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# Ruthven souterrain, Angus

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## Introduction

In March 1998, during the course of digging a service trench for pipes and cables, a roofing slab of the souterrain at Ruthven Church was removed. On Tuesday, 24th March, the author was informed by Angus Council Museum Service that the souterrain would be accessible for only a few days. After consultation with Mr and Mrs Angus Hood, who were responsible for the development work which led to the digging of the service trench, the Royal Commission on the Ancient Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS) conducted an emergency survey on Thursday 26th March and the souterrain was resealed the following weekend. This paper presents the results of that survey and details the previous history of the site.

## Historical background

The souterrain (NGR NO 2868 4878; NMRS NO24NE 1) was found about 1859 when the path linking Ruthven Church with the main road to the SE was constructed (*Name Book*, no 78, Forfarshire, p.5, 1863). The minister, the Rev Mr Patrick Bartney, was able to tell the compiler of the *Name Book* only that it contained '3 apartments artificially built and arched over with dry stones'. The next useful reference to the souterrain is by Simpson (1868, 42, plate XXV,3), who noted and illustrated the cup-and-ring-marked roofing slab, but added nothing to the known detail of the souterrain itself. Indeed, all of the subsequent accounts of the souterrain (see references) simply repeat what was already known, although one, by the Rev Dr John G McPherson (1885, 132), states that 'some of the stones were built into the walls and mullions of windows of the new Church'. The church bears the date 1859 on its N wall.

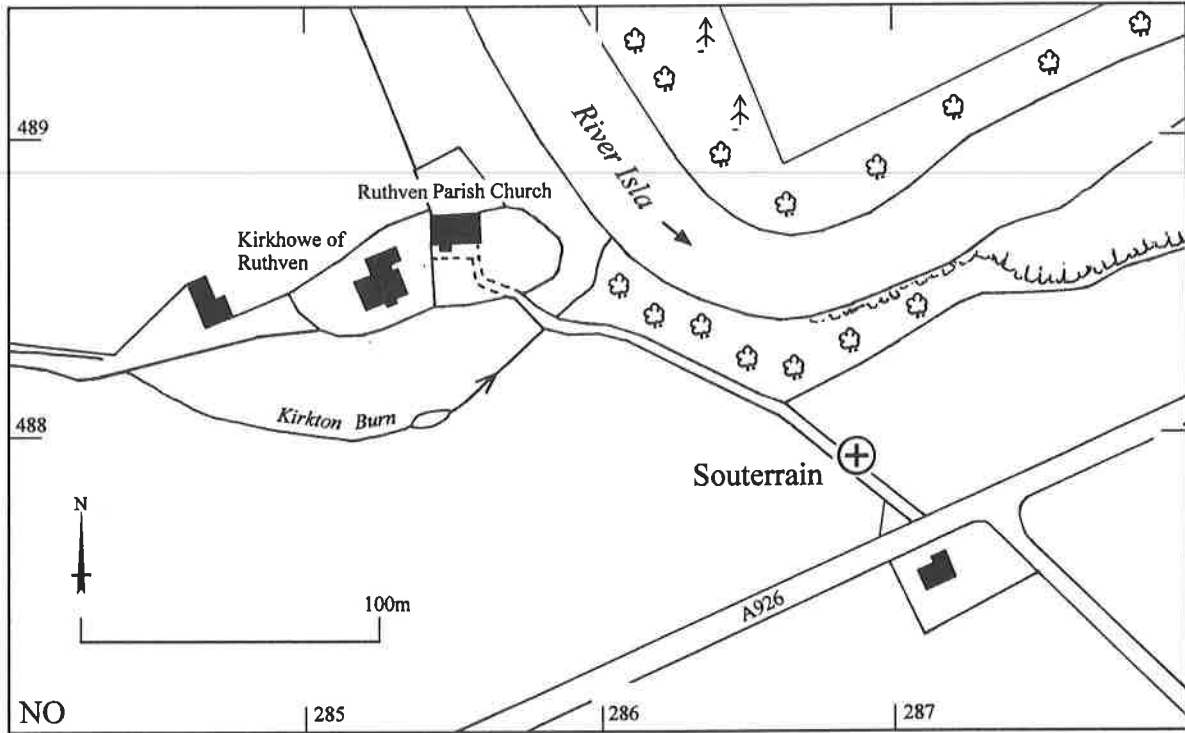
McPherson also noted, for the first time, that the souterrain had contained 'bits of cinerary urns, human bones and a flattened ring'. This is the first mention of any finds from the souterrain and it probably reflects McPherson's close contact with Ruthven (he was minister there between 1870 and 1909; Watt 1998, 18-20). The finds were presum-

ably recovered sometime between the *Name Book* account of 1863 and McPherson writing in 1885, and their present whereabouts are not known. Wainwright (1963, 210) provided a good summary of the site and concluded that the fragments of cinerary urns and human bones previously referred to were probably fragments of native pottery and animal bones.

The E part of the surviving chamber was noted in 1962, when the roofing slabs were discovered during ploughing. A note to the Ordnance Survey from Mr Lowson, a former tenant of the farm in which the souterrain lies, states that although the workers who found the slabs thought they had found a granary floor, he considered the slabs to most likely represent the remains of a souterrain similar to the one underlying the kirkyard path which he saw. A rotary quern, the location of which is now unknown, was found in the field immediately to the NE of the path to the church in 1961 (*DES* 1961, 4).

## The site

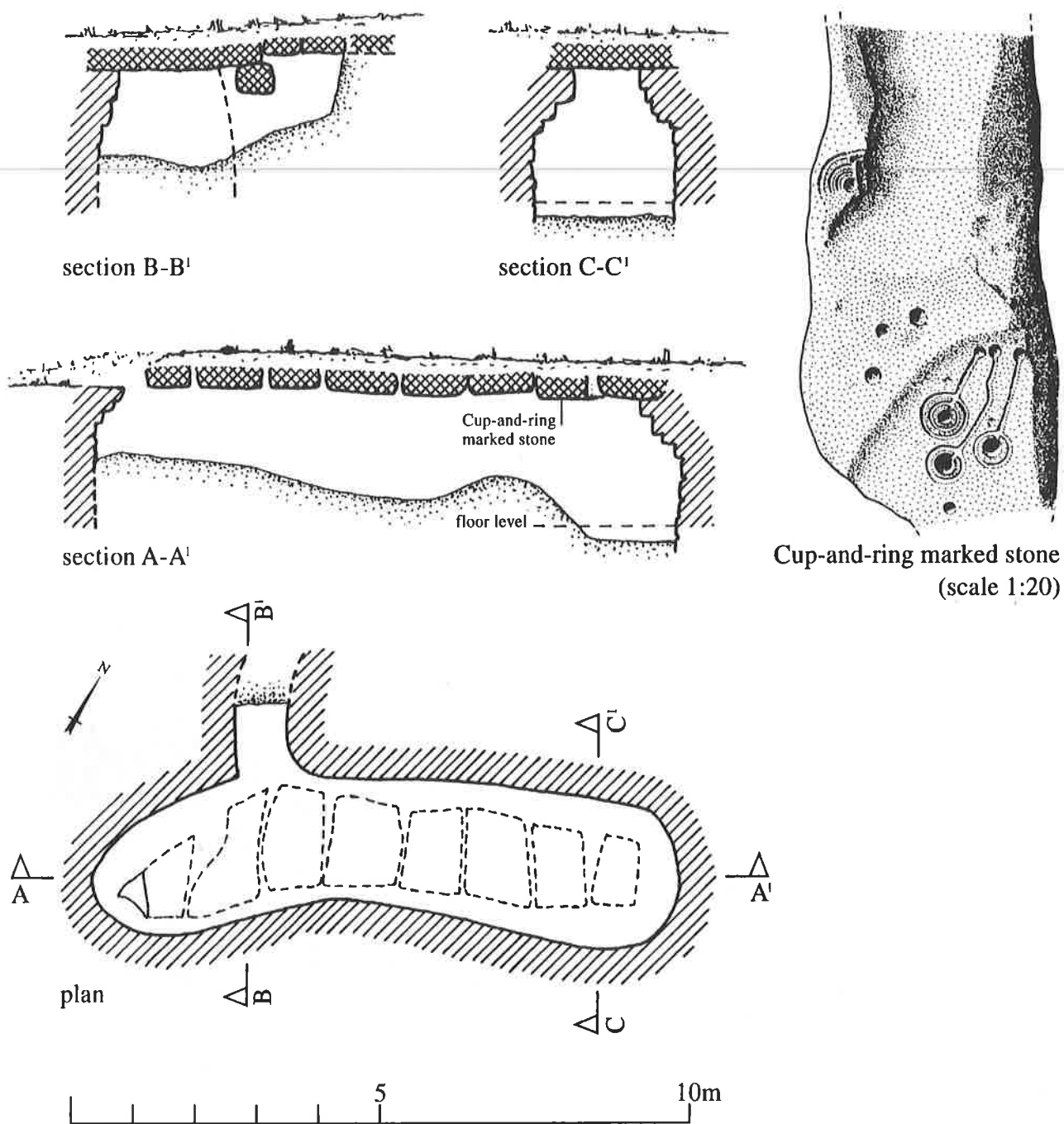
The souterrain is situated on the northern edge of a gravel terrace on the right bank of the River Isla about 120 m to the SE of Ruthven Kirk and 90 m SE of the confluence of the Isla and the Kirkton Burn, the valley of which lies between the souterrain and the church (Illus 1). Since the 19th century the position of the souterrain has been indicated by a large sandstone slab that protruded slightly from the surface of the path to the church. It was the removal of this stone, a conglomerate block, in the process of excavating the service trench, that resulted in the creation of a small hole in the roof at the W end of the souterrain and allowed modern access. However, the sheer size of this stone, and all of the other roofing slabs, makes it rather unlikely that the 19th century access to the souterrain was gained by way of the roof, and it is most probable that entry was gained through the narrow passage that adjoins the N side of the chamber.



*Illus 1. Location plan of souterrain (based on the OS map, Crown copyright).*



*Illus 2. The E end of the chamber (Crown copyright: Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland).*



Illus 3. Plan and elevations of chamber (Crown copyright: Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland).

The chamber of the souterrain (Illus 2) containing the cup-and-ring-marked roofing slab (Illus 3 and 4) is sausage shaped on plan, measuring 9.3 m in length from ENE to WSW by up to 2.3 m in width and about 2 m in maximum height. The walls of the chamber are constructed of random, dry-stone masonry comprising mainly angular sandstone slabs and boulders, but with some waterworn stones, and are corbelled to such an extent that the width of the chamber at roof level has been effectively reduced to as little as 1 m. A large amount of soil, measuring at least 1 m in depth at the W end, has filtered through into the

chamber. At the E end, however, there is a shallower depth of soil but it has been dug into, probably in the 19th century, and the original floor of the chamber has been removed. Further disturbance to the soil deposits may be seen where those entering the chamber via the passage on the N side have literally dug their way in.

This passage joins the N side of the chamber 3 m from the W end. It measures 0.8 m in width and 2 m in height, though the lintel at the junction with the chamber is set only 1.4 m high. The passage arcs slightly to the E, but it is choked with earth, and only about 1.5 m of the top of the passage is



*Illus 4. Cup-and-ring-marked roofing slab (Crown copyright: Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland).*

visible. The passage presumably linked the surviving subsidiary chamber to a principal chamber, one of the other chambers noted in the *Name Book*, and one which linked with the outside world.

The modern service trench measured 0.5 m in width and 0.8 m in depth, and, in addition to crossing the W end of the recorded chamber, it clearly cut across the tops of three other features, probably passages, each marked by their fills of dark earth and rubble. The extent of these features, which had been excavated into bright orange natural gravel, were planned in relation to the surviving chamber but are not illustrated. No evidence of surviving masonry in the form of walls or roofing slabs was visible and, as far as can be ascertained, the excavation of the modern service trench appears to have done little more than

penetrate deposits which had already been severely disturbed.

### **Cup-and-ring-marked stone**

The second roofing slab from the E end of the chamber is decorated on its underside with cup-and-ring markings (Illus 3 and 4). The stone was originally illustrated by Simpson (1868, 42, plate XXV; 3), based on a drawing by his friend Dr T Wise, who was otherwise best known for his 'excavations' at the nearby Dunsinane hillfort (Wise 1859). Like some of the other drawings of Angus stones by Gibb and Shaw that Simpson based his illustrations on (Sherriff 1995, 12–13), Wise's sketch has proved to be quite an inaccurate depiction even though all of the elements have

been included.

The stone is a slab of red sandstone which measures at least 1.7 m in length by 0.85 m in width and 0.3 m in thickness, the ends of which are effectively hidden by underlying corbel stones. It bears at least eleven cup marks, measuring up to 60 mm in diameter, two of which are accompanied by single rings, two others are accompanied by two and three rings respectively, and three are small and rather poorly executed, but are linked to three of the ringed cups at the N end of the stone by grooves or channels; there are four simple cups. Simpson's illustration shows the three-ringed cup towards the S end of the stone to be about three-quarters complete, perhaps implying that the carving had already suffered some erosion. But since the 19th century, scaling of the underside of the stone has caused the further loss of about half of what was recorded at that time.

## Conclusion

The chance to enter the souterrain at Ruthven provided a valuable opportunity to evaluate previous descriptions of the site and to assess the surviving remains. Most of the original souterrain complex may have been filled in during the last century, but the evidence from the surviving ancillary chamber is that, despite the 'exploration' by the Rev Bartney, undisturbed deposits may well survive within the interior. After a period of 130 years, Simpson's sketch of the cup-and-ring-marked stone was finally compared with the real thing and found to be wanting. Finally, the digging of the service trench, across what was then an unscheduled site, proffered information relating to the fuller extent of the site. This data will prove invaluable in determining the future care and protection of the monument.

## Acknowledgements

Thanks to Margaret King, Arbroath Museum, for informing me about the development work at Ruthven; to Mr and Mrs Angus Hood for keeping access to the souterrain open long enough to allow recording work to take place; to Alan Leith and Steve Wallace, both of RCAHMS, who, respectively, undertook the survey and photography of the site; to Archie and Fraser Dick, Kirriemuir, who assisted the author in completing the survey of the site, and to Jack Stevenson for his comments on this paper.

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## Abstract

*The excavation of a service trench and the removal of a roofing stone from the west end of the souterrain at Ruthven Church, Angus, allowed a unique opportunity to record the interior of a souterrain that had last been entered about 1859. Examination of the remains made it clear that the surviving chamber, which incorporated a Neolithic cup-and-ring-marked stone in its roof, was but the best preserved part of a larger complex of passages and chambers that had been in-filled probably in the 19th century.*

Keywords: souterrain, cup-and-ring markings, Neolithic, iron-age, settlement