



ULSTER  
ARCHÆOLOGICAL  
SOCIETY

---

# Survey Report

---

---

Reference: **Survey Report No. 47**

Author: **Ian Gillespie**

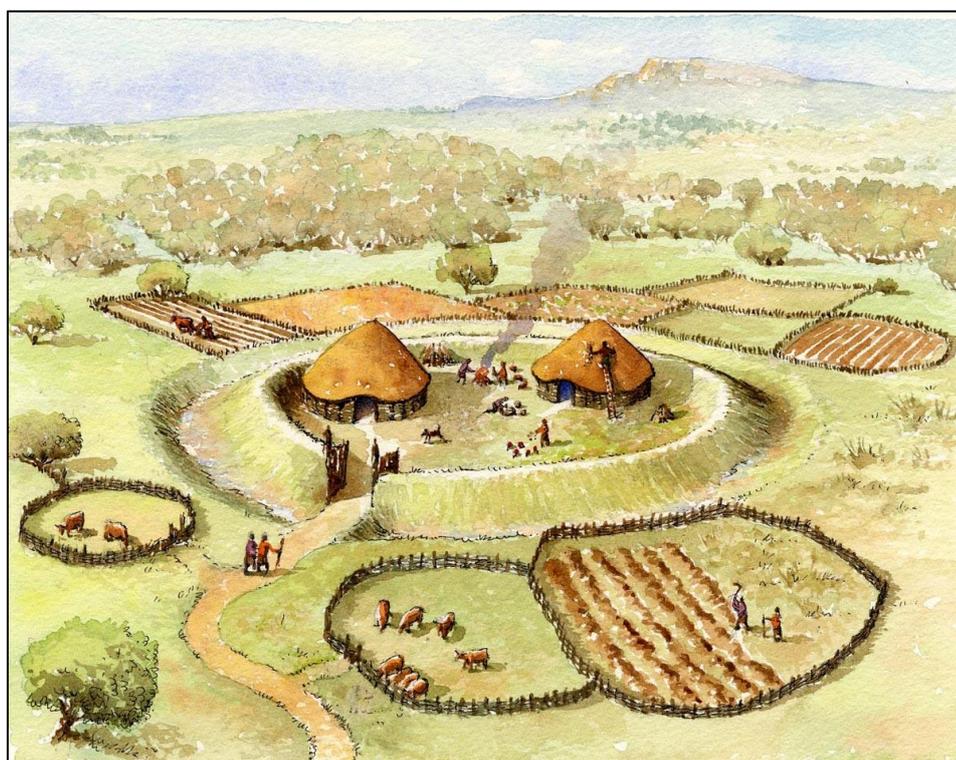
Location:

**Fort Hill Rath  
Mount Stewart  
Ards Lower  
IGR J 55277 70876**

---

In association with:

 **THE NATIONAL TRUST**



© Ulster Archaeological Society

First published 2016

Ulster Archaeological Society

c/o School of Natural and Built Environment

The Queen's University of Belfast

Belfast BT7 1NN

Cover illustration: Artist's impression of a rath *Philip Armstrong*

## CONTENTS

---

	<b>Page</b>
<b>List of illustrations and figures</b>	4
1. Summary	5
2. Introduction	6
3. Survey	14
4. Discussion	16
5. Recommendations for further work	23
6. Bibliography	24
 <b>Appendices</b>	
Photographic record	25
Photographs	26

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS AND FIGURES

---

<b>Figures</b>	<b>Page</b>
1. Location map for Fort Hill Rath	5
2. Aerial view of Mount Stewart demesne	6
3. DOENI field notes	7
4. DOENI field notes	8
5. DOENI field notes	9
6. Ordnance Survey GIS data	10
7. Ordnance Survey GIS data overlaid on aerial photograph	10
8. Ordnance Survey 1st Ed 1832	11
9. Ordnance Survey 2 <sup>nd</sup> Ed 1857	11
10. Ordnance Survey 3 <sup>rd</sup> Ed 1903	12
11. Map from Griffiths Valuation	12
12. Excerpt from “The properties of the National Trust for Places of Historic Interest or Natural Beauty in Northern Ireland	13
13. The Survey Team at Work	15
14. Site Plan	15
15. W-E Profile	16
16. Artist’s impression of a rath	17
17. Territory of Dál Fiatach and Uí Echach Arda	20
18. Distribution of Early Medieval settlement sites and maritime raths in the Strangford Lough region	22
19. Archaeological sites in Mount Stewart demesne	23
20. Northern Ireland Woodland Cover	24

## 1. Summary

### 1.1. Location

A site survey was undertaken of a rath, locally known as Fort Hill, in the townland of Mount Stewart, barony of Ards Lower, parish of Grey Abbey, County Down, Irish Grid reference J 55277 70876. The site is a listed but unscheduled monument in accordance with the Historic Monuments and Archaeological Objects (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 (SMR: DOW 011:004) and is situated on the National Trust's Mount Stewart property.



Figure 1: Location map for Fort Hill Rath



Figure 2: Aerial view of Mount Stewart demesne © National Trust

## **1.2. Aims**

In order to enhance the archaeological record of this site, the aims of this survey were to produce an accurate plan drawing of the monument and carry out a photographic survey. This information was compiled into a report and submitted to the National Trust.

## **2. Introduction**

### **2.1 Background**

The survey of Fort Hill was carried out on Saturday 31st May 2014 by members of the Ulster Archaeological Society survey group. A follow up visit was made on 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2016. This was the 47th such survey carried out by the Society, whose survey programme has been running since April 2006. This programme was undertaken in response to a decision taken by the committee of the Society to extend an opportunity to members to participate in practical surveys of archaeological monuments that had not previously been recorded. This decision had been prompted by a bequest to the society from the late Dr Ann Hamlin, from which the items of survey equipment were purchased. During discussions with Mr Malachy Conway, Archaeologist for the National Trust in Northern Ireland, it had been noted that many archaeological sites on National Trust property had not been subject to a detailed archaeological survey. It

was therefore agreed that members of the society would commence a programme to survey these sites.

## 2.2 Previous archaeological surveys

**2.2.1** A site visit was made by an archaeologist (initials G.R., possibly Greer Ramsey) from the Historic Monuments and Buildings Branch of the DOENI on 4<sup>th</sup> October 1991 (SMR7-DOW-011-004.pdf). He made the following field notes and an accompanying sketch (figures 3, 4 and 5):

ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY OF NORTHERN IRELAND			
Historic Monuments and Buildings Branch DOENI			
OS Grid Ref. <b>11:14</b>	Site Name <b>WANT SCHAET</b>	Type <b>Enclosure - RATH</b>	Altitude <b>100 ft +</b>
A No.	Site No.	Parish	DC
N	OS	Barony	DC
OS <b>see attached sketch</b>			
part of first survey			
Condition <b>well preserved</b>	Threat	Check/Action	Schedule
Land use <b>mixed conifer + deciduous woodland</b>		Field boundaries	
Site description		Photos? <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
<p>Interpreting the details of this site are complicated by the quite dense forest cover with numerous fallen branches, ivy and total pine needle cover. Despite this it is an impressive rath set on the crown of a hill with ground sloping immediately to the W - N - E but flatter towards the S. It gives the impression of having deliberately used the topography to its advantage which has influenced the details of the site. The interior is densely planted though some trees are immature and could be cleared. It consists of a circular flat platform <sup>slightly raised</sup> above the surrounding land with no distinct evidence for an internal bank, though to the S there is a slight rise <sup>of ground</sup> around its perimeter. It is surrounded by a broad ditch which is met in places. From the NE - E - SE the ditch stops, though its line continues as a small gully. The reason for this is not clear. If the ditch was originally as substantial as elsewhere, it has become filled. The only alternative explanation is that in this area there is slight traces of an external bank, not visible <sup>over</sup>.</p>			
Visited by <b>GR</b>	Date of visit <b>4/10/91</b>	Scale	Index

Figure 3: DOENI field notes (SMR7-DOW-011-004.pdf)

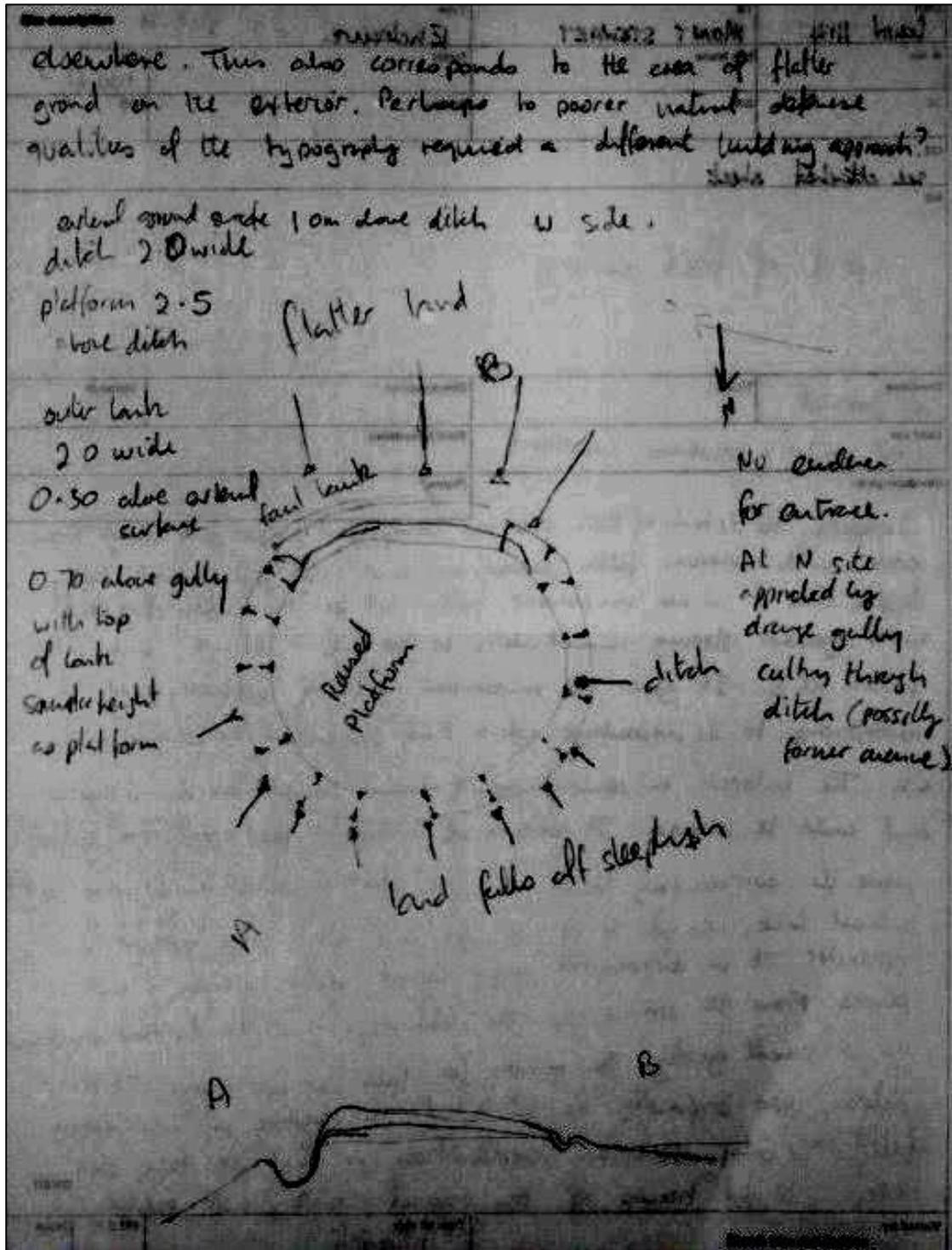


Figure 4: DOENI field notes (SMR7-DOW-011-004.pdf)

MOUNT STEWART:  
CS 11; IG

RATH

100 ft + OD  
IGR

Located within Mount Stewart forest in a dense stand of conifers and deciduous woodland are the remains of an impressive rath. Interpreting the details of the site are complicated by the level of forest cover and the numerous fallen branches strewn about the site. It is sited on the top slope<sup>s</sup> of a hill with ground falling immediately to the west, north and east, while towards the south it levels out. Taking advantage of this natural slope the site consists of a circular, raised platform sloping slightly to the east, which is densely planted, having a diameter of 33.0 m N-S and 31.0 m E-W. There is no distinct evidence for an internal bank, though to the south there is a slight rise of ground towards its edge. To the west the interior stands 2.50 m above a broad, wet ditch which is 2.0 m wide and 1.0 m below the external ground surface. The ditch surrounds the platform except for a stretch running from the NE-E-SE where its line can only be traced as a small gully. The reason for the absence of the ditch in this area is not immediately apparent. If it existed as the substantial ditch visible elsewhere, it may have silted through time. An alternative explanation is that topography of the site influenced the building techniques. In those areas where the ground falls off abruptly the material from the ditch has been used to increase the platform height and provide a level interior. However towards the south where the ground is flatter it may not have been necessary to displace much material from a ditch to add to the height of the platform. In addition, this area has the remains of an outer bank, not found elsewhere, measuring 2.0 m wide, 0.70 m above the gully and 0.30 m above the external ground surface. No trace of an entrance could be located. To the north, the site has a drainage gully cutting through the ditch.

SMR Dn 11:4

October 1991

Figure 5: DOENI field notes (SMR7-DOW-011-004.pdf)

### 2.2.2 Ordnance Survey GIS data



Figure 6: Ordnance Survey GIS data © OSNI

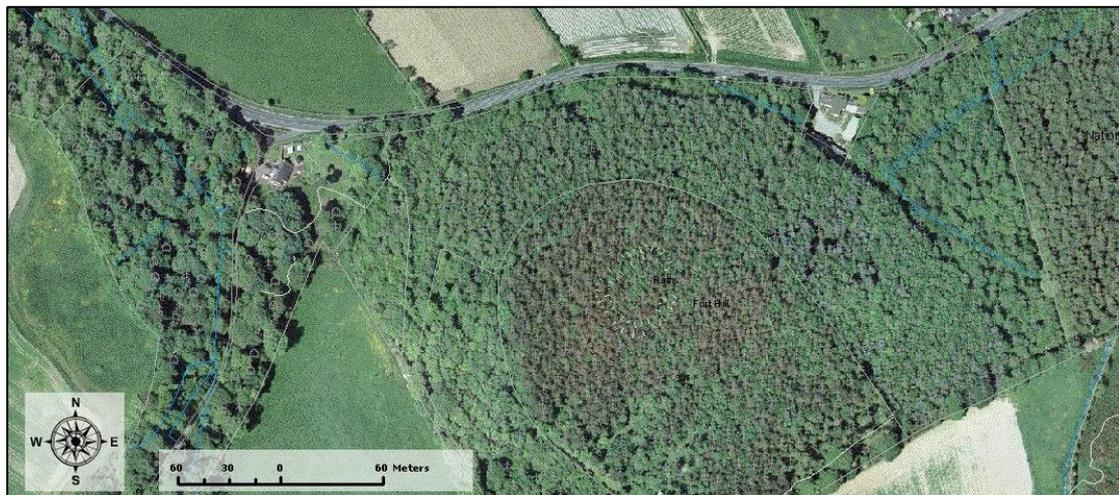


Figure 7: Ordnance Survey GIS data overlaid on aerial photograph © OSNI

### 2.3 Cartographic evidence

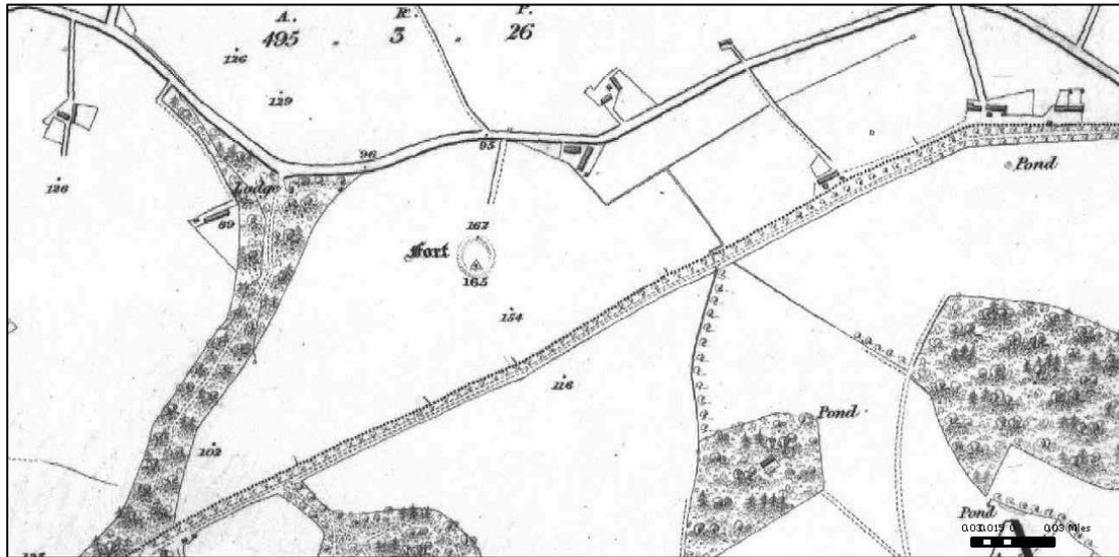


Figure 8: Ordnance Survey 1<sup>st</sup> Ed 1832 © OSNI

The first edition OS map shows the Fort in open ground, approached from the north east by a laneway from Mount Stewart road.

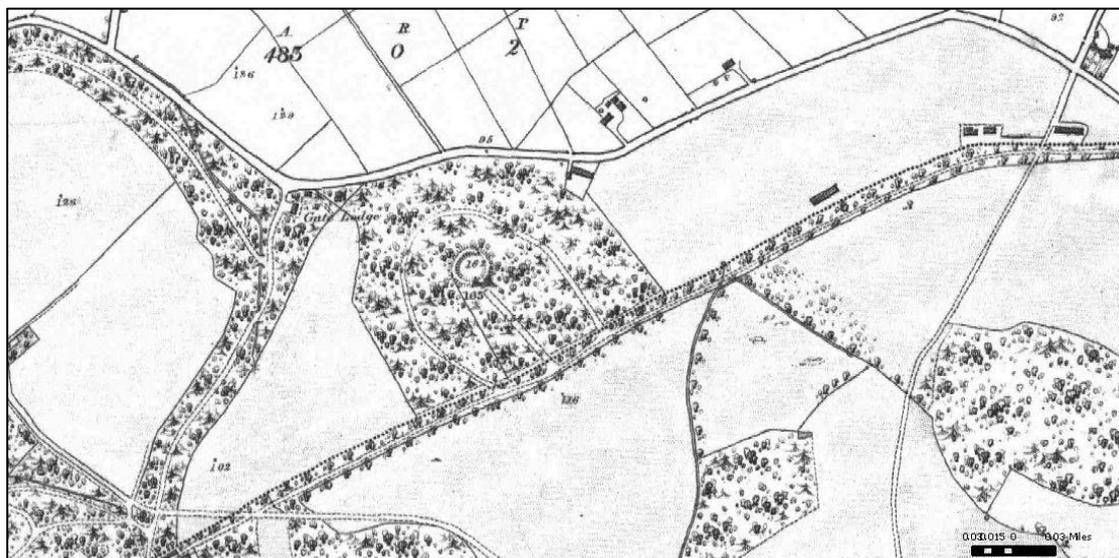


Figure 9: Ordnance Survey 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed 1857 © OSNI

By the second edition the land around the fort has been planted with mixed woodland. The path from Mount Stewart road has disappeared and there are a series of pathways circling the fort and an approach path from south south east within the Mount Stewart demesne.

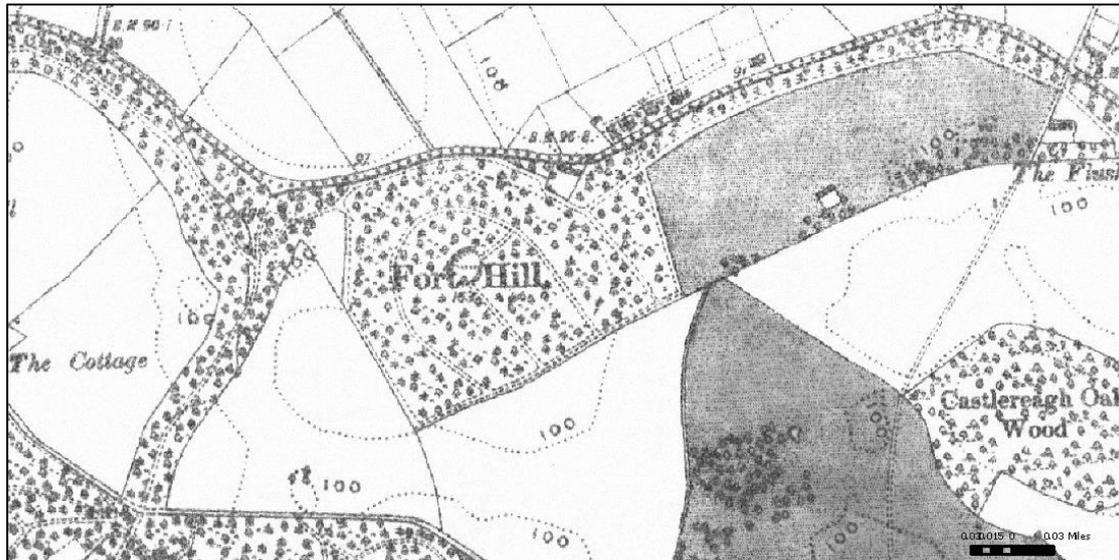


Figure 10: Ordnance Survey 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed 1903 © OSNI

By the third edition there is a second approach lane to the monument from east north east connecting to the circumferential pathway.

Griffiths valuation 1858

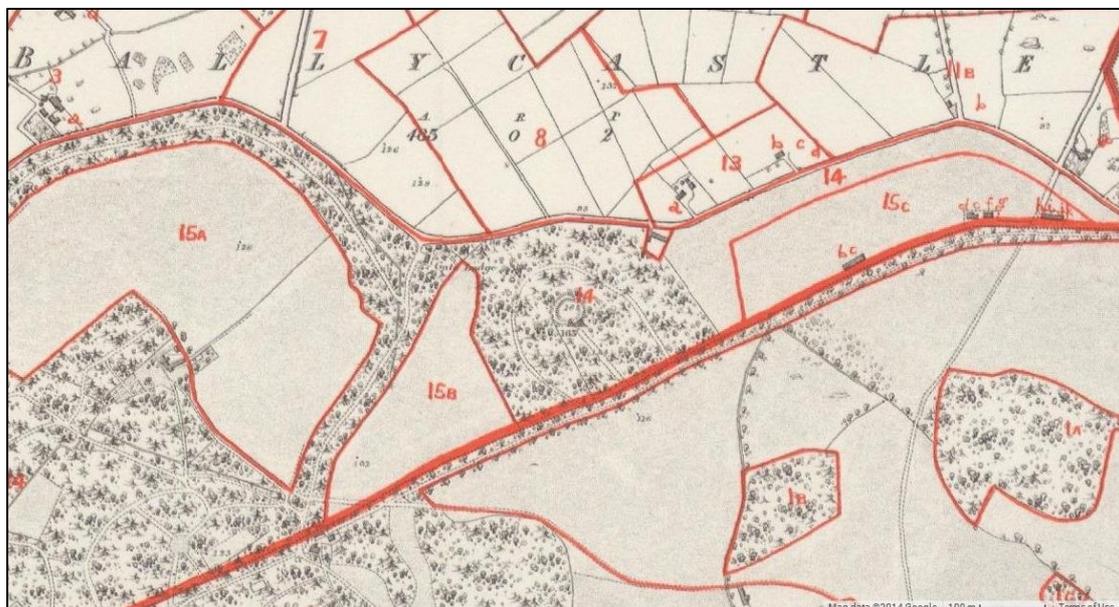


Figure 11: Map from Griffiths Valuation © www.askaboutireland.ie

Griffiths Valuation does not mention the fort specifically; however the land is listed as part of the Marquis of Londonderry's estate.

## 2.4 National Trust

Fort Hill rath forms part of the Mount Stewart demesne. The National Trust acquired the site. The reproduced below is an excerpt from a 1964 National Trust publication describing the site.

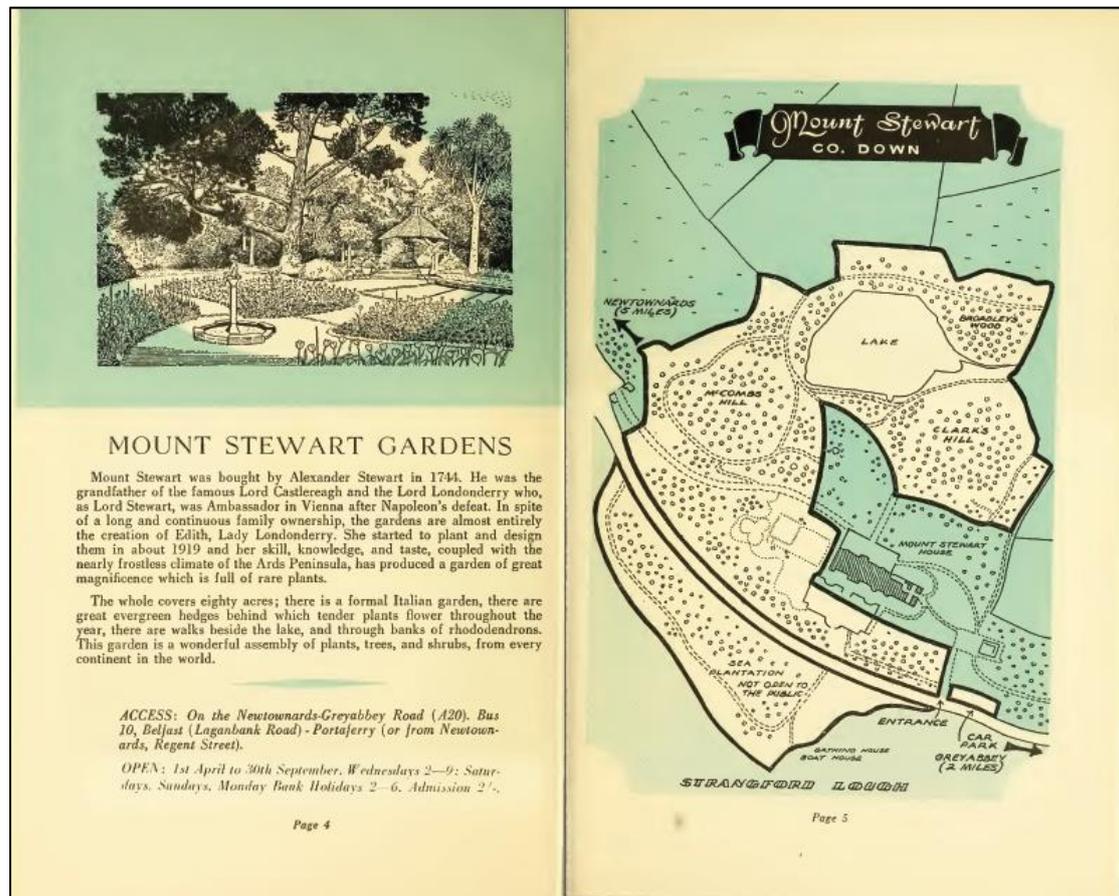


Figure 12: Excerpt from “The properties of the National Trust for Places of Historic Interest or Natural Beauty in Northern Ireland” National Trust Committee for Northern Ireland (1964)

Fort Hill rath was outside the boundary of the Mount Stewart estate as it existed in 1964.

## 2.5 Archiving

Copies of this report have been deposited with the National Trust. All site records are archived by the National Trust and a copy of the report is available on the UAS website.

## **2.6 Credits and acknowledgements**

The survey was led by Ian Gillespie and the other members of the survey team were: Philip Baxter, Colin Boyd, Hilary Boyd, Olive Campbell, Michael Catney, Ian Forsythe, Lee Gordon, Alan Hope, Anne MacDermott, Josephine Magill, Grace McAlister, Janna McDonald, George Rutherford, Randall Scott and Chris Stevenson. The Ulster Archaeological Society is particularly grateful to Mr Malachy Conway, Archaeologist for the National Trust, who worked closely with the survey team in choosing the site and facilitating access.

## **3. Survey**

### **3.1 Methodology**

It was decided that the survey would take the form of the production of plan and profile drawings accompanied by a photographic survey.

### **3.2 Production of a plan and profile drawings**

Sketch plans at 1:200 scale were completed on site by recording these measurements on drafting film secured to a plane table and the data obtained was also recorded on a field notebook for subsequent reference.



Figure 13: The Survey Team at Work

### 3.2.1 Site Plan

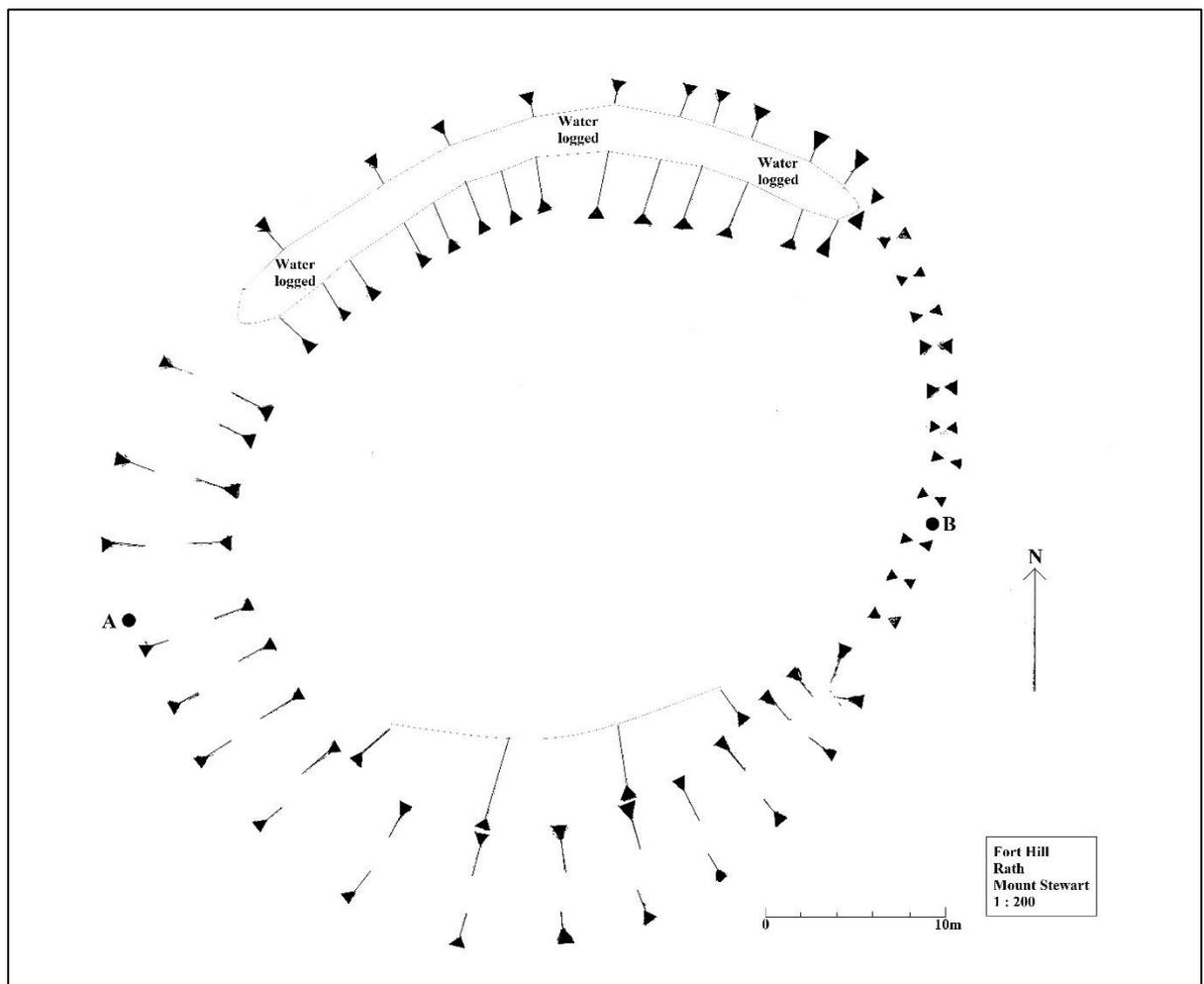


Figure: 14: Site Plan

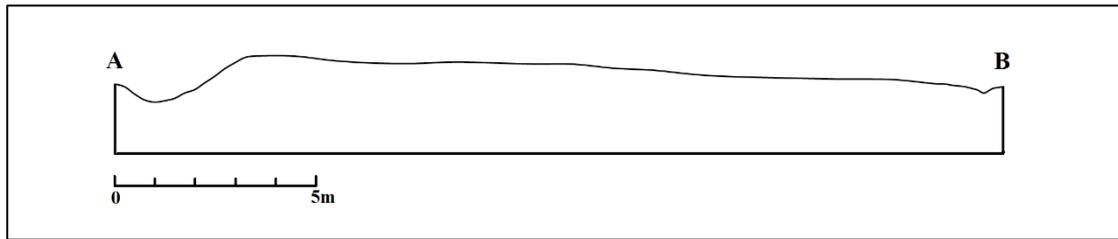


Figure 15: West - East Profile

### 3.3. Monument description

Fort Hill rath is a circular raised platform 33m North - South and 31m East - West. Its location seems to have been carefully chosen to take advantage of the natural contours of the hill on which it has been constructed. The platform slopes slightly to the East. There is a poorly defined internal bank between the South and South West. The platform is surrounded by a well-defined ditch except between East – South - East and North – North - East where it appears to have been filled in, leaving a narrow, shallow channel. This may have been undertaken to facilitate heavy machine access to the site when it was being planted.

To the West the platform stands 2.5m above the ditch, which is 1m below the external ground surface.

### 3.4. Photographic archive

A photographic record of the site was taken by using a Ricoh Caplio G600 Wide, 8 megapixel digital camera. A photograph record sheet was used, corresponding to photographs taken during the site survey. The archive has been compiled in jpeg format and saved to compact disc.

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1 The Rath or Ringfort

The rath or ringfort is the ubiquitous monument in the Irish countryside. Matthew Stout (1997, 14) opens his monograph 'The Irish Ringfort' with the statement that 'The ringfort is such a common and simple monument, and one so familiar to Irish field workers, that a definition seems almost unnecessary'.

The introduction of the word 'ringfort' to archaeological parlance in the early 20th century gave a scientific name to the many and varied Irish native enclosed settlements. The apparent intention was to replace the colloquial Irish ráth, lios, caisel and cathair with a universally accessible descriptive term (Fitzpatrick, 2009). This author prefers to use the more specific term 'rath' when referring to a monument of this type.

It is estimated that approximately 45,000 raths were constructed in Ireland between the 7<sup>th</sup> & 10<sup>th</sup> centuries (Stout 1997, 53). They have been interpreted as the defended settlements of landowners, enclosing houses or possibly farmyards (Lynn, 2005).

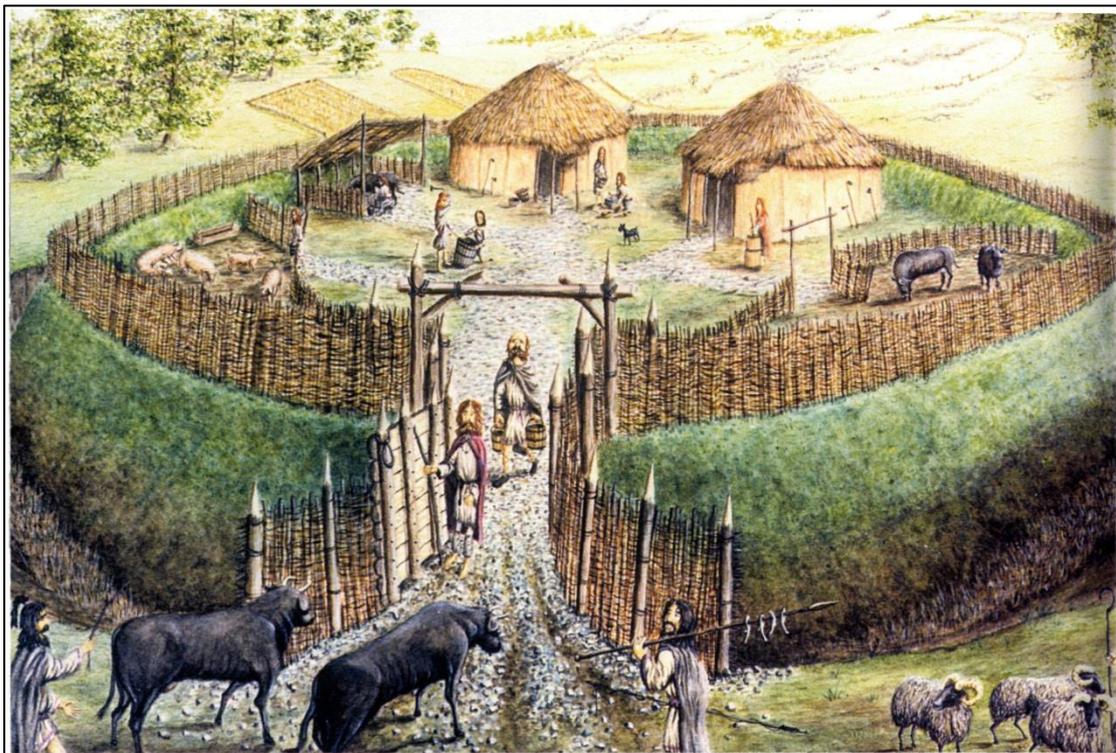


Figure 16: Artist's impression of a rath (After Lynn 2005)

Lynn questions why a significant proportion of the population of Ireland suddenly decided to live in isolated defended settlements of this form in the late seventh and

eighth centuries, but not before and not since? This seems especially puzzling given that in other aspects of life at the same time, for example art, learning and the church, Ireland is regarded as enjoying a golden age, a beacon for Europe in the 'Dark Ages'. He points out that there was little evidence of invasion or raiding from abroad at that time and, furthermore, the rath defences would not have been adequate to resist a determined attack.

He postulates that the people who built these defended settlements may have witnessed the effects of a series of plagues which may have killed up to 25% of the population in the mid sixth century, and built these raths to protect their families from contact with those infected (Lynn, 2005).

#### **4.1.1. Typology**

In the Archaeology Ireland series 'Know Your Monuments', O'Sullivan and Downey (2007) describe the main rath types and their functions:

**Univallate raths**, which are by far the most numerous (80% of the total in some areas), are circular enclosures, some 20-40m wide, with a single earthen bank and an external ditch.

**Cashels** are raths with a stone-built enclosing wall. They are generally smaller than univallate raths, with an average internal diameter of 25m (and in some locations much less).

**Counterscarp raths** have an additional low bank surrounding an internal bank and ditch. Kerr (2007, 3) notes that in many cases they are erroneously equated with multivallate raths, noting that 'the external counterscarp bank may not represent an event contemporary with the construction of the rath, but may represent maintenance of the ditch, whether during occupation of the rath, or at a later more, recent date'.

**Platform, or raised, raths** have large, flat-topped central areas, raised some 2m or more above the surrounding countryside. Raised raths have been defined as having 'a perimeter bank around the top area' (Jope 1966). Platform raths may have been built

by altering the natural landscape to develop a raised profile; alternatively, they may have been created by the accumulation of debris over a long period of occupation, so as to raise the enclosed area above the water-table and alleviate waterlogging. Kerr (2007) points out that relatively few platform raths seem to have been deliberately constructed; a number appear to have evolved from pre-existing univallate forms.

**Multivallate raths** are larger and more complex structures, with two (bivallate) or three (trivallate) series of enclosing banks and ditches, and with central areas comparable in size to the univallate forms.

#### **4.1.2 Chronology**

As further detailed by Kerr (2007), the majority of univallate raths date from ca. AD 600-900. Multivallate and counterscarp raths show a similar dating distribution but may have a slightly earlier starting date. Platform raths seem to date from a later period, between the mid-eighth and mid tenth centuries AD. The construction and occupation of raths appear to have tapered off before the coming of the Anglo Normans (Stout 1997).

#### **4.1.3 Who may have occupied Fort Hill Rath?**

In the 7th and 8th centuries the Ards peninsula was occupied by a tribe known as the Uí Echach Arda and, as such, the area was known as Aird Ua nEchach, ‘peninsula of the Uí Echach’ (McKay 2007). This territory was part of the over-kingdom of Ulaid, and its inhabitants claimed to be descended from Eochaid Gonnat who was of the Dál Fiatach (O’Lavery 1878). The principle family in this area was MacDunlevy (Scott 2015).

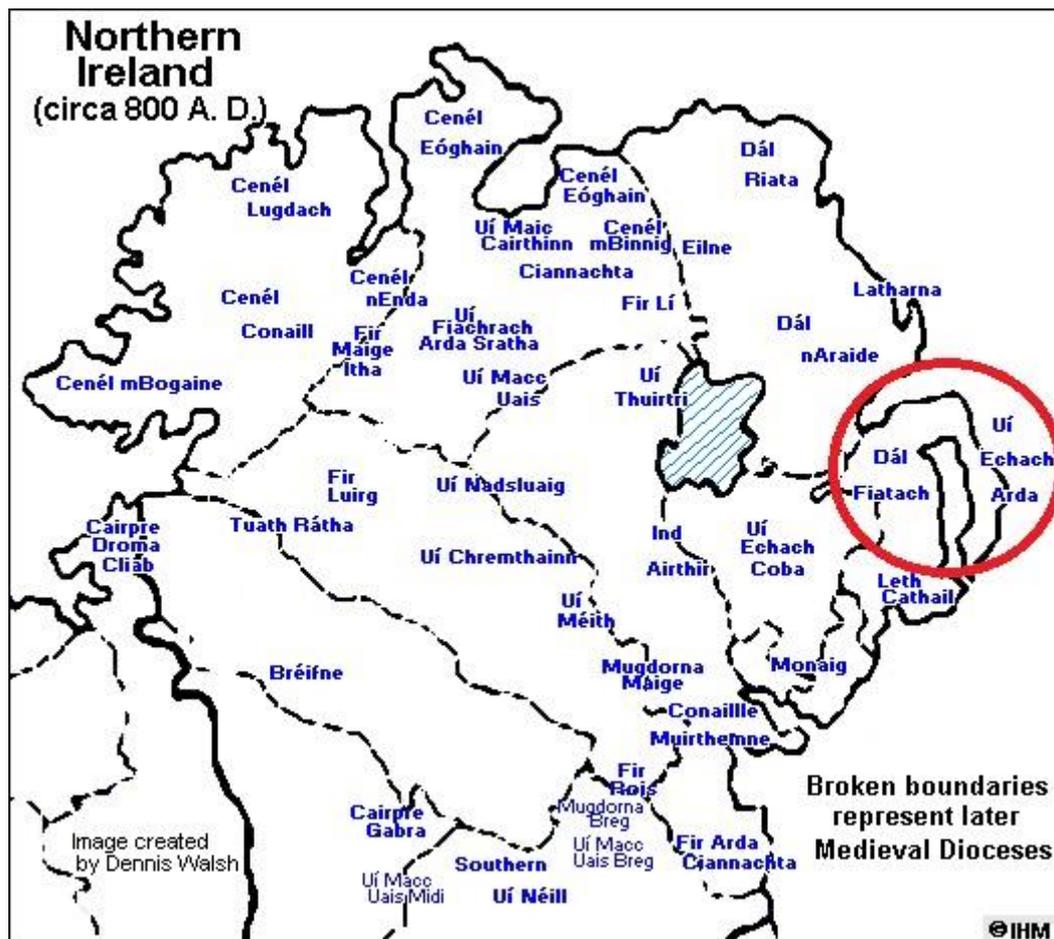


Figure 17: Territory of Dál Fiatach and Uí Echach Arda

The occupiers of Fort Hill were likely a well to do farming family. Given that Aird Ua nEchach is situated well to the east of other tribe lands, one hopes that they led a relatively peaceful existence – until the coming of the Vikings in the 9<sup>th</sup> Century and the Normans in the 12<sup>th</sup> Century!

In a paper published in the Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy O’Sullivan (2010) utilises evidence from archaeology, history, anthropology, social theory and experimental archaeology to explore dwelling practices, domestic life and society in early medieval Ireland, particularly between the sixth and ninth centuries AD.

Writing about early Irish medieval society O’Sullivan writes:

Kinship and gender relationships were also significant in daily family life within a rath or cashel, governing the ownership of property; the practices associated with livestock management and

food preparation; or the practical social and economic ties that bound an extended kin group together. The role of dwellings and settlements is all the more important when we recognise that they were the main location of one of the key social units in early medieval Ireland; the *'muintir'* ('household'), which was quite unlike the modern family and which variously included those people connected by blood descent (i.e. grandparents, parents and children); marriage or sexual relationship (e.g. husband and wife); fosterage (foster-father and foster-son relationships being of key importance); and economic dependency (e.g. slaves and servants who lived and worked with prosperous families carrying out the more menial tasks of grinding grain or digging ditches). The *muintir* were also part of the *'fine'* ('wider kin group'). In the seventh century, and perhaps for some time afterwards, the *'derbfine'* was an extended kin group whose members were descendants of a common great-grandfather through the male line. The *derbfine* held and worked common farm land (*'fintiu'* or 'kin land') and had many legal and social obligations to one another—including co-operative labour and gathering together for various occasions.

In early Irish law and narrative literature, the enclosure around a house was known as the *'les'* ('farm-yard or 'courtyard'), which term referred to the enclosed space itself rather than the *'ráth'* ('earthen rampart') around it. In the eighth-century law text *Críth Gablach*, there are various penalties prescribed in the event of trespass into a house or dwelling enclosure. A person is allowed to open (the gate of?) the *les* from the outside without penalty - presumably to see if anyone is home and to announce his or her presence. However, if someone enters without permission into a *mruigfer* or prosperous farmer's *les*, the culprit is obliged to pay five *'séuit'* in restitution for the initial entry. Should the person venture in further and open the door of the house, a fine of another five *séuit* is incurred and if he or she peers into the house a fine of one cow must be paid (O'Sullivan 2010).

Fort Hill rath may have continued to be occupied until the beginning of the second millennium however it would certainly have gone out of use with the arrival of De Courcy and the Normans who built a large motte 1.3 km south east of the rath in the late 12<sup>th</sup> century.

## 4.2 The archaeological landscape

Forthill Rath is one of a large number of raths located in the vicinity of Strangford Lough as shown in figure 18

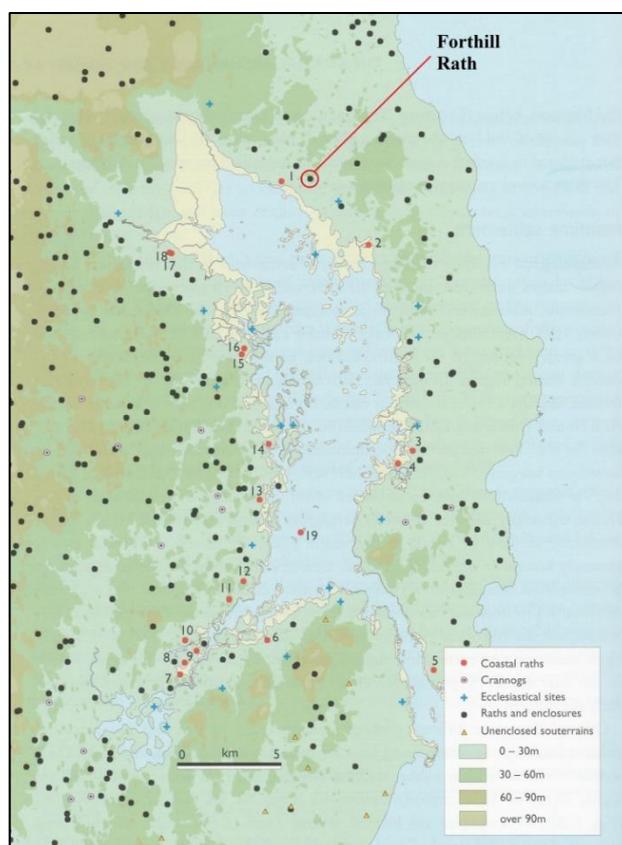
Fort Hill rath is one of a number of significant archaeological sites on the Mount

Stewart demesne (figure 19). Located 1.3km to

Figure 18:  
Distribution of Early Medieval settlement sites and maritime raths in the Strangford Lough region. (McErlane 2002)

the south east is Moat Hill motte (SMR DOW011:006). This is a substantial Norman motte which is located 430m north west of the site of a medieval church site known as Templecrone (or Templecran) (SMR DOW 011:007). This site has also been surveyed by the UAS survey team (Scott, R. Stevenson, C.

2015) and it has been noted that, in the vicinity of Strangford Lough, it is not uncommon to find such early churches built adjacent to Norman mottes, suggesting a possible Norman date for the church.



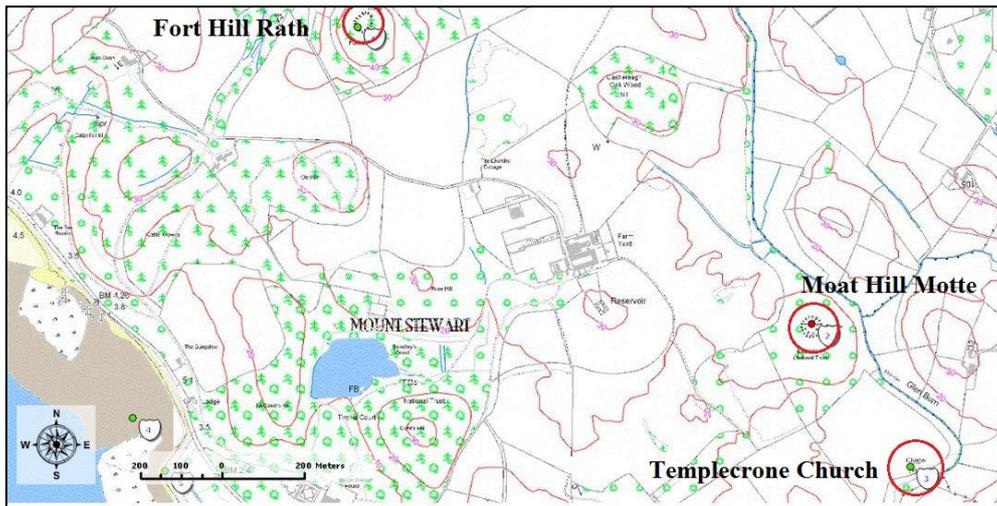


Figure 19: Archaeological sites in Mount Stewart demesne © NIEA

### 4.3 Ards Landscape

Woodland occupies only 2% of the area, most associated with estates; prominent among these are Mount Stewart, Rosemount/Greyabbey and Carrowdore Castle. The broadleaved woodland (lowland woodland pasture and parkland) in these estates is predominantly beech with oak, sweet chestnut, sycamore, wych elm, lime, ash and alder.

Coniferous woodland is mainly in the Mount Stewart estate and is predominantly Japanese larch and Norway spruce. Unfortunately, some of this replaced clear felling of hardwoods; it is to be hoped that when these are harvested, broadleaves will replace them.

## 5. Recommendation for further work

The planted woodland on the site has not been well maintained. The monument is overgrown with trees and foliage such that it is difficult to appreciate its extent and nature. Access to the site is hazardous as a consequence of the many fallen trees which pose a significant trip hazard.

The woodland is the responsibility of the Northern Ireland Forest Service (NIFS) which sits within the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD). The following excerpt is from the Woodland Register map published by DARD on 1

April 2015 (accessed at <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/dard/niwoodland-cover-map-conifer-broadleaf-mixed-by-ownership.pdf>) showing those areas of forest within Mount Stewart demesne that are the responsibility of NIFS - which includes Fort Hill rath (figure 20):

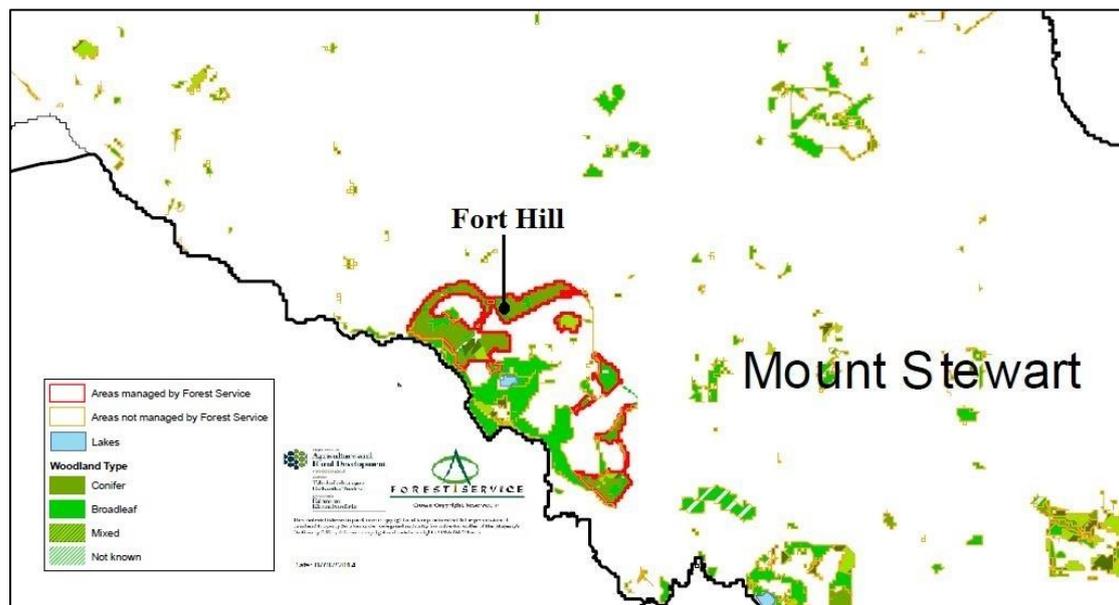


Figure 20: Northern Ireland Woodland Cover (part of) Crown Copyright Reserved ©

Although Fort Hill rath is not protected under the Historic Monuments and Archaeological Objects (NI) Order 1995, it is imperative that the woodland covering the monument is cut back and maintained in future.

## Bibliography

FitzPatrick, E 2009. 'Native Enclosed Settlement and the Problem of the Irish 'Ring-fort'', *Medieval Archaeology*, 53.

Jope, E.M. (ed.) 1966 *An archaeological survey of County Down*. Belfast. HMSO.

Kerr, T.R. 2009 'The height of fashion: raised raths in the landscape of north-west Ulster', *The Journal of Irish Archaeology* Vol. 18, (2009), pp. 63-75.

Lynn, C. 2005. 'A Plague on All Your Rathes', *Archaeology Ireland*, Vol. 19, No. 4. (Winter 2005), 14-17.

McErlane, T., McConkey, R. & Forsythe, W. (2002) *Strangford Lough: An Archaeological Survey of the Maritime Cultural Landscape*. Blackstaff Press

McKay, P. 2007 'A Dictionary of Ulster Place-Names' 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., Belfast. Clo Ollscoil na Banriona

National Trust. *The properties of the National Trust for Places of Historic Interest or Natural Beauty in Northern Ireland*, National Trust Committee for Northern Ireland (1964).

O'Laverty, J. 1878 'The Territory of the Ards'. *An Historical Account of the Diocese of Down and Connor, Ancient and Modern, Vol. I*. Retrieved August 2016.

O'Sullivan, A. 'Early medieval settlement enclosures in Ireland: dwellings, daily life and social identity'. *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* Vol. 111C, 59–90 © 2010 Royal Irish Academy

O'Sullivan, M. and Downey, L. 2007. 'Ringforts', *Archaeology Ireland*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (Autumn, 2007), pp. 32-35.

Scott, R., Stevenson, C. (2015) *Survey Report: Templecrone Church Ruins Mount Stewart Co Down*. [online] Available at: <https://www.qub.ac.uk/sites/uas/UASfilestore/CoDown/Filetoupload,545605,en.pdf> [accessed 29 October 2016]

Stockman, G. (ed.) 1992 "Place-names of Northern Ireland, Volume 2" Institute of Irish Studies, The Queen's University of Belfast, 1992.

Stout, M. 1997. *The Irish ringfort*. Dublin: Four Courts Press.

## Appendices

### Appendix 1. Photographic Record Form;

*Ricoh Caplio G600 Wide, 8 megapixel digital camera*

Frame no	Direction viewed from	Details
RIMG0003	NE	Looking SW
RIMG0009	E	Looking W
RIMG0012	S	Looking N
RIMG0015	W	Looking E
RIMG0016	S	Ditch at E
RIMG0018	S	Causeway
RIMG0020	W	Causeway

Appendix 2. Photographs

	
RIMG0001 Looking SW	RIMG0009 Looking W
	
RIMG0012 Looking N	RIMG0015 Looking E
	
RIMG0016 Ditch at E	RIMG0018 Causeway
	
RIMG0020 Looking W from Causeway	