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## **Excavation of three Early Christian graves at Lyne, near Peebles**

by Tam Ward. 2015.

# Excavation of three Early Christian graves at Lyne, near Peebles

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2015

## Abstract

*The discovery of a single cist found to be eroding from a gravel bank led to the detection of a further two cists, all of which were shown by excavation to be long cists of Early Christian date. The site was consequently created into a heritage trail.*

## Introduction

While visiting the Roman fort of Lyne, near Peebles in July 1998, Sharon Corder and David Cowley, both trained archaeologists, recognised a cist eroding from the summit of a nearby gravel ridge (Pl's 1 & 2). The writer was informed and an emergency excavation on the site was organised in the belief that the cist, which appeared to be a short cist, was a Bronze Age burial.

## The site, its landscape and context

The site is a prominent tree covered natural sand and gravel knoll, known as Abbey Knowe, it lies about 100m NW from Lyne Church, which is on the A 72 road between Blyth Bridge and Peebles, being c 4miles west of the latter town. The site (Fig's 1 & 2) is in Lyne Parish and is part of Scottish Borders, and can be found on OS 1:10,000 map sheet NT 14 SE at NT 1902 4055, or on OS Landranger Series No 72 Upper Clyde Valley.

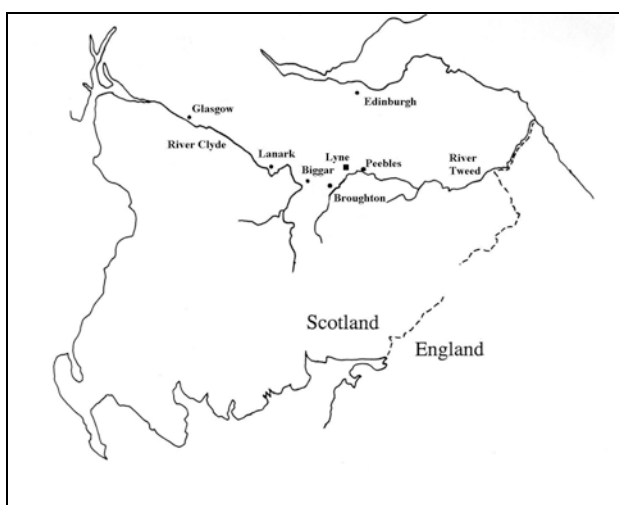


Fig 1 location map

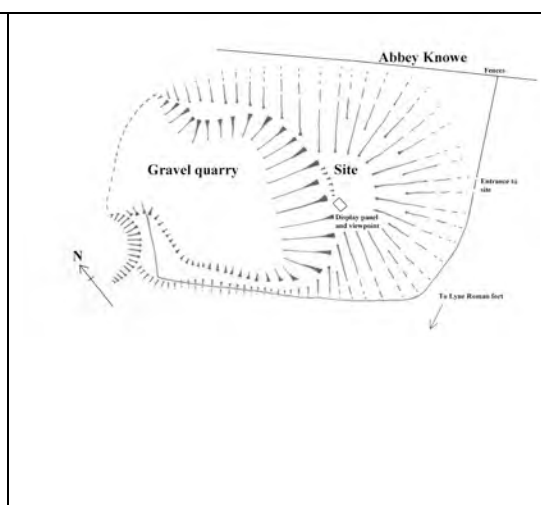


Fig 2 Site environs



Plate 1 Showing site location



Plate 2 The discoverers

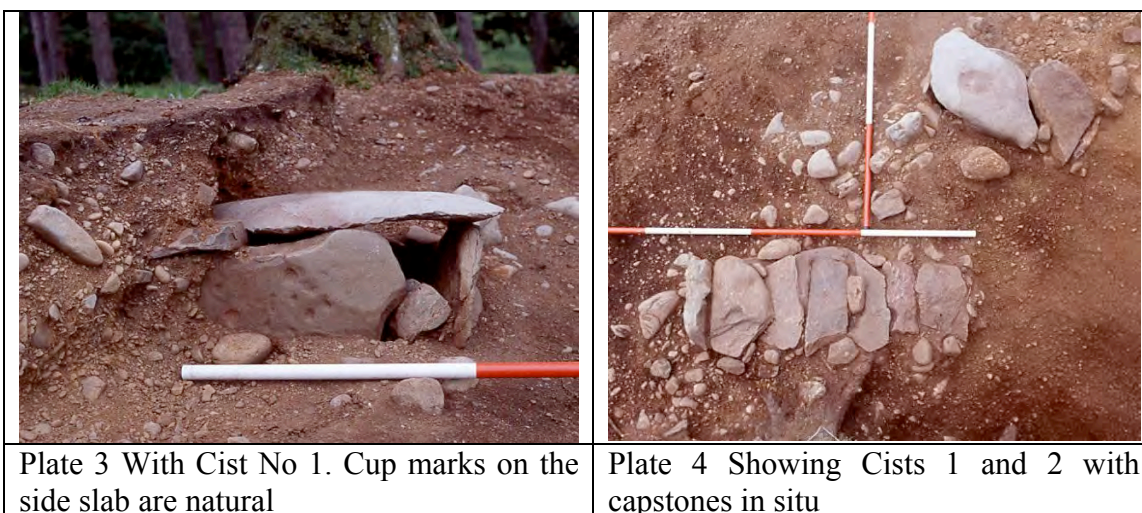
## Excavation

Members of both Peeblesshire Archaeological Society (PAS) and the Biggar Archaeology Group (BAG) carried out the work of site excavation, consolidation and creation of a heritage trail (of which more below).

Work commenced with the excavation of the visible cist (Cist No 1) which lay at the northern edge of the summit of Abbey Knowe, and where the ground was collapsing due to old quarrying of sand and gravel of which the entire hillock is composed. During the course of trowelling around Cist No 1, the end of another cist; Cist No 2 appeared from the crumbling land surface and finally, a third cist; Cist No 3 was revealed when a rotten tree trunk was removed to reveal its presence, during the excavation of the first two graves, the tree was used as a photographic tower, and it was often jokingly speculated that it may conceal another cist. The remainder of the summit of the knoll was excavated but no further evidence was discovered.

The entire excavation was done by hand trowelling after removal of turf from the summit of the hill and all spoil was dry sieved, but no artefacts or environmental samples were recovered during the work. The contents of each cist; and completely filling the chambers, were composed of fine sandy gravel having filtered into the burial chambers through interstices between the cists covering stones. There were no skeletal remains within the cists.

Ultimately three small long cists were revealed and each was shown to be intact with its cover slabs in situ, they all lay at the same level on the ground and less than 0.3m from the ground surface.



### Cist No 1

The original discovery was the exposed western end slab and cover stone of the cist and which was in imminent danger of collapsing down the quarry face. Excavation soon revealed it was indeed a short cist but not an example from the Bronze Age as had first been thought. Upon excavation the shape was immediately recognisable as being typically Early Christian in style, having a broad internal area at the western end formed by two long slabs of greywacke rock, and a narrower eastern end created by two shorter stones but clearly set closer to narrow that end of the chamber thus making the distinctive and recognisable Early Christian grave. The end stone at the

western end was set to stand higher than the other three sides and the two cover slabs, and this may have acted as a grave marker when the rest was covered over. The two cover slabs were carefully selected to fit together and completely cover the chamber. The total depth of the grave was 0.3m and the base was the natural gravel.

The alignment was also immediately recognisable as being of an Early Christian burial; being orientated east/west and with the narrower end at the east end, for an extended inhumation burial. The dimensions of the cists are given in Fig 4, and what was mistaken for a short cist of pre-historic date was nevertheless surprising by its small size, evidently created for a child, furthermore the deceased must have been a baby judging by the size of the cist.

#### Cist No 2

The cist was similar in all constructional aspects and depth to Cist No 1, apart from its dimensions, which are especially longer, however, and again judging by the size of the burial chamber, this one was also for a child, although one older than the occupant of Cist No 1. The two shorter eastern end side slabs had the appearance of having slumped inwards however; they make a direct comparison to those of Cist No 1 and therefore were clearly designed to form the narrower (feet) end of the burial. Cist No 2 also had the raised western end stone exactly the same as the smaller grave. Six stones were selected to cover the chamber and these were all neatly fitted adjacent one another to form a relatively good seal, but like the other graves not quite good enough to prevent the incursion of fine gravel over time.

#### Cist No 3

Amazingly, had the tree which covered Cist No 3 been healthy as most of the trees on the knoll were, then this grave would not have been discovered. It was similar in some respects to the other two, including its depth and it was completely undisturbed with all its capstones in situ. However the chamber was formed using three stones on the long south side and five on the north side. The end west stone was not set higher than the others as appeared in Cists 1 & 2, and the internal width was more uniform for the entire length. Furthermore one stone in the long north side was re-used from another place as it was a piece of sandstone with tool marks on it (Figs 3&4 and Pl 7), this may have originally been a stone from the nearby Roman fort, which had stone buildings (RCAHMS 1967) (see Pl 11).



Plate 5 Showing the three cists with cover stones in situ



Plate 6 Showing the three cists excavated

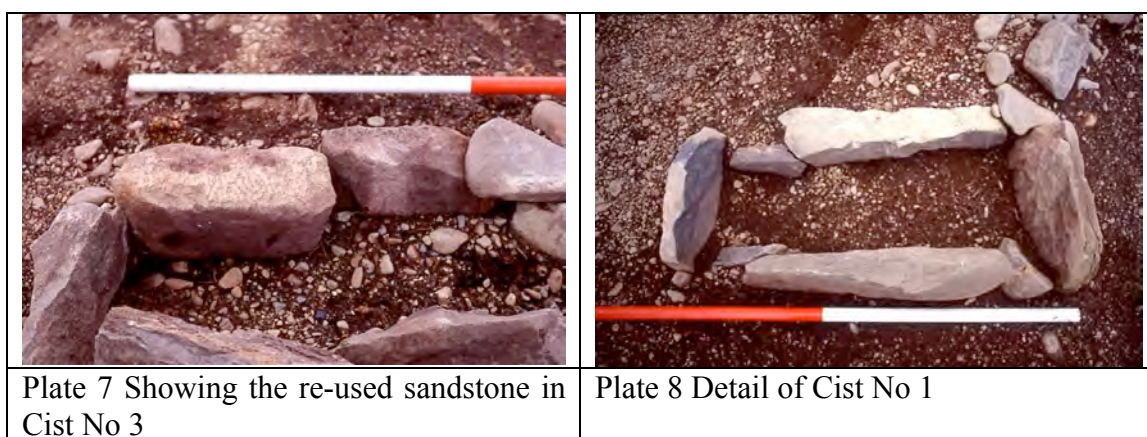
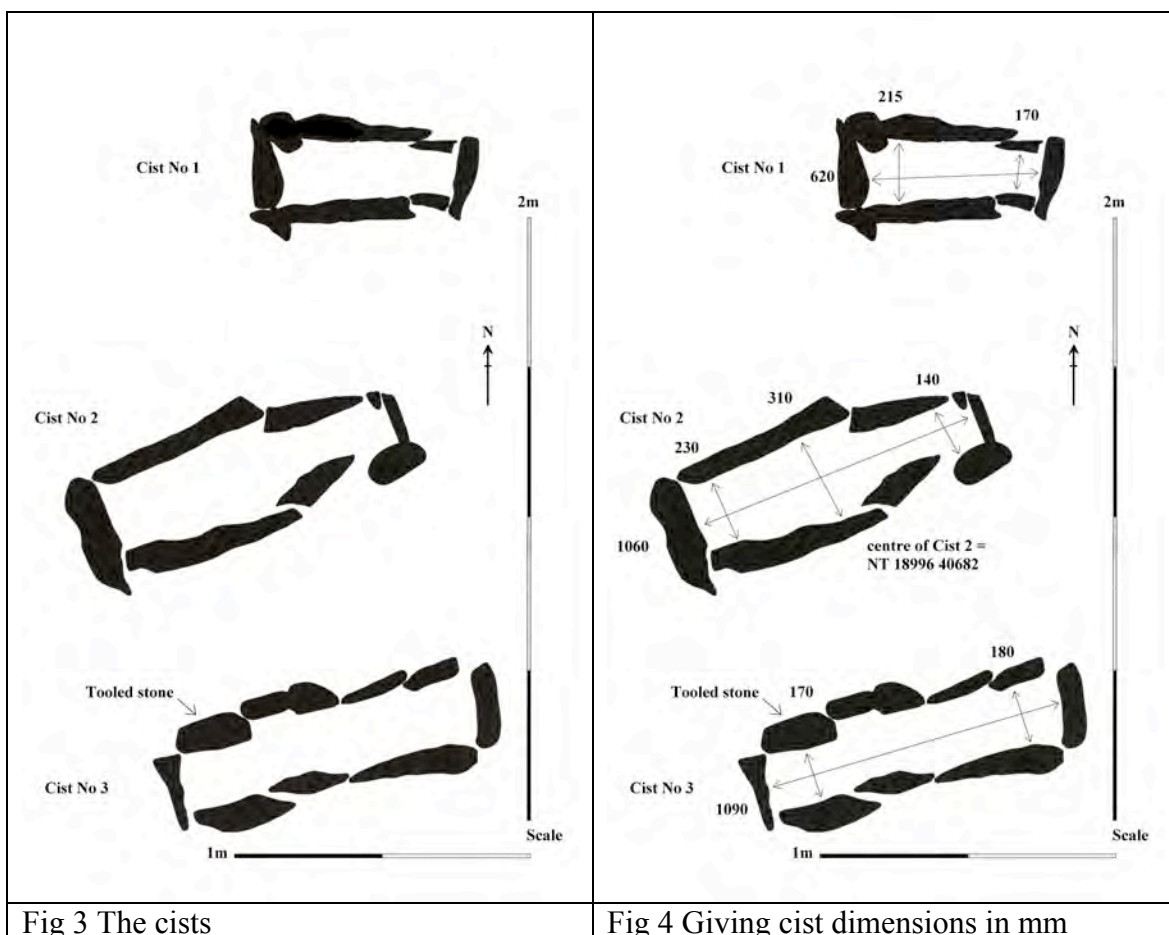




Plate 9 Lady Elizabeth Benson opens the Trail



Plate 10 Visitors to the site

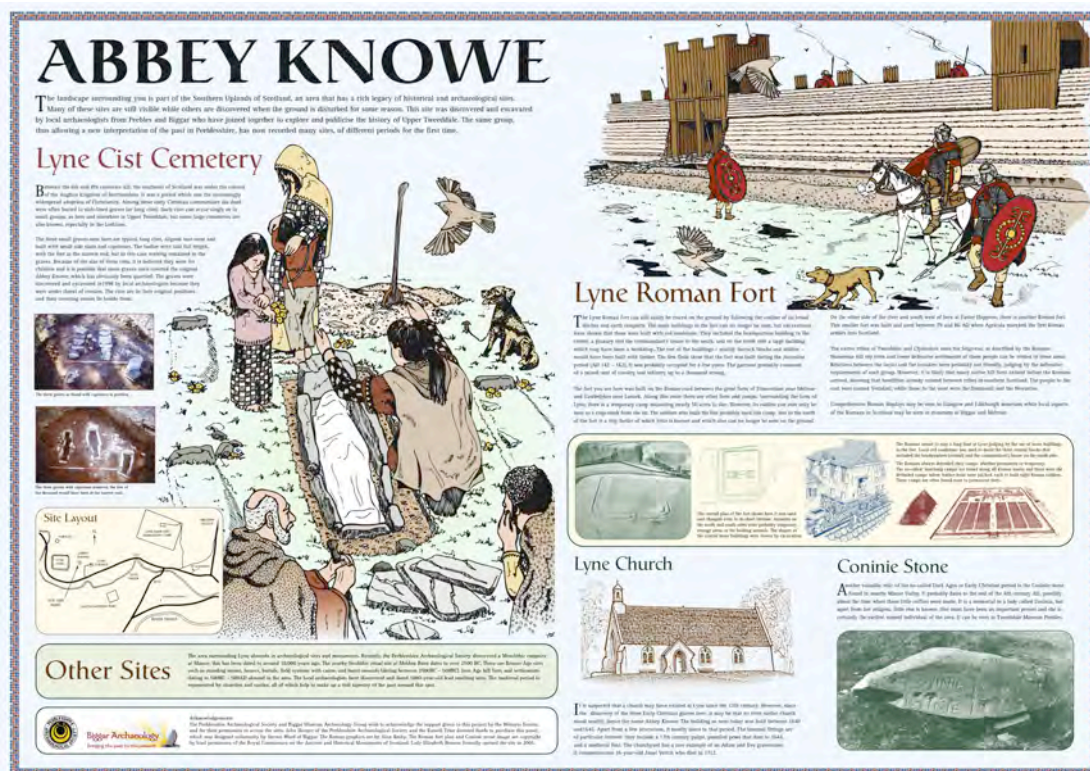


Plate 11 Interpretation Panel at Lyne Cist Cemetery

### Discussion/conclusion

Firstly, it is clear that other cists may originally have been positioned on Abbey Knowe before a large part of it was quarried for sand and gravel at some unknown period. The three cists may therefore have been the survivors of a larger cemetery and what the composition of that hypothetical cemetery may have been will never be known. It could have been a larger cemetery for young people's graves, or one with mixed children and adults, or of course the three graves which were located may have been the only examples. It is thought likely that no other cists survive on Abbey Mound as the rest of the ground slopes down quite steeply from the flat area where the three burials were found, although that is by no means certain. Similarly it must be considered a possibility that the separate ridge of gravel (see Pl 1) which extends down to the main road and the cottage there, and is also wooded may have burials upon it. It is also speculatively conceivable that the Lyne church site could have accommodated further burials of the period under discussion.

Because of the size of the cists it is probably correct to say they were made for two children and a baby. Cists 1 & 2 are very similar in construction details and one may speculate they formed a single event, perhaps for siblings, while the third cist does vary somewhat in design and may therefore have been a separate burial in time. The three graves do however seem to respect each other in their spacing and it is possible that all positions were known so as not to interfere with each other, assuming the burials were made at different times.

Upper Tweeddale has other Early Christian burials and they have also been inserted in similar circumstances of gravelly knolls. Two were found at Polmood near Tweedsmuir village; one in 1939 and the other 1958 (RCAHMS 1967 op cit), both were for adults and both contained skeletal remains.

The name Abbey Knowe has long been speculated upon as suggesting something ecclesiastical in former times (OS Name Book 1856). The present Lyne church dates to the mid 17<sup>th</sup> century although it was extensively restored in 1888. However it is likely that the site was occupied by a church as early as the 12<sup>th</sup> century (RCAHMS 1967 op cit). The new discovery on Abbey Knowe may be taken as evidence of an even earlier religious establishment extending back a further 500 years or so.

Nevertheless, the present church, although outwardly pleasing itself in its elevated position has much to offer the visitor. Inside it contains a 17<sup>th</sup> century pulpit and two panelled oak pews with the date of 1644 which probably indicates the construction of the building. During recent roof repairs it was discovered that the original 17<sup>th</sup> century roof timbers remain, and examples of wooden pegs used to fix slates were recovered. A font of earlier medieval period was discovered built into an internal wall and now stands in the church.

Externally the building has a few interesting features such as finials and other architectural features, and in the cemetery is an important 'Adam and Eve' gravestone inscribed for Janet Vietch, who died in 1712, aged 16 years. Peeblesshire Archaeological Society adopted the stone and has protected it with a suitable transparent case to preserve it.

### **Heritage Trail**

The idea of creating the Lyne cists and surrounding area into a heritage trail was suggested, and both PAS and BAG co-operated once more to create the Trail.

The cist site was used as a central location from which to view the nearby and impressive Roman Fort earthworks and explain by means of a full colour display panel (Pl 11), the history and antiquity of the immediate area, including Lyne Church.

The eroding top of the quarry edge was consolidated by shoring with timber and the A1 display panel was mounted on a stone cairn. The three graves were left open with their respective cover stones laid out beside them and the entire knoll was cleared of fallen branches and loose stones, while the site owners re fenced the mound and provided a gate and stile for visitors to the site.

**Acknowledgment**

Permission to carry out the entire project was granted by Wemyss Estates who also provided assistance on site with re fencing. Furthermore, the site owner Lady Elizabeth Benson of Barns House formerly opened the heritage trail and which will be maintained by the Peeblesshire Archaeological Society. The Heritage Trail Panel was voluntarily designed by Steven Ward with illustrations by Alan Braby.

**References**

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