

Boozing & Bloodsports in the Barracks

Archaeologists from Atlantic Archaeology have recently uncovered a fascinating glimpse of the everyday life of the first soldiers stationed in Athlone during the foundation of the present day Custume Barracks (formerly Victoria Barracks) around 1690. These discoveries were made while monitoring excavation works for underground services to the rear of the new Garda Station on Barrack St. This work was being carried out by Kilcawley Construction who along with the OPW have facilitated and funded the work of the archaeologists on site.

Excavation in this area led to the findings of various stone mortared and red brick wall footings, rounded cobbled surfaces, fireplaces etc., Archaeological artefacts recovered were linked to military activity, artefacts included musket balls, 18th century coins, regimental uniform buttons, sewing pins, thimble, bone comb, fork, spoon, coins, clay pipes, ceramics, glass bottles etc. giving a fascinating insight into daily items used by 18th century militia stationed in the town.

The features and surfaces exposed in all areas are most likely linked either to the late 17th century block of buildings erected in 1691 (shown on Sherrards map of 1784 – see Fig. 1), these buildings were subsequently demolished in 1793 and replaced by Victoria barracks in 1837 (shown on the 1st edition Ordnance Survey map). The 19th century barracks was then demolished in the 1930s to make way for the OPW government buildings and Garda Station built 1935-47. These buildings are now being refurbished and linked together to form a new and expanded Garda Station.

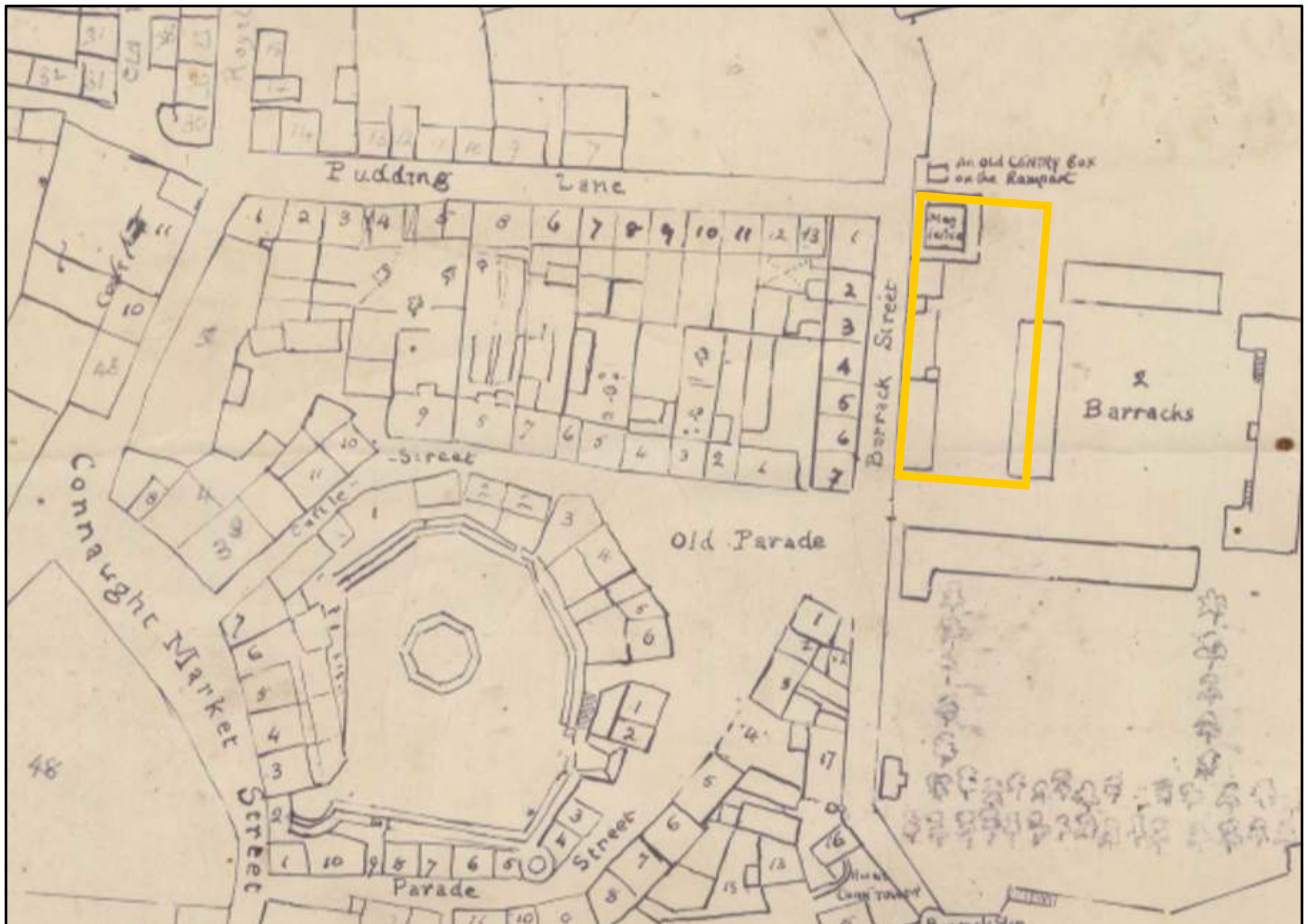


Fig. 1: From Map 7 (a) of *Irish Historic Towns Atlas -Athlone 1784* by Thomas Sherrard (RCB Dublin, MS 151)
<http://mpdsearch.militaryarchives.ie/#>

Yellow rectangle is indicative of current development location. An 'Old Sentry Box on the Rampart' is indicated at western part of the site. This seems like a solid indication of line of ramparts more to western edge of laneway in current garda station. Also sentry box immediately west of Pudding Lane now Connolly St.

A perfectly preserved cobbled surface and courtyard area were found intact beneath rubble of a former barracks building which was demolished in the 1930s.



Amongst this cobbled layer some interesting items were found. Two small lead musket balls were discovered. These small lead balls were used in a *musket*, the name given for any long gun with a flintlock, in use from around the mid-16th century all the way through the mid-1800s.



Items linked to personal dress and hygiene included many small dress pins, a thimble, buttons and buckles used for uniforms.



Many of the soldiers during this time shaved their heads to avoid lice infestations and more senior officers wore grand wigs. A fine-toothed bone comb for lice was discovered along with a wig-curler. pipe-clay curlers were made from the 17th–19th centuries. Wigs were very popular amongst men in

England in the 17th and 18th centuries. The wig curler was heated up and the hair of the wig was wound round it. Men wore their wigs over very short hair or even a completely shaven head. Wigs were a very fashionable look and they also helped to control the spread of head lice.



The social habits of the soldiers indicated time for gambling on bloodsports, drinking and smoking while away from the stresses of battle and maintaining and expanding control in the colonies (or keeping the local Irish Catholic population in check).

Evidence for this was found in the form of plenty of clay pipe fragments. As the addiction to tobacco grew in Europe following its introduction from America in the mid-sixteenth century, so too did the number of clay pipes produced for its consumption. The majority of the type of pipes recovered date from around 1640-1670.



Type 1 spurred clay pipe bowl, 1640 -70 & Type 7 flat heeled clay pipe bowl, 1640-60.



Clay pipe stem with a Free Masonry symbol of the square and compass.

Pipes decorated with masonic symbols were manufactured in Glasgow and Belfast. Pipe wasters, many with emblems such as crossed compass and square with plumb bob were excavated in 1990 at the site of the Ulster Pipe works on Winetavern Street.

Glass specialist Antoine Giacommetti identified some fragments of fine 17th century glass beakers or tumblers used as drinking vessels and would have been used at the table in a relatively affluent context, as they are quite rare in Ireland. A small square-sectioned case bottle was identified, these were designed for storing and transporting liquids, and popular in the 16th and 17th century. The bottles could easily be packed in wooden cases due to their shape. Given the small size this one was probably used for medicine. A 17th century shaft and globe bottle used to serve wine at the table was also identified. The remainder of the assemblage is dominated by eighteenth and nineteenth century wine bottle fragments.

A total of 1,331 hand-collected mammal and bird bone fragments from the site were examined by zoo-archaeologist Siobhan Duffy. The assemblage is dominated by the main domestic animals (cattle, sheep/goat, pig, domestic fowl and goose). Of these, sheep/goats are the most frequent, accounting for 26.6%.

One of the more unusual discoveries was a lower leg-bone from a male chicken identified as having had the characteristic spur sawn off at approximately mid-way along its length. This procedure

would have been carried out during the bird's life, to facilitate the attachment of an artificial spur for the purposes of cockfighting.



Tarsometatarsus from a male chicken, with spur sawn off – recovered from Barracks Excavations

Male fowl will readily fight for dominance, but while in the wild the losing contender can and does fly away, escape is not possible in the closed confines of a cockpit and fights were often brutal, ending in the death of the losing bird. Despite the inherent cruelty involved, cockfighting continued to be a popular and widespread sport, until legal and cultural changes in the nineteenth century (led by the SPCA) criminalised the practice leading to its eventual demise.

Artificial spurs of bone or metal were used to replace the sawn-off natural spurs, and there is documentary evidence of metal spurs being used in both Ireland and Britain in the nineteenth century.

In England, cockfighting was 'positively encouraged among soldiers and schoolboys to teach them valour' (Serjeantson 2009, 330). The esteem in which cockfighting was held in the eighteenth century is evident in contemporary references to it: newspapers of the time regularly advertised the major tournaments, labelling it the 'Royal Sport of Cock-fighting' (Dublin Journal; Finn's Leinster Journal; Freeman's Journal, various dates, www.irishnewsarchive.com). The prize money offered also gives an indication of both the degree of interest these tournaments commanded and the level of gambling that would have accompanied them.

It is perhaps not surprising that cockfighting was engaged in among the men and officers stationed at Custume Barracks, during the eighteenth century. At this time, cockfighting was still in its heyday; it was a potentially lucrative enterprise, regarded as a sport worthy of the powerful elite and strongly associated with masculinity, before the changing sensibilities of the nineteenth century forced it to the periphery of societal acceptance.

Serjeantson, D. 1989b Animal Bones and the Tanning Trade in D. Serjeantson & T. Waldron (eds) *Diet and Crafts in Towns: the Evidence of Animal Remains from the Roman to the Post-Medieval Periods*. B.A.R. British Series, 199. Oxford; B.A.R. pp.129-146.



The 17 LD on this copper alloy badge/uniform fitting was a mystery but with the kind assistance of local historian Harman Murtagh it seems likely it is linked to the 17th Light Dragoons:

“In 1759, Colonel John Hale was granted permission to raise a regiment of light dragoons. He formed the regiment in Hertfordshire on 7 November 1759 as the 18th Regiment of (Light) Dragoons, which also went by the name of Hale's Light Horse. The regiment saw service in Germany in 1761 and was renumbered the 17th Regiment of (Light) Dragoons in April 1763. In 1764 the regiment went to Ireland. In May 1766 it was renumbered again, this time as the 3rd Regiment of Light Dragoons. It regained the 17th numeral in 1769 as the 17th Regiment of (Light) Dragoons. The regiment was sent

to North America in 1775, for the American Revolutionary War, returning to Ireland after that contest ended, where it remained until 1795, when it became involved in the war against Revolutionary France. After this it seems to have been mainly stationed in Britain, although it may sometimes have been in Ireland. It took part in the Crimean war and in 1861 was re-designated 17th Regiment of Lancers." (Murtagh H. *pers. comm.*)

The uniforms associated with the Light Dragoons are known from various paintings and historical documents, this gives us some insight for other artefacts recovered from the site. Image below is taken from an American Light Dragoons re-enactment group and gives a good impression of military uniform.



Source: <https://www.facebook.com/17th-Light-Dragoons-in-North-America-232800010089134/>

Four coins were retrieved from the site, 2 George II coins from dating 1727 –60 and 1753 respectively. A later George III Halfpenny coin dated to 1766 and a fourth George coin is worn and of unknown date.



George II Halfpenny coin, 1753



George III Halfpenny coin, 1766

Hibernia inscribed over the crowned harp

Artefacts recovered give a fascinating insight into the everyday utilitarian items forming part of a soldiers/officers kit. The presence of cutlery items, a fine tooth bone comb for lice, buttons, dress pins, a thimble all indicate a concern for hygiene and good presentation of uniform. Other items such as coins and a considerable quantity of tobacco pipes and fragments of glass goblets, bottles and phials point to trade links. This material forms an important assemblage documenting military activity within the town in the late 17th and early 18th centuries.

The construction of Victoria (now Custume Barracks) around 1691 has to be seen in the context of its time at the very end of a very significant battle in Irish history between Jacobite and Williamite forces culminating in the massive loss of life at the Battle of Aughrim to the south-west of Athlone in July 1691.

While there are good documentary sources regarding the political and military events of 17th and 18th century Athlone they often focus more on major events rather than the minutiae of everyday life. Archaeological excavation and systematic study of associated artefacts and ecofacts gives us a

more detailed insight into the diet, habits, social activities, dress, hygiene, trade and material culture linked to a military barracks of that time.

Excavation has revealed information on the everyday lives of the soldiers stationed here during the end of the 17th and early 18th centuries. To date there has been no other extensive excavations carried out on a military barracks in Ireland which have yielded such a wide range of artefacts and ecofacts informing us about the social and domestic activities of the soldiers.

To date there has been very little study on the overall social, political and economic impact of the program of British barracks construction in late 17th/early 18th century Ireland. A recent program of study on this phase of Irish history has been initiated by UCD (<https://barracks18c.ucd.ie/>)

This project points to the fact that:

The commencement of the building of a countrywide network of barracks in Ireland in the late 1690s was a wholly new and innovative approach to dealing with the age-old problem of maintaining a standing army in both peace and wartime. The only other European country to have developed a similar network at this time was France.

Collins Barracks claims to be the “oldest continuously occupied barracks in the world”, it was built in 1702. Elements of the Athlone barracks are reputed to have been built around 1691-97 so I’m sure there could be a similar claim by Athlone.

It would seem on a national level Victoria Barracks now Custume Barracks played and continues to play a highly significant role in Irish military history. The location of the barracks on the banks of the River Shannon at the gateway into Connaught was a highly important strategic location throughout Irish history.

Acknowledgements:

OPW Architect: Elaine Hanna

Site Manager: Cyril Crosbie, Kilcawley Construction

National Monuments Service Archaeologist: Hugh Carey

Atlantic Archaeology Excavation & Post-Excavation Team: Angela Wallace, Brian O’Hara, Micheal Forde, Niall Jones, Maria Colmenar, Paul Monaghan & Grainne Kelly.

Specialists: Susannah Kelly (Conservation), Siobhan Duffy (Faunal Remains), Antoine Giacometti (Glass), Nuala Hiney (clay pipes) Denise Kavanagh (Artefact Photography -

<https://www.denisekimages.com>)