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Camster Cairns &
'Hill o' Many Stanes'

Signposts to Prehistory

Location: The Camster Grey Cairns (ND 260 441) are easily accessed from a minor road (signposted from the A9) between Watten and Lybster in Caithness, in the Highland region of Scotland. The Hill o' Many Stanes (ND295384) is signposted from the A99 in the hamlet of Clyth.

Main period: Neolithic/Bronze Age

Access & ownership: Both sites are in the care of Historic Scotland and open to the public. Parking is available by the roadside. At Camster, boardwalks cross the low, marshy ground. An iron gate provides access to the round cairn but the chamber can only be accessed on hands and knees. (Note: all the passages are surfaced with sharp gravel, so wear old trousers and gloves!)



Fig. 1. Camster Long Cairn. By John Allan [CC BY-SA 2.0]

The Grey Cairns are two large Neolithic chambered tombs, one 'long' and one 'round', set 180 m apart (Fig. 2) in boggy moorland. During the Neolithic period this was fertile farming land and only became covered in peat during the Bronze Age. The cairns are unusual in being built in a low-lying area: most similar monuments were set on high ground, visible in the landscape, or with extended views.

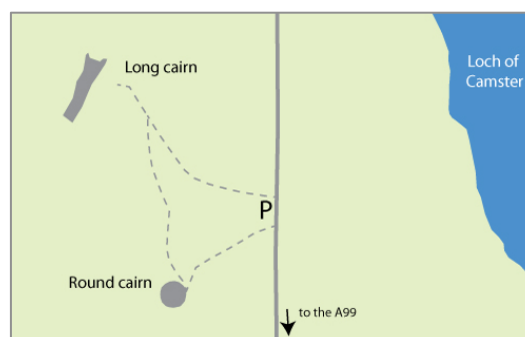


Fig. 2. Map showing Camster cairns and Loch of Camster



Fig. 3. Passage to chamber in Camster long cairn. By K. Sharpe

Camster Long is 60 m in length with 'horns' extending at each end. It is 20 m wide at the NE end, narrowing to 10 m at the SW. The horns at the north end define a clear forecourt with a platform at the back. This gives it a modern stage-like appearance. Two burial chambers open from the east side of the long cairn. Both were originally constructed as separate freestanding round cairns with passages just 2m long. The north chamber is polygonal and had a corbelled roof in 1866 (now a fibreglass dome); the south chamber is subdivided by transverse slabs set in the wall – a type of chamber found elsewhere in Caithness, and in Orkney where they are enormously elongated. It was roofless in 1866. Excavation revealed a few fragments of human bones mingled with broken animal bones.

After an unknown length of time the two cairns were covered by the much more roughly built long cairn. This necessitated extending their passages: 6 m in the case of the north tomb; 3m in the case of the south tomb.

Camster Round measures 18 m in diameter and is 3.7 m high. It is perhaps similar to the original round cairns that were amalgamated into Camster Long. Accessed by a passage 6m long is a 3.35m high intact vaulted central chamber; larger, but of the same segmented plan, as the south chamber of the long cairn. Excavations (Masters 1997) revealed the passage to have been deliberately blocked with stones 'from end to end'. Two skulls and bones from the upper parts of skeletons were found amongst these stones, and similar bones were found on the deep layer of black earth and ash on the chamber floor. Lower parts of skeletons were either removed or had rotted before the remains were deposited.

In a small valley 230 m south of the round cairn is a monument of a different type: a stone row fan. This setting of multiple rows of small standing stones, arranged to form a truncated cone is a rare form of megalithic arrangement. In the UK only around 20 examples are recorded, all in Caithness or Sutherland, although similar rows of much taller stones are also found in Brittany. At Camster, an accumulation of peat has buried many of the stones but 34 are recorded, arranged in 6 rows.

A more impressive example of a stone row fan lies 6 km away at '**The Hill o' Many Stanes**' at Mid Clyth. Here, over 170 stones less than a metre high remain firmly set in the ground (Figs 4 and 5), although at the end of the 19th century more than 400 were recorded (Anderson 1886). Removal for building probably explains the gaps in the rows. From the higher northern end of the rows, the hills of Banffshire can be seen across the Moray Firth, some 80 km away. The moon appears over those hills in its most southerly rising position and Alexander Thom (1971) believed the stone rows to be a Bronze Age observatory, tracking lunar movements over a cycle of 18.6 yrs.



Fig. 4. Detail of stone row.
By David Purchase
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Fig. 5. Hill o' Many Stanes. By Ron McKinnon [CC-BY-SA-3]

References and further information

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