

## The cremation cemetery

About 3500 years ago, Loanhead was again a scene of activity. Beside the now disused circle and at the centre of an enclosure formed by two arcs of walling laid in shallow ditches, a funeral pyre had been lit. Its flaring, spitting flames flickered on the old grey stones and on the faces of the onlookers. Beneath the bonfire in a shallow pit lay the body of a 40-year-old man, his arms stretched out in front of him and his hands clasped round a stone pendant. Unusually, after the flames had died away the mourners did not gather up the bony splinters but left them in the pit and returned to build further pyres on this central burial. Bodies awaiting cremation were stored in a temporary grave beside the pyre pit. Over several years at least 31 people were cremated and buried to the N, E and S of the central pit. Various relationships were expressed in the grouping of the burials.

Twenty separate deposits were made, 11 in large pots or urns, and the rest in pits. In several cases the remains of more than one individual were placed in the same urn or pit; for example one adult and two children were found in an urn with a small bone toggle. Eight of the cremations were of children between 3 and 6. This cremation cemetery was built some time after the impact of the first metalworkers. Some social changes may be marked by the emphasis on individuals and their relationships within a relatively insignificant monument, compared with the more grandiose but communally-created stone circle of the preceding millennium.

## Stone circles

Several hundred stone circles are known throughout Britain. They were built over at least 1000 years and show many variations in form. The recumbent stone circle is Grampian's own variant of the tradition; over 90 are known, concentrated in the Howe of Alford, the Garioch and in Buchan.

### Prehistoric observatories?

The suggestion that these stone circles were used for precise astronomical observations has not been accepted as the sightings that can be made across the stones are relatively crude. However, it is believed that the recumbent stone circles were set up to provide clear views of the moon rising and setting in the southern sky.

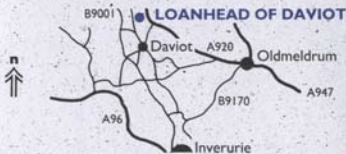
## The stone circle

Five thousand years or nearly 200 generations ago, a sweating work-gang of up to 90 people dragged, pushed and levered a huge stone, weighing 12 tons, into position as the first and most important part of a stone circle. Once they had managed to manoeuvre this stone into its recumbent position on the south-west side of a carefully levelled area, the gang levered and chocked it up so that its upper surface was completely horizontal. They then erected a circle of 10 other stones, decreasing in height from the recumbent (on right in illus above). All this work was in order to help the 30 or so farming folk who lived within an area approximately 10km square around the circle to mark the changing seasons. Before returning to their home areas the neighbours who had helped were probably rewarded with a feast.

For many generations the circle was used to view the movement of the moon through the southern sky in the 'window' formed by the recumbent stone and its two flanking pillars. Fertility rituals, probably involving dance, drumming and feasting, would also have been enacted. The end of the circle's life came when the interior was used for cremations and the scattering of bone, flint and pottery, after which the low cairn of stones which can be seen today was built. Recumbent stone circles like Loanhead probably fell out of use at a time of social change when the old, settled order of small, egalitarian groups of farmers was disrupted by the appearance of the new and mysterious craft of bronze-working, associated with high-status pottery called beakers.

## Reaching the site

Loanhead lies 5 miles NW of Inverurie, between the A920 Oldmeldrum/Colpy and the B9001 Inverurie/Rothienorman roads. It is signposted off both roads.



## About your visit

From the car park follow the path through the wood for 100m to the wicket gate. Entry is free and can be had at all reasonable times. No toilets are available. Wheelchair access is difficult. Please respect this ancient structure: it is in the care of the Secretary of State for Scotland.



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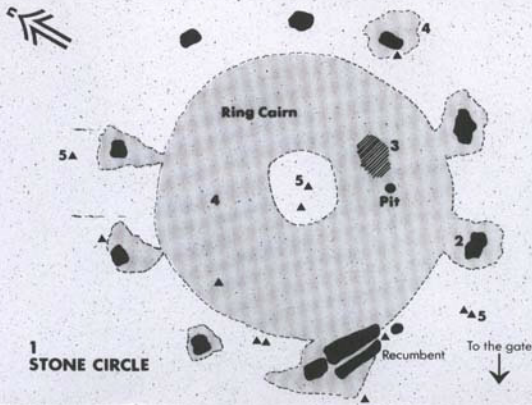


Planning and Economic Development  
Department

# Loanhead of Daviot

*First in a series of leaflets  
on the Archaeology of N.E. Scotland*





**1 STONE CIRCLE**

**1. Stone circle**

This is 20.5m in diameter and consists of a massive stone laid on its side (the 'recumbent'), two flanking pillars and 8 other stones. The site was excavated in 1934 by HE Kilbride-Jones.

**2. Cupmarks**

A total of 12 cupmarks are on the inner face of the stone beside the east flanker. They may mark the position of the rising moon.



**3. Pyre and token cremation deposit**

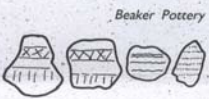
Several generations after the circle had been built it was used for a short time for cremation burials. Traces of burnt children's bones were found beneath the cairn.

**4. Cairns**

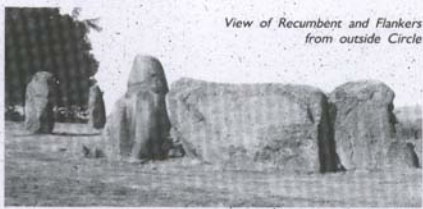
The central ring cairn and the individual cairns around the standing stones were probably built long after the circle was first constructed. They covered token fragments of cremated bone.

**5. Pottery**

These scraps of pottery were left by the people who may have challenged the authority of the circle users, perhaps as much as 1000 years after it was built.



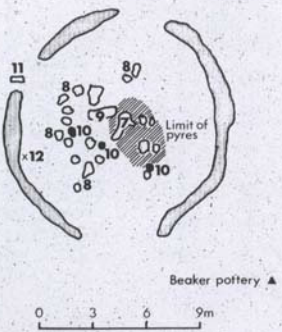
View of Recumbent and Flankers from outside Circle



**Further Reading**

HE Kilbride-Jones, *Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, 69 (1934-5), 169-214.  
 HE Kilbride-Jones, *Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, 70 (1935-6), 278-310.  
 HAW Burl, *The stone circles of the British Isles*, Yale, 179-82. (1976).  
 C Ruggles, & HAW Burl, *Archaeoastronomy*, 8 (1985), S25-S60.  
 IAG Shepherd, *Exploring Scotland's Heritage: Gramplan*, Edinburgh. (1986).

**6 CREMATION CEMETERY**



**6. Cremation cemetery**

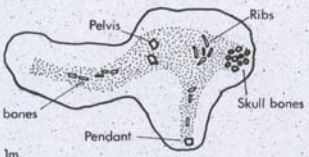
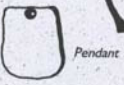
This was discovered by chance during the excavation of the circle in 1934. It is similar to examples in the Borders.

Enlarged Food Vessel Pottery Urn



**7. Foundation deposit**

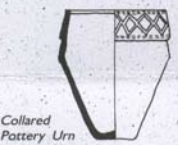
This plan shows the partially cremated body in the central pit. The man was holding this pendant.



0 1m

**8. Cremations**

Twenty deposits of cremated bone were found within the enclosure, 11 in pottery urns like this one. In all, 31 people, 8 of whom were children between 3 and 6, were found. Various ranks and relationships in life are here being expressed in death.



**9. Temporary grave**

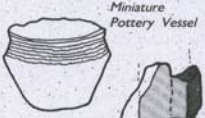
This oblong pit was empty when found by the archaeologists. It may have been used for storing bodies before cremation on the adjacent pyre.

**10. Ash pits**

The remains of fires were found in six places within the enclosure. These were the carefully gathered ashes from successive funeral pyres.

**11. Cist**

A small stone box or cist containing a miniature pottery vessel was found on the east side of the cremation cemetery.



**12. Later use**

After the cemetery went out of use it was used as a bronze smithing area around 500bc.

