



HISTORIC  
ENVIRONMENT  
SCOTLAND

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Property in Care (PIC) ID: PIC221

Designations: Scheduled Monument (SM90316)

Taken into State care: 1890 (Guardianship)

Last Reviewed: 2022

## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

# WREN'S EGG



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Cover Image: General view of the Wren's Egg in Dumfries and Galloway © Historic Environment Scotland.

# HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

## WRENS EGG

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## I. SUMMARY

Please note, in this document the various components discussed are identified by the following terms:

- The Wren's Egg – the whole site in Guardianship (boulder and one pair of stones)
- The Wren's Egg Boulder – the boulder
- The Wren's Egg Stones – the pair of stones in Guardianship
- The Milton Hill Stones – the other pair of stones not in Guardianship, but covered by the same designation as the Wren's Egg Stones

### 1.1 Introduction

The monument known as the Wren's Egg<sup>1</sup> is located on a low, elongated ridge to the north of Monreith on the western side of The Machars peninsular in Dumfries and Galloway. It is situated within fields near the farmhouse of Blairbuie.

The Property in Care consists of a pair of standing stones, around 1.5m apart, with a large glacial erratic boulder<sup>2</sup> some 20m to the west. Another similar pair of standing stones<sup>3</sup> is located around 400m to the south-east on the slopes of Milton Hill and do not form part of the property in care. The site was taken into guardianship in 1890 by Deed of Appointment on request from the landowner and Member of Parliament for Wigtownshire, Sir Herbert Maxwell who was also instrumental in bringing other local monuments into state care.

Both pairs of standing stones are designated as a Scheduled Monument (SM90316)<sup>4</sup> but the erratic boulder, as a natural feature in situ is not designated. This area of The Machars contains many archaeological

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<sup>1</sup> Canmore ID 62572, more details available at: ['The Wren's Egg' | Canmore](#) (Accessed: 16 September 2022).

<sup>2</sup> A glacial erratic is a natural phenomenon whereby a boulder is incorporated into a glacier, transported some distance by the moving glacier, and then deposited when the glacier melts. Glacial erratics can therefore be of a different geological type to the underlying geology of the place where they come to rest.

<sup>3</sup> Canmore ID 62753, more details available at: [Blairbuy | Canmore](#) (Accessed 16 September 2022).

<sup>4</sup> SM90316, scheduling documents are accessible at: [The Wren's Egg, two standing stones 18m ENE and two standing stones 406m SSE of \(SM90316\) \(historicenvironment.scot\)](#) (Accessed: 16 September 2022).

remains of a similar age, forming an extensive prehistoric landscape, most likely dating to the Bronze Age.

The site is unstaffed and is not signposted. It has no parking arrangements and access to the site is difficult and the field is often used for livestock. People who decide to visit should pay attention to local signage and requests and observe the Scottish Outdoor Access Code.<sup>5</sup>

## 1.2 Statement of Significance

Our understanding of the Wren's Egg is uncertain. By 19th century accounts, the two standing stones once formed part of a larger stone circle. The accounts hint that the circle was mostly demolished during agricultural improvements, with only the boulder and the two Wren's Egg Stones remaining of this larger monument. However, archaeological investigation in 1975 found no evidence of a larger circle, and the Wren's Egg Stones were re-interpreted as belonging to a class of standing stones which are found in pairs.

Such pairs of standing stones are less common than single standing stones. Even more unusual is their relationship to the nearby pair of the Milton Hill Stones. This is recognised in their being covered by a single designation entry.

It is accepted that there remains some question over the original form of the monument: a 1777 estate plan depicts a stone circle near to the Wren's Egg, however this would require further investigation and corroboration before it could be relied upon to overturn the physical evidence of the 1975 investigation. Therefore, this Statement proceeds accepting the premiss of the 1975 research that the site was conceived as a pair of stones, and not a circle. Accordingly, it concentrates on those aspects of the site which are relatively certain and differentiates issues of interpretation and discussion which are largely confined to Appendices.

- The Wren's Egg Stones belong to a class of prehistoric monument widespread across Scotland, including Dumfries and Galloway, however pairs of stones are comparatively rare. Additionally, the Wren's Egg Stones have what could be described as a sibling pair on the next area of high ground to the south. The two pairs are intervisible indicating that the Wren's Egg potentially forms part of a complex over a wider area.
- The Wren's Egg monument incorporates a natural feature – the Wren's Egg Boulder, the erratic boulder from which the monument

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<sup>5</sup> Available at: [NatureScot \(outdooraccess-scotland.scot\)](https://www.naturescot.org.uk/outdoor-access-scotland) (Accessed: 19 October 2022).



derives its name. The incorporation of natural features into a ritual monument by prehistoric people is by no means unheard of but is noteworthy and adds to the distinctiveness of this site. Taken together, the above features have the potential to inform our understanding of ritual and belief in prehistory.

- The site was one of the first to be taken into state care following the introduction of the 1882 Ancient Monuments Act – it is indicative of the decision making and values associated with ancient monuments in the 19th century.
- The origin of the name for the site is not known but may be significant. Wrens are associated with many traditions and legends including one particularly recorded in Kirkmaiden Parish, the *Deckan' o the wran* but no confirmation of this possible link was found during research for this Statement. The name may therefore have no greater meaning than an ironic reference to the size of the boulder.
- Research into stone pairs has pointed to potential geographical and astronomical alignments for the class of monument. Some tentative potential conclusions about the Wren's Egg have been drawn, see 2.4.1.

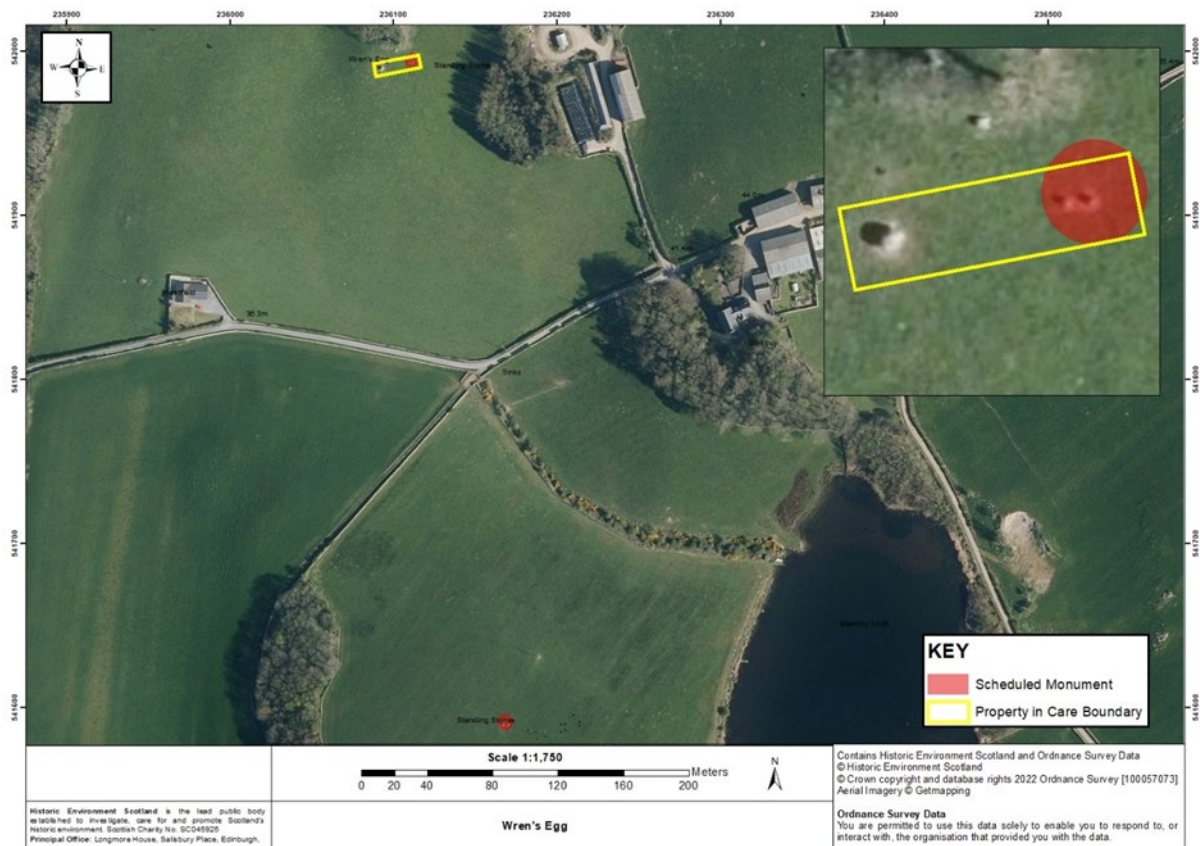


Figure 1: Wren's Egg Scheduled area and Property in Care (PIC) boundary. Image for illustrative purposes only. The Wren's Egg in Care area is at the top of the image and the Milton Hill Stones (not in Care) near the bottom. The insert shows a close-up of the PIC boundary.

## 2. ASSESSMENT OF VALUES

### 2.1 Background

The Wren's Egg Property in Care comprises a glacial erratic boulder and a pair of standing stones. The glacial erratic boulder which is commonly referred to as the Wren's Egg is around 2m in height and 7.2m in circumference, it is granite and is located slightly to the east of the crest of the ridge.

The pair of standing stones are around 20m downslope to the east, set about 1.5m apart and both are of unworked granite set just under 1m in height above the current ground surface.



*Figure 2: Wren's Egg Boulder and the two standing stones down the slope to the east of the boulder. The picture was taken in 1958 © HES.*

The pair of standing stones that form the Wren's Egg Stones belong to a class of late Neolithic and Bronze Age monuments that occur across Britain, Ireland and Brittany.<sup>6</sup> In Scotland, there are major concentrations identified in Perthshire, Argyll and Bute (especially around Kilmartin Valley)

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<sup>6</sup> Burl 1993.

and The Machars in Dumfries and Galloway, where the Wren's Egg is found. Pairs of stones, such as those at the Wren's Egg have not benefitted from the intensive study that the more dramatic and eye-catching megalithic stone circles (such as **Calanais**<sup>7</sup> or **Brodgar**) have. They have been considered 'lesser' in importance and interest by some academics.

Burl categorised pairs of standing stones as Bronze Age in date, being 'the final manifestation of a linear tradition that had endured, always undergoing change, for almost two thousand years'.<sup>8</sup> The dating evidence for these sites is limited, especially in Scotland. However, limited radiocarbon dates for pairs and stone rows in western Scotland have shown that they are Bronze Age,<sup>9</sup> and dates for some pairs located in West Wales range from 2000BC to 1180BC.<sup>10</sup> An analysis of radiocarbon dates demonstrated that single and multiple standing stone sites in southwest Britain and Wales are predominantly a Middle Bronze Age occurrence.<sup>11</sup>

Many standing stones and stone pairs are far from megalithic in stature,<sup>12</sup> and the Wren's Egg Stones are no different measuring just under 1m in height. Dimorphism is a noted characteristic of stone pairs whereby one stone, is often shorter and/or more triangular in shape than the other, which is deemed the 'pillar'.<sup>13</sup> At the Wren's Egg the eastern stone (Stone 1) has a definite triangular form compared to the western (Stone 2) which is flat topped.

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<sup>7</sup> Throughout the text, site names in **bold** are managed by Historic Environment Scotland and are publicly accessible. Access information can be found at: <https://www.historicenvironment.scot/visit-a-place/> (Accessed 06 October 2022).

<sup>8</sup> Burl 1993, 181.

<sup>9</sup> Higginbottom 2020, 36.

<sup>10</sup> Pritchard 2017, 147.

<sup>11</sup> Williams 1988, 117-118

<sup>12</sup> Gillings 2015, 211 has styled such stones as 'miniliths' and observes that they are often relegated from academic studies of Neolithic and Bronze Age monuments.

<sup>13</sup> Burl 1993.





*Figure 3: The Wren's Egg Stones. The eastern stone has a triangular form while the western stone is flat topped. © Historic Environment Scotland.*

Williams saw small stones as equals to the larger megaliths, carrying out the same role and located and erected with the same level of care and attention, however Gillings questioned why miniaturise in the first place, and does not see them as equal, especially when there is observable patterning between large and small.<sup>14</sup>

### 2.1.1 Earliest descriptions of the site

The earliest reference<sup>15</sup> to the site, is in a late 18th century survey of the Maxwell of Monreith estate.<sup>16</sup> On a 1777 plan of Blairboy (sic) by John Gilone, the site is depicted as 'Antique Stone' and in the accompanying Book of Description the field is referred to as 'standing stone field'.<sup>17</sup> The

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<sup>14</sup> Williams 1988, 32-8 and Gillings 2015, 226.

<sup>15</sup> That could be found with the limited resources available during lockdown.

<sup>16</sup> Available to view online at the National Library of Scotland: [Maxwells of Monreith Estate Maps and Plans, 1777-1778 - National Library of Scotland \(nls.uk\)](#) (Accessed: 12 October 2022).

<sup>17</sup> The map and book are available to view online at the National Library of Scotland: [View map: No. 11 Blairboy survey'd 1777 by John Gilone - Maxwells of Monreith Estate Maps and Plans, 1777-1778 \(nls.uk\)](#) and [Book of Description: Blairboy - Maxwells of Monreith Estate Maps and Plans, 1777-1778 \(nls.uk\)](#) (Both accessed: 12 October 2022).

stones were clearly viewed as significant by the landowner, as Sir William Maxwell made it a condition of the farm tenancy that the stones should not be moved.<sup>18</sup>

The site is recorded in the Ordnance Survey name book compiled during the first survey in 1848. The Wren's Egg is recorded as 'a large stone or rock on the farm of Blairbuy situated closed to the farm house, and about 40 [yards] to the East of it are two standing stones which the tenant is bound in his lease not to remove'.<sup>19</sup> The two standing stones and the boulder are individually depicted and labelled on the 1st edition 6 inch map published in 1850 (and on subsequent editions thereafter).<sup>20</sup>

A description of the site from the early 19th century was published in the first edition of *History of the Lands and their Owners in Galloway* where it was described as such: 'On the farm of Blairboy some fifty years ago, was a double circle of large stones, with one flat topped stone in the centre. All have been long removed, except the centre stone, and one stone of each of the circles'.<sup>21</sup> Murray, in her overview of stone circles of Wigtownshire highlights that this view is tied in with the 19th century ideas of Druid Circles and that M'Kerlie would have gleaned such information from the landowner Maxwell.<sup>22</sup>

## 2.1.2 Guardianship

General Pitt Rivers, who became the first Inspector of Ancient Monuments following the passage of the Ancient Monuments Protection Act, 1882, did not include the Wren's Egg on the initial Schedule for the introduction of the Act.<sup>23</sup> Instead, the 'Standing stones at Blairbowie, locally known as "The Wren's Egg"' were included in the Schedule by Order in Council on 8th February 1890 and taken into guardianship by Deed of Appointment on 10th April 1890. It was the twelfth monument (in Scotland) to be included in this way, and the 21st guardianship monument in Scotland overall.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Murray 1981, 19.

<sup>19</sup> Ordnance Survey 1845-1849, 58. Available to view online on the ScotlandsPlaces website: [OS1/35/75/58 | ScotlandsPlaces](#) (Accessed: 12 October 2022).

<sup>20</sup> Available to view online at the National Library of Scotland: [View map: OS six-inch to the mile, 1st ed., Wigtownshire, Sheet 29 - Ordnance Survey Six-inch 1st edition, Scotland, 1843-1882 \(nls.uk\)](#) (accessed: 23 September 2022).

<sup>21</sup> M'Kerlie 1906, 489.

<sup>22</sup> Murray 1981, 19.

<sup>23</sup> Chippendale 1983.

<sup>24</sup> Fry 2014a, 55.



Figure 4: Pitt-Rivers sketch of Wren's Egg. © The National Archives.

The Wren's Egg first came to prominence (in terms of state care) when it was one of a number of monuments offered up for guardianship to Pitt-Rivers by the landowner, Sir Herbert Maxwell, who was also the Member of Parliament for Wigtownshire.<sup>25</sup> In what seems to be a familiar pattern when monuments were offered for state care, Pitt-Rivers undertook a trip to Wigtownshire in 1887 to view the site, and presumably meet with Maxwell. During this visit, Pitt-Rivers arranged for a drawing of the monument (above figure 4) and a survey also seems to have been carried out. Ultimately the Wren's Egg was rejected from guardianship in the same year as Pitt-Rivers had been unable to establish the importance of the monument.<sup>26</sup> In a memorandum written by Pitt-Rivers dated November 1, 1887, he stated 'it cannot certainly be said to be an important monument in its present state but Sir Herbert Maxwell wished to place it under the Act and it will entail little or no expense'.<sup>27</sup>

The decision was reconsidered, and it was agreed to bring it into state care 'because of the value imposed on it by local communities, led by Sir Herbert Maxwell'.<sup>28</sup> It also seems that the historical significance of the site had been restated by Maxwell who suggested that the standing stones formed part of a larger stone circle, and that whereabouts of the missing stones was known by the estate for eventual re-erection.

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<sup>25</sup> As an MP since 1880 Maxwell would have been involved in the parliamentary debates which introduced the 1882 Act and had an understanding of what the Act entailed/allowed which he used to help bring other monuments in Dumfries and Galloway into state care.

<sup>26</sup> Fogel 2019, 37.

<sup>27</sup> MW1/775.

<sup>28</sup> Fogel 2019, 53.





Figure 5: General view of the site with the small sign positioned between the Wren's Egg Boulder and standing stones. © HES.

Little work seems to have been carried out following the Wren's Egg entering state care; a small sign appears to have been erected at the Wren's Egg.<sup>29</sup> At the start of the 20th century the Office of Works planned to reconstruct the stone circle as made clear by a 1908 memorandum of a conversation between J Fitzgerald, Inspector with the Office of Works, and Sir Herbert Maxwell:

This huge monolith is the centre of a Circle of Stones, of which few remain in their original position. Many have been removed, even within the memory of old parishioners to form gate-posts, etc., or even to be broken up.

I discussed with the owner of the land, Sir H. Maxwell and the Tenant, Mr. McMasters, the recovery and replacing of the lost Stones. The tenant promised his co-operation without which nothing could be done, and I hope that the Circle which was once of exceptional importance may be reformed<sup>30</sup>

For whatever reason the restoration attempt did not happen, which may indicate that the task was found to be impossible, as the stone circle had

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<sup>29</sup> As found by Masters in 1975 and recorded on Canmore: [Archaeology Notes | Canmore](#) (Accessed: 12 October 2022).

<sup>30</sup> MW1/775.



most likely never existed. True to Pitt-River's word it seems the care of the site entailed little or no expense. The total sum of works carried out amounts to the erection of a small cairn to beside the woodland to the north of the erratic to hold an information plaque, although it is not entirely clear when this was undertaken.

### 2.1.3 Archaeological Investigation

The Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historic Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS) included the site in its 1912 Inventory for Wigtown.<sup>31</sup> Listing it under 'Sepulchral Constructions' RCAHMS described the pair of stones as opposite members of a double concentric stone circle, the outer of which has a radius of 66 feet (20m). The site had been visited in 1911 as part of fieldwork for the compilation of the Inventory and the description was recorded by Alexander Curle in his 8th diary.<sup>32</sup> Such a description would suggest that the RCAHMS surveyors had been provided with information by locals who were explaining the long-held belief in the original form of site. Interestingly the pair of stones to the south on Milton Hill were described as is, suggesting that a previous form as a circle was not envisaged for them.<sup>33</sup>

The Wren's Egg was first officially scheduled in 1921, although it would have been deemed to meet scheduling criteria by virtue of its guardianship status, so this was just a formalisation when the first list of scheduled ancient monuments was published.<sup>34</sup>

The first modern attempt at examining the site was in 1967 by Professor Alexander Thom who included it in his mathematical investigation of megalithic sites in Britain.<sup>35</sup> For more information see 2.1.4.

The idea that the pair of stones were the last remnants of a stone circle was tested in 1975 when Lionel Masters of Glasgow University was invited by the Inspectorate of Ancient Monuments (Scotland) to investigate the monument in order to establish its classification. Masters excavated three trenches; 1st to examine an area around the pair of standing stones to look for the next potential stone holes, 2nd to examine the area around the Wren's Egg Boulder for traces of prehistoric activity, and 3rd as an area to the south of the monument to examine if there was a continuation of a stone circle - no evidence of this was found in the area excavated.

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<sup>31</sup> RCAHMS 1912.

<sup>32</sup> Available online with transcriptions on ScotlandsPlaces website: [Curle Diaries | ScotlandsPlaces](#) (Accessed: 12 October 2022).

<sup>33</sup> Murray 1981.

<sup>34</sup> Fry 2014b, 34.

<sup>35</sup> Thom 1967.

The excavation found that Stone 1 was set into a well-defined hole, packed with thin slabs and small rounded stones. A brief examination of the hole found nothing but the packing stones and soil and established that Stone 1 is at least 1.5m in height. Stone 2 was established to be 1.34m in height and had been set so that it had a flat top, with its base more pointed. Stone 2 was found to be set into a very slight hollow, with the base packed with small stones to a height of 400mm above the subsoil, no finds were recovered from the packing. The topsoil proved quite shallow, with the excavator suggesting that had further stones been erected in a fashion to Stone 2, all traces could easily have been removed by ploughing.

The Wren's Egg itself was found to have been shifted from its original position in modern times, though not by a significant distance. A large pit was found partly underlying the boulder. This was found to contain a small posthole for an Office of Works sign and a single shirt button of modern date was recovered. Furthermore, an iron plough chain found around the base of the boulder probably represent a farmer's failed attempt to move it.

64 pieces of flint, the majority of which had been worked in some way, including a fine knife, were recovered during the excavation, mainly from the topsoil of the trenches, no other finds were recovered or samples taken.<sup>36</sup>

Masters' excavations found no physical evidence for a stone circle. He also concluded that a circle centred on the Egg Boulder as had been described in 19th century sources would, because of the topography, not have been visible side to side: this would be unheard of among stone circles. Masters therefore concluded that the Wren's Egg Stones had not formed part of any stone circle, and that they had been erected as a pair, close to the glacial erratic.<sup>37</sup>

Three stone cists were disturbed by ploughing 150m to the northwest of the Wren's Egg in 2012. One cist contained skeletal remains and no artefacts; the other two cists did not contain skeletal remains or artefacts. All of the cists lay on a slight ridge leaving them at risk from further damage by agricultural practices.<sup>38</sup> Post-excavation analysis of the skeletal remains showed that they were of a juvenile, approximately 9-12 years of age, suffering from malnutrition. Radiocarbon dating of the remains gave a date of 2027-1886 BC, placing it in the Early Bronze Age.<sup>39</sup> The excavators of the cists suggested that the Wren's Egg may have formed a focal point for ritual activity within the local landscape, especially given the previous cists unearthed in the area.

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<sup>36</sup> A small burnt patch was deemed too small for radiocarbon dating.

<sup>37</sup> Masters 1976, 42.

<sup>38</sup> Bailie 2013.

<sup>39</sup> Bailie 2013, 10.



Figure 6: View of the cists in relation to the Wren's Egg. The Wren's Egg is further up the slope, highlighted by a red circle. © GUARD Archaeology Ltd.

#### 2.1.4 Interpretations and Archaeoastronomy

The Wren's Egg was included by Professor Alexander Thom in his mathematical investigation of megalithic sites in Britain.<sup>40</sup> Listed as G 3/13, Thom calculated that the Wren's Egg (although it is unclear which element of it) has a solar alignment at  $227.5^\circ$  and noting that it is to Big Scare.<sup>41</sup> This was further clarified between Thom and Masters that the alignment was with the setting sun on the midwinter solstice.<sup>42</sup>

Archaeoastronomical work by Ruggles in western Scotland found that stone pairs were likely orientated on the southerly limit of the Moon's monthly movements<sup>43</sup> whilst Higginbottom's detailed re-analysis of the

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<sup>40</sup> Thom 1967.

<sup>41</sup> Big Scare is the largest of The Scares, a number of rocky islets in Luce Bay that are around 12km southwest of Port William.

<sup>42</sup> Masters 1976.

<sup>43</sup> Ruggles 1988, 234.

data found that with stone pairs it is common to have at least two different alignments such as the Moon at a standstill and the Sun at a solstice.<sup>44</sup>

A 2017 study into the stone pairs of southwest Wales examined the applicability of ‘shadow phenomenon’<sup>45</sup> to them. This found that 60% showed clear evidence of possessing the necessary characteristics for a ‘shadow union’ to occur, with the author suggesting that given the variables required ‘the likelihood of this result occurring by chance seems small’<sup>46</sup> and therefore indicative that it was an intentional feature of stone pairs.<sup>47</sup>

Pritchard also suggested that the location of the stone pairs, on the lower and more fertile ground, compared to other ritual monuments may be indicative of them playing some part in agricultural practices of the period, with the diversity of the times and dates causing the ‘shadow unions’ relating to different periods and activities of the agricultural year.<sup>48</sup> A similar hypothesis has been suggested for shadows cast at the Bronze Age Clava Cairns.<sup>49</sup>

## 2.2 Evidential Values

Surviving archaeological remains provide us with evidence for Bronze Age people and their culture. The Wren’s Egg significance lies in what it can tell us about the Bronze Age inhabitants of the area, their belief systems and how they viewed and experienced the landscape, and for its potential to provide further evidence for these through ongoing research. It also demonstrates that they had a commonality and shared understanding with people across Europe in creating such monuments.

The 1975 excavation demonstrated that in all likelihood the standing stones did not form part of a stone circle and provided evidence that instead the pair of standing stones are part of another form of megalithic monumentality. The excavation also demonstrated that the stones were in their original positions with no evidence for re-erection, meaning that further study of them would likely yield accurate results.

Whilst not within the Property in Care area, the presence of burial cists in the immediate landscape provides further evidence of a Bronze Age funerary landscape, potentially centred on the Wren’s Egg. Any contents of

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<sup>44</sup> Higginbottom 2020, 58.

<sup>45</sup> Whereby the shadow of one stone falls on the base of the other, forming a ‘shadow union’ at either of the solstices or one of the equinoxes.

<sup>46</sup> Pritchard 2017, 159.

<sup>47</sup> Pritchard 2017.

<sup>48</sup> Pritchard 2017, 163.

<sup>49</sup> Trevarthen 2000, 301.



the cists could provide evidence about the inhabitants of the area during the Bronze Age.



*Figure 7: View from the Wren's Egg Boulder to the Milton Hill Stones which are included in the schedule SM90316 but not in the PIC boundary. © Historic Environment Scotland.*

To the south of the Wren's Egg Stones, on the northern slope of Milton Hill, another pair of similar shape and stature are located. Given the close proximity and apparent commonality between the two pairs, it is possible that grouping forms a wider monument across the landscape. However, no study has been undertaken into the relationship between the two monuments to date (2022).

The alignment, or potential alignment of the stones, provides evidence for the Bronze Age understanding of the natural world and cosmological happenings.

There is a high potential that further research within the immediate landscape, such as geophysical survey, may yield further information.

### **2.3 Historical values**

The primary historical importance of the Wren's Egg is in its potential to contribute towards our understanding of belief systems of the Bronze Age

in southwest Scotland. However, the current lack of secure dating for the monument limits this.

The Wren's Egg also contributes towards our understanding of the development of the (now) Historic Environment Scotland estate. Its association with Pitt-Rivers and the mechanism through which it was brought into state care, along with more recent research on the subject, has helped to highlight how sites were valued not just for the historical or archaeological importance but also through their value to local communities.



*Figure 8: General view of the Wren's Egg Boulder. Photograph taken in 1958. © HES.*

### **2.3.1 The name The Wren's Egg**

The origin of the site name is not known, though there is much speculation. The name first appears in the Ordnance Survey Namebook of 1848. The name may simply be a humorous play on the size of the stone and the absurdity of a wren laying it. A group of similar glacial erratics on the coast of Co Antrim, Ireland are also called wren's eggs.

There are many traditions, customs and beliefs associated with the wren including a winter wren-hunt around St Stephen's day (26 December) recorded in several parts of the British Isles. Often the hunt involved the beating or stoning to death of the wren.

There is a particular, less bloodthirsty, tradition specifically recorded in Wigtownshire called *The Deckan' o' the Wran'*. This is only recorded in one location in Scotland: Masters recounts that the custom was carried out at Kirkmaiden in Galloway, and that Kirkmaiden is the ancient parish name in which the Wren's Egg is situated.<sup>50</sup> The Dictionary of the Scots Language also reports the custom in its entry for 'Wran', though it gives it as a New Year custom:

On the morning of New Year's Day the boys used to go in companies to catch wrens. When one was caught its legs and neck were decked with ribbons. It was then set at liberty. This ceremony was called 'the deckan o' the wran'.<sup>51</sup>

Thus far, we have not uncovered any sources that link the Wren's Egg to this tradition.

## 2.4 Architectural and artistic values

The erection of megaliths belongs to an architectural tradition that was common across Europe in the Bronze Age and has also been observed worldwide at different periods in time.

The Wren's Egg Stones follow a dimorphic design that is frequently observed in other pairs located in the British Isles, where one stone (Stone 1) is flat topped, and the other (Stone 2) is slightly shorter and more triangular in shape.

The Wren's Egg Stones are similar in appearance and stature to the pair of stones located to the south on Milton Hill, and also those which form the **stone circle at Torhouse**. Whether this is due to a commonality, or a product of the local geology needs to be explored further.

If the stones were erected with an astronomical and/or landscape alignment in mind, that would demonstrate a high degree of sophistication in the concept and design of the settings and of course skill and preparation to execute the design. More research is required to help clarify the former point.

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<sup>50</sup> Masters 1976, 42.

<sup>51</sup> Dictionary of the Scots Language.

### 2.4.1 Artistic representation

The Wren's Egg is depicted on a 18th century plan of Blairbui farm, which provides an insight into land/estate management at the time and shows that the stones were understood as part of the landscape.<sup>52</sup>

Pitt-Rivers arranged for a drawing of the site when he visited in 1887 and viewing of this now shows that very little has changed about the site and its immediate environs between then and the present day.<sup>53</sup>

## 2.5 Landscape and aesthetic values

Relationship to the wider landscape is important to our appreciation of the monument today and no doubt was an important factor in its original design and siting.

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<sup>52</sup> Available online to view at the National Library of Scotland: [View map: Blairbui - Maxwells of Monreith Estate Maps and Plans, 1777-1778 \(nls.uk\)](#) (Accessed: 12 October 2022).

<sup>53</sup> Available to view online at The National Archives: [Sketchbook no 3, entitled 'Ancient Monuments, Wigtonshire \(Wigtownshire\), Welsh Crosses... | The National Archives](#) (Accessed: 12 October 2022).





*Figure 9: View of the Wren's Egg from the south-east. The body of water is flood water and is not a permanent feature. Photograph taken in 1958. © HES.*

The location of the standing stones would have been chosen as it was a significant point in the landscape for those who erected the stones. Although we believe the Wren's Egg Boulder has been shifted in modern times (see 2.1.3) it is unlikely to have been moved any distance, and it was clearly of some significance to the Bronze Age inhabitants of the area to erect two standing stones very close by.

Any other alignments with landscape and archaeological features are not immediately apparent, apart perhaps from the Milton Hill Stones and even their connection has not been subject to any proper study. The local topography restricts wide views from the Wren's Egg, with the higher ground of the Fell of Barhullion to the east, of Milton Hill to the south, and the rolling landscape to the north and east. Within this restricted landscape perhaps delineated by rock art to the east,<sup>54</sup> the Wren's Egg may have acted as a focal point for the activities of Bronze Age people. The midwinter solstice alignment calculated by Thom would suggest a very deliberate positioning of the site, and the presence of cist burials adds

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<sup>54</sup> There are several cup and ring marked stones found towards the east of the Wren's Egg: [Rock Art Database - Scotland's Rock Art Project](#) (Accessed: 13 October 2022).

further evidence to this being a special, possibly sacred landscape for them.

Nowadays the Wren's Egg is situated in what can be described as the classic rolling Galloway landscape, with the surrounding fields, stone dykes, fences and scattered trees.

## 2.6 Natural heritage values

The small patch of woodland to the north of the standing stones is referred to by some observers as the Wren's Nest.<sup>55</sup> The woodland has been present as a backdrop to the monument since it was first recorded by the Ordnance Survey in the mid-19th century but is not shown on the 18th century farm plan.



*Figure 10: Aerial view of the Wren's Egg with the cope of trees to the north of the boulder known as the Wren's Nest. © Crown Copyright: HES*

The monument and surrounding landscape is not (in 2022) covered by any Natural Heritage designations.

## 2.7 Contemporary/use values

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<sup>55</sup> Cope 1998,365.

These have not yet been formally assessed.

### 3. MAJOR GAPS IN UNDERSTANDING

- What was the original form of the monument? Given that excavation has shown that the boulder has been moved/attempted to be moved in more recent history, where was it located/what was its relationship to the pair of standing stones?
- Commentators from the 19th century through to the present day have noted 'lost' stones and similar stones incorporated into more recent features such as stone dykes. These may be indicative of further standing stones in the surrounding area. A detailed study of the stones and the landscape may elucidate further information on this (the pastoral fields would make excellent conditions for geophysical survey).
- Are there further archival sources that could shed light on the stone circle theory or on the name of the site?
- What is the relationship between the Wren's Egg standing stones, and those to the south on Milton Hill?
- What was the function of the pair of standing stones? Do they have astronomical and/or landscape alignments? Is the theory of 'shadow union' tested in SW Wales applicable here?
- What is the relationship between the Wren's Egg and other ritual monuments in the local area? Did it function as a focal point as has been suggested?
- Is it possible to establish folklore or other associations with the site, origin of the name etc.?
- What are the social and community values for the site?

### 4. ASSOCIATED PROPERTIES

Locally related places: **Drumtroddan Standing Stones**, Milton Hill Stones, **Torhouse Stone Circle**

### 5. KEYWORDS

Wren's Egg, Bronze age, standing stones, alignment, ritual, glacial erratic, geology, General Pitt Rivers



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#### Further Resources

Canmore ID: 62752  
Site Number: NX34SE 10  
NGR: NX 3610 4199

Canmore entry: ['The Wren's Egg' - Canmore \(canmore.org.uk\)](https://canmore.org.uk/entry/62752)

Scheduling Description: SM90316, details accessible at: [The Wren's Egg, two standing stones 18m ENE and two standing stones 406m SSE of \(SM90316\) \(portal.historicenvironment.scot\)](https://portal.historicenvironment.scot/entry/SM90316)

A number of artefacts from the surrounding area are held within the Dumfries Museum and National Museums of Scotland collections. Their respective collections database can be searched via [Dumfries Museum: Collections \(futuremuseum.co.uk\)](https://futuremuseum.co.uk/) and [National Museums of Scotland: Search our collections \(nms.ac.uk\)](https://nms.ac.uk/).

Further information on the cup and ring marked stones found around the area can be searched via the [Rock Art Database - Scotland's Rock Art Project \(rockart.scot\)](https://rockart.scot/).

Alexander Curle's digitised diary recording site visit to Wren's Egg, Blairbuie: [Scotland's Places: Curle Diary 08 \(MS 36/34\) \(scotlandspplaces.gov.uk\)](https://scotlandspplaces.gov.uk/).

## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX I: TIMELINE

#### Bronze Age

3rd Millenium BC	The pair of standing stones are erected just to the east of the glacial erratic
(at a similar time)	The pair of standing stones on Milton Hill are erected
2027-1886 BC	A juvenile is buried in a stone cist to the NW of the Wren's Egg
Modern	
AD 1777	The site is mapped as part of the survey of Blairbuie Farm
1850s	Ordnance Survey visit the site and survey it for the 1st edition mapping
1870s	McKerlie describes the site in <i>History of the Lands and their Owners in Galloway</i>
1880s	The landowner Sir Herbert Maxwell brings it to the attention of Pitt-Rivers
1887	Pitt-Rivers visits and makes a drawing of the Wren's Egg
1890	Site is taken into guardianship via deed
1911	Visited by RCAHMS (published 1912).
1921	The Wren's Egg is included in the first Schedule of Ancient Monuments
1975	Excavations by Masters
2012	Ploughing in the field reveals three Bronze Age stone cists, which are excavated by GUARD Archaeology

### APPENDIX 2: BACKGROUND TO NEOLITHIC AND BRONZE AGE MONUMENTS AROUND THE WREN'S EGG

The late Neolithic and Bronze Age in southwest Scotland is characterised by the wide range of ritual and funerary monuments erected across the

landscape. Standing stones, stone alignments, stone circles and rock art are common across The Machars peninsular, with a high concentration in the immediate environs of the Wren's Egg, including the **Drumtroddan Standing Stones** (PIC193). The slightly elevated, outcropping ground to the east of the Wren's Egg, which forms the western slopes of the Fell of Barhullion has a particular concentration with 12 recorded panels/motifs.<sup>56</sup> Further afield in the area, there are the megaliths of Longcastle and the Carlin stone, and there is a concentration of megalithic monuments around 15km to the north surrounding and including **Torhouse Stone Circle** (PIC218), additionally a series of cairns occupy the higher moorland of The Machars to the northwest.

The purpose of such monuments is much debated however it is clear that they were often multi-purpose and multi-faceted. As well as being associated with funerary practices, such monuments are thought to mark routeways and significant places in the landscape, and astronomical and/or landscape alignments are an important feature of many of these classes of monuments.<sup>57</sup>

Attempting to understand the belief systems that would have been practiced at such monuments is almost impossible, but it is likely that they would have been at least partly based around astronomy, and the cup-and-ring motifs common in rock art have sometimes been interpreted as cosmological symbols.<sup>58</sup> During this period natural landscape features became more significant, and this is interlinked with another major Bronze Age practice, the deliberate deposition of artefacts.<sup>59</sup> Such votive deposition especially in wet contexts, appears to have been a significant component of Bronze Age cosmographies.<sup>60</sup>

Stray prehistoric finds, indicating a continual presence on the land, have been recovered from the landscape surrounding the Wren's Egg in the 19th and 20th centuries. Such finds include Mesolithic and Neolithic flints, stone axes, hammerstones and a cinary urn from a cist, further indication of Bronze Age practices.<sup>61</sup> Unfortunately, locational information for these is restricted to a generic Blairbuy/Blairbuie Farm, and the artefacts now form part of the collections in the Dumfries Museum and the National Museum of Scotland (NMS).<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Records of prehistoric rock art can be accessed on the Scotland's Rock Art Project database: [Rock Art Database - Scotland's Rock Art Project](#) (Accessed: 13 October 2022).

<sup>57</sup> SCARF.

<sup>58</sup> Beckensall 2009.

<sup>59</sup> Gregory 2002, 73.

<sup>60</sup> SCARF.

<sup>61</sup> Morrison 1968.

<sup>62</sup> The collections can be searched here: for Dumfries Museum: [Collections \(futuremuseum.co.uk\)](#) and for NMS: [Search our collections \(nms.ac.uk\)](#) (Both accessed: 13 October 2022).



Little is known about Bronze Age settlement in the area, possibly due to a survival, or lack-of survival, bias caused by centuries of agriculture and also due to a lack of archaeological fieldwork.<sup>63</sup> Especially perhaps because there has been little requirement for archaeology in advance of development which has provided a better understanding of prehistoric settlement patterns elsewhere. One exception would be the excavations at Dunragit to the northwest undertaken in advance of the A75 Bypass route. This was instrumental in adding to the prehistoric picture of the area, and there is likely more to be found. Few palaeoenvironmental studies have been carried out in the area, but one, around 6 miles to the south east at Rispain Mire near Whithorn found that small-scale woodland clearance for agriculture, both pastoral and arable began in the Neolithic and continued on through the Bronze Age.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Cowie and Shepherd 2005.

<sup>64</sup> Ramsay *et al* 2007, 52.