

## SOLAR SYMBOL STONES AT CARRIBLAIR?

The northern highlands of Scotland are geographically varied and archaeologically exciting. Yet there are surprisingly few individuals or local societies who are actively involved in archaeological research in the region. To meet Doug Scott of Tain is therefore both refreshing and stimulating.

For the past year or so he has concentrated his attentions on the standing stones at Carriblair, Edderton in Easter Ross. Detailed surveys and historical research have led him to the conclusion that here is a Bronze Age complex which could have been used to indicate the passing of the seasons : a calendar. It is a calendar in which the setting sun represents time, with the horizon as the backdrop.

The standing stones may well have been used as a perennial timepiece for some 2,000 years, through the Iron Age, and by the Picts. For Doug suggests that the Pictish symbols carved into one of the stones at Carriblair mark that stone as the hinge of the calendar. Indeed, could it be that the symbols are those of the sun (the Pictish discs) passing across the sky (the Pictish Z rod) with glimpses of the moon (the Pictish crescents between the discs)??

The Carriblair area at Edderton is an unimposing one. Today it is mainly pastureland set in a relatively flat coastal plain about  $\frac{1}{2}$ km from the shallow waters of the Dornoch Firth. Some 3,500 years ago a very small circle of 10 boulders was built within sight of two tall standing stones. One was 100m to the SW, the other about 2km to the NW. But today only half of the stone circle remains (5 boulders in a semi-circular arc) and only one of the standing stones is still in position. That to the NW was taken down some 15 years ago.

All in all an unimpressive remnant of what used to be.

But these stones at Carriblair are surrounded on the landward side by a particularly striking horizon of hilltops, overlapping slopes and notches. Almost 100 years ago an eminent archaeologist noted that if you look across the 2 outer boulders of the remnants of the stone circle, the standing stone with the Pictish symbols is directly in line. Behind it is the distant peak of Tor Leathan. Doug Scott's curiosity was aroused. Were these stones pointing at something less obvious? Is so, what and why? On numerous occasions he has taken camera, theodolite, notebook and computer out to Carriblair, to try to unravel the secret.

The alignment to Tor Leathan soon yielded its information. Here the sun would set behind the peak each year, on 4 February and 7 November. Both are ancient festival days, known in Celtic folklore as Bride and Samhain. Astronomically they are known as the cross quarter days.

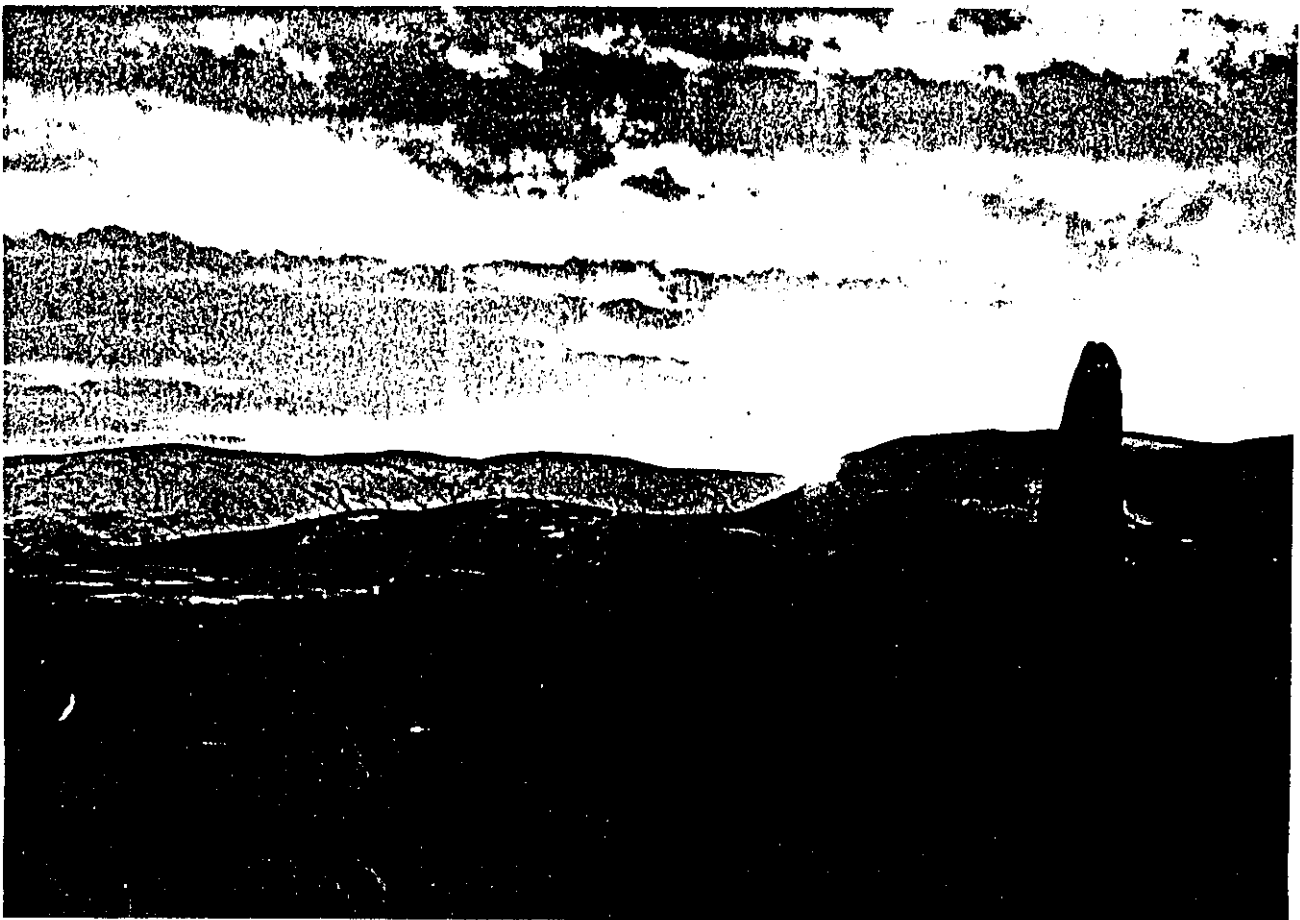
Having discovered this much, Doug started to look at the standing stones and the indented horizon in more detail. Surely it couldn't just be coincidence that when looking across the sites of the two tall standing stones the Spinningdale Notch came into line? Here he found that the sun sets within the notch on 21 June - the time of the summer solstice - the longest day of the year.

With increasing wonder and excitement Doug spent more time assessing the horizon from the tall standing stone with its Pictish symbols. No other artificial features are visible from the stone. But when standing beside it and looking at the horizon other seasonal points did emerge.

A major peak on this horizon is the Struie Hill. Behind this hilltop the sun sets twice a year, on 4 May and 7 August. These are, once again, ancient festival days, which in Celtic folklore are known as Beltain and Lamma. They are also cross quarter days in the astronomical calendar. It was then

discovered that the sun also sets in the Struie Gap twice a year. This occurs at the spring and autumn equinoxes of 20 March and 22 September - both have equal hours of day and night. And exactly halfway along the flattest part of the horizon Doug found that the sun set on the shortest day of the year - 21 December, the winter solstice. An amazing record for a comparatively unimpressive site/complex in the north of Scotland.

Doug Scott has discovered a unique complex at Carriblair. The position of the stones could be used to predict the seasons. It accurately allowed the viewer to watch the eight parts of the year come and go during the Bronze Age, some 2,500 to 3,500 years ago.



If Doug is correct in his interpretation of the Pictish symbols on the tall standing stone (the double discs and Z rod) then it is more than likely that the complex continued in use up to 1,200 years ago. But with the advent of Christianity and its associated calendar about 700AD the stones went out of use. Traditions were presumably forgotten or deliberately stamped out. It is only now that the achievements of our prehistoric forebears are beginning to be unravelled once more.

