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| Property in Care (PIC) ID: | PIC130 |
| Designations: | Scheduled Monument (SM90053) |
| Taken into State care: | 1948 (Guardianship) |
| Last Reviewed: | 2026 |

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

CAIRNPAPPLE HILL



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Cover image: Aerial view of Cairnpapple Hill, a neolithic henge and Bronze Age cist near Bathgate. © Historic Environment Scotland

HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

CAIRNPAPPLE HILL – FINAL DRAFT

Contents

| | |
|---|-----------|
| 1. SUMMARY | 2 |
| 1.1 Introduction | 2 |
| 1.2 Statement of Significance | 5 |
| 2. ASSESSMENT OF VALUES | 6 |
| 2.1 Background | 6 |
| Phase 1 (c. 3800 BC) | 6 |
| Phase 2 (c. 3000 BC) | 7 |
| Phase 3 (c. 2000 – c. 1000 BC) | 8 |
| Phase 4 (1st millennium AD) | 12 |
| Phase 5 (modern development and conservation) | 12 |
| 2.2 Evidential values | 15 |
| 2.3 Historical values | 16 |
| 2.4 Architectural and artistic values | 17 |
| 2.5 Landscape and aesthetic values | 18 |
| 2.6 Natural heritage values | 20 |
| 2.7 Contemporary/use values | 21 |
| Spiritual values | 22 |
| 3. MAJOR GAPS IN UNDERSTANDING | 23 |
| 4. ASSOCIATED PROPERTIES | 24 |
| 5. KEYWORDS | 25 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY | 25 |
| Files in the National Records of Scotland | 25 |
| Secondary Sources | 25 |
| Further Resources | 26 |
| APPENDICES | 27 |
| Appendix 1: Timeline | 27 |

I. SUMMARY

This document aims to present a holistic approach to support the definitions of cultural significance of Cairnpapple Hill as a Property in Care. It highlights the key features that make the site special by assessing it against six values that cover tangible as well as intangible heritage values. The most important aspects of significance for the site are summarised under *1.2 Statement of Significance* before each value is assessed individually under *2 Assessment of values*. The overall assessment takes into account the ongoing development of our knowledge of the site. The Statement informs Historic Environment Scotland's conservation and management activity, provides the basis for interpreting the site and highlights areas where more research is needed.

1.1 Introduction

Cairnpapple Hill is situated atop the broad, slightly convex summit of Cairnpapple Hill, approximately 2km from Torphichen and 5km from Bathgate. It is a prominent feature in the Bathgate Hills, commands extensive views in all directions across the Forth valley and beyond. On a clear day, views extend as far as Goat Fell, on Arran in the west, and North Berwick Law, in the east.

Cairnpapple Hill is one of the best-known prehistoric sites on the mainland of Scotland. Archaeological excavations in 1947-8 revealed that this place had been the focus of activity for over 4000 years, from the early Neolithic (c. 3800 BC) through to the early Christian era. The discoveries included a Neolithic structure as well as pottery, axes and a cremation cemetery, a Chalcolithic henge monument,¹ three Bronze Age burial cairns, and four long-cist burials from the first millennium AD.

The site was originally scheduled on 23 July 1935 and was taken into state care on 1 May 1948, before the second season of excavation began.

¹ A henge is a circular or sub-circular enclosure of middle to late Neolithic date, defined by a ditch and external bank, usually with one or more entrances. May contain a variety of internal features, including stone and timber settings and hearths. [Trove. Monument Type Thesaurus \(Scotland\). Henge \(trove.scot\)](#) (accessed: 15 October 2025).

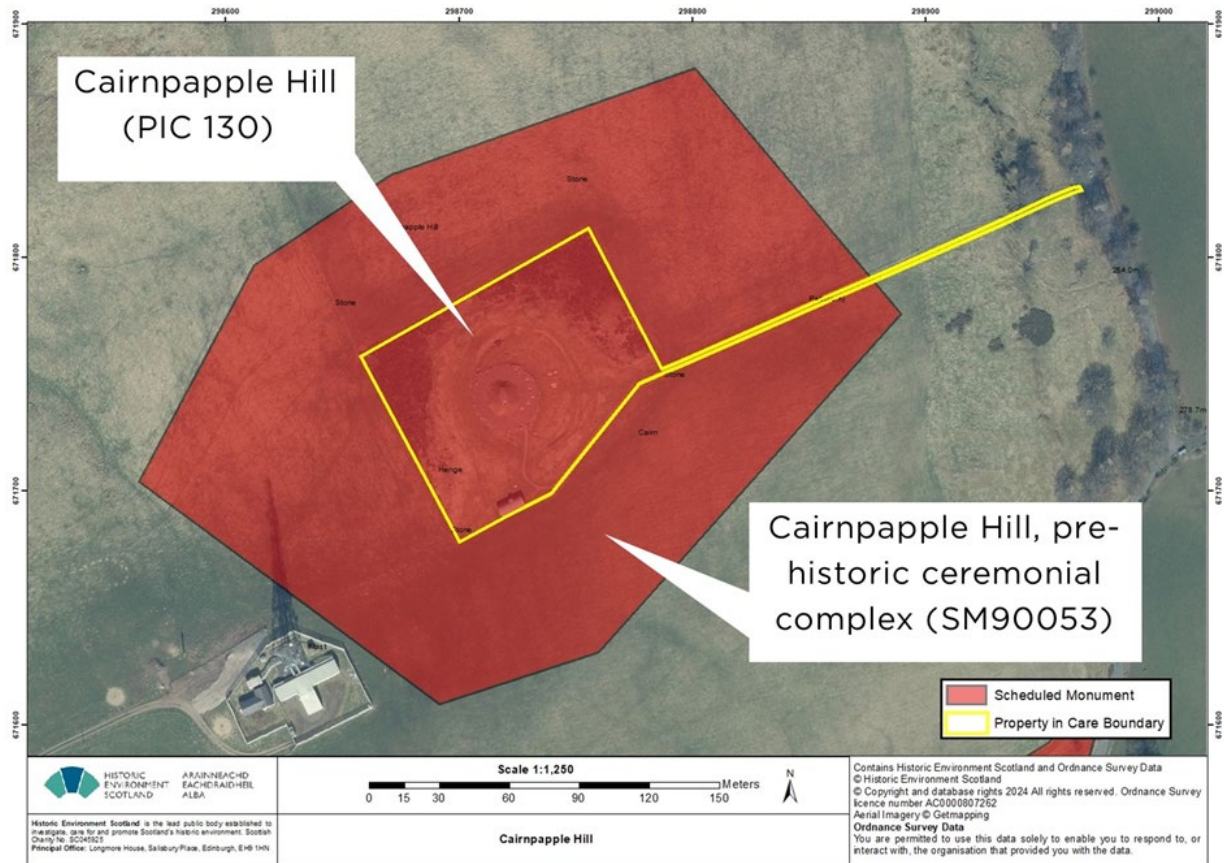


Figure 1: Cairnpapple Hill scheduled area (SM90053) and Property in Care (PIC130) boundary. Image for illustrative purposes only.

It was extensively modified to present the monument for public display as a sort of ‘exploded diagram’, and this has itself become a significant heritage asset. A concrete dome, now covered with grass, is today the most conspicuous feature of the complex. It was constructed over the second-phase Bronze Age cairn in 1949, both to preserve the graves and present them to the public. The remainder of the site is grassed over, with the henge and other features marked in various sizes and colours of gravel.



Figure 2: View of dome covering Bronze Age cairn © Historic Environment Scotland

The site is staffed part of the year, when the visitor centre and the interior of the cairn are accessible. The rest of the year, only the exterior of the monument can be accessed. Visitor numbers average around 2,000 when the site is open,² however, this number is most likely higher as there is currently no data on visitor numbers while access is restricted to the exterior. There is limited parking in a tarmacked layby at the foot of the hill. Access to the site is over about 500m of rough uphill ground and over agricultural land. There are steps to reach the fenced path, which crosses a field used for grazing cattle. An introductory display is located in the visitor centre which is within an adjacent Second World War Nissen hut. Information boards are located on the main approach to the dome, at the entrance hatch at the top of the cairn and inside the cairn. The top of the cairn is reached via stone steps with no handrail and access to the interior of the cairn is down a metal ladder.³

² Average of visitor numbers between 2011 and 2024. Visitor numbers for 2023/24 were 2,001, numbers courtesy of HES.

³ Prior to visiting, please check access information, available at: [HES Visit a place, Cairnpapple Hill \(historicenvironment.scot\)](https://www.historicenvironment.scot/visiting) (accessed: 22 October 2024).

1.2 Statement of Significance

- Cairnpapple Hill is a striking example of a site in use for ceremonial and funerary activities, on and off, for some 4000 years.
- Professor Stuart Piggott, his archaeological excavations at Cairnpapple Hill, and his published report have an iconic status in prehistoric studies.
- The development of the interpretation of the site – both in the site guidebooks, in academic papers and in the on-site interpretation is an interesting study. Notably, Cairnpapple is the last surviving prehistoric ‘exploded diagram’ style of interpretation among the Properties in Care. This approach, which predated modern illustrated interpretation panels, attempted to show the physical remains of all phases of use at once, even where later features in reality covered those of an earlier period. The various phases are differentiated through coloured gravel and variety in the size of stones.
- Cairnpapple Hill’s landscape setting remains tangible to modern visitors, despite the presence of masts and other ‘clutter’ nearby.
- The area outside the henge monument still has the potential to enhance considerably our understanding of the sequence of events on this site, and to expand our knowledge of the nature of such complexes.



Figure 3: Aerial drawing of Cairnpapple Hill © Crown Copyright HES

2. ASSESSMENT OF VALUES

2.1 Background

The development of the site in the prehistoric period can be broadly split into four phases. That set out below replaces the sequence presented by Piggott, taking into consideration archaeological discoveries made elsewhere in the intervening 70 years.

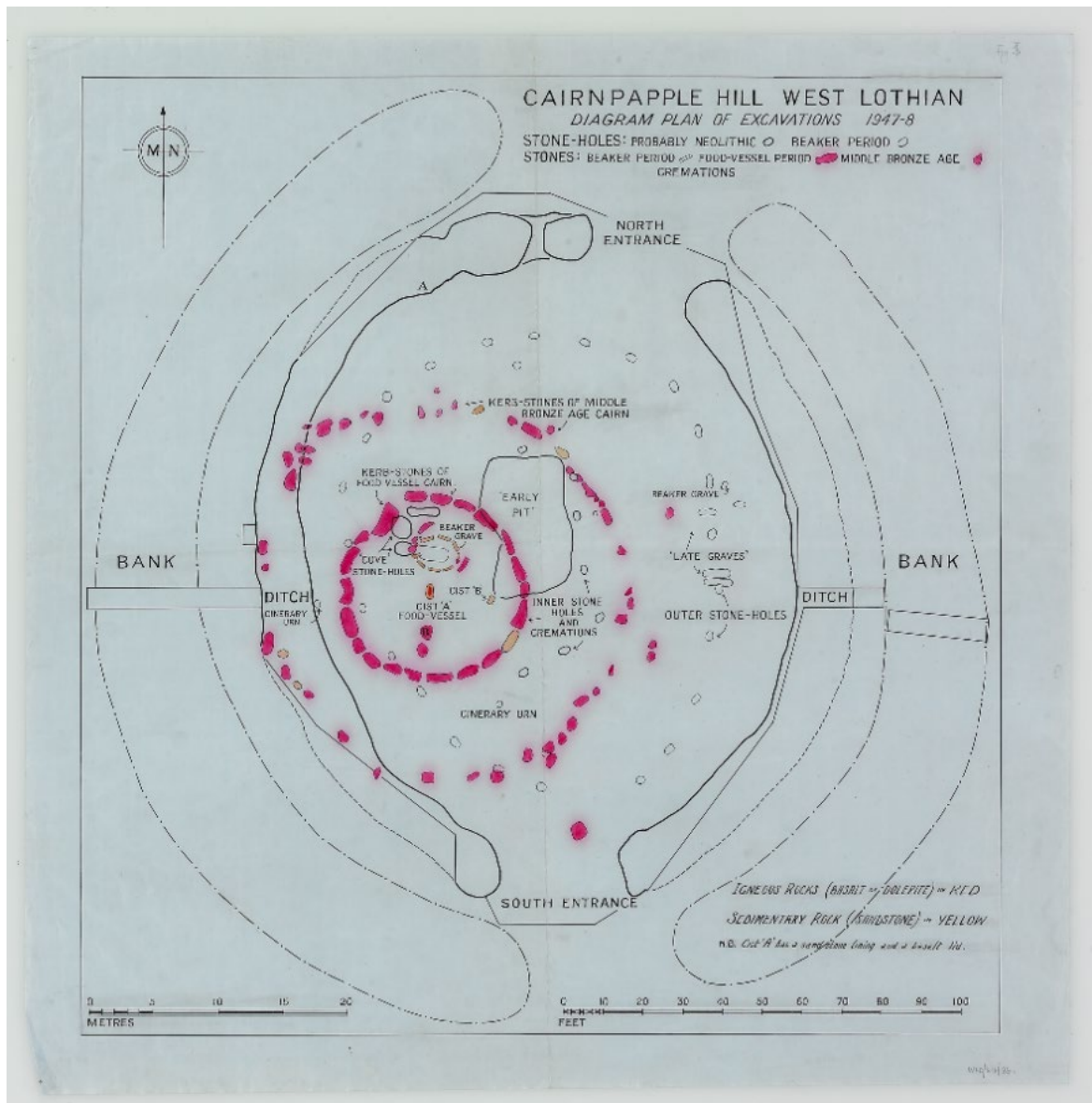


Figure 4: 'Diagram plan' of excavation at Cairnpapple Hill (DP 007227) © Courtesy of HES (Society of Antiquaries of Scotland Collection)

Phase 1 (c. 3800 BC)

The earliest signs of activity at the site are plain sherds of pottery bowls and axe fragments that were deposited in hearths. This is no longer

represented physically at the site and does not form part of the ‘exploded diagram’. One of the hearths lies beneath the henge and must therefore predate it. The discovery of fragments of two stone axes that can only have come from axe factories in Cumbria and North Wales demonstrates the wide links of these first users of the site. This activity was followed by the digging of an arc of seven pits (indicated by pale grey gravel on site). In and around these were 11 deposits of the cremated human remains of 13 individuals. A burnt pin associated with one of them is dated to 4470±35 bp (GU-19423) calibrated to 3341-3024 cal BC,⁴ and is the only radiocarbon date associated with this site. The presence of cremation cemeteries, including comingled cremated remains, ahead of henge earthwork construction was also found at Forteviot 1 henge, Perth and Kinross.⁵ The appearance of henge monuments around places that have been used before has been noted elsewhere, such as at Balfarg, Fife,⁶ where pre-henge use included pits lined with broken pots and sealed with layers of boulders.

Phase 2 (c. 3000 BC)

Cairnpapple saw the erection of a roughly circular timber circle (originally interpreted as a stone circle), consisting originally of 24 posts. This timber circle remains undated. It has often been assumed that the ditches and banks of henges were broadly contemporary with features like stone and timber circles found within. However, work at other sites suggests this is not certain. Millican notes that such monuments were constructed across the third millennium BC.⁷ Comparable examples have been dated to around 2500-2000 BC (North Mains⁸ and Balfarg) where the timber circle is taken to predate the henge bank and ditch. The posts, usually identified as oak in monuments of this kind, originally stood perhaps as high or higher than an adult. They are represented on the site by shallow post-holes with red gravel in the bottom.

Radiocarbon dates for henges in Scotland show that most were built not in the late Neolithic period, but in the Chalcolithic or Early Bronze Age. By analogy with the North Mains and Forteviot henges the Cairnpapple ditch and bank are likely to date to 2500–2000 BC. Cairnpapple comprises a shallow ditch within an outer bank. It had two entrances, both about 9m wide, in the north-east and south-east quadrants. The outer bank is now grass covered and stands no more than 1.2m high. It appears largely undisturbed by the excavation and the post-excavation works for public display. The published ditch sections show it to have been no more than 1.2-1.5m deep and 3m wide;⁹ unless somehow supported the bank cannot

⁴ Sheridan *et al* 2009, 212–214 and Younger 2015, 170.

⁵ [Trove Identifier: 26565, Forteviot \(trove.scot\)](#) (accessed 16 June 2025).

⁶ [Trove Identifier 29990, Balfarg \(trove.scot\)](#) (accessed 16 June 2025).

⁷ Millican 2007, 5–34.

⁸ [Trove Identifier 26006, North Mains, Strathallan \(trove.scot\)](#) (accessed: 16 June 2025).

⁹ Barclay 2005, 89.

have been much higher, and unlikely to provide a barrier to people looking in (a frequent interpretation of the function of the bank of a henge).

Cairnpapple Hill's henge is among a class of monument found across much of Britain and Ireland, from the **Ring of Brodgar**¹⁰ and the **Stones of Stenness**, on Orkney, to sites in south-west England. Piggott felt that the henge monument appearing to provide the best parallel for Cairnpapple Hill was that at Arbor Low, in Derbyshire,¹¹ because it too occupied a similarly elevated position, an unusual feature as most henges are situated on low-lying land.

Phase 3 (c. 2000 – c. 1000 BC)

At some point in this period, three successive burial cairns were built within and partly over the defining ditch of the henge monument. None of the actual cairns themselves now survive, but their respective graves do.



Figure 5: An aerial drawing of Cairnpapple Hill © Crown Copyright HES

¹⁰ Throughout the text, site names in **bold** are managed by Historic Environment Scotland and are publicly accessible. Access information can be found at: www.historicenvironment.scot/visit-a-place/ (accessed: 10 January 2025).

¹¹ [English Heritage. Arbor Low Stone Circle and Gib Hill Barrow \(english-heritage.org.uk\)](http://English Heritage. Arbor Low Stone Circle and Gib Hill Barrow (english-heritage.org.uk)) (accessed: 10 January 2025).



Figure 6: Interior of modern cairn. © Historic Environment Scotland

The earliest of these is the so-called 'north grave' (now lying within the area covered by the concrete dome). It is rock-cut, lying within an oval setting of stones measuring 3.3m by 2.7m. Its west end is marked by a large upright stone almost 2.4m high. This grave contained two distinctively decorated pots, known as Beakers, together with what was interpreted as traces of a wooden club alongside the body and a supposed wooden 'mask' over the face.¹²

¹² [Trove. DP 192354. Excavation plan of North grave and detail of burial deposit at Cairnpapple \(trove.scot\)](#) (accessed: 16 June 2025).

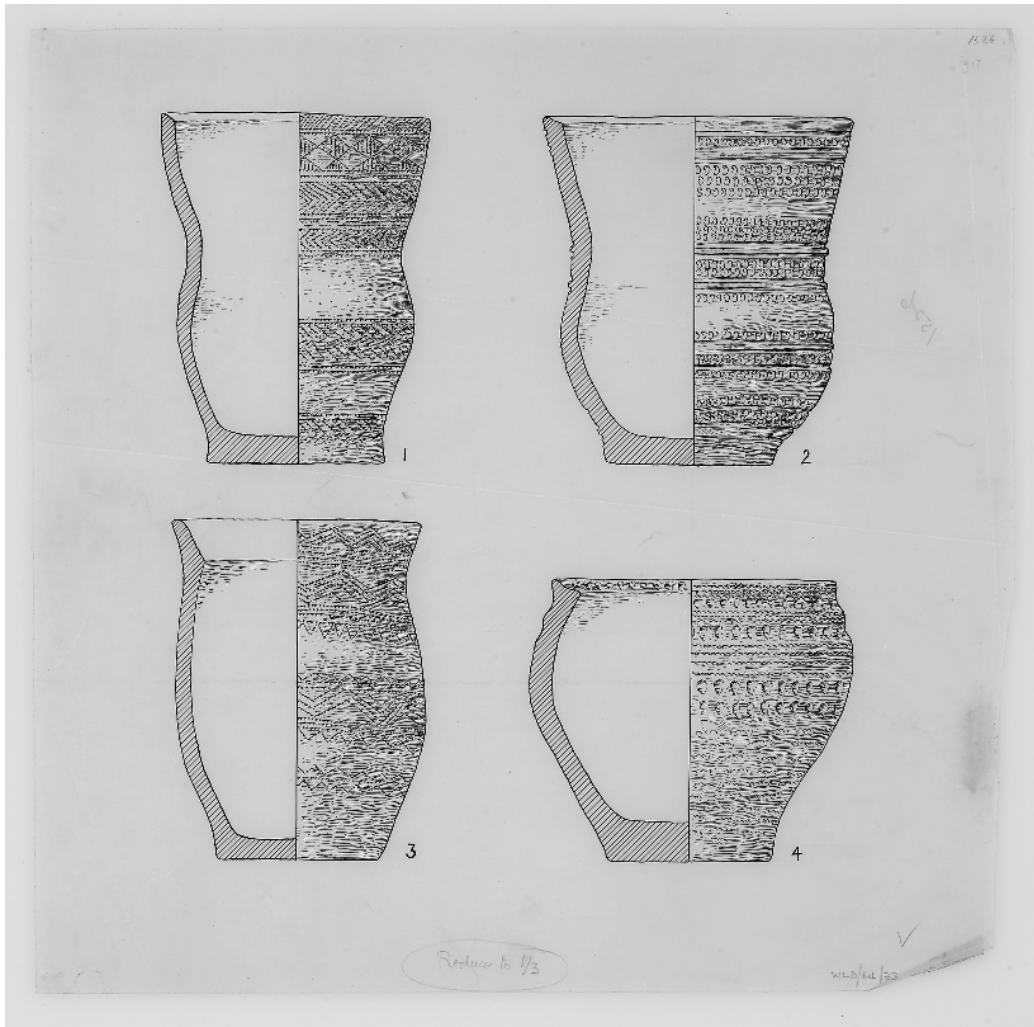


Figure 7: Drawings of prehistoric pottery found during excavations by Stuart Piggott at Cairnpapple Hill: Nos. 1 and 2 Beakers from North grave (Period II); no. 3 Beaker from grave by stone-hole 8; no. 4 Food-vessel from Cist A (Period III). (DPO07231) © Courtesy of HES (Professor Stuart Piggott Collection).

The second cairn, which is now represented by the area covered by the concrete dome, is defined by large kerb stones forming a circular area about 15m in diameter. Before excavation it was about 1m high, less than half the height of the concrete dome. It contained two cist burials. Both graves were rock-cut and covered by massive capstones, one of them with three cup-marks pecked into its surface. Other cup-marked stones were discovered among the cairn material. A food vessel pot was also found; this had been carefully placed on a shelf at the top of the cist (Figure 8).¹³

¹³ This, and other vessels excavated, are in the care of the National Museum of Scotland (NMS) and can be found here: [NMS. Search our collections, 'Cairnpapple' \(nms.ac.uk\)](https://nms.ac.uk) (accessed: 17 October 2025).

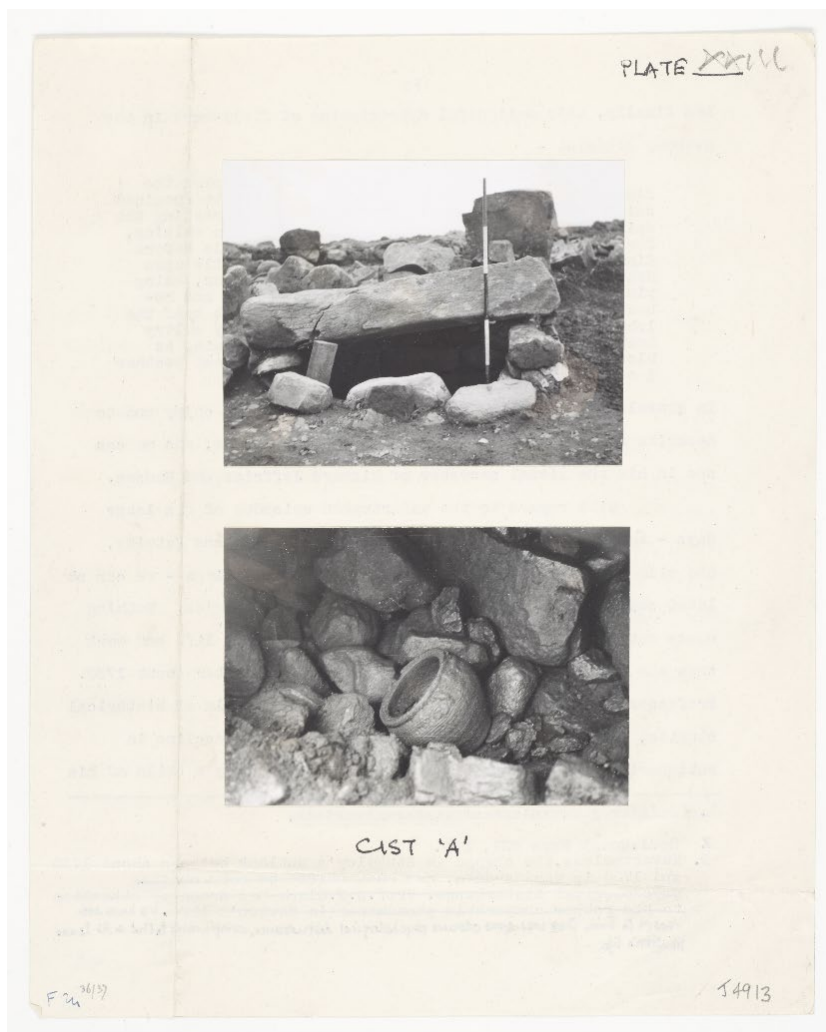


Figure 8: Views of Cist A during the excavation at Cairnpapple. (DP192347)
© Courtesy of HES (Society of Antiquaries Collection). Reproduced with kind permission of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland.

The third and last cairn was also the largest, with a diameter of c. 30m. It completely enclosed the two earlier cairns. This cairn was constructed from smaller stones and with a greater proportion of rubble and soil than its predecessors. It overlay the silted-up henge ditch and seven post-holes of the earlier setting; this apparent slighting of a partially backfilled henge ditch by a cairn was also evident at Forteviot 1. No inhumation was found at the centre of it, just two cremation burials, placed in upturned, collared cinerary urns elsewhere in the cairn material.¹⁴ The plan of this cairn is laid out around the base of the concrete dome.

The only human remains associated with this phase was a single tooth recovered from the north grave. However, the pottery vessels associated with the various burials indicate that the people burying their dead must have had links with people from considerable distances.

¹⁴ [Trove, DP 192349, Views of excavated cinerary urns 1 and 2 at Cairnpapple \(trove.scot\)](https://trove.scot.nls.uk/doc/DP192349) (accessed 16 June 2025).

Phase 4 (1st millennium AD)

In the eastern half of the henge are four shallow, rock-cut graves, whose east to west orientation suggests that they date from the early Christian era. They are long enough to have held fully extended bodies. They are marked on site with white gravel.

Phase 5 (modern development and conservation)

There is evidence that during the medieval period treasure-seekers and stone-robbers dug into the monument, impacting its preservation. The 1st edition Ordnance Survey map, surveyed 1854-55, labels the monument as 'Cairn-naple Hill fort', indicating the understanding of the site at that time.

The monument was altered around 1850 AD, when an octagonal turf dyke was built around the site, perhaps to protect the site from planting, as the surrounding hill was planted with trees around that time. Most of the trees were subsequently felled during the 1920s. The site was first scheduled in 1935 (most recently updated in 1998).¹⁵



Figure 9: Extract from Ordnance Survey, Linlithgowshire, Sheet 5, surveyed 1854-55, published 1856. © Reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Scotland

During the Second World War, the Army built a Nissen hut on the site. It was not a Royal Observer Corps post though its purpose is not yet known. The hut is now used as the visitor centre, housing a small display and graphic information boards.

¹⁵ [Scheduled Monument \(SM90053\), Cairnpapple Hill, prehistoric ceremonial complex \(portal.historicenvironment.scot\)](#) (accessed: 10 January 2025).



Figure 10: Nissen Hut, now used as a visitor centre. © Historic Environment Scotland

In 1947 to 1948, archaeological excavations were undertaken by Professor Stuart Piggott, of the University of Edinburgh. It was the first henge monument excavation in Scotland in modern times. The works were undertaken by students from across the UK and Europe, several of whom were women, with Piggott directing the excavations.



Figure 11: Excavation of Cairnpapple henge and cairn, by Professor S. Piggott. © Courtesy of HES (Professor Stuart Piggott Collection).

In 1948, after the first season of excavation and before the second, the site was taken into state care, meaning the latter season was worked largely by Ministry of Works labourers, though again under Piggott's supervision. Major works were carried out to protect and present the property, including the erection (1949) of a concrete dome over two of the Bronze Age burials. From drawings in the HES archive dated 1948 it is likely the plan to build the dome was conceived at an early stage.



Figure 12: Concrete dome under construction © Crown Copyright: HES

During archaeological excavation undertaken in advance of the construction of an access path in the 1960s, another major post-hole was discovered under the bank.

One of the problems affecting the interpretation of henges is the way in which the bank and ditch is taken as being the defining characteristic of the site, rather than a feature that is merely, for example as at North Mains, the third phase out of five.

Since the 1950s, work at Cairnpapple has been kept to the minimum necessary to maintain and present the site, for example grass seeding and cutting, maintaining the 'exploded diagram' stone and gravel sections, and clearing ventilation ducts.

2.2 Evidential values

In addition to the archaeological evidence for prehistoric customs, building, and ritual, Cairnpapple Hill can also provide evidence regarding the conservation and presentation of prehistoric monuments, giving it high evidential value across a number of areas.

The area within the ditch of the henge was extensively excavated in 1947–8, by Professor Stuart Piggott, of the University of Edinburgh. However, there is likely to be significant archaeological potential remaining both within the ditch itself and those parts of the bank undisturbed by Piggott. There may also be archaeological remains beyond the bank, within the boundary of the property in care.

In addition, there is also the distinct possibility of further prehistoric and early historic features lying beyond the area in state care and the extended scheduled area, as attested by the existence of a ring ditch to the south-west of the property,¹⁶ and stray finds of flints and an axe head nearby.¹⁷ As yet, no remains have been identified of settlement associated with prehistoric activity, but we would expect this to be located away from Cairnpapple in lower-lying areas of the landscape.

The property comprises structural elements of various forms and dates. All known features are contained within the shallow ditch and outer bank that defined the henge monument. The precise sequence is not certain, largely because of the absence of radiocarbon dating available to the excavator. It is possible that material excavated from the site retains the potential for further radiocarbon dates.

The coherence of ‘henge monuments’ as a class has been questioned since the last reconsideration of Cairnpapple.¹⁸ This arrangement of bank and ditch is found enclosing a wide range of earlier features, and with later features inserted into it. Excavated examples of henge earthworks in Scotland have dates from just before 3000 BC through to 1500BC. All radiocarbon dated examples in mainland Scotland post-date 2500 BC.¹⁹

The 1940s interpretative scheme has in the past been criticised by some as confusing, though on site staff and interpretation now explain the layout more clearly. However, it does lay out all key aspects of the site and has itself become an object of historic and visitor interest. It is the last ‘exploded diagram’ style and has a significant place in the history of the development of, and changing attitudes towards, on-site interpretation.

At the time of the excavation there were only eight known henges in Scotland, growing to 14 in 1962 and 19 in 1969. It was assumed by Burl that

¹⁶ [Trove ID: 47942. Cairnpapple Hill. Ring Ditch \(trove.scot\)](#) (accessed: 16 June 2025).

¹⁷ [Trove ID: 47966. Cairnpapple Hill. Stone Axehead \(trove.scot\)](#) (accessed: 16 June 2025).

¹⁸ Barclay 1999, 17–46.

¹⁹ Younger 2016, 116–138.

hengings originated in Wessex and were a development of causewayed camps, an assumption that would have significant impact on studies in the field for many years.²⁰ And it has been more recently suggested that they originated in Orkney.²¹ However, their origins remain a matter of debate. Opinion has differed over the years as to whether features inside henges, like stone and timber circles, were an integral part of their design and where we have dating evidence such features often pre-date the henge earthworks. The excavation and publication of the site, given the long-standing focus on Wessex origins, was a significant landmark in the understanding of the Neolithic of Britain. The eventual overturning in the 1990s of the hitherto uncritical recycling of the original interpretation was part of a wider appreciation of regional variation in the Neolithic and Bronze Age, and of the negative effects of Wessex-centred models.

Piggott identified the ring of 24 uprights erected as part of Phase 2 inside Cairnpapple as being made of stone. Mercer later suggested that they were made of timber.²² This remains open to debate. The prevailing view today is that there was no stone circle at Cairnpapple, though Bradley includes a circle of 24 standing stones as part of his sequence for this site drawing on the Balfarg henge sequence.²³ A lack of section drawings of these features in the excavation reports and archive hinders a definitive answer to this question. At the time of Piggott's excavation timber circles were a rarely-investigated type of prehistoric structure, with the putative timber circle at Cairnpapple amongst the first monument of this type excavated in Britain.

2.3 Historical values

Cairnpapple Hill demonstrates past ways of life in relation to burial practices and may in the future demonstrate more about prehistoric 'spiritual life'. It is also associated with Piggott, a key figure in prehistoric archaeology. It was in fact his knowledge of similar sites in Dorset and Wiltshire that allowed Piggott to recognise that Cairnpapple Hill was a henge monument and not a fort or other type of site. The site also demonstrates changing attitudes towards the presentation of this type of monument.

Historically, Cairnpapple Hill shows how a single site might attract interest and activity over thousands of years, from the early Neolithic to early Christian era. Apart from the burials, however, we do not know the meaning or purpose of any of the activities or structures. The assumption of a prehistoric 'spiritual' importance is to a great extent a modern imposition.

²⁰ Burl 1969.

²¹ Thomas 2010.

²² Mercer 1981.

²³ Bradley 1998.

Henge monuments were built over a period of over 1000 years. The huge difference in scale between the largest and smallest and the long period over which they were constructed must raise doubts about whether they served only one purpose. A long-standing hypothesis is that the bank and ditch may have been to screen the interior from view (suggesting that only a select few took part in what went on therein). But some henges (for example, **Ring of Brodgar**) never had a bank, and many banks may not have been high enough, unless topped by a screen, to block the view. A current suggestion, which also makes sense of the long period over which henges were built, is that the bank lying outside the ditch (the reverse of the expected relationship in, say, an enclosed settlement or fort) suggests that what is being 'defended against' lies within – that is, it is a 'ritually charged space' containing something that might be seen as potentially harmful.²⁴ The presence of entrances, however, suggests that access of some sort, real or symbolic, was provided for. There is no evidence that henges were built for their interiors to be used in any way, but such activities may have taken a form that would leave no trace behind.

The lengthy use of the site as a burial place is self-evident from the extant remains, but apparently only a handful of individuals were considered qualified for burial here (perhaps they were important, of a specific lineage, or too dangerous to bury anywhere else).

As the only 'exploded diagram' arrangement of a prehistoric monument surviving, the site can demonstrate changing attitudes towards the presentation of such monuments.

2.4 Architectural and artistic values

There is little particularly unusual or rare about the layout of Cairnpapple Hill, or the sequence of its development. The best Scottish comparators are North Mains in Perth and Kinross, and Balfarg in Fife. The earliest known 'structures' at Cairnpapple are cremation deposits placed in and around an arc of pits. There are similar cremation cemeteries at other sites, for example, Forteviot 1, North Mains and Moncrieffe, in use before the construction of the henge. The undated timber circle, which probably predates the bank and ditch, also has comparable examples elsewhere. The henge belongs to a class of monuments found across Britain and Ireland, such as **Ring of Brodgar** and **Stones of Stenness** in Orkney. It may be that the 'designer' was aware of such monuments and may have been deliberately incorporating elements of them at Cairnpapple.

It should also be noted that the construction and maintenance of the site, at all stages of its use, would have required significant labour. Whoever initiated the works clearly had the ability to direct and control such

²⁴ Warner 2000.

resources. The extent to which such labour was willing or coerced is not known.

The location, in an elevated position, is less common, and may allow for further interpretation of the different rituals that may have been performed when compared to other sites.

2.5 Landscape and aesthetic values

The present layout of the site, with all phases on display at once, is confusing and makes the history and use of the site difficult to grasp for many visitors. The modern concrete dome, though helpful and fascinating in its own way, can confuse as much as clarify the situation, and is potentially inaccessible to some visitors. This is exacerbated by features outside the dome existing only as ground level markings.

The concrete dome, while giving problems of interpretation, provides an unusual atmospheric quality on entering its hatch and descending the ladder. It is an important part of a visitor experience, although only available when the monument is staffed, that might otherwise, to the non-specialist, be a little underwhelming. It is interesting to note that one of the technical drawings made in the letting of the construction contract seems to show that the dome was originally planned to have a coating of stone externally, to give the impression of a cairn. HES records also show that the design of the dome changed radically in the months before its construction, from an original scheme that had a door at ground level (Figure 14).²⁵

²⁵ Unpublished HES Archive Drawings 172/053/28; 172/053/20.

Cairnpapple Hill provides stunning views of a vast area of central Scotland and the night sky which is a key aspect of its aesthetic value. The view east over the Forth Bridges and down to the Firth of Forth to North Berwick Law and the Bass Rock is particularly dramatic. To the south, the Cauldstane Slap, a pass between two peaks in the Pentland Hills is also visible. On clear days one can even glimpse Goat Fell, on Arran from the site. The spectacular and far-reaching views often inspire imaginations how life in prehistoric Scotland must have been like. However, these suggestions are problematic. The visible landscape is heavily modified by subsequent human interference, and we have limited information about tree cover while this monument was in use in prehistory which would have influenced visibility and aesthetic. The views regularly feature as a highlight for visitors, with most TripAdvisor reviews noting this aspect of the site.²⁷



Figure 15: Distant view of the Trossachs from the top of Cairnpapple Hill. © Crown Copyright HES.

2.6 Natural heritage values

Surrounded by semi-improved acidic grassland the monument contains a remnant of former heath vegetation of the surrounding upland. Originally it was probably an example of ‘Wood Pasture’, as old maps (1850) show the site as historically being wooded, but records from the early 1800s indicate that it was likely open, so may have supported a cross between woodland and either grassland, or as in this case, heathland. In 1991 the site was reported as being the only remaining area of heathland on the Bathgate hills.

²⁷ [Tripadvisor. Cairnpapple Hill \(tripadvisor.co.uk\)](https://www.tripadvisor.co.uk) (accessed 19 January 2024).

The grassland on the cairn is semi-improved neutral grassland of some value to wildlife including insect pollinators when mowing allows the herbs to flower. The grassland surrounding the monument is mown acidic grassland with greater species diversity, which supports red fescue and sheep's fescue along with meadowgrass. Heath bedstraw, Field-woodrush, heather, Common Cat's-ear and Bird's Foot Trefoil, Tormentil, Mouse-eared Hawkweed and Yarrow have all been recorded at various times. To the north of the cairn is an area of rough grassland with widespread Lady's Mantle. To the east, apart from a small area of heather/blaeberry the area has reverted to grassland, Sheep's Fescue, Yorkshire Fog and Brown Bent similar to the area to the north of the cairn. Rosebay Willowherb has spread throughout the outer area. Similarly, the south-east corner of the outer area has changed from heather/blaeberry to grassland. The remaining area still retains Heather/Blaeberry heath, but the heather that was recorded as mature in 91/92 would now represent over-mature stands. There is no evidence of seedling re-growth, possibly due to thick moss cover preventing the growth of seedlings and the presence now of more dominant grasses. A moss and liverwort survey was carried out in 2004, with some 36 species recorded, the majority of which were common well distributed species of lichen.

The geology of the site is fundamental to its significance. The commanding nature of Cairnpapple is due to volcanic activity some 330 million years ago. The remnants of the hard igneous rock which forced its way through the surrounding sedimentary rock now form the Bathgate hills on which Cairnpapple sits. The views the situation provides are a key aspect of the aesthetic value of the site. The relationship between the geology and archaeology of the site was the basis of an event as part of the Scottish Geology Festival in 2023.

2.7 Contemporary/use values

There has not been a formal study of the contemporary values of this site to local communities or communities of interest. Therefore, the following observations are intuited from HES staff experience of the site and from online sources.

Cairnpapple Hill is a complex site. It attracts people with prehistoric interests, but, other than the view, it can disappoint those without that specialist understanding. The expertise of the stewards (when staffed) and information in the Nissen Hut exhibit on offer help to counter this. By adding meaning, they make the visit far more revealing of prehistoric life in the area, and well beyond it. However, when visiting the site out-with the opening hours or in the winter months, when the site is unstaffed and the Nissen Hut closed, there are only two interpretation panels available which may limit the experience. During such times the concrete dome cannot be accessed.

The site attracted 2,001 visitors in the summer months of 2023-2024. During pandemic lockdowns and reduced opening hours in subsequent years visitor numbers were lower, however, from 2022 numbers were again over 2,000 which conforms to the pre-Covid average.²⁸ It is important to note that these figures only represent visitor numbers counted during official opening times when the site is staffed. The annual visitor number of the site is likely higher.

Aside from paid visits, the site provides an opportunity for community activities. For example, volunteers worked to remove rosebay Willowherb from the grounds, to allow blaeberrries and natural biodiversity to thrive.²⁹ It was also part of an event at the Scottish Geology Festival in 2023 where the archaeology and history of the site was explored, as well as how the surrounding geology affected settlement and land-use.

The monument is primarily a tourism and educational asset, which provides a healthy uphill walk, fine views, and a rare insight into the world of our prehistoric ancestors. Though it is currently not clear to what extent the property is involved with the local community, there is evidence that it can arouse considerable local scrutiny. For instance, the threat of closure of the property in the 1980s,³⁰ or of potentially disadvantageous developments which would impact upon the impressive views as was clear when reportedly 50 demonstrators gathered to oppose plans for another communications mast close to the site in the 1990s.³¹ West Lothian Council have noted this in other development proposals for the area.³²

Spiritual values

In common with other prehistoric sites to which a pre-Christian religious use is ascribed, Cairnpapple Hill has attracted modern, albeit retrospective, expressions of spiritual value, or have had projected onto them modern understandings of pre-Christian religion.

There is a strand of thought that the co-option of a prehistoric monument by those practising contemporary pagan ceremonies (that cannot be proven to be relevant to the original use), is itself disrespectful, particularly where a site has been used for burial. But the reuse of sites is long-standing and can reflect the changing beliefs or needs of the communities connected to the sites. It is not clear whether the early Christian graves were placed knowingly within a pagan site, but the same sequence was found at North Mains.

²⁸ Visitor numbers provided courtesy of HES

²⁹ [Bathgate Hills. Working with HES at Cairnpapple \(bathgatehills.co.uk\)](https://www.bathgatehills.co.uk) (accessed: 23 October 2024).

³⁰ Cadell 1980, 10.

³¹ Kyle 1993, 7.

³² For example: [West Lothian Council. Meeting report of Development Management Committee regarding Application No. 0471/FUL/10 - 20 October 2010 \(PDF 1.8MB\)](#) (accessed: 10 January 2025).

Visitors to the property often record their spiritual response to the place in the visitor book kept on site, though it is not regularly mentioned in online reviews. Site staff also often find deposits or ‘offerings’ (sometimes referred to as ‘ritual litter’) of various kinds left by visitors around the site and for some time a rag tree sat just outwith the henge enclosure.³³ There are regular informal gatherings at Equinoxes and Solstices.

Case Study: The Heathens of Lothian

Paganism is one of the fastest growing religions in the United Kingdom.³⁴ The ‘Heathens of Lothian’ describe themselves as an inclusive religious organisation in the Lothians following Germanic/Celtic/Northern tradition paganism. Cairnpapple Hill is considered a sacred site to people of their faith, and they have used the site for rituals. It should be noted these rituals are non-invasive, and do not impact on the physical site.

For the group, the continued use of the site over multiple time periods was noted as being of particular relevance, imbuing the site with special significance. That the site was clearly a place of burial also provides for greater connection to particular gods invoked in specific rituals.

The lack of direct evidence for the rituals carried out by the original users of the site is acknowledged. The physicality of the site thus guides modern rituals but does not define or restrict them.

The accessibility of the site is recognised as being particularly important. Cairnpapple is a rare example of a publicly accessible prehistoric site on the mainland of Scotland, close to population centres. This allows for a broader range of people to participate in rituals.

3. MAJOR GAPS IN UNDERSTANDING

- What effect would radiocarbon dating have had on our understanding of the date and sequence of events at the site? There remains an opportunity for further scientific analysis of areas not touched by the 1947-8 excavations – for instance the bank may seal a Neolithic soil horizon and – as the 1960s intervention suggested – perhaps also additional cut features.
- What value might there be in adding to our understanding of the site through analysis of legacy materials from the excavations held in the National Museums of Scotland, such as lipid analysis of ceramics,

³³ Visitors are reminded that it is not permitted to leave items at properties in care without prior written consent and all items will be removed. Furthermore, as a scheduled monument, the site is protected by law under the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act 1979, and it is an offence to damage it in any way. Ground disturbance of any form, fires and the use of metal detectors are prohibited.

³⁴ 2011 Census 56,620 people identified as Pagan. 2021 Census 74,631 people identified as either Pagan or as a member of a specific Modern Pagan group.

environmental information from samples, isotopic or genetic study of human remains, and the further potential for new radiocarbon dates on organics and pot residues?

- What archaeological potential lies outwith the henge itself, and beyond the area in state care? In particular, what evidence might be found for settlement associated with the builders and users of Cairnpapple Hill in the immediate and wider landscape?
- It is unlikely that it will ever be possible to resolve the debate about whether a timber, or stone, circle once stood within the henge monument.
- It would be intriguing to discover if the silver deposits to the east of the property, at Windywa's, Wester Tartraven (a Scheduled Ancient Monument),³⁵ were being exploited in prehistory. There is also a possible chert source at Hilderston near Cairnpapple Hill; again, it would be interesting to find out whether this was being exploited in the Neolithic period.
- Piggott's suggestion that Cairnpapple Hill might be the place called Medio Nemeton ('Middle Sanctuary'), mentioned in the Ravenna Cosmography, compiled in the 7th century AD, cannot be tested.
- The role and later careers of the student excavators in general, and the female archaeologists in particular, is not understood.
- The social and spiritual values of the site are not fully understood and would benefit from future research.
- The reason for deforestation of the surrounding landscape in the 1920s is not understood.

4. ASSOCIATED PROPERTIES

Some other henge monuments in Scotland: Balfarg (Fife); North Mains (Perth and Kinross); **Ring of Brodgar** (Orkney); **Stones of Stenness** (Orkney).

Some other henge monuments in the British Isles: Arbor Low (Derbyshire); Avebury (Wiltshire); Stonehenge (Wiltshire).

Some other Bronze-Age burial cairns in HES care: **Cairnholy Chambered Cairns**; **Camster Cairns**; **Clava Cairns**; **Corrimony Chambered Cairn**; **Memsie Cairn**

³⁵ [Scheduled Monument \(SM11226\), Windywa's Silvermine, silvermine 300m SW of Wester Tartraven \(portal.historicenvironment.scot\)](#) (accessed: 10 January 2025).

5. KEYWORDS

henge, burial, cremation, cairn, axe, beaker, food vessel, early Christian, Piggott

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Further Resources

Trove ID: 47919

Trove Site Number: NS97SE 16

NGR: NS 9872 7173

Trove entry: [Trove ID: 47919, Cairnpapple \(trove.scot\)](#)

Scheduling description: [Scheduled Monument \(SM90053\), Cairnpapple Hill, prehistoric ceremonial complex \(portal.historicenvironment.scot\)](#)

Historic Environment Scotland – Scottish Charity No. SC045925

Principal Office: Longmore House, Salisbury Place, Edinburgh EH9 1SH

Cairnpapple Hill 26

3D models of the site are available on Sketchfab: [Sketchfab, University of Aberdeen Archaeology, Cairnpapple Monument 3D Model \(sketchfab.com\)](https://sketchfab.com/University-of-Aberdeen-Archaeology/Cairnpapple_Monument)

A number of artefacts from the site are held within the National Museums of Scotland collections. Their collections database can be searched via: [NMS, Search our Collections \(nms.ac.uk\)](https://nms.ac.uk)

APPENDICES

APPENDIX I: TIMELINE

- C. 3800–3000 BC – fragments of early Neolithic pottery and two stone axe fragments were deposited.
- C. 3350–3020 cal BC – an arc of holes is dug, associated with 11 deposits of cremated human bone, representing 13 individuals.
- C. 3000–2500 BC – a circle of 24 wooden posts (or, less likely, standing stones) is erected.
- C. 2500–2000 BC – the henge ditch and bank are built; pits are dug.
- C. 2000 BC – the first of three burial cairns, for the deposition of a single individual, is built over the west half of the henge monument. Two more burial cairns are built at the site over the course of the following millennium.
- Later 1st millennium AD – four graves, orientated east to west, are dug over the east part of the site.
- During the medieval period treasure-seekers and stone-robbers dig into the monument.
- C. 1850 AD – an octagonal turf dyke is built around the site, and the hill planted with trees. The 1st edition Ordnance Survey map labels the monument ‘Cairnnaple Hill fort’.
- 1920s – most of the trees are felled.
- 1939–45 – the Army builds a Nissen hut on the site. It is not a Royal Observer Corps post and its purpose is as yet unknown.
- 1947–8 – archaeological excavations are undertaken by Professor Stuart Piggott, of the University of Edinburgh, the first henge monument excavation in Scotland in modern times.
- 1948 – the site is taken into state care. Major works are carried out to protect and present the property

- 1949 – a concrete dome is erected over two of the Bronze-Age burials.
- 1955 – a Police wireless mast is erected a short distance to the south-west of the site.
- 1959 – a larger mast is erected by the South of Scotland Electricity Board and the police antenna is moved to this, and the original police mast removed.
- Mid-1960s – archaeological excavation in advance of constructing an access path leads to the discovery of another major post-hole under the bank.
- 1980 – objections to proposed closure of site
- 1993 – protests over further development of telecommunications mast near the site.
- 2003 – Cist B capstone, moved during Piggott's excavation, rediscovered by Steven Sweeney-Turner and authenticated by Gordon Barclay. It was lined into the kerb of cairn 3.
- 2023 – permanent survey markers are installed at the site to aid future surveys