

A Grampian stone circle confirmed

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INTRODUCTION

In 1900, on his Gunning Fellowship survey of the stone circles of north-east Scotland, F R Coles visited the steadings of Brandsbutt, c 1 mile (1.61 km) NW of Inverurie, Aberdeenshire

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(fig 1a) to examine the remains of a stone circle shown on the Ordnance Map. He had no difficulty in accepting the

‘three good-sized stones, which at some date unknown to me have been utilized as portions of two dykes’ (Coles 1901, 229)

which he found ‘almost hidden by haystacks’ (*ibid*) as the remains of a stone circle whose circumference and diameter he calculated as c 270 feet (82.35 m) and 90 ft (27.45 m) respectively (*ibid*, 230, fig 37). In interpreting the three stones which he saw as the *in situ* remnants of a stone circle, he was following the *Ordnance Survey Name Book*, no 42 (1866, 5), which recorded that the remainder of the stones were taken either for building or agricultural purposes when reclaiming the land on which the stones were placed. (It should be noted, however, that there is no evidence that Coles consulted the *ONB* to supplement the information found on the map.) The *ONB* also relates that

‘a considerable quantity of ashes of burnt wood was found, but there were no remains of any other description’ (*ibid*).

Subsequent writers have followed Coles in acknowledging the existence of a circle at the Brandsbutt steading, probably of simple form (Burl 1976, 350).

By 1982, the steading of Brandsbutt (NGR NJ 760 224) was no longer a rural backwater ‘a mile from Inverurie’ but the next group of fields due for development as housing in Inverurie’s rolling, oil-related expansion northwards (fig 1b). The planning application lodged with Gordon District Council in late 1982 led to consultation with the writer in his capacity as Grampian Regional Archaeologist. Assessment of the archaeological value of the Brandsbutt area (the well known Pictish guardianship monument apart) was hampered by the ambiguity of the earlier accounts (Coles 1901; *ONB* 1866). Although Coles clearly believed that the three stones that he saw in the field dykes were *in situ*, the possibility that they had been moved from some point on the farm could not be discounted. Furthermore, even if the circle was where Coles believed it to be, it was evident that the field had been ploughed regularly for over a century, so little of value might remain in any case.

Fortunately, discussions with the developer and Gordon District Council Planning Department produced a solution. The developer agreed to safeguard the site of the circle, after first providing the means of locating it with the writer’s assistance. (The formal full planning consent, issued by the District Council in March 1983, contains conditions requiring the safeguarding of the site of the circle during construction work and its preservation in a suitably landscaped area within the development.)

THE STONE CIRCLE

As a result of the agreement and planning conditions outlined above a small scale exploratory exercise was mounted with the single objective of locating accurately the presumed stone circle. The writer took the view that as the aim of the whole exercise was the long term preservation of the site, major excavation which would involve the removal of evidence from an already denuded site (eg stonehole sectioning) would not be justified. The operation was designed rather to identify sufficient evidence of a stone circle, hopefully in the form of a number of stoneholes to allow the definition of a suitable safeguarding area. (Or, alternatively to confirm the archaeological sterility of the presumed site.)

The developer provided a tracked Hymac hydraulic excavator, fitted with a ditching bucket

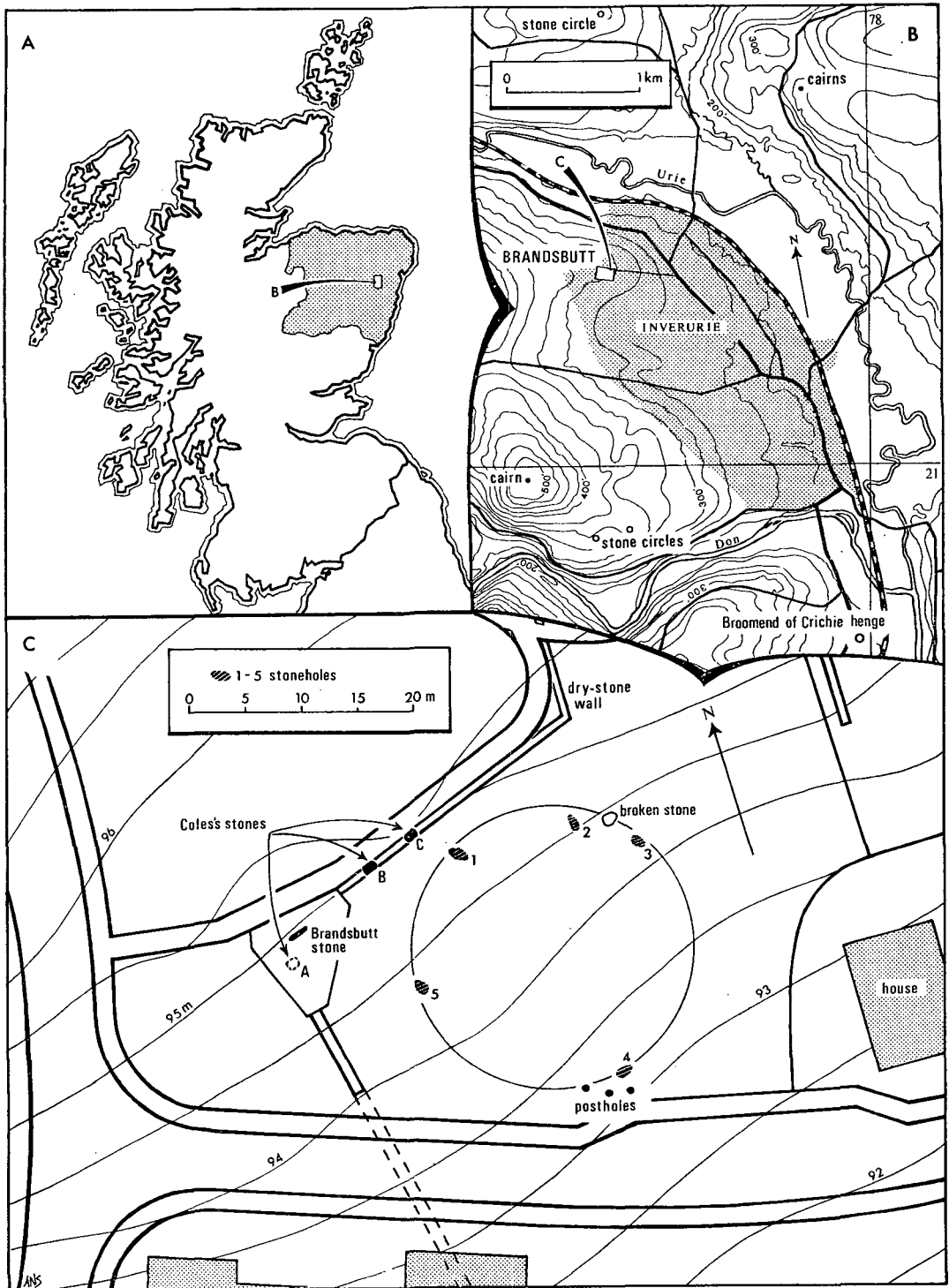


FIG 1 Brandsbutt stone circle: location maps and plan. (Based on OS map; Crown Copyright reserved)

(a narrow, shallow blade with an even cutting edge which produces a very clean stripped surface, without the scoring and disturbance which toothed buckets produce) and a highly skilled and observant operator. The work took place in extreme weather conditions in January 1983.

The field immediately S of the dyke containing the remaining two of the three stones which Coles saw (B and C on fig 1c) was chosen as the most suitable starting point. It has a gently sloping southerly aspect and the N wall, at 95 m OD is some way (c 90 m) down from the hill crest. Work proceeded by carefully removing the even dark 0.3 m thick ploughsoil in bucket-wide strips (c 1.2 m), starting adjacent to the fence immediately S of Coles's stones, to reveal the subsoil surface, a yellow-brown sandy clay with angular stones.

In the event, it proved relatively easy to recognize man-made disturbances of the subsoil. Five stoneholes were eventually located, showing generally as dark ovals with humic fills and the odd disturbed boulder and charcoal fleck (Table 1; fig 1c).

TABLE 1
Dimensions of stoneholes

No	Dimensions	Notes
1	1.8 × 0.56 m	Elongated oval; cheesy humic fill with charcoal flecks; packing stones
2	c 1.05 × 0.4 m	Squat oval; cheesy humic fill and redeposited till lumps and charcoal flecks
3	0.95 × 0.55 m	Sub-rectangular; greasy black earth with many charcoal fragments
4	1.36 × 0.9 m	Sub-oval; light humic fill with loose stones
5	1.05 × 0.5 m	Elongated oval; brown humic fill with charcoal flecking; occasional packing stone

Care was taken not to disturb the interior of the circle: once three stoneholes had been identified on the N, the circumference of the circle was estimated and work began in the area of the S arc to locate sufficient evidence to confirm the circle's diameter.

Five definite stoneholes were found, representing a circle c 25 m in diameter (fig 1c). It was clear from the stonehole fills and other evidence that the circle had been deliberately slighted. The fills of all the stoneholes consisted of relatively loose, humic soil with some charcoal flecking in four cases, and a few loose boulders (maximum dimension 400 mm) in three cases, interpreted as packing stones. The nodules of till seen on the surface of stonehole 2 reinforced the impression that the present plans and fills represented the effects of digging out the stones. Confirmation that these features represent a deliberately slighted stone circle came with the discovery of an area of dense grey-green clay around stonehole 4, and particularly on its inner edge, which signified that a fire had been lit around the standing stone. Finally, in the NE arc, a fragment of a fallen stone, an irregular rectangular slab 0.98 m long by 0.56 m wide by 0.2 m thick, and two smaller pieces were found lying on the surface of the subsoil. They were left *in situ*.

Evidence of activity at an unknown date just outside the SW arc of the circle (c 3.00 m W of the centre of stonehole 4) consisted of three possible postholes, each c 0.3 m in diameter. They were in a shallow arc, open to the SW and 1 m and 2.35 m apart (fig 1c). Along with the stoneholes, they were left unexcavated. The topsoil was replaced immediately and the area of the circle fenced off; it is now protected open space within the housing development.

CONCLUSIONS

In summary, the location of a stone circle 25 m in diameter and consisting of an estimated 12 or 13 stones has been confirmed at Brandsbutt, Inverurie, the centre at NJ 7601 2239 at 94 m

OD. The circle had been slighted and is now represented by stoneholes and two standing stones, the latter relocated in a dyke 3 m N of the N arc of the circle.

It is not possible to characterize the circle firmly; although the SW arc was exposed no evidence of a recumbent stone was found, nor is there any excessively large stone in adjacent dykes which could be a resited recumbent. With these two, admittedly negative, factors in mind it might be tentatively suggested that the Brandsbutt stone circle was a plain ring, similar perhaps to such now destroyed Aberdeenshire sites as Holywell, Kennethmont (Coles 1902, 555) or West Haughs, Auchterless (Coles 1903, 102) which had diameters of 24.4 m and 23.2 m and seven and six stones respectively. There are, however, also parallels for its diameter amongst the recumbent stone circles, Hatton of Ardoyne at 24.7 m being particularly close (Coles 1901, 242). One final (potential) similarity may be noted. Hatton of Ardoyne had originally 13 stones, the spacing between which averaged 6.4 m (*ibid*). At Brandsbutt stoneholes 2 and 3 are just over 6 m apart, while stoneholes 1 and 5 are c 12 m apart (fig 1c): extending such equal spacing along the circumference would give a circle of 13 stones.

However, confirmation of such intriguing indications can now be left safely to some future date as the site is now safeguarded.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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