
Public access and visitor management

6.1 General background



▲ The Brú na Bóinne Visitor Centre is a beautiful building internally and externally and was designed to almost disappear into the landscape. Visitor cross the new suspension bridge and are brought by bus to Knowth and Newgrange.

6.1.1 Although Newgrange has been publicly accessible for over 300 years, it was only following the excavation and restoration programme of the 1960s and 1970s that the monument attracted significant tourism. The potential effects on the monument of uncontrolled access by large numbers of visitors were recognised. A guide service was established for the busier summer months and a full-time caretaker was employed. These measures provided the public with information on the site, reduced the risk of deliberate damage to the monument, and provided structured opening hours.

6.1.2 As visitor numbers increased, admission to the monument was further controlled. In 1982 access only by guided tour was introduced year-round. In 1985 priority was given to tour groups who had pre-booked, and visitors to the site were turned away once a quota for the day was reached. By 1987 all tour groups had to be pre-booked and individuals had to arrive early in the day to ensure admission (Fig. 16).

6.1.3 Visitor numbers continued to be limited through the late 1980s and the early 1990s. Many more visitors came to the site than could be accommodated, which caused great disappointment. The opening of part of the Knowth site and the establishment of a visitor service on the Hill of Tara in 1991 took some of the pressure from Newgrange.

6.1.4 The large numbers of visitors to Newgrange created problems not only in terms of wear and tear on the monument but also in terms of traffic congestion, litter, illegal trading and the need for increased security, parking and toilet facilities.

6.2 Brú na Bóinne Visitor Centre

6.2.1 The Brú na Bóinne Visitor Centre opened to the public in June 1997. Located on the south side of the River Boyne, its primary purpose is to manage the flow of visitors to Newgrange and Knowth. This is done by the provision of a shuttle bus service. By providing a partial full-scale replica of the chamber of Newgrange it presents an alternative to visitors who cannot wait to visit the monuments or who arrive after all the tours are sold. The Centre also interprets the monuments, the Neolithic and Bronze Age people and their culture. At present, it is the starting-point for all visits to Newgrange and Knowth. It could also be the starting-point for visits to Dowth and other sites in Brú na Bóinne. The Centre provides other facilities for tourists, such as information, a restaurant, toilets and parking.



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6.2.2 Staffing levels.

In 1997, prior to the opening of the Visitor Centre, four people were permanently employed to provide a visitor service to the public. In addition, sixteen temporary guides were employed for the high season. Midlands East Tourism employed five people on a temporary basis at the Newgrange Tourist Office before 1997. At present there are twenty-four full-time workers at Brú na Bóinne, including guides, storekeepers, general operatives and bus drivers, with an additional twelve people

employed in the high season. The Tourist Information Office employs four permanent staff and three seasonal staff. The tea rooms at Brú na Bóinne employ five full-time staff and fifteen seasonal staff on a full-time/part-time basis.

6.2.3 *Solstice arrangements.*

Since the winter solstice alignment at Newgrange was rediscovered by Professor M. J. O'Kelly in 1967 the phenomenon has generated much interest. From 2001 access to the chamber at dawn is granted to visitors to Brú na Bóinne who apply for places during the year. Fifty names are drawn from the total number of applicants and invitations are sent to those selected. Each person selected may invite a companion. This system replaced the list system that was in place for over twenty years.



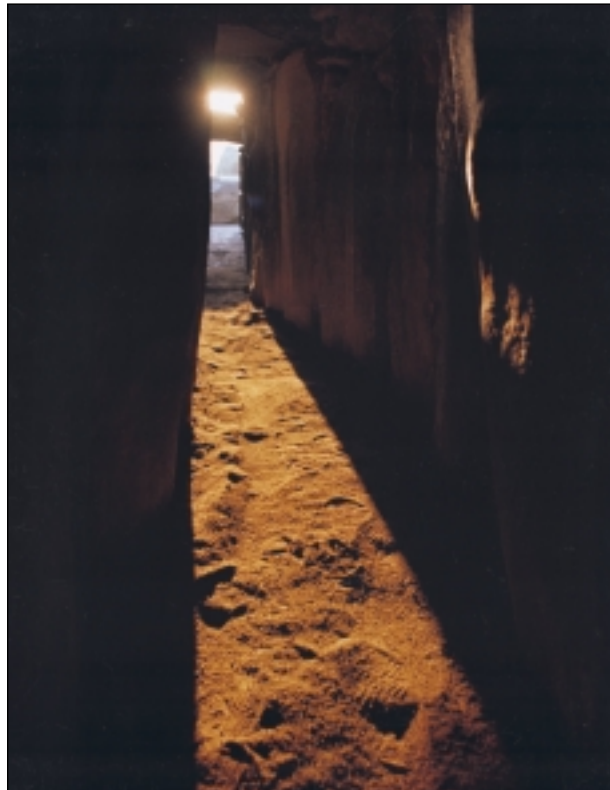
▲ Guide services in action at Newgrange

6.2.4 *Archaeo-astronomy.*

Since the introduction of a visitor service at Brú na Bóinne, efforts have been made to facilitate any reasonable request with regard to research at the various monuments. This is particularly the case in relation to archaeo-astronomy, with access being granted outside normal opening hours.

6.2.5 *Visitor numbers.*

In 2001 there were just under 186,000 visitors to Brú na Bóinne Visitor Centre, and 4,000 students visited free of charge under the 'Free admission for schools' scheme operated by Dúchas. This figure was down on 2000 when there were 235,000 visitors and 8,000 schoolchildren. The decrease in visitor numbers was mainly due to the effects of the closure of sites during the foot and mouth crisis. Visitor numbers for 2002 are expected to reach 215,000.

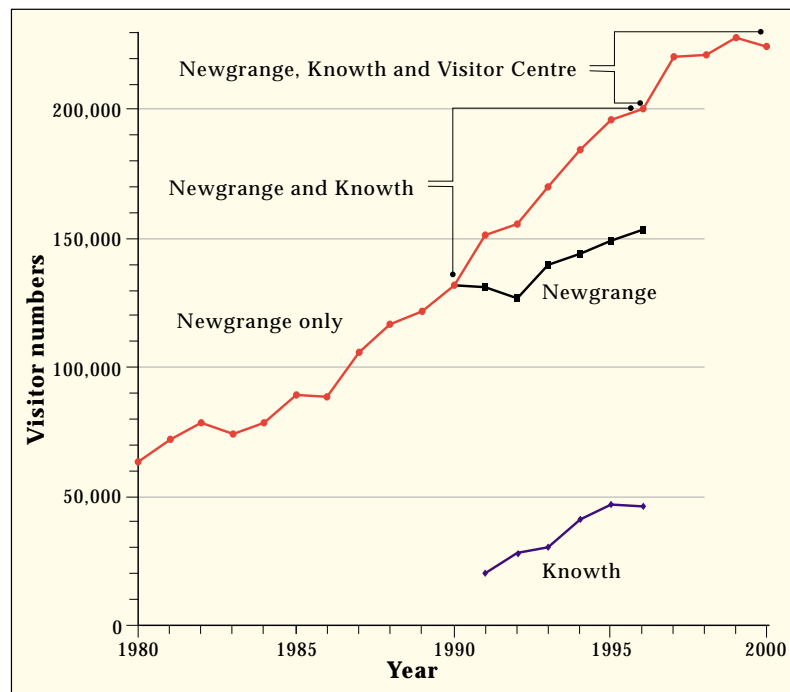


▲ Winter solstice at Newgrange passage tomb

There is no restriction on visitor numbers to Brú na Bóinne Visitor Centre and Exhibition but tour groups are encouraged to pre-book.

6.2.6 *Disabled access.*

The Visitor Centre was designed to be fully accessible to people with disabilities. While access to the monuments is difficult for visitors with disabilities, special arrangements can be made locally by prior arrangement.



▲ Winter solstice at Newgrange passage tomb

6.2.7 *Arrangements with B&B operators.*

Since the opening of the Brú na Bóinne Visitor Centre in June 1997, a scheme has been in operation whereby the owners of B&Bs in the core area have been issued with vouchers that they in turn can issue to their guests as tickets to Newgrange and Knowth at a discount. They then book the tour of the site by phone.

The advantages to the B&B owners are:

- They can offer their guests a reduced rate for a visit to the monuments.
- Their guests are brought from designated pick-up points directly to the sites by the Brú na Bóinne buses.
- Their guests have guaranteed admission and avoid the need to queue.

There are clear benefits in this scheme for both the B&B operators and the Visitor Centre. It is the intention of Dúchas to look at ways of expanding this facility.

6.2.8 *Local bus service.*

Following a specific request from Dúchas the Heritage Service in 1997, Bus Éireann agreed to provide a bus service linking Drogheda and Slane via the Brú na Bóinne Visitor Centre. Subsequently the service to Slane was discontinued and Bus Éireann now operates seven buses per day, Monday to Saturday, from Drogheda to Brú na Bóinne. On Sundays and on Bank Holidays the service is reduced to four buses per day. The bus service is widely used by local residents on both sides of the River Boyne. Dúchas would favour the reintroduction of the Bus Éireann link from the Visitor Centre to Slane.

6.2.9 *The Visitor Centre as a community facility.*

Dúchas encourages the use of the Visitor Centre by the local community for a variety of events. At present these events include Christmas parties for senior citizens, sports events for local children, concerts, poetry readings, craftwork exhibits, art exhibitions and book launches.

Special attention is given to events that in some way reflect, explore or illuminate some aspect of the meaning or archaeology of Brú na Bóinne, and to events demonstrating traditional crafts or activities. Local craftworkers have been invited to display their work in the Visitor Centre both as individuals and through their link to Meath Craft. In 2001 over thirty craft workers from the Boyne Valley area had the opportunity to display their work at Brú na Bóinne.

Artists using a variety of media but whose inspiration is from the monuments or the general Boyne Valley area are also invited to exhibit their work. Seven successful exhibitions of art inspired by the Boyne Valley and the monuments took place in 2001. Amongst the other exhibitions held in the Centre was a very successful Ledwidge Awareness Week at the end of July 2001 to coincide with the annual Ledwidge Day.

Residents of the immediate area and their guests are always admitted free of charge to both the Centre and the monuments.

6.3 Access to the monuments

6.3.1 The number of visitors to Newgrange and Knowth each day is limited to the maximum that can be accommodated with due regard to the protection of the monuments.

6.3.2 While access to the chamber of Newgrange will continue, visitors to Knowth will not have access to the chambers. However, since April 2002 access has been possible to a modern room built within the main tumulus (see 5.3.5).

6.3.3 There is direct public access to Dowth. While visitors cannot enter the chambers without prior permission they can walk freely around the site without restriction.

6.3.4 Access to the other archaeological sites in Brú na Bóinne is very restricted and dependent on permission from individual landowners.

6.3.5 Filming and photography at the monuments are restricted and bound by conditions necessary for the proper management of the sites.

6.3.6 Use of the Visitor Centre or monuments beyond regular visits during normal opening hours is restricted.

6.4 Information

6.4.1 Guides/Information Officers provide information and interpretation at the Visitor Centre and at Newgrange and Knowth. Information panels are placed at the sites in State care and these are augmented by publications.

6.4.2 Information on access and guided tours and any restrictions is disseminated to as wide a public as possible. While it is a primary aim to keep the monuments open to the public during advertised opening hours, necessary conservation works will take priority over public access.

6.4.3 Educational activities concentrate on promoting awareness of the need for conservation, while being relevant and enjoyable for the students who visit. Local management will continue to liaise with teachers, curriculum development centres and local schools to develop programmes suited to advance these aims.

This section identifies the main objectives of this management plan and, where necessary, recommends the key actions for addressing these, taking into account the resources available.



