

ART. II. – Cairns at Mecklin Park, Santon Bridge.

By W. FLETCHER

A large group of cairns and other earthworks situated on the saddle which connects Irton Pike with the Wastwater Screes was first reported by Miss M. C. Fair and listed on the card index kept for this Society by the Committee for Prehistoric Studies.¹ The area is known as Mecklin Park, Irton Fell (Fig. 1) and the cairns are chiefly grass covered with rocks of Eskdale granite and Borrowdale lavas protruding through the turf, heather and gorse, while in a few cases a kerbing of larger stones is visible. The remains mostly lie between the 800 and 550 ft (243 and 167 metre) contours in kilometre square NY 1201 of the National Grid and there are fine views north-eastward to the head of Wasdale. A cart track runs across the area to a drift from which iron ore was extracted in the late nineteenth century.

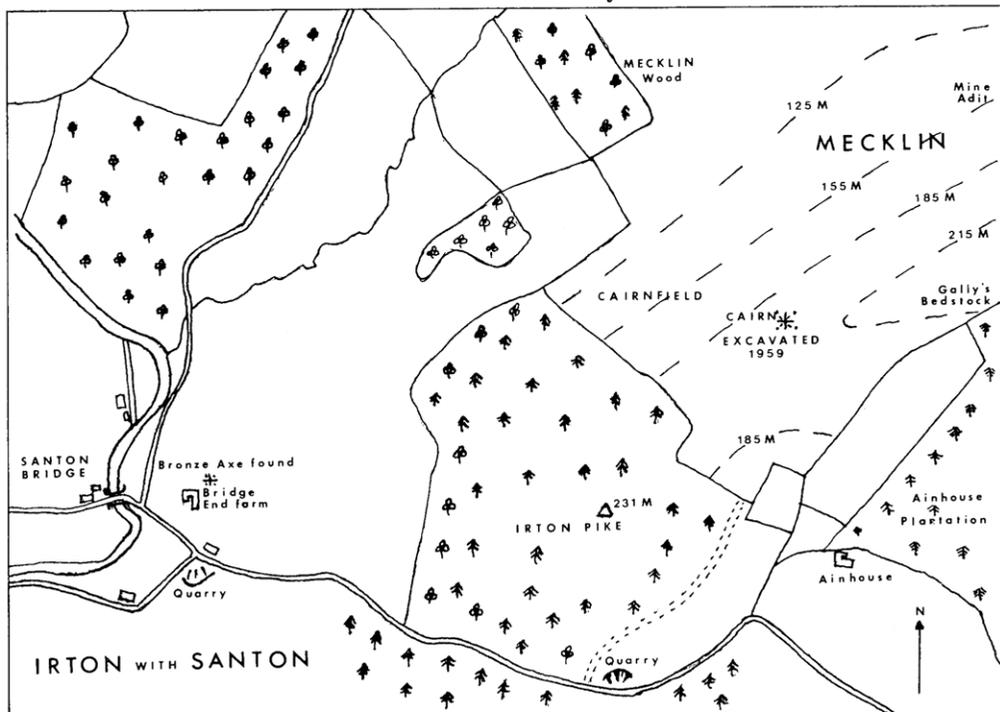


FIG. 1. – Map of the Mecklin Park area.

(drawn by J. Cherry)

In 1936 Dr J. E. Spence cut a trench across one of the larger cairns which was surrounded by a ring of granite boulders. The only significant find was a sherd of cord-zoned Beaker pottery, now in Carlisle Museum.² This cairn now lies within the Forestry Commission plantation.³ In view of the possible afforestation of the whole area a survey was carried out in 1957 under the direction of Mr W. H. Alp and Mr H. Stout for the

South-West Regional Group of this Society. The following year, with permission of Mr W. Walker, owner of the site, excavation was started on a structure which was at first thought to be a hut circle and later considered to be a cairn disturbed in antiquity. Work continued in 1959 and was carried out by members of the Group under my direction and that of Mrs A. Bromley-Boorne, together with boys from Pelham House School, St. Bees School and pupils of Calder Girls School, Seascale.⁴ In addition some work was done on a small cairn close by to the north and at the site known as Galley's Bedstocks.⁵ The cairn was 15 ft (4.57 metres) in diameter, but the results at both sites were inconclusive.

As this work took place many years ago it is intended to summarise the results here and to deposit plans, photographs and drawings with the Society's possessions at the City Library, Carlisle, together with a note on the geology of the area by Mr E. H. Shackleton, F.G.S. and an analysis of the jet by Mr J. Cherry.

The large cairn

Before excavation this cairn showed as a wide, crescent shaped, stony bank, rising about 1 ft. 6 ins. (0.456 metres) above a flat, grass covered central area. The bank was incomplete on the eastern side where four large boulders were noticed, the largest of which was 4 ft. (1.22 metres) wide. During May 1958 the turf was first stripped from the stones of the bank, baring an area 35 ft. by 40 ft. (10.67 by 12.19 metres). (Pl. 1).

Meanwhile, a check trench 20 ft. (6.09 metres) to the north-east of the cairn was dug to examine the soil profile. At this point the surface growth of grass and heather covered a layer of black humus 4 ins. (101 mm) deep, below which was a 6 ins. (152 mm) layer of humus enriched soil, which overlay 1 ft. 2 ins. (0.36 metres) of red, iron enriched soil. Beneath this level iron pan and quartz fragments in a red soil overlay the granite bedrock. Pieces of charcoal occurred in the black humus suggesting that the land surface had been burnt in the past. In the humus enriched soil remains of oak and birch occurred together with hawthorn berries and traces of runs of rodents and small burrowing animals. Mats of blackened bracken roots were seen above the bedrock. The soil of the cairn itself was strongly acid and the buried soil seemed markedly different from the surrounding podsol.

The cairn was excavated in quadrants leaving balks 2 ft. (0.61 metres) wide in order to obtain sections. Work started in the south-west quadrant and it was here that the bulk of the jet beads were found scattered over an area of approximately 9 ft. by 6 ft. (2.74 by 1.83 metres). Altogether one hundred disc beads were found, two of which were broken, and two broken barrel beads and a single quoit shaped bead – all of jet.⁶ The disc beads vary slightly in size but average 10 mm in diameter with a central drilled perforation. The quoit shaped bead was found near the centre of the cairn and is $\frac{5}{8}$ in. (17 mm) in diameter with an hourglass perforation. (Pl 2). The greatest depth at which a bead was found was 16 ins. (0.41 metres) below the modern surface.

Four fragments of coarse handmade pottery were found at various positions in the cairn and identified by Miss Clare Fell as Early Bronze Age pottery of Food Vessel type⁷ (see note below). Subsequently five other small fragments of similar ware were found. One of the sherds was found in the south-east quadrant near a small, damaged tanged and barbed flint arrowhead. A broken plano-convex knife of grey flint was discovered



PLATE I. - The large cairn, Mecklin Park, stripped of turf.

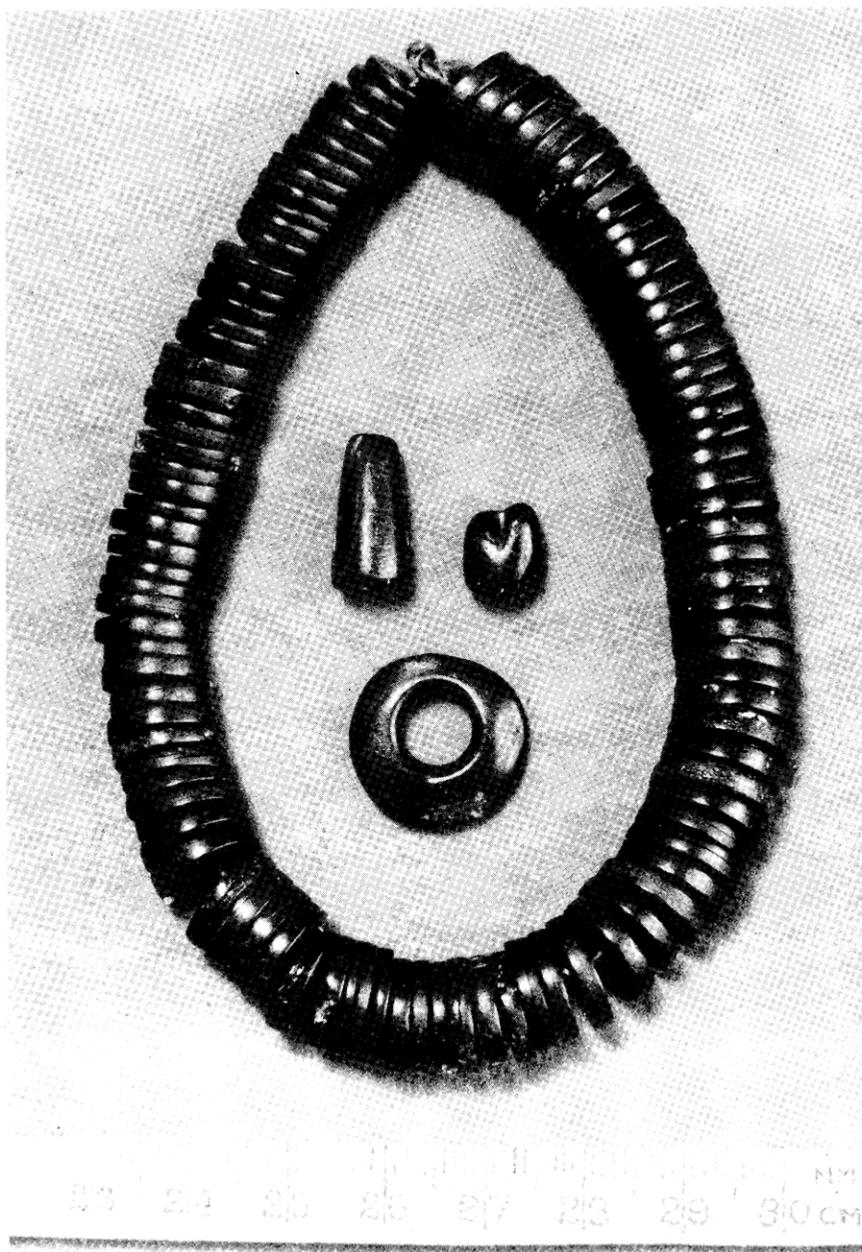


PLATE 2. - The jet necklace from the large cairn, Mecklin Park.

(photo: J. Cherry)

1 ft. (0.3048 metres) below ground level in the south-west quadrant under a large stone. Three other pieces of flint were found (Fig. 2). There was no trace of human bones.

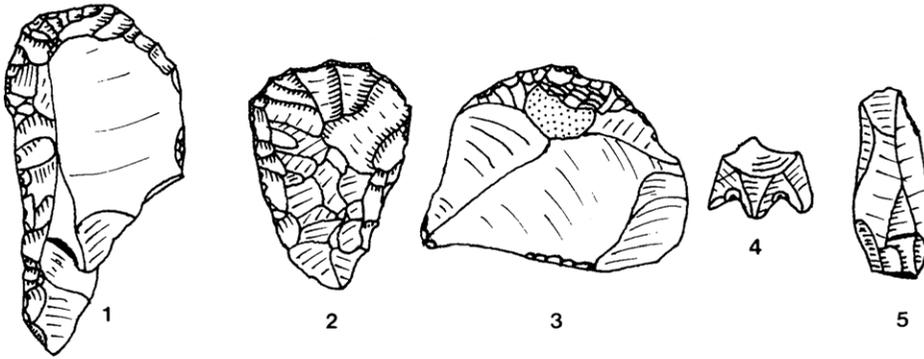


FIG. 2. – The flints from the large cairn. 1. Broken plano-convex knife; 2-3. Scrapers; 4. Tanged and barbed arrowhead – tip broken off; 5. Blade. Scale 1:1. (drawn by J. Cherry)

Other finds included a sandstone whetstone and a splinter of haematite. Two hollows on the eastern side contained charcoal and grey ash which we thought might be the remains of secondary interments by cremation. Dr D. W. Ockenden examined two samples, one of which certainly contained pieces of charcoal, but the other sample supposedly containing bone ash, was “too diluted with ordinary earth for a calcium and phosphorus analysis to be worthwhile”. Mr J. Cherry undertook an analysis of a broken jet disc bead.

An important find near the centre of the cairn in the north-east quadrant and 18 inches (0.46 metres) below the modern surface was a circular waterworn cobble, probably of a rock of the Borrowdale Volcanic Series, 8 ins. (203 mm) in diameter and 3 ins. (76 mm) thick in its centre. On one side a pair of eyes and a mouth have been pecked out of the weathered surface and there are engraved lines possibly representing facial hair. The whole appears as a rough representation of a human head (Pl. 3). This stone was exhibited to the Society by Mr R. Hogg in 1960⁸ and could be a cult object. It was later studied by Dr Anne Ross, then of the School of Scottish Studies, Edinburgh and mentioned in her comprehensive book on Celtic religion.⁹ A somewhat similar carved head of stone from St Johnstown, Co. Donegal, Eire has been described by Mr Oliver Davies.¹⁰

The finds were donated to Carlisle Museum by Mr W. Walker of Greenlands, Holmrook in September 1968, registration numbers 88-1968.1-10.

The presence of Food Vessel pottery, jet beads and contemporary flint artefacts confirms that this area was occupied at least as early as the first half of the second millenium B.C. Such a date had already been suggested by the discovery of Beaker pottery in a nearby cairn.

Note on the pottery. By Clare Fell

Four small sherds of pottery were sent to me in June 1958 by Mr W. Fletcher. These had been found in a disturbed cairn at Mecklin Park, Santon Bridge.

The largest sherd is from the rim of a Food Vessel of Yorkshire Vase type.¹¹ It is



PLATE 3. – Possible cult object in the form of a human head.

decorated on the outer edge, flat top and inner bevel with parallel rows of twisted cord arranged in herringbone fashion. There is a second chip from the inner bevel of the same rim with similar decoration. The third piece is a shoulder sherd and shows the lower end of the inner bevel. The decoration on the outer face of this fragment is difficult to interpret, but appears to have been irregular impressions of whipped cord placed vertically.

All four sherds are of handmade, poorly fired ware, red-brown on the outer surface, dark brown to black on the inner and in the fracture. The paste is coarsely gritted.

Radiocarbon dates for Food Vessels now available range from about 1700 to 1300 b.c.¹²

Looking back over twenty-seven years one wonders whether this site was really a ring-cairn rather than a cairn with the middle dug out.

References

- ¹ E. D. Hyam, 'A Report on Archaeological sites in South West Cumberland, (1958) 11-12. CW2, xxx, 222-3.
- ² CW2, xxxvii, 104-105.
- ³ G. Crawford and C. George, *An Archaeological Survey of Copeland*, Cumbria C.C. Planning Dept. (1983), 36 with plan of the cairnfield.
- ⁴ E. D. Hyam, *op. cit.*, 26: *Archaeological News Bulletin for Northumberland, Cumberland and Westmorland*, No. 4 (Jan. 1969), 10.
- ⁵ C. A. Parker, *The Gosforth District*, CW Extra Series xv (1926), 152.
- ⁶ W. Fletcher, *The history of the Parish of Ponsonby, Cumbria* (n.d. 1984), 44 and Pl.; CW2, lxvii, 25.
- ⁷ CW2, lxvii, 22.
- ⁸ CW2, lx, 207.
- ⁹ Anne Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain*, (1967), 67 and 72, Pl. 15a.
- ¹⁰ *Journal Royal Soc. Antiquaries of Ireland*, Vols. lxxvii (1947), 157, Pl. xli; lxxxiii (1953), 198; Anne Ross, *op. cit.*, 72, Fig. 42.
- ¹¹ CW2, lxvii, 22.
- ¹² Colin Burgess, in *British Prehistory, a new outline*, ed. Colin Renfrew, (London, 1974), 169, Fig. 25.

Acknowledgements

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