

The Green Fort Archaeology Project

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The Green Fort Archaeology Project

THE GREEN FORT ARCHAEOLOGY PROJECT was conceived in 2023 following discussions between Atlantic Technological University archaeologists Dr Fiona Beglane and Dr Marion Dowd, Sligo County Council and the National Monuments Service regarding the potential for establishing an archaeological field school in Sligo. The focus of the project is a seventeenth-century earthwork artillery fortification (bastioned fort) known since at least the 1830s as the 'Green Fort' (SL014-065014-). It is located on Fort Hill in Rathquarter townland, on the north-eastern side of Sligo town, on lands owned by Sligo County Council and the HSE. The Green Fort is protected under a dedicated Preservation Order and is within the zone of archaeological potential of the historic town of Sligo. It is one of 65 bastioned forts in Ireland and one of seven such sites in County Sligo.

In its current state, the Green Fort measures 86m north-south by 90m east-west externally, 45m by 49m east-west internally, and occupies an area of approximately 2ha (Fig. 1). It was described by Wood-Martin (1889, 98) as follows:

'quadrilateral in form, the ramparts enclosing nearly an acre; there was a large bastion and platform at each of the four corners; the two gates were defended by a half-moon; the whole surrounded by a deep and broad fosse, from the edge of

which the hill sloped down regularly on every side, forming a natural glacis. At each angle, within half musket shot of the ramparts, stood a small spur fortified on two sides, but open at the gorge so as to shelter the advance posts. A deep well in the middle of the enclosure supplied water to the garrison.'

HISTORY OF THE SITE

For the year 1595, the Annals of the Four Masters record the presence of an early medieval ringfort known as *Ráith dá Briotócc* at the location where the Green Fort was subsequently constructed. Wood-Martin suggested that the name was an Anglicisation of 'Britton's Fort', though an alternative and popular suggestion is that it means the 'Fort of the Stuttering Woman' (from *briotóg*, 'lispng woman').

The monument as it exists today may have been constructed during the Nine Years War (1594-1603), as it appears on Baxter's map of c. 1600. In 1656, during the Confederate Wars (1649-58), it was described as being in poor condition, and it is represented as abandoned in an illustration of Sligo drawn by Phillips c. 1685 (Fig. 2). The site also features on the Down Survey maps of 1657.

Williamite Wars (1688-91)

The Green Fort became a strategic defensive base during the Williamite Wars and formed part of the defences of Sligo town (Fig. 3).



Above: Fig. 1—Aerial view of the Green Fort (Sam Moore).

Opposite page:
Fig. 2—Phillips's map of Sligo c. 1685, with the Green Fort indicated (Gallagher and Legg 2012; reproduced with the permission of the Royal Irish Academy).



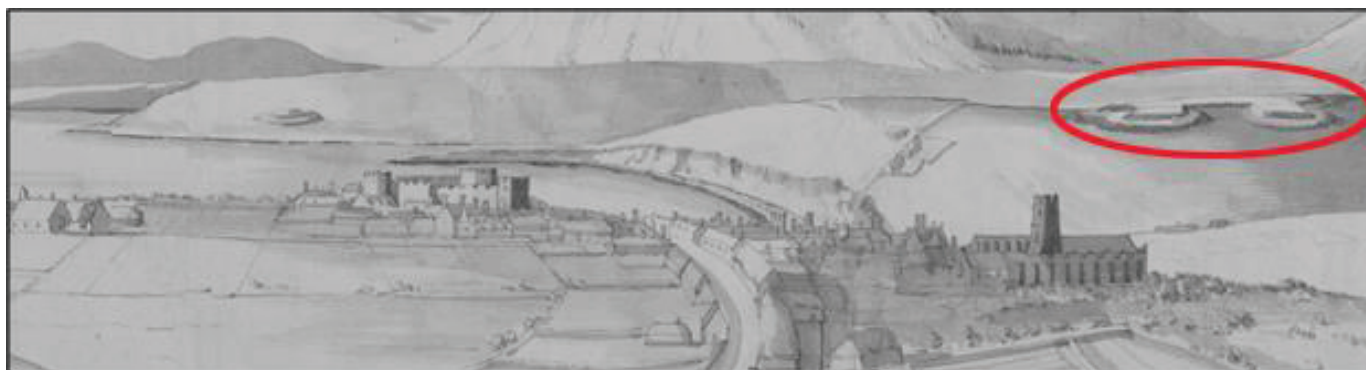
During the first half of 1689 the fort was captured and recaptured several times. It was initially under the control of Brigadier Patrick Sarsfield and his soldiers, but the Jacobites were forced to abandon it when a Williamite party of approximately 20,000 men descended on Sligo. In October 1689, under orders from James II, Sarsfield

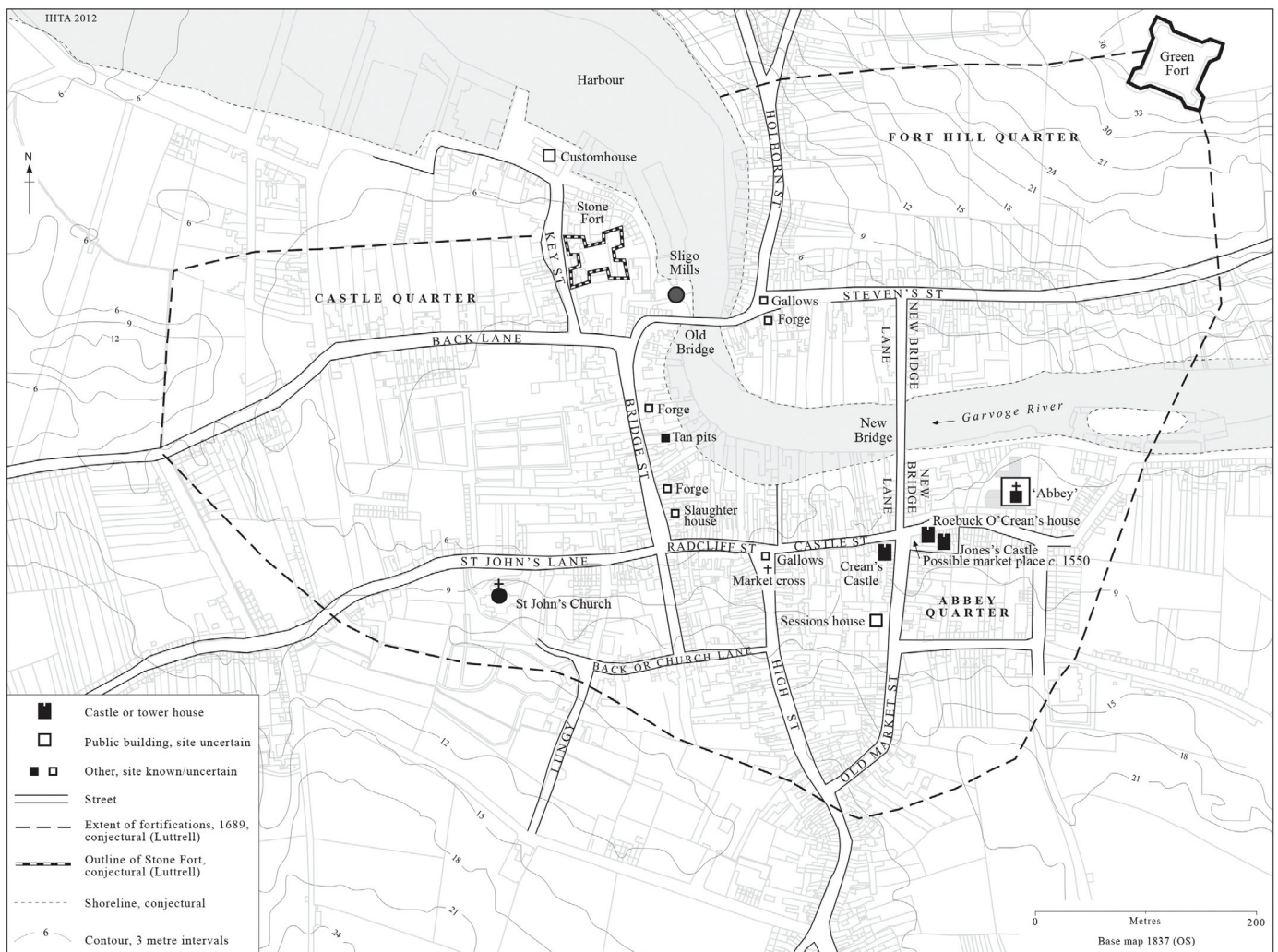
attacked the town and regained control. The commanding Williamite officer, Colonel Thomas Lloyd, abandoned Sligo town and brought his troops to the Green Fort, from where they were able to escape northwards to Ballyshannon and Enniskillen. Sligo was strategically important to the Jacobites, as control of the town secured north Connacht

and provided them with a platform from which they could attack Ulster. In October 1689 Colonel Henry Luttrell re fortified the site and added additional outworks and defences; approximately 200 men were involved in this work. In June 1690 Sir Teige O'Regan was appointed commander of the Jacobite forces at Sligo and added further defences to the Green Fort.

During the second siege of Sligo, in September 1691, the Green Fort was attacked by Williamite forces under Colonel John Michelburne, who noted that only a single company of grenadiers was stationed there. O'Regan and the garrison of 28 companies were forced to surrender. The Williamite forces secured the defensive ditch and took possession of the fort. The fort at this time had sixteen cannons mounted on the defences, 'ample supplies of all kinds in store' and 30 barrels of gunpowder in the magazines. Sir Teige's terms of surrender of the Green Fort, agreed on 15 September 1691, provide an insight into the make-up of the garrison:

'all the said garrison, viz.,
Govenours, Officers,
Souldiers, Engineers, Gunners,
Gunsmiths, Bakers,
Chaplains, and all others that
have a mind to go, Craights or
others, shall have their lives
secured and march out with
their arms, Baggs and





Baggage, Drums beating,
Colours flying, match lighted,
Bullets in their mouths, each
officer and souldier twelve
Charges of Powder, with Match
and Ball proportionable, and
their horses and Cowes' (Wood-
Martin 1889).

Abandonment (1700 onwards)

The Green Fort was abandoned relatively soon after the Williamite Wars. It was in a ruinous state by 1739, by which time it was known as 'Sodd Fort' and 'Teague O'Regan's Fort'. It is not marked on Taylor and Skinner's 1777 map of Sligo or William Larkin's 1810 map. The monument is named the 'Green Fort' on the OS First Edition map (surveyed in 1837) and on all later editions and revisions, where it is shown as an

Above: Fig. 3—Sligo town in the late seventeenth century; note the Green Fort to the north-east (top right of image) (Gallagher and Legg 2012; reproduced with the permission of the Royal Irish Academy).

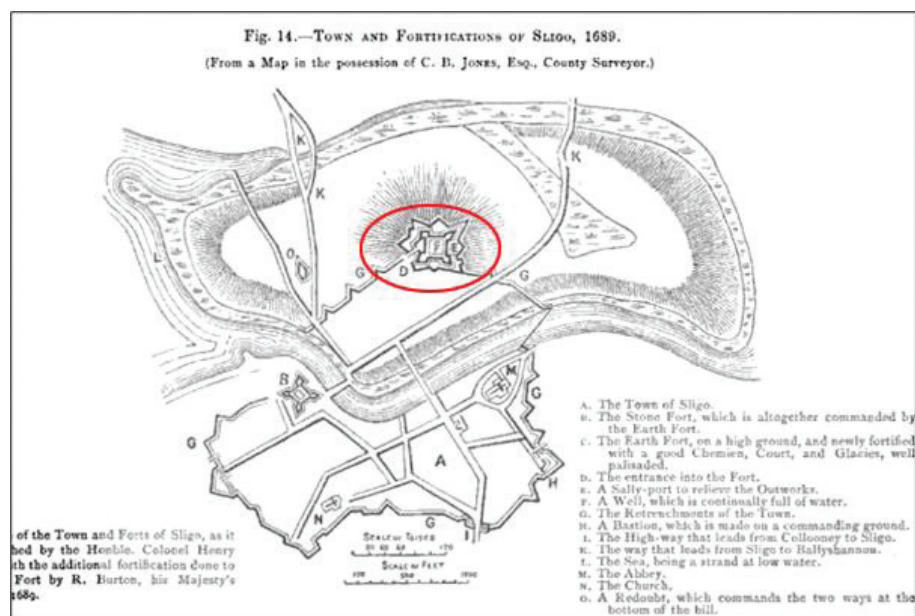
isolated but well-defined
rectilinear fortification with
salient-angled corner bastions.

FOLKLORE AND FOLK TRADITIONS

An account collected for the National Folklore Collection in the 1930s revealed that the Green Fort continued to be of cultural significance and had taken on a role as a supernatural place that was best avoided. It was believed to be unlucky for people to sleep or to fall within the Green Fort.

On one occasion a woman fell asleep there on a hot summer's day, after which it was noticed that she had 'lost her senses and used to stray away. She would stand up during Mass and turn her apron and her shawl inside out' (NFC 0160:89–90). Her behaviour was attributed to the 'Good People' who had spirited her away. This folktale is typical of beliefs associated with ringforts occupied by the fairies. In the case of the Green Fort, it is tempting to consider that the folklore may relate to the ringfort that apparently originally occupied the site.

From at least the 1950s there have been folk traditions surrounding a large slab in one of the ditches of the Green Fort. It was known locally as the 'wishing stone'—people would lie on the



Left: Fig. 4—Henry Luttrell's 1689 plan of Sligo town, redrawn by Wood-Martin; the Green Fort is circled (Wood-Martin 1889).

stone and make a wish. Others lay on the stone to obtain a cure for backache (Padraic Feehily, pers. comm.).

RECENT ARCHAEOLOGICAL WORKS

The location of the Green Fort within the urban area of Sligo town has meant that several development projects have involved archaeological testing in the immediate vicinity of the monument (www.excavations.ie). Most significantly, archaeologist Eoin Halpin has exposed and excavated several segments of ditches that appear to relate to the 1689 Jacobite defensive works overseen by Henry Luttrell (Fig. 4). Archaeological testing 40m west of the Green Fort in 2000 revealed portions of a ditch (2.94m wide and 0.74m deep) that ran outside the projected line of the Green Fort defences. Pottery from the ditch fills suggested eighteenth- and nineteenth-century backfilling. Four years later, archaeological excavations north-west of the Green Fort revealed a ditch (1.2m wide and 0.55m deep) whose fills produced charcoal, a copper-alloy button and oyster shells. Running parallel to the ditch was an earthen bank (1.65m wide and 0.55m high) and a drystone wall (0.5m high and

0.5m wide); the latter either served as a revetment for the southern side of the bank or was a later addition. Test excavations in 2014–15 to the west of the Green Fort again revealed a portion of a ditch running east-west (2.5m wide and 0.75m deep). In addition to the above works, a small assemblage of material recovered from the Green Fort is housed in the National Museum of Ireland, including seashells, animal bones, clay pipe fragments, a lead musket-shot, a glass bottle fragment and pottery sherds.

In 2017 Sligo County Council commissioned a conservation plan for the Green Fort, carried out by Jason Bolton, Pat Dargan and Niamh Roche. The conservation plan sought to address the long-term preservation of the monument and how best to manage, maintain, interpret and present the site. The ecological and environmental dimensions of the Green Fort were considered in tandem with its archaeological and historical significance. One of the outcomes of the plan was that in 2021 Sligo County Council commissioned licensed geophysical (magnetometer and resistivity) surveys of the monument, conducted by the Archaeological Consultancy

Services Unit (ACSU). The surveys revealed a wealth of subsurface features within and in the wider environs of the monument, including sections of embankments, ditches and defences, and possible pits, cut features and structures. The most significant feature identified by both surveys was a circular anomaly, approximately 25m in diameter, in the centre of the monument. Might this be the early medieval ringfort alluded to in the annals?

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The Green Fort has long been a significant place for the Forthill community and a key part of local identity. Since at least the 1980s, different community groups have celebrated the site through activities as varied as enactments of Williamite attacks, public lectures and guided tours. A room in the Northside Community Centre contains information and site photographs, as well as a model of the fort as it would have appeared in the seventeenth century. The Forthill Community Men's Group have been particularly active in promoting knowledge of and engagement with the monument. Recently, 5th Class students from the local Mercy Primary School initiated the 'Junior Green Fort Guardians Project'. The children met with the local community to learn about the site and its importance to the residents of Forthill. They also attended a talk delivered by Sam Moore. At the end of the school year, the pupils produced a wonderful booklet called *Our Green Fort*, which is now available in the local libraries and in the Northside Community Centre.



THE GREEN FORT ARCHAEOLOGY PROJECT: 2025–9


Building on all the work that has been carried out to date by Sligo County Council, professional archaeologists and local residents, the Green Fort Archaeology Project aims to take the next step and begin archaeological excavations at the site, commencing in June 2025. Our project will involve opening a 30m trench across the fort interior to investigate the nature of the archaeological remains at the site and to explore how the complex developed through time (Fig. 5). We hope to gain an insight into the nature of the buildings, structures and features that once occupied the bastioned fort, thus shedding light on the lives of those stationed there during the seventeenth century. We will also investigate whether a ringfort was once located beneath the bastioned fort, as suggested by

Above: Fig. 5—In June 2025, a 30m-long trench (in red) will be opened through the interior of the bastioned fort (composite of surveys by Eoin Halpin and Sam Moore, reproduced with their permission).

the Annals of the Four Masters and potentially by a distinct circular anomaly on geophysical surveys. Community participation will be a key component of the Green Fort Archaeology Project, building on the long-standing community engagement with the site through outreach events as well as community participation in the excavations.

The Green Fort Archaeology Project will involve three weeks of excavation and post-excavation work, on site and in the Archaeology Laboratory at ATU Sligo, from 2 June to 20 June 2025. The excavation will be

directed by Dr Fiona Beglane (licence-holder) and Dr Marion Dowd. Sixteen places will be available, which will include community volunteers. If you are interested in being part of the Green Fort Archaeology Project, please visit our webpage:

<https://www.itsligo.ie/courses/certificate-in-archaeological-excavation-post-excavation-blended/>. 

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