

# What are Stone Circles and Recumbent Stone Circles?

Stone circles can be found throughout Britain and Ireland, in various forms, and were erected during the third and second millennia BC (the Bronze Age). While the exact function of these enigmatic 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, flanked by 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 terraces, with wide southerly views, although in some cases the landscapes in which they now sit would 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 generated a great deal of study 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, flankers 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 Clava Cairns 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 where needed.

Take responsibility for your own actions

The outdoors is a great place to enjoy but it's also a working environment and natural hazards exist. Make sure you are aware of this.

[www.outdooraccess-scotland.com](http://www.outdooraccess-scotland.com)



# 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 metalworking skills.

The knowledge of how to produce copper and bronze objects set individuals apart from the rest of 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](http://www.aberdeenshire.gov.uk/archaeology)

[www.aberdeenshire.gov.uk/museums](http://www.aberdeenshire.gov.uk/museums)

[www.visitscotland.com](http://www.visitscotland.com)

## Selected Reading:

A. WELFARE Great Crowns of Stone (2011) RCAHMS

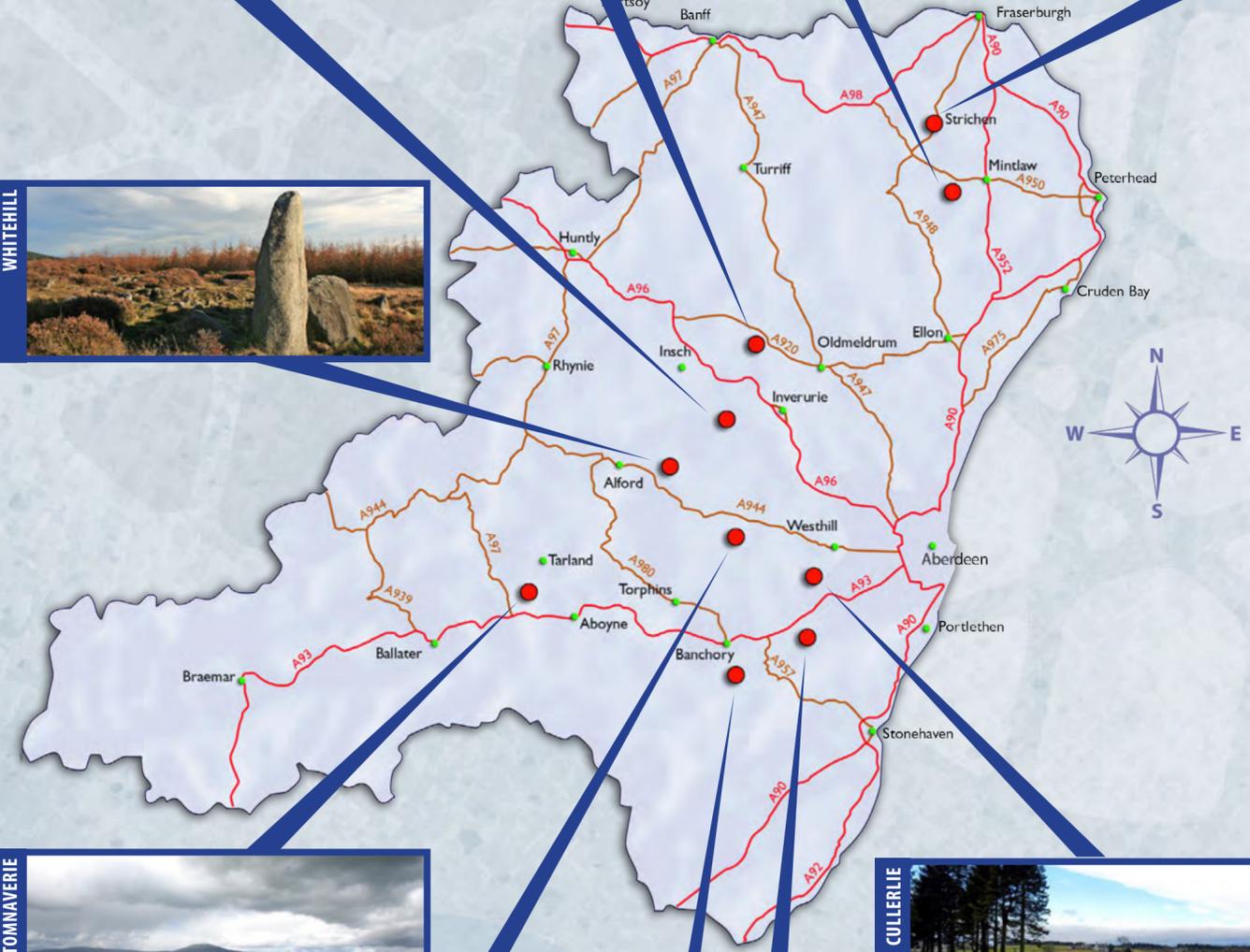
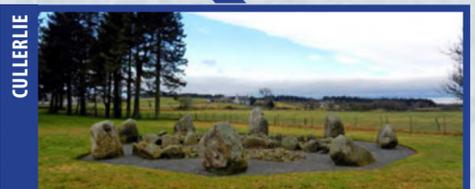
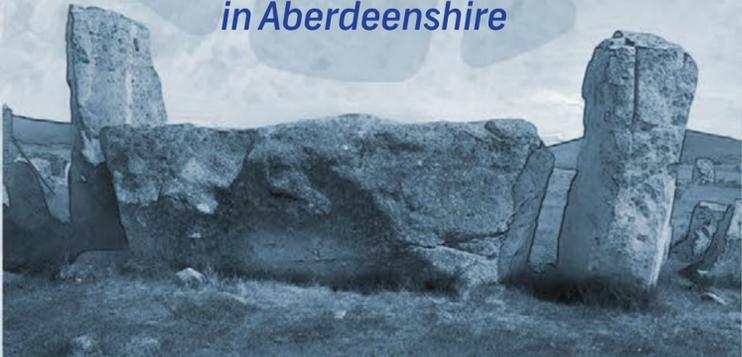
C. RICHARDS Building the Great Stone Circles of the North (2013) Windgather Press

K. J. EDWARDS & I. B. M. RALSTON Scotland after the Ice Age (2003) Edinburgh University Press

R. BRADLEY The Moon and the Bonfire: An Investigation of Three Stone Circles in NE Scotland (2005) Society of Antiquaries of Scotland

# the Stone Circle trail

A guide to ten of the best Stone Circles in Aberdeenshire



## STRICHEN

SMR Ref No: NJ95SW0001 // NJ 9367 5448 // AB43 6TN

Reconstructed Recumbent Stone Circle, c.15m in diameter, comprising the recumbent, 2 flankers and 7 other standing stones of local grey granite. The circle was pulled down by a tenant farmer in 1830, who was then made to re-erect it by the "furious" landowner. It was later discovered that it had been re-erected to the South of the original site, so that the recumbent appeared on the North arc of the new circle. This reconstruction was itself removed in the 1960s. After excavation in 1979, the stones were replaced in their original positions and the circle reconstructed.

**Directions:** 7 miles (11km) Northwest of Mintlaw. Take the A950 West out of Mintlaw (direction: New Pitsligo) for 6.2 miles (10km). Turn right onto the A981 and continue on this road for 3.2 miles (5km); turn left onto minor road (Brewery Road) for 0.4 miles (0.6km). Car park. Walk under old railway bridge and follow signed path up hill. Beware of livestock.



## EASTER AQUHORTHIES

SMR Ref No: NJ72SW0009 // NJ 7323 2079 // AB51 5JL

Its almost perfectly circular plan places this circle early in the series of Recumbent Stone Circles. It is 19.5m in diameter and consists of 9 erect stones, the red granite recumbent, 2 grey granite flankers plus 2 massive blocks which form a reserved area in front of the recumbent. The West flanker has 4 cup marks on it. The differences between this recumbent with its flankers and the other circle stones can be seen clearly in terms of their geological origin.

**Directions:** 3 miles (4.8km) West of Inverurie. Turn left off A96 at Inverurie at Blackhall Road roundabout (at the North end of Inverurie), on to minor road. Continue for c.2 miles (3.2km); the car park is on the left. From the car park follow the signposted track.



## MIDMAR

SMR Ref No: NJ60NE0003 // NJ 6994 0649 // AB51 7NA

Recumbent Stone Circle, 17.3m in diameter, consisting of the recumbent, 2 flankers and 5 other erect stones. This re-arranged circle is now surrounded by a churchyard. The 2 flankers, each c.2.5m high, have been matched and shaped to resemble two enormous canine teeth, and flank a massive recumbent which weighs 20 tons. It is likely that at least one stone has been re-erected and a ring cairn removed, probably when the graveyard was laid out around the circle in 1914.

**Directions:** 16 miles (25.7km) West of Aberdeen. 3 miles (4.8km) West of Echt turn right off B9119 (signposted for Midmar Kirk). Parking is possible by the churchyard wall.



## TOMNAVERIE

SMR Ref No: NJ40SE0001 // NJ 4865 0348 // AB34 4YQ

Reconstructed Recumbent Stone Circle, c. 17m in diameter, comprising the massive whinstone recumbent, its 2 flankers and 8 erect stones of pale red granite. The recumbent has 2 cupmarks. The circle enclosed a ring cairn, c.14m across, whose substantial kerb still survives.

**Directions:** 4.5 miles (7.2km) Northwest of Aboyne. Turn right off A93 onto B9094 at the West end of Aboyne. Continue on this road for 4 miles (6.4km). The car park is on the left. From the car park follow the signposted path.



## AIKEY BRAE

SMR Ref No: NJ94NE0003 // NJ 9587 4709 // AB42 5PP

The most intact Recumbent Stone Circle in Northern Aberdeenshire. It has 5 erect stones, including the recumbent and East flanker, and 5 fallen stones, including the West flanker. They are set upon a circular bank of small stones and earth c.14.4m in diameter, with kerbs formed by slab-like stones on the inner and outer faces. Most of the stones of the circle are of granite although the fallen West flanker and recumbent are of whinstone. The recumbent is estimated to weigh 21.5 tons.

**Directions:** 3.6 miles (5.7km) Southwest of Mintlaw. From the A950, turn left onto the B9029. Continue for 1 mile (1.6km), passing through Old Deer; turn left onto minor road. In c.800m, park safely at the end of the track on the left. Walk up the signposted track to the first wood and follow the path through it to circle.



## 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).

## Timeline



## Glossary

- CIST BURIAL** A small, stone lined grave into which a body is placed along with grave goods.
- CLAVA CAIRNS** Passage graves and circular or ring cairns surrounded by stone circles. Typically found around Inverness, in the inner Moray Firth and Speyside.
- CUPMARKS** 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 mounded cairn 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 banks of stones with an open area left clear 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 and input the SMR Reference Number for each of the stone circles described to see more information on each site.  
[www.aberdeenshire.gov.uk/archaeology/smr](http://www.aberdeenshire.gov.uk/archaeology/smr)

## CLUNE HILL

SMR Ref No: NO79SE0002 // NO 7947 9495 // AB31 6DX

Recumbent Stone Circle, measuring 17.5m x 16.7m, consisting of the recumbent, its 2 flankers, and 3 erect stones. All are of red granite. The recumbent is on the South side, measuring c.3m long, and weighing over 9 tons. The centre of the circle is occupied by a cairn measuring c.15.3m by 13.9m. Immediately to the East of the stone circle is a ring cairn.

**Directions:** c.6.5 miles (10.4km) East of Banchory. From the A93, turn onto the A957 at Crathes. After crossing the River Dee, turn left onto B9077; continue on this road, for c.1.8 miles (2.9km), passing through Kirkton of Durris, then turn right onto a minor road, towards Woodlands of Durris, for c.0.9 miles (1.4km), then turn left. Clune Wood is signposted on the right. Car park. From the car park take the left hand uphill trail, at the top of the hill take the right hand trail until you reach a bench; take the track on the left to the stone circle.



## LOANHEAD OF DAVIOT

SMR Ref No: NJ72NW0001 // NJ 7476 2885 // AB51 0JH

Reconstructed Recumbent Stone Circle, with low central kerb cairn. The outer circle, 20.5m in diameter, is formed of 8 standing stones, 2 flankers and the massive, frost-split, 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 sherds. Adjacent to the stone circle are the remains of a Bronze Age cremation cemetery which, when excavated, contained the remains of 31 individuals.

**Directions:** 5.5 miles (8.8km) Northwest of Inverurie. Take the B9001 out of Inverurie, and after 4.3 miles turn right onto minor road signposted to Daviot. Follow this road through Daviot. The stone circle is signposted on the right. Car park.



## WHITEHILL

SMR Ref No: NJ61SW0002 // NJ 6432 1350 // AB51 7SS

Recumbent Stone Circle, c.20m in diameter, within which is a well-defined ring cairn of c.17m in diameter. Only the grey granite recumbent, its West flanker and 2 other stones are in their original positions, although a number of fallen stones remain.

**Directions:** 11.5 miles (18.5km) Southwest of Inverurie. Turn left off A96 onto B993 at the South side of Inverurie, towards Kemnay, and continue on this road for c.10 miles (16km) then turn right towards Pitfichie Forest car park. From the car park follow the marked trails for 0.9 miles (1.5km).



## CULLERLIE

SMR Ref No: NJ70SE0001 // NJ 7851 0427 // AB32 6UX

Restored Stone circle, comprising 8 stones placed around the circumference of a circle c.10m in diameter. Within the stone circle, 8 small kerb cairns were added which when excavated contained burnt bone, charcoal, flint tools and pottery. The central cairn is the largest, at 3.4m in diameter, and is the only one to have a double kerb. This stone circle is seen as a later development of the Recumbent Stone Circle tradition.

**Directions:** 11 miles (17.7km) West of Aberdeen. Turn left off the A944 at Westhill onto the B9119/B9125. Pass through the village of Garlogie, turn left to stay on the B9125, and in 250m fork left onto a minor road. Continue on this road for c.0.5 miles (0.8km). Car park.



## NINE STANES

SMR Ref No: NO79SW0008 // NO 7233 9121 // AB31 6JU

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 having the recumbent and flankers set on the edge of the inner cairn, while the remaining standing stones sit in an oval outer arc, c.18 by 14.6m. It is thought that this circle was built late in the sequence of Recumbent Stone Circles.

**Directions:** 8 miles (13km) Southeast of Banchory. From the A93, turn onto the A957 at Crathes. Continue for 2.8 miles (4.5km), then turn right before the bridge, onto a minor road. Continue for 2 miles (3.2km); park at the end of the forestry track on the right. The stone circle is a short walk along this track.

