

## ANNUAL REPORT: SPIKE ISLAND (IRELAND) 2013 FIELD SCHOOL

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Students excavating at Spike Island convict burial grounds

### GENERAL

The Spike Island field school ran from June 3 through August 2, 2013. This was the first 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, visits to Titanic and Lusitania related sites as well as a sea-kayaking trip around the island.

The full team of 29 individuals 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 a restaurant in 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 most evenings 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 wars with Napoleon in the first decade 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.

For our first season, we concentrated our efforts in three areas of the prison: the convict burial ground; the punishment cells; and the 20<sup>th</sup> century prison.

### **THE CONVICT BURIAL GROUND**

Geophysical testing carried out before the excavation began suggested regularities in ground disturbance in a walled area that was enclosed after the 19<sup>th</sup> century prison closed. Excavation revealed the pattern of burial within the area and an estimate of the numbers of interments that took place there. This was clearly not the burial place of the majority of convicts known to have been interred on the island and the location of the earliest phase remains to be found. Burials were of a uniform pattern and all students got to participate in the excavation, retrieval and initial processing of skeletal remains and associated artifacts. Future seasons will explore further the walled burial area and test for the locations of the remaining convicts.

Trenches located outside the walled burial ground did not produce any burials but did uncover possible trenches dug during World War I to give soldiers experience of trench warfare. The retrieval of dummy ammunition dating from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century supports this conclusion.

### **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. Trenches were excavated in rooms reserved for prison guards and a sequence of use, remodeling and abandonment was documented. Artifacts possibly related to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century jail were recovered along with material that related to the building's use as a military prison in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Future seasons will extend this work by excavating within the isolation cells themselves. This will be complemented by exploration of the sub-floor deposits in the dormitories that housed the bulk of the 19<sup>th</sup> century prison population.

### **THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY PRISON SCHOOL**

Spike Island was used as a prison again from 1985 until 2004. The most noticeable difference between the two prison regimes related to numbers incarcerated. While 102 prisoners were housed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century complex, up to 2,300 convicts were housed in the fort in the 1850s. Many of the 20<sup>th</sup> century buildings remain intact with their contents still in place. We undertook a detailed survey of the material remains in the 20<sup>th</sup> century school as part of a social history project and to provide comparisons with the more draconian regime of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Students and staff documented prisoner graffiti, catalogued the remaining materials in the prisoner library and art room. This provides considerable insight into the perspective of 20<sup>th</sup> century prisoners and the motivation of their keepers.

### **SUMMARY**

The first 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. One IFR student has even returned to Ireland to pursue her studies at UCC.