

Property in Care (PIC) ID: PIC059

Designations: Scheduled Monument (SM90051)

Taken into State care: 1962 (Guardianship)

Last reviewed: 2004

**HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND
STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE**

CARN BAN LONG CAIRN



We continually revise our Statements of Significance, so they may vary in length, format and level of detail. While every effort is made to keep them up to date, they should not be considered a definitive or final assessment of our properties.

CARN BAN

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

Carn Ban is a trapezoidal long cairn of Clyde-type dating from the Neolithic period. The monument lies within a modern forestry clearing in a remote valley near the head of the Kilmory Water in Arran.

One of the most complete examples of a Clyde-type cairn in Scotland, Carn Ban is composed of bare stones and measures approximately 30.5m by 18m. The height of the cairn declines from 4.5m at the downhill end to being almost flush with the ground at the uphill NE end where there is a semi-circular forecourt. Much of this area is now filled with earth and stones washed down from the hillside above.

In 1902, T H Bryce opened the undisturbed chamber located behind the forecourt. The slab-built chamber, measuring 5.7m in length and 2.4m in height, is divided into four compartments. Bryce describes that above the slabs was a corbelling of small flags to increase the interior height and the roofing stones were set on these corbels. Finds from the excavation included worked stone artefacts and small fragments of burnt and unburnt bone. Several exposed stones suggest the presence of a second chamber at the opposite end.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview

- 1902: T H Bryce's excavations at Carn Ban investigates the four compartments of the central burial chamber.
- 1959: Carn Ban becomes a Guardianship monument
- 1969: various flint and pitchstone artefacts found near the cairn donated to the NMAS by the Forestry Commission.
- 1994: Scheduled as an Ancient Monument

Archaeological Overview

- T H Bryce's 1902 excavation revealed an undisturbed slab-built chamber behind the forecourt that measured 5.7m in length and 2.4m in height. Smaller slabs had been used to subdivide the area into four compartments and additional height was achieved by the use of corbelling of small flags to support the roofing slabs. Bryce recovered a number of artefacts from the chamber, including worked stone artefacts and small fragments of burnt and unburnt bone. Bryce noted several exposed stones at the south-west end that suggest the presence of a second chamber at the opposite end. The scanty survival of bone is probably due, as Bryce suggested, to water running through the chamber.

Artistic/Architectural Overview

- The architecture of Carn Ban is typical of Clyde-type cairns found throughout Argyll and south-west Scotland. Most examples are trapezoidal or rectangular on plan and are characterised by a central burial chamber and a façade of large upright stones fronting onto a semi-circular or elliptical forecourt area.

The main burial chamber is entered by way of a passage from the centre of the façade. Internally, the chamber is subdivided by cross slabs or septal stones into a number of stalls or compartments, as can be seen at Torrylin. The chamber may also feature a corbelled roof, as at Nether Largie South where the burial chamber is relatively complete and opened for public display. Some Clyde-type cairns possess secondary chambers that open from the narrow end of the cairn or from its sides and were probably created when additional space was required.

Social Overview

- Not assessed, although the site features on several on-line archaeological guides.

Spiritual Overview

- No formal studies have been carried out into the monument's current spiritual significance.
- In the past, prehistoric monuments such as Carn Ban appear to have been regarded with trepidation by the islanders. Writing in 1873, local antiquarian J MacArthur, who excavated several prehistoric monuments on Arran, noted the *'feelings of superstitious dread with which these monuments are generally regarded'* when discussing excavations at another cairn at Torrylin.
- Chambered cairns are believed to represent a belief in an afterlife by the Neolithic communities that constructed them. Excavation evidence appears to suggest some monuments remained in use for as much as a thousand years. Although these beliefs are poorly understood, it is likely that the deceased were believed to join a group of 'ancestors'. It is likely that various rituals were carried out in the forecourt prior to bones being interred or on other occasions when the spirits of the ancestors were invoked.

Aesthetic Overview

- The monument is exceptionally well-preserved and offers the visitor an excellent opportunity to gain an appreciation of a Neolithic funerary monument.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

With only one limited excavation of the burial chamber in 1902, our knowledge of Carn Ban is sparse, and many questions about this monument remain unanswered.

- **Development:** it has been demonstrated that some Clyde-type cairns possess a long history of development. Excavations by J W Corcoran at Mid Gleniron I, Galloway, in the 1960s found that the long cairn had incorporated two circular chambered cairns. Both chambers were closed when the later long cairn was built around them. The presence of additional burial chambers within the cairn is unknown.
- **Surrounding area:** evidence of ritual activities may survive in the immediate vicinity of the cairn.

- Relationship to landscape: many of the Clyde cairns on Arran appear to be similar in form, although there are insufficient dates to ascertain whether they are contemporary. Little research has been conducted into their relationship with each other, their distribution and their relationship to agricultural land.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key points

- Carn Ban is one of the finest examples of a Clyde-type cairn in Scotland. Having only been partially excavated, it has considerable potential to enrich our understanding of the Neolithic community who built and maintained it as well as their ritual and spiritual beliefs.
- Chambered tombs of differing forms occur throughout parts of Scotland, Ireland and the Atlantic coast of Europe and such monuments may reflect a set of common beliefs, including a belief in an afterlife. As such, study of these monuments might be able to help us appreciate the beliefs of these distant communities.
- The Neolithic communities probably placed their dead with these tombs over a period of more than 1000 years. In turn this may have helped to reinforce their identity with their land and their ownership of it by giving them a sense that their 'ancestors' were a physical part of the landscape.

Associated Properties

PIC: The exposed chamber at **Torrylin** is of Clyde type and similar to that which Bryce explored in 1902, although the cairn itself is much truncated as a result of extensive excavation and quarrying in the past. Other (non PIC) Clyde-type cairns on Arran include East Bennan, 'Oscar's Grave' at Slidery Water (excavated by Bryce in 1901) and Clachaig (excavated by Bryce in 1900). Many of the cairns on Arran were robbed for stone, re-used as limekilns (as at Clachaig) or by antiquarians.

Visitors can gain a better impression of a Clyde-type burial chamber at **Nether Largie South** cairn whose architecture is similar to that at Carn Ban. The excavated cairns at **Cairnholy** are Mid Gleniron I (non PIC) are both examples of Clyde-type cairns.

Keywords Clyde-type cairn; long cairn; 'ancestors'; Neolithic; corbel; drystone walling; T H Bryce