

## The excavation and reconstruction of the recumbent stone circle at Strichen, Aberdeenshire, 1979–82

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### ABSTRACT

*The Strichen monument had often been considered an anomaly with its recumbent stone and flankers apparently on the north side of a stone circle, rather than to the south or south-west as is usually the case with this class of monument. Although the site had been badly damaged by modern activities, the excavations were able to demonstrate that the recumbent and flankers originally lay on the southern side of a prehistoric stone circle. A sequence was revealed showing that a roundhouse-like structure and a timber circle had been constructed in the Early Iron Age inside an Early Bronze Age monument. This is probably not a unique occurrence; comparisons with other Early Bronze Age sites that were reused in the later Bronze and Iron Ages suggest that this may be part of a wider pattern in prehistoric Scotland. After the fieldwork was completed, the stones of the monument were re-erected in the sockets revealed by the excavation.*

### INTRODUCTION

The recumbent stone circles of north-east Scotland are a group of over 80 known monuments located mainly in the modern county of Aberdeenshire (illus 1). Their name is derived from the remarkable degree of uniformity in their design. A supine or ‘recumbent’ stone, guarded on each side by an upright flanking stone – the tallest in the ring – is positioned on the southern part of the circle’s perimeter. The remaining stones can number between seven and 11 and they diminish in size the further they stand away from the recumbent. The stones are graded taller towards the south. The recumbent was carefully positioned to provide an almost horizontal upper surface. Ruggles & Burl (1985) suggest that its alignment had a lunar association. Enclosed within the circle there may be a ring cairn or a low rubble platform cairn. This is often the case on Deeside and Donside. However, in Buchan,

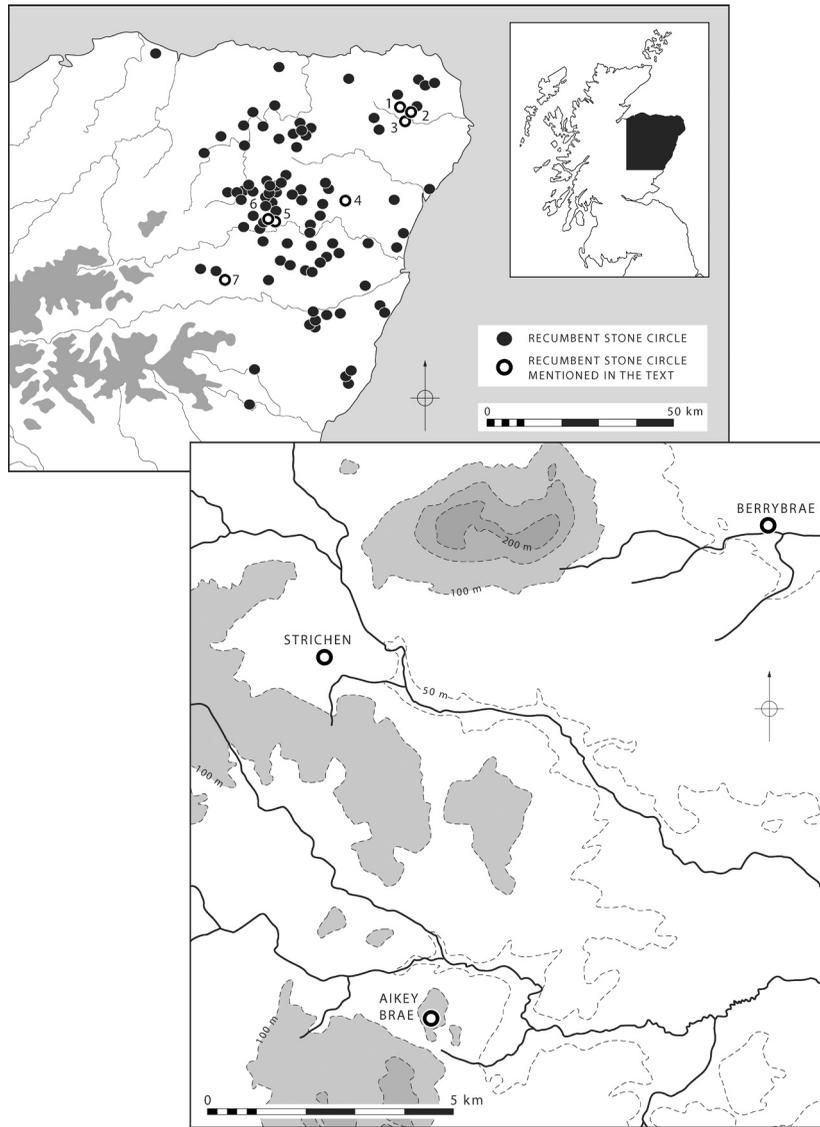
in the northern part of the county, the stones tend to be set in a low circular bank of earth and rubble enclosing an apparently stripped hollowed interior. At many of the excavated sites burning and sometimes small pieces of cremated human bone have been found in the centres of the monuments. Cupmarks may also be present, usually on the larger stones. Another embellishment was the sprinkling of white quartz chippings around the sites. Beaker and later prehistoric pottery have also been recovered (Coles 1902; Childe 1933; 1934; Kilbride-Jones 1935; Bradley 2005). Recent excavations by Bradley (*ibid*) at Tomnaverie in the Howe of Cromar, Deeside, have produced radiocarbon dates for the primary phase of that monument at around 2500–2400 BC.

Amongst the known recumbent stone circles, the site of Strichen in Buchan had always been seen as a possible exception to this general pattern. The site had been damaged

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ILLUS 1 The location of Strichen and other sites mentioned in the text: 1, Strichen; 2, Berrybrae; 3, Aikey Brae; 4, Loanhead of Daviot; 5, Cothiemuir Wood; 6, Old Keig; 7, Tomnaverie

on many occasions in historical times and the stones were finally removed in 1965, being unceremoniously dumped in a small hollow nearby. However, a survey by Thom in *c* 1962 (Thom et al 1980, 156) shows the recumbent and flankers still standing. Rather than being

set into a bank of rubble, they stand within the perimeter of a circular structure. More importantly, the recumbent and flankers lie on the northern side of the circle (see illus 20d). This is the opposite of every known example of this monument type.

## BACKGROUND TO THE EXCAVATION

In 1978 the Community Council of Strichen wrote to Aubrey Burl asking for his help in reconstructing the circle. Because an ad hoc reconstruction would have involved the disturbance of possible archaeological levels, he proposed that the site first be excavated in order to establish the nature of the surviving sub-surface deposits. The excavations and reconstruction of the stone circle took place seasonally between 1979 and 1982 and were funded by the Earthwatch Institute, who also provided the volunteer workforce. This report is based on the archive produced initially by Aubrey Burl and continued by the site directors Phil Abramson and Iain Hampshire-Monk. The archive is complete except for one important aspect. The finds were submitted for expert analysis after the excavation, but through no fault of the excavators, have since been lost. The information about the finds is taken from the descriptions in the written record.

The recumbent stone circle of Strichen (NJ 9367 5447) stands on a hilltop at an altitude of 85m (illus 1). It overlooks the ruins of Strichen House located in a valley to the south. On nearly all sides the land falls rapidly away, save for a small area to the north-west. However, even here the downward slope is resumed after a hundred metres or so. The aspect is open in all directions, offering extensive views to the north-west and south-east. To the north-east, Mormond Hill dominates the skyline, and to the south-west a small ridge, now covered by a forestry plantation, forms the horizon. The underlying rock is granite. This yields a soil in the Foudland series, a leached and depleted forest brown earth. Today the field in which the monument stands is coarse pasture, but within historical time it has been afforested, ploughed and possibly a grassed golf course. The soil at Strichen has been complicated by the introduction of manure and soils from the House and main estate of Strichen in the valley to the south of the site. These soils possibly belong to a different series, the Fisherford soils.

## PHASING OF THE SITE

### PHASE 1 – STONE PHASE

A recumbent stone circle was constructed with the recumbent stone and flankers on the southern side of the monument, as is usual for recumbent stone circles. The monoliths of the stone circle were set in a rubble bank. Two stone-lined graves are associated with this phase.

### PHASE 2A – TIMBER PHASE

A post circle was erected inside the monument around one of the stone-lined graves, but not at the exact centre of the stone circle.

### PHASE 2B – TIMBER PHASE

A roundhouse was constructed within the site. This probably dates to the Early Iron Age.

### PHASE 3 – MODERN REWORKING OF THE SITE

The site was heavily reworked, probably from the 18th to 20th centuries, leading to its incorrect reconstruction. This involved the removal of most of the stones in the circle and the creation of a circular bank to the south of the recumbent stone and flankers. Eventually all the standing stones were removed and deposited in a small hollow to the south-east of the site.

### PHASE 4 – MODERN RECONSTRUCTION

Immediately after the excavation, the stones were re-erected in the original positions and the rubble bank re-instated.

## THE EXCAVATION TO THE SOUTH OF THE SITE OF THE RECUMBENT AND FLANKERS

Initially, the main thrust of the excavation was to identify the authenticity of the bank and to locate any sockets for the stones of the destroyed circle. Two sondages were opened to investigate the nature of the bank which was visible as a circular earthwork.

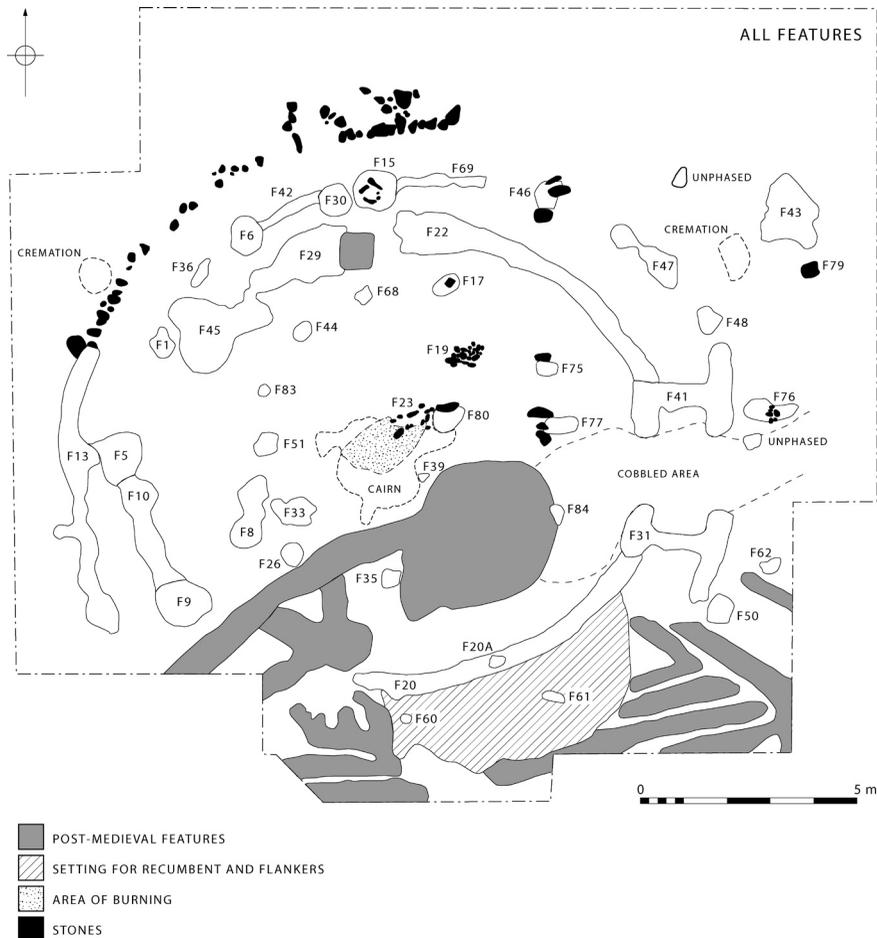
Although some worked flint was recovered, including a transverse arrowhead, these were all residual finds. The greater numbers of artefacts were 19th-century glazed pottery sherds, bottle glass and pieces of drainage pipe, some within the structure of the bank itself. The bank was made up of a core of stones and rubble, with turves stacked over the top. It did not have a kerb. It had been constructed on top of a cultivated soil layer and, in one section, overlay a field drain. This clearly demonstrated that it was a fairly modern feature. It had been constructed on an area that had been levelled with imported soil. Given the large numbers of pieces of bottle glass, it was probably a popular picnic spot in the 19th century.

The excavations to the south of the site where the recumbent and flankers had stood clearly demonstrated

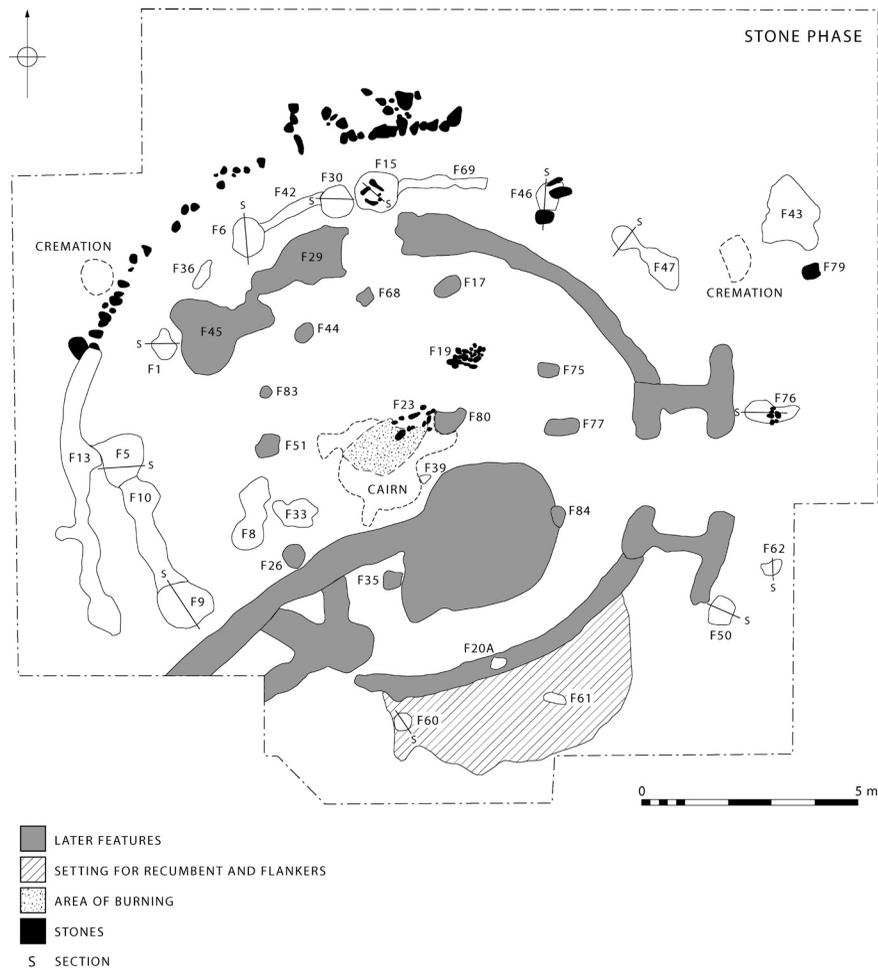
that a prehistoric stone circle had not been constructed on this side of them. The features visible on the ground and in earlier plans were landscaping features most likely dating from the early 19th century when several of the stones of the original circle (although not the recumbent and flankers) were re-erected. It now seemed feasible that Strichen was not an exception to the pattern of the recumbent stone being placed on the south side of a stone circle. In the light of this, an area to the north of the visible bank was opened and a number of prehistoric features were identified (illus 2).

THE STONE PHASE (ILLUS 3)

The features dating to this phase can be described separately: the prehistoric bank, the stone sockets,



ILLUS 2 All features, excavation plan



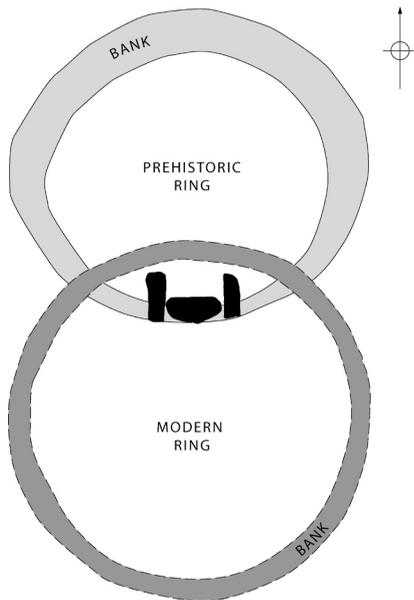
ILLUS 3 Stone phase features, excavation plan (see illus 2 for other later features)

the setting for the recumbent and flankers and the central area.

THE PREHISTORIC BANK

In plan, the prehistoric bank appeared as a large arc of spread rubble across the northern half of the site. In some areas it could be seen as a slight rise in the section. In the southern half, little was visible. The modern bank cut through this part of the monument and there were signs of other modern disturbance. The prehistoric and modern circles lay almost at a tangent to each other, the shared area was where the recumbent and flankers had stood (illus 4). On the outside edge of the bank's north-west quadrant, horizontal slabs had

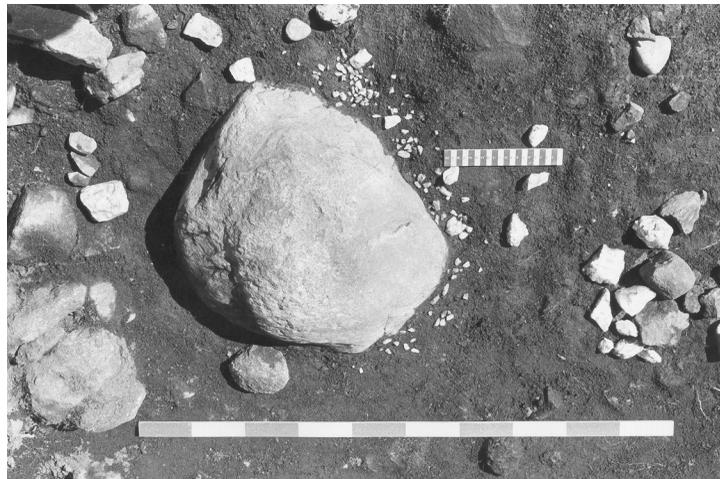
been set in a shallow gully measuring 0.25m wide and 0.10m to 0.15m deep in this part of the monument. The slabs measured up to 0.50m or more in length by 0.20–0.30m in height when set on their sides. These survived in situ only on the outer edge of the bank and, when set in the gully, were not of a size to act as a retaining wall. Instead, they may have been a 'foundation' kerb marking the line of the bank. Similar gullies, but without kerbstones, were visible on the western edge of the bank (F10, F13) and its inner line to the north (F36, F42, F69). The soil beneath the bank had not been stripped prior to its construction. However, the prehistoric surface in the centre of the monument had apparently been removed. Dark greasy patches between the stones in the bank suggest that



ILLUS 4 Schematic drawing of the tangential arrangement of the prehistoric and modern rings

stripped turves from the central area had been used to make up the bulk of the bank. The effect of this would have been a hollowed out interior of yellow subsoil lower than the surrounding area. A sherd of Beaker pottery was found amongst the disturbed bank material. Another Beaker sherd and a barbed and tanged arrowhead were found nearby outside the line of the original bank.

The spread of bank material contained a large amount of flaked and shattered pieces of quartz. A quartz count across the whole site revealed concentrations to the north and south-east on the general line of the bank. To the north-east, on the outer edge of the bank, was a naturally set stone with a heavily abraded apex (F79, illus 5). Numerous quartz chips surrounded its base and a hammerstone was found to one side of it. The irresistible conclusion is that this was the stone upon which the quartz was broken up before being distributed around the site. Close to this stone the bank was heavily



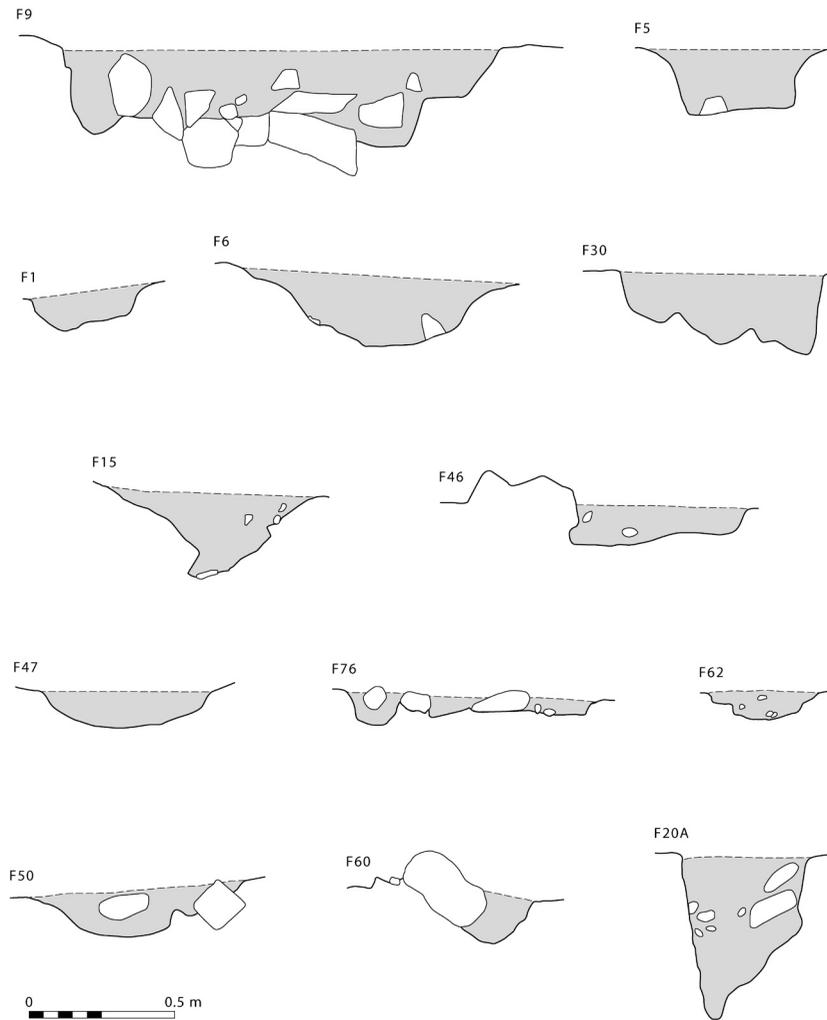
ILLUS 5 The anvil stone (F79) and associated quartz chips

disturbed where it appeared to have been dug into in prehistory. The disturbed area was distinct from the stony material of the bank around it. Next to this, on the outside edge of the monument, was a pile of upcast lying on the prehistoric land surface (F43). This may have come from the bank when the hole was dug into it. Amongst a spread of charcoal in the disturbed area of the bank was a concentration of cremated human bone and six pottery sherds described as 'coarse prehistoric urn'. The cremated bone has been lost, but examination suggested that it represented the remains of an adult female (K Manchester, pers comm). A bulk sample of *Alnus* charcoal from the base of this deposit gave a radiocarbon date of  $3390 \pm 130$ BP (BM-2316R). This gives a *terminus ante quem* for the construction of the bank in the later Early Bronze Age. A second radiocarbon determination yielded a date of  $2650 \pm 160$ BP (HAR-4301); this is in the Late Bronze Age or Early Iron Age. The (bulk?) sample is labelled as 'Charcoal/Soil' and its exact context is unclear. A letter from the Harwell Laboratory comments:

The error term quoted on the measurement is rather large but this is because the sample was small, you will remember all the problems we had with its treatment.

#### THE STONE SOCKETS (ILLUS 6)

Based on their location and the nature of their fills, some 14 features were identified as possible stone sockets. The upper fill was a mixture of topsoil



ILLUS 6 Excavated stone hole sections

with a cultivated soil of the Fisherford series. This was probably introduced in the 18th century. This mix of soils would have filled the upper parts of the sockets when the stones were removed. The lower fill consisted of a ‘packing’ of the local clay. In some cases, stones had been jammed into the sides and bases of the features. Sometimes larger packing stones had been set at an angle within the sockets. On site, the fills assigned to this phase were described as a ‘light chestnut colour’. Some of the features described here were most certainly stone holes, whilst others

can only be designated as ‘possible’ examples, and not all these features were used in the re-erection of the stone circle which took place after the excavation. What they all have in common are their fillings and that they lie on the line of the inner kerb of the bank.

#### *Feature 9*

In section this feature is a wide (1.50m diameter at its top and 1.20m at its base) and shallow stone-filled and clay-lined hole 0.30m deep. Angular packing stones had been pressed into its base and sides.

*Feature 5*

This feature was joined to F9 by a shallow gully which was probably the setting for the inner kerb of the bank. Indeed, in plan it appears to be more a continuation of this gully than an actual stone hole. However, the lower fill consisted of clay and stones were jammed into its sides. It was 0.50m wide at its top and 0.35m at its base, being 0.20m deep.

*Feature 1*

This example was only 0.30m in diameter at its top and 0.25m at its base and was also relatively shallow, 0.13m. Although it had a lower fill of clay, actual packing stones were not present. It does lie on the line of the bank's inner kerb, but can only be described as a 'possible' stone hole.



ILLUS 7 Excavated stone hole (F6) showing packing stones around its lip

*Feature 6 (illus 7)*

This was a large feature about 1.0m in diameter and 0.25m deep. A ring of packing stones had been set around its upper edge and sides, and smaller stones were pressed into the packing clay in its base. The site notebook comments on this feature: 'F42 appears [to be] part of a gully [kerb trench] running into F6, some of the filling of F6 remained, and must have been compacted into the side [of F42] by whatever F6 held.' This suggests that the two features may have been contemporary and perhaps indicates that the rubble bank and the stone circle were a unitary construction.

*Feature 30*

This enigmatic feature was probably not a stone hole. It was located next to F15, which is a more certain candidate, but it does lie on the line of the inner kerb of the bank and its lower fill of clay was consistent with the other features assigned to this phase. It was a shallow oval depression less than 1.0m across and 0.25m deep. There were lumps of the local clay in its base, but no evidence for packing stones.

*Feature 15*

This stone- and clay-lined hole was shaped to fit an orthostat with a protruding base. Some of the packing stones had been set at an angle in its sides and others were pressed into the clay filling in its base. It was 0.50m across and 0.25m deep. The area around the stone hole had been extensively disturbed.

*Feature 46*

Displaced packing (?) stones lay around the edges of this oval feature measuring 0.50m across and 0.15m deep. It was very shallow, but its base was lined with clay.

*Feature 47*

This relatively shallow feature was about 0.50m in diameter and 0.15m deep. Its stone-packed lower filling, including clay, makes it a strong candidate as a stone hole.

*Feature 76*

This feature measured 0.30m by 0.20m and was 0.15m deep. It contained a lining of clay and some displaced packing stones. An area of disturbance was identified on its eastern side including more possible displaced packing stones.

*Feature 62*

Measuring 0.20m in diameter and less than 0.10m deep, this circular feature contained topsoil and loose clay. It can only be described as a 'possible' example.

*Feature 50*

Located on the south-eastern side of the monument, this feature contained a lining of clay and displaced packing stones. It measured 0.80m wide at its top, 0.50m at its base and was 0.20m deep.

*Feature 61*

The socket for the east flanker survived only as an oval soil stain measuring 0.50m by 0.30m.

*Feature 60*

The socket for the west flanker had a large displaced packing stone on one side of it. Circular in shape, it measured 0.40m across and 0.20m deep.

*Feature 20A*

Another stone hole was found directly in front of the location of the recumbent stone. It was discovered in the base of the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age wall trench (F20) which is described in the next section. It was overlain by the fill of that feature. Beneath the structure trench it was 0.55m deep and 0.40m wide at its top. The side by the recumbent stone was vertical and the other side curved down to form a pointed base. It contained a number of displaced packing stones.

#### SETTING FOR THE RECUMBENT AND FLANKERS (ILLUS 8)

This was a semi-circular feature located on the south side of the monument in the area enclosed by both the prehistoric and modern banks. It consisted of a heavily compacted area of clay mixed with rubble. Post-medieval spade furrows could be seen in the excavated area on its southern side. Similar semi-circular features on which the recumbent and flanker stones were set can be seen in surface evidence at other recumbent stone circles (Burl 2000, chapter 12). The survival of the feature lends weight to the argument that these stones remained undisturbed up until 1965, despite the destruction of the rest of the monument.

## CENTRAL FEATURES

*Central cairn (illus 9)*

Within the stone circle there had been a low rubble cairn, but it was not possible to trace the full extent of this feature as it had been extensively damaged. It survived best as an approximately 2m diameter spread in the centre of the circle, but even here the upper stones showed signs of plough damage. Apart from this modern disturbance, this spread of cairn material may also have been damaged by later prehistoric activity on the site. Two layers of stones were observed, with a reworked prehistoric soil mixed in with the upper layer. These stones were described as being 'egg-sized'. The lower layer consisted of larger stones and several of these were burnt, as was an area of the stripped prehistoric land surface about 1m diameter in the exact centre of the monument.

*Graves*

These very disturbed features are best described as 'stone-lined' graves rather than cists, as their sides had been constructed from several stones rather than from single slabs. They were both severely damaged and any capstones were missing. The first of them (F23) was located north of the centre of the circle on the edge of the burnt area (illus 10). It was uncertain whether it lay beneath the central cairn or had been cut through this material. Its fill was a mixture of the local clay and topsoil. It contained patches of charcoal and small pieces of cremated bone. A sherd of Beaker pottery was reported as being found in a disturbed area to one side of this feature.



ILLUS 8 The setting for the recumbent and flanker stones



ILLUS 9 The remains of the central cairn

A second possible grave (F19) was located in the north-eastern quadrant of the circle's interior. It was very similar in construction to the other example and its fill was also the same. Two pottery sherds were recovered from this feature. One was modern, but the other was described at the time of the excavation as 'Neolithic'.

#### *Other internal features*

A number of other miscellaneous features within the stone circle were recognized which can be assigned to the stone phase by the nature of their fills. On the south-eastern side of the central burnt area was a small circular feature (F39). This contained a small amount of charcoal and cremated bone. In the south-western quadrant of the internal area there was a 'scoop' about 1.0m in diameter and 0.10m deep (F33). Next to this there was a line of three interconnecting holes (F8). The central hole was shallow, 0.20m, whilst the other two were over 0.50m and 0.80m deep. These were stone-lined and had a clay packing. A waste flint flake was recovered from the filling of one of these features. The exact purpose and function of these features is uncertain.

#### THE TIMBER PHASE (ILLUS 11)

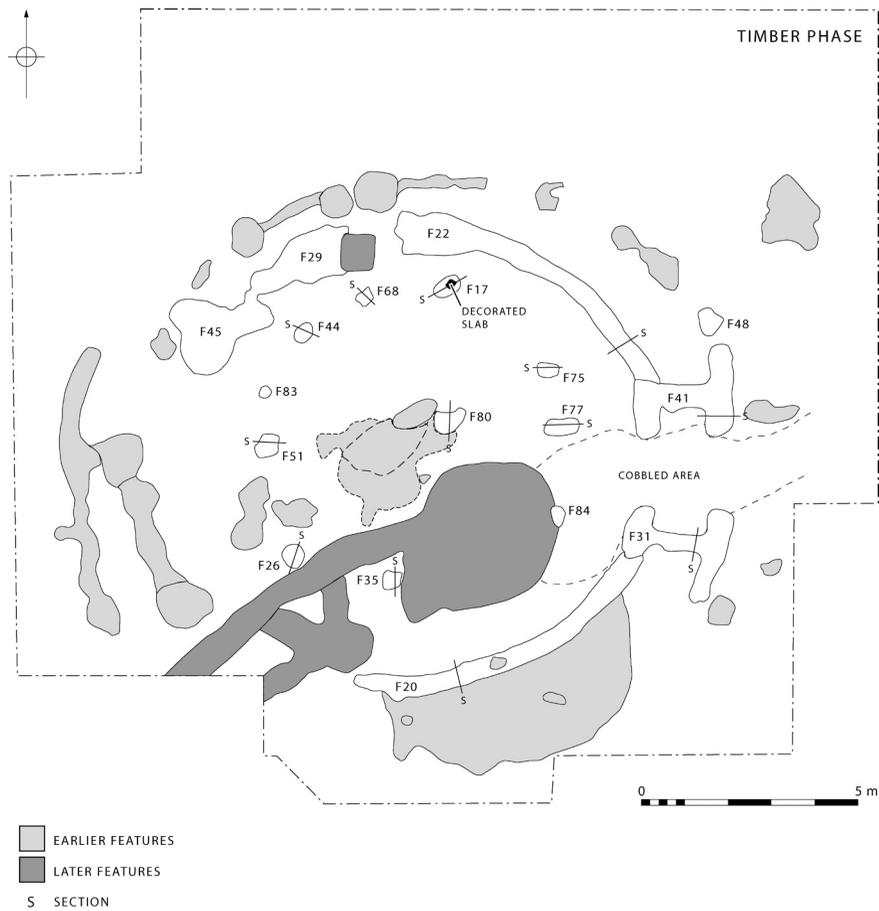
This phase is defined by a different filling of the features, as opposed to those already described. On-site it was described as a 'dark humic soil'.

This evidence is supplemented by two radiocarbon dates and the observed stratigraphic relationships. The timber phase consists of two main structural elements: a post circle and the wall trench of a possible roundhouse. As these were not concentric with each other it seems more likely that they were separate phases rather than a unitary structure. Other roundhouses have internal circles of post supports (Harding 2004, fig 2.5), but Rachel Pope has commented that at Strichen she 'would be happy with the interpretation that the two timber rings are not contemporary' (pers comm). There was also one

miscellaneous external feature that has been assigned to this phase on the basis of its fill.



ILLUS 10 Stone-lined grave (F23)



ILLUS 11 Timber phase features, excavation plan (see illus 2 for other later features)

TIMBER CIRCLE (ILLUS 12)

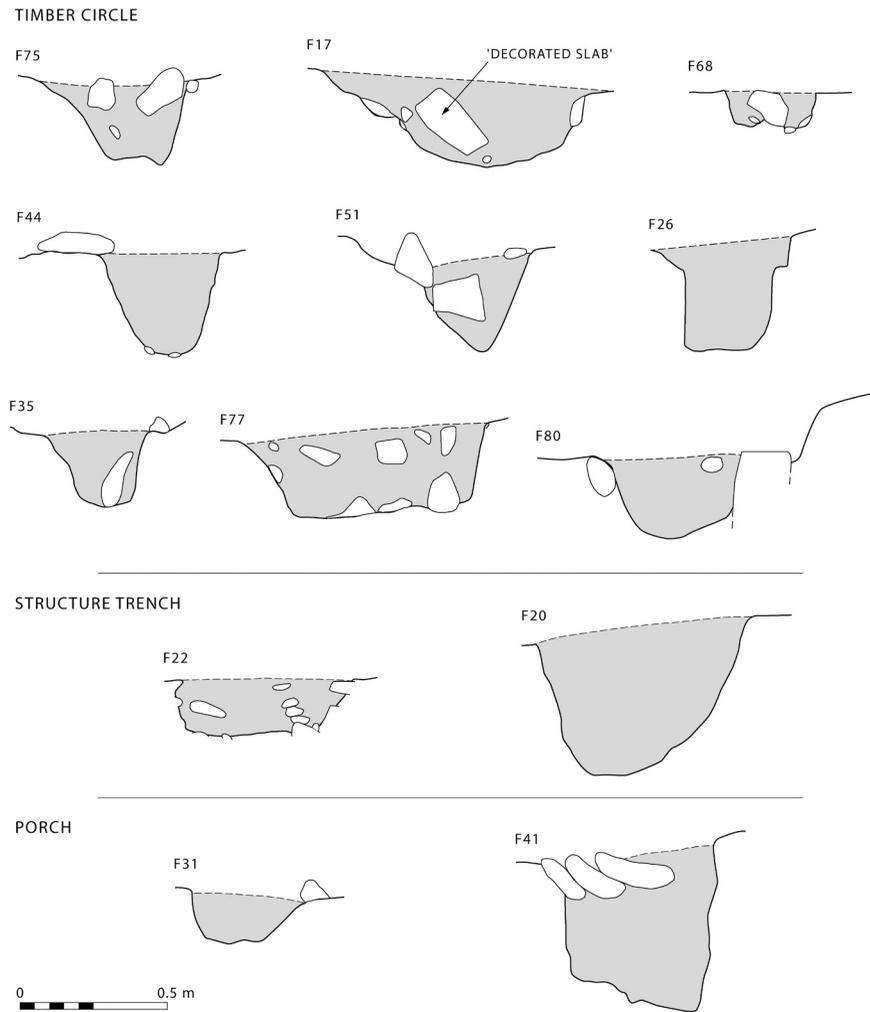
Inside the stone circle was a post circle of eight extant post-holes and one central post-hole. It is possible that one further post-hole existed on the south-eastern side, but this area had been heavily disturbed by post-medieval activity. The circle was slightly flattened on its eastern and western sides. It is not at the exact centre of the megalithic ring, but is slightly offset to the north. It orientates itself around one of the graves (F23). Moreover, the central post-hole is not in the middle of the circle, but offset from the centre at the eastern end of the grave. It was not possible to ascertain the exact relationship between these two features. Displaced stones around the lips of some of the post-holes and the 'slumping' of the filling suggest that the posts had been pulled out rather than left to rot in situ.

*Feature 75*

This post-hole was 0.25m deep and 0.45m wide at its top and 0.20m at its base. It had one vertical side, whilst the other sloped gently outwards. Displaced packing stones were present in the top of its filling.

*Feature 17 (illus 13)*

This feature was U-shaped in section, being 0.40m deep, 0.80m wide at its top and 0.45m at its base. Displaced stones lay around its lip and the hole itself was stone-lined. One of these packing stones was a cup-and-ringmarked slab measuring 0.30m by 0.25m. This had slipped down the edge of the post-hole, possibly when the post was removed. The decoration



ILLUS 12 Excavated timber phase features sections. (a) Timber circle post-holes; (b) Built structure trench; (c) Built structure porch

was weathered which indicates that the stone had been reused. This slab of 'local granite' appears to have been broken and it resembled a broken cist cover. It is uncertain whether it would have been long enough to have covered the central grave, but it was certainly of a size to span its width. Although the post circle set up an east/west alignment, this feature and its contents retained some elements of the stone circle's original north/south alignment. The post-hole is directly opposite the recumbent stone in line with the central post-hole (F80) and the stone hole in front

of the recumbent stone (F22A). The decorated slab also faced the recumbent stone. Indeed, as the central post-hole (F80) impinges on one of the graves (F23), this may be the context in which the decorated slab was appropriated.

#### *Feature 68*

Displaced packing stones lay around the upper edge of this U-shaped feature and a large stone was present in its base. It was 0.10m deep and 0.30m wide.

*Feature 44*

This post-hole was U-shaped with a flat base. It was 0.40m deep, 0.40m wide at its top and 0.15m at its base. Small stones were pressed into its base and a large stone lay on one side of its lip.

*Feature 83*

This small post-hole was 0.25m in diameter and contained a fill of dark humic soil.

*Feature 51*

This V-shaped hole was 0.30m deep and 0.40m wide at its top. Displaced stones lay around its lip and packing stones were pressed into its sides.

*Feature 26*

Small stones were mixed in with the fill of this post-hole and it was defined by small stones pressed into its sides and base. It had vertical sides, resembling a small post-pipe, and was 0.35m deep, 0.40m wide at its top and 0.25cm at its base.

*Feature 35*

In plan this feature had a rectangular shape measuring 0.30m by 0.20m and was 0.25cm deep. It had sloping sides and a flat base. Its fill contained a number of stones. A 'prehistoric' sherd was reported as coming from the fill of this feature, but it has been lost.

*Feature 84*

This oval post-hole measuring 0.50m by 0.30m lay on the edge of a large area of post-medieval disturbance. It contained a dark humic soil fill.

*Feature 77*

This post-hole was on the eastern side of the circle and its size and shape was distinct from the other examples. In plan it was oval in shape measuring 0.80m by 0.40m and 0.30m deep. Its filling contained a number of small stones.



ILLUS 13 Post-hole (F17) showing broken decorated slab reused as a packing stone

*Feature 80*

This stone-lined post-hole was inside the post circle, but not at its exact centre. It had been dug at the eastern end of the grave. It was U-shaped, 0.25m deep and 0.60m wide at its top.

## WALL TRENCH (ILLUS 12)

The wall trench was observed in four areas. In the north-east (F22) and south-east sectors (F20) it survived in its entirety. In the north-west sector (F29, F45) it could be identified, but as an archaeological feature it had been extensively disturbed, probably by later tree planting. On its eastern side, the building's entrance porch was very well preserved (F31, F41). Evidence for the foundation trench was not found in the south-western sector, but this area had suffered most from modern disturbance. The trench fitted neatly inside the rubble bank of the stone circle. It formed a circular structure that would have been 10.5m in diameter. It was between 0.40m and 0.50m wide along most of its length and 0.15–0.30m deep. In parts of its base, slabs had been placed vertically in pairs, presumably as chocking stones to hold the basal planks of a building in place (illus 14). These may have been reused from the inner foundation kerb of the rubble bank. Slabs of this kerb were only found in an undisturbed condition on the outside edge of the north-western sector of the bank and slabs were not found in any other parts of the site. Because the slabs in the built



ILLUS 14 Wall trench (F20) showing in situ slabs used to hold planking in place

structure trench had not been disturbed, it appears that it had rotted in situ.

The 'porch' was 3.0m wide and 2.0m deep. The dimensions of its foundation trench were similar to those of the main parts of the structure already described (illus 12). The surface of the entrance porch consisted of a floor of 'worn cobbling' (illus 15). This spread into the interior of the structure, but its full extent in this area could not be ascertained as it had been partially destroyed by modern disturbance. It also spread outside the entrance porch. It is uncertain whether the rubble bank had been levelled at this time to allow access to the building. Stones displaced from the bank did lie on top of part of the cobbling in this area, but this may have been the result of the later disturbance and destruction of the bank feature.

A bulk sample of *Alnus* charcoal from the base of the foundation trench in the north-eastern sector yielded a radiocarbon date of  $2460 \pm 130$ BP (BM-2315R). A similar sample from the same context in the north-western sector produced a date of  $2370 \pm 130$ BP (BM-2317R). These dates could relate either to the initial construction or the final destruction of the

building. As the dates lie along the 'plateau' of the calibration curve, the event they record would be somewhere in the Late Bronze Age or Early Iron Age. A palaeoenvironmental assessment of soil samples taken from various levels of the gully (F22) suggested a slightly drier environment than at present, with no sedges but some heather (M Bastow, pers comm).

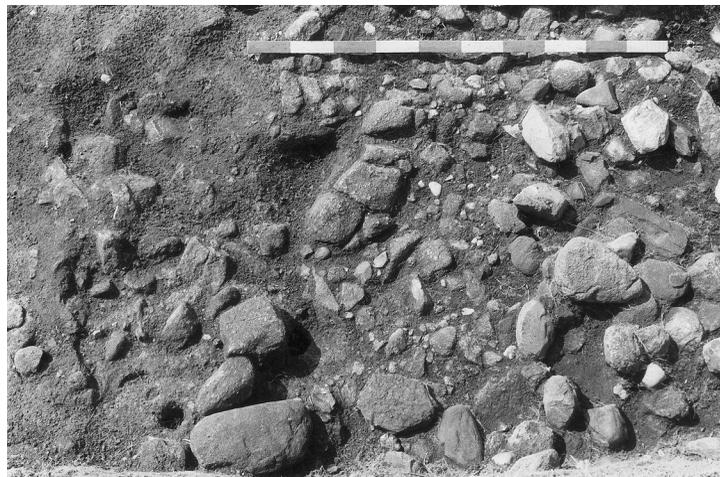
#### EXTERNAL FEATURE

Outside the entrance to the building was a post-hole, or scoop-like, feature (F48). Its fill was similar to the other features assigned to the timber

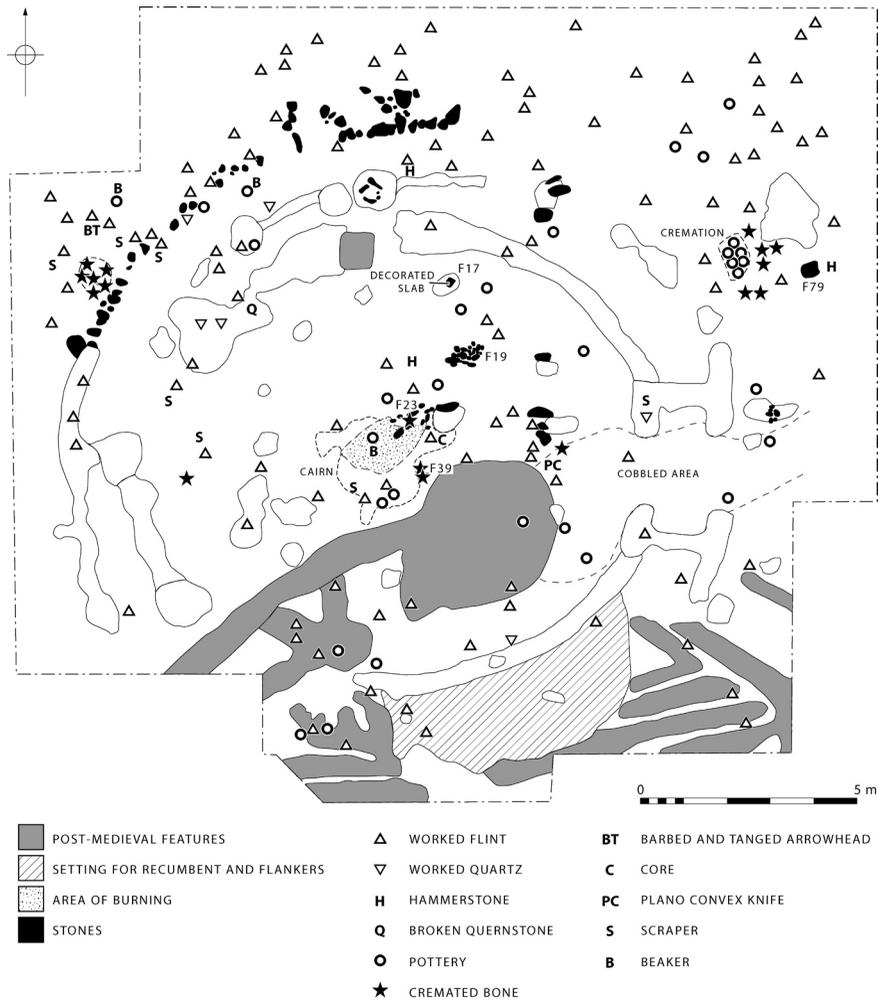
phase, but its exact nature or function cannot be ascertained.

#### ARTEFACTS (ILLUS 16)

As has been already noted, most of the artefacts from the excavation have been lost, although the cupmarked slab is thought to be housed in the village of Strichen. Most of the finds were from residual contexts, exclusively so in relation to the features assigned to the timber phase. Plotting their



ILLUS 15 Cobbled surface in the porch of the built structure



ILLUS 16 The distribution of artefacts

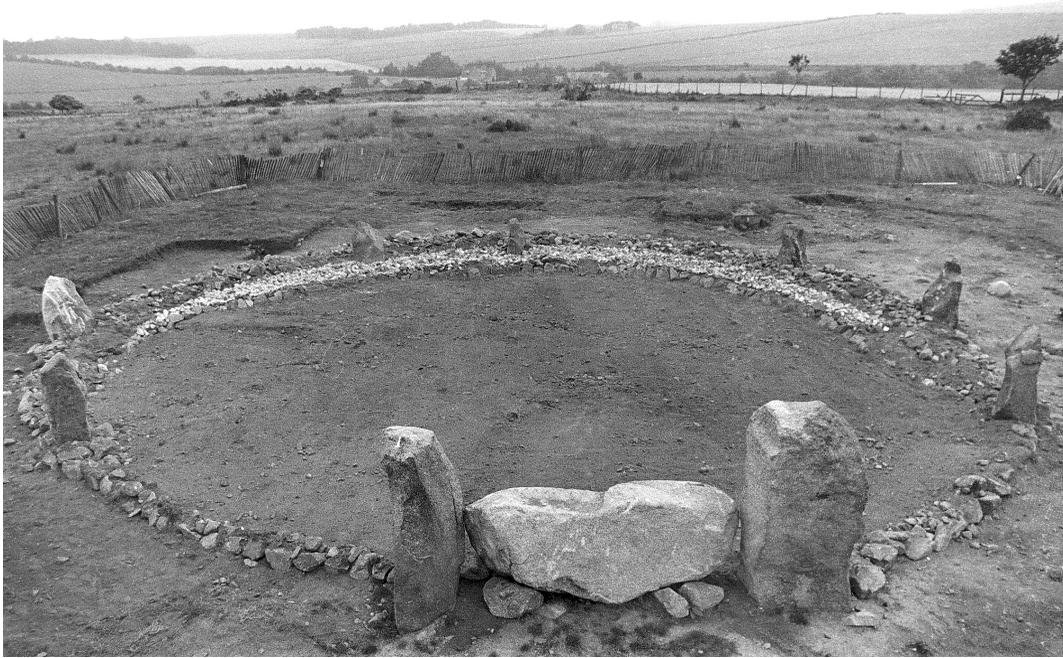
locations, using the details and descriptions in the site notebooks, there appears to be a greater concentration of material on the northern side of the monument opposite the recumbent stone. A similar pattern was noted in Bradley’s (2005) excavations at Tomnaverie and Cothiemuir Wood.

Three sherds of Beaker pottery were recovered. One came from amongst the disturbed bank material in the north-west sector, another was close by outside the bank and a third was found in a disturbed area beside the central grave (F23). A sherd of ‘Neolithic’ pottery reportedly came from the other grave (F19). The pottery from the cremation dug into the north-eastern sector of the rubble bank

was described as a ‘coarse prehistoric urn’. It is not possible to date that excavated material from this description alone.

There was one sherd of pottery in the archive. This came from a disturbed area outside the northern part of the building’s porch. Alison Sheridan has described this as:

... not especially diagnostic, but certainly well within the range (thickness and coarseness) of the flat-rimmed pottery seen at other Recumbent Stone Circles as secondary deposits, potentially (?late 2nd)/early 1st millennium BC. Although this cannot rule out the possibility of it being



ILLUS 17 The reconstructed recumbent stone circle, looking north

from an earlier kind of urn, such as a Cordoned or Collared urn, making it a tentative LBA attribution.

A barbed and tanged arrowhead was recovered from outside the rubble bank in the north-western sector, part of a plano-convex knife from the 'cobbled' area and a flint core from the central area of burning. These have all been lost. Four worked quartz flakes, one possibly worked chunk of crystal quartz and one flint flake, along with two small pieces of medieval glazed pottery, remained in the archive. These were all from residual contexts.

On the outside edge of the rubble bank in its north-western sector was a discrete scatter of six pieces of cremated bone. Its location almost mirrors that of the cremation found in the north-eastern sector, although that deposit had been inserted into the bank itself. No burnt material was reported as being recovered from the north-western sector, but two residual sherds of Beaker pottery and a barbed and tanged arrowhead were found nearby. If there had been a cremation burial here, it has been severely truncated.

#### THE RECONSTRUCTION OF THE STONE CIRCLE (ILLUS 17 & 18)

The original objective of the excavation was to locate prehistoric sub-surface features so that the stone circle could be re-erected and immediately after the excavation this was carried out by members of the project team. The circular bank of earth and rubble was reconstructed using the dispersed material found in the excavation. The pieces of chipped and shattered quartz were spread across the surface of the bank, especially on its northern side. The recumbent and flankers were brought to and re-erected at the site using heavy machinery. The other stones were transported and raised using more 'traditional' methods. Wooden rollers were used to return them to the site and they were lifted into position using ropes and levers (illus 19). The recumbent and flankers were placed in the positions on the south side of the monument that had been identified in the excavation. The other stones were re-erected in some of the stone holes recognized in the excavation: Features 9, 5, 6, 15, 47, 76, 50, 61 and 60.

TABLE 1  
Radiocarbon dates

| <i>Lab no</i> | <i>Sample</i>   | <i>Years BP</i> | <i>1-sigma date<br/>(cal BC)</i> | <i>2-sigma date<br/>(cal BC)</i> | $\delta^{13}C\%$ |
|---------------|---|-----------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|------------------|
| BM-2315R      | Base of built structure trench (F22)<br>Bulk sample of alder charcoal                                       | 2460 $\pm$ 130  | 600–400                          | 900–200                          | Unknown          |
| BM-2316R      | Base of disturbance in rubble bank<br>Where a cremation had been inserted:<br>bulk sample of alder charcoal | 3390 $\pm$ 130  | 1780–1520                        | 2050–1400                        | Unknown          |
| BM-2317R      | Base of built structure trench (F29)<br>Bulk sample of alder charcoal                                       | 2370 $\pm$ 130  | 800–350                          | 800–150                          | Unknown          |
| HAR-4301      | Within disturbance in rubble bank<br>Where a cremation had been inserted:<br>bulk sample of 'charcoal/soil' | 2650 $\pm$ 160  | 1000–750                         | 1300–350                         | Unknown          |



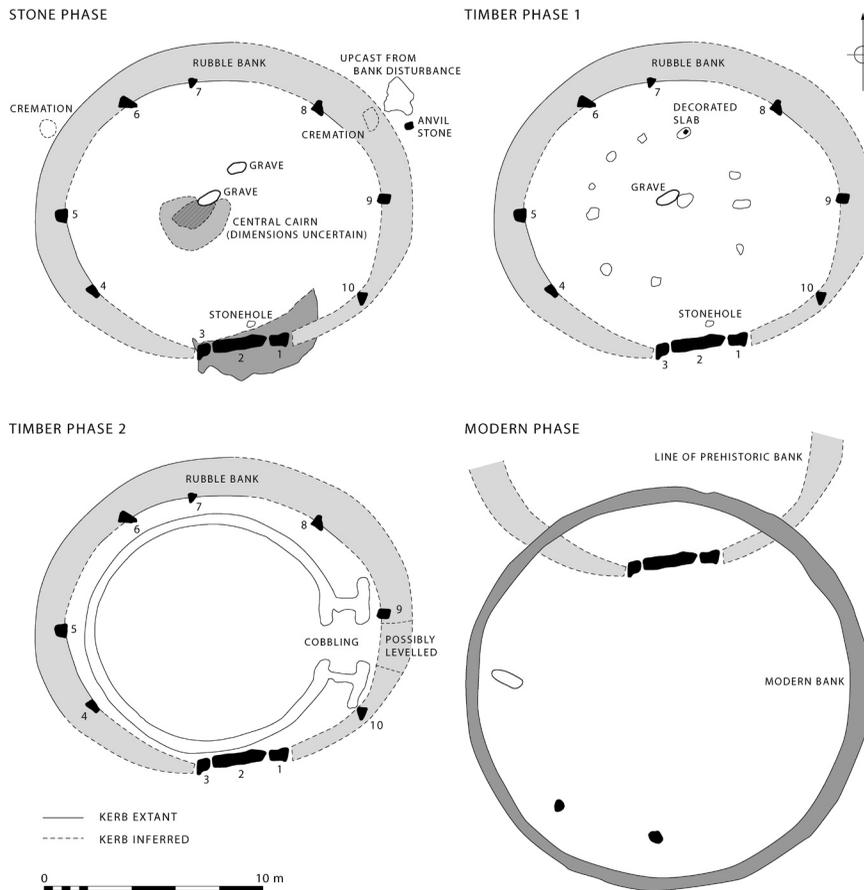
ILLUS 18 The reconstructed stone circle, looking south-west



ILLUS 19 Moving the stones by 'traditional' methods

## DISCUSSION

The excavations at Strichen clearly demonstrated that it was not an exception to the known layout of prehistoric recumbent stone circles: the recumbent and flankers had been placed on the southern side of a stone circle. Reports of the existence of a stone circle on the other side of the recumbent were observations of 19th-century landscaping.

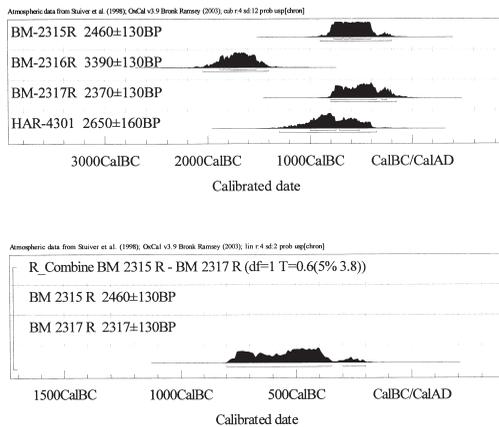


ILLUS 20 Suggested site phasing. (a) Stone phase; (b) Timber phase I; (c) Timber phase II; (d) Modern phase

The first constructional activity at Strichen relates to the ‘stone phase’ (illus 20a). It appears that turf and topsoil were stripped from part of the hilltop. The material was then piled up with rubble to form a circular bank. Within the bank, and superimposed on the yellow stripped subsoil, was a crescentic area of broken quartz. The edges of this were marked by a line of horizontal slabs set in a shallow trench which formed a ‘foundation’ kerb. There is a similarity between this and the kerb around the circular bank excavated at Aikey Brae (Bradley 2005). The bank supported the orthostats of a stone circle. The similarity of the original fillings in one of the stone holes (F6) and the adjacent kerb

constructed around an earlier stone circle (Burl 2000, 220). At Strichen the recumbent stone and flankers were erected on the south side of the circle on a specially prepared semi-circular area of consolidated clay and rubble. Similar semi-circular platforms can be observed in surface evidence at other recumbent stone circles (ibid, chapter 12). Inside the Strichen circle, a rubble cairn was constructed. The height and extent of this cannot be ascertained because of later damage, but it overlay, and was partly associated with, an area of burning. The fires may have been quite intense as the natural clay and some of the stones were severely burnt. Evidence of burning in a primary and/or secondary phase is very common inside recumbent stone circles (ibid, 228). Two stone-lined graves were also inserted, but not at the exact centre of the monument.

The date for the construction of the stone circle is difficult to ascertain from direct dating evidence. The two radiocarbon dates from the cremation dug into the rubble bank contradict one another (BM-2316R and HAR-4301, illus 21a). These dates were derived from bulk samples in an era before AMS dating allowed the dating of individual samples. A letter in the archive does suggest that there may have been problems with the sample that produced a later date. Evidence from other stone circles suggest an Early Bronze Age date for construction. At Tomnaverie, Beaker pottery was recovered from the old land surface at the edge of the kerb (Bradley 2005); it was associated with the raising of the recumbent stone at Loanhead of Daviot (Kilbride-Jones 1935); it occurred beneath the recumbent at Old Keig (Childe 1933; 1934); and in an internal burial at Old Rayne (Coles 1902). The radiocarbon dates for the construction of the primary platform cairn at Tomnaverie centre on 2500–2400 BC (Bradley 2005), and there is a *terminus ante quem* of 1700 BC for the construction of the monument at Berrybrae (Burl 2000, 220). Some of the artefacts from the Strichen excavation (Beaker pottery and a barbed and tanged arrowhead) certainly show activity at the site in this period



ILLUS 21 Calibrated radiocarbon dates. (a) All dates; (b) BM-2315R and BM-2317R combined

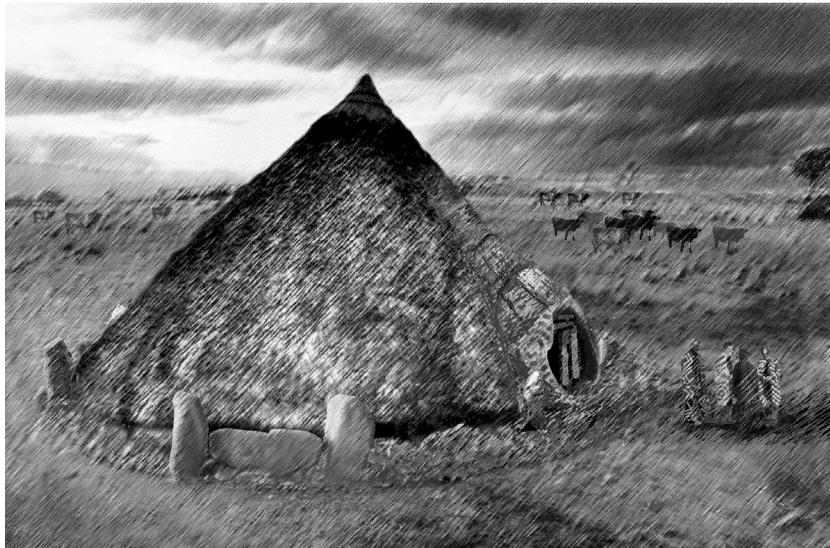
trench (F42) may suggest that the construction of the rubble bank and the erection of the stone circle was a contemporaneous event. This would be different from Bradley’s (ibid) observations at other excavated sites. At Tomnaverie, Deeside, and at Cothiemuir Wood, Donside, the recumbent stone circle was raised on an already existing platform cairn. At Aikey Brae, Buchan, the orthostats of the stone circle were inserted into an existing rubble wall. However, it should be noted that at Berrybrae, Buchan, the excavator concluded that a rubble wall was

and would support an Early Bronze Age date for its construction. However, it should be noted that samples from the bottom of the kerb trench at Aikey Brae provided a radiocarbon date in the Late Bronze Age (Bradley 2005). The excavator suggests that these might relate to an event when the kerb was reset at that time.

The timber phase consisted of two elements: a simple post circle (illus 20b) and a circular wall trench with an eastern entrance porch (illus 20c). No artefacts that could date this phase were found in secure contexts. The fillings of the features belonging to these two elements are similar, but they may not be structurally linked, as they were not laid out in a symmetrical way. Indeed, many aspects of the post circle appear to relate to the earlier stone phase rather than the later wall trench. The post circle is not in the exact centre of the stone circle, but orientates itself around one of the stone-lined graves lying at its centre (F23). The central post (F80) was not in the middle, but was placed at the eastern end of the grave. A large post (F77) was also on the eastern side of the circle. It would seem that the

axis of the monument had been radically altered from north–south to east–west. However, some aspects of the north–south axis were retained. In the post-hole opposite the recumbent (F17), a broken decorated slab had been used as a packing stone. It is possible that this had been part of a grave cover. Its reuse may indicate the incorporation of an older artefact into a new and related feature, or even its ritual destruction. Between this post-hole on the northern side of the timber circle at Strichen and the recumbent stone a north/south line was formed incorporating the central post-hole (F80) and the location of a stone hole in front of the recumbent (F22A). There was no evidence to suggest that this post circle had been a roofed structure. The post circle was eventually removed by the purposeful pulling out of the posts.

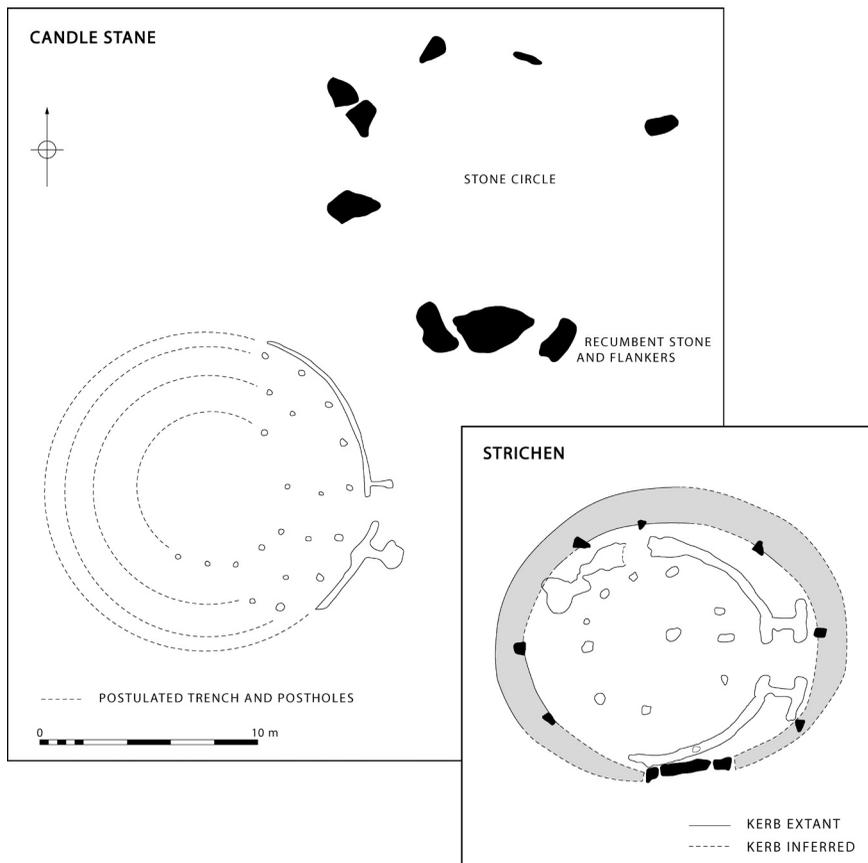
The second element of the timber phase was a circular wall trench. In plan this resembles a classic later prehistoric roundhouse (Harding 2004, 97). Although not a perfect roundhouse, especially given the large entrance features, it may be a symbolic structure based on a house



ILLUS 22 Reconstruction drawing of a later prehistoric roundhouse built inside a recumbent stone circle

plan. Two radiocarbon dates place its use within the later prehistoric period (illus 21a). When these two dates are combined it suggests that this could be at some point in the Late Bronze Age or the Early Iron Age (illus 21b). The layout of this structure finally changed the orientation of the monument to an east/west axis as its entrance was on its eastern side. The building fitted neatly within the rubble bank of the stone phase, although some of the slabs from the bank's kerb may have been reused in the base of the building's foundation trench to hold planks in place. Visually the effect could have been a roundhouse within a recumbent stone circle, and it is shown as such in the reconstruction in illus 22. This structure seems to have decayed in situ.

The Strichen stone circle was a very badly damaged monument and not every detail of the site can be resolved. At the time of the excavation the chronological sequence of its different elements could not be observed. This was, in part, due to the lack of parallels in the literature of 25 years ago. Late Bronze Age activity is known from excavations at several stone circles in north-east Scotland (Childe 1933; 1934; Kilbride-Jones 1935; Bradley 2005). At Clava, Strahairn, Late Bronze Age urned cremations were deposited in the chamber of an Early Bronze Age passage grave (Bradley 2000). At Aldclune, Blair Atholl, an enigmatic structure on a knoll between two consecutively constructed Iron Age roundhouses may have been a small Neolithic or Early Bronze



ILLUS 23 Comparative plans of Candle Stane (after Cameron 1999, illus 2) and Strichen

Age stone circle (Hingley et al 1997, 456). A cupmarked stone had also been reused in the paving of the porch floor of one of the houses (ibid, 421). At Candle Stane, Donside, a large circular timber structure (house?) with an eastern entrance was excavated outside the recumbent stone circle on Candle Hill (Cameron 1999) (illus 23). There was no associated material culture, but the structure was radiocarbon dated to the mid first millennium BC. Unlike Strichen, this was built on a large scale, over 25m in diameter, but it did have a similar complex entrance porch. Three apparently circular post-rings within its interior were concentric with an outer pennisular gully. In comparison, the timber structure at Strichen is only 10.5m in diameter, although its size was determined by the existence of the stone circle. Hingley (1996) has also shown that the Iron Age reuse of earlier prehistoric monuments extends to the Northern and Western Isles of Scotland. It is now possible to perceive how Strichen fits into a much wider pattern. The excavators take great satisfaction from having faithfully recorded features which, at the time, contradicted all expectations, but which can now be seen as part of a wider pattern.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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the duration of their much welcomed stay. Although it is many years since we worked at The Circle, the warm hospitality paid to all the staff and volunteers by the people of Strichen remains a cherished memory to the present day. To Mike, Fay, Jimmy, Gammuck, Bill, Kirsty, Morag and many more ... make mine a pint of heavy!!

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