



Property in Care (PIC) ID: PIC130

Designations: Scheduled Monument (SM90053)

Taken into State care: 1948 (Guardianship)

Last reviewed: 2013

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

CAIRNPAPPLE HILL



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CAIRNPAPPLE HILL

SYNOPSIS

Cairnpapple Hill is one of the best-known prehistoric sites on the mainland of Scotland. Archaeological excavations in 1947-8 revealed that the place had been the focus of communal activity for over 200 generations of local farmers, from the early Neolithic (c. 3800 BC) through to the early Christian era. The discoveries included early Neolithic pottery and axes, a later Neolithic henge monument, used for ceremonial purposes, three Bronze-Age burial cairns, and four long-cist burials dating to the first millennium AD.

The site was taken into state care immediately following the excavations, and a concrete dome – today, the most conspicuous feature of the complex - was constructed over the second-phase Bronze-Age cairn, both to preserve the graves and present them to the public. An introductory display is located in an adjacent WWII Nissen hut.

The site, situated atop the broad, slightly convex summit of Cairnpapple Hill, a prominent feature in the Bathgate Hills, commands extensive views to west, north and east, 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. The presence of a tall telecommunications mast close by detracts somewhat from the property's impressive setting.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview:

- c.3800 BC – people light fires and deposit pottery and stone axe fragments at the site.
- c.3000 BC – a henge monument is constructed, for communal ceremonial use,
- 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-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 'Cairnpapple Hill fort'.
- 1920s – most of the trees are felled.
- 1939-45 – the Army builds a Nissen hut on the site.

- 1947-8 – archaeological excavations are undertaken by Professor Stuart Piggott, of the University of Edinburgh, the first henge monument excavation in modern times.
- 1948 – the site is taken into state care immediately on completion of the excavations. Major works are carried out to protect and present the property, including the erection (1949) of a concrete dome over two of the Bronze-Age burials.
- late 1950s – a Police wireless mast is erected a short distance to the SW of the site.
- mid-1960s – archaeological excavation in advance of constructing an access path leads to the discovery of another major post-hole under the bank.

Archaeological Overview:

- The area within the ditch of the henge was extensively excavated in 1947-8, by Professor Stuart Piggott, of the University of Edinburgh, and it is probable that little further remains to be discovered in this area. However, there is likely to be significant archaeological potential remaining both within the ditch itself and those parts of the bank undisturbed by Piggott, and also conceivably 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, as attested by the existence of a ring ditch to the SW of the property, and stray finds of flints and an axehead nearby. As yet, no remains have been identified of the farms and houses inhabited by the builders and users of Cairnpapple Hill.
- 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), were being exploited in prehistory. The proximity of the workings to Cairnpapple Hill recalls a similar situation at **Edin's Hall Fort and Broch**, which has copper mines nearby.

Architectural/Artistic Overview:

- The property comprises structural elements of various forms and dates. All 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. That set out below replaces the sequence presented by Piggott, taking into consideration archaeological discoveries made elsewhere in the intervening 50 years.

Phase 1 (c.3800 BC)

- The deposition of plain sherds of pottery bowls and axe fragments in hearths is no longer represented physically at the site. However, the discovery of two stone axes that can only have come from axe factories in Cumbria and North Wales demonstrates the wide trading links of these first users of the site.
- The prior use of henge monument sites has been demonstrated through archaeological excavation elsewhere, including at Balfarg, Fife, where pre-

henge use included pits lined with broken pots and sealed with layers of boulders.

Phase 2 (c.3000 BC)

- The henge monument comprises a roughly circular timber circle, consisting originally of 24 posts, contained within a shallow ditch and outer bank. It had two entrances, both about 9m wide, in the NE and SE quadrants. Excavations elsewhere (eg., North Mains, Perthshire) suggest that the reason the circle and encircling ditch do not mirror each other is because they were constructed at different dates, and that the timber circle possibly came first. The posts, originally standing perhaps as high or higher than an adult, are today represented by shallow post-holes with red gravel in the bottom. The outer bank, now grass covered and standing no more than 1.2m high, may also have stood higher than an adult originally.
- Cairnpapple Hill's henge is among a class of monument found across the British Isles, from the **Ring of Brodgar** and the **Stones of Stenness**, on Orkney, to sites in SW England. Piggott felt that the henge monument appearing to provide the best parallel for Cairnpapple Hill was that at Arbor Law, in Derbyshire, 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)

- Three burial cairns superseded the henge monument. None of the actual cairns themselves now survives, but their respective graves do.
- The earliest – the 'north grave' (now lying within the area covered by the concrete dome) – is impressive by any standards. The rock-cut grave lies 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 traces of a wooden club alongside the body and a wooden 'mask' over the face.
- The second cairn – now represented by the area covered by the concrete dome – is defined by large kerb stones forming a circular area about 15m in diameter. It contained two cist burials. Both graves were rock-cut and covered by massive capstones; one of them had three cup-marks pecked into its surface. Other cup-marked stones were discovered among the cairn material. A food vessel was also found; this had been carefully placed on a shelf at the top of the cist.
- The third cairn – the last – was also the largest, with a diameter of c. 30m. It completely enclosed the two earlier cairns. Constructed from smaller stones and with a greater proportion of rubble and soil than its predecessors, it was clearly less well-built. It also overlay the silted-up ditch and seven post-holes of the henge monument. No burial was found at the centre of it, just two cremation burials, placed in upturned, collared cinerary urns elsewhere in the cairn material.
- The pottery vessels associated with these burials indicate that the people burying their dead must have had strong trading links with people from many hundreds of miles away.

Phase 4 (1st millennium AD)

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

Social Overview:

- 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 guided tours 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.
- Though the property may not be intensively involved with the local community, it can nonetheless arouse considerable local scrutiny. For instance, the threat of closure of the property, or of potentially disadvantageous developments which would impact upon the impressive views.
- 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.

Spiritual Overview:

- Historically, Cairnpapple Hill is evidence of the continued spiritual investment of populations in Scotland over some 200 generations, from the early Neolithic to early Christian eras. Spiritual/ religious activity on the site was probably far more intense and elaborate than the extant field remains suggest.
- Quite how henge monuments were used is a mystery, but they are generally accepted to be places in which religious ceremonies took place. The currently favoured hypothesis is that the bank lying outside the ditch (the reverse of the expected relationship in, say, an enclosed settlement or fort) may have been to screen the interior from view (suggesting that only a select few took part in what went on therein).
- The lengthy use of the former henge as a burial place is self-evident from the extant remains.
- Today, Cairnpapple Hill continues to have some spiritual meaning in the present. For example, it is a common and accepted phenomenon that modern pagans use pre-Christian sites for their own ceremonies. At Cairnpapple this has been suggested by deposited material found around the site on a regular basis. There is also anecdotal evidence from local people that Cairnpapple Hill is used as a meeting place for witches. There are possibly regular gatherings at Equinox and Solstice.
- Visitors to the property often record their positive response to the spirituality of the place in the visitor book kept on site.

Aesthetic Overview

- The present layout of the site 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.

- However, as an aesthetic arena, Cairnpapple Hill has tremendous appeal, easily helping to conjure up in the mind's eye life in prehistoric Scotland.
- The concrete dome, whilst giving problems of interpretation, provides an unusual atmospheric quality on entering its hatch and descending the ladder.
- Cairnpapple Hill is not all that conspicuous from the landscape around, except close up. However, the same cannot be said of the WWII Nissen hut or, more dramatically, the telecommunications mast and associated building immediately outside the area in state care.
- Cairnpapple Hill is strikingly located, with excellent views to west, north and east. 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. It is said that Goat Fell, on Arran can be glimpsed from the site on a clear day.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- What effect would radiocarbon dating have had on our understanding of the date and sequence of events at the site? Perhaps there remains an opportunity for further scientific analysis of areas not touched by the 1947-8 excavations.
- What archaeological potential lies outwith the henge itself, *and* beyond the area in state care? In particular, where are the houses, etc., that the builders and users of Cairnpapple Hill inhabited?
- Could Cairnpapple Hill be the place called *Medio Nemeton* ('Middle Sanctuary'), mentioned in the Ravenna *Cosmography*, compiled in the 7th century AD, as postulated by Professor Piggott?

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key Points

- Cairnpapple Hill is a striking example of a prehistoric complex in use, on and off, for some 4000 years.
- The tangible presence of the henge monument is a rare and precious relic of this type of late Neolithic/Bronze-Age ceremonial complex in Scotland.
- Professor Piggott, his archaeological excavations at Cairnpapple Hill, and his published report have an iconic status in prehistoric studies.
- 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.

ADDENDA

Associated Properties:

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

(some other henge monuments in the British Isles): Arbor Low (Derbys); Avebury (Wilts); Stonehenge (Wilts).

(some other Bronze-Age burial cairns in HS care): **Cairnholy Chambered Cairns; Camster Cairns; Clava Cairns; Corrimony Chambered Cairn; Memsie Cairn**

Keywords:

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

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