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Jordyn Marlin  
*Palm Beach Atlantic University*

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The Black Friary:  
Reflections on a Community Archaeology Project

Jordyn Marlin  
Palm Beach Atlantic University  
(West Palm Beach, Florida)

*Editorial introduction*

The Blackfriary Community Heritage and Archaeology Project (BCHAP), conducted by the Irish Archaeology Field School (IAFS), is a program focused on archaeological excavations at the location of a 13<sup>th</sup> century Dominican friary in Trim, Co. Meath, Ireland. IAFS has attracted students of various skills and backgrounds from around the world to participate in various heritage themed courses such as field archaeology and bio-archaeology. Students are provided in-depth insight into Irish archaeology and culture through experiential hands-on learning, specialized lectures, and tours of various leading heritage sites. Jordyn Marlin, currently a senior studying history at Palm Beach Atlantic University, attended the IAFS in the summer of 2014 and had the privilege of returning as a student assistant in 2015 as a member of the Community Team. His essay below outlines a contextual summary of the Black Friary and its excavation, as well as the importance of the Black Friary project to Trim's contemporary community. More information about the project can be found on the official website <http://iafs.ie/>.

## Location, Location, Location

The Black Friary is located in the town of Trim, one of the foremost heritage towns in County Meath, which is itself known as the heritage capital of Ireland. County Meath is home to a plethora of other important heritage sites, including the UNESCO World Heritage Site, Brú na Bóinne<sup>1</sup> and the Hill of Tara,<sup>2</sup> both famed as the seat of the High Kings of Ireland. It is argued that Trim was founded by St. Patrick, who established a monastery in Trim sometime around the fifth or sixth century, before leaving it in the care of Trim's now patron saint, Saint Lommán.<sup>3</sup> The town is strategically placed on the River Boyne, which runs broadly east to west through the town, and undoubtedly contributed to the development of Trim from a pilgrimage stopping point to a powerful medieval town.<sup>4</sup> The foundations of the later medieval town occurred in the 12<sup>th</sup> century (following the Norman invasion) when Hugh de Lacy, the Lord of Meath, founded Trim Castle; Trim Castle, the largest castle of its type in Ireland, remains the number one tourist attraction in the town.

## The Black Friary

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<sup>1</sup> A complex of Neolithic enclosures, mounds, standing stones, and passage tombs such as Newgrange, Knowth and Dowth.

<sup>2</sup> "Brú Na Bóinne, "Archaeological Ensemble of the Bend of the Boyne," UNESCO World Heritage Centre, <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/659> (Accessed November 27, 2015.)

<sup>3</sup> Nathalie Stalman and T.M. Charles-Edwards, "Meath, saints of (act. c. 400- c.900)," *Oxford dictionary of national biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> Charles George Herbermann et. al. eds, *The Catholic Encyclopedia: An International Work of Reference on the Constitution, Doctrine, Discipline, and History of the Catholic Church*, Compiled by Knights of Columbus, Vol. 13 (Encyclopedia Press, 1913), 761.

The Black Friary was a Dominican friary located just outside the northern limits of the medieval town of Trim. It was the seventeenth Dominican establishment in Ireland.<sup>5</sup> Founded by Geoffrey de Geneville in 1263, the Black Friary was an important site in the medieval Trim, serving as a meeting place for Irish bishops as well as for parliamentary meetings.<sup>6</sup> The Black Friary was suppressed in 1540 as part of the Dissolution of the Monasteries, but continued to serve the community in the Post-medieval period as a cillín burial site (an unconsecrated burial ground for individuals not permitted a Christian burial, frequently used for unbaptized children). However, the buildings remained abandoned and fell into a state of disrepair.<sup>7</sup> The Black Friary was recorded as ruinous but standing by Bishop Burke in 1762,<sup>8</sup> but by 1795 the buildings had been quarried to fuel a building boom in the adjacent town: "...[all that was left was] a few remaining heaps of old wall (like rock) of a castle or some other building."<sup>9</sup> In 2010, when excavations at the site commenced, all that remained visible of the 'friary' was grassy hummocks in the field, with one or two larger pieces of masonry protruding from the ground.

Since IAFS' excavations commenced, the site has welcomed students from around the world. These students have contributed to some remarkable findings, helping to clarify the plan of the friary's buildings as well as investigating agricultural and burial practices at the site. To date, over 100 burials have been excavated at the Black Friary under the expert supervision of Professor Rachel Scott of DePaul University. The burial population reveals that while the site was first used as a medieval cemetery, the site continued in use post-dissolution as a cillín burial ground for infants and young children.

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<sup>5</sup> Flynn, *The Irish Dominicans, 1536-1641* (1993)

<sup>6</sup> Potterton, Michael, *Medieval Trim: History and Archaeology*, (Dublin, Ireland: Four Courts Press, 2005), 319; Hennessey referenced in Green, Ashely, "Excavations at the Black Friary: A Unique Digging Experience in Ireland" in *The Post Hole*, (York: University of York, 2015) and 64.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Potterton, *Medieval Trim: History and Archaeology* (Dublin, Ireland: Four Courts Press, 2005), 330.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

### Community Emphasis: A Personal Reflection

The Black Friary site has historically been a focal point for the community, providing vital services to the Trim community during its active years and continuing in community use as a cillín burial site, post its 16<sup>th</sup> century dissolution. Thus in 2010 when excavations began it was fitting that the local community, unlike with many archaeological projects, were placed at the center of the research endeavor through the creation of the locally coordinated BCHAP group.

BCHAP a joint initiative of several partners, including the local community, IAFS, tourism provider Cultural Tourism Ireland, Meath County Council, statutory organisations, and a range of academic partners (including all IAFS' students)! BCHAP can be summarised as having two main objectives: first, to provide heritage community outreach and education events, helping to further enthuse the Trim community on their fantastic medieval heritage, and second, to help rehabilitate the Black Friary site into a valuable amenity/green space for the local community of Trim. Both these objectives are in keeping with the founding principle of BCHAP in 2010 to help protect and promote the heritage of the Black Friary site.

BCHAP's ethos is made abundantly clear to students and was evident during my time on the site as part of the Black Friary's Community Team in 2015. As part of my role I was instructed on how to interact with the local community and guided on how best to illustrate the importance of the archaeological work taking place at the site. Through such interactions it is hoped the local community will increasingly see the Black Friary as an important site that is worthy of safeguarding. The Black Friary excavations are always open to local community, who are encouraged

to participate in family days, walking tours, school visits, exhibitions, and lectures. In 2015 alone IAFS and BCHAP collectively organized over 29 community events – over a period of two weeks!

One of the larger and ongoing outreach projects (named “Living among the Monuments”) was in the process of being established and advertised while I was on the Black Friary Community Team. This project aims to document the social history of Trim that is retained in living memory. BCHAP hopes to work with local, national, and secondary schools, community groups, and individuals, to collect and collate stories, memories, folklore, photographs, and other forms of local knowledge relating to the social history and heritage of both Trim and the Black Friary. The projects main objective is to record and archive such information, so that it can ultimately be presented in a publicly accessible manner and made available as an educational resource.

In addition to community outreach, BCHAP is equally interested, as stated, in improving the Black Friary site as a community resource. In 2014 (when I first attended the site as a student) BCHAP partnered with a jobs initiative scheme called Gateway, administered through Meath County Council, which saw 12 local men placed on the Black Friary on a part time basis to contribute to amenity works. The ‘Gateway crew’ has helped tremendously with amenity and landscaping programs – redressing decades of neglect and illegal dumping activity on the site. From 2014-2015 the Gateway crew helped to install safety rails and signage, erected new fencing, constructed new site entrances, and contributed to general waste management on site. A notable example of their work, while I was with IAFS, was the rehabilitation of a finishing archaeological cutting, Cutting 11, into a learning and activity attraction for younger site visitors.

Cutting 11 was initially opened to explore a possible location of the northern limits of medieval town wall. While the ‘real’ wall was not found, the Gateway workers constructed a one to one scale replica, before burying both the wall and other simulated archaeology. The cutting is

now regularly used by the “Dig It Kids program,” which allows children to learn about basic archaeology concepts through a hands-on activity, letting them realize their dream of becoming archaeologists for a day!

In 2014 a local charity that works with teenagers, named “SMART” (South Meath Area Response to Teenagers), also joined under the BCHAP umbrella. From 2014–2015, SMART, together with the Gateway crew, installed a community garden on the site (that was formally launched in June 2015). This garden was constructed in the previously unsightly entrance area to the site, an area that had, in the past, seen extensive dumping activity. The symmetry in the community garden was intended to mirror the medieval symmetry of the friary and its associated gardens, thus complementing the heritage site. The initial garden provided seating for 32 people, and was beautifully planted and decorated with murals by local youths. By the time I left the site at the end of summer 2015, plans were already afoot to follow the garden with a community orchard!

The garden and oral histories project are just examples of the extensive efforts made by IAFS and BCHAP to engage with the local community. It was the community aspect of working on the Black Friary that left the greatest impact on me; the Black Friary was not only the place I solidified my decision to pursue a career in archaeology, but also the reason I am passionate about the need for community integration in our work. Not only does the IAFS staff help students excel in their personal studies, but they also teach us how to communicate the importance of our work to our ‘host’ communities. This focus on community inclusion in preservation of their heritage is inspiring. As part of the Community Team on site this summer of 2015, I had the privilege of being able to observe the site’s progress on the archaeological level, as well as interact with the local community and tourists groups. I was able to get to know the members of the community on a

deeper level and build both professional and personal relationships. The town of Trim and the project at the Black Friary has captivated my heart, and I look forward in years to come to returning to see how the site has evolved and the community has utilized this beautiful piece of their heritage.

## Appendix



Figure 1. View of Trim Castle and Yellow Steeple (Image: Author's own).



Figure 2. LiDAR survey results with the cuttings outlined. (Image provided by Dr. Denis Shine, IAFS).





Figure 3. News clipping from the Meath Chronicle concerning BCHAP's Medieval Family Day (Image: Author's own taken for IAFS archives).



Figure 4. Children participating in an archaeological activity during 'Medieval Family Day' at the Black Friary, in Cutting 11. (Image: Author's own taken for IAFS and Dig It Kids).

*About the author*

Jordyn Marlin is a senior studying history at Palm Beach Atlantic University. After two seasons of fieldwork in Irish medieval archaeology, she looks forward to continuing her education at the University of Glasgow in the Celtic and Viking Archaeology MLitt program.