

Excavations at Hillhead, Tarland

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General view of the excavation looking towards Morven and Lochnagar

The prehistoric monument at Hillhead overlooks the Howe of Cromar and is located in a saddle beside a long established drove road communicating between there and the Howe of Cushnie. It was built at a height of 345 metres on the watershed of the Dee and the Don and commands an extensive view to the south and south west, extending as far as Lochnagar and the mountains of South Deeside. The stone circles at Tomnaverie and Waulkmill are also visible. A remarkable feature is that the site at Hillhead was constructed at the first point where someone climbing the slope from the west would catch a glimpse of the summit of Mither Tap. That happens at the exact location of the ring cairn. Any further down to the slope to the south west, the mountaintop is invisible. The area above the excavated site may have contained other monuments which have been located during fieldwork by Moyra Simon and Jane Summers.

The site was first identified by Ken Cooper as a circular bank covered by trees. He made the reasonable suggestion that it consisted of the remains of a large roundhouse like those at Old and New Kinnord. He also noted the presence of quartz on the site and a flat stone in the centre of the enclosure. Although he published a note of the discovery, the site remained little known. No one seems to have been aware of its archaeological significance when it was first afforested and it was only when the trees had been removed and trenches had been excavated for a second phase of planting that its potential importance was recognised (**Fig 1**). Following discussion between the McRobert Estate and the Aberdeenshire Council it was agreed that the site should be preserved and that excavation should take place there.

Before excavation in September 2013 the entire area that had been planted was surveyed by a team led by Moyra Simon and Jane Summers. This work resulted in the identification of an extensive distribution of worked quartz. There were smaller groups of worked flint, and a short distance outside the ring cairn sherds of early Beaker pottery were found, together with a barbed and tanged arrowhead. They may be all that remains of a destroyed burial.



Figure 1: The site before excavation, showing the forestry trenches

Since the monument was to be preserved, excavation was on a limited scale and most of the stratified deposits were left intact. The aims of the project were to determine the original form of the monument and to collect dating evidence.

The excavation investigated two quadrants, one to the north east and the other to the south west. In view of the size of the bank, parts of it were excluded from the excavation (**Fig 2, Fig 3**). An additional area was opened at the centre of the monument where there were two large flat stones. These might have been the remains of a cist, but in the event it became clear that they had been placed there comparatively recently. The outer perimeter of the enclosure was exposed in both quadrants, but the bank was sectioned at only two points, one on either side of the enclosure. A further small section investigated the inner kerb where it was especially well preserved. Within the excavated areas the full extent of the monument was exposed and planned,

but only the latest deposit – a layer of quartz close to the modern ground surface – was excavated in its entirety. A line of boulders to the south of the enclosure was also sectioned and seems to have been part of a comparatively recent field wall.

After the excavation the excavated area has been refilled, as have most of the forestry trenches. An exclusion zone has been established around the prehistoric enclosure, and this is to be maintained as grazed grassland, allowing visitors to see what remains of this unusual structure.



Figure 2: The site during initial clearance, looking north east. The summit of Mither Tap is just visible on the skyline in the middle of the picture.



Figure 3: Kite photograph of the excavated area looking towards the south west (Photograph Nigel Healey).

The structure of the monument

Despite the damage caused by tree planting, the monument was remarkably well preserved (**Fig 4**). It had suffered from the removal of a number of kerbstones and monoliths, probably in the 1940s, but material of the cairn had hardly been disturbed. The monument seems to have developed over five structural phases.

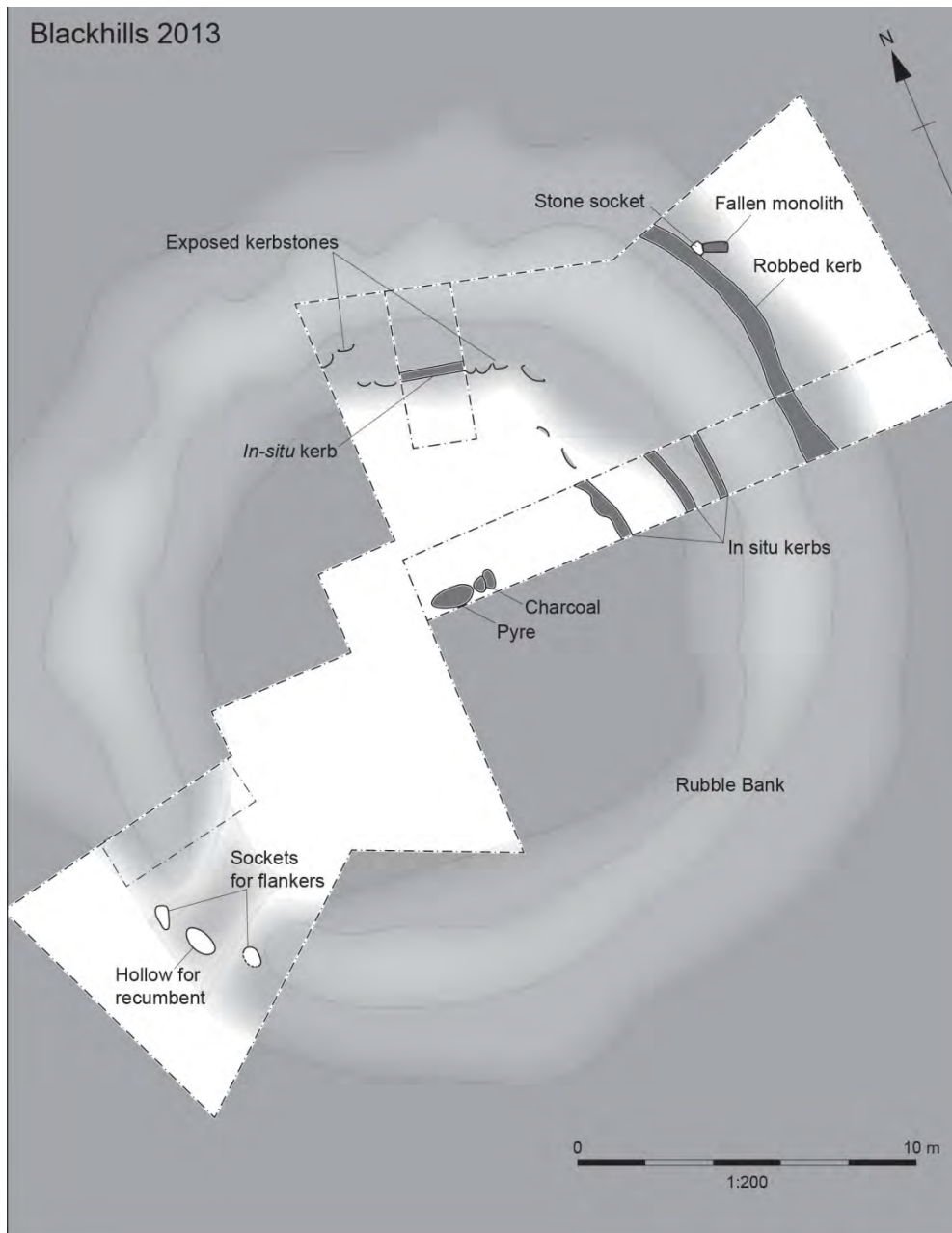


Figure 4: Outline plan of the Hillhead excavation showing the principal features.

1. The primary ring cairn

The earliest structure was a substantial ring cairn 26 metres in diameter which enclosed an open court 15 metres across. It was built out of large stones, many of them angular blocks that could be collected in the vicinity. Towards the north east it had been bounded by a kerb of upright slabs, wedged between larger boulders placed on the old ground surface (the same technique was employed in the recumbent stone circle at Tomnaverie). Much of it had been robbed, leaving a trench filled with topsoil and rubble. On the exterior the kerbstones were skirted by a narrow band of rubble, but this was much slighter than the equivalent deposit at other sites in the area. The kerb was essentially a screen, as the main mass of the cairn was retained between two banks of large boulders, one laid against the base of the outer setting of kerbstones and the other marking the edge of an inner court. (**Fig 5, Fig 6**). There was very little worked quartz in the buried soil, suggesting that the scatter of artefacts in the surrounding area may have accumulated *after* the monument had been built. That is clear as its distribution extended up to the outer kerb.



Figure 5: The structure of the ring cairn on the east side of the monument. The robber trench for the outer kerb is visible to right, and to the left a series of larger boulders represent its inner kerb. The photograph also shows two inner walls incorporated in the mass of the cairn



Figure 6: The remains of the outer kerb on the north-east side of the monument. Four kerbstones remain in situ. A fifth has been removed, leaving a short section of robber trench.

A striking feature of this part of the monument was the presence of two internal walls within the core of the ring cairn. It seems possible that the surface of the monument originally took the form of a series of shallow steps. More light was shed on this phenomenon by excavating a small section through the filling of the court to expose the inner kerb (**Fig 7**). This was built out of vertical slabs and certainly retained a level of flat stones. There may have been another step, largely destroyed, within the excavated area. Observation of other kerbstones exposed in the surface of the monument suggests that this pattern continued across the north and north-eastern sectors of the monument, and it was here that the cairn was higher and wider than on other parts of the site.



Figure 7: The inner kerb of the ring cairn, showing the setting of flat stones abutting it.

By contrast, a narrower section across the ring cairn on the south-west side of the enclosure found no evidence of any kerbstones. Here the material consisted of large angular and rounded stones which had been laid directly on the old ground surface. Again there was very little quartz, although more boulders of this material were found in the material of the cairn in this area than other parts of the site. There was no evidence of internal walls within the structure of this sector of the enclosure.

Taken together, these observations suggest that the original ring cairn was dished and presented a slightly elliptical appearance, with a broader and higher bank on the uphill side and a less impressive structure at its lowest point. The exposed kerbstones suggest that it was most substantial towards the north and north east where the sloping surface of the rubble bank was capped by a series of shallow steps. These may have been organised in short straight sections as these features do not appear to have been laid out from a common centre. The effect would have been like that of an open air theatre. An audience occupying this part of the monument would have overlooked an

area of lower ground extending towards Lochnagar. The south-western sector of the enclosure would not have obstructed the view, as it was lower and lacked a kerb.

2. Evidence of a stone circle

Even before the excavation commenced it was clear that the surviving cairn had been accompanied by a ring of standing stones. A local resident, Mabel Lawson, has a clear recollection of playing there as a child in the 1940s and even remembers when it was dismantled to provide material for a wall. The 2013 excavation confirmed this.

On the north-east side of the ring cairn there was a fallen monolith of a distinctive red stone which does not occur anywhere else on the site, although it could have been brought from nearby (**Fig 8**). It was located just beyond the outer kerb. It is not certain whether it was complete, but its original position seems to be indicated by a shallow hollow in the natural subsoil accompanied by the disturbed remains of what was probably a 'packing cairn' of the kind associated with the stone circles at Clava.

On the south west side of the enclosure, directly opposite the fallen monolith, the bank had been disturbed and its outer edge was marked by an oval hollow. It seemed possible that a recumbent stone had been taken away, and that all that remained was the imprint left by part of its base. Equidistant from this feature were two circular holes edged by large boulders, each of them 45 cm deep (**Fig 9, Fig 10**). They could be where large uprights had been removed in comparatively recent times and compare closely with the sockets for the flankers at Tomnaverie. If this comparison is valid, it would suggest that the south-western limit of the site included a recumbent stone approximately three metres in length flanked by two standing stones.



Figure 8: A fallen stone, interpreted as the north-westernmost monolith in the circle. It is marked by a scale. Beside it is a displaced kerbstone.



Figure 9: The south-west perimeter of the ring cairn, showing the hollow marking the possible site of a recumbent stone. The putative sockets for the flankers are marked by ranging poles.



Figure 10: The socket for the south-western flanker, partly masked by a displaced stone interpreted as part of the recumbent.

There are several features in favour of this interpretation. The putative recumbent is exactly in line with the fallen monolith outside the kerb to the north east and also with the centre of the ring cairn. As is common in Aberdeenshire, it is located on the south west side of the circle. Seen from the highest section of the bank there would have been a view across the horizontal stone towards a cleft on the far horizon between the flank of Lochnagar and the spur running southwards from Morven. It may be no coincidence that the recumbent stone circle at Tomnaverie was also orientated on Lochnagar.

There may be other evidence of the 'missing' stones. Close to each of the sockets attributed to the flankers, there are two substantial pieces of stone containing prominent bands of schist. They could have formed a pair, and their proportions raise the possibility that they were the base of one flanker and the upper part of another. In between them was a substantial fragment of a pink sandstone block which had fractured along flat bedding planes. This kind of rock can have been found locally, but it is the only substantial piece from the excavation. It may have formed part of the recumbent, removed when the ring cairn was robbed for building material. The bank may have been breached at the same time.

In the centre of the monument were two more fragments of the distinctive white stone employed for the putative flankers. Excavation showed that they did not form part of a cist. In fact they overlay the latest filling of the ring cairn and refitted to form a substantial monolith (**Fig 11**). This may have been another component of a stone circle, but, of course, its original position is unknown.

There is a little evidence of sequence. There is no way of establishing the relationship between the fallen standing stone and the north-western sector of the ring cairn, but the holes left by the putative flankers did not penetrate the old ground surface. If these features have been interpreted correctly, the monoliths must have been bedded in the material of the ring cairn and would have been placed there after its construction. That sequence would be consistent with the results of recent excavations at Tomnaverie, Cothiemuir Wood and Aikey Brae.



Figure 11: Two refitting fragments interpreted as parts of a monolith found on the surface in the centre of the monument.

3. The secondary ring cairn

The next development was the capping of the entire monument by a layer of glacial boulders. They could have been collected close to the site, but did not come from the same deposit as the large blocks used to build the primary structure. They were various colours, from white to red, but there was no evidence of patterned stonework of the kind identified at Tomnaverie. In fact they were more like the secondary capping of the recumbent stone circle at Cothiemuir Wood. At Hillhead, a single deposit covered the full extent of the original cairn and filled the court to the level of its inner kerb. A similar process has been identified at other ring cairns in Scotland.

4. Secondary settings of boulders and a cremation pyre

At the centre of the monument three features cut through the filling of the court. There may have been more beyond the area investigated in detail. Two shallow pits were lined by medium-sized boulders and filled with charcoal (**Fig 12**). Next to them, in the middle of the ring cairn, was a larger area over which the natural ground surface had been scorched. Again it was associated with a deposit of charcoal, but in this case it was mixed with a quantity of cremated human bone (**Fig 13**). The evidence for *in situ* burning suggests that this was the position of a cremation pyre. Similar deposits have been found at other ring cairns and stone circles in the north where radiocarbon dates indicate a period of secondary reuse during the Middle and Late Bronze Ages.



Figure 12: The settings of pebbles defining features filled with charcoal in the centre of the monument.



Figure 13: The area of burnt subsoil associated with charcoal and cremated bone, interpreted as the position of a secondary pyre in the centre of the circle.

5. The capping of worked quartz

The three features just described were covered by a thin lens of unburnt boulders which were rather smaller than those filling the court. This was sealed by a continuous scatter of worked and broken quartz which extended across the whole of the interior of the monument but was not represented on the bank (**Fig 14**). When these finds were recorded on a two metre grid it became clear that they increased in density towards the centre of the monument. There were 13,000 in all. Although there are antiquarian references to quartz scatters associated with recumbent stone circles, the closest parallel may be at Croftmoraig stone circle in Perthshire where a late phase in the use of the monument was associated with a similar amount of worked quartz. On that site it dates from the Middle or Late Bronze Age.



Figure 14: Excavation in progress on the secondary filling of the ring cairn, showing part of the scatter of worked quartz.

The quartz scatter was the latest deposit at Hillhead, and parts of were brought to the surface in the course of tree planting. For that reason it was excavated in its entirety

Dating evidence

The material of the ring cairn had been placed directly on the old land surface which provided charcoal samples from both the excavated sections. A tiny sherd in the same fabric as the Beaker pottery found in field walking came from this level. There is little to show when the original structure was capped with glacial boulders, but a charcoal sample from the surface of the court beside the inner kerb should provide a *terminus post quem* for that phase. There are samples of charcoal and cremated bone from all three features cut

through the centre of the monument. They should provide a *terminus ante quem* for the filling of the court and a *terminus post quem* for the layer of quartz which covers the interior.

The character of the monument

Although the site had been disturbed on more than one occasion, there seems little doubt that it was originally a recumbent stone circle similar to those investigated in recent years at Tomnaverie and Cothiemuir Wood, and, to some extent, to the nearby monument at Waulkmill. It must have been one of the largest structures of its kind, and it seems to have been the second highest of those whose positions are known. It shares the same components as other monuments – a ring cairn which was filled with rubble during a secondary phase; an outer stone circle; an alignment towards the south west; an apparent association with major mountains in the region; and evidence that the central area was reused during a secondary phase. There are other features which are much more unusual.

One is the siting of the Hillhead monument. It contrasts with that of most comparable sites because it is so high and is located in a kind of pass. This is very different from the positions of its neighbours – Tomnaverie and Waulkmill – which were associated with the lower ground. At the same time, neither of those monuments was in an area with many surface finds; the same is true of Cothiemuir Wood. Hillhead, on the other hand, is surrounded by finds of worked quartz which clearly outnumber those found during fieldwalking in the Howe of Cromar. That seems counterintuitive as the immediate surroundings of Hillhead would have been less suitable for settlement or agriculture. The excavation raises the possibility that the deposition of worked quartz on the hillside began after the ring cairn had been built - in fact it may have occurred during visits to the monument. In that case its position beside the route between the Howe of Cromar and the Howe of Cushnie may be particularly important. Perhaps this unusually large monument served more than one community.

The form of the monument is unusual, too. The ring cairn was built on a massive scale, but that may not have been true of the stone circle. The point

can no longer be established with any confidence, but the fact that the site was overlooked when so many other monuments were recorded suggests that any ring of monoliths may have been a modest structure. In that case there would have been a striking contrast between the large scale on which the cairn was constructed, and the less prominent role played by a circle of uprights. It is obvious that the cairn increased in height towards the north east. If this was a recumbent stone circle, the monoliths would have been tallest at the south west.

Some monuments of this kind were built on carefully levelled platforms, but Hillhead was located on a slope and this effect was emphasised by the structure of the ring cairn which was built on a larger scale on its uphill side. Indeed it may never have had a kerb in the south western sector. The effect was to create an enclosure that appeared both elliptical and dished. This effect was enhanced by the stepped interior of the enclosure towards the north and north east. This is a feature that was observed in the nineteenth century, but it is the only example to be recorded in a modern excavation.

A last anomaly also recalls early observations of these monuments. This is the massive scatter of worked and broken quartz spread across the interior of the ring cairn. It is the latest component of the monument and has no equivalent in the equally extensive excavation at Tomnaverie. It remains to be seen how often a similar phenomenon occurs at recumbent stone circles, but it is certainly a feature that has been observed at other prehistoric monuments in Scotland.

The issues will be pursued in the excavation report which will be written over the next few months.

Acknowledgments

The excavation was commissioned and funded by Aberdeenshire Council and conducted with the permission of the McRobert Estate which undertook the reinstatement of the site. Special thanks are due to Bruce Mann, who invited us to undertake the work, and to Simon Power for his help and support. We must also thank Moyra Simon, Jane Summers and their team for surveying the forestry trenches before the excavation took place, and Mabel Lawson for sharing her memories of the monument when it was still intact. Above all, our thanks to the wonderful team, many of them from the local community, who did so much to ensure the success of the project.

