WITH ITS LONG rugged coastline and numerous lakes, rivers, and estuaries, Ireland presents many opportunities for underwater researchers to use the very specialized methods of marine archaeology. Many types of boats have plied Irish waters since prehistoric times. Not all vessels reached their destinations safely. In the last three centuries alone, there were nearly 3,000 shipwrecks in Northern Irish waters. Off the Irish coast, archaeologists have excavated Mesolithic and Neolithic longboats, medieval merchant ships, and galleons from the Spanish Armada.

Marine archaeologists also document coastal dwellings, fortifications, and settlements. Leather, fabric, wood, and remains of structures, such as crannogs (artificial, fortified islands) and bridges, are sometimes preserved better underwater than they are on dry land. Some of Ireland’s earliest sites, established more than 8,000 years ago at the end of the Ice Age, are now underwater.

The University of Ulster’s Centre for Marine Archaeology was founded in 1999. Its staff does extensive fieldwork throughout the United Kingdom, as well as in East Africa, Australia, and the Faroe Islands.

The Smithsonian Institution thanks the Centre for Marine Archaeology at the University of Ulster–Coleraine for its assistance with this display.