

## ANNUAL REPORT: IRELAND-SPIKE ISLAND 2014 FIELD SCHOOL

**Director(s):** Dr. Barra O'Donnabhain, University College Cork (Ireland)



Students excavating at the Spike Island convict burial ground

### GENERAL

The Spike Island field school ran from June 29 through August 2, 2014. This was the second season of excavations at the site and IFR students worked alongside their peers from University College Cork. 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 an excursion to West Cork, a tour of Cork harbor as well as visits to Titanic and Lusitania related sites in the vicinity.

The full team of 36 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 now-closed 20<sup>th</sup> century prison on the island. 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 the British authorities were experimenting with different punishment regimes as transportation of criminals to the colonies was becoming problematic. In our second season, we concentrated on four areas of the prison: the walled area known as the Convict Burial Ground; the pre-fort cemetery; the punishment cells; and the stockade built around the original 1847 prison building.

### THE CONVICT BURIAL GROUND

Excavation in 2013 revealed that the area known as the Convict Burial Ground on the west side of the island contained a regimented series of individual graves. 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. It was estimated that there may be up to 50 burials per row. Six burials were excavated in 2014 and all were in coffins and at uniform depths and spacing. It seems likely that this walled cemetery represents the last two decades of burial from the Victorian prison and that the bulk of convict deaths were disposed of elsewhere on the island. Students got to participate in the excavation, retrieval and initial processing of skeletal remains and associated artifacts.

### **THE PRE-FORT CEMETERY**

Maps dating from the early decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century indicate the existence of a burial ground on the east side of Spike Island. This is likely to be the enclosed cemetery listed in an 1849 inventory of facilities available to the prison authorities. Three test pits were opened in an attempt to locate this burial ground. The two largest of these proved sterile but the third uncovered a cobbled surface that was probably related to convict-era earth-moving works. Further testing will be carried out in this area in future seasons.

### **THE PUNISHMENT BLOCK**

The punishment block is the only purpose-built prison building surviving on the site as most convict accommodation was located in former barracks buildings from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century fort. The punishment block building is now derelict and the original wooden floors have rotted out. In 2013, three trenches were excavated in rooms reserved for prison guards. In 2014, work was concentrated in the isolation cells and the connecting corridors. This revealed considerable information regarding the construction and later uses of the building. The invisibility of convicts in terms of material culture reflects the effectiveness of the punishment regime.

### **THE PRISON STOCKADE**

At the time of the opening of the convict depot on Spike Island in 1847, two large barracks buildings were commandeered as prison accommodation. In order to secure the building and prevent contact between convicts and the small garrison that remained in the fort, a large wooden stockade was constructed around the former barracks buildings. This stockade was 6m high, contained a number of internal divisions and was later dismantled as the entire fort became prison accommodation. The rock-cut foundations of this stockade were uncovered in a trench opened in the Parade Ground in 2014. This trench also demonstrated the complex pattern of building and demolition that has occurred over the last two centuries.

### **SUMMARY**

The second season of the Spike Island Archaeological Project was extremely productive and 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 second year in a row, an IFR student has remained in Ireland to pursue studies at UCC.