

3. PREVIOUS ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXPLORATION

‘We dug deeper into the cairn, and the supposed rough pavement turned out to be loose stones fallen into the central cavity and embedded in peat growth. These stones were lifted out, and at a depth of about three feet from the original heathery top we came upon a perfectly level flooring consisting of two large slabs and a small one, all neatly laid and fitting one into the other. This pavement was the flooring of a well-constructed circular chamber, with walls formed of vertically set slabs. The floor was swept and the soil carefully sifted by riddle and hand, but no relics were found. It is clear that the contents of the chamber had been subjected to some previous scrutiny, and that the chamber itself had originally been covered by a capstone, removed a considerable time ago for building or other purposes’ (Ludovic McLellan Mann, ‘Recent Discoveries in Arran’, 1925: 252).

Carmahome passage tomb was excavated in 1924 by the landowner, James Craig, and Ludovic McLellan Mann, following initial exploration by the landowner (Mann 1925). When it was excavated the monument was surrounded by open heather moorland, with an open view to the northwest, west, and southwest. The monument measured 5.30m x 5.40m with a circular chamber, passage, and encircling ring of stones. The passage, orientated towards the west, was found to be some 1.10m long and 0.75m wide, narrowing to 0.60m at the opening to the chamber at the east. In terms of size and shape, the chamber and passage compare very closely to those of Achnacreebeag SE (Illus 2 and 3). It is unclear from Mann’s excavation whether the passage extended to the edge of the cairn or was limited to the space between the outer ring of stone and the chamber; his published plan (1925: fig. 1) suggests the latter. Mann’s excavation appeared to reveal that at some point in the past the capping



Illus 2 Simple passage tombs, closed chambers and comparative sites: (1) Achnacreebeag (NM 9296 3639); (2) Carmahome (NR 9149 2685); (3) Dalineun (NM 8799 2670); (4) Clach an t'Sagairt (NM 8063 0451); (5) Moleigh (NM 8808 2631); (6) Greadal Fhinn (NM 4765 6397); (7) Rahoy (NM 6446 5592); (8) Leaval (NF 7539 1509); (9) Achnacree (NM 9227 3636); and (10) Craonaval (NF 8330 6272) (image: Forestry and Land Scotland)

stones over the chamber had been removed. Peat had then accumulated within the central chamber up to a depth of about 1m; within this peat were a number of stones which had fallen in from the cairn material. Below the peat was a stone floor comprising two large flagstones and a smaller stone. Mann reported that the 'medium-sized paving stone (C) was lifted and fine soil was found underlying it. This was carefully sifted and a fine flint knife discovered. The largest flooring slab was not disturbed. To have done so would have injured the structure beyond repair' (Mann 1925: 253, and see Illus 14).

The absence of finds from the floor of the chamber led Mann to conclude that the passage tomb had been robbed in antiquity ('It is clear that the contents of the chamber had been subjected to

some previous scrutiny' (Mann 1925: 252)). The peat was removed from a large part of the surface of the cairn to reveal the ring of ten stones (the kerb), but it appears that little of the cairn material was excavated; Mann noted that the cairn extended nearly 2m beyond the ring of stones.

More recently, several archaeological landscapes in the surrounding area have been surveyed and investigated by John Barber between 1978 and 1981 in advance of afforestation (Barber 1997). The earliest feature within Barber's study area was the 'Cashel', which Barber argued was likely to have started life as a Neolithic chambered cairn, with later Bronze Age components and later Iron Age occupation (conversion to a dun and enclosure), and with subsequent medieval and post-medieval



Illus 3 Achnacreebeag chambered cairn (NM 9296 3639), excavated and reinstated in 1969. The primary chamber is to the rear, and the secondary simple passage tomb is to the fore. (image: Forestry and Land Scotland)

cultivation within the enclosure. Other monuments include hut circles, field banks, and a scatter of stone cairns (Barber 1997: 123). One of Barber's excavated burial cairns within this complex, 16/3, also occupied a prominent location and had a complex history, starting with the creation of a simple pit grave, covered by an earthen barrow (no trace of any body was found in this grave, and there is no justification for Barber's claim that this had

been of Neolithic date.) During the Chalcolithic period the barrow was converted to a cairn and enlarged into 'a rather imposing monument which must have been visible from the settlement below' (ibid). Over a hundred sherds of a single food vessel and a single Beaker sherd were recovered from the soil cover of the cairn (MacSween 1997: 46). Another nearby small cairn, 16/2, was also dated to the Chalcolithic.