

The first farmers in Ireland

Farming was one of the single most important developments in the history of man. The cultivation of crops and domestication of animals originated in the Middle East about 12,000 years ago and gradually spread across Europe, reaching Ireland about 4000BC. This period is referred to as the Neolithic or New Stone Age.

Farming began in Ireland with the domestication of goats, sheep, cattle and pigs, and with the cultivation of a primitive form of wheat and barley. It is thought that this revolution was pioneered by some travellers to our shores, and that these ideas proved so productive that they were adopted by their predecessors, the hunter-gatherers.

The first farmers cleared forests of dense oak and elm to plant crops and enable their animals to graze. Many early farming sites favoured sheltered places near quality water sources. This created a year-round supply of food and enabled people to live in permanent settlements, although hunting and gathering of wild foods remained important and provided supplementary foods.

Remains of the houses of some of the earliest farmers are occasionally discovered by archaeologists and their burial monuments, seen in such places as the Boyne Valley in Co Meath, are the earliest standing archaeological monuments in the country.

Early examples of the fields laid out by Neolithic farming folk survive beneath the bogs of north Mayo, where the Céide Fields, dating to around 3500BC, cover several square kilometres.

NEOLITHIC TOOLS

The creation of the first fields necessitated the felling of trees and, to do this, Neolithic farmers used one of the most characteristic tools of the Neolithic: the polished stone axe. Many axes found throughout Ireland were made from porcellanite, which was sourced primarily from Tievebulliagh Mountain in Co Antrim and Rathlin Island. Some polished stone axes are so impressive and carefully made that they were more than likely symbols of power, wealth, and prestige.

Other tools and weapons such as arrowheads, blades and scrapers were made of flint or chert and were used for skinning animals, cutting hides, cleaning fish, harvesting crops and for warfare.

Pottery made its first appearance in Ireland during the Neolithic period. The earliest pots were mainly non-decorated round-bottomed bowls, although decoration became more common in the later part of the period. Pots were handmade and fired in bonfires or firing pits.

Following its introduction about 6,000 years ago, farming gradually

Over the next 12 weeks we will be bringing you a series of articles from the National Monuments Service. This week, we look at Ireland's first farmers.



The Céide Fields in north Mayo date to around 3500BC.



Polished stone
Neolithic axe



Leaf-shaped
arrowhead



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became the dominant way of life in Ireland. Until recent centuries, almost all the structures built in Ireland were directly or indirectly related to farming and were built by farming communities. To this day, most of our archaeological monuments are situated on farmland.

The role of farmers in protecting our national heritage has been recognised in the Common Agricultural Policy, in REPS and in the current move towards recognising the delivery of “public goods” as an important task of the farming community.

PRESERVING THE PAST

The preservation of archaeological monuments might seem less important in a time of recession but there are still many good reasons for looking after them. For example, the work farmers do to protect our monuments is vital to another of our largest industries: tourism.

The reports of Tourism Ireland and Fáilte Ireland repeatedly show

that heritage and culture are high on the list of things tourists enjoy most about their visits to this country. This is at least partly because they find themselves surrounded by evidence of our past – in the form of our archaeological monuments – everywhere they go.

Of course, conserving our unique heritage is not something we should do just to keep our tourists coming. Archaeological monuments are an educational and recreational resource that is available to everyone. They are part of the ancient furniture of our landscape. They provide a reference point for local people throughout their lives and connect them to the places their ancestors knew.

The farming community plays a vital role in protecting our irreplaceable archaeological heritage and for ensuring that it is preserved for the generations to come. **CL**

NEXT WEEK:
IRELAND'S EARLIEST FARMHOUSES



A WORD FROM THE MINISTER

Most of the monuments and ancient settlements that form our archaeological heritage are found in the Irish countryside. They help us to research and understand the story of history from its earliest beginnings. They tell us who we are, how we lived and where we have come from.

The farming community has always been the main protector of Ireland's archaeological monuments. Custom, tradition and respect for our past has ensured that the monuments have survived down through the ages.

Modern farmers are continuing this stewardship of a precious and unique legacy, ensuring that present and future generations can come to enjoy and learn from it.

In a series of articles over the coming weeks, archaeologists from my Department's National Monuments Service will introduce *Farmers Journal* readers to different aspects of Ireland's archaeology. The articles will cover subjects such as what archaeology tells us about the evolution of farming, how rural lifestyles have developed and the customs and practices that have accompanied these changes. They will show how important our heritage is to the local and national economy as a significant and growing stimulus for tourism.

I sincerely hope that farm families will find the articles both interesting and enlightening and that they will foster an even greater interest in the abundance of archaeological monuments that dot our rural landscapes.

If you would like to know more about what monuments might be on your farm, or in your local area, a good first step is to visit the National Monuments Service's website at www.archaeology.ie and use the map viewer to look up individual monuments.

Jimmy Deenihan TD
Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht

Please remember that all recorded archaeological monuments are protected under the National Monuments Acts 1930-2004. Visitors to archaeological monuments on lands in private ownership should request permission from the landowner. If you would like to know more about the archaeological monuments on your land or in your locality, please visit www.archaeology.ie. Any questions or feedback can be forwarded to nationalmonuments@ahg.gov.ie

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