

Neolithic Timber Halls and a Bronze Age Settlement with Hoard at
Carnoustie, Angus



Neolithic Timber Halls and a Bronze Age Settlement with Hoard at Carnoustie, Angus

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Front cover

Upper image: Artist's reconstruction of the early Neolithic Structure 8 long timber hall in its landscape, by Gillian Sneddon. Lower image: an aerial view of the footprint of the hall as excavated.

Back cover

From left to right: three views of Neolithic stone axehead SF 8017; early Neolithic Carinated Bowl Vessel 83, flint scraper CAT 128, modified early Neolithic Carinated Bowl Vessel 20; middle Bronze Age spearhead and sword.



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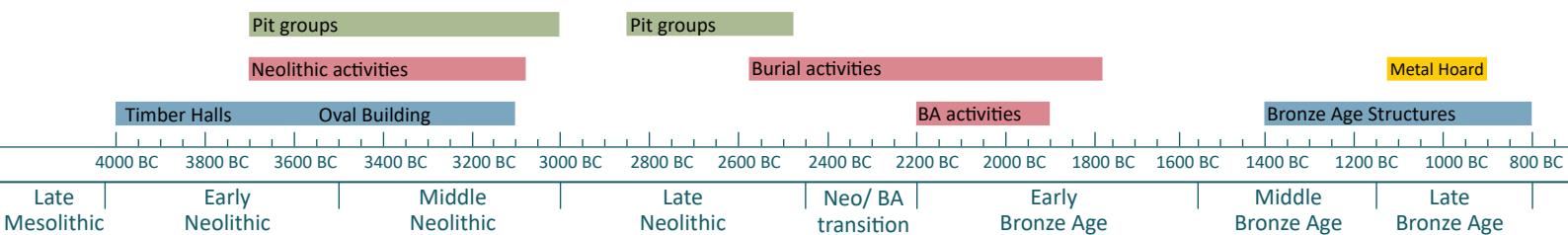
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Summary

The Carnoustie excavation produced exceptional results. Traces of the longest early Neolithic timber hall in Scotland was discovered there beneath the topsoil alongside the remains of another large hall and which was replaced by a smaller hall. In addition, a rare and well-preserved late Bronze Age metalwork hoard of a sword, spearhead with gold decoration and a long pin were found wrapped in the remains of textile and sheep-skin and buried in a pit within the midst of a late Bronze Age settlement.

The first evidence of human activity on the site was organic and flint tool-making debris was left behind at temporary encampments by Mesolithic hunters and gatherers from the mid-seventh to the end of the fifth millennia BC.

This was followed near the beginning of the fourth millennium BC by the construction of the largest as-yet known timber hall of the early Neolithic in Scotland. This was a permanent structure built of oak with opposed doorways near one end of the building. Its large roof was supported by paired massive timber posts. Its walls were wattle and daub panels supported by posts that were partly protected by its over-hanging roof. This monumental building was planned and designed using marker pits for its layout and the divisions of space within it. Deposition of pitchstone and other stone artefacts in some of the postholes and pits for the building timbers represents the beliefs and rituals of the community that built it, perhaps one of the very first groups of farmers to colonise Scotland.

Built at roughly the same time was a smaller but companion timber hall. The timbers of the west wall of this building had to be reinforced and replaced but its large hearth with the remains of cereal grain and hazel nutshells suggested it had a more domestic function than the large hall. Both halls may have been used for seasonal festivities and community gatherings.

At some stage the large timber hall was replaced by a smaller hall built inside its footprint at the south-west end. Other contemporary timber halls in Scotland, when they had come to the end of their useful life, were burnt down, but at Carnoustie there was nothing to suggest this. The smaller hall was deliberately built and positioned so that it took on the beliefs and rituals of the larger hall.

For the first time there were also indications that people were using the spaces outside the hall, for short-lived visits to the site.

Later in the Neolithic, from c. 3500 to 3000 BC, people used the site for temporary shelters that they returned to time and time again. However, there were indications that some people also used the sites of the old halls for dwellings, such as the construction of a small oval building over part of the subsidiary hall. Another temporary dwelling of a hearth and postholes was also situated over part of the large timber hall. During this time fewer and fewer people returned to the site and at some stage the area was abandoned. A variety of factors could have been involved, including soil exhaustion from slash-and-burn agriculture and the lack of a woodland cover.

After this period of abandonment, the site was next occupied in the early Bronze Age from c. 2400 BC for a small number of isolated burials, the main evidence being the remains of pottery vessels associated with burial rituals. An early dated Beaker was discovered in a possible burial pit, and a burial with an urn had a barrow or mound of soil heaped over it with a shallow ditch around it in the north-eastern part of the site.

The erection of a permanent oval-shaped dwelling indicated the return of people in the middle and later Bronze Age to live and farm on the area. A single house with perhaps an ancillary building were replaced three or more times on new plots over the following centuries until around 800 BC. The later roundhouses each had a central ring of posts that held up their conical roofs and were enclosed within exterior walls comprised of wattle and daub panels.

The best preserved of these Bronze Age roundhouses was positioned over part of the foundations of the large timber hall. Like the other buildings it had an entrance facing south-east and during the course of its life it was used as a domestic dwelling, a workshop and also a byre. The overwintering and stalling of domestic livestock within the buildings of this period seem to have been a common occurrence. Behind this building, and between it and another larger roundhouse to its north, a hoard of precious metal objects was deliberately buried sometime between 1118 – 924 cal BC.

The objects include a bronze sword within its wooden scabbard, a bronze spearhead with a gold decorative band around its socket and a bronze sunflower-headed swan's neck pin. They were wrapped in woollen cloth and a sheepskin.

These, together with a shale bangle found in the roundhouse, indicate that its occupants were wealthy and had some status in the wider community. Hoards such as this are rare, but a similar collection of slightly later dated metalwork was found at Pyotdykes north of Dundee. The occurrence of these deliberate burials of late Bronze Age metalwork in the Tayside region and across Scotland indicates shared cultural practices and the wealth of some late Bronze Age farming communities.

A gap of around 1500 years followed the abandonment of this late Bronze Age settlement until Pictish farming activities are apparent during the early medieval period. Subsequent rig and furrow cultivation had a significant negative effect on the remains of the past. However, what did remain is an exceptional story of prehistoric timber buildings and a metalwork hoard.

Foreword

When Angus Council approved the development of two outdoor grass football pitches on land at Balmachie Road, Carnoustie, no one imagined the process would reveal one of the most remarkable and internationally significant archaeological discoveries in Scotland. The discovery of land rich in traces of past occupation provided evidence of Britain's largest Neolithic longhouse, a later Bronze Age settlement of roundhouses and, most surprisingly, a hoard of Bronze Age artefacts buried in haste and lost or forgotten.

The final publication report on the post-excavation analysis presented here, demonstrates the huge amount of work undertaken by GUARD Archaeology Ltd on behalf of Angus Council. The fieldwork led by Alan Hunter Blair expertly identified previously unknown buried remains in this complex site. Off site, a programme of analysis and conservation of the hoard has provided a unique insight into the creativity and craftsmanship of the period. Much appreciation goes to the GUARD Archaeology team for their infectious excitement during engagement with the Carnoustie community. The provision of tours and presentations, work experience for two students, and employment for a newly qualified archaeologist, were of substantial benefit to the local community. The display of the model village and hoard replicas have been very well received at Carnoustie Library.

The work presented here confirms the extent of prehistoric features at the site, telling us about the settlement over time: the palaeo-environmental conditions, land use, economy and diet of the people on this site during the prehistoric period. Many residents in the area may not have imagined what life was like during this period of history, right on their doorstep. The wealth of discoveries at this site have provided an invaluable opportunity to learn more about how people in Angus lived in the Neolithic and Bronze Age.

The Bronze Age metal hoard discovered during the removal of topsoil is incredible and significant, both nationally and internationally, and provides a very rare example of the survival of late Bronze Age organic items. The wooden scabbard, sheepskin wrapper and woven textiles do not usually survive. The delicate gold decoration on the spearhead is one of only five examples of spearheads adorned with gold binding and the survival of a pommel is also very rare.

The hoard gives us the indication that the owner would have been a wealthy and important member of the community and it is fitting that these wonderful artefacts have become a link to Carnoustie's past.

Angus Council is delighted to have played its part in uncovering this fantastic connection to our past and ANGUSalive's Museum Team hope to arrange a loan from the hoard, which was allocated to the National Museum of Scotland.

Kathryn Lindsay

Chief Executive Angus Council

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