

I.

NOTES ON SOME STONE CIRCLES IN CENTRAL ABERDEENSHIRE. By JAMES RITCHIE, F.E.I.S., CORRESPONDING MEMBER.

During several successive years Mr F. Coles made a survey of the Stone Circles of Aberdeenshire on behalf of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, and his reports embodying the results of the survey appear in vols. xxxiv. to xxxix. of the *Proceedings* of the Society. These reports give, for the first time, a full and systematic account of the Aberdeenshire circles, and furnish in a readily accessible form a mass of information regarding them which should prove exceedingly valuable to subsequent investigators.

The following notes on some of the circles in Central Aberdeenshire are intended to supplement these reports, by describing a few circles which had been omitted from the survey, and supplying additional information regarding some of the others.

FRENDRAUGHT.

The lands of Frendraught lie in the parish of Forgue, about 7 miles north-east of the town of Huntly. They have become well known in Scottish history through the terrible tragedy recorded in the ballad of "The Burning of Frendraught," which event occurred there in the year 1630. The owner of the estate at that period was Sir James Crichton, who seems to have been of a somewhat quarrelsome disposition. Early in the year he got into trouble with a neighbouring proprietor, Gordon of Rothiemay, who was slain in the quarrel, with the result that Sir James had to pay 50,000 merks to his heirs. Shortly afterwards he became involved in another dispute, with Leslie of Pitcaple. This time, however, the High Sheriff, the Marquis of Huntly, decided the case in favour of Sir James Crichton. As it was rumoured that Leslie intended to waylay Sir James on his homeward journey, the High Sheriff sent a number of gentlemen to accompany him, among whom was young Gordon of Rothiemay. The party arrived safely at Frendraught, and the visitors were persuaded to stay overnight there. They were hospitably entertained by Sir James and his lady, and were

lodged for the night in the Old Tower, which stood a little apart from the remainder of the buildings. About midnight fire broke out in the tower, and spread so rapidly that nothing could be done to rescue the guests, though it is said that they appeared at the windows and called loudly for help, before they perished in the flames. The fire very likely was an accidental one, but as it was never satisfactorily explained how it originated, public opinion laid the blame of it on the Lady of Frendraught, who was credited with using this method of getting rid of some of her enemies, including Gordon of Rothiemay.

But this is not the only tragedy that occurred at Frendraught, if the traditions still floating about in the district have a basis of fact. One of these relates how, on one occasion, a brawny Highlander had occasion to pass the house. He was observed by the lady, who remarked to her husband that he was the prettiest man she had ever seen. This remark led to a quarrel, and her husband, filled with jealous anger, is said to have rushed from the house and followed the unsuspecting Highlander, whom he slew, and buried under a large stone near the hill top.

Another tradition relates that the gallows, so frequently in use in the olden times, had become so unstable that a new one had to be erected. When it was finished there was some doubt as to whether it would work satisfactorily. Just as the workmen were discussing the matter, a poor cadger, leading a pony carrying on its sides panniers laden with fish for sale, appeared on the scene. He was a stranger, with no one near to protect him, so, it is said, he was at once seized and hanged. The workmen's doubts were thus set at rest, for the gallows was found to work satisfactorily.

The inhabitants of the district are now eminently quiet and respectable, but these traditions, whether true or not, serve to show the value which was set upon human life in the olden times in this neighbourhood. And if so little respect was paid to the living, it could hardly be expected that much reverence would be felt for the ancient burial-places of the long-forgotten dead. The condition of the Stone Circle of Frendraught (fig. 1) seems to confirm this, for it is in a very dilapidated state. It stands just within the wood, near the north-eastern boundary of the farm of Hillhead of Frendraught. When complete it must have been a large and imposing erection, having about a dozen standing-stones in its circumference, and a diameter of, at least, 85 feet. Most of the standing-stones must have been removed many years ago, for the oldest inhabitant cannot remember any more than four, along with the fragments of several others lying in the western arc. About seventy years ago an attempt was

made to break up some of the stones then in existence, so that they might be used for lintels, but the material did not prove satisfactory, and the broken fragments are still lying where they fell, one of them having marks of the bore-holes still in it.

The recumbent stone faces the south, and measures 5 feet in length, but, as a portion 1 foot 7 inches long has been broken off (fig. 2), the total length must have been originally 6 feet 7 inches. Its height above



Fig. 1. Frendraught Stone Circle from the north-east, showing Recumbent Stone and fallen East Pillar.

ground is 6 feet 3 inches, and its greatest breadth is 3 feet 6 inches. The east pillar, which has fallen, measures 7 feet 4 inches in length, 2 feet 8 inches in breadth, and 2 feet in thickness. The west pillar is 6 feet 6 inches high, 3 feet 7 inches broad, and 2 feet 3 inches thick. There are several fragments lying on the ground which appear to be the remains of three stones that once stood on the western arc of the circle, and a fourth stone is still standing at a distance of 85 feet north of the recumbent stone. The recumbent stone has also been broken, and two large portions of it are still lying where they fell, close to its base. Nothing is known locally of any excavations having been



Fig. 2. Frendraught Stone Circle from the south-west, showing fragments broken off Recumbent Stone.



Fig. 3. Stone Circle at Candle Hill, Inch. Recumbent Stone and fallen Pillar.

made within the circle, nor of any remains having been found there, and doubtless the planting of its area with trees will have helped to destroy any such that may once have existed.

CANDLE HILL, INSCH; AND TOMNAVERIE, TARLAND.

In the description of the circle at Candle Hill, Inch, in vol. xxxvi. of the *Proceedings*, pp. 540-5, attention is drawn to what is evidently regarded as a peculiar feature of the circle, namely, a deep trench on the western side. This trench, however, has no real connection with the circle, but is simply a disused quarry, from which, many years ago, a large quantity of the stones used in the buildings and dykes on the farm were taken. The working of the quarry so close to the circle in all probability accounts for its dilapidated condition, for all the stones, with one exception, have fallen (fig. 3). A somewhat similar state of matters occurs at the Tomnaverie Circle, near Tarland, which has also a quarry on its western side. A few years ago one of the large standing-stones which stood near the edge of the quarry was undermined and fell, and it has now disappeared. If the working of the quarry is continued, a similar fate will doubtless soon overtake the remaining stones of the circle.

ELLON.

In the field on the north bank of the Ythan, a short distance to the west of the bridge over the river at Ellon, there are the remains of a small circle (fig. 4). The stones at present standing on the site are five in number, but only three of these belong to the circle, the other two having been brought in from other places. The stones average about 3 feet in height, and the distance between them seems to show that the circle could not much, if at all, have exceeded 20 feet in diameter.

Two of the stones stand at the southern and one at the northern side. The stone to the south-east measures 3 feet 6 inches in height, and is 2 feet 3 inches broad. The rounded pillar-like stone to the south-west is also 3 feet 6 inches high, but is only 1 foot 6 inches broad. The pointed stone at the northern side is somewhat smaller than the other two, as it measures only 2 feet 4 inches in height and 1 foot 6 inches in breadth. These are the three stones which belong to the original circle. The two rounded squat blocks in the centre are the stones which have been added to it in recent times. The more southerly of these is 2 feet high and 2 feet 6 inches broad, the other being of the same height but slightly broader. In the view shown in fig. 5, the



Fig. 4. Stone Circle at Ellon from the south.



Fig. 5. Stone Circle at Ellon from the west.

pointed pillar-stones which are parts of the original circle are clearly distinguishable from the rounded ones in the centre, which are the modern additions to it. Another circle is said to have stood at one time near the bank of the Ythan a little further down the stream, but no trace of it now remains.

POTTERTON, BELHELVIE.

Potterton House stands in the parish of Belhelvie, about 6 miles north of Aberdeen, and nearly a mile west of the main road between Aberdeen and Newburgh. The name Potterton is well known in Aberdeenshire, for the mill-pond on the estate is one of the few places in the district where the black-headed gull breeds, and from this fact these gulls are locally known as "Potterton hens."

The remains of the stone circle on the Potterton estate are, however, not so well known. This may be partly accounted for by the position of the circle. It stands on the top of a ridge on the home farm, and has a striking appearance when one is close to it. But, unfortunately, to the traveller on the main road it is only visible on the far-distant horizon, and thus it appears small and easily escapes notice. As the circle is approached the intervening ridges on one side and the woods on the other completely hide it, and it only appears again as the traveller gets close to it, along a not much frequented side-road.

The circle (fig. 6) is known as the Temple Stones, and the field in which it is situated is called the Temple Park. When complete the circle must have been a large and important one, but now only the recumbent stone and its accompanying pillars remain, and both the pillars have fallen. The recumbent stone is of a rectangular shape, and is apparently an ice-carried block, smoothed by friction on the outside, but rough and irregular on the inner side. It measures 9 feet at its greatest length; its height is 6 feet, and the thickness varies from 1 foot 6 inches to 4 feet 6 inches. The east pillar is 8 feet 6 inches long and 5 feet 6 inches broad, with a thickness varying from 1 foot to 2 feet 6 inches. The west pillar is 9 feet long, 4 feet 6 inches broad, and 1 foot 6 inches thick. There are two small cup-marks close together near the centre of the outside or southern face of the west pillar.

The recumbent stone, which faces the south, has at the base of its inner or northern side another stone lying at right angles to it (fig. 7). This stone is 4 feet 6 inches long and 3 feet broad, and it has an average thickness of about a foot. It is somewhat difficult to discover exactly what position this inner stone originally occupied in the circle. It may have been one of a pair of stones, similar to those found on the inner side of the recumbent stone in several of the Aberdeenshire circles—



Fig. 6. The Temple Stones Circle, Potterton, Belhelvie. Recumbent Stone and Pillars from the south.



Fig. 7. The Temple Stones Circle, Potterton, Belhelvie. Recumbent Stone and Pillars from the north.

such, for example, as those at Auquhorthies near Inverurie, and Ardlair near Kennethmont. But if so it must have fallen over on its side, and its companion stone must have disappeared. It seems more probable, therefore, that it is one of the standing-stones which formerly stood in the circumference of the circle, and that it was removed from its place, and thrown down in its present position, when the ground was being brought under cultivation.

It is unfortunate that none of the other standing-stones have been left in their original positions, for their removal has rendered it impossible now to gain a correct idea of the diameter of the circle, or of the number of stones of which it was composed. It must, however, have been both a large and important one, and the view from its site is extensive.

PEATHILL, KINKELL.

The farm of Peathill lies in the old parish of Kinkell, now joined to Keith Hall, and is about 4 miles south-east of Inverurie. There was once a circle on the farm, but now there remains only a single stone (fig. 8), 6 feet 7 inches high, standing in the middle of one of the fields to the north-east of the farm buildings. It is about half a mile south of the village of Kinmuck, where there is a post-office, and a small chapel and graveyard belonging to the Society of Friends. In this graveyard, just inside the wall on the west side, there may be seen an interesting relic of the resurrectionist times—an iron mortsafe formerly used to prevent the lifting of the bodies of those buried in the graveyard.

On p. 744 of vol. xxxix. of the *New Statistical Account*, quoted by Mr Coles in his report, it is said that "the corn grows very luxuriantly around this solitary pillar to a distance of 15 yards, and has always been 18 inches higher than the crop immediately beside it." This was written by Dr Keith, the parish minister of Keith Hall, and represents the state of matters round the stone about the year 1840. Since that date, however, the extra fertility of the soil has become exhausted, and for many years back there has been no difference between the crop in the vicinity of the stone and that on the rest of the field. The Peathill stone is now used as a rubbing-post for the cattle pasturing in the field, for which purpose, doubtless, it was left when the other stones belonging to the circle were removed. Several urns have been found in the neighbourhood of the Peathill stone.

CAIRNHALL AND FULARTON, KINTORE.

About half a mile north of Kintore railway station, on the west side of the main road leading to Inverurie and the north, the farm-

house and steading of Cairnhall are situated. There formerly stood in the field just in front of the farmhouse a circle, of which only a single stone about 5 feet high now remains (fig. 9). There were, till quite recently, two stones—the one still in position, and a fallen one; but the



Fig. 8. Standing Stone, remains of Circle, at Peathill, Kinkell.

latter, since the date of Mr Coles's report, has been broken up and removed to the neighbouring dyke because it interfered somewhat with agricultural operations. The one left standing has been preserved because it is useful as a rubbing-post for the cattle.

On the other side of the road, a short distance to the north-east, a small round plantation may be seen in the middle of the field. This marks the site of the Fularton circle, of which only a single stone

has been left. It may be observed standing upright in the dyke which forms the boundary of the plantation. Many human remains have been found at various times within the area of the Fularton circle.



Fig. 9. Standing Stone, remains of Circle, at Cairnhall, Kintore.

CHAPEL O' SINK, FETTERNEAR; AND THE SUNKEN KIRK, CLATT.

In the wood on the slope of the ridge just at the back of the farm of Westerton, on the estate of Fetternear, and about six miles from Inverurie, are to be seen the remains of a small circle which is known locally by the name of The Chapel o' Sink (fig. 10), commonly contracted into Chapel Sink. The name is said to have originated in the belief that Satan caused the stones used in building the chapel during the day to sink out of sight during the following night. A similar tradition

exists concerning The Sunken Kirk, a circle which stood on the farm of Tofthills in the parish of Clatt, but which has now been entirely removed, though the site is still known by its old name.

There are no tall pillar-stones now to be seen at the Chapel o' Sink; but if the stones of the farm buildings could speak, in all likelihood they would be able to tell what had become of them. What still exists appears to be the remains of an inner stone setting, with the majority of the stones standing only about a foot above the ground. This stone setting has been described as being of a rectangular form, but it appears to me to be rather of a circular, or perhaps elliptical, shape. Its rounded form is quite distinctly seen in the photograph. An old cart-track, which had formerly been used for removing trees from the wood, passes along one side of the circle, and has displaced several of the stones, thereby, no doubt, somewhat altering its appearance. The stones, too, are small, and during summer and autumn many of them are almost entirely hidden by the undergrowth of heather and rough grass. This circle, and indeed all our stone circles, should be visited, if possible, in spring, after the snows of winter have flattened the tall grasses and ferns, and before the new growth has had time to hide the smaller stones. The stone setting has a diameter of about 45 feet, and no doubt the diameter of the circle of pillar-stones, now removed, must have been considerably larger.

About 120 yards to the north-west of the Chapel o' Sink there lies a large square-shaped block of stone (fig. 11) built into the dyke forming the boundary of the plantation. It measures 4 feet in length, and 4 feet also in breadth, and its height varies from 1 foot 9 inches to 3 feet. It is known locally as "The Ark Stone," but why it got that name no one now knows. It has all the appearance of being the recumbent stone removed from the circle. If this surmise is correct, then the name would be easily accounted for. Its box-like shape, and its prominent position in the Chapel o' Sink, taken along with the idea so very prevalent in some quarters that these stone circles were heathen temples, would doubtless suggest the name "Ark Stone."

NETHER COULLIE, MONYMUSK.

The farm of Nether Coullie is in the parish of Monymusk, and near the north bank of the Don, barely two miles from Kemnay Station on the Alford branch of the Great North of Scotland Railway. At the side of the road, close to the northern boundary of the farm, there lies a huge stone, almost as large as a small cottage. It is known as The Greatstone, and has been deposited in its present position by the ice with which our country was at one time covered. There are many



Fig. 10. The Chapel o' Sink Stone Circle, Westerton, Fetternear.



Fig. 11. The Ark Stone, Chapel o' Sink, Westerton, Fetternear.

other ice-carried blocks to be seen in the neighbourhood of Kemnay, which derives its name from the Kaims, a long line of glacial deposits stretching for several miles along the valley of the Don. These stones, however, are of no archæological interest, although in several instances



Fig. 12. Standing Stone, remains of Circle, at Nether Coullie, Monymusk.

their presence has been accounted for by legends which are current in the neighbourhood.

A stone of antiquarian interest, however, stands on the farm of Nether Coullie. In the Standing-Stones Field there is a tall pillar of dark grey granite veined with white quartz (fig. 12). It is 9 feet high, 5 feet in width at the base, and narrows gradually to a somewhat truncated top, the width about half way up being 3 feet 6 inches. Its

average thickness is only about 10 inches. This pillar is all that remains of a circle that originally had eight standing-stones. The remaining stones were removed by the farmer, with the proprietor's permission, about forty years ago, and the tall pillar-stone was left standing because it might be of use as a rubbing-post for the cattle which occasionally pastured in the field. The original diameter of the circle, as pointed out by Mr Connon, the tenant, was from 75 to 80 feet. At first it seemed



Fig. 13. Stones belonging to Nether Coullie Circle, Monymusk.

as if the Nether Coullie circle had been of a different type from the other circles in Aberdeenshire, for, according to Mr Connon's statement, the tall pillar stood in the centre of it, and there is no other circle having this characteristic now in existence in the county. Mr Connon very kindly accompanied me to the circle, and pointed out, as near as he could remember, the position of the various stones which had been removed. Then it became clear that the circle had really been one of the usual recumbent-stone type, and that the tall stone now remaining was the west pillar.

An interesting fact was brought to light during the further inspection

of this circle. Mr Cannon happened to mention that another stone, a little longer than the one still standing, lay buried in the ground a short distance to the south-east of it. This statement confirmed the surmise that the circle had been of the recumbent-stone type, for the buried stone was evidently the east pillar, fallen flat. It would naturally appear somewhat longer than the standing pillar, since its whole length was exposed, while the base of the standing stone was still hidden in the ground. As the fallen stone lay in a slight hollow (perhaps caused by the removal of the recumbent stone), and proved too heavy to be displaced, it was covered up with rubbish and soil from other parts of the farm, so that the plough could pass over it without obstruction. It is still lying where it fell, but constant cultivation of the overlying soil during the long period of over forty years has so effectually hidden it that we were unable to lay it bare. Probably it now lies further below the surface than we imagined, so that we did not probe deep enough, and therefore failed to find it.

The recumbent stone seems to have been removed at some date earlier than the destruction of the circle, for it was missing when the other stones were taken away, but the position of the pillar-stones seems to indicate that it faced the south-west.

Two of the stones removed from the circle may still be seen in the neighbouring dyke which bounds the road to the south of the circle (fig. 13). They are each about 3 feet 6 inches in height, and about the same in breadth.

The soil in the Standing-Stones Field is poor and thin, the result of "turving" in the olden times, when it was a common practice to remove the rough heathery surface of the ground in the form of divots, which were used for fuel and other purposes.

TOMBEG, MONYMUSK.

Fully half a mile south-west of the village of Monymusk, in a small plantation on the west side of the farmhouse of Tombeg, there is a standing-stone which is said to be the remnant of a circle (fig. 14). The stone is 4 feet 6 inches in height, 2 feet 6 inches in breadth, and its thickness varies from 9 inches to 1 foot 6 inches, averaging about 1 foot. Twenty-four feet south of the standing-stone a smaller stone lies flat on the ground, but it is doubtful if it ever formed one of the uprights of the circle. There is nothing now left to indicate the original size of the circle, or the number of stones it contained when complete, and definite particulars concerning it seem not to be now available.

There is a curious tradition, however, concerning Tombeg, which, if founded on fact, may help to account for the state in which the

circle is now to be seen. The Rev. Wm. M. Macpherson, D.D., on p. 72 of his *History of the Church and Priory of Monymusk*, says: "The granite used in the building is not the same as the common blocks in the fields, or in recently opened quarries. The tradition is that it was taken



Fig. 14. Standing Stone at Tombeg, Monymusk.

from Tombeg farm, and that the stones were passed from hand to hand down the hill." This may mean that the loose blocks found lying on the hill were taken, or it may mean that the stones were quarried there. Probably both things happened, for there is a small quarry, not now used, lying close to the standing-stone. There does not appear to be any other quarry on the farm, so it is probably the spot from which the building material was taken, in part at least. It is easy to

understand, therefore, what has become of the other stones of the circle. The temptation to carry off suitable stones, standing ready for use, instead of having to dig them laboriously out of the quarry, would be too great for the workmen to resist, more especially if at the same time they thought that they were despoiling a "heathen temple" for the benefit of a Christian church. The single stone now remaining would, no doubt, be left as a rubbing-post, as has been done in so many other cases.

In the same plantation, not far from the northern side of the quarry, there once stood one of those whin-mills which were formerly used for the purpose of crushing whins or gorse into a pulp, suitable for food for the cattle and horses on the farm. The stone-lined circular course, and the central pin on which the shaft revolved, are still in their original positions, but the heavy round mill-stone lies just outside the garden wall, near the farmhouse.

KIMMONITY OR REDHILL

The circle called the Kimmonity Circle in vol. xxxvii. of the *Proceedings*, p. 132, appears to be that more generally known as the Redhill circle. It was destroyed many years ago, and no trace of it now remains. From the same neighbourhood came the sculptured stone found at North Redhill, and described in the *Early Christian Monuments of Scotland*, part iii. p. 154. It was removed from North Redhill a good many years ago, and now stands at Rothiemay House.