



## **The arts past and present**

*Ireland: Ancient heritage*

### **Narrator**

As the Post Office was nearing completion, the fate of Irish heritage was about to be decided by a National Monuments Bill introduced into the Irish parliament, the Dáil.

### **Male voice (as Member of the Dáil, Sheehy)**

*We have a sacred heritage handed down to us. Every single man with a drop of Irish blood in his veins will remember that the time has come to remember the heroism of our race and it would be sad that the stones that were erected centuries ago and used by Irishmen would now be used for cow-houses and sheds. God forbid that there should be such a sacrilege.*

### **Narrator**

The parliamentary debates give a revealing insight into the images of Ireland that moved members of the Dáil to speak.

### **Male voice (as Member of the Dáil, Prof Alto)**

*Everybody should be interested in the ancient things of this country and I believe that every Irishman is. I don't know anything that stimulates more quickly a sense of nationality than a sight of one of these monuments.*

### **Barry Murphy**

I have to say that politicians do tend to use these as emblems for Ireland, they still do. In fact, when Ireland was joining the EU in 1973, the speech by the Minister For Foreign Affairs then, Michael Kennedy, was to the effect that there was a golden age in Ireland and that we were returning to it in some way by rejoining the Europe that we had been disconnected from when we had these ancient places and sacred spaces.

### **Narrator**

The Act was framed to protect monuments built before 1700. This immediately safeguarded medieval Christian sites and important Neolithic sites such as Tara and New Grange. They'd been abandoned and plundered by local authorities and farmers for roads and building materials. Even so, they held a significant place in Irish national consciousness.

### **Barry Murphy**

They were high on the list of images Irish people have of Ireland. I think most school children would have known about Tara and the high kings. Most students would have known about New Grange and the string of history that New Grange and Tara give to Ireland is a very important one.

### **Narrator**

The excavation of New Grange began in 1967. The principal archaeologist was Professor Michael O'Kelly, from Cork University.

### **Vincent Comerford**

Well, the sense of the past that prevailed in the Irish free state clearly embraced the notion of ancient glory, And there's no doubt at all that in Ireland as elsewhere, that archaeology was driven by this desire to vindicate the national past and national greatness by means of archaeology.

**Narrator**

Today New Grange is one of the most popular historic attractions in Ireland. And what tourists see and learn about the site is the result of O'Kelly's work. He discovered that the tomb was much older than had previously been thought, even older than the pyramids.

**Female Guide**

*Now New Grange was constructed in 3200 BC, it's 5200 years old and our date comes from radiocarbon dating and organic product found on the site.*

**Narrator**

O'Kelly also discovered that at dawn during the winter solstice, a shaft of sunlight enters the chamber through an opening above the doorway. This makes New Grange the oldest known astronomically aligned structure in the world.

**Female Guide**

*When we look at New Grange, this great white wall, this outer façade, it's the most visually striking part of the monument, it's visible for miles on end. Now this wall is a reconstruction, and as it's a reconstruction, it's also an interpretation, and quite a controversial interpretation at that. Now many archaeologists believe that this wall did not exist in 3200 BC, that the quartz, which is the white material and the granite boulders between the quartz made a ceremonial footpath around the perimeter of the site. But Professor Michael J. O'Kelly believed that this wall existed at that time because when the cairn collapsed, all this material fell into the ground as we said as far as we are standing and that suggested that it stood upright at a point.*

**Narrator**

Working with an engineer, O'Kelly tried to recapture what the approach to New Grange must have looked like. From the distribution of stones from the collapsed cairn they deduced that the surface had been almost vertical.

This reconstruction was controversial at the time because the evidence was conjectural. It's controversial today because instead of stabilizing the existing remains a whole new structure was erected, characteristic of restoration projects in Britain and Ireland during the 1960s.

**Barry Murphy**

The reconstruction was the best I would say Kelly could have done from what was found, taking the engineering into account and where the material was found. But, it has been said, not by me, since, that the reconstruction of the façade is very much in harmony with the fronts of various houses built during the 1960s with their stone frontings.