
3 The Context of the Blackhouse Burn Environs Project by *O Lelong*

3.1 Site location, topography and geology

The survey area lies in the Upper Clyde Valley, to the west and south-west of a deep bend in the river. It includes a crescent-shaped massif; a small, nameless valley immediately west of the uplands, through which the A73 now runs; the valley of the Glade Burn to the north of Tinto Hill, and the area around Carmichael village, to the south-west of Carmichael Hill (see *Illus 1*). The massif is a broad ridge that rises to four crests – Chester Hill, Swaites Hill, Cairngryffe Hill and Westraw Hill – and curves around the east side of a broad, boggy, upland basin. The local antiquarian, David Christison, termed the massif ‘Pettinain Hill’ after a local village (*Christison 1890*, 324–5); his useful term, employed in recent publications (*Lelong & Pollard 1998a*; *Lelong & Pollard 1998b*), has been adapted here to ‘Pettinain Uplands’ (to distinguish the massif from the hills that comprise it). The Blackhouse Burn springs up in the basin and flows down the west side of the Pettinain Uplands into the adjacent valley.

The topographic and geophysical surveys focused on monuments on the Pettinain Uplands. Field walking took place on ploughed fields in the adjacent valleys, with trial trenching over a lithic scatter at Carmichael village (see *Illus 1*). Most of the survey area belongs to the Carmichael estate, although the topographic survey also extended onto the neighbouring farms of Meadowflatts and Swaites.

The solid geology of the Pettinain Uplands consists of stratified metamorphosed sedimentary rocks of Silurian age, mainly conglomerate with intervening sandstones, overlain by patches of greywacke, with felsite making up Cairngryffe Hill; in the valleys to the south and west, the solid geology consists of quartzite conglomerate also of Silurian age. Overlying the rock on the uplands and in the valleys is a thin, consolidated, glacially deposited till, mainly derived from the Silurian sediments and including lumps of sandstone (British Geological Survey 1:63,360 map, Sheet 23, Solid and Drift).

3.2 Archaeological background

Spread across the ridge and basin of the Pettinain Uplands is a complex prehistoric landscape, comprising ritual, domestic and possibly defensive elements. The ridge is thickly sprinkled with upstanding archaeological remains, including the double-banked circular enclosure on Chester Hill, the smaller enclosure at Meadowflatts and the cairns, hut circles and other features on Cairngryffe

Hill and Swaites Hill, all recorded in this survey. In addition to these is the Hero’s Cairn, which was excavated and found to be a robbed cairn containing a disturbed cist, with part of a Food Vessel and cremation inside it (*Stevenson 1976*; *RCAHMS 1978*, 64, no 106[1]). Also scattered along the ridge are at least 26 other cairns recorded by the Royal Commission (*RCAHMS 1978*, 64–5, no 106[2–8]). The ridge defines a natural amphitheatre, in which lies the Blackhouse Burn enclosures as well as several small cairns inside and to the west of them.

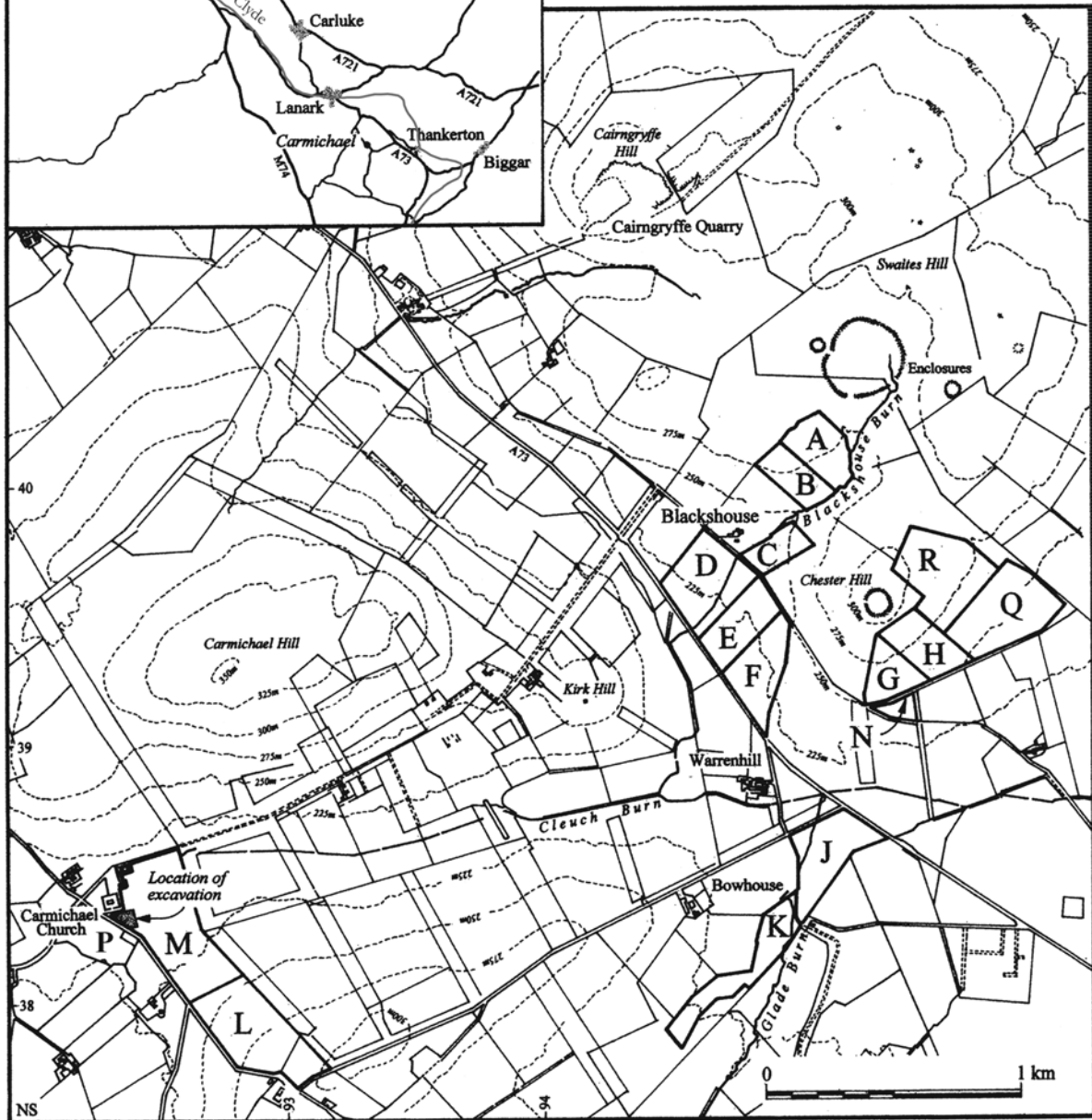
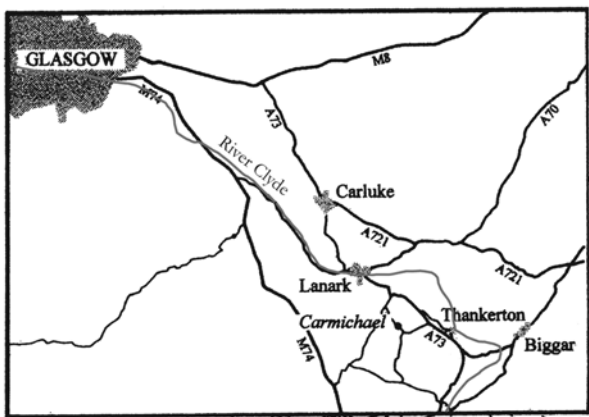
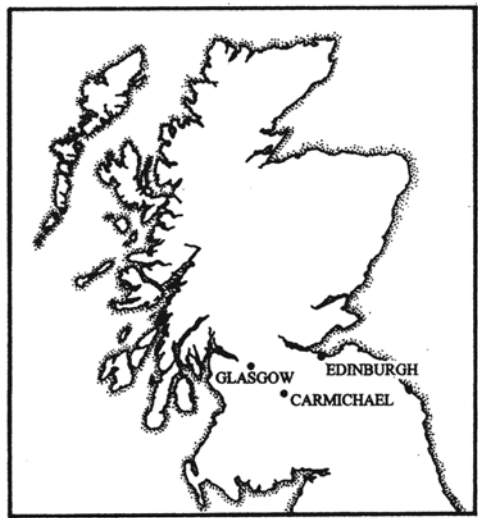
In 1985 and 1986, limited excavations carried out on both the large, sub-circular enclosure at Blackhouse Burn and the smaller, adjacent one (*Lelong & Pollard 1998a*) established something of their character and date. The large enclosure was built around the double heads of the Blackhouse Burn, which exits it on the west. The enclosure was originally defined by a double ring of substantial timber posts on either side of a rubble bank. The bank had later been extended to lap around the bases of the posts; after they decayed, more stone was added to cap the bank above the post holes. Waterlogged conditions beneath the bank had preserved the stumps of oak posts in the excavated section, and one of these was dated to 2697–2453 cal BC (GU-1983: *Lelong & Pollard 1998a*, 42).

While no dating evidence was recovered from the bank of the smaller enclosure, this proved to have been built just within an ancient bog. Several neatly defined pits or ditches had first been dug into the peat using mattocks, and then a stone ring (possibly a double-skinned drystone wall) had been built above it.

Pollen from peat columns taken from the bog indicated that the local birch and hazel woodland began to decline after 7500 BP, to be replaced by a more open, grassy landscape, probably as a result of human impact (*Ramsay 1998*, 37–40). It is thought that Mesolithic hunters may have cleared the local vegetation in order to flush out game. The scale of and enormous effort involved in building the enclosures suggest that their construction formalized a place long perceived as a natural monument (see *Bradley 1991*, 136) which had perhaps been a focus for hunting and other, ritual activity over many generations since the Mesolithic. Clearly the basin’s significance continued and deepened during the Neolithic. The clear references to water in the monuments could indicate a root in traditions of transhumance to the uplands, where sources of water for stock would have been at a premium (*Lelong & Pollard 1998a*, 47–50).

The enclosures are the most monumental of a number of significant structures on the upland that

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Illus 1 Location map, showing the extent of the survey area and fields walked during the Blackhouse Burn Environs Project

indicate its continuing importance throughout prehistory. Among the others was a Bronze Age ring cairn on Cairngryffe Hill, now destroyed by quarrying but subjected to rescue excavation during the 1980s under the direction of Mary Kemp-Clarke (Lelong & Pollard 1998b). It proved to be a multi-phase monument, with evidence for early Neolithic activity followed by early Bronze Age timber and stone rings associated with cremations and dated by radiocarbon to 1890–1630 and 1910–1620 cal BC (Beta-111006 and Beta-111007, respectively; Lelong & Pollard 1998b, 119). This monument was superseded by a bank enclosing cremations in an imported felsite deposit, and the interior of the area was finally capped by a flat cairn. Later prehistoric monuments also occur at either end of the crescent-shaped ridge, with a later prehistoric hillfort on Cairngryffe Hill (since destroyed) (Childe 1941) and the circular banked enclosure on Chester Hill.

Recent and ongoing work in the surrounding area, particularly that carried out by the Upper Clyde Valley Landscape Project, Biggar Museum Trust, Historic Scotland and the Lanark and District Archaeological Society, has uncovered and clarified evidence for these monuments' wider prehistoric context. Field walking on Biggar Common in the wake of forestry planting has revealed a wealth of evidence for settlement and funerary practice from the late Mesolithic into the Bronze Age, including scatters of Neolithic pottery and lithics. Excavations

as a result of field walking investigated an early Neolithic long mound that sealed a late Mesolithic stake-built structure and several early Neolithic bonfires, while excavations over artefact scatters have found traces of at least three early Neolithic structures (Sheridan 1989; Ward 1990; Ward 1991a; Ward 1991b; Ward 1992; Ward 1993; Ward 1995; Johnston 1997).

The region, particularly the area around Biggar, has produced an extraordinary concentration of stone axeheads (Clough & Cummins 1988), suggesting the intensive movement of people or goods, or both, along the natural corridor formed by the river valley.

The Upper Clyde Valley Landscape Project, which carried out fieldwork from 1995 to 2001, has employed a diverse methodological approach in order to elucidate long-term patterns of land use and settlement from the Mesolithic onward. The methods, which include aerial reconnaissance, field walking, geophysical survey, trial excavation and documentary research, have identified numerous new sites and subjected others, including four of the five known henge monuments in the area, to more detailed investigation. While the results are still being prepared for publication, the project has already identified patterns of generally static, multi-phase settlement in the valleys with phases of agricultural and other activity on the uplands (Hanson & Sharpe in prep; Sharpe forthcoming).