



HISTORIC
ENVIRONMENT
SCOTLAND

ÀRAINNEACHD
EACHDRAIDHEIL
ALBA

Property in Care (PIC) ID: PIC183 & PIC184

Designations: Scheduled Monument (SM90049), (SM90050)

Taken into State care: 1957 (Guardianship)

Last reviewed: 2013

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

CAIRN HOLY CAIRNS 1 AND 2



We continually revise our Statements of Significance, so they may vary in length, format and level of detail. While every effort is made to keep them up to date, they should not be considered a definitive or final assessment of our properties.

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CAIRN HOLY CAIRNS 1 & 2

SYNOPSIS

The Cairn Holy Chambered Cairns comprise two Neolithic chambered tombs, known as Cairn Holy 1 and Cairn Holy 2, set about 150m apart on a south-facing hillside close to the Kirkdale Burn 4 miles south-east of Creetown. They are the most impressive and dramatically situated chambered tombs in Galloway. Both tombs share the same essential elements, a forecourt fronting a portal that gave access to an antechamber fronting a stone-slabbbed burial chamber, the whole covered by a cairn of stones. Cairn Holy 1 is the larger and more complete, with a particularly impressive concave 'horned' façade of tall pillar stones.

Both tombs were archaeologically investigated in 1949 by Professors Stuart Piggott and Terence Powell, iconic figures in the development of European prehistoric studies, and found to date from the 4th millennium BC. The excavations, carried out and published to a high standard, produced considerable evidence relating to their construction and use, and have added greatly to our understanding of the date and function of these prehistoric monuments as a whole.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview:

- **4th millennium BC** Both chambered tombs are built as repositories for the dead, presumably by a community of early farmers.
- **pre 2000 BC** Both tombs appear still to be in use, judging by the Beaker pottery found in both, and the presence of two slabs bearing cup and ring marks in the burial chamber of Cairn Holy 1.
- **18th century AD** Both tombs are substantially robbed of their stone for use in building nearby field dykes.
- **1949** Both tombs together with a third, the White Cairn, at Bargrennan, north of Newton Stewart are archaeologically investigated by Professor Stuart Piggott, of Edinburgh University, and Professor Terence Powell, of Liverpool University.
- **1957** Cairn Holy 1 and Cairn Holy 2 are taken into state care.
- **2003** A modern cremation is discovered in the inner chamber of Cairn Holy 2.

Archaeological Overview:

Cairn Holy 1 and Cairn Holy 2 belong to a defined group of prehistoric burial monuments known by archaeologists as 'Clyde chambered tombs'. These are to be found in Galloway, Strathclyde, Argyll and Perthshire. Broadly similar tombs are found in most of the Atlantic coastal regions of western Europe.

Both tombs were archaeologically investigated in 1949 by Professor Stuart Piggott, of the University of Edinburgh, and Professor Terence Powell, of the University of Liverpool, two iconic figures in the study of European prehistory. Their excavations were among the earliest 'modern' excavations, carried out

and published to a high standard. They produced considerable evidence relating to the tombs' construction and use and have added greatly to our understanding of the date and function of these prehistoric monuments as a whole.

In particular, the excavation of the forecourt at Cairn Holy 1 found evidence, in the form of fired hearths, for activities there, interpreted as ritual or funerary in nature. Beneath one hearth, in line with the entrance to the tomb, was a filled in pit interpreted as the hole in which a single stone pillar had stood during an early stage in the forecourt's use.

Finds were few but surprising. Beneath another forecourt hearth was a flake of pitchstone from the island of Arran, whilst a fragment of polished Jadeite axe head, found in the antechamber of Cairn Holy 1 and ascribed a purely ceremonial function, had originated in the Alps, graphically showing that our remote ancestors had access to long-distance networks. The discovery of Beaker pottery, dated to before 2000 BC, suggested that the tombs were still in use for burial purposes many centuries after their original construction. Both tombs had been carefully sealed up at the end of their long periods in use.

No archaeological survey or excavation work has been carried out either in the immediate vicinity of the tombs or within their wider moorland landscape. Thus the human context within which both tombs sit is little understood. Much doubtless remains to be learned, particularly about how the builders and users of the tombs lived their earthly lives.

Architectural/Artistic Overview:

Both tombs comprise the same essential elements, a forecourt fronting a stone façade housing the single entrance portal centrally placed, behind which was first an antechamber, then the burial chamber itself.

Cairn Holy 1 has by far the better façade, showing admirably the considerable care taken in its design and construction. The concave 'horned' façade has individual upright pillar stones graded in height from the lowest at the outer ends to the highest at the centre, either side of the central portal, an arrangement that cleverly draws the eye to the tomb's entrance. It has been suggested that Cairn Holy 1 was the principal focus for ceremonies, whilst Cairn Holy 2 functioned more simply as a repository for the dead.

The antechambers and burial chambers in both tombs were constructed of stone slabs and roofed with capstones. The burial chamber in Cairn Holy 1 had two cup and ring marked slabs (one is now in the National Museum of Scotland, in Edinburgh), of probable Bronze Age and perhaps indicating a redesign or rebuild at some later date.

The cairns of stone covering the tombs would originally have been visually far more impressive than they appear today. Cairn Holy 1 was a long, straight-sided mound aligned east-west along the contour of the land, whilst Cairn Holy 2 seems to have been somewhat smaller, with its façade facing south-east. The true significance of this differing orientation, if any, is lost to us today.

Cairn Holy 1 and 2 lie within 150m of each other. Whilst paired tombs do occur in Scotland (eg, **Camster**), single tombs are far more common.

Social Overview:

Other than being a minor visitor attraction, the Cairn Holy Chambered Cairns currently play little social role, though anecdotal evidence suggests that some people hold the places dear, in relation to a wished for connection with our remote ancestors. One American was so moved by his accidental visit some years ago that he relocated from New York and today spends most of his days carefully measuring and observing the stones of Cairn Holy 1.

Spiritual Overview:

In the absence of survey data, it is not known whether the Cairn Holy Chambered Cairns currently play a spiritual role, though the discovery of a modern cremation in the burial chamber of Cairn Holy 2 in 2003 clearly shows that someone has a close spiritual affinity with the place.

Aesthetic Overview:

The two tombs are set in a remote landscape, often one that is windswept, majestic and haunting. On a clear day, the views southward out over Wigtown Bay to the Irish Sea are magnificent. The Isle of Man is frequently visible.

The tombs themselves are impressive architectural statements, with an almost sculptural quality. The curved, inclined façade of Cairn Holy 1 is particularly impressive visually, whilst the megalithic orthostats of Cairn Holy 2, set against the landward backdrop of pasture, sea and sky, have qualities of starkness and strength.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- What, if anything, existed at both sites prior to the construction of the stone tombs? More recent excavations, at Mid Gleniron I & II (NX 187610 & 188609), Lochhill (NX 968651) and Slewcairn (NX924614), have shown just how complex the structural history of long cairns can be, of which only the final, and substantially depleted, version is visible. It seems that many began about 4000 BC with wooden or stone mortuary structures and a simple round cairn.
- Where did the people who built and used the tombs live, and how did they farm the surrounding land? It is becoming increasingly important to view such monuments as the Cairn Holy Chambered Cairns 'in the round', and not just as entities in themselves.
- What was the significance of the pairing of the tombs? Did one replace the other, were they reserved for different strata of society, or what? Perhaps we will never know.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key Points

- Chambered tombs of varying forms are common across parts of Scotland, Ireland and the Atlantic coast of Europe. The Cairn Holy Chambered Cairns

are among the best-preserved Neolithic chambered tombs surviving in Scotland, and certainly the most impressive and dramatic in south-west Scotland. Their relative completeness, and the fact that they complement each other, help us gain some understanding of the belief system and spirituality of our remote ancestors.

- The archaeological excavations directed by Professors Piggott and Powell have provided much valued additional information relating to the construction and use of these fascinating monuments from our remote ancestral past.

Associated Properties:

(*other excavated chambered tombs in Galloway*) – Mid Gleniron I & II; Lochhill; Slewcairn

(*other prehistoric cup-markings in Galloway in HS's care*) – **Big Balcraig and Clachan; Drumtroddan**

(*some other 'Clyde' chambered tombs in HS's care*) – **Carn Ban; Torrylin**

Keywords:

Neolithic; Bronze Age; chambered tomb; burial chamber; façade; Stuart Piggott; Terence Powell

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