

Archaeology Research Grant 2021

Denis Shine_ Final report

1. Title: Dr.

First name: Denis

Surname: Shine

2.

3. Grant programme: Archaeology Research Grant

4. Year awarded: 2021

5. Title of project: Finding the Black Castle

6. Summary of report (Minimum allowed 100 words) Our project aimed to identify the site of the medieval Black Castle in Birr, through systematic geophysical survey of its believed location to ascertain if any of the castle remains survived sub-surface.

An Anglo-Norman castle (OF035-012009-) is known to have been established in Birr by at least 1207, when it is first recorded in the Annals of Clonmacnoise as being attacked and destroyed by Murchad Ua Briain. The castle was re-edified in 1213 but reverted to the O'Carrolls of Ely sometime in mid-14th century as the Anglo-Norman colony declined. The O' Carroll's 'Black Castle' became one of the principal seats of the ruling branch of that dynasty until it was sold to Butler of Ormond in 1594.

While some of the castle's history is known a systematic desktop survey was still undertaken (to include extensive consultations with the Rosse family who continue to reside in the current Birr Castle today) prior to any geophysical survey taking place. This research recorded the site of two structures marked as 'old castles' on a 1691 map of the site, as well as the site of the Black Castle as identified on:

The First Edition map (1838)

The 25" map (1909)

The site as recorded in Cooke's History of Birr in the later 19th century

The site of crop marks identified during a summer drought in 2018

The site of the castle as identified in the Birr Castle Archives and by the Rosse family themselves (primarily from family journals extending back 400 years)

With an understanding of the approximate site of the medieval castle geophysical surveys were undertaken over two days in June 2021, across an area that has been heavily landscaped and altered, notably in the 18th and 19th

centuries. A clear sub-square anomaly was identified (c. 10m square) which appears to clearly mark the location of a portion of the Black Castle as documented on 17th century mapping.

Understanding the location of the site within the modern landscape and, crucially, investigating the scope for sub-surface remains has helped inform if future research on the site (such as keyhole archaeological excavations) are likely to be successful in identifying the centre of high medieval Birr – a previously neglected and poorly understood part of the town’s history. Discussions are continuing in that regard with the Rosse family, in the hope that an excavation on the site might be possible in future years.

7. Please provide two appropriate images



8. Please outline the objectives of the project

The project had three main objectives:

1. To assess the site of the Black Castle through a detailed paper survey.

2. To identify the site of the Black Castle through archaeo-geophysical survey, including a fluxgate gradiometer (magnetometer) - to provide an efficient method of locating the broadest range of sub-surface archaeology- and an earth resistance survey, to attempt to detect extended features such as masonry foundations. The locations of all surveys were carefully captured using electronic distance measurement equipment (EDM), to allow for precise capturing of the locations of any detected archaeology.

3. To communicate the results of the work to the local community, in so far as Covid-19 restrictions allowed. This dissemination included:

- A senior member of IAFS staff (Dr Denis Shine) remained on site for the duration of the works to explain the significance of the project to the general public.

- The project was/is actively promoted through our social media channels.

- The project was filmed and prepared into a short film by Cránnog media (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ga5c5qEoJMI>).

- A talk on the project will be given in John’s Hall, when Covid-19 restrictions allow. John’s Hall is a previous Town Hall, and fine 19th century building in Birr, which is now the dedicated lecture hall of the IAFS/Irish Heritage School.

- The results of the survey, with the historical and cartographic history of the site, will ultimately be prepared into a short article(s), suitable for dissemination to an informed/general audience.

9. Please describe the methodology used in conducting the research

Careful examination of the sources as outlined previously precisely identified the 'recorded' site of the Black Castle. Once this research was concluded a number of temporary bench-marks were established in these locations. These benchmarks were surveyed using a Lecia Viva GS07 with GS20 field controller, and georeferenced to the ITM and Ordnance Datum (OD). The works were undertaken by a professional archaeological surveyor on June 9th.

Once base stations were established at the site the area was subjected to archaeo-geophysical survey, on June 9th and 10th. The survey comprised a fluxgate gradiometer (magnetometer) survey to provide an efficient method of locating the broadest range of sub-surface archaeology, coupled with earth resistance survey to attempt to detect extended excavated features such as enclosure ditches and masonry foundations. The locations of all surveys were carefully captured using electronic distance measurement equipment (EDM), to allow for precise capturing of the location of any detected features, such that measures for their possible future excavation, or preservation, can be taken. As a matter of course, survey data was checked on a daily basis and downloaded to a secure format as part of IAFS quality control procedures. The geophysical works were undertaken by Ian Elliott of Irish Geophysical and Archaeology Surveys who has since furnished IAFS with a full report on the work.

As outlined above the entire surveys were also filmed, as were interviews with the Rosse family, which focused on records of the Black Castle in the Birr Castle archives. This footage has since been prepared into a short video on the project.

10. Please outline the findings of your research and/or milestones achieved

The major milestones were as follows:

- May/June 2021: Desktop research on the site takes place, including consultations with the Rosse Family.
- June 2021: Surveys of the site of the Black Castle are completed and filming of the project takes place, including interviews with Lady Rosse.
- July 2021: A film detailing the project is produced.
- September 2021: A full report on the geophysical surveys is completed.

11. a) Please provide details of the dissemination of the outcomes from this project (inc. publications, presentations, outreach, media etc.) including details of any social media/web platforms used to publicise this project

As outlined above a senior member of IAFS staff (Dr Denis Shine) remained on site for the duration of the works to explain the significance of the project to the general public, several of whom visited the castle after seeing posts related to the project on social media. The project was extensively highlighted on our social media, and will also be summarised in due course in the local newspaper 'The Midland Tribune'. Finally, the project was filmed and prepared into a short film by Cránnóg media (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ga5c5gEoJMI>).

An intended talk on the project has not taken place yet due to the continuing restrictions associated with Covid-19; this talk is now planned for some time after October 22nd, when restrictions are relaxed. A publication on the site is now also being planned with the Rosse family, with a meeting scheduled to discuss the same in October.

e) How will you continue to communicate the results of your project and what are your publication plans?

As outlined above an intended talk on the project did not take place due to the continuing restrictions associated with Covid-19; this talk is now planned for some time after October 22nd, when restrictions are relaxed. A publication on the site is now also being planned with the Rosse family, with a meeting scheduled to discuss the same in October, now that the final version of the survey report is received. A summary of this publication will also be circulated to the local press.

15. How did the award enhance your professional development (e.g. in terms of specific opportunities, opportunities for enhancing skills, collaborations with others etc.)?

The project has enhanced our connections within the local community, building capacity for future collaborative work in the future.

16. What plans (if any) do you have to further your proposal/project?

As outlined above the project encouraged further collaboration with the IAFS/IHS and the Rosse Family. Lady Rosse has already encouraged us to further the project in the form of keyhole excavations next year, which is something we aim to discuss next month.