



TAYSIDE & FIFE
ARCHAEOLOGICAL
COMMITTEE
TAFAC

Newsletter of the

Tayside and Fife Archaeological
Committee

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FIFE'S "UNDISCOVERED" PREHISTORY

Steve Liscoe, Fife Council Archaeology Unit

Fife's Historic Environment Record, (HER), maintained by Fife Council's Archaeological Unit, contains over 12,000 records of archaeological sites across the county. The HER is used as a tool to advise in planning and other service matters for the local authority and is a repository of archaeological information often consulted by private and public bodies. The Unit also maintains an active programme of investigating, assessing and recording both old and new sites to add to the constantly growing corpus of information.

With centuries of antiquarian recording, and more current programmes of historic landscape surveys, you would expect that in Fife's heavily populated and utilised landscape all substantial and significantly upstanding archaeological remains were already known and recorded either in the regional Sites & Monuments Record or Scotland's National Record of the Historic Environment, (NRHE). Most certainly you would think there would be nothing of this nature still left to be discovered in the modern day. However, quite recently the Archaeological Unit was responsible for recognising a number of prehistoric archaeological sites that had been hiding in plain sight for millennia, but which had been unrecorded, unidentified, and completely overlooked.

Right: The recently recognised standing stone at Newton Braes, near Mossmorran.
Image copyright: Steve Liscoe.





Another view of the stone at Newton Braes. Image copyright: Steve Liscoe.

The three examples noted in this and the next two Newsletters makes it quite apparent that such unexpected occurrences are still to be made.

The first instance was quite outstanding by its absence from any known record. Anne Smith, a lady Rambler, contacted the Archaeological Unit to ask about a possible 'standing stone' she had seen on one of her walks through Fife. Asking for more details, to identify which of the many prehistoric standing stones in Fife she was referring to, it was a complete surprise to be sent photographs of a very large upright stone of significant and obvious antiquity that we had never seen before; and a site assessment was undertaken as soon we could duck out of the office!

On approaching the site, that Anne had directed us to, even a cursory first glance identified it as categorically prehistoric in origin, and highly significant. Located at Newton Braes, close to Mossmorran, the stone is a rectangular slab of limestone standing almost vertically some 2m above ground and exhibits several distinctive vertical erosion striations that typify a stone which has stood, unmoved, for a few millennia. It leans slightly to the north and stands at a field entrance where it serves as a terminal to a collapsed boundary dyke and fence for the farmland to the south. Other features on the stone showed its more recent history. Most apparent was its use as an extemporised gatepost. Several sockets had been cut into its sides to take hinges, with two still containing the remains of iron gate pintles within them. But the most outstanding feature was on the eastern face, where an Ordnance Survey benchmark had been incised into the stone. With that discovery in mind, we felt sure we would find a previous record of the stone and some historical account or reference to it, believing, at the time, that it had simply been overlooked by our modern records.

Indeed, a quick check of OS mapping clearly showed a benchmark and datum height at the exact location on the 1854 First Edition, but with no annotation mentioning a

“Standing Stone”. Further reference to the Ordnance Survey’s detailed archive, of all its benchmarks ever installed in Scotland, found the same benchmark, but unlike other entries with details such as ‘railway bridge’ or ‘cornerstone of barn’ there were no notes to give any clue as to what that particular benchmark had been appended to.

Similarly, a thorough search of the usual antiquarian suspects who produced gazetteers of Fife’s prehistoric monuments turned up no mention of the stone.



The Newton Braes standing stone bears an Ordnance Survey benchmark low down on one side. Image copyright: Steve Liscoe.

Nothing was found in Statistical Accounts, and nothing was found in local or estate histories. It was then considered as to whether the stone might have been moved from another location for practical or 18thC landscaping reasons. Again, no evidence for this was uncovered.

Everything started to indicate, however unlikely it might have seemed, that a previously unknown and unrecorded Bronze Age standing stone had been identified and a proposal was promptly made to have it considered for Scheduling. As part of this process evidence had to be shown supporting the assumption that the stone was still standing on its original location.

That would be difficult without an intrusive excavation, and even then, the evidence of proof required might not be forthcoming. Fortunately, ample historical evidence could be provided to give a weighty balance of probabilities that this was indeed the case.

The stone stands on a statistically improbable nexus of significant ancient boundaries and has been a key landscape feature associated to these long before records began. Firstly, it stands within yards of the current day parish boundary between Auchtertool and Aberdour. Apart from minor messing around for modern administrative purposes our parish boundaries date from the consolidation of ecclesiastical districts by the Normans in the 12thC. These would have largely been a “copy and paste” based on existing earlier divisions from the 4thC, but these were in turn the successors of even more ancient territorial delineations, probably from the Iron Age, that were defined by topographical features and man-made markers in the landscape.

The stone also stands immediately alongside an abandoned roadway which follows this parish boundary and mirrors the natural barrier of the Pilkham Hills at this location. In the 18th century this was known as “The Great North Road” and was the main route north through Fife from the ferry crossing at Burntisland. The 1700s ‘Improvement Period’ of the roads in Fife was mostly an upgrade of the existing mediaeval road network, that itself was founded on ancient trackways which often followed natural and territorial boundaries across the land.

Furthermore, investigations established that the stone stands directly on another significant, but undatable, division of land ownership which was the former boundary between the old landholdings of Cullaloe and Craigton farms.

It soon became clear that the stone had stood at this location for many centuries and

had served as a reference point in the landscape for both ancient and more modern land divisions and boundaries. In other words, the stone standing at such a coincidence of these boundaries and ancient routes was not a coincidence and not just happenstance.

Following discussion with HES to persuade the argument that the stone was still in situ at its original location, it was recognised as a previously unrecorded prehistoric standing stone and was attributed Scheduled Ancient Monument status as of 15th March 2021.

The stone had been seen by untold thousands of people passing by in sight of it standing alongside an arterial route through Fife that followed ancient and modern boundaries. The OS had used it as a datum in their survey and mapping of Fife, and it had been used as a waypoint on several Rambler's websites! It was difficult to believe that nobody, except Anne Smith, had thought anything more of it, recorded it, or described it as anything other than "a large gatepost". Finally recognised for what it really was some four thousand years after it was erected it became arguably the last and unlikely discovery of a previously unrecorded Bronze Age standing stone in Fife – or was it?

TO BE CONTINUED



Carving out Connections

HES Rock Art Exhibition --- Stanley Mills

Sat 8 July until Sun 24 September 2023

During opening hours (9.30am – 5.30pm)

Our exhibition on Scotland's Rock Art is arriving at Stanley Mills. Explore these fascinating relics of life dating back thousands of years. The display features assets from our archives and explores the connections and mysteries surrounding the meaning of the stone carvings.

Free for members.

Cattle rubbing stones

At Falfield, SW of Peat Inn in Fife, there is a remarkable grouping of early 19th century cattle rubbing stones which have survived, notwithstanding the effects of weathering, largely intact. Of the 33 stones that are depicted on various editions of the OS 1st and 2nd edition maps 28 still stand erect, one has fallen and is broken and four appear to have been completely removed.

The stones are all red sandstone pillars, roughly square in section with a pyramidal cap and standing about 2m in height. Each has originally borne an incised legend on its south side which has named the field in which it was erected. The Fife place-name database (fife-placenames.glasgow.ac.uk) mentions an 1833 estate plan that names the fields but some of these differ from the names on the stones. This provides evidence that the pillars were erected after 1833. Illustrated below left is one of the three pillars that stand close to Falfield Bank (once a steading and now a



private house). It bears the old spelling of the estate (FAWFIELD BANK FARM) but, crucially, also a date which appears to be '1840'. However, only this stone and five others are depicted on the 1st edition 6-inch map (Fife and Kinross 1855, sheets 18 and 19). This indicates that either the OS surveyors failed to map all the pillars or the majority of them were erected after 1855.

The pillars are finely crafted and although their dimensions are not exactly the same (some are more rectangular than square in section) all their surfaces exhibit horizontal droving, and the carving of the incised letters and numbers is of high quality. Despite the apparent homogeneity of the 33 pillars, there are three basic forms that might support the case for supposing that they were erected over an extended period of time (see images next page). The simplest and most common (16) form is a pillar with chamfered corners rising to a pyramidal cap. An elaboration of this form sees the chamfered corners rise to a point where a corbel supports each corner of the cap. There are five of these pillars. The third form, of which there are six, sees a further elaboration with cap, again supported on corbels, projecting slightly on all four sides. Of the six pillars depicted on the 1st edition 6-inch map none are

of the simplest form, – four have the most developed cap and two are of the intermediate type.



The three different forms of cap perhaps supports the suggestion that the rubbing stones were not all erected at the same time. Images copyright (above and below) J Sherriff.

There are also variations in the form of the inscription each stone bears. The majority of them comprise a roundel (below left), the outside comprising the name of the field, with the number of the field at the centre. One pillar bears a square cut-out which has borne the name of the field and yet another exhibits a circular cut-out.



Editor's note to contributors

The editor would like to take the opportunity to thank all contributors to the previous 42 TAFAC Newsletters and remind folk that future contributions will be welcomed and should be sent to johnsherriff@hotmail.co.uk. All submissions are edited with a light touch and unless an article contains something that is obviously factually wrong or is likely to offend, it will only require minor changes to punctuation or grammar. However, contributors should also consider whether their submission fairly represents all the people who may have contributed to the work? If the submission represents part of a process, is this clear within the article? Even if the article itself cannot (because of issues of brevity) provide full details of all who may have contributed to the work, the editor is happy for the author to include 'Acknowledgements' at the end of the piece.

Highland milestones

A recent meeting of the TAFAC Committee at the Oakbank Crannog Centre permitted your editor to record a couple of milestones on the A827 public road between Logierait and Aberfeldy. Both stones are of a form typically found north and west of the highland line – basically triangular on plan with a broad and roughly hewn rounded rear face and two finely finished front faces that are angled towards the road. The triangular top of the stone slopes down towards the road.

What is particularly nice about these stones (other than the fact that they actually survive) is that unlike so many of the other surviving milestones in the highlands upon which information is simply painted, the information on these is incised. Both are depicted on the 1st edition of the OS 6-inch map (Perthshire 1867, Sheet XL) and the style of the lettering makes it clear that they are stones that were originally erected in the first half of the 19th century.



Despite the what the inscriptions on the two stones at Wester Logierait and Knockintobar respectively say, they do lie one mile apart. On the former stone whoever painted it has simply forgotten to or decided not to highlight the extra half miles to Dunkeld and Perth! Images copyright: J Sherriff.

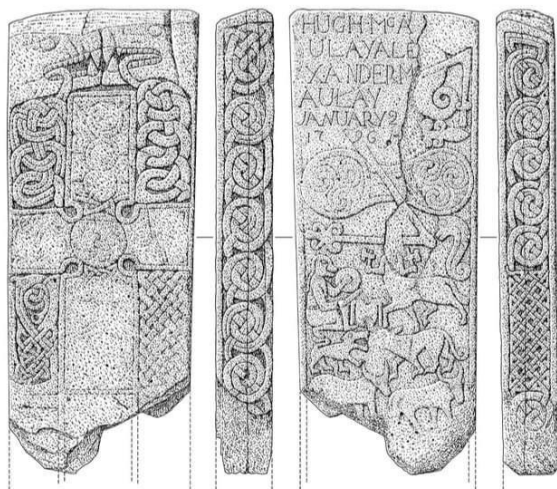
When is a milestone not a milestone?

Recently, on a trip between Aberfeldy and Crieff, your editor came across a painted boulder (image right) at Cablea, not far from the site of a 19th century milestone. It appeared to indicate the distances in miles to Crieff (14) to the SW and Dunkeld (8) to the E. It was only after travelling on to Crieff and seeing other sets of distances painted on (amongst other things) wooden fenceposts that the penny dropped and your editor realized that these distance markers must have been provided for the benefit of some form of race between the two towns, perhaps a cycle race.

Technically a milestone, but your editor will not be reporting this particular modern example to the NRHE.



Pictish Symbol Stones discovered 2008-2022



Elsbeth Reid & John Borland

New PAS publication

This important new publication by the Pictish Arts Society highlights 15 Pictish stones that were discovered between 2008 and 2022. The stones are described, with geological information, locations and references. They are superbly illustrated by John Borland. The book contains eighteen pages with 20 illustrations.

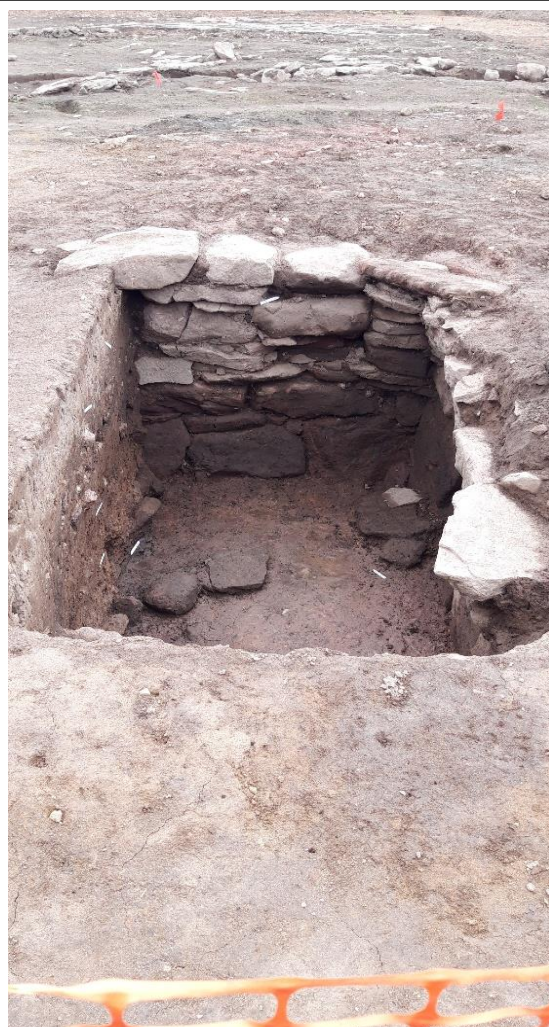
Please note, however, that because of copyright reasons this publication is only available to PAS members. New members will receive a PDF copy and the latest PAS quarterly newsletter by email. Paper copies can be ordered separately by members on the PAS website. Anyone wishing to become a member should do so through the website –

<http://www.thepictishartsociety.org.uk>

Meigle Iron Age Settlement

Your editor visited the AOC Ltd excavation in Meigle in June and he was astonished at the scale of the surviving remains, in particular the size of the souterrain and the extent of the paved surfaces at ground-level. The souterrain is almost as long as that at Pitcur and it has a well-preserved side-chamber complete with a paved ramp down to the entrance. A slot at ground-level suggests that this entrance may have been originally secured with wooden bar. On the date of visit the excavators had yet to locate any substantial post-holes associated with the surface structures, but at that time the dig had another month to go. A cup-and-ring marked stone that was built into the base of the souterrain wall, and a polished stone axe-head found during the dig perhaps hint of an occupation stretching much further back than the Iron Age. For information on other AOC excavations please see: -

<https://www.aocarchaeology.com>



General view of side chamber

Two 'new' fingerposts

Serendipity seems to be playing a role in your editor's archaeological life since retiring from HES last October. Two examples of this are discoveries of previously unrecorded fingerposts, probably of early 20th century date - one in Fife and one in Perth, made recently when in the pursuit of other things. The Fife fingerpost (below left) stands in Kennoway at a former crossroads. There are two surviving finger boards. That pointing NE indicates the distance in miles to 'CERES' (7½), 'CUPAR' (9¼) and 'NEWPORT' (19); there is also a rectangular cartouche containing the name of the road 'A916'. The board that points SE indicates the distance in miles to 'LEVEN' (2½) and 'ELIE' (10¼). It is likely that there was once at least one other board which would have indicated the distances SW towards Windygates, Buckhaven and, ultimately, Kirkcaldy. At the foot of the post on its SW side there is an oval foundry mark. However, successive applications of paint have rendered it illegible.

The second fingerpost is situated in Perth, at the junction of Hillend Road and Oakbank Road. A hundred years ago these roads were effectively a form of ring-road around the west side of the city, and this was an important junction. The original finger boards have gone – replaced by modern versions (probably in the 1970s). There is no maker's mark on the column which is unusually stout and plain. This is the first but hopefully not the last fingerpost to be recorded in Perth.



Finger Post, Kennoway, Fife. Image copyright: J Sherriff



Finger Post, Perth. Image copyright: J Sherriff



Scone SPAR shop prior to recent re-roofing. Image courtesy of Google Streetview.



Scone SPAR shop with its new roof. Image courtesy of Google Streetview.

In the late 1920s and early 1930s there was a football ground in Scone which lay at the N end of Abbey Road, a location now occupied by housing (Thistle Place). The ground was served by a pavilion at its SW corner, a distinct and notable feature of which were the three louvred vents situated along its roof ridge. For the past 60 years at least the building has served as a shop and notwithstanding the changes made to both the interior exterior of the building over the years, the roof remained unchanged from its original design. No-one wants to stand in the way of progress or improvement but it is a shame that the recently fitted new roof doesn't reflect or at least hint at in some way the more interesting character of the former design.

