



Evaluation/Monitoring Report No. 087

**White Island
Co. Fermanagh**

LICENCE NO.: AE/06/190

Ronan McHugh

Site Specific Information

Site Name: White Island, Co. Fermanagh

Townland:

SMR No. : FER 173:002

State Care Scheduled ✓ Other [delete as applicable]

Grid Ref.: I H 1753 5999

County: Fermanagh

Excavation Licence No. : AE/06/190

Planning Ref / No.

Dates of Monitoring: 16th August 2006

Archaeologist(s) Present: Ronan McHugh

Brief Summary:

Excavation of four small trenches was undertaken on the site of White Island Church, Co. Fermanagh, in order to accommodate two handrails designed to facilitate easier access to the site. The site is a scheduled monument. Fragments of human bone were recorded in the base of one trench, but they were not removed from the site. No other material or features of archaeological significance were unearthed.

Type of monitoring:

Manual excavation of four trenches by the licensed archaeologist.

Size of area opened:

Four trenches were opened:-

Trench 1 - 0.23 metres x 0.28 metres

Trench 2 - 0.25 metres x 0.23 metres

Trench 3 - 0.25 metres x 0.23 metres

Trench 4 - 0.26 metres x 0.24 metres

Current Land Use: Scheduled archaeological site.

Intended Land Use: Scheduled archaeological site.

Brief account of the monitoring

Introduction

White Island is situated in Castle Archdale Bay on Lough Erne, Co. Fermanagh (Fig. 1) and is the location of a multi-period ecclesiastical site that possibly dates to pre-Norman times (Hamlin 1976, 170). The site is most renowned for a collection of stone carved figures, some of which are conventionally dated to the 12th century, but is also the location of a small church and a disused graveyard (Fig. 2). The ecclesiastical remains are confined to the eastern side of the island (Fig. 2), much of which has been scheduled for protection under the Historic Monuments Act (Northern Ireland) 1971.

The church as it stands today is the result of substantial renovations undertaken in 1928 as the majority of the church had collapsed by the late 19th century (Hamlin 1976, 171). It consists of a simple rectangular structure measuring 14.5 metres (east-west) x 8.2 metres (north-south), surrounded by a curvilinear enclosing wall. Hamlin recounts that the reconstruction took great care to replicate the earlier building and the enclosing wall was constructed from stones left-over from the renovation (*ibid.*)(Plate 1). The most notable feature of the church's architecture is a probable 12th-century Romanesque doorway, which is the only such example surviving in Northern Ireland. However, human activity at the site predates the erection of the church. Excavations undertaken within the grounds of the church in 1959 revealed evidence of an earlier wooden rectangular structure on the site, possibly an earlier church or ecclesiastical building (Lowry-Corry 1959, 65).

Access to the church today is by means of a stile straddling the curvilinear wall enclosing the church (Plate 2). In order to improve access for the disabled, it was proposed to install two handrails, one on either side of the stile. Archaeological monitoring of this work was required as the proposed location of the handrails was within the scheduled area of the island. Consequently, a Scheduled Monument Consent was obtained (B20/96) prior to commencing the archaeological work.

The Excavation

Installation of the handrails required the excavation of four small trenches at the base of the stile. The position of the trenches is schematically depicted in Fig. 3. The excavation brief envisaged that the trenches would be approximately 0.18 metre-squares, with a depth of 0.45 metres, although latitude was provided to extend the trenches where necessary. Excavation of the trenches was undertaken manually by the licensed archaeologist. The trenches have been labelled Trenches 1 – 4 for the purpose of this report and are described in detail below.

Trench 1

Trench 1 was located outside the stone boundary wall, immediately to the south-east of the stile (Fig. 3). The area where the trench was located was stony and uneven, and the corner of a large angular stone protruded through the ground surface at this point. The dimensions of the trench were 0.23 metres (north-west / south-east) x 0.28 metres (north-east / south-west). The uppermost stratum was a relatively shallow sod of clay and grass (Context 101) with a depth of 0.04 metres. Removal of the sod exposed a deposit of stones, rubble and debris, interspersed with loose black loamy soil (Context 102), which had built up against the enclosing wall. This rubble deposit (Context 102) contained modern crisp wrappers and soft drink cans.

The large stone that was visible prior to the excavation formed a portion of the rubble deposit (Context 102). The stone had a rough, angular, block shape and measured approximately 0.25 metres x 0.27 metres x 0.29 metres. One side of the stone bore a sub-circular depression (Plates 4 and 5), which was probably the result of rain or root erosion rather than anthropogenic modification. A linear groove on one of the adjacent faces (Plate 4) was more obviously a result of natural processes. The size and relatively regular nature of the block suggests that it conceivably formed part of the original church structure, but it was not reutilized during the 1928 renovations.

The depth of the rubble deposit (Context 102) was 0.36 metres. Removal of the rubble deposit (Context 102) exposed the upper portion of a deposit of loose black clay loam (Context 103). In order to reach the requisite depth of 0.45 metres, Trench 1 was excavated for a further 0.05 metres into this clay loam deposit (Context 103). Disarticulated fragments of probably human bone (Plate 3) were recovered from the upper portion of this deposit (Context 103). Because the deposit (Context 103) was not to be further disturbed, the bones were restored to the base of Trench 1 at completion of the excavation. The Police Service of Northern Ireland were notified of the finding of the remains.

The excavation of Trench 1 was discontinued when a depth of 0.45 metres was reached (Plate 6). The clay loam deposit (Context 103) formed the basal layer of the trench at this point and was not fully excavated.

Trench 2

Trench 2 was located outside the stone boundary wall, immediately to the south-west of the stile. It was approximately 2 metres to the south-west of Trench 1 (Fig. 3). Trench 2 measured approximately 0.25 metres (north-west / south-east) x 0.23 metres (north-east / south-west). The uppermost layer in Trench 2 was a shallow sod with a maximum depth of 0.04 metres (Context 201). Removal of the sod revealed a deposit of rubble, stones and loose black soil (Context 202), similar in character to the corresponding deposit recorded in Trench 1 (i.e. Context 102), although the stones recovered from the rubble and stone deposit in Trench 2 (Context 202) were smaller than those observed in Trench 1, with the largest excavated stone measuring approximately 0.09 metres x 0.11 metres x 0.12 metres. The depth of this deposit (Context 202) was recorded as 0.26 metres. Excavation of this deposit exposed a

layer of loose black loam (Context 203) similar to the basal deposit recorded in Trench 1 (i.e. Context 103). A depth of 0.15 metres was excavated through the black loam deposit before excavation in Trench 2 was completed. No bone or other artefacts were recovered from the excavated portion of the black loam deposit (Context 203). Excavation of Trench 2 was discontinued with its depth standing at 0.45 metres (Plate 7). No material or deposits of archaeological significance were recovered from Trench 2.

Trench 3

Trench 3 was located at the base of the stile within the area enclosed by the church boundary wall, immediately to the north-east of the stile. The topography within the area enclosed by the boundary was flatter and more even than the terrain surrounding Trenches 1 and 2, and the grass was freshly cut. Trench 3 measured approximately 0.25 metres (north-west / south-east) x 0.23 metres (north-east / south-west). The uppermost layer in Trench 3 was a shallow sod with a maximum depth of 0.05 metres (Context 301). Removal of the sod revealed a deposit of loose black soil, rubble and stones (Context 302), similar in character to the corresponding deposit recorded in Trench 2 (i.e. Context 202). The depth of this deposit (Context 302) was recorded as 0.24 metres. Immediately beneath this deposit lay a layer of loose black loam (Context 303) similar to the basal deposits recorded in Trenches 1 and 2 (i.e. Context 103 and 203). In order to attain the requisite depth of 0.45 metres in Trench 3, a further depth of 0.16 metres was excavated through the black loam deposit (Context 303), which proved to be sterile of artefacts.

Excavation of Trench 3 was discontinued with its depth standing at 0.45 metres (Plate 8) and, as in Trenches 1 and 2, the basal deposit of black loam in Trench 3 (Context 303) was not completely excavated. No material or deposits of archaeological significance were recovered from Trench 3.

Trench 4

Trench 4 was positioned inside the church boundary wall, immediately to the north-west of the stile. Trench 4 measured approximately 0.26 metres (north-west / south-east) x 0.24 metres (north-east / south-west). The sequence of deposits in Trench 4 broadly replicated that recorded in Trench 3. The uppermost layer in Trench 4 was a shallow sod with a maximum depth of 0.03 metres (Context 401). Immediately beneath the sod was a deposit of loose black soil, rubble and stones (Context 402). The depth of this deposit (Context 402) was recorded as 0.20 metres. Excavation of this deposit exposed a layer of loose black loam (Context 403) similar to the basal deposits recorded in the other three trenches. In order to attain the requisite depth in Trench 3, a further depth of 0.22 metres was excavated through the black loam deposit (Context 403), which proved to be sterile of artefacts.

Excavation of Trench 4 was discontinued with its depth standing at 0.45 metres (Plate 9). No material or deposits of archaeological significance were recovered from Trench 4.

Conclusion

The excavation of the four trenches caused minimal disturbance to archaeologically significant deposits. Beneath the sod, a build-up of rubble was evident on both sides of the wall. The debris layer was more substantial in the trenches on the outside of the enclosure, almost certainly due to regular caretaking and landscaping within the boundary wall, in the immediate environs of the church. A single stone of a possible structural nature was unearthed in Trench 1, which might be relict of the collapse of the church in the 19th century. Immediately beneath the rubble layer in all of the trenches was a black loam deposit. The black loam deposits in all four trenches (Contexts 103, 203, 303, 403) were homogenous in character, suggesting that they possibly represented a single deposit that predated the erection of the stone boundary wall. The presence of probable human bone fragments within this deposit in Trench 1 (Context 103) suggests that the black clay loam is possibly associated with the early graveyard on the island, although no detailed interpretation was possible given the limited size of the area excavated. No publication is required save for a short summary in the annual '*Excavations*' bulletin.

Archive:

Finds:

N/a

Photographs:

The digital images taken during the evaluation are currently archived within the Centre for Archaeological Fieldwork, School of Geography, Archaeology and Palaeoecology, Queen's University Belfast.

Plans / Drawings: A single annotated sketch of the location of the trenches is archived within the Centre for Archaeological Fieldwork, School of Geography, Archaeology and Palaeoecology, Queen's University Belfast.

Bibliography

Hamlin, A. 1976. *The Archaeology of Early Christianity in the North of Ireland*, Unpublished PhD thesis, Queen's University, Belfast.

Lowry-Corry, D. 1959. 'A Newly discovered Statue at the Church on White Island, Cpunty Fermanagh', *UJA* 23, 59 – 66.

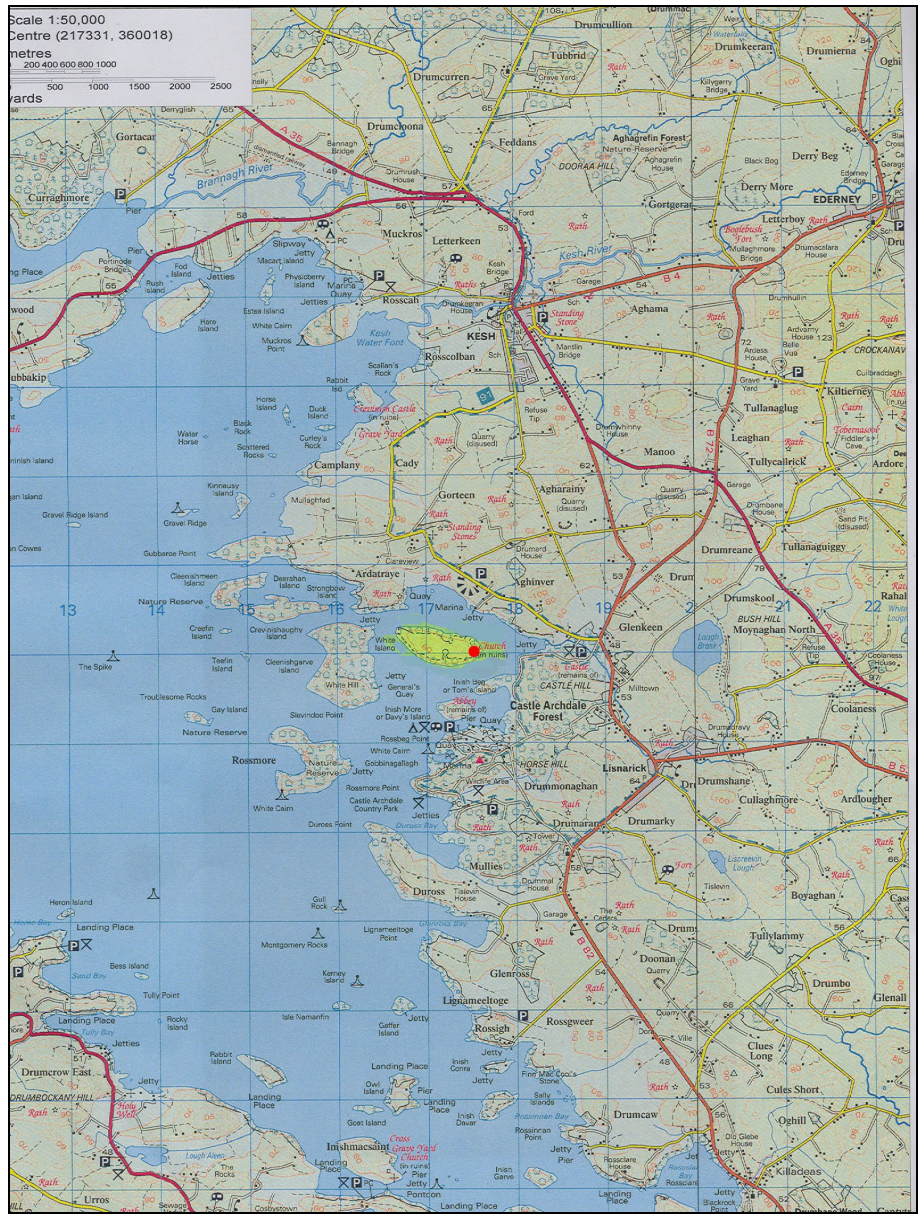


Fig. 1. Location of White Island, CO. Fermanagh (Appropriate position of church site is marked by red dot)(Map supplied by EHS).

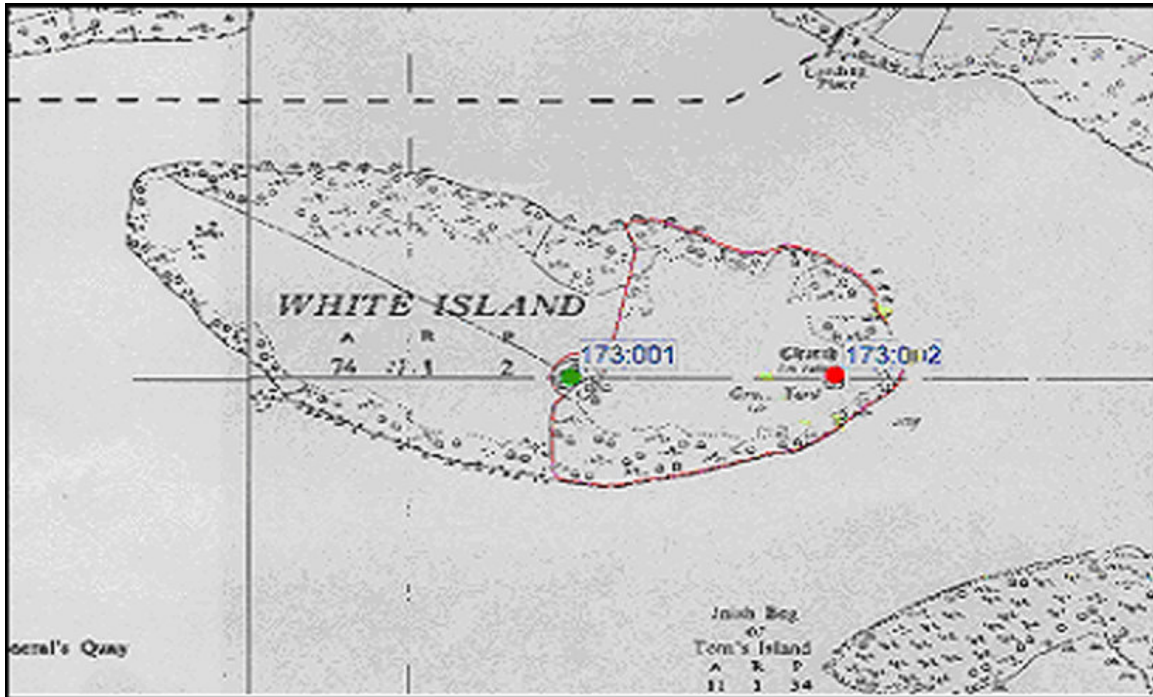


Fig. 2 White Island, Co. Fermanagh showing the scheduled area (delineated with a red line) and the church site (marked with a red dot)(Map supplied by EHS)

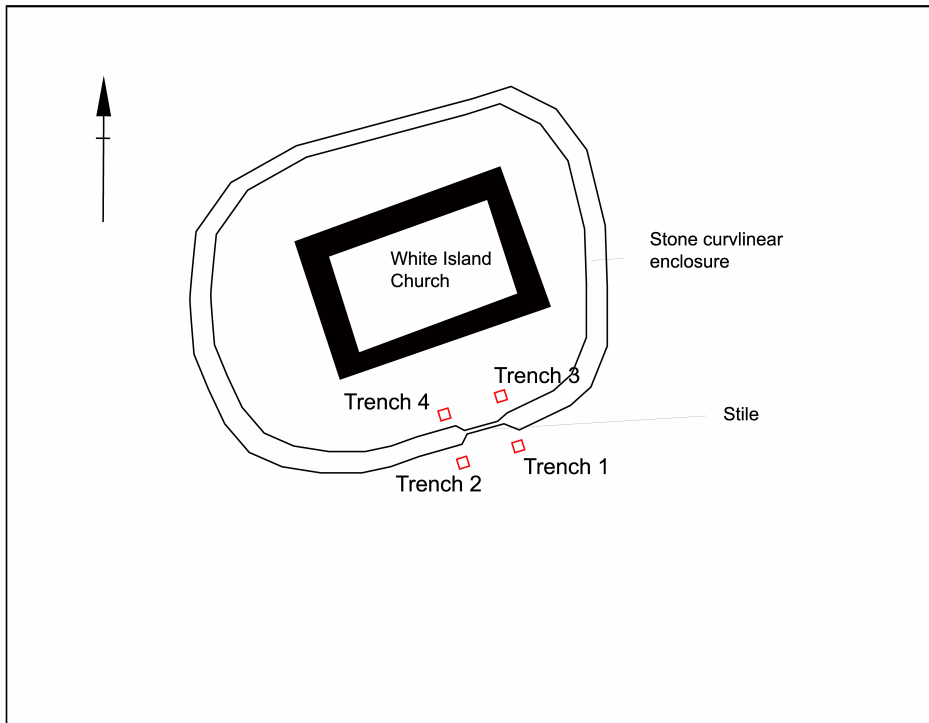


Fig. 3. Schematic plan of White Island Church site showing location of excavation trenches (Not to scale).



Plate 1. View of the enclosing wall surrounding White Island church (facing north).



Plate 2. The entrance stile at White Island church, prior to the installation of the handrails. The 12th century Romanesque doorway is visible in the background (facing north).



Plate 3. Base of Trench 1, with visible fragments of human bone.



Plates 4 and 5. Two views of the angular block unearthed in Trench 1.

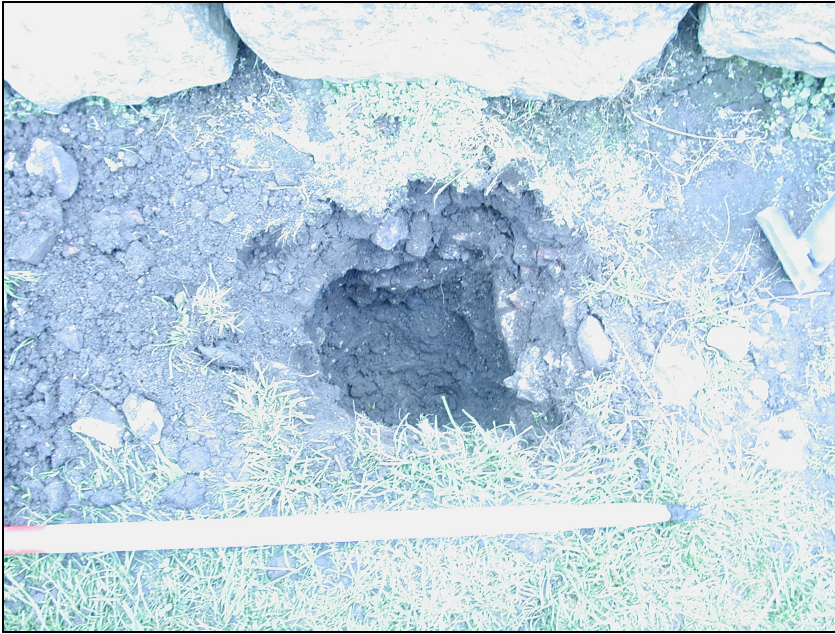


Plate 6. Trench 1 after completion of excavation.

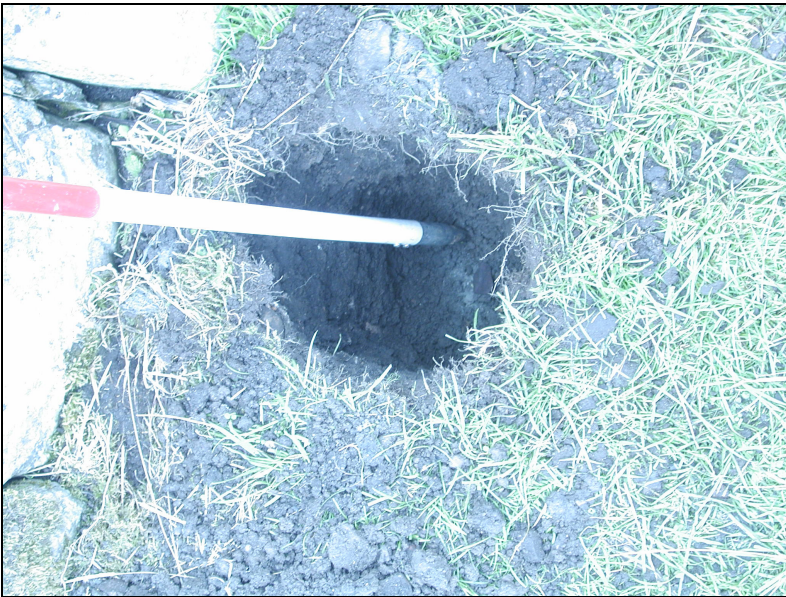


Plate 7. Trench 2 at completion of excavation.



Plate 8. Trench 3 at completion of excavation.



Plate 9. Trench 4 at completion of excavation.