

Numismatic Society of Ireland NB In Search of Medieval Dublin

by Alexey Shitvov, Member NSI

*"It's still possible to find pockets of old Dublin
- but it's becoming more and more rarified."*

Anjelica Huston

As a wise grandmother once told a kid who was staring in awe at an old copper kopeck of rather odd shape and size: "Staring at one coin will not make another, so go back to your chores and at the dusk I shall tell you a bedtime story of this copper coin and of your great grandfather who once had it for luck during the Great War." Since that time, I used to keep the hobby for myself, occasionally irritating my dear and near with unnecessary spending on some unattractive stuff to be kept in the dark drawers alongside the piles of unsorted papers, chipped fossils and pin badges patiently waiting their chance to prick my finger. That was a long time ago, before I met a group of same-minded characters from the Numismatic Society of Ireland in Belfast, who opened me new perspectives of the hobby and the joy of sharing time and thoughts with those who really care.

On the bright morning of Friday 17th August 2018, a cheerful company of five members in two luxury cars headed to Dublin to see and sense the millenary history of the city, reputedly, first mentioned by Ptolemy as Eblana, built up by the Vikings, raised in stone by the Normans and made illustrious through the lives and deeds of its mixed-race inhabitants in the centuries past, growing from the raiders' winter station and slave market into the heart and soul of the Irish state and a modern world-class business destination. An ambitious objective was set for the trip, aiming to revisit the key surviving remains of the medieval city and to examine the Airgead numismatic collections on display in the Collins Barracks. And so it was, as the team made a smooth ride from the Shaws Bridge in Belfast to the exhibition in Dublin with perfect timing, thanks to Alan's and John's exceptional driving skills.



On the arrival, we were warmly greeted by a sunny Irish morning and a pair of Michael Kenny's, notably, by Michael E. Kenny, the Chairman of the paternal Numismatic Society of Ireland, and by Michael Kenny, former Curator of the National Museum's numismatic collection. Conversely, our team featured a greater diversity of names and interests, including the Russian and Iranian ones, which were carefully noted by the hosts for future communications. First thing first, and after brief introductions the expanded team dropped into the nice Barracks' café, having been lured in by the smell of fresh bakery and clanks of teapots. The short break worked miracles and the old and new friends departed



to the coin exhibition, hastily passing rooms full of fine antiques and state-of-the-art digital aids, accompanied by Michael's insights on the design and presentation of the digital collections, eager to get in the numismatic paradise – the [Airgead: A Thousand Years of Irish Coins and Currency](#).

I thought I had seen enough coin and medal displays in the best museums worldwide, so that nothing would see me jaw dropping, but what I met in the rooms of the Airgead proved me utterly wrong. *Veni et vidi* – those were the ultimate and iconic pieces of the Irish numismatic history, spanning from the earliest hacksilver looted by the Vikings in the remoted lands of Europe and the first Viking coins struck in Dublin by Sigtrygg (Sihtric) II Silkbeard, the chief Norse leader at the Battle of Clontarf, right through the Medieval Anglo-Irish, the Great Rebellion and Irish Gunmoney down to the Irish Free State and beyond. The stories heard at the Society meetings over the years past came alive, in flesh and light, accompanied by comprehensive textual notes and occasionally even under magnification.



Although the exposition of the coins was not somewhat modernistic, kiddie or all-digital, its traditionalist layout proved to be well thought through and thus efficient for those willing to spend time on reading and learning. Apparently, to make coins viewable to old and young one should place them at the most inconvenient height, so the old would graciously bow and the young would stretch up on their toes like prima-ballerinas just to see something odd and beautiful in a dim light of the coin

cabinet. Fortunately, the lighting was mostly adequate and the elbow ledges throughout the exhibition took a great deal of relieving the visitors from cringing before the thousand years of Irish history in coins. Michael Kenny made the visit most enjoyable by entertaining the guests with tales and stories of the Irish coins, collectors, mavericks and the museum cabinets. Essentially, the Airgead exhibition revisits and reveals how the lives of different people were influenced by the use of currencies, including coins, tokens and banknotes, and how the money in turn reflected the political events and socio-economic developments of the time. The exposition of Irish medals is aimed to highlight their historical significance and rediscover some lesser known events that shaped the Irish communities over the centuries past.



Amongst the Airgead highlights, I selected just few for this short report which caught my eye. An interesting group of the earliest Hiberno-Norse coins and bracteates (which are the coins struck on foil blanks) drew my attention with their odd imagery and make. The first Viking coins were struck in Dublin at about 995-997 by Sihtric II Silkbeard and they were quality copies of the contemporary English pennies, notably those of Aethelred II (979-1016). Some copies of the Hiberno-Norse coins, so called Hiberno-Manx coins, were subsequently struck on the Isle of Man

the kings of which at the time had close family ties with the Vikings in Ireland. There were seven major phases of the steadily degrading Hiberno-Norse coinage, which ceased in about 1130-1150, just before the arrival of the Anglo-Normans to Ireland. Given the debasement and impractical manufacture of the later Hiberno-Norse coins, it is doubtful whether they were real currency of daily transactions or served another purpose, as the significance of the money economy seems to have diminished.



Another object, chosen here for its beauty and rarity, is the gold proof of Gunmoney crown of 1690. Irish Gunmoney is the unique phenomenon in the numismatic history. They were minted by the Jacobite forces during the Williamite War in Ireland between 1689 and 1691. The coin nominals, from sixpence to crown, were struck in copper and brass and other base materials that would come from any available source, including kitchen utensils, church bells and old cannons. These base-metal substitutes of the contemporary silver and gold coins were designed to be redeemed following the victory by James II and consequently bore the date in month to allow their gradual replacement. The mercenary forces seemed to be refusing to accept the payments in Gunmoney, so the latter were circulated amongst the Irish troops mainly.



Following the defeat of James' forces, the Gunmoney were devalued by William to pennies and its fractions, and eventually went out of circulation in the early XVIII-th century. The rare Gunmoney coins struck in silver and gold from the same dies as the base-metal units were either contemporary trial/gift pieces or later restrikes made in London for the art connoisseurs, although there exist some very worn white metal specimens that suggest that the good-metal coins were actually in circulation. Our fellow expert on Gunmoney coinage, Dr John Rainey, was pleasantly surprised by the outstanding gold and silver pieces on display, although a remark was made that the selection of brass coins by month could have been chosen a little bit more judiciously. You can never satisfy an expert with their unquenchable appetite for quality and knowledge, so that the rest of us just quietly enjoyed the view of the coins and medals of the period, trusting that John's feedback would be taken aboard to make positive impact indeed.

A review of the whole collection on display would take a book, which, sadly, we could not find in the museum shop, so I shall restrain myself to saying that the visit to the Airgead exhibition will satisfy the most sophisticated taste and is highly recommended to all interested in turbulent Irish history, coinage and arts. It is certainly worth a second and a third visits, since the full extent of the collection is barely possible to comprehend in a day visit, especially if one is in love with Irish coins and medals.





Having left the Collin's Barracks, our pilgrimage took a busy Dublin Luas tram to get to the next destination – the Medieval City Wall and Gates, ca. 1240. After disembarking the squeeze cosmopolitan tramcar at the Four Courts Luas Stop, our flock spread in a flying formation led by the Chairman breaking the wall of air to make a better progress towards the next destination. In doing so, a voice was heard bringing our attention to an interesting stone church building at the junction of the Church Street and some unnamed road following the tramline. The Google enlightened us that it was the “medieval tower and crypt with mummies” of St. Michan's Church.



The Irish mummies! That was unpassable, so we left the track and popped into the church, but just to learn that the Saturday tours were over, yet we still could visit the church hall. A very nice and highly educated lady in attendance of the visitors' desk gave us a great introduction in the history and antiques of the St. Michan's. It appeared that the church was founded in 1095 and was the only church on the north side of Dublin until 1686. The surviving building dates to 1685, with the evidence of extensive renovation carried out in 1825. Inside the church, there was a beautiful Victorian wooden gallery stretching towards the church organ. Although the organ itself is rather of modern built, commissioned in the 1940-s to Evans and Barr of Belfast, its wooden case predates the instrument by more than two centuries. It is said that Georg Friedrich Händel practised here on the old organ for the first performance of Messiah. The crypt houses five long burial vaults containing naturally mummified bodies of some influential Dubliners from XVII-th through XIX-th centuries. The mummies were discovered during the renovation of 1825 and, unabashedly, exposed for the public entertainment by the entrepreneurial Victorians. We were also told of other treasures of the crypt, including the death mask of Wolfe Tone, the father of Irish republicanism and a leader of the 1798 Irish Rebellion, and of the coffins of other 1798 rebels, notably, the Sheares brothers, who were tried and subsequently hanged, drawn and quartered on 14th July 1798. With a great pity we had to postpone the visit to the crypt reliquaries for another occasion.

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After the very educating and enjoyable diversion to the St. Michan's, we eventually approached the Medieval Wall and Gates - the sole surviving city gates of Dublin. It is also known as St. Audoen's Gates, due to the medieval St Audoen's Church situated nearby. Despite noticeable restoration and dramatically changed surroundings, the old walls still emanate the enigma and voices of the life in the medieval city, where their existence meant security and prosperity, while their operation used to set the daily rhythm of the communities both inside and outside the fortress. It was a great pity to find the gates blocked, inelegantly, by some bare wallboards, so we could not get through to examine the view from the inside and thus had to walk up the hill to the next point on our tourist map.



Our next stop was the St. Audoen's church, the parish church in the Church of Ireland, where we enjoyed a guided tour with plenty of historical remarks and re-enactments staged by Tony the tourist guide. The church was built by the Normans in 1190 and dedicated to St. Audoen of Rouen, who was a prominent VII-th century clerical and political figure in the Frankish State. The Norman church might have been erected on the spot of an earlier VII-th century Celtic church dedicated to

St. Columcille. The tour started at the medieval map of the area before the arrival of the Vikings. We learned that the Viking town was preceded by a Christian ecclesiastical settlement known as *Duibhlinn*, deriving its name from *dubh* meaning "black, dark", and *lind* "pool", referring to a dark tidal pool located at the conflux of the Rivers Poddle and Liffey and chosen by the Vikings for its convenience to harbour their longships. The Viking settlement, called *Dyflin*, appeared from about 841, situated beside a native Gaelic settlement, called *Áth Cliath*, meaning "ford of hurdles" further up the river Liffey.



In 1430, Henry VI authorised the erection of a chantry in the St. Audoen's church dedicated to St Anne, the grandmother of Jesus according to the apocryphal Christian and Islamic tradition. Its founders and successors were known as the religious Guild or Fraternity of St. Anne. The great developments of the church in the XV-th century were financed by the wealthier parishioners, amongst whom was Sir Rowland Fitz-Eustace, Baron of Portlester, who in 1485 sponsored the erection of a new chapel commemorating his survival in a shipwreck near the site. Following the XVI-th century

dissolution of monasteries, aggravated by other natural and anthropogenic misfortunes, such as the massive accidental gunpowder explosion in one of the nearby quays on 11 March 1597 that damaged the tower of St. Audoen's, the church fell in a decrepit state by the mid. XVII-th century. By 1825 the church was lying in a ruinous state with only few protestant families remained in the parish. Although the historical importance of the church remains was dully recognised in mid. XIX-th century,



notably by the efforts of the Irish architect Thomas Drew, the actual restoration took place only in the 1980-s, followed by archaeological excavations in 1996 and extensive conservation work. Although not much of the historic interior or medieval gravestones preserved, some antics still can be found in the exposition, including original XII-th century Anglo-Norman baptismal font, an early Celtic gravestone known as the "Lucky Stone" since before 1309, which said to be rubbed for luck by merchants and traders embarking on their business voyages, and a fifteenth-century stone monument in alto-relievo dedicated to Sir Rowland Fitz-Eustace, the founder of the New Abbey, Kilcullen in Co. Kildare, who died in 1496, and his wife, Margaret Jenico. The sarcophagus was moved in St. Audoen's from New Abbey about 1786. Interestingly, the sculpture allowed rain water to retain in some parts of the relief, and no wonder that water was believed by simple folks as possessing some miraculous healing powers. The bell tower of the St. Audoen's also houses three of Ireland's oldest bells, dating from 1423. The bells used to be rung for the Angelus and after the Reformation continued to be rung every morning and evening to call the people to and from their chores.

A sympathetic reader should have already anticipated how weary we were leaving the St. Audoen's in the late afternoon with a burden, if not treasure, of pictorial information, chronologies, hagiographies and names. Despite the shy note voiced by the younger members that it would be really nice to take a rest and have lunch at last, with due respect that one does not live by bread alone, the commencing mutiny was dealt with in its infancy and the tour went on, without stopping to sooth our sore feet or wet one's whistle, straight down to our next destination which was supposed to be a piece of cake for educated minds like ours – the extravaganza Dublinia exhibition of the daily life in the Medieval City.

I had been always prejudiced that Dublinia, which is described as a non-profit heritage centre located in the Synod Hall at Christ Church, just at the crossroad of the medieval city, would be a kind of space designed to entertain kids and simple folks by showing off some nasty things and habits of medieval



people and society, which turned out to be true in part when I finally found that Viking guy groaning on the toilet with a proud slogan "moss as toilet paper" above his head. As to the rest, the place provided a wealth of information on all aspects of the origins, culture, crafts and life of the Viking society, both in their native land, on the islands and in Ireland. Extensive reconstructions and vikingomorphic dress forms exhibiting replica arms and armoury helped a lot to appreciate the scale of things. It was also fortunate to meet a live Viking moneyer at work,

striking Hiberno-Norse pennies on aluminium blanks and giving them off to the visitors for good memories and luck.

To be fair, there were plenty of authentic artefacts on display throughout Dublinia's rooms too, alongside their dummies. From the numismatic perspective, it was exciting to see a purse of XIII-th century lead tavern tokens, colloquially called as "beer money", found during the archaeological excavations in Winetavern Street in Dublin, as well as few other coins and tokens.



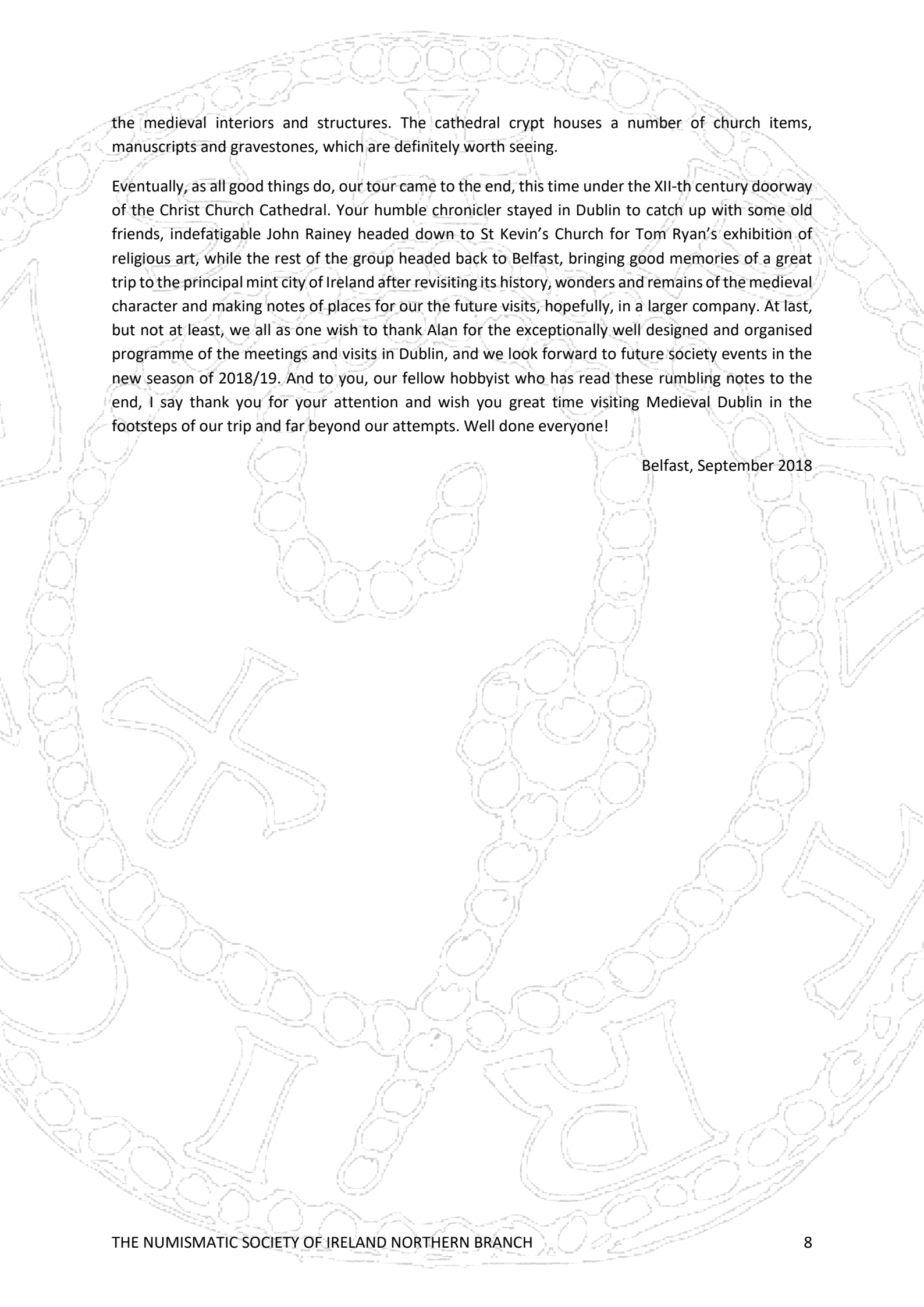
The top floor of Dublinia is dedicated to the science of archaeology, demonstrating the state-of-the-art archaeological methods and tools in quite interactive manner.

From there on, our route was to climb 96 steps, although of the modern design, to the top of St. Michael the Archangel's tower with a panoramic view of the former medieval city area. Was it the overall tiredness, perceived lack of time to appreciate the view, or just absence of the infectious adventurism that would always dare and ignite the others, but we spared that trip to the top, indeed with a firm promise to complete it next time despite all odds, and subsequently, went down to the Christ Church – our final destination on the day.

The Christ Church Cathedral (Col) met us by a peaceful daily prayer.

The cathedral was founded probably sometime after 1028, when King Sihtric II Silkenbeard made a pilgrimage to Rome. In the 1180's, the original wooden structure was replaced with a stone building by the donations and effort of the Anglo-Norman lords, notably by Richard de Clare "Strongbow". In 1487, the cathedral was the stage of the sham coronation of Lambert Simnel, a 10-year boy and Yorkist's pretender to the throne of England, as "King Edward VI". Despite the promising start, the boy eventually ended up as a kitchen scullion, and, later, as a falconer in the Royal household. It is said that during the ceremony the crown was borrowed from an effigy of the Virgin Mary and after pronouncing the boy as the King he was paraded along the streets of Dublin on the shoulders of his Irish supporters. The cathedral building was in relatively good state in the later times, although it did suffer some structural damage due to the natural causes. A major renovation and rebuilding work were undertaken from 1871 through 1878 by George Edmund Street, sponsored by a wealthy Irish distiller Henry Roe of Mount Anville, which, regretfully, resulted in a loss of most of





the medieval interiors and structures. The cathedral crypt houses a number of church items, manuscripts and gravestones, which are definitely worth seeing.

Eventually, as all good things do, our tour came to the end, this time under the XII-th century doorway of the Christ Church Cathedral. Your humble chronicler stayed in Dublin to catch up with some old friends, indefatigable John Rainey headed down to St Kevin's Church for Tom Ryan's exhibition of religious art, while the rest of the group headed back to Belfast, bringing good memories of a great trip to the principal mint city of Ireland after revisiting its history, wonders and remains of the medieval character and making notes of places for our the future visits, hopefully, in a larger company. At last, but not at least, we all as one wish to thank Alan for the exceptionally well designed and organised programme of the meetings and visits in Dublin, and we look forward to future society events in the new season of 2018/19. And to you, our fellow hobbyist who has read these rumbling notes to the end, I say thank you for your attention and wish you great time visiting Medieval Dublin in the footsteps of our trip and far beyond our attempts. Well done everyone!

Belfast, September 2018