

SITES OF PREHISTORIC  
LIFE IN NORTHERN  
IRELAND

**Harry and June Welsh**

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# INTRODUCTION

## BACKGROUND AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This monograph has been designed to be a resource for those who have an interest in the study of sites of prehistoric activity in Northern Ireland other than burial sites, which have been investigated in another volume (Welsh and Welsh 2014). The purpose of this monograph is to present a baseline survey of all known sites of prehistoric activity in Northern Ireland, where people lived, worked and played. The survey begins with a review of some of the sources from where our information has been obtained and how these have developed over time. It then places the prehistoric archaeology of Northern Ireland in a wider context, with the remainder of Ireland, Britain and north-west Europe. The main part of this document is an inventory of prehistoric sites (other than burial sites) in Northern Ireland and this is preceded by a discussion about the categorisation of such monuments generally and the methodology by which this inventory is compiled. The inventory is followed by a short discussion about the prehistoric landscapes of Northern Ireland and the artefacts, usually associated with prehistoric activity. A comprehensive glossary and bibliography have also been provided.

Much information contained in this inventory has been made available by the Department for Communities: Historic Environment Division (HED) from the Sites and Monuments Record and our thanks go to Dr Paul Logue for his help and support. At the Centre for Archaeological Fieldwork, Queen's University Belfast (CAF), Drs Colm Donnelly and Cormac McSparron freely gave of their time and expertise. Also at Queen's University, Libby Mulqueeny provided illustrations for the text. The Ulster Archaeological Society also provided information on prehistoric sites, obtained from their programme of monument surveys and Malachy Conway of the National Trust in Northern Ireland gave his enthusiastic support. We would also like to thank Dr Paul Walsh of the National Monument Service: Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht in the Republic of Ireland for sharing his expertise in monument classification.

## A SHORT HISTORY OF PREHISTORIC ARCHAEOLOGY IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Until the beginning of the latest millennium in 2000, little was known about the places, where prehistoric people lived in Northern Ireland. This was largely due to the lack of visible evidence as prehistoric dwellings, being largely constructed of timber, had rotted completely away, leaving nothing visible above ground. The few sites that had been investigated had largely been found by chance, usually during development or infrastructure works. In contrast, prehistoric burial sites, such as megalithic tombs and burial cairns, were predominantly constructed of stone and many have survived into modern

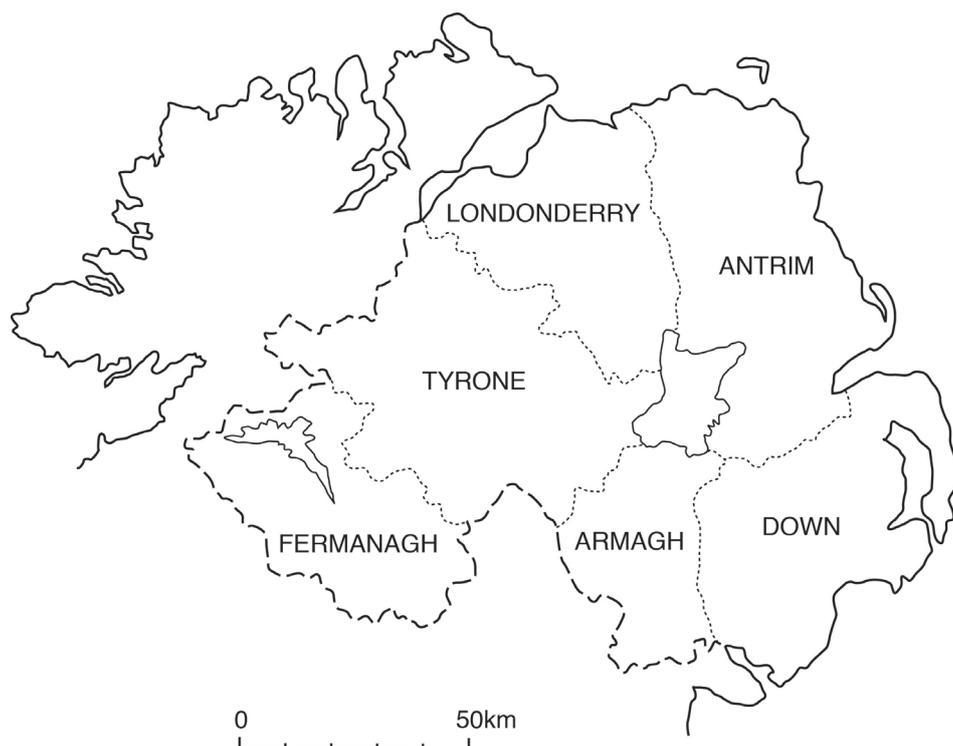


FIGURE 01: THE MODERN COUNTIES OF NORTHERN IRELAND *LIBBY MULQUEENY, QUB*

times. These have attracted the attention of the inquisitive, antiquarians and archaeologists for thousands of years and while most have been disturbed or badly damaged, the surviving remains have provided us with most of our information about prehistoric society. The discovery in recent years of hundreds of prehistoric habitation sites in Northern Ireland, as a result of infrastructure work and associated archaeological monitoring, has given us much more insight into how and where people lived. It has become apparent that prehistoric people occupied much of the landscape and that a vast number of sites still remain undiscovered. As a result, it is probably too early to draw firm conclusions about prehistoric society in general, but sufficient evidence from available data allows us to make some tentative suggestions for particular sites.

One of the earliest and most comprehensive surveys of the prehistoric monuments of the north of Ireland was carried out as part of the compilation of the Memoirs and maps of the Ordnance Survey of Ireland between 1833 and 1847. These Ordnance Survey records make reference to many prehistoric burial sites, but habitation sites were entirely unknown to the surveyors and local people, from whom they obtained much of their information. During the nineteenth century, interest in anthropology and archaeology increased and many individuals, now usually referred to as antiquarians, committed their own time and resources to the recording and occasionally excavating ancient monuments. Antiquarians were again unaware of the presence of prehistoric habitation sites, but at least three were encountered by chance during these excavations, or more accurately, while plundering the sandhills sites in north Antrim. Two others were found during agricultural or building works and a shell midden was noted following coastal erosion. Their combined efforts represented only 0.2 per cent of the current total of known prehistoric habitation sites.

Following the partition of Ireland in 1921, governments north and south established departments to oversee the recording and care of ancient monuments in their respective jurisdictions. In Northern Ireland this was initially the remit of the Ministry of Finance. A team of volunteers made up of academics, antiquarians and interested others, carried out a survey of such monuments and this was published as *A Preliminary Survey of the Ancient Monuments of Northern Ireland* in 1940. It was edited by David Chart, Assistant Keeper of the Public Records of Northern Ireland and is often referred to as PSAMNI. Due to the concentration on the 1939-1945 war effort and economic difficulties thereafter, it was left to a few individuals to keep archaeology alive and many of those who had worked on PSAMNI published their surveys and excavations in the *Ulster Journal of Archaeology*. Notable among these were Estyn Evans and Oliver Davies, whose prolific rates of publication remain unmatched and added immensely to our knowledge of Irish prehistory. Research-based archaeology commenced initially at the Queen's University of Belfast, with the appointment of K.T. Frost in 1909, but following his death in action during the First World War and the partition of Ireland, it was not until the post-war years that the subject was revived by Estyn Evans, Oliver Davies and Professor Martyn Jope. Knowledge of prehistoric habitation sites was restricted to visible monuments such as hillforts and by 1950, only 5.7 per cent of the current total of habitation sites was known about. The Northern Ireland Archaeological Survey was established by the government of Northern Ireland in 1950, with the appointment of Dudley Waterman and Pat Collins. They initially concentrated their efforts on County Down and the *Archaeological Survey of County Down*, edited by Martyn Jope, was published in 1966. Despite the more structured approach to recording ancient monuments, only 0.9 per cent of the current inventory of sites of prehistoric life had been discovered between 1950 and 1969.

Within the government sector, the work of Dudley Waterman and Pat Collins was continued in the 1970s and 1980s by archaeologists such as Dr Ann Hamlin, Dr Chris Lynn, Dr Brian Williams, Claire Foley and Nick Brannon, until 1996 when the government organisation was renamed Environment and Heritage Service (EHS). In 2008, the EHS was re-branded as the Northern Ireland Environment Agency: Built Heritage and due to reform of the Northern Ireland Assembly, is currently the Department for Communities: Historic Environment Division (HED). Archaeological information from all sites in Northern Ireland has been brought together into the Sites and Monuments Record, which is maintained by HED. Much of this information has been made available online, where site details and on-line mapping can also be accessed. It was during this period that several major archaeological inventories were completed, beginning with *Strangford Lough: An archaeological survey of the marine cultural landscape* in 2002, followed by *An Archaeological Survey of County Armagh* (2009), *Rathlin Island: An Archaeological Survey of a Maritime Landscape* in 2012 and *An Archaeological Survey of County Fermanagh, Volume 1*, in 2014. A wide range of smaller archaeological monographs were also published during this period. Excavation work had also been devolved by HED to commercial archaeological companies and regulated by a licensing system, which proved to be very opportune. By around 2000, with an improving economic situation, many infrastructure improvements, such as up-graded road schemes and service improvements such as electricity, gas and water all took place. These schemes were subject to monitoring by licenced commercial archaeologists and a vast number of previously-unknown archaeological sites were discovered and excavated in advance of destruction. Between 2000 and 2014, over 77 per cent of the current inventory of prehistoric habitation sites was discovered. Unfortunately, most of the excavation reports relating to these sites remain unpublished, but summary articles are available in the annual *Summary Accounts of Archaeological Excavations in Ireland* volumes (Wordwell). Details are also available at [www.excavations.ie](http://www.excavations.ie). In Northern Ireland, many excavation reports, the so-called grey literature, are curated by HED.

Archaeologists based at Queen's University have continued to be closely associated with research excavation and survey work. For example, Professor Jim Mallory and Barrie Hartwell have drawn attention to the significance of the prehistoric landscapes around Navan Fort in County Armagh, Donegore Hill in County Antrim and Ballynahatty in County Down. Many of their findings have been published in the journal *Emania*. Archaeology continues to be taught at undergraduate and post-graduate levels at Queen's University in the School of Natural and Built Environment. The university is also home to the Centre for Archaeological Fieldwork (CAF), which currently undertakes fieldwork for the university and a wide range of other bodies, such as the Belfast Hills Partnership. At the Ulster University, the Centre for Maritime Archaeology (CMA) carries out similar functions, with regard to coastal and marine archaeology. The principal repository for archaeological objects from Northern Ireland continues to be the Ulster Museum, although many items from prehistoric sites are held at smaller museums around Northern Ireland. The National Museum in Dublin and several other museums in Great Britain also hold significant collections of prehistoric artefacts from the north of Ireland, principally from pre-Partition times. While many artefacts are on display or held in storage at museums, there is currently no facility to link these artefacts with the Sites and Monuments Record or to associate artefacts with known monuments. The exception to this is the 2002 HED publication *Archaeological Objects from County Fermanagh, Northern Ireland Archaeological Monographs No. 5*, so far the only county to have such a resource. Until fairly recently, opportunities for members of the public to become involved in archaeological fieldwork were limited to field trips, organised by local archaeological and historical societies. Limited opportunities do now exist through CAF, the National Trust and the Ulster Archaeological Society for participation in archaeological excavations and monument surveys.

## METHODOLOGY

The main part of this document is an inventory of all 1,580 known prehistoric monuments in Northern Ireland, which are unconnected with burial. Considered along with 3,332 known burial monuments (Welsh and Welsh 2014, 452) Northern Ireland is a significant and relatively untapped source for research into prehistoric society.

Sites of prehistoric life have attracted a wide variety of classifications, often changing over time and many sites were recorded only by their local name, giving rise to confusion over exact locations. In an attempt to overcome such difficulties, the methodology and classifications employed in this inventory have been explained in detail. Even the use of terms such as site and monument have led to confusion, so in this inventory site is taken to mean 'an area of ground on which something is located' (Soanes and Hawker 2000, 968). The term monument is taken to refer to 'a structure of historical importance' (ibid., 659). There may be many monuments on a single site and often these are all included, as one reference in the Northern Ireland Sites and Monuments Record. In the Republic of Ireland, each monument is allocated an individual reference number, which greatly assists in identification. The inventory in this document records all prehistoric monument types in Northern Ireland, which are in some way connected to human domestic activity and for the first time this information has been brought together in one document. Details are provided for every known site, even if it has been removed from the landscape, since it was first recorded and no visible trace remains. These are categorised in accordance with the typology in the following section and each site is given its own entry in the inventory. Entries are recorded alphabetically by county and by townland, a small division of land thought to be of Gaelic origin, but still in use today. For sites that are located across multiple townlands, the first townland in alphabetical order is used. Each site is provided with its own unique number, as determined by the Sites and Monuments Record (SMR) maintained by HED. The first three letters of the unique number indicate the county in which the monument is located, ANT for County Antrim, ARM for County Armagh, DOW for County Down, FER for County Fermanagh, LDY for County Londonderry and TYR for County Tyrone. Each site is also provided with an Ordnance Survey altitude above sea level, an Irish Grid map number, County Series map number and Irish Grid reference. A brief description is given for each site, including landscape and structural features and references are supplied, where a survey or excavation has been carried out. Some sites have been scheduled under the Historic Monuments and Archaeological Objects (Northern Ireland) Order 1995. These are indicated by a single asterisk. Those in State Care are indicated by a double asterisk, with a third asterisk to indicate that both levels of protection have been afforded. Entries in the inventory are provided with plates, plans and illustrations of associated artefacts, where these are available.

## CLASSIFICATIONS USED IN THE INVENTORY

The classification of prehistoric sites is problematic for the researcher, in that no general consensus exists between the statutory authorities in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. Both organisations hold classification lists, but these are not entirely consistent. In addition, many field archaeologists do not strictly adhere to these classifications and a wide variety of terms may be used to describe the same monument. Further, the classification of these monuments has changed over time and is reflected accordingly in documentary sources. Particularly problematic is the classification of sites where people lived. If these sites contain evidence of dwellings, such as arrangements of post-holes, or perhaps a hearth, the

classification is reasonably clear. If these features are absent, but items such as pottery, flint tools or perhaps areas of burnt material are found, the classification becomes much more difficult. The site may have been an area used for the production of pottery, or processing food, away from the site of any dwelling. Often, these sites are recorded (particularly in Northern Ireland) as 'settlement', where 'habitation site' would perhaps be more appropriate.

The classification of monuments here is generally in accordance with that of the Northern Ireland SMR and National Monuments Service of the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (which has also developed a system of codes suitable for use in electronic databases). On occasions, text describing specific monuments occasionally refers to the monument being 'possibly' or 'probably' a particular class. In these instances and in the absence of a secure classification, these terms have been ignored in order to help classify the monument in the inventory. For example, if in the text a monument has been described as being a possible burnt mound, then it has been classified as a burnt mound in the inventory. Findspots are problematic, as these refer to stray artefacts, not associated with a particular monument. Some have been recorded in the SMR, while most have not and others end up in museum or private collections. Little attempt has been made to quantify these or make the information publicly available, with the exception of those from County Fermanagh (Williams and Gormley 2002).

### CLASSIFICATION LIST

#### *Axe Factory*

A place where stone axes were quarried and/or manufactured. In Ireland identified axe factories date to the Neolithic period (c. 4000-2500 BC).

#### *Burnt Mound*

A circular or irregularly shaped mound of material consisting of burnt stones, ash and charcoal with no surface evidence of a trough or depression. Levelled examples can appear as a spread containing burnt stones. See also *Fulachta Fiadh*. These can be of any date from the Bronze Age (c. 2500-300 BC) to the early medieval period (5th - 12th century AD).

#### *Causewayed Enclosure*

A roughly oval area enclosed by one or more concentric fosses with internal banks, both fosse(s) and bank(s) are not continuous but are broken by numerous gaps (causeways) at frequent but irregular intervals. The diameter is normally in excess of 100m. Possibly ceremonial or ritual in function, these date to the Early Neolithic (c. 4000-3200 BC).

#### *Crannog*

An island, partly or wholly artificial, built up by dumping timber, earth and stones onto a lake or river bed, often revetted with timber piles or a palisade. Derived from the Irish word *crannóg*; the Irish word for tree is *crann* and *crannóg* principally means a piece or a structure of wood.

#### *Decorated Stone*

A stone which has been incised or carved with decorative motifs. These may date from the Neolithic (c.4000 BC) to the 19th century AD.

#### *Decorated Stone (Present Location)*

A stone which has been incised or carved with decorative motifs, but in this case the decorated stone has been moved from its original location.

#### *Earthwork*

An anomalous earthen structure, usually raised and occurring in a variety of shapes and sizes, which on field inspection is found to possess no diagnostic features which would allow classification within another monument category. These may date to any period from prehistory onwards.

#### *Enclosure*

An area defined by an enclosing element and occurring in a variety of shapes and sizes, possessing no diagnostic features which would allow classification within another monument category. These may date to any period from prehistory onwards.

#### *Field System*

A group or complex of fields, which appear to form a coherent whole. These date to any period from the Neolithic (c.4000-2500 BC) onwards.

#### *Findspot*

The place, where an archaeological artefact has been found, without any known association with an archaeological monument or feature.

*Fulachta Fiadh (plural Fulachtaí Fia)*

A horseshoe-shaped or kidney-shaped mound consisting of fire-cracked stone and charcoal-enriched soil built up around a sunken trough located near or adjacent to a water supply, such as a stream or spring, or in wet marshy areas. The first recorded use of the Irish term *fulachta fiadh* (cooking pit of the deer or of the wild) related to ancient cooking sites was in the 17th century. These are generally interpreted to have been associated with cooking and date primarily to the Bronze Age (c.2500-300 BC).

*Habitation Site*

A concentration of archaeological features, which are indicative of habitation, the remains being insufficient to allow a more specific classification. These may be of any date up to the medieval period (5th-16th centuries AD).

*Hilltop Enclosure*

An enclosure, consisting of an earthen bank and sometimes an outer fosse, which encompasses the domed summit of a hill. These enclosures may have been ceremonial rather than defensive and may date to any period from prehistory to the late medieval period.

*Hillfort*

A large area, from 3 to 22 hectares, located on and often following the natural contours of a hill, enclosed by an earth or stone bank or banks and fosse or fosses which can be internal or external. They may have been important ceremonial tribal centres and/or permanent or temporary settlements. They usually date to the Late Bronze Age (c.1000-300 BC) with examples of re-occupation in the later Iron Age (c.AD 100-430).

*House – Bronze Age*

A building used for human habitation which dates to the Bronze Age (c.2500-300 BC).

*House – Iron Age*

A building used for human habitation which dates to the Iron Age (c.300 BC-AD 430).

*House – Neolithic*

A building used for human habitation which dates to the Neolithic (c.4000-2500 BC).

*House – Prehistoric*

A building used for human habitation which is broadly dated to the prehistoric period (up to AD 430)

*Hut Site*

A structure, occasionally discernible as a low, stone foundation or earthen bank enclosing a circular, oval or subrectangular area, generally less than 5m in maximum dimension. The remains are generally too insubstantial to classify as a house but the majority probably functioned as dwellings. These may date to any period from prehistory (c.8000 BC - AD 430) to the medieval period (5th-16th centuries AD).

*Inauguration Site*

A place, where inauguration ceremonies were held, which may include hilltop enclosures, earthen mounds, church sites, raths and less frequently, natural locations. They are usually situated on low-lying hills with a good prospect (30-122m OD), generally overlooking the kingdom or lordship of the king-elect. These usually date from the Iron Age (c.300 BC - AD 430) and to the medieval period (5th-16th centuries AD).

*Industrial Site*

An area or defined space believed to have been used for trades and/or manufacturing activity. These may date to any period from prehistory onwards.

*Inauguration Stone (Present Location)*

A stone which formed part of an inauguration rite, but in this case the inauguration stone has been moved from its original location. These usually date from the Iron Age (c.300 BC - AD 430) to the medieval period (5th-16th centuries AD).

*Linear Earthwork*

A substantial bank and fosse, usually forming a major boundary between two adjacent landholdings. Most date from the late Bronze Age and Iron Age.

*Lithic Scatter*

A dense concentration of lithics in a spatially discrete area recovered from the surface, usually by fieldwalking, rather than from a particular archaeological context. These usually date from the prehistoric period (c.8000 BC - AD 400).

*Midden*

A refuse heap sometimes surviving as a layer or spread. These may be of any date from prehistory up to the medieval period (5th-16th centuries AD).

## SITES OF PREHISTORIC LIFE IN NORTHERN IRELAND

### *Mound*

An elevation of earth or earth and stone of unknown date and function which cannot be classified as any other known archaeological monument type on present evidence.

### *Pit*

An excavated hole or cavity in the ground. These may date to any period from prehistory onwards.

### *Promontory Fort (Coastal)*

A defensive enclosure, created by constructing one or more lines of ramparts across a neck of land in order to defend or restrict access to a spur or promontory in a coastal area. These usually date to the Iron Age (c.300 BC - AD 400).

### *Promontory Fort (Inland)*

A defensive enclosure, created by constructing one or more lines of ramparts across a neck of land in order to defend or restrict access to a spur or promontory in an inland area. These usually date to the Iron Age (c.300 BC - AD 430).

### *Quarry (Prehistoric)*

A place, where stone was extracted for building purposes or tool manufacture. These date from the Neolithic to the Bronze Age (c.4000-300 BC).

### *Ritual Site - Pond*

A body of still water, artificially formed for ritual depositions. These are associated with the Bronze and Iron Ages.

### *Road (Trackway)*

A way, deliberately constructed between places, used by travellers and wide enough to accommodate vehicles. This classification is also applied to roads which have become relict features. These may be of any date from prehistory onwards.

### *Road (Class 1 Togher)*

A peatland trackway or causeway constructed of wood, usually substantial timber planks, with a known orientation, good structural definition and intended to traverse a bog. These structures may have several phases of construction indicative of long-term use and re-use. These may date from the Neolithic (c.4000-2500 BC) to the medieval period (5th-16th centuries AD).

### *Road (Class 2 Togher)*

A length of trackway, constructed of wood, within peatland with a clear orientation, good structural definition and believed to be over 15m in length. These may date from the Neolithic (c.4000-2500 BC) to the medieval period (5th-16th centuries AD).

### *Road (Class 3 Togher)*

A short stretch of trackway, constructed of wood, with evidence of deliberate structure that was laid down to cross a small area of bog. These monuments can be up to 15m in length with a discernible orientation although it may not be possible to trace them beyond a single sighting. These may date from the Neolithic (c.4000-2500 BC) to the medieval period (5th-16th centuries AD).

### *Road (Unclassified Togher)*

A peatland trackway or causeway constructed of wood, which cannot be classified as a primary, secondary or tertiary togher. These may date from the Neolithic (c.4000-2500 BC) to the medieval period (5th-16th centuries AD).

### *Settlement Cluster*

A group of prehistoric houses and associated land plots, arranged in close proximity to form a nucleated settlement.

## FINDSPOTS

Findspots are problematic, when attempting to compile an inventory of sites and monuments and there are several reasons for this. First, the huge number involved would make such an inventory too large to be of practical value. Second, many artefacts which have been found over the years now reside in a widely dispersed number of museums and academic institutions, most of which do not make details of their collections widely available. Third, unknown quantities of artefacts are retained in private collections, or languish in the stores of academic institutions and archaeological companies, who do not have the resources to analyse, curate or publish the details. However, much information is available in specialist volumes, such as Peter Woodman's *The Mesolithic in Ireland* in 1978. Archaeological journals, such as the *Ulster Journal*

of *Archaeology*, have published details of large quantities of artefacts found over huge areas, such as those from along the River Blackwater (Bourke *et al.* 1991/1992, 138-149), in addition to the details normally published in excavation reports. The HED has also contributed to the corpus of information, in a series of archaeological monographs, such as *Coiti, Logboats from Northern Ireland* (Fry 2000), *Archaeological Objects from County Fermanagh* (Williams and Gormley 2002) and in the archaeological surveys of Counties Down (Jope 1966), Armagh (Neill 2009) and Fermanagh (Foley and McHugh 2014).

The lack of a coherent and accessible database for recovered artefacts is a major problem, when attempting to form a picture of prehistoric life in Northern Ireland, as it is in many other places. Many of these artefacts have been found by chance, giving rise to the term findspot, where there seems to be no association with a particular site. However, our current knowledge of prehistoric society is largely based on the information gleaned from artefacts recovered from prehistoric burial sites, such as megalithic tombs and burial cairns, in the assumption that these artefacts are a reflection of those used in everyday life. It is only in recent years that sites associated with prehistoric life, rather than death, have been located and the artefacts associated with them have been scientifically analysed. A vast amount of research remains to be carried out on the existing sites and artefact collections, in order to gain a clearer understanding of what life was really like for our prehistoric ancestors.

#### ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THE TEXT

ACS: Archaeological Consultancy Services Limited

ADS: Archaeological Development Services Limited

CAF: Centre for Archaeological Fieldwork, Queens University, Belfast

CM: Centimetre

CMA: Centre for Maritime Archaeology, Ulster University

CS: Ordnance Survey County Series (6 inches to 1 mile) map number

DARD: Department of Agriculture and Rural Development

FT: Foot or Feet

GAA: Gaelic Athletic Association

G&L: Gahan and Long Limited

GUARD: GUARD Archaeology Limited

HED: Department for Communities: Historic Environment Division (formerly NIEA: Built Heritage and Environment and Heritage Service)

IDB: Industrial Development Board

IG: Ordnance Survey Irish Grid (1:10,000 scale) map number

INS: Inches

JRSAI: Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland

KM: Kilometre

M: Metre

MM: Millimeter

NAC: Northern Archaeological Consultancy Limited

NIHE: Northern Ireland Housing Executive

NPL: Not precisely located

OD: Height in metres above Ordnance Datum

OS: Ordnance Survey

PSAMNI: Preliminary Survey of the Ancient Monuments of Northern Ireland

QUB: Queen's University, Belfast

SMR: Northern Ireland Sites and Monuments Record (HED)

YDS: Yards