

ANNUAL REPORT: FERNS, IRELAND – SUMMER 2021 FIELD SCHOOL

**Four-week program - Discovering Aidan's Monastery; Intensive
Bioarchaeology Program**

and

**Two-week program - Discovering Aidan's Monastery;
Introduction to Excavation (Including the
Recording of Human Remains) Program**

Name of Directors: Dr Linda Shine, Dr Stephen Mandal & Dr Denis Shine



Students and staff on the last day of the program (left Cutting 1; right Cutting 2)

SECTION A: PUBLIC PORTION OF THE REPORT

The 'Discovering Aidan's Monastery' archaeological excavations commenced in July 2021 at the site of St Aidan's Monastery, Ferns, Co. Wexford (Recorded Archaeological Monuments WX015-003004-, WX015-003031-, WX015-003032-, WX015-003033-). This site is a multi-period complex, originally founded by St Aidan at the turn of the 7th century, which also contains Early Medieval crosses and cross slabs, a 12th century Augustinian Abbey (Mary's Abbey, which is a listed National Monument), and 13th century medieval cathedral (Edan's Cathedral) within its wider confines.

In season one of this long-term excavation, proposed to run for three seasons from 2020-2022, we opened two cuttings to investigate geophysical trends identified in previous surveys of the site by Ger Dowling in 2015 (Detection License 15R042). The aim of the excavations is to contribute to an understanding of the form, function, and date of key components of this multi-period complex.

The excavation spearheads a major new heritage initiative being jointly developed by the IAFS, Wexford County Council, and the local community, which will provide visitors both to Ferns and the wider community with a better understanding of the history of this key historical site. The first phase of the project is part of Rediscovering Ancient Connections – The Saints initiative, a new cross-border arts and heritage project linking North Pembrokeshire and North Wexford. The excavation was undertaken by the IAFS teaching team and 27 IFR students; 7 participating in the short program for the first two weeks of the excavation, 20 participating for the long program for four weeks. A small group of local volunteers participated in the final week of excavation, and the season's excavation was completed and the trenches back-filled one week after the IFR students departed. A brief summary of progress to date provided below:

Cutting 1 measured 8m x 4m and specifically assessed the rectangular feature, a possible cloister, identified in geophysics immediately south of Mary's Abbey church (WX015-003004). Based on the geophysical survey, the possible cloister appears to be constructed over the inner enclosure of St Aidan's monastery (WX015-003031-). The excavations confirmed the sub-surface presence of an L-shaped wall, which had been built over an earlier deep enclosing ditch, again in keeping with the geophysical survey. The archaeology was more complex than the geophysics indicated however, with a series of ditches / pits also uncovered. An organic rich cess pit was uncovered at the base of the enclosing ditch. Medieval pottery (both local and imported) was the dominant artefact type.

Cutting 2 also measured 8m x 4m and specifically assessed the possible double-aisled structure (WX015-003033-) identified in geophysics to the southeast of Mary's Abbey church (WX015-003004). This structure also appears to be constructed over the outer enclosure of St Aidan's monastery (WX015-003032-). As with cutting 1, the excavation confirmed the presence of a stone structure, which was substantial but has been largely removed at a later date. Cutting 2 was more finds rich than cutting 1, with local and imported medieval pottery again dominating the assemblage. Some other lovely finds included an Anglo-Norman coin and a Neolithic flint scraper. The latter was the first artefact found during the excavation, in the sod, and is not surprising given that Neolithic and Bronze Age sites are known in the immediate vicinity of the site.

Research Aims, Reporting and Dissemination of results

The program of vlogging, blogging, publishing etc. that has been a feature of our long-standing excavations at Ferrycarrig, were expanded to include the Discovering Aidan's Monastery project.

The excavations were delayed by a year due to the Covid-19 pandemic, but we undertook a number of online initiatives to bring the project into the public consciousness. This included an online archaeological masterclass series investigating various specialisms, undertaken in parallel with the Carrick project, and a Know Your Locality Online Course, which was attended by over 500 people from Ireland, the UK, Europe, the US, Canada, Australia and South Africa.

Despite Covid-19, we managed to run an oversubscribed community excavation in tandem with the final week of the student's excavation season.

Student research

At the IAFS we are supportive of our student's continuing professional development and post-graduate studies. Three of our 2021 students have expressed an interest in carrying out post-graduate studies in Ireland and related to the Ferns field school.

This extends a long-standing commitment by the IAFS to supporting student alumni in their further studies.

It should be noted that all students wishing to carry out research on material from the site must undertake one season of excavation at the site first and then are required to comply by the Irish Archaeology Field School Intellectual Property (IP) protocols, which can frequently include completion of an IP agreement.