

ART. I. – *Excavation of standing stones and cairn at Clifton, Cumbria, 1977.*  
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THE pair of megaliths at Crooklands, west of the village of Clifton in Westmorland, were recorded on the earliest Ordnance Survey 6" map of 1859, and have been more fully described by the RCHM in 1935 and the Ordnance Survey in 1965.<sup>1</sup> By at least 1813, these stones had received the name of Crummack Stone,<sup>2</sup> while on the earlier Ordnance Survey maps they appear as Cromlech Stone. Until the work described below however there was no evidence for the presence of burials at the site.

The small excavation<sup>3</sup> to be described took place in March 1977 before the re-erection of the southernmost of the two stones. Both were still standing in 1965, but by the early 1970s<sup>4</sup> the smaller, southernmost stone lay partly buried; by 1974 it had been removed. Miss Clare Fell, who had noted the stone's removal, told the land owner, the Lowther Estate, who asked the Department of the Environment to re-erect it.

### **The Excavation**

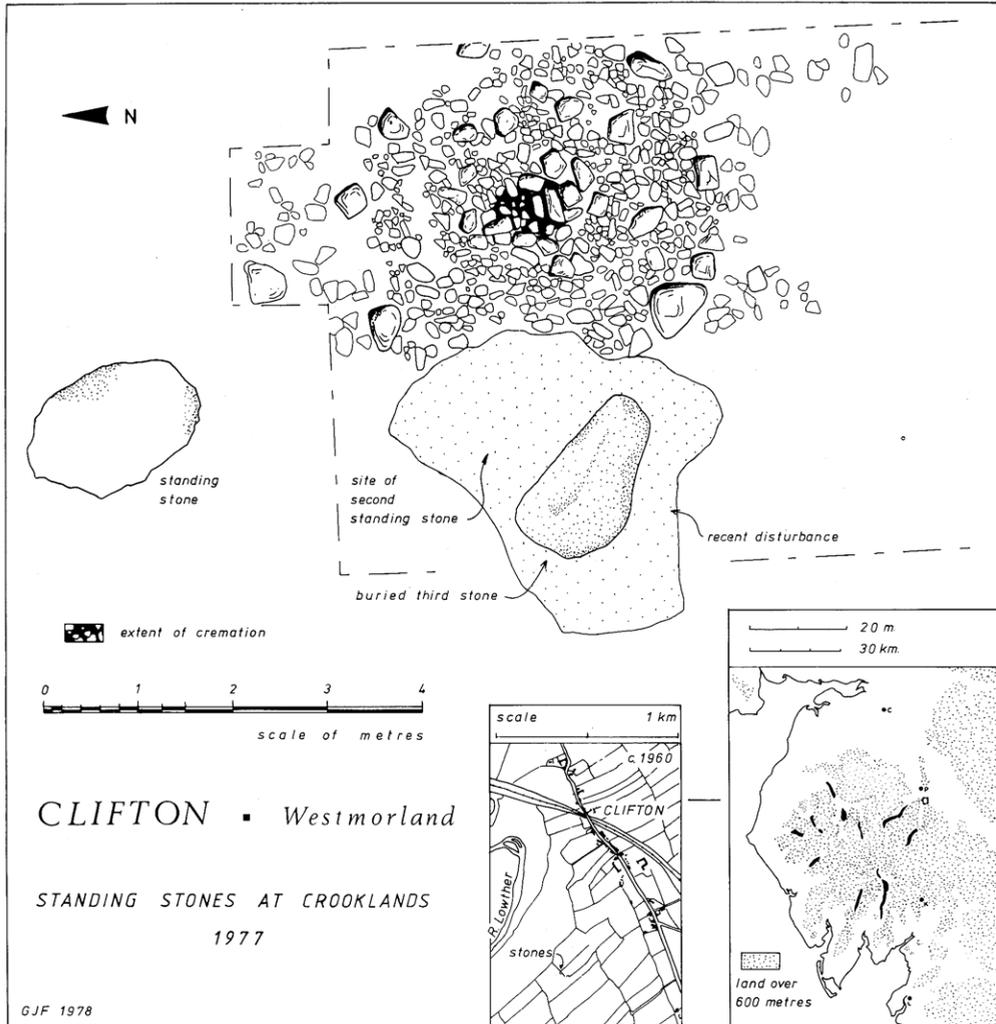
The initial aim of the excavation was to examine the socket for the fallen stone prior to re-erection. This proved impossible, however, owing to the presence of a large (2.7 × 2.2 m) mechanically excavated pit at this point. Above this pit was a shallow depression, the recent resting-place of the fallen southernmost stone until its final removal. The large pit was found to contain a third large (1.0 × 1.75 × 0.90 m) megalith, a glacial erratic.

The unsuspected presence of a third megalith requires some discussion. There is no evidence that it had ever been associated with the known standing stones, nor indeed that it had ever been upright itself, but the presumption that this was the case is strong. It is most likely that it had been incorporated into the adjacent hedge in the later medieval period and removed during the hedge's destruction between 1965 and 1969.

The excavation was extended eastwards after the discovery of a small cairn partly overlain by the remains of the hedge. The cairn had suffered extensive plough damage, and only the lower one or two layers of stone remained.

As excavated, truncated to the west by the large pit, the cairn measured 3.2 m east-west by 4.0 m north-south. It was composed of small stones, c. 10 × 10 × 15 cm, laid in circles around a central area of larger stones, and surrounded by the remains of a kerb of small, unshaped boulders, up to 20 × 20 × 40 cm in size. In the central area was a large amount of burnt bone. This rested merely among and beneath the stones of the cairn, in neither pit nor container.

The central area and the south-east quadrant of the cairn was excavated to remove the cremation and to examine its construction and underlying stratigraphy. It had been built directly upon subsoil, a dark reddish-brown clayey sand derived from the underlying red glacial clay. There was no evidence for a buried land surface, though such a survival would not be expected in view of the high degree of worm and plant activity. Nor, in the



Plan of excavated area and northernmost standing stone.

Inset: position of excavation in Cumbria and in relation to village of Clifton (latter after Ordnance Survey).

restricted area investigated, were there any traces of pre-cairn activity. No artefactual material was recovered.

The cremation<sup>5</sup> consisted of *c.* 4 kg. of lightly burnt, but very fragmented, bone. No pieces larger than 2 cm were encountered. It was thus possible only in a few cases to state with certitude that the bones were of human origin. On the other hand, none was positively identifiable as animal remains. The quantity of the remains implies the presence of several individuals, though positive evidence of more than one body was absent.

From within the cremation was recovered a slight quantity of charcoal.<sup>6</sup> Many of the fragments appeared to have been subjected to a high temperature, in contrast to the lightly burnt bone. This perhaps indicates the use of prepared charcoal rather than wood

in the cremation ritual. Four species were identifiable: hazel (*Corylus avellana*), eighteen pieces, and oak (*Quercus* spp), seven pieces, being the most common; and one each of pine (*Pinus ?sylvestris*) and alder (*Alnus glutinosa*). The small size of the sample precludes further comment on the nature of the surrounding ecological habitat.

### Discussion

The main elements of the site as revealed by this excavation are twofold: two (or perhaps at least three) standing stones in undefined association with a small multiple-cremation cairn. Further than this, the available evidence can scarcely be stretched, especially with the enormous variations known in megalithic and sepulchral monuments. Certain comments can however be made.

The tradition of burials, whether or not in cairns, associated with megalithic stones is well attested. In Cumbria, one of the Moor Divock cairns was associated with standing stones, while excavation at Lacre 'D' produced a middle Bronze Age cremation at the foot of a standing stone.<sup>7</sup> Closer to Clifton, the Leacet Wood circle included cremations at the foot of some of the stones, as well as in the more common position within the circle,<sup>8</sup> while at Kirkby Thore a standing stone, destroyed last century, was closely associated with an urned burial.<sup>9</sup> Of smaller megalithic monuments, all the excavated examples of "four-posters" contained burials.<sup>10</sup>

Frequently, as at Clifton, the relative chronology of burial and megaliths is far from clear. Most usually the burial has been considered to be secondary, as at Leacet Wood, though on the other hand several of the excavated "four-posters" were added to existing cairns, while in one case the contemporaneity of cairn and stones was established.<sup>10</sup>

One difficulty of determining the sequence at Clifton is that the original form of the megalithic monument is no longer clear. It is possible that the third stone encountered was not a part of the structure, as pairs of standing stones are not unknown,<sup>11</sup> and no socket for a third stone was found at Clifton. The small area excavated may have missed a third stone-socket, however, and as stated above it seems probable that the site at some stage consisted of at least three standing stones.

The cairn can be paralleled throughout Britain. Such small cremation cairns occur in Cumbria, for instance at Moor Divock, Burn Moor, and Lacre.<sup>12</sup> The most useful comparison is perhaps with a recently studied type of small cairn frequently termed 'kerb-cairn'.<sup>13</sup> While certain important diagnostic features of these cairns are not paralleled in the Clifton example (such as the use of quartz in the construction of the cairn, and the presence of a burnt, pre-cairn ground-surface) others are, notably the small size, the presence of a relatively prominent kerb of larger stones, and the absence of any form of container or pit for the cremated bone. The presence of standing stones is not, however, a feature of these cairns.

It is not possible to suggest a close date for the building of either the cairn or the megalithic monument at Clifton. While, where dated, kerb-cairns seem to belong to a period late in the second millenium, the practice of erecting standing stones is very much older. The existence of a cairn of apparently early Bronze Age date in the same parish of Clifton is perhaps significant.<sup>14</sup> In the absence of any more detailed evidence, a general second millenium context for the site is all that can be suggested.

**Notes and References**

- <sup>1</sup> *RCHM*: Westmorland, p. 206; O.S. reference card: NY52NW10. The NGR is NY 5313 2592.
- <sup>2</sup> Enclosure Award, CRO Kendal.
- <sup>3</sup> The excavation was carried out principally by the author and Miss B. Smith, with the assistance of members of the D.O.E. workforce of Carlisle Castle.
- <sup>4</sup> *ex inf.* Mr T. Clare.
- <sup>5</sup> I am indebted to Miss J. Bayley of the Ancient Monuments Laboratory for her analysis of this material. The comments are based upon her report, but errors of interpretation are attributable to the author.
- <sup>6</sup> For her identification of the charcoals I am most grateful to Miss B. Smith.
- <sup>7</sup> Moor Divock: CW1, i, 104-5  
Lacra 'D': CW2, xlvi, 1-22.
- <sup>8</sup> Leacet Wood: CW2, xlvi, 76-8.  
For Cumbrian circles containing burials cf. A. Burl: *The Stone Circles of the British Isles* 1976, 92-7.
- <sup>9</sup> CW1, i, 70.
- <sup>10</sup> AA4, xlix 1971, 37-51; 1 1972, 1-14.
- <sup>11</sup> Within Cumbria they exist, for example, at Bampton and Kirksanton – *ex. inf.* Mr T. Clare.
- <sup>12</sup> Moor Divock 2b and 4: CW1, viii, 323-47.  
Burn Moor: *Scottish Archaeol. Forum* 4, 1972, 93.  
Lacra 'B': CW2, xlvi, 12-16.
- <sup>13</sup> *Procs. Soc. Antiqs. Scot.* 106, 1974-5, 30-38.
- <sup>14</sup> CW1, v, 79-97.

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