What are Stone Circles and Recumbent Stone Circles?

Stone circles can be found throughout Britain and Ireland, in various forms, and were erected throughout the third and second millennia BC (the Bronze Age). While the exact function of these megalithic monuments is difficult to determine, the considerable labour required to build them would seem to suggest that they were of great importance to the prehistoric communities who created them.

Around 10% of the total number of stone circles recorded in Britain can be found in Aberdeenshire, and the region even boasts its own unique style of circle—the Recumbent Stone Circle. Found almost exclusively in Aberdeenshire, more than 70 examples of Recumbent Stone Circles have been recorded in the region, with diameters ranging from 11m to 26m.

The distinctive feature of the Recumbent Stone Circle is a massive stone, laid horizontally on its side in the Southwestern or Southern arc of the circle. Flanking the two tallest stones of the circle, the recumbent stones have an average weight of 24 tons, and were carefully levered and chocked up to ensure that their upper surface was as level as possible.

Recumbent Stone Circles are usually found on the crests of hills or tors, with wide southerly views, although in some cases the landscapes in which they may not be unrecognisable to their creators.

The beliefs or rituals connected with these stones can only be speculation, and the function of Recumbent Stone Circles has remained a great deal of mystery and debate over the years. It is generally accepted, however, that the precise setting of the stones is linked to the cycles of the moon.

It is believed that the recumbent and flanking stones form a kind of false horizon or frame through which to view the rising or setting of the major standstill moon that occurs every 18.6 years. At that point, the moon dips towards the recumbent. On 12 Recumbent Stone Circles, decorations in the form of cupmarks have been found, clustering at points where the major standstill moon rises or sets (on the recumbent, flanking or immediately adjacent stones).

In several cases, Recumbent Stone Circles were converted into burial monuments by the building of a ring cairn or kerb cairn within the stone circle into which cremation burials were placed. In this respect, Recumbent Stone Circles are closely related to the Early Bronze Age Costume Circles of the inner Moray Firth and Speyside.

These ceremonial centres built by the local farming communities are so different from the previous communal burial tombs of their ancestors, that it suggests a fundamental change in society. They also mark a strong regional tradition that is not found anywhere else, and may belong to a distinct set of beliefs, completely separate from the ideas and values of others to the North and South.

When exploring Aberdeenshire, please follow the Scottish Outdoor Access Code:

Respect the interests of others
Respect the needs of other people enjoying or working in the outdoors and follow any reasonable advice from land managers.

Care for the environment
Take your rubbish home and consider picking up other litter as well. Don’t disturb or damage wildlife or historic places. Keep your dog on a short lead or under close control when needed.

Take responsibility for your own actions
The outdoors is a great place to enjoy but it also a working environment and natural hazards exist. Make sure you are aware of these:

Try to avoid walking at dawn or dusk when many animals are active.

The Bronze Age 2500 BC – 800 BC

The Bronze Age in Northeast Scotland was a time of great change, which saw the emergence of a new society hugely different from what had gone before.

Around 2500 BC different cultural ideas, influenced by Northwestern Europe, developed in Northeast Scotland. These ideas, sometimes attributed to the Beaker People so named for the distinct type of pottery vessels found at burial sites, are culturally and technologically different from the previous Neolithic traditions. Most significantly, the period saw the introduction of megalithic skills.

The knowledge of how to produce copper and bronze objects set individuals apart from the rest of the population, and saw the beginnings of a hierarchical society develop.

Settlement habits also changed during this period, with the roundhouse becoming the dominant dwelling form. These roundhouses had walls made of timber or stone, probably with thatched roofs, and were built singly or in small groups.

As well as technological innovations, new ritual and funerary monuments evolved. There was a move away from communal tombs to individual burials, along with the appearance of megalithic monuments such as standing stones and stone circles, including the distinctive Recumbent Stone Circle.

Useful links:
For more information on these, and other sites to visit in the area, the following websites and books provide a useful introduction.

www.aberdeenshire.gov.uk/archaeology
www.aberdeenshire.gov.uk/museums
www.visitscotland.com

Selected Reading:
A. WELFRE The Great Crowns of Stones (2011) RCHMS

Stone Circle trail
A guide to ten of the best Stone Circles in Aberdeenshire

Test and photography by Aberdeenshire Council Archaeology Service ©ACAS
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Prepared by Aberdeenshire Council 02/2012 August 2013
**Stenchen**

Reconstructed Recumbent Stone Circle, 1.5m in diameter, comprising the recumbent, 2 flankers and 7 fallen stones of local granite. The circle was pulled down by a tenant farmer in 1838, who was then made to re-erect it by the "foremost" landowner. It was later discovered that it had been re-erected in the 19th century at the original site, so that the recumbent appeared on the North arc of the new circle. This reconstruction was itself removed in the 1980s. After excavation in 1979, the stones were replaced in their original positions and the circle reconstructed.

**Directions:** 3 miles (4.8km) West of Inverurie. Turn left off A96 at Inverurie at Blackhall Road.

**Tomnaverie**

Reconstructed Recumbent Stone Circle, c. 1.7m in diameter, consisting of the recumbent, 2 flankers and 5 other erect stones. This is an arched circle is now surrounded by a charthbur. The 2 flankers, each c.2m high, have been matched and shaped to resemble two enormous cannon's mouths, and flanks a massive recumbent which weighs 20 tons. It is likely that at least one stone has been retired from a recumbent and a new cairn is formed. When the graveworks was completed it was found that the recumbent was on the South side.

**Directions:** 4.5 miles (7.2km) Northeast of Mintlaw. Turn right off A950 onto B9149 at the West end of Strichen, then follow the road for 4 miles (6.4km). The car park is on the left. From the car park follow the signed path.

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**Scheduled Monuments**

Most of the sites listed here have been designated as Scheduled Monuments, which are monuments of national importance to which Scottish Ministers have given legal protection under the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act 1979.

**Treasure Trove Law**

Under the laws of Treasure Trove in Scotland, all finds of archaeological or historical interest or importance are the property of the Crown. If you find an artefact please report it to either a local museum or contact the Archaeology Service (archaeology@aberdeenshire.gov.uk).

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**Glossary**

- **Cist burial**: A small, stone-lined grave into which a body is placed along with grave goods.
- **Clach Carns**: Passage graves and cairn rings surrounded by stone cairns. Typically found around Inverness, in the inner Moray Firth and Speyside.
- **Cup marks**: Cup-shaped hollows, measuring between 10 and 50 mm in diameter, which have been carved or ground into a stone.
- **Flankers**: A pair of upright stones which stand at either end of the recumbent, the tallest stones of the arrangement. Often decorated with cupmarks.
- **Kerb cairn**: Circle of upright kerbstones, often quite large, containing a mound of small stones. Sometimes contain burials.
- **Recumbent**: Massive stone slab laid horizontally in the Southwestern or Southern arc of a Recumbent Stone Circle, often decorated with cupmarks, flanked by 2 tall upright stones.
- **Ring cairn**: Circular or oval cairn of stones with an open area left in the centre, forming a ring shape. Sometimes contain burials.
- **SMR**: The Sites and Monuments Record (SMR) is a database containing information on nearly 20,000 sites of archaeological and historical interest in Aberdeenshire. Visit the SMR online to inspect the SMR Reference Number for each of the stone circles described to see more information on each site.

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**Timeline**

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**Ankery Brae**

Reconstructed Recumbent Stone Circle, with low central kerb cairn. The outer circle, 25.5m in diameter, is formed of 8 standing stones, 2 flankers and the massive, front-splitted, recumbent. The stone immediately East of the East flanker has a vertical line of cup marks on its inner face. Each stone stood in a small cairn beneath which was a pit containing charcoal and pottery sherd. Adjacent to the stone circle are the remains of a Bronze Age cremation cemetery which, when excavated, contained the remains of 31 individuals over a 500-year period.

**Directions:** 2.4 miles (3.8km) Northwest of Inverurie. From the B9029, turn left onto a minor road (Dyce Brae) for 2.8 miles (4.5km). Car park. Walk under old railway bridge and follow signed path up Dyce Brae. Beware of livestock.

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**Loanhead of Daviot**

Reconstructed Recumbent Stone Circle, with low central kerb cairn. The outer circle, 25.5m in diameter, is formed of 8 standing stones, 2 flankers and the massive, front-splitted, recumbent. The stone immediately East of the East flanker has a vertical line of cup marks on its inner face. Each stone stood in a small cairn beneath which was a pit containing charcoal and pottery sherd. Adjacent to the stone circle are the remains of a Bronze Age cremation cemetery which, when excavated, contained the remains of 31 individuals over a 500-year period.

**Directions:** 2.4 miles (3.8km) Northwest of Inverurie. Take the B9016 out of Inverurie, then after 4.3 miles turn right onto minor road (Dyce Brae) for 0.5 miles (0.8km). Car park. Pass through the cattle grid and follow the path through the farm. Car park.

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**Whitehills**

Reconstructed Stone Circle, c. 22m in diameter, of which a well-defined ring cairn of c.1.7m in diameter. Only the grey granite recumbent, Whitehill, and 2 other stones are in their original positions, although a number of fallen stones remain.

**Directions:** 1.1 miles (1.8km) Southeast of Inverurie. Turn left off A96 onto B9105 at the South end of Inverurie, continue left onto the road for 1.2 miles (2km), then take right towards Pitfour Farm. From the car park follow the marked trail for 0.6 miles (1km).

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**Cullerlie**

**Smr Ref No:** NJ70S50001 / NJ 7051 0427 / AB30 6LX

**Prehistoric Recumbent Stone Circle, 17.3m in diameter, comprising the recumbent, 2 flankers and 5 other erect stones. This is an arched circle is now surrounded by a charthbur. The 2 flankers, each c.2m high, have been matched and shaped to resemble two enormous cannon's mouths, and flanks a massive recumbent which weighs 20 tons. It is likely that at least one stone has been retired from a recumbent and a new cairn is formed. When the graveworks was completed it was found that the recumbent was on the South side.

**Directions:** 7 miles (11km) Northwest of Aboyne. Turn left off the A93 onto B9094 at the West end of Strichen, then follow the road for 2.8 miles (4.5km). The car park is on the left. From the car park follow the signed path.

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**Clane Hill**

**Smr Ref No:** NJ70S50002 / NO 7947 0945 / AB31 6DX

**Recumbent Stone Circle, measuring 17.5m x 16.3m, consisting of the recumbent, 2 flankers and 3 erect stones. All are of whinstone. The recumbent is on the South side, measuring 2.6m long, and weighing over 9 tons. The Centre of the circle is occupied by a cairn measuring 1.5m by 1.5m. On the East side of the circle is a cairn.

**Directions:** 4.5 miles (7.2km) West of Auchmithie. From the B970, turn left onto the A97 at Auchmithie. After crossing the River Dee, turn left onto B970, continue this road for 2.2 miles (3.5km) passing through Deightons, then turn left onto a minor road. Continue for 0.5 miles (0.8km) and turn left. Clane Hill is on the right. Park in the car park.

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**Nine Stanes**

**Smr Ref No:** NJ70590000 / NO 7233 9132 / AB31 6YJ

**Remains of a Recumbent Stone Circle, surrounding a ring cairn, comprising 6 erect stones, the recumbent and 2 flankers. This stone circle differs from classic examples in that the recumbent and flankers are set on the edge of the inner cairn, while the remaining standing stones sit in an outer cairn, c.18 by 1.6m. It is thought that this circle was built later in the sequence of Recumbent Stone Circles.

**Directions:** 6 miles (9.7km) Southeast of Buckton. From the A950, turn right onto the B971 at Cawder. Continue for 2.8 miles (4.5km), then turn right onto a minor road. Continue for 2.8 miles (4.5km) past the end of the forestry track on the left. The stone circle is a short walk along this track.