

Impact Case Study

UoA 7: Earth Systems and Environmental Sciences

Rediscovering the lost town of Dunluce Castle – heritage, community engagement and sustainability in Northern Ireland

Summary

An archaeological research project that led to the discovery of a buried and forgotten 17th-century town of international importance adjacent to Dunluce Castle on the north coast of Ireland has led to the development of school and community based archaeological initiatives in Northern Ireland and Scotland, changes in school curricula in NI, and significant investment in heritage preservation and tourism by the NI government and the Heritage Lottery Fund. Specifically, the HLF has provided £300k of funding to develop a £5m bid for development of the site, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) and the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) have invested £208k for new interpretation and improved facilities, and the NIEA has spent £200k to buy the adjacent land beside the castle which contain the buried town and associated structures and to facilitate the expansion of a major research project led by the University of Ulster. Additionally, to date 27 schools and 18 different community groups have participated in an archaeological excavation program based at Dunluce; as a consequence 4 of the latter have received AHRC funding to continue their community based archaeological work.

Research and Impact

During the 16th and 17th centuries, Dunluce Castle in Northern Ireland was at the centre of a maritime lordship controlled by the MacDonnells that spread from northeast Ulster to the Western Isles of Scotland before it was brought under centralised government control. It played a significant role in the socio-economic and political life of both areas and familial connections from the medieval period remain evident in today's communities. A 5 year programme of excavation and survey work led by Dr. Colin Breen (lecturer / senior lecturer at the University of Ulster since 1999), and funded by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency, was initiated at Dunluce Castle in 2008 examining these past connections. Prior to this project little was known about the material culture and lifeways that bound these past peoples together. This ambitious undertaking was the first large-scale project to address the historical archaeology of the late medieval period of this region.

Dunluce Castle is one of Ireland's most substantial and best preserved medieval castle complexes but, surprisingly, had not been previously studied in any systematic way. The architecture of the Castle illustrates the complexity of Ireland's political, economic and cultural life during the medieval period and the building expresses the complex broader cultural influences of this area (Breen, 2012a).

Excavations within the castle uncovered an early sequence of cultural activity dating back to the Iron Age. The undisturbed remains of an early 17-century town, discovered outside the castle walls by Breen in 2008, represent one of the best preserved examples of the period, unparalleled across the globe in terms of its preservation. The key research findings from this project have revealed that the settlement was one of the earliest examples of a regionally planned town in the early modern period and the archaeology has provided key insights into the functioning and structure of society at the close of the middle ages. They have also shown that this urban site was established a number of years earlier than the official Plantation of County Londonderry, supported by the Crown in London, and this result significantly alters the official histories of early 17th-century Ulster. This settlement should be understood as part of a broader cultural process within the context of British colonial

expansion and the newly founded towns and settlements across north America such as at Jamestown, Virginia, the first permanent English settlement in the New World.

Insights into this 'unofficial' plantation by Randal MacDonnell can only be provided by archaeology due to the paucity of surviving historical sources (Breen, 2012b). To support the emerging cultural insights from the Dunluce project further investigations subsequently took place at Kinbane, Ballylough and Ballyreagh castles in north Ulster and at both Dunstaffnage castle and Dun Mhuirich in Argyll and at Dun Cholla on Colonsay (Breen et al., 2010). Each of these sites provided a detailed regional context for later medieval societal and landscape change and significantly enhanced our understandings of that period (Breen 2012b; Forsythe et al., 2012). This research highlights the significance of the historic built heritage and associated material culture across both localities, which have been neglected and undervalued resources, and is examining ways by which the better utilisation of this resource can contribute to building more resilient and sustainable societies.

From the outset community engagement was a core element of the Dunluce project. The successful research facilitated the development of an innovative parallel programme of public participation and outreach. A substantial portion of the excavation programme during 2009 was linked to community participation through tours, workshops and joint excavations, known as 'The Big Dig', which was organised by Breen and the Causeway Museums Service (CMS). Twenty seven schools from across Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland participated in a quarter of the excavations at Dunluce, with half of them returning in subsequent years. Eight community development groups were also involved. As a result of the success of the community group involvement CMS was awarded £200k NEP Peace III funding for further heritage projects.

Involvement in this process, both in Northern Ireland and Scotland, has enhanced cross community knowledge and understanding, developed community heritage research skills and initiated new community-led heritage based projects. Through the AHRC Connected Communities program, Breen established a researcher network across Ulster and Western Scotland including Queen's University, Belfast, Historic Scotland, Northern Ireland Environment Agency, Kilmartin House Museum and a diverse range of schools and community groups.

Four of the groups involved during the earlier work at Dunluce and the Cultural Connections funded research have gone on to receive 'All Our Stories' Heritage Lottery funding (~£30k total) to continue heritage-led development initiatives both in Scotland and Ireland. Two of the primary schools, Millstrand Integrated Primary, Portrush, NI, and Tayvallich, Argyll, Scotland, have formally introduced heritage and heritage fieldwork into their school curricula.

The archaeological research at Dunluce has also significantly enhanced its economic and tourist performance. The Castle has been a major tourist attraction since the 19th century and remains the most visited archaeological site in Northern Ireland. The summer excavations carried out by Dr. Colin Breen at Dunluce began in 2008 and were completed in 2010; they resulted in an increase in the number of annual summer visitors to the site by 4986 at the excavation peak in 2009.

The increase in visitor numbers during the research and excavation programme at Dunluce coupled with recognition of the unique significance and potential of Dunluce resulting from the research programme led to the NITB, under the Tourist Development Scheme 2010-2011, and the NIEA investing £104k each in interpretation and visitor facilities at the site⁶. These facilities were informed and supported by the information gathered throughout the research project. Dr Breen was the lead historical advisor for the exhibit and fronts a 15 minute onsite video as part of it.

The combination of the university-led research and the success of the engagement programme resulted in the Northern Ireland Environment Agency significantly changing its policy towards the built heritage resource in Northern Ireland. Using Dunluce as an potential model of future development led the organisation to employing 2 staff at the University of Ulster to work directly on developing a Dunluce development funding application⁶ and to investing £200k in 2012 to purchase

lands adjacent to the Castle which contain the buried 17th-century town, affording them State Care protection.^{6,10} The potential for development of Dunluce as a centre of excellence in heritage management and community education and participation was recognised by Minister Atwood as its development was made a ministerial target.

Breen also worked with the NIEA board on the best options for sustainable heritage management at Dunluce to enable the potential of the site to be recognised. This resulted in a successful HLF funding application worth £300k to develop a further bid for £5m.

References

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