

'THE GIRDLSTANES,' AND A NEIGHBOURING STONE CIRCLE, IN THE  
PARISH OF ESKDALEMUIR, DUMFRIESSHIRE. BY DAVID CHRISTI-  
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The number of stone circles in the South of Scotland that have survived the ruthless hand of man is so small, even if we include the merest fragments of them, that it seems no little wonder to find still standing near each other two fairly well preserved specimens, which have hitherto escaped description. The only notice of them that I could discover in print is by the Rev. William Brown in the *Old Statistical Account of Scotland*, and repeated by him in the *N.S.A.* :—  
“On the farm of Coatt there are two circles of erect stones, the one entire measuring about 90 feet (*i.e.*, in girth), and the other, having a part of it worn away by the Esk, measuring about 340 feet.” It appears from this brief but fairly correct notice that, by a singular stroke of bad fortune, nature had taken up the task of destruction, usually due to the covetousness of man; and using as its tool the erosive action of the river, has in fact swept away nearly a half of the larger circle. It is also greatly to be feared that it will gradually accomplish the work and destroy the whole, although the process is slow, as there seems to have been little or no loss since the Ordnance Survey was made about forty years ago. The smaller circle fortunately stands uninjured, beyond the action of the stream.

My attention was first drawn to the circles by Mr Richard Bell, F.S.A. Scot., of Castle O'er, in the neighbourhood; and with his aid I took a rough plan of 'the Girdlestanes,' as the larger circle is called, in

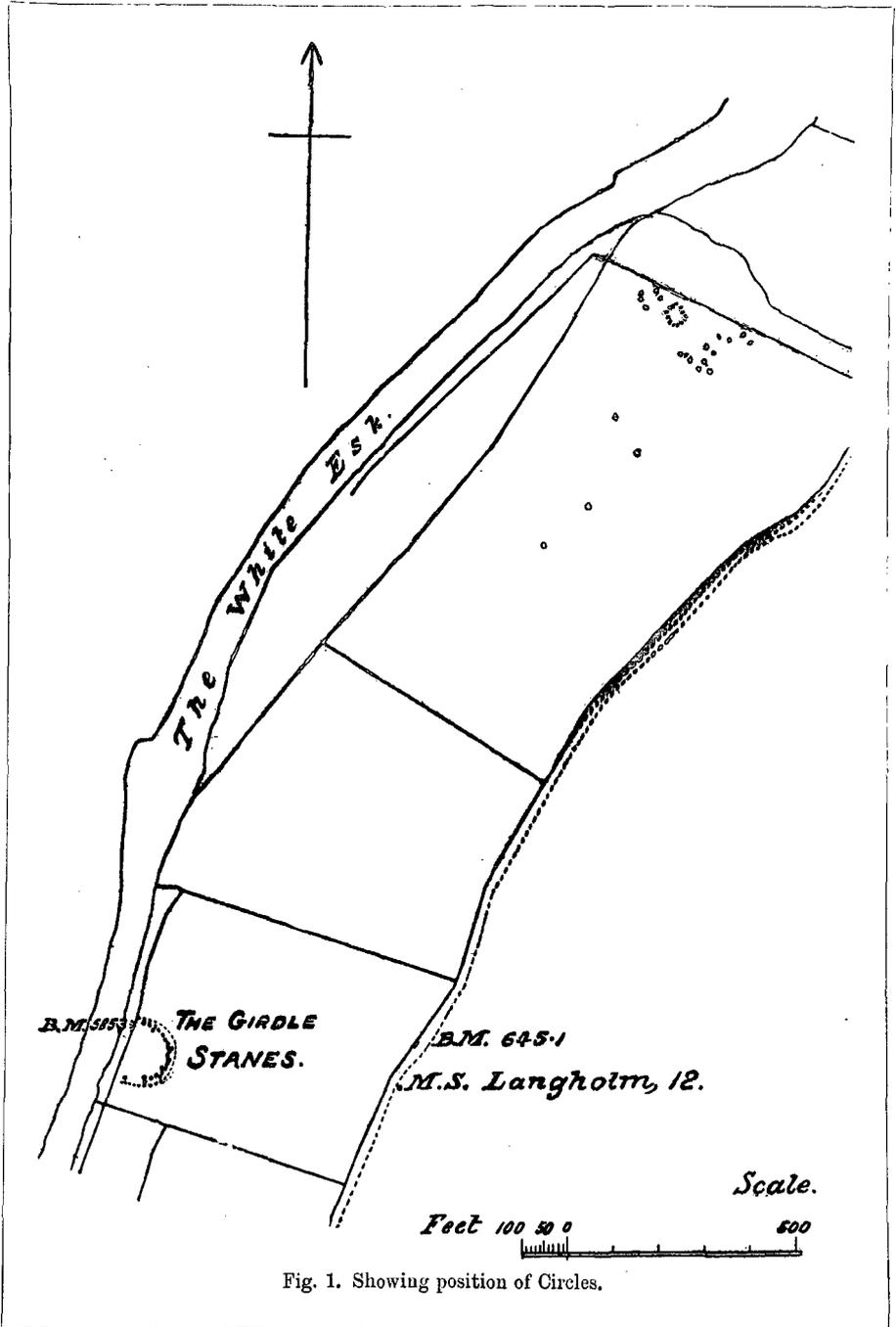


Fig. 1. Showing position of Circles.

the autumn of 1896; but as we were both desirous of getting a thoroughly reliable plan of both circles, I paid a second visit to Mr Bell this spring, along with Mr J. H. Cunningham, C.E., to whose trained skill I am indebted for the accompanying plans.

The first (fig. 1) is taken from the 25-inch O.M. to show the

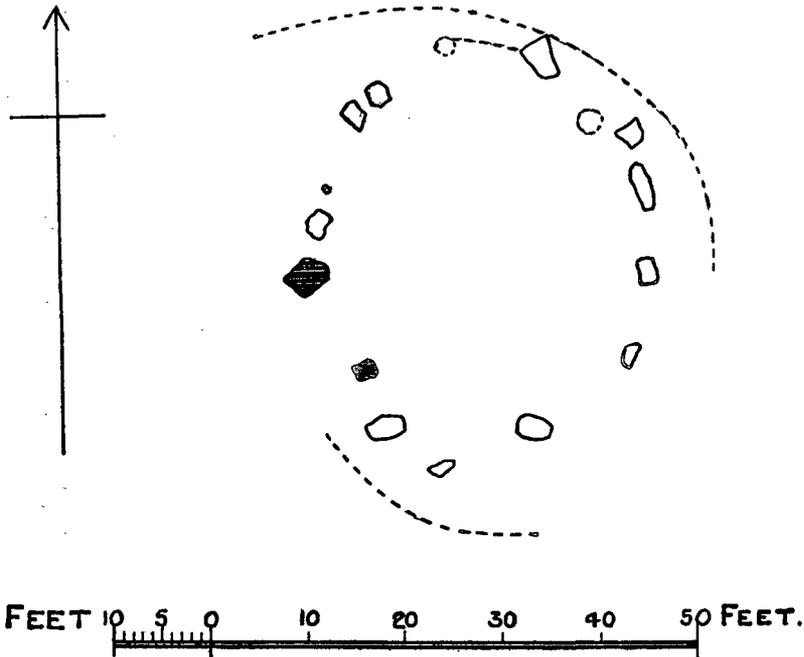


Fig. 2. Ground Plan of Circle at Hartmanor.

position of the circles in the valley, and with regard to each other, the smaller circle standing nearest to, and about  $\frac{2}{3}$  of a mile south of, the parish church of Eskdalemuir, on the opposite or east side of the Esk; but the stones forming the circles are laid down accurately, instead of conventionally as on the O.M.; and a number of scattered boulders, that may have had some structural intent, have also been introduced.

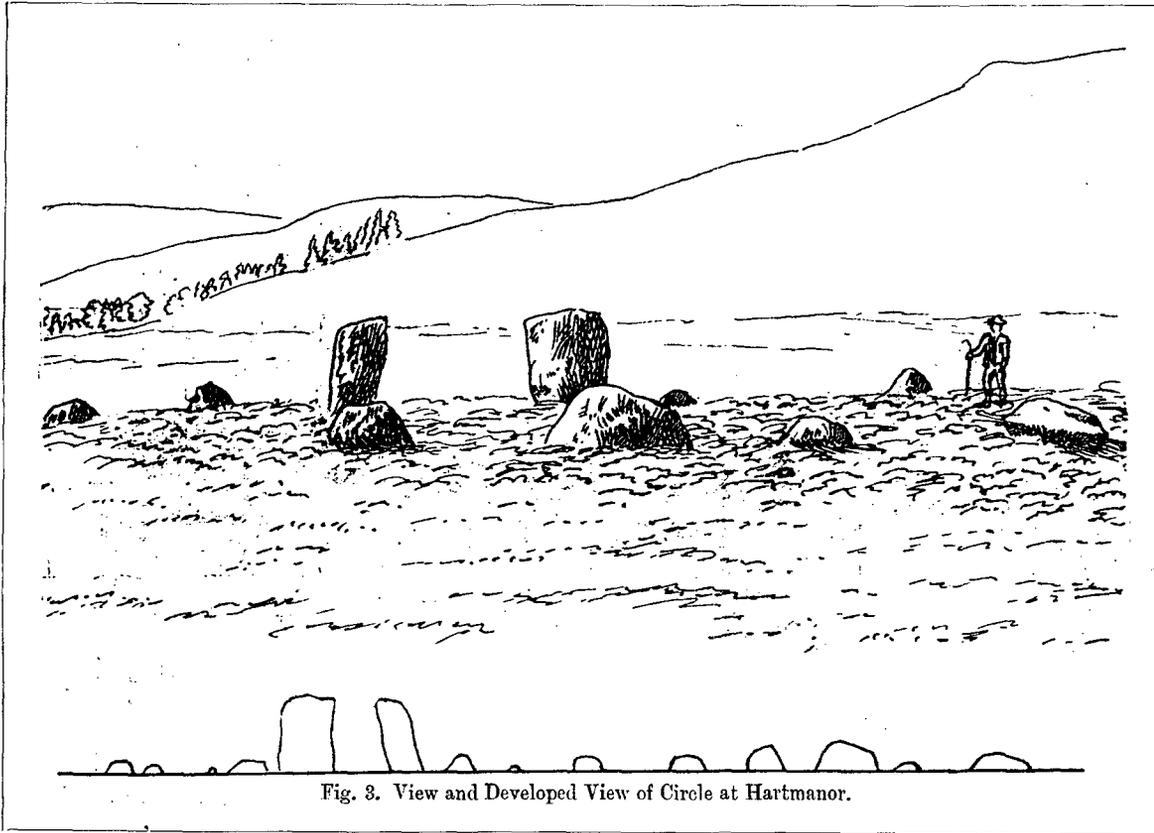


Fig. 3. View and Developed View of Circle at Hartmanor.

The site of the smaller circle is at Hartmanor, retired about 80 yards from the river, in a gently undulating field, and it has been banked up nearly all round from a foot to 18 inches, perhaps with the object of making the interior level. The circle consists of thirteen stones (fig. 2), not reckoning one which seems too small to be included, but from the inequality of the intervals it is likely that a number have been carried off, and this seems proved by one hollow (marked by a dotted circle on the plan), left in all probability by the removal of a stone, and by another within the circle opposite a blank in it, probably caused by digging to uproot a second stone. The developed view, fig. 3 (in which the intervals between the stones are reduced to half their real length), shows this irregularity of the spacing. But it also shows that two neighbouring stones greatly exceed the others in size, and alone can be considered truly standing, as they are pillar-like and set on end, whereas the smaller ones are so shaped that it does not much matter on which end they are placed. The two large stones are about 5 feet 4 inches high, and are flat-topped. One is a massive rectangular block, about twice the bulk of the other. Few of the smaller stones stand a foot above ground, and the two highest do not exceed a couple of feet. The large stones are known as 'the loupin' stanes,' because it is said that lads, and even a lass, were in the habit of jumping from the top of one to the other; but as the distance is 8 feet, the people of the district must be uncommonly good 'loupers' to accomplish the feat without breaking their legs. However it may be with their limbs, so little are the powers of observation of the natives cultivated that, although all know 'the loupin' stanes,' they generally deny the existence of a circle. Yet the appearance of the circle is marked enough, as will be seen from the view (fig. 3), copied on an enlarged scale from a photograph taken by Miss Bell, Castle O'er. In its present state the 'circle' is slightly oval, the cross diameters, measured from the inner faces of the stones, being about 35 and 31 feet. The entrance, if we may call it so, between the two pillar-stones, looks out about E.S.E.

'The Girdlestanes' are situated about 600 yards lower down, and on the same side of the stream, upon a narrow level haugh, 11 feet above the river, and not liable to inundation. As far as can be judged, about

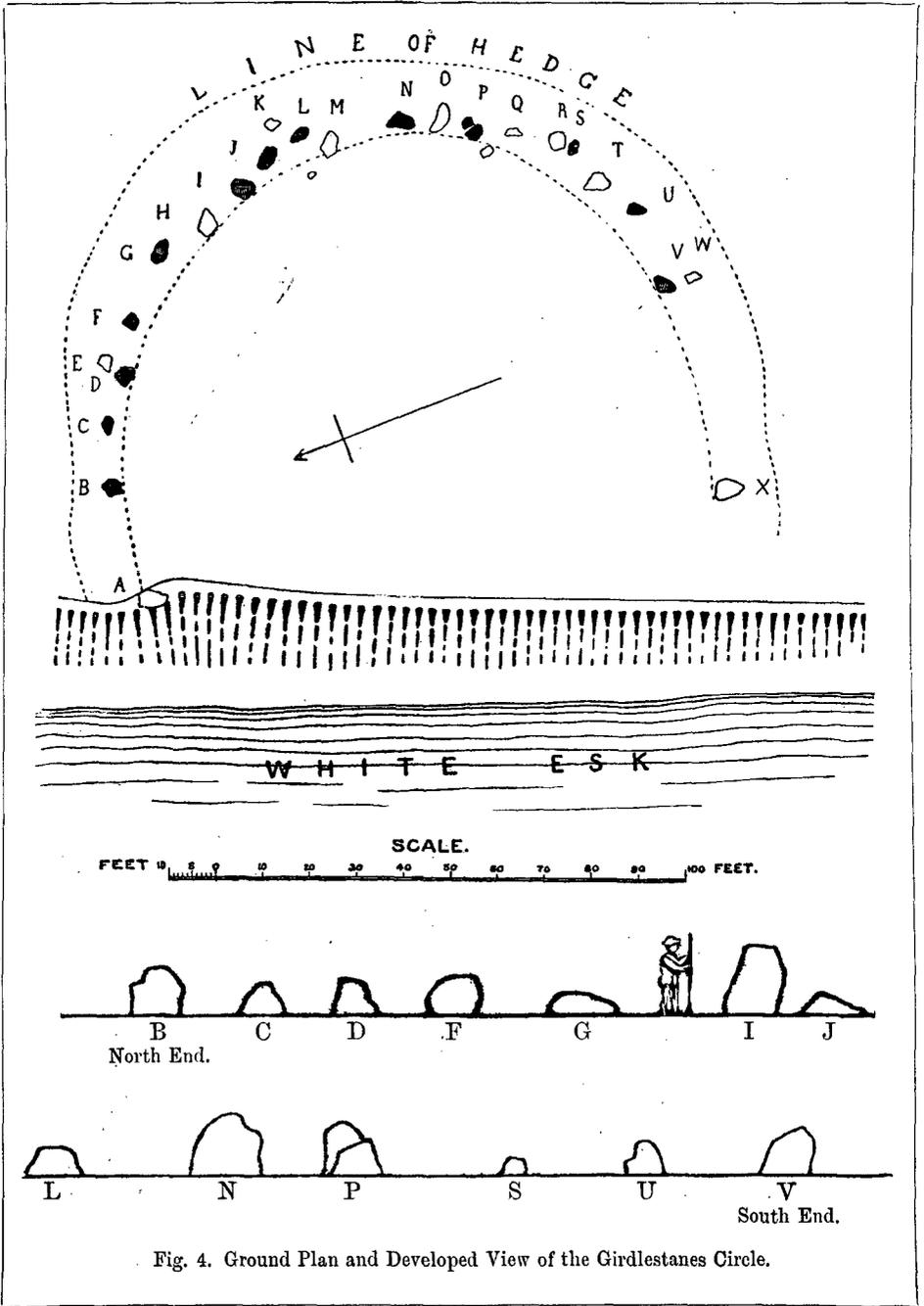


Fig. 4. Ground Plan and Developed View of the Girdlestanes Circle.

two-fifths of the original area has been carried away by the river by a straight cut, so that the present figure is somewhat semicircular (fig. 4). Without reckoning two small stones within the circle, twenty-six remain, of which ten are erect, and more or less pillar-like, one being a double stone, four are overthrown pillars, one is a flat slab, that may never have been erect, and the remainder are squat. The erect stones, and such of the others as are above a foot or so in height, are shaded on the plan. The great irregularity in the spacing leaves no doubt that a good many other stones have been carried off. Neither is this the only irregularity, for the position of the stones with regard to each other is such that no circle or oval can be drawn that would touch, or nearly touch, a majority of them. It is true that irregularity in both these respects is an ordinary, if not universal, characteristic of Scottish stone circles; but among all those hitherto figured in our *Proceedings*, the divergences from a regular contour appear to depend upon an indifference on the part of the constructors to strict accuracy, whereas here the irregularity is far too great to be caused in that way. Neither can it be made out to be due to the remains belonging to an originally double circle. We may therefore briefly consider whether any order can be brought out of the apparent disorder, premising that all such attempts, when we know not how many stones may be missing, nor where they stood, must be accepted as purely conjectural.

First, as regards the spacing, I find that a tolerably regular curve can be drawn that touches the inner face of ten of the stones (fig. 4); and beginning with the prostrate A, some of the distances are as follows,—to B 24 feet, to D 23, to I 46,—so that we have here four intervals of nearly 23 feet each if we suppose one stone missing. Beyond this, from I to V, or 100 feet, there is not the same rule; but it may be remarked that exactly half way between I and V stands the double stone (appearing to be a single pillar) P. Lastly we have, again, from V to X 46 feet, or by supplying a missing stone, two 23 feet spaces. As to the space between any one stone and its neighbours, no rule can be made out: 9 or 10 feet is a common interval, but from V to X measures 46 feet, and from R to S only a foot.

Passing to the ground plan, three peculiarities in the arrangement of

the stones are noticeable, whether produced accidentally by the removal of other stones, or not, it would be hard to say.

1. The stones outside the dotted 'circle,' it will be seen on the plan, form a series of outward curves or arcs.

2. D and V of the 'circle' have E and W a few feet behind them, and V is connected with W by a slight bank, apparently of earth and stones.

3. N and P arrest the eye of an onlooker from their size and proximity to each other, and on going up to them a flat slab, O, is seen lying between them. This is the only flat slab, and its position between the two most prominent stones somewhat recalls the so-called altar stone of certain circles in the North of Scotland, except that it lies the opposite way, so that it is quite possible it may have been erect originally; it is also probably the longest of all the stones. These three stones, in an outward direction, face about E.S.E., or the same as the opening between the two prominent stones of the lesser circle.

Mr Cunningham has given a Developed View of the erect members of the group, fig. 4, the intervals between the stones being reduced one-half. As the scale is small, I give a table of the height, and girth at the base, of these stones, the letters corresponding with those on the plan and developed view.

	Height.		Girth at Base.			Height.		Girth at Base.	
	Ft.	Ins.	Ft.	Ins.		Ft.	Ins.	Ft.	Ins.
B	3	7	13	5	L	2	2	10	7
C	2	6	11	10	N	4	10	13	10
D	2	10	13	4	P <sup>1</sup>	4	4	12	3
F	3	0	13	11	P <sup>2</sup>	2	8		
G	1	8	7	7	S	1	6	6	5
I	5	4	14	7	U	2	8	10	11
J	1	8	6	1	V	3	7	12	2

Some of the prostrate stones are of considerable size: A is 6 feet 5 inches in length; H, 6 feet; M, 6 feet; O, 7 feet; and T, 5½ feet. Probably these, with the exception of O and possibly A, do not really exceed in height the larger erect stones, as the total length of the

former was ascertainable with a little digging, while in the latter the portion buried in the ground is unknown. Opposite the ends of the half circle, six or eight similar stones lay in the bed of the stream, and were probably members of the circle, but none are of great size.

The remaining part of 'the Girdlestanes,' measured from A to X along the dotted circle, is 240 feet, or going on to the edge of the bank, 265 feet, and across from A to X is 125 feet. When complete, the figure may have been about 450 feet in circumference. Unfortunately, a tall straggling hedge closely environs the Girdlestanes, so that it is impossible to get a good view or photograph of them.

It may be that the circles are not the only relics of the builders, as other boulders are found, some in proximity to the lesser circle, and others scattered about the field in which it stands. This field has apparently never been cultivated, being used to grow meadow hay. The field in which the Girdlestanes are has long been under plough, and that may account for the removal of boulders there, but they are likewise absent in the neighbouring fields and on the hill sides, and Mr Bell informs me there are none nearer than Crurie,  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a mile to the south, and in the bed of the Rennald burn,  $\frac{1}{4}$  mile to the north. Mr Cunningham has laid down on the map (fig. 1) all that are near the small circle, or somewhat in the direction of the Girdlestanes. Those near the small circle are small and the others are inconspicuous, except one solid square block to the south-west. I do not think anything definite can be made out of their arrangement, but there are a good many other small ones in the unsurveyed part of the field to the east, west, and south.

Finally, it is to be hoped, thanks to the prohibition of wanton destruction of ancient monuments on their estates by the House of Buccleuch, that the Girdlestanes and its neighbour may long be preserved to excite the interest of many generations to come.