



HISTORIC  
ENVIRONMENT  
SCOTLAND

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EACHDRAIDHEIL  
ALBA

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## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

# NETHER LARGIE NORTH CAIRN



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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Cover image: General exterior view of Nether Largie North Bronze Age burial cairn. © Crown Copyright HES

# HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

## NETHER LARGIE NORTH CAIRN

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# I. SUMMARY

## 1.1 Introduction

Nether Largie North Cairn is an Early Bronze Age burial cairn, located in Kilmartin Glen in Argyll. Kilmartin Glen is an internationally significant archaeological landscape, and one of Scotland's most important. It contains a wealth of upstanding prehistoric monuments,<sup>1</sup> including an Early Bronze Age Linear Cemetery consisting of massive monuments, of which Nether Largie North is one. There are also the remains of other burial cairns, stone circles, a timber circle, a cursus monument, a henge, standing stones, stone rows, and numerous rock art sites within the Glen. Nether Largie North was excavated in 1930, and a number of important structural elements were discovered.

The site is not staffed, there is no entry charge, and it is freely accessible throughout the year. Precise visitor numbers are not recorded, however annual visitor figures for Kilmartin Museum, which acts as a hub for the Glen, are 25,000 annually which gives an indication of visitor numbers and interest.<sup>2</sup>

## 1.2 Statement of Significance

- Nether Largie North Cairn is a rare example of a large and complex Early Bronze Age Burial cairn.
- The cairn has unusual structural elements including the massive cist, which incorporates two slabs bearing both cup marks and rare carvings representing flat axes. A decorated slab which had been incorporated into a stone setting was also found at the site.
- Nether Largie North Cairn is part of a larger monument, the 'Linear Cemetery'; a form of monument that is rare in Scotland.
- Nether Largie North Cairn is one of a number of funerary and ritual monuments that make up the highly significant ritual archaeological landscape in Kilmartin Glen.
- Nether Largie North Cairn has inherent potential to make a significant contribution to our understanding of the past.

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<sup>1</sup> RCAHMS 1988

<sup>2</sup> This figure relates to people visiting Kilmartin Museum to get information etc., as opposed to c.13,000 ticket-buying visitors. (Sharon Webb, pers.comm.)

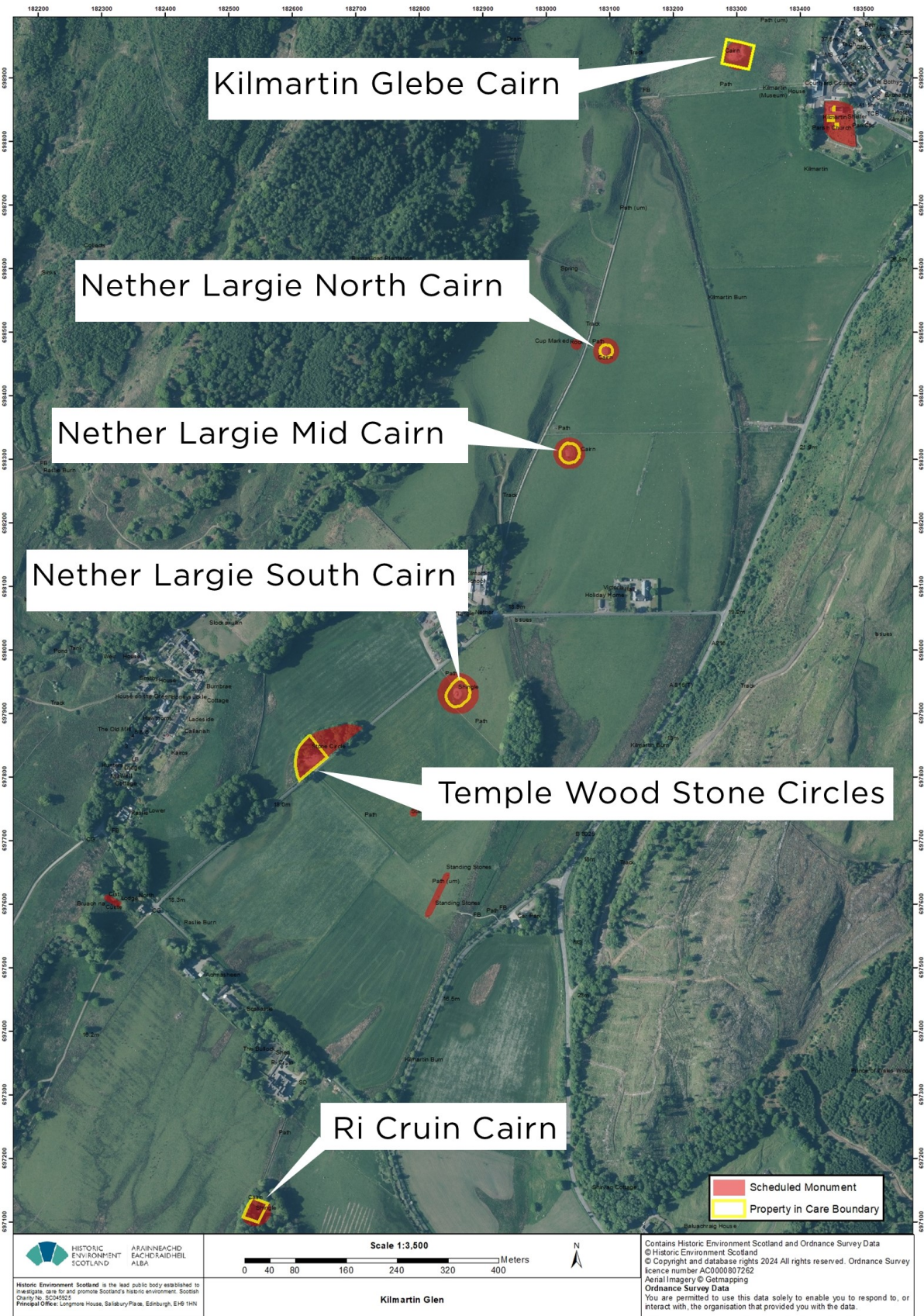


Figure 1: Location of Temple Wood and cairns comprising the Linear Cemetery. For illustrative purposes only.

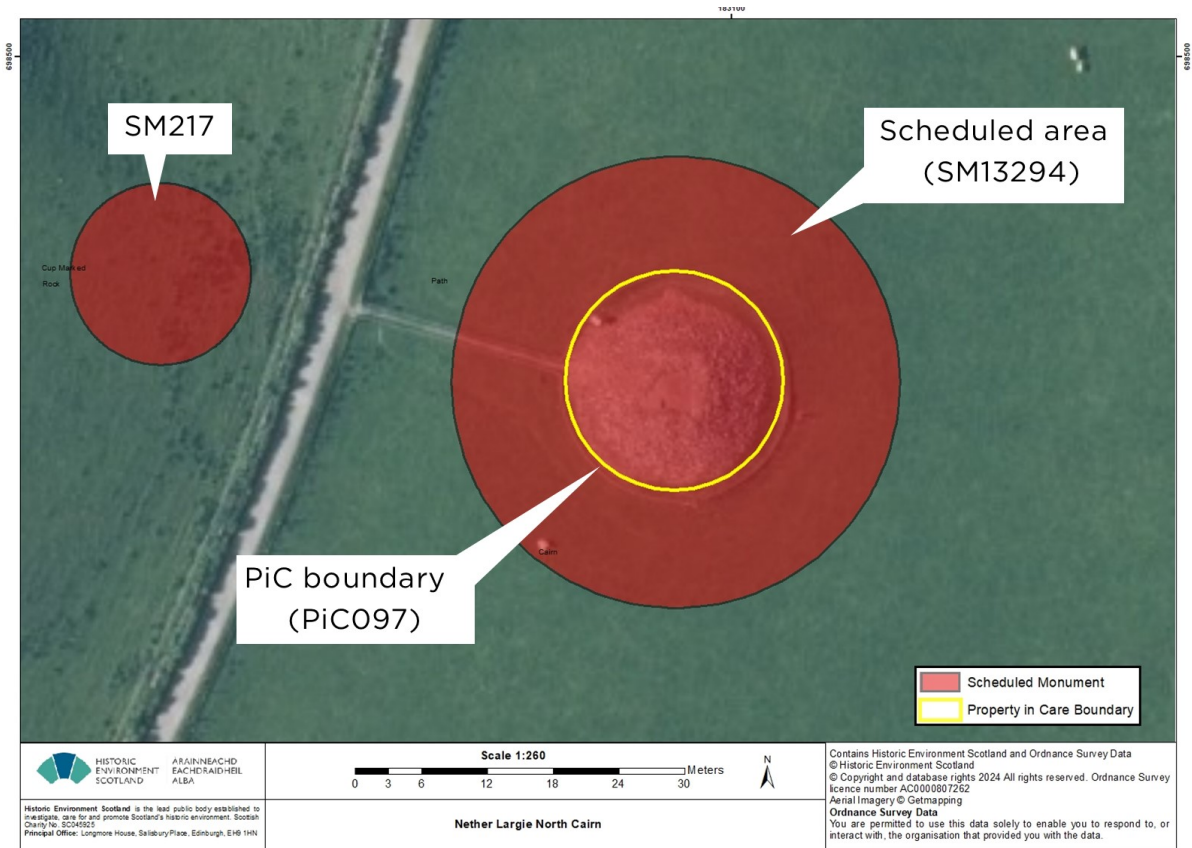


Figure 2: Scheduled area and Property in Care Boundary of Nether Largie North Cairn with scheduled area of Nether Largie cup marked rock (SM 217) to the west. For illustrative purpose only.

## 2. ASSESSMENT OF VALUES

### 2.1 Background

The cairn is located in pasture, surrounded by a fence and accessed by a short, fenced path that leads to a track which is known as the 'Coach Road'. The field in which the site is located is part of Nether Largie Farm.

Nether Largie North Cairn is a very large burial cairn, which along with the **Glebe Cairn**, **Nether Largie Mid Cairn**, **Nether Largie South Cairn** and **Ri Cruin Cairn**, form a larger monument known as the Linear Cemetery. This line of Early Bronze Age burial cairns, along the floor of Kilmartin Glen, were designed to be an imposing feature in a landscape that had already been marked as a significant place for ritual and funerary activity.

The site was excavated by J. Hewat Craw in April 1930 and his findings are presented below. The cairn itself was completely removed during excavation, so its appearance at present is a result of reinstatement.

Craw's excavations uncovered a massive cist within the cairn. Two of the slabs used to construct the cist were carved with rock art in the form of

both cup marks and representations of axe heads, and a further stone carved with two circles was also found nearby.<sup>3</sup>

Nether Largie North Cairn came into State care / Guardianship in 1932, along with a number of other prehistoric sites on the Poltalloch Estate, by a deed signed by Sir Ian Zachary Malcolm on 19th May of that year.

In the late 1970s a concrete and stone chamber was erected, accessed by a concrete stair. This enabled visitors to view the central cist and its remarkable carvings, which themselves were protected from the elements. The water-rolled stones that made up the cairn were reassembled to cover the chamber.

Nether Largie North Cairn was scheduled on 16th July 2013 because of its inherent potential to make a significant contribution to our understanding of the past, in terms of:

- The design and construction of burial monuments.
- The nature of burial practices and their significance in prehistoric society.
- Potential to inform our understanding of the creation of rock art in prehistory and the relationship between broadly contemporary ritual monuments and burial structures.
- Potentially undisturbed archaeological layers offer excellent potential for the preservation of ancient botanical remains, which can help us to ascertain the nature of the climate, vegetation and agriculture in the area when the cairn was in use.
- Capacity to further our understanding of the enduring importance of such sites over a long period of time, their distribution within the landscape, and how they related to one another.

See Appendix 1 for an archaeological overview of Kilmartin Glen's Prehistoric Monuments, and the Early Bronze Age in Kilmartin Glen and the Linear Cemetery.

### **Archaeological Overview of Nether Largie North**

Nether Largie North Cairn is situated 150m north-north-east of **Nether Largie Mid Cairn**, and 500m south-south-west of the **Glebe Cairn**, on a slightly raised area which may represent a sand bank or gravel deposit. It has been partially constructed using water-rolled stones, which are of local origin.

In 1930, J. Hewat Craw supervised excavations of Nether Largie North Cairn under the auspices of Sir Ian Malcolm and the Society of Antiquaries

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<sup>3</sup> For more information on prehistoric rock art in Kilmartin Glen and elsewhere in Scotland, see Scotland's Rock Art Project at: [www.rockart.scot/](http://www.rockart.scot/)

of Scotland. Carnassarie Cairn and a cairn at Ballymeanoch were also excavated at the same time.<sup>4</sup>

The entire cairn was taken apart, with 300 cart loads of stone being removed.<sup>5</sup> In his published report Craw does not give details of any reconstruction undertaken after excavation.

Craw noted that the cairn appeared mostly undisturbed prior to excavation, other than an amount of stones having been removed from the west side.<sup>6</sup>

The following description of the site, based on Craw's published account (Craw, 1930) is taken from the account given in RCAHMS (1988: 69-70):

This cairn measured 21.6m from N to S by 20m transversely and 2.7m in height; there were no kerbstones, but Craw states that the central area of the cairn (14m by 13.4m) was enclosed within a bank of stones some 2.4 m thick and standing 0.6m high externally and 0.3m internally. A little to the N of the centre there was a massive cist aligned N and S and set into a pit dug into the natural gravel, with the top of the cover slab about 150mm below ground level. The underside of the capstone, which measures 2m by 1.07m and up to 0.35m in thickness, is decorated with about forty cup marks and at least ten axeheads. The cist had been additionally protected by eighteen flat slabs which lay on top of the capstone, two overlapping the edge of the cover stone at the ends of the cist and the others arranged along the edges and across the top. The cist, which measures 1.6m by 0.65m and 0.6m in depth, contained soil, in which were found a human molar tooth, a little ochre, and a few fragments of charcoal. The inner face of the N end-slab was decorated with two large axeheads, their edges to the top. To the S of the central cist an arrangement of slabs suggested that there might have been a further burial, but none was found; at either end of the setting, however, there were two upright slabs, one of which, at the E end, was decorated with two pecked circles each about 180mm in diameter. This slab is now in the Royal Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh. A second grave was found 3.3m NE of the central cist; here an oval pit dug into the natural gravel measured 1.5m by 0.7m and 0.8m in depth and contained an ox molar and fragments of charcoal.<sup>7</sup>

Craw notes that the human molar "fell to pieces when it was lifted".<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Craw, 1930

<sup>5</sup> Craw, 1930: 270

<sup>6</sup> Craw 1930: 269

<sup>7</sup> RCAHMS, 1988: 69-70

<sup>8</sup> Craw 1930: 273



## Interpretation and Dating

Nether Largie North Cairn is a rare example of a large and complex Early Bronze Age burial cairn. It has unusual structural elements including the massive cist, which incorporates two slabs bearing rock art, as well as the additional decorated slab which had been incorporated into a stone setting nearby. It is part of a larger monument, known as the Linear Cemetery, a type of monument that is rare in Scotland.

Sheridan dates the Linear Cemetery to the Early Bronze Age c. 2200-1900 BC.<sup>9</sup> This is based on stylistic elements, however, it is widely accepted.

Carved representations of flat axe-head markings are very rare. While they also occur at **Ri Cruin** and **Nether Largie Mid Cairns**, (both also part of the Linear Cemetery), no other examples have yet been found in Scotland. They have hence been described by Jones as “remarkable”.<sup>10</sup> The nearest axe marks on a Bronze Age monument (geographically) is on the monoliths at Stonehenge.

Craw noted that at least one of the axe heads appears to be shown with a handle,<sup>11</sup> however this interpretation has not been fully investigated.

The stone marked with two circles, found under the cairn, is also unusual. Sheridan suggests it might have been taken from the South-West circle at Temple Wood and re-used at Nether Largie North.<sup>12</sup> It has also been suggested that the cup-marked top slab of the cist might have originally been part of a standing stone.<sup>13</sup>

The remodelling of ancient sites and re-use of structural elements in Bronze Age monuments has been suggested to have occurred at a number of other sites in Kilmartin.<sup>14</sup> **Nether Largie South Cairn**, built possibly some 1500 to 1800 years before the Linear Cemetery, was re-modelled to take on the appearance of a round cairn. Sheridan also suggests that the cist slab may have originally been a cup-marked outcrop of bedrock which was quarried, shaped and carved with the shape of flat axes, some of which were superimposed onto the cup-marks.<sup>15</sup> Ritchie regards the Early Bronze Age cairns in Kilmartin Glen as one of the best demonstrations of sequence, reuse and veneration in Scotland.<sup>16</sup>

About 37 metres from Nether Largie North Cairn is a cup-marked earth fast rock (SM217). It is assumed that this rock art was created *before* the cairn

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<sup>9</sup> Sheridan 2012: 175-176

<sup>10</sup> Jones 2015: 78

<sup>11</sup> Craw 1930: 271

<sup>12</sup> Sheridan 2012: 177

<sup>13</sup> Stevenson, 1997

<sup>14</sup> Stevenson, 1997; Sheridan 2012:177; Sheridan 2017 RARFA

<sup>15</sup> Sheridan 2012: 177; 2017 RARFA

<sup>16</sup> Ritchie, 1997: 82

and it therefore may have had an influence in the placement of the later burial monument in the landscape.

## 2.2 Evidential values

Nether Largie North Cairn is important as it is one of the key sites in Kilmartin Glen and is an integral element in a much larger monument. For these reasons, the cairn would be a strong candidate for inclusion in any future research programme aiming to further explore the Bronze Age in Kilmartin Glen. The site has been only partially excavated, and thus there is potential for undisturbed remains, both within the cairn and in the surrounding area.

The site has evidential potential to significantly inform our understanding of the past, in terms of:

- The design and construction of burial monuments.
- The nature and meaning of ritual and burial practices and their significance in prehistoric society.
- Its relationship to other contemporary monuments and burials.
- The continued use and re-use of rock art.
- Potentially undisturbed ancient botanical remains, which may elucidate the nature of the climate, vegetation and agricultural practices in the Glen when the cairn was in use.
- The distribution of similar sites in the landscape.
- How sites of a similar age related to one another in the Early Bronze Age and in later periods.

## 2.3 Historical values

Archaeological features such as the Linear Cemetery and other prominent monuments in Kilmartin Glen, including the nearby **Temple Wood Stone Circles**, were integrated into the designed landscape of the Poltalloch Estate. It is possible that the track known as the 'Coach Road' was deliberately designed so that the cairns and other monuments could be viewed when passing along this route. As an example of a landscape in which features have been re-used, respected and incorporated into a palimpsest spanning thousands of years, the whole of Kilmartin Glen and all the monuments it contains, including Nether Largie North Cairn, has great historical value. The incorporation of prehistoric monuments into the designed landscape has undoubtedly contributed to their survival.

Recent research into the relationships between the Properties in Care of Scottish Ministers and the British Empire<sup>17</sup> has highlighted that Nether Largie North Cairn has ‘property’ empire connection<sup>18</sup> as it was owned by the Malcolms of Poltalloch. The Malcolms of Poltalloch acquired significant slavery-derived wealth during the colonial era in Jamaica. This included acting as merchants, holding shares in companies trading in the region, and owning enslaved people. Considerable monies came through compensation given when slavery was abolished in Britain. Neil Malcolm collected almost £40,000 compensation in 1835. The family used this wealth to become major landowners in Scotland, with the acquired estates containing many sites that would become Properties in Care. The estates were cleared to create aesthetically pleasing landscapes, with funds also being directed to the excavation of some of the archaeological sites.<sup>19</sup>

## 2.4 Architectural and artistic values

Nether Largie North is a rare example of a massive cairn with complex structural elements. The carvings representing flat axes are particularly rare; in Scotland they only occur in Kilmartin Glen (here, at Ri Cruin and at Nether Largie Mid Cairn). These rare elements equate to high artistic, architectural and aesthetic values.

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<sup>17</sup> Full report can be downloaded from HES website: [Surveying and Analysing Connections between Properties in Care and the British Empire, c. 1600-1997 \(historicenvironment.scot\)](https://www.historicenvironment.scot/research-and-analysis/surveying-and-analysing-connections-between-properties-in-care-and-the-british-empire-c-1600-1997)

<sup>18</sup> ‘Property’ connection describes land or buildings owned by either an established propertied family which participated in the Empire, or a recently enriched family which, through involvement in colonial activities, acquired the means to secure property. See Mullen *et al* 2024, 30-31 for a full definition of typology.

<sup>19</sup> Mullen *et al* 2024, 50-55.



Figure 3: Inside Nether Largie North, with the capstone of the cist propped against the wall, revealing the rock on its inner face.

What is present at Nether Largie North Cairn today is largely a reconstruction based on excavation evidence. There is a modern internal chamber at the centre of the cairn, accessible from the top, constructed so that the cist and carved stones can be seen.

## 2.5 Landscape and aesthetic values

Across Scotland, burial cairns are often inter-visible, and apparently positioned to maximise their visual impact; this is certainly true of the cairns which comprise the Linear Cemetery. Collectively, they form a dominant feature in the landscape, deliberately positioned in a striking location and, in its current form, stretching nearly 2 kilometres along Kilmartin Glen. It is probable that the Kilmartin Burn meandered around the cairns, and the traces of old river channels can be seen, but it is not

known to when these date. The Kilmartin Burn was canalised in the 19th century as part of the farm improvements undertaken by the Poltalloch Estate. The Glebe, Mid and South Cairns can be seen from Nether Largie North Cairn. As such, it has very high landscape values.

## 2.6 Natural heritage values

To be assessed.

## 2.7 Contemporary/use values

### Social value

The social values of Nether Largie North Cairn lie – together with the other Kilmartin Glen sites – as a visitor attraction, education and learning resource, and the atmosphere and special qualities of the place, all of which are highlighted in online social media reviews. A large percentage of tourists to the area cite the archaeological monuments and Kilmartin Museum as a reason for visiting. Cultural tourism is one of the region's largest economic drivers.

Nether Largie North Cairn, like many of the Kilmartin Glen sites, is relatively easily accessible and the site is interpreted and presented in order to aid understanding and access. The site is not staffed, there is no entry charge, and it is freely accessible year round. Precise visitor numbers are not recorded, however annual visitor figures for Kilmartin Museum, which acts as a hub for the Glen, are 25,000 annually which gives an indication of visitor numbers and interest.<sup>20</sup>

Nether Largie North has an interpretation board installed by Historic Environment Scotland, and another in the nearby vicinity was installed by the Dalriada Project (a Heritage Lottery Fund funded landscape partnership scheme), both of which provide visitor information on the site and other monuments in the area.

Kilmartin Museum was founded in 1997 and its mission is to inspire and educate people by interpreting, explaining and conserving the internationally important archaeological landscape, artefacts and natural heritage of Kilmartin Glen.

Kilmartin Museum's education team regularly use the Nether Largie North Cairn, and the other sites in the Linear Cemetery, in its education programmes. The teachers and pupils of Kilmartin School, in particular, feel a deep connection to the monument due to its close proximity. Kilmartin Museum organises a weekly volunteer-led guided walk along the Glen visiting Temple Wood and all the cairns in the Linear Cemetery. Kilmartin

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<sup>20</sup> This figure relates to people visiting Kilmartin Museum to get information etc., as opposed to c.13,000 ticket-buying visitors (Sharon Webb, pers.comm.).

Museum and the education service are part funded by Historic Environment Scotland.

In the late 1970s, following excavation, Nether Largie North was reconstructed, and a chamber built within so that people could enter via a concrete stairway. The massive cist slab was propped up against the newly formed drystone wall, exposing the carvings on its underside, along with the rest of the cist and the other axe-head marked end slab. This reconstruction, although confusing for some visitors who sometimes assume the cairn could be entered in prehistory, is valuable in that the massive cist may be viewed in situ, providing a richer experience for visitors.

In 2007, Kilmartin Glen was the setting for '*Half Life*', a cultural event spread over several weeks which involved landscape art installations and a performance created by the Scottish theatre company [NVA](#) in collaboration with the National Theatre of Scotland.

All these activities render Nether Largie North as having a very high social value.

It should be noted, however, that the tourism generated by the national and international importance of the archaeological monuments, is not necessarily seen as positive by everyone in the local community, since this presents certain challenges for farming, and restrictions related to other forms of land use.

### **Spiritual values**

It is clear that the monument had great spiritual significance in prehistory as a burial monument and part of the Linear Cemetery. The re-use of these monuments, which is evidenced through excavation, demonstrates that they remained a spiritual focal point for a long period of time. The carvings on the inner side of the cist capstone were likely to have been deliberately oriented to face the dead – perhaps suggesting spiritual significance.

There is anecdotal evidence that these sites are special for people today and this is evidenced by 'offerings' of flowers and other items.<sup>21</sup> This is particularly true of Nether Largie North, perhaps due to the chamber which in its current form provides an enclosed and hence a relatively private space. The cairn therefore has high spiritual values.

### **Cultural values**

Nether Largie North is situated in one of Scotland's richest archaeological landscapes. It has great significance as part of the Kilmartin Glen ritual and funerary landscape and is also part of a multi-monumental feature (the Linear Cemetery), designed in prehistory to be imposing and awe inspiring.

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<sup>21</sup> Such actions can inadvertently harm archaeological sites, and visitors are reminded that the use of candles or naked flames are not permitted at any HES properties.

It has remained so to this day. It therefore has great multi-generational cultural significance.

### 3. MAJOR GAPS IN UNDERSTANDING

There are some major gaps in our understanding of the site.

Although the site was extensively excavated, this work was undertaken at a time when modern scientific dating techniques were not available.

Therefore, no scientifically-determined date for the site is available and the postulated date is based on stylistic evidence from other sites.

There are also major gaps relating to the period to which this monument belongs. These have been recently summarised as key research questions:

- Where did the people who were buried in the ostentatious graves live? Was Kilmartin Glen used only as a place of burial and ceremony?
- Was there a hierarchy of settlement, reflecting an inegalitarian society?
- Was there regional variability in subsistence activities during this time? How typical is the evidence from Kilellan and Ardnave?
- Was control over the flow of metal the only source of wealth and power in this part of Scotland at that time?
- Was the incoming metal just Irish copper, or were bronze items or ingots also coming in? Was there any local exploitation of copper?<sup>22</sup>

Added to these research questions is also a lack of understanding about the relationship of monuments such as the Linear Cemetery to other contemporary and later ritual and funerary monuments to each other. The nature of the contemporary climate, vegetation and agricultural practices in the Glen in and around the linear cemetery as a whole remains relatively unexplored.

### 4. ASSOCIATED PROPERTIES

- Achnabreck Cup and Ring Marked Rocks
- Ballygowan Cup and Ring Marked Rocks
- Baluachraig Cup and Ring Marked Rocks
- Cairnbaan Cup and Ring Marked Rocks

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<sup>22</sup> Sheridan, 2017

- Carnassarie Castle
- Dunadd Fort
- Dunchraigaig Cairn
- Kilmartin Crosses
- Kilmartin Crosses
- Kilmichael Glassary Prehistoric Rock Carvings
- Kilmartin Glebe Cairn
- Kilmartin Sculptured Stones and Neil Campbell Tomb
- Nether Largie Mid Cairn
- Nether Largie South Cairn
- Ri Cruin Cairn
- Temple Wood Stone Circles

## 5. KEYWORDS

Neolithic; Bronze Age; round cairn; Linear Cemetery; cist; cupmark; flat axe; Kilmartin Glen; Argyll

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## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX I: ARCHAEOLOGICAL OVERVIEW: NETHER LARGIE NORTH CAIRN IN CONTEXT

#### Kilmartin Glen's Prehistoric Monuments

Kilmartin Glen is located in Argyll and Bute, on the west coast of Scotland. The landscape of the west coast of Scotland is typified by rocky hills and relatively deep Glens. The undulations of the land and the underlying rock formations generally follow a north-west to south-east axis.

Kilmartin Glen follows that pattern, being narrower at its northern end, with steep sided hills and gravel terraces, broadening out to the south into a flatter, wide area which intersects with the south west end of the adjacent Kilmichael Glen. The south is bordered by the Knapdale Hills, and the flatter area to the south-west is now the Mòine Mhòr – an expanse of peat bog which gradually changes to salt marsh towards the Crinan Estuary and the open sea. The Kilmartin Burn flows down the Glen, joining the River Add as it emerges from Kilmichael Glen, before meandering through the Mòine Mhòr to the sea. Both watercourses have been extensively altered by canalisation and straightening as part of the 19th century land improvements by the Poltalloch Estate.

The wider area of Mid Argyll and Kilmichael Glen which intersects Kilmartin Glen contains a number of important sites. There is, however, an extraordinarily dense concentration of monuments in Kilmartin Glen itself. Many of these are upstanding, highly visible prehistoric monuments,<sup>23</sup> including burial cairns within a Linear Cemetery, of which Nether Largie North Cairn is one. There are also the remains of stone circles, a timber circle, a cursus monument, a henge, standing stones, stone rows, and numerous rock art sites. It is a world class archaeological landscape and one of Scotland's most important.

The dramatic topography of the Glen and surrounding landscape almost certainly lent itself to the creation of a highly significant prehistoric ritual, funerary and ceremonial landscape. Belief, social status and particularly the relationship between the living and the dead have been expressed by generations of people through cultural practices relating to the use and disposal of high status artefacts and the construction of complex and powerful monuments in an already naturally striking landscape. The dense concentration of artefacts in the Glen is also outstanding: "Many individual finds such as jet necklaces or Food Vessels have been found in other parts

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<sup>23</sup> RCAHMS 1988

of Argyll, but the dense distribution around Kilmartin is unique.”<sup>24</sup> Currently, evidence for the earliest activity around these themes dates to the earliest Neolithic (3800-3700 BC)<sup>25</sup> and accumulates through to the Late Bronze Age (1500-1100 BC), a timespan of some 2300 years.<sup>26</sup>

Mid Argyll’s rock art stands as one of Europe’s finest groups of prehistoric monuments. The concentration is unparalleled in Britain. Rock art in the area appears both on earth fast bed rock and also on monuments. Recent work on dating rock art sites points to those created on earth fast bedrock as being late Neolithic, between 3000 - 2500 BC,<sup>27</sup> although it should be noted that only relatively few radiocarbon dates are available. In common with some of the other cairns in the Linear Cemetery, (**Ri Cruin and Nether Largie Mid Cairn**), Nether Largie North Cairn has a number of structural features which have been carved with rock art. This is rare and some may be reused elements from other monuments or earth fast sites. The carved features found at Nether Largie North Cairn are described above.

Kilmartin Glen’s prominent monuments attracted antiquarian and archaeological interest from the early 1900’s and a wealth of important artefacts have been found as a result of that work. Survey and recording of much of the Mid Argyll landscape was undertaken by local antiquarian Marion Campbell of Kilberry and Mary Sandeman in the 1960’s.<sup>28</sup> In more recent decades, the work of Kilmartin Museum, academics, and developer-funded archaeologists have discovered many other monuments, subsoil features and artefacts. In addition, members of the public have also found artefacts by chance. All this knowledge has significantly contributed to the understanding of Kilmartin Glen and the surrounding areas, firmly establishing the Glen as one of Britain’s most significant archaeological landscapes.

As noted above, most of the Neolithic, Chalcolithic and Early and Middle Bronze Age monuments are of a ceremonial or funerary nature. Currently, the earliest evidence of domestic occupation in the Glen dates to the later Bronze Age, leading some to speculate that the area was used solely for ritual purposes. However, no systematic survey or excavation programme has been undertaken across the whole Glen landscape. Therefore, the archaeological record is likely to be biased towards large and upstanding monuments than more ephemeral subsoil features and it is entirely possible that people were living in the Glen in earlier prehistoric periods as well as utilising it as a ritual landscape but the evidence for this has not yet been found.

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<sup>24</sup> RCAHMS 1988: 14

<sup>25</sup> Sheridan 2012: 166

<sup>26</sup> Sheridan 2012: 166.

<sup>27</sup> Sheridan, 2012: 171; Jones and Riggott 2011: 253

<sup>28</sup> Campbell and Sandeman 1962

Dingwall and McGowan noted that many of the archaeological monuments in the Glen lie within areas developed as designed landscapes in the 18th and 19th centuries in particular.<sup>29</sup> It is very likely that the most conspicuous monuments, including the Linear Cemetery, **Dunchraigaig Cairn**, **Baluachraig** Rock Art site, **Temple Wood Stone Circles**, Nether Largie and Ballymeanoch Standing Stones were deliberately incorporated as significant points of interest in these landscape designs.

## The Early Bronze Age in Kilmartin Glen and the Linear Cemetery

The use of copper appeared in Argyll in the 25th century BC and, by the 22nd century BC this was alloyed with tin to produce bronze across Britain and Ireland.<sup>30</sup> Other changes also occurred, including the construction of cairns containing just one or two individual burials. This is markedly different from the earlier Neolithic practice of communal burial.<sup>31</sup> It is widely accepted that social stratification is visible in the archaeological record at this time, and in Kilmartin this is expressed by the construction of striking and conspicuous funerary monuments, as well as the acquisition of prestigious objects and ornaments.<sup>32</sup> Although this is seen elsewhere in Britain, the intensity of finds in Kilmartin is remarkable. Sheridan has suggested that Early Bronze Age elites in Kilmartin were able to control the flow of copper and also possibly bronze from Ireland to the north-east of Scotland, which was expressed in terms of conspicuous consumption and large-scale monument building, as the elites visibly demonstrated their wealth and power.<sup>33</sup> It is possible that mining was also taking place in, and around, the Glen as there are copper deposits which were certainly exploited in the early modern period.<sup>34</sup> Whether copper was acquired locally, or from further afield or both, the connections of the people living in Kilmartin were clearly wide-ranging. Evidence in the form of materials or stylistic affinities suggest these extend to Ireland the north-east of Scotland, and Yorkshire.<sup>35</sup>

The Early Bronze Age, described by Sheridan as a 'golden age' in Kilmartin,<sup>36</sup> saw the construction of a highly visible, deliberately imposing, Linear Cemetery of cairns, of which Nether Largie Mid Cairn is one. Taken as a single entity, the Linear Cemetery is the grandest of all the prestigious monuments in the Glen.

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<sup>29</sup> Dingwall and McGowan, 1996: 43

<sup>30</sup> Sheridan 2017, RARFA

<sup>31</sup> RCAHMS 1988: 14

<sup>32</sup> RCAHMS 1988; Sheridan 2017, RARFA

<sup>33</sup> Sheridan 2012: 175; Sheridan 2017, RARFA

<sup>34</sup> Steiniger 2012

<sup>35</sup> Sheridan 2012: 177

<sup>36</sup> Sheridan 2012: 175

Today, the Linear Cemetery consists of five large cairns – the **Glebe Cairn, Nether Largie North Cairn, Nether Largie Mid Cairn, Nether Largie South Cairn** and **Ri Cruin Cairn**. The cairns were constructed on gently raised areas of ground on the flat valley floor of Kilmartin Glen – these raised areas are most likely to be areas of sand and/or gravel deposited by melt water following the end of the last glaciation. The Kilmartin Burn would have followed a more sinuous course past the cairn cemetery in prehistory, prior to it being straightened and canalised in the 19th century. Flowing water may have been significant to the builders of the cairns and this might have been an influencing factor in their construction and location. As well as potentially referencing running water, the cairns are carefully sited in a line. Although not evenly spaced, they are roughly central to the valley bottom and form a very prominent complex of monuments. Even though all of the cairns have been denuded to a greater or lesser extent, they still have great impact in the valley today. Many of the other prominent monuments are visible from the Linear Cemetery, including Temple Wood Stone Circles and Nether Largie Standing Stones (from Ri Cruin and Nether Largie South Cairns).

It has been suggested that the Linear Cemetery once comprised more cairns. Two possible other sites are represented only by cists today with any cairn material having been removed.<sup>37</sup> Speculation that there may also have been a further cairn in between Nether Largie Mid and Nether Largie South has never been investigated.

The builders of the Linear Cemetery incorporated the earlier Neolithic Nether Largie South Chambered Cairn into the alignment, and this may have been its initial focus.<sup>38</sup> The original trapezoidal linear shape of Nether Largie South was substantially altered to appear circular.<sup>39</sup> Linear Cemeteries are known in other parts of Britain, however they are rare in Scotland. A clear parallel with a similar chronological range is the line of cairns at Balnuaran of Clava near Inverness which also has other similarities including associations with rock art.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> RCAHMS 1988: 14

<sup>38</sup> RCAHMS 1988: 14

<sup>39</sup> RCAHMS 1988: 14; Sheridan 2017, RARFA

<sup>40</sup> A. Watson, pers. com.