

1. A SMALL CAIRN NEAR OSPISDALE.

The purpose of this note is to record the excavation, carried out by Lord Migdale and his family in 1959, of a small cairn in the group at Gablon, on the estate of Ospisdale, that is described under No. 60 in the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland *Inventory of Monuments and Constructions in the County of Sutherland*.

The group is situated on a gentle slope with a southerly aspect, about 450 ft. above sea-level, its approximate position being NH [28] 711915. It contains about two dozen cairns, of which the largest measures 21 ft. by 16 ft. and stands 4 ft. 6 ins. high, while the remainder are from 15 ft. to 20 ft. in diameter. In the south-eastern part of the group several cairns are disposed around what seems to be a cleared plot some 50 ft. in diameter, one of them in particular being piled against the side of a rickle of stones, perhaps the remains of a boundary-dyke, as if to economise the cultivable ground in the plot. It is tempting to regard these cairns, with the probable exception of the largest (*supra*), as cultivators' clearance-heaps and not as a cemetery, and to associate them with the large hut-circle that is noted by the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland as lying close to them on the west. A similar association of a hut, small clearance-heaps, and larger, probably sepulchral, cairns has been recorded on the Burn of Vat, Cromar.¹

The cairn selected for excavation was round, measuring 18 ft. in diameter within a kerb of stones rather widely spaced and evidently not contributing to the stability of the piled-up material. A trench was cut through the centre, and in the resulting section the following features appeared, taken from below. (a) The original surface of the ground, showing as a line of turf, not a thick layer of peat, and with a narrow leached band below it. At this level there were lying two exceptionally large stones, one an irregular block measuring 1 ft. 8 ins. by 1 ft. 5 ins. by 1 ft. 5 ins. and the other a slab of which the exposed dimensions were 2 ft. 2 ins. and 5 ins. (b) An accumulation of larger or smaller stones, mixed with peaty earth and showing no trace of structure. This layer was less than a foot deep in the centre, thinning down to nothing at the sides. (c) A superficial layer of peat about 9 ins. thick, with a leached band below it, the division between (c) and (b) not being very distinct. The greatest height of the present surface above the original ground-level is about 2 ft. 2 ins.

This cairn thus appears to have been a simple pile of stones, with the larger material at the bottom and the smaller higher up. Its evidence supports the idea that the cairnfield, again with the probable exception of its largest member, resulted from agricultural clearance. The fact that the original turf-line is comparatively thin suggests that, though the soil was acid enough to cause leaching, the climatic conditions were not such as produce the blanket peat that now covers the site.

A. GRAHAM.

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