

II.

FURTHER EXCAVATIONS OF CAIRNS AT POLTALLOCH, ARGYLL.

By J. HEWAT CRAW, SECRETARY.

During April 1930 a further examination of ancient monuments on the Poltalloch Estates was made by Sir Ian Malcolm, K.C.M.G., and our Society, the work being carried out under my supervision.

I. NORTH CAIRN, NETHER LARGIE.

The first of the cairns to be excavated was the northmost of three large cairns situated near Nether Largie. These form part of an alignment of early burial places which apparently marks the course of an ancient road for some $4\frac{1}{2}$ miles along the level floor of the Kilmartin valley. The other cairns and cists forming this alignment had already been examined, and had yielded results of much importance. One contained a segmented chamber of Neolithic type as well as cists of the Bronze Age;¹ four contained cists having grooved slabs,² the feature being unknown in Scotland save in the Poltalloch neighbourhood; and one contained a cist having axe-heads, and the representation of a boat cut on the slabs,³ a feature almost unique in the British Isles. It thus seemed not improbable that the unexcavated cairn at Nether Largie might yield results of importance to archæology.

The position of the cairn is $\frac{1}{4}$ mile north-north-east of Nether Largie school. The ground is almost level, falling slightly to the east towards the Kilmartin Burn, which is some 200 yards distant. The cairn (fig. 1) was almost circular, measuring 71 feet from north to south, and 67 feet from east to west; the height was 8 feet 9 inches. It had not the appearance of having been previously disturbed, save that some stones had been removed from the west side, probably for walls or road-making. At its edges the cairn had been augmented by the addition of stones removed from the fields during farm work. The stones of the cairn

¹ *Proc. Soc. Ant. Scot.*, vol. vi. p. 341 (1866); vol. lxiv. p. 233 (1929-30).

² *Ibid.*, vol. viii. p. 378 (1869-70); vol. lxiii. p. 154 (1928-29); vol. lxiv. pp. 127-146 (1929-30).

³ *Ibid.*, vol. viii. p. 378 (1869-70); *Journ. Arch. Assoc.*, vol. xxxvi. p. 146 (1880).

were chiefly water-worn, such as are plentifully found on the adjacent fields; few were larger than one man could easily handle.

Work was begun on 7th April with five men, and was completed on 16th April, forty days of one man having been occupied in the work.



Fig. 1. North Cairn, Nether Largie. Looking north-east to Kilmartin.

The stones, amounting to almost 300 cart-loads, were entirely removed from the area of the cairn, and were built into a wide protecting wall round the site.

In this cairn (fig. 2) there was no surrounding ring of boulders, but a circular area measuring 46 feet north and south, and 44 feet east and west, was enclosed by a mound 8 feet across, and about 2 feet in height externally, and 1 foot internally. This mound was most clearly marked at the north side, and was discontinued for about a third of the circumference at the south-east side, where its position was merely indicated by an abrupt outward slope.

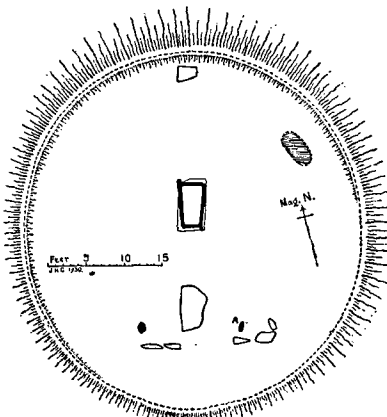


Fig. 2. North Cairn, Nether Largie.

the south end, and was 1 foot 10 inches deep. It was formed of four massive slabs of schist, the end slabs being placed between the side slabs. It was unpaved. Over the cover were laid eighteen large slabs,

distinct in character from the rounded stones of the cairn; the two largest of these, measuring 4 feet by 2 feet 1 inch and 3 feet 8 inches by 1 foot 9 inches, were laid along either edge of the cover, which they overlapped; the others were arranged along the edges and partly over the top. The cover, which lay some 6 inches below the surface, is a massive slab of schist measuring 6 feet 7 inches by 3 feet 5 inches by 9 inches; on the under surface (figs. 3 and 4) are carved the shallow representations of ten large flat axe-heads variously arranged



Fig. 3. Under surface of Cist-cover, with Axe-heads and Cup-marks.

and measuring from 5 to 11 inches in length, and four smaller figures, $3\frac{1}{2}$ to $4\frac{1}{2}$ inches in length, which also probably represent axe-heads. One at least of the larger axe-heads is shown with a handle which, at a distance of 7 inches from the head, turns at right angles and ends in a cup-mark. Several show lateral projections at the cutting edge. There are also forty-one cup-marks on the slab, from 1 to 3 inches in diameter and $\frac{1}{2}$ inch in depth; several of these are placed on the axe-heads. On the inner face of the north end slab of the cist (fig. 5) are two large axe-heads measuring 16 by $9\frac{3}{4}$ inches, and 9 by $5\frac{3}{4}$ inches; the cutting edges, which have lateral projections, point upwards.

The cist was partially filled with soil which, on being riddled, was found to contain only a few fragments of charcoal, a little ochre, and a human

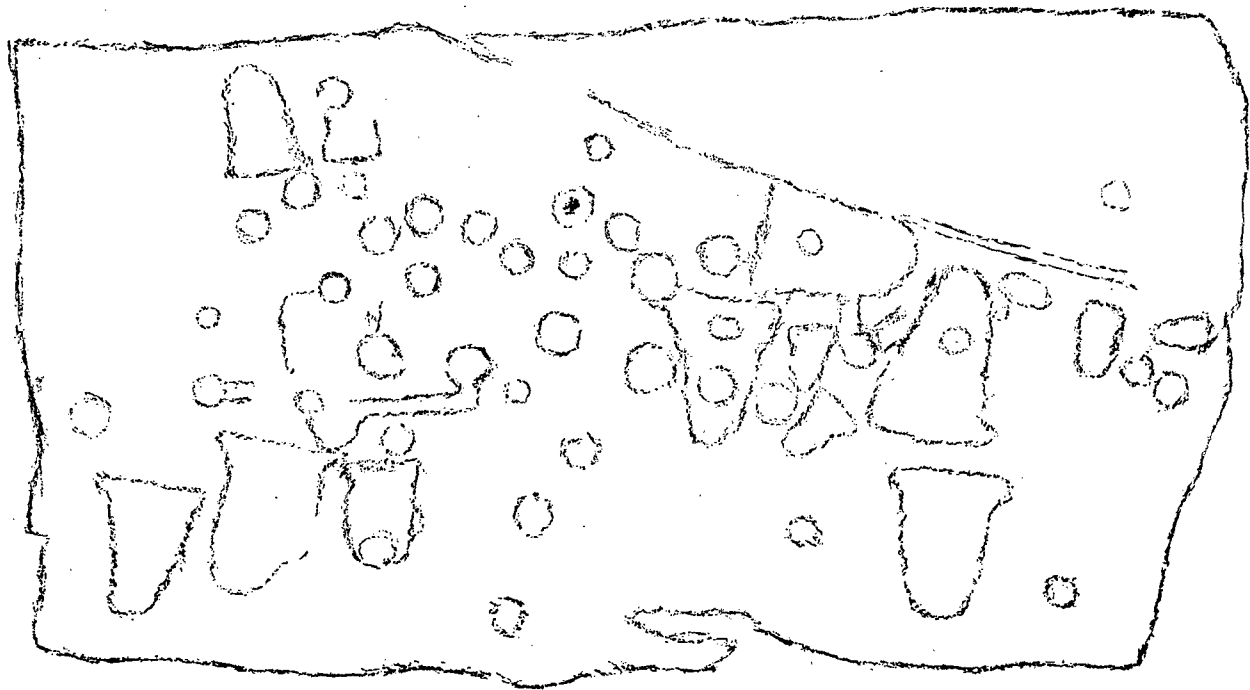


Fig. 4. Rubbing of Cist-cover. Scale, 1 inch = 1 foot.

molar tooth which lay at the west end and fell to pieces when it was lifted. The burial had evidently been inhumed.

At a distance of 7 feet 6 inches to the south of the cist lay a large slab about a foot below the surface of the ground. It measured 5 feet 6 inches by 3 feet 3 inches and was 10 inches thick, its axis being in alignment with that of the cist. This was probably the cover of a grave made without the use of slabs; the outline, however, could not be traced in the gravel beneath, and excavation failed to find any relics or the presence of charcoal or discoloured soil resulting from an interment. Over this slab was a covering of large stones; these were not flat slabs as in the case of the central cist, but were similar in character to, though



Fig. 5. Axe-heads on North End-slab.

much larger in size than, the stones of which the cairn was composed. This covering measured 15 feet east and west by 7 feet; its axis was thus at right angles to that of the slab, from the north end of which it fell short by about 1 foot 6 inches. Some of the large boulders along the south side of this covering seemed to have been placed in alignment as shown on the plan. On opposite sides of the southern end of the slab, and at a distance from it of about 5 feet, were two upright stones set in the ground. That to the east, at A (fig. 2), was a pointed slab (fig. 6), 3 feet in length by 1 foot 2 inches across the base; on its western face were two circles, one above the other, 7 inches in diameter and $1\frac{1}{4}$ inch apart.

To the north-east of the central cist, and at a distance of 4 feet from the low enclosing mound, was an oval grave measuring 5 feet by 2 feet 6 inches, having its axis parallel to the enclosing mound. It was 2 feet 9 inches in depth, and was filled with dark soil, in which were found fragments of charcoal and the molar tooth of an ox.

Immediately within the encircling mound, at the north side of the cairn and in alignment with the axis of the central cist, lay a flat

quadrangular slab, 2 feet 6 inches by 2 feet 3 inches; it had been placed on the original surface of the ground in a horizontal position, but bore no marking on either surface; neither was there any appearance of the ground beneath having been disturbed.

The finding of the carved slabs in this cairn is of unusual interest. The only other example of axe-head markings in Scotland is in a cist at Ri Cruin cairn,¹ less than a mile to the south-south-west of Nether Largie, and for other examples we have to go to Brittany. From the presence of such unusual features as these carvings and the grooved



Fig. 6. Slab with Incised Circles, *in situ*.

side-slabs above mentioned, we may conclude that the alignment of cairns in the Kilmartin valley belongs to one period early in the Bronze Age.² That burials at this time, however, were not confined to the floor of the valley is shown by the presence of a cist having grooved slabs on the top of a prominent eminence at the Lady's Seat to the north of Poltalloch.

Close to the opposite side of the road which runs past the cairn at Nether Largie, and at a distance of 40 yards west of the central cist, is an exposed rock surface (fig. 7), smoothed by glacial action. It slopes

¹ *Proc. Soc. Ant. Scot.*, vol. viii. p. 378 (1869-70). Mr L. M'L. Mann draws my attention to the fact that a slab with axe-markings from a barrow in Dorset is preserved in the British Museum. The slab has been described by Mr Callander in our *Proceedings*. See vol. xxxviii. p. 494 (1903-4).

² The segmented chamber in the south cairn at Nether Largie has of course an earlier origin.

gently to the north-east. Within an area measuring 28 by 21 inches are 13 cup-markings from $1\frac{1}{2}$ to 3 inches in diameter and less than $\frac{1}{2}$ inch in depth. One of these is placed on a natural vein or fissure in the rock, which may have been artificially widened for 4 or 5 inches where it leaves the cup.

II. CARNASSARIE CAIRN.

Rather over a mile to the north of Kilmartin village stands the fine sixteenth-century castle of Carnassarie; from the site can be had a

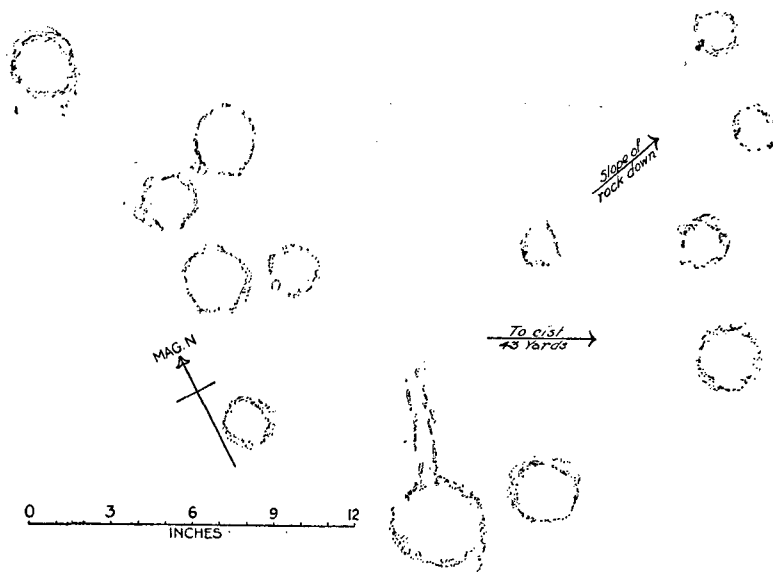


Fig. 7. Cup-markings on Rock Surface, Nether Largie.

commanding view down the Kilmartin valley towards Crinan Moss and the hills of Knapdale. Some 500 yards west of the ruin and at a higher elevation are two standing stones,¹ the position of which is shown on the Ordnance Survey map. In the summer of 1929 when visiting these stones, I went farther to examine an eminence shown on the map as Dun Macsamhainn, the name inviting investigation.² On this hill I found a Bronze Age cairn much damaged, and on the way to it from the standing stones, I found another cairn on a knoll 140 yards south of the stones, above which it stood about 50 feet.

¹ The south stone measures 8 feet 10 inches by 4 feet 1 inch by 1 foot 5 inches, and the north stone 8 feet 7 inches by 4 feet 10 inches by 1 foot 8 inches. They are 7 feet 9 inches apart.

² A later examination of the earlier edition of the Ordnance Survey map showed this site marked "Cairn."

This cairn is almost circular, measuring 93 feet east and west by 90 feet. Its height was 8 feet 3 inches. It had been much disturbed, and a large quantity of stones had been removed from it, probably for



Fig. 8. Carnassarie Cairn, from the west. The figures show the edges of the Cairn.

walls; the ruins of one of these, running close past the cairn, can be seen in the foreground in fig. 8. The stones were larger and more angular than those in the cairn at Nether Largie.

Work was begun here on 16th April with four men and was completed on 28th April, the cairn taking 37 days' work to excavate. Owing to its large area and the size of many of the stones, the material was not removed beyond the edge of the cairn, but was thrown back as the work progressed. A belt about 10 feet in width round the edge was not fully excavated, trenches 15 feet wide being cleared through it at the cardinal points. The remainder was excavated to the subsoil, which was of a red colour and easy to distinguish.

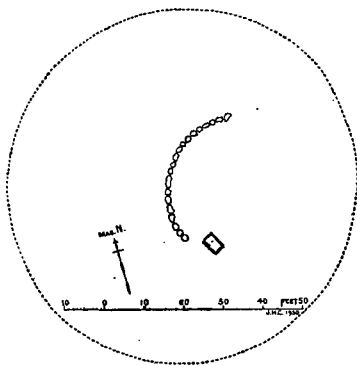


Fig. 9. Carnassarie Cairn.

There was no surrounding ring of boulders, but most of the area covered by the cairn had been paved with large boulders 15 to 18 inches in diameter, set close together. Although the central part was carefully examined, no cist was found there, nor had any cist been previously removed, as the paving had not been disturbed at this part.

Part of a ring of large boulders was traced (fig. 9), having its centre about 16 feet to the east of the centre of the cairn. This ring extended

3 feet beyond the centre of the cairn, and if complete would measure some 40 feet in diameter, reaching to within 10 feet of the edge of the cairn at its east side. The part of the ring that was traceable measured 40 feet in length and consisted of twenty boulders, the largest of which was 3 feet in length.¹

Only one cist was found. It lay within the ring of boulders, close to its south-west side, and some 14 feet south-south-east of the centre of the cairn. It measured 3 feet 11 inches by 2 feet 1 inch, and was 1 foot

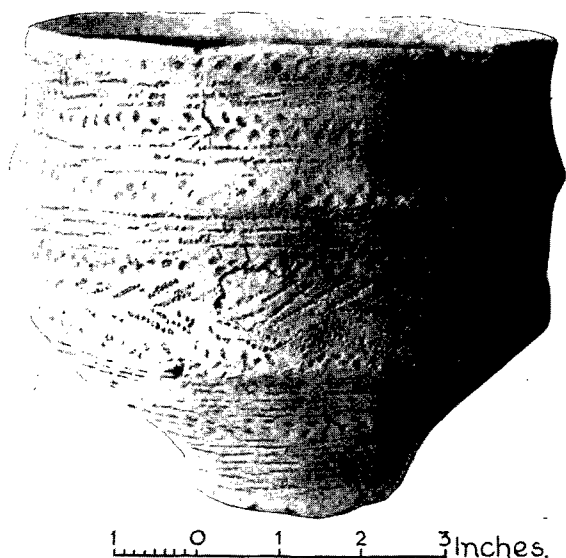


Fig. 10. Food-vessel from Carnassarie Cairn.

6 inches deep, the bottom being paved with 265 small water-worn stones. The north end-slab was placed between the side-slabs, which abutted against the slab at the south end. The west end-slab had been split and forced inwards by the superincumbent weight. The cover, which lay 1 foot beneath the surface, measured 6 feet 1 inch by 4 feet 6 inches by 8 inches. The axis of the cist pointed north-west (29° west of magnetic north). The cist was entirely filled with soil, and contained a food-vessel in good condition (fig. 10) and some charcoal and ochre. More charcoal

¹ In the Glebe cairn at Kilmartin, Canon Greenwell found a double ring of boulders which lay entirely to the south-west of a cist at the centre of the cairn (*Proc. Soc. Ant. Scot.*, vol. vi. p. 339 (1866)). At the centre of these rings was a cist with a bowl-shaped food-vessel and a jet necklace. The urn is in the Poltalloch collection in the National Museum, the necklace was destroyed in a fire at Poltalloch in 1893.

and a small piece of flint lay outside the cist; another fragment of flint was picked up in the north part of the cairn.

The urn lay on its side a little to the north of the middle of the cist. It is yellowish brown in colour, and measures $6\frac{1}{2}$ inches in height, but is slightly warped, being $\frac{1}{2}$ inch lower at one side. The diameter at the mouth is 7 inches, and at the base $2\frac{3}{4}$ inches. It is encircled by two mouldings, the upper being $1\frac{3}{4}$ inches below the rim and 2 inches above the lower moulding. The decoration consists of six encircling bands of zigzag ornament in false relief, formed by making a series of impressions with a flat, pointed tool with the point downwards, and below that another series with the point upwards. These bands are separated by

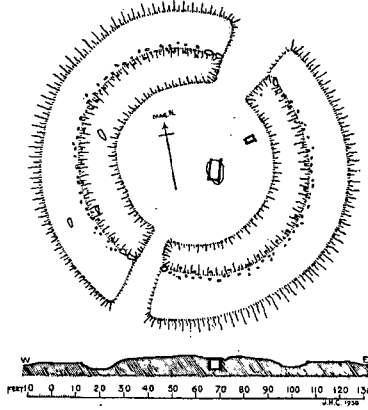


Fig. 11. Bell Cairn, Ballymeanoch.

horizontal lines (from three to six in number) of dotted impressions. Between the mouldings the dotted lines, instead of being horizontal, are arranged to form a series of chevrons pointing to the left. Immediately above the base a single series of impressions of the flat, pointed tool encircle the urn, and the lip is decorated with the false relief design. The same combination of these two forms of ornament was used on the urn found in the cist which adjoined that containing a jet necklace near Poltalloch in 1928, and on a fragment found at Dunadd in 1929.

III. BELL-CAIRN AT BALLYMEANOCH.

Canon Greenwell has described the examination of a bell-cairn lying 140 yards south of the pierced stone in the setting of standing stones at Ballymeanoch.¹ As no plan accompanied the description, and as the features still remain intact, the plan shown in fig. 11 has been prepared to supply the want.

¹ *Proc. Soc. Ant. Scot.*, vol. vi. p. 348 (1866).

The cairn is formed of earth and stones, and is much denuded (fig. 12). It is circular, measuring 72 feet in diameter and rather over 4 feet in height above the bottom of the trench which surrounds it. This trench is from 7 to 12 feet wide, and has on its outer slope a flat-topped mound 24 to 28 feet broad, 2 feet high internally, and about 1 foot externally. At the north-north-east and south-south-west sides a broad roadway crosses the trench, and numerous stones project from the inner face of the surrounding mound. The overall measurements are 138 feet.

Two cists are exposed. The larger lies about 8 feet east of the centre. It is unusually large. The north end-slab is gone, but the east side-slab measures no less than $9\frac{1}{2}$ feet in length, the west slab being 3 inches less. The width is 3 feet 1 inch at the south end and 2 feet 11 inches at

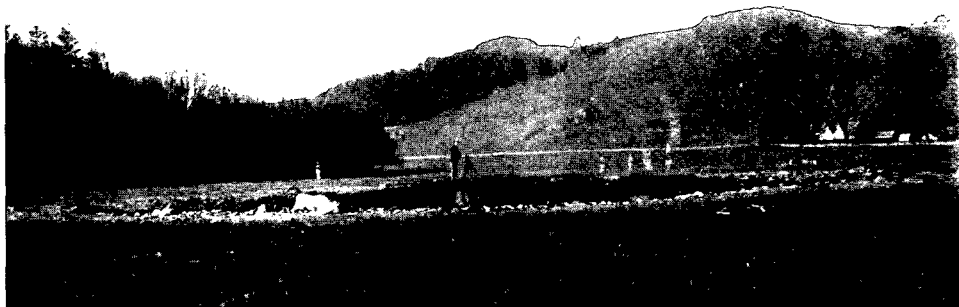


Fig. 12. Bell Cairn, Ballymeanoch, from the south. Standing Stones of Ballymeanoch beyond.

the north end. The axis points to the north (17° east of magnetic north). Ten feet to the north-north-east lies another and much smaller cist, the axis pointing east-north-east (78° east of magnetic north). The length is 3 feet 11 inches, and the width 1 foot 9 inches at the east end and 1 foot 7 inches at the west end. The cover has been removed.

The large cist had been rifled before being examined in 1864, the smaller one had also been opened, but parts of a beaker were found in it and human teeth.

A number of cists at Poltalloch are said to have been opened many years before the excavations of Canon Greenwell and Dean Mapleton by a factor called Gow. After his death the relics in his possession were removed from the district by his sister. Their subsequent fate is not known.

A striking feature of the monuments in the Poltalloch district is the great size of slabs used as standing stones, and as the covers and side-slabs of cists. At many places in the neighbourhood can be seen

outcrops of rock where such slabs could be got with little labour. One of the most striking of these is shown in fig. 13 at Torbhlaren Hill near Kilmichael Glassary. By the process of denudation the slabs stand out isolated from the face of rock, merely requiring to be broken off. Others



Fig. 13. Probable Quarry for Standing Stones, Torbhlaren Hill, Kilmichael Glassary.

that have fallen away lie ready for carrying off, on the steep slope below.

To Sir Ian Malcolm our thanks are due for carrying out the work, and for placing the urn and the inscribed slab in the Poltalloch Collection in our Museum. I should also like to record my indebtedness to Mr J. G. Mathieson, Factor at Poltalloch, for much help given in arranging for the excavations, and to Mr J. S. Richardson for the use of the photograph reproduced in fig. 12.