**Dunluce Castle**

Dunluce Castle is probably Northern Ireland’s most iconic archaeological monument, positioned dramatically on the sea cliffs on Antrim’s north coast. However, until recently, it has been subject to only limited archaeological research.

**History**

‘Dun’ is an Irish term for fort, suggesting there has been a fortification on this outcrop for several hundred years. But it was the McQuillans who first built a castle on this spot in the late 15th and early 16th centuries. The northeast and southeast towers of the castle, as well as parts of the outer wall, survive from this period. The McQuillans were Gaelic lords, originally either Scottish or Welsh, and they controlled a territory known as the Route, which broadly covers east County Antrim.

In the 1550s, the McQuillans were ousted by the MacDonnells, who were descended from the Scottish Clan Donald, Lords of the Isles. The Clan Donald lordship was centred at Finlaggan and Dunyvaig Castle, on Islay, which can be seen on a clear day to the northeast of Dunluce.

Over the following decades the MacDonnells became the dominant family across North Antrim and the Glens. To hold this position they were almost constantly in conflict with the surrounding families including the O’Cahans west of the Bann, the MacQuillans, and the O’Donnells of Donegal. In 1584 Dunluce Castle was besieged and taken by the English crown, but was granted back to Sorley Boy MacDonnell by Queen Elizabeth in 1586. Sorley Boy later salvaged large guns from the 1588 Spanish Armada shipwreck *La* *Girona,* lost at Lacada Point near the Giant’s Causeway.

In the 1590s the Ulster Gaelic chieftains rose in rebellion against the English. Randal MacDonnell was now head of the family and joined Hugh O’Neill at the battle of Kinsale where the Irish revolt was essentially defeated. Randal surrendered to the English at Carrickfergus but was pardoned and granted the territories of the Route and the Glens in 1603.

Before the official Plantation of Ulster got underway, Randal began his own unofficial plantation. He brought large numbers of Scottish settlers onto his lands in Antrim and established new towns and markets that also created opportunities for those already living on his lands.  One of these towns was built directly outside of the castle walls at Dunluce. Much of the buildings you see today date to the first decades of the 17th century, when Randal built a fine English-style manor house, stables and accommodation block. By 1620 he was created Earl of Antrim and his large estates enjoyed considerable success.

In 1641 the Irish again rose in rebellion.  The MacDonnells split into factions, some siding with the Irish and others fighting with the King. The second Earl, also Randal, was arrested in 1642 and imprisoned at Carrickfergus. He later escaped and spent the following decade in exile in England. His wife Katherine salvaged many of their possessions from the castle and shipped them to Chester where they were stored until Cromwell’s agents seized them and sold them off. An inventory of these fine furnishings illustrates the comfort of the Dunluce household. It includes tapestries, Persian carpets, an Irish harp and chairs upholstered in silk, damask, velvet and satin.

Randal regained his estates in 1665 but Dunluce did not remain the primary residence of the family. The MacDonnells moved initially to Ballymagarry before settling at Glenarm Castle, which remains the seat of the Earl of Antrim to this day. Dunluce castle gradually fell into ruins before coming into State care in 1928.

**Excavations**

Dunluce town was established in 1608 but occupied for just four decades. When the castle was abandoned in the late 17th century the land grassed over and reverted to farmland. The existence of the town was largely forgotten. However, when archaeologists started investigating here in 2008, they discovered remarkably well-preserved remains. Broad cobbled streets, over 11 metres wide, were lined with houses on either side.  In one section the foundations of a Scottish merchant’s house was uncovered. It would originally have been a two-storey structure with the main living area, gable fireplace and internal toilet on the ground floor and the sleeping and private quarters contained upstairs. Coins dating to 1614 were found inside the house as well as several pieces of pottery.

Further along the same cobbled street a blacksmith’s workshop was excavated in 2010. A forge and working area were found, which would have been accessed through wide wooden doors. It appears to have been abandoned almost overnight as tools and heaps of horseshoes were found lying about on the floor of the forge under the collapsed walls. Perhaps they had been pushed over during the rebellion of 1641. Some small 17th-century gaming pieces were found just outside the entrance, suggesting this was an area where people gathered, gossiped and generally passed the time of day.