Clare Castle Excavations in September 2013

Clare Castle is a medieval motte-and-bailey castle adjacent to the River Stour in the southern part of the historic market town of Clare and is a Scheduled Monument of national importance. It was built by the powerful de Clare family in the late 11th century and its earthworks and masonry remains now form the focus of the Clare Castle Country Park.

In May 2013, excavations directed by Access Cambridge Archaeology for the Heritage Lottery Funded ‘Managing a Masterpiece’ of four archaeological trenches established that archaeological deposits are preserved in situ within the inner bailey of the castle, despite the presence there of extensive engineering works and buildings associated with the railway of 19th and 20th century date. These removed some of the later medieval layers across part of the inner bailey, but earlier deposits do survive intact beneath these, overlain with thick layers of modern ballast and hardcore. Below these, medieval archaeological remains revealed by the May 2013 excavations included a large ditch or pit containing domestic refuse dating to the late 12th to 14th century (near the entrance linking the inner and outer castle baileys); two graves dating to the mid 11th to late 13th centuries (in the centre of the inner bailey); a stone building, originally part of the first phase of the castle in the 11th – 12th centuries, but refurbished with decorated tile and glass in the 13th/14th century while Elizabeth de Burgh was resident and demolished in the later 15th or early 16th century.

The discovery of part of two in situ human burials was of particular interest, as although stories abound of human remains being found in the bailey, there had not previously been any formal recorded evidence for these being present. Finding these burials still in their original positions enabled the archaeologists to identify them as likely to be Christian as they were lying flat on their backs and aligned east-west (with the feet present in the eastern end of the grave cuts and, by implication, their heads to the west). One was an immature individual aged between 10 and 14 years at time of death, and the graves contained pottery of 10-13th century date, showing they must date to this time or later. However, with just two burials found (and those only partially exposed in the trench), a number of questions remains, and for this reason, in order to inform future management and interpretation of the site that a small additional excavation is taking place in September 2013. A single trench will be sited near the burials, intended to answer the following questions about this part of this important historic site:

A. Are there any more in situ human burials nearby which would confirm that the cemetery in the castle bailey extends to more than just two burials found so far?
B. What is/are the date, age, sex and condition of any further human burial(s) found in the area excavated in May 2013, and what can this tell us about who was buried there and when?
C. Is there any evidence for a church or other structures associated with these apparently Christian burials?
D. Are there any other archaeological features and/or deposits in the excavated area which may be related to the burials or to other past activity in this area?

For more information visit the ACA website:
http://www.arch.cam.ac.uk/aca/clarecastle.html

And the ACA blog:
http://accesscambridgearchaeology.wordpress.com/