

**Harry Welsh and Ruth Logue**, Centre for Archaeological Fieldwork at Queen's University, Belfast, **Malachy Conway**, National Trust Archaeologist and **Lizzy Pinkerton**, Landscape Partnership Scheme Manager of the Belfast Hills  
Partnership report on an interesting dig at Divis, Belfast

### Introduction and background

A small-scale research excavation was carried out at the site of a proposed car park at Divis townland, Co. Antrim, between 22 April and 17 May 2013. The site lies within the Divis and Black Mountain property, owned by the National Trust and close to the warden's base, also known as Divis Barn. Planning approval had been granted for the development without any archaeological conditions, but the National Trust considered the project suitable for a public-outreach excavation. This was adopted by the Belfast Hills Partnership as part of an on-going programme of such work in the Belfast Hills, funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund and supported by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency: Built Heritage (NIEA). The excavations were led by professional archaeologists from the Centre for Archaeological Fieldwork at Queen's University Belfast (CAF) and a wide range of schools and community groups took part.

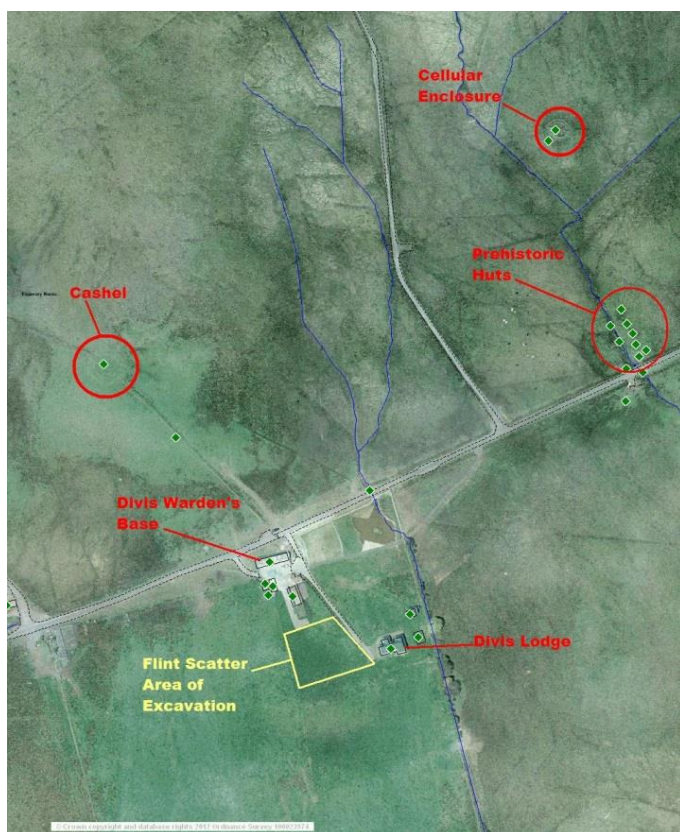


Figure 1: Aerial view of excavation site *National Trust*

A small excavation team from CAF was augmented by volunteers from the Ulster Archaeological Society, students from Queen's University Belfast and members of the general public. Sixteen local primary and secondary schools, four community groups and two young archaeologists groups supported the event and a total of 987 people actually participated in the excavations. Many other people visited the site during the course of the excavation and the event attracted widespread media attention, including television, radio and local newspapers. Also during the event, a number of courses in basic monument survey were carried out, designed to equip local people to explore the hills and record ancient monuments, enhancing the archaeological record of the Belfast Hills.



Figure 2: Members of the Ulster Archaeological Society Survey Group recording at the site

### The excavation

The excavation comprised four trenches, located over areas where flint scatters had been reported and where anomalies had been identified during a resistivity survey carried out immediately prior to the event (Figure 1). Trench 1 (3m by 3m) was opened in an area to the north-west of the centre of the site where flint scatters had previously been identified by National Trust staff. Finds included 965 flints, including an arrowhead and 32 pottery sherds. When the public excavating had finished, the trench was excavated by professional archaeologists, who found two linear features cut into the sub-soil, interpreted as furrows from lazy bed cultivation.

Figure 3: Illustration of Local primary school children [Lizzy to provide?]

Trench 2 (8m by 6m) was located at the south-east of the site, where several stones with a regularity, or alignment, had been observed and where the geophysical survey indicated a possible structure. This trench was excavated by members of the Ulster Archaeological Society, who have built up considerable expertise in excavation techniques thanks mainly to opportunities provided in recent years by the National Trust and the Belfast Hills Partnership. When the topsoil had been removed, a rectangular stone platform was revealed, measuring 5m east/west by 4.2m north/south.

A wealth of finds was recovered from around the stones, including an intact glass ink pot, presumably used in conjunction with quill pens (Figure 5). A wide range of metalwork, ceramic and glassware fragments were also recovered, including two further sherds of seventeenth-century pottery. The stone platform has been interpreted as being the floor of a small vernacular building, probably a cottier's house, the existence of which had been previously unknown.



Figure 4: UAS members excavating house in Trench 2



Figure 5: Glass ink pot recovered from Trench 2

Trench 3 (3m by 3m) was opened over an anomaly which appeared in the results of the resistivity survey, to the south-east of the centre of the excavation area. Following the removal of the topsoil, weathered bedrock and sub-soil were uncovered, with a linear feature cut into the sub-soil.



This feature, which was most likely to have been the remains of a cultivation furrow had a similar north-east/south-west alignment to the features observed in Trench 1. Finds included a further 314 flint items, with another arrowhead (Figure 6), pottery and slate. The anomaly which had been highlighted in the resistivity survey results was probably the weathered bedrock uncovered in the trench.



Figure 6: Flint arrowhead

Trench 4 (6m by 6m) was opened at the north-eastern corner of the site, where significant amounts of flint had been found when the National Trust had been de-sodding during a path construction programme. This trench was employed as the main excavation site for the school groups participating in the project and their interest was maintained by the large amount of finds recovered from this trench. These included 1682 flints, 11 clay pipe fragments (some decorated), glass, metal and pottery fragments, including two more dated to the seventeenth-century. When the public excavating had finished, the trench was excavated by professional archaeologists, who found three linear features cut into the sub-soil, interpreted as evidence of lazy bed furrows and with a similar alignment (north-east/south-west) to those found in trenches 1 and 3.

### The wider landscape

There are several interesting monuments close to the excavation site, including stone-built circular structures known as the *Cashel* and the *Cell-Bay Enclosure*. These have been surveyed by the Ulster Archaeological Society (McAlister 2012 and Gillespie 2011 respectively), but their age and function will probably remain uncertain unless excavation is carried out to recover some dating evidence. Several Bronze Age burial cairns have also been surveyed. These are *Summit Cairn* (Welsh and Welsh 2007), *Cairn 2 Black Mountain* (Welsh and Welsh 2007), *Yellow Jack's Cairn* (Rutherford 2009) and *Cairn 3 Divis* (McShane and Cooper 2012). A group of circular hut platforms, known as the *Divis Settlement Site* is located close to the excavation area and this has also been surveyed (Gillespie 2011). Four vernacular houses have also been investigated, including *House Site 1 Black Mountain* (Dunlop and Catney 2009), *Divis Farm* (McDonald and Catney 2013) and *Johnston's Green* and the

*Hatchet House* (in preparation). Many other sites have been identified by staff of the National Trust and will be the subject of future investigation, while many others probably await discovery under the blanket bog in the area.

### **Conclusion**

The National Trust Divis and Black Mountain property is steadily revealing its wealth of archaeological sites, which range from Bronze Age burial cairns to enigmatic enclosures, field systems, vernacular houses, early industrial sites and relics from the two world wars. The ownership of the site by the Ministry of Defence for many years in many ways protected the area from development and its acquisition by the National Trust will ensure that this fascinating landscape will be available for all to explore and enjoy in the future.

Thanks to the efforts of organisations such the Belfast Hills Partnership and National Trust, public awareness of the Belfast Hills as a place of interest and relaxation is increasing rapidly. One of the aims of the project was to encourage an interest in the archaeology of the Belfast Hills and through this encourage people to value and engage with the area and its heritage. The high levels of media coverage, public participation and positive feedback have confirmed this has been a success. The research aims of the excavation have also been met, along with exciting new information about previously unknown vernacular house on the property.

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