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## Conservation and presentation practices

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## 5.1 Introduction

This chapter summarises the conservation works carried out to date and highlights some of the conservation issues affecting Brú na Bóinne which need to be addressed in the period of this management plan. The approaches taken to the works at both Newgrange and Knowth reflect the twin, and sometimes conflicting, needs to conserve the monuments while at the same time presenting them to the public. Major programmes of excavations and conservation have occurred at two of the three principal sites, Newgrange and Knowth.



▲ *The chamber and passage at Newgrange when viewed from the recess.*

## 5.2 Newgrange

**5.2.1** As stated in Chapter 2, archaeological excavations were carried out by Professor M. J. O'Kelly from 1962 to 1975. The conservation and restoration works are fully described in his publication of the excavation, *Newgrange: archaeology, art and legend* (1982). Perhaps most controversial at the time was the rebuilding of the quartz and granite stone wall on the entrance façade.

**5.2.2** To allow for the increasing numbers of visitors (already 70,000 in 1978) the quartz revetment wall was brought only as far as the outer ends of kerbstones K2 and K97 on either side of the entrance stone. Wooden steps were installed over these two kerbstones for public access.

**5.2.3** There was a collapse at the rear of the tumulus in the late 1980s. This may have been caused by a build-up of water pressure in the cairn owing to the blocking of the drainage holes in the reinforced concrete retaining wall behind the entrance façade. The collapse was stabilised using gabions that allowed water to percolate through them. Cantilevered slabs were also installed to protect the kerbstones from direct rainfall. This system was a prototype for the works carried out on the main passage tomb at Knowth.

**5.2.4** Other features, including a number of satellite tombs and the pit and timber circles identified by David Sweetman during archaeological excavations between 1982 and 1984, have been marked out on the site.

**5.2.5** The option of moving the entrance stone at Newgrange indoors and replacing it with a replica has been considered. While this may have to be done in the future, an advisory group set up to look at the matter recommended that, pending a comprehensive assessment of the condition of the stone and its potential deterioration, it should be left in situ.

**5.2.6** The establishment of a mature thorn hedge around the boundaries of the site has enabled the removal of a chain-link fence along the road frontage. The area of the old roadside carpark has also been filled in and landscaped.

## 5.3 Knowth



▲ *Passage tombs are found throughout the Bend of the Boyne and there is a sense of order and formality in their arrangement in the landscape*

**5.3.1** Excavations were undertaken at Knowth by Professor George Eogan from 1962 to 1998. Major publications to date include *Excavations at Knowth* (1) (1984), *Knowth and the Passage Tombs of Ireland* (1986), and (with Helen Roche) *Excavations at Knowth* (2) (1997). Numerous articles have also been published.

**5.3.2** This complex comprises a major tumulus (Site 1) with two passage tombs, the eastern and the western. Site 1 is circled by at least seventeen smaller satellite tombs. As well as its impressive architecture the complex is noted for its large number of Neolithic decorated stones — the largest collection on any one site in western Europe.

**5.3.3** The excavations revealed almost continuous occupation of the site from before the tombs were built to the present day, with a break in the Late Bronze Age/Iron Age. Many earlier features were destroyed, in whole or in part, by later activity. By way of example, a later defensive ditch and a complex of Early Christian souterrains destroyed the first five metres of the eastern passage of Site 1.

**5.3.4** The conservation and presentation of Site 1 presented technical and conceptual difficulties. These included:

- The destruction of earlier phases of work.
- Some of the orthostats and capstones were shattered and were no longer suitable for their original structural use.
- The east chamber was distorted because of rotational settlement. Restoration to allow public access would have required the complete dismantling of the original structure, which was not considered an acceptable option.

**5.3.5** Conservation works had been taking place since excavations commenced, but EU Structural Funding allowed significant progress to be made, enabling the completion of the conservation and presentation work. From the very start the approach taken was to conserve and present all excavated features even if not of the same period. Specific interventions include:



▲ *The basin stone at Knowth is the finest ever found in passage tomb in Ireland*



- The protection of decorated stones, either by using a cantilevered canopy or the reinstatement of the satellite tombs.
- The conservation and consolidation of some of the damaged orthostats and capstones. Removal of cairn material during the excavations provided access to the eastern and western passages in Site 1, enabling sections that had collapsed to be straightened. An enclosing concrete structure was constructed to take imposed loads off and to allow inspection access to the tops of the lintels.
- The replacement with a lightweight fill of some of the cairn material removed during the excavations over the eastern and western tomb chambers to relieve pressure on the structures.
- An accessible chamber was constructed next to the entrance to the eastern tomb to protect and present the interventions and alterations from the Neolithic to the Early Christian period.
- Post-holes of other structures, including a timber henge and house sites, have been marked out.

**5.3.6** A section of the site was opened to the public in July 1991. Conservation works are complete and the entire site was formally opened to the public in April 2002.

## 5.4 Dowth

**5.4.1** Dowth is the easternmost of the three great passage tombs. The site, which was purchased by the State in 1997, includes the mound with its two passage tombs, an Early Christian souterrain and partial remains of the medieval manor of Dowth. The tumulus was damaged in the mid-nineteenth century by excavations and the removal of cairn material for road construction and building. Archaeological work has been confined to survey and recording. No archaeological excavation has been carried out on the tomb itself in recent years.

**5.4.2** The north tomb can be accessed either along the souterrain or down a vertical shaft and ladder; access to the south tomb is direct from ground level. Public access to both tombs is restricted at present.



➤ The deposition of human remains was usually confined to chamber areas. They were laid in stone basins like this impressive example from the passage tomb at Dowth

5.4.3 When purchased, the site was heavily overgrown with gorse and noxious weeds. In 2000 and 2001 the gorse covering the tumulus and decorated kerbstones was cut back and the weeds treated. The complete eradication of these will take a number of years. There has also been some thinning of the adjoining hedgerows to allow for the checking of possible solar alignments and to open up views to and from the site.

5.4.4 In view of the major programme of excavation at Newgrange and Knowth, it is important that some sites are left unexcavated to allow future generations with more advanced techniques to work on them. It is intended, therefore, that future archaeological investigation of Dowth will be mainly confined to non-invasive techniques.

## 5.5 Other monuments

5.5.1 There is considerable evidence of monument erosion caused by arable farming and stock damage in the other archaeological sites at Brú na Bóinne but there is no systematic monitoring or conservation programme, apart from survey and recording. The establishment of such a programme is one of the primary objectives of this plan. As most of these monuments are on private lands this will require the co-operation of the landowners.

## 5.6 Knowth House

5.6.1 Knowth House and its range of yards and outbuildings were purchased in 1992. It is a classic early nineteenth-century strong farmer's house. There is some evidence that elements of the complex may date from the seventeenth century, but further work is required to establish whether this is so. It currently serves as a base for the visitor minibus service and provides an office for the Meath and Louth Wildlife Rangers along with a temporary office for the Battle of the Boyne 1690 Project.

