

Colm Donnelly and Eileen Murphy reflect on a busy year at the Centre for Community Archaeology

CAPNI: the Community Archaeology Programme Northern Ireland

The Centre for Community Archaeology (CCA) at Queen's University Belfast (QUB) was established in 2017 as an organisation that could promote archaeology among the general public and schools. Co-directed by the authors, the CCA team comprises Dr Heather Montgomery, Brian Sloan and Ruairí Ó Baoill, with support from Queen's Archaeology-Palaeoecology undergraduate and postgraduate students.

The CCA works closely with the Belfast branch of the Young Archaeologists' Club, established in 2006, and with the Ulster Archaeological Society (UAS), established at QUB in 1947, most notably through the annual Discovery conference, which for the last eight years has highlighted archaeological activities across the sector in Northern Ireland.

The CCA defines community archaeology as a means of enabling members of the public to engage with their past through their direct participation in archaeological activities, working with and alongside professional archaeologists, and since 2017 we have led 23 community excavations across Northern Ireland. Participants on our community projects make an active contribution to discovering their local heritage and knowledge creation. They may have no previous archaeological experience but are given on-site training and are directly involved in all aspects of the fieldwork experience.

Much of this work, however, was reliant upon other organisations making funding applications with community archaeology included as an element of their programmes. As a result, there was no overarching plan in place to further develop community archaeology within Northern Ireland.

In light of this, in 2022, we approached the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF) with a proposal for a three-year



Clockwise from top left: The CCA staff and QUB students at the CAPNI stand at the Balmoral Show, 15 to 18 May 2024; The CCA's Eileen Murphy leading a CAPNI school hub event at Holy Cross Primary School in Ardoyne, Belfast, April 2024; Members of the Loup and District Historical Society working on the CAPNI survey of the stone circular enclosure in Maghadone, County Londonderry, March 2024

programme – the Community Archaeology Programme Northern Ireland (CAPNI) – that would inspire and engage diverse communities across Northern Ireland to learn about and appreciate their local archaeological heritage through their participation in a range of activities.

While the CCA had an established network of partners, CAPNI would enable us to connect with new diverse audiences while improving individual and community well-being through engagement with the archaeological resource. Our proposal contained a suite of activities, including survey field schools, community excavations, festivals, public lectures, guided heritage walks, and school hubs.

Following receipt of Development Phase funding from the NLHF we spent the first half of 2023 further developing our proposal, with a Delivery Phase

application submitted on 17 August 2023. We were delighted to receive confirmation from the NLHF on 12 December that year that our proposal had been successful; CAPNI was formally launched in the QUB Great Hall on 8 February 2024.

Since then, and up to the end of September, we have undertaken six festivals, five survey training schools, three excavations, four school hubs, five guided heritage walks, and four public lectures.

In addition, we were very aware that the majority of archaeological sites in Northern Ireland are located on farmland. To enable us to directly interact with the rural community we, therefore, had a stand for the duration of the Balmoral Show, the largest agricultural show in Northern Ireland.

Our agreed public interaction target for the NLHF in 'year 1' was 6,000; after

Right: The CCA's Ruairí Ó Baoill with the Belfast Young Archaeologists' Club during their visit to the CAPNI community excavation at Shaftesbury Park in Carrickfergus, County Antrim, April 2024



eight months we have exceeded this target and have achieved over 8,500 interactions.

Interacting with youth has always been a core element of the work of the CCA and we have a strong tradition of engagement with schools across Northern Ireland. This tradition continues with CAPNI and our school hubs aim to introduce archaeology in a fun and engaging manner to the children.

The hubs introduce the children to their local heritage, helping to instil awareness and foster a sense of place, particularly important to our newcomer communities in places like Dungannon, County Tyrone, which has the highest number of ethnic communities in Northern Ireland.

We work closely with teachers so we can connect with aspects of the Key Stage 2 'World Around Us' curriculum which has seen the application of literacy and numeracy in real-world situations, with children participating in activities such as measured surveys.

Local historical societies across Northern Ireland represent rural and urban communities and we have established relationships with many such groups. Our festivals offer an opportunity for us to work with these societies to deliver activities and enable them to interact with replica artefacts and ecofacts, while participating in experimental archaeology (such as, blacksmithing, flint knapping, and pottery manufacture).

This is also a means for us to provide training to members of historical societies in surveying, such as our work with The Loup and District Historical Society in the survey of a probable early medieval stone enclosure in Maghadone, County Londonderry – the tape and offset survey were conducted by members of the society.

Similarly, our work with the Kilmore Oneilland Trust involved members of the local community undertaking a survey of the memorials in the historic Kilmore Graveyard in County Armagh.

For those not wishing to engage in fieldwork, our guided heritage walks are a more gentle way to engage with local monuments, such as our tours around the



Above: The CCA's Brian Sloan at the Balmoral Show trying to persuade Michelle O'Neill, Northern Ireland's First Minister, to sign-up for CAPNI's community excavation at the site of the "lost" O'Neill castle at Castlereagh, County Down

medieval buildings of Ardglass and the prehistoric monument complex at Ballynoe, both located in County Down.

Our fieldwork activities are also accompanied by public lectures which provide a further opportunity for local communities to learn more about the archaeological heritage on their doorsteps. Our most popular form of engagement, however, remains direct public participation in archaeological excavations. Our first community excavation this year was a two-week investigation at Shaftesbury Park in Carrickfergus, County Antrim, undertaken in partnership with Carrickfergus Museum.

The selected site was an earthen enclosure marked as a 'fort' on an Ordnance Survey map sheet from the 1830s, but it was uncertain if this was genuinely an early medieval settlement; the excavation subsequently revealed it to be a eighteenth-century garden feature.

A total of 107 adult volunteers and 166 schoolchildren participated in the excavation. Our second excavation was conducted over four weeks in partnership with the East Belfast Mission and TURAS, to investigate the location of a 'lost' medieval castle in Castlereagh, County Down, connected to the Cladeboy O'Neills.

Depicted on an 1803 estate map and demolished around 1810, the excavation revealed a stone road surface associated with the castle, hinting that more of



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the structure remains to be found. We were joined by 385 adult volunteers and 406 schoolchildren.

At the time of writing our third excavation is ongoing – we are carrying out an investigation at Nailors Row in Derry City with the Friends of Derry Walls looking for evidence of the seventeenth century town ditch outside the historic walls.

As this short review of activity has demonstrated, 2024 has certainly been a busy but very successful year for the CCA and CAPNI. There is clearly an appetite for community archaeology amongst the general public and we look forward to extending our reach to communities across Northern Ireland over the next two years. ■

From top: Members of the Kilmore Oneilland Trust engaged in the survey of the grave memorials in the historic Kilmore Graveyard, County Armagh, April 2024; Adult volunteers participating on the CAPNI community excavation at Nailors Row outside the historic seventeenth century walls of Derry City, September 2024; A school group on the excavation at Nailors Row in Derry City being interviewed and filmed by Ulster Television, September 2024