



Conference report

Increasing the value of Northern Ireland's archaeology to the public: What can Northern Ireland Archaeology Forum members do?

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The Northern Ireland Archaeology Forum (NIAF) event attracted around 40 delegates, together representing a diverse slice of the region's heritage profession. The aim of the day was to discuss the value of archaeology in Northern Ireland, and how archaeological work, particularly developer-funded, should contribute to society in an economic and cultural capacity. Phil MacDonald (Queens University) began by outlining the issues which had prompted NIAF to host the event

- 1) a lack of opportunity for the public to engage and participate in archaeology
- 2) the collective failure from the heritage profession to disseminate the results of developer-funded investigation to both public and specialist audiences
- 3) an inadequate provision for public access to archaeological archives

The first speaker, **Brian Williams** (Northern Ireland Environment Agency), summarised the Department of the Environment's report into the economic value of Northern Ireland's historic environment (www.nienvironmentlink.org/cmsfiles/files/Publications/HESF-Economic-Summary-Report---FINAL-VERSION---17-6-2012.pdf). The report intends to raise the profile of heritage to decision makers, to improve understanding of heritage assets, and to increase tourist revenues. It highlights the importance of the historic environment to Northern Ireland's economy and includes six key recommendations. The historic environment is already a major contributor to the economy, supporting 5400 full time equivalent jobs and generating around £532 million annually. Despite current achievements, the sector contributes less than in neighbouring jurisdictions (for example, Scotland). The report recommends that Government and stakeholders develop a coherent strategy and implementation plan for realising the potential of the historic environment. These recommendations will not provide instant results, but will build capacity within the sector

designed to facilitate more strategic development and provide sustainable benefits to the wider community. The recommendations are that

- 1) government and non-government organisational stakeholders develop a coherent strategy and implementation plan for realising the potential of the historic environment
- 2) public sector funding should be increased to realise further economic and social benefit and to encourage private sector involvement
- 3) presentation of historic environment sites should be reviewed to enhance their visitors experience and to maximise their impact
- 4) the present level of impact generated by the historic environment in Northern Ireland should be sustained and increased
- 5) organisations involved in the historic environment should consider ways of expanding their existing linkages with suitable partners (including links with the natural environment) to coordinate marketing and promotion efforts
- 6) an economic impact toolkit should be developed for use within the historic environment sector

Brian concluded that Northern Ireland has been gifted a fantastic heritage; as a profession we must ensure that it is not only accessible to be explored and enjoyed by everybody, but that the planning framework and wider infrastructure has the capacity to input real benefits into the local community.

Gabriel Cooney (University College Dublin) followed with his talk *Charting a future path for archaeology in Ireland – North and South*. Gabriel began with one central concern: if we don't make the case for a robust strategy on the historic environment to government we are failing as a profession. Heritage does not respect boundaries and we need to consider our past within a broader perspective of Ireland, the UK and Europe. Viewed from continental Europe there is no real differentiation between North and South; products are Irish and that includes heritage assets. The mid-90s boom pushed a massive growth of the profession, particularly in commercial archaeology, creating a legacy of data and an unparalleled resource. 2007-12 is a changed world. During this quiet time of recovery and change, we should think more strategically about how we can plan for a sustainable future.

There are some positive experiences of the past decade which we should consider as part of that future planning

- NM/NMS facility at Swords

- INSTAR (Irish National Strategic Archaeological Research Programme)
- National Monuments Bill (EAC, Ireland) – the profession has to get behind this bill
- National Landscape Strategy – has been prepared and consulted on, and is waiting for the next stage

As a profession, we must guarantee value across the board and to do so we need a change in focus. Our work is about research and understanding; we need to produce high quality work which is rooted in a research ethic in order to guarantee value for the public.

Questions and discussion

Professor Tom Woolley (Ministerial Advisory Group for Architecture (Northern Ireland)) highlighted a lack of joined up thinking. How do we begin to change the current tendency to overdesign (eg to bring in signature architects rather than use local talent), and impose those heavy handed solutions? If we are discussing how the historic environment can have a wider impact, can we also ensure a joined up strategy for development which includes architecture, design and construction? **BW** responded in agreement; he was unaware of the advisory group which highlights the clear lack of communication between departments. This report – and the recommendations included – is the first significant attempt to try and join up thinking across government.

Finbar McCormick (Queens University) commented that Northern Ireland suffered from there being a lack of an overriding body. NIEA can only do certain things; we need a body which brings all together and provides links to partners, including councils, churches, museums and the profession. Is that what Brian is trying to do? **GC** commented that much of the solution was about time and investment – and the need for people to keep going. **BW** felt that one overarching body might not be the answer, but that partnerships and implementation groups were. We don't need to bring all together all of the time, but we should have an inaugural meeting which provides a catalyst for separate meetings that facilitate real dialogue.

Sinead McCarten (NMNI) commented that more synergies between cultural and natural environments would be beneficial. **BW** felt that there was an opportunity to try and develop this over the next couple of years with the reform of local authorities and review of government departments. Currently, monuments are managed within NIEA, and museums in CeCAL. A cultural heritage grouping, which included tourism, would make more sense (a Department of Culture?). Currently we are putting different environments (the natural, the historic) into silos which visitors don't have.

James Eogan (IAI) – The profession needs to pay close attention to government structures, and to try and gain some influence in them. Environmental heritage professionals seem better at climbing ladders than heritage professionals – why is that?

Peter Hinton (IfA) – The profession also needs to consider why the government doesn't get the message about the historic environment. Think in terms of the Treasury – people just look at the numbers and the lobbying comes from all areas, and how much each of those areas contributes economically. Are there other stats which heritage professional should have?

BW – Would like decision makers to be more aware of the small amount of funding, comparatively, which the historic environment receives.

Dan Hull (Northern Ireland Assembly) – Within other sectors people are used to understanding the proportion of total GVA – is there a similar number for heritage?

BW commented that within the recent report this was a bit vague, and difficult to get to a particular figure. In Scotland 3% of economy is from the historic environment.

PH – In Scotland, there is a 'killer statistic' that historic environment contributes more to the economy than whisky does. All figures need a context and setting.

Beth Cassidy (Archaeological Development Services Ltd) – With reference to archives, the challenge we are facing in Northern Ireland is a serious crisis – we have data and material in limbo, with no state facility and no funding, how can we get out of it? Funding from the development sector is there to some extent, but the private sector has a financial life cycle on a given project. Longer term our collective archive is not getting the proper management it needs right now – the direction we go in is of huge public relevance. Have we spearheaded this enough? There have been debates, but has there been enough action?

BW – There is a real problem in that the issue falls between two departments, and we need to get both departments to take it seriously at a high level. This is crucial issue for archaeology – so much money has come through the polluter pays principle since the mid 90s and all that material is stored in chests, garden sheds and people's heads. Somehow government has to be lobbied and told about the importance of this by a group like NIAF – we must draw on the potential of the archives.

GC – The argument for archaeological archives has to be presented in terms of return and public access. Public benefit is the key; the level of resource put into SWORDS is insufficient at the moment. There should be a follow up briefing document published by the Royal Irish Academy which will be useful as a respected

voice making comments on heritage issues which should provide part of that momentum in both a South and North context.

Audrey Horning (Queens University) – With regards to the identification of the level of material held in private companies – what will happen with that information?

Phil MacDonald (Queens University) – This is one of the central concerns of the membership of NIAF, and there seems to be a consensus that we need to deal with it. However, we don't have a real consensus on solutions, which is what we need to achieve. Hopefully some of that can come out of discussion groups in terms of increasing public benefits. There are two problems – backlog and how to deal with that, and how we go forward.

Mike King (Down County Museum) – Should we develop a toolkit which outlines how archaeologists should be thinking about the value of archaeology to society – both in terms of social and economic value. There is a toolkit used by Association of Independent Museums which includes direct and indirect spend in the economy – could something like this be adapted? (www.aim-museums.co.uk/content/research_papers/)

PM – There is a real need to collect data, and to compare it year from year, in order to come up with some meaningful statistics. We need to make data collection and reporting more consistent.

BW – It would be useful to look a whole site – such as an authentic heritage town, rather than looking at individual sites, so we can get the bigger picture.

The afternoon session was introduced by **Malachy Conway** (National Trust), who presented a summary of recent work undertaken by NIAF. A key issue is archaeological collections and archives which currently are not embedded within PPS6, the planning policy statement for archaeology. From the number of licences issued, approximately 1900 archaeological projects have been undertaken – currently nothing has been received in museums. Moreover there is no strategy of how material can be released to agencies with public access (eg museums). In October 2012, NIAF was sent an update from the Minister outlining a new initiative to quantify the material currently stored. A survey of commercial companies was undertaken by Federation of Archaeological Managers and Employers (FAME), quantifying undeposited archaeological archives, on behalf of NIEA. In moving forwards, we need to understand better the material we are recovering and ask what should be kept, and what should be deposited with museums.

Peter Hinton (Chief Executive, Institute for Archaeologists) outlined the diverging archaeological agendas of Northern Ireland, Wales, Scotland and England. Recent work has

focused on commercial archaeology and the curatorial infrastructure that supports it. This includes the administration of the planning system and has resulted in initiatives such as the development of the joint IfA/ ALGAO *Standard and guidance for archaeological advice by historic environment services* (accessible at www.archaeologists.net/codes/ifa). With regards to England, one document which could inform discussions in Northern Ireland is the Southport Report (www.archaeologists.net/southport). The Southport group identified the key concerns of the sector in England to be insufficient opportunities for public engagement, the academic/ commercial divide, the issue of archaeological archives, and the failure of the market to demand high quality archaeological works undertaken by heritage professionals. As a profession, we need to create archaeological knowledge from the information we have gathered with tangible research outputs. With regards to archives, it was felt a key concern was creating sustainable solutions which facilitate access by researchers and the public. The market itself needs to be based on a quality product – there should be no room for below-standard work. Professional standards and professional accreditation should be the means of quality measurement. The Southport report contains detailed recommendations on how all of these problems could be fixed by comparatively simple and inexpensive means, and it would be worth the time of archaeologists in Northern Ireland to see how many of the solutions might work for them. The reviews and strategy development we see happening in Wales and Scotland are informed by political drivers – economic growth, employment and economic contribution. There is a range of pressures that archaeologists must be aware of and embrace as a profession: all the work we do should be about research; we should be confident and not fearful of public engagement; we must address the needs of different audiences. Quality and value should not be contentious but we have got ourselves in a position where they are not always at the top of the list.

To conclude, **Alex Attwood MLA**, Minister of the Environment, outlined the importance of the NIEA report published on the economic value of Northern Ireland's historic environment. The heritage of Northern Ireland is unsurpassed in terms of its 'scale, wonder and beauty' – it is part of the character of the lives we lead. The current economic situation is not going to get better soon. Opportunities can be created from our heritage – it is within the control of ministers – and they could have a real impact on the economy, for example through tourism. This would require a strategic shift in terms of law, resources and policy in favour of heritage – and to ensure that in protecting it, we are also getting the best out of it for the future. To positively develop heritage and tourism, we need the infrastructure in order to support, including the management of developer-funded archaeology. In response to a question from Mark Gardiner, the minister clarified that in his view this could mean 'the state imposing a more focused obligation though development conditions to ensure public benefit from the wealth of archaeology'.

Questions

Sinead McCarten (NMNI) - How would changes in licensing improve the situation with regards to archaeological archives? It is a responsibility issue?

GC – Some changes are needed, but licensing won't change the problems we have with the current problem with archives – but it could prevent exacerbating the problem with future projects.

PM – Changes could deal with the issue of dissemination and publication, so in terms of accessibility, they could really help.

PH – [To AA] You described how out of bad things comes good; do you think that good things will come out of the bad experience of the Cherrymount crannog? Eg that the system moves up a gear.

AA – There are legacy issues from that experience – do we learn from that to better manage the historic environment? We have asked NIEA to take this forward, and to ask where and how it went wrong. How should archaeology be managed on future road schemes? We would like to be part of that conversation – we have to learn from this experience.

MC – Should we have a summit about planning and community benefit?

AA – The Fermanagh Trust published a document about the community benefit of wind turbine and wind farm applications, many private arrangements. This provides a model of community benefit from windfarms in Scotland – we don't have that model for heritage, but we should have. There is a need to shape issues; how do we make this a mainstream part of the development? For approval to be granted, the system should guarantee creation of local community benefits. There are a lot more corners to turn.

Mark Gardiner (Queens University) – Message is encouraging regarding the increase to the community benefit from planning process. How to move beyond present system? A benefit not merely to developers but by the knowledge we gain from that, ensuring value added archaeology.

AA – In my view, this means the state imposing a more focused obligation though development conditions to ensure public benefit from the wealth of archaeology.

James Eogan (IAI) – With reference to an all Ireland economy in a global market – our heritage didn't receive a high priority in terms of political agreement reached,

but has great potential north and south. Heritage has something which could be Ireland's unique selling point.

AA – Some people would say that the sleeping giant of Irish tourism is our Christian heritage, the St Patrick experience. People across the whole of Ireland are collaborating more, but we are not reaping the benefit yet.

Beth Cassidy (Archaeological Development Services Ltd) – Commercial archaeology in the South has been massively hit by the economic downturn; the construction sector has all but left the room and turned off the light. There have been many opportunities lost during the boom period to protect community benefit.

AA – problem is getting agreement through the Executive to get community benefit secured via the planning framework. Executive can make hard decisions but it needs the information to back them up – that's the challenge.

The day was rounded off with a session of discussion, focused on three main areas; what should NIEA do? What should NIAF and its members do? And, what do we want from develop-funded archaeology? The comments, presented in the diagram below, provide some clear directions for both NIEA and NIAF.

The NIAF conference was supported by:

Down County Museum

Institute for Archaeologists

National Trust

NIEA



Figure 1 A summary of discussions at the NIAF conference.

This report was compiled by the Institute for Archaeologists and should be referenced as

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