

Meeting on 14th November 2018
Historical Development of Mount Stewart
Malachy Conway, Regional Archaeologist National Trust

The speaker at the Ards Historical Society's November meeting was Malachy Conway, the National Trust's regional archaeologist. 'Historical Development of Mount Stewart' was a journey through time from pre-history to the present day.

A demesne is defined 'as an area of land, usually surrounding a manor and often walled that is retained by the owner for their own use'. A demesne will be a minimum of 20 acres and at one time they occupied 4% of the land area of Ireland.

A comprehensive aerial survey of the whole demesne was undertaken during 2015 using LIDAR (Light Detection And Ranging), a technique that produces high resolution 3D images of the terrain accurate to 0.5cm. By linking with sophisticated satellite positioning software a full 3D analysis of the site has led to new discoveries and different interpretations of some previously known features. As the LIDAR 'cuts' through trees, shrubs and other ground cover, ring barrows, burial sites, medieval and more recent features have been identified and a much better understanding is emerging regarding habitation of the demesne and surrounding area.

By 10,000BC the ice cap had fully receded and the Strangford Lough shoreline and adjoining land has been moulded by widely fluctuating sea levels that continued into the Mesolithic era (8,000–4,000BC). For part of that time the sea was 20 metres above today's low tide level. There is however much evidence of hunter gatherers living around the foreshore that would have been rich in foods such as shellfish, fish, wildfowl and eggs. The discovery of an oak log boat at Greyabbey that has been carbon dated between 3419-3032BC; and submerged oak and pine has been uncovered that has been dated earlier suggest that the area around the lough has been a busy place for thousands of years.

There is evidence of early settlement at Mount Stewart and prior to 1786 a Bronze Age multiple cist cairn had been discovered. Cists are stone boxed burial containers that often contain artefacts such as jewellery, food and drinking vessels. 6 pottery food vessels found in the cists can be seen at the Ulster Museum. Detailed archaeological records have been maintained since the discovery and in 1862 a large central cist was located surrounded by 14 smaller cists. Remains of circular enclosures, retained walls an underground archway exist, flint tools and implements and 2 twisted gold bars have been found that indicate a possible cist burial site.

450-1177AD, defined here as the early Medieval Age, discoveries dating to that era include remains of a ring fort and farmstead plus 2 or 3 timber buildings surrounded by an inner ditch outside of which farmers would keep livestock. Importantly an early stone church possibly that of St Korcony from which the later place name of Temple Crone or Templecrone is derived.

The Norman conquest of Ireland was quick, disciplined men in armour with deadly bows and arrows; their leaders mounted on horses that were also shielded with armour ensured that the local population armed with little more than axes stood no chance. In 1177 John de Courcy declared himself King of Ulster and established a new Norman lordship based around Carrickfergus Castle that he commenced building in 1178. The recently rediscovered Motte at Mount Stewart is now thought to have had a timber

castle at the top that as well as having a defensive function may also have been an administration centre. LIDAR imaging indicates that the earth mound is much earlier at one time being surrounded by a double banked enclosure. The earliest verified occupant was Robert de Singleton who in 1333 was a free tenant holding a caracute of land; a medieval unit equating to approx. 120 acres.

Alexander Stewart purchased the 675 acre demesne, buildings and other townlands from Robert Colvill in 1744. In 1780 he commissioned the 'Temple of the Winds' that was based on the Tower of the Winds, Athens. Alexander's second son Robert was to become the 1st Marquess of Londonderry and he planned the construction of a grand house on Bean Hill with panoramic views across the lough. The house was never started as he diverted much of his wealth towards promoting his son, also Robert with the aim of achieving high political office. Instead he built the first extension on the west side of the existing house in 1804. Robert was to become Viscount Castlereagh, British Foreign Secretary and later take the title 2nd Marquess upon his father's death in 1821. The aerial survey provides an explanation as to the positioning of the 8 acre walled (rose) garden, ha-ha stone wall, laundry, old dairy all of which were positioned to be within the environs of the intended new house. In 1834 the 3rd Marquess acquired land at Ballycastle townland extending the demesne to appx. 1000 acres and by 1845 the east extension had been added completing the house very much as it looks today.

In 1940, members of RAF Squadron 231 (reformed from 416) were stationed at the Mount Stewart and remains of platforms, nissen huts and brick buildings have been located. Zig-zag trenches have been identified possibly constructed by Royal Engineers that were billeted at the house where they occupied rooms in the attics. Near to the Motte, a cluster of tree trunks have been carved with names and slogans, one being 'Victory is ours'. A concrete quadrant tower stood at the north end of the area of land where the swimming pool once was. It has been discovered that the purpose was a location point from which pilots carrying out bombing practice aimed their bombs on targets in the lough.