

Site Specific Information

Site Name: 79 Vianstown Road, Downpatrick.

Townland: Bonecastle.

SMR No (if applicable): DOW 037:041 [other].

Grid Ref: J46514154.

County: Down.

Excavation Licence No.: AE/14/181.

Planning Ref. No.: R/2013/0043/RM.

Date of Excavation: 20/10/14 and 21/10/14.

Archaeologists Present: Philip Macdonald (director), Sapphire Mussen (21/10/14 am only).

Brief Summary: Archaeological excavation of the footprint of a single residential development undertaken in order to fulfill a condition of planning permission. No deposits, features or artefacts of archaeological significance were observed during the course of the excavation.

Type of excavation: Mitigation undertaken to fulfill a condition of planning permission. Superficial deposits were mechanically excavated under the supervision of the licensee (Philip Macdonald) and the underlying, exposed surfaces, deposits and features were documented using the standard context recording method.

Size of area opened: A single, near-rectangular trench, approximately 18.0 by 9.0 metres in size.

Current Land Use: The site straddles the garden of the former property at 79 Vianstown Road, a cleared hedge line and part of an adjacent field currently used for pasture.

Intended Land Use: Residential.

Account of the Excavation

Introductory Comments

The excavation site to the rear of 79 Vianstown Road is located approximately 175 metres to the eastnortheast of the ‘Site of Bonycastle’ on the revised 6” Ordnance Survey map of 1859 (Sites and Monuments Record No. DOW 037:041; Irish Grid Reference J46324139). The site is shown on the 1859 map as a ruin on the southeastern edge of a complex of farm buildings also called Bonycastle (Figure One). The *Archaeological Survey of County Down* records that built traces of stone and mortar masonry could be traced beneath the turf during the middle of the twentieth century and that the structure occupied a rock outcrop whose quarrying had furthered the destruction of the building (Anon. 1966, 228, no.846). The castle site is currently occupied by a large silage shed. The Sites and Monuments Record notes that during the construction of this shed in the early 1980s, ‘large flat slabs together with lime mortar’ were found.¹ These slabs and mortar were presumably elements of the lower courses of the apparent castle building. The compilers of the *Archaeological Survey of County Down* plausibly identified the site with the historically attested *Buncastellis* - first recorded in the *Rental of the Ninth Earl of Kildare* (begun in 1518 and now preserved among the Harleian Collection of manuscripts in the British Library) as being in the ‘countie of Lecale’ and consisting of two carucates (Quinn 1933-34, 61). A report on royal possessions prepared by a special commission in 1540 confirms that the ‘two towns of Buncastells’ formed part of the manor of ‘Strongforde in Co.Leacayll’ and consisted of a nominal figure of 240 acres (Quinn 1933-34, 77). The age of the possible castle and the associated holding of two carucates is uncertain. The description of the footings of a mortared masonry structure noted above suggest the building was a towerhouse of later medieval date, however, if speculation that the name Bonycastle is an Anglicisation of

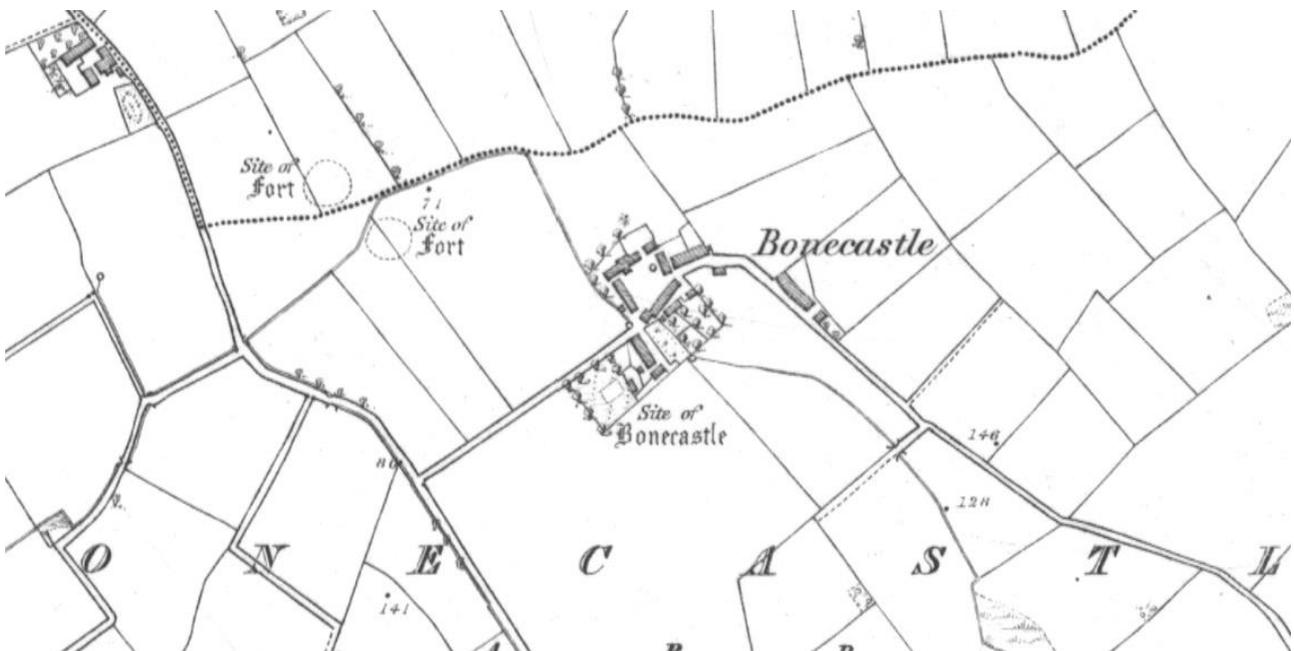


Figure One: Detail of the revised 1859 Ordnance Survey 6” map (Sheet

¹ A copy of the relevant SM7 File is available to download at: http://apps.ehnsi.gov.uk/ambit/docs/DOW/DOW_037/DOW_037_041/Public/SM7-DOW-037-041.pdf; accessed 15.10.14.

the Norman-French *Bon Castell* (i.e. 'good castle') is correct,² then the castle may have its origins in the Anglo-Norman period. Given that the excavation site is located within the townland of Bonecastle, it is reasonable to assume that it fell within the late medieval holding associated with the castle. Located between the excavation site and the recorded site of Bonecastle is a complex of farm buildings arranged around a large courtyard (centred upon J46364150; Figure One). It is possible that this courtyard site represents the centre from which the late medieval estate of two carucates was managed.

In 2012, the 'close' proximity of both the castle site and the potentially late medieval farm centre prompted an archaeological evaluation (Licence No. AE/12/43E) at the site of a proposed residential development in the garden (Trench 4) and steeply sloping field (Trenches 1-3) immediately behind a derelict property at 79 Vianstown Road (Mussen 2012). The date of this one-storey property is unknown, however, both it and the triangular-shaped garden to its rear are represented on the first edition Ordnance Survey map of 1834. Examination of the fabric of the surviving part of the building's northwestern gable in 2014 demonstrated that at least that part of the building's masonry was clay bonded suggesting the building's construction may pre-date the nineteenth century (Figures Two and Three). A total of four trenches were mechanically excavated during the course of the evaluation in 2012 (Figure



Figure Two: The reduced, northwestern gable of the former property at No.79 Vianstown Road, looking northwest. Scale 2.0 metres.

Notes the clay-mortared masonry and small patches of whitewash and secondary concrete pointing.

² A brief consideration of the place-name 'Bonecastle' is incorporated into the placenamesni.org website: <http://www.placenamesni.org/resultdetails.php?entry=12766>; accessed 15.10.14.

Four) in which superficial deposits of humic topsoil and cultivation soil, which varied in depth between 0.30 and 0.54 metres, were shown to overlay the surface of the natural subsoil. Two of the trenches contained no archaeological features (i.e Trenches 1 and 4), whilst a third (i.e. Trench 3) contained a field drain cut into the subsoil. Towards the southwestern end of the remaining trench (Trench 2), the truncated remains of an apparently shallow curvilinear feature (205) was exposed (Figure Four). It is suggested here that the extent and character of this feature was misinterpreted by the original excavator. Originally it was suggested that the feature had a surviving width of 0.30 metres and was filled with a dark grey-brown silt (206) that contained the occasional fleck of charcoal and was associated with a layer of burnt material and heat-modified soil (204) that had a maximum thickness of 0.06 metres and extended for a distance of 1.50 metres southwestwards and downhill from the feature. The relationship between the spread of burnt material (204) and the silty fill (206) of the cut feature was not obvious to the excavator, although the two were clearly associated. Combined the feature and the associated deposit had a maximum depth of only 0.21 metres and contained no cultural material. The excavator considered it 'likely that the burnt layer (204) originally formed part of ... [the] ... curvilinear feature (205) and spread from it in a natural downhill direction' (Mussen 2012, 4). Re-examination of the photographs taken of the feature and associated deposit, undertaken in light of the 2014 excavation results, suggest that the spread of burnt material is likely to have formed the primary fill of a truncated feature which was much wider than the excavator originally imagined (approximately 1.50 metres as opposed to 0.30 metres). Given its truncation and only partial exposure, interpretation of the feature is difficult, however, it may represent nothing more significant than a large fire pit of uncertain date. It remains possible, however, that it represents part of a feature of



Figure Three: Part of the clay-bonded northwestern gable of the former property at No.79 Vianstown Road, looking north.

archaeological significance and the original excavator reasonably recommended that ‘further archaeological monitoring of the site ... during the first stages of development’ took place (Mussen 2012, 5). The only artefacts found during the course of the evaluation were recovered from the trench located within the garden associated with the property (Trench 4) and consisted exclusively of twentieth- and twenty-first-century material.

The footprint of the residential development was located immediately adjacent to the position of the curvilinear feature uncovered during 2012 and a condition placed upon the granting of planning permission was that a full excavation of the development’s footprint was undertaken prior to the commencement of building works. At the request of Gina Baban (Northern Ireland Environment Agency), the author was asked to direct the mechanical excavation of the superficial deposits extending across this footprint in order to expose and record any element of the apparent curvilinear feature which extended into the footprint before subjecting it, and any other exposed archaeological features, to manual excavation.

Excavation: Methodology (including statement of confidence)

In order to both avoid confusion and remain consistent with the 2012 evaluation, the single trench dug in 2014 was excavated as Trench 5. The mechanical excavation of the superficial deposits within Trench 5 was undertaken by a contractor (Kilbroney TimberFrame) appointed by the developer using a machine (Takeuchi TB290) equipped with a 1.8 metre-wide, back-acting, smooth-edged bucket under the direct supervision of the licensed archaeologist. Following removal of the sod (501) and topsoil/cultivation soil (502) the exposed surfaces (505) and features (504 and 507) were photographed and planned (scale 1:100). As these contexts were not of archaeological significance excavation was discontinued. The site’s stratigraphic sequence was documented using the standard context recording method. In addition to photography and illustration, the principal site record consisted of a site diary. The position of all four trenches excavated during 2012, along with Trench 5, were tied into the Irish Ordnance Survey Grid. Relevant members of the NIEA Inspectorate were kept informed of all significant developments during the course of the excavation. Following the completion of recording, responsibility for the site was handed back to the developer and their contractors.

The excavation was conducted using a mechanical excavator and, following removal of the topsoil and cultivation soil (502), the surface of the natural, glacial till, subsoil (508) was distinctive and easily recognisable. Upon their exposure, two archaeologically insignificant features (504 and 507) were immediately identified cut into the surface of the subsoil. Consequently, there is a high level of confidence that no additional features were missed during the course of the excavation.

Excavation: the Results

A near-rectangular-shaped area (approximately 18.0 by 9.0 metres in size, longest axis aligned northwest/southeast) was excavated as Trench 5. The trench straddled both the garden and an adjacent field to the rear of the former property located at 79 Vianstown Road and encompassed one of the trenches (Trench) 4 dug in 2012. Prior to excavation this area had been disturbed by the removal of an overgrown, approximately north-south aligned, hedge that had once formed the boundary between the garden and the field. The line of this boundary was still visible as a distinct break in slope between the steeply sloping field and the relatively flat garden.

Underlying a thin humic loamy sod (501) which, where it had not been disturbed, supported a vegetation of grass and occasional weeds, was a layer of disturbed greyish brown clay loam topsoil (within the garden area) and greyish brown clay loam cultivation soil (within the field area) that was mechanically excavated as a single stratigraphic unit (502). The cultivation soil was relatively thin

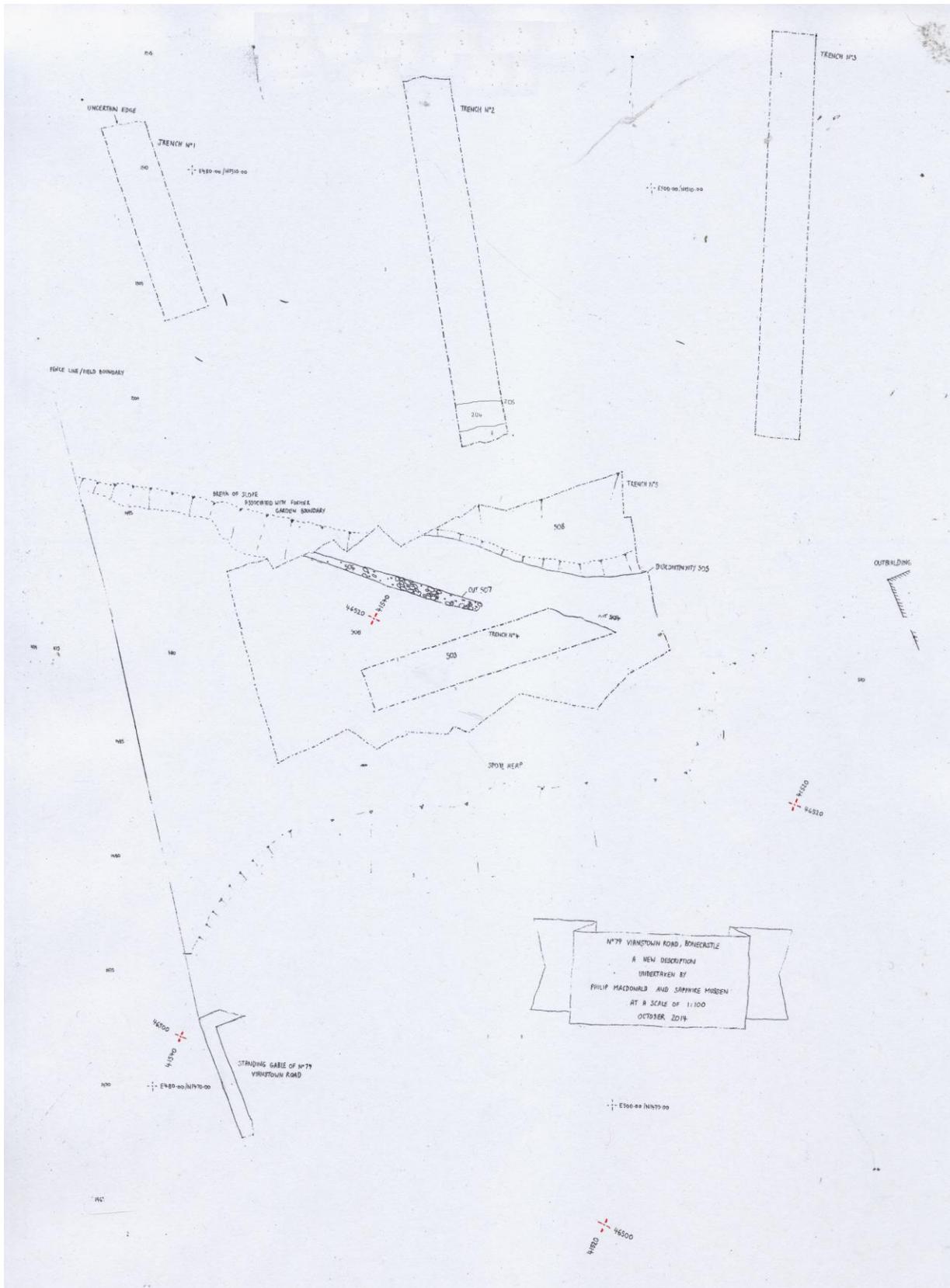


Figure Four: Field survey of site at 79 Vianstown Road showing position of the 2012 and 2014 excavation trenches. Ordnance Survey grid points are marked in red, site grid points are marked in black.

(0.10 to 0.15 metres thick) and contained a frequent amount of small sub-rounded to sub-angular stone inclusions and the occasional larger, plough-marked stone. The presence of the plough-marked stones indicated that the field had previously been cultivated, although today it forms an area of pasture. There was little difference in the character of the two soils, except that the disturbed topsoil excavated within the former garden contained a large number of nineteenth to twentieth century finds, whilst no material culture was recovered from the area of pasture. This marked pattern of finds distribution was consistent with that identified during the 2012 evaluation, where all of the finds were recovered from Trench 4 (located in the former garden) and not Trenches 1, 2 and 3 (all located within the adjacent field) cf. Mussen 2012, 3-4. The finds recovered in 2014 from the disturbed topsoil (502) included: ceramics (mostly blackware, transfer-printed pottery and tile fragments), window and bottle glass, ironwork (mostly structural fittings), copper alloy items of harness and a plastic ice-cream spoon. No finds demonstrably of eighteenth century or earlier date were identified, although it should be noted that some of the sherds of blackware may predate the nineteenth century. The collected artefact assemblage was not awarded find numbers or retained.



Figure Five: Trench 5 following mechanical excavation of topsoil and cultivation soil (502), looking northwest. To the left of the ranging rods the truncated base of Trench 4 (504) is clearly discernable, to the right of the ranging rods the field drain (507) is also visible. Scales 2.0 metres.

Removal of the disturbed topsoil and cultivation soil (502) revealed the surface of the natural, glacial till subsoil (508), which in the area of the former garden had been truncated by a near horizontal discontinuity (505) that had evidently been dug into the hillside in

order to create a comparatively level area (Figure Five). Within this garden area survived the bases of two truncated features: a field drain (507) and one of the trenches that had been excavated in 2012 (i.e. Trench 4 - which was awarded the context number 504). No features were present in the surface of the subsoil in the exposed area of the field above the line of the hedge. The line of the former field boundary was visible as a comparatively steep break in slope upon the surface of the natural subsoil. The character of the natural, glacial till subsoil varied markedly across the site. Over a short distance it changed from a relatively stone-free, light grey, very sticky and plastic clay to a stone-rich, orangey brown, sandy clay.³



Figure Six: the truncated field drain (507) following mechanical excavation of the topsoil and cultivation soil (502), looking north.
Scale 2.0 metres.

³ This marked variation in the character of the boulder clay is apparently responsible for the mistaken identification of the natural subsoil as being a 'mid orange brown silty clay (C203)' during the excavation of Trench 2 in 2012 cf. Mussen 2012, 3.

A large section of one of the 2012 evaluation trenches (Trench 4 / 504) extended across much of the southwestern part of Trench 5. This cutting was 1.80 metres wide, aligned approximately northwest-southeast and survived for a maximum length of 10.95 metres. The width of the trench is consistent with the standard size of bucket used during archaeological evaluations undertaken with mechanical excavators. The feature's location and alignment is consistent with that recorded in 2012 (Mussen 2012, 7, fig.3). Consequently, its identification with the previously excavated Trench 4 is certain. Excavation in 2014 demonstrated that Trench 4 had been backfilled with a mixed, waterlogged deposit of old turves and cinder-rich clay soils (503). The southeastern end of the feature was not identified, presumably because this end of Trench 4 had not been overcut into the natural subsoil during the 2012 evaluation.

The field drain (507) was aligned north-south and slowly diverged away from the line of the adjacent field boundary as it ran southwards (Figure Six). The drain had a width of 0.35 to 0.45 metres and extended towards the centre of Trench 5 for an exposed distance of 7.9 metres where it terminated. It was filled with medium-sized (maximum dimension 0.15 metres), sub-rounded to sub-angular stones the air gaps between which had largely become choked with a greyish-brown, silty clay loam soil matrix (506). In character, the field drain was identical to that uncovered during the 2012 evaluation within Trench 3 cf. Mussen 2012, 4, pls.9-10. Although the field drain was not excavated, careful examination indicated that the northern end of the drain which lay closest to the field boundary was more heavily truncated. This suggests that the field drain (507) was truncated by the near horizontal discontinuity (505) cut during the terracing of the hillside to create the garden to the rear of the former property at 79 Vianstown Road. Given that the earliest representation of the garden is that contained on the first edition 6" Ordnance Survey map, this indicates that the field drain predates 1834. Furthermore, the presence of the field drain strongly suggests that the excavation site was an unoccupied green field prior to the construction of the former property at 79 Vianstown Road. By extension, it also suggests that although the property was located on the periphery of the farm complex arguably associated with the late medieval 'Bonecastle' estate, it was not built on the site of an earlier medieval dwelling. It is unlikely that the field drain predates the beginning of organised agricultural improvement in the north of Ireland during the eighteenth century.

Concluding Remarks

The planning condition relating to the need for a full archaeological excavation in advance of commencing the construction of the new residential building at 79 Vianstown Road was successfully fulfilled. No features or deposits of archaeological significance were uncovered.

Unfortunately, as the footprint of the replacement dwelling did not coincide with the position of the apparently curvilinear feature uncovered within Trench 2 during the 2012 evaluation, it was not possible to establish the archaeological significance of this feature as had been originally intended. The uncovering of a comparatively large area of subsoil within Trench 5 did, however, enabled an improved appreciation of the marked variation in the character of the glacial till across the site. This, in turn, prompted a limited reinterpretation of the feature uncovered in 2012, which can now be confidently identified as an approximately 1.5 metre wide, apparently northwest-southeast aligned cutting filled with a soil containing burnt material and truncated by subsequent cultivation. A more precise interpretation of the feature is not possible, however, that it is located upon a relatively steep slope and is not associated with any evidence for the presence of a house platform or artificial terrace suggests that it is unlikely to have formed part of a building or domestic structure. Consequently, it is considered unlikely that the feature uncovered in 2012 is of any notable archaeological significance.

Bibliography

Anon. (ed.) 1966. *An Archaeological Survey of County Down*, HMSO, Belfast.

Mussen, S. 2012. *79 Vianstown Road, Bonycastle, Downpatrick, Co. Down*, (Centre Archaeol. Field. Eval. Rep. No.239) Centre for Archaeological Fieldwork, Queen's University Belfast, Belfast.

Quinn, D.B. 1933-34. Anglo-Irish Ulster in the early sixteenth century, *Proc. Rep. Belfast Nat. Hist. Phil. Soc.* N/A, 56-78.

Details of archive

Finds: N/A.

Photographs: Thirty-two digital images [P1040594-P1040625] showing the site before and after the excavation, temporarily held by the Centre for Archaeological Fieldwork, Queen's University Belfast.

Plans / Drawings: A single site plan (Scale 1:100) showing location of 2012 evaluation trenches and 2014 excavation trench (reproduced here as Figure Four), temporarily held by the Centre for Archaeological Fieldwork, Queen's University Belfast.

Signed: _____

Date: _____