

## 2. INTRODUCTION

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In February 2009, a large slab was disturbed during ploughing of a field at Knappach Toll on Balbridie Farm, Aberdeenshire. The farmer dragged the slab to a corner of the field and, returning to the spot, observed a large, stone-lined hole where it had been. Thinking it was a field drain he stepped inside it, but on closer inspection he realised it contained pieces of pottery and was of some antiquity. He removed a slab that lay above the southern edge of the cist, laid it inside, collected the sherds of pottery and placed them on the slab. He then informed the Aberdeenshire Council assistant archaeologist, Moira Greig, who contacted Historic Environment Scotland (formerly Historic Scotland). The contents of the cist were excavated and its construction was investigated by a team from the former Glasgow University Archaeological Research Division over two days in dry conditions. The work was carried out under the Human Remains Call-off Contract issued by Historic Environment Scotland, who funded and monitored the fieldwork and post-excavation work.

### 2.1 Site location

The cist lies on a river terrace to the north of the B9077 road, about 2.5km to the east of Banchory (Illus 1). From the road, the ground rises slightly to a low ridge that runs along the field's northern edge, reaching a height of 50m above OD. The cist lies *c* 5m south of the field's northern boundary at approximately 49m above OD (NGR NO 7369 9595). To the north of this boundary, the ground drops steeply beneath mature conifers to a level expanse beside the River Dee. The first edition Ordnance Survey 6 inch to the mile map of the area shows that the field had been enclosed and improved by 1865. By 2012 it had been planted with conifer saplings, although the cist itself was excluded and protected under a low mound of ploughsoil.

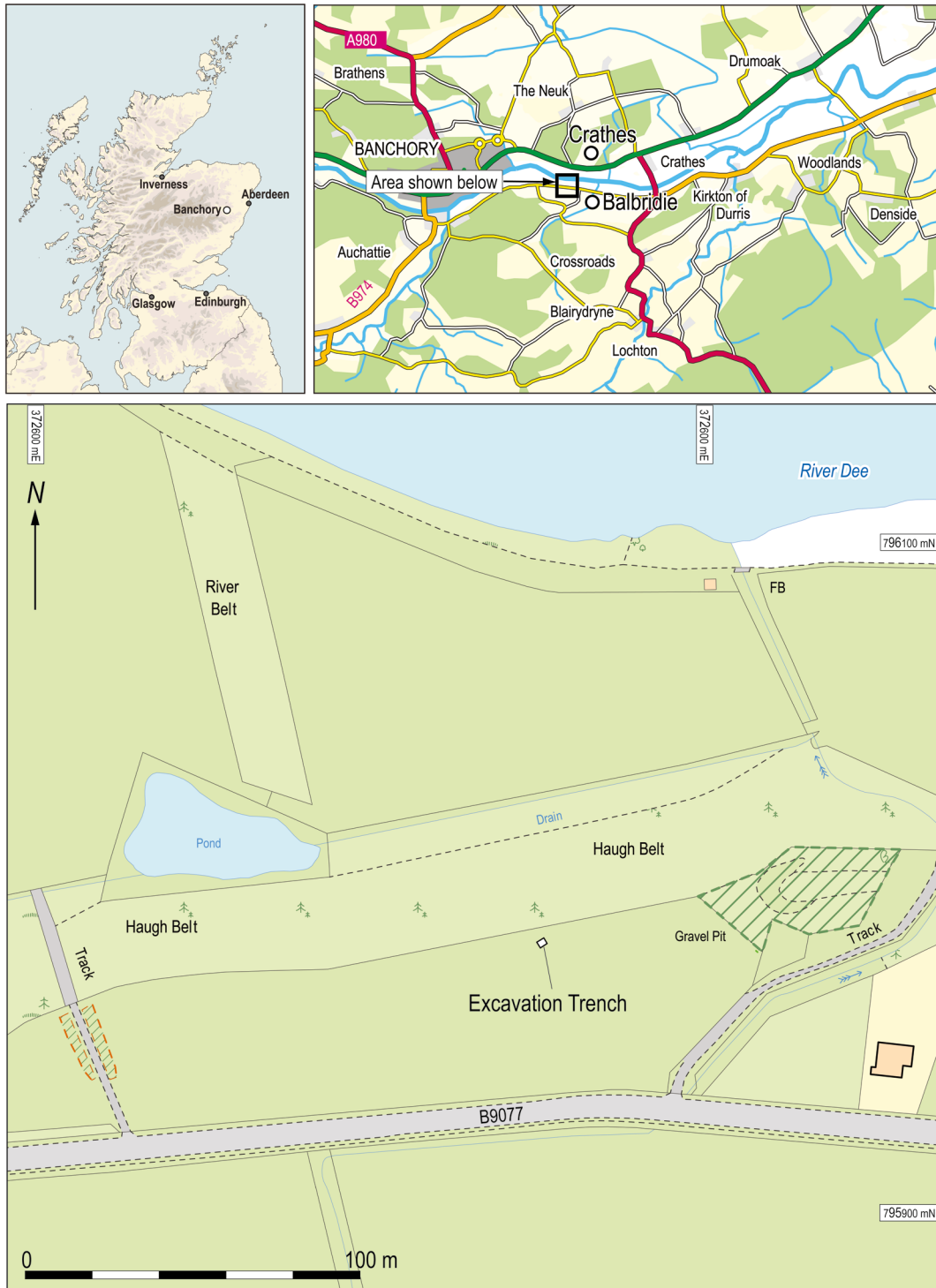
The solid geology at the site consists of metamorphic bedrock formed between 1,000 and 542 million years ago (Queen's Hill Formation – semipelite, psammite and pelite); these were originally sedimentary rocks that formed in shallow seas and were later altered by low-grade metamorphism. The superficial geology formed up

to three million years ago in the Quaternary Period, when glaciers were scouring the land and meltwater was depositing moraines of till with outwash sand and gravel deposits (British Geological Survey [nd]).

### 2.2 Archaeological background

This part of the Dee valley was home to well-established communities in the 4th and 3rd millennia cal BC, with a ceremonial landscape flanking the river and dominated by large, communal monuments. Two substantial timber halls stood in the vicinity of Knappach Toll during the early Neolithic – one at Balbridie about 300m to the east and the other 1.5km to the north-east, across the river at Crathes (see Illus 1). Excavation of Balbridie timber hall in 1977–81 revealed that it had been built of prepared oak timbers; abundant carbonised grain was found inside it, along with sherds of Unstan Ware and worked flint (Canmore ID 36669; Ralston 1982). The similar but slightly smaller timber hall at Warren Field, Crathes was partially excavated in 2004. It was also built of dressed oak timbers, with relatively sparse pottery, flints and grain associated with it (Canmore ID 36670; Murray et al 2009). Both buildings stood during the early to mid-4th millennium BC and both were destroyed by fire.

By the mid-3rd millennium cal BC, the character of ceremonial activity in the landscape had shifted towards the construction and use of recumbent stone circles (Bradley 2005) and single burial in cists, often accompanied by Beakers, with some debate about whether the construction of these monuments preceded the common use of Beakers or whether these practices emerged concurrently (see Curtis & Wilkin 2012: 241–3). In the vicinity of Knappach Toll, a cluster of three cists was discovered during ploughing on a natural knoll in 1893, a kilometre to the SSE; they contained probable inhumations with Beakers and Beaker sherds (Shepherd 1986: 37) (see Illus 1). Other finds suggest the locations of settlement and other activity in the environs. Scatters of worked flint, including a barbed-and-tanged arrowhead, have been found along the south bank of the river within about a kilometre of the cist; a possible ring ditch has been identified through aerial photography to the east of Balbridie timber hall; and several extensive field systems which may incorporate burial cairns lie on higher ground to the SSW.



**Illus 1** Location plan. © Northlight Heritage

North-east Scotland contains one of the highest concentrations in northern Britain of inhumation burials accompanied by Beakers in short cists (Shepherd 1986). These point to shared belief

systems and social practices across the region's communities and their connections elsewhere along the eastern seaboard of the UK and to Continental Europe (Bradley 2005: 113; Shepherd 2012).