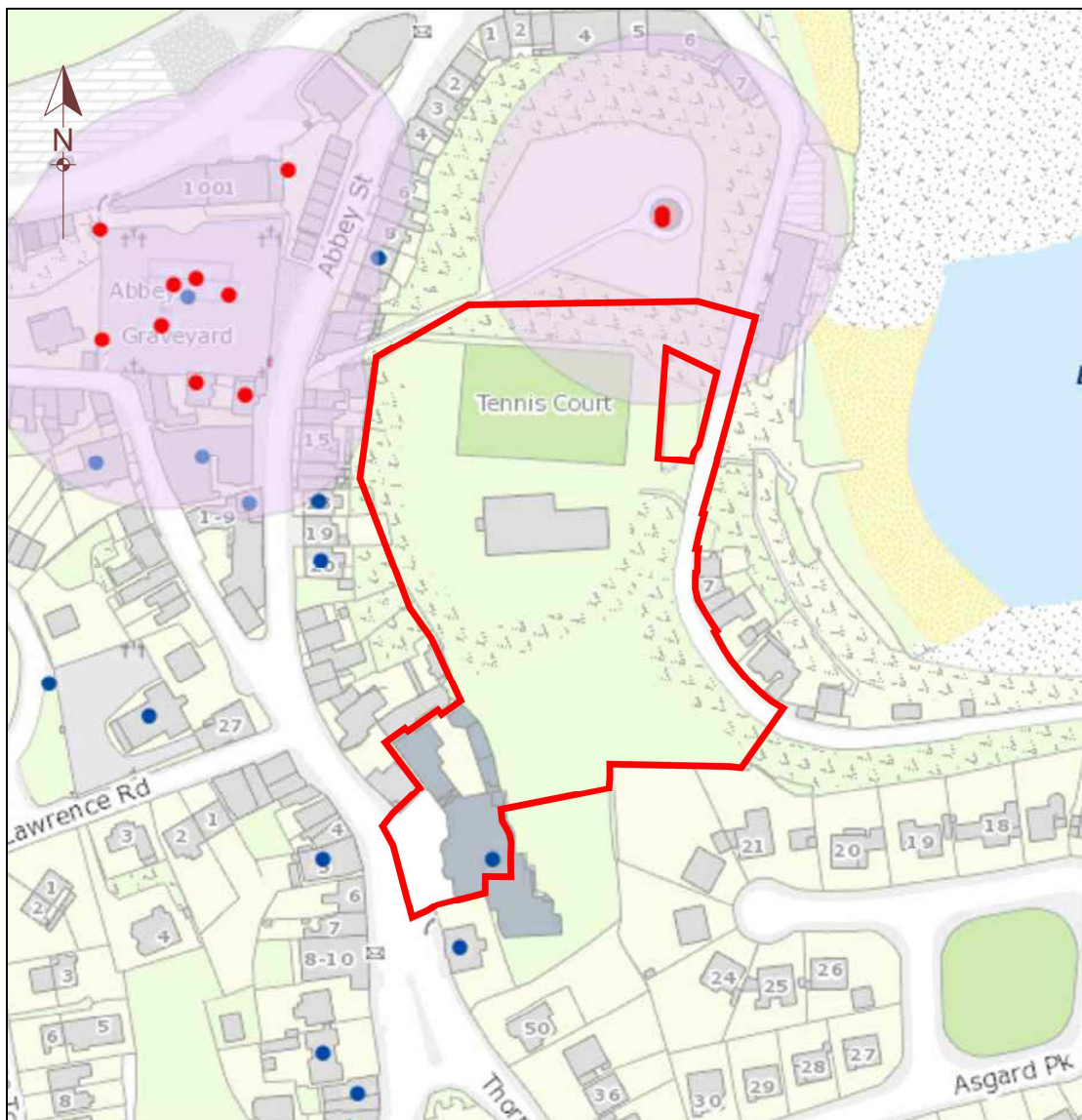


Figure 3 Proposed development site with RMP sites (red dots) with associated Zones of Notification and NIAH listed sites (blue dots) (ASI, Historic Environment Viewer)

2.4 The remaining recorded monuments to the hill west of the development site comprise medieval structures. The sole extant example is a fortified house (DU015-030), known as the 'College of Howth' located to the southeast of the church. This is a T-shaped building of late fifteenth- or early sixteenth-century date fronting onto Abbey Street. A nineteenth-century description of the structure states 'it is entranced from the south and consists of a hall, kitchen and the remains of seven cells. The ruins are sufficiently tenatable to afford shelter to a number of poor families' (Warburton *et al.* 1818, 1260).

The remains of two medieval buildings have been uncovered as a result of previous archaeological investigations. The northwest angle of a late medieval structure (DU015-094) was recorded outside the southern boundary of the graveyard discussed above. This comprised two courses of masonry overlying a construction layer. A second medieval structure was found to the northeast of the church complex. This dated to the thirteenth or fourteenth century and measured 8.6m E-W and 4m N-S internally, with walls up to 950mm in thickness, suggesting the building had more than one storey. Three floor levels were also uncovered in the building which was likely demolished in the late medieval period.

2.5 To the immediate north of the site stands a circular Martello tower (DU016-002002; NIAH Reg. 11359033; RPS Reg. 570), one of 28 constructed to defend the coastline of Dublin (Bolton, 2008). Situated overlooking Balscadden Bay, its construction was completed in 1804 and it was armed with twenty 4lb canon against an expected Napoleonic invasion fleet. The tower was constructed on a natural spur on top of which is believed to be the location of the remains of the motte discussed above. The damage to the motte was lamented by the antiquarian T.J. Westropp (1922, 64) who opined that

Unfortunately, in the wasteful craze for building useless Martello Towers, in the Napoleonic Wars, early in the last century, the great mound, like other interesting and historic structures was levelled; its successor alone marks its site.

2.6 Historic mapping provides a visual aid in identifying the morphology and development surrounding the development site. The Barony Map of Coolock from the Down Survey c. 1657 (Figure 4) exaggerates the church of St. Mary's surrounded by trees, with a large house denoting the location of Howth village. Rocque in 1757 provides considerably more detail (Figure 5). This depicts the development site as undeveloped, with a watercourse (now presumably culverted under Abbey Street) delineating its western boundary. The layout of the village is clearly visible with substantial houses along Main Street, extending to the south from St. Mary's Church. The mound on which the present Martello tower was constructed can be seen north of the development site.



Figure 4 Barony of Coolock, Down Survey mapping c. 1657

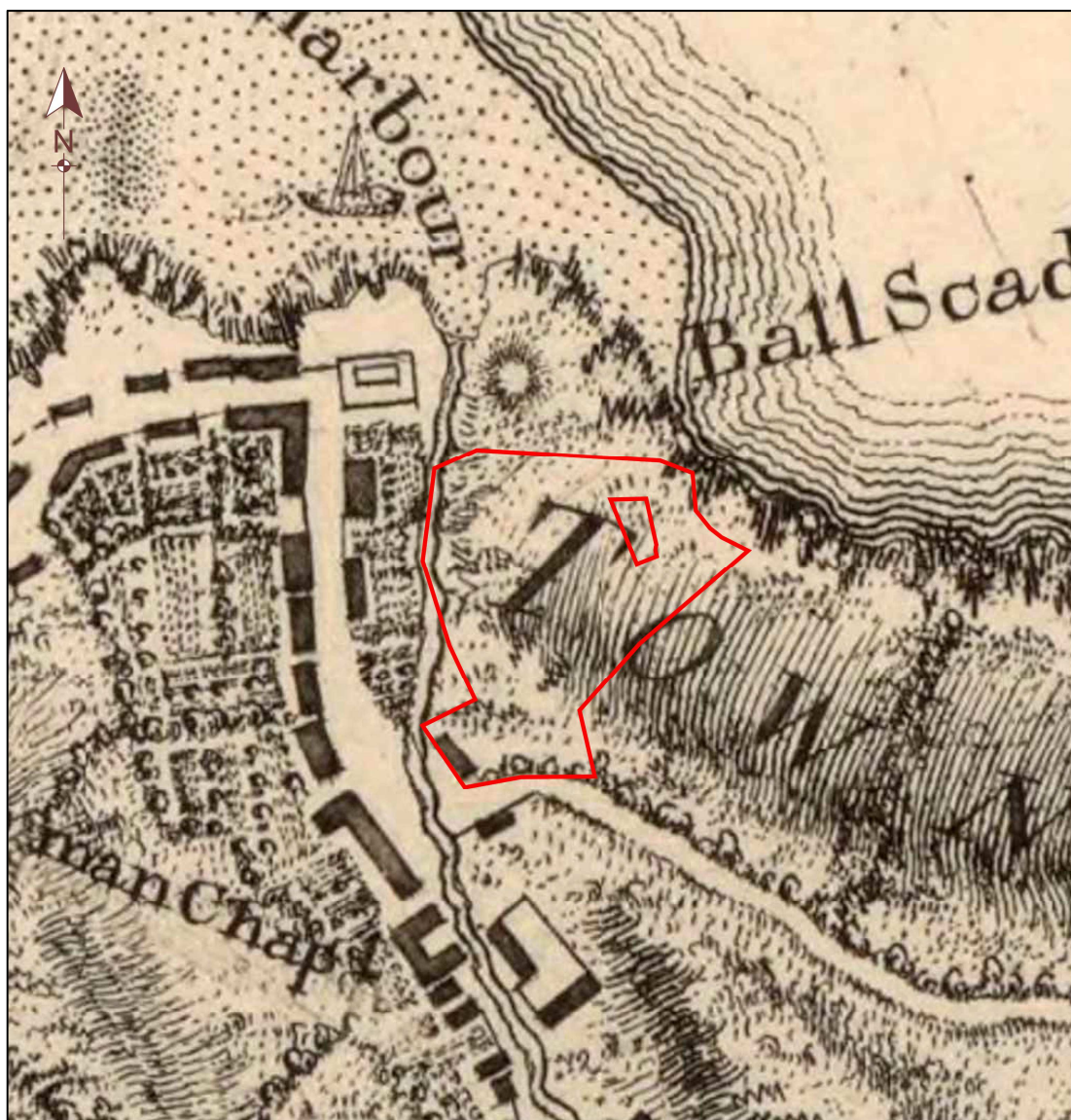


Figure 5 John Rocque, *A Survey of the City, Harbour, Bay and Environs of Dublin*, 1757. Approximate site boundary in red. Note absence of Abbey Street along watercourse

The first edition Ordnance Survey mapping 1838 (Figure 6) depicts Howth with a more recognisably modern layout, where early nineteenth-century additions, such as the Martello tower and Abbey Street are evident. A footpath is depicted across the development site where the Cluxton lands are depicted as three fields with outbuildings, with the extensive footprint of the Royal Hotel occupying the southwestern corner.

This can be compared with the 1907 25-inch mapping (Figure 7) where the field boundaries in the southern half of the site have been removed to create one larger field. The footpath (labelled F.P.) traversing across the site is still visible and continued to be depicted into the 1930s. The careful contouring around the site perimeter is not replicated to depict a quarry pit towards the centre of the site.

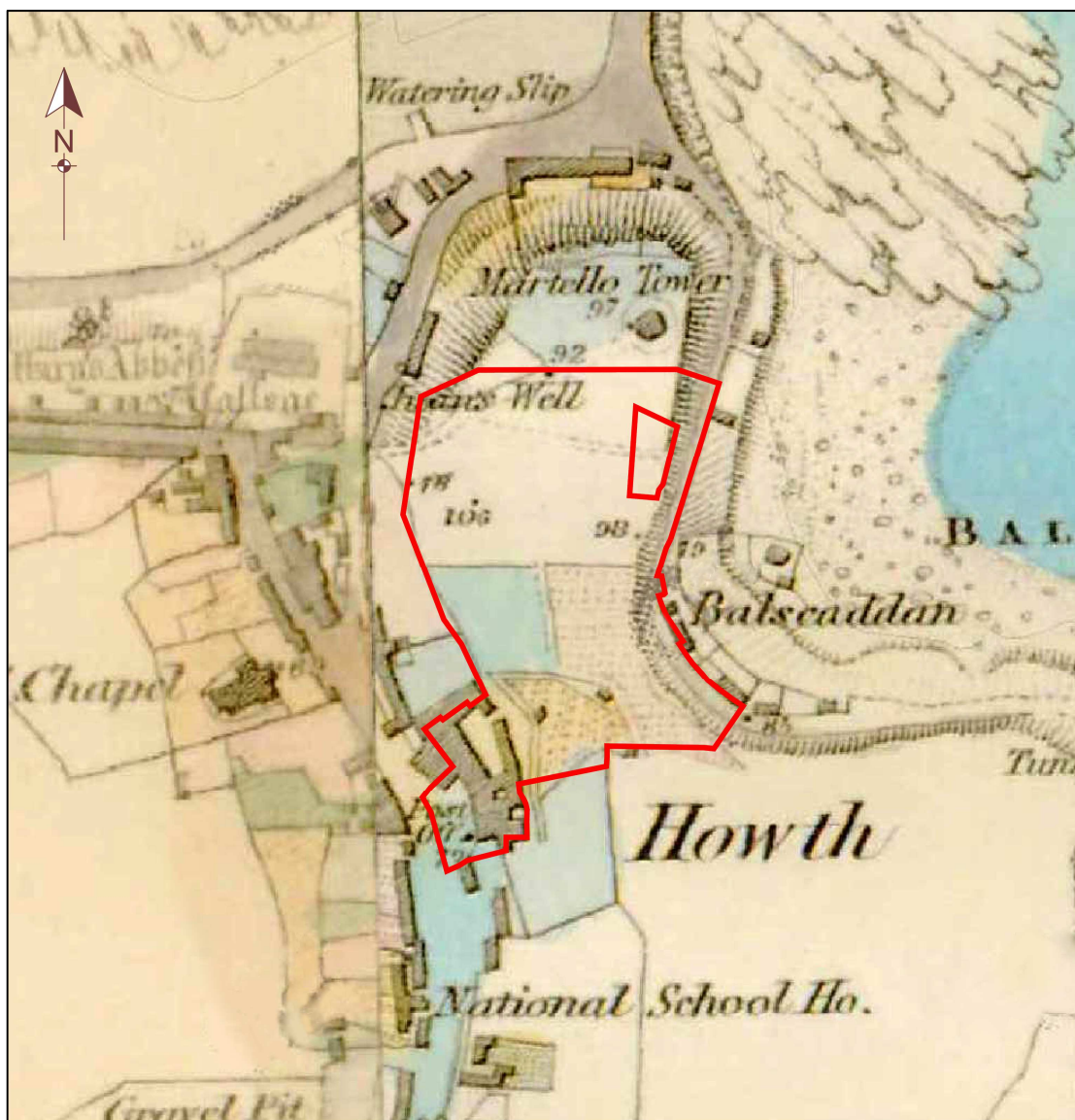


Figure 6 Ordnance Survey 6 inch to 1 mile mapping, Sheet 16, 1837. Boundary approximate

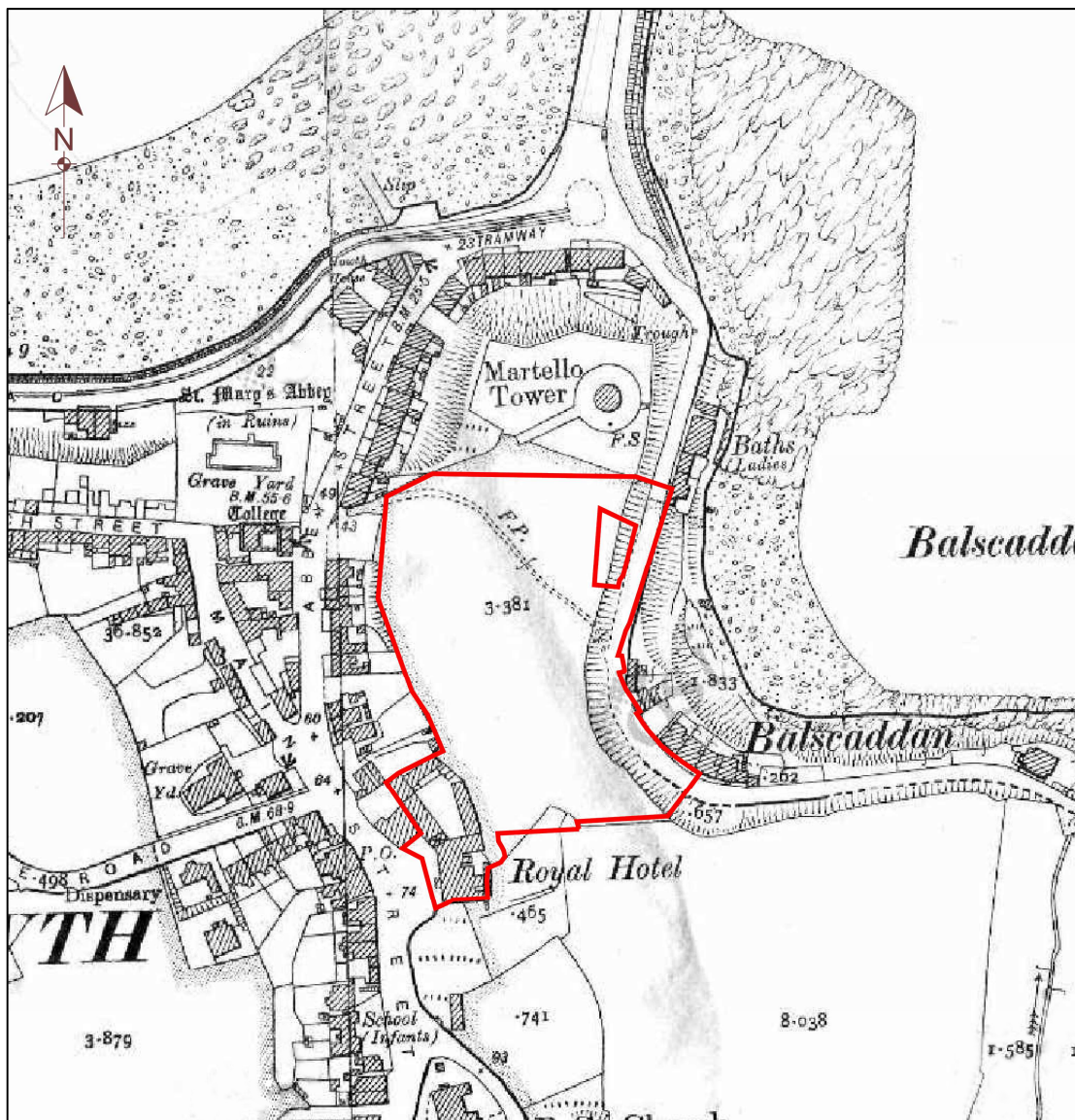


Figure 7 Ordnance Survey 25 inch to 1 mile mapping, DN016-05, 1907.

3 Previous archaeological investigations

- 3.1 A search of the online *Excavations Bulletin* for previous archaeological investigations within the proposed development area produced no results.³ Several investigations have however been undertaken within the wider vicinity (Figure 8, Table 1). These were all concentrated to the west and northwest of the development site, with archaeological deposits surviving at St. Mary's Abbey and on the shoreline immediately below to the north.



Figure 8 Previous excavations in vicinity of development site to 2008

³ www.excavations.ie

Licence No.	Location	Site Type	Author
92E0010	Howth House, Howth	No archaeological significance	Claire Cotter
92E0092	Howth House, Howth	No archaeological significance	Alan Hayden, Archaeological Projects Ltd.
94E0094	30 Church Street, Howth	Urban medieval, sixteenth- century gable wall	Roseanne Meenan
03E0122	Old College, Abbey Street, Howth	Urban medieval, sixteenth- century building	Linzi Simpson, Margaret Gowan and Co. Ltd.
03E1804	Abbey Street, Howth	Medieval deposits	Christine Baker
05E1041	14b, Abbey Street, Howth	No archaeological significance	Jane Whitaker, ADS Ltd.

Table 1 Previous excavations to 2008

- 4.2 The most pertinent work has been undertaken more recently by Paul Duffy and the *Resurrecting Monuments Community Archaeology Group*,⁴ which undertook the excavation of a test trench beside the Martello on Tower Hill in 2015. Worked flint recovered from the topsoil indicated human activity since prehistoric times, where most of the material recorded was disturbed by the earthworks undertaken to construct the Martello tower.

Duffy concluded that

due to the strategic significance of the Tower Hill site it seems likely that it was inhabited prior to the construction of the motte castle. There is a motte castle at Mallahow (DU004-020) which is surrounded by several ring ditches which ... are a good indication of Iron Age activity. Along with Tower Hill, this may have been a site which was of significance during the Iron Age and was subsequently built upon in later periods.⁵

In this regard Westropp was adamant that the Ordnance Survey's identification of the Baily promontory as Dun Griffin was incorrect (1922, 62-4). He located *Dún Crimthann* at Tower Hill, supported by early literature and folklore.

4.2 *Discrete find sites*

No stray finds from within 1km of the development site have been recorded on the topographical files of the NMI.

⁴ The project received grant funding from the Irish Research Council (IRC) under the New Foundations Grant Scheme 2015 and further support from Fingal County Council.

⁵ Duffy, P. 2016. 'Archaeological test excavation. Tower Hill, Howth Co. Dublin'. Unpublished report kindly communicated by the writer.

5 Archaeological testing results

5.1 Archaeological testing of the site took place over three days from 7 November 2017. This was undertaken by the writer with the assistance of Alva Mac Gowan of *Archaeology and Built Heritage*. Seven trenches were excavated over three areas in the site (Figure 9). These were positioned to identify the location and density of any sub-surface archaeological deposits that would be disturbed by ground works occasioned by the new development.

All the trenches were opened mechanically between 1500mm and 2000mm in width and trowelled off by hand. No trenches were opened over the southwestern corner of the site due to a steep incline, making working conditions hazardous.

For recording purposes, three areas were defined within the site. Area A comprised the quarry pit currently occupied by the Edros Centre and tennis courts (Trenches 1-2). Area B was defined by the elevated area to the south of the development site where the primary height of the ridge appears to have been maintained (Trenches 3-4). Area C was the steep slope defining the northern perimeter of the site that divides the proposed development site from the curtilage of the Martello tower to the north (Trenches 5-7).

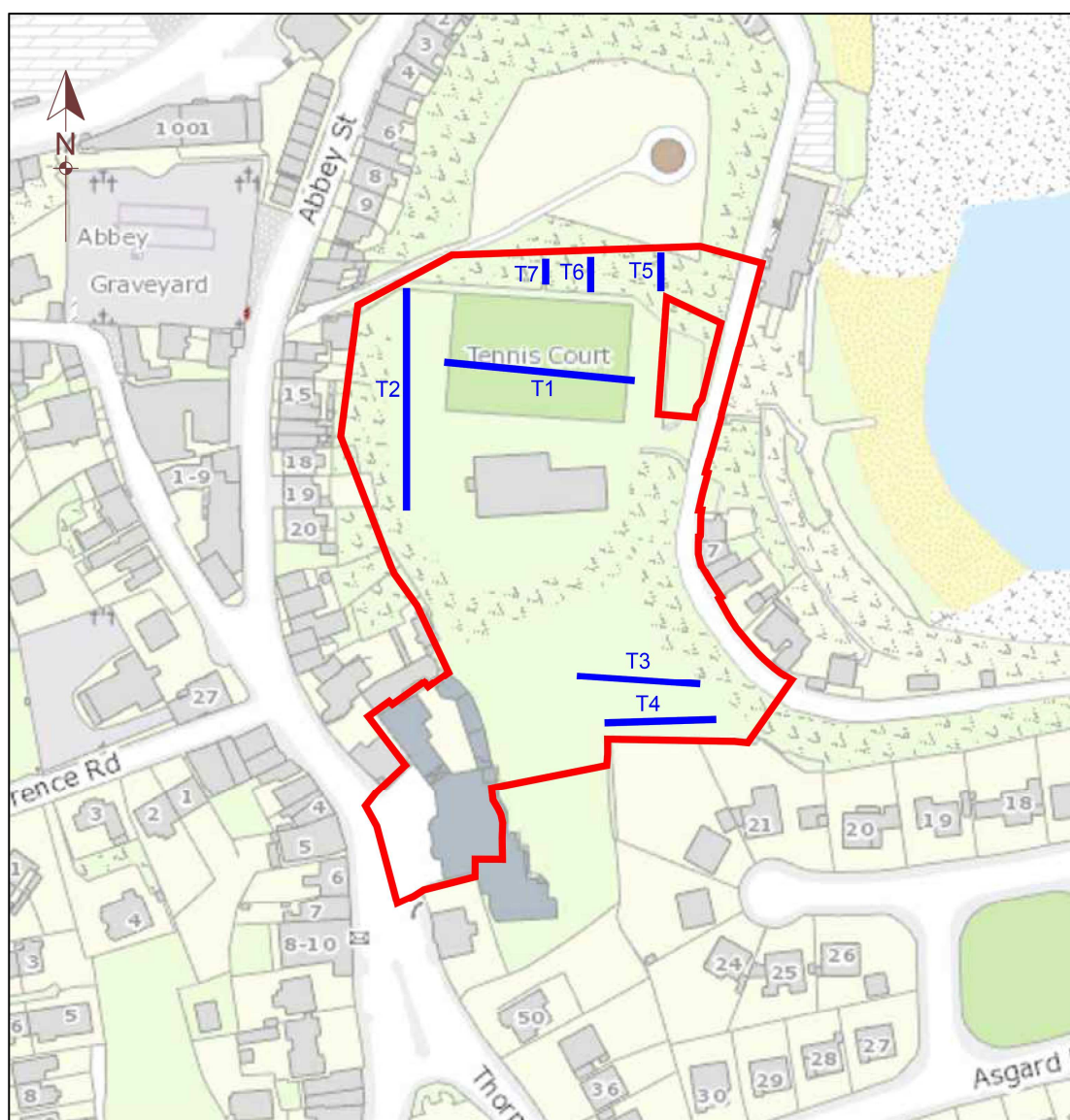


Figure 9 Test trench locations

5.2 Area A

Two trenches were excavated across Area A, T1 extending E-W and T2 extending N-S (Figure 9). The removal of the tarmacadam surface and underlying hardcore associated with the tennis courts revealed naturally deposited sands at 300mm below present ground level (BPGL) (Plate 1).

The high level of naturally deposited sand and gravels was repeated in T2, where the removal of 200mm of sod revealed the area had been previously quarried.



Plate 1 Trench 1, facing east

5.2 **Area B**

Two trenches (T3 and T4) were excavated in Area B, which was located on the elevated area over the southern part of the site. This area constitutes the only part of the site that had not been quarried and retains a natural ground level. As such, sub-surface archaeological deposits/features were more likely to be encountered in this area.

Trench 3 was 30m in length and was located on the southern side of the slope defining the southern end of the quarry. The excavation of the trench revealed 400-500mm of homogenous, light brown topsoil (with rubbish contamination in the western half of the trench) deposited over light brown, sandy, natural subsoil. Four medieval pits were recorded in the eastern half of Trench 3. These were half-sectioned to identify the composition of the fill material.

Pit 1

This sub-circular pit was 300mm in depth, measured 1100mm by 800mm and was located at the eastern end of Trench 3 cut into natural subsoil 500mm below PGL. The pit was U-shaped in section and had two fills. The upper fill (200mm deep) consisted of yellow/brown sandy clay with a high concentration (40%) of marine shell (cockle, periwinkle), animal bone (some pieces of which was butchered) and charcoal. Five sherds of late medieval Dublin-type green glazed, red earthenware were also recorded. The lower fill of the pit was similar to the upper but contained less inclusions of bone and shell.

Pit 2

This oval-shaped pit was 900mm in length and 650mm wide and was located towards the centre of Trench 3, cutting into natural subsoil at a level of 500mm below PGL. The pit was V-shaped in section, 12mm deep and had a fill of loose dark brown, sandy clay with inclusions of marine shell (cockle, periwinkle), charcoal and one fragment of cattle horn.

Pit 3

This oval-shaped pit was 650mm in length and 560mm wide and was located at the middle area of Trench 3 cut into natural subsoil at a level of 500mm below PGL. The pit was V-shaped in section, 16mm deep and had a fill of loose dark brown, sandy clay with inclusions of marine shell (cockle, periwinkle), bird bone, charcoal and burnt stone.

Pit 4

This sub-circular pit was 200mm deep and measured 2000mm in length and was located at the eastern end of Trench 3 cut into natural subsoil at a level of 500mm below PGL. Half the pit was visible with the second half extending underneath the southern baulk. The fill consisted of yellow/brown sandy clay with inclusions of marine shell (cockle, periwinkle). Three fragments of animal bone, charcoal flecks and one sherd of Dublin-type green glazed red earthenware were also recorded in the fill of the pit.

Trench 4 was located along the southern boundary of the site. The excavation of the trench revealed 400-500mm of homogenous, light brown topsoil (with rubbish contamination in the western half of the trench) deposited over light brown, sandy, natural subsoil. No archaeological material was uncovered in Trench 4.



Plate 2 Trench 3, facing west. Note high marine shell content in pit in foreground

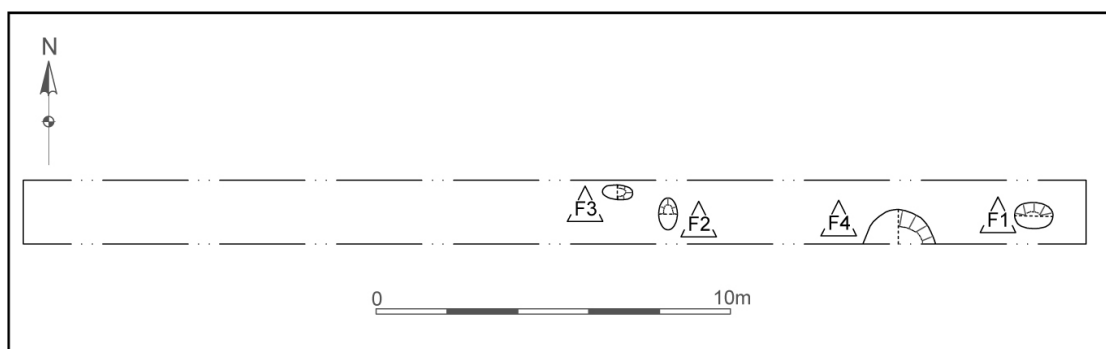


Figure 10 Plan of Trench 3 with location of medieval pits (F1-4)



Plate 3 Pit 1, Trench 3,



Plate 4 Pits 2 and 3, Trench 3

5.3 Area C

Three trenches (Trenches 5-7) were excavated in a N-S direction down the steep slope defining the northern perimeter of the site between the proposed development footprint and the Martello tower to the north. This was undertaken to identify any *in situ* archaeological material associated with the twelfth-century Norman motte, supposedly located on the spur of land now housing the Martello tower.

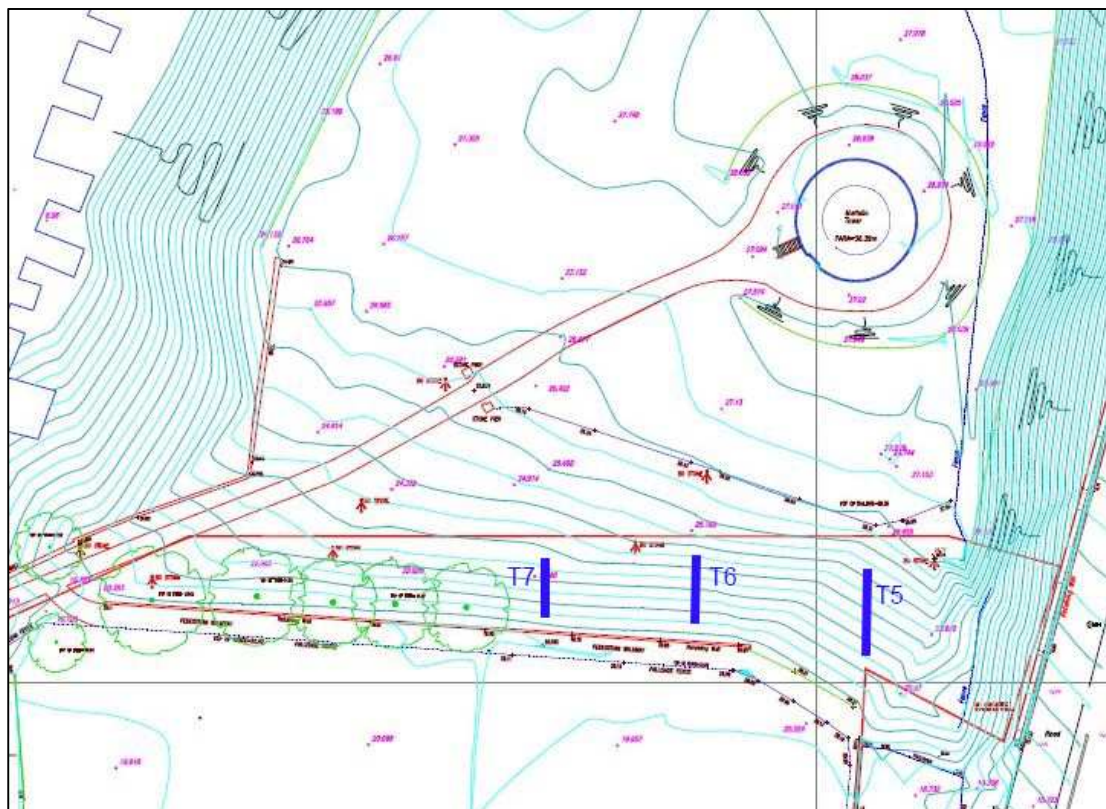


Figure 11 Trench location in Area C

All three trenches revealed 200-300mm of light brown, loose, sandy topsoil over naturally deposited sand. One piece of animal bone (T5) and two sherds of post-medieval pottery (black-glazed earthenware and green-glazed red earthenware) (T6 and T7) were recorded in the topsoil but not in an archaeological context. No features of an archaeological nature were encountered.



Plate 5 Trench 5, facing north with Martello tower in background

6 Conclusion and recommendations

- 6.1 Test trenching revealed that historic surface levels over more than half the site have been truncated by modern gravel and sand extraction. The topography of the area comprising the Edros Centre lands and defining northern slope is clearly the result of heavy quarrying activity, a fact that is highlighted by examination of historical photographs (Plate 6) which depict the area as relatively flat, without a slighter slope to the north.



Plate 6 *Coastline at Howth, Co. Dublin.* Joshua H. Hargrave Collection, NLI

- 6.2 The Cluxton Lands to the north of the site constitute the only unquarried part of the site which retains a historic ground level. Trench 3, excavated on the level surface along the southern perimeter of the site, offered several indicators of medieval activity. These included four pits, ranging in diameter from 2000mm to 650mm, which all provided evidence of medieval food waste; most notably marine shell, animal and bird bone. Food production is also identified by finds of charcoal and burnt stone, indicators of the fires on which the above animals and birds were cooked.

- 6.3 Pottery sherds recovered from the Pits 1 and 4 in Trench 3 include six pieces of late medieval Dublin-type green glazed red earthenware, providing an indicative date for the activity recorded. All the sherds were from wheel thrown ceramic vessels and four had decoration in the form of horizontal ribbing (Plate 6).



Plate 6 Medieval pottery sherds recorded in Trench 3

- 6.4 These findings represent are significant when considering the development of medieval Howth. It is likely the pits containing evidence of food production and waste are contemporary with St. Mary's Church (DU015-029001) and the 'College of Howth' (DU015-030) with both buildings dating to the late medieval period. The location of the pits is also significant in that they represent the most easterly recorded example of activity contemporary with the medieval ecclesiastical establishment and may indicate the survival of medieval settlement *sub stratum* in the southern area of the proposed development site.
- 6.5 It is recommended the level area of the Cluxton lands, where the above medieval deposits were recorded, undergo full archaeological excavation prior to groundworks associated with the new development proceed. This will involve stripping of topsoil and the excavation of all archaeological features/deposits in the area in order to assess the nature and distribution of medieval activity in the area.

Any recommendations regarding the archaeological resolution of the site are nonetheless subject to agreement with the planning authority and the National Monuments Service of the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht.



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