

II.

AN ACCOUNT OF THE EXCAVATION OF A CAIRN, AND OF THE REMAINS OF FOUR OTHER CAIRNS IN THE PARISH OF MUIRKIRK, AYRSHIRE, AND THE DISCOVERY OF A DEPOSIT OF BURNT HUMAN BONES AT BORLAND, OLD CUMNOCK, AYRSHIRE. BY ARCHIBALD FAIRBAIRN.

CAIRN NEAR LINBURN PLANTATION, MUIRKIRK.

In September 1913 my attention was attracted to a low, green mound, with a few boulders showing through the turf, and surrounded on all sides by heath and bent lands.

The situation is flat, the ground sloping sharply from the summit of Middlefield Law, 1528 feet, down to wide, undulating moorland. The position of the cairn is 80 yards north-east of the northern end of Linburn Plantation, on the lower slope of the moorland, and at an elevation of 1050 feet. The view to the east and south is wide and open, extending to the hills beyond Dippol and Glenbuck, and across the valley to the heights of Cairntable and Wardlaw.

The late proprietor, J. G. A. Baird, Esq., F.S.A.Scot., decided on a trial excavation. When the turf had been removed, it was found that the peat on the west side had overgrown the cairn to a depth of 3 feet 10 inches, and that the stony mound of the cairn at the centre was 4 feet above ground level. It is circular (fig. 1), measuring from margin to margin 23 feet in diameter. It had been built on the clay

overlying the clayband rock, a fact ascertained when the surrounding subsoil was laid bare.

Excavation was begun in the centre, by throwing the stones and

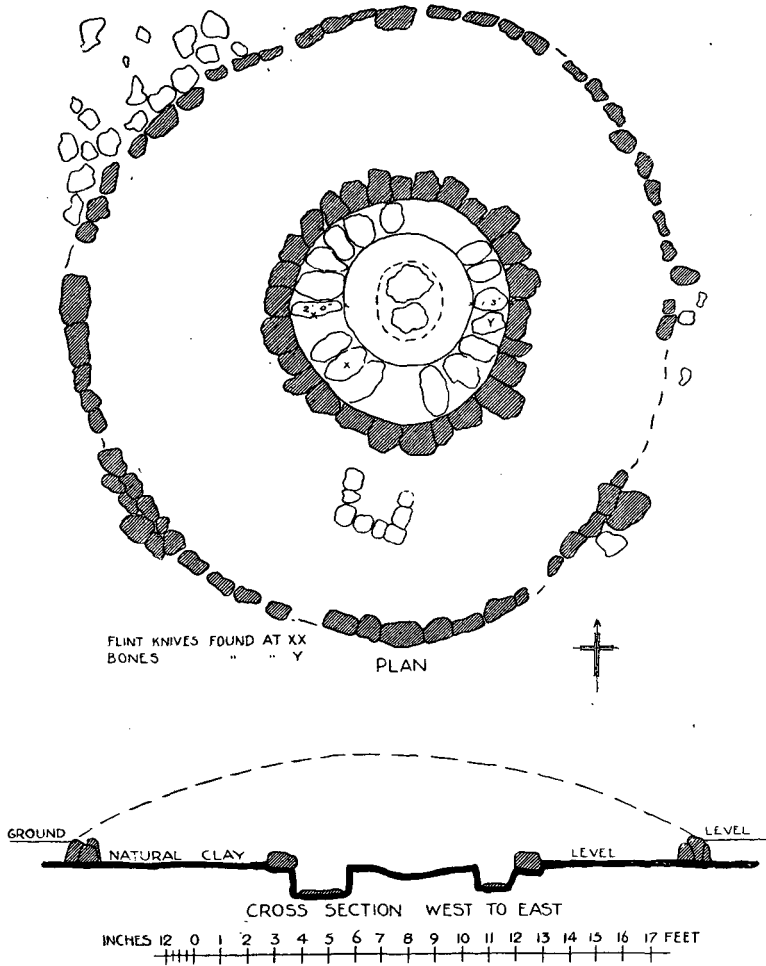


Fig. 1. Plan and section of Cairn near Linburn, Muirkirk, after removal of mound of stones.

peaty soil back over the boundary of the cairn, leaving a wide outer margin with kerb of boulders in position. The excavation was carried down to a level of 1 foot 6 inches above the ground without result. To test the theory of a possible hut circle, suggested by the flat situation, a section of the margin was entirely removed on the east side

in search of a probable entrance. No entrance was found, but appearing on the ground level were three large stones on edge, forming the segment of a circle in the stony mass of the cairn. While this discovery proved of great interest towards the close of the excavation, it had the effect at the time of strengthening the hut circle theory by suggesting the inner setting of a circular wall. Reluctance to pull the construction further to pieces, combined with the absence of relics to point to its character, brought the exploration to a close for the time being. After the lapse of years, and acting under the direction of Miss E. C. Broun Baird, now Mrs Broun Lindsay, the proprietrix, I undertook, with two willing assistants, the completion of the excavation in July 1921. Working from the centre, and removing the stones from the interior, I discovered, under a particularly firm covering of stones, charcoal or carbonised oak in large quantity, associated with evidence of burnt bone. A further section of this covering was taken up, the black charcoal underneath acting as a guide. The charcoal and incinerated bone were carefully removed to the rock floor at a depth of 1 foot 6 inches. Much interest was added by the discovery of a worked flint knife in the deposit. It was seen that the charred material in the opening thus made was passing under that part of the cairn which had not been removed. The excavation in this dark layer was now carefully widened, as the charcoal deposit was followed up, when it was found that this opening was in reality a section of a circular trench. The greatest care was taken to keep to the original ground level along the upper edges of the trench; while the sides remained clearly defined by their having been cut through the clayband subsoil. The excavation of the trench had proceeded half way when a chert knife was found within it. The relic is rudely worked on one face. It had been deposited among the burnt bone and charcoal.

The central platform encircled by the trench was now carefully cleared. Two large stones, one measuring 22 inches by 16 inches, covered the middle portion. They were found to be overlying a layer of dark yellow clay 4 inches in thickness. Underneath the clay there was a thick deposit of charcoal with burnt bone much broken up. The circular platform is 4 feet 10 inches in diameter, and its surface is 1 foot below the general ground level of the cairn. There is a hollow depression in the centre 1 foot 6 inches in diameter and 6 inches deep.

The three stones forming the segment of a circle—mentioned in the trial excavation of 1913—now came into prominence. They proved to be a continuation of the covering of the trench, all of which was well arranged and firmly put together.

Meanwhile, the incinerated bone recovered had been submitted to

Mr A. O. Curle for examination, who pronounced the bone deposit to be of human origin, and the exploration proceeded on the assumption that this cairn had contained a burial after cremation.

The outer part of the cairn surrounding the trench was now carefully removed, with the exception of part of a course of massive boulders protecting the trench on the west side and still in position. Only the narrow marginal outer kerb was left intact. The loose soil and also the subsoil were minutely examined for relics or fragments of pottery, but without success.

The remainder of the trench on the east side was now uncovered and the contents, consisting of dark-coloured earth, charcoal, and burnt bone, removed and examined. One very sharp flake of flint was discovered in the deposit.

It will be seen from the accompanying plan that the trench was a continuous and complete circle, with a diameter of 8 feet 4 inches. The width varied from 2 feet 3 inches south to 1 foot 3 inches east, and the bottom width varied in proportion. The depth also varied from 1 foot 6 inches west to 9 inches east, following the upward trend of the clayband rock.

It is interesting to note the greater width and more massive style of construction of the cairn on the south and west sides; the measurements are, roughly, from centre of platform to outer edge of kerb, 13 feet on the south and west, 11 feet on the north, and 10 feet 6 inches on the east side.

There appears on the plan a small arrangement of stones 2 feet by 2 feet 6 inches set on edge and open towards the centre of the cairn. The interior was carefully examined and it contained nothing but very dark-coloured soil.

There was no evidence of the cairn having been disturbed previous to excavation. The solid platform of clayband rock, surrounded by the trench, was much reddened by fire. This, with the great quantity of charcoal contained in the trench, suggests the cremation of a body on the spot; but not till after the trench had been formed and the centre of the platform hollowed for the reception of the incinerated ashes. The trench must then have been formed as the receptacle for the remains of the funeral pyre, the flint and chert knives added, in view of the after life, the trench and the surface of the platform securely protected, and the massive cairn formed over all.

It is noteworthy, that beyond the limits of the trench, there was no vestige whatever of bone or charcoal, as showing the infinite care taken in the carrying out of the final ceremony.

On the Yorkshire Wolds, Canon Greenwell¹ speaks of finding, within

¹ *British Barrows*, p. 6.

the barrows, rare cases of enclosing circles of stone, and of encircling trenches, but always in an unfinished state. With the stone circle, a space was left vacant; and in the trench, one portion or more, which was necessary to complete the circle, was left unfinished. Four round barrows only are described as containing trenches, all more or less incomplete.¹ In the parish of Rudstone, a barrow, No. 63, contained a trench—"formed into compartments by narrow divisions of chalk left undisturbed."²

In the opening of the Eddertoun tumulus, Ross-shire,³ an account is given of a trench—"about 3 feet deep which seemed to surround the tumulus, but of which no trace appeared on the surface." Within the trench an urn was found. "It contained incinerated bones, and several very minute fragments of oxydised bronze." Within the area enclosed by the trench, underneath the mound, was a cist constructed of sandstone slabs. "It contained fine black mould and sand, with a sprinkling of burnt bones at the bottom, also a small piece of bronze, apparently the point of a blade, and a bead of streaked glass." Particulars are not given regarding the completeness of the trench.

None of those instances is quite analogous to the cairn under description, and, within my limited knowledge, I do not know of any other cairn quite like it. I desire to express my indebtedness to Mr C. P. Bell for preparing the plan.

FOUR CAIRNS IN MUIRKIRK PARISH.

Cairn No. 1.—About half a mile south of the cairn above Linburn Wood, and 200 yards west from Linburn Farm, at an elevation of 850 feet, are the remains of a round cairn. Previous to excavation it appeared as a slight addition to a green knoll, about 1 foot 6 inches in height. After the removal of turf and soil the diameter of the cairn proved to be 15 feet 6 inches. There is a marginal kerb, and the circle is almost perfect. On clearing off the debris, it was seen that the greater part of the cairn had been removed at some former time. A cist occupied the centre, lying north-east and south-west and slightly below ground level. The cist is fortunately well preserved, and is constructed of small flat stones (not slabs) set on edge, intermixed with undersized cairn stones. It measures 5 feet in length and 2 feet to 2 feet 6 inches in marginal breadth, tapering to the bottom to 9 inches at each end, and 1 foot 6 inches across the centre, and 2 feet deep. There was no trace of cover stones. It was filled in with surface soil and stones, which could have had no connection with the original interment. On making a

¹ *British Barrows*, pp. 166, 201, and 227.

² *Ibid.*, p. 145.

³ *Proceedings*, vol. v. p. 311.

minute examination of the cist in July 1921, I found adhering to the crevices of the rock-floor, a sprinkling of charcoal and also one fragment of thick hand-made pottery 1 inch by $1\frac{1}{4}$ inch and $\frac{1}{2}$ inch in thickness. There was no evidence of burnt bone.

Within the circle of the cairn, some 3 feet south-east of the centre, is a basin-like compartment 1 foot 10 inches in diameter. It had a flat cover stone but nothing was found within the cavity. It may be considered somewhat analogous to the small compartment without relics mentioned in the account of the former cairn.

The fragment of pottery is evidently part of an urn of the Bronze Age, and the cist with the cairn encircling it is, no doubt, referable to that period.

Cairn No. 2.—The cairn in question overlooks the upper portion of the Ayr valley. It is situated 65 yards east of the main tributary of the March burn, on the lower edge of the moor, and at an elevation of 830 feet. On discovery, it was merely the highest point of a grass-grown elevation, surrounded by heather, with a suspicion of stones underfoot. It was explored on the 15th November 1918. On removal of the turf and wind-blown soil, the greater part of the kerb was found in position, and the diameter of the cairn was seen to be 16 feet. Most of the structure above ground had been removed. One row of flat stones, laid end to end, was noticeable and led to the centre. The interior was cleared out to the undisturbed soil at a depth of 3 feet. Near the centre, at a depth of 2 feet, underneath forced soil, was a thick layer of yellow clay. Underneath this clay there was a concentrated deposit of charcoal, resembling burnt oak, intermixed with dark gray mould containing a sprinkling of bone. There was no evidence of a cist, and neither pottery, relics, nor flints were discovered. Immediately south-east of the cairn there are three hut circles—one oblong and two circular—faintly showing above ground.

Cairn No. 3.—This structure is situated near the south-east margin of Ayr's Moss and 210 yards south-east of the monument to the Rev. Richard Cameron and the brave men who died with him there, in 1680, in defence of religious freedom.

The mound was, previous to excavation, 1 foot above ground level, and more noticeable from its having stopped the progress of the plough. A trial exploration took place in 1915. The structure was of a circular shape, and the diameter both ways was 17 feet. The central area was explored to a depth of 3 feet, the cairn stones being continuous for 2 feet below the present level of the mossy ground. At this level, much charcoal in small pieces was met with, intermixed with dark-coloured soil. One unworked flake of flint was discovered.

In November 1921, the excavation was again resumed under the personal supervision of Major and Mrs Broun Lindsay. The interior was explored beyond the limits of the former excavation, exposing a portion of paving of rough stones, 6 feet 4 inches in length and 4 feet 2 inches in width, at a depth of 2 feet, leading from near the centre to the south-west margin. In the crevices of the paving there was conspicuous evidence of charcoal—chiefly of oak. The paving was taken up and the ground examined underneath to the undisturbed soil. Neither relics nor fragments of pottery were discovered. At the south-east end of the paving there are signs of a narrow entrance in the rounded corners of the margin. The plough, however, has carried away many details. The interior of the construction—chiefly the inner margin—was strongly formed with whinstone boulders.

There is no evidence, beyond the presence of charcoal, of sepulchral rites, nor yet is there evidence—such as a hearth—of occupation.

Cairn No. 4.—This cairn, the last under review, occupies the highest point of a wooded ridge called Rineknowe—700 feet—near Wellwood. It has a diameter of 18 feet north and south and 17 feet east and west. The west side is slightly concave in form, with well-defined corners. The south-west corner has still its original corner-stone, measuring 2 feet 6 inches, supporting it. In excavation, a narrow margin was left intact, and the stones and earth of which the cairn was formed were thrown back over its boundaries. On the ground level, in the centre of the cairn, a heavy flat whinstone 1 foot 6 inches by 1 foot 4 inches and 10 inches thick, was found on edge facing east and west. In conjunction with it were two flat boulders of sandstone, all suggestive of the ruined remains of a cist.

The soil in the vicinity was passed through a riddle, and five fragments of a Bronze Age urn were recovered. The largest fragment seems to have been part of the lip of a beaker urn, and has four thin transverse lines of decoration.

The interior was minutely examined down to the boulder clay below ground level, but there was no evidence of bone, nor of flints, and, curiously enough, not a vestige of charcoal of any kind.

The excavation was finished in November 1918 and the cairn restored within its boundaries.

A DEPOSIT OF BURNT HUMAN BONES FOUND AT BORLAND, OLD CUMNOCK.

On the 18th May 1921 I visited what appears to be a mote, locally called Borland Castle, near Borland Farm, a short distance from the main road between Old and New Cumnock. Behind the

eminence facing the railway—which passes at its base—there is a sand pit encroaching on the hillock. In the face of the pit I observed fragments of burnt bone, and, on making a closer inspection, discovered, near the summit of the cutting and 4 feet 6 inches below the present ground level, a deposit of burnt bone, appearing through the sand and evidently undisturbed. On carefully exposing the deposit, it was found to be contained within a space of 6 inches by 6 inches, very compact, and surrounded by dark-coloured soil, which had been filled in over it. After a most careful scrutiny, no evidence whatever of pottery or other relics could be found, nor were there any signs of the stones of a cist which might have fallen below. There is good reason to assume that the deposit lay as it had been buried in the sandhill, at the depth stated. In the filling in of the interment, the darker surface soil, surrounding and covering the bones, was very noticeable, in contradistinction to the undisturbed strata of the surrounding sand.

In the Dick Institute Museum, Kilmarnock, there is a prehistoric exhibit labelled “Broken Cinerary Urn found at Borland Castle, Old Cumnock, 1899.”

This fragment of Bronze Age pottery is decorated with four dotted parallel lines and one perpendicular line.

The site of Borland Castle is the property of the Marquis of Bute, and Mr Kennedy, his lordship’s agent at Dumfries House, very kindly granted me permission to examine the deposit.