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ENVIRONMENT
SCOTLAND

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Designations: Scheduled Monument (SM13299)

Taken into State care: 1932 (Gaurdianship)

Last Reviewed: 2019

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

NETHER LARGIE SOUTH CAIRN



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Historic Environment Scotland – Scottish Charity No. SC045925

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HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

NETHER LARGIE SOUTH CAIRN

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1 Summary

1.1 Introduction

Nether Largie South is a Neolithic chambered cairn of the 'Clyde' type, situated in Kilmartin Glen, Argyll. It was constructed sometime after 3700 BC, and was later re-modelled and incorporated into an Early Bronze Age 'Linear Cemetery', around 1500 to 1800 years later.

Kilmartin Glen is a world-class archaeological landscape and one of Scotland's most important. It contains a wealth of upstanding prehistoric monuments¹, including an Early Bronze Age Linear Cemetery, consisting of massive monuments, of which Nether Largie South Cairn is the oldest. 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.

In addition to being the earliest cairn in the Linear Cemetery, Nether Largie South Cairn is also one of the oldest monuments in the area.

The monument was excavated by the Rev. Greenwell in 1864, and a number of important structural elements, inhumation and cremation burials and artefacts were discovered².

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 annually³ which gives an indication of visitor numbers and interest.

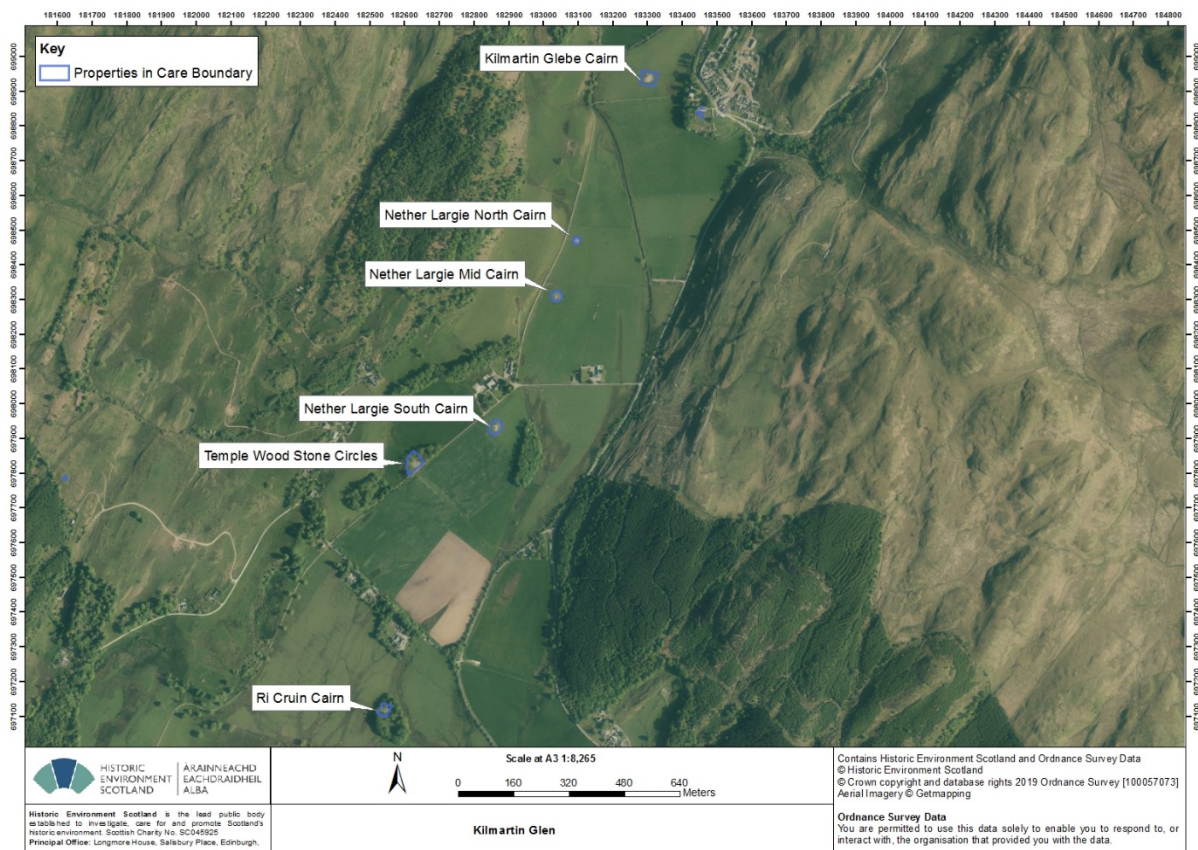
1.2 Statement of significance

- Nether Largie South Cairn is a very well-preserved example of a large and complex Neolithic chambered cairn of the 'Clyde' type.
- Dating to shortly after 3700 BC, the Early Neolithic period, Nether Largie South Cairn is one of the oldest monumental constructions in Kilmartin Glen.
- Nether Largie South Cairn was a culturally and religiously significant place of burial for an extended period of time in the Neolithic period; this continued into the Bronze Age, although changing burial practices suggests the belief system had changed in this time.
- In the Early Bronze Age, Nether Largie South Cairn was modified and incorporated into the Linear Cemetery, a larger monument of a form that is rare in Scotland. It is the oldest cairn surviving in the Linear Cemetery.

¹ RCAHMS 1988

² Greenwell, 1866

³ 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.)



Above: Location of cairns within Linear Cemetery, and neighbouring Temple Wood Stone Circles

Below: Scheduled area and Property in Care boundary, Nether Largie South Cairn. For illustrative purposes only.



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- Nether Largie South 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 South Cairn has inherent potential to make a significant contribution to our understanding of the past.

2 Assessment of values

2.1 Background

Nether Largie South Cairn came into State care / Guardianship in 1932, along with a number of other prehistoric sites on the Poltalloch Estate.

The cairn is located in pasture, surrounded by a fence accessed by a short fenced path that leads from the single track public road that runs from Kilmartin Primary School. The field in which the site is located is part of Nether Largie Farm.

Nether Largie South is a Neolithic chambered cairn of the 'Clyde' type. There are other chambered cairns in the surrounding area, the nearest ones being Kilchoan and Upper Rhudle. Nether Largie South Cairn was modified in the Early Bronze Age and at that time was also incorporated into a larger monument known as the 'Linear Cemetery' which stretches along the floor of Kilmartin Glen. The Glebe Cairn, Nether Largie North Cairn, Nether Largie Mid Cairn and Ri Cruin Cairn are the other known cairns in the Linear Cemetery. This monument was designed to be an imposing feature in a landscape already marked as a significant place for ritual and funerary activity.

Nether Largie South Cairn was excavated by the Rev. W. Greenwell in 1864 and his findings are presented below. Earlier stone quarrying had exposed two short cists and it is thought that a great many of the stones covering the cairn had been removed for wall building and drains prior to Greenwell's excavations, reducing its size considerably. The cairn appears to have been further reduced in size subsequent to the 19th century excavations.

Greenwell's excavations uncovered an internal chamber with four compartments separated by slabs, within the centre of the monument. A small cist was found inside the rear compartment, which had been opened prior to Greenwell's work. Sherds of Beaker pottery and unburned bones were found nearby which were thought to have originally come from this cist. A cremation deposit covered with a slab was found close by. A layer of earth and cremated bones were found under a pavement of small pebbles which ran down the centre of the compartment was. This layer also contained three perfect and one broken barbed and tanged arrowheads, other flint tools, a bovine tooth and numbers of broken quartz pebbles.

A fragment of Beaker and several other pottery sherds were also found, some in the third compartment. Greenwell also discovered a round-based Neolithic pottery vessel within a layer of earth, close to the side of the chamber.

The third compartment also contained cremated bone and sherds of Beaker. The outer compartment contained unburnt bone and pottery, as well as two flints.

Within the cairn material, Greenwell discovered two secondary cists, one of which contained fragments of a Food Vessel; the other was empty⁴.

The cairn's present appearance is a result of the reinstatement and modification of the monument for public access and presentation. This was undertaken after the monument came into Guardianship in 1932, with repairs and conservation work taking place from the 1970s. The central burial chamber can be accessed, and its four compartments are visible. One of the secondary burial cists is visible, with its top slab propped up to facilitate viewing.

All the surviving finds are in the Collections of the British Museum, London.

Nether Largie South Cairn was re-scheduled in 2013 (having been originally scheduled in 1981) as a monument of national importance due to 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
- the relationship between broadly contemporary ritual monuments and burial structures
- potentially undisturbed archaeological layers, which offer excellent potential for the preservation of ancient botanical remains, helping us to ascertain the nature of the climate, vegetation and agriculture in the area when the cairn was in use
- the site's 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 South Cairn

Nether Largie South Cairn is situated a little to the south-east of Kilmartin Primary School, between Nether Largie Mid Cairn, and Ri Cruin Cairn, on a slightly raised area which may represent a sand bank or gravel deposit. It has

⁴ Greenwell, 1866

been constructed using large slabs and water-rolled stones, all of which are apparently of local origin.

In 1864, the Rev. W. Greenwell supervised excavations of Nether Largie South Cairn, having received permission and help from John Malcolm Esq. of Poltalloch, the then owner of 'Largie Farm', where the cairn is located.

The following description of the site, based on Greenwell's published account (Greenwell, 1866) is taken from the account given in RCAHMS (1988: 48-51):

"In 1864 Greenwell reported that the cairn had a diameter of about 40m and that it had already been severely robbed to provide material for walls and drains; it is now a grass-covered mass of stones measuring about 34m by 27m, and it is likely that in its final form it was a circular mound between 34m and 40m in diameter and over 4m in height. In 1864 Greenwell excavated the chamber and examined two secondary cists, and the following account is based in part on his published report (Greenwell 1866). The chamber, which belongs to the Clyde type, is at the centre of the cairn and is aligned NE and SW with the entrance at the NE end. Built partly of massive orthostats and partly of drystone walling, the chamber comprises four compartments separated by upright slabs and measures 6.1m in length by 1.9m in breadth at the NE end and 1m in breadth at the SW end; Greenwell records that the septal slabs were about 0.8m in height, and, as they now protrude only a little above the gravel floor, the original floor level is clearly much lower.

The first compartment is entered between two tall portal stones some 0.9m apart, that on the NW being 1.85m high and that on the SE being visible to a height of 1.4m with at least another 0.4m below present ground level; the sill-stone just protrudes, and the entrance itself is partly blocked by two flat slabs and drystone walling, which may form part of the original sealing of the tomb. The first compartment measures 1.9m by 1.2 m with the side-slabs reaching to the height of the capstones of the chamber as shown on the section; only the back-slab is as tall, and the capstones are elsewhere supported on drystone walling on top of the orthostats at a height of about 1.7m above the present floor level. The slabs of the SE side all overlap one another, but on the NW side, apart from a basal slab in the rear compartment and the massive slab of the first, the walling is largely of drystone construction. A supplementary slab helps to support the SE side behind the second and third orthostats; it stands to a height of about 1.37m above floor level, but it is likely that it was originally masked by drystone walling. It is possible that the stone that is embedded in the floor of the third compartment is a fragment of a broken lintel. At the end of the chamber a slab about 0.3 m in thickness is wedged into position against the back-slab at a height of about 0.3m; Greenwell described this stone as being '2 feet 7 inches from the bottom' of the chamber (about 0.8m) and resting on 'two upright stones, one at each end' (Greenwell 1865). Henshall comments on the unusual relationship of the slabs at the end of the chamber with the back-slab which necessitated this bracing stone (Henshall 1972).

Greenwell's excavation provided detailed information about the deposits recovered from the chamber. In the rear compartment a small cist composed of four upright slabs, a capstone and a basal slab was found in the SE corner; the cist had been rifled and the cover was lying nearby, but Greenwell considered that sherds of Beaker pottery and unburnt bones found scattered around probably represented the original interment. Several layers of filling were encountered beneath the cist. Just to the N of the cist and on a level with the basal slab, a further slab covered a cremation deposit. A carefully laid 'pavement' of small pebbles about 230 mm wide and with flat stones at each end ran down the centre of the compartment; beneath it there was a layer of dark earthy matter with cremated bones, the bones 'becoming more thickly spread in the space between the pavement and the sides of the chamber'. This layer also contained three perfect and two broken barbed-and-tanged arrowheads, several other flint implements, 'great numbers of broken quartz pebbles' and a bovine tooth. The black layer covered a second pebble pavement on the floor of the compartment. Several vessels were recovered: a fragment of a Beaker (several other sherds of which were found in the third compartment) was discovered on the black layer to the W of the cist; a round-based Neolithic vessel was found to the N of the cist and close to the side of the chamber, 'amongst the undisturbed layer of dark earthy matter'.

The third compartment also contained a deposit of dark earthy matter with cremated bones resting on a pebble pavement; on top of this layer were sherds of three Beakers including a fragment of the same vessel that was found in the end compartment. The deposits in the third compartment were not in well-preserved layers, but human and bovine bones were found as well as 'a few fragments of a rudely made, dark coloured urn, without any pattern on it'.

The outer compartment, which also contained unburnt bones and pottery in an upper deposit, apparently in some disarray, was distinguished by side-walls built against the main orthostats, with a space of some 0.66m as a central passage between the two blocks of masonry; some trace of this may still be seen in the floor of the chamber. Two flints were discovered, but there was no trace of any burial-deposit.

Two secondary cists were also found within the cairn material; one, no longer visible, was about 7m to the N of the centre of the cairn and measured 1.6m in length, 0.94m in breadth, and 1.2m in depth. Although the cover slab remained in position, no traces of burial were discovered, but fragments of a Food Vessel were found. The second cist may still be seen 8.5m to the SSW of the chamber beneath its substantial capstone; built of four massive slabs, it measures 1.15m by 0.8m and 0.83m in depth and was found to be empty. It is possible that the cairn was enlarged to incorporate these later burials."

Interpretation and Dating

Nether Largie South Cairn is a very good example of a large and complex Neolithic 'Clyde' Cairn, which was later modified to be incorporated into a

larger monument. Greenwell considered it to be *“one of the most instructive places of sepulture I have ever seen”*⁵.

Pottery found during Greenwell’s excavations has been dated comparatively to the Earliest Neolithic by Sheridan, who states *“it could have been deposited 3600-3500 BC and it may well be that the monument was constructed during the 37th century BC”*⁶. ‘Clyde’ type cairns are thought to be the earliest form of cairn found in Scotland⁷.

The site was used as a place of both inhumation and, later, cremation burial, with communal burial (inhumation) being the most common form of burial rite in these type of tombs during the Neolithic period⁸.

Some 1500 to 1800 years after its construction, in the Early Bronze Age, Nether Largie South chambered cairn was re-modelled to take on the appearance of a round cairn⁹. The Early Bronze Age modifications took two forms – first the cairn was altered from its original trapezoidal form to appear similar to the round cairns (and apparently to cover the two later cists), and second, it was incorporated into the Linear Cemetery; a larger monument of a type that is rare in Scotland. Sheridan dates the Linear Cemetery to the earliest Bronze Age (c. 2200-1900 BC)¹⁰. Although this is based on stylistic elements, rather than scientific dating methods, it is widely accepted. The cremation burials found by Greenwell probably date to this period.

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 Glen¹¹.

Ritchie regards the Early Bronze Age cairns in the Glen as one of the best demonstrations of sequence, reuse and veneration in Scotland¹².

2.2 Evidential values

Nether Largie South Cairn is important as it is one of the key sites in the Glen and was subsequently integrated 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 Neolithic and Bronze Age of Kilmartin Glen. The site has been partially excavated, and thus there is the potential for undisturbed remains, both within the cairn and in the surrounding area.

⁵ Greenwell 1866: 342

⁶ Sheridan 2012: 167

⁷ Noble 2006; Sheridan 2012: 170

⁸ Henshall, 1972: 82

⁹ Sheridan 2012: 177, Sheridan 2017 RARFA

¹⁰ Sheridan 2012: 175-176

¹¹ Stevenson, 1997; Sheridan 2012:177; Sheridan 2017 RARFA

¹² Ritchie 1997: 82

There are other Neolithic chambered cairns in the area, forming a cluster of seven¹³. Kilchoan and Baroile (Upper Rhudle or Rhudil [alternative spelling]) are the closest. Kilchoan chambered cairn was also excavated by the Rev. Mapleton (1866).

Sheridan ascribes the megalithic chambered cairns found in the area as belonging to the Carinated Bowl (CB) Neolithic, and argues that Nether Largie South Cairn *“had probably been constructed by the descendants of the initial ‘CB Neolithic’ settlers, a few generations after their arrival in the region..... Architecturally it suggests that these people were part of an interaction network extending over parts of western and south-west Scotland and Northern Ireland. Ceramically, however, it also suggests connections to the north and north-east”*¹⁴ Whilst there is disagreement about the nature of the introduction and spread of the practices, beliefs, architecture and material culture which archaeologists recognise as Neolithic, clearly Nether Largie South Cairn is important on a national scale because it is one of the earliest forms of megalithic architecture to be built in Scotland.

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

- the design and construction of burial monuments
- the origins, uptake, character and dating of Neolithic cultural, social, religious and agricultural practices
- the nature and meaning of ritual and burial practices and their significance in prehistoric society, as well as how these might have changed over time at the same site
- its relationship to other contemporary monuments and burials
- 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 Neolithic and 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 South Cairn, has great historical value. The incorporation of prehistoric monuments into the designed landscape has undoubtedly contributed to their survival.

¹³ Sheridan 2012, citing Henshall 1972: 27

¹⁴ Sheridan 2012: 170

2.4 Architectural and aesthetic values

Nether Largie South is a very good example of a massive burial cairn with complex internal structural elements, in a striking location. It is characteristic of the Clyde cairn type principally found in south-western Scotland, particularly in the Clyde Estuary. Similar monuments are also found in northern and western Ireland. The burial chamber of this type of chambered cairn is generally located at one end of trapezoidal or rectangular cairn, with a semi-circular courtyard at the entrance, providing access. These entrances are often blocked at some point during the lifespan of the monument. The entrances to the cairns are often flanked with large stones, and the courtyards thought to be used for rituals. At Nether Largie South the area in front of the entrance is now full of cairn material and it is therefore not possible to determine whether the cairn was originally built with a façade or not¹⁵. Internally, large stones are often used as roofing material in this monument type, with chambers formed of large stones and often sub-divided into smaller compartments. Henshall suggests that it is *“possible that the cist found in the upper burial layer at Upper Largie served some ritual purpose during the communal burials”*¹⁶.

In the Early Bronze Age, the monument was re-worked, expanded and incorporated into the Linear Cemetery. The two cists found within the cairn material probably date to this period. A circular platform around the remains of the cairn has been noted. Henshall suggests this might be the base of the robbed-out extension of the original structure, constructed to facilitate the insertion of the later cist burials¹⁷.

These factors equate to high artistic, architectural and aesthetic values being assigned to Nether Large South chambered cairn.

2.5 Landscape 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 two 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 as 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, North and Mid Cairns can be seen from Nether Largie South Cairn. It is possible that Ri Cruin Cairn was visible during prehistory, however, the current presence of large trees and stone walls makes this undeterminable.

As such, it has very high landscape values.

¹⁵ Sheridan 2012: 167

¹⁶ Henshall, 1972: 84

¹⁷ Henshall, 1972: 336

- 2.6 Natural heritage values
To be assessed.
- 2.7 Contemporary/use values

Social values

The social values of Nether Largie South 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.

Nether Largie South 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 annually¹⁸ which gives an indication of visitor numbers and interest.

Nether Largie South Cairn has an interpretation board installed by Historic Environment Scotland which provides visitor information on the site and other monuments in the area.

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. 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. Some of the finds from Nether Largie South are currently¹⁹ on display at the Kilmartin Museum, having been loaned by the British Museum.

Kilmartin Museum's education team regularly use the Nether Largie South 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 all the cairns in the Linear Cemetery and Temple Wood Stone Circles. Kilmartin Museum and the education service are part funded by Historic Environment Scotland.

In the late 20th century Nether Largie South Cairn was reconstructed and the internal chamber made safe to facilitate access; repeated access would have been a feature of the monument when first constructed in the Neolithic period. Henshall suggests that some work was done to rebuild the inner chamber

¹⁸ 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.).

¹⁹ 2018

when the site was first excavated in 1864²⁰. The reconstruction provides a richer experience for visitors today, and is unusual for a monument of its type. One of the secondary cists is visible and the top-slab has been propped up on metal supports so that visitors can look inside.

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 South Cairn as having very high social values.

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.

There is anecdotal evidence that these sites are special for people today and this is evidenced by 'offerings' of flowers and other items²¹.

Cultural values

Nether Largie South Cairn 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. It has remained so to this day; partly due to its incorporation into a 18th and 19th century designed landscape. The monument, 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 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. None of the human or animal remains have survived from Greenwell's 19th century excavations which

²⁰ Henshall, 1972: 336

²¹ 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.

would have been a very valuable source of information had it been possible to apply modern archaeological techniques.

Greenwell did not completely excavate the cairn and it is possible that further undisturbed deposits remain, which could significantly add to our understanding of the site. Sheridan states the remodelling of the cairn in the Early Bronze Age is 'probable'²². I would be beneficial to verify the extent of this, and to determine whether a façade existed in the earlier phases of the cairn.

A more detailed study of the nature of 20th century consolidation and conservation works would also be valuable.

There are further major gaps in our understanding of the Neolithic period, which have been recently summarised by Alison Sheridan²³ as key research questions:

- What is the precise nature of the settlement pattern and subsistence strategy for the inhabitants of Argyll and Bute between c. 3750 BC and c. 2500 BC – especially during the relatively poorly-attested period 3500-3000 BC? Are we correct in assuming that population was increasing over this period? And is there any evidence for survival of indigenous Mesolithic communities after c. 3750 BC?
- Where did the people who constructed the Nether Largie South Cairn and the other Neolithic monuments in Kilmartin Glen live? Currently there is no unequivocal evidence for Neolithic settlement in the Glen; was it solely a 'ceremonial landscape' at the time, or are there remains of habitation waiting to be found?
- What was the full range of funerary practices used during this period? We need better dating of passage tombs, Clyde cairns and related monuments.
- What was the specific trajectory of ceramic development (and development in other aspects of material culture) over this period in Argyll and Bute? For example, the proposed ceramic sequence for western and south-west Scotland (as presented in 2003²⁴) needs to be underpinned by more dates.
- Is there further evidence for participation in the Orkney-Boyne nexus in the centuries around 3000 BC? Is there much more evidence for the use of Grooved Ware to be uncovered in Argyll and Bute? And where, apart from Townhead on Bute, are the settlements that date to this time? What did participation in this extensive network mean for the social organisation of the farmers in Argyll and Bute? Were they, too, engaging in some kind of competitive conspicuous consumption?
- How does cup-and-ring rock art fit into our overall understanding of the nature of society, beliefs, and external contacts in Argyll and Bute?

²² Sheridan 2012: 176

²³ Sheridan, 2017

²⁴ Sheridan [2003](#)

Currently it tends to be studied in its own right, but it needs to be situated within Late Neolithic practices (and more dating evidence for its creation is needed).

The focus on Nether Largie South Cairn in these regional research questions further highlights the importance of this monument.

There are also major gaps in understanding relating to the Early Bronze Age period, which spans some of the life-use of this monument in prehistory. These have also been recently summarised as key research questions²⁵:

- 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 in-egalitarian 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? And was there any local exploitation of copper?

Added to these research questions is a lack of understanding about the relationship of monuments, such as the Linear Cemetery, to other contemporary ritual and funerary monuments, as well as those of later periods. In addition, 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

- Achabreck Cup and Ring Marked Rocks
- Ballygowan Cup and Ring Marked Rocks
- Baluachraig Cup and Ring Marked Rocks
- Cairnbaan Cup and Ring Marked Rocks
- 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 North Cairn
- Ri Cruin Cairn
- Temple Wood Stone Circles

²⁵ Sheridan, 2017

- 5 Keywords**
Neolithic; Bronze Age; round cairn; 'linear cemetery'; cist; Kilmartin Glen; Argyll

Bibliography

Canmore ID 39460

Site Number NR89NW 2

NGR NR 82860 97920

Scheduled monument

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Appendix 1: Archaeological Overview: Nether Largie South 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 monuments²⁶, including burial cairns within a Linear Cemetery, of which Nether Largie South 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 of Argyll, but the dense distribution around Kilmartin is unique."²⁷ Evidence for the earliest activity around these themes dates to the earliest Neolithic (3800-3700 BC)²⁸ and accumulates through to the Late Bronze Age (1500-1100 BC), a timespan of some 2300 years²⁹.

Mid Argyll's rock art stands out 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 bedrock and also on monuments. Recent work on

²⁶ RCAHMS 1988

²⁷ RCAHMS 1988: 14

²⁸ Sheridan 2012: 166

²⁹ *ibid*

dating rock art sites points to those created on earth-fast bedrock as being Late Neolithic, between 3000 - 2500 BC³⁰, although it should be noted that only relatively few radiocarbon dates are available. Some of the cairns in the Linear Cemetery, (**Ri Cruin**, **Nether Largie North Cairn** and **Nether Largie Mid Cairn**), have a number of structural features which have been carved with rock art. Some of these may be reused elements from other monuments, or earth-fast rock art sites.

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's³¹. 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.

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 particular³². 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 Ireland³³. Other changes also occurred, including the construction of cairns containing just one or two individual burials. This is markedly different from

³⁰ Sheridan, 2012: 171; Jones and Riggott 2011: 253

³¹ Campbell and Sandeman 1962

³² Dingwall and McGowan, 1996: 43

³³ Sheridan 2017, RARFA

the earlier Neolithic practice of communal burial³⁴. 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 ornaments³⁵. 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 power³⁶. 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 period³⁷. 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 Yorkshire³⁸.

The Early Bronze Age, described by Sheridan as a 'golden age' in Kilmartin³⁹, saw the construction of a highly visible, deliberately imposing, Linear Cemetery of cairns, of which Nether Largie South Cairn is one. Taken as a single entity, the Linear Cemetery is the grandest of all the prestigious monuments in the Glen.

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

³⁴ RCAHMS 1988: 14

³⁵ RCAHMS 1988; Sheridan 2017, RARFA

³⁶ Sheridan 2012:175; Sheridan 2017 RARFA

³⁷ Steiniger 2012

³⁸ Sheridan 2012: 177

³⁹ Sheridan 2012: 175

material having been removed⁴⁰. 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 focus⁴¹. The original trapezoidal linear shape of Nether Largie South was substantially altered to appear circular⁴². 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 has other similarities including associations with rock art⁴³.

⁴⁰ RCAHMS 1988: 14

⁴¹ RCAHMS 1988: 14

⁴² RCAHMS 1988: 14; Sheridan 2017 RARFA

⁴³ A. Watson, pers. com.