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The landscape features, follies and antiquities of Dowth demesne

Joe Fenwick


Glancing down I noticed, to my dismay, that I was still wearing my mud-caked boots, but at that moment we were airborne – Patsy McCloskey at the controls of his two-seater Cessna 150. Without need for a second invitation, I had abandoned the department’s gradiometer in a field beside Dowth passage tomb and had hot-footed it down the road to his private airfield.

“Won’t we be able to keep an eye on it” reassured Patsy with a mischievous grin.

Thankfully, he was right. At that hour in the morning only the sheep were stirring and the crisp October air and panoramic blue skies revealed all below in exceptional clarity. It was hard to believe that only the day before, George Eogan and I were cooped-up in his site office at Knowth waiting (in vain) for the rain to pass, but at least we had managed to re-establish the geophysical grid. We had also spoken to Caroline Kavanagh, who had shown us some intriguing aerial photographs, one of which showed various grass circles that she and Patsy had noticed during flights over Dowth.

From our birds-eye vantage point, as the aircraft banked and wheeled around the Brú na Bóinne World Heritage Site, the remarkably compact nature of the prehistoric landscape, confined as it is within the ‘bend of the Boyne’, becomes all the more apparent. Features in the far distance too seemed so much closer; Patsy pointing out familiar landmarks on the horizon – the Mourne and Wicklow Mountains, the hills of Tara and Loughcrew, Lambay Island and Howth Head – like old friends in a crowd. But my eye was drawn to the archaeological wonders beneath, and most particularly the contrasting textures and colours of the open fields and expansive woodlands that enveloped Dowth Hall. Most impressive of all was the embanked enclosure (ME020-010), a henge dating to c. 3000BC, standing in proud isolation at the centre of a large field (Pl. 1). And, situated immediately to its east, to my astonishment, were the circles that Caroline had mentioned, appearing as a series of darkened discolorations in the grass (Pl. 2).
On later consulting the National Monuments Service’s (Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht) ‘web view’ database (www.archaeology.ie), I was intrigued to see that these had not been included as recorded archaeological monuments. My initial hopes were somewhat dashed, however, on viewing the ‘historical maps’ (1st ed. 6-inch County Series map sheets) on the Ordnance Survey of Ireland’s on-line ‘mapviewer’ (www.osi.ie), where, sure enough, what looked like a series of decorative tree-rings in the landscaped grounds of Dowth demesne were clearly marked – the real antiquities distinguished by annotations in gothic script (Fig. 1). A little further investigation of the history, archaeology and landscape of Dowth, however, revealed a particularly rich seam of Ireland’s ‘cultural heritage’, more fascinating than I could have imagined.

The townland of Dowth contains a sizeable number of remarkable sites and monuments of various classification and date (Stout 2002). It is perhaps equally remarkable, however, that so many of these have survived given that this prime agricultural land has been farmed and cultivated continuously over the centuries. Moreover, substantial and radical transformations were imposed on the farming landscape as a consequence of progressive land improvements, reclamation and the prevailing rural aesthetic of the 18th century. It was during this time that much of the farmland at Dowth was remodelled enthusiastically by the Netterville family, the principal landholders of the area (Jenkins 2008). Indeed, it was in the years around 1760 that the sixth Viscount Netterville built the elegant country residence that stands at the heart of this estate to this day. According to an early 18th century lease, these demesne lands amounted to some 319 Irish acres, and included the old manorial village of Dowth, which was originally established on appropriated lands granted to a supporter of Hugh de Lacy in the 12th century. Incidentally, these lands were successively owned by the de Rusheburys and the de Pitchfords during the early Middle Ages before being acquired by the Netterville family in the early 14th century and which were to remain in their possession for several hundred (often turbulent) years, until the 19th century (Kenny 2008). Though the manorial village appears to have been abandoned sometime towards the end of the 17th century, some of its more durable elements, such as the church (ME020-019 – currently under conservation), the tower house (ME020-018 – renovated), and various related earthworks, field-systems (ME020-016001) and holy well (ME020-016003) can still be identified today, situated within the shadow of the great passage tomb of Dowth (ME020-017). These and other notable antiquities in the townland, in addition to Dowth Hall its surrounding farmland and estate features, all appear to be relatively unchanged since first mapped in detail by the
Ordnance Survey in the 19th century (Fig. 1). But, in the context of 18th century estate lands, is there anything that sets Dowth demesne apart from the norm? To address this question, a brief detour through the realms of contemporary landscape design and garden aesthetics is required.

The so-called ‘rural’ style of William Kent, Alexander Pope and other like-minded gardening evangelists of these islands in the 18th century was very much a reaction to the formal angular style that was a ubiquitous feature of aristocratic pleasure gardens of the time (Roberts 1944). Its underlying principle might be best expressed by Kent’s proclamation that “nature abhors a straight line”. One particularly pioneering and energetic exponent of ‘landscape gardening’, as it came to be known, was Hampton Court’s royal gardener, Lancelot ‘Capability’ Brown – so called on account of his habit of exclaiming that practically any garden presented to him ‘had great capabilities’ to be rehabilitated to accord with his vision of vast sweeping lawns and expansive artificial lakes. In the process, he single-handedly swept aside many of England’s finest formal gardens but thankfully refused work in Ireland explaining that he ‘had not yet finished England’. The development of landscape gardening in Ireland occurred simultaneously with that in Britain but is generally agreed to have been somewhat more sympathetic to the distinctive and varied natural landscape characteristics of these shores (Mallins & Fitz-Gerald 1976). Interestingly, it was Dean Swift and Dr Patrick Delany who are generally credited with introducing and promoting these new design concepts through their shared enthusiasm for gardening and their bond of friendship with Kent and Pope, among the leading proponents of this progressive new movement in Britain.

The estates of Castletown and Carton, both in county Kildare, for example, were landscaped in this peculiarly Irish manner (ibid). Both have balustraded terraces that formally demarcate the house from that of its surrounding landscape (unlike the English counterparts) and both have a number of picturesque features – sometimes somewhat disparagingly referred to as ‘follies’ – placed strategically within the landscaped demesnes. The grounds of Castletown house, for instance, boast a number of radiating avenues, the ‘wonderful barn’ (a remarkable conical structure with spiralling external staircase) and an elaborate multi-arched obelisk. Carton house, likewise is famed for its shell cottage, monumental bridge over the especially widened Rye Water and yew-tree avenue. It appears, therefore, that straight lines were also occasionally tolerated. Other examples of the so-called ‘picturesque school’ of Irish landscape gardening incorporated romanticised Irish architectural themes of the past – real or
imaginatively recreated – into this picture of rural idyll. The ‘gothic wall’ at Belvedere House, Co Westmeath, for example, was built to mimic the ruinous remains of a great house. Similarly, Sir Charles Coote went to enormous expense and lengths to construct an idealised medieval castle complete with turrets, moat and draw-bridge at Ballyfin, Co. Laois. In contrast, Adare Manor, Co. Limerick, happily incorporated a genuine fifteenth century Franciscan Friary and Geraldine castle into its grand design.

Dowth Hall and demesne seems modestly sized in proportion to some of the great houses of Ireland but it contains all of the necessary attributes to be included among this elite group, and perhaps a few besides. The house (Pl. 3), a stately two-storey, five-bayed residence might possibly have been the work of architect George Darley (Jenkins 2008), who in 1767 designed the Netterville town house in Dublin, but its elegant spaces and internal design features are attributed to Robert West (www.buildingsofireland.ie). The rusticated limestone ground floor façade supports an upper storey of fine ashlar masonry, punctuated by equi-spaced windows framed by plain pilasters with alternating triangular and rounded pediments. Its centrally placed doorway, approached by a broad flight of steps, is flanked by austere Doric columns supporting a triangular pediment. Most remarkable of all, however, is its interior. Here the drawing, dining and ball rooms retain their original finely proportioned marble fireplaces and elaborately flamboyant Rococo-style stucco-work (Pl. 4)

Perhaps unusually, it would appear that the setting and orientation of the house has been influenced by the distribution of a number of the more impressive and conspicuously located archaeological monuments. The house is clearly situated on elevated ground and orientated east-northeast to command a panoramic vista over the embanked enclosure (ME020-010) and rolling terrain beyond (Pls 3 & 5). This setting also affords it an unobstructed view over terraced lawns to its rear, against a backdrop of two shrub-planted mounds (ME020-012 & ME020-013 – marked ‘moat’ on the 1st edition Ordnance Survey map sheet). Both are passage tombs (c. 3200BC), one of which contains an impressive cruciform chamber with corbelled roof (Pl. 6) – an half-scale model of Newgrange! The passage is sediment filled and the chamber is now only accessible on account of the roof capstone having been pushed to one side. Taken as a whole, it would appear that an informal symmetry, aligned along an axis between the embanked enclosure, the house and between the two mounds, has been deliberately created (Fig. 1). In so doing, the archaeological monuments have been effectively appropriated as garden ‘follies’ within the overall demesne design (Fig. 1). Other
significant archaeological features, some of which are also marked on the first edition map sheet, are situated in the field to the east of the house. A stone circle (Me020-009) lying adjacent to Cloghalea quarry was depicted by Gabriel Beranger in 1775 (the drawing is now housed in the Royal Irish Academy – see http://cats.ria.ie/printsadvanced.html). Sadly, this monument is no longer extant. Interestingly, an oval fort was noted by John Dalton in his History of Drogheda (1884) lying to the south of Cloghalea but its location has not been identified in the RMP. The local place-name ‘Listerveran’, however, recalls the presence of a ringfort in the area and perhaps the largest of the earthwork tree-rings, still extant to the north of the embanked enclosure, marks its location.

A number of additional demesne features were also introduced in the landscape. Towards the end of the 18th century John Netterville built a temple-like structure on the summit of Dowth tumulus as a place of private prayer and contemplation. This too has been recorded in a water-coloured drawing by Beranger (also in the RIA archive), but no surface trace of it remains today. In addition to a walled garden (situated to the south of the house), an orchard with circular pond (lying southeast of the manorial village), a farm courtyard and gate lodge, Dowth demesne also boasts a sizable area of planted deciduous woodland, a walled deer park, and an elaborate race course. The race course is composed of four unequally sized tree-lined fields divided axially by broad avenues intersecting at a central diamond. It was used well into the 20th century but today the trees have been cleared and it exists as one large open field. Deer parks and race courses, though not unknown, were relatively uncommon features of contemporary estates and perhaps the Netterville family were, in this instance, making a deliberate reference to their noble pedigree and the tradition of lordly pursuits enjoyed by their forbearers at Dowth since medieval times.

Again, I had the good fortune to have been offered an impromptu tour of the estate grounds in Patsy’s four-wheel-drive, which I gladly accepted. Again, I winced with embarrassment on noticing, all too late, my mud-caked boots, but we had already set off on our white-knuckle safari. Perhaps the most remarkable revelation of that tour was the scale of an unclassified mound, listed ME020-023 in the Record of Monuments and Places (Pl. 7). This little-known monument approaches the size of the great passage tombs of Knowth, Newgrange or Dowth, but its low-lying, unobtrusive, riverine location, nestled between elevated ridges to the east and west is quite unusual. It was clearly meant to be seen by those navigating the river, appearing dramatically on rounding the first upstream ‘bend of the Boyne’. The first edition
Ordnance Survey map does not identify this as an antiquity but instead, somewhat tellingly, marks it as a circular stand or trees like those close to the embanked enclosure. Pasty informed me that some of these tree-rings had been removed in the mid-twentieth century to facilitate mechanised cultivation. Of the isolated stands of trees that remain, some appear to be defined by earthworks while others are unenclosed or defined by a low-relief ditch (Pl.8). The possibility remains, therefore, that some of these features are neither folly nor flowerbed but genuine archaeological monuments. Indeed, one needs only to look, for instance, at the complexity of extant and sub-subsurface archaeological features associated with the Giant’s Ring embanked enclosure at Ballynahatty, Co. Antrim (Hartwell 2002) to appreciate the archaeological potential of the equivalent prehistoric landscape preserved at Dowth (Stout 1991).

The Brú an Bóinne area has been subject to extensive antiquarian interest and archaeological research over the years. George Eogan has been researching this area over the course of his professional career and recently, on the occasion marking 50 years of investigations at the great passage tomb cemetery, the Royal Irish Academy published his fifth volume of *Excavations at Knowth*. Others too have been exploring this unique landscape and the monuments that populate it, most notably Geraldine Stout (Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht) and Conor Brady (Dundalk I.T.). In more recent years, the Heritage Council-funded INSTAR Boyne Valley Research Project was established to draw together experts from various fields to provide a research framework for the World Heritage Site (Smyth 2009). As part of this work, an examination of LiDAR imagery in combination with targeted laser scanning, geophysical survey and excavation has been conducted in the area, revealing many new and fascinating aspects to this remarkable landscape. More specifically, in relation to Dowth, work underway by Stephen Davis (School of Archaeology, UCD) is revealing a number of previously unrecorded low-relief and sub-surface archaeological features and monuments. Similarly, the Brugh na Bóinne Research Project, based at N.U.I. Galway (www.nuigalway.ie/archaeology/) has also illuminated significant new facets of the prehistoric and medieval archaeology of the World Heritage Site and it too is currently investigating the State-owned lands in and around the great passage tomb at Dowth. In the light of the observations presented above, perhaps a number of the other estate features and tree-circles will warrant a little closer examination to see if these too, are part of the extraordinary archaeological legacy of Brú na Bóinne. I have my boots polished and ready to go. Now where did I leave that gradiometer?
References


(Note: Since writing this article and before going to print, Dowth Hall and demesne lands have changed ownership. Readers are reminded, as a matter of courtesy, to ensure to get permission from landowners before visiting any monuments on privately owned lands.)
Fig. 1  Map of Dowth Demesne (outlined in green): Selected features, tree-circles and annotations marked in white are taken from the Ordnance Survey 1st ed. County Series (map sheet 20). Text in black font represents shorthand RMP numbers (prefixed by ME020). The red dashed line marks the axis along which Dowth House is aligned. (LiDAR image generated by the Discovery Programme and reproduced courtesy of the Heritage Council and Meath County Council©)
Plates

Pl. 1 An aerial view of Dowth embanked enclosure (c. 165m NE-SW by 140m NW-SE) viewed from the northeast.

Pl. 2 An aerial view of the grass-mark circles (c. 25m to 35m in diameter) situated to the east of Dowth embanked enclosure (12 October 2012).
Pl. 3  View of the Dowth Hall through the western facing entrance gap of Dowth embanked enclosure.

Pl. 4  The drawing room, Dowth Hall.
Pl. 5  Patsy McCloskey on the roof of Dowth Hall with the embanked enclosure in the background.

Pl. 6  View into the cruciform chamber of the passage tomb situated to the rear of Dowth Hall.
Pl. 7  Tree-planted, unclassified mound ME020-023, viewed from the northern bank of the River Boyne.

Pl. 8  View of Dowth Hall from a tree-planted, low-relief, earthwork situated to its northeast.