

Case information

Case ID	300017939
File Reference	AMH/90056/2/1
Name of Site	Grey Cairns of Camster

Local Authority	Highland
National Grid Reference	ND 26000 44200
Designation No. (if any)	SM90056
Case Type	Amendment

Received/Start Date	27/04/2015
Decision Date	02/02/2017

1. Decision

The monument was first scheduled in 1934. An inadequate area was included to protect all of the archaeological remains and the documentation does not conform to current standards. The assessment against criteria demonstrates that the monument continues to be of national importance. The decision is to update the entry in the Schedule as **Grey Cairns of Camster**.

2. Designation Background and Development Proposals

2.1 Designation Background

The Grey Cairns of Camster was first scheduled in 1934. There have been no subsequent amendments.

2.2 Development Proposals

There are no known development proposals affecting this assessment.

3. Assessment

3.1 Assessment information

The site was considered for designation as part of 2015 Highland project and visited on 27/04/2015.

3.2 Assessment against designation criteria

An assessment against the Scheduling criteria has been carried out (see Annex A). The monument was found to meet the criteria for scheduling.

The designation criteria are published in the Historic Environment Scotland policy statement June 2016, Annex 1, pp. 48-50.

<https://www.historicenvironment.scot/advice-and-support/planning-and-guidance/legislation-and-guidance/historic-environment-scotland-policy-statement/>

3.3 Other considerations

N/A

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ANNEX A – Assessment Against the Scheduling Criteria

Grey cairns of Camster

1 Description

The monument is a chambered long cairn and two chambered round cairns dating from the Neolithic period, probably built and in use between 3800 BC and 2500 BC. The long cairn survives as a substantial trapezoidal cairn of exposed stone with two internal chambers and short horns at each end defining forecourts. The chambered round cairns are visible as substantial stone mounds, the northern-most contains a single chamber while the southern cairn is tumbled with evidence for the presence of a chamber. The long cairn and northern round cairn have been excavated and substantially reconstructed. The monument is located on level moorland, around 170m above sea level.

The long cairn measures 60.5m in length including the horns, by 17m wide across the façade at the north end, narrowing to about 9m around half way along. The profile of the cairn rises over two burial chambers in the north end, while the south part is relatively level. The north burial chamber is polygonal in plan and formed of vertical slabs, while the southern chamber is divided into three compartments by upright stone slabs. The cairn has a long history of investigation. Excavations undertaken in 1866, 1971-73 and 1976-80 revealed two round cairns containing the burial chambers within the body of the long cairn, retaining walls, evidence of pre-cairn activity and finds in the form of Early Neolithic pottery, worked stone tools and fragments of human bone. Considerable consolidation and reconstruction of the cairn has taken place. The northern round cairn lies around 170m south-southeast and was excavated in 1865 and 1966-7, though these interventions are poorly documented. It measures around 22m north to south by about 19m east to west, and is 3.7m high. An eastern facing passage leads to a central chamber with corbelled roof. Excavations recovered burnt human bone, flint tools and pottery within the chamber. Parts of two skeletons were found within stone blocking in the passage. The cairn has been restored and consolidated. The second round cairn, situated about 115m south-southwest measures about 9m in diameter and 0.4m in height. The centre of the cairn has been disturbed, exposing the remains of a cist or central chamber.

The scheduled area is in three parts, two of which are circular in plan measuring 50m and 48m in diameter, and the third is irregular, to include the remains described above and an area around them within which evidence relating to the monument's construction, use and abandonment is expected to survive, as shown in red on the accompanying map. The scheduling specifically excludes the above-ground elements of all modern structures, fittings and fixtures within and around the monuments. The monument was first scheduled in 1934 but an inadequate area was included to protect all of the archaeological remains and the documentation does not meet current standards: the present amendment rectifies this.

2 Assessment Against the Scheduling Criteria (Historic Environment Scotland policy statement June 2016, Annex 1, pp. 48-50.)

2.1 Intrinsic Characteristics

The monument is an upstanding and well preserved chambered long cairn and two round cairns. Although the long cairn and the northern round cairn have been subject to excavation, consolidation and reconstruction, all three cairns survive as substantial monuments close to their original scale and appearance and have high potential to support future archaeological research using modern methods and recording. The excavations have established that there is good potential for the survival of archaeological deposits, including human burials, artefacts and environmental remains such as pollen and charcoal, within, beneath and around the unexcavated round cairn and unexcavated portions of long cairn and northern round cairn. The archaeological deposits have the potential to provide information about the date of the monuments, ritual and funerary practices, and the structure of Neolithic society, while any artefacts and ecofacts would enhance understanding of contemporary economy, land-use and environment.

Excavations of the long cairn have revealed a complex development sequence and considerable constructional complexity. Its construction, probably in the 4th millennium BC, was preceded by temporary occupation in the form of postholes and areas of burning. The northern burial chamber and probably the southern chamber were contained within substantially built round cairns which may have existed as free-standing cairns before being encased within the structure of the long cairn and the passages extended. The structure of the long cairn itself suggests it may have been built in several stages. The chambers, passages and both forecourts were subsequently blocked and cists inserted into the body of the cairn and at the edge of the collapsed east wall face. Questions still remain regarding the exact phasing and dating of the monument, so further scientific study of the structure of the cairn has the potential to enhance our understanding of the development sequence of this site and of long cairns in general.

The two round cairns are likely of similar date to the long cairn. There are indications that the northern round cairn may have been enlarged to a heel shape, suggesting an extended development sequence, while the presence of later stone blocking and burials within the passage indicates extended use of this monument. It is possible that the southern round cairn also derives from a similar extended sequence. Scientific study of the form and construction techniques of both chambered round cairns compared with other round cairns would enhance our understanding of the development sequence of this site and of chambered cairns in general.

2.2 Contextual Characteristics

Long cairns and chambered round cairns are found throughout Scotland, with a concentration upon the north and west. The examples at Camster are of particular significance because of their close proximity, association of long and round cairns,

their likely contemporary date and excellent preservation. The long cairn and northern round cairn comprise two of the best preserved Neolithic burial cairns in Scotland. Additionally the plan of the long cairn, with two chambers within their cairn cores and passages opening from the long side of the cairn rather than the forecourt, is unique with no known parallels elsewhere. The cairns at Camster are part of a broader concentration of prehistoric monuments in the area, including stone rows (Canmore ID 8708) around 100m to the south. The proximity of these monuments can give important insights into the Neolithic landscape and the placing of such sites in the landscape, and add to our understanding of social organisation, land division and land-use during the Neolithic.

Chambered cairns are often placed in conspicuous locations within the landscape, at the edge of arable land and overlooking or inter-visible with other ritual monuments. At Camster, all three cairns are inter-visible with one another and the location of the stone rows (Canmore ID 8708) to the south. The long cairn sits on a low ridge rising gently from south-southwest to north-northeast and the northern round cairn is positioned on locally high ground, increasing their prominence. As substantial structures all three cairns are conspicuous and visually impressive.

2.3 Associative Characteristics

The long cairn and northern round cairn were first investigated by the archaeologist Joseph Anderson in 1865 and 1866, a key figure in the development of archaeology as a discipline in Scotland. He excavated many prehistoric monuments in the Caithness area and undertook the first systematic study of a group of Scottish chambered cairns, of which the cairns at Camster were a part.

While questions have been raised about elements of the reconstruction of these monuments, the story behind the reconstruction and the decisions taken remain highly significant for illuminating past and present conservation issues and concerns.

3 Purpose and implications of scheduling

The field investigation concluded the site is in a stable condition and well preserved. Designation as a scheduled monument is therefore the most appropriate mechanism to secure the preservation of the monument, and ensure the recognition of its national importance.

4 Assessment of national importance

This monument is of national importance because it has an inherent potential to make a significant addition to our understanding of the past, in particular the design and construction of burial monuments, and the nature of burial practices and their significance in Neolithic society and economy in the north of Scotland. The cairns are visually impressive monuments that retain their field characteristics and demonstrate complex development sequences. Chambered cairns are often our main source of evidence for the Neolithic in Scotland, and can enhance our understanding of

Neolithic society and economy, as well as the nature of burial practices and belief systems. They are an important component of the wider prehistoric landscape of settlement, agriculture and ritual. The loss of the monument would diminish our ability to appreciate and understand the meaning and importance of death, burial and ritual in the Neolithic and the placing of cairns within the landscape.

5 References

Historic Environment Scotland <http://www.canmore.org.uk> reference number CANMORE ID 8686, 8693 and 8694 (accessed on 27/04/2015).

The Highland Council HER references are MHG1809, MHG1816 and MHG1817.

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