Biggar Archaeology

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Biggar Museum Trust
Biggar Archaeology Group
Excavation of three small cairns at Corse Law
Tam Ward 2005

Summary
This report describes the results of survey and excavating small cairns which are part of a larger group at Corse Law near Carnwath, South Lanarkshire.

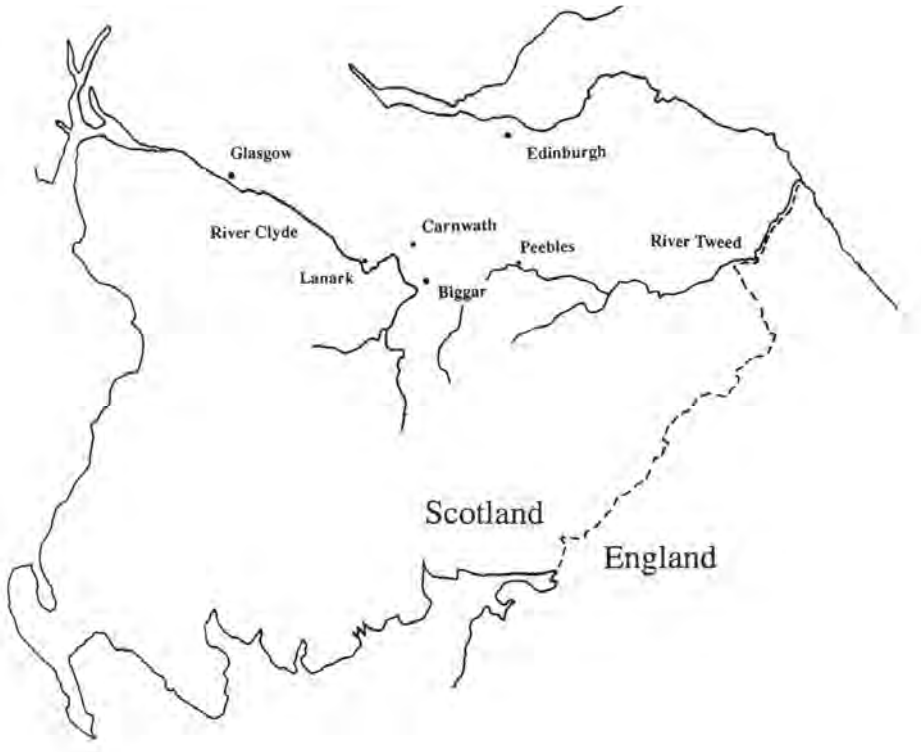


Fig 1

Introduction

The cairns given in this report are part of a large cairn group which spreads from the West Linton area in the east to the Carnwath area in the west, a distance of about 12 miles. It is one of, if not the largest concentration of pre-historic cairns in Scotland. The distribution of cairns lie at the southern end of the Pentland Hills and are ranged in groups, as single examples, and of varying sizes. Within the overall group there are several prominent large cairns, a chambered cairn and several long cairns, however the vast majority may be classed as small cairns measuring less than 10m in diameter and more often than not, less than half that size.

Many of the most prominent cairns were recorded by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, and are given in their two separate Inventories of the area (RCAHMS 1967 & 1978). A further group were surveyed in 1988/89 by Glasgow University Department of Continuing Adult Education (Marshall, 1995) and a final grouping of forty three were discovered and recorded in 2004 (Ward, 2004). It is from the latter group that three cairns were selected for excavation.

Surrounding the area within which the recently found cairns lie is a landscape of proven pre-historic activity ranging from the Mesolithic to Bronze Age eras. This was a lithic assemblage found by the Lanark and District Archaeological Society in 1988 (Clarke, 1989) in forestry plough furrows. At that time the ground within which the latest cairns lay was covered in mature forest. This was clear felled in 2003 and re-planted in 2004 at which time the cairns were discovered and recorded.

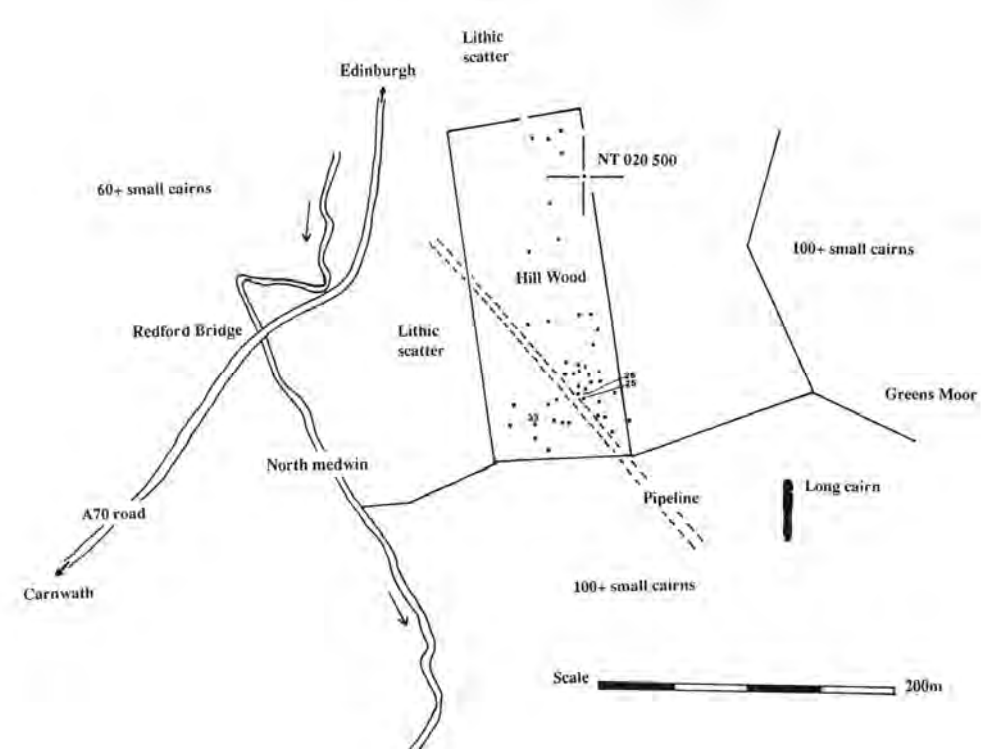


Fig 2

Report on a cairn group at Corse Law, Carnwath, South Lanarkshire
OS 1:10,000 map NT 04 NW. Centred NT 019 498

Typical disturbed cairn and burnt debris

Clearing debris from excavation site

The cairn group (fig 2, Appendix III), which numbers forty three, and measuring up to 6m in diameter and no higher than 1m, lies in an area known as Hill Wood. The mature woodland was recently felled, and has now been re-planted and enclosed by a new protective fence. It is surrounded on the north, east and west sides by a plantation, which dates to c 1987 but is open to moor land on the south. The 1987 plantation area was subject to an archaeological field walking exercise already cited, when a significant lithic assemblage was retrieved; the artefacts were shown to embrace the Mesolithic, Neolithic and Bronze Ages.

Since the present cairn group lay within the mature woodland, it was never located and it is reported here for the first time.

The area lies on a gentle west-facing slope at 260m OD. To the west, the North Medwin river flows south at the base of the slope, where the A70 road crosses the river at Redford Bridge.

The perimeter fence encloses a rectangular area of c 450m by 175m, the long axis being aligned N/S. The stumps of the original trees are still extant with much brushwood and timber off cuts being strewn around. The majority of cairns are at the southern end of the enclosure and lie in an apparent random scatter.

During the felling operation, numerous large bonfires were used to clear away brushwood. The sites of these fires are obvious by the presence of large quantities of semi burnt wood and charcoal, burnt soil is evident and some fires have been burned on top of cairns.

Several cairns have tree stumps beside them and therefore the root systems of these trees have permeated through and below the cairns.

These factors obviously have an important bearing on any future archaeological work that may take place in the area.

During the re-planting operation, a mechanical digger was used to create better depths of soil for the young trees. Scrapes of turf were pulled up in small patches and these have caused some superficial damage to nearly all of the cairns. Occasionally the digger has penetrated deeper creating small craters; however, no cairns have been exposed to their basal levels.

The cairns consist of rocks and boulders of Upper Old Red Sandstone of which the solid geology is very near the surface of the area.

A search for artefacts was also made during the survey but none were found. This is probably due to the fact that the ground has only been lightly disturbed, and seldom below the shallow peat cover. Occasional tree roots have been pulled up exposing the underlying sandstone bedrock and soil, however, the work of the digger has only removed the turf from small areas, mostly exposing peat and only rarely, some soil.

Rationale for excavation

Small cairns still pose a problem as to their function on the landscape. Groups of cairns are usually ascribed to field clearance while isolated examples may be more readily accepted as being of a funerary nature. Generally, the evidence shows them to be Bronze Age in date. The nearby chambered cairn at Burngrange (RCAHMS, ibid) is evidently of Neolithic date, and the long cairns in the vicinity may also be of that period. It is therefore likely that some of the thousands of smaller cairns may also date to this time.

Burngrange Chambered Cairn and other nearby large cairn

The furrow walking which took place in 1988 demonstrated the area to be rich in artefacts and it was considered possible to locate finds or features relating to these, perhaps even pre-dating the cairns.

Since nearly all of the cairns had been affected to some extent by the forestry activities, and the entire area had been re-planted, a small scale excavation strategy was devised. It was considered that four main objectives were possible:
1) To determine the physical nature of the cairns.
2) To establish a function.
3) To establish a date.
4) To find any evidence of pre-cairn activity.

Three cairns were chosen for excavation; two were adjacent and had superficial damage to their surfaces with some stones being pulled off, while the third had been more or less pushed or pulled away, but still leaving the basal stones in situ.

The excavation

Cairn 1	NT 02001 49706	(cairn No 26 on the survey report)
Cairn 2	NT 02000 49701	(cairn No 25 on the survey report)
Cairn 3	NT 01939 49669	(cairn No 33 on the survey report)

The first two cairns selected lay on the east side of the pipe line track which runs through the forest. It is likely that other cairns were demolished by the installation of the water supply pipe from the West Linton area to the Calders region.

A trench totalling 33.5 square metres and aligned N/S was opened over the two cairns. The west side of cairn 1 and the east side of cairn 2 were totally excavated, allowing sections through the centres of each.

Cairn 1 measured 5m in diameter by 0.5m high, it had been disturbed by the digger and was rather flat topped prior to excavation, unlike No 2 which was still dome shaped, the latter measured 4m in diameter by 0.7m high. Each was covered in stunted vegetation of heather, grass and weeds and each had burnt forestry debris lying over them. Prior to those materials the cairns were covered in pine needles over a shallow depth of peaty soil. The ground around was strewn in modern charcoal and forest debris. Large tree trunks had grown around but not directly on the cairns but it was obvious that roots had penetrated the cairn bodies and the ground below.

The removal of modern burnt material and debris from all sites was essential, loose stones were also removed at this stage. The cairns were cleaned down to the underlying stone showing the approximate shape and extent of each, however, in each case the actual definition of the cairns was somewhat confused by large boulders, many of which were later shown to be in situ and pre-existing naturally occurring stones, to the cairns themselves.

The matrix of the cairn bodies (except No 3 which had been wrecked) was a layer of peat no more than 0.15m thick and a darkened mineral soil which was almost exclusively sand. Tree roots permeated as described above.

After first cleaning, the trench of 1 & 2 was planned and photographed, cairn 3 was only photographed. Cairn stones were then removed in arbitrary layers, care being

taken to search for any artefacts buried within the cairn structure, none were found. The entire trench areas of all cairns were then hand excavated down to and through the natural undisturbed horizon, which was composed of clean sand with some broken rock included.

Each of the three cairns consisted of sub angular and rounded stones of the local sandstone. In each case it became evident that the gathered stones, which measured up to 0.5m but which were more frequently half that size or less, had been dumped over the pre-existing boulders. The naturally occurring stones must originally have protruded from the ground, causing their areas to be selected for the formation of the cairns; a technique often seen in small cairn groups.

About 1.5 cubic metres of stones were removed from each cairn, forming spoil dumps (or new cairns) of c1.5m in diameter by 0.8m high, this being about half of the original cairn contents of stone.

The ground around and below each cairn varied considerably in colour and texture. This was mainly due to two aspects of the sites; firstly the modern tree roots penetrated throughout, leaving easily recognised organic trails and consequently discolouration of the sand. Secondly, and over all the areas investigated, an iron pan and discolouration had formed around and below the stones. The pan which in some areas formed a black crust would have formed as a consequence of the peat covering above being leached. Interestingly from a geological point of view, the black pan changed on exposure to the air to a rust coloured dust.

The ground below the cairns, and most especially cairns 1 and 2, varied considerably in colour and texture from an orange to pale yellow and from fine to course grained sands. This effect confused the archaeology but was eventually understood to be entirely natural and indeed the same effect could be seen elsewhere in exposures in the forest area and its access road.

A sondage of 0.6m by 0.5m in area was cut against the centre of cairn 1 section; this revealed the complexity of geological processes of the area. Much of the lighter coloured sand could be seen to be the result of weathering of the cairn stones surfaces, during the period of time it took to envelope the cairns in their matrix of soil. Layers below the cairn bodies could be seen to be the result of wind and/or water borne sand deposition prior to the building of the cairns.

There were no obvious old ground surfaces evident in any of the excavations, apart from the layer of slightly darker soil lying below the peat above and beside the cairns. Any old soils must have been leached out completely, although throughout the areas, in the basal layers, occasional fragments of tiny charcoal were noted. It was in these layers that twelve pieces of flaked chert and one of flint were retrieved, and near the centre of the cairn 1, a single abraded sherd of comb decorated beaker base was found. This lay on a probably natural layer of pale coloured sand. The deposition of the lithic is suspected as being pre-cairn material and possibly Mesolithic in origin, however the beaker sherd may have been a token deposit made by the cairn builders. The sherd therefore provides a rough terminus ante quem for the building of the cairn. The taphonomy of the charcoal is unknown and it may be attributable to natural

occurrence before the cairns were made. No samples were retrieved during the project.

Massive boulders and slabs of sandstone up to 2m long and 1.5m square respectively lay apparently in natural repose, both on the surface of the sub stratum and embedded into it. Protruding through the underlying sand were the tips of other boulders and stones; some rounded, some tabular and some 'on end', but all typical of post glaciation's deposition. The same could be seen in many surrounding parts of the area.

Cairn 1 with over burden removed

Cairn 2 with over burden removed

Cairn 1 Plan

Cairn 2 Plan

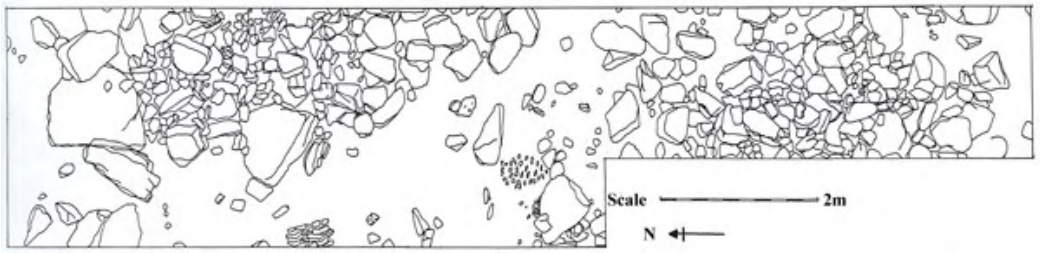
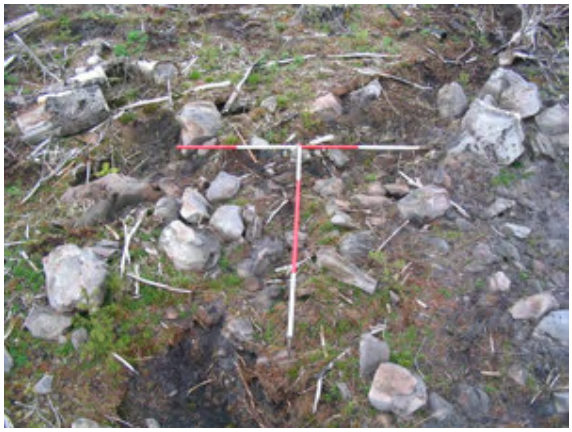


Fig 3. showing upper layers of stones.

Cairn 1. The natural boulders left after the cairn stones were removed. Showing the lighter coloured sand in centre where the beaker sherd was found. The sherd is a base fragment with comb decoration.

The excavation of cairn 3 was more arbitrary, given the way it had been disturbed. An approximate trench of 3m by 2m was opened and this was aligned NW/SE. The cairn is assumed to have been about 3m in diameter by 0.5m high. The natural ground surface below the cairn was almost totally a bed of massive and large boulders. Three large boulders had been moved onto the pile and the rest of the cairn was similar to those already described. No artefacts were found here.



Cairn 3 showing disturbance prior to excavation.

Discussion

It is to be hoped that the excavation of these cairns may help slightly in the quest for a more definitive answer as to the real purpose of small cairns.

Recent surveys by the Biggar Group have recorded hundreds of small cairns in Clydesdale and Tweeddale, these are mostly in groups and taken along with other features such as unenclosed platform settlements and burnt mounds, they are enabling a better understanding of land use in these areas, in the second and third millennium BC.

The weight of evidence strongly suggests that the cairns were primarily the product of field clearance, although finds both on, within and below the cairns may imply an activity was taking place which was not simply the dumping of stones. Ceremonial acts may have been performed at small cairns, whatever their original purpose, with token deposits being placed.

Cairns similar to those under consideration here were investigated by University of Glasgow at Fall Kneesend near Elvanfoot, South Lanarkshire, where in one instance a single sherd of pottery was located below a cairn and part of a shale napkin ring was found at the edge of another. Of course these items may simply be accidental inclusions or objects discarded long before the formation of the cairns, since there must have been various types of activities around the general areas of the cairns and which could easily account for such finds.

The sherd, although inconclusive as to the overall decorative scheme and size of the pot, is another location to be added to the growing corpus of beaker sites in Clydesdale (Sheridan in Johnston, 1997), and although hardly surprising in the context of the landscape within which it was found, nevertheless contributes to the distribution pattern of such pots.

Conclusion

The four objectives of the excavation project were probably realised, although it must be stressed that the sample of three cairns from the hundreds in the immediate vicinity, is tiny.

1) The cairns were all shown to be the product of gathered stones being placed over pre-existing larger boulders, some of which were lying on the undisturbed natural while others were firmly embedded into it. Other than creating roughly circular domed shaped piles, there was no structure or form to the cairns.

2) The function cannot be shown to be sepulchral and therefore it seems the obvious conclusion is to ascribe the cairns to a field clearance activity.

3) Although no material suitable for C14 dating was recovered, the single beaker sherd found below one cairn allows for an approximate chronology. The comb decorated base sherd is probably derived from an Early to Mid Bronze Age bell beaker and can be ascribed the second or third millennium BC. Thus the cairn was probably built around that time or later.

4) The scatter of chert flakes found below and around cairns 1 and 2, almost certainly indicate a pre-cairn scatter of worked lithic. Although not of a quality to be diagnostic as far as the expertise of the group is concerned, it is judged that it may represent a Mesolithic distribution of waste material. This is entirely possible given the nature of the lithic previously found in the vicinity, and if so, it merely demonstrates that the scatter of lithic over the general area is extensive.

Acknowledgment

The owners of the site Mr and Mrs Maxwell-Stuart kindly allowed both the survey and excavation to be undertaken.

The following members of the group carried out the fieldwork; Fiona Christison, Brenda Dreghorn, Denise Dudds, Joyce Durham, Richard Gillanders, John Goodie, Jim Ness, Ian Paterson. Brenda Dreghorn executed site and finished drawings. The writer organised the project and carried out site photography.

References

Marshall I, 1995 An Archaeological Field Survey at Greens Moor, Association of Certificated Field Archaeologists Occasional Paper No 14.

The Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland 1967, Peeblesshire an Inventory of Monuments.

The Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland 1978, Lanarkshire Prehistoric and Roman Monuments.

Clarke A, 'Corse Law, Carnwath, Lanarkshire: a lithic scatter', *Proc Soc Ant Scot*, 119 (1989), 43 –54

Johnston D, Biggar Common, 1987-93: an early prehistoric funerary and domestic landscape in Clydesdale, South Lanarkshire. *Proc Soc Ant Scot*, 127 (1997), 185 - 253

Ward T, 2004 Report on a cairn group at Corse Law, Carnwath, South Lanarkshire, Biggar Archaeology Group(amalgamated here, see appendix III).

Appendix I Finds

CL/001	Ce	Base sherd comb decorated beaker	B3.3 E2.6
2	Li	Chert 2 of	B1.9 E2.8
3	Li	Chert	B6.1 E2.9 from corner
4	Li	Chert 2 of	B3.3 E2.15 from corner
5	Li	Chert	B3.3 E0.75
6	Li	Chert	B1.75 E0.10
7	Li	Chert	B1.4 E2.25
8	Li	Chert	B0.6 E0.9
9	Li	Chert	FL 4 on drawing
10	Li	Flint	FL 1 on drawing
11	Li	Chert 2 of	FL 2 on drawing

Appendix II Photographs

The work was recorded on 35mm colour slide film; digital stills and video were also used.

People seen from left to right in slides.
JN=Jim Ness, BD= Brenda Dreghorn, JD= Joyce Durham, RG=Richard Gillanders, IP= Ian Paterson, FC= Fiona Christison

Colour slides

CL 1 General view of site looking east, JN
CL 2 ditto
CL 3 Removing burnt logs, BD, DD, RG, IP, JD
CL 4 Cairn 1 after first clean
CL 5 ditto
CL 6 ditto
CL 7 ditto
CL 8 ditto
CL 9 ditto
CL10 Working on cairn1, RG, IP
CL11 ditto, RG
CL 12 Upper layer of cairn 1 showing smaller stone over pre cairn boulders
CL 13 ditto
CL 14 ditto looking west
CL 15 ditto
CL 16 ditto
CL 17 ditto
CL 18 ditto
CL 19 ditto
CL 20 ditto
CL 21 ditto
CL 22 ditto looking east
CL 23 ditto
CL 24 ditto
CL 25 ditto
CL 26 Looking south over edge of cairn 1 to cairn 2, BD, DD, FC
CL 27 Cairn 2 cleaned and looking west
CL 28 General view over cairn 1, FC, IP, JN, DD, DD, RG
CL 29 Basal layer, natural stone at cairn 1
CL 30 ditto
CL 31 ditto
CL 32 Looking east over cairn 2, JD, FC, JN, RG
CL 33 ditto with cairn stones removed, natural boulders left in situ
CL 34 General view north over cairn 2 and cairn 1
CL 35 Cairn 3, looking east, pre excavation

CL 36 Cairn 3 excavating, RG, JN, BD, DD, IP
CL 37 Cairn 3 basal layer showing natural sand, JN, RG, BD
CL 38 Cairn 3 stripped to natural looking east

Digital photographs

1191 Cairn 1 looking east
1120 General view to east showing forest debris
1121 Cairn 1 looking east showing burnt logs
1122 Clearing forest debris from cairns 1 and 2. FC, BD, DD, JG, RG, IP, JD
1123 Burngrange chambered cairn looking north east
1124 Ditto
1125 Ditto. BD, JD
1126 Ditto
1127 Burngrange cairns looking south. JD, BD
1128 Ditto
1141 Cairn 1 cleaned showing small cairn stones and large natural boulders. East
1142 Ditto
1143 Ditto
1144 Ditto
1145 Ditto looking west
1146 Looking south over Cairn 1 and 2. IP, DD
1147 Ditto showing edge of Cairn 1
1148 Ditto looking north. FC, BD
1149 Ditto looking north east
1150 Cairn 1 north west corner of trench
1151 Cairn 1 edge
1152 Ditto
1153 Ditto
1154 Ditto. IP
1155 Looking north over Cairn1. RG, IP
1156 Cairn 1 edge looking east
1157 Cairn 1 cleaned showing small cairn stone on larger natural boulders
1158 Ditto
1159 Ditto
1160 Cairn 1 north west corner of trench
1161 Ditto
1162 Ditto
1163 Ditto
1164 Cairn 1 edge looking west
1165 Ditto
1166 Ditto
1167 Ditto
1168 Looking south over Cairn 1 to Cairn 2. BD, DD, FC
1169 Cairn 1 cleaned looking west
1170 Ditto
1171 Ditto
1172 Ditto
1173 Looking SE over trench to C2. BD, DD, FC
1174 Looking SE over trench C1 & C2. DD, JD, RG, BD, IP, FC
1175 Cairn 1 sondage looking east
1178 Cairn 2 first clean looking west
1180 Cairn 1 with cairn stone removed leaving natural boulders. Note colours
1181 Ditto
1182 Cairn 1 sondage at centre section showing layer of pale sand upon which the beaker sherd was found.
1183 Ditto
1184 Cairn 1 with cairn stone removed leaving natural boulders. Note colours
1185 Ditto
1186 Cairn 1 sondage at centre same as 1182
1187 Ditto

1216 cairn 2 looking west, cairn stone removed leaving natural boulders
1217 Looking north over C2 and C1, trench complete
1238 Cairn 3 looking west, pre excavation
1239 Cairn 3 excavation. JN, RG, BD, DD, IP
1240 Cairn 3 showing charcoal horizon above clean sand
1241 Ditto
1242 Cairn 3 looking west with most cairn stone removed
1243 Ditto
1244 Ditto

Appendix III (Fig 2) Gazetteer of individual cairns and features

The cairns were spot recorded using GPS and their sizes were estimated visually in metres. The heights ranged from 0.5m to 1m but the vast majority were around 0.5m high. Unless otherwise given, the sizes here are for diameters.

1	NT 01951 50055	4	
2	NT 01955 50060	4	
3	NT 01977 50025	3	
4	NT 01962 49963	3	
5	NT 01972 49918	3	
6	NT 02008 49828	5 x3	
7	NT 01997 49818	5	
8	NT 02020 49794	4	
9	NT 02013 49765	5 dome shape	
10	NT 02000 49738	4	
11	NT 01993 49733	3	
12	NT 01988 49716	4 dome shape	
13	NT 01985 49730	4	
14	NT 02001 49708	5	
15	NT 02009 49732	3	
16	NT 02018 49725	3	
17	NT 02028 49734	4	
18	NT 02028 49723	3	
19	NT 02051 49711	6 dome shape	
20	NT 02028 49689	10m long linear pile N/S	
21	NT 02036 49672	5	
22	NT 02065 49672	outside fence and undisturbed	
23	NT 02043 49656	5 in forest break (pipeline track)	
24	NT 02017 49681	3 ditto	
25 *(S)	NT 02000 49701	3 ditto	(Excavated)
26 *(N)	NT 02001 49706	3	(Excavated)
27	NT 01961 49692	2	
28	NT 01955 49690	5 dome shape	
29	NT 01978 49661	2	
30	NT 01985 49658	4 with 10m long tail or bank	
31	NT 01955 49629	4	
32	NT 01934 49647	3	
33	NT 01939 49669	4	(Excavated)
34	NT 01901 49663	5	
35	NT 01911 49694	5 dome shape	
36	NT 01984 49731	4	
37	NT 01995 49736	3	
38	NT 01981 49750	4	
39	NT 01959 49814	3	
40	NT 01925 49801	8m long linear pile	
41	NT 01933 49903	2	
42	NT 01915 50054	3	
43	NT 01964 49671	boulders scatter c 20m across	

NT 01993 50094 corner of plantation
NT 02074 49629 corner of plantation

NT 01897 49611 corner of plantation
NT 01833 50062 corner of plantation