

II.

NOTICE OF UNDERGROUND CHAMBERS RECENTLY EXCAVATED ON
THE HILL OF CAIRN CONAN, FORFARSHIRE. By JOHN STUART, Esq.,
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The ancient ecclesiastical district of St Vigeans, in Forfarshire, was originally of much greater extent than the parish which is now called by that name. It comprehended not only the present parish of St Vigeans, but also the parish of Arbroath, and part of the parish of Carmylie. In its western angle is situated the ridge of Cairn Conan, rising from the water of Brothock to a height of 550 feet above the level of the sea, and commanding an extensive view on all sides. Till a comparatively recent period, this ridge was a heather muir, but it is now under cultivation. Tradition has preserved some notices of a struc-

ture which stood in this locality in former times, under the name of Castle Gory; but we are unable, from these, to judge of its age or character. The Cairn from which the place gets its name is still to be seen near to the northern summit of the ridge. It no doubt covers the ashes of some person of importance, and it is to be desired that an examination of it may be made, with the view of getting any relics, which would reveal something of the people by whom it was erected. As is not unfrequently the case, this early sepulchral memorial, at a more recent period, came to be used for a secondary and different purpose. At Cairn Conan, the Abbot of Arbroath held his three head-courts yearly, at which the vassals of the abbey were bound to pay suit; and so early as the year 1254, when a dispute arose between the Abbot of Arbroath and Peter Maule, Lord of Panmure, touching the boundaries of their lands of Conan and Tuloch, we find that the perambulators appointed by Alexander Cumyn, Earl of Buchan, the King's justiciary, along with the contending parties, met upon this Cairn. In this case the subject of dispute was in the neighbourhood of the Cairn; but in 1409 we find Walter Ogilvy, the Abbot's bailie, holding an inquest at the Cairn for the service of Alexander of Ouchtirlouny, as heir of his brother William, to certain lands in the parish of Kingoldrum; and the chartulary of the abbey furnishes us with notices of various inquests held at this venerable Cairn. On an adjoining eminence is a circle of standing stones, and in the churchyard of St Vigeans are some fine specimens of the sculptured stones so frequently found on the east coast of Scotland.

In the month of June last, I learned that an underground chamber had been accidentally discovered on the farm of Cairn Conan, and readily obtained the good offices of my friend Mr John Macdonald, town-clerk of Arbroath, and a fellow of this Society, with the landlord and tenant, in securing the integrity of the building till a proper examination should take place.

In the course of the autumn I had an opportunity of seeing the chamber, when it appeared to be very much like one of the beehive houses in the Isle of Harris, recently described by Captain Thomas, except that it was wholly underground. It was, however, very much filled up with earth, and it was obvious that, until this should be cleared

out, no accurate opinion could be formed as to its shape and structure. A few months after this, Mr Macdonald wrote to inform me, that a second chamber had been discovered in the immediate neighbourhood of the first, with appearances of a passage connecting them together. Both of these chambers were discovered by the removal of the large flags which covered the tops, on which the plough had struck.

It was then resolved to carry out a proper examination of both, which took place on the 27th of April last, under the directions of Mr Jervise, of Brechin. The soil in the circular chamber was first removed, when it was found that it was about $7\frac{1}{2}$ feet in height from the rocky floor to the covering stone, and about 9 feet in diameter from north-west to south-east, and about 10 feet 7 inches from east to west. The walls are formed of slabs of freestone, converging gradually to the top, which is covered by a flag. From this chamber an opening of about 2 feet square, led to a curved, narrow passage, resembling a weem, which at its widest and highest points is nearly 4 feet high by as many in width, and which again terminated at the west end, to which it curved, in another opening of about $2\frac{1}{2}$ feet wide. This weem is about 12 feet in length from the circular chambers to the point where it began to curve, and from that to the narrow opening referred to about 5 feet. By means of an iron probe it was found, that flags were dispersed at different spots in the vicinity of the chamber, which suggested the possibility of a congeries of underground apartments having been originally arranged here. On entering from the circular chamber to the passage referred to, at the distance of a few feet, a square aperture was observed on the south, about 27 by 22 inches at its entrance from the weem; and on examination this proved to have been the original means of communication with the surface, up to which it sloped about 4 feet, and its disposition at the surface was so arranged as not to be observed.

The weem is almost filled up with earth and stones, but of a different kind from that soil which was found in the circular chamber. This last was moist and clammy, and interspersed with particles of charred wood. In the circular chamber and in the weem were found a few round pieces of stone, about the size and thickness of a crown piece, and a few bits of bones; but as yet no querns, which occur so frequently in weems, have been discovered.

As yet the weem has not been fully excavated, nor has the opening at the west end been followed out, so that it would at present be premature to speak of the design of the singular structures in question. It seems, however, probable that further examination will reveal a series of chambers in connection with each other. In the end of last century a subterraneous building was discovered near Lundie House, where there were many apartments, all connected with a principal one, which was about 12 feet in length, 6 feet in breadth, and 5 feet in height. The connecting passage was about 2 or $2\frac{1}{2}$ feet wide; the building either of a large space, with semicircular recesses, or of two chambers, each with three semicircular recesses, connected by a passage. (See *Old England*, vol. i. p. 22.)

A similar plan prevails in a group of underground chambers at Annor county of Antrim, about four miles from Ballymena. One of these is about 18 feet long by 5 in width, narrowing towards one end next the passage leading into it. The general height is about 5 feet, and the walls are formed of large undressed stones, converging from the bottom, and covered with flags. From this chamber a narrow passage of about 18 inches square runs for about 8 feet; at one part somewhat interrupted by the projection of a stone into it from the roof, where the floor also sunk. At the end of this passage is another chamber 16 feet long by 5 wide, having at its farther end a very small opening leading into another narrow passage, which probably led to another chamber, one of which on the opposite side of a stream is also about 16 feet in length by 5 in breadth, approached by a narrow passage of about 10 feet in length. (*Ulster Journal of Arch.*, vol. vi. p. 98.)

Professor Stuart has described, in the Transactions of this Society, vol. ii. p. 53, a group of underground chambers at Kildrummy, in Aberdeenshire, which were generally about 30 feet long and from 8 to 9 wide, accessible by a sloping passage of 5 or 6 feet, entering between two stairs, about 18 inches apart.

I have examined a double chamber of this sort at Glenkindy in the same district; and at Strathdon, a little farther up the River Don, five underground houses have been explored, all of much the same character. One of them, described in the "Statistical Account," had an outer passage from the south, and is circular, and about 8 feet in length. The exterior

chamber is 24 feet long, 6 feet 8 inches high; greatest breadth across the floor 8 feet 8 inches, while at the roof it is only 6 feet 6 inches. The floor is laid with stones, and the walls are covered with flags about $8\frac{1}{2}$ feet in length. On the north side of this chamber is an aperture 15 inches high, 7 inches wide at the bottom, and 10 inches at the top, which communicates with a small apartment 5 feet long and 1 foot broad—the back, cover, and ends being each a single stone. On the same side, very near the minor end of the outer apartment, is another opening, 2 feet high and 1 foot 8 inches wide, and 3 feet above the floor, which leads to the inner chamber. Here is the only angle that occurs, all the other parts being segments of circles. The length of this chamber is 10 feet 6 inches, breadth 6 feet 6 inches, and height 6 feet, and precisely the same construction as the outer. The whole length of the house, including both chambers, is thus 48 feet 6 inches. (*Stat. Acc. Aberd.*, p. 546.)

At Reysten, in Hertfordshire, an underground chamber was discovered, in the market place of that town, in 1742. Several of them occur in Kent. According to Brasted, many occur in moors and fields near Crayford. He says, that at the mouth, and thence downwards, they are narrow, like the tunnel or passage of a well; but at the bottom they are large, and of great compass, so that some of them have several rooms one within another, strongly vaulted, and supported with pillars of chalk. Camden also depicts two caverns near Tilbury, in Essex, which stood on the shelving side of a rock; and the apartments, on being opened, were filled with rich black mould. On removing this, were observed the remains of some burnt matter and several fragments of bones, as also some querns, much worn. In the centre of some of these querns was fastened a small bit of iron.

It may be difficult to classify the remains of the ancient dwellings in this country which have come down to us; but there is one leading idea which may be pointed out as influencing the construction of buildings of very varying appearance. In the weems and subterraneous dwellings which occur south of the Spey, as well as in the chambered cairns and so-called Picts' Castles or Burghs, to be seen in Sutherland, Caithness, and the Orkney and other islands, the entrance rarely exceeds a square of two feet. The chambered cairn at Kettleburn, excavated by Mr

Rhind, contained many apartments in the centre; but these were approached by a passage of about 2 feet square, so that difficulty of access in all cases, and concealed entrances in the case of weems, seem to have been leading objects.

Adjoining many of the weems small earthen enclosures are discernible, sometimes round, and sometimes rectangular, while objects of the same kind have been remarked in the vicinity of several burghs in Shetland. These probably were used for various daylight purposes by the same people who retreated to their cellars on other occasions. If any such vestiges ever existed in the neighbourhood of Cairn Conan, they have been obliterated by the plough. But it may be suggested that the Castle Gory of tradition was originally one of those circular structures, sometimes called castles, of the same sort as the circular fortress in Cornwall now called Castle Chun, and that it had been used by those who erected the underground houses. The stones of which it was composed have probably been long used for building purposes; and in a dyke in the neighbourhood of Cairn Conan I observed a piece of freestone with a cup scooped out, quite of the same sort as those so frequently found at the Laws, similarly hollowed out. On the same spot I also picked up one of the sea-worn pebbles which also occur at the Laws.

The following notice of underground chambers under Irish raths seems to have a considerable bearing on the present subject: "Many of the larger raths have caves contrived within them under ground, running in narrow galleries, some of above 26 feet in length, 5 feet high, and as many broad, which make several returns, and join to one another in almost right angles; where they meet, the passage is enlarged, and at the corners forms a sort of closets, that are square in some raths and round in others; the walls or sides of those galleries are made of stones laid flat on one another, without mortar or cement, like dry walls, and covered with flagstones laid across, that rest with their ends on the side walls."¹

I have ventured to draw attention to the remains at Cairn Conan, in the hope that the subject may be thought of interest by the Society, and in the hope also that some of the members may be disposed to assist in

¹ Molyneux's "Discourse in Boate's Nat. Hist. of Ireland," p. 209, as quoted in "Transactions of Royal Irish Academy," vol. xvi. p. 129.

getting the excavations completed. What has been hitherto done has been at the expense of a few gentlemen in the neighbourhood, and one or two of our members. It is of so great consequence to obtain correct plans of these early remains, so as to classify and distinguish the different sorts of them, that at some future time, when the funds of the Society have recovered from recent burdens, I could conceive nothing more legitimate than to employ a portion of them in obtaining such plans, and helping to pay for the necessary excavations. Till then, however, we must depend on the assistance of individuals; and as, in the present instance, a few pounds would suffice to accomplish all that is wanted, I hope there will be no difficulty in obtaining the necessary funds.

As yet no circular underground house has been discovered except the present; and the Society is greatly indebted to the landlord (Dr Crichton of Dundee) and to the tenant (Mr Lindsay, Cairn Conan), for the facilities for examination which have been so liberally accorded to those engaged in excavating the remains.