

# EXCAVATION AND RESTORATION OF THE DOLL TOR STONE CIRCLE, STANTON, DERBYSHIRE, 1994

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## INTRODUCTION

In the spring of 1993, shortly before the Spring Equinox, the stone circle at Doll Tor was seriously damaged when persons unknown 'restored' it prior to holding ceremonies there. In 1994 archaeological excavations and restoration were undertaken after the removal of several newly-added spurious features, in order to return the site to how it may have appeared in prehistory.

The site was extensively excavated by Heathcote between 1931 and 1933, who demonstrated that originally it comprised a small stone circle with six orthostats, two of which were fallen. There was a low 'kerb' of horizontal stones running between all six stones and a complex cairn had been added to the east (Heathcote 1939). After his excavations Heathcote 'restored' the site, leaving the stone features visible rather than re-burying them; excess soil was spread across the surrounding area. From that date to 1993 the site suffered no identifiable damage except for minor collapse of some of the stones used to rebuild the stone kerbs and cairn (Barnatt 1990, 79-82).

After the illicit 1993 'restoration' the circle had fourteen orthostats, in contrast to the six known to have been there originally! The circle kerb and much of the eastern cairn, including the western side of a central 'cist', had been removed to build a steep-sided stone bank over three sides of the cairn's central setting. Several earthfast boulders had been set upright to create a crude outer 'circle' on the southern side, beyond the monument.

The work on site brought together professional archaeologists, students and Peak National Park Rangers, in a co-operative effort to restore the monument. The input of different skills allowed a greater understanding of the site to be reached and for the circle to again act as a communal focus, if only for a short time. This publication note is a summary of a detailed archive report which is retained in the Peak National Park Archaeological Archive, Bakewell and by English Heritage, London.

## THE EXCAVATION

The Doll Tor stone circle lies on the western flank of Stanton Moor close to an extensive palimpsest of prehistoric remains, including a range of ritual monuments as well as agricultural features (Barnatt 1986, 73-79; RCHME 1986). Previous excavations by Bateman and Heathcote (Bateman 1861, 84; Heathcote 1939) have been summarised recently elsewhere (Barnatt 1990, 79-82).

Two small excavation trenches were dug in 1994 prior to site restoration (Fig. 1). These were designed to identify the original stoneholes of the two western orthostats in order to re-erect these stones correctly. Both excavations comprised the emptying of material redeposited

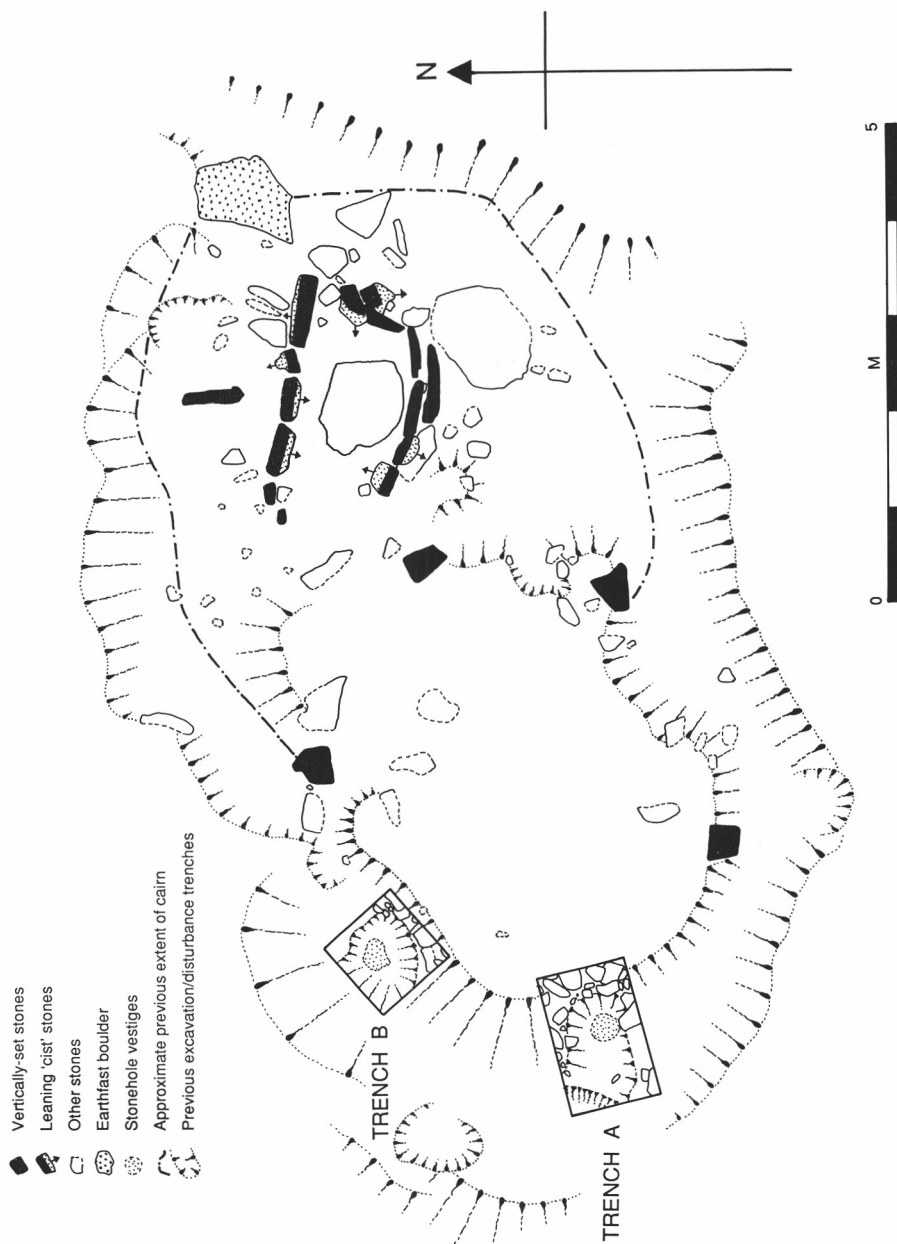


Fig. 1 Doll Tor stone circle: plan showing the location of the two excavation trenches and the structural features which survived the 1993 disturbance.

in 1993 and then the removal of other vestigial deposits within the original stoneholes. Other prehistoric deposits were left *in situ*.

The south-western orthostat had fallen prior to Heathcote's 1930s excavations and in 1993 had been re-erected wrongly at the western end of Trench A. The north-western orthostat had been re-erected approximately at its original position in 1993, thus much of Trench B was taken up by the hole dug at this time.

In Trench A there was an irregular hollow, up to 0.17m deep, filled with redeposited subsoil. This feature cut through a post-prehistoric humic soil and may well have been created by Heathcote, presumably in a search for ritual deposits around the orthostat. It is unclear if he was aware of the limits of the original stonehole, or whether or not the present shape of the pit in part reflects any attempt to define the stonehole. The shape and position of the pit roughly mirrors the fallen position of the orthostat as shown on Heathcote's plan. It is not known if he moved the stone to dig under it. He makes no specific mention of this excavation pit which suggests that he found little that interested him there.

At the base of Heathcote's excavation pit in Trench A was the bottom of an earlier pit filled with a pale, reddish-brown, sandy soil. This may have been the very base of an original stonehole; the shape corresponds roughly with the orthostat in that each has a pointed base. The fill was a prehistoric soil derived either from backfilling the hole when the orthostat was erected or from slumping when it fell or was removed.

At the base of the 1993 stonehole in Trench B was a lense of small gritstone cobbles, some degraded, mixed with a pale, reddish-brown, sandy soil. This layer may well have been within the very base of the original stonehole and comprised the prehistoric backfill.

Both stoneholes were positioned at the edge of an artificial platform within the stone circle. Unfortunately the stratigraphic relationship between the two was lost because of the 20th century disturbance. The small parts of the platform investigated comprised irregularly-placed gritstone blocks up to c. 35x20cm across. The interstices were filled with a pale, reddish-brown, sandy soil. The platform was c. 0.20m high and appeared to be placed directly on a sandy orange subsoil. That the soil in the interstices was not humic-rich indicates this is an ancient feature rather than a layer created during Heathcote's restoration.

Prior to the 1994 excavation, it had been assumed that Heathcote had removed virtually all prehistoric deposits, with the probable exception of the fills of stoneholes and other vertically-set stones. However, the identification of the edge of a stony platform, presumably filling much of the interior of the stone circle, indicates that there are further unexcavated deposits. It appears that Heathcote did not recognise this platform, presumably misinterpreting it as a natural layer. His published account makes no reference to the nature of the material he found in the interior of the circle, but his sections suggest that the kerbed mound which he removed was predominantly earthen with only occasional large stones. Thus, while Heathcote (and Bateman) may well have emptied any ritual feature cut into the stony platform, other deposits which may have been placed before the platform was constructed await investigation.

It seems probable that the platform was built to level the interior of the monument at the time the circle of orthostats was first erected. If so, it is likely that this feature was highest in the western half as the ground drops away slightly in this direction. However, it is far from clear if the stony platform was built as an integral part of a design that included the kerb linking the orthostats and the interior covering mound, which Heathcote's published section suggests was largely earthen. Alternatively, these features could have been added at a later date. Thus, it is unclear if the site was designed from the outset to be a flat-topped kerb-cairn with a ring

of six taller orthostats, or whether the kerb was added later, at a time when the levelled interior was heightened slightly by the addition of a covering mound.

### THE RESTORATION

After disturbance in 1993, the only *in situ* structural parts of the monument were four of the circle orthostats, three sides of the cairn's central setting and its internal slab, a vertical slab north of the setting and a horizontal slab south of it (Fig. 1).

The two re-erected circle orthostats were readily identified. The disturbed stones of the kerb and cairn had been moved to such an extent that it was impossible to attempt a 'stone by stone' reconstruction as individual stones could not be recognised. Stones of similar size and character to those shown on Heathcote's plan were used wherever possible.

The south-western and north-western orthostats were set upright as close to their original positions as the vagaries of the excavation data and practical considerations allowed. Both had their surrounding holes backfilled with packing stones and soil. In the case of the south-western orthostat, to increase stability, it was necessary to place the stone c. 0.25m closer to the interior and c. 0.10m deeper than it was originally. It was unclear from excavation if this stone slab was set originally so that it was flat-topped, or whether it was set in the ground at an angle so that it would have appeared diamond shaped when viewed from inside the site. The former option was chosen. The restoration of the two orthostats as uprights, rather than leaving them prone as Heathcote found them, will hopefully prevent future uncontrolled restoration of these stones that could potentially cause further disturbance to prehistoric deposits.

The four other circle orthostats were not touched during the 1994 restoration. Three of these did not appear to have been moved in 1993. The fourth, to the south-east, had been leaning forward prior to 1993 and had been straightened during the illicit 'restoration'. The stone appears to be approximately in the position it was in prehistory and further work here during the restoration may well have resulted in yet more disturbance of intact deposits.

A kerb of horizontal slabs between the six circle orthostats was recreated, following the line of that shown by Heathcote. To the east, where it abutted the cairn, this was made two to three courses high, while elsewhere its one course was rebuilt. To stabilise the stones, soil and turves were placed against the inner edge of the kerb. This had the effect of making the internal area a flat-topped platform.

At the cairn's eastern edge, a crude kerb comprising a single line of stones was placed in the position shown on Heathcote's plan. Care was taken to retain the polygonal plan. Remaining stone was then placed in the interior of the cairn to create a low and relatively regular mound. The central setting's western side, three stones of which were removed in 1993, was marked with a line of stones but these were not set vertically into the ground. The interior of this setting was left open.

The monument now is closer to its prehistoric appearance than at any other time in historic times. This will hopefully negate future attempts at ill-informed 'rebuilding' at the site.

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