

# Nick Brannon—An Appreciation

Ruairí Ó Baoill



Nick Brannon (9th September 1952–9th November 2025) was a friend of mine for more than 40 years and he was also instrumental in the setting up and the development of the *Irish Post-Medieval Archaeology Group* in Belfast in 1999.

Nick was originally from Colchester in Essex, but he came over to study Archaeology at Queen's University Belfast in 1972, the worst year of the most recent 'Troubles' in Ireland. He graduated from Queen's in 1976 with a BA in Archaeology and the following year became an Inspector in the Historic Monuments and Buildings Branch of the Department of the Environment, the government body which oversaw the regulation of archaeology in Northern Ireland. In an illustrious career in archaeology, he became Director of Built Heritage of the Environment and Heritage Service (EHS), Department for the Environment (NI), in 1999. He was elected a *Fellow* of the *Society of Antiquaries of London* in 2001, served on the *Historic Monuments Council* from 2012 to 2016 and was President of the *Society for Post-Medieval Archaeology* from 2008 to 2011. He was a Committee member of the *Irish Post-Medieval Archaeology Group* from its establishment in 1999 until his passing in 2025. He was always an integral part of IPMAG, and his judgement and advice were highly regarded.

I first met and worked with Nick as a Queen's University Archaeology student in 1983, when Nick directed the first-ever archaeological excavation to be carried out within historic Belfast, at the site of Brands and Norman's shop in Castle Place. I worked again with Nick in 1984 on his excavation at High Street, the second-ever archaeological excavation carried out in the centre of Belfast. His excavations were always extremely professionally and efficiently run. Rigorous attention to detail, planning and organisation were always part of Nick's defining characteristics. But more than that, Nick's excavations were always fun. He had a great energy which was infectious and he was a great believer that archaeology could (and should) be fun if it was done properly! And he was a very loyal friend and a very decent person. I remember during the 1990s, when there were problems and delays with wages for some of the people working on my Carrickfergus excavations, Nick subbed some of the diggers with his own money until the wages were sorted out. That was the measure of the man. Even when he became Director of Built Heritage for EHS in 1999, his door was always open for people who wanted to come in to discuss archaeological matters or if you just wanted to drop in for a chat.

Over the course of 25 years, Nick led excavations at over 45 sites across Northern Ireland before his retirement in 2002. Many of these excavations were at monuments of the early 17th-century Plantation period, including Bellaghy Bawn and Brackfield Bawn, as well as a series of pioneering urban excavations in Belfast, Carrickfergus, Coleraine and Downpatrick. He was a trail-blazer in northern archaeology in relation to the study and excavation of historic towns in the 1970s and 1980s.

Nick was instrumental in the development of post-medieval archaeology within the north, providing essential support to the establishment of the *Irish Post-Medieval Archaeology Group* (IPMAG) in the summer of 1999. When the idea of setting up an Irish post-medieval archaeology group arose in a conversation between myself and Dr Paul Logue in 1999, whilst we were both working in the EHS offices on Hill Street, Belfast, Nick was the first person we approached to discuss the idea. Nick facilitated the first few meetings of the fledgling group in rooms in Hill Street and gave us very sensible advice on how to proceed. He was central to the idea of IPMAG, helped organise our first conference in 2001 and contributed a chapter to the first IPMAG publication in 2007. This publication, *The Post-Medieval Archaeology of Ireland 1550–1850: Irish Post-Medieval Archaeology Group Proceedings 1*, was edited by Audrey Horning, Ruairí Ó Baoill, Colm Donnelly and Paul Logue and published by Wordwell Books in 2007. It was the first book to directly engage with Ireland's post-medieval or historical archaeology and

material culture. Following on from this, in 2009, along with his wife Professor Audrey Horning, Nick was an editor of the second IPMAG publication, *Ireland and Britain in the Atlantic World: Irish Post-Medieval Archaeology Group Proceedings 2*, which was also published by Wordwell Books.

Nick was a great believer in the dissemination of archaeological information to both colleagues and the interested public alike and during his career he published 66 papers. He was ever generous with his time, and he was always lending people books and other useful heritage material. He had his own bespoke library system for keeping track of who had borrowed which books! Nick was a great mentor and teacher. And he was a great influence on me. He was also instrumental in my archaeological career, as he offered me my first job directing an archaeological excavation in Carrickfergus in 1991.

Although slight in stature, you could always see Nick coming as he owned a fine selection of western hats which he wore with great style. He liked to relax by reading the *Guardian* and listening to or watching cricket matches. Tequila was his drink of choice. He loved music, especially reggae and AC/DC, and he was an energetic dancer. There were several memorable evenings at the 'Bury the Trowel' archaeological get-togethers over the years! He was great company, with a wicked laugh and a mischievous glint in his eye. Because of this, and because of his ability to explain archaeological and heritage matters succinctly and intelligently, Nick was very often interviewed on TV, radio and for newspapers. The importance he placed on giving tours, talks and walks to colleagues, community groups and to the public made a big impact on those of us who worked with him and influenced us on how we should also be disseminating heritage information rather than hoarding it.

Nick had strongly liberal sensibilities. He had strong opinions on many things and the capacity to back up these opinions with great intelligence. He was committed to integrated education and was one of the people behind the establishment of Forge Integrated Primary School in 1985.

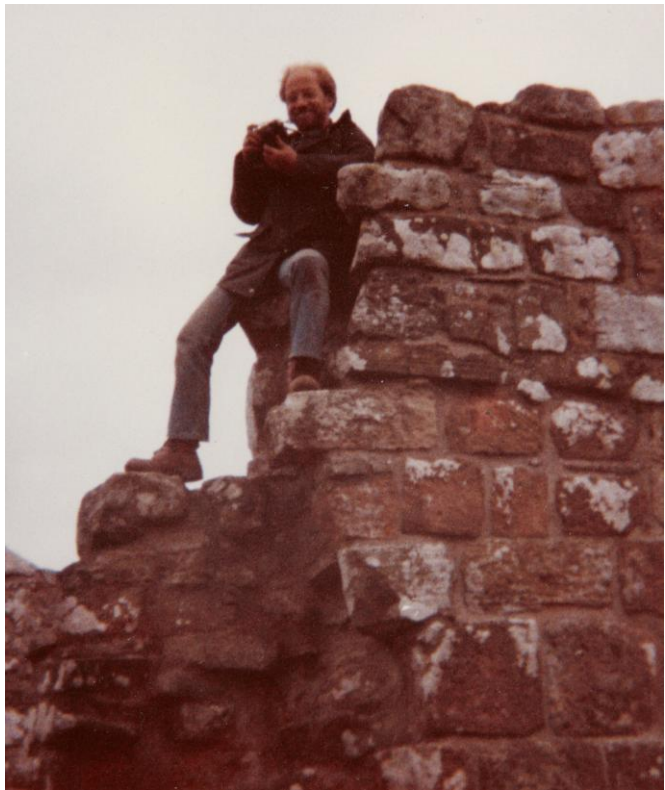
Although in recent years I didn't see Nick as often as I would have liked after he moved to America with Audrey, I still greatly looked forward to seeing him at the annual IPMAG conferences or, when Audrey and he were back home in Ireland, at the amazing Thanksgiving Day meals that they hosted. I miss his friendship, craic and company. He will always be an important part of IPMAG, and we will all be raising a glass (or two) to him at the IPMAG XXVI conference this weekend in Waterford.

Nick is survived by his wife, Audrey Horning, daughters Fay Decodts and Eve Kelly, sons-in-law Conor Decodts and Niall Kelly, grandchildren Beau and Daisy Decodts, and Woody, Tabitha and Buddy Kelly, as

well as his siblings Judy Blake, Christine Gould, Robert (and Delia) Brannon, and Steve (and Jackie) Brannon.



**With Vanessa Knight, Cumber House, Claudy, Co. Derry, August 1983.**



**Dungiven Priory, Co. Derry, September 1983.**



**Dungiven Priory, Co. Derry, September 1983.**





With Gerry Quinn and Ruairí Ó Baoill. High Street carpark excavation, Belfast, 29th June 1984.



High Street carpark excavation, Belfast, 29th June 1984.





With Gerry Quinn. High Street carpark excavation, Belfast, 29th June 1984.



Time Team, Downpatrick, Co. Down, 1997. © Crown copyright.

Historic Environment Record of Northern Ireland.





At an excavation at Doagh, Co. Antrim. © Crown copyright. Historic Environment Record of Northern Ireland.



With Patricia Cornwell. © Crown copyright. Historic Environment Record of Northern Ireland.





***The Post-Medieval Archaeology of Ireland 1550–1850* book launch, The Black Box, Belfast, 20th February 2008. With Ruairí Ó Baoill, Dr Paul Logue, Professor Audrey Horning, Dr Colm Donnelly, Dr James O'Neill and Declan Hurl.**



**The IPMAG Committee, February 2017, Dublin.**





**With Dr Liam Campbell and Ruairí Ó Baoill at the Brocagh, Co. Tyrone, excavation in June 2018.**



**With Professor Eileen Murphy, IPMAG XIX conference, Enniskillen, Co. Fermanagh, 2019.**



**The IPMAG Committee, February 2019, Enniskillen.**