Clare Castle Excavations in 2013

Clare Castle is a medieval motte-and-bailey castle of Norman origin built shortly after the 1066 Conquest by the powerful de Clare family. It was a particularly large and imposing castle by medieval standards, but little of the original structure is visible, much now lost, hidden by trees or damaged by later building, including the 19th century railway line.

In 2013, archaeological excavations by local residents supervised by Access Cambridge Archaeology are exploring four sites within the castle grounds.

Little is known of the early history of the site of Clare Castle, but documentary evidence suggests that a small priory was there by 1045 AD, possibly associated with a high-status Anglo-Saxon residence and several human skeletons unearthed in 1951: tooth samples recently subjected to isotopic analysis show the owner to have come from the local area. In 1124 the priory was moved to Stoke-by-Clare.

Castles (private defended residences of medieval feudal lords) were introduced to England after the Norman Conquest. Soon after 1066, William the Conqueror granted the Clare estate to one of the knights who'd helped him conquer England, Richard Fitz Gilbert. Documents show the castle was built by 1090. Its valley-bottom location is easily defended by the river and strategically positioned to dominate both the adjacent town and movement up and down the valley. If there was an Anglo-Saxon lordly residence on the site, building the castle there would emphasise that power had now passed into new hands.

Clare Castle was a motte and bailey castle, the most common form of castle in the 11th and 12th centuries which went out of fashion as castles with keeps and curtain walls became popular. Clare Castle was unusually large, with two baileys (rather than the usual one) and a 16m high motte. The baileys at Clare may both be part of an original layout designed to allow for a staged progression into the inner bailey and the motte; alternatively the northern, outer bailey may be a later addition.

The motte lies west of the inner bailey, and is topped by a flint rubble wall, the remains of a 13th-century circular shell keep which may have replaced an earlier timber keep (tower). Another section of wall east of the motte protected the steps up to the keep. Both walls were restored in
the 19th century, when the spiral path up the castle mound was also built. In 1846 the motte was still separated from the inner bailey by a curving section of water-filled ditch, now in-filled.

The southern, inner bailey comprised an earthen rampart topped with a stone wall. Three fragments of this wall survive on the south side where the rampart runs alongside the New Cut (a 14th-century diversion of the Stour created to supply water to a mill). A break in the south-east corner of the rampart may be an entrance. The northern rampart of the inner bailey is topped by a path, now called ‘Lady’s Walk’, and the north-east corner, known as ‘Gun Hill’, may have carried a 13th-century building. This may have been built to create more spacious living accommodation than was available on top of the motte; the Clares in the 14th century had a retinue of more than 250 people and entertained royalty. The east side of the rampart was badly damaged in 1865 when a railway line and station was built: the platform still survives with the buildings housing an interpretation centre, but the track has been removed leaving a flat grassed area where it ran.

The northern, outer bailey is separated from the inner bailey by a large water-filled ditch. 19th century excavations showed an entrance linking the two baileys to have been via a causeway flanked by stone towers and earthwork bastions, one of which is still visible on the east side. The outer bailey comprised an earthen rampart, with no evidence for any stone wall. The western rampart was quarried away in 19th century to provide material to repair roads and a fire-station and public lavatory built in the 20th century north of the modern road which runs across the medieval causeway.

Suspected medieval gardens survive east of the baileys, visible on the 1846 map as a quadrilateral enclosure defined by narrow water-filled ditches, surrounding a central rectangular pond with a smaller rectangular pond at each corner. This is the likely location of an important 14th-century garden made for Elizabeth de Burgh, the Lady of Clare. Documents record that this contained flint pathways railed with rods, a glass structure (perhaps an aviary) a fountain and a pool. The area was badly damaged by the railway line, and the area to its north used for dumping silt from cleaning the ponds. The area to its south is now a wildlife island.

For centuries, the Clares were one of the most important families in medieval England, who became earls of Hertford and Gloucester. The last male heir died at Bannockburn in 1314, and his great-niece married Lionel Duke of Clarence (disgraced son of Edward III). In the 15th century the Clare estate passed to the king, and the castle probably went out of use soon after this.

The 2013 excavations will take place on four separate sites within the bailey of Clare Castle, following up community test pit excavations carried out by Access Cambridge Archaeology Managing a Masterpiece programme in 2011 (http://www.arch.cam.ac.uk/aca/clare.html).

- **Trench A** is investigating the site where the human burials were found in 1951.
- **Trench B** aims to assess the damage caused by the building of the railway line in 1865, which ran through the area where the main castle buildings were probably located.
- **Trench C** seeks traces of the 14th-century gardens of Lady Elizabeth de Burgh, thought to lie in the wooded area beyond the inner bailey of the castle.
- **Trench D** seeks to establish the extent and level of preservation of archaeological remains south of the railway line, which lies within the area of the scheduled ancient monument and could contain medieval building remains.