
6 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

6.1 Introduction

The fieldwork at Stoneyhill was spread over a year and provided a rare opportunity for the in-depth study of an apparently inauspicious part of a small Buchan valley. This area was the subject of a commercial development so the archaeological remains described above are not the result of favourable site or location selection by archaeologists. The results may therefore be seen as a truer reflection of the actual picture of past human activities in the landscape than the results of selected-site excavations could be.

An overview of the impact of developer-led archaeology in Scotland between 1990 and 2003 (Philips & Bradley 2004) includes a map-based summary of the evidence from Buchan (*ibid*, Figs 3–5). Mesolithic evidence was not forthcoming, and the Neolithic was represented by a single site. Better represented is the Bronze Age, but still only three sites are highlighted. Stoneyhill is clearly an important addition to the baseline archaeological evidence from Buchan investigated through developer funding, and should assist in informing future work in the area.

Within Stoneyhill, the widespread extent and varied nature of the remains detailed above entirely justified the requirement from Aberdeenshire Council, Planning and Development for the extensive archaeological survey, evaluation, excavation and monitoring of the development, even where the baseline archaeological resource tended to suggest low potential.

The extent of the work, and the geography of the site, in particular encompassing both sides of a valley, has allowed an insight into the inter-relationships between monuments over time, observations that greatly increase their potential for interpretation. This may throw up problems, but also allows preconceived theories to be challenged.

6.2 Prehistoric activity

The prehistoric structures at Stoneyhill consist of two cairns (7/4, 7/17), one apparently a result of field clearance and one of a funerary nature, a post-setting/arc with nearby post-holes/pits, and two isolated pits. The field clearance cairn is assumed to be prehistoric on the basis of soil stratigraphy, morphology, lichen growth and the recovery of lithic artefacts from amongst and under the stones. It is possible that these cairns were once part of a much larger site, recorded on the OS First Edition, which were removed by the 1950s Stoneyhill Quarry.

Some, at least, of these sites may have been

clearance cairns. Whilst the reliability of the accounts may be questioned, the OS Name Book (1868) is of assistance in this regard as it notes that neither bones nor artefacts were recovered when they were ‘opened’ (Site 7). Although containing some large stones, similar to those forming the modern cairns, Cairn 7/4 was partially grassed over and the exposed stones were lichen-covered. Cairn 7/17 was distinguished by its low profile, gorse covering and, when exposed, by smaller cobbles.

Prehistoric clearance cairns and other types of cleared stone accumulations are widespread in Scotland. They are often formed around, or in, an obstacle to cultivation, for example a large stone, surface bedrock or a wet area. The former was the case at Stoneyhill. Such a monument would naturally be, or become, the focus for later events, knapping for instance, even if only by virtue of a place to sit whilst undertaking the task. This being the case, the Late Bronze Age lithic artefacts may provide a *terminus ante quem* for the cairn. Indirect supporting evidence for cultivation in the area comes from the cartographic evidence for the missing cairns and potentially direct evidence from the ard-mark near Cairn 7/17. On the other hand, the well-defined nature of the lithic scatter *under* Cairn 7/6 (providing a *terminus post quem* date for the covering cairn) suggests there has been minimal cultivation since the Late Bronze Age.

Prehistoric burial cairns are also widespread in Scotland. They may be formed on an obstacle to cultivation (which may also be a point of visibility) or adjacent to an existing landmark or monument, which may often be destroyed in the process.

In the case of Cairn 7/17, the presence of lithic artefacts and pottery ensures some survival of the evidence. The deposition of the grey flint assemblage by Pit 7181, suggested by Ballin to be one episode and likely to have been specifically produced for deposition, is dated to the Late Neolithic. The Beakers date to the period 2500/2400–2200/2100 BC, which accords with the latest part of the Late Neolithic, and so it seems reasonable to assume that both assemblages were inserted at the same time for a funerary or other ritual purpose. It seems unlikely that the cist is significantly earlier than the construction of the cairn. The cairn material incorporates lithic artefacts of Early Neolithic, Late Neolithic and Early Bronze Age date which form a more diverse, redeposited domestic assemblage, probably a result of the disturbance and reworking of domestic material in the vicinity during the construction and maintenance of the cairn.

What is without doubt is that the rock-cut cist represents the only example of its type in Buchan (I

Shepherd, pers comm). Similar examples of rock-cut funerary pits occur at Ferndale in Orkney (Duffy 2005) and at Craigsorry near Beaully (Callander 1925). At neither are the side slabs of conventional cists mimicked in the construction, and it may be that the particular geology and angle of the strata at Stoneyhill provided a rare opportunity for this feature.

On the western side of the valley, the pits and post-holes under ploughsoil have no ready parallels in the area. The fills of the features interpreted as post-holes suggest that the structure(s) may have been dismantled. No evidence for the function of the post-setting was forthcoming. With the open end facing across the valley to Cairn 7/17, an association either with the cairn or a previous monument on the site may be inferred. Assumed to be Late Neolithic or Early Bronze Age, the pottery from the post-setting is of a similar date to the finds from the cairn. Unlikely to be merely a windbreak, were the post-holes to form the base for a solid screen any occupant would have their view directed towards the monument on the horizon and be isolated from the remaining landscape, a concept recalling the isolation experienced within henges.

Within the post-setting, the recovery of pottery and hammerstones solely from the features at the terminals of the arc may indicate deliberate or structured deposition. There was unfortunately insufficient charcoal for dating purposes and in any case the taphonomy of the carbonised material is uncertain. Although possessing a close spatial relationship, the nucleus of the Late Neolithic lithic scatter did not overlie the post-setting and may therefore be unrelated to the features. In addition, the scatter is domestic in character and the features less obviously so by dint of their aspect, facing across the valley to the cairn. The pottery would be closely related in date to both lithic assemblages. Little can be said about nearby Pit F70 other than it may contain pottery similar in character to the Beaker ceramics in the cairn, but its presence strengthens the connection between the west and east sides of the valley. F81 appears to be an isolated Mid/Late Neolithic feature which may have been associated with some aspect of cereal drying or processing and the Impressed Ware/Unstan Ware pottery is a useful addition to the insubstantial corpus of sites containing this material in the north-east of Scotland.

Any discussion of the archaeology in this part of Buchan cannot escape from the presence of flint. John Milne, writing in 1892, recognised its dominance over 'all other types of surface stones' (1892, 189) between the Water of Cruden, 5km to the south of Stoneyhill and the River Ugie, 7km to the north near Peterhead. The Stoneyhill site is in the centre of this area. Several general observations about the results of the fieldwork at Stoneyhill in relation to the lithic assemblage can be made:

- Worked flint was remarkably commonplace within the topsoil across the site, with significant

numbers of the overall assemblage (the 11 sub-assemblages) being found in widely spread parts of the development.

- Useful assemblages were most common in those areas not recently cultivated, but the most important assemblage was recovered from an annually cultivated field.
- Seven of the eleven sub-assemblages have the character of in-situ domestic assemblages and five of these were recovered from areas not subjected to modern, or perhaps any, ploughing. In none of these cases were they associated with surviving structural remains. This observation has implications for the assumption that assemblages of domestic character in ploughed fields were associated with shallow-founded or vestigial structures.

Conversely and surprisingly, the only in situ domestic sub-assemblage to be associated with anything that could be described as a structure at Stoneyhill was recorded in an annually ploughed field.

The lithic scatters recorded at Stoneyhill vary from what may be single knapping events (Trench 9; 769, 770, 771) to scatters representing extended periods of activity (Dun na Cluaich; Grid J). They have suffered varying degrees of post-depositional disturbance, with those in Trench 9 being apparently undisturbed and others in Area 1 being the result of casual (if frequent) loss or discard. Much of the remainder derives from disturbed contexts which include incorporation into ploughsoil (Grid J) or machine clearance and inclusion in banded topsoil (Dun na Cluaich).

Flint scatters are recognised as an indicator of prehistoric occupation and, that being the case, the landscape within Stoneyhill was widely settled. Numerous flint scatters are recorded in the landscape around Stoneyhill and it should come as no surprise that extensive fieldwork of the type described here should greatly increase this number.

6.3 Conclusions

The conclusion resulting from the archaeological fieldwork at Stoneyhill must be that archaeological input into the development process can enable the remains present within it to be located through careful trench positioning and a knowledge of the types of site likely to be found in the area.

The input of Aberdeenshire Council in requiring extensive monitoring of topsoil removal during the watching brief was of benefit in allowing well-defined smaller sites not discovered during the evaluation to be located. Further, a willingness on the part of an interested client to modify agreed programmes of archaeological work in the light of unexpected discoveries was noteworthy.

The fieldwork revealed just how widespread were the traces of past human activity within an unpromising Buchan valley, with most of the test-pit grids revealing lithic assemblages characteristic

of prehistoric settlement-based activity, from the Mesolithic to the Bronze Age. Even in the most definitive of these locations however (Dun na Cluaich and Grid J), no clearly settlement-related features could be found.

Overall, the opportunity to investigate a substantial

part of what may be seen as a typical flint-producing area of the Buchan landscape was an important one and the extent of the work has been justified by the recovery of nationally important lithic assemblages and by the recognition of changing procurement strategies over time in the Buchan Gravels.