

The Bronze Age 2500 BC - 800 BC

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

Around 2500 BC, different cultural ideas influenced by Northwestern Europe developed in North East 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 the population and saw the beginnings of a hierarchical society develop.

Settlement habits also changed during this, with the roundhouse becoming the dominant dwelling form. These roundhouses had walls made of timber or stone, probably with thatched roofs, somewhere 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.

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 North East Scotland (2005) Society of Antiquities of Scotland

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.scot

Scheduled Monuments

Most of the sites listed here have been designated as Scheduled Monuments, monuments of national importance to which Scottish Ministers have given legal protection under the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act 1979. It is a criminal offence to damage a Scheduled Monument. Historic sites should be treated with care and respect.

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 their 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 11 m to 26 m.

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 the stones can only be speculation. 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.

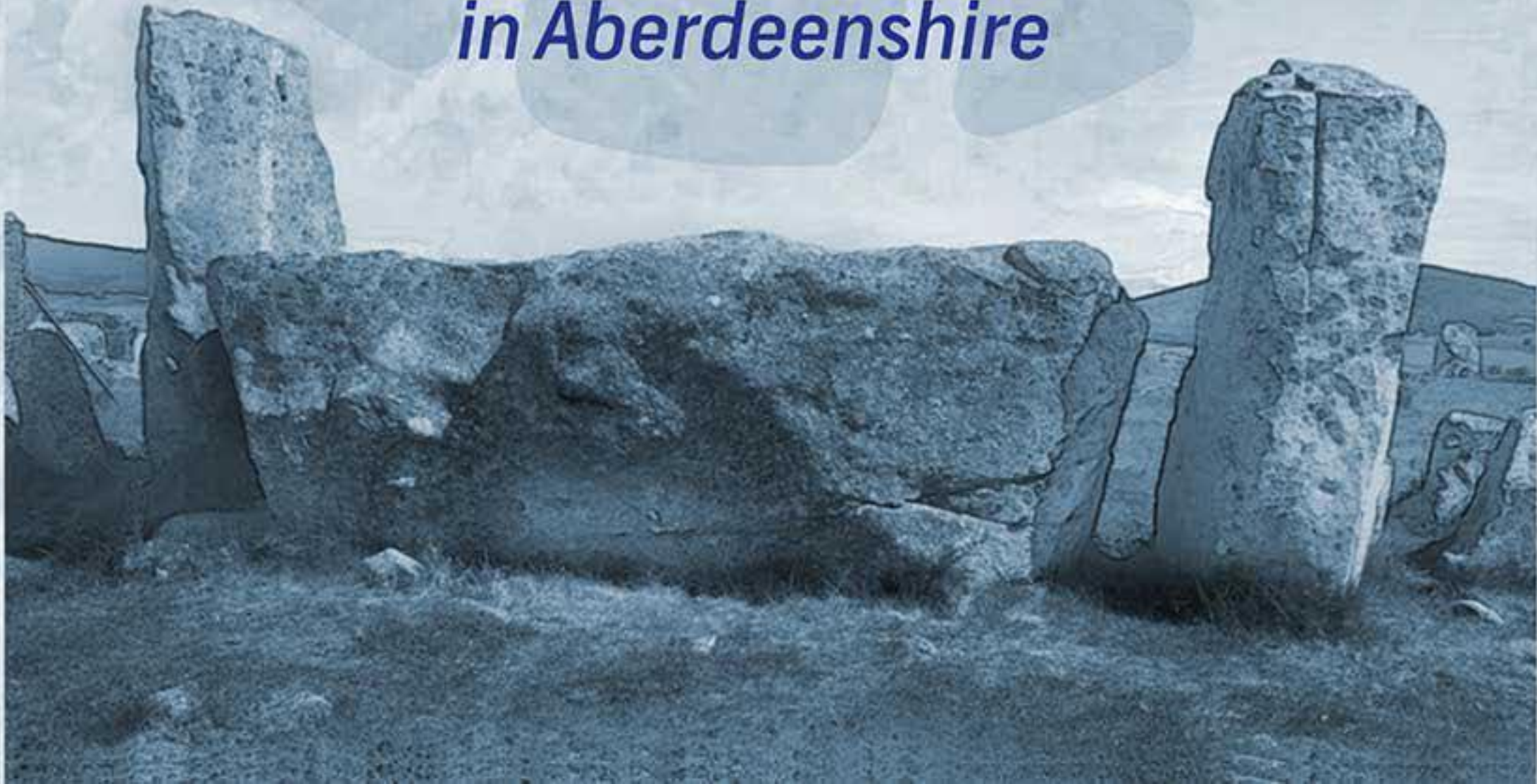
It is believed that the recumbent and flanking stones form a kind of false horizon or frame through which to view the rising or setting of the major standstill moon that occurs every 18.6 years. At that point, the moon dips towards the recumbent. On 12 Recumbent Stone Circles, decorations in the form 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.

the Stone Circle trail

A guide to ten of the best Stone Circles in Aberdeenshire



Map of Aberdeenshire showing the locations of ten stone circles, each linked to a photograph by a blue line. The circles are: Loanhead of Daviot, Dunideer, Easter Aquhorthies, Whitehill, Tomnaverie, Midmar, Nine Stanes, Clune Hill, Cullerlie, and Aikie Brae. The map also shows major roads (A90, A91, A92, A93, A94, A95, A96, A97, A98, A99, A100) and towns (Aberdeen, Inverurie, Ellon, Strichen, Mintlaw, Peterhead, Cruden Bay, Portsoy, Huntly, Rhynie, Alford, Westhill, Torphins, Aboyne, Ballater, Braemar, Stonehaven, Portlethen). A compass rose indicates North (N), South (S), East (E), and West (W).

LOANHEAD OF DAVIOT

DUNIDEER

EASTER AQUHORTHIES

WHITEHILL

TOMNAVERIE

MIDMAR

NINE STANES

CLUNE HILL

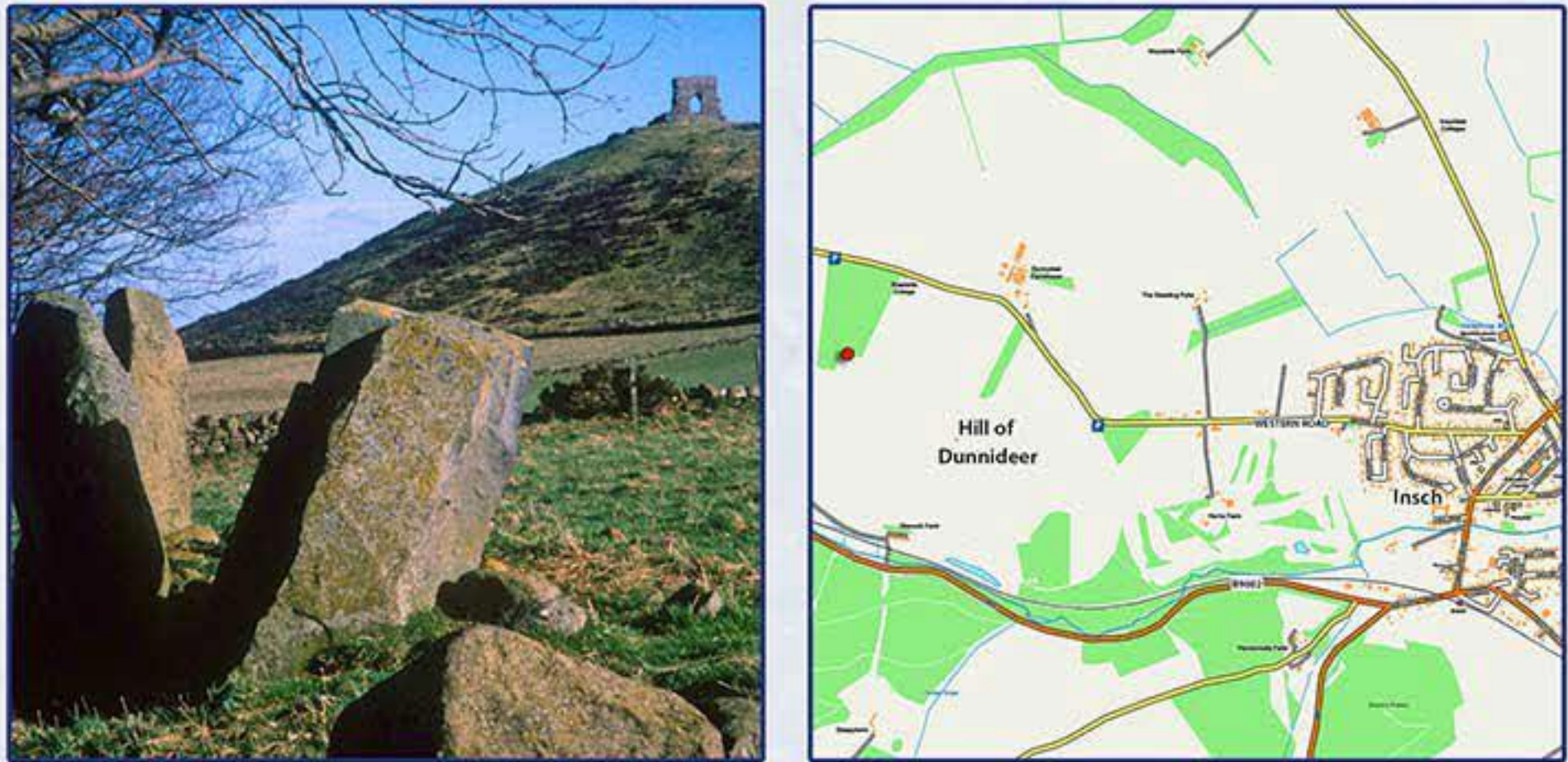
CULLERLIE

AIKIE BRAE

DUNNIDEER

HER Ref No: NJ62NW0003 // NJ 6086 2845 // AB52 6LN
Remains of a Recumbent Stone Circle, of which only the recumbent and 2 flankers survive. The recumbent, measuring 2.84 m by 1.72 m high, is aligned Northwest - Southeast. The 2 flankers were re-erected in about 1960. The West flanker bears evidence of the circle's destruction: the top of the stone has been broken off, with a shot hole visible in the fracture; it is split in 2 and the east face has plough scratches. The remains now stand in a small plantation.

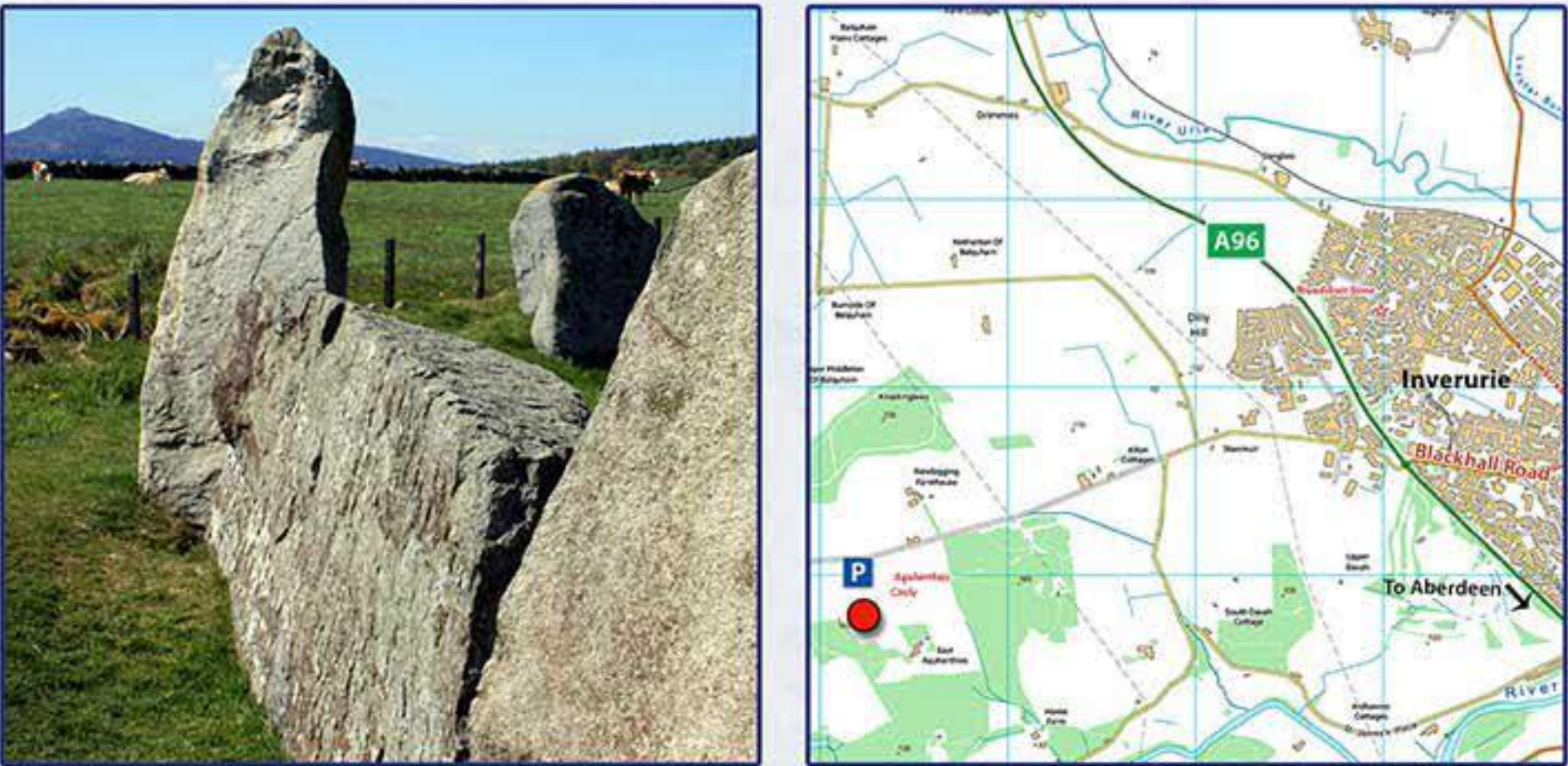
Directions: 1.67 miles (2.7 km) West of Insch. Travel West from the centre of Insch on Western Road. There is parking at 0.9 miles (1.47 km) with a 0.7 miles (1.2 km) signposted walk to the stone circle via Dunnideer hillfort. Alternatively, continue past the first car park for 0.7 miles (1.1 km) to a small lay-by. From here, there is a 0.3 miles (500 m) signposted walk through the plantation to the stone circle.



EASTER AQUHORTHIES

HER Ref No: NJ72SW0009 // NJ 7323 2079 // AB51 5JL
Its almost perfectly circular plan places this circle early in the series of Recumbent Stone Circle. It is 19.5 m in diameter, comprising 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 cupmarks. on it. The differences between this recumbent and its flankers and the other stone circles can be clearly seen in terms of their geological origin.

Directions: 3 miles (4.8 km) West of Inverurie. Turn left off the A96 at Blackhall Road roundabout (at the North end of Inverurie), on to a minor road. Continue for 2 miles (3.2 km) along a private road (unsuitable for coaches). Car Park. From the car park follow the signposted path.
PLEASE DO NOT PARK ON THE ROAD.



MIDMAR

HER Ref No: NJ60NE0003 // NJ 6994 0649 // AB51 7NA
Recumbent Stone Circle, 17.3 m in diameter, consisting of the recumbent, 2 flankers and 5 other erect stones. This rearranged circle is now surrounded by a church and graveyard. The 2 flankers, each 2.5 m high, have been matched and shaped to resemble 2 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.

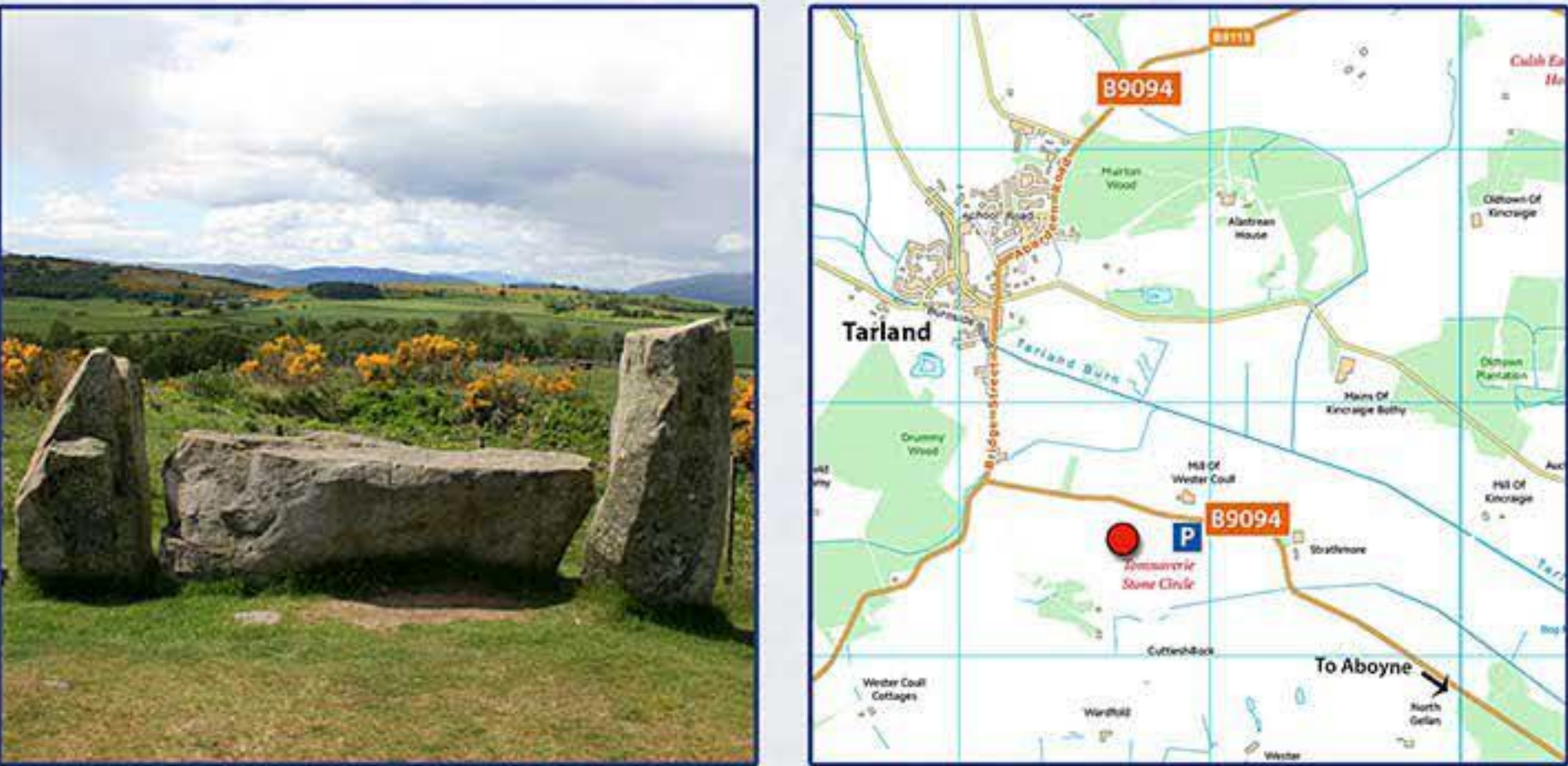
Directions: 16 miles (25.7 km) West of Aberdeen. 3 miles (4.8 km) West of Echt turn right off B9119 (signposted for Midmar Kirk). Parking if possible by the churchyard wall.



TOMNAVERIE

HER Ref No: NJ40SE0001 // NJ 4865 0348 // AB34 4YQ
Reconstructed Recumbent Stone Circle, circa 17 m in diameter. It comprises 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, circa 14 m across, whose substantial kerb still survives.

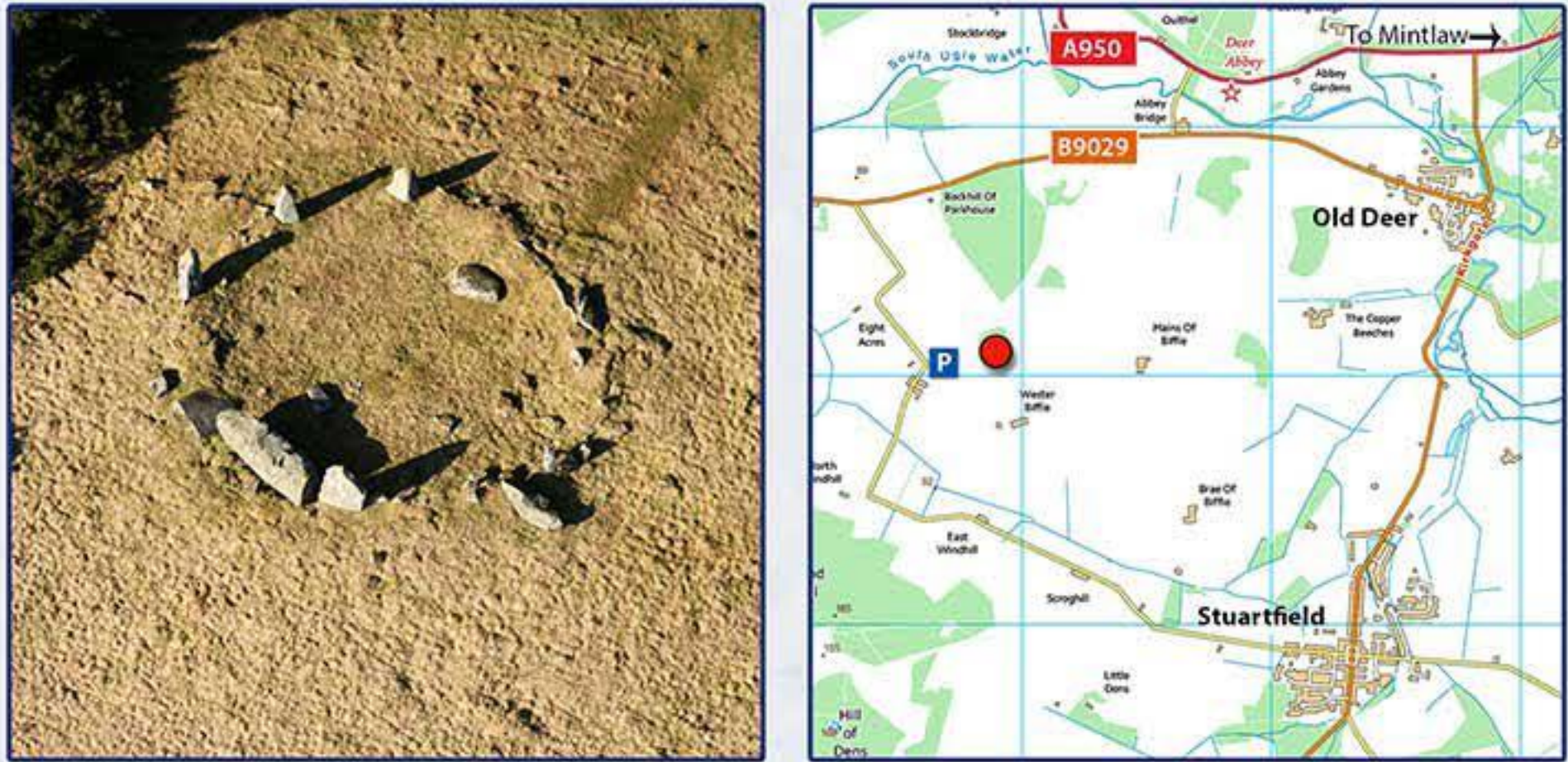
Directions: 4.5 miles (7.2 km) Northwest of Aboyne. Turn right off A93 onto B9094 at the West end of Aboyne. Continue on this road for 4 miles (6.4 km). The car park is on the left. From the car park follow the signposted path.



AIKEY BRAE

HER 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 circa 14.4 m in diameter, with kerbs formed by slab-like stones on the inner and outer faces. Most of the stones of the circle are granite although the fallen West flanker and recumbent are whinstone. The recumbent is estimated to weigh 21.5 tons.

Directions: 3.6 miles (5.7 km) Southwest of Mintlaw. From the A950 turn left onto the B9029. Continue for 1 mile (1.6 km), passing through Old Deer. Turn left onto a minor road. In 800 m park safely in the small car park on he left. Walk up the signposted track and follow the path to the circle.



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: A circle of upright kerbstones, often quite large, containing a mounded cairn of small stones. Sometimes contain burials.

Recumbent: A massive stone slab laid horizontally in the Southwestern or Southern arc of a Recumbent Stone Circle. Often decorated with cupmarks, the recumbent is flanked by 2 tall upright stones.

Ring cairn: Circular or oval banks of stones with an open area left clear in the centre to form a ring shape. Sometimes contain burials.

Timeline



LOANHEAD OF DAVIOT

HER Ref No: NJ72NW0001 // NJ 7476 2885 // AB51 OJH
Reconstructed Recumbent Stone Circle, with low central kerb cairn. The outer circle, 20.5 m in diameter, is formed of 8 erect stones, 2 flankers and the massive, frost-split, recumbent. The stone immediately East of the East flanker has a vertical line of cupmarks 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.

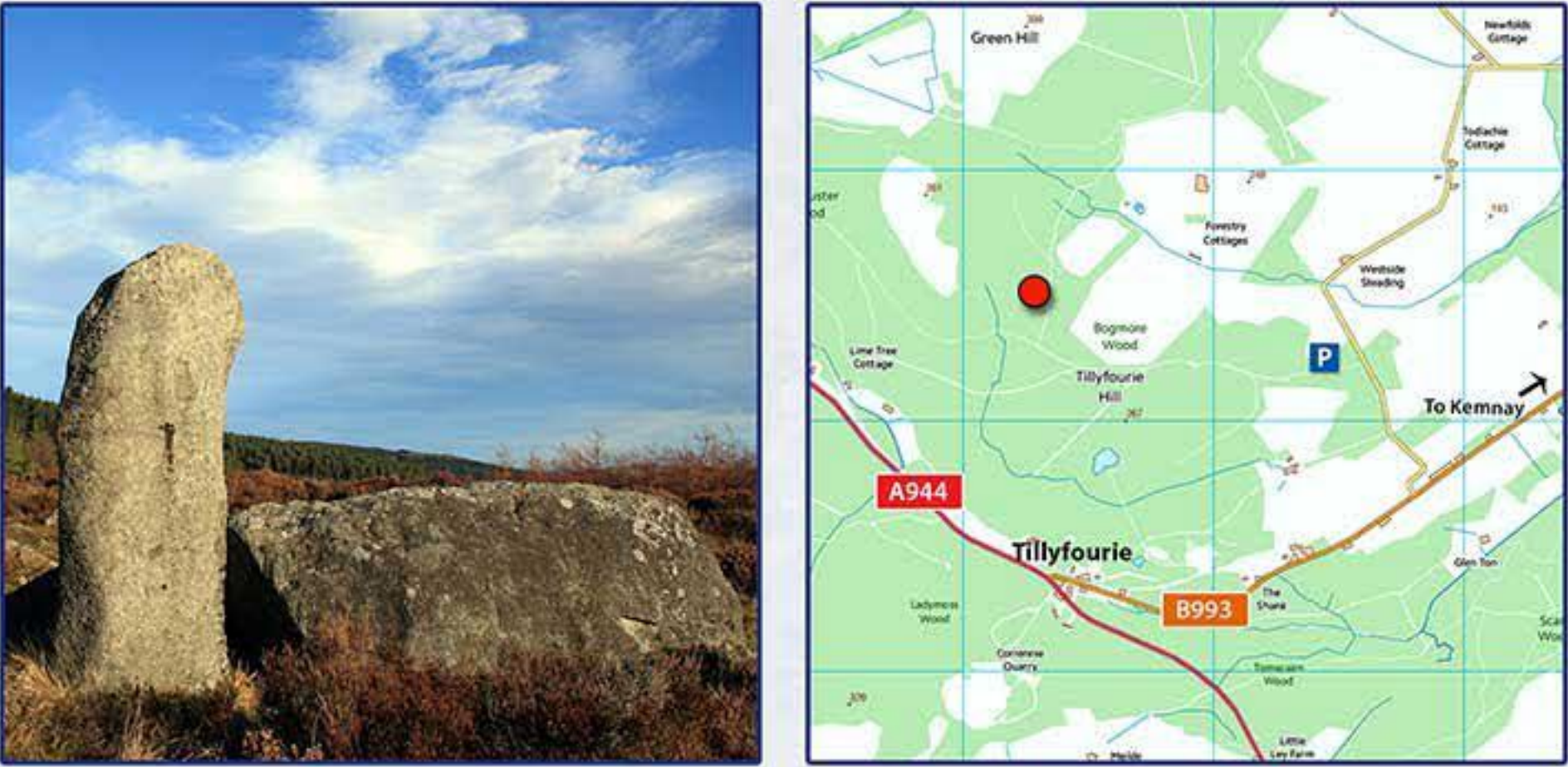
Directions: 5.5 miles (8.8 km) Northwest of Inverurie. Take the B9001 out of Inverurie, and after 4.3 miles (6.9 km) turn right onto a minor road signposted to Daviot. Follow this road through Daviot. The stone circle is signposted on the right. Car park.



WHITEHILL

HER Ref No: NJ61SW0002 // NJ 6432 1350 // AB51 7SS
Recumbent Stone Circle, circa 20 m in diameter, within which is a well defined ring cairn of circa 17 m 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.

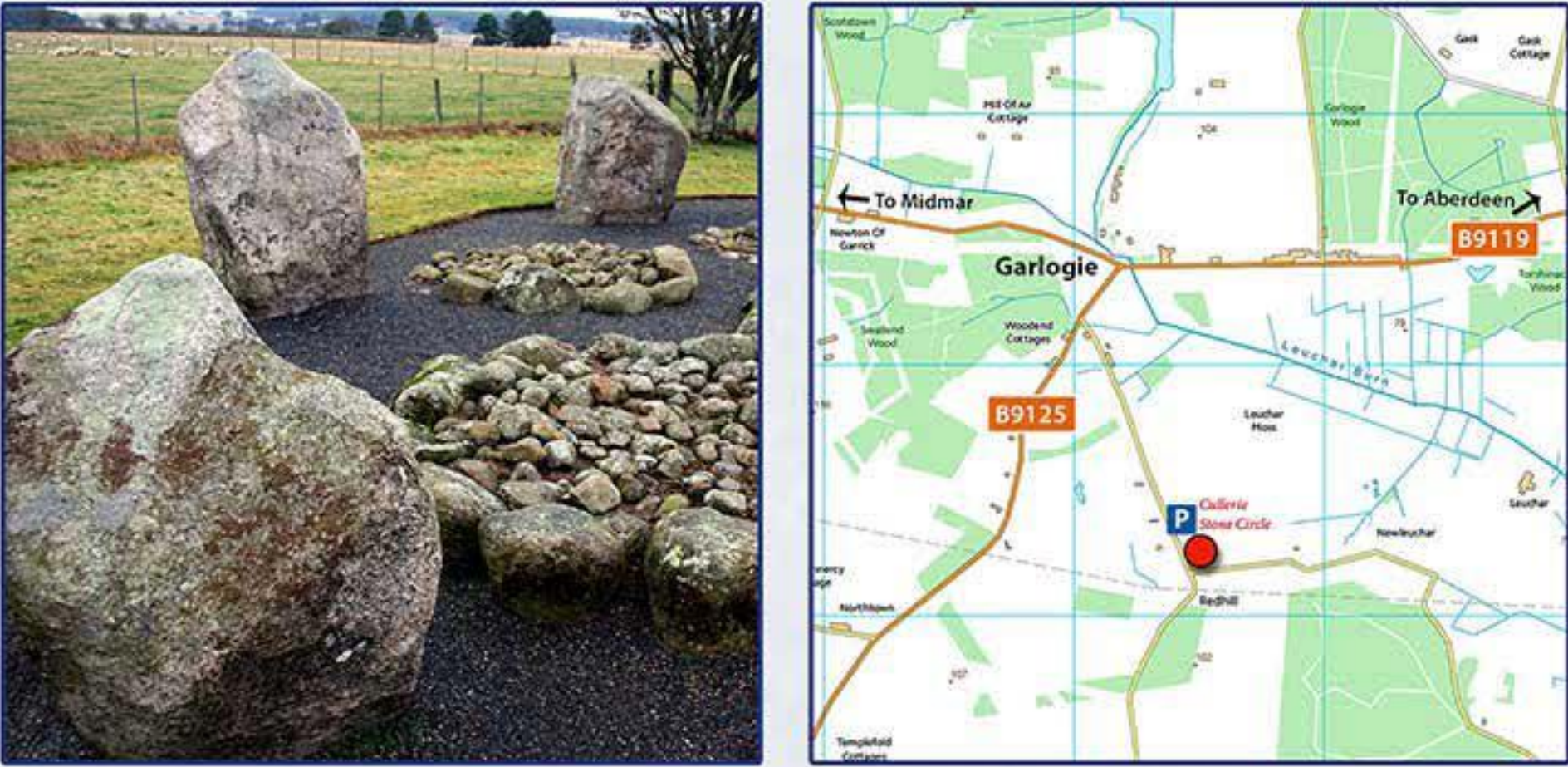
Directions: 11.5 miles (18.5 km) Southwest of Inverurie. Turn left off A96 onto B993 at the South side of Inverurie, towards Kemnay, and continue on this road for 10 miles (16 km). Turn right towards Pitfichie Forest car park. From the car park follow the marked trails for 0.9 miles (1.5 km).



CULLERLIE

HER Ref No: NJ70SE0001 // NJ 7851 0427 // AB32 6UX
Restored Stone Circle, comprising 8 stones placed around the circumference of a circle circa 10 m 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 3.4 m 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 (17.7 km) 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 250 m fork left onto a minor road. Continue on this road for 0.5 miles (0.8 km). Car park.



NINE STANES

HER 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 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, circa 18 x 14.6 m. It is thought that this circle was built late in the sequence of Recumbent Stone Circles.

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

