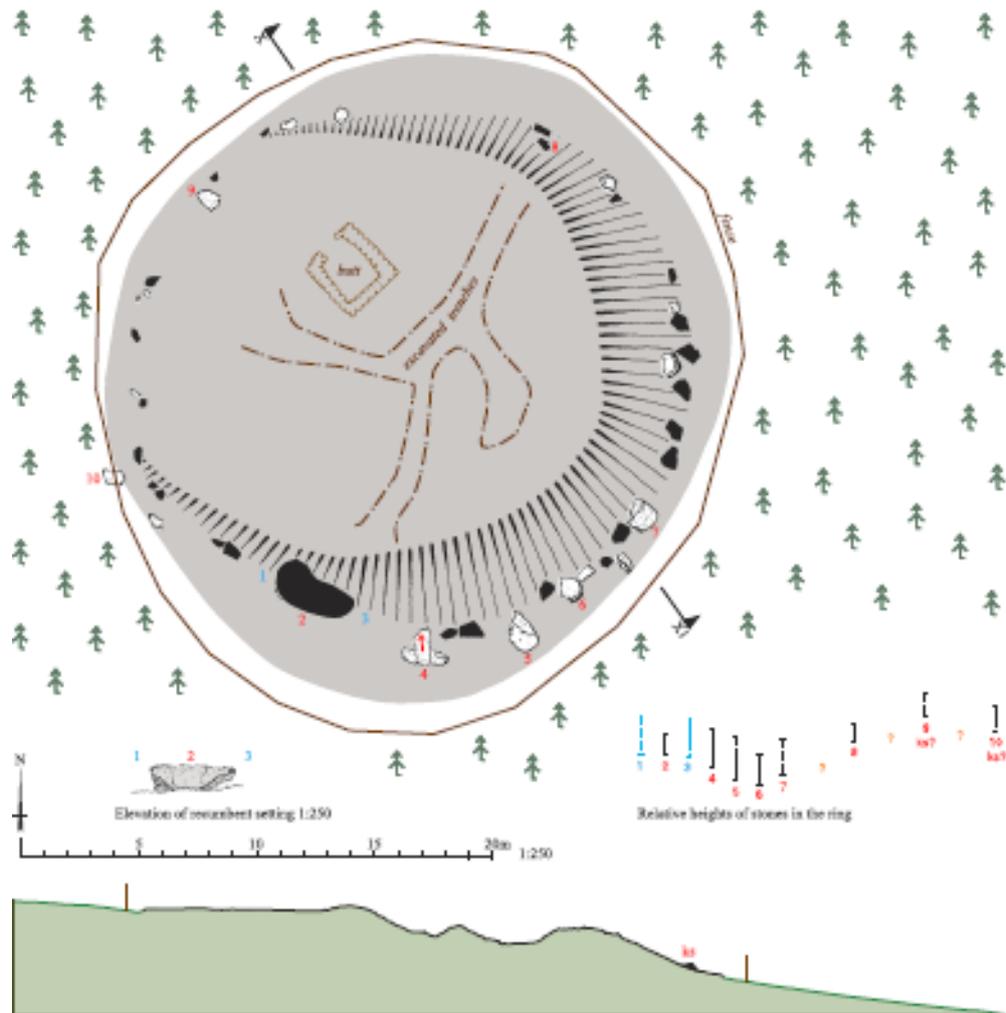


The Ladieswell or Blue Cairn, Tillypronie

Map reference: NJ 4113 0633



The dominant feature of this recumbent stone circle is the large mound of stones within the ring. This stands amongst the conifers of Balronald Wood and straddles the leading edge of a natural terrace on the steep south-east flank of Bonlee Hill. The monument is on the fringe of the main distribution of recumbent stone circles.

Unusually, the upright stones of the ring are set into the kerb of the cairn. The cairn measures about 23m in overall diameter by up to 1.5m in height. It is possible that it was named The Blue Cairn for the colour of the moss and lichen that grows on the cairn stones and that have a blue tinge when dry. The huge recumbent which measures about 3.6m in length by 0.9m in height, is orientated to the SSW and lacks flankers.

Of the upright stones (orthostats), four remain on the south-east, one leaning steeply and the other three fallen. They were probably set out at intervals of about 3m and may have graded into the run of large kerbstones that demarcates the east side of the cairn. Elsewhere, a stumpy upright pillar stands within the margin of the cairn on the north-north-east. Two slabs lying fallen on the north-west and west-south-west respectively may be small orthostats rather than kerbstones. There is a suggestion that the orthostats on the south-east arch alternate between granite and tonalite. It appears that missing stones have been ransacked for lintels. The surface of the cairn is disfigured

with crude excavation trenches dug in 1875 by Rev John Michie, but it preserves an asymmetric profile on the slope and is evidently built up on the east to create a level top. This may account for the presence of the larger kerbstones on the east, designed to retain the greater height of cairn material on the downslope side.

Nothing can now be seen of an inner court that Michie described at the centre of the cairn. Measuring 3.65m in diameter within a kerb of upright stones and drystone masonry, it contained some sherds of pottery and a few sheep and deer bones.



Cormack's watercolour of 1942 shows the view from the recumbent stone circle before reforestation. © Valerie Parkinson

Although the *Statistical Account* reports that there were 'Druidical fanes in different parts of the parish' (*Stat Acct*, ix, 1793, 512), the first record of Blue Cairn is in 1868 by OS surveyors, who cautiously annotated the map 'Remains of Supposed Stone Circle' (Aberdeenshire 1870, lxx). They reported that the 'tenant [John Forbes of Pittellachie] recollects having seen a number of upright stones standing round it, but they have all been removed for building purposes save one very large tabular stone on the west side of the circle, which might have been the Altar of the Temple' (Name Book, Aberdeenshire, No. 56, p 55).

Ogston recognised that the cairn incorporated the essential components of a recumbent stone circle. The forest was first planted in the 19th century and the circle was shrouded with trees, but by 1942 these had been cleared and a watercolour painted by William Cormack shows the circle in an open setting looking out across the recumbent into the Howe of Cromar. Shortly after, in 1944, John Craig found the circle in heather moorland and prepared a plan that shows the outlines of all the stones around the kerb much as they are today. Subsequent fieldwork has had little to add.

Ruggles and Burl included Blue Cairn in their assessments of astronomical alignments in recumbent stone circles and drew attention to the care with which the flat summit of the recumbent has been levelled.

For those of you who want a challenge, Ogston states that at a distance of 191 feet from the middle of the cairn and on a bearing of 222° is a ring cairn or hut circle. Again from the middle and 156 feet away on a bearing of 147°45' is a 12-foot cairn. Whether these possible cairns and hut circles were contemporaneous with the Blue Cairn is unknown.

References:

Adam Welfare (2011) *Great Crowns of Stone*. RCAHMS.

Ogston (1931) *The Prehistoric Antiquities of The Howe of Cromar*. Printed for the Third Spalding Club, Aberdeen.

The Ladies' Well

Situated to the south of the Blue Cairn, is the Ladies' Well. This is now the water supply to Ladieswell Cottage, but it's interesting to wonder if originally it was associated with the cairn in any way. There are many wells named for 'The Lady' and it is possible that this refers to the Virgin Mary. However, springs and wells have always been regarded as hallowed sites; the lady in question may well be of far more ancient in origin than Christianity and invoke a pre-celtic goddess figure.

One legend associated with this well refers to a sea-rover or pirate whose 'Lady' was thrown from her horse and killed at the site of the well!