

## ANNUAL REPORT: SPIKE ISLAND 2015 FIELD SCHOOL

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*Students at work in the Convict Burial Ground at Spike Island*

### GENERAL

The Spike Island field school ran from June 21 through July 25, 2015. This was the third season of excavations at the site and 14 IFR students worked alongside their peers from University College Cork (UCC). The first week was spent on field trips and in class, familiarizing students with the archaeology of Ireland and that of the island while also learning about methods and strategies used in archaeological reconnaissance and excavation. Field trips included a tour of Cork harbor including to sites related to the loss of the Titanic and Lusitania, as well as an excursion to West Cork.

The full team of 28 was present from the second week when the UCC students joined the IFR group and accommodation for all was in the comfortable administration block of the 20<sup>th</sup> century prison on the island that closed in 2004. Meals were brought by ferry each afternoon from the nearby town of Cobh. The entire group worked Monday to Friday from 8am to 4pm with 2 breaks during the day. Everyone returned to the lab from 6:00 to 8:30pm three evenings each week to process the materials retrieved that day. Students took turns to work in all areas of the excavation and took part in all elements of recording, survey and retrieval of remains.

About 60% of the surface of Spike Island is occupied by a fortress that dates from the first two decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The project's focus is on the convict prison that occupied the site from 1847 to 1883. While some historical accounts of this institution survive, there has been no investigation of the material remains of the prison. The convict jail at Spike Island was constructed at a time when Ireland was part of the United Kingdom and when the British authorities were experimenting with different punishment regimes as the transportation of criminals to the colonies was becoming problematic. The experimentation carried out at Spike Island and the resulting 'Irish System' influenced the development of penal regimes elsewhere in Europe as well as in the USA and elsewhere. In our third season, we concentrated on four areas of the prison: the walled area known as the Convict Burial Ground; the punishment block; and the location of a building known as the Timber Prison.

### THE CONVICT BURIAL GROUND

Excavation in 2013 and 2014 revealed that the area known as the Convict Burial Ground on the west side of the island contained a regimented series of individual unmarked graves. This is the second of two burial grounds for convicts from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century though the precise date when burial commenced is unknown. The 2014 season demonstrated that there were five rows of burials and that the most easterly of these predated the boundary wall of the cemetery. Two trenches were opened in 2015 to test for burials outside this eastern wall. These were sterile. This was an important fact to establish as it has confirmed that the burial in the northeast corner of the burial area is the first in this cemetery. Data from the graves excavated in all three seasons were compared with the historical records of burial on the island and these were found to match, so it is possible that individuals buried in the cemetery can now be identified. This needs to be confirmed with further investigation, but if so, bioarchaeological data can be tested against historical information. The four convicts whose graves were excavated in 2015 were in coffins. Similar remains were found in previous seasons when traces of paint were noted on the decaying wood. It was not clear if this represented painted coffins or the reuse of previously painted wood. In the 2015 season, it was established that all of the excavated coffins had been painted. Students got to participate in the excavation, retrieval and initial processing of skeletal remains and associated artifacts.

### **THE PUNISHMENT BLOCK**

Spike Island was a military fort prior to being converted to a prison in 1847. Prison accommodation was in buildings that were formerly soldiers' barracks. The punishment block is the only purpose-built prison building surviving on the site and was constructed in the late 1850s. The punishment block building is now derelict and the original wooden floors have rotted out. In 2013 and 2014, cuttings were opened in rooms reserved for prison guards and in a number of cells. In 2015, this work was completed (the building is now being restored) with excavations in cells and the connecting corridors. This most recent season helped to clarify which cells were used for which type of punishment.

### **THE TIMBER PRISON**

Within three years of its opening in 1847, Spike Island became the largest convict depot in what was then the United Kingdom. In an attempt to keep pace with the very rapid growth of the convict population, the government in London diverted resources to the island that had been intended for the penal station at Bermuda. This was in the form of a prefabricated building originally intended to house 200 convicts but used for over twice that number in Spike Island. The location of the Timber Prison was established this season and a cobbled surface that predated the building was uncovered. Further excavations will be carried out at this structure.

### **SUMMARY**

The third season of the Spike Island Archaeological Project was very productive and clarified a number of key research issues. It provided all participants with a valuable learning experience while also being great fun. The experience of living together on an otherwise uninhabited island fostered new friendships and lasting relationships. For the third year in a row, IFR students have remained in Ireland to pursue studies at UCC. The first substantial publication associated with the project will be a history of the Victorian prison that will go to press in late 2015.