

Property in Care (PIC) ID: PIC064

Designations: Scheduled Monument (SM90111)

Taken into State care: 1932 (Guardianship)

Last reviewed: 2004

**HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND
STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE**

DUNCHRAIGAIG 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.

DUNCHRAIGAIG CAIRN

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

This monument is a large burial cairn approximately 30m in diameter situated on a slight tree covered terrace that dates to the early Bronze Age period. Dunchraigaig is part of a complex of monuments sited within a few hundred metres of one another in the SE part of Kilmartin Glen and is similar to the round cairns of the linear cemetery (Ri Cruin, Nether Largie North and Mid and Kilmartin Glebe).

The renowned antiquarians Rev R J Mapleton and Rev William Greenwell each partially excavated Dunchraigaig in quick succession in 1864, their combined investigations revealing three cists, which contained a number of relatively well-preserved burials and grave goods.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview

1864: partial excavations at Dunchraigaig carried out in quick succession by Mapleton and Greenwell.

1932: monument given into Guardianship by the then landowner Sir Iain Malcolm of Poltalloch.

Archaeological Overview

Combined excavations revealed three cists; the first lay in a roughly central position entirely within the cairn material. Several burials were associated with this cist. An extended inhumation lay on top of the cist cover slab, and inside the cist were cremated human bones, a Food Vessel, some flint chips and charcoal. Below some rough paving within the cist was yet another burial, a crouched inhumation. There is no information on the age or sex of the individuals, and all material apart from the pottery appears to have been lost. The second cist was in the east half of the cairn, again completely within the cairn material (ie not dug into the old ground surface below the cairn). Inside this cist were a Food Vessel, some flint chippings and cremated human bones.

The largest cist, and the one assumed to contain the primary burials, for which the cairn was probably constructed, lies on the south-east edge of the cairn as it appears today. Greenwell reports that this consisted of a hollow either natural or dug into the ground, lined with drystone cobble walls, with a massive capstone (3.8m long) resting on top. Inside this cist were the remains of about 8-10 individuals, represented by both burnt and unburnt bones. It is extremely unusual to find so many individuals buried together in a cist, and it may be that this type of burial has more affinities with the earlier tradition of multiple burials of the Neolithic chambered tombs, than with the Bronze Age single burial tradition. A few artefacts were found lying within the stones of the cairn, including a whetstone, a greenstone axe, a flint knife and pottery fragments.

Artistic/Architectural Overview

The cairn is composed of water-worn boulders, and is now somewhat diminished in size through stone robbing, leaving two cists exposed to public view, although the traces of kerb give a sense of the cairn's original size.

Social Overview

Although there are no known formal studies, anecdotal evidence appears to imply that residents of the Kilmartin area may hold mixed feelings about these monuments. Promotion of the local heritage resource has increased tourism revenues, but has also restricted gravel extraction and house building through increased controls on development in the area.

Dunchraigaig features in several popular archaeological guides, both in print and on-line.

Spiritual Overview

No evidence exists to indicate that the monument holds any current spiritual or religious significance, although it features on a number of 'New Age' websites that offer their own spiritual interpretations of the site.

In antiquity, the monument appears to have held an enduring significance as burials were probably interred over a long period and the site was probably chosen for its proximity to long-established ritual and funerary monuments.

Aesthetic Overview

Dunchraigaig is enclosed by exotic trees planted in the mid-19th century as part of a planned parkland landscape that used several local monuments as secluded "picnic spots".

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

The cairn was excavated unscientifically, and without the benefit of modern techniques which could have extracted further information about the cairn's construction and its use.

Excavations at Dunchraigaig focussed solely on the cairn, and paid no attention to the surrounding area, which is in effect a fragment of the archaeological landscape. Recent work at Upper Largie has revealed a ceremonial complex with a long history of development and re-use as a burial place in the Bronze Age, with traces of what may be mortuary platforms. Therefore, it is possible that other Bronze Age burial sites in the Kilmartin Valley, such as Dunchraigaig, could overlie earlier ritual sites.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key points

Despite its denuded appearance, Dunchraigaig is significant because it shows that many burials could be placed within a single cairn over a long period and is reminiscent of the multiple burials found within Neolithic chambered cairns.

Mapleton and Greenwell only partially excavated the cairn. The surrounding PIC area may contain evidence to enrich our understanding of prehistoric funerary and ritual practices.

Associated Properties

PICs: Ri Cruin, Nether Largie North and Mid and Kilmartin Glebe cairns

Keywords Neolithic; Bronze Age; linear cemetery; cairn; chambered cairn; cist; inhumation;