

ANNUAL REPORT: SPIKE ISLAND 2016 FIELD SCHOOL

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Group photo on Spike Island 2016

GENERAL

The Spike Island field school ran for 5 weeks from June 12 through July 16, 2016. This was the fourth season of excavations at the site and 9 IFR students worked alongside a similar number of their peers from University College Cork. The IFR students spent the first week on field trips and in class. They were introduced to the archaeology of Ireland and that of the island. They also learned about methods and strategies used in archaeological reconnaissance and excavation. Field trips included trips to medieval monasteries and castles as well as to a 19th century purpose-built prison.

The full team of 25 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 20th 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 half-hour breaks during the day. Everyone returned to the lab from 7 to 8:30pm three evenings each week to process the materials retrieved that day. Students took turns working 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, the construction of which began in 1804 at the height of fears of a French invasion. The construction project was unfinished at the time of the defeat of Napoleon and the fort was converted to use as a prison in 1847. Convict labor was then used to complete the construction of the complex. The focus of our project is on the convict prison that operated 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 in Europe as well as in the USA and elsewhere.

In our fourth season, we concentrated on the walled area known as the Convict Burial Ground and the location of a building known as the Timber Prison.

THE CONVICT BURIAL GROUND

Previous seasons' excavations 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-19th century though the precise date when burial commenced is unknown. A total of ten graves were excavated in 2016. These were in a single row beginning with what was probably the earliest grave in the cemetery. With the retrieval of ten sequential graves, it is hoped that bioarchaeological data can be matched with historical information. All of the graves were single burials, each contained in a painted coffin. Some religious artifacts were found in some of the burials and one individual had been autopsied. Samples were taken for isotopic and other analyses. Students got to participate in the excavation, retrieval and initial processing of skeletal remains and associated artifacts.

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 had been uncovered in 2015. In 2016, more progress was made exploring the foundations of the Timber prison and related material culture. This included a cache of carved stones that included blanks and finished objects, some of which resemble gaming pieces.

SUMMARY

The fourth 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 fourth year in a row, IFR students

have remained in Ireland to pursue studies at UCC. The first substantial publication associated with the project was published in May 2016.