

#### IV.

#### NOTICE OF STONE CIRCLES, IN THE PARISH OF OLD DEER; WITH PLANS. BY REV. JAMES PETER, F.S.A. Scot.

In the parish of Old Deer or Deer the stone circles must have formed from a very remote period a notable feature in the landscape. According to the late Dr Stuart, there were almost within the memory of man twelve circles, generally pretty complete; and on the testimony of an aged man still alive, who had the intelligence from those who were old in his young days, several more had existed.

So long as agriculture was in its infancy, and when there was little disposition to cultivate any land but that which was of fair quality or free from obstacles, coupled perhaps with a belief that it was uncanny to meddle with that which, through age, and the mystery naturally attaching to these colossal stones set upright in regular order, they had an impunity from the hand of the destroyer; but when land increased in value, through improved methods of agriculture, and the introduction of extraneous manures, old boundaries and the most sacred enclosures were ruthlessly swept away.

Before proceeding to a description of the individual circles, with a detail of their form and their respective measurements, as shown in the outlines and sketches herewith submitted, it may be deemed fitting that, as an introduction to this paper, some description should be prefaced of the district in which they are situated.

The district of Deer or Old Deer, so called after a large part of it

had been detached in 1694 to form a separate parish, then named New Deer, occupies the centre of the large district of Aberdeenshire known as Buchan. Its mean length from N. to S. is about 11 miles, with a mean breadth of 5 to 6. It is intersected from W. to E. by the small stream called the Ugie, on which are situated the parish church where religious houses have successively stood since the first was planted by St Columba in the year 673, according to Adamnan his biographer; and the Cistercian Abbey of Deer, a mile to the west, founded in 1219. From this point—the parish church—the sea is distant on the east 10 miles (at Peterhead) and on the north (at Fraserburgh) 14. Its surface is diversified, consisting mostly of a succession of rounded knolls or hills not exceeding 500 feet. It is on the summits of the secondary knolls, about 350 feet above the sea, that the stone circles have been erected.

From very early times the district must have sustained a large population, if we may judge from the great number of *tumuli* containing urns or other memorials of the dead; while on either side the stream referred to, for 3 miles to the west of the church, and at right angles to the line or disposition of the stone circles, almost every height shows traces of a rath or circle of varying proportions. We pass by these as only interesting in connection, though bearing testimony to the fact of a considerable population having existed at a period long anterior to written history.

With this paper is submitted a reduced Ordnance map, on which are placed marks showing the exact position of the circles existent, in part, as well as of those whose locality is well ascertained, though every vestige of them has disappeared. The circles in *red* are distinguished as those which, though incomplete, are marked by stones standing, while those extinct are filled in in black.

On referring to the map, it will be seen that a certain regularity attaches to their position; while an examination of them singly, in relation to their contiguity, suggests that the chain (if we may so designate the series) was so constructed, that each link should be so placed as to be visible from the nearest. Thus the circle numbered 2 is visible from 1, 3 from 2, and so on to the last; while from Aikey Brae Circle, the

centre one, all, but for the intervening modern woods, would be visible on either side.

The following are the individual circles in detail :—

No. 1. *Strichen Circle*.—The most northerly, above Strichen House, just outside the parish of Deer, but forming part of the group. The stones are composed of grey granite, unlike all the others to be noticed, which are of whinstone or highly crystallised gneiss. The recumbent stone (fig. 1) is narrower than any in the group, being only  $1\frac{1}{2}$  foot across, owing to the square cleavage. There is a peculiarity attending this circle, that the recumbent stone and its side stones, if we may so designate them, are placed on the north of the circle instead of the south, all others



Fig. 1. Recumbent Stone with its two uprights in Strichen Circle.

being to the south, while the recumbent stone has (on its east end) been hollowed atop for some purpose. Trending to the S.E. from this point is

No 2. *White Cow Wood Circle*, with dolmen enclosed.—This circle (fig. 2) is 40 feet in diameter, and the circumference is lined out by a number of small, sharp stones, none of them over 2 feet 4 inches in height. At the S.E. point some stones have been removed to a little distance, to allow of ingress. The dolmen is formed of five supporting stones, one on the east and two on either side. It was open to the west. The covering stone lies at an angle towards the N.E., so that one standing at west, and running his eye along the centre, would find the line of vision strike the horizon on or about the point where the sun rises at mid-

summer. The dolmen is not exactly in the centre of the circle, but in the N.E. quadrant, only the S.W. supporting stone being near the centre.



Fig. 2. Sketch of White Cow Wood Circle (diameter 40 feet—not to scale).

No 3. *Auchmachar Circle*.—This circle was comparatively complete until about forty years ago. The recumbent stone remains in position, but was shattered several years since by the kindling on it of a Halloween fire. One of its side stones remains erect. The other is thrown down; while beyond it, or two spaces or distances, a stone is

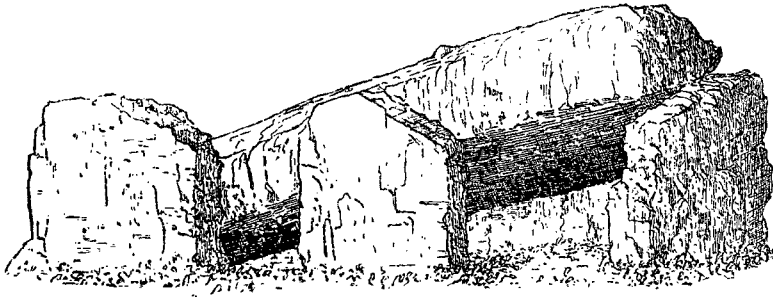


Fig. 3. Enlarged View of Dolmen in White Cow Wood Circle.

standing in position, having been spared, as forming a handy rubbing stone for cattle. One large stone had been removed, and laid lengthwise to form a good portion of a stone fence; another had been long since

taken to be used as a bridge across a small burn; another had been utilised for the keystone of a thrashing mill support. The form of this enclosure seems to have been an oblong. From being able to identify the exact spot, through one who had assisted at the removal of one of the absent stones, sufficient data were obtained to realise the form and size of the circle. The size of the single stone is considerably in excess of the average, and when complete and standing in the skyline, the circle must have formed an imposing object. So far as could be ascertained this circle would appear to have been an exact counterpart of the next to be noticed, situated about a mile east, viz.,



Fig. 4. Recumbent Stone with its two uprights in Loudon Wood Circle.

No 4. *The Loudon Wood, Pitfour Circle.*—This circle can be traced without difficulty, in consequence of the recumbent stone and its side stone on the west being still in position, as shown in fig. 4, while the other side stone on the east has simply fallen over. Besides, on either side, and about the middle of the circle, there is still one of the stones standing as originally placed. The ground plan of the circle is shown in fig. 5.

No 5. *Aikey Brae or Parkhouse Circle.*—This is the most complete circle of the group. Its recumbent stone is the largest of those still extant, formed of whinstone, and weighing according to estimate, 21 tons. The circle is wholly complete on the west side, with the exception of the

stone next to the recumbent stone, which has fallen, and in so doing broken in two. On referring to the ground plan (fig. 6), it will be seen that there is a graduation in height, the stones being of less size towards the north. The section at the base of the stone shows in each case a rude triangle pointing to the centre of the circle. On the opposite side the stones are still on the spot, though broken, more or less, and their original position is easily ascertained.

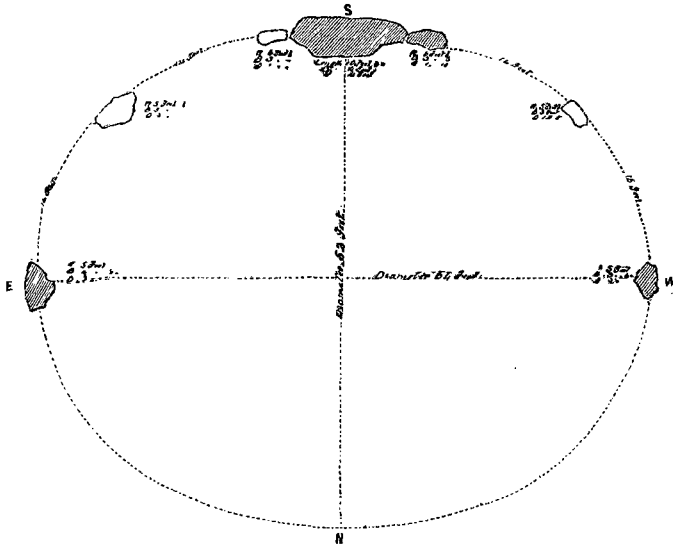


Fig. 5. Ground Plan of Loudon Wood Circle (diameter 64 feet).

No. 6. *Upper Crichtie Circle*.—This circle was destroyed nearly one hundred years ago, according to the testimony of one whose father was witness to the destruction.

It would appear the stones were sold by the tenant *en bloc*, to aid in building a steading. Not long after it was noted that his family were visited by illness, one after the other dying. The superstition of these days was at no loss in assigning a cause. As in the case of the Keiths, after their forcibly appropriating the lands pertaining to the Abbey of

Deer, the lines referring to their so-called sacrilege in Pratt's *Buchan* may be quoted here as embodying the general belief—

“ Meddle nae in haly things ;  
For gin ye dee,  
A weird, I rede, in some shape  
Shall follow thee.”

No. 7. *East Crichtie Circle*, entirely destroyed about 60 years since.

No. 8. *Circle on Skelmuir Hill*, the most southerly of the group, now represented by one solitary standing stone.

No. 9. *Circle at Gaval*, mentioned last, because not so ostensibly connected with the group.

This circle was pretty complete about forty years since. The recumbent stone was a prominent object in the field until sixteen years ago, when it was shattered by gunpowder by thoughtless young apprentice masons working in the neighbourhood. A single stone now only remains, spared, as in a former case, to be desecrated as a rubbing stone for cattle.

Referring to the recumbent stones, it may be noted that they are generally flat in the top till towards the western end (No. 4, Loudon excepted), where there is a rise of several inches; that they are not sunk in the ground, but are firmly kept in a position by a simple contrivance—a large stone wedge on the one side within a foot or two of the end, and a similar wedge, but on the opposite side and towards the opposite end, care being seemingly taken to leave an open space between the inner end of the wedge and the stone.

In every case the length of the stone is from E. to W.; and in all cases (save that of Strichen, which is in the north) in the south of the circle.

As to the composition, as before remarked, they consist of whinstone, or highly crystallised gneiss (Strichen again excepted, which is of granite), and were likely derived from the large erratic boulders which probably at one time were strewed thickly over the district—there being yet in some places vast numbers of smaller ones, which are being removed in the process of clearing and enclosing fields of arable land.

With regard to sepulchral remains, either within or in the neighbourhood of the circles, I am not aware that any well-marked traces have been

found. In the case of the Aikey Brae or Parkhouse circle (fig. 6), several years ago, an examination was made by Mr C. Dalrymple and the late Col. Forbes Leslie, accompanied by the proprietor of the land, but

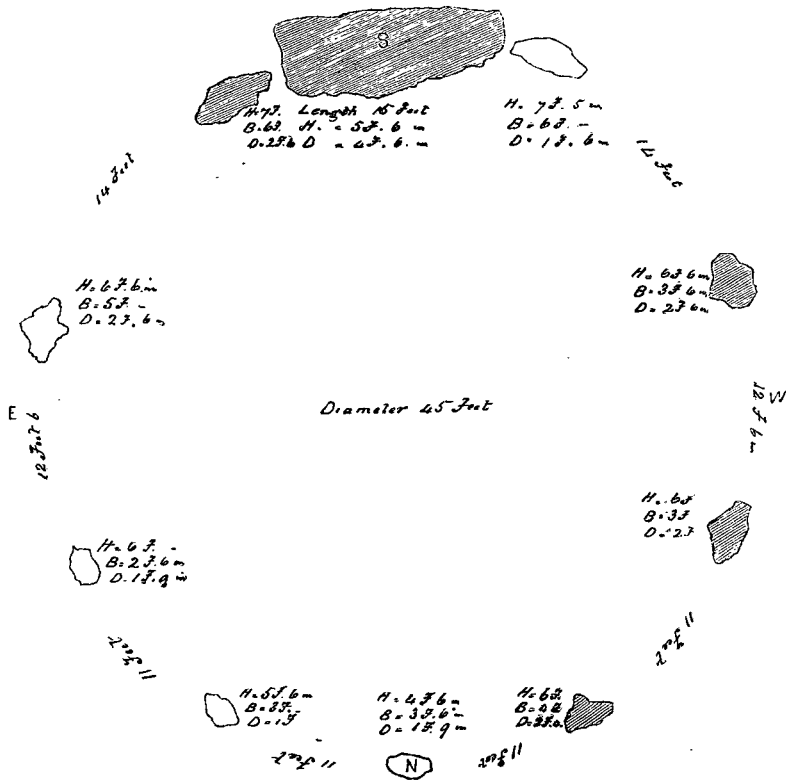


Fig. 6. Ground Plan of the Circle at Aikey Brae (diameter 45 feet).

nothing, I understand, was found except some charred substance a few yards outside the circle; while in the matter of the Gaval circle, when the fragments of the recumbent stone were being cleared off, nothing save a small quantity of black fatty earth was found underneath.