

Michael J. & Claire O'Kelly



Born in Abbeyfeale, Co. Limerick, Michael J. O’Kelly obtained his secondary education at Rockwell College, Tipperary, before entering University College, Cork, as a student of engineering in 1934. A year later he switched to architecture and became an articled pupil in a Cork office.

Fate intervened in the considerable person of Seán P. Ó Ríordáin, the energetic Professor of archaeology at UCC. Ó Ríordáin was looking for a surveyor as he engaged in the excavation of the ring-fort at Garranes, Co Cork. Michael J. began work there in the spring of 1937 and later that year moved on to the neolithic site of Lough Gur with Ó Ríordáin.

Ó Ríordáin’s infectious enthusiasm wooed many to the cause of archaeology and in that summer of 1937, Michael J. proved to be a ready convert. The new recruit returned to UCC that October, as a student of Ó Ríordáin’s, in the faculty of archaeology.

By the time Michael J. had graduated (in 1940) with a first class honours degree in archaeology (quickly followed by a first class M.A.) he had trained as an engineer, surveyor and architect and had taken courses in Irish, geology and geography, all of which uniquely qualified and equipped him to take on the challenges that Irish archaeology would present in the second half of the 20th century.

In 1946 he replaced Ó Ríordáin as head of the Department at UCC, a position he held for thirty-six years. For O’Kelly, ‘teaching was an integral part of his zest for humanity and scholarship’, and demanded and received whole-hearted student participation.

By the 1960s O’Kelly was the most highly qualified archaeologist in the country, armed as he was with twenty five years of practical experience – having excavated continuously every summer – and by virtue of being the only recipient of the D.Litt. Degree awarded on foot of published works.

Michael
or Brian?
Classifying
the archaeologist



Michael J. O’Kelly



Irish archaeology

Partnership

The O’Kellys met for the first time as students at UCC in 1939 in the Department of Archaeology, “I was only there for the craic”, Claire later admitted, “as I already had a teaching qualification, but Brian was a serious student. In fact, the star of the show”. As students both Michael J. and Claire worked on Seán P. Ó Ríordáin’s excavation at the neolithic site of Lough Gur in County Limerick. It wasn’t long before a working relationship turned to something more serious. With their students years behind them and a position for Michael J. as curator of Cork Public Museum, they married in 1945.

The times dictated that they should honeymoon in Ireland and it was in Dingle that a long and fruitful partnership in archaeology and prehistory began. Together they spent their honeymoon checking the accuracy of R.A.S. Macalister’s records of ogham inscriptions which had just been published in *Corpus Inscriptionum Insularum Celticarum*.

Every summer thereafter was spent excavating at sites, “ranging from megaliths to ringforts, from west Kerry to north Tipperary”. Much of this work was ground-breaking with scientific application and experimental archaeology being introduced for the first time. Together this unique partnership would change the face of Irish archaeology.



Kilmalkendir, 1945



Cork Public Museum





Claire O'Kelly

Claire was born in Cork in 1916 and lived on the banks of the Lee for most of her life. She qualified as a national school teacher and while working as a teacher decided to study archaeology at night in University College Cork under the late Séan P. Ó 'Riordáin.

Her working career in archaeology began alongside her future husband at Ó Riordáin's Lough Gur excavation. These were remarkable times, when the foundation of modern Irish archaeology were laid with the uncovering of settlements dating to the neolithic and the hitherto unknown beaker period.

She married in 1945, and was forced by the dictate of the time to retire from her teaching post. She now devoted her time to rearing her three children, but as soon as possible was helping out, particularly during the regular summer season excavation. Her role spanned the practical, managerial and domestic all in one day. Often she could be cataloguing finds in the morning, filing accounts in the afternoon and feeding the volunteers by the day's end.

Amongst her greatest interests was the Irish language which found practical application when she created many of the archaeological terms for the English/Irish dictionary edited by Tomás de Bháldraithe. Her interest in Irish language and literature led her to research the references to Brú na Bóinne in early Irish literature, going back to the original sources and reaffirming its identification as Newgrange.

During the Newgrange campaign Claire developed other research interests, publishing papers on the Roman finds at the site and the megalithic art of the Boyne Valley. She painstakingly traced all the carved stones at Newgrange, thereby creating the first complete corpus of the decorated stones.

She also published together with Michael J., a detailed survey of Dowth, the result of countless hours below ground in the cold and damp, working by candle light and lantern. Her own publication, *Illustrated Guide to Newgrange*, was the first of its kind in Ireland, aimed as it was at the intelligent layperson.

As if this were not enough, she undertook to feed and house the army of archaeologists, distinguished visitors and international students who arrived every season to work on the excavation at Newgrange, as well as looking after her own three children.

In the years following her husband's death, she embarked on the task of preparing for publication his unfinished manuscript 'Early Ireland, An Introduction to Irish Prehistory', while also ensuring that his papers and excavation archives were put in order and deposited in the relevant institutions.

In recognition of her work she was elected a Fellow of the Society of Antiquities of London in 1984.



Dining out – with the ancestors

Re (11) p 2 I have hardly thought of this since due to pressure of other work, but I don't see any reason why I shouldn't take on this dig. I feel that it will probably be very dull in itself, but it would give me a chance to become more familiar with the sites in the area than I am now.



The O'Kellys at Newgrange

B

1st Nov:

6th Nov:

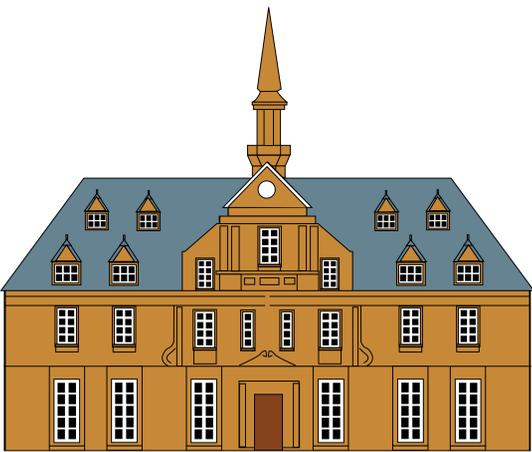
9th Nov:

13th Nov:

15th Nov:



It was the unanimous wish of the meeting that Professor O'Kelly should undertake the direction of the excavation, being the acknowledged expert on archaeological excavation and exploration in Ireland. In the end he took the excavation on, reluctant as he was given his work load and the great distance from his base in Cork, 'not because I chose this site for myself in the normal course of my work, but because I was the one best qualified to direct the excavations'.



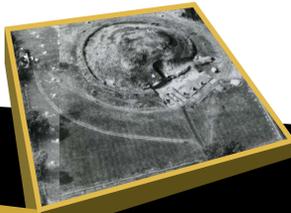
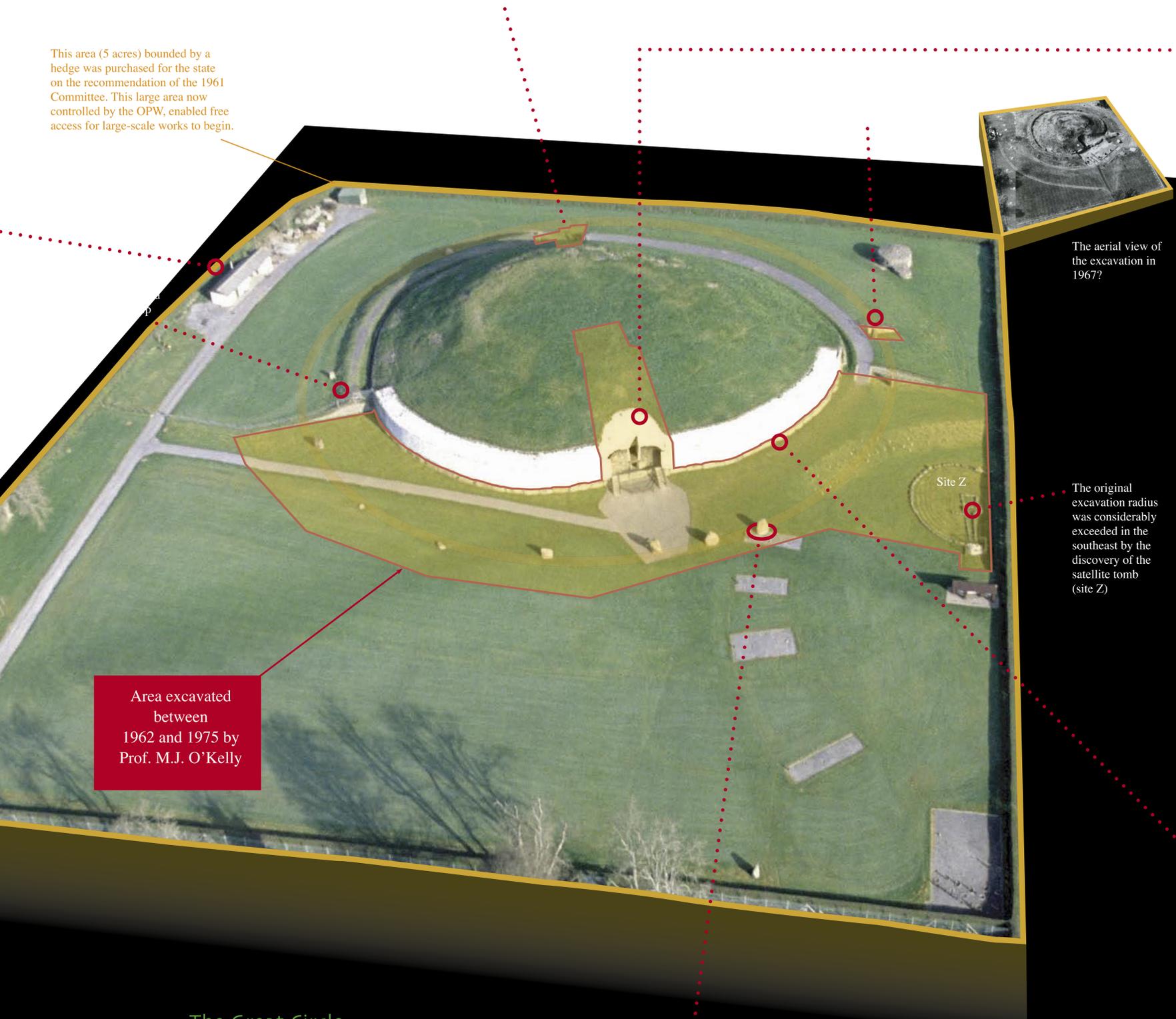


The north cutting

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This area (5 acres) bounded by a hedge was purchased for the state on the recommendation of the 1961 Committee. This large area now controlled by the OPW, enabled free access for large-scale works to begin.



The aerial view of the excavation in 1967?

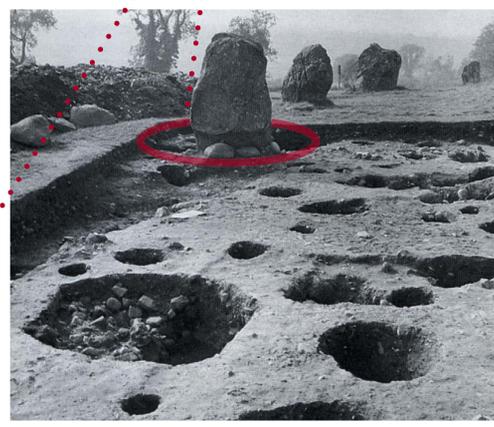
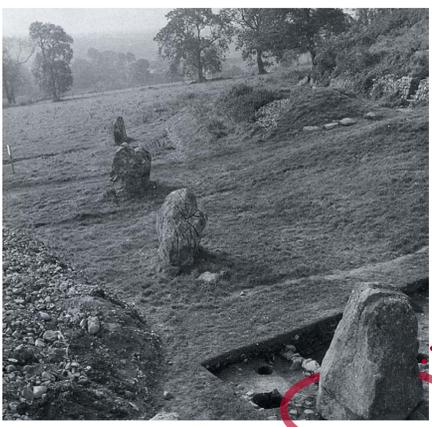
The original excavation radius was considerably exceeded in the southeast by the discovery of the satellite tomb (site Z)

Area excavated between 1962 and 1975 by Prof. M.J. O'Kelly

The Great Circle

The great circle contains twelve surviving orthostats with a diameter of 103.6m.

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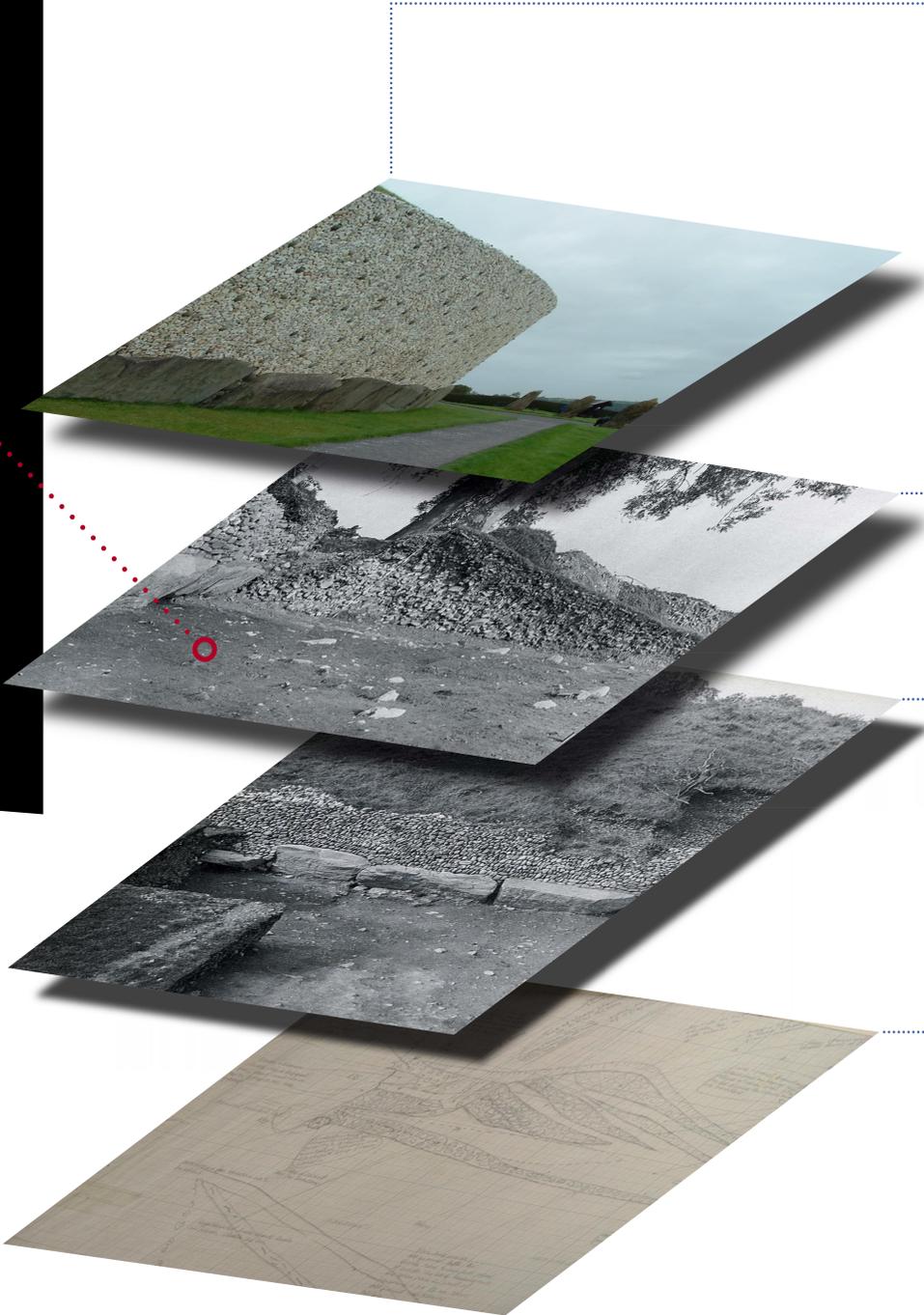


The passage and chamber

Restoration D

Quartz wall

The Cairn slip



Photograph recording the cairn slip profile at K96

Excavated area in front of K96 - K92

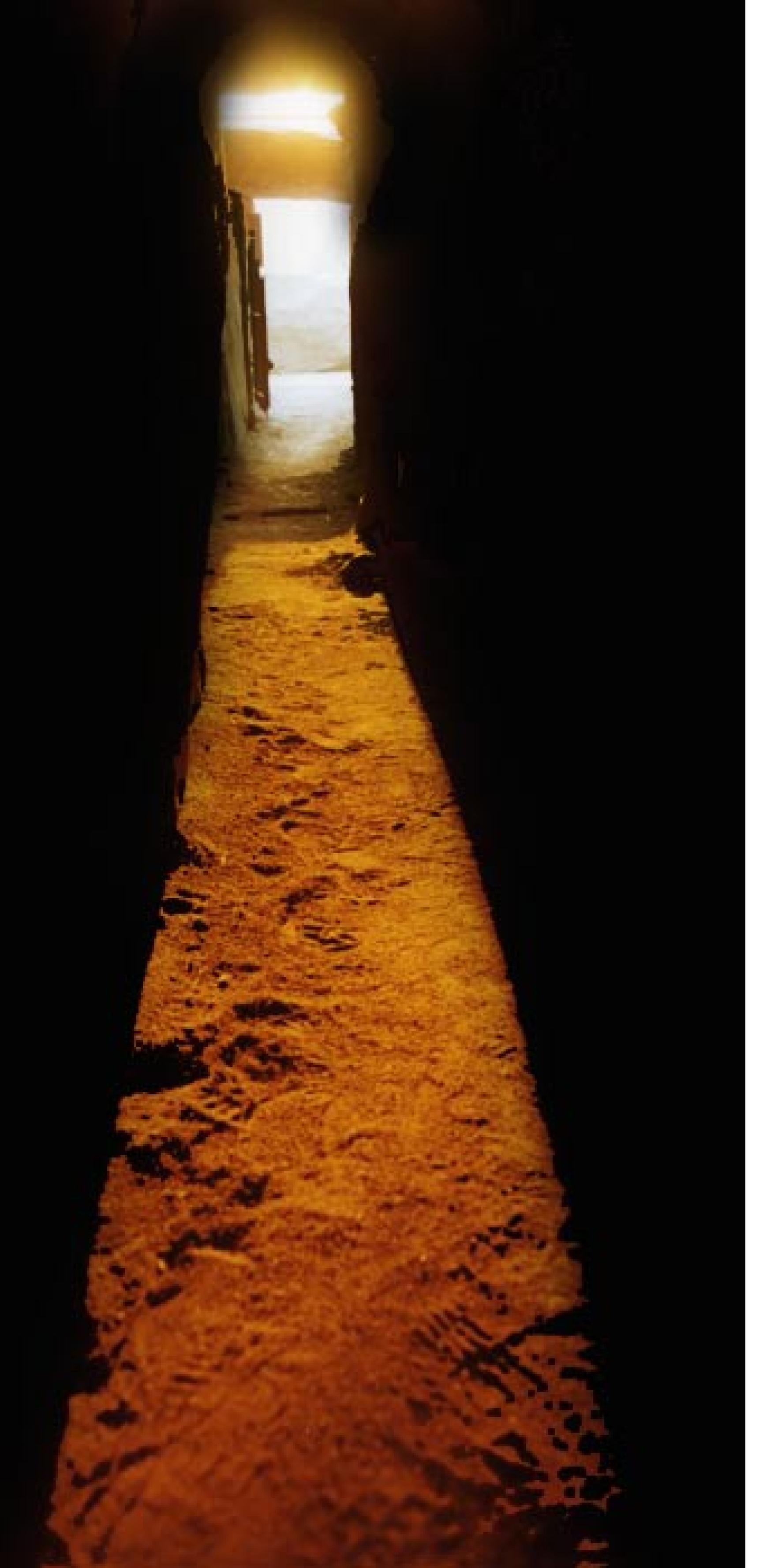
Survey of cairn slip profile at K92 with notes by Prof. O Kelly



Winter Solstice 1967

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Surveying and recording

