

Monasterboice Conservation Study

Executive Summary

Background

In July 2008 the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, in partnership with the Office of Public Works and Louth County Council, commissioned Margaret Gowen & Co. Ltd. to lead a multi-disciplinary team to undertake a Conservation Study for the early medieval ecclesiastical site of Monasterboice, County Louth. The team's expertise included: history, archaeology, art history, architecture, spatial planning, natural environment, and technical studies. The study was commissioned to address a range of urgent concerns in respect of the preservation, conservation and presentation the early medieval ecclesiastical site and its iconic high crosses. Weathering of the crosses is ongoing and a serious concern. It has accelerated in recent decades leading to serious loss of the internationally important art on the crosses. One of the main aims of the study was to establish the best method for preserving the high crosses.

The National Monument (No. 94), which is in State care includes a round tower, two stone churches, a series of cross-slabs and the world-renowned high crosses, set in an enclosed graveyard in agricultural countryside. The graveyard is still in use.

A large associated below-ground enclosing complex, identified through aerial photography and geophysical survey, extends for up to 250m beyond the graveyard wall, incorporating four souterrains. In its analysis the study considered Monasterboice in the context of its wider landscape setting, taking in a core zone of c.120 hectares, centred around the graveyard, and a wider zone of c.1,054 hectares.

A Conservation Study involves a process that "*seeks to guide the future development of a place through an understanding of its significance*" with a policy-based guidance document as its outcome. The process provides conservation-focused analysis of a site or place, without prejudice, based on a highly structured approach to its examination and study by a multidisciplinary team. The study is conducted with the protection and public enjoyment of a monument or site as its central point of reference.

The significance of the site

The Monasterboice complex is exceptional. It incorporates outstanding examples of Irish High Crosses with upstanding early medieval structures, together with a recently-revealed extensive, enclosing sub-surface archaeological site. The unique nature, quality and importance of the High Crosses at the site, and their iconography, is sufficient in itself to lend international significance to the site, while the complex in its entirety is a highly integrated and well-preserved, historic cultural entity, with the evident connections between its elements, thereby increasing its cultural significance overall.

The history of the site

The site may have been founded as early as the 5th century AD, placing it within the missionary period of Christianity in Ireland and potentially associated with its early spread.

Historically, the site is linked to the dynasties of the Ciannachta and is likely to have been the foremost church of the territory, known as Arda Ciannachta. Monasterboice was an Episcopal church prior to the Synod of Raith Breasail (AD1111), further reinforcing that contention. It was renowned during the medieval period as a centre of scholarship and learning, a fact regularly noted in the annals, and its most famous son Flann Mainistrech, was considered one of the pre-eminent scholars of the age.

Consultation

The study had a Steering Group, and during the preparation of the study the Project Team liaised with multiple stakeholders. The team met with interested parties, held a public meeting in Monasterboice, invited and received written submissions and integrated the views expressed into the report's findings and conclusions.

Objectives defined during the study

The protection and display of the Monasterboice high crosses, two of the most important high crosses in Ireland
The conservation, preservation and presentation of the entire monument complex
The development of improved facilities and traffic management for visitors to the National Monument in a sustainable manner, and
The identification and development of a suitable site in the locality to provide an extension to the capacity of the existing graveyard.

The preservation of crosses

While a number of structures on the site require conservation, and there are a number of pressing issues that need to be addressed, none present as urgent or as important an issue as the protection of the crosses.

Arising from the study, it is clear that on-going weathering and the existing public access will cause the continuing deterioration of the high crosses. A range of options for the preservation of the crosses have been examined. All of these options involve the crosses remaining within the immediate vicinity of the National Monument. The table below illustrates how the issue was assessed and the options that are available, adopting the following criteria:

- (A) Protection from the weather and preservation in present condition in perpetuity.
- (B) Round-the-clock security from vandalism/wilful damage.
- (C) Protection from casual visitor damage.
- (D) Protection of visual integrity and character of monument group and visitor experience of monument.

The Options

The evaluation of the options was guided by principles of best practice in conservation (√=objective achieved; X=objective not achieved)

Options	A	B	C	D
(1) Moving crosses into purpose-built visitor centre nearby and putting exact replicas, indistinguishable from originals, at the original locations	√	√	√	√
(2) Leaving crosses exposed to continued weathering (and deterioration) where they are and placing high quality replicas within visitor centre	X	X	X	√
(3) Erecting protective railings around crosses	X	X	√	√?
(4) Erecting shelter around crosses (roof only with supports)	√?	X	X?	X
(5) Erecting shelter around crosses (glazed walls and roof)	√?	√	√	X

The other objectives

Depending on the decision agreed in relation to the crosses, all other related decisions, including those relating to the extension to the graveyard, traffic management, visitor management and visitor facilities can be further analysed.

Project team

Lead Consultants: Margaret Gowen & Co. Ltd Archaeological Consultants and Project Managers: Margaret Gowen, Teresa Bolger, and Keay Burrige,

Consultant Archaeological Historian: Dr Peter Harbison

Conservation Architects: Consarc Conservation; Una Ni Mhearain and Arthur Parkinson,

Stone Condition: Consarc Stone Conservation Services : Joanne Curran, and John Savage,

Consulting Structural Engineer: Lisa Edden

Planning John Cronin & Associates: John Cronin,

Ecology: Natura Ciara Hamilton,

Steering Group

Conleth Manning, National Monuments Service (DEHLG); Pat Keane/Terry Allen, National Monuments Service (DEHLG); Brendan McSherry, Heritage Officer, Louth County Council; Cllr Anthony Donohoe, Drogheda Borough Council; Ana Dolan, Office of Public Works