



BATTLEBAGS AND BLIMPS:

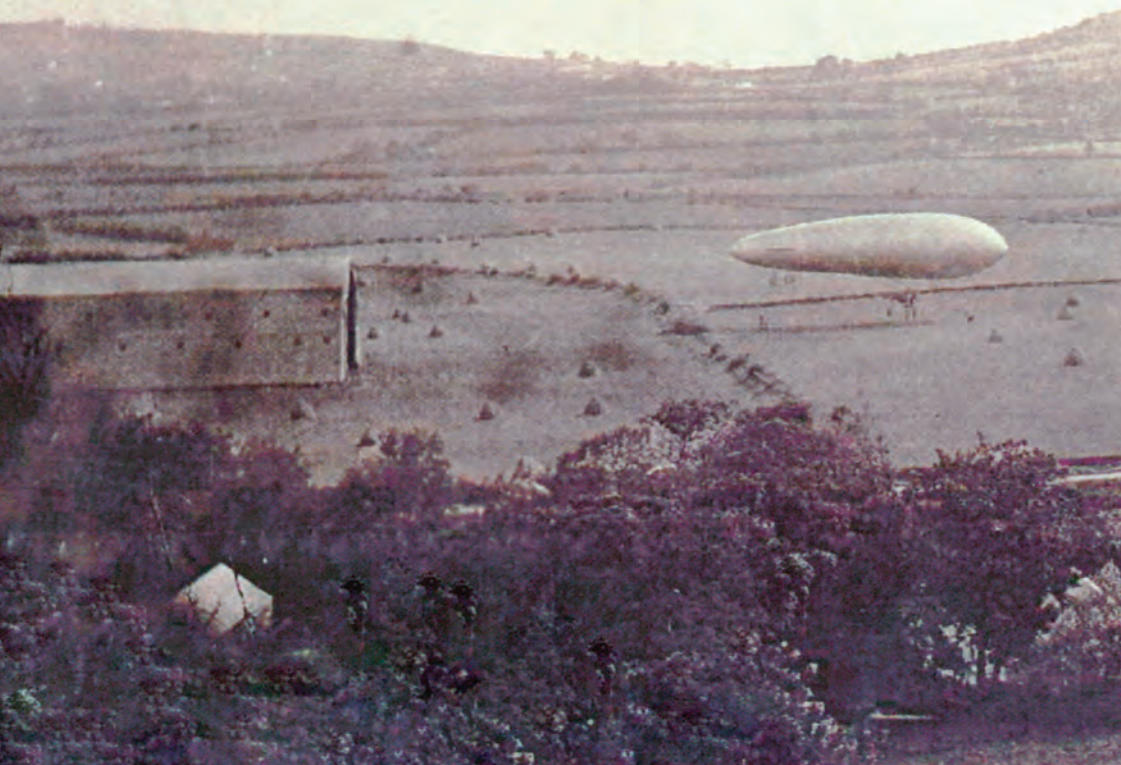
**EXPLORING THE
LEGACIES OF
WHITEHEAD'S FIRST
WORLD WAR
AERODROME**



INTRODUCTION

“When the drone of an airship’s engine could be heard approaching, the local children would run down the side of the adjacent field to watch through the hedge”

Guy Warner, *Airships over Ulster*



To find out more and see the results of the survey visit go.gub.ac.uk/bentramapper or scan the QR code



To find out about the WW1 aviation in Ireland project scan the QR code

The airship station site at Bentra was a small but important link in a chain of naval and aviation bases all around the coast of Ireland, which were instrumental in winning the First World War. The Royal Naval Air Service airships operating from here carried out their roles of surveillance and deterrence, that helped combat the deadly German U-Boat menace.

To raise awareness and appreciation of this almost forgotten aspect of local heritage, a Heritage Lottery funded community engagement programme was delivered by Carrickfergus Museum in partnership with Living Legacies 1914-1918, supported by History Hub Ulster. As part of the project, the field which contained the airship hangar was surveyed by project participants using laptops with maps and aerial imagery, metal detecting and Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR) kit.



The site is now commemorated with a granite memorial, provided by the Airfields of Britain Conservation Trust, whose purpose is to preserve Britain's former airfields that deserve recognition as heritage sites.

Bentra Airship station - The first military aviation facility in Ireland

In October of 1915, Bentra, just outside Whitehead, was established as a sub-station of Royal Naval Air Service Luce Bay airship base, Scotland.

Following the renewal of Unrestricted Submarine Warfare by the Germans on 1st February 1917, the facilities there were enhanced, with the erection of a portable airship shed. Wooden huts were built to act as accommodation for personnel on site.

Situated in a field close to Larne Lough, the location is almost forgotten today, but a hundred years ago this was very much a 'front line' in the British war effort, for Bentra was a key part of the coastal defence of these islands, protecting military and merchant ships from enemy attack.



The 'Battlebags and Blimps' project was founded through a partnership between Carrickfergus Museum and Living Legacies to recognise the important wartime role Bentra airship station played in protecting British military interests, and address its relative obscurity as local First World War heritage.

Ireland has a rich heritage of First World War military sites including aerodromes and airship stations. So far though, none of these landing grounds has been surveyed in the field. The relative 'invisibility' of WW1 aerodromes and airship stations in today's landscape poses a particular challenge to those researching their remains. This challenge is one that the Living Legacies 1914-18 WW1 engagement centre has been addressing through working with community partners in Northern Ireland, using modern-day state-of-the-art technologies to open up the hidden heritage of WW1 military aviation. The key to this is to combine archaeological and historical research methods, and through the 'Battlebags and Blimps' HLF-funded community project, the RNAS airship station that once existed at Bentra, just near Whitehead, has been brought to light.



Bentra field survey, marking metal detector spots with flags ready for recording using GPS



Bentra field survey, using the GPR survey equipment on site

Participants from the local community, including members of Whitehead Community Association, History Hub Ulster and local Air Cadets, have come together to work with Carrickfergus museum and Living Legacies to research Bentra. A series of workshops involving the community and professional researchers have taken the group through from a desktop study to field survey. Visits to First World War coastal defence sites have enabled the group to test out new skills, including using Global Navigation Satellite Systems (GNSS) technologies for surveying the sites, for recording features, and then using Geographical Information Systems (GIS) and digital mapping to plot them out. The results of this fieldwork have already fed into the Northern Ireland 'Defence Heritage Project', led by the NI Historic Environment Division.

At the site of Bentra airship station on a wet and cool August Friday, the project team gathered to survey the field to see what might be revealed of this once important part of Ireland's coastal defence network. Out came the GNSS survey equipment, laptops with maps and aerial imagery, metal detecting and Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR) kit, and the group set to work, surveying the unassuming field beside the Larne-Whitehead main road.

BELFAST LOUGH



GIS map overlays for Grey Point Fort used by the project group to locate site features.

The local landowner had kindly granted permission to access the site, and slowly but surely the field was surveyed, looking not only for above ground features, such as earthworks, but also, by using the GPR and metal detector, seeing what lay below the surface. These non-invasive techniques opened up from the ground what our eyes could not see, and the fruits of the labours on that damp day have now been plotted out in a GIS and shared with the group using online mapping (see go.qub.ac.uk/bentramapper).

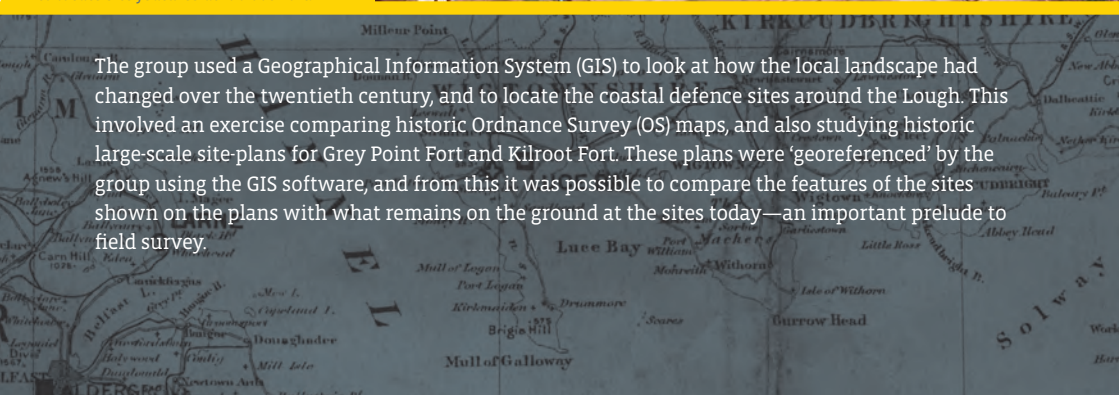
Using Geographical Information Systems

Delivered at Queen's University Belfast by researchers of the Living Legacies 1914-18 engagement centre, the project's participants learned how to use scans of existing aerial photographs and historical sources (provided by Guy Warner), along with existing orthophotography and Historic OS maps, to create a 'Baseline' dataset. This 'desktop' study was an important starting point for the field surveys of the airship station at Bentra as well as the associated coastal defence sites along Belfast Lough.



GIS map overlays used by the project group to locate site features at Kilroot Fort.

The group used a Geographical Information System (GIS) to look at how the local landscape had changed over the twentieth century, and to locate the coastal defence sites around the Lough. This involved an exercise comparing historic Ordnance Survey (OS) maps, and also studying historic large-scale site-plans for Grey Point Fort and Kilroot Fort. These plans were 'georeferenced' by the group using the GIS software, and from this it was possible to compare the features of the sites shown on the plans with what remains on the ground at the sites today—an important prelude to field survey.



Kilroot and Grey Point forts— and their place in coastal defence

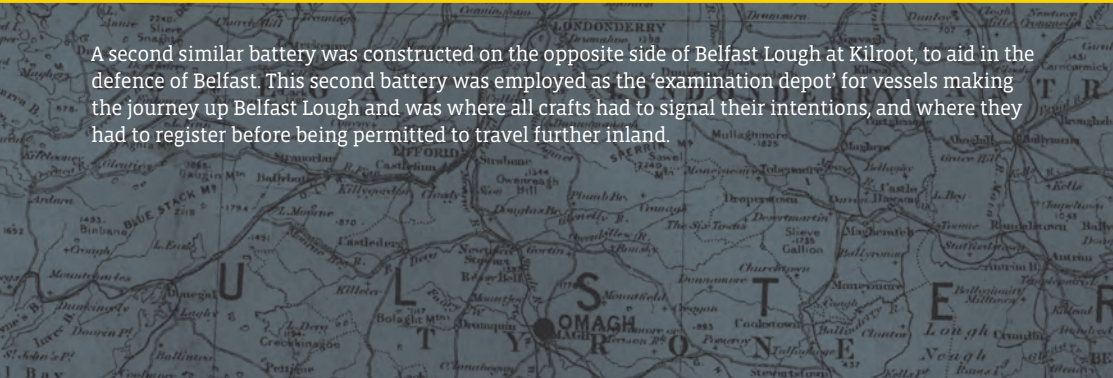
The airship station at Bentra did not exist in isolation, it was part of a wider landscape of coastal defence during the First World War. The evidence of this coastal defence network still exists along the shores of Belfast Lough. To help place Bentra in this wider context of other WW1 defensive sites, the project team visited two key defence heritage sites located on the south and north shores of Belfast Lough, Grey Point Fort and Kilroot Fort.

The first records of construction work at Grey Point date to 1904, with the Fort becoming operational by 1907. Two six-inch Mark VII breech-loading guns were initially installed in 1907 and associated outbuildings were constructed over the next three years providing workshops, shelters, stores facilities and other ancillary buildings prior to the outbreak of the First World War.



Air Cadets site recording at Kilroot Fort

A second similar battery was constructed on the opposite side of Belfast Lough at Kilroot, to aid in the defence of Belfast. This second battery was employed as the 'examination depot' for vessels making the journey up Belfast Lough and was where all crafts had to signal their intentions, and where they had to register before being permitted to travel further inland.



Kilroot was not completed until 1910 with the final fortifications recorded as having been similar to Grey Point. Both forts contained dual gun emplacements with protective armour and associated magazines, shell stores and shelters constructed below the gun positions.

The coastal fort and battery at Grey Point are now protected by the State, and the site is the focus for a small museum about the site and its defensive roles during the twentieth century. Similarly, contrary to what many people believe, much of Kilroot fort also remains in situ today, the fort buildings now in use by the Irish Salt Mining Exploration Co. Ltd.



The project survey team at Kilroot Fort. The building was the fort's guard house



Gun platform still visible at Kilroot site.



Kilroot Fort, the gun platforms were to the left and steps lead down to the battery

Armed with historical plans of the two forts, the project team explored the sites in the field, learning how the forts were organised and what the different buildings were used for. At Kilroot, hand-held GNSS devices were used for recording the positions of the fort's buildings, which were also photographed for feature identification and landscape analysis.

After the survey work on site, the team relocated to Carrickfergus Museum to upload our findings onto the Defence Heritage Project database. This is an online platform created by Living Legacies 1914-18 for the Historic Environment Division (HED) of the Department of Communities (DfC), and is accessible free, at:



The project's findings

Bentra is just one of many such 'lost' legacies of the air war of a hundred years ago. The 'Battlebags and Blimps' project has demonstrated what can be rediscovered about these sites using digital survey methods and mapping. These approaches are important for contributing to our better understanding, appreciation and recognition of our nation's early aviation heritage.

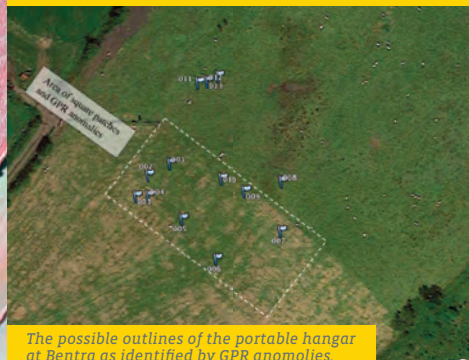
From the project it is now clear that there are features at Bentra, hidden below the surface, that help identify the location of the airship station's hangar. No longer visible on the ground, the site is archaeologically significant all the same, and the project has highlighted the importance of these hidden remains, which surely deserve protecting. It may be that further study of the site—and in particular an archaeological excavation—would help towards identifying and recording the airship station's 'lost' heritage, but that's for another day.



Bentra site from above using infra-red imaging which shows up ground and surface features



GPR and metal detector spots plotted onto Google Earth imagery showing possible interpretation of features



The possible outlines of the portable hangar at Bentra as identified by GPR anomalies.

What 'Battlebags and Blimps' has brought to light is new and exciting information about the Bentra airship station, and its place in the wider landscape of coastal defence of our shores during the First World War. Sharing these findings with the wider community and raising awareness of the aeronautical heritage of South-East Antrim is also a very important outcome of the project.

Thanks to the digital age, the results of the group's work are now available online, globally, through the 'WW1 Aviation in Ireland' web-site (<http://go.qub.ac.uk/www1airfields>), and locally through the Defence Heritage Project. One of the most important legacies, however, is the site itself, at Bentra, and the permanent memorial that is now set in place to commemorate the role of the airship station in the First World War and all those who served there.

The 'Battlebags and Blimps' project had a positive impact on those who participated. Some comments from the project's participants include:

"Great day getting hands on with some field work, unique opportunity for amateurs and communities to get a new appreciation of what goes on behind the scenes"

"Excellent - really enjoyed going to Kilroot Coastal Battery and investigating the site. Enjoyed the company and was made to feel very welcome"

"Good to put everything together and see the data that we collected in the field using appropriate technology"

"Great to use the technology in the actual field after seeing various maps and pictures from previous workshops"

"Good visit to a former fort - nice to contrast with last visit to restored Grey Point Fort. Very happy to assist in adding information via the online portal to the database and contribute to the body of work"

"Visit to fort was fabulous experience and delivered with great knowledge base and enthusiasm. Certainly whetted appetite for more"



Ground crew at Bentra pose in front of the airship shed. A hundred years later, the Project Team found its remains.

Acknowledgements

The Battlebags and Blimps community heritage project was coordinated by Shirin Murphy and Laura Patrick (Carrickfergus Museum) and by Keith Lilley and Heather Montgomery (Living Legacies 1914-18/Queen's University Belfast). The project was funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) with additional financial support from Mid and East Antrim Borough Council and Living Legacies 1914-18. Our thanks to those who participated in the project, including History Hub Ulster, 2062 Carrickfergus Squadron Air Cadets, Whitehead Community Association, the Centre for Data Digitisation and Analysis (CDDA), Conor Graham, Rebecca Milligan, Alastair Ruffell, and Guy Warner.

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