



This the second of a monthly series of heritage articles, published by the National Monuments Service of the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht in conjunction with the Irish Examiner and Limerick Education Centre. Today's article focuses on the concept of commemoration; the archaeological and historical evidence of its development and its relevance today.

Our identity is reflected in how we celebrate our heritage

MOST people can remember where they celebrated their 18th or 21st birthday, but how many will be able to recall the venue of their 15th or 23rd?

To understand why this is the case we must realise that all human activity has memory at its core.

Short-term memory, for example, allows our brains to process information which is only relevant to us for a short period of time, before it is discarded.

Our long-term memory is, however, the storage space required for ongoing learning. It stores the things our brains consider important to us.

Memories are like photos, after a while we don't always remember what we have kept and why sometimes our brains need a little help to remember.

To help us with this we have diaries, cal-

'Dúirt mé leat go raibh mé breoite' (I told you I was ill) — epitaph of Irish comedian Spike Milligan



endars and timetables. We even have mnemonics — "trigger" words or visual aids that teach our brains to remember something important.

We often don't realise it, but the act of doing something can become the trigger for our memories.

For example, marking a special occasion can become a visual trigger for the future.

So that's why we always remember details of our 18th and 21st birthday but not of lesser birthdays. The events themselves have become an important milestone in our commemorative culture.

Commemoration has been integral to our society and our lives for thousands of years; it is part of our personal and cultural identity, and a way of bringing people together.

We often mark religious festivals, historical events and memorial services together, as a family or com-



TIME TOMB

For more information on Megalithic Tombs in Ireland, like Proleek, above, go to www.itsabouttime.ie and www.excavations.ie for the results of recent archaeological excavations at burial sites in Ireland.

munity, and while these events can be happy or sad, no matter what the reason, they are important to us.

Commemoration is so ingrained in our psyche that this year has been designated by the Government, and Irish communities abroad, as a Commemorative Year; hundreds of

OSSUARIES

An ossuary is a place where the bones of the deceased are removed to after being exhumed from a primary, temporary burial. This is a traditional method of burial used by Native American Indians — see The Indian Neck Ossuary in Wellfleet in Cape Cod.

events have been, and will be held, across the country as part of The Gathering initiative (see www.thegathering.ie). Commemoration will be staged throughout our communities and many of these events will have links to our archaeological heritage.

All commemorations, whether they involve just you and your family, or your school and community, are ways of bringing people together.

Some of these events will be so important to us that we may mark them by taking a picture, or by buying a souvenir — a physical marker and visual aid that remind us of



History in the making

Project 1 will help you map and locate the monuments in your area — try making your own heritage trail for the school.

Left: Pillar stone, An Caiseal, Glencolumbkille, Co Donegal.

this important time.

For example, schools have plaques and pictures on their walls celebrating their sporting victories or their students' academic achievements.

Communities commemorate people who are special to them by organising events in their honour or naming buildings or streets after the Sam Maguire Cup, St Patrick's College or Oliver Plunkett St.

In the towns and villages of Ireland there are memorials commemorating historic events integral to the collective memory of those communities, for example monuments marking events during the War of Independence.

Holy wells also serve as commemorative markers drawing crowds of people on a particular day each year in remembrance of a local saint or holy day.

Some archaeological monuments in our landscape also represent physical markers commemorating a person or an event — from the ancient tombs, cairns and ogham stones which commemorate people, to the stone circles and alignments commemorating events like the summer and winter solstices.

Some of these monuments also had more than one commemorative function, like Drombeg Stone Circle in West Cork. This monument

is aligned with the sunset at the winter solstice, marking a major event in the ancient winter calendar, and it is also a burial marker — archaeologists discovered the cremated remains of a young adolescent in the centre of the circle when it was excavated in the 1950s.

Drombeg is also a rather unusual monument in that there are two hut sites and a fulacht fia (ancient cooking site) beside the stone circle. It is possible a celebration which included ritual dining could have taken place here, where people may have gathered to mark the winter solstice and commemorate the life of a loved one.

One of the most prevalent reasons for building these commemorative monuments in our landscape was to honour the dead. From the first humans 200,000 years ago to our Irish hunter-gatherer ancestors almost 10,000 years ago, people have treated their dead with respect and care.

Burial is a sacred ritual not just in Ireland, but throughout the world — from the mummified pharaohs of the pyramids, to the ritual funeral pyres of Asia and the carefully placed ossuaries of the North American Indians.

Ireland has a 10,000-year tradition of commemorating the dead. The oldest known burial in the country was discovered in 2001 in Castleconnell, Co Limerick. Unlike the great tombs in the Boyne Valley, it took the form of a small pit containing the cremated bones of an adult male which were buried with

a stone axe and two flint points (probably part of a larger artefact like an arrow).

Next to the pit was a post-hole which archaeologists think may have been the socket of an upright marker — like a headstone. Radiocarbon analysis has dated the site to c7,400 BC showing

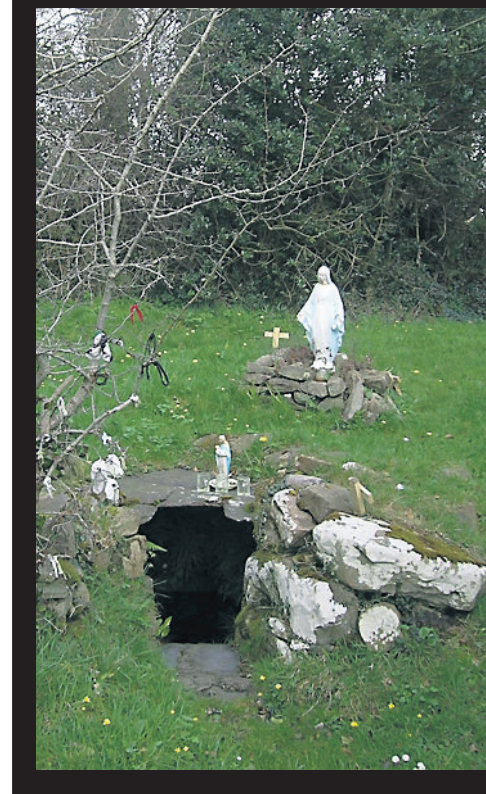
us that even our early ancestors commemorated their dead.

Perhaps the most widely known and visible ancient burial markers, which are clearly associated with Irish culture, are the megalithic tombs at Newgrange and Knowth in Co Meath.

These large tombs date to c4000 BC, and are recognised around the world. They are even older than the



See www.archaeology.ie to find out more about Drombeg, the stone circle in Glandore, Co Cork, and other stone circles.



Celebrating and commemorating exam results is one of the key milestones in our lives. Examples of archaeological monuments that represent physical markers commemorating a person or an event in our past are, clockwise from above: Labbacallee wedge tomb, near Fermoy, Co Cork; the Everard/Roche commemorative plaque and the Butler memorial plaque, Fethard, Co Tipperary, and St Conlon's Holy Well, Youghal Village, Co Tipperary. Pictures: National Monuments Service



pyramids in Egypt and are amongst the finest examples of passage tombs in Europe. Similar to Drombeg, Newgrange and Knowth have more than one commemorative purpose; from the solar alignments, to the decorated stones celebrating the sun and the afterlife, to the monuments

the act of commemoration itself had in our ancient past. These monuments were constructed to make an unforgettable mark on the Irish landscape.

However, our closest links with the commemorative practices of the past are with Christian burials. Christianity arrived in Ireland around the 5th century AD and with it the ancient ways of the pagan past were abandoned or adapted.

A new "set of rules" was introduced — rules that still form part of our modern burial practices today.

During Early Christian times burials were in shallow graves, not always marked, but always aligned east-west. This alignment nearly always indicates a Christian burial and this practice is still carried out today. While individual burials were not marked in the Early Christian period, they were located within a visibly demarcated area of consecrated ground.

However, in medieval times, large and often elaborate effigies and grave markers were used for the tombs of our Anglo-Norman ancestors and Irish chiefs. Some of the effigies that survive today can also provide good information on the type of armour, weaponry, clothes

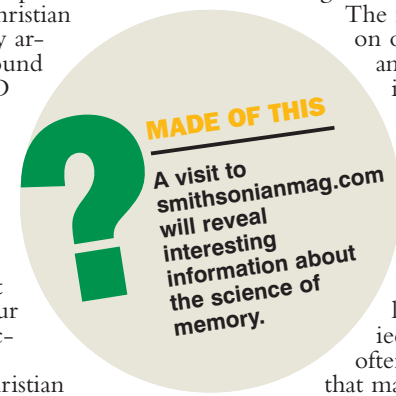
and helmets/headresses worn by the high status men and women of the time. Many medieval churches and graveyards contain an interesting and informative mix of headstones and effigies showing how burial markers changed over time.

The importance we place on our sense of identity and culture is reflected in how we respect, care for and celebrate our heritage.

How we commemorate the people and events of our past, as well as the cultural heritage that has been left to us, can be varied and complex. It is often rooted in traditions that may have changed over

time — but commemoration is still important to us today. Whether heritage is central or peripheral to your world, it is still a reminder of where you have come from and why certain traditions or values are important to you, your family, school or community.

Many towns and villages will be commemorating and celebrating their heritage this year and the archaeological and historic monuments of the country will form no small part in these celebrations — perhaps we should all find out a little bit more about the rich cultural heritage that's outside our door and beneath our feet.



This article is the second in a series of articles published by the National Monuments Service of the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht in conjunction with The Irish Examiner and Limerick Education Centre aiming to supplement the recently revised second edition of 'Archaeology in Classroom, Time in Transition'. The resource offers a comprehensive range of engaging lessons across a series of three themes: Worship and Commemoration; Lifestyle and Living; Archaeology at Work. All the lessons are targeted (but not exclusively) at students who are undertaking the Transition Year Option. In this article the focus is on the concept of commemoration; the archaeological and historical evidence of its development and its relevance today. For a more complete picture this article should be read in conjunction with Theme 1, Unit 4, Lessons 1 and 2 of Time in Transition available on www.itsabouttime.ie.



IT'S ABOUT TIME 2



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