

OUR 13th Green - CASTLE HILL HENGE

A SCHEDULED NATIONAL MONUMENT

Castle Hill Henge was declared a Scheduled Monument on 11th April 1957 in a registered letter to the Right Honourable Lord Lovat.

In 1969 HAW Burl classified Castle Hill as a Class II henge (meaning it has 2 or more entrances). These entrances are on its west-north-west and east-south-east sides. Class II henges are thought to date from 2500-2000 BC. (Neolithic/Bronze Age), and to be attributable to Western Neolithic people.

Excavations at similar sites have revealed that in some cases their centres once contained circles of timber posts, and/or circles of stones, and/or burials.

A.A. Woodham in the article referenced below argues that this henge is wrongly described as a fort, that it was not built for defence. "For a fort it's obvious the bank should be inside the ditch." Castle Hill henge would have been a public monument, erected as a ceremonial meeting place for the community, and may have been used for ritual activity for many centuries thereafter. He supports the suggestion that the function of the bank was at least partially to serve as a "grand stand" for the laity, who were separated from the central sanctum by the internal ditch.

Unfortunately, the development of the then 11th & now 13th green necessitated some alteration to the original form of the monument in the early 1980's. These included levelling of the central part of the henge to improve the existing green and construction of four sand bunkers in the outer ditch. A large stone now lying between the 13th green and the adjacent 12th tee was dug out from the central area during this work. It was buried just below the surface and prevented the hole being cut in that area.

Historic Environment Scotland were concerned about this work at the time, and sent representatives to the site to ensure no artefacts of historic importance were lost.

It is probable that associated remains survive elsewhere on the golf course.

EARLY DESCRIPTIONS OF CASTLE HILL

A.J. Beaton 1882-3 described Castle Hill henge as follows....

"The Muir of Ord Fort is situated in the wood 300 yards southward from the railway station, and about 20 yards west of the line of the railway. It stands on one of the numerous gravelly ridges (evidently lateral moraines) so prevalent in this locality, between the rivers Beaully and Conon. From the position of the "fort" one would infer it could never have been selected as a place of defence, the surrounding grounds being more or less on the same level as the "fort", which is of the common oval form, surrounded by a ditch, still very complete, 20 feet wide at top and 6 feet deep on average."

"If the ditch were filled with water, it must have been conveyed a long distance, as no water in the immediate vicinity is available by gravitation."

AA Woodham - Proc. Soc. Ant. Scot. Vol 87 1952-53 Four Henge Monuments in Easter Ross Page 76

Anthony A Woodham, B.Sc. , Ph.D., F.S.A. Scot. visited and surveyed the archaeological features of the Black Isle, and singled out four henge monuments at Cononbridge, Contin, Culbokie and Muir of Ord for separate treatment in the reference described above.

Here follow edited extracts of his description and his summary conclusions relevant to the Castle Hill henge site.

MUIR OF ORD (Nat Grid Ref 28/527497)

“The present green is circular, and occupies the upper northern part of the interior. A slight bank inside the ditch, round the W. side of the green, is obviously modern, being a common device in green construction.” He also refers to “two standing-stones are still to be seen situated about ¾ mile from the henge, and visible from it.” (One in the open field near Wind Hill and the other in the Muir of Ord Industrial site)



2. Muir of Ord: view from NW. showing the slight external bank in foreground and entrance causeway over ditch.

ANTHONY A. WOODHAM.

Edited Summary of Conclusions from Woodham's Study

The description of three of the four henge sites as “forts” on the OS maps is not a true indication of their original function. The positions chosen are in every case on low ground and possessed of no tactical value for defence.

The Contin and Cononbridge sites are on flat ground in river valleys, Culbokie on a gentle slope and Muir of Ord although on a slope is overlooked by higher ground on one side, and is in close proximity to several locations which would be preferable from the point of view of fortification. The non-defensive nature of these monuments is clear when compared to such indisputable fortlets as Dun Mhor at Beauly, and Findon, Drummondreoch and Culbokie forts in the Black Isle.

A characteristic feature of the four earthworks is the relative positioning of the bank & ditch in each case. For a fort it's obvious the bank should be inside the ditch, and for these four sites the bank is outside the ditch.

Thus the general plan and siting of each is identical with that of classic henge monuments such as Arminghall, Cairpapple and Stonehenge I. The Muir of Ord henge is similar in size and plan to the Class II henge at Broomend of Crichton, Aberdeenshire. This latter is the nearest previously recorded henge monument to this group of four under consideration.

A tradition of sanctity has been attached to the sites and has aided their survival in a practically intact condition to the present day. It has been suggested that the function of the bank was at least partially to serve as a "grand stand" for the laity, who were separated from the central sanctum by the internal ditch.

The majority of Class II henges have their entrances on a NW-SE axis as is the case at Muir of Ord site. Also while Class I henges tend to be circular, Class II henges are more often oval as at Muir of Ord.

J.G.D. Clark (1954) suggested that sites having no central features in the form of stone or timber uprights should be considered as progenitors of henge monuments rather than be included in the henge category. Woodham however held the view that, until definitive evidence is obtained by excavation, proving that enclosures containing posts and stones were constructed for a different purpose than those with bank and ditch alone, we can assume that both types fulfilled a similar function and classify them all as henge monuments.

Available evidence suggests the Class I henges are attributable to Secondary Neolithic people, and Class II henges to Western Neolithic people.

Further Information on Castle Hill and other henge sites can be found in the following references

Beaton, A J. (1883) *Notes on ancient fortifications in the Black Isle, Ross-shire*, *Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, vol. 17, 1882-3. Page(s): 414 plan 415 (fig. 1

Bradley, R. (2011) *Stages and Screens, An investigation of four henge monuments in northern and north-eastern Scotland*. Edinburgh. Page(s): 105 RCAHMS Shelf Number: E.7.BRA

Burl, H A W. (1969) *Henges: internal features and regional groups*, *Archaeol J*, vol. 126, 1969. Page(s): 19, 24, No. 61

Feachem, R. (1963b) *A guide to prehistoric Scotland*. 1st. London. Page(s): 66-7 RCAHMS Shelf Number: E.2.FEA

Harding and Lee, A F and G E. (1987) *Henge monuments and related sites of Great Britain: air photographic evidence and catalogue*, *Brit Archaeol Rep, BAR British*, vol. 175. Oxford. Page(s): 367, 369, No. 268 RCAHMS Shelf Number: P.81

RCAHMS. (1979d) *The Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland. The archaeological sites and monuments of the Black Isle, Ross and Cromarty District, Highland Region, The archaeological sites and monuments of Scotland series no 9*. Edinburgh. Page(s): 13, No. 63 RCAHMS Shelf Number: A.1.2.ARC(9)

Woodham, A A. (1955a) *Four henge monuments in Easter Ross*, *Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, vol. 87, 1952-3. Page(s): 76