

Excavations in Carrickfergus, Co. Antrim, 1972–79

A Summary Report on the Excavations Directed by
the late T. G. Delaney

By M. L. SIMPSON and A. DICKSON

THE LATE T. G. DELANEY directed excavations in Carrickfergus between 1972 and 1979. Structures and finds from four major and two smaller sites have all pointed to the important political and economic role of Carrickfergus in Ulster from the foundation of the town by the Anglo-Normans in the late 12th century to the late 17th century when it was overtaken by Belfast.

HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION

Carrickfergus lies at the mouth of Belfast Lough, on its NW. shore (Fig. 1), a position of strategic importance during the medieval period. The castle around which the town grew was an Anglo-Norman foundation, on which work must have begun soon after John de Courcy's invasion of Ulster in 1177. The church of St Nicholas dates from soon after this and that part of the Anglo-Norman work which has survived is, in a northern Irish context, of high quality. John de Courcy acted as justiciar in the 1180s but reigned in semi-independence of the Crown, minting his own coinage in Carrickfergus and Downpatrick until he was displaced by Hugh de Lacy, who was created Earl of Ulster in 1205. The de Lacy family, however, incurred the displeasure of King John, who took over the castle as a royal possession in 1210. A Franciscan friary was founded in the mid 13th century at the E. end of the town. In 1315 the Scots, under Edward Bruce and in alliance with three of the banished de Lacys, invaded Ulster but were expelled after the death of Bruce in 1318. The earldom nevertheless was greatly weakened in the mid 14th century after the murder of William de Burgh but Carrickfergus retained its urban status, under Crown control, throughout the medieval period.

Despite the presence of the castle, the town was by no means free from the effects of wars during the 15th and 16th centuries and the large number of tower houses shown on 16th-century maps may be a reflection of this insecurity. Robert Lythe's map of about 1567 gives the names of tower-house owners and shows that by this time the friary had been taken over to house men and stores from Londonderry after the fort there had been blown up (Pl. vi). After the abortive attempt in 1573 by

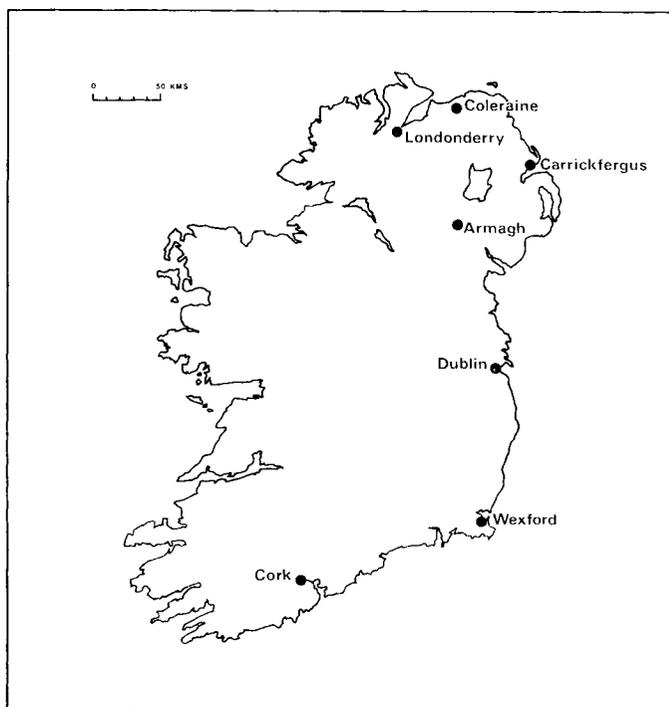


FIG. 1

Major urban excavations in Ireland

Walter Devereux, the first Earl of Essex, to establish a plantation, the defences were improved, although left unfinished, by Lord Deputy Sydney. The re-conquest of Ulster was planned and achieved by Mountjoy and consolidated by Arthur Chichester (Lord Deputy, 1605–15). It was Chichester who largely re-made Carrickfergus, repairing the castle, constructing a new town wall, re-building St Nicholas's Church, which had suffered considerable damage in the late 16th century, and building his magnificent residence, Joymount, on the site of the friary, granted to him in 1610. Joymount was itself unfortunately demolished in the 18th century to make way for the courthouse and jail. Chichester also built a castle at Belfast which, because of its better communications and deeper harbour, ultimately superseded Carrickfergus as the economic and administrative centre of the north of Ireland. Although Carrickfergus remained county town until the mid 19th century, the town grew little until the mid 20th century when major redevelopment began to take place.

THE EXCAVATIONS

Several small excavations have taken place in the castle,¹ but apart from a few trial trenches at Joymount² no excavations had been conducted in the town itself until 1972. Damage must have been done to the castle outworks by the construction of the Marine Highway in the late 1960s and redevelopment was clearly

threatening the historic town centre. T. G. Delaney of the Ulster Museum recognized the potential of the town and initiated a series of excavations in 1972, supported by the Ulster Museum, largely financed by the Department of Finance (later Environment), and with help from Enterprise Ulster. Annual summaries of this work were published between 1972 and 1976.³ Tom Delaney's untimely death in 1979 robbed the project of its director and Irish urban archaeology of a leading figure. Since the end of the 1979 season, work on the publication has proceeded in the Ulster Museum, funded by the Department of the Environment. This report summarizes the results of the eight years of excavation.

11-17 Market Place (CF I) 1972

This was a trial excavation, in the sense that it was the first large excavation in the town, in advance of a shopping development, on a site adjoining St Nicholas's Church (Fig. 2). It was hoped to determine if anything of the medieval and Plantation town survived under the 18th- and 19th-century buildings. The upper layers proved to be very disturbed, comprising thick deposits of garden soil. Beneath these, in the E. part of the site, was found a sequence of stone wall foundations and a wooden fence representing property boundaries, following the same lines from century to century. No other structures were found and it appeared that this part of the area had been cultivated as gardens from perhaps the 14th century.

At the western end of the site, excavation revealed a pit grave into which had been thrown disarticulated human limbs and torsos. Directly overlying this pit was a normally interred skeleton. This suggests that the medieval churchyard may have been of greater extent than it is today. These skeletal remains, together with a few fragmentary decorated floor-tiles and some painted window-glass, were the only finds relating directly to the adjacent church. At the lowest level was found evidence of industrial activity: large quantities of iron slag and furnace bottoms were recovered from a cobbled area. Research has shown that smelting was based on local Co. Antrim lateritic iron ores.⁴ Iron objects have been found in great numbers on most sites excavated in Carrickfergus, but of special note from Market Place are four 13th-/14th-century knife blades with stamped maker's marks, and two Jew's harps. Pottery associated with the medieval layers came from a variety of sources, including NW. England, southern Scotland, SW. France and centres of production in Ireland. Very little post-medieval pottery was recovered. Coins found include a 17th-century Irish token, three Elizabeth I pennies, one 14th- and one 15th-century French jetton, a bawbee of Mary of Scotland and a groat of Henry VI. The site was destroyed before it could be fully excavated.

Cheston Street (CF II) 1972

Lack of adequate time and money permitted only a small and hurried excavation on this site, where further shops and offices were planned (Fig. 2). In the SE. corner of the area part of a rectangular structure was revealed, standing one metre above its boulder foundations and 1.60 m thick. Medieval pottery, probably no later than 13th/14th century, was recovered from the foundation trench, and in the



FIG. 2

Modern street plan of Carrickfergus, and excavated areas. Compare Pl. vi for the 16th-century topography. (Based on the Ordnance Survey map with the sanction of the Controller of H.M. Stationery Office: Crown copyright reserved)

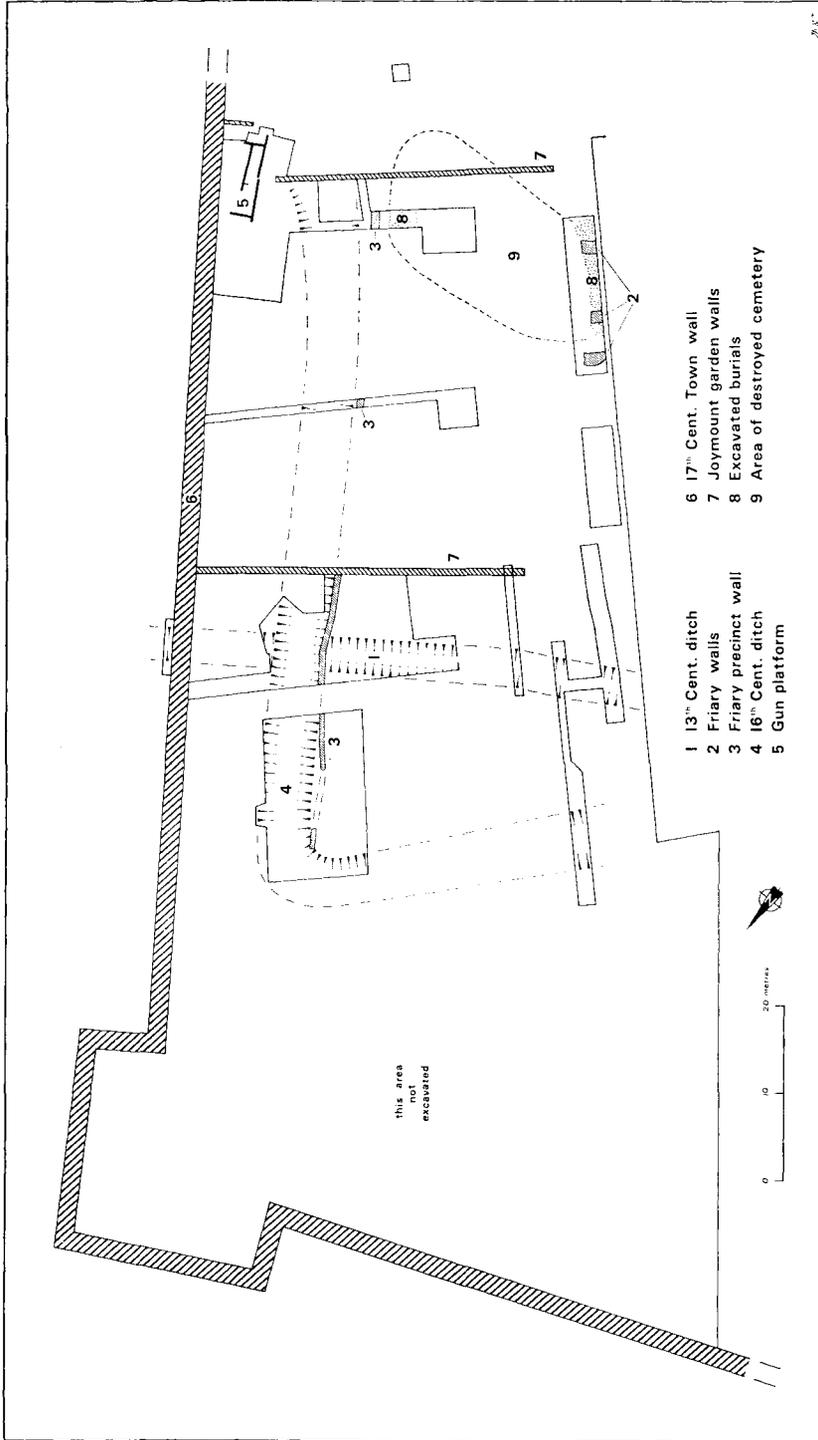
layer sealing this was a 16th-century copper-alloy annular brooch. From 16th-century map evidence the structure may be identified as the small tower-house built in about 1560 by Henry Wylles (Pl. vi). Medieval pottery was also recovered from a series of large pits but metal finds and post-medieval pottery were rare.

Joymount (CF III) 1973-74 and 1976

This was a massive site of about 10,000 square metres but because of lack of money only small areas were fully excavated (Figs. 2 and 3). Further evidence is irretrievably lost since the overburden was removed as far down as bedrock even in those areas not intended to be built on. The area excavated corresponded approximately with the gardens of Joymount in the late 17th century. Only its seaward end had been built on in the 19th century, and this building was demolished in 1972 to make way for a local authority development. During its demolition fragments of window mullions and jambs were found built into the walls, and three pieces of oak were removed and dated by dendrochronology to 1559 ± 9 , 1605 ± 9 , and 1622 ± 9 . Both stone and timber would appear to have been originally used in Chichester's house. The rest of the site was covered with a thick overburden of garden soil heavily disturbed by drains, service conduits, culverts and gas mains.

The most important discoveries were the 13th- and 16th-century town defences (Fig. 3) and a timber structure interpreted as a temporary gun platform (Pl. vii, A). It is suggested that this was built to defend the town while the early 17th-century town wall was being constructed. The 13th-century defences comprised an earthen bank supported by a wooden palisade inside a ditch *c.* 4 m wide. The defences constructed in the 16th century consisted of a rampart with boulder foundations inside a ditch *c.* 5.50 m wide. It is interesting to note that these defences followed a different route from those of the 13th century. A stone wall, thought to be the friary precinct wall, ran along the inner lip of the 16th-century ditch. The early 17th-century defences, of which extensive sections of wall still survive, followed the same direction as those of the previous century but enclosed more land to form a private garden for Joymount. The foundations of Joymount itself, and the friary, must lie underneath the council yard to the NW. of the town hall.

Fragments of masonry were found, originating from both Chichester's house and the friary, and during the final destruction of the W. part of the site three stone walls, 0.65, 1.30 and 1.50 m thick, were uncovered. They were all aligned E.-W. and have been interpreted as part of the E. end of the friary. Associated with these walls was a medieval cemetery overlain by some late 17th-/early 18th-century burials: 68 skeletons from the medieval cemetery, including some of women and children, were removed for study. Decorated medieval floor-tiles and painted window-glass were evidence of the close proximity of the friary. Most of the finds were medieval in date and probably 13th/14th century rather than later, to judge from the pottery, which includes a varied selection of fabric types from all over Britain and Ireland. Everted rim pottery, however, appears to have come from 15th-/16th-century contexts. It is from the Joymount site that some of the most interesting continental imports were recovered, including sherds of early German stoneware (Siegburg and



Langerwehe), and a variety of French (SW. and northern) pottery, such as part of a Saintonge horn. Among the coins found were a farthing of John de Courcy, probably minted in Downpatrick, a halfpenny of John as Lord of Ireland, a penny of Richard I, half groats of David II of Scotland and Edward III, a groat of Henry VIII, French and German jettons and a 17th-century Irish token. Other small finds of note were a 13th-century silver annular brooch, a modelled ceramic insect and a 16th-century bone zoomorphic terminal.

33-37 High Street (CF IV) 1974-79

Excavation began here after the demolition of three Victorian properties had revealed the 16th-century town wall at the seaward end of the site (Fig. 2). The retrieval of a 15th-/16th-century masonry windowhead from demolition rubble indicated the close proximity of a tower-house. In fact, the site was very complex as a result of intensive occupation since certainly the 16th and probably from as early as the 13th century. A series of superimposed walls, floors, drains and property divisions was found; several of these property divisions were found to follow the same line from century to century, as at the Market Place site.

The cellar of no. 33 High Street may have been the re-used foundations of a tower-house but later disturbance made firm identification impossible. However, directly beneath the rubble of nos. 35/37 were the foundations of a tower-house, standing to a height of over 1.50 m, with a cobbled floor. The S. wall had been robbed out in the 19th century but the building of the tower-house was firmly dated by numismatic and dendrochronological evidence to 1560-67. Sixteenth-century map evidence suggests that it was built by Thomas Stephenson, who was mayor of Carrickfergus several times.

The scale of the 16th-century works has meant that earlier structures have not survived along the street frontage. Moreover, serious waterlogging at the seaward end of the site made it difficult to be certain if 'natural' had been reached. Medieval pottery recovered from this area was badly rolled and metal objects found on the site generally were heavily corroded. However, X-raying and conservation have revealed an interesting range of late medieval and post-medieval metal-work. All coins retrieved were 16th/17th century in date, including three 17th-century French coins, a plack of Mary of Scotland, a turner of Charles II, a Nuremberg jetton and an Irish 17th-century token. Iron objects included a spearhead, spoon-auger and horse bit, while among other small finds were a lead weight-box, copper-alloy official weight of Henry VII or VIII and a 15th-/16th-century wine glass. One earlier find was a 13th-century gold finger-ring set with an amethyst. Large quantities of 17th-/18th-century pottery, including Staffordshire slipware, tin-glazed wares and Chinese porcelain, which had not survived at sites previously excavated, were recovered from the upper layers and have therefore been useful in building up a balanced picture of the ceramics. It is interesting to note that although N. Devon gravel-free and gravel-tempered wares were present, the majority of the sgraffito sherds were quite different from N. Devon types. Some have been identified as Donyatt sgraffito but others may be local copies.

Irish Quarter (CF V–VIII) 1975–79

Irish Quarter grew up as a late 17th-century suburb, outside the town wall erected by Chichester between 1607–10. Although the street pattern here changed very little from this time, the town wall itself was demolished in the late 18th century. When some 19th-century houses were removed in advance of road development and pedestrianization schemes, excavation began with the intention of locating the town wall and other features connected with it, such as the Irish Gate and SW. angle bastion. The work also offered a chance to investigate the medieval settlement or use of land at the W. side of the town, about which nothing was known.

Two large sites (CF V and VI, divided by the original road), a smaller site (CF VIII, to the N. of CF V) and a trial trench (CF VII, to the S. of CF VI) were excavated (Figs. 2 and 4). Prior to excavation, however, during the re-building of a cinema at 30–32 West Street (at the E. end of CF VI) it was noted that the cinema's E. wall rested on a massive early wall, at least two metres thick. This can be interpreted as the late 16th-century town wall, erected by Lord Deputy Sydney. A trench cut three metres to the W. of this wall produced leather and 16th-century pottery.

Excavation proper began at the W. end of the area (CF V), where stratification proved to be remarkably uniform. The 19th-century house foundations, resting on layers of red clay and mixed soil, bore no relationship to any earlier features. Beneath these layers was a black organic layer of midden type deposits, which sealed a layer of pebble paving. The paving became less regular in the N. and W. of the site but was continuous elsewhere. It sealed a medieval cultivation soil, the top of which appeared to have been removed in the late 16th century when the pebble paving was laid down. The underlying natural sediments comprised mixed gravel and sand deposits of a terraced raised beach which increased in height towards the sea, resulting in the thinning of overlying deposits. No substantial structures were recorded on this part of the site but several pits contained pottery now recognized as having been made in the kiln which was excavated in the final season.

This stratigraphy continued across the area into CF VI where a 37 m stretch of the 1607–10 town wall was quickly located in 1976, close to the surface, and standing over one metre high and two metres wide. The foundations of the Irish Gate were uncovered in 1978; incorporated into them was dressed stone, probably re-used from a tower house. No trace of the SW. angle bastion was found. A ditch, less than 1 m deep and *c.* 5 m wide, lay outside the town wall, but became shallower to the S. and seemed to be unfinished. It appeared to be earlier than the wall but probably not considerably so. The town wall cut through the black layer but its foundation trench did not cut the pebble paving, which clearly predated it. It is possible that the paving was laid down at the same time as Sydney's wall was being built. Preserved in the black layer was a post-and-wattle fence, running 1 m to the E. of, and parallel to, the 17th-century wall. The most important feature excavated in the medieval layers was the pottery kiln (Pl. VII, B), complete with its last firing load and dated by numismatic evidence to pre-1250.⁵ Other than this, medieval features were scarce, comprising mainly small pits and gullies. Some of the larger pits would seem to have been related to the kiln since their fill included much fired clay.

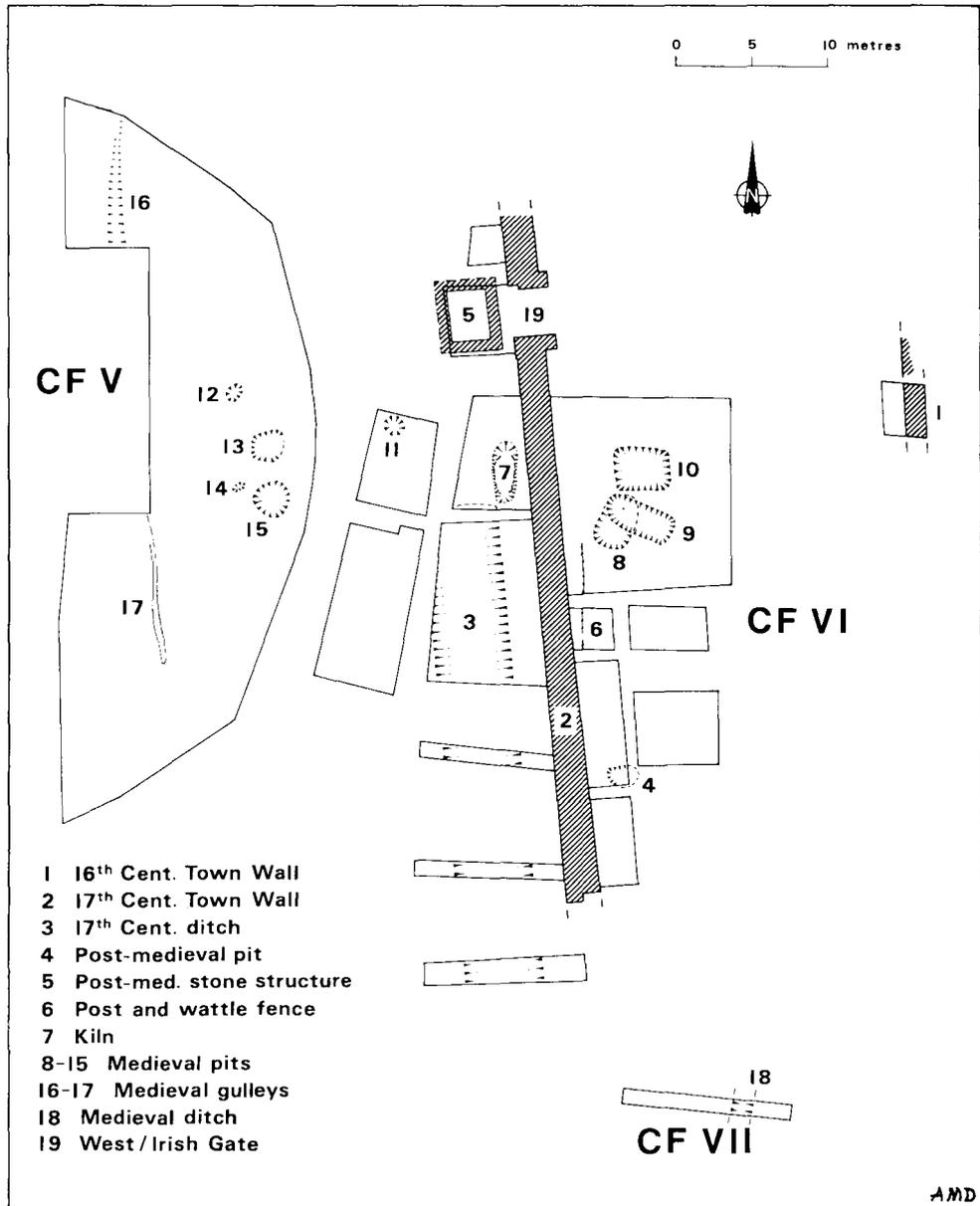


FIG. 4

Irish Quarter, Carrickfergus: Excavated areas and main features

Finds from Irish Quarter were rich and varied. From the upper mixed soil layers came eight Elizabeth I coins, three 17th-century Irish tokens, two 17th-century French coins, three 17th-century Scottish coins, a groat of Philip and Mary and a French or Spanish coin-weight for a half pistol, dated 1718. Another 17th-century French coin was found in the ditch and two Elizabethan coins in the black organic layer, while a Nuremberg jetton was associated with the pebble paving. Three 14th-century coins were found in the later medieval layers and eight 13th-century coins in the layer sealing the kiln, together with a gilded copper-alloy 13th-century brooch, a fragment of an annular copper-alloy brooch and a copper-alloy zoomorphic object. Many leather shoes and scraps and wooden fragments were recovered from the black organic layer, and a great many iron objects from most layers. Four more Jew's harps were found, one from an early medieval context, the rest from post-16th-century contexts. A knife blade with a stamped maker's mark (R I) and several bone handles were found in the 16th-/17th-century layers. Pottery was found in large quantities in most layers and was varied in type and origin. Much of that recovered from the earliest layer appeared to be locally made but some was evidently also brought from various centres of production in Ireland, southern Scotland, NW. England and SW. France. The Irish Quarter area has provided the best series of 16th- and 17th-century pottery imported from N. Devon and the Continent. The incidence of large quantities of N. Devon wares is of great interest since it is known that many settlers came from Devon in the early 17th century. Several virtually complete vessels, including N. Devon and Staffordshire pottery and London/Bristol tin-glazed mugs (mid 17th century in date), were recovered from a pit inside the town wall. Pottery and pipes dating from about the turn of the 17th century were recovered from a rectangular stone structure immediately outside the town gate.

In the site excavated to the N. of CF V (CF VIII), the archaeological deposits had unfortunately been heavily damaged by 19th-century terracing for houses and gardens and all surviving traces dated from the 17th century. Coins found included two 17th-century French coins, a 17th-century Irish token and a coin-weight for a piece of eight. In a pit were found fragments of a large hollow cast-iron projectile which seemed to have burst *in situ*, possibly during Schomberg's siege of the town in 1689. A trial trench (CF VII), 11 m long, was opened at the rear of Gill's Alms-houses to the S. of CF VI. Stratigraphy was found to correspond to that in the S. part of CF VI although layers were thicker in the E. A medieval ditch and a pit were found, sealed by later deposits. It was not possible to extend the trench eastwards to check the route of the 16th-century town wall, as time was not available. Part of the area designated CF VI has been landscaped, using the 17th-century town wall as a focal point.

5-13 North Street (CF IX) 1978

Excavation took place here in advance of a shopping development (Fig. 2). The site was potentially important since it was in the middle of the town and most other excavations had been concentrated towards the perimeter.

It was clear from an early stage that the later 17th- and 18th-century layers had been disturbed or completely removed by later building. However, beneath the 19th-century walls and concrete rafts the earlier archaeological layers were preserved intact. The only feature of interest was a masonry wall, 5.70 m long and *c.* 0.70 m wide, clearly earlier than any of the other walls, drains and culverts excavated on this site; its function has proved elusive. The uppermost layer contained some 16th-/17th-century pottery, including N. Devon gravel-free and gravel-tempered ware, as well as medieval pottery. Sgraffito and Staffordshire slipwares were absent. Beneath this level only medieval pottery was recovered, mostly 15th/16th century in date. A high proportion of this pottery was of southern Scottish/NW. English origin. Very little diagnostically earlier medieval (*i.e.* 13th-/14th-century) pottery was found on this site. Metal finds were not common and the only objects of note were a Nuremberg jetton, a rowel spur fragment and an iron and wooden handle with copper-alloy rivets, all found in the uppermost layer. 'Natural' was reached in a trial trench but work did not proceed as far as this elsewhere on the site, which has now been destroyed.

CONCLUSIONS

Excavations in Carrickfergus have confirmed the pre-eminence of this town in Ulster, as clear from historical sources, from its foundation by the Anglo-Normans in the late 12th century to its peak in the early 17th.⁶ No traces have been found of any earlier settlement. The wide variety of imported pottery recovered testifies to the role of Carrickfergus as a major port while the coins reflect the status of the town as a Royal Exchange with its mint. The excavations have supported the evidence of the 16th- and 17th-century maps, confirming the positions of tower-houses and lines of defence. One building, possibly a church, shown on the 16th-century maps, has eluded identification.

It has been interesting to note that each of the sites excavated in the town has contributed something different to the overall archaeological picture: for example, the iron working at Market Place, the town defences and varied finds associated with the friary at Joymount, the tower-house and the 16th-/18th-century material at High Street, the well-stratified layers at Irish Quarter which will help to put the finds from other sites into more useful contexts, and the pottery kiln with its significance for Irish and British medieval pottery studies. The site at North Street was least rewarding since the results were so limited.

The excavations in Carrickfergus must be seen in the context of urban archaeology in Ireland as a whole.⁷ In the north, work on a large scale has so far only taken place in Armagh, Coleraine and Londonderry while in the south there have been excavations in the cities of Cork, Dublin and Wexford. Comparisons with any of these are difficult to make because of the differences in time span and the range of material covered. In Londonderry, for example, no medieval material has been found during recent excavations while finds in Dublin have in the main been dated between *c.* 900 and 1400. Similarly, excavations in Cork and Wexford have shown that most of their trade was with Bristol and SW. France throughout the medieval

period, while Carrickfergus was evidently trading mainly with the NW. of England and Scotland. Thus, not only are many of the individual structures and objects found at Carrickfergus of great interest and importance, but the total picture of life in an Irish town between *c.* 1200 and 1700, which can be reconstructed from Tom Delaney's excavations, remains unique.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We should like to express our gratitude to P. Bryan, in particular for his work on the pottery kiln; to R. Heslip for his comments on the coins; to Dr B. G. Scott for information relating to the iron industry in Carrickfergus based on his research; and to Dr A. Hamlin and R. Warner for much helpful advice and discussion.

NOTES

¹ T. E. McNeill, *Carrickfergus Castle* (H.M.S.O., Belfast, 1981).

² E. M. Jope, 'Excavations at Carrickfergus, 1949-50', *Ulster J. Archaeol.*, 13 (1950), 61-65.

³ T. G. Delaney, 'Carrickfergus', in T. G. Delaney, ed., *Excavations 1972*; *ibid.*, 1973; *ibid.*, 1974; *ibid.*, 1975-76 (Belfast).

⁴ B. G. Scott, *The Origins and Development of Irish Iron Metallurgy to 1400* (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Queen's University of Belfast, 1976).

⁵ M. L. Simpson, P. S. Bryan, T. G. Delaney and A. Dickson, 'An early 13th-century double-flued pottery kiln at Carrickfergus, Co. Antrim: an interim report', *Medieval Ceramics*, 3 (1979), 41-52.

⁶ For comparison with other towns, see G. Camblin, *The Town in Ulster* (Belfast, 1951).

⁷ For an overall view of urban archaeology in Ireland, see T. G. Delaney, 'The archaeology of the Irish town', in *European Towns and Their Archaeology and Early History*, ed. M. W. Barley (London, 1977), 47-64.

The Society is grateful to the Department of the Environment for Northern Ireland for a publication grant for this paper.