



Property in Care (PIC) ID: PIC218

Designations: Scheduled Monument (SM90304)

Taken into State care: 1931 (Guardianship)

Last reviewed: 2013

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

TORHOUSE STONE CIRCLE



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TORHOUSE STONE CIRCLE

SYNOPSIS

Torhouse Stone Circle, situated just off the B733 3½ miles west of Wigtown, is one of the best preserved stone circles in the British Isles. Also known as 'King Gauldus's Tomb', the Standing Stones of Torhouse, and Torhousekie Stone Circle, the monument comprises 19 granite boulders forming a near-circle c.20m in diameter. Three upright boulders stand in a line near the centre of the circle, from which a low arc of rubble extends for a short distance to the north-west.

Torhouse Stone Circle sits in a landscape once rich in prehistoric ritual and funerary monuments (ie, standing stones and cairns) which may have been in contemporaneous use. Some have been removed almost in their entirety, and the interior of Torhouse Stone Circle has clearly been used as a dumping ground for adjacent field clearance. Scarcely any archaeological survey and excavation work has been carried out on any of the sites, including Torhouse Stone Circle itself.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview:

- **Late Neolithic / Bronze Age** – Torhouse Stone Circle is erected.
- **1684** – Andrew Symson refers to Torhouse Stone Circle as 'King Gauldus's Tomb', Gauldus being a mythical Scottish king.
- **1795** – the robbing of nearby burial cairns for building stone dykes is reported.
- **1924** – Torhouse Stone Circle is designated as a Scheduled Ancient Monument.
- **1931** – Torhouse Stone Circle is taken into state care, along with other nearby ancient monuments (**Barsalloch Fort** and **Big Balcraig and Clachan Cup-and Ring Marks**).

Archaeological Overview:

Torhouse Stone Circle is regarded as one of the best preserved, and most important, stone circles in the British Isles (Burl). It consists of 19 granite boulders set on end and forming a near-circle 21.4m by 20m in diameter. The stones range in height from 0.6m to 1.5m, with the tallest in the south-east arc. Three upright boulders stand in a line near the centre of the circle; a low arc of rubble adjoining them to the north-west has been compared to the inner ring cairns present in recumbent stone circles in NE Scotland (eg **Tomnaverie** and **Loanhead of Daviot**). The circle appears to be sitting on an artificial platform. As the stone circle has never been archaeologically investigated, little more can meaningfully be said concerning it.

However, Torhouse Stone Circle is surrounded by other ritual and funerary monuments that may have been in contemporaneous use. A site 450m to its west-north-west consists of a circular stony platform 24m in diameter and 1.3m in maximum height, with a central circular mound 18m in diameter and averaging 0.8m in height, around the top of which there is a 'rim' typical of a robbed-out cairn. Some 180m to the north-west of Torhouse are the remains of

a dilapidated cairn, 28m in diameter and now 1m, but formerly 4m, high. At least two other nearby cairns are recorded as having been removed for stone dyke building. Some 130m east of the circle is a row of three standing stones, and 40m to the SSE of the circle is a further pair of stones, one large and the other small. The only archaeological excavation took place in 1994 prior to the re-erection of the central stone of the three to the east of the circle, which hinted at the possibility of a timber phase pre-dating the erection of the stones (as was found to be the case also at one of the stone circles on **Machrie Moor**, Arran). This quite unusual concentration of large ritual and funerary monuments emphasises the importance of Torhouse Stone Circle in the second, and quite possibly the third, millennium BC.

Torhouse has also been regarded by some (eg Burl) as an important link between the recumbent stone circles of Aberdeenshire and Cork, on the basis that its central setting can be compared to the recumbent stone and flankers present at the former. Burl (2000) avers that Torhouse 'provides illumination of travel and communication in the early centuries of the Atlantic Bronze Age'. However, on the present lack of evidence this perhaps takes the comparison between them too far.

Architectural/Artistic Overview:

Torhouse is an exceptionally well-preserved monument, and its relative completeness has resulted in it becoming important to debates concerning how stone circles were laid out. Some authorities have suggested that 'flattened' stone circles, such as Torhouse, were designed using complex geometry; others postulate that the 'flattening' of one side was an architectural device to emphasise one aspect of the monument.

The purpose of the central setting, which is a prominent architectural feature of the site, probably cannot be explained without recourse to archaeological excavation, but it could have been a device to frame a distant view.

Social Overview:

Torhouse Stone Circle is a relatively minor visitor attraction in the Machars, but otherwise one with little apparent social significance for the resident population. Nevertheless, in our age of increasing globalisation, certain sections of society attach a particular significance to such prehistoric monuments and their associated landscapes. It may be that this tendency will increase as the rest of society becomes more uniform, reincarnating the importance of these monuments as markers of local identity.

Spiritual Overview:

See above (Social Overview)

Aesthetic Overview:

Torhouse Stone Circle is exceptionally well preserved, and the visitor is rewarded with a thought-provoking experience.

Torhouse Stone Circle sits within a landscape once rich in prehistoric ritual and funerary monument. However, that ancient landscape is not all that apparent today. Even Torhouse Stone Circle itself seems to lurk in the landscape rather than dominate it.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- What date was the stone circle erected? The lack of archaeological investigation means that we know remarkably little about the site.
- Was there an internal enclosure? The platform on which the circle sits may be artificial.
- Where did the people who built the stone circle, and the other numerous ritual and funerary monuments in the vicinity, live, and what sort of economy did they have? Here again we lack modern archaeological survey and excavation.
- What was the relationship, if any, between Torhouse Stone Circle and the recumbent stone circles of north-east Scotland and southern Ireland?

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key Points

- Torhouse Stone Circle is one of the best-preserved stone circles in the British Isles, making it a rewarding site to visit.
- Torhouse has undoubted significant archaeological potential to cast valuable insights into the form and function of prehistoric stone circles.
- Torhouse Stone Circle lies within a landscape rich in prehistoric ritual and funerary monuments. Taken together, they have the potential to inform how our remote ancestors lived.
- That Torhouse may in some way have been linked with stone circles as far apart as north-east Scotland and southern Ireland raises fascinating possibilities about the relationships between peoples in remote times.

Associated Properties:

(*other locally related places*) – **Cairn Holy**; Claghreid Stone Circle;
Drumtroddan Standing Stones; Glenquichen Stone Circle; **Wren's Egg, stones**

(*some other stone circles in Historic Scotland's care*) – **Auchagallon**; **Calanais**;
Cullerlie; **Loanhead of Daviot**; **Machrie Moor**; **Ring of Brodgar**;
Stones of Stenness; **Templewood**; **Tomnaverie**

Keywords:

Ritual; funerary; stone circle; standing stone

Selected Bibliography:

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