

# The Chambered Cairns of the Central Highlands

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INV31.                ESSICH MOOR  
                          (Carn Glas)

*Parish* Inverness and Bona

*Location* 5.5km SSW of Inverness

*Map reference* NH649383

*NMRS number* NH 63 NW 14

*References* ISSFC 1899a, 178; ISSFC 1918, 394; RCAHMS 1943, 93-6; Childe 1944, 36-7; Henshall 1963, 376-8

*Plan* ASH and JNGR (note differing scales)

*Visited* 11.4.57, 2.10.96, 21.10.96

*Description.* The cairn is on an undulating plateau of rough grazing (formerly heather moor), with pools and marshy areas in hollows. The cairn is in a prominent position at 210m OD, but is not on the highest point available. The site commands magnificent views, to the N across the Beauly Firth to the Black Isle and the mountains of Easter Ross, to the W to the hills on the NW side of the Great Glen, and to the SE to distant mountains. The cairn occupies a small ridge running N to S, which rises at each end and sinks in the centre. The ground falls away quite steeply along the E side, and less steeply round the rest of the cairn.

This exceptionally long cairn is a complex structure, of which four elements can be detected on surface examination. At the S end, on the highest part of the ridge, is the large S cairn; a little to the N and at a lower level is the small mid cairn; at the N end is the large N cairn; all three cairns contain a chamber; the low parallel-sided linking cairn combines the separate components into one monument. The size of the long cairn, and the height at each end (exaggerated by the rising ground) remain impressive. The length is about 126m and the axis lies E to N to W of S by about 13°. The cairn is partly bare cairn material of small angular shattered stone with some cobbles, and partly covered with coarse grass. The contrasting areas of stone and grass tend to confuse interpretation, and patches of gorse, especially along the E side, cause further difficulties. Although parts of the cairn have suffered considerable disturbance, the damage is evidently much less than was implied in the two earliest notes (ISSFC 1899a, 1918). The outline plan of the long cairn is clear, though the position of the edge can seldom be traced precisely because the turf-covered lower slopes merge into the ground. The four components of the cairn are described below in turn.

The S cairn, because of its position on the highest part of the ridge, appears to be the largest component of the long cairn. The sides of the cairn slope up virtually undisturbed, and the only serious interference is into the S slope where the passage would be expected, and on the top where the chamber has been investigated and hollows have been made to the N and NW of it. The cairn appears to be heel-shaped. The S edge is straight, and the square form of the S end is clearer above ground level where the end slope joins that of the almost straight W and E sides. The sides curve northwards to a round N end. Here the cairn merges with the linking cairn material, but the edge of the cairn can be approximately traced where the two meet. The cairn is about 42.5m N to S by about 36m transversely. The height of the cairn is nearly 2.6m (calculated from the recorded height of the back-slab of the chamber). The axis of the cairn, judging by the S edge and the probable alignment of the chamber, is nearly SSW to NNE, skew by some 20° from that of the long cairn.

About 7m S of the centre of the cairn, the back-slab of the S chamber is exposed in the centre of a deep hollow which is partly infilled with loose stones. The back-slab is a large block, 1.56m long by 0.45m thick, and was recorded in 1918 as about 2.2m high; it now projects only 0.9m above the chamber filling. The E wall of the chamber was formerly partly visible (RCAHMS, Childe). A narrow pointed orthostat butted against the SE corner of the back-slab; it was 0.86m long, and was about 1.2m shorter than the back-slab, so its true height was about 1m. A second orthostat immediately to the S (its top edge still just visible) is 1m long by over 0.13m thick; it was a little taller than its neighbour. Above the pointed orthostat there was a walling of thin slabs which reached nearly to the top of the back-slab, and also continued behind the second orthostat (illustrated in Childe, pl. II, 2). The awkward alignment of the orthostats in relation to the back-slab strongly suggests that they had been displaced slightly inwards whilst the walling had retained its original position. The chamber was investigated about 1918, when 'distinct indications of a burial, and a few small bones' were found (ISSFC 1918).

About 5m to the N of the S cairn, and E of the axis of the long cairn, are the reduced and disturbed remains of the mid cairn. It is largely concealed within the linking cairn material of the long cairn, but it is up to 1.6m high to the N and W of the chamber which it contains, and so is somewhat higher than the surrounding cairn material. Amongst the spread of loose stone the edge of the mid cairn is indicated by boulder kerb-stones the tops of which are just visible, and by the portal stones mentioned below. Some 7.7m W of the chamber are two kerb-stones, 0.75 and 0.45m long by 0.5 and 0.4m thick, and a probable kerb-stone can be seen on the grass-covered S side of the cairn. The mid cairn has a diameter of about 12m.

On the E edge of the mid cairn, and near the edge of the long cairn, is a pair of portal stones 0.54m apart. They evidently formed the entry to the small chamber, perhaps via a short passage. The taller S stone, which leans to the E, has a worn rounded upper edge; it is over 0.7m long by 0.2m thick, and projects 0.3m. Its partner is 0.6m long and only the top edge can be seen. The structure to the W of them has evidently been dug out and refilled. Only the back-slab of the chamber, 3.3m from the N portal stone, and the adjacent S side

stone can be seen. The back-slab is rectangular in plan and elevation, 1.5m long by 0.34m thick, and projects 1m. It butts against the side-slab which is 0.45m shorter; the side-slab is over 1.07m long (the W end is not visible), and of unknown thickness. The axis of the chamber is SSE to NNW and is thus unrelated to that of the long cairn, but the former is roughly at right angles to the axes of the other two chambers.

The N cairn is roughly 37m from the S cairn, and is of similar size, but it differs in being oval in plan. Apart from the investigation of the chamber area and some probably superficial hollows made in the S side, there does not seem to have been any serious interference with the cairn. The edge can be traced with confidence from the centre of the N end for about 20m to the SW, but beyond this the edge is obscured. On the S side the cairn slopes down gradually and the edge cannot be traced due to disturbance where it merges with the linking cairn. Round the E side and up to the centre of the N end the outer part of the cairn is almost entirely overgrown by gorse. The N cairn is about 44m NNE to SSW by roughly 36m transversely. Measured from N it is 2.3m high around the inner end of the chamber, and 0.3m higher than the tallest orthostats, though (due to the rising ground level) the real height of the cairn is almost certainly less.

The axis of the N chamber is not quite straight, but it is roughly parallel with the axis of the S chamber, and differs from the axis of the long cairn by between 10° and 20°. About 9m from the N end of the cairn is a pillar-like W portal stone, set transversely to the chamber axis, and leaning slightly to the N. It measures 0.6m by 0.3m, and projects 0.85m. It is a little taller than the highest part of the chamber at the W end, and its true height is over 1.2m. The unusual height of the portal stone suggests it may be part of a façade.

It is not clear whether the structure extending S from the portal stone should be regarded as a passage and chamber, or whether the whole structure should be regarded as a chamber. There is little difference in the widths of the outer part, which is 3.2m long, and of the inner part, which is 1.8m long; nor is there any indication that there were any transverse divisional slabs. Nevertheless, it seems preferable to interpret the structure as a long and substantial passage leading to a chamber built with a pair of massive side-slabs. There is no indication that the chamber was ever longer, but no back-slab is visible, and it is possible that the chamber extended further to the S (see ¶ 4. 15, 44).

The passage is completely infilled and turfed over. Two slab orthostats on the W side have been partly exposed by the removal of cairn material from their outer faces. They are 1 and over 1.37m long by over 0.18m thick, and they are exposed for up to 0.6m. They are about 0.6m lower than the portal stone, and a little lower than the N ends of the chamber orthostats. The S end of the S passage orthostat has shifted slightly to the E. On the opposite side of the passage, the E portal stone and the orthostat(s) forming the outer part of the wall are missing or hidden, and all that can be seen is part of the top edge of the innermost orthostat. It is over 0.75m long (neither end is visible) by over 0.2m thick. It overlaps the E side of the E chamber orthostat, and is somewhat skew to the axis of the passage.

The chamber has been emptied and partially infilled. The side-slabs are intact rectangular blocks with flat upper edges gently sloping up to the S. They are 1.75m and 1.86m long by up to 0.33 and 0.35m thick; they are the same height, and project 0.9m. They are not quite parallel, and give the chamber a maximum width of 1.3m at the S end. The W block is at a slight angle to the orthostats on the W side of the passage, though the non-alignment is exaggerated by the slight displacement of the S passage orthostat.

A large flat slab in an almost vertical position leans against the W side of the W chamber orthostat. The slab is almost certainly a displaced capstone. It is 2.05m long by 0.23m thick, and over 0.63m wide (the vertical measurement). Two or three nearly vertical slabs, of which only the upper edges can be seen, lean against the E side of the opposite orthostat, and are probably displaced corbel stones. A few large flat slabs lie outside the chamber.

The cairn which links the S and N cairns and encloses the mid cairn is 17 to 18m wide. The edge is fairly clear along the W side, but is less clear along the E side. The cairn is generally about 1m high, and has been much disturbed except where it is grassed over, but there is no reason to think that any quantity of cairn material has been removed. In several places slabs can be seen amongst the small cairn material and suggest the presence of cists or other structures, but the slabs are probably no more than relatively recent disturbed cairn material which has not yet been disturbed by weathering.

The profile of the long cairn, built along the saddle-shaped ridge, can be well seen from the E side. The top of the S cairn is 2.85m higher than the top of the N cairn, and 3.85m higher than the highest part of the mid cairn, which in turn is 0.6m higher than the linking cairn.

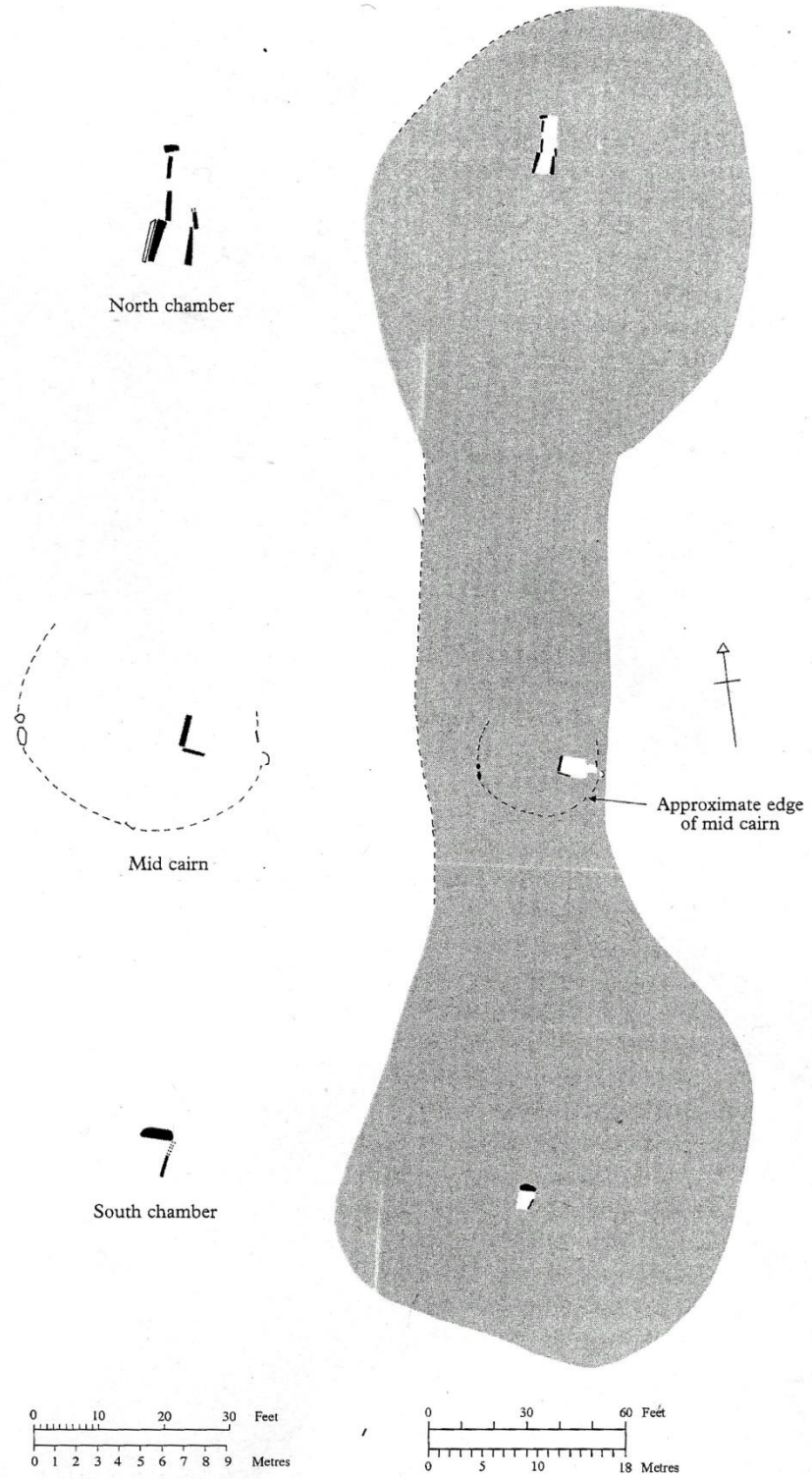


FIGURE 28. The multi-period long cairn, Essich Moor, INV 31.