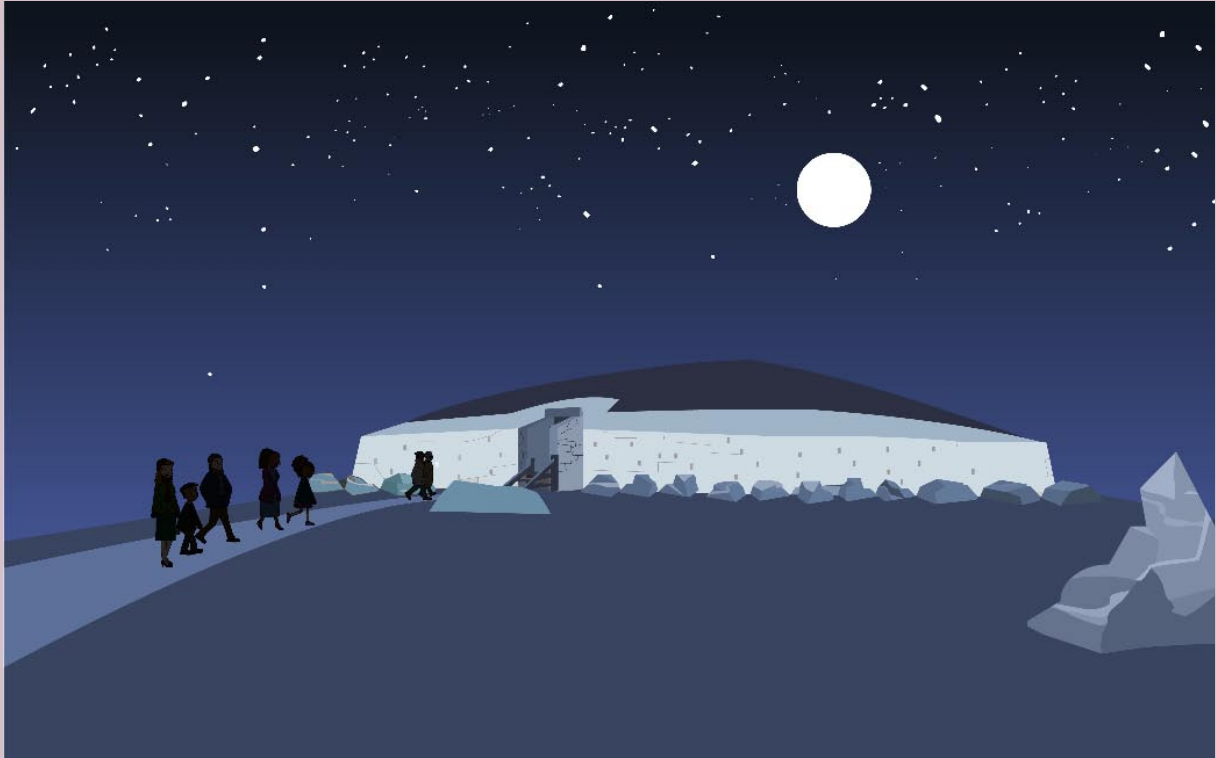


NEWGRANGE



NEWGRANGE

Newgrange has been designated a World Heritage Site by UNESCO and attracts some 200,000 visitors per year. The megalithic passage tomb at this site has been in use since it was completed some time around 3200 BC, though there had already been an earthen mound here for hundreds of years. Originally known by its Irish name, Sí an Bhrú (Fairy Mound), the burial mound of Newgrange overlooks the river Boyne where it curves, taking in the famous Brú na Bóinne area, the burial grounds of the ancient high kings of nearby Tara. Tara was the seat of the Árd Rí (High King) of Ireland and the Hill of Tara is about 20km from Newgrange. Also, St Patrick is said to have lit his Paschal fire on the hill of Slane in full view of the Árd Rí and those in the palace at Tara.

The magic of Newgrange occurs when the passage and chamber are illuminated by the winter solstice sunrise.

IDEAS TO EXPLORE WITH YOUR CLASS



All access to the Newgrange chamber for the winter solstice sunrise is decided by lottery, and application forms are available at the Brú na Bóinne Visitor Centre, across the river from Newgrange. The tickets are much sought-after and names are drawn in September each year. Fifty names are drawn and each of the winners can bring a guest, so there are ten lottery winners and their guests in the chamber on each of the mornings around the winter solstice (usually 18 to 23 December).

In the film, Abbi's mother wins a ticket through the school, so Abbi gets the wonderful opportunity to visit Newgrange with her mother for the winter solstice.

WINTER SOLSTICE



The passage and chamber of Newgrange are illuminated by the winter solstice sunrise, on the shortest day of the year in the northern hemisphere. A shaft of sunlight shines through the roof box over the entrance and penetrates the passage to light up the chamber. The dramatic event lasts for seventeen minutes at dawn on the winter solstice and for a few mornings either side of the solstice. When Newgrange was built, over 5000 years ago, the winter solstice sunbeam would have made its way to the back recess of the central chamber. The sunbeam now stops two metres from the back recess due to changes in the tilt of the earth's axis.

CLASS PROJECT

What might your class or school do to celebrate the arrival of the shortest day of the year? Discuss the possibility of lighting candles surrounded by ivy and other leaves, once considered sacred for their evergreen properties, in the hallway or at some focal point of the school. Investigate the pagan or pre-Christian origins of the practice of having an evergreen, coniferous tree in the home at this time of the year – maybe the class could work in groups with some children investigating the origins of the Yule log, others the hanging of mistletoe inside the home at mid-winter, while another group might learn more about the history of the practice of decorating coniferous trees – some say that the earliest that a pine tree was used and decorated for Christmas was in 1521 in Germany.

Why were Newgrange and other megalithic monuments built?

A Scottish engineer, Professor Alexander Thom (1894–1985), and others have pointed to advanced astronomical skills in megalithic man and suggest that

their mathematical knowledge pre-dated the Egyptians. The class might investigate Thom's theories about the 'megalithic yard' and his studies of Stonehenge and other megalithic monuments in Northern Europe.

More recently, Martin Brennan, a graphic designer living in Dublin, claimed to have deciphered the secret language of Newgrange. Brennan first became interested in Newgrange and the other sites of the Boyne Valley, not from an archaeological or astronomic point of view, but from his interest in prehistoric religion and art – art, religion and science all merge in the achievements and pursuits of megalithic man, he says:

'I'm sure that Newgrange was not originally built as a burial site although later on it came to be used as one. It is most deliberately aligned not only to the rising sun at the winter solstice, as is generally known, but to the moon at certain periods, when the rising moon fills the whole chamber with silver light. So I'm sure the mound's primary purpose was astronomical.'

A group of children might key in 'Stonelight Archives' into a search engine and read the articles about Martin Brennan and the Stonelight team and present their findings to the class. Use of an interactive whiteboard, or powerpoint or similar, could enhance the presentation.

Clearly, Newgrange and other megalithic monuments were built with a mixture of advanced understanding of how and when sunlight shines down on earth, and a love of beautiful decoration. The people who built Newgrange put energy and talent into making one of the most impressive feats of engineering in the world.

The beautiful spiral incisions into the huge stone slabs inside and outside the tomb are also exceptional, and it is obvious that these Stone Age artists were highly skilled.

There were no tools or weapons found in the chamber at Newgrange, and relatively few fragments of cremated human remains, facts that might prompt children to talk about the possible functions of monuments such as those at Newgrange, Knowth and Dowth. Might the tombs have been built to proclaim the wealth and social status of those who built them? Might they have been reserved for the burial of very important people, eg kings, chieftains? Or were they built to honour the lives of some very special members of the community?

CLASS PROJECT

(Based on a project by Siobhán Rea, Griffeen Valley ETNS)

- Emulate megalithic man and build an elaborate structure. Think of someone you love. Imagine building a big house for them which would always be in complete darkness *except on their birthday*. On that day a light would shine in and illuminate one special object which you had made out of clay to represent them or show them how much you loved them. What would that object be? A perfect sphere? A disc with spirals incised on it? A symbol like a star or a moon? Would you make a pedestal for it?

The following are some ideas of how you could go about making a house or shrine or enclosure and a special object to celebrate the person you love.

CLAY: Roll, coil, flatten, twist! Take some clay and make it into a special object. If you don't like it, squish it and start again! Find some sharp and blunt pencils to press patterns into it or gently rub the surface with a little water to make it perfectly smooth. When you are happy that this is worthy of your loved one, put it in the sun to dry (or bake it if you have a special clay oven).

Next, using clay or an object you find suitable, make a little table or pedestal or box on which your object can stand, to make a display that you think is just perfect.

CONSTRUCTION: Find some slabs of foam (some old cushions have these) and build walls and a roof on a flat card surface. Use fabric or card to block out every bit of light getting in except at one point. Then take your house to the sunniest place you can find and see can you get light to shine in through that point. You will have to move your house a lot to get the light to

shine in well. Think that's difficult? The people who built Newgrange couldn't pick it up and move it around to find the sun! Now position your precious object in your construction.

FABRIC AND FIBRE: Find some beautiful old cloths or look in bargain bins in fabric shops, and drape yourself regally. You could paint spirals with fabric paint on the fabric first. Conduct a ceremony where you place your special object on its pedestal in the centre of the house. Put the roof on so that it is in darkness. Bring it to your light source. Get all your community to walk behind you towards the sun and to sing a special song as the sun shines on the enclosure.

The public could not see the light shine into Newgrange. Even though they were much smaller on average than we are now (the adults were about five feet tall) very few people could fit inside to watch.

It's the same with your special object. Not everyone will be able to see the light shining on it. But you could take some photos of it and put them up on an interactive white board or a laptop and let people see that way. (Or maybe you would rather keep it all a secret, just between you and your loved one...).

NEWGRANGE IN CELTIC TALES

An Tóraigheacht (the story 'Tóraigheacht Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne') retold in graphic novel form by Colmán Ó Raghallaigh, is an imaginative and original retelling of one of stories of Fionn and the Fianna, and one in which Newgrange plays a part. This story features strong human emotions of love, hate, greed, jealousy and desire for revenge. The love of young Gráinne, promised in marriage to the much older Fionn, for brave and handsome Diarmaid Ó Duibhne causes the pair to flee the court at Tara. Tragic consequences are inevitable, despite some magical intervention from Diarmaid's foster-father, the druid Aonghus an Bhrogha, who finally has to take his much-loved foster son to Newgrange for burial.

Another graphic novel, also written in Irish by Colmán Ó Raghallaigh, *An Táin*, is the greatest of the stories from the Ulster cycle and it too has links with Newgrange as Cúchulainn is said to have been conceived there. *Táin Bó Cuailgne* is an epic tale of friendship, treachery and heroism which tells of the Connacht invasion of Ulster and

the heroic defence of his native province by Cúchulainn.

- Provide the children with copies of these graphic novels and of other books of Celtic tales and spend some time reading and enjoying them. If you choose to focus on one myth with the whole class, ask them to draw or illustrate their favourite part of each chapter or sequence of pages as they read, and to write a piece about it underneath. The work might be kept in a folder until it can be displayed as a summary of the story, with at least one example of each child's work displayed. (See Relevant and Related Books for some suggested titles.)

OTHER WAYS OF HONOURING THE DEAD

'We will remember them': Armistice Day (also known as Remembrance Day, or Poppy Day)

On the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month of 1918, the guns fell silent on the western front after the armistice was signed by the Germans. There are still parades and official wreath-laying ceremonies in many towns and cities in many countries, and people observe a two-minute period of silence as a sign of respect for all those – armed forces and civilians – who died in that Great War of 1914–1918. In Britain, the 'official' or national ceremony is held at the Cenotaph at Whitehall in London, and the end of the two-minute silence is marked by the sounding of the Last Post. Services are also held on the Sunday nearest to 11 November and there are ceremonies at local war memorials in most cities, towns and villages, attended by politicians, serving members of the armed forces and ex-servicemen/women. Wreaths of poppies are laid at the memorials and two minutes' silence is held at 11.00am. Church bells are usually rung 'half-muffled', creating a sombre effect.

- The class might read 'At the Going Down' by Laurence Binyon, quoted at many Remembrance services, or some of the poems of Wilfred Owen and/or Siegfried Sassoon, poets who brought home to many the almost indescribable horrors endured by soldiers at the front.
- An Irish war poet from County Meath, Francis Ledwidge, sometimes known as the 'poet of the blackbirds', was killed in action during World War I, and one winning novel of a Bisto Book of the Year Award is dedicated to his memory (as well as to the

memory of the author's wife). The children might read Ledwidge's poems.

- Many Irish towns and cities have memorials to commemorate those who died in World War I. Visit the War Memorial Gardens, Islandbridge, Dublin, or contact the Secretary, War Memorial Building, 9–13 Waring Street, Belfast, to arrange a tour. You might also contact the Somme Heritage Centre, which details Ireland's contribution to World War I and shows reconstructed trenches of the Battle of the Somme in 1916, or visit www.irishsoldier.org.
- Examine local churches and cemeteries for commemorations or graves of soldiers who died in World War I. An organisation was established to commemorate all those from the island of Ireland, men and women, who served, fought and died during World War I, and to promote peace and reconciliation between all the people of the island of Ireland. For information on the Island of Ireland Peace Park, Messines, Flanders, visit <http://www.mesen.be/en/toerisme/adressen.asp> or the website of the In Flanders Field Museum at www.inflandersfields.be.
- Debate the motion: *Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori* (It is sweet and honourable to die for one's country).

HONOURING THE DEAD IN OTHER CULTURES

To this day, it is customary in many cultures to honour those who have died, often on the anniversary of their death. Children might investigate the elements of the original festival of Samhain that traditionally marked the beginning of the New Year in the Celtic calendar. It was felt that this time belonged neither to the Old Year nor to the New, and there was a blurring of the boundaries between the temporal and spiritual worlds, allowing people a chance to show respect for their dead.

- The class might work in groups to research the ways in which people in other countries and cultures honour and show respect for their dead.