

A Visitors' Guide to

BALNUARAN of CLAVA

a prehistoric cemetery



HISTORIC SCOTLAND



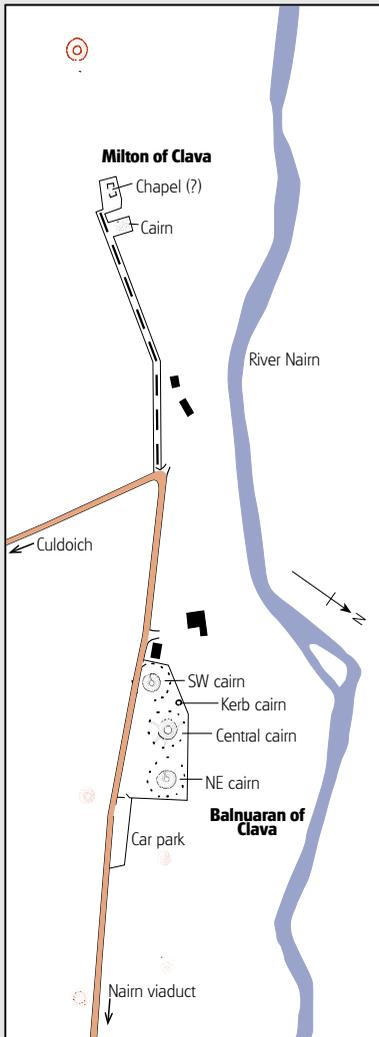
Balnuaran of Clava is the site of an exceptionally well-preserved group of prehistoric burial cairns that were built about 4,000 years ago.

The cemetery was used in two periods. Around 2000 BC a row of large cairns was built, three of which can be seen today and there may once have been two more. A thousand years later the cemetery was reused. New burials were placed in some of the existing cairns and three smaller monuments were built including a 'kerb cairn'. Traces of a smaller cemetery can also be seen at Milton of Clava, a short distance up the valley to the west.

The cairns at Balnuaran of Clava extended along a gravel terrace raised above the River Nairn. Recent excavations have found evidence for farming on the site before any of these monuments were built. The settlement was directly replaced by the cairns and it even seems possible that some of the material used to build them had been taken from demolished houses.

The site was excavated in part during the 1990s by Professor Bradley and his team from Reading University. In addition to the finds underground, a thorough survey of the upstanding remains revealed hitherto unnoticed connections between the colour and texture of the building materials, the architecture of the monuments and their known relationship with the rising and setting sun.

No traces of the bodies which would have been placed within the cairns survive. We know from other cairns of this type, most notably Corrimony in Glen Urquhart, that probably only one body would have been placed within the central chamber.



- Route to Milton of Clava
- ⊙ Sites you can visit
- ⊙ Sites not open to the public



The south-west cairn
(Crown copyright: Historic Scotland)

THE NORTH-EAST CAIRN

This is a well-preserved passage grave. It would originally have been a completely closed structure with a domed chamber at its centre that was about four metres high. This was approached by a low passage in which it would not have been possible to stand upright.

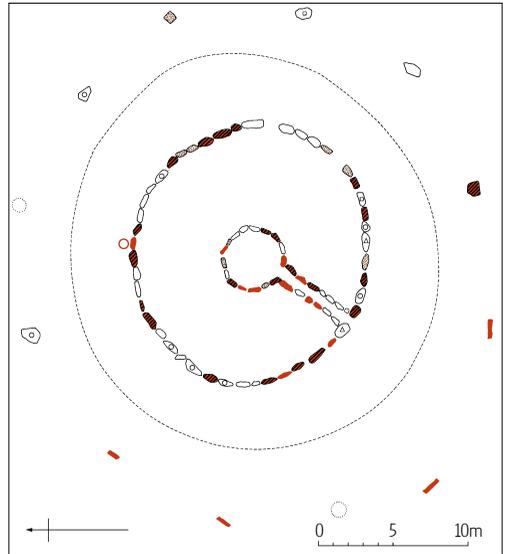
All the main components of the north-east passage grave are graded by height: the kerb which supports the outer edge of the cairn, the stone circle which surrounds it, and even the foundation course of the central chamber. This scheme was obviously important for it made the monument more difficult to construct. When it was first built, the kerb would have been brightly coloured with distinct sections of red and white stones. One of these was decorated with abstract designs pecked into the surface of the rock.

The cairn was probably in use for only a short time before a rubble platform was built encasing the kerb and impeding access to the entrance. On its surface was a scatter of seashells and cremated bone. Its outer limit was marked by a ring of standing stones.

The Midwinter Solstice

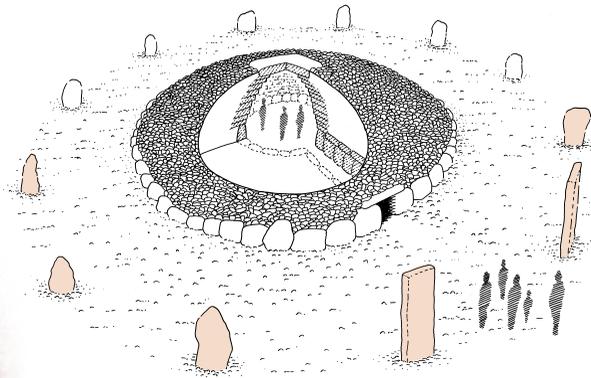
The monument is aligned on the midwinter solstice. In recent years this phenomenon has been observed by covering the chamber and passage with tarpaulin. This showed that on a clear day the rays of the setting sun travel down the passage and divide the chamber in half. A beam of intense light focuses on the back wall. The same effect would have been visible in the south-west cairn where the view is obstructed by a modern farmhouse.

Kerb stone decorated with cup-marks and abstract designs (Crown copyright: RCAHMS)



A plan of the north-east passage grave showing the location of the different coloured stones.

	Red Sandstone		Cup-marks
	Red Conglomerate		Probable location of missing stone
	Pink		Platform
	'White'		
	'White' with mica		
	'White' with quartz		
	Gneiss (white)		



Artist's impression of the tomb as it was when completed. (Aaron Watson)

THE CENTRAL CAIRN

The large monument in the centre of the site is rather different. This is a 'ring cairn' rather than a passage grave and consists of an unbroken circular enclosure which was open at the centre. It was never roofed and may not have had an entrance, but it has many features in common with the other cairns.

The inner and outer kerbs are composed of stones of contrasting colours, textures and heights and are enclosed by a circle of standing stones that are arranged in the same way. The outer kerb of the ring cairn is decorated with shallow pecked hollows - 'cup-marks' - where it meets one of the rubble banks and another cup-mark can be seen on the outer face of one of the standing stones. The ring cairn is offset from the alignment of the passage graves so that it did not obstruct the view between them.

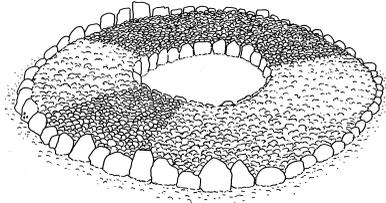
The ring cairn has been damaged. Parts of its outer kerb have been lost and the interior would originally have been filled with a layer of rubble extending to the height of the wall. This was removed about 80 years ago. Excavation in the 1950s revealed signs of burning in the interior and found a small quantity of cremated bone. A later cremation burial has also been discovered in the area in between the cairn and the stone circle dating to some time between AD 610 and 770.

THE KERB CAIRN

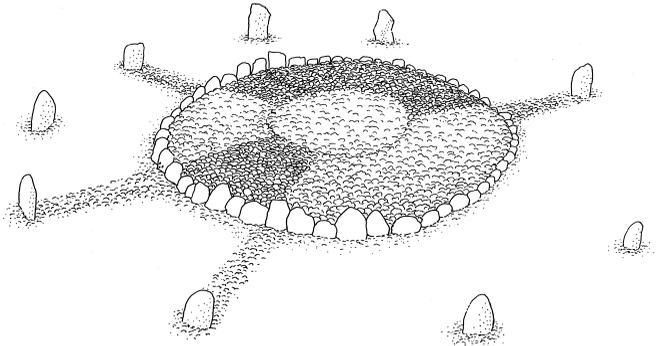
This is a small ring of boulders located close to the central ring cairn. It is possible that the stones once defined a low earth mound, and excavation in the 1950s located the position of a possible grave. This monument was probably built around 1000 BC when both of the passage graves were reused. Little of its structure remains intact but again it makes use of differently coloured stones. For the most part pink or red boulders alternate with those which were originally white. One of the stones is decorated with cups and rings.

A Different Role

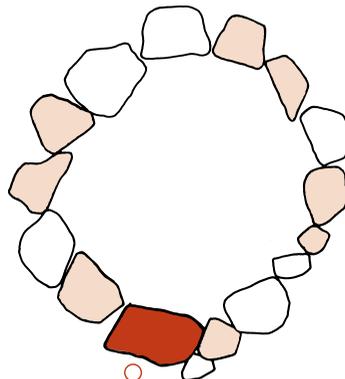
Comparison with monuments in Aberdeenshire (for example, the stone circle at Tomnaverie) raises the possibility that the ring cairn may have marked the position of a pyre, built to hold the ceremonies that accompanied the burials in the adjacent passage graves. The interior of the ring cairn was filled with rubble, and it may have been at this time that the cairn was enclosed by a stone circle.



The first phase of use of the ring cairn (Aaron Watson)



The second phase of use of the ring cairn (Aaron Watson)

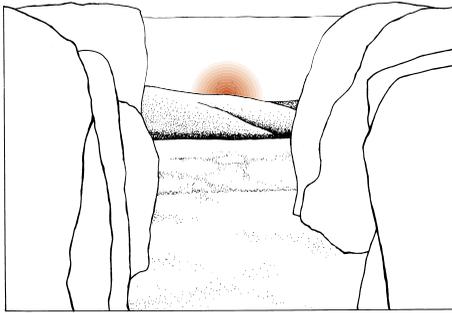


- Red sandstone
- 'Pink'
- White
- Cup-marks

THE SOUTH-WEST CAIRN

This monument is almost identical to the other passage grave and shares the same orientation on the midwinter sun. The south-west passage grave would have been substantially higher when it was completely roofed. Viewed from the north-east cairn, the sun would have seemed to set on top of this monument.

Again the tomb seems to have gone out of use after only a short time. A stone platform with a fine cobbled surface was constructed against its flanks and an impressive stone circle was built. Two of the stones were moved from their original positions when the cemetery was enclosed in the 1870s and the modern road was built. At the time these cairns were thought of as pagan temples, and, in keeping with Victorian aesthetics, trees were planted to evoke the idea of a druid grove.



The view of the midwinter sunset from the south-west cairn.
(Aaron Watson/Society of Antiquaries of Scotland)

Abstract Designs

The entrance to the tomb is flanked by red sandstone pillars which had been quarried for the purpose. One of these is decorated with cup-marks, whilst another group can be identified on the outer kerb. Similar features are found inside the chamber. It is clear that some of the slabs built into the rear wall had already been decorated with cup-marks before the work began. It is possible that they were reused from another building. The main decorated stone is at the junction of the chamber and the passage and is decorated with cup-marks.

Excavation in 1994 showed that two of the stones employed in the foundations of this chamber had also been embellished before the tomb was built. The significance of these designs is not clear but they can be found at other prehistoric monuments associated with ritual and ceremony. They also occur on boulders and natural outcrops in Strathnairn.



The passage and decorated stone of the south-west cairn.

MILTON OF CLAVA

A short distance to the west are the remains of another cemetery.

We do not know its original extent but there are subtle indications of a number of monuments in the vicinity of a denuded cairn, probably a further passage grave. Adjacent to the cairn are the foundations of a stone building thought to be the remains of a medieval chapel.

Aerial view of the remains at Milton of Clava
(Crown copyright: RCAHMS)



PLACES TO VISIT

Balnuaran of Clava (1) is located in Strathnairn, 8 km east-south-east of Inverness and two kilometres south-east of the battlefield of **Culloden (2)** (National Trust for Scotland) and about 10 km from **Fort George (3)** (Historic Scotland). Because the cairns have such unusual characteristics they have given their name to a special class of monument. The distribution of 'Clava Cairns' focuses on the inner Moray Firth and you can visit a passage grave of this type at **Corrimony (4)** in Glen Urquhart. Another group of well-preserved cairns of about the same date are displayed to the public in **Kilmartin Glen (5)**, Argyll.

You can also visit stone circles with similar features to those at Balnuaran of Clava at a number of places in Aberdeenshire, including **Tomnaverie (6)**, **Loanhead of Daviot (7)** and **Easter Aquorthies (8)**.



FURTHER READING

A detailed analysis of the recent excavations can be found in *The Good Stones* by Professor Richard Bradley, Society of Antiquaries of Scotland (2000). General introductions to the Bronze Age are provided in *Neolithic and Bronze Age Scotland* by P.J. Ashmore, Historic Scotland/Batsford (1996) and *Farmers, Temples and Tombs* by Gordon Barclay, Canongate Books/Historic Scotland (1998).