



Location: Easter Aquhorthies recumbent stone circle (NJ 7323 2079) is located about 1.6 km W of Inverurie in Aberdeen, NE Scotland.

Main period: Bronze Age

Access & ownership: The site is sign-posted from the A96 along minor roads to a small car park, from which a track leads uphill for around 350 m to the stone circle. The site is Scheduled and is maintained by Historic Environment Scotland.



Fig. 1. Easter Aquhorthies. By stu smith [CC BY-SA 2.0]

Easter Aquhorthies (pronounced to rhyme with 'torch kworthy') is a well-preserved example of a recumbent stone circle, one of 71 such surviving monuments found only in Aberdeenshire. The name comes from their shared feature: a large stone laid horizontally ('recumbent') between two vertical flanking stones. This style of stone circle is thought to have arrived in the landscape in around 2000 BC, in the Bronze Age. The monument consists of a ring of nine standing stones and a massive (3.8 x 1.4 m, 9 tons) recumbent block flanked by two tall upright pillars (Fig. 1); two large blocks set at right-angles to create a defined area in front of the recumbent (Fig. 2). Measuring around 19.5 m in diameter, the monument is close to circular (see Fig. 2), a characteristic that suggests it is one of the earlier circles to be built in Aberdeenshire.

The builders of the monument paid particular attention to the size, colour and texture of the stones that are graded in height from the 2.25 m tall flankers to the 1.7 m stones opposite. The stones were cleaned in 1985 so that casts could be taken of them, and this revealed new subtlety in their colouring. The stones in the ring are all of pinkish porphyry, except for that next to the east flanker, which is distinctive red jasper. The flankers are both grey granite, and the recumbent is reddish granite flecked with crystals and lines of quartz; its outer face has been carefully smoothed. It was probably brought from Bennachie, a mountain a few miles to the west. The stone of red jasper is said to have magical qualities and as a result parts of the surface have been rubbed smooth by hopeful visitors over the centuries.

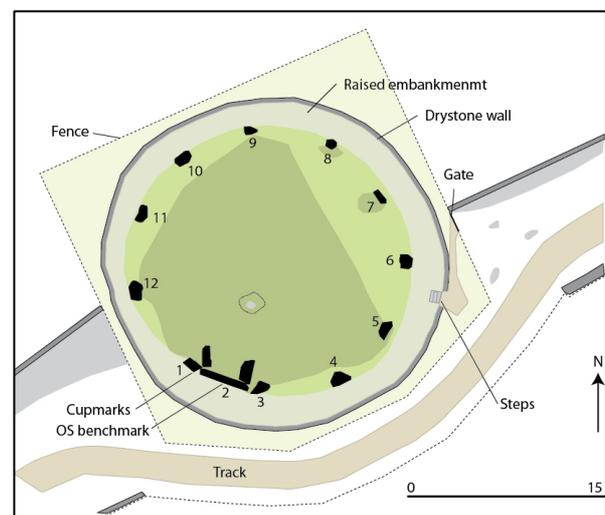


Fig. 2. Plan of Easter Aquhorthies. After Canmore

A possible cist (a stone-lined grave), covered by a capstone, was recorded at the centre of the circle (Keillar 1934); it may once have been surrounded by a ring cairn (an unbroken circular enclosure, open at the centre and defined by a rubble wall) but only a low mound now remains. It is suggested that recumbent stone circle sites developed over time, beginning with a funeral pyre, then a cairn, and finally the recumbent and its circle stones (Bradley 2005) but that the final appearance of the circle was probably intended from the outset (Welfare 2011). The site offers extensive views to the east, and the circle is aligned so that the flanking stones would have framed the rising and setting moon at midsummer.



Fig. 3. The recumbent and flanking stones that create unusual acoustics.
By Wmck [CC-BY-SA-3.0]

Investigations have revealed that the circle has unusual acoustic properties (Watson *et al.* 1999): the recumbent block and its flanking stones seem to project sounds across specific areas of the site, so that they could be heard easily in some areas but were faint in others. Listeners outside the stone circle would have remained largely unaware of the acoustic effects within.

The name 'Aquthorthies' derives from Gaelic but opinion is divided as to its meaning. Some contend that it means 'field of prayer' (from 'auch' or 'achd' meaning 'field', and 'ortha' meaning 'prayer'), suggesting that the place was special both to the circle builders and their much later Gaelic successors.

Others argue that it means 'field of pillar stone' ('achadh choirthe'). The circle's immediate surroundings were landscaped in the late 19th century, and the raised embankment and retaining drystone wall are much later additions. The monument was brought to public attention in the 1870s and 1880s by a series of paintings, drawings and descriptions, though some, such as Christian Maclagan's reconstruction of the circle as a kind of broch (a prehistoric circular stone tower), were far-fetched. In 1884 it attracted the attention of the archaeologist Augustus Pitt Rivers, and five years later his assistants William Tomkin and Claude Gray visited the site to measure, document and photograph it in order to build a scale model (now part of the collection of The Salisbury Museum in Wiltshire).

The site became badly overgrown at the beginning of the 20th century. When the Right Rev. George Browne visited in 1920 he observed that it was 'filled with a forest of whin bushes as high as our heads' (Welfare 2011, 356). The monument was Scheduled in 1925, and taken into guardianship by the State in 1963.

References and further information

- Bradley, R. 2005. *The Moon and the Bonfire: An investigation of three stone circles in north-east Scotland*. Edinburgh: Society of Antiquaries of Scotland
- Bradley, R., Ball, C., Croft, S. & Phillips, T. 2002. The stone circles of northeast Scotland in the light of excavation. *Antiquity* 76, 840–8
- Burl, H.A.W. 1970. The recumbent stone circles of north-east Scotland. *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* 102, 56–81
- Burl, A. 2000. *The Stone Circles of Britain, Ireland and Brittany*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press
- Keillar, A. 1934. *The Megalithic Monuments of N.E. Scotland*. London: Reprint for the Morven Institute of Archaeological Research
- RCAHMS. 2007. *In the Shadow of Bennachie: A field archaeology of Donside, Aberdeenshire*. Edinburgh: Society of Antiquaries of Scotland & Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland
- Watson, A. & Keating, D. 1999. Architecture and sound: An acoustic analysis of megalithic monuments in prehistoric Britain. *Antiquity* 73, 325–36
- Welfare, A. 2011. *Great Crowns of Stone: The recumbent stone circles of Scotland*. Edinburgh: Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland

Easter Aquhorthie on Historic Environment Scotland: www.historicenvironment.scot/visit-a-place/places/easter-aquhorthies-stone-circle/

The Prehistoric Society is a registered charity (no. 1000567) and company limited by guarantee (no. 2532446). When visiting sites, it is important to assess the terrain and expected weather conditions and then take appropriate precautions before embarking. The Prehistoric Society accepts no responsibility for any accidents or injuries sustained during such visits.