

Irish Museums Association (IMA) Education and Outreach Forum 2015

19 June. National Museum of Ireland – Decorative Arts and History

Engaging with 17th Century Coleraine. Sarah Carson, Collections Access Officer, Coleraine Museum.

SLIDE 1

2013 marked the 400th anniversary of Coleraine's Town Charter, presented to the town in 1613, and as such Coleraine Borough Council (now Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council) wanted to commemorate the occasion. A working group made up of cross party representatives and council officers chose to offer a school workshop programme, as part of the project, to engage local children with 17th century Coleraine. Museum staff were tasked with organising and implementing this programme.

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Coleraine Museum is different from most museums as we don't actually have a permanent building. The collection of over 30,000 objects are stored at Council headquarters and we hold exhibitions, workshops and so on at our accredited space in Coleraine Town Hall. This space is booked out by others throughout the year for Irish dancing festivals, music festivals and the Pantomime so this has to be taken into account when planning temporary exhibitions and school programmes. In order to develop a workshop plan for the Coleraine 400 schools project we had to reflect on past work, search our collections and think about activities that would be meaningful and appropriate.

It seems apt to give a bit of context and a short overview of the plantation in Coleraine. In the early 17th century King James I devised a scheme under which 55 London Merchant companies, known as guilds or livery companies were obliged to invest in County Coleraine which was renamed County Londonderry. The county was divided up and the 12 great companies with their associate companies were given land to 'plant'.

In 1613 King James granted a Royal Charter to The Honourable The Irish Society, the body that had been set up to govern the Londonderry Plantation. The Church and some native Irish were also granted land.

For centuries Coleraine has held a crucial part in Irish history and it was key in this plantation scheme. A fortified town was built on this ancient site on the River Bann under the direction of The Honourable the Irish Society. The town's defensive fortifications were an earthen rampart bank crowned by a timber palisade. A shallow, water filled moat ran outside the ramparts with a series of dams filled with water. There were 2 gates in the ramparts – the Kingsgate and the Blindgate which helped control who could get into and out of the town. There was a curfew bell located in Bell House Lane. Houses were built in the 'English' style. They were made of timber frames from logs shipped down the River Bann. The first row of these houses was constructed in New Row. The timbers were joined on the ground in one long row, and then hauled up onto their stone foundations. The Church, that already existed, was repaired.

Coleraine was connected through its port with Britain, Europe and America, enabling trade. The River Bann was full of salmon and eels, which could be sold and exported. The valuable fishing rights were granted to The Honourable the Irish Society. The area was also striped of its timber, some of which was used for building the town and the rest was also sold and exported.

On 28th June 1613 King James I granted the town of Coleraine its charter. This charter allowed the town to hold markets, to trade with the world, set up the local government system modelled on the system in London and enabled Coleraine to send representatives to Parliament.

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Causeway Museum Service, of which Coleraine Museum is part of, had been working on how to present plantation history in a way that conveys the complexities. They had found it extremely beneficial to take community groups and people out to plantation sites such as Dunluce Castle, Movanager, Dungiven Priory and Coleraine town centre as examples, and to have the archaeologists who excavated the sites reveal what they found there. This presented interesting theories which can contradict common preconceptions or at least is able to provide food for thought. One of the participants in a project ran by Causeway Museum Service said “What I will remember most is learning for the first time that there is Irish Scottish and English architecture in Dunluce Castle. I was in awe. I feel like I am part of it, more than before. It is my roots. It belongs to no one side, it belongs to us all. My perspective has completely changed.”

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Another example of this mix of culture was discovered at Movanager, near Kilrea. Excavations carried out at Movanager in 1999 by Audrey Horning focused upon the village site, and recovered materials associated with an English timber-framed house and with a vernacular Irish dwelling adapted and occupied by English settlers. Artefacts recovered included a mixture of Irish and English ceramics and it is thought or suggested that this may reflect day-to-day interaction between the settlers and the local inhabitants. Something which is commonly thought to have not happened. So, we knew how successful these tours were in prompting discussion and encouraging people to rethink their history and decided that we wanted to include something similar in the Coleraine 400 school workshops. The only issue with Coleraine was that other than the street layout which is exactly the same as it was in the 17th century – very little visual evidence of this period actually remains – imagination and a facilitator who was able to vividly describe what would have been there was going to be essential.

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The Museum Collection is the most important part of any Museum and it is where all our work stems from – exhibitions, outreach, education and other activities. On this occasion our programme was being driven by an anniversary rather than our collection, fortunately we knew that we had a small pool of relevant objects but that we needed to expand this in order to deliver an education programme with objects at its centre. You can see a clay pipe, the book of Coleraine – this dates from 1816 and contains the only visual record of 17th century houses surviving into the 19th century – it is completely unique and irreplaceable.

The Coleraine Mace dates from 1702 and the sword dates to 1616. The sword was presented to the Corporation by representatives of the Honourable the Irish Society and it is supposed to be so flexible that you can bend the tip of the blade to the hilt without it breaking. The last image is a cigarette card dating to 1913 – this series of cigarette cards featured the crests of the 55 London livery companies involved in the Londonderry Plantation. The Ironmongers were granted land in the Aghadowey area. Having worked closely with archaeologist, Nick Brannon, we were aware of his excavations in Coleraine and that the Northern Ireland Environment Agency stored the artefacts from his digs.

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We were able to loan some material from them, in particular items that were associated with the oldest known town house, at the time, discovered by Nick Brannon on New Row in Coleraine. They dated this house to 1674 – the roof was dismantled and can now be seen in the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum. Objects that we borrowed included a colourful chamber pot imported from Stoke-on-Trent, leather shoe pieces, fragments of Venetian glass, a bridle piece, tankards among other artefacts.

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In the first phase of the Coleraine 400 project over 550 pupils from state schools, catholic schools, an integrated school and a special needs school participated in history and art workshops. It was decided by the Coleraine 400 working group to offer the workshops to all schools in the then Coleraine Borough Council. This included Primary and Secondary Schools and all schools that wanted to participate were accommodated. We did find that it was mostly primary schools that took part. Interestingly, we did have several smaller schools join up and come together such as Castleroe Primary School and Ballyhacket Primary School and also Coleraine College, a state school and St Joseph's College, a Catholic school.

The workshops were led by a facilitator, Noreen Hamilton, and myself. They involved a power point presentation as an introduction to the plantation period incorporating images of maps, plans, objects in the collection and artefacts on loan from the Northern Ireland Environment Agency.

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A mapping session followed this in which we placed all the street names and modern images of shops and places in Coleraine town centre onto Thomas Raven's 1622 picture map of Coleraine in their current locations. This was a really effective way to start the students thinking about what Coleraine was like 400 years ago – what was different and if anything was still the same. It enabled them to use map reading skills and was useful to do before they went out on their town tour. On several of the tours the pupils took the Raven's map out with them and at each location we stopped and they had to tell us what street we were on using their map. We placed an emphasis on the street names and why each street had its name. For example, New Row, is called New Row because it was where the first row of houses was built in 17th century Coleraine. Stone Row is called stone row as the houses were built with stone rather than wood. Bell House Lane housed the curfew bell and so on. Pupils visited several points of interest on their tour – including the location of the original market, New Row, as mentioned, the location of the first row of houses built, the town tannery, one of the town gates and the Church.

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St Patrick's Church in Coleraine contains several 17th century memorials and gravestones including the memorial stone of the first Mayor of the town – Sir Tristram Beresford – an agent of The Honourable The Irish Society. There was an excavation in the Church that revealed its Medieval foundations. A section of this has been left exposed and covered with glass panelling. This became an important part of the tour as it provided visual evidence that dated the Church to before the Plantation period. The tour finished back at Coleraine Town Hall where each pupil was given a scratch and sniff card which allowed them to smell what Coleraine may have smelt like 400 years ago. We had used similar cards for Victorian Coleraine school workshops and they are extremely popular! Back inside the town hall we concluded with a mini dig in which students uncovered a broken chamber pot, leather and some 17th century coins.

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The history workshop was followed by a textile workshop with artist, Angela Ginn. This session focused heavily on images from the collection, on relevant maps and artefacts. Pupils combined what they had learnt and discovered to visually represent their history in colourful banners. As the salmon in the River Bann played such a vital role in the Coleraine's plantation history it was decided to recreate large salmon and decorate them with the banners that the school workshops had produced.

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The culmination of this phase was a parade through Coleraine Town Centre with the artwork created. Unfortunately, due to the heaviest rain imaginable in June we were unable to parade outside. Instead the schools came together and we celebrated the pupil's artwork with the Mayor, Cllr David Harding, attending and congratulating all the children who took part, we listened to the songs that the brilliant samba band had prepared and showed off all the artwork to each other. The salmon were paraded and displayed later that week during the Coleraine 400 event day.

We asked all the teachers to complete evaluation forms and here are some of their comments:

There was a good balance of different activities. The walk, talk, archaeology and map work were excellent and I have no doubt that there was learning taking place.

Karen Gilpin, Hezlett Primary School

Coleraine 400 has been a fantastic experience for my P7 children. They listened really well and were very interested in everything that they saw and heard. I would love this trip to be repeated every year for P7 children so that they can learn a little bit of history about their own town.

Miss Sloan, Irish Society Primary School

We also received some letters from pupils who participated in the workshops.

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27th February 2013

Dear Museum Service,

Thank you for inviting both P7s from Portstewart Primary School to Coleraine on Wednesday 20th February. I really enjoyed my visit to the Town Hall. I loved learning about Coleraine's amazing past. It was really interesting to learn about the streets and buildings. I loved the archaeological dig even if I only found a marble! I also liked designing crests but my favourite activity was the tour around some of Coleraine. But I hated the smell-cards smelled atrocious! So thank you very much again. I really enjoyed our trip and I hope you enjoyed it too.

While we received positive feedback, a few teachers felt that the power point presentation at the start was a little long and parts of it were not pitched at the right level. Reflecting on these workshops we felt there was a definite need for additional resources, activities and more imaginative ways to engage pupils with the collection and artefacts. The use of a power point didn't work and instead we wanted actual objects to be used as teaching aids. As such it was essential to have a relevant temporary exhibition running alongside the workshops.

The history and art workshops finished around the end of March 2013 and the second phases of workshops were scheduled for October 2013. Between March and October Museum staff worked on various ideas in order to improve the resources for the second phase.

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We worked with archaeologist Nick Brannon and illustrator Philip Armstrong to create an illustration or reconstruction of what Coleraine town would have looked like in 1615. Using historic maps including Raven's 1622 picture map, reports of the time, and Nick's vast knowledge of 17th century Coleraine, including what he had discovered through digs we were able to produce a fantastic representation of the town.

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This was blown up and hung on the stage in our Coleraine 400 exhibition. It was then used for the second phase of school workshops and acted as a fantastic teaching aid to introduce the pupils to 17th century Coleraine. It added a 3d dimension which you didn't get from the maps. You could see the business of the market, the ramparts that surrounded the town looked much more substantial, as did the gates. The river had wood drifting down and was full of activity with ships coming in and out. There is even smoke rising from the houses. It truly brought 17th century Coleraine to life.

Another idea that we had, which at the time we didn't have the budget for, but which is something we may pursue in the future is providing a large plan of the town and kit to construct miniature versions of different buildings. For example English style houses, Irish houses, a Church, the ramparts or a bawn and so on. So the activity would focus on town planning – you could simply reconstruct the town as it was or make improvements as seen fit.

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We were also working on a learning resource which would be primarily used by teachers but also for people interested in local history. The resource includes a brief timeline of Coleraine prior to 1613, it looks briefly at Mesolithic Mountsandel, St Patrick and Medieval Coleraine before focusing on the Plantation in Coleraine. The resource includes a lot of the visual material that we used in the workshops and exhibition and provides another way to engage with the collection and the material evidence. If people want to do further research it gives some useful web links to the excavation reports, muster rolls and hearth money rolls and the 1641 depositions. At the back of the learning resource are a selection of worksheets. These include story cubes, an activity where you imagine you are Mary Murphy – the Portrush Giantess and write a diary entry as her, 'If I was Mayor for the Day' – this looks at the fines that the Mayor imposed at council meetings, as discovered in their minute books which are held in the London Metropolitan Archives, and it asks students to come up with their own rules and fines. The resources are all available in hard copy format, free of charge, or to download from the Northern Ireland Community Archive. We actually had one local secondary school that asked for 30 copies to use as history textbooks.

We decided to produce story cubes which would provide an opportunity to further engage with objects. For the second phase of the school workshops we incorporated the story cubes into the workshop programme.

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There are four story cubes with objects from the collection such as the Coleraine sword, the mace, a canon ball, a measure from the market yard, alongside some of the archaeology, such as Venetian glass, leather shoe pieces, the chamber pot and then images of maps and various other things that link to certain parts of Coleraine's 17th century history. The idea is that in groups of four the pupils firstly assemble a cube each they then throw this cube and each write a story incorporating the four objects that turn up on the cube. This has generated some interesting interpretations. I will read a short extract from one:

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“Once upon a time many years ago in Coleraine there was a small cottage. There lived a family of four who loved to drink whiskey and eat salmon. One day they went out exploring and discovered some glass and became rich and famous. They were out for a walk and met two wild Irish men – suddenly someone threw their chamber pot and it landed on their heads.”

Another example:

“Once upon a time many years ago in Coleraine there was a house, a round house that Irish people lived in. The windows were made of glass. The man and woman that lived in the house sold fish for a living. The fish they sold was salmon. They didn’t make much money but they still tried to sell them. They had a stall in the market in Coleraine. The stall is black and blue. Because they didn’t make much money they decided to sell their stall and buy a new house. They didn’t sell salmon anymore they sold the wood from their old house and now they are so so so happy.

These are particularly interesting as although the story is supposed to centre around just the four objects that come up on the cubes they also incorporate what else the students have remembered or found stimulating. We have definitely found it an extremely useful way to increase access to and encourage engagement with our collection. It also presents us with different interpretations or reinterpretations of objects.

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So as well as what has been already mentioned, we did incorporate a few other things into our second phase of workshops. The Coleraine 400 exhibition which exhibited objects from the collection and artefacts from the various digs in Coleraine became an important aspect of the workshop. We had some replica items that the children were allowed to handle, including a replica chamber pot and all other objects were displayed within cases and the students were given time and encouraged to carefully look at everything. We introduced some role play – so for example when explaining about the charter we gave pupils various appointments stipulated in the 1613 charter, such as a Mayor, Sergeants-at Mace and Sword bearers and this then connected to some of the objects on display. For example, the Coleraine sword, dating from 1616 was on display and this was the sword that the sword bearers would have used.

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A character that stood out from the 1st phase of the workshops was Mary Murphy, also known as the Portrush giantess – who lived in Portrush in the 17th century. Mary married a French sea captain that docked at Portrush Harbour. He took her off to France and exhibited her at side shows. The story goes that her French husband abandoned her and she was last seen on her own at a show in Paris. A researcher, working for us, discovered her illustration in ‘Drawings of Human Prodigies’ dating from 1730 by James Paris du Plessis. The British Library holds a copy of this and we were able to reproduce a 7ft figure cut out and as such the students were able to meet Mary Murphy.

In this second phase of the project the Museum engaged with a further 340 pupils – so over 900 in total. Again we asked teachers to complete evaluation forms and overall the comments were excellent. A couple of examples are:

Children thoroughly enjoyed exhibition, they were engaged and keen to answer questions.
V. informative and fun!

Claire Scott, D. H. Christie Memorial P. S.

Very informative – brought the history of Coleraine to life for the children – I enjoyed it very much and so did the children.

Marie O'Neill, St John's Primary School

We will continue to use the resources and have programmed a Coleraine 400 schools workshop programme for next year.

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We definitely learned a lot of lessons from running the first phase of the workshops. The main one was that objects are key, they are what set us apart, and have to be at the heart of all that we do where possible. They enable us to interpret history in a different way – each object has its own story to tell, from our Coleraine sword only carried by the appointed sword bearer and used for ceremonial purposes to the chamber pot imported from Stoke-on-Trent and used by a family living in New Row in Coleraine. They provide a portal that allows us to connect with the people that used and handled them in the past. While objects were obviously included in the first phase they weren't enough of a focus. The workshops definitely benefitted from incorporating the exhibition with actual objects on display. While it is not always practical or even possible, due to conservation issues, to display an object, activities like the story cubes and the learning resource provide a way for people to engage with objects and their history. Reflecting on the workshops, our evaluations and the level of interest generated it seems safe to say that we did manage to engage local pupils with 17th century Coleraine.