

Conservation Report for Ferns Old Graveyard Co. Wexford



Compiled for Ferns Community Development Association

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Abstract

Background

This conservation report was commissioned by 'Ferns Community Development Association' with funding provided through the Heritage Council's 'Community Heritage Grant Scheme 2025

Objectives

The undertaking of a conservation survey and plan will enable local stakeholders to establish a framework which will ensure the preservation and enhancement of the site for future generations and achieve the following aims.

- To understand the historical and archaeological significance of the site
- Preserve the built heritage of the old graveyard and address the condition of the boundary wall
- To assess, identify, evaluate and mitigate against current threats and vulnerabilities to the old graveyard
- To preserve and enhance the sites biodiversity and mitigate against climate change
- Create awareness of this historic graveyard and ensure its preservation for locals and visitors alike

Summary of Significance

Historical Significance

Ferns Old Graveyard was the site of a major 6th-century monastic foundation by St. Aidan (Mogue) and remained an important ecclesiastical centre throughout the medieval period. The site shares an association with St. David of Wales through historic and modern cultural connections. It is the final resting place for some notable historical figures including Fr. John Murphy (1798 Rebellion) and Dermot MacMurrough, King of Leinster (traditionally).

Archaeological Significance

The Old Graveyard is situated upon the site of an important medieval monastic and ecclesiastic centre, is designated a monument under the National Monuments Act 1930-2014 and is listed within the record of monuments and places (RMP) (Reg No. WX015-003008) with three other monuments within its confines; a high cross (WX015-003013), cross slab (WX015-003030) and sub-surface archaeological remains of an ecclesiastical enclosure (WX015-003031). It contains ex-situ medieval masonry within its grounds and built into the boundary walls. Memorials within the graveyard display unique designs and iconography, reflecting local vernacular craftsmanship. Sub surface archaeological remains within the site form an important part of the archaeological resource both locally and nationally

Architectural Significance

The boundary walls of Ferns Old Graveyard are defining architectural and spatial elements that continue the historic ecclesiastical enclosure first established over a millennium ago. They delineate the sacred perimeter of the early monastic and later medieval graveyard, preserving the spatial organisation and

enclosure traditions that have framed this burial landscape for centuries. Constructed primarily from locally sourced greywacke and siltstone, laid in random or roughly coursed rubble with traditional lime-based mortars, the walls exemplify vernacular Irish craftsmanship and the enduring use of indigenous materials.

Medieval masonry survives within the graveyard grounds and is incorporated into sections of the boundary wall, representing rare and tangible evidence of early ecclesiastical construction and later adaptation. Embedded carved fragments and re-used dressed stone reflect centuries of alteration and repair, revealing how historic builders reused material from earlier ecclesiastical or funerary structures. These features offer direct insight into local building traditions, medieval ecclesiastical design, and patterns of stone recycling typical of long-lived sacred sites.

The walls form a coherent visual and structural framework that defines the setting of the graveyard, maintaining the historic relationship between enclosure, access, and landscape. They embody both functional and symbolic roles providing containment and protection while also expressing the sacred delineation of consecrated ground within the townscape of Ferns.

The memorials within the graveyard further demonstrate the evolution of commemorative practices and stone-carving traditions from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries. Together with the boundary walls, they illustrate the continuity of craftsmanship, devotion, and cultural expression within the same enclosed space.

Collectively, these elements present one of the few largely intact ecclesiastical enclosures surviving in County Wexford. Their authenticity layered construction history, and patina of age make them a significant component of the region's architectural heritage and a vital record of the evolving relationship between community, craft, and sacred space.

Ecological Significance

The graveyard site is evaluated as of **county conservation value** due to the occurrence of Harebell (*Campanula rotundifolia*), This is the only site in Wexford where it is found. The site is also of **high local importance and possibly of county significance** for the presence of the locally rare bryophytes – the liverwort *Porella platyphylla* and the moss *Gymnostomum viridulum* that grow on the walls. Bee hives present in the woodland retain the native black bee *Apis mellifera mellifera*. The walls also support a range of herb species, ferns, bryophytes and lichens.

Social Significance

The graveyard was a shared burial ground for both local Catholic and Church of Ireland communities. Despite being closed to new burials since the early 20th century it is still regularly visited reflecting an ongoing local importance.

Summary of Conservation issues

Archaeological

- The graveyards memorials are susceptible to vandalism, **unmanaged vegetation** and damage from inappropriate cleaning methods
- Medieval masonry within the graveyard and boundary wall requires surveying, cataloguing and the consideration of potential secure long-term storage
- Access is limited for people with mobility issues
- The current **information panel is within an inaccessible location for people with mobility issues**
- The current information available requires updating
- Care is required to avoid potential damage to sub surface archaeological remains during works
- Previous surveys of the graveyard's memorials were limited with the need for a comprehensive, survey to ensure preservation by record..

Architectural

The boundary walls of Ferns Old Graveyard are of considerable historic and architectural importance but are now in poor and unstable condition, presenting a combination of structural, material, and safety concerns. These issues threaten not only the integrity of the built fabric but also the legibility of the historic enclosure and its relationship with the surrounding townscape.

The most pressing issue is structural instability, particularly along the southern and south-eastern stretches of wall fronting Station Road, where two sections have already collapsed internally and further bulging and displacement are clearly evident. The condition poses an active health and safety risk to both visitors and pedestrians using the adjoining public footpath.

Inappropriate historic repairs using cementitious mortars have **exacerbated decay by trapping moisture within the wall cores**, leading to accelerated stone delamination and loss of bond in adjacent areas. The remaining original lime mortar has weathered heavily, resulting in open joints, voiding, and water ingress, which in turn weaken the wall's structural cohesion.

Medieval architectural fragments embedded within the wall fabric, reused stones from earlier ecclesiastical phases, **are particularly vulnerable to movement and vibration, as their host masonry deteriorates**. These features, of considerable archaeological and architectural value, risk dislodgement or loss if deterioration continues unchecked.

Additional conservation concerns include:

- **Vegetation and root ingress**, particularly ivy and woody growths, which destabilise wall heads and joints;
- **Inadequate surface water management**, resulting in persistent dampness and mortar wash-out at wall bases; and
- **Localised stone decay**, where differential weathering of greywacke and siltstone has led to fragmentation and scaling.

Overall, the boundary walls require urgent stabilisation, careful conservation repair, and ongoing maintenance. Their deterioration not only undermines the historic and aesthetic character of the graveyard but also places unique architectural evidence, such as medieval carved stones and early construction details, at significant risk of loss.

A strategic, conservation-led approach, prioritising safety, authenticity, and material compatibility, is essential to secure these walls as defining heritage structures of Ferns Old Graveyard.

Ecological

There is a risk of direct removal and/or damage to the habitat of two rare bryophytes, the liverwort *Porella playphylla* and the moss *Gymnostomum viridulum* during the repair works to the walls. There is also a risk of trampling or disturbance of the habitat of the Harebell which is the only recorded site for this species in Wexford during the conservation works with increased activity on the site and the storage materials etc. **The loss of these species from the site would be a significant negative effect at the county scale.** Bee hives present in the woodland retain the native black bee *Apis mellifera mellifera*. Pure populations of the native black bee need to be protected as this subspecies is a highly valuable gene pool for the protection of this subspecies in Europe.

Summary of policies

The following policies have been set out in the conservation plan to address the identified conservation issues and preserve and enhance the sites heritage.

Policy 1 – Conserve significant fabric of graveyard

The historic fabric of the old graveyard, which forms part of the sites overall historical and archaeological character, should be preserved and maintained.

Policy 2 – Document and Understand the Graveyard

The historical, cultural and archaeological significance of the site should be supported by thorough documentation and recording. This should include an inventory of the graveyard's memorials, medieval masonry and any other notable features to ensure their preservation and allowance for future research.

Policy 3 – Site Interpretation and Accessibility

The site should be accessible to all persons. Visitors should be encouraged to visit and explore the graveyard.

Policy 4 – Preservation of Natural Heritage Assets

The Old Graveyard is a rich biodiversity resource and habitat for many plant and animal species. All works should consider and mitigate against any potential negative impacts to the sites natural assets taking account of the recommendations set out in the ecological report.

Summary of Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Establish a steering group of key stakeholders (Ferns Community development Association, Wexford County council, National Monuments Service, and project professionals) to oversee the implementation of the policies and recommendations within this report.

Recommendation 2: Prioritise emergency works to vulnerable sections of the graveyard's boundary wall, following conservation recommendations. Apply to Community Monuments Fund (CMF) for funding.

Recommendation 3: Survey memorials within the graveyard applying selective 3-d modelling to include public training and participation.

Recommendation 4: Commission a condition report of graveyard memorials within the graveyard to identify vulnerabilities and mitigate against them.

Recommendation 5: Develop a set of guidelines and advice to discourage negative actions such as inappropriate cleaning of memorials, installation of conflicting modern features to historic graves, removal of protected lichens and mosses from memorials. Refer to the document '*Guidance for the Care, Conservation and Recording of Historic Graveyards, published by the Heritage Council 2011*' for guidance.

Recommendation 6: Remove any trees or overgrowth causing damage to memorials in consultation with project ecologist and archaeologist.

Recommendation 7: Relocate existing information panel to outside of graveyard to allow accessibility for those with mobility issues.

Recommendation 8: Include the graveyard in Wexford County Council's 'Advanced Digital Access Participation Project'.

Recommendation 9: Survey and catalogue the medieval masonry scattered and identify potential secure storage location in consultation with the National Monuments Service.

Recommendation 10: The steering group should encourage and support further research to enhance and highlight our understanding of the old graveyard, cultural practices and more.

Recommendation 11: That the steering group make efforts to have all available research and data on the site be made public through a range of different media.

Recommendation 13: Implement protective measures outlined in Section 7 of the Ecological Assessment to prevent removal or damage to species and incorporate same into method statements.

Recommendation 14: Retain bryophytes (mosses and liverworts) and lichens on the walls where possible with provision made for this in the works method statements.

Recommendation 15: Clearance of ivy or other tree/ shrub growth should take place outside the bird breeding season (which occurs March 1st – August 31st). If this schedule cannot be accommodated, the vegetation should first be checked for nesting birds prior to works.

Recommendation 16: It is recommended that the walls are checked by an ecologist prior to works as a precaution. In the unlikely event that a bat is encountered during the works advice is provided in the mitigation measures in the Ecological Assessment Report.

Recommendation 17: It is recommended that some bat boxes and bird boxes are installed in the small area of woodland on the site.

Recommendation 18: The steering group should encourage public participation with the project through social media accounts, radio, newspapers and organising events for heritage week, culture night and other times throughout the year.

Recommendation 19: The steering group should remain proactive in identifying and pursuing potential funding opportunities on an ongoing basis.

Recommendation 20: Historical or archaeological objects within the graveyard should not be removed from their current location or relocated elsewhere. This includes masonry, memorials and fragments of the same. Upon the discovery of any new historical or archaeological objects, the project archaeologist, county Heritage officer and The National Museum should be notified and consulted.

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A selection of suitable Figures has been included to illustrate this conservation report. Please see accompanying reports and assessments for comprehensive visual and illustrative records.

Acknowledgements

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Heritage Council for providing funding; Project professionals Barry Lacey (Licensed Archaeologist), Caroline Kearns Gethings (Anú Heritage), Deborah D'Arcy (Ecologist), Joe Byrne (Chartered Surveyor) and Lorraine O' Dwyer (Gallivanting) for their expertise and advise; Catherine MacPartlin and members of the Ferns Community Development Association (FCDA); County heritage officer Colm Moriarty and county biodiversity officer Claire Goodwin; Wexford county council; Ferns Tidy towns; Rev. Dean Mooney; Phil Murphy Supervisor Ferns Community Project; Joe Kelly Beekeeper; Ferns Tidy Towns; Ferns Heritage Project.

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APPENDIX 3: ECOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

1 Introduction

1.1 Project Background

This report details the results of a conservation plan for the 'Old Graveyard' in Ferns Village, Co. Wexford commissioned by the 'Ferns Community Development Association' (FCDA) with funding provided through the Heritage Council's 'Community Heritage Grant Scheme 2025' Reg No. CH4342). The report aims to combine and summarise together the findings of the reports and assessments undertaken by Barry Lacey (Licensed Archaeologist), Built Heritage Specialist Caroline Kearns Gethings (Anú Heritage) and Ecologist Deborah D'Arcy. These can be found within the appendix at the end of this document.

1.2 Objectives

The undertaking of a conservation survey and plan will enable local stakeholders to establish a framework which will ensure the preservation and enhancement of the site for future generations and achieve the following aims.

- To understand the historical and archaeological significance of the site
- Preserve the built heritage of the old graveyard and address the condition of the boundary wall
- To assess, identify, evaluate and mitigate against current threats and vulnerabilities to the old graveyard
- To preserve and enhance the sites biodiversity and mitigate against climate change
- Create awareness of this historic graveyard and ensure its preservation for locals and visitors alike

1.3 Site Location

Ferns Old Graveyard is located at the eastern end of Ferns village, within the townland of Ferns Upper (Figure 1). The site is enclosed on all sides by a stone and mortar boundary wall defining an area approximately 150m x 120m. To the north it adjoins St. Edan's Church of Ireland Cathedral and the R772 public road. Station Road forms the western and southern boundaries while to the east is a pasture field containing the ruins of the 12th century St. Mary's Augustinian Abbey. A two-storey building occupies the north-western corner of the site and is currently in use as a hairdressing business. The site borders the townland of Castleland to the west and south and Ferns Demesne to the east. The graveyard's grass covered grounds are generally flat with minor undulations, containing multiple gravestones of various design and date. It is maintained through a local community employment scheme.

1.4 Methodology

This methodology has been prepared in accordance with the following guideline documents.

- The Burra Charter: The Australian ICOMOS Charter for Places of Cultural Significance, 2013
- 'Framework & Principles for the Protection of the Archaeological Heritage' issued by the DAHGI (1999)

- Department of Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and the Islands. 1999b. *Policy and Guidelines on Archaeological Excavation*. Government Publications Office, Dublin.
- 'Architectural Heritage Protection- Guidelines for Local Authorities' issued by the DAHG (2011)
- Guidance for the Care, Conservation and Recording of Historic Graveyards, published by the Heritage Council 2011

For ease of discussion each project element has been divided into relevant headings.

1.4.1 Archaeological Assessment

An archaeological assessment of the graveyard was undertaken by Licensed Archaeologist Barry Lacey. The assessment was comprised of a comprehensive desktop study combined with an archaeological walkover survey of site to identify any issues and vulnerabilities. Recommendations were made towards the preservation and enhancement of the sites archaeological resource.

1.4.2 Built Heritage assessment

A comprehensive built heritage assessment was undertaken by Caroline Kearns Gethings of Anú Heritage. The assessment included inspections and recording of graveyard's boundary walls to identify issues and vulnerabilities and make recommendations towards its conservation. A detailed measured and photographic survey was also undertaken by Joseph Byrne (Chartered Surveyor) to inform the built heritage assessment.

1.4.3 Natural Heritage assessment

Deborah D'Arcy was commissioned to prepare an Ecological Appraisal (EA) to accompany the Conservation Management Plan for Ferns Graveyard. This Ecological Appraisal Report (EA) reports on the surveys and community liaison with FCDA with regard to the conservation of natural heritage features at ferns Graveyard and identifies any ecological constraints associated with the proposed conservation works to the boundary walls of the graveyard church, advises on mitigation measures required and makes recommendations for appropriate vegetation management and other actions to promote biodiversity at the site.

A Plant History Audit of the Graveyard and surrounds was undertaken by Lorraine O'Dwyer of 'Gallivanting' and utilised for a heritage week event.

1.4.4 Community Engagement

As part of National Heritage week a 'Talk and Tour' event was undertaken of the graveyard where members of the public got to hear about the sites archaeological, natural and built heritage directly from the specialists undertaking the conservation plan. In addition to this Lorraine Dwyer of 'Gallivanting' gave a separate tour of the graveyard exploring its plants and their medicinal uses with particular focus on those used during the medieval period.

2 Understanding the Monument

2.1 Location and Setting

Ferns Old Graveyard is situated at the eastern end of Ferns village, covering an area approximately 150m x 120m (Figure 1). It is bounded to the north by St. Edan's Church of Ireland Cathedral, to the east by a field under pasture and elsewhere by public roads. A boundary wall of stone and mortar construction encloses the site and contains elements of medieval architectural masonry. The structure is highest on the eastern and southern side of the graveyard. The grounds of the graveyard are grass covered with mature trees and maintained through a local community employment benefit scheme. It contains an array of grave markers which range in date from the 18th to 20th century, some of which display unique iconography and designs. The site is of archaeological and historical significance with St. Aidan said to have founded a monastery here at the turn of the 6th century (Culleton 1999, p102). Objects of archaeological significance can be found throughout the grounds including fragments of medieval architectural masonry, portion of a high cross and a cross slab. The ruins of St. Mary's Augustinian abbey are situated a short distance to the east of the graveyard and the church of Ireland Cathedral is built upon the site of an earlier medieval church. In recent years Ferns has been the subject of much research and investigations as part of 'Ancient Connections' an EU funded project aiming to revive and celebrate the ancient links between communities in Wexford and North Pembrokeshire in Wales. Geophysical investigations undertaken to trace the route of the original monastic enclosure surrounding St. Aidan's monastery identified that it extends into and likely continues through the old graveyard (Mandel S, Potterton, M. and Shine, D. 2023). Also as part of an arts project under Ancient Connections two bee hives have been placed in the southeast corner of the graveyard to enhance the biodiversity of the site and are maintained by local beekeepers

2.2 Ownership and Legislative Protection

(The following sections of chapter 2 was extracted from the archaeological assessment)

2.2.1 Wexford County Council

Ferns Old Graveyard is classified as an '**Old Closed Burial Ground**' vested in Wexford county council, being under its ownership and management. The following relevant objectives are set out in chapter 13 of the county development plan in relation to historic graveyards.

Objective G01

To preserve and enhance the county's graveyards through improved management, access and community stewardship, and to promote the unique character of each of the burial grounds.

Objective G02

To provide education and training on the appropriate care and maintenance of our graveyards and burial grounds (including the legislative procedures involved).

Objective G03

To promote the use of Graveyard Plans as a means of identifying the significance of each graveyard and of co-ordinating maintenance and conservation works and the required permissions, as well as any promotional activities desired.

Objective G04

To protect the burial grounds identified in the Record of Monuments and Places in co-operation with the National Monuments Service of the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht.

2.2.2 The Historic and Archaeological Heritage and Miscellaneous Provisions Act

The Historic and Archaeological Heritage and Miscellaneous Provisions Act (the Act) came into effect on 13 October 2023 to replace the National Monuments Act 1930-2004. While the Act is now law, a number of legal and administrative measures are required to make the legislation enforceable and it will come into effect on a phased basis. Until such time existing sections of the National Monuments Act remain relevant and are referred to within this report.

2.2.3 National Monuments Act

Ferns Old Graveyard is an archaeological site of historical significance listed on the record of monuments and places (RMP) (WX015-003008) and is subject to statutory protection under the National Monuments Act, Section 12 (1930–2014). The Record of Monuments and Places (RMP) is a statutory list of Monuments and places where monuments may exist, established under Section 12 of the National Monuments (Amendment) Act 1994. There are over 120,000 Recorded Monuments (and places) included in the RMP. When the owner or occupier of a property, or any other person proposes to carry out, or to cause, or to permit the carrying out of any work at or in relation to a Recorded Monument or a Registered Monument they are required to give notice in writing to the Minister 2 months before commencing that work. This is to allow the National Monuments Service time to consider the proposed works and how best to proceed to further the protection of the monument. It should also be noted that *'where a graveyard is in the care/ownership of a local authority, ministerial consent along with notification is required under Section 14 of the Act (as amended) where the graveyard is a national monument.'* (Heritage Council, 2011, p11)

In summary: Anyone proposing or planning to undertake, or carryout works at or in relation to the graveyard must notify the 'National Monuments Service' (NMS) at least two months prior to their commencement. This is to allow sufficient time to consider the proposed works and how best to protect it.

In addition to being a registered monument the graveyard contains other protected objects of archaeological significance including the base and shaft of a high cross (WX015-003013) and cross slab (WX015-003030). Pieces of medieval architectural masonry are visible throughout the graveyard as well as being incorporated into the boundary wall.

It is a legal requirement for any person who finds any object or portable artefact inside an historic graveyard to report this find within 4 days of their discovery to the Director of the National Museum of Ireland, Kildare Street, Dublin 2. It is illegal for any unlicensed person to use or possess any metal detecting device in or around the vicinity of an historic graveyard.

2.3 Monuments within the Graveyard

In addition to the graveyard itself there are three 'monuments' recorded within the site. All three are listed on the Record of Monuments and Places and granted legislative protection under the National Monuments Act.

SMR No.	Monument Type	Brief Description
WX015-003013	High Cross (Figure 5)	In the graveyard (WX015-003008-) and S of the cathedral (WX015-003003-) is the base (dims. 1.4m x 1.15m) of a cross supporting the bottom of a shaft (dims. 0.57m x 0.34m; H 0.95m) decorated in fret-pattern. References: Anon. 1909-10, 6-7; Harbison 1992, vol. 1, 89)
WX015-003030	Cross Slab (Figure 2)	A fragment of a decorated stone (dims 0.97m x 0.17-0.43m; T 0.12m) tapering from top to bottom was identified in the graveyard (WX015-003008-) of the Cathedral in 2013 (Figure 2). It has an incised stem terminating in an incised circle that encloses a marigold in false relief. It's origin may have been as a cross-slab in the 1st millennium (Corlett 2011). It was re-used as a grave-marker when a lightly-incised cross opposite the stem was added, probably in the 18th or 19th century. References: Corlett, C. 2011 A previously unrecorded cross-slab from Ferns, Co. Wexford. Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland, 141, 199-200.
WX015-003031	Ecclesiastical Enclosure	A combination of targeted geophysical investigation in the recent past combined with analysis of previous archaeological investigations within the village has confirmed the existence of a double monastic enclosure surrounding the former ecclesiastical site (Lacey et al. 2023). Of the past investigations; in 2015 geophysical investigations within the south east corner of the graveyard uncovered a short segment of the inner monastic enclosure (Bhreathnach and Dowling 2021, 195)

2.4 Archaeological & Historical Background

The historical record points to the existence of a monastic foundation at Ferns from AD 598 onwards, attributed to St Aidan (Culleton 1999, 134; O' Rian 2025, 447–451). Aidan is often referred to as 'Mogue,' which comes from the Irish 'Mo Aodh Óg meaning "my young Aodh" or "my darling Aodh". He was of noble birth and born at Port Island in Templeport parish, Co. Cavan sometime before the middle of the sixth century (Culleton 1999, 103). He studied for several years at St David's monastery in Menevia in Pembrokeshire, South Wales where he was ordained a priest (*ibid.*). Upon returning to Ireland, he landed in Ardamine, North Wexford and founded several churches throughout the south-east and within the Uí Cheinnselaig territory (*ibid.*, 104). The saint's exact year of death is unknown, and accounts vary including AD 624, AD 625 and AD 656 (*ibid.*, 106). He is reputed to have been buried within his monastery in Ferns (*ibid.*).

Varying accounts exist surrounding the foundation of the monastery at Ferns. One states that St Aidan obtained land from a noble called Becc, a kinsman of Brandubh, the then Uí Cheinnselaig king of Leinster (Culleton 1999, 135). Another account records that Brandubh bestowed on Aidan lands at Ferns and made him bishop of his kingdom after he defeated the High King of Ireland in battle because of advice from Aidan (*ibid.*). It's thought the historical association placed between Brandubh and St Aidan was concocted centuries later to enhance the importance of Ferns monastery and the Uí Cheinnselaig (*ibid.*, 134). After his death, Aidan was succeeded by a number of bishops and Abbots during the centuries that followed (*ibid.*, 135–136). By AD 1160 there are few references to the monastery after the then king of Uí Cheinnselaig and Leinster Diarmuid MacMurrough, granted the Canons Regular of St Augustine a foundation at Ferns (*ibid.*, 139–140) (Figure 3) The native monastics may have simply switched to the rule of St Augustine and taken up residence within the Abbey (O'Keeffe and Bates 2016, 78). As part of the twelfth-century church reforms, diocesan boundaries were drawn up at the Synod of Rath Breasail in AD 1111. The boundary of the Ferns diocese reflected the territory of the Uí Cheinnselaig and Ferns was chosen as its episcopal see (*ibid.*, 1999, 180–181) which it remained throughout the medieval period.

Despite being an important ecclesiastical centre throughout much of the early medieval period few upstanding remains associated with this period remain in the village. The exception to this is the existence of some high crosses and a cross slab surrounding the Cathedral area. Archaeological excavations in recent years however combined with geophysical investigations have revealed the sub surface remains of a monastic enclosure surrounding the former monastery site (Lacey et al. 2023).

By the early to mid-twelfth century Ferns, already a long-established ecclesiastical centre, had become both a political and royal stronghold under Diarmuid MacMurrough (Culleton 1999, 188; Colfer 2013 60–69). In approximately 1160 he established the Augustinian Abbey of St. Mary's in Ferns (Figure 3) ensuring a continuation of the site's ecclesiastical importance (Corlett 2023). Diarmuid had become King of Leinster and his ambitions led to conflicts that resulted in him seeking aid from Norman mercenaries in Wales with an initial landing recorded in the year AD1167(Colfer 2002, 25–35). Further on in AD1169 the leader of these new arrivals, Richard De Clare, better known as Strongbow, landed

under the promise of Diarmuid's daughter Aoife's hand in marriage and the Kingdom of Leinster (*ibid*). Upon their arrival the Normans expanded and established themselves within the country with Ferns becoming an important stronghold and retained as demesne land under their rule. During this time a strong stone castle was constructed at Ferns (Figure 4). Archaeological excavations within the village have uncovered evidence of domestic activity and craft working, complimenting the historical record (Gowen 1995; McLoughlin, 2020)

Ferns grew to be a prosperous manor under the Norman rule throughout the medieval period. During this time, it doubled as both a secular and ecclesiastical manor which often brought conflict between the church and controlling family (Potterton 2023, 31). However, from the late 13th century onwards the fortunes of the manor began to wane with references constantly referring to it being attacked and destroyed by the resurging Irish (*ibid*, 46–47). From then on, the Manor declined being witness to constant warring and conflict. Colfer in describing Ferns Castle outlined the village's situation for most of the later medieval period as; '*Ferns Castle built in a frontier location, was in the land of war for the three and a half centuries that it functioned as a military stronghold*' (2013, 64). Excavations at Ferns castle by Sweetman in the 1970s pointed towards the manor's decline with excavations demonstrating that the ditch was mostly infilled by the beginning of the 14th century, making it less effective for defence. Based on a lack of finds of post mid-14th century date Sweetman assumed the castle fell into disuse until it was reoccupied in the 17th/18th centuries (Sweetman 1979). At the very end of the medieval period in 1598, Ferns was described as an ancient ruined town (Hore 1911, 153).

The context to Oliver Cromwell's arrival in Ireland comes from AD 1642 when the English Crown, under King Charles, was in a power struggle with his parliament, leading to the English civil war (Mac Annaidh 2002, 110–113). After parliament won the power struggle they turned their attention to Ireland, where many remained supportive of the King (*ibid.*). Oliver Cromwell, the new lord lieutenant, landed with an army in AD 1649 and swept across the country crushing any resistance (*ibid.*). Heading south from Dublin he reached Ferns and after negotiations the castle was surrendered to Cromwellian forces (Colfer 2013, 68–69; Power 2010, 47). This was its last use as a military stronghold. Following the surrender one of the generals named 'Coote' is said to have partly dismantled the castle and greatly oppressed the inhabitants (Lewis 1837, 624). After the Cromwellian invasion (AD 1649–53) Flood describes how '... Ferns lapsed into the status of an inconsiderable village' (1916, 27).

2.4.1 Ferns Old Graveyard

The 'Old Graveyard' in Ferns, has functioned as a burial place since the early 6th century, when St. Aidan first established his monastic foundation on the site. This religious association was reinforced and maintained by its proximity to a medieval cathedral and Augustinian Abbey. Whether the site's current boundary is contemporaneous with that of the medieval period we can only speculate but at least part of the site has served as a place of burial for many hundreds of years.

Archaeological investigations north of the graveyard have uncovered evidence of funerary activity predating the arrival of St. Aidan; excavations in 2004 where Alderbrook estate is now situated, uncovered six or seven cremation pits, with some containing fragments of crushed pottery (Kavanagh

2004). These pits were interpreted as forming part of a larger Bronze Age (2500–500 BC) flat cemetery that occupied the high ground on the western side of the river valley (*ibid.*). Further investigations in 2006 near the same area uncovered a further two cremation pits (Kavanagh 2006). Several authors have suggested a prehistoric significance in Ferns that influenced the establishment of a monastery in the early medieval period. (Culleton 1999, 135; Corlett 2012, 5; Doyle 2016. 51–55; Lacey 2017; Mandel, Potterton, Shine 2023; Lacey 2025). It is therefore possible that parts of the old graveyard may contain burials or funerary deposits predating the establishment of a St. Aidan's monastery.

The old graveyard acted as the primary site of internment within the village up until the early part of the 20th century. Prior to this the only other location was a small graveyard adjacent to the ruins of the medieval St. Peter's church. The construction of the new Catholic church within the village in 1826 (Power 2010, 64) offered an alternative site although limited by its small size. A new Catholic cemetery (still in use today) was eventually opened in September 1909 by the Enniscorthy Rural District Council in response to the Old Graveyard being 'overcrowded' (Free Press, 11th Sept 1909, p16). The previous year the Old Graveyard was described as being in a 'neglected state' (Free Press 25th July 1908, p9). An analysis of newspaper archives indicates the site had been neglected for decades prior. An article in the Wexford People Newspaper from 1861 entitled 'Desecration of the dead' describes the site as being in a deplorable condition, covered in nettles, thistles, grazed by sheep, cattle and with animal droppings on the headstones (Wexford Independent 7th Sept 1861, p2). Less than 20 years later the situation seems to have changed little with a visitor to the graveyard describing how it was in a deplorable state with the walls down in several places and two large breaches, one considerable, facing the public street. Horses, cattle, asses and pigs could roam freely owing to the absence of any fences (Wexford People 20th May 1882, p5). In 1894 the condition of the site was the subject of a board of guardians meeting with one party stating how a donkey was damaging wreaths and enquiring what could be done to remove it (Wexford People 3rd March 1894, p7). In 1900 it had been converted into a pasture ground for donkeys (Enniscorthy Guardian. 15th December 1900, p4). Overcrowding within the site is reflected in a court case from 1906 concerning two parties over the issue of coping stones encroaching upon the grave of the other (Echo 26th October 1906, p13).

In an attempt to address the ongoing issue an inquiry was held at Ferns courthouse by the local government board medical inspector in 1906 which suggested that the graveyard be closed. This same recommendation had already been made two years prior in 1904 in a report concerning the unsanitary condition of the site. During the inquiry Mr Whelan, a sanitary sub officer stated '*...he hardly ever saw a grave opened, but he saw bones and skulls exposed*', while a colleague of his a Mr. Murphy described how '*...he had frequently seen bones thrown up at burials and three tiers of coffins. He often saw a coffin removed to make way for another and the bones put in a heap and put down again*'. Mr Bolger, a member of the rural district council, stated he went to 20 burials in Ferns graveyard on average that year and that he hardly ever saw a grave opened but there were bones and coffins thrown up. Some coffins were reportedly not even two feet under the surface. Such was the level of overcrowding that Canon Gibson, who had been rector of Ferns for the previous nine years, noted that some parishioners had chosen to change their burial place to other locations within the district. He rarely saw a grave open

that he did not see bones removed and had on one occasion seen two coffins removed from a grave and placed back down over another. Rev Gibson provides us with a possible explanation as to the reason for the continued use of the site despite its poor condition stating that St. Mogue had prayed that anyone buried there should remain no length in purgatory. He suggested the site be closed and right of burial be given to the elderly only. The suggestion of overcrowding in the inquiry was met with opposition by some members of the public in attendance. One person suggested there were 100 graves on the site not touched and blamed people coming from Enniscorthy for the overcrowding and shallow internments. Dr. Greene, who had made the initial report on which the inquiry was based, stated the place was a danger to the public health being so overcrowded and that his predecessor had reported similar 20 years previously (Free Press 24th March 1906, p5; Echo 23^{ed} March 1906, p15). It appears that burials also encountered potential structural remains also; the famed antiquarian Hore wrote in his publication on the county in 1911 that ‘...for in the opening of graves in the adjacent graveyard walls of immense thickness and strength are often uncovered near the south side of the present (cathedral) building.’ (Hore 1911, 163)

Despite its unsanitary condition and the opening of a new graveyard in the village in 1909 it continued to be used for internments. In 1913 at a meeting of the Enniscorthy Rural District Council a letter from Rev. Dean Gibson stated that Internments were still ongoing, almost on a weekly basis. He described how the site, nearly being three acres in total and although sacred ground was used as a privy also. Rev. Gibson had sent two men to attempt to clear the graveyard, but they were ‘...put out by stoning’. At the same meeting a Mr. Kavanagh declared it a disgrace with card schools being held there in the summer every night (Free Press 8th Sept 1923). The following month the graveyard was described as being filled with ‘...old rags, tins etc’. Attempts were made by some to maintain the site. In 1913 reference is made by a Mr. Bolger to the graveyard being open in parts and that he had repaired some breaches in the walls at his own expense (Free Press 8th November 1913, p5). Issues regarding the responsibility of maintaining the site are noted and it seems to have been with the representative church body rather than the council. The maintenance of the site appears in newspapers again in 1937 with questions surrounding what can be done (New Ross Standard 9th July 1937, p8).and again in 1965 (24th July 1965, p5). In recent years decades the site is regularly maintained through a local community employment scheme.

2.5 Recorded Monuments

The Old Graveyard is designated as a monument under the National Monuments Act 1930-2014 recorded in the record of monuments and places (RMP) under the designated number WX015-003008. Any person proposing to carry out work at or in relation to a Recorded Monument is required to give notice in writing to the Minister two months before commencing that work. This Section 12 Notification allows the National Monuments Service time to consider the proposed work and how best to protect of the monument. Three additional monuments are recorded within the graveyard itself. These have previously been listed in section 2.3 with descriptions.

In addition to the monuments recorded within the Old Graveyard the following are situated within the cathedral church of Ireland grounds to the immediate north:

SMR No.	Monument Type	Legislative Protection
WX015-003002	Church	Recorded in the 'Record of Monuments and Places' (RMP)
WX015-003003	Cathedral	Recorded in the 'Record of Monuments and Places' (RMP)
WX015-003009	High Cross	Recorded in the 'Record of Monuments and Places' (RMP)
WX015-003010	High Cross	Recorded in the 'Record of Monuments and Places' (RMP)
WX015-003011	High Cross	Recorded in the 'Record of Monuments and Places' (RMP)
WX015-003012	High Cross	Recorded in the 'Record of Monuments and Places' (RMP)
WX015-003015	Tomb Effigial	Recorded in the 'Record of Monuments and Places' (RMP)

The following monuments are situated within the field east of the graveyard and include St. Mary's Abbey which is a National Monument in ownership of the minister (No.133). The term 'national monument' means any monument considered to be of national importance because of the historical, architectural, traditional, artistic or archaeological interest associated with it. Any works at or in the vicinity of a national monument require the consent of the minister.

SMR No.	Monument Type	Legislative Protection
WX015-003004	Religious house - Augustinian canons	National Monument in state ownership (No.133)
WX015-003017	Cross	Recorded in the 'Record of Monuments and Places' (RMP)
WX015-003018	Cross	Recorded in the 'Record of Monuments and Places' (RMP)
WX015-003028	Round Tower	National Monument in state ownership (No.133)
WX015-003032	Enclosure	Recorded in the 'Record of Monuments and Places' (RMP)
WX015-003033	Structure	Recorded in the 'Record of Monuments and Places' (RMP)
WX015-003034	Field System	Recorded in the 'Record of Monuments and Places' (RMP)
WX015-003035	Road/Trackway	Recorded in the 'Record of Monuments and Places' (RMP)
WX015-003039-	Horizontal Water Mill	Recorded in the 'Record of Monuments and Places' (RMP)

2.6 Previous Archaeological Investigations

A review of the excavations bulletin has revealed only a single investigation has taken place within the grounds of the old graveyard. In 2020 archaeological monitoring was undertaken of excavations for information panels at several locations within the village which included the old graveyard. Works were done under ministerial consent ref: E004953. The panel base was located just west of the entrance to the graveyard from the main street. The ground area to accommodate the foundation base was reduced

to a depth of 0.2m with nothing of archaeological significance recorded. Additionally, a section of old pathway was removed leading from the cathedral grounds (south east corner) to the decorated high cross shaft within the graveyard (known locally as the grave of Diarmuid MacMurrough). A new section of pathway was then installed. Nothing of archaeological significance was uncovered.

2.7 Cartographic Analysis

The first detailed depiction of the Old Graveyard is shown on the ordinance survey (O.S) map from c.1840 (Figure 6). The site is referred to as 'Grave Yard' with no other internal details depicted. The sites boundary is the same as today with a structure also visible in the northwest corner. Another structure, of which nothing now remains, is visible adjoining the southeast corner. The land immediately east of the graveyard is heavily wooded.

The graveyard is depicted again several decades later on the second edition ordinance survey map dating from approximately 1905 (Figure 7). The footprint of the site has not changed and the land to the east remains wooded. The only notable difference is that the structure abutting the southeast corner of the site has been replaced with one that now runs parallel with the road. Similarly, the structure on the northwest corner now has an extension added to the rear.

2.8 Finds Listed within the Topographical Files of the National Museum of Ireland

Three finds are recorded within the topographical files in relation to the old graveyard. In 2016 a part of an inlaid and glazed tile (NMI:2018:90) dating from the 13th century was found just east of the Cathedral during the excavation of a modern grave (Corlett 2018) (Figure 8). It depicted a mounted knight with armour and sword.

In 1931, while ploughing near St Mary's Abbey, John Doyle discovered a 'book-clasp', which was subsequently presented to the National Museum of Ireland by a Lorna Chapman of South Circular Road, Dublin (Figure 10). The piece was made of copper alloy (bronze), decorated with glass and enamel. It is potentially of eighth or ninth century date and is of excellent craftsmanship (NMI:193:315).

The third and final find was recorded as having been found within the graveyard. Several iron spurs (exact number not specified) (Figure 9) were recovered nine feet deep in the graveyard at Ferns and presented to the National Museum by a Stephen Radcliffe, being either presented or found in 1825 (National Museum of Ireland 1825: WK108 & 7913:W5). It is presumed the items were found during grave digging operations. Their condition was worn and rusty with no established chronology, but they were obviously for an equestrian purpose. A potential 13th century chronology has been suggested (Potterton 2023, 36)

2.9 Previous Works and Surveys

While Ferns has been the subject of much research and investigation in the last few years (Mandel, Potterton, Shine 2023; Lacey 2025) the old graveyard has received little analysis and investigation.

Between 1966 and 1990, over a span of twenty-five years, Brian J. Cantwell surveyed more than 500 sites and documented thousands of memorials dating up to 1900. His work covers all of Wexford and Wicklow, significant portions of South County Dublin, much of West Clare, and selected areas of Cork, Kildare, Galway, and Sligo. Consultation of his works regarding the old graveyard in Ferns show that he visited the site between April and July of 1980 (Brian Cantwell, *Memorials of the Dead*, Vol 5). He recorded a total of 339 memorials and 1077 names. In describing the graveyard, he states it is well maintained by the county council with some headstones having been re-erected. Most memorials were easy to read while some were worn smooth by foot wear or had fallen down. The only carving of a skull and cross bones noted in the county is on a ledger lying to right of pathway from car park on main road to old cathedral and castle ruins.

In the early 2000s workers attached to a local FAS employment scheme undertook a recording of names within the graveyard. Details recorded included surname, first name and date of death. While a record of those buried within the graveyard it does not include to reference to family groups, memorials or location within the graveyard and is therefore of limited use.

In 2018 a blog post by Finola (<https://roaringwaterjournal.com/2018/04/15/the-headstones-of-ferns/>) gave a brief overview of the headstone iconography within the old graveyard. While brief the piece was well illustrated covering the details of various headstones, their iconography and carvers.

In 2015 geophysical investigations were undertaken in the field immediately east of the old graveyard (Bhreathnach and Dowling 2021, 195). These investigations uncovered an array of archaeological features. The primary features among those were two concentric ditches suggested as forming part of a monastic enclosure. Further research undertaken of these anomalies have confirmed an early medieval chronology and function (Lacey et al. 2023). Of particular interest to this report is at of the southeast corner of the graveyard a continuation of the innermost enclosure ditch (G1) (Figure 11) was uncovered. This indicates that the old graveyard forms part of the inner core of St. Aidan's monastic foundation.

3 Archaeological Assessment Summary

The following information is provided as a summary of the archaeological assessment undertaken by Barry Lacey (Licensed Archaeologist) which is attached in Appendix 1.

Ferns Old Graveyard is situated on the site of a monastic foundation founded by St. Aidan at the end of the 6th century AD. The location remained an important ecclesiastical centre throughout the early (AD 400-1200) and later medieval (AD 1200-1600) periods being adjacent to a Cathedral and St. Mary's Augustinian Abbey. Archaeological investigations have shown the graveyard is situated within what would have been the inner core of the former monastery; geophysical investigations have traced the inner enclosing element of the monastic enclosure traversing the southern end of the site (Bhreathnach and Dowling 2021, 195). Additionally, a link is shared with St. David of Wales whom was a teacher of St. Aidan.

The graveyard is listed as a Recorded Monument (SMR: WX015-003008) on the Record of Monuments and Places (RMP) and is granted protection under the National Monuments Act 1930-2014. Additionally, three other monuments are listed within its grounds which include a high cross (WX015-003013), cross slab (WX015-003030) and the sub-surface archaeological remains of an ecclesiastical enclosure (WX015-003031). Archaeological artefacts have been recovered within or adjacent to the graveyard and archaeological investigations have confirmed the existence of sub surface archaeological remains (Bhreathnach and Dowling 2021, 195)

The Old Graveyard was the primary burial place within the village until the opening of the new graveyard at the early part of the 20th century. The is final resting place of several historical persons including; Fr. John Murphy, the catholic priest who played a prominent leadership role in the 1798 rebellion as well as other Individuals who perished during the 1798 rebellion (Cantwell 1990). The shaft of a high cross is said to mark the final resting place of Dermot MacMurrough former King of Leinster (Cantwell 1990); Edward Nolan who was the first fatality of the War of Independence in county Wexford.

There is a variety of headstones and other memorials situated within the graveyard dating from the early 18th century onwards. Many of these display unique iconography and designs reflecting local vernacular craftsmanship. Also, pieces of medieval masonry can be found situated within the graveyard and built into the enclosing boundary walls. The site is regularly visited by both locals and visitors and is the final resting place for both denominations of Roman Catholic and Church of Ireland ensuring it has maintained a social significance within the area.

While the site is regularly maintained there are notable issues and concerns which have been identified and listed within this report. This includes the conservation of the graveyard's boundary walls, preservation of memorials, medieval masonry within the site, site access interpretation and presentation, and protection of the archaeological resource.

4 Built Heritage Assessment Summary

The following summary is based on the Built Heritage Assessment undertaken by Caroline Kearns Gethings of Anú Heritage, included in Appendix 2 of this report. It condenses the key architectural findings; the full report should be consulted for detailed condition data, methodologies, and drawings.

The Conservation Management Plan for Ferns Old Graveyard has been prepared to guide the protection, repair, and sustainable management of one of County Wexford's most significant ecclesiastical enclosures. The graveyard, containing medieval masonry, historic monuments, and extensive boundary walls, represents over a millennium of spiritual, architectural, and community continuity within the town of Ferns.

4.1 Built Fabric Overview

The built fabric of Ferns Old Graveyard reflects a long sequence of construction and adaptation. The boundary walls, formed primarily of locally sourced greywacke and siltstone rubble bonded in lime

mortar, delineate the early ecclesiastical precinct. Embedded medieval carved fragments testify to reuse of earlier ecclesiastical material, confirming the wall's archaeological and architectural importance. The surviving masonry demonstrates traditional vernacular techniques, with field-gathered stone and irregular coursing characteristic of local craftsmanship.

4.2 Condition Summary

The boundary walls are in varied but generally poor condition, showing progressive structural and material deterioration. Key observed issues include:

- Loss of mortar and open joints, particularly where past cementitious repointing has restricted breathability and trapped moisture.
- Bulging, leaning, and partial collapse in sections of the southern wall, caused by internal ground pressure, moisture ingress, and traffic vibration from Station Road.
- Differential weathering between the harder greywacke and softer siltstone, resulting in exfoliation and surface loss.
- Vegetation colonisation, notably ivy, ferns, and mosses, accelerating physical and moisture-related decay.
- Inadequate drainage and raised internal ground levels exerting continuous lateral pressure on the wall base.

These combined factors have rendered several areas structurally unstable, posing a safety risk to both visitors and pedestrians and endangering the surviving medieval masonry incorporated within the wall fabric.

4.3 Conservation Approach

The assessment recommends a phased programme of stabilisation and repair following best-practice conservation standards, including:

- Controlled dismantling and like-for-like rebuilding of unstable sections using traditional hot-mixed lime mortars and matching stone.
- Removal of cement-based mortars and reinstatement with breathable lime pointing.
- Selective vegetation management in consultation with ecological specialists, avoiding damage to valuable species such as wall ferns and lichens.
- Drainage improvements through verge reinstatement rather than intrusive ground excavation.
- Comprehensive photographic and drawn recording of all interventions, with numbering and reinstatement of carved stones to preserve authenticity and context.

The built heritage of Ferns Old Graveyard, and particularly its enclosing boundary walls, forms a defining element of the town's medieval landscape. Their conservation is a high management priority, essential to maintaining the site's structural safety, historical integrity, and visual character. The

assessment supports the principle of minimum intervention, use of authentic materials, and ongoing community involvement in monitoring and maintenance ensuring the graveyard remains a living record of Ferns' enduring architectural and spiritual heritage.

5 Ecological Assessment Summary

The following information was provided as a summary of the ecological assessment undertaken by Deobrah Darcy which is attached in Appendix 3. This is provided as a summary and the report should be consulted for further details.

Ferns Graveyard is located 0.9km west of from the River Bann which is part of the Slaney River Valley SAC (site code: 000781). No significant constraints with respect to Appropriate Assessment Screening of the Conservation Plan or associated proposed works were identified during this Ecological Appraisal.

The habitats at Ferns Graveyards include old stone walls (BL1), scattered trees and parkland (WD5) including a moderately species rich dry neutral grassland (GS1) and a small area of broadleaved woodland (WD1).

Historic graveyards are important for the conservation of small areas of semi-natural grasslands as these sites are rarely if ever fertilised and have potential to support species rich grasslands. In addition, there may be associations between the flora at the site and the medieval history of the site. The study of relict plants (descendants of introduced or cultivated plants by people in the past) at castle sites has been given attention recently in Ireland by the "Sowing Seeds of Interdisciplinary Work" a project funded by the Castle Trust.

Historic sites provide a stable and protected place for flora associated with old walls including vascular plants, bryophytes and lichens. Historic graveyard sites may be very important for lichens because they have changed little over decades or even centuries, and this allows slow growing lichen species the time and ecological continuity that they need to become established and flourish. The diversity of stone used in buildings and memorials maintains lichen diversity.



Rue-leaved saxifrage growing with moss on the low roadside wall



Profuse growth of mosses and ferns on the southern boundary wall

There are three particular notable findings:

The graveyard site is evaluated as of **county conservation value** due to the occurrence of Harebell (*Campanula rotundifolia*). This is the only site in Wexford where it is found. It is not clear whether it is native at this site or an ancient introduction.

The site is also of **high local importance and possibly of county significance** for the presence of the locally rare bryophytes – the liverwort *Porella platyphylla* and the moss *Gymnostomum viridulum* that grow on the walls.

Bee hives present in the woodland are kept by a local beekeeper and are notable in that they are hives for the native black bee *Apis mellifera mellifera*. Pure populations of the native black bee need to be protected as this subspecies is a highly valuable gene pool for the protection of this subspecies in Europe.

The walls also support a range of herb species, ferns, bryophytes and lichens taking advantage of the old stone wall niche habitats on the site. The grassland within the graveyard is currently moderately species rich and was cut on a regular mowing regime until this year when the frequency was reduced as part of the investigations for this project. Continuation of this reduced mowing regime is recommended and will increase the ecological value of the site for plants, pollinating insects, birds and bat species.

There is a risk of direct removal and /or damage to the habitat of two rare bryophytes, the liverwort *Porella platyphylla* and the moss *Gymnostomum viridulum* during the repair works to the walls.

There is also a risk of trampling or disturbance of the habitat of the Harebell which is the only recorded site for this species in Wexford during the conservation works with increased activity on the site and the storage materials etc.

The loss of these species from the site would be a significant negative effect at the county scale.



Porella platyphylla



Gymnostomum viridulum (close up)



Harebell



Woodland with the native black honey bee hives

6 Statement of Significance

6.1 Historical Significance

The Old Graveyard in Ferns was the site of an important monastic foundation founded by St. Aidan in the early 7th century AD. Aidan is often referred to as ‘Mogue,’ which comes from the Irish ‘Mo Aodh Óg’ meaning “my young Aodh” or “my darling Aodh (Culleton 1999, 134; O’ Rian 2025, 447–451). The monastery became an important ecclesiastical centre during the early medieval period. An association between St. Aidan and St. David of Wales created an important link between both places which was celebrated in recent years through the Ancient Connections project. It remained an important religious centre into and during the later medieval period being the episcopal seat of a new diocese (Culleton 1999, 180–181) The site’s proximity adjacent to the medieval Cathedral and St. Mary’s Augustinian abbey ensured it remained a sacred space throughout the medieval period. A number of historical persons are buried within the graveyard including Fr. John Murphy, the catholic priest who played a prominent leadership role in the 1798 rebellion and other Individuals who perished during the 1798 rebellion (Cantwell 1990). The shaft of a high cross is said to mark the final resting place of Dermot MacMurrough former King of Leinster (Cantwell 1990). Edward Nolan, who was the first fatality of the War of Independence in county Wexford

6.2 Archaeological Significance

The Old Graveyard holds significant archaeological value being situated upon the site of an important medieval monastic and ecclesiastical centre. It is designated as a monument under the National Monuments Act 1930-2014 and listed within the record of monuments and places (RMP) (Reg No. WX015-003008) with three other monuments listed within its confines; a high cross (WX015-003013), cross slab (WX015-003030) and the sub-surface archaeological remains of an ecclesiastical enclosure (WX015-003031). Artefacts have been recovered from within the graveyard and nearby while examples of medieval masonry can be found within the grounds of the graveyard and built into the boundary walls. These showcase important examples of medieval craftsmanship. Also, a wide variety of memorials of various type and date are contained within the graveyard with unique iconography and designs

reflecting local vernacular craftsmanship. There is a high and almost definite certainty of sub surface archaeological remains within the site which form an important part of the archaeological resource both locally and nationally.

6.3 Architectural Significance

The cathedral incorporates medieval and post-medieval fabric, including masonry elements from the 13th-century nave and chancel and later 19th-century reconstruction using traditional materials and detailing. The boundary wall is a defining architectural and spatial element that continues the historic ecclesiastical enclosure, providing both structural containment and visual unity. Surviving medieval masonry retain high architectural value as examples of local craftsmanship and medieval ecclesiastical design. The ensemble of cross bases, grave markers, and memorials within the curtilage demonstrates the evolution of commemorative practices and stone carving traditions from the 17th to the 20th centuries. Collectively, these elements present a rarely intact cathedral precinct, contributing substantially to the architectural heritage of County Wexford.

6.4 Ecological Significance

The habitats at Ferns Graveyards include old stone walls (BL1), Scattered trees and Parkland (WD5) including a moderately species rich dry neutral grassland (GS1) and a small area of broadleaved woodland (WD1).

The graveyard site is evaluated as of **county conservation value** due to the occurrence of Harebell (*Campanula rotundifolia*), This is the only site in Wexford where it is found. It is not clear whether it is native at this site or an ancient introduction. The site is also of **high local importance and possibly of county significance** for the presence of the locally rare bryophytes – the liverwort *Porella platyphylla* and the moss *Gymnostomum viridulum* that grow on the walls. Bee hives present in the woodland are kept by a local beekeeper and are notable in that they are hives for the native black bee *Apis mellifera mellifera*. Pure populations of the native black bee need to be protected as this subspecies is a highly valuable gene pool for the protection of this subspecies in Europe. The walls also support a range of herb species, ferns, bryophytes and lichens taking advantage of the old stone wall niche habitats on the site. The grassland within the graveyard is currently moderately species rich and was cut on a regular mowing regime until this year when the frequency was reduced as part of the investigations for this project. Continuation of this reduced mowing regime will increase the ecological value of the site for plants, pollinating insects, birds and bat species.

6.5 Social Significance

The graveyard still holds significance within the local area, with some graves still visibly maintained. It contains members of both Roman Catholic and Church of Ireland denominations signifying a shared sacred space. Many locals still visit the graveyard today and it holds a strong social significance within the local area.

7 Key Issues and Considerations

A number of primary issues and considerations have been identified as part of the conservation plan process. These vulnerabilities are typical of many historic graveyards and can be a result of both natural and man-made interventions. The concerns listed below have been taken from the accompanying specialist assessments and reports.

7.1 Archaeological Vulnerabilities

- The graveyard's memorials are susceptible to vandalism, unmanaged vegetation and damage from inappropriate cleaning methods
- Medieval masonry situated within the graveyard and built into the boundary wall requires surveying and cataloguing to ensure its preservation and documentation. Consideration is also required for secure long-term potential storage
- Access to the site is limited for people with mobility issues with inadequate signage to alert them to an appropriate entrance via the cathedral grounds
- The current information panel is situated within an inaccessible location for people with mobility issues
- The current public information available on the site is limited and requires updating
- The old graveyard is a legally protected site with high potential for sub-surface archaeology, requiring careful management and prior approval for any works to prevent damage to the archaeological resource.
- Previous surveys of the graveyard's memorials were limited in scope, lacking photographic documentation, mapping, and analysis of iconography or stonemasons, highlighting the need for a comprehensive, detailed survey to ensure their preservation by record.

7.2 Architectural Vulnerabilities

The graveyards boundary walls are currently in a varied but generally poor condition and currently pose a health and safety hazard to both visitors to the graveyard and pedestrians using the external footpath along station road, south of the graveyard. Two sections of the wall have collapsed internally with pronounced bulging evident elsewhere. Widespread loss of mortar, vegetation colonisation, localised bulging, and structural movement was recorded. Some areas exhibit partial collapse and voiding due to long-term water wash-out and vibration impacts. Sections constructed in irregular greywacke show progressive degradation where inappropriate cementitious repairs have trapped moisture. Vegetation and water retention remain the dominant agents of decay, compounded by limited drainage and compaction at the wall bases. Medieval architectural masonry is embedded within the structure of the boundary wall and is also vulnerable due to the poor condition of the wall.

7.3 Ecological Vulnerabilities

There is the potential that without prior consultation works within the graveyard could have a negative impact upon the site's biodiversity. Conservation works will inevitably involve some removal of vegetation from the walls. There is a risk of direct removal and /or damage to the habitat of two rare

bryophytes, the liverwort *Porella playphylla* and the moss *Gymnostomum viridulum* during the repair works to the walls. There is also a risk of trampling or disturbance of the habitat of the Harebell which is the only recorded site for this species in Wexford during the conservation works with increased activity on the site and the storage materials etc. **The loss of these species from the site would be a significant negative effect at the county scale.** Bee hives present in the woodland are kept by a local beekeeper and are notable in that they are hives for the native black bee *Apis mellifera mellifera*. Pure populations of the native black bee need to be protected as this subspecies is a highly valuable gene pool for the protection of this subspecies in Europe.

8 Policies and Recommendations

8.1 Policies

The following policies have been compiled to address the concerns identified within this report.

Policy 1 – Conserve significant fabric of graveyard

The historic fabric of the old graveyard, which forms part of the sites overall historical and archaeological character, should be preserved and maintained. All works should follow the guidelines and recommendations as set out in the accompanying specialist reports and assessments.

Policy 2 – Document and Understand the Graveyard

The historical, cultural, natural and archaeological significance of the site should be supported by thorough documentation and recording. This should include an inventory of the site's memorials, medieval masonry and any other notable features to ensure their preservation and allowance for future research.

Policy 3 – Site Interpretation and Accessibility

The site should be accessible to all persons. Visitors should be encouraged to visit and explore the graveyard.

Policy 4 – Preservation of Natural Heritage Assets

The Old Graveyard is a rich biodiversity resource and habitat for many plant and animal species. All works should consider and mitigate against any potential negative impacts to the sites natural assets taking account of the recommendations set out in the ecological report.

8.2 Recommendations

To mitigate against the vulnerabilities, issues and concerns identified within this report recommendations have been drafted, taken from the accompanying specialist reports and assessments. These have been compiled in line with the policies compiled in the previous section. These recommendations should be read in conjunction with the reports from which they originated.

Recommendation 1: A steering group should be established to include all key stakeholders (Wexford County Council, National Monuments Service, FCDA, community representatives and project professionals) to oversee the implementation of the policies and recommendations within this report.

Recommendation 2: The steering group should prioritise emergency conservation works to vulnerable sections of the graveyard's boundary wall. The National Monuments Service should be consulted prior to the commencement of any works. All works should follow the guidelines and recommendations as set out by Barry Lacey Archaeologist, Caroline Kearns Gethings of Anú and ecologist Deborah D'Arcy. It is also recommended that any works be monitored under licence by a suitably qualified archaeologist and carried out by skilled stone masons with conservation experience and in accordance with the latest best practice guidelines and legislative requirements. The group should apply to the 'Community Monuments Fund' (CMF), Built Heritage Investment Scheme (BHIS) and Heritage Councils community grants scheme for funding towards these works

Recommendation 3: A full comprehensive survey should be undertaken of all memorials within the graveyard to include a written and photographic record of their text, iconography, style, maker (where it is known) and location. A selection of memorials should be 3-D recorded using photogrammetry. The results of the survey should be digitised and made publicly available. Priority should be made for the training and participation of locals and other members of the public to record the memorials.

Recommendation 4: A condition report should be compiled of memorials within the graveyard to identify specific individual vulnerabilities and how best to protect and mitigate against them. These could include vandalism, inappropriate cleaning works and threat of collapse.

Recommendation 5: To help maintain the character of the site the steering group should develop a set of guidelines and advice for visitors to encourage best practice and discourage negative actions such as; the inappropriate cleaning of headstones i.e. sandblasting, using a wire brush, application of chemical cleaning products; installation of modern memorial and graveyard elements (i.e. concrete or marble curbing, marble or granite headstones etc) which negatively impacts the overall character of the historic graveyard; the removal of lichens or mosses which help preserve the memorials. Any guidelines and advice should follow best practice as set out in the document **'Guidance for the Care, Conservation and Recording of Historic Graveyards'** published by the Heritage Council in 2011.

Recommendation 6: Trees or overgrowth and/or invasive plant species causing damage to or obscuring memorials should be removed in consultation with the project ecologist and archaeologist and as per the recommendations set out in their accompanying reports.

Recommendation 7: The existing information panel should be relocated, or a new one installed, outside of the graveyard. Its current location is difficult to access for those with mobility issues. Consideration should be given to alerting persons with mobility issues towards a more suitable access point.

Recommendation 8: Include the graveyard in Wexford County Council's 'Advanced Digital Access Participation Project' to provide greater dissemination among the public, especially those who cannot access the site.

Recommendation 9: Survey and catalogue the medieval masonry scattered throughout the graveyard and built into the graveyard boundary wall. A secure location for the same should be explored and discussed with the National Monuments Service.

Recommendation 10: The steering group should encourage and undertake further research to enhance and highlight our understanding of the old graveyard. This could include; geophysical investigations of the grounds; analysis and study of the findings from memorial survey to provide information on population, demographics, chronological patterns, religious and cultural practices and more.

Recommendation 11: That the steering group make efforts to have all available research and data on the site be made public through a range of different media.

- The graveyard could be incorporated into existing walking trails and tours of the village.
- A self-guided walk around the graveyard exploring the headstones and findings of the survey
- Development of an audio guide detailing the history of the site and a selection of persons buried within it.
- Creation of a digital story map of the site to include all new findings and works.
- 3-D scans of headstones should be uploaded online and made publicly available.
- Highlight historical personalities buried within the graveyard from a range of periods.

Recommendation 13: To avoid impacts to the site's biodiversity, the protective measures and ecology recommendations outlined in the Ecological Assessment should be implemented for protected and rare species and the conservation of biodiversity on the site. Measures for the protection of species should be incorporated into the works method statements. The grassland management regime for the protection of Harebell should be implemented over the long term and a reduced mowing regime established as the routine maintenance for the graveyard grassland to increase its biodiversity value. Refer to the Ecological Assessment for details.

Recommendation 14: The works will inevitably involve some removal of vegetation from the walls. In the interest of maintaining the wall flora diversity, it is strongly recommended that ferns, bryophytes (mosses and liverworts) and lichens should be retained on the walls where possible and that provision is made for this in the works method statements.

Recommendation 15: There were no signs of the crevices in the walls being used as bird nesting sites and few suitable crevices. It is possible that some of the dense ivy or other bushy vegetation within and around the boundary walls and memorials could be used for nesting. Clearance of ivy or other tree/shrub growth should take place outside the bird breeding season (which occurs March 1st – August 31st). If this schedule cannot be accommodated, the vegetation should first be checked for nesting birds prior to works.

Recommendation 16: It is recommended that the walls are checked by an ecologist prior to works as a precaution. In the unlikely event that a bat is encountered during the works advice is provided in the mitigation measures in the Ecological Assessment Report.

Recommendation 17: It is recommended that some bat boxes and bird boxes are installed in the small area of woodland on the site.

Recommendation 18: Public participation and awareness is an important element to ensure the success of this project. The steering group should encourage public participation and interaction with the project through social media accounts, radio, newspapers and organising events for heritage week, culture night and other times throughout the year.

Recommendation 19: The steering group should remain proactive in identifying and pursuing potential funding opportunities on an ongoing basis.

Recommendation 20: Historical or archaeological objects within the graveyard should not be removed from their current location or relocated elsewhere. This includes masonry, memorials and fragments of the same. Upon the discovery of any new historical or archaeological objects, the county Heritage officer and The National Museum should be notified and consulted. Where the relocation of objects is required to facilitate works the project archaeologist should be consulted prior to their commencement.

9 Funding

Funding is an important factor in the continued success and progression of any conservation project. A number of suitable funding opportunities have been identified which are relevant and suitable for this conservation project.

Heritage Council Community Heritage Grant Scheme

The Community Heritage Grant Scheme run by the Heritage Council supports a broad range of heritage projects and is available to voluntary or community groups and non-government organisations. Funding available can range from €500-€25000. Examples of funded projects include Heritage Audits, workshops and training, development of digital heritage resources, conservations plans, reports, surveys and conservation works.

Historic Monuments Fund

The historic monuments fund offers grants in range of €50,000-€200,000 focusing on works that involve the enhancement, refurbishment or reuse of heritage structures with a clear community, public or residential benefit. The following structure are eligible

Protected Structures: Structures in the Record of Protected Structures (RPS) of each Local Authority;

Structures eligible for or proposed for inclusion in the RPS but not yet formally approved for inclusion. Such structures must meet the criteria for inclusion in the RPS by the Local Authority, i.e. must be of special interest from an architectural, historical, archaeological, artistic, cultural, scientific, social or technical point of view;

Structures or works within Architectural Conservation Areas (ACAs), or within the amenity of a National Monument, where exceptional circumstances apply.

The funding is administered through applications made by the local authority.

The Built Heritage Investment Scheme 2025

The Built Heritage Investment Scheme 2025 (BHIS) is for the repair and conservation of structures that are protected under the Planning and Development Acts. Grants of between €2,500 and €50,000 are available and also include incorporated streams for vernacular buildings and historic shopfronts.

Community Monuments Fund

Funding is prioritised for local authorities, private owners and custodians and community groups for the care, conservation, maintenance, protection and promotion of archaeological monuments. The Community Monuments Fund provides funding for projects in relation to Archaeological Monuments that are included in the Record of Monuments and Places (RMP) under the National Monuments Act 1930 (as amended) and Archaeological Monuments that are identified in the Sites and Monuments Record compiled by the National Monuments Service. Three separate streams of funding are offered:

Stream 1 will offer grants **up to €100,000** aimed at essential repairs and capital works for the conservation and repair of archaeological monuments

Stream 2 will offer grants of **up to €30,000** for development of Conservation Management Plans/Reports that are aimed at identifying measures for conservation of archaeological monuments and improving public access.

Stream 3 will offer grants of **up to €30,000** for enhancement of access infrastructure and interpretation (including virtual/online) at archaeological monuments.

Applications are administered through local authorities.

Leader

Leader funding is administered through local action groups, in county Carlow through 'Carlow County Development Partnership' and county 'Wexford through Wexford Local Development'. It currently administers funding to projects which improve four themes being

Theme 1: Economic Development and Job Creation

- The Green Economy
- Agricultural Diversification
- Rural Tourism & Recreation
- Enterprise Development
- Rural Food Production
- Social, Community & Cooperative Enterprises

Theme 2: Rural infrastructure and Social Inclusion

- Rural Infrastructure
- Accessible Services
- Optimising Digital Connectivity
- Rural Youth

Theme 3: Sustainable development of the rural environment and climate change mitigation and adaption.

- Sustainable Development of the Rural Environment
- Climate Change Capacity Building
- Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation

Funding can range from €30,000 to €500,000 dependent on the type of project with a certain percentage of match funding required.

Wexford County Council Amenity and Arts Grants Scheme

Wexford County Council Amenity and Arts Grants Scheme This funding scheme is aimed at providing small-scale support to community & voluntary based groups and is designed to assist with a wide variety of projects that promote social inclusion and building strong communities.

10 Implementation

The policies and recommendations set out within this report and the accompanying ecology assessment aim to conserve and enhance the archaeological, built and natural heritage of the Old Graveyard Ferns. In order to ensure the successful implementation of this recommendation it is important to take into account the following considerations.

10.1 Ensuring Best Practice

To ensure works undertaken are of good quality standard and best value is gained from their application it is important that the recommendations and methodology's set out in the accompanying reports and assessments are followed. All works should be undertaken by suitably qualified professionals with experience on similar projects. Consultation and collaboration with the project professionals and relevant public bodies i.e. Wexford county council and National Monuments Service is important to ensure best practice is applied. All works should follow recommendations set out in the '*Guidance for the Care, Conservation and Recording of Historic Graveyards*' document issued by the Heritage Council.

10.2 Legal Obligations

The Old Graveyard Ferns is granted protection under the National Monuments Act 1930, being listed on the Record of Monuments and Places (RMP). Consequently, the National Monuments Service must be consulted at least two months prior to the commencement of any works on the site or to the boundary wall surrounding it. Wexford's Heritage Officer should also be consulted.

The old graveyard is an archaeological significant site and there exists a high potential of encountering sub surface archaeological features and human remains. To mitigate against any vulnerabilities to the archaeological resource no groundworks should be undertaken without prior consultation with the National Monuments Service. Additionally, it is recommended that all ground works be monitored under licence from the NMS by a suitably qualified archaeologist. The project archaeologist should be consulted regarding any potential works on the site.

Clearance of ivy or other tree/ shrub growth on the site should take place outside the bird breeding season (which occurs March 1st – August 31st).

10.3 Dos and Don'ts within the graveyard

Some of the recommendations below have derived from the '*Historic Monuments Advisory Committee Information Leaflet*' published by Cork County Council

Do's	Don't
Contact Wexford County Council and the National Monuments Service prior to undertaking works on the site	Start any works without first consulting Wexford County Council and the National Monuments Service

Ensure that appropriate Health & Safety Procedure is complied with to the satisfaction of Wexford County Council.	Do not attempt unlicensed excavation as it is illegal (this includes removal of rubble from collapsed walls, pulling up of roots, planting trees, digging drains/ducts/paths etc.).
Clear the site using hand tools only, such as hand trimmer, scythe, strimmer etc.	Do not use any machinery to clear or level the site or gain access to graves
Leave all hummocks and surface undulations as they may mark earlier graves or hidden archaeological features.	Do not uproot trees, plants or gravestones.
Retain healthy trees and native hedgerows as much as possible. Graveyards are refuges for native flora and fauna, so minimal intervention is best practice.	Do not pull ivy off masonry walls or fragile headstones/vaults or uproot saplings.
Maintain and repair rather than replace.	Do not clean vegetation from wall joints unnecessarily.
Consult with project professionals regarding applying best practice and to quality of work	Do not use metal detectors on site - it is illegal.
Use suitably qualified professionals for works with experience on similar projects	Do not plant new trees or plants (including wild flowers) without expert advice.
Consult the project ecologist before removing any vegetation on site.	<p>Do not use abrasive tools to clean headstones such as wire brushes, disc cutters or sandblasters.</p> <p>Do not strim up against headstones or grave markers. Do not apply paint to gravestone inscriptions.</p> <p>Do not straighten headstones.</p> <p>Do not remove gravestones including low unscribed grave markers that may be loose. Where safety is an issue, any works shall be agreed in advance with Wexford County Council.</p>

10.4 Implementation

The policies and recommendations contained within this report aim to enhance and conserve the old graveyard Ferns. To ensure the successful implementation the following actions are recommended.

- Upon submission of the conservation plan a steering group should be formed comprised of the FCDA, Wexford County Council and project professionals and community representatives.
- The group should oversee the implementation of the recommendations.
- The steering group should review current available resources and develop a provisional schedule of works. This should undergo regular review or as required.
- The steering group should prioritise emergency conservation works to sections of the boundary wall.
- The National Monuments Service must be included in the planning and development stage of any works to provide advice regarding the preservation of the archaeological and heritage resources of the site.

11 Conclusion

The Old Graveyard in Ferns is significant site, once forming part of an early monastic settlement founded by St. Aidan at the end of the 6th century AD. The site contains a rich variety of archaeological, built and natural heritage. It serves as the final resting place for many individuals including some historical figures and continues to hold a social significance within the village to this day being regularly visited by both visitors and locals alike. While the site is regularly maintained there are notable issues and concerns which have been identified and listed within this report.

Funding is crucial to ensure the longevity of the project. It is recommended that the Ferns Community Development Association apply to the Community Monuments Fund (CMF) to seek funding towards emergency conservation works to the boundary wall. Additional funding sources, including the Heritage Councils Community Grants Scheme, should also be considered. Ongoing review with project professionals is required for any works to ensure that relevant guidelines and legislative requirements are met.

Public outreach and engagement form an important element of the overall conservation plan. The old graveyard maintains a strong social significance and the Ferns Community Development Association should utilise the opportunity to increase public awareness of the site through engagement activities such as tours, information events, conservation workshops, graveyard recording etc. This will encourage pride of place and the development of an appreciation for the site that will aid in its future preservation

While there are ongoing issues and concerns to be addressed the conservation, report is the first step to ensure the preservation and enhancement of the Old Graveyard in Ferns. By using a collaborative approach with engagement between key stakeholders, project professionals, Wexford County Council and other relevant public bodies it can be maintained an enhanced for the benefit of the local community and visitors for the future.

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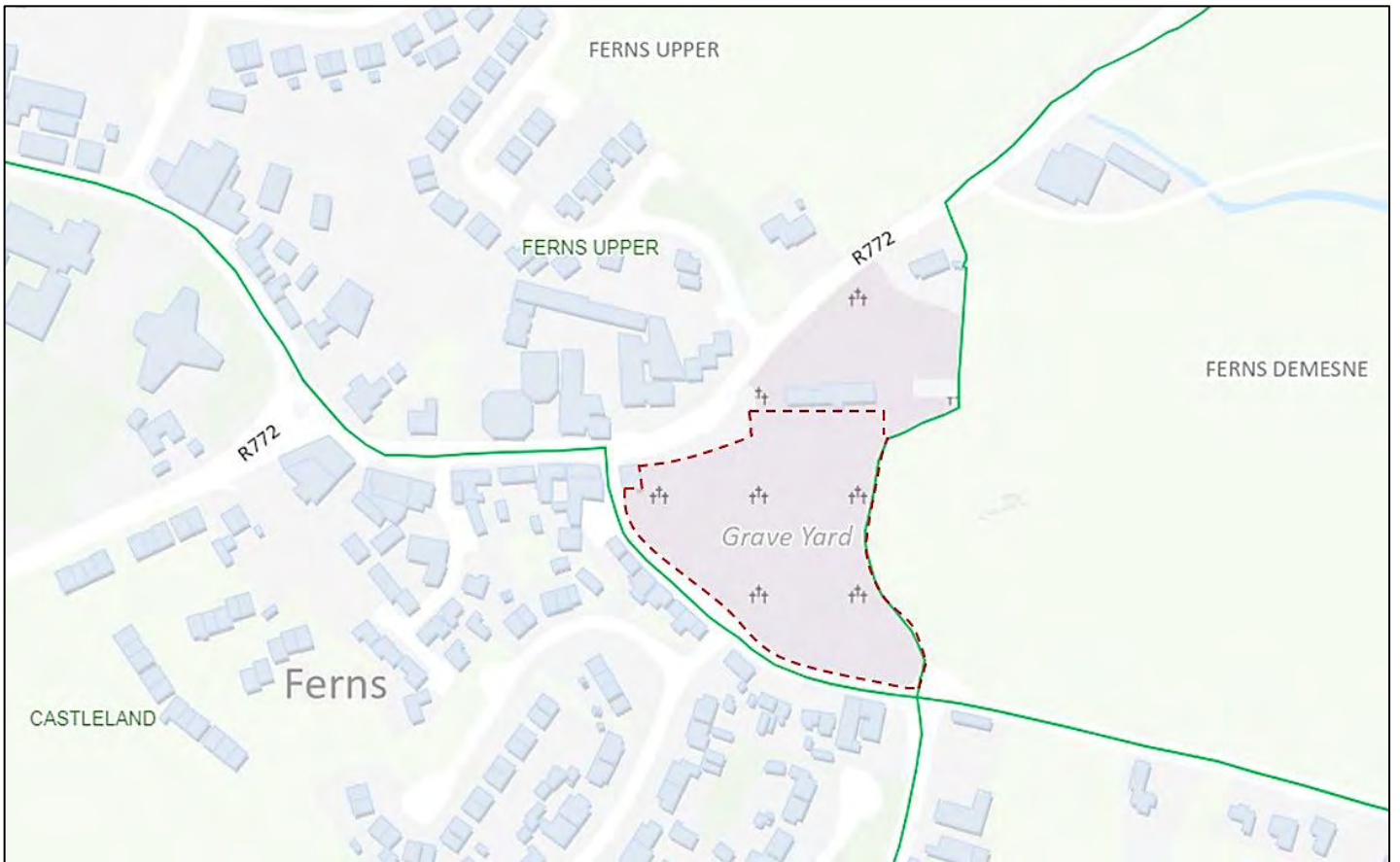


Figure 1: Map with outline of graveyard defined by red dashed line and townland boundaries in green



Figure 2: Cross slab within the ground of Ferns Old Graveyard



Figure 3: St. Mary's Augustinian Abbey Ferns



Figure 4: Ferns Castle



Figure 5: High Cross WX015-003013



Figure 6: OS Map depicting graveyard c. 1840



Figure 7: OS Map depicting graveyard c. 1905



Figure 8: Tile fragment depicting mounted knight



Figure 9: Iron Rowel Spur with sixteen spikes (National Museum of Ireland)



Figure 10: Fragment of Bronze Book Clasp (National Museum of Ireland)

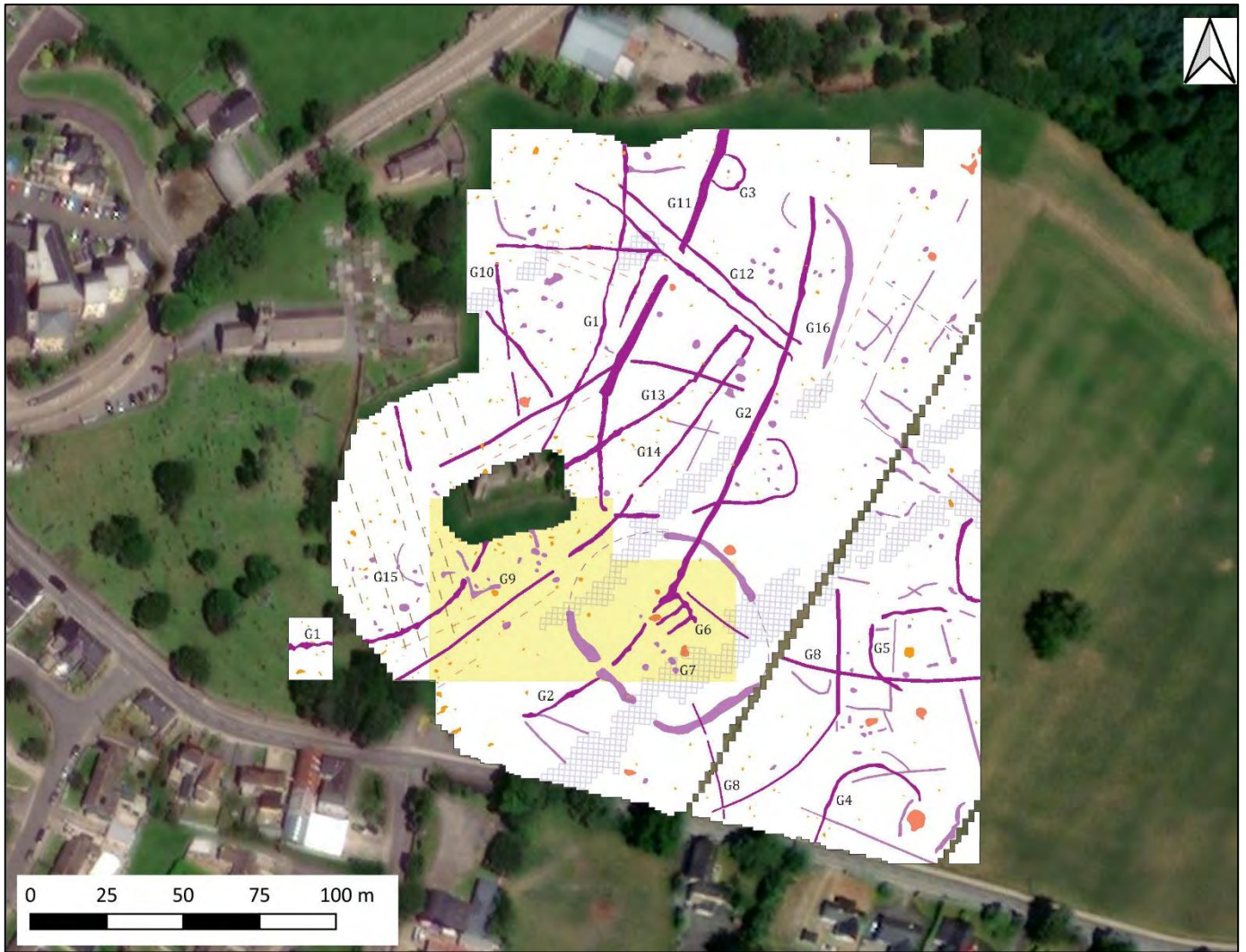


Figure 11: Results of geophysics undertaken within the abbey field and graveyard. G1 and G2 were interpreted as a possible inner and outer monastic enclosure (Image courtesy of Ger Dowling)