Uncovering the lost town of Dunluce

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Development funding of £302,000 was awarded to the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) in support of their initial plans and will enable them to draw up more detailed proposals in order to secure the full £4million grant.

Dating from the 16th and 17th centuries, Dunluce Castle was once at the centre of the lordship controlled by the MacDonnell's that spread from the North East of Ulster to the Western Isles of Scotland. Today, it is part of the Causeway Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), is a must-see tourist attraction and provides one of the most iconic images of Northern Ireland.

The new Dunluce Castle Cultural Heritage Project will build on the discovery in 2009 of the incredibly well preserved remains of part of the lost town of Dunluce. Established in 1608 by Randal MacDonnell, the first Earl of Antrim, the town was razed to the ground during the Irish uprising of 1641 before being finally abandoned in the 1680s. Over the next two centuries the houses and streets were slowly buried and grassed over, with all above ground traces of the settlement gone by the 1860s. NIEA worked in partnership with the University of Ulster and Queen's University Belfast to carry out the archaeological excavations on this lost town on the land adjacent to Dunluce Castle. The initial excavations revealed the formally designed and planned settlement contained a cobbled meeting place and market, houses, industrial buildings and administrative offices, alongside artefacts such as blacksmith's tools and horseshoes which lie where they were abandoned.

This ambitious project will help to rewrite the story of the castle and town by fully excavating and conserving the buried archaeological features and opening these up to the public to increase understanding of the site and its heritage.

Commenting on the announcement, Head of HLF Northern Ireland Paul Mullan, said: "One of the most exciting aspects of this project is the opportunity to step back in time and reveal this superbly preserved 17th-century town, which has lain undisturbed for centuries. It will also provide opportunities for people to get actively involved in helping to reveal and secure the future of this hugely significant heritage asset for current and future generations to experience, learn from and enjoy.

"We are delighted to support these outline proposals. There is much work to be done however and we look forward to receiving the fully developed plans in due course."

"Welcoming HLF's announcement, Environment Minister Alex Attwood, said: "I very much welcome that the HLF has chosen to support this opportunity to explore the hidden heritage at Dunluce, and to develop a new visitor facilities here which will do justice to this incredible site. I visited the site in the summer of 2011 and have worked with HLF to get to this point.

"I see much potential unearthing our historic past to boost tourism today. A lot of work went into ensuring the archaeological details of the Crannog in Co Fermanagh which has shed new light on life in medieval Ireland. Now we fast forward a 10 centuries to Dunluce.

"Dunluce has very exciting archaeology, and the potential of uncovering our own 'little Pompeii' is huge. I and NIEA are looking forward to working with the HLF, and other key partners such as the local councils, local landowners,

businesses and the University of Ulster to deliver this project.

"This is an exciting opportunity. Protecting and enhancing our heritage and building infrastructure is key going forward. Dunluce creates another big exciting unprecedented opportunity. Promoting tourism around the Causeway Coast has been a key priority of mine that is why I have approved the planning application for the Bushmill's Dune and secured funding to reduce dereliction within this area. This will be a further tourism boost to the area."

The five year project will significantly enhance the visitor experience at Dunluce. It is hoped that everyone coming to the site will be able to take part in the future digs to reveal the hidden heritage and improvements will be made to the current visitor facilities to support this archaeological activity. Opportunities for visitors to learn more about and engage with the heritage of the castle, garden and town will be improved with the design and use of new interpretive materials, enhanced exhibitions and multi-lingual displays. The project will also create volunteer and apprenticeship opportunities in traditional building skills such as stone masonry. Additionally a new heritage trail will be established to link together other heritage sites associated with the MacDonnells.

Notes to editors

Initial support means the project meets our criteria for funding and we believe it has potential to deliver high-quality benefits and value for Lottery money. The application was in competition with other supportable projects, so a first-round pass is an endorsement of outline proposals.

Further information

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